

ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



FIGHTING FOR
Eternity

SHAYLA KERSTEN

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Fighting for Eternity

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Edited by Mary Moran

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FIGHTING FOR ETERNITY

Shayla Kersten

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Chapter One

Düsseldorf, Germany – Seventy years ago

Estefan's stomach flipped like an acrobat in a traveling show. Although this wasn't the first time he'd encountered a vampire, it was the first time he was alone. His friends Adria and Cardin waited nearby, but anything could happen before they reached him.

The tall blond vampire's easygoing smile was disarming. Golden flecks in his hazel eyes reflected a calm air. His hand caressed Estefan's cheek. Nothing like the vicious, blood-crazed creatures Estefan had met before.

Estefan's mission was clear—albeit a little insane—let the vampire feed from him, transform him. Estefan tried to suppress a shiver of fear.

“You like my touch?” the creature whispered.

With a hard swallow, Estefan nodded. An even more terrifying idea—he wasn't lying. The gentle touch sent desire combined with terror curling through his body. Torn between warring needs, he'd rather be facing the vampire—demon as Adria called them—with a strong sword. But Adria's over three hundred years of experience and research spoke of a final cure, able to rid the world of all vampires. Estefan was here to try to become that cure—the Rememdiu.

“My name is Karl.” His thumb brushed Estefan's lips.

Out of instinct, Estefan kissed the calloused pad. Slow-building need tightened his groin and thickened his cock. If he'd not known Karl's true nature, Estefan would have been hard and aching at the idea of sex with the tall, muscular man. Then again, fear could be a powerful aphrodisiac, as well.

Karl leaned over. His mouth brushed Estefan's forehead. “You're so beautiful.”

Estefan's chest tightened. Only his first love Renaldo had ever told him that. His first betrayal had been at Renaldo's hands as well, a small voice reminded him. As

Karl's lips kissed a path down Estefan's nose, he pushed aside painful memories and concentrated on the present.

The present included allowing Karl to drink from him, transform him.

Kisses fluttered past Estefan's mouth with teasing touches. Soft lips nibbled at Estefan's throat. In spite of his increasing fear, Estefan's cock continued to rise, tightening against the buttons of his trousers. He waited for the painful bite but it didn't come.

Instead of feeding, Karl pulled away. His eyes almost glowed in the dim light of the dingy room. "I want you." His fingers found Estefan's hair. With a tight grip, he held Estefan's head as their lips met.

Opening to the rough kiss, desire overrode fear. Estefan melted against the hard body. Karl's thick cock rubbed against Estefan's stomach through their trousers. Maybe Adria was wrong and Karl wasn't a vampire.

A warm tongue swept through Estefan's mouth as one of Karl's hands gripped his ass.

With a soft moan, Estefan wrapped his arms around Karl. His fingers clutched the soft linen shirt. His heart thumped a wild staccato beat as he flexed his hips against the bulge of Karl's cock, returning his kiss with enthusiastic fervor.

"Anxious, are we?" Karl chuckled.

"Yes..." In so many ways. If Adria was right, Estefan's destiny lay in the arms of this creature. Since his fateful encounter with Cardin over fifteen years ago, Estefan hadn't aged. He still looked the same as he had on that day—barely twenty. As a Watcher, he could possibly live forever— young and healthy. Like the creature making love to him.

Except a Watcher didn't feed off the blood of humans.

Estefan pulled his thoughts back to the task at hand. The vampire must feed from him, drain him, for the transformation to take place. The warm caresses and passionate kisses weren't exactly what Estefan expected from the process.

A calloused hand slid down the back of Estefan's trousers. Hard kneading of his ass teased his anus. Intense desire threatened to overwhelm him.

For the last fifteen years, Cardin had been his only lover. Although Estefan loved him, his feelings were more a deep friendship. A convenient relationship for both of them. They both were destined to never age. No need to explain or worry about leaving someone behind.

The simple newness of Karl's body against him had Estefan boiling with desire. Letting his guard down was dangerous but only added to his excitement. Need crawled over his skin like a nearby bolt of lightning. Estefan slipped an arm around Karl's neck, holding him close as he matched his ravenous kisses.

The tall creature tightened his grip on Estefan, almost to the point of pain. Lifted from his feet, Estefan wrapped one leg around Karl's thigh. His body moved with short, awkward thrusts. The desire to get closer, move with him, against him made Estefan lightheaded.

Pressed onto the small bed, Estefan moaned as Karl's weight covered him. "Yes..."

"I want inside you..." Karl's whisper teased Estefan's ear. His thick cock rubbed through the layers of clothing.

"Oh yes..." Estefan held on when Karl tried to pull away.

A curious look narrowed Karl's hazel-eyed gaze. "Clothes... Need to remove them." A slight smile curled his lips.

Estefan released his hold. As a Watcher, his strength surpassed humans, matching the superior force of a vampire. Fear of discovery cleared some of the sexual fog clouding his mind. He needed to be careful.

Karl's fingers made quick work of the buttons on Estefan's shirt. His hands slipped inside, caressing muscles, teasing nipples. "I love your body. Lean muscles." He dipped his head down. His hot tongue swiped one of Estefan's nipples. "Smooth skin." The calluses on his hands teased Estefan's skin.

Curling his fingers into the bedding, Estefan stifled a loud moan. *Control yourself, He's a bloodsucking killer.*

But it wasn't blood Karl sought as his mouth fastened on Estefan's nipple. Sharp suction and a twirling tongue shot pleasure through Estefan. The sound of ripping linen accompanied his gasp.

Karl's chuckle added a gentle vibration around Estefan's nipple. With a lick and a tiny nip, Karl released him. "Maybe I'd better move on." Pulling away, Karl resumed undressing him.

Warm fingers grazed Estefan's aching cock but didn't provide any relief. Estefan lifted his hips so Karl could tug his trousers down his legs.

Pausing to yank off Estefan's shoes and socks, Karl then stripped the pants over his feet.

Splayed out on the bed, shirt open and nothing below the waist, Estefan shivered from desire made more intense by his vulnerable state.

Karl stood between Estefan's open legs. "Delicious."

Fear trilled through Estefan's veins but he didn't have time to react.

Dropping to his knees, Karl gripped Estefan's engorged cock. With varying strokes, Karl brought him close to the edge then backed him down.

Tension vibrated through every muscle. Need forced moans to the surface and escaped Estefan's mouth.

"So responsive." Karl's murmured words barely reached Estefan.

Too many sensations rippled through Estefan. Need, desire, fear, duty... He was here for a purpose—one he wasn't so sure about anymore. Unable to think of Karl as a vicious killer, part of his mind dared question Adria's driving purpose.

Wet heat surrounded the tip of his cock. Short, bobbing strokes worked the crown while Karl's hand gripped the base. His free hand immobilized Estefan's hips, keeping him from arching up.

Estefan reached for the golden head. His fingers twisted through silken curls. "So close..." His muscles tensed as Karl increased his pace. "Oh God!" His cock erupting into the moist heat, Estefan's body rippled with wave after wave of pleasure.

Gentling his motion, Karl suckled the crown while his hand milked Estefan's length. When Karl released him, cool air washed over Estefan's wet dick.

"Ready for more?" Karl kissed a path up Estefan's stomach. Pausing, he teased a sensitive nipple.

"Yes..." Estefan gasped for air. His hands cupped Karl's head, holding him against his chest.

"Turn over." Karl broke Estefan's hold as he pulled away.

His body limp from an incredible orgasm, Estefan floundered as he tried to obey. Strong hands pulled his shoulder and hip until he flopped over onto his stomach.

"Oh yes..." Karl brushed his fingers down Estefan's spine until he teased the cleft of his ass. "Gorgeous from this side as well." Wet, warm kisses followed the same path but didn't stop. Almost bruising fingers spread Estefan's cheeks then Karl's tongue brushed against his anus.

Estefan's relaxed body tensed. Another swipe of Karl's tongue resurrected Estefan's flagging cock. "Oh God."

As if he were waiting for Estefan's reaction, Karl dove in. His tongue laved Estefan's opening with quick, teasing strokes. The soft flesh poked at the ring of muscle.

Estefan rocked back into the intense pleasure. His half-hard cock rubbed against the coarse linens. The welcome friction renewed his arousal.

A calloused thumb rubbed the skin between Estefan's balls and his anus with a deep, massaging pressure. His body shuddered hard with growing need.

Karl's other thumb pressed against his aching hole.

"Yes...please..."

"Patience."

"No." A combination of desire and increasing fear fed his impatience. If he took too long, Cardin and Adria would assume something went wrong. They'd break in, weapons drawn... "Please do it now."

Karl's lips pressed a soft kiss against his opening. "Okay." His hands squeezed Estefan's ass as he stood. Reaching for a small bottle on a table near the bed, Karl whispered, "You're right. It's time."

Estefan sank into the mattress. His mind raced with Adria's plans. She'd kill Karl, one way or another. If Estefan were the mysterious Rememdiu, he'd be the means of destruction. If he weren't, Adria would take more direct action.

In spite of Adria's tales and dire warnings, Karl had done nothing to warrant death. Emotion gripped Estefan's chest. No, nothing wasn't what he'd done. He made love to him, passionate, ecstatic love.

A thick finger, slick with oil, pressed against his opening. "Are you ready?"

Estefan almost said no, almost told him to run, save himself. Instead, he groaned into the bedding as Karl's finger slid past the relaxed muscle. Rising up on his hands and knees, Estefan pushed back, impaling himself on the long finger. "More..."

"Easy." Karl's other hand rubbed against Estefan's back. "We have all night."

Estefan wanted to yell that they didn't, he wanted to shout out the danger the unsuspecting vampire faced. But would discovery result in harm to his friends? "Please...fuck me." Moisture welled in his eyes as emotion clogged his throat.

Karl's finger disappeared, replaced quickly by the thick crown of his cock.

"Yes..." Estefan arched back to meet him. Penetration burned but Estefan welcomed the feeling. His punishment for Karl's fate. "Hard..."

Karl groaned but his body pressed forward, his rigid flesh filling Estefan.

Pleasure matched the intense pain. Estefan pulled away then slammed backward again. "More..."

With his fingers digging into the flesh of Estefan's hips, Karl rode him with hard rapid-fire thrusts. Bliss surpassed the burn, lengthening Estefan's cock.

Moans punctuated with grunts accompanied each stroke. Estefan wasn't sure if the sounds came from him or his lover. He didn't care. Ecstasy washed over him. Need burned through his groin.

"Fuck—" Karl's shout signaled the warm release lining Estefan's passage.

A strong arm slid around Estefan's waist, pulling him up until Karl's sweaty chest lined his back. Karl's hand slid down Estefan's stomach until his hand grasped Estefan's cock.

Still filled with Karl's flesh, a few strokes took Estefan back to the edge. Tiny pinpricks pierced his neck. The gentle sucking pushed Estefan over. His body melted against Karl's as his fluids flowed from his neck and his cock. Soft licks teased his wounds.

"God...you're..." Karl gasped against Estefan's ear. "Fantastic..."

Estefan fell from the high of orgasm. "You have to leave." Weak from pleasure combined with blood loss, he failed in his feeble attempt to pull away.

"Leave? Why?"

"They'll kill you. Please...go..."

Karl turned Estefan as he lowered him to the bed. "What are you talking about?" His body covered Estefan's. Under different circumstances, Estefan's would have welcomed his weight.

“They – we – know what you are.” Pressing his hands against Karl’s chest, Estefan tried to push him off. “You have to go or they’ll kill you.” Panic threatened to reveal the strength he needed to hide. He couldn’t let Karl know what he was. Adria said if the vampires knew about Watchers, they’d be hunted down. He couldn’t endanger his friends, but he didn’t want Karl to die.

“What I am?” Karl’s eyes narrowed and a deep frown creased his forehead. “What do you know?”

“Please...”

Karl’s gaze softened. “Come with me.” His fingers trailed down Estefan’s sweat-slick face.

Estefan gasped with surprise and renewed desire. “Come with you?”

“Yes.” Karl covered his mouth with kisses. “You’re...” His thumb brushed Estefan’s lips. “Something about you.”

His mind whirled with the possibility but loyalty to Cardin, to Adria. They’d rescued him from starvation and despair. “I can’t. But you have to leave.”

“I...”

“Please – go!”

Chapter Two

Memphis, Tennessee, USA – Present day

Estefan woke aching from more than the usual piss hard-on. “*Mierda!*” The dream was so real he lapsed into his native Spanish. Glancing around the room, he double-checked his surroundings.

Cheap hotel room, two beds—Adria curled around Roger in one and Cardin snoring next to Estefan in the other. Bright sunlight streamed through the thin curtains.

The memory was so clear. Even now the golden-flecked hazel eyes hovered on the edge of Estefan’s vision. A shiver ran down his spine. The old saying *someone’s walking on his grave* popped in his mind.

He’d reconciled the loss of Karl years ago, although he never told Adria or Cardin about what he’d done.

Roger knew. Estefan had confided his secret to the latest addition to their small intrepid band of Watchers.

Immortal, immune to aging, illness or natural death, the only way a Watcher could die was beheading or consumption by fire. Blessed with strength, speed and senses beyond mortal ken, being a Watcher came with a price. Estefan and his friends were also vampire hunters.

Estefan propped his elbow on his pillow, his face cradled in his hand, and stared at his longtime lover. A tremor of anxiety snuck out of nowhere and ramped up his heart rate. He shook off a feeling of foreboding, chalked it up to his dreams and his purpose. Pushing aside thoughts of their mission, he studied the man next to him.

His relationship with Cardin and Adria started as gratitude for rescuing him from the streets of Marseilles. Over time, grateful grew into friendship, love and respect. Adria watched over them, took care of them both, but her first purpose was the

destruction of all vampires. Estefan cared for both of them, but sometimes he longed for something more.

Estefan followed Adria's leadership, bowing to her knowledge and fierce determination. How could drinkers of blood not be evil? Until seventy years ago, Estefan didn't doubt. Even then, faced with Karl who made love to him, he wasn't sure enough to disagree with Adria. He never regretted letting Karl live, but sometimes he wondered what life would have been like if he'd chosen a different path.

Memories of Karl surfaced from time to time, but his image softened over the years. Carrying regret around for so long wasn't healthy and his life with his friends wasn't unpleasant. His dream sharpened his memory and fleeting emotion tightened his throat. Karl's hazel eyes had held promise of something Estefan couldn't define.

Then Roger Malloy came into their lives a few short weeks ago. For hundreds of years, Adria had searched for the one special Watcher capable of destroying all vampires. She had been convinced Roger was the one—the Rememdiu. Little did she know how wrong her theories were.

Roger wasn't the avenger she'd wanted, just another Watcher. The Rememdiu wasn't even one of their kind but a vampire—Kevin St. James. The Rememdiu—the Cure—wasn't the destruction of all vampires. Literally, the Rememdiu was a cure of sorts for vampirism. The creature's dependence on blood was significantly reduced and sunlight didn't drain his strength, leaving him closer in nature to Watchers. The Rememdiu's blood could cure other vampires.

Roger, like Estefan, didn't believe all vampires were evil. After their group's encounter with Kevin and his lover, Adria had to deal with the end of her four-hundred-year-old mission. Slowly, Adria was coming around to the change—not easy after devoting her long life to her cause. Helping ease her into a new concept was the fact they'd not given up vampire hunting completely.

Since Watchers had all the strengths of a vampire but none of the weaknesses—need for blood or aversion to sunlight—they made the perfect police force against vicious or insane creatures.

Shaking off the fog of the past, he thought about the events leading them to Memphis—a rogue vampire leaving a trail of dead, mangled bodies. Estefan and his friends—lovers, all of them—were on the killer’s trail.

Cardin’s snore ended in an abrupt snort. His chest rose and fell with a deep breath before his eyelids popped open. “What time is it?”

Estefan shook his head. He hadn’t bothered to look at the clock. “Early afternoon by the angle of the sun.”

“We should get the others up. Take advantage of daylight.”

“Let them sleep a little longer. I want a shower first.” Rolling off the side of the bed, Estefan rushed for the bathroom. One of the bad things about sharing a room with three other people...

Since his first night with Cardin, Estefan had become fastidious about cleanliness. The memory of his own stench, his body gritty with filth and sores, never left him. His hard-on had wilted enough to empty his bladder. As soon as he finished, he shed his briefs then flipped on the shower’s hot water.

“Estefan, I need to use the bathroom.” Adria’s voice climbed over the sound of water.

“Damn.” Irrational frustration swept through him. He didn’t bother to turn off the water or cover himself. Yanking the door open, he stormed past her. “Make it quick.” Flopping down on the bed, his legs hanging off, he stared at the ceiling.

“You’re grumpy this morning.” Roger tossed a pillow at Estefan’s head.

Estefan caught the pillow then threw it back. “It’s not morning.”

“Whatever. What’s up?” Roger sat beside him. His hand brushed Estefan’s hair off his forehead.

“Don’t know. Just antsy.”

“Me too. Maybe we’re close to the killer.” Roger’s forehead crinkled in a frown. “I didn’t sleep very well.”

“I feel something...” Another Watcher gift, and sometime curse, allowed them to feel the presence of a vampire, and to a lesser degree, each other. Estefan shook his head. Unfortunately, the ability didn’t point the way like a compass.

Adria opened the bathroom door. “We need to move soon. He’s close.”

Of the four of them, Adria’s sense of awareness was more refined, but then she’d had four hundred years to hone her skill.

“Anyone else need the bathroom?” Estefan’s skin crawled. The sensation had nothing to do with cleanliness, but he had a strong desire to scrub the prickly feeling from his skin.

* * * * *

Estefan’s sense of their prey was different. Something didn’t feel right.

Cardin led Estefan from the east while Adria and Roger approached from the west. Estefan’s ears strained for a sign of the crazed killer. Noise from traffic on Interstate 55 through Memphis distracted him.

Darkness hid nothing from his sight. To a Watcher, as well as a vampire, night was as bright as day, even on a cloudy one like tonight. Approaching the two-story structure, Estefan could see every detail.

Constructed over a hundred years ago as a hospital, the stately old building was in a serious state of disrepair. Weathered paint peeled from old bricks. The wraparound porch was decrepit and falling apart. Crossing the old wood without alerting the occupant could be difficult. The high metal fence should have kept intruders out. Someone with incredible strength had pulled the chain on the rusted gates into loose links. Even without his sense of the rogue vampire, the torn metal assured him they were close to the killer.

Holding up his left hand, fist clenched, Cardin signaled Estefan to wait. His right hand clutched a samurai sword. The only sure means of killing a vampire was the same as a Watcher—decapitation.

Estefan ducked behind a nearby tree, fingers tight around the hilt of a well-maintained cavalry sword, while Cardin crept across the twenty or so yards of open space.

“Cardin, are you in place?” Roger’s voice whispered in Estefan’s ear.

The earpieces were a new addition to the Watchers’ arsenal. As a former Secret Service agent, Roger had a fondness for gadgets. The small headset and microphone allowed continuous communication with his teammates.

“Almost.” Cardin paused near the porch. After a quick scan up and down the length of the building, he motioned Estefan forward.

Estefan hurried across the yard, stopping a few feet down from Cardin. Crouching in the dark, damp soil, he concentrated on the distracting awareness of the vampire.

The muggy heat of Memphis in August created a sheen of sweat across his face and down his back. In spite of the temperature, a shudder shook Estefan down to his bones. Realization struck him. Tapping the unfamiliar earpiece, he whispered, “There’s two of them.”

“Damn...he’s right,” Adria growled. “We should back off and wait.”

Cardin nodded at Estefan. “Four of us could take one rogue but two?”

If the killer was insane, his madness, fueled by frequent feeding and added adrenaline, would guarantee him incredible strength. As Estefan turned to retrace his steps, a loud crash echoed through the night. The clash of metal on metal and the protesting creak of the old wooden porch sent Cardin running around the corner. Estefan followed on his heels, sword raised.

The two vampires fought, their blades almost invisible flashes of speed. The sword blows sent sparks flying across the worn boards. For a split second, one of them met

Estefan's gaze. The bloodshot eyes were bright with madness. A toothy grin revealed long, sharp canines. The man personified darkness—hair as dark as night and eyes like coal. Dark stains covered the creature's light-colored shirt. Torn material revealed chiseled muscles.

His insanity fueling his strength, he had the upper hand over his blond opponent. Each blow forced the other back a step.

A shiver of terror tore down Estefan's spine. Gripping his sword, he edged forward, keeping Cardin's approach in his peripheral vision. Movement to his right made him glance away from the vicious fight.

Adria raced toward them, her machete raised in defense, with Roger right behind her.

The two vampires turned in their fierce dance, revealing the blond's familiar face—Estefan's one-time vampire lover Karl. Tight emotion outran Estefan's fears.

Wood splintered, shards flying as Karl's leg crashed through the wooden deck. Trapped, Karl was helpless against a renewed onslaught from his attacker, but his sword kept flashing in his defense.

Without considering the danger, Estefan leapt over the railing then rushed the mad creature.

"Estefan, no!" Adria's cry couldn't stop him.

The first blow served up by the crazed creature jolted Estefan's arm to the bone. After the third, numbness hampered his fingers. Estefan expected the next blow to disarm him. Instead, someone shoved Estefan hard, slamming him against the wall.

Free from his rotten wood trap, Karl's sword took hit intended for Estefan. "Damn, you—" Karl grunted between strikes. "Die already!" Lifting his leg, he kicked the insane vampire in the stomach.

The dark creature fell backward, off balance.

"Finally!" Karl rushed for the killing blow, but the creature regained his stance.

Leaping over the railing, the rogue vampire raised his sword in one parting blow.

“No!” Cardin’s grief howled in the night against the sound of rushing traffic on I-55.

* * * * *

Karl knelt on the porch of the old hospital, gasping for breath. After five days of chasing Martin Langley, Karl’s strength was waning. Twice the sunrise caught him by surprise. If he wasn’t careful, he’d end up as bad as Langley. He needed to feed soon. Cries of fury and grief penetrated his exhaustion.

Glancing between the wooden slats of the railing, he grimaced at the cause. The sharp copper smell of human blood almost overwhelmed him.

“No. No. No.” A tall man with reddish-brown hair knelt over the decapitated body of a young woman. His hands, coated in fresh blood, held the head against the neck of the bleeding corpse. “She can’t die. No!”

“Cardin.” A dark-haired man knelt next to him. His fingers pried at Cardin’s hands. “You can’t help her. Let her go.”

A whimpered sob reminded Karl of the man who’d come to his rescue. Turning, his gaze locked with the young man’s. “Estefan?” Not possible, but the man was the spitting image of someone long dead. In spite of the rising howls of grief from the one called Cardin, a flush of heat raced through Karl’s body.

Surrounded by a pale face, luminous blue eyes filled with tears. “No...” Estefan’s gaze passed Karl and locked on the dead woman.

Cardin still held tight on the woman’s throat. “No, Roger.” He shouldered away from Roger’s touch. “She can’t die.” Bright blood seeped into the dark soil.

A slow-moving spotlight shone from the street. Roger pushed Cardin down below the height of the beam.

Karl scrambled for the shadows at the back of the porch. Landing next to Estefan—or whoever he was—Karl pulled him down on the old boards. The creaking wood seemed to echo through the air.

“We have to get out of here.” Roger’s whisper was too low to have been heard by human ears.

“We can’t leave her here,” Estefan whispered as if in response.

A strange thrill ran through Karl. Maybe... He noticed the headset in Estefan’s ear. Shaking his head, he pushed aside the idea of this man being the same one he knew seventy years ago.

The spotlight moved on down the street toward the Metal Museum.

“No. We can’t.” Roger rose to his knees. His head turned to follow the progress of the police car. Once the vehicle turned the curve around the old Civil War bunkers, he stood. His bloody hand reached for Cardin’s shoulder then stopped.

Spinning around to face Karl, Roger stared for a few seconds. “We know what you are. And the other. We’ll keep your secret if you keep ours.”

Estefan rolled free of his embrace.

“What I am?” Karl didn’t have time to mourn the loss of his warmth. “I don’t know what you mean.” Standing, he brushed his hands on his jeans.

“You’re a vampire. So was Adria’s killer. Right now we need someplace to burn her body.” Roger’s voice cracked on the last word. His throat worked hard against his Adam’s apple. “The authorities can’t find her—any trace of her.”

Although his first thought was to flee, Karl’s curiosity overrode his judgment. He wanted to know more about these humans...and how they’d discovered his secret. “I know a place.” He cast his gaze at the quietly weeping Estefan. And he wanted to know more about the haunting reminder of a past lost.

* * * * *

“Turn left at the next street. It’s about halfway down the block.” Karl kept a close eye on the young man as his fingers clenched white-knuckled on the steering wheel. “What’s your name?”

“Estefan—” He glanced at Karl. A hard swallow rippled his throat.

Suspicion settled hard in Karl’s stomach. Old rumors—legends—swirled in his memory. The night he’d spent with the “other” Estefan, Karl had tasted his blood. A euphoric sense of well-being made him drop his guard. When the young man warned him of others planning to kill him, Karl asked him to come with him, but that Estefan refused.

More than lust fueled his memory. Estefan’s blood had sustained him for much longer than a normal human. He didn’t have time to analyze it then, but that Estefan tasted different. Over the intervening years, each time he fed, he hoped for the same flavor but never found it. Feeding never quite satisfied him again.

A soft sob pulled him out of his thoughts. Glancing over his shoulder, he checked on the two men in the back of the van.

Roger sat on one of the bench seats with his arm around Cardin’s shoulders. Tears streamed down Cardin’s face. Roger’s lips rested against Cardin’s forehead in an intimate caress.

Adria’s body, wrapped in a blanket, occupied the floor in front of them. The tempting scent of sustenance faded as the woman’s blood congealed.

Feeling like an intruder, Karl turned to face front. “Here.” Karl pointed at a driveway. “Pull around back and park by the double doors.”

Estefan maneuvered the big van around the building. “What’s your name?” His gaze cut toward Karl.

“You know my name already. We’ve met before.”

“No, we haven’t.” Grim determination colored his tone.

Okay, he’d play along. “My mistake. I’m Karl Brandt.”

Estefan eased the van to a stop. His fingers clenched the steering wheel until his arms shook.

Leaning toward the young man, Karl rubbed his hand on his shoulder then squeezed hard. "Let's get this done then I have a place where you can rest."

Estefan's head tilted to the side until his cheek rested against the back of Karl's hand. As if he realized what he'd done, he jerked away then yanked the door open.

With a sigh, Karl climbed out of the vehicle. He'd get to the bottom of the mystery of these people.

A quick call as they left Metal Museum Drive had alerted Hank, the crematorium manager, of Karl's need for an off-the-books cremation.

One of the few humans in the world who knew Karl's real nature, Hank didn't ask questions. For some reason, Memphis seemed to draw vampires. The city had been Karl's since he was turned nearly one hundred and fifty years ago and he had no desire to share. Not that vampires could. The gnawing awareness of another vampire's close proximity was a recipe for loss of control.

A hundred years ago, disposing of a body wasn't a problem. With advances in forensic science, Karl needed a better way, so he bought a local crematorium.

Hank exited the building, pulling a gurney. "Mr. Brandt." The tall, lanky man added a short nod to his formal greeting.

"Gentlemen," Karl addressed the three grieving men. "Hank will take good care of Adria. He'll deliver her ashes when he's done." His hand settled on Estefan's shoulder. "You should say your goodbyes now."

Cardin's bloodshot eyes glared at Karl. His hands clenched into fists.

"No." Roger cupped Cardin's cheek. "He's right. You have to let her go."

A choked sob brought Karl's attention back to Estefan. Tears streamed down his pale face. His shoulder shook under Karl's hand.

Taking a chance, Karl wrapped the distraught man in a tight hug. Damp skin burrowed into Karl's neck. Running his hands up and down the muscled back, Karl reveled in the close contact. His body remembered the feeling of holding this same man so many years ago. Somehow, this was his Estefan, his strange lover, still young after seventy years. And he didn't plan to let him get away so easily this time.

Chapter Three

Estefan felt numb. His feet moved, one in front of the other. His brain registered the large, opulent apartment. Somewhere deep in his subconscious awe bubbled up at the penthouse view of the Mississippi River. Lights from the bridges twinkled in the predawn then blurred.

His throat tightened with unshed tears. A deep ache settled in his stomach. For over eighty-five years Adria and Cardin had been the focus of his life. The hunt for vampires had never been Estefan's driving force. He'd followed because of her—her conviction, her drive and her kindness to him.

Although Estefan knew deep in his soul she'd have sacrificed him to her cause, he knew she had cared. Like a little general leading a tiny army, her purpose had a higher need. The idea of no more Adria left Estefan lost in a universe without focus.

Once the truth of the Rememdiu was discovered, Estefan thought their lives would become simpler. Only hunting vampires who killed for pleasure...how often would their services be required? Adria's own records didn't reveal many truly evil creatures.

Karl's voice brought Estefan out of his reverie. "Roger, you can get him cleaned up through here. The bedroom is yours for as long as you need it."

Pushing a door open, Karl revealed a large bedroom with a king-sized bed and dark wooden furnishings.

Roger nodded. "Thank you." His gaze was hard and cold, as was his voice. "Estefan, come on." Roger, his arm still around a dazed Cardin, walked into the bedroom.

Cardin's clothes were covered in dark stains. His hands discolored with Adria's blood. A shudder swept through Estefan. *Adria's gone...*

As he followed his friends, Estefan glanced at their host. Karl's face was pale and a slight tremor shook his hands. "Are you okay?"

Karl closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You claim you know what I am." His eyelids popped open. The flecks of gold in his hazel eyes seemed to spark. "You tell me what I need."

"To feed..." Estefan whispered.

Roger turned toward him. "Estefan, we need to talk."

With a short nod toward Karl, Estefan followed Roger and Cardin into the bedroom. He pushed the door closed behind him then leaned against it.

"We can't trust him." Roger kept his voice to an almost inaudible whisper. Like Watchers, vampires' hearing was far superior to mortals.

"I know but..." Estefan swallowed hard. The only person he'd ever told about warning Karl of Adria's plan was Roger. "I know him."

With his back to Estefan, Roger lifted the hem of Cardin's shirt, tugging it over his head. "Know him?"

"He's the one I told you about. The vampire who convinced me not all were evil."

"Fuck!" Roger didn't bother to lower his voice this time. As he turned around, Cardin swayed without Roger's support.

Estefan rushed to help, steadying his old friend. "It has no bearing on whether we can trust him—"

"No, it doesn't," Roger's voice dropped to a hint of a whisper, "but how the hell do we explain you?"

"I don't know." Estefan wrapped his arms around Cardin while Roger stripped the blood- and dirt-covered jeans down Cardin's leg. "Maybe he's forgotten me." Except Karl hadn't forgotten. Estefan didn't mention Karl's words in the van. Guilt flushed through his body and heated his skin.

“That wouldn’t be our luck.” Roger slipped one of Cardin’s arms over his shoulder. “I need to get him cleaned up and into bed. He’s in shock.”

Estefan took the other side then helped Roger maneuver Cardin into the bathroom. A huge whirlpool tub was in the center of the large room. A walk-in shower, big enough for the three of them, was in one corner. “Bath or shower?”

“Bath.” Pulling Cardin tight against him, Roger said, “I got him. Get the water started.”

“What about Karl?” Estefan turned on the tap, holding his hand under the water to check the temperature.

Roger shook his head. “We need a refuge for a little while. Cardin needs rest and a chance to come to terms with Adria’s loss.” His gaze locked with Estefan’s. “What about you?”

“Doesn’t seem real yet.” Estefan shook his head. “She’s always been there—gotten out of impossible situations with barely a scratch. The idea she won’t show up...” Tears blurred his vision and his throat grew too tight for words.

“Yeah. I understand.” Breaking his gaze, Roger tugged Cardin toward the rapidly filling tub. “Keep an eye on our host. He seems interested in you. He’s barely spoken to me.”

“He said he needs to feed.” A swirl of desire crept past the numbness.

“Can you handle it?”

Estefan nodded. His memory flashed with his last encounter with the tall blond vampire. “Yeah.” Desire seemed an inappropriate response under the circumstances but Estefan couldn’t control his reaction. Or his cock...

He and Roger struggled to finish undressing Cardin and settle him in the big tub. Roger began stripping as Estefan turned to leave.

“Don’t tell him anything. Especially about Kevin.”

“I won’t. I’m not stupid.” Irritation sparked deep inside Estefan as he left the bathroom.

In the beginning, as the youngest of the Watchers, Estefan had followed Cardin and Adria’s lead without question. After several years, his quiet role in the small team had become habit. At times, he thought Adria considered him simple—unchanged from the ignorant peasant boy prostituting himself for bread. He never tried to change her mind, although he didn’t believe Cardin felt the same way.

Adria’s ideas were usually good. Estefan never needed to disagree with her plans. If she proposed something too risky, Cardin usually pointed out the danger before Estefan had the chance.

Estefan exited the guestroom, closing the door softly behind him. No sign of his host. The sunrise glowed orange and red over Memphis. Estefan stared at the brilliant display of color. With a hum of quiet machinery, blinds and heavy curtains slid across the wall of windows, hiding the brightening daylight.

Tears welled in his eyes. Adria was gone... Maybe if he kept repeating the words they’d penetrate the fog clouding his brain.

“Estefan?” Karl’s harsh whisper came from behind him.

Twirling around, he found Karl hiding in the shadows of a long hallway. “You said you need to...”

“Yes. Very soon. Or I’ll be as bad as Martin Langley.”

“Who?” Estefan dragged his feet toward Karl’s hiding spot.

“The vampire who killed your friend.”

Estefan slipped into the darkened hallway. Growing desire for Karl mingled with an overwhelming need for revenge and the numbness began to dissipate.

“I should clean up first.” Estefan whispered as Karl pushed him into the master bedroom.

Sunlight didn't penetrate the windows in here. A small part of Estefan's mind wondered at the view hidden behind the shuttered glass.

"Need you now." Karl didn't waste time on words. His lips fastened on Estefan's mouth. His warm tongue teased the seam of Estefan's lips.

Simmering arousal reached boiling in the space of a few seconds. Estefan opened his mouth and matched Karl's hard kisses. Need filled his cock, pressing tight against the zipper of his jeans.

Fingers tangled in Estefan's hair as an arm snaked around his waist. Pulled tight against Karl, Estefan rubbed against the hard bulge of Karl's erection.

"Need you..." Karl whispered between biting kisses.

Karl's grip around Estefan tightened as the aroused vampire lifted Estefan from his feet. Estefan quelled his first instinct to struggle. Instead, he wrapped his arms around Karl, fingers combing through the wavy blond hair. With one leg crooked around Karl's hip, Estefan ground his aching groin against Karl's cock.

Sorrow morphed into the need to be close to someone. Estefan's memory of Karl, of a single night of passion, fueled a burning desire to rewind time, change fate. A sob slipped into the hard kisses. As Karl lowered Estefan to the bed, a second moan—half-passion, half-mourning—burst free.

Estefan's chest ached with suppressed grief. Karl's weight added to the pain but eased it at the same time. His throat thickened with emotion. Tears slid free and tickled a path down the sides of his face.

"Estefan?" Karl's fervent kisses stilled. His passion-glazed eyes softened. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked." Gentle fingers swiped moisture from Estefan's face.

"No!" Estefan slipped his hand around Karl's neck then tugged his face closer. Raising his head, he met Karl's lips again. "Please..." Frantic nips and licks urged Karl's cooperation. "Please..." Tears flowed between sobbing kisses.

Karl slid off Estefan but stayed close by his side. His hands caressed Estefan's body. Gentle touches to his chest, a tweak of a nipple through the dirty cotton t-shirt. Shivers joined the racking sobs. Fingers twisted the button of Estefan's jeans open. The zipper lowered, tooth by tooth, as Karl's kisses swallowed Estefan's gasping breaths.

When Karl's calloused hand slid inside the tight denim, Estefan arched into his palm. Thick fingers wrapped around Estefan's length. With his hips undulating to match Karl's strokes, strong desire swept through Estefan's body.

Release came fast and hard. Long spurts of come striped Karl's hand and Estefan's shirt.

Leaning over Estefan, Karl revealed the tiniest bit of fangs just below his upper lip.

Estefan nodded. His fingers laced through Karl's hair, pulling him closer. Twin pinpricks pierced his neck. Estefan's remaining energy curled through his body then out through the point of Karl's gentle sucking mouth. Closing his eyes, Estefan let darkness take him.

* * * * *

Karl propped his head in his hand, elbow planted on his pillow. The young man beside him was definitely the same one from seventy years ago. His taste wasn't something Karl could forget – so sweet and energizing.

Estefan's chest rose and fell in the regular rhythm of sleep. His eyes flitted back and forth under his eyelids. A soft moan, a gentle sigh, a deep sob...

Curiosity made Karl wonder what he dreamed. He ran his fingers across Estefan's chest then he placed his palm over his heart. A steady beat, a little fast, thrummed against Karl's skin.

Human but not quite. Even Estefan's blood affected him different from others. All vampires could feel the influence of the sun, even in the darkest room. Although the sun was high in the sky, Karl didn't feel the subtle pull against his strength.

Blood, laced with the pheromones of strong emotion, was the true sustenance capable of sustaining a vampire's life. Blood alone would suffice in an emergency but didn't satisfy the appetite for long.

Fear and sexual release were the opposite ends of the emotional spectrum. Most of his kind preferred one or the other, although either would do when necessary. The degree of emotion heightened the flavor of the blood. Arousal tasted sweeter, more mellow. Fear, while delivering a powerful jolt of adrenaline, left a bitter aftertaste. And the taste of terror was addictive. As Martin Langley proved.

Karl sighed. At one time, Martin had been the closest thing to a friend two vampires could be. The natural animosity between their kind didn't allow close physical contact except for brief periods. Technology—telephones and now computers—all unknown when they first met over one hundred thirty years ago allowed them to get to know each other well.

Then Martin was caught in daylight, unprotected. Drained and weak, self-preservation sent him hunting. The sunlight drove him mad and the flavor of terror spurred him into a killing spree.

Estefan's breath caught and held. His eyelids opened a crack, showing a little white but not his brilliant blue irises. His hand cupped Karl's, resting on Estefan's chest. Fingers tightened around Karl's hand. With a deep breath, Estefan opened his eyes.

"Hi," Karl whispered.

Estefan's sleepy gaze searched Karl's face. "I thought you were a dream."

"Nope. I'm really here." Karl laced his fingers through Estefan's. "Are you hungry? I can send out for something."

"Yeah, a little." A frown creased Estefan's forehead. His eyes squeezed tight, deepening the lines. "Adria..."

The word was so soft, Karl wasn't sure if Estefan spoke or he'd read his lips.

Estefan pulled his hand free of Karl's. "I need to check on Cardin and Roger." Shoving the light blanket off him, he rolled to the side of the bed then sat on the edge. "What time is it?" He adjusted his twisted t-shirt then ran a hand through his dark hair.

Karl glanced over his shoulder at the clock. "A little after four in the afternoon."

"And you're awake?" Estefan's tone didn't express surprise.

"Yes." Karl narrowed his gaze at the strange man. If he knew about vampires, he would understand the effect of sunlight. Unless his knowledge was limited. Karl needed to find out just how much his guests knew, but he also needed to deal with Martin.

Deal with Martin... Kill his friend.

Estefan stood then tugged his jeans into place. As he buttoned and zipped, he turned toward Karl. "So you're okay."

"For now. Check on your friends. I'll order some food." As Estefan left, Karl stretched out on the bed. His mind raced with possibilities. If Estefan was a ghost risen from his past, would his friends be the ones who had wanted to kill him? At the old marine hospital, the four of them had swords, armed for vampire killing.

Karl might be safer without his houseguests, but his curiosity wouldn't let them go so easily. And something more... He wouldn't let the idea of losing Estefan again take hold.

* * * * *

Estefan tapped on the guestroom door. No sound came from inside. He hated to wake either of his friends, especially Cardin. As he started to walk away, the doorknob clicked.

Peering out, his dark hair in a bad state of bedhead, Roger motioned for Estefan to enter. "Are you okay?" he whispered. Marks from the sheets lined Roger's naked skin.

"Yeah." Estefan slipped inside then closed the door. "Cardin?" Tangled in the sheet, his old friend was deep in sleep.

“Rough night.” Roger scratched his head, his fingers combing down the worst of his cowlicks. “Or morning. Sleep will do him some good.”

“They were together for a long time.” Estefan swallowed around a lump in his throat.

“So were you. How are you doing?”

“I’ll survive.” Concern from Roger—even Karl—made it difficult for Estefan to hold on to his self-control. A change of subject would keep more tears at bay. “Karl’s presence last night wasn’t random. He knows the killer. Martin Langley.”

“We should get Adria’s computer out of the van and see what her database has on both of them. We need clothes also. And food.”

“I’ll get the things from the van. Karl said he’d order some food.”

Roger’s gaze narrowed. “He’s awake? It’s full daylight.”

Shrugging, Estefan replied, “Watcher blood. You know it gives vampires more stamina.”

Roger’s lips pursed as he puffed a breath. “And will make him suspicious.” He shook his head. “Can’t be helped, I guess. If he knows the killer, we can use him.” A dark eyebrow arched over Roger’s right eye. “Did he say anything about remembering you?”

“No,” Estefan lied. At least not since the incident in the van.

“Stick with him as much as possible. Keep a close eye on him. Just because he hasn’t tried to harm us doesn’t mean he won’t.”

In his heart, Estefan disagreed, but his mind warned him to be cautious.

“And be careful.” Roger squeezed Estefan’s shoulder. “I don’t want to lose another and I don’t think Cardin could handle it.”

Estefan nodded then slipped out the bedroom door. Walking over to the covered windows, Estefan pulled one of the heavy curtains open a crack. His finger tugged aside one of the vertical slats of the blinds.

Sunlight glittered off the Mississippi River like a jeweled crown, but a dark cloud hovered far out on the horizon. The high vantage point emphasized the beauty of the massive river and hid the murky details of flotsam he knew was there.

The muddy waters would probably be Adria's final resting place. Even her cremated remains couldn't be saved. Fear of analysis by some enterprising forensic scientist demanded obliterating any evidence of Watcher or vampire.

Years ago, things weren't so complicated. The technological leaps and bounds made life more difficult for immortals.

"Are your friends okay?" Karl's voice startled him.

Releasing the curtain, Estefan turned toward his host. "Cardin's still sleeping. Roger asked me to get our bags from the van."

"I'll have Vicki fetch your things."

"Vicki?" Estefan hadn't realized anyone else was here. A possibly fatal mistake in his line of work.

"She works for me. Kind of housekeeper, chauffeur, all-around gofer. She lives on the next floor down—likes her privacy." Karl grinned. "I just called and woke her up. She's a little surprised I'm awake but she doesn't ask questions. She'll be here in a little while with the food. You can give her the keys to the van then."

"Does she know what you are?"

Karl's smile slipped. "Yes. She does."

A tendril of something almost like jealousy threaded through Estefan's gut. "Do you..."

"Drink from her?" Karl nodded. "I have. In emergencies. She's not real happy about it when it's necessary. She doesn't mind the sex part. It's the biting thing." Karl chuckled.

“Well, I can understand her position.” Karl’s nearness created a low undercurrent of tension. Whether the feeling came from his nature or from attraction, Estefan wasn’t sure. “Tell me about Martin Langley.”

Karl’s amusement faded into a frown. “He was a good person.” He tilted his head toward the couch then walked toward it. “He was a good friend.” After plopping down on the sofa, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “But he’s insane now. Nothing more than a killing machine – one who could reveal the existence of vampires.”

Estefan knew he should stay aloof and sit in one of the overstuffed chairs, but instead, he sat next to Karl. “Are you in pain?”

“Not really. I can feel Martin’s presence. It’s...hard to describe. Pins and needles – ants crawling, biting. The irritation becomes almost unbearable at times and is worse when he’s close. Like last night. Like now. And it gets worse the longer he’s around.”

The description matched the way Estefan felt but not as painful. And Karl’s close presence added a different kind of distraction. His encounter may have satisfied Karl’s immediate need, but the abrupt hand job left Estefan wanting more. Brushing aside his attraction, Estefan asked, “Can you tell where he’s at now?”

“No... Just too close. I should check the news reports. See if another victim has been reported.”

“What happened to Martin – to make him insane?”

Karl sighed as he slouched down into the thick cushions, stretching his long legs out in front of him. “He was traveling from his place in Texas to his home in Nashville. He hated flying. If he’d just...” Huffing a breath, Karl shook his head. “The vehicle he was traveling in wrecked on Interstate 40 just outside of West Memphis. His driver, who would have known what to do, was killed. When dawn broke, the sun would have added to his injuries, his need for blood. A passerby must have stopped to help and called 911.” Karl closed his eyes. “Police found the man’s body when they arrived on the scene. The string of killings leads straight into Memphis. Five in Arkansas and at last count, seven in Memphis.”

Without thinking about what he was doing, Estefan reached for Karl's hand. A tight grip returned his quick squeeze of compassion.

"If I'd known... He spoke to me the night before, warning me he would be passing through." Karl turned his face toward Estefan's. "Now I have to find my friend and kill him."

Impulse pushed Estefan closer. Hesitation made his kiss a soft brushing of lips. Karl helped banish uncertainty with a firm hand on the back of Estefan's neck, pulling his mouth against Karl's. Warm, moist flesh teased Estefan's lips.

A thrill of need raced through Estefan. Letting desire instead of logic reign, Estefan fell into the deepening kiss. One arm slid around his host while his other hand caressed the tight, muscled chest through a thin polo shirt. Dragging his fingernails over the hidden bump of a nipple, Karl rewarded him with a gasping moan.

Encouraged, Estefan ran his fingers down well-defined abs then teased the waist of Karl's faded jeans. The hard stomach concaved as Karl sucked in a sharp breath. Estefan took advantage of the slight gap between the jeans and Karl's skin. Slipping his hand inside, Estefan flattened his palm over Karl's hard length.

Confident Roger would stay in the guestroom until he returned, Estefan let desire take control. "I want to suck you," he whispered against Karl's mouth.

"Shit!" Karl exhaled hard. One hand opened his fly while the other twisted in Estefan's hair, pushing Estefan toward his groin.

Pulling his hand free, Estefan slid to the floor then crawled between Karl's splayed legs. He tugged the jeans open. Yanking soft black briefs down, he freed Karl's long, thick cock.

He wrapped his hand around Karl's hot flesh. Running his tongue around the flared head, he savored the musky flavor and scent. Karl's hands tangled in Estefan's long hair with almost painful strength. Estefan ignored the sharp tugs. His lips suckled the tip while his tongue teased the bitter taste of pre-come from the slit.

Seventy years ago, petrified with the knowledge of what Karl was, Estefan hadn't taken an active role in the encounter, reacting rather than participating. Now he knew what he wanted and how to get it.

Sucking hard, Estefan swallowed most of the erect cock. The thick tip filled his throat. Unable to breathe, he had to pull back. Gasping air around the crown, Estefan filled his lungs then plunged again.

Karl's moans intensified. His fingers alternated between pulling and combing Estefan's hair. "Damn...you're...fucking...good."

Lips tight around Karl's length, Estefan couldn't grin his amusement. Instead, he strove to drive Karl further into ecstasy.

Hips flexing, Karl matched Estefan's rhythm stroke for stroke. Grunts and groans punctuated each movement. Karl's fingers tightened on Estefan's scalp as his body went rigid. "Oh God!" Long legs wrapped around Estefan's chest in a breath-stealing crush.

Hot come splashed against Estefan's throat. Pulling back, he wrapped his lips around the crown. His hand milked the thick flesh as he suckled Karl's semen from his pulsing length.

"Damn..." Karl's legs eased their hold on Estefan. His tense body relaxed as did his grip on Estefan's head.

Karl's cocked slipped from Estefan's mouth. "Not finished with you." He kissed a path up Karl's stomach, pushing his shirt up as he went.

"Really?" A wide grin split Karl's face. His eyes twinkled his interest.

"Really." Estefan pulled away. Raising Karl's legs up against his chest, Estefan yanked his jeans and briefs off Karl's long legs. His hands behind Karl's knees, he shoved the man's legs forward. "Hang on to these, would you?"

Karl grasped his legs, pulling his knees toward his chest. Grinning at Estefan, he asked, "What now?"

Chuckling, Estefan bent over. "This." Using the flat of his tongue, he bathed Karl's balls with sloppy licks. "And this." Moving lower, he swiped his tongue against his puckered anus. "And this." After wetting his finger with spit, he pressed against Karl's perineum as his mouth teased Karl's ass.

"Yeah..." Karl gasped for air. His fingers tightened, knuckles white, around his legs as he spread his knees wider.

"Like that, eh?" Estefan whispered. He pushed his finger past the ring of muscle, now relaxed from Estefan's teasing. Twisting his finger, he searched for Karl's prostate. When he found the hard gland, Karl's body jerked and his half-wilted cock twitched with renewed interest.

"Yes. More." His body rocked back and forth, slowly fucking himself on Estefan's finger.

Estefan chuckled. "How much more?" He slipped a second finger in the tight passage.

Karl's gaze met his. Hazel sparkled with gold. "Whatever you've got."

With his free hand, Estefan undid his fly. Awkward one-handed tugs released his cock from the tight prison of his jeans. Spit wasn't much of a lubricant but Estefan was past caring and Karl wasn't objecting.

Pushing past the initial resistance, Estefan paused to catch his breath. Tight was an understatement, but the sharp flare of pain didn't dampen the pleasure.

With his eyes closed, Karl's teeth worried his lower lip. "Don't stop." His harsh whisper encouraged Estefan.

The muscle wasn't relaxed enough. Using his thumbs, Estefan massaged the flesh stretched around his length. Added spit helped ease his cock deeper. A grunt and a gasp made him pause again.

Karl nodded. "Keep going."

“Is this your punishment?” Estefan knew the pain of unprepared penetration. Many years had passed since he wandered the streets of Marseilles but he hadn’t forgotten.

Karl’s eyes flew open. “Punishment?”

“For letting your friend down?”

“No.” Karl rocked toward him, pushing Estefan’s cock deeper. “I…” Karl closed his eyes again. With a long sigh, his body relaxed. The hard pressure around Estefan’s dick eased a little. “Just shut up and fuck me.”

Estefan moved again. Short strokes matching Karl’s rocking body. He wouldn’t last long. The taste of Karl’s cock had him on edge. The intense grip of Karl’s body was almost too much. A slow rhythm pushed Estefan’s need to the limit. The heat of desire swirled through his groin then erupted. Come eased Estefan’s final strokes as his body jerked against Karl’s ass.

Gulping air, Karl released one leg. His hand reached for Estefan, snagging a strand of hair. He tugged him forward.

Leaning between Karl’s legs, Estefan met Karl’s mouth. Hungry, gasping kisses bruised Estefan’s lips. Hands ran up and down Estefan’s back, clawing at his sweat-damp t-shirt. Nails bit into his flesh. Desperation flavored Karl’s kisses, not need or desire, but Estefan let it pass.

A sharp rap on the front door didn’t give him much warning—especially when the door opened immediately after the knock.

“Boss—oops…” A tall, well-built black woman, at least six foot, filled the doorway. Her hands full of plastic bags, a wide grin split her face. “Didn’t realize you were gettin’ busy. I’ll come back.”

Karl laughed a long, low sound. “Vicki, this is Estefan. Estefan, Vicki.” His hand waved between the two. “And your timing is perfect. We just finished.”

Chapter Four

Easing free of Karl's body, Estefan chuckled at Karl's nonchalant attitude. "Nice to meet you, Vicki." After tugging his jeans in place, he tossed Karl his clothes. "I presume you're bringing lunch. I'm starved."

Vicki sauntered through the living room, her ample hips swaying to a silent rhythmic beat. "Strenuous exercise has been known to work up an appetite."

The aroma of grilled meat and other tantalizing smells had Estefan following Vicki. "Definitely."

"Vicki." Karl came around the corner of the long bar separating the kitchen from the living room, fastening his jeans. "I need you to get the bags out of Estefan's van. He and his friends will be staying for a few days."

"No problem, boss."

"Don't call me that."

"Sure, boss." Vicki held her hand out toward Estefan. "Keys? And where'd you park?"

Estefan handed over the keys. "It's a white cargo van. I don't remember the parking spot number." He'd been in a daze when they arrived. He barely remembered the drive from the crematorium. A jolt of sadness tightened his chest.

"He's next to the Mercedes."

"Back in a flash." Vicki strode out of the room.

As soon as the front door clicked shut, Karl backed Estefan against the counter. "And I'm not punishing myself over Martin. I couldn't help him when I didn't know what was happening. I realize that." He leaned his forehead against Estefan's. "Maybe I

am beating myself up—a little—over what I have to do.” His lips brushed Estefan’s nose. “However, what we did wasn’t punishment. You felt so good—”

The click of a door then Roger’s voice interrupted the conversation. “Estefan. Cardin’s awake and asking for you.”

Estefan brushed his nose against Karl’s. “Gotta go.” Slipping from Karl’s grasp with regret, Estefan hurried toward the bedroom.

Roger’s frown wasn’t a good sign.

“Is Cardin okay?” Estefan slipped past his grim friend.

“Yeah. He’s in the bathroom.” Roger shut the door. “I told you to stick close to Brandt but you seem to have taken my words to the extreme.”

“What?” Estefan turned to face him.

“I was looking for you earlier. Didn’t have to look far.” Roger arched his eyebrow as his teeth worried the inside of his lower lip.

A flush of anger washed through Estefan. “So...I fucked him. We’ve done worse for information.” Irritation switched to shame as he lied.

“And did you get *any*?”

Estefan ignored his sarcastic emphasis. “Yes. Langley was traveling from Texas to Nashville when his vehicle crashed. Injuries, too much sunlight, lack of blood... You know the story. Like Serena would have been without Adria’s blood.”

Roger’s frown softened at the mention of his mother. Serena Whitmore had nearly died in an accident while pregnant with Roger. Her vampire lover Zaki Bashandi had a choice of letting her die, and Roger with her, or transforming her. Unable to care for an injured premature child, Zaki left him at a hospital. By the time Serena recovered from the voracious appetite of transformation, Roger was gone, lost in the foster care system.

Only a few days ago, Roger met his mother and her lover for the first time. Weak and violent from lack of blood and too much exposure to sunlight, Serena almost ended up like Langley. Adria volunteered her blood to save the other woman.

But no one could save Adria.

"Yeah..." Roger walked across the room. "Did you get our things?"

"Karl's housekeeper is getting the bags. And she brought some food."

The bathroom door opened. Pale with dark rings under his eyes, Cardin shuffled into the bedroom. "Estefan..."

Crossing the room, Estefan pulled Cardin into a tight hug. "How are you doing?"

"I'll survive." A shudder rippled through Cardin's body. "We have a job to do. Adria wouldn't want us to allow the killer to get away because of her."

"I know. We'll get him." He squeezed his old friend tight. "Our host gave us some information. He should be able to help us."

Cardin pulled away. His hooded gaze glared. "You expect us to trust him?"

"He didn't kill Adria. And he saved me." Estefan backed away from Cardin's angry hiss. "I couldn't have taken another blow. Langley is past insane. He's going to be hard to kill."

Pushing Estefan away, Cardin turned to Roger. "You agreed to this?"

Roger shook his head. "Not yet. But Brandt has supplied us with enough information to verify his story. As soon as I get Adria's computer, I'll check it out. In the meantime, play along with Brandt. Let's see where it gets us." With a sharp glare at Estefan, Roger continued. "If he looks like he'll double-cross us, we'll take care of him as well."

Divided loyalties ripped through Estefan. A swirl of conflicting emotions twisted his gut. Under the pressure of Roger's expectant stare and silence, Estefan forced his head into a short nod. He prayed he'd never have to make a choice.

A light knock on the door saved him from having to say anything. "It's Vicki. I have your things."

Roger yanked open the door.

Shouldering her way into the room, Vicki wheeled a trolley filled with luggage past Roger. "I grabbed everything in the van. Didn't know what you needed. I'll hang on to the keys. The van needs cleaning. I'll take care of it."

"Thank you, Vicki." Estefan shuddered at the idea of cleaning Adria's blood out of the floorboard. "Please tell Karl we'll be out in a few minutes."

With a quick nod toward Estefan, Vicki strolled out of the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

Grabbing his bag from the trolley, Estefan rushed for the bathroom. "I need a quick shower."

* * * * *

Karl sat back in his chair. Tension radiated off Estefan's friends even as they ate. The scent of barbecued ribs tickled his memory of the taste of food. A liquid diet for nearly for a hundred and fifty years could get a little boring.

Lowering his eyelids, he suppressed a smile. Estefan's taste was a definite step up from his usual menu. Somehow, he'd convince the man to stay. Estefan's blood staved off the weakness of daylight and if he was as old as Karl believed, he'd be the perfect companion for a vampire.

Peering through his lashes, he watched Estefan. The shoulder-length dark hair was longer than he remembered. But the eyes—luminous blue like sparks of electricity surrounding the dark circle of his pupil—not something he could forget. Or the gentle feelings the young man had inspired in him then—and now.

With a soft sigh, he pulled his thoughts back to business. "Langley killed again after he escaped last night."

Estefan's gaze cut across the table to Roger then back to his plate. Obviously not new information. One of the bags Vicki retrieved was a computer case. They probably checked out the news story on Martin's accident, as well.

Without waiting for acknowledgement, Karl continued. "He's still close. I can sense him."

Roger dropped a rib bone on his plate then grabbed his napkin. "Can you tell how close? Or a direction?"

"The feeling isn't that clear, but I'd say he's within a few miles. Probably in hiding since he fed recently."

"Considering we're right on the edge of Memphis, that's a lot of ground to cover." Estefan's gaze darted toward Karl. "Thank you for the meal."

"I could say the same."

A brilliant smile lit Estefan's face. An invisible tether tugged Karl toward the young man. Forcing his body to remain in his chair, he couldn't help his wide grin. More than his looks—gorgeous as he was—even more than the amazing effects of his blood, something about Estefan attracted him as no other had in the long years of existence.

"Where was his latest victim found?" Roger returned the conversation to business. A frown marred his forehead as he glared across the table at Estefan.

"A couple of miles from here—in an alley off Beale Street. But you knew that."

Roger's gaze switched to Karl. "Yes. I did."

With a long sigh, Karl leaned back in his chair. "I know you have no reason to trust me. And I have even less to trust you. But Martin is dangerous, to humans and to my kind." Karl tapped his fingernails on the table. "I thought I'd have to handle Martin alone. Evidently, you have abilities you prefer to keep a secret but can be useful."

One eyebrow shot up as Roger glared at Estefan.

"He didn't say anything. He didn't have to." Leaning forward, he met Roger's hard stare. "Estefan withstood three blows from Martin. The first should have disarmed him then sliced right through him. No way he's human. And if he isn't..."

The one called Cardin had picked at his food in silence since he sat down. "Doesn't matter what we are. All we're concerned with is finding Adria's killer." His jaw clenched and his throat rippled up and down his Adam's apple. "Whatever it takes."

"Agreed." Probably not for the same reasons. Karl relaxed his body one muscle at a time, easing back against his chair. "The sun sets around eight. We'll hunt then."

Roger pushed away from the table. "Wandering around Memphis that early with swords could be problematic."

"True..." The gnawing presence of another vampire nagged at Karl's patience. Besides the irritation, he wanted to get this over and done. "But the weather report shows a storm moving in. Raincoats should be sufficient cover for the blades."

* * * * *

A jumble of music echoed off buildings lining Beale Street, mingling with rumbling thunder. Cracks of lightning played percussion to the bluesy tempos. Estefan tramped through the slow, drizzling rain, his gaze resting on Karl's broad back as they wove through the few souls foolish enough to brave the storm. His skin sweltered under the military-style rain poncho.

Although Estefan didn't think starting at the scene of Martin Langley's last attack would do any good, he hadn't objected when Karl suggested it. Estefan had no idea where else to begin their search.

Estefan glanced over his shoulder to check for his friends. A couple of yards behind Estefan, Roger kept near Cardin's side. Cardin's stumbling grief from last night was gone. He moved with strong, even steps but his pale face and dark rings under his eyes revealed his inner turmoil.

Estefan's sense of Karl seemed to intensify the longer they walked. The same double tingling as the night before teased his skin. Without thinking, Estefan whispered, "I think he's close."

"Estefan!" Roger's hiss of anger came from behind Estefan.

Karl stopped so suddenly, Estefan nearly plowed into him. Whirling around, his gaze narrowed. "You can sense him."

"What are you talking about?" The thin denial helped stall for time. Estefan darted around Karl. "We have a job to do."

A tight grip squeezed Estefan's left arm, yanking him to a stop. Karl spun him around. "What are you?"

Cardin sprang toward Karl, his poncho outlining the blade hiding beneath the thin disguise. "Let him go." His low growl revealed some of the anger bubbling below the surface.

Twisting free of Karl's grip, Estefan stepped between his friend and Karl. "Not here," he hissed as much at Karl as at Cardin. "We don't need to draw attention." As if three men in surplus military ponchos weren't attracting gazes already. "Save it. Let's find Langley first."

Roger pulled Cardin away. "He's right. The sooner we get the job done, the sooner we'll be out of here." Roger's dark-eyed gaze rested on Karl as he spoke. "And what we are is none of your business."

Karl's voice lowered to a harsh whisper as a passerby rushed around them. "It is if you endanger me. I don't plan to lose my head because of your personal vendetta."

Roger drew a long breath. "It didn't start personal. We were sent here because we know about vampires and have the means to kill them if necessary." His hand rubbed Cardin's back in long strokes on the wet raingear.

Releasing his hold on Cardin, Estefan relaxed a little. In the short time Roger had been with their team, he and Cardin had formed a tight bond. If anyone could keep a handle on Cardin's grief and anger, Roger could.

The unnatural awareness of another vampire grew stronger. A shudder rippled down Estefan's back. "He's really close." Like pins and needles, the sensation grew worse as he spoke.

Roger and Cardin nodded, their gazes darted around the surrounding area.

“He’s right.” Tight with irritation, Karl’s voice whispered close to Estefan’s ear. “We should split up. Move down the street on each side.”

A soft tug on Estefan’s poncho indicated whom Karl wanted with him. “Okay.”

Heat and humidity added to the nervous sweat trickling down Estefan’s back. As many times as Estefan followed Adria and Cardin into harm’s way, he never grew accustomed to the rush of adrenaline. His heart raced, sending blood pounding through his veins. Taking short breaths through his mouth, he strained to hear any sign of Langley. The sensation guiding him grew in intensity with each step.

Karl stumbled, weaving to the left before his feet steadied. “Too close...” The tip of his long sword tented the hem of his long raincoat.

The hilt of Estefan’s sword rested against his palm. An easy grip, familiar and comforting, tightened against the warm metal.

As he passed a darkened alley, a flash of movement caught Estefan’s gaze. As he twisted around for a closer look, Langley, his face skull-like, hollowed cheeks and sunken eyes, flew from his hiding spot at a blinding speed.

Mouth agape, long canines flashing, Langley dove for Estefan. Dim light from the street lamp glinted off a long blade.

Estefan flipped his sword forward. Twisting in the poncho, the defensive blow missed the target. Langley’s aim was much better.

The ripping screech of tearing nylon sounded far away. Blinding pain tore Estefan’s breath from his lungs. Heat flushed through his body as the blade drove deep. A warm gush of blood mixed with sweat wet the front and back of his shirt.

Teeth grazed Estefan’s jaw, scraping a line down toward his throat. The sharp sting lancing through his neck was a minor irritation compared the pain in his gut.

“Estefan!” Three voices in unison yelled his name.

With a hidden well of strength, Estefan shoved Langley. The force of Estefan's blow sent Langley reeling backward, off balance. Searing fire ripped through his stomach as the steel slid free. Strong hands kept him from falling.

A flurry of feet rushed away and toward them at the same time, shouts of alarm from strange voices obscured the action.

Cardin's low growl murmured against his ear. "We have to get him out of here."

Estefan forced his eyes open. Karl's blurry face floated in front of him.

"He needs a doctor. A hospital." The panic in Karl's voice added a fuzzy sense of pleasure.

"No, no doctor..." Estefan ran his hand across his stomach. Langley's sword was gone but the gaping wound left behind burned as if he'd been branded. "Get me out of here. Your place."

Cardin's arms started to tighten around his chest but Karl stepped forward. Cradling Estefan as if he were a wounded child, Karl lifted him in strong arms. Stepping into a dark corner, Karl hesitated then began to run.

Vampires and Watchers could attain high speeds on foot, almost to the point of invisibility to inattentive humans. Hot, muggy wind tugged at Estefan's clothes as Karl raced through the dark storm-heavy night.

With a sigh of relief, Estefan sank into his lover's arms and let darkness surround him.

Chapter Five

Karl gritted his teeth as he stood back and let Estefan's friends treat the gaping wound. The scent of blood was almost overpowering. His concern for Estefan kept his appetite in check.

"More water, boss." Vicki's normally cheerful disposition was subdued as she walked in with a basin of clean water. "How's he doing?"

"He'll be fine," Roger murmured as he traded bowls.

The once-clear water was thick with blood. Kneeling on Karl's bed next to Estefan, Roger used a clean cloth to wipe away the remaining blood from the injury. Already the gash in Estefan's stomach seemed smaller, like the skin was knitting back together without benefit of stitches.

Vicki glanced at Karl as she moved carefully toward the door. "You okay, boss?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Vic." As soon as she left the room, Karl asked, "How did he survive?" He racked his memory for the old tales of immortal creatures. Some hinted the...the name was on the tip of his tongue but his mind wouldn't supply it. Some stories claimed they were related to vampires. Others believed the creatures were "cured" vampires – no longer dependent on blood. Most considered them a myth born of wishful thinking.

Whatever they were called, Estefan was living – still living – proof they existed. And Karl wanted to know more. If they were cured vampires... The possibility of leaving his world of forever darkness sent his heart racing. Of all the things he missed about mortality, the sunrise was top of his list. His very long list.

"Fuck, that hurts," Estefan whispered.

"I would think so." Sitting next to Estefan, Cardin smiled at the supine man in the middle of Karl's wide bed. "Getting run through isn't much fun." Cardin ran his hand

across Estefan's forehead, brushing sweat-damp hair out of his eyes. "Scared me." Leaning over, Cardin planted a soft kiss on Estefan's cheek.

A surge of jealousy rushed through Karl. He'd been sure Roger and Cardin were lovers but Cardin's gesture was more than friendly.

"Lift him up so I can finish cleaning his back and wrap him." Roger pulled a thick roll of gauze from a first-aid kit as Cardin slid his arm under Estefan's shoulders.

"Oh shit..." Estefan gritted his teeth, his jaw tensed and locked. The muscle beneath ticked a steady beat as Cardin lifted him to a sitting position.

Before Roger covered the wound with gauze, Karl caught a good look at Estefan's stomach. The long gash looked like it had several days' worth of healing. In less than an hour, the cut had angry red edges, puckered and swollen.

Even if Langley hadn't hit any major organs, the blood loss alone would have killed a human. The only visible effects were Estefan's pale face and a tremor in his hands. Even the wound on his neck had faded to almost invisible. If Karl hadn't known where to look, he'd have never seen the faint lines where Langley bit him.

"We need to talk." Karl wouldn't allow them to distract him again.

The three men glanced in his direction then exchanged furtive looks among each other.

Roger kept twisting the bandage around Estefan's stomach as he spoke. "We *are* different. Kind of hard to deny it at this point. However, exactly what we are is of no importance. What we have to do is."

"I understand your mission. Langley has to be stopped. But I can't effectively use your abilities if I don't know what they are." Karl forced down a wince at his poor choice of words.

Roger's head shot up and his hard glare threatened to poke holes in Karl. "You don't need to use us at all. We don't need you to accomplish our mission."

Estefan ran a hand down Roger's arm. "We do need him. It'll be safer with four of us." A slight flush gave color to Estefan's pale skin.

A rush of pleasure swept through Karl. Estefan's reaction gave him hope. Maybe Estefan wanted Karl around for more than the hunt for Langley.

"Estefan—" Cardin's low growl was cut short.

"Let's not argue now." Estefan eased back on the bed. "I could use a little rest."

Roger nodded. He brushed a stray lock of hair off Estefan's cheek. "Good idea."

"We'll try again in the morning." Cardin didn't look ready to let go. His frown deepened as his jaw clenched. "Maybe we can catch Langley asleep."

"No, he's harder to track then." Roger met the other man's hard stare. "I don't want to leave Estefan and he needs more time before he can rejoin us."

The slight power struggle seemed odd. Karl had assumed from the beginning that Roger was their leader. However, his orders ruffled Cardin's feathers.

"If Adria—"

Estefan's fingers clutched around Cardin's wrist. A long sigh ended in a slight groan. "She's not, Cardin. Please don't argue. I don't want you hunting Langley without me. Just wait a little while. I'll be better by morning."

Cardin's fierce gaze softened. His hand cupped Estefan's fingers. Although his frown didn't match his tone, his acquiescence was gentle. "Of course," he whispered.

"Now let me sleep...a little while." Estefan's eyes closed as his words slurred.

Roger packed the first-aid kit and snapped it shut before he ran his fingers through Estefan's hair. "Come on. Leave him to rest." He glanced at Cardin then canted his head toward the bedroom door.

As the two men rose from their places on each side of Estefan, Karl stepped forward. He wanted his own reassurance of Estefan's rapid recovery. Even though Estefan's chest rose and fell with a regular rhythm, Karl needed to touch the pale face, feel the heat of his breath. Except Roger stepped in the way.

“Leave him.” The low growl didn’t intimidate Karl. No matter what kind of creature the three men were, Karl didn’t believe they could best him in a fight.

“I will. In a minute.” Karl sidestepped Roger with a burst of speed then knelt on the bed. His fingers trailed down Estefan’s face from his temple to his chin. His index finger ran across the soft lips.

A weak mumble from Estefan ended in a half kiss on the tip of Karl’s finger. His eyes moved under his eyelids in rapid, jerking movement. A smile quirked the edge of his mouth for a brief moment.

“Sweet dreams,” Karl whispered. Climbing off the bed, Karl turned toward Estefan’s friends. “Now we can let him rest.”

Roger stood, waiting for Karl, his expression soft and questioning. Cardin, however, looked as if he wanted to rip Karl’s head off.

“Let’s have that talk now.” Karl led the way out of the bedroom, down the dark hall then into the large living room.

The open blinds revealed the lights of the bridges over the Mississippi River. Even at nearly two in the morning, cars created glowing ribbons across the long spans. Karl had never seen the impressive architecture during daylight. If Estefan and his friends were cured vampires, the possibility of seeing the sun glinting off the bridges...

“So what are you?” Karl spun on his heel to face his two guests. “And no bullshit about it doesn’t matter.”

“Why should it?” Roger shrugged. “It doesn’t affect you.”

“How can you say that? You appear to be vampires—or at least have their abilities—yet you don’t need blood, you eat real food. Estefan’s blood sustained me better than any human ever has.”

“We can’t change what you are.” Roger’s gaze flicked away then back again. “So, like I said before, what difference does it make?”

“But Estefan’s blood does. I was awake during daylight without any weakness.” Karl hadn’t thought of it at the time, but now he wondered what would have happened if he’d opened the blinds and let the sun into the apartment. “With him, I wouldn’t be trapped in eternal night.” Although Karl wasn’t sure of his statement when he spoke the words, Roger’s slight frown and tightening jaw seemed to confirm his suspicions.

“You can’t have him.” Instead of his usual gruff growl, Cardin’s tone was soft. “He...I can’t lose him too.”

Roger’s attention shifted to his friend. “We won’t lose him, Cardin. He’ll be okay.” A swift hug enveloped the despondent man.

Karl wasn’t ready to let the subject go. “How could he survive Langley’s blow? The position of the sword had to have hit something vital. Intestines, liver, kidneys, something.”

Roger kept an arm around Cardin as he turned back toward Karl. “Look, we do have certain strengths, abilities. Yes, similar to vampires but we aren’t—have never been—vampires. We can’t cure you. Our blood is only a temporary fix.”

“All of you are the same.” Karl’s mind roiled with possibilities. Three of them, each with blood laced with strength unlike any he’d found before. If he could convince them to stay, supply him with sustenance, the strength gained from Estefan—that still flowed through him—could continue. But how to convince them?

“Yes, as was Adria. But as far as we know, we’re the only ones.”

Vicki stepped into the dining area of the large open room. One hand carried a platter of sandwiches. Her other hand gripped the necks of a couple of cold beers. “Thought ya’ll might need to refuel a little.” She set the food and drinks on the dark table next to highly polished wooden box. Her hand caressed the top with a reverent touch. “Hank dropped this off earlier.” Vicki headed for the front door. “Holler if you need anything else, boss.”

Nodding, Karl turned to his guests. He didn’t need to explain the contents.

Cardin's gaze fixed on the small casket of ashes. "Adria..." He pulled from Roger's embrace. Stumbling forward, he reached for the box, but his fingers stopped short of touching it. A small gasp slipped from his lips followed by a low groan.

Roger stepped behind him. His hands steadied Cardin's swaying body. Fingers dug into tense muscles, alternating between massaging and caressing. Planting a light kiss on Cardin's neck, Roger whispered into Cardin's ear, "It's okay."

Cardin ran his hand across the polished wood then he grasped the box in a tight hold with both hands. "I need a few minutes." Escaping Roger's steadying hold, Cardin stumbled toward the bedroom with the casket clutched tight to his chest.

Roger stepped forward then hesitated.

"How long were they together?" Karl asked, his voice soft and low.

"Two hundred years or so." Roger twirled around to face Karl. A flush crept up his throat toward his face.

Karl kept his smile of triumph from his lips. At last, some real information. "So Estefan was the man I met in Düsseldorf seventy years ago."

First glancing over his shoulder at the now-closed bedroom door, Roger nodded. "We still can't cure you." He looked again toward the door where Cardin disappeared.

A low growl of pain floated through the solid wood.

"Excuse me." Roger darted toward the bedroom. As he opened the door and slipped through, a long, sobbing howl escaped the bedroom.

Karl stared at the door as it clicked shut. "But a temporary fix repeated on a regular basis is a cure, of sorts." His thoughts led him to Estefan and his feet followed.

Slipping down the hall, he eased the door open. Estefan had rolled over on his side and curled into a fetal position. His hand rested on his bandaged wound. Estefan's slow, steady breathing reassured Karl.

Shutting the door behind him, Karl then moved to the bed. The eminent sunrise tugged at his nervous system like the inevitable tide. With Estefan's blood still fueling

him, the exhaustion, which usually heralded daylight, wasn't present. Somehow, he'd convince Estefan to stay. He had to.

With one man, he could stave off the overwhelming need for blood. One man, as immortal as Karl, he could share his solitary life without fear of his lover growing old and dying.

Even seventy years ago, Estefan fascinated Karl. If only he'd convinced the younger man to stay with him then, how different would his life be?

Estefan's eyelids refused to cooperate as the bed shifted behind him. The pain had decreased to a dull ache, but his body was dead weight. He didn't have the strength to do more than breathe. The healing process focused all his energy into knitting his flesh back together.

Warm breath nuzzled his neck as a muscled arm wrapped him in a gentle embrace. "Sleep and heal." Karl's whisper teased his ear. A soft kiss tickled his neck.

His mind drifted through the events of the evening like a video. Karl's arms cradling him as they raced back to the apartment, the whispered words of encouragement laced with a pleading tone, all came back to Estefan on a wave of emotion. A soft whimper tightened his throat.

Karl's arm lifted from Estefan's waist. "Am I hurting you?"

His neck didn't have the strength to shake his head. "No." Estefan croaked out the single syllable.

Karl's embrace returned with a lighter touch than before. The warmth of his body lined Estefan's back with a comforting heat. With a long sigh, Estefan sank back into the oblivion of sleep.

* * * * *

Estefan opened his eyes as the bedroom door squeaked open. Karl's breath puffed through the hair on the back of Estefan's head.

Roger's head poked around the door, one eyebrow quirked up toward his hairline. "How're you feeling?" His low whisper carried across the room.

Drawing a deep breath, Estefan took inventory of his aches and pains. The stomach wound was a dull memory. Strength returned to his muscles and the lethargy flowing through his veins earlier was gone. "Good." His condition surprised him.

In eighty-five years of vampire hunting, Estefan had never suffered more than a few scrapes and bruises and once a broken arm. The healing process hadn't affected him the same way. Of course, he hadn't had severe blood loss with those injuries. Maybe the heart needed more resources to replenish his system.

A strong urge to stretch languid muscles overwhelmed him. As he straightened his body and let the desire take over, Karl stirred behind him.

"Are you okay?"

Karl's concern warmed him more than it should. "Yeah." After Langley was destroyed, Estefan and his friends would move on. Something more with Karl was as impossible now as it was seventy years ago. Leaving Cardin and Roger wasn't an option, especially now that Adria was gone.

Sadness welled up with the thought of her. "Cardin?" He directed his question toward Roger.

"He's fine. Sleeping." Roger's Adam's apple bobbed with a hard swallow. "We received Adria's ashes. He had trouble getting to sleep. I didn't want to disturb him yet."

"What time is it?" Estefan squeezed Karl's forearm then slipped free of the man's embrace. Sitting up, he swung his legs off the bed. A small wave of dizziness kept him from rising.

"Almost dark. We should start the hunt again." Roger's gaze narrowed and a frown creased his brow. "Are you up to it? We could wait."

“No. We’d be risking another death—or more.” With a deep breath, Estefan heaved his body to a standing position. Residual pain from his side caught his breath. Or maybe it was the idea he should hurt, phantom pain like an amputee feels.

Karl followed him out of the bed. His hand hovered at Estefan’s side as if he expected him to topple over in a dead faint. Or maybe just dead.

“I’m fine.” Estefan waggled a dismissive wave even though his arm objected to the sudden motion. “I need to walk around some. I’m a little stiff.”

Straightening, he took a few more steps. Karl and Roger both started when he did then stopped with him.

“God, please! Leave me alone. Get out. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Karl chuckled as he shrugged. “Fine. I’ll see if Vicki’s brought up any food.” With a fast gait, Karl disappeared through the bedroom door.

“So what’s going on with you two?” Roger kept his voice very low.

Estefan darted a quick look at his friend. Roger’s face was so open. His gaze merely questioning, not accusing. “I don’t know. If things were different...”

“How different? You weren’t a Watcher? He wasn’t a vampire?”

“Yeah, sounds a little like the Capulets and the Montagues, doesn’t it?”

Roger smiled, the look gentling his features. “Not as easy. At least they were all human.”

“But if we can befriend other vampires, why not this one?” Estefan didn’t mean to blurt out the question that had been bugging him for the last two days.

“Because we don’t know if we can trust him with our deepest secrets. And we can’t risk him being around and one of us slipping.” Roger’s smile faded, replaced by a sympathetic grimace.

“What if I went off alone with him?”

“I’m not sure we could let you do that.”

Resentment bubbled up in Estefan's stomach. "Let me? I don't need your permission."

"It's not a matter of permission." Roger laid a hand on Estefan's arm. "What's at stake is far too dangerous. If a vampire found out about the Rememdiu—about what it means—he could create an army of almost invincible creatures. With their natural animosity for each other gone, they could band together. The world wouldn't be safe from an army of vampires."

"I know." Estefan yanked his arm away. "I'm not as stupid as everyone assumes."

"I never thought you stupid, Estefan. But I do think you can be impulsive. Keep in mind, if you tried to leave with Brandt, we'd have to stop you."

"You think you can? What would you do? Kill me?" His voice rose as his anger threatened to boil over.

Roger's eyes widened with shock. "Shush. Keep your voice down. No. Never." His features hardened again. "But we would have to kill Brandt."

Estefan drew a sharp breath. "You couldn't. He's done nothing but help us."

"I could and I would to keep the secret safe. We don't know him and can't trust him. Keep that in mind." Roger turned then ended the conversation by stalking out of the bedroom.

Shock relieving him of breath, Estefan returned to the bed. Sitting on the edge, he buried his hands in his face. Although he'd not seriously thought about a life with Karl, the idea had stuck somewhere in the back of his mind. Now with even the remote possibility obliterated by Roger, Estefan mourned the loss of something he'd never have.

Chapter Six

The thunderstorms from the night before had abated, leaving sticky, humid air in its place. Concealing long swords wasn't easy without the ponchos, but the weather made the gear too suspicious. Using speeds only immortals could muster, the four men stayed hidden as they moved from shadows to shadows.

Karl, in the lead, kept glancing over his shoulder to assure himself the others kept up. The idea of immortals who were not vampires fascinated him in more than one way.

Legends and myths circulated over the centuries about a cure for vampires. Although Roger insisted they couldn't cure him, if these three men existed, then wasn't there a possibility the cure did too? Maybe he wouldn't find it with them, or in them, but would a search go completely unrewarded?

And Estefan. The man himself would be a dream come true. So far, his blood had sustained Karl far better than any mere mortal. Even if the trio wouldn't lead him to a cure, Estefan was the next best thing.

But he'd heard bits and pieces of the whispers earlier. Roger was adamantly opposed to Karl staying with them or Estefan with Karl.

Karl was feeling the proverbial rock sticking in his back as the hard place closed on his chest. To keep Estefan, he might have to fight the other two. Would Estefan allow that? Probably not. Could Karl kidnap Estefan without provoking a fight? A possibility. But he'd need to get everything into place before he made a move. And Langley had to be disposed of before he could do anything.

The situation was enough to make his head hurt. His sense of awareness focused on the pain. Langley was close. He put aside his musings about Estefan to concentrate. As

they paused in the shadows, Karl whispered, "He's close again. Let's not get taken unaware this time."

Roger nodded. "We need to stay together, try to cover all sectors of approach."

"Do you think he will come to us?" Estefan asked. "I mean, he has to be aware of at least Karl. Don't you think his instinct would force him to attack?"

"It's possible." Karl moved closer to Estefan. "I know he didn't get much of you when he bit but if he's tasted you at all..."

"You think he'll come back for me?" Estefan's throat worked his Adam's apple up and down. "I'm really not liking that possibility."

"We need to keep him in the middle as bait," Roger said.

"Uh, do I get a vote on this? I don't want anyone hurt because of me. I can defend myself."

"No." The three other men spoke in unison.

Karl continued. "He'll be after your blood. If it helped him at all like it does me, I think he'll recognize the advantage, even through his madness. We can't afford for him to get another taste."

"But Roger and Cardin have the same properties in their blood."

"He doesn't know that." Karl spoke as his gaze tracked back and forth across the street in front of them. "And I don't think he'll consider the possibility in his state of mind. So stay in the middle and behave yourself."

"Fine." Estefan snorted the word. A quick glance revealed a spark of anger in his eyes, but his features were set to impassive.

"Let's go." Karl led with a burst of speed toward an alley across the street. The irritation of another vampire's presence grew with each step. Jerking to a stop inside the shadowed mouth of the alley, Karl strained his vampire-enhanced hearing, trying to isolate any sound that might lead to Langley's hiding spot. The alley appeared empty, but Karl couldn't ignore his jittery stomach and itchy skin.

Estefan leaned around Karl, peering down the alley. "He's got to be inside one of the buildings. I know he's here. Really close to here."

Karl reached back, resting his hand on Estefan's shoulder. "I agree. I hate getting inside tight quarters though. Hard to swing a sword." Almost as if Estefan were a divining rod, Karl found the simple touch focused the strange vibes. "There." He pointed to the second building. "Let's try there."

Roger nodded. "I'll go around front. Cardin and Estefan, stay here."

"You can't go alone," Estefan whispered. "He's too strong for only one person."

"He won't notice me. With the three of you back here, his focus will be on his sense of you."

"Roger's right," Karl said. "But whatever you do, don't let him drink from you. I'm not sure what effect your blood would have on his strength. We might never catch him." Karl motioned Roger off. "Go. Quickly. I think he's moving."

The eerie crawl on his skin grew stronger as Karl moved down the narrow alley along wall of the building. Music grew louder with each step down the alley. "Figures. The place is occupied. We could have a bloodbath on our hands."

Estefan's whisper barely reached his ears. "Would he feed so openly?"

"Don't know. Haven't had to deal with this before."

A door flew open. A siren warbled a piercing warning as Langley burst from the building with a young woman held tight to his chest. Her screams joined the noise echoing through the alley.

"Shit." Karl rushed forward. He couldn't strike for Langley's neck without killing the woman. Who would have thought Langley would be coherent enough to grab a hostage? "Martin, it's me, Karl. We're here to help you."

A loud snarl, fangs bared was Langley's answer. The gleam in his eyes held only madness, not a sign of recognition or lucid thought. With a sniff of the air, his head jerked like a dog catching a scent until his gaze rested on Estefan.

“Watch out!” Karl yelled as Langley tossed the woman aside. She hit the wall then slid to the ground unconscious or possibly dead. Karl couldn’t worry about her just yet.

A man, clothing disheveled and blood running from his nose, ran out of the emergency exit. His gaze locked on the woman just behind Langley. “Karen!” Her name was an anguished howl. He started past Langley toward the woman.

Langley reached out with one hand, grabbing the man by the neck. Shaking him as if he were a rag doll, the audible snap of bone sealed the man’s fate. Langley tossed him across the alley, straight at Karl.

Dodging the limp body, Karl rushed toward Langley. A wide swipe with his sword met a flash of steel as Langley pulled his weapon.

Sparks flew with the sharp exchange of blows. Each pass of blades pressed Karl backward. He needed to lower Langley’s guard. Find a way through his defenses. Even a slicing wound would hamper him. The blood loss would weaken him.

Likewise, a wrong move and Karl would be at Langley’s mercy. His desire to live was strong, even more so knowing that dying would leave Estefan in danger and Memphis, his city, defenseless from an insane vampire fueled by Estefan’s blood.

Another blow forced Karl back. A second. Losing ground too fast. If Roger could get behind... A few more steps and the fight would spill out of the alley onto the street. Police sirens added to the noisy chaos. Footsteps, voices, screams...

Concentrate. Raise arm. Parry. Strike. Lunge. Back. Step. Karl’s mind slowly blocked out the raucous noise of the world. Only the strike of metal on metal. Karl’s own harsh breath. The muttered curses of the madman Langley.

A break. Langley paused, stepped back. A missed step. Roger’s face—jaw clenched, a fierce frown creasing his forehead. Behind Langley. A blow caught Langley’s shoulder just below the neckline.

Langley whirled, sword arm flailing toward Roger. A hoarse cry from behind Karl. A yelled word. “Nooooo...” Drawn out into a howl. A rush of wind blew past Karl.

Lunging forward, Karl struck but Langley ducked. Steel struck the brick wall. The force of the blow shattered brick, dust splattered across Karl's face, in his eyes.

Another howl – anger, fear, anguish – steel against steel.

Karl held his sword up, still blinded, wiping the blur from his eyes. Pain bit through his arm, his shoulder. Warm liquid washed across his chest and stomach. A gasp of burning breath then darkness.

* * * * *

Estefan bandaged Karl's shoulder while Cardin and Roger held him. He'd done as much as he could for the arm but he didn't have much hope. Langley's blade had sliced through the forearm, to the point of severing the bone but leaving the hand attached by barely an inch of flesh. The force of the blow pushed Karl's arm up toward his shoulder, nicking a considerable gash near his collarbone.

Emotion clogged Estefan's throat. So close... If Karl hadn't raised his hand when he did, the blow would have been to his neck. Although Estefan knew he'd have to leave Karl eventually, the idea of losing him permanently created an ache in the pit of his stomach and a stinging in his eyes.

"Okay." Estefan's hoarse voice almost croaked the word. His shout in the alley left his throat painful and burning. "Lay him down."

The two men eased Karl to the bed with gentle hands. Estefan appreciated their efforts considering the way they felt about the vampire. But then again, Karl had almost lost everything in their defense against Langley.

"I'll stay here with him. You two can go get some rest." Estefan didn't pay any attention to their murmured goodnights. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, he watched Karl for any telltale sign of life.

Vampires did breathe, but in deep slumber, their breaths were so shallow they were almost undetectable. The pulse running through Karl's veins would be almost nonexistent right now because of the extensive blood loss, he had very little to circulate

through his body. After he fed, his pulse would seem almost human normal, if a little slow.

Estefan had no idea if the wounded hand would heal, and if it did, would the nerves and veins reattach enough to keep the hand from being dead weight?

Estefan tangled his fingers through Karl's on his good hand. Using his other hand, Estefan sandwiched Karl's cold flesh between his warm palms. Until Karl stirred, Estefan couldn't do anything else to help him. Karl had to be awake to drink blood. Although Estefan thought about a direct transfusion, using needles, he didn't know if it would help or hurt. Instead, he forced himself to sit watch over the cold, still figure.

The adrenaline high gone, Estefan's body ached with the aftershock of carrying Karl several miles to safety. Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm his determination. But he had to stay awake. No telling what Karl would remember when he woke.

* * * * *

Estefan choked against the stranglehold around his throat. His fingers pulled at the cold hand pinning him to the bed. As his sleepy vision cleared, Karl's face, eyes gleaming, came into focus.

"Karl!" Estefan choked his name. "Stop, Karl. It's me, Estefan." His fingers gained a little ground under Karl's strong hand. "Please stop."

"Estefan?" The grip eased then Karl jerked his hand away. "Estefan..."

"You need blood. Now." Estefan sat up, wrapping his arm around Karl. "Drink." Offering his neck, Estefan guided Karl's face down.

A snuffling breath teased Estefan's skin. Cold lips fluttered against his neck.

"Do it." Estefan caressed the back of Karl's neck, encouraging him closer.

With a soft breath, Karl rested his razor-sharp fangs on Estefan's skin. Twin needle pricks punctured layers of flesh, seeking the vein. Slow, easy sucks grew harder, greedy.

"Enough." Estefan gripped Karl's hair, pulling him back.

At first Karl resisted then with a long, deep breath, he pulled away. "What happened?" Karl leaned away from Estefan, raising his right arm as he did. "Fuck." His face paled even more than Estefan thought possible as Karl eyed his cold, dead hand. "I can't feel my hand."

"Langley. Roger took a swipe at him from behind but didn't make the kill. You jumped in when Langley turned on him. Took a blow that would have probably killed Roger." Estefan ran his fingers down Karl's face. "Almost lost you." Tightness in his throat strained his voice.

Karl pinched the fingers on his right hand. "I can't feel anything. Nothing."

"The hand was almost severed. I bandaged it as best I could. I don't know if the nerves will heal or the bones will knit."

"You should have left me there." Karl looked from Estefan to his bandage. "How will I survive now? I can't defend my territory anymore." Pulling away from Estefan's caress, Karl scrambled off the bed with an awkward roll. "You should have let him finish me off."

"I couldn't let that happen and you know it." Estefan followed his distraught lover.

"Why not? You won't stay here after Langley's taken out. I heard you and Roger whispering." Karl held his wounded arm in front of Estefan's face. "I can't help with Langley anymore. You should have just let me die. It would have saved you the trouble of killing me later."

"I won't let Roger hurt you. And I wish I'd been able to stop Langley, but it all happened so fast. Then the cops started showing up. We grabbed you and ran."

"And Langley?"

"Roger got in a good blow. So did Cardin. But he got away anyway. With the loss of blood, unless he feeds—a lot—Langley should be unconscious by morning. We'll need to find him and finish him off. Cardin and Roger were keeping an eye on the news and the police scanner. If they hear about any killings, we'll go back out tonight."

“No.” Karl shook his head.

“We have to. He’ll keep killing until someone stops him. We’re the only ones who know how to do that.” Estefan glanced at Karl’s injury. “Have you ever had a serious wound like this? Or heard of another vampire with one?”

Karl’s eyes glazed over for a few seconds then he looked at his arm. “No, not me. And I don’t remember hearing anything.”

“Have you ever been injured? I mean, how fast do vampires heal?”

“A few minor injuries and those healed within hours. I have no idea about something...like this.” Karl’s throat worked hard over the words.

Estefan managed a small smile. Holding his hand out to Karl, Estefan asked, “Will you come back to bed? You should rest.”

“I really need more blood to heal. Even with the superiority of yours, I’m still weak. It would have been better if you’d been aroused.”

Grasping Karl’s good hand, Estefan led him back to the bed. “Sorry, I don’t get off on being choked.” He crawled onto the bed. Tugging Karl’s hand, he urged him to follow. “But you can take a little more blood. Being different, I can handle it.”

“I guess if it’s not enough, I can ask Vicki. It’s been a long time but...”

Estefan shook his head. “I said I can handle it. And my blood will work better than a normal human’s. You know that.” Propped up on pillows, Estefan motioned for Karl to move closer.

“So all of your kind’s blood has the same properties? Not just you?” Karl splayed out on his back against Estefan.

“Yes. But as far as I know, we’re the only ones of our kind.” Estefan ran his hand down Karl’s wounded arm. Estefan’s fingers traced the edge of the bandage. “Does it hurt? I mean, do you feel pain like a human would?”

“Not much. Now anyway.” Karl raised the arm, his gaze fixed on the bloodstained bandage. “I guess if I’d been conscious right after it happened it probably would have hurt like hell. I feel pain but it doesn’t last long. I heal too quickly.”

“So hopefully, we should know something soon.” Estefan wrapped his arms around Karl’s chest, tugging him over until he cradled Karl, back to chest, between his thighs.

“Hopefully.” Karl’s frown revealed despair rather than hope.

“What’s it feel like now?”

“Arm itches. The hand too, but when I touch it, it’s as if it’s not my hand.”

Estefan didn’t know if that was a good sign or bad. Amputees often felt phantom pain.

“Yeah.” Karl’s hand slid across Estefan’s arm. His head snuggled back into the curve between Estefan’s shoulder and his neck. “And I’m so tired.”

“You need more blood.”

“And I’m too tired to get a rise out of you. Damned if I do...”

“Well, who says you have to be involved?” Estefan whispered in Karl’s ear. “I’m quite capable of taking things into my own hands.”

A shudder swept through Karl’s body. “Oh shit. And I get to watch?”

“Of course. So much more fun that way.” Shock and exhaustion could pose a problem to Estefan’s proposal, but the idea spurred on the action.

Estefan’s cock agreed that the idea was a worthy one. His flesh began to harden as he rubbed his groin against Karl’s ass. Slow need welled up. His exhaustion seemed to add a surreal quality to the languid desire flowing through his veins.

His hands slipped under Karl’s shirt. His fingers teased a line from navel to nipple. As he tweaked the tiny nub, Estefan ran his tongue around the shell of Karl’s ear. “Of course, I don’t have to play with just myself, either.”

With a soft groan, Karl turned his head so his lips could meet Estefan's. Gentle, loving kisses, clinging lips with little tongue ignited a slow fire burning deep in Estefan's gut. His hands roamed from Karl's chest to his groin and back again, covering as much skin and muscle as he could.

Each touch sparked need, desire, closeness...love. Estefan's body moved on automatic pilot while his brain tried to absorb the new information. Love. During their first encounter, Estefan had strong feelings toward the wounded vampire in his arms. He hadn't found a word adequate to describe the emotion. Until now.

"I won't leave you. Ever," Estefan whispered.

Karl's hand clutched around Estefan's wrist. A gasp softened to a sob against Estefan's lips. "Promise?"

"Promise. I...love you."

Karl twisted in Estefan's arms, pulling him down the pillows until they were chest to chest, face-to-face. Resting his injured arm on his elbow, the white bandages stained with blood drew a contrast to Karl's pale complexion. "Love?" Karl's weight pinned Estefan to the bed. A frown drew deep lines across his forehead.

Nodding, Estefan ran a finger down Karl's face. "Yeah. Love."

"Because of this?" Karl held his arm up with the lifeless hand close to Estefan's face.

"No. Before that. I never forgot you, you know?"

Karl's frown faded a little. "Really?"

"Always wondered what would have happened if I'd have left with you."

"Why didn't you?"

Estefan took a deep breath. "I couldn't leave Adria and Cardin. I owed them my life, literally. When they found me, I was selling myself on the streets of Marseilles. Dirty, hungry, freezing to death. I'd have died if not for them."

"I thought you were immortal."

“Uh...” Estefan grimaced. He’d said too much. More than he should have. But he trusted Karl, in spite of Roger’s misgivings. He didn’t have to tell the whole truth though. “We’re not born immortal. We have to have a sexual encounter with another like us. For vampires, blood is the key to the change. For Watchers, it’s sexual fluids. If I’d never met Cardin, had sex with him, I’d have died a natural death...probably when he found me eighty-five years ago.”

“Wow.” Karl’s eyebrows shot up. “So there could be thousands out there like you but they’ll never know it because they didn’t have sex with the right person?”

“I guess so.” Estefan left out the key to Watchers’ existence—they were children born to women attacked by vampires in the late stages of pregnancy. Vampire blood circulated in Estefan’s veins from the creature who turned his mother. A child would have to survive the trauma of premature birth, the mother’s ravenous hunger and the vampire who turned her. The number of Watchers was very few. As far as Estefan knew, he, Roger and Cardin were the only ones left. “But I doubt there are that many. We can sense each other much like vampires can. If there were thousands, as much as we travel, I think we’d find at least some of them.”

“Oh,” Karl sighed.

“Why? Wanting to stock up just in case I don’t stick around?”

Karl laughed. “No. It’s just kind of sad to think there might only be three of your kind. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“A little but I’ve lived with the knowledge for eighty-five years.”

“And for seventy of those, you think you loved me?” Karl’s eyes narrowed as his smile grew.

“Yeah. I think so.”

“I’m suddenly not feeling so weak.” Karl pushed his hips against Estefan. “Of course, I’m still injured. You might have to do all the work.”

“I can handle that.” Holding Karl tight against him, Estefan rolled their bodies over, careful of the bandaged limb. He pressed a kiss in the middle of Karl’s forehead. “I do love you.”

“I love you too.” Karl whispered so close to Estefan’s neck, his breath teased Estefan’s skin.

A fierce tightness banded around Estefan’s chest as his throat closed with emotion. “Good.” The word croaked out of his suddenly dry mouth. “Good.” Burying his face in Karl’s neck, Estefan let go a long sigh of relief. As much as he loved Cardin and even Roger, he knew he couldn’t leave Karl. Not now.

One way or another they’d stay together.

Kissing a path from Karl’s neck to his chin, Estefan struggled to control the emotion of the moment. Pulling Karl’s head down, he sought his lips.

With a soft sigh, Karl leaned into the kiss. Mouths moving slow, sweet and almost chaste.

Estefan ran his fingers through the dark blond hair, nails teasing a path down Karl’s scalp. His other hand slipped down Karl’s back, settling on his ass. Clutching the muscled flesh of one cheek, Estefan lessened the space between their bodies. With a languid motion, much like the lazy river outside the apartment, they moved together.

Clothing still separating them didn’t matter. Sweet pressure built in Estefan’s groin. Each flex of muscle, movement of hips, brought Estefan closer to what he needed. To what he wanted to provide his lover.

The kiss deepened with a gentle clash of tongues. Timid and teasing, soft flesh tangled then retreated.

An ache in the back of Estefan’s throat pushed him to plunder deeper into Karl’s mouth. Breathing rasped and grew harsher as heat curled through Estefan’s balls.

Karl reacted with equal fervor. His good hand slid behind Estefan's head, holding him still. His injured arm moved closer. The cold, dead fingers touched Estefan's face. Karl jerked his wounded flesh away. The kiss ended abruptly. "Sorry..."

"For what?" Estefan smiled as he reached out for Karl's arm. "Your injuries don't bother me—except that I wish for your sake, they'd never happened. You might have lost your hand defending me and my friends." Running his hand from Karl's elbow to the edge of the bandage, he whispered, "I don't want to do anything to further injure you, but I won't be repulsed by your touch."

Karl swallowed hard. He resumed the interrupted kiss with renewed passion. As the kisses grew harder, deeper, so did the motion of his body. Pressing bodies together, rubbing, exquisite friction, harder, faster.

"Oh yes." Estefan tangled his legs with Karl's, pulling him tighter as warm, wet come spread inside Estefan's briefs. "Drink! Now!" His voice rose louder than he meant but he didn't care who heard or knew what they did.

The sharp prick and gentle sucking added to his release. The intense giving of himself surpassed sexual need and desire.

With a vibrating moan against Estefan's flesh, Karl withdrew his fangs. "You...your taste...so...amazing." Karl lowered his face to Estefan's neck, resting his forehead against his skin. "Love you so much."

Chapter Seven

Karl's eyes popped open at the sound of the door opening. A fast glance revealed Roger and Cardin.

"Sorry to wake you," Roger said, his voice low and grave. "We need to talk to Estefan."

"I'm awake." Estefan struggled out from under Karl's arm. Sitting in the bed, he rubbed his eyes before spreading his arms in a bone-cracking stretch.

"Can you come out here?"

"About Langley?" Estefan asked through a yawn.

"Yes."

"Then just tell me. I'm not keeping secrets from Karl."

A flush of warmth ran through Karl at his words.

Roger's forehead creased in a deep frown and his glare seemed pointed. "Police think they have a lead on Langley. Or on us. I'm not sure. Since we're all sword-wielding crazies as far as the news goes."

"What about us?" Karl interrupted. "Have they said anything to indicate this address?"

"No," Roger said, "but they keep encoding or switching to phones. Police scanners don't give you as much information as they did years ago. Technology makes everything more secure."

"We need to be ready to vacate if they arrive. I have an escape route out of the building, but it's not a pleasant one and it's dangerous for humans. And maybe now for me as well." Karl raised his injured arm. "Especially right now."

"Where is it?"

“There’s a way from the basement of this building into the Mississippi. The river is very high at the moment and has serious undercurrents.”

“Then we’d better be out of here before we need to use that route.” Roger nodded to Estefan as if they had some preexisting signal.

“I’m not leaving Karl.” Estefan slid out of the bed. His shorter stature didn’t reassure Karl. Roger and Cardin both stood head and some shoulder above Estefan. And Estefan’s slender frame seemed too fragile to handle the two men if it came down to it.

Karl scrambled out of the bed. “No need to get into a dispute about it now. We need to clear out of here first. We can settle who goes where after we’re gone.”

Without thinking, he reached toward the dresser for his cell phone with his right hand. His dead fingers didn’t transmit the touch to his brain nor did they curl around the phone. A quick glance around confirmed the others had noticed.

Taking a sharp breath, he used his left to snag his phone. He’d overcome the awkwardness of opening and dialing with the wrong hand eventually, but he hoped it wouldn’t be necessary. Pushing Vicki’s number, he stormed out of the room with the other three men trailing behind him.

“Vicki, we have to vacate. Now. Possible police. Don’t know when or even if they’ll show but I can’t take that chance.”

“Sure, boss. I’ll be there in a sec.” Vicki’s line went dead.

“We’ll clear out to a safe house I have on the other side of town.”

“No,” Roger said. “That’s putting us farther away from Langley.”

“We can’t be caught by the police.” Karl turned around to face down Roger’s disapproving glare. “Do you want that kind of battle on your hands? Or the kind of explanations we’ll have to come up with? There were witnesses at the last attack. You couldn’t have cleaned up all the blood. Don’t you think forensics is having a fun time with that analysis?”

“But—”

“No buts. If you have even the slightest suspicion the cops are headed here, we’re gone.”

“Fine. You take Estefan to the safe house. Cardin and I will head back downtown and keep searching for Langley.”

“You are one stubborn son of a bitch, aren’t you?” Karl closed his eyes then took a deep breath. Having a testosterone-laden pissing contest wasn’t getting them anywhere. “Let’s at least get everything we need out of here first. Then we’ll worry about what comes next.”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” Karl mimicked Roger’s exasperated reply.

“Boss.” Vicki came through the front door at a run. “Cops. Downstairs. Saw them on surveillance.” Her chest heaved with her panted words. “I’ve locked down the elevator. They’ll have to take the stairs.”

“Good girl.” Karl turned around. “Grab only what you need and can carry. Too late to do much else.”

Cardin, Estefan and Roger ran toward the guestroom.

“Come on.” Karl motioned for Vicki to follow him. “We need to get some of my things.”

“Boss, it’s almost dawn.”

“Damn.” Karl almost forgot. The healing process drained him of strength even with Estefan’s super-blood. Getting caught in the daylight, especially if they had to use the river exit, meant Karl was in for a very bad morning.

* * * * *

The damp cave hid the rising sun, but Karl could feel the effects already. The tug and play of muscles, like the movement of the tides, wore on his tired body. Sharp pins and needles taunted his wounded hand. His shoulder seemed to have healed already.

The skin itched under the bandage but the strap from his pack rode easy near the wound.

Now if only some sensation would return to his hand. And if it didn't, would the hand rot? A vampire's body would break down fast until the remains reflected their real age. Turned at thirty, Karl would be one hundred and eighty in a couple of months. The thought of his hand slowly disintegrating on his arm sent shivers down his spine.

Estefan stuck close to his side as they slipped and slid through muck and moss. Water sloshed under their feet, getting deeper as they continued down the old abandoned drainage tunnel toward the Mississippi River.

Roger and Cardin brought up the rear. Vicki returned to her apartment. Nothing on paper connected her to Karl. Neither did anything in the apartment unless a stray fingerprint got past her usual housekeeping routine. Better she stay out of harm's way. She'd slip out later once the cops left.

"Wait up." Roger's voice echoed even as a whisper. "Looks like there's a dry space back here. We should be able to hole up for a little while."

Karl would welcome the rest although he was a little surprised Roger suggested it. "Okay. Hank will need some time to get the boat out to the point. Better we stay deeper under cover."

"Come on." Estefan held Karl around the waist, helping him backtrack through the mud. The small shelf looked worn from years of water flowing through the huge pipe. "Let me put something down first."

The three men seemed prepared for anything. Their waterproof backpacks included outdoor gear and survival rations. Cardin's included Adria's ashes as well. Something else they couldn't afford to leave behind.

Leaning against a damp wall, Karl took a deep breath and let the exhaustion wash over him. He needed more blood or to be able to sleep until dark. Estefan was already too depleted. His pale skin seemed almost paper-thin over his bones. Roger and Cardin couldn't care less about Karl, so he didn't expect any help from that quarter. And

sleep... Well, the tunnel was dark enough, but was it safe? Besides, Hank would be waiting in about three hours.

Estefan rolled out a sleeping bag then unzipped it. "Get in here. A little warmth will help you preserve your strength."

"What about you?"

"I'll be with you. I'm not leaving you." Estefan smiled then whispered, "Ever."

Roger and Cardin exchanged glances but didn't say anything.

Climbing up on the stone shelf, Karl crawled into the sleeping bag. Estefan zipped the bag closed then turned his lap into a pillow for Karl's head.

"Rest for now. The cops will never find this tunnel. They have no reason to look for it." Estefan's fingers combed through Karl's hair.

The unrelenting tug of daylight pulled at Karl until his eyes drooped shut. The sounds of water trickling through the cave, waves from the massive river at the end of the tunnel and the whispers of his lover and his friends faded into nothing.

* * * * *

"I wasn't kidding." Estefan refused to budge on the subject of Karl. "I can't leave him. I shouldn't have left him the first time. I know that now. I've wasted seventy years following a path that wasn't real. Vampires, as a race, are no more evil than are humans."

"No." Cardin's word came out a harsh whisper. "I won't lose you too. Adria would want us to stay together."

"But she's not here. Her purpose, her life's only goal was the destruction of those we no longer seek to destroy. What difference does it make if we stay together or come together when we're needed?"

Cardin sucked in a long breath. "I love you."

Estefan chuckled low. "And I love you. Always will, but not the way you love Roger. And not the way I love Karl."

A flush of red tinged Cardin's ears. "I...I..."

Roger ran his fingers down Cardin's cheek. "Don't worry about it." Grasping Cardin's chin between his thumb and forefinger, he tilted Cardin's face toward him. "I feel the same way." Slipping an arm around Cardin, he pulled him close. "I just didn't want Estefan to feel like a third wheel."

"What about Adria?" Cardin choked out the question.

"We all loved Adria," Estefan said. "And she us, but she loved her mission first. She would have willingly sacrificed every one of us to her cause. You know that. Four hundred years of working toward a threat that no longer exists—she would have never been happy without the hunt."

"You're probably right." Cardin slipped away from Roger's arms then grabbed his backpack. Extracting the dark wooden box, Cardin ran his hand across the top. "We should scatter her in the river, but I hate to think of her mixed in with the mud and the silt."

"Why don't we leave her here?" Estefan looked up and down the tunnel, checking the walls. "There." He pointed to a spot a few feet down, about a foot higher than Cardin's head. "That ledge looks like it would hold the box. Plug it up with some mud and no one will ever know she's there. Except us."

"That would work." Cardin's frown eased and a half smile crossed his lips—the first Estefan had seen in days.

"And once things settle down here, when Karl and I can return to Memphis, you can come visit." Estefan almost held his breath waiting for his friends' reaction to his words.

"Yeah." Cardin nodded. "I'd like that."

Roger pulled Cardin into his arms. "In the meantime, we need to take care of Langley. Then I suggest we head for Quebec. Even if Mother and Zaki haven't returned, her people will be able to put us up. Karl probably already knows about the city's use as

a vampire underground railroad, so it won't appear strange nor will it give anything away. Especially if Mother is still in Ireland."

Estefan smiled at the memory of Serena, Roger's petite blonde mother. Turned at twenty, she seemed so young compared to Roger's apparent age of thirty-five. "Have you spoken with them?"

"Not in a couple of days. Things got so crazy..."

"Yeah." Estefan had one last item on his agenda—one he wasn't sure either man would agree to. "One more thing. Karl needs blood. He's already fed from me three times in the last two days. I can't do it again."

Cardin and Roger glanced at each other then back to Estefan.

Roger narrowed his eyes and a slight frown creased his forehead. "You're asking one of us to provide him with blood."

"Yes. Preferably pheromone-laden blood." Estefan was asking a lot, but pheromones from strong emotions made the blood much more nutritionally valuable to a vampire. He was asking his friends to have sex with or in front of Karl so he could feed when one of them climaxed. "He's not going to be able to leave here without it and I'm not leaving him behind."

"So you're blackmailing us?" Cardin's face grew hard, his eyes emotionless.

"No, I'm not. It's a simple fact. I won't leave him and he can't go on without blood. The wound was too great, daylight too soon after he fed from me. Maybe if we hadn't had to leave..."

Roger tilted his head down the tunnel.

Without asking, Cardin fell in beside him then the two of them walked away, heads together whispering.

Estefan caught only a word here and there. Cardin's tone was more resisting or resentful. Roger's seemed calm and soothing.

Leaning back, Estefan rested his head against the cold stone. He'd given too much and needed rest as much as Karl. Fortunately, daylight didn't have the same debilitating effects on Watchers. His hand cupped Karl's pale face.

Estefan couldn't force Cardin or Roger into helping. He could only hope. Closing his eyes, prayers from his almost forgotten youth whispered through his mind.

"Okay." Roger's voice interrupted.

"You'll help?" Estefan looked at his friends and sometime lovers.

"Yes. We'll both allow him enough blood to get what he needs. Although," Roger hesitated as he glanced at Cardin, "we don't want him involved in the...sexual aspect of it."

"Not a problem." Jealousy wouldn't have stopped Estefan from securing what Karl needed, but he was relieved with Roger and Cardin's decision.

"For now we'll rest." Roger grabbed his pack, yanking the sleeping bag off the frame. "A couple hours then Karl can feed. We'll still have an hour until Hank arrives with the boat."

"Agreed." Estefan's eyes slid closed again. Wedged into the crevice, an outcropping of rock next to him served as a prop for his head. Conflicted between gratitude, loyalty and love, Estefan eased into a restless sleep.

* * * * *

Marseilles, France – Eighty-five years ago

Curled in the slight shelter of an overhanging roof, behind a stack of empty crates, Estefan half dozed waiting for the looming sunrise. No one had approached him all night. The small piece of bread hidden in his pocket from yesterday's meal wouldn't do much for the ache in his belly. The cold rain had stopped a little while ago so he prayed for a clear sky and the warming rays of the sun.

Footsteps alerted him to an approaching passerby. He peered out of his hiding place. Who would it be—customer, constable, maybe mugger or killer? His choices were as bleak as his life.

A plainly dressed man stopped in front of Estefan. His ruddy complexion even redder from the cold, the man's smile was kind.

"Do you want me?" Estefan smiled in the coy manner that helped gain him customers. Although almost twenty, Estefan knew his slight build and short stature gave him the appearance of someone younger. To some men, this was appealing. Desire curled through Estefan's groin. The man before him wasn't old, fat or dirty like most of the men he serviced.

"Yes." The smile grew wider. "But not here. Will you come with me to my room?"

Estefan worried about a trap. Escape was easier outdoors. He'd learned the hard way that trusting people could get him hurt. Greed stemming from need warred with his sense of safety and won. "It'll cost you extra."

The man's soft chuckle eased Estefan's fears a little. "Would a real meal and a warm room suffice?"

"Meat?" The small morsel of bread wouldn't ease the hunger pains. They never went away.

"Yes. Meat, cheese, even wine."

Estefan nodded as he crawled out of his hole. The man turned then headed north on the narrow street. The walk was short. The *pensione* he entered wasn't one of the best in the area but it wasn't the worst either. And the warmth was a welcome difference to Estefan's chilled body.

Following the man up the stairs past the common dining room, Estefan caught a whiff of food. His stomach growled in response to the heavenly aroma of roasting meat. As he entered the room, Estefan wondered if he'd died and this was heaven.

A roaring fire warmed the small room. The promised food covered a small table near the fireplace. Against the wall on the opposite side of the room was a bed. A real bed.

Estefan hadn't slept in a bed in so long he'd almost forgotten the feel of linens against his skin. Of course he wasn't here to sleep, but the idea of plying his trade in comfort made his cock rise.

With a shy glance at his host, he walked toward the bed. They always paid when they finished. The food would have to wait.

"What's your name?" the man asked.

The question stopped him in his tracks. "Ah...my name?" No one ever asked.

"Yes."

"Estefan."

"My name is Cardin. And before we go any further, you need a bath."

"Bath?"

Cardin laughed as he walked across the room. Grabbing something from a small case near the foot of the bed, he turned back to Estefan. "A bath. Here's soap and a towel. I'll show you where."

Taking the offered items, Estefan followed Cardin once again. Down the hall from the room, a small bathing room held a steaming tub of water.

"Scrub everywhere. Including your hair." Cardin pulled the door closed behind him as he left.

For a minute, Estefan stood staring at the water. Memories of home, of his mother's insistence on a bath once a week, rushed through his mind. But as the youngest, he always ended up with dirty water, lukewarm at best.

Swirling his fingers through the water, the warmth heated his cold hand. He dropped the soap and towel on the floor near the tub then stripped as fast as his fingers would unlace and unbutton. Being clean appealed to him but being warm...

As he sank into the hot water, his aching body protested but the chill in his bones eased. The sting of scrapes and cuts didn't keep his sigh of contentment from escaping. Sliding lower in the tub, he ducked his head under the water. When his lungs demanded air, he erupted from the warm wet cocoon sputtering water.

Afraid of irritating his benefactor by dawdling, Estefan grabbed the soap then began to scrub. The soap burned his wounds gathered from living on the streets—skinned knees, cuts from the crates he hid behind and worse. If he wasn't fast enough, regular beating—both from the locals and the men he serviced. His ass stung as he cleaned himself, reminding him of the half-drunk, dirty man from the night before.

So different this morning... The man—Cardin—was clean and fit. Even good-looking in a rugged, peasant sort of way.

Estefan hurried through the rest of his bath. The idea of being with Cardin sent long-absent arousal through his groin.

Wrinkling his nose at his dirty clothes, Estefan wrapped the damp towel around his waist. The tips of his fingers grasped the edge of his pants and shirt. With his body clean, the stench of his clothes nearly gagged him.

He slipped into the hall then back to the room. As he hesitated, trying to decide whether he should knock, the door opened.

Cardin's smile greeted him. "I thought you might have drowned." Cardin snagged the dirty clothes from Estefan's fingers. His nose wrinkled as he held the worn rags at arm's length. "I'll take care of these."

With a wide grin, Estefan scurried into the room. His feet slowed as he passed the food-laden table, but he didn't stop until he reached the bed. The damp towel did little to hide his growing arousal. After crawling on the bed, Estefan leaned back on his hands, facing his host.

A spark of humor plus something darker glinted in Cardin's brown eyes. His trousers bulged with interest. "Not yet. Eat first."

"Eat?" His stomach roiled with hunger. "But..."

“Yes. Eat.” Cardin’s hand motioned toward the table. “I need to run an errand. I expect to find you here when I return.” He pulled the door open. “There’s nothing to steal so don’t bother looking.” The door creaked shut behind him.

“Leave?” Estefan asked the empty room. A warm fire, food and a clean bed – why would he ever want to leave? Bounding off the bed, he rushed to the table. Grabbing a roasted chicken leg, his hand shook. After years of hunger, he expected the food to vanish and he’d wake in an alley, cold and alone.

The first bite exploded on starved taste buds. Estefan dug into the food as if it’d be his last meal.

* * * * *

Nestled in a cocoon of soft warmth, Estefan struggled toward wakefulness. His eyes, grainy with sleep, didn’t want to open. The heat of another body in the bed finally forced his eyelids to obey.

The outline of a man silhouetted against the glowing fire. A soft snore and deep breaths confirmed he was asleep. The windows revealed dark skies of night.

When Estefan lay down to wait on Cardin, morning had barely broken. He hadn’t heard him return. A tendril of fear curled through his stomach then vanished. If Cardin had been angry, he’d have woken Estefan, not joined him in bed.

Desire awakened other parts of his body. His fingers trailed down Cardin’s chest, broken nails snagging on coarse hair. His thumb rubbed across a nipple. The tiny nub of flesh peaked under the attention.

A snort interrupted Cardin’s snore. His hand brushed at his chest then wrapped around Estefan’s. “You’re finally awake.” His low voice growled with sleep.

“I’m sorry I fell asleep.” The strong grip on Estefan’s hand eased.

“You obviously needed rest. You slept all day.” Cardin’s fingers trailed down Estefan’s face from his temple to his mouth. “And I was willing to wait.” His calloused index finger brushed across Estefan’s lower lip.

Estefan ran his tongue around the tip of Cardin's finger.

With a sharp inhalation of air, Cardin pulled his hand away then curled his fingers through Estefan's hair at the base of his skull. Darkness hid the man's face.

Estefan feared he'd done something wrong until Cardin's mouth covered his. Almost forgotten desire swept through Estefan as Cardin's tongue met his. His usual customers didn't bother with kissing. The last man to kiss him was his first lover Renaldo. He was also the first man to betray him.

Estefan pushed the painful memories aside as Cardin wrapped him in a hard embrace. Need pulsed through his body, filling his cock. Strong fingers kneaded the muscles in his back then worked down toward Estefan's ass. Overwhelming emotion threatened as Cardin returned his kisses like a lover instead of a despised whore.

Rolling Estefan onto his back, Cardin spread his heavy body over him. Pressing his thick length against Estefan's stomach, he thrust against Estefan's skin. "You're too skinny," Cardin mumbled between kisses. "Need to put some meat on you."

A small kernel of hope joined Estefan's desire. Could Cardin mean he'd keep him? Estefan had heard of some men who kept whores, housed them for their personal use. Or did he mean to sell him to others?

Whatever Cardin's plans, for now Estefan was clean, warm and fed. His body burned for the man nibbling his neck. Wrapping his leg around Cardin's legs, his heel dug into the back of the man's thigh. His cock tight against Cardin, rubbed against the thick length, Estefan moaned into the reddish-brown hair.

"Don't come yet." With a growl, Cardin pulled away, breaking Estefan's hold on him. His tall body slid off the bed. Rushing across the room, he grabbed something from the table. His erect cock bobbed in the firelight.

Estefan stretched out on the bed, legs spread wide, his hands stroking his length as he waited for Cardin's return. When the man approached the bed, Estefan rolled to one side to give him room.

“No, stay where you are.” Cardin climbed over one of Estefan’s legs then knelt between his thighs. He tipped the bottle a little. The contents glistened on his fingers. “Bend your knees.”

Without questioning, Estefan obeyed. Cardin’s hand dropped then slick oil circled his opening. Cardin’s finger pressed the sensitive skin below Estefan’s balls. Desire curled through his groin as his sac tightened. A small moan slipped through gritted teeth.

“You like that?” Cardin’s gruff voice was almost a whisper.

His eyes closed tight, Estefan nodded. A blunt finger wiggled against his hole.

“Want more?”

“Yes...” Estefan emphasized the word by pushing his hips toward Cardin’s hand. A soft chuckle forced his eyes open.

Cardin’s wide grin teased him as much as the man’s fingers. The firelight put a glint in his eyes. He pushed his finger past the ring of muscle then twisted.

Slow strokes, in and out, kept Estefan’s need on low simmer. After almost pulling free, a second finger joined the first. Estefan pushed to meet the deep plunge. Soon his hips rolled in time to Cardin’s rhythm. His cock tapped his stomach with each stroke, leaving a drop of sticky fluid on his stomach. His hands avoided temptation by curling in the soft linens. A single touch and he’d shoot. His desire to obey Cardin overrode the almost overwhelming need.

“Are you ready?”

Estefan met the man’s gaze. “Yes... God, yes.” Arousal burned through him as Cardin coated his thick length with oil.

Leaning over the edge of the bed, he set the bottle on the floor. He paused as he straightened to plant a soft kiss on Estefan’s knee.

The gentle fingers and oil eased the normal burn of entry. The thick cock pushed into him so slow it set Estefan’s teeth on edge. Concern for him – for his desire or pain –

was never a high priority for the men who used him. Cardin's gentleness tightened Estefan's throat with emotion.

An eternity passed until Cardin's cock filled him. Grasping the linens, Estefan held his breath. Heat engulfed his body. Need urged him to move against the man. Instead, he forced his body still. He didn't want to rush the unusual encounter.

No one, not even Renaldo, had treated him with such tenderness. Tears stung his eyes and a small whimper vibrated his closed lips.

"Did I hurt you?" Cardin's short strokes paused.

"No!"

Cardin's mouth curled in a grin. "Want more?"

"Yes."

Pulling back his full length, Cardin plunged deep into Estefan's passage. Each stroke harder, longer. "Touch yourself."

Estefan's almost numb fingers released the bedding. Two strokes was all it took. His juices bubbled to the surface, erupting in hot, sticky spurts. "*Mierda!*" His body shook with long-denied desire. His ass clenched around the hard flesh filling him.

"Oh yes." Cardin's hips jerked then warm wetness helped the oil slicking Estefan's insides. Cardin leaned forward, his mouth caught Estefan's in a hard kiss.

A determined tongue pressed into Estefan's mouth. Meeting the warm flesh, Estefan moaned as pleasure continued to rack his body.

Chapter Eight

Present day

Estefan started awake. His dream was so real—his first meeting with Cardin, his transformation. The beginning of the path leading him to a damp tunnel under the city of Memphis. So far away from Marseilles. Or his home in Spain. And his first lover who, when caught, accused Estefan of seducing him. Called him out as evil to the priests and the law. Estefan barely escaped with his life. He'd left his heart shattered in Spain.

Until now.

Glancing down, he checked Karl. His heart rate and breathing were so slow they were imperceptible. His injured arm crossed his chest, cradling his hand near his neck.

Estefan had to have faith his lover would survive.

A soft noise caught his attention across the tunnel and up a little. Sitting side by side on one sleeping bag with another covering them were Cardin and Roger. The rustling material didn't mask soft groans and grunts. The sleeping bag near Cardin's waist rustled with a rhythmic motion.

Smiling, Estefan watched his friends in their lovemaking.

Roger met his gaze then nodded. "I'll tell you when to wake Karl."

"Agreed." Although tempted to close his eyes, give his friends privacy, Estefan watched them.

Roger's somber face twitched with a mischievous wink before he returned his attention to his lover.

Cardin, with eyes closed, his mouth agape and a harsh, rasping breath seemed oblivious to the short exchange. Not that Estefan could blame him. The soft snick and

slap of skin on skin alternated between fast and slow. The blanket slipped off Cardin's shoulder. Reddish-brown chest hair peeked through his open shirt.

Turning his face toward Roger, Cardin's lips parted. His neck strained toward Roger until their mouths met.

Amusement as well as desire tickled Estefan. The first time Roger laid eyes on him and Cardin, they'd been making out against the wall of a bar in Brooklyn. What seemed like a lifetime ago was in reality only a matter of weeks. So many things had changed...some good, some bad but all significant.

Shifting position, Roger slid off the narrow rock shelf. The sleeping bag covering Cardin slipped down farther until Cardin yanked it aside, stuffing it on the shelf beside him. Pants open, briefs tugged out of place, Cardin's cock was full and already leaking. Roger's hand stayed wrapped around Cardin's thick flesh as he kissed a trail down Cardin's chest.

Arousal, already simmering because of Estefan's dream, began to boil. His fingers curled through Karl's hair, nails combing a trail across his scalp. Estefan's hips flexed even as he tried to keep still.

Roger nipped and licked a path down the russet-colored trail of hair on Cardin's abdomen. His hand maintained long, slow strokes on Cardin's cock. His other hand disappeared between Cardin's legs.

Opening his thighs wide, Cardin moaned as Roger's hand teased somewhere out of sight. Was Roger cupping or rolling Cardin's balls? Taunting his anus?

Not knowing gave Estefan's imagination free reign. His dick, twisted in the tight confines of his jeans, ached for release—with multiple meanings of the word.

Karl's chest rose suddenly with a long, deep breath. His eyes flew open, gaze darting around, checking his surrounding. His startled frown eased when his gaze paused on Estefan.

A muffled moan caught his attention. Estefan watched his expression as Karl turned toward Roger and Cardin. Karl's tongue peeked out, curled over his upper lip then slowly disappeared into his mouth.

"Patience," Estefan whispered. "They'll let you feed when they're ready."

Karl's gaze met Estefan's. "Both?" His pupils were wide open in the darkness of the tunnel.

A shiver of almost fear trilled down Estefan's back. "Yes, both. But when they are ready."

Nodding, Karl resumed watching the other two men.

Roger now leaned over Cardin's groin. His mouth and hand hid Cardin's cock except for brief flashes of flesh as he worked up and down the thick shaft.

Cardin's hands cupped the sides of Roger's head, fingers twitching and teasing the short, dark hair. His eyes closed, Cardin's hips rolled back and forth to meet Roger's fast strokes.

Estefan couldn't decide what to watch—his two friends in their erotic play or the hunger growing on his lover's face.

Almost frightening, Karl's intense gaze focused on Cardin and Roger. His breath came in short gasps as if he were on the edge of orgasm also. The sleeping bag hid Karl's lower half, but Estefan would wager money Karl was also aroused.

Estefan leaned over then whispered, "You like watching them?"

"They – the scent of food..."

"What does it smell like?" Estefan's curiosity wanted an answer.

"Sweat, come, heat rising from the skin... I can almost taste them on the air." Karl's tongue flickered between his lips like a snake. "I've hunted this way...smelling the sex, someone in the throes of ecstasy. Surprised by my presence but too far gone to care. The mix of sex and fear is powerful. Hard to find. Worth the hunt."

A deep breath through parted lips revealed sharp fangs. Barely a fraction of an inch long, the pointed tips gleamed.

A shudder swept through Estefan. Common sense told him Karl had fangs—he'd felt them penetrate his flesh. Seen a brief flash of them, but he hadn't really looked before. He moved his hand to Karl's lips. After a hint of a touch, he pulled away. "Sorry."

Karl dragged his gaze away from the two men to meet Estefan's. "It's okay. Do you want to touch?" With a toothy grin, Karl bared his fangs.

Slowly, Estefan returned his hand to Karl's mouth. Running his finger across Karl's human teeth, he paused at one of the long canines. The fang was actually behind the regular tooth. He curled the tip of his finger under then eased it over the sharp point.

A soft snick and the fangs were gone.

"Where'd they go?" Estefan raised the edge of Karl's lip, looking.

"There's a little pocket in the gums where they recede when I don't need them."

Estefan examined his finger. A tiny scratch welled up with a faint line of blood. "Damn good thing or I'd never let your mouth near my dick again."

Karl's sharp snort of laughter overlay Cardin's sharp, "Now!"

Estefan helped Karl up and out of the sleeping bag. "Quickly, drink from Cardin."

A low moan rose from Cardin's throat. His fingers tightened on Roger's head. "Now! Yes!" Cardin leaned his head away from Estefan and Karl, baring his neck.

A few sloshing strides through the ankle-deep water put Karl next to Cardin. His face lowered toward Cardin's offering.

Estefan followed, keeping a close eye on Cardin and Karl. Roger, wiping his mouth, straightened, watching as well.

"Not too much," Roger growled. "Don't need him too weak to face the river."

Karl pulled away. His tongue ran over the tiny holes. Within a few seconds the holes shrunk to tiny bumps—almost like twin pimples.

“Do you need more?” Roger’s gaze narrowed as he examined Cardin’s neck.

“Give me a minute.” Karl turned away, drawing deep breaths.

Estefan watched Karl’s face. Looking for what, he didn’t know. “Don’t take a chance if more would help.” He cupped Karl’s cheek. “I don’t want to lose you now.”

“I won’t. I think that’s enough.” Karl wrapped his arms around Estefan, pulling him close. “Should be enough. And Roger needs his strength in case Cardin needs help. I’ll be fine.”

“If you’re sure.” Estefan rested his ear against Karl’s chest. The steady thrum of his heart reassured him. “I love you.”

Karl dipped his head until his breath tickled Estefan’s ear. “I love you too.”

* * * * *

Karl led the way through the murky water and slick mud. The swishing sound of the river’s current caught his ears over the constant trickle of water from the tunnel walls. The rancid smell of rotten trash, animal carcasses and waste grew stronger as they approached the end of the tunnel.

His injured hand still wouldn’t work, but the hint of a tingle teased the tips of his fingers. Too soon to rejoice or even tell Estefan. The sensation could be phantom memories of the nerve endings in his arm.

Three months ago, when Karl had last checked the tunnel, the water had been chest-high by this point. Mud and clumps of silage littered the lower walls of the tunnel as evidence of the previous level of the water. A dozen or more yards down, the increasing slope would put the water chest-high. On him. Estefan was much shorter. The water would be over his head.

While another infusion of blood would have been good, Karl hadn’t wanted to risk both Roger and Cardin. Now he wasn’t sure if he made the right decision. Estefan’s life could depend on Karl’s ability to ford the high waters and fierce currents with his lover in tow.

A few more steps confirmed his suspicion. The water rose steadily over the next few yards until Karl was waist-deep.

Karl stopped then turned to face the other men. "Estefan, the water's going to be rough and maybe over your head. Cardin, you're still feeling some effects from the blood loss. Do you have anything in those packs to tie us together? Cardin to Roger and you to me?"

"Yes, there's rope." Roger pulled his pack off. After digging into a pocket, he pulled out a coiled length of black nylon rope.

"We may need to ditch the packs too. If the water gets too deep, they'll be too heavy."

Roger looked startled at first then nodded. "We need to redistribute some stuff. We can't ditch everything."

"Adria's ashes..." Cardin scrambled out of his pack. "We were going to leave her ashes in the tunnel back there. I...got distracted."

Karl frowned. "Leave them? I thought you were going to scatter them?" He didn't like the idea of leaving evidence of an immortal anywhere, even in a place as unlikely to be found as the tunnel.

Estefan placed a gentle hand on Karl's arm. "We were going to put the casket in one of these holes in the tunnel wall then plug it up with mud. We're not...quite ready to let her go."

"Okay." Karl still didn't like the idea but they didn't have time to argue. "Be quick. Hank should be in place. Bad enough we have to do this during daylight."

His words reminded him the sun was up. Should be high—eleven, maybe noon. Cardin's blood had the same exhilarating effect as Estefan's. As good as a rush of adrenaline. The subtle tug of the sun was almost completely missing, but his injuries, combined with the exertion of swimming through the tunnel, could sap his strength fast. Not too much he could do about it now. Even if the police had come and gone, they probably left someone to watch the apartment.

And they couldn't stay hidden for too long. Langley was still out there.

"Here." Roger climbed up the side of the tunnel, his foot slipping a couple of times before he got a good hold.

A small alcove created by a break in the tunnel wall, high above their heads and set at an up-sloping angle, would conceal the small wooden box well. With some mud stuffed in the opening, no one would accidentally find Adria's remains.

Cardin handed the box up with one hand while his other steadied his lover. "Goodbye, old friend," he whispered as Roger tucked the box into the hole.

Estefan scraped some mud off a lower ledge, passing it up to Roger. Working in silence, the three men took care of the burial of their friend.

"I don't mean to be insensitive, but we need to move." Karl noticed the small sign of the cross Estefan made before he turned away. "She'll rest easy here."

"We need to pull a few things from our packs." Roger pulled a rubber bag out of his pack then pulled a laptop out of the bag. Using a pocketknife, he removed a few screws then pulled a small rectangular piece out of the computer. "The hard drive. We can replace everything else." He stuffed the drive into the rubber bag, folding the bag several times around it. Then he tucked it into his shirt. "Make sure you have everything that might identify us. Passports, credit cards, phones—even though they probably won't survive the water. The rest of this stuff is expendable."

Cardin and Estefan followed Roger's lead. As each man finished his inventory, he looped a scabbard with his sword over his shoulder. Then they held the open backpacks underwater until they sank.

"Ready?" Karl glanced from man to man.

Estefan nodded then shuffled toward Karl with a length of rope in his hand.

Reaching for the rope, Karl held out his right hand—which still wouldn't work. So easy to forget because he could almost feel it. Maybe. "Tie, ah, one end to my belt and the other to yours."

Estefan did as asked while Roger did the same for himself and Cardin. A soft whisper reached Karl's ears. "You're the only thing that matters now." Roger's words brought a sting of emotion to Karl's throat.

The situation was dangerous. Heavy rains through the summer up and down the river created treacherous undercurrents and high flood levels. Tons of flotsam battered the edges of the river. Whole trees, pieces of houses and animal carcasses littered the river over the last couple of months.

As a vampire, Karl's body could take serious battering and still recover. With the influx of Cardin's blood, he'd probably survive sunlight, but if his neck or upper spine was severed, he'd die.

He wasn't sure how Estefan and his friends would fare or what their weaknesses were. All he knew was he didn't want anything happening to Estefan. Taking his lover's hand, Karl kissed his knuckles then started forward.

The water rose quickly as the tunnel sloped at a steeper angle. Water now chest-high on Karl was nipping at Estefan's chin, splashing up on his mouth.

"Get on my back." Karl tugged Estefan closer. "I'm afraid we're going to have to do some swimming soon. The river is so high, we might have to do this underwater."

"I'll be okay." Estefan put his hand on Karl's shoulder, fingers digging into his muscle with reassuring strength. "Just lead the way."

"Okay." Karl took two more steps then he was swimming. Estefan moved beside him with choppy but adequate strokes.

Cardin and Roger splashed into the water behind them.

At least the water was warm this time of year. Cold would hamper them as much as flotsam.

Treading water, Karl examined the narrow headspace left in the tunnel. He'd memorized every inch of the place, but the water left nothing the same. "I think we're

going to have to swim underwater for at least twenty or thirty yards. How well can you hold your breath?"

Water splashed right behind him as Cardin answered, "Pretty much as well as any human. Run out of air, pass out. Not enough air to live, we'll go into a coma. Drowning...once the lungs are pumped out, we'll wake up. Eventually. But it might take a while. What about you?"

"I don't need to breathe. Body does it as an autonomic reflex...left over from being human. When I'm in a deep sleep or meditative state, I don't necessarily breathe. Never tested drowning. But if my spinal cord is severed..."

"You're dead," Estefan whispered. "Us too."

"Okay..." Karl turned back the way they'd traveled. "Let's get back to somewhere with some footing. We'll tie us all together. I'll go first, leading the three of you." He swam past Cardin and Roger with Estefan in tow.

"Can you manage with only one good hand? Won't that hamper your ability to swim?" Estefan asked.

"I can do it. I'm doing fine now." Karl wasn't lying. He did feel a little off balance. However, he'd need to keep one hand on the tunnel wall to track his progress. Not sure how that would work with his right hand still numb. He could use his forearm to guide him. That would put him almost too close to the ceiling. Couldn't be helped.

As soon as his feet touched ground, he stopped and waited for the other two. "I want the three of you to flatten your bodies with one hand in front of you, the other feeling above you. Don't want anyone to knock themselves out on the tunnel ceiling. The least amount of water resistance, the better. This would work much better without clothes causing a drag on the water, but we're going to be suspicious enough without showing up naked." An itch tickled Karl's right hand. Without thinking, he scratched at the spot. The touch didn't soothe the itch, but he was sure he felt something from the injured hand.

Roger used his knife to cut off another length of the rope. He secured it to Estefan's belt.

Karl continued with his instructions. "Once we go under, don't resist, don't fight. Do everything to conserve your oxygen and let me do the work for now. Kick if you want but don't wear yourself out trying to swim. You might survive drowning, but I don't know if I can manage three deadweight bodies in the river if you are unconscious. It's daylight and while I can feel it, I don't seem to be affected by it right now. I don't know what will happen when I'm actually in direct sunlight." He looked at Roger. "I may need you when we get to the boat. And we're all going to need serious rest before we can take on Langley again."

"I understand." Roger nodded. "Let's get this over with."

Stepping off first, Karl led the way back into the deep water. A few long strokes and the ceiling of the tunnel loomed just ahead. "Take several deep breaths and hyper-oxygenate." Treading water, he waited until the three men were ready.

"Let's go." Ducking under the water, he grunted as the weight of his load caught on his belt. The leather was of the highest quality. If it didn't hold, he'd have to demand a refund.

Chapter Nine

Estefan slid under the dark, murky water. Now wasn't the time to panic. His swimming skills had never been very good. The idea of being in the water terrified him. Being under it? His heart raced to the point his chest hurt. His trust in Karl was being tested – severely.

But losing control would not only endanger himself, but his lover and his friends. Hands in front of him, the rope meshed between his fingers, he tried to forget about the tunnel above him, blocking him from the safety of open air. Just kick. Don't panic. His sense of time wasn't working. Had they been under for a minute or ten? How long could he hold his breath? He had no idea. Never tried.

His foot bumped something hard. The ceiling? A rock? A body? His chest ached. Lungs burned. He clamped his lips together tighter, fighting the impulse to exhale. Once he did, he'd instinctively gasp for air only to find black water.

Would he sink if he inhaled too much water? Stuck in the mud and muck at the bottom of the river, would fish feed on him while he was still alive? His mind darted through terrifying scenarios – one after another – as his heart rate ratcheted up and the need to breathe became overwhelming.

His eyes fluttered open then closed. Nothing to see but darkness. Strange. Above water, night was the same as day to a Watcher. Under here, the darkness was complete. Something Estefan hadn't seen in eighty-five years.

An almost welcoming blackness, like the womb, protected and safe. Warm and welcoming. Estefan stopped kicking. Why was he fighting? His mind clouded over. His purpose – it was important. Something he had to do...

Exhaling hard, he gasped into the dark. A rush of liquid filled his lungs. Scorching, harsh. Choking. Panic. Something twisted around his fingers, cutting, twisting. Sharp pain – light?

Erupting into the air, Estefan spewed foul-tasting water from his lungs. A racking cough rasped his throat raw. An arm wrapped around his neck, choking him. Clawing at the flesh holding him, Estefan struggled to get free.

“Estefan! Stop fucking fighting me!” Karl’s voice barked in his ear. Karl’s breath blew harsh and fast against his ear.

Karl...his lover...the vampire...the river. “Fuck.” Estefan relaxed against Karl’s chest. The bright sunlight was almost blinding. Rope tangled in his fingers.

“Hank’s almost here. Just stay calm.”

“Cardin, Roger?” The tug and pull on his belt reminded him they were attached.

“They’re okay.”

As the rush of his breath calmed, he heard coughing and murmured whispers behind Karl.

Sunlight? “Are you okay?” Estefan attempted to turn around.

“I’m fine. We’ll be under cover shortly. The cabin has full blackout capabilities.”

A large motorboat slid up in front Estefan. The gleaming white hull was marred with splatters of mud and grass. A platform ran across the back of the boat low enough to crawl on. A gate opened just above the platform. Hank tossed a life preserver attached to a rope into the water. Estefan grabbed the float. Karl reached around and held on as Hank pulled them in.

With a quick slice of a knife, Hank freed Estefan from his friends.

Floundering up on the platform, Estefan sprawled there gasping for air. Safe. Not going to drown. End up as living fish food. He shuddered then rolled over. Crawling out of the way, he stood. Hank motioned him through the gate and onto the boat. Karl followed him.

With Hank pulling the rope, Roger and Cardin half swam to the boat then scrambled aboard.

“Everyone below deck. We need to stay out of sight.” Karl led the way into the cabin below. “Hank, take us on a leisurely cruise up the river for a little while. Bring us back around dusk.”

“Aye, aye, boss.” Hank bounded up the short set of steps to the pilothouse.

Estefan followed Karl down a separate set of steps and into the darkened cabin. Relief tightened his throat and stung his eyes. His lover and friends had survived. Now if they could finish off Langley, he could get back to living his life. One without a purpose driving him from place to place, existing but never really living.

Wrapping his arms around Karl from behind, he rested his cheek on Karl’s wet shirt. Karl’s hand closed over Estefan’s. Content for the moment, Estefan didn’t need to say anything. For right now, he just wanted to feel.

* * * * *

After dry clothes, hot coffee and cold sandwiches, Estefan felt all was right with the world again. The cabin cruiser sluiced through the water, heading up river at a leisurely pace.

The dark cabin provided Karl shelter from the sun, conserving the strength he gained from Cardin’s blood. The rest of the afternoon, Karl had spent sleeping in the large bed in the aft of the boat.

Roger and Cardin shared the bed forward. Estefan had napped for a little while as well, but he’d awakened restless. Not wanting to disturb Karl, he found a comfortable seat near the galley and nursed another cup of rich coffee.

The only thing to mar the afternoon was knowing they’d soon be hunting for Langley. And this time, they couldn’t fail. Time was running out. However the police traced them, if they did it again... Well, they couldn’t be captured—any of them. A

DNA test would be sure to reveal some strange results even on Watchers. They'd have to fight their way out or end up laboratory specimens.

Estefan shuddered at the idea of them locked away, used by scientists as lab rats.

The hum of the engine shifted down and the forward motion slowed. An intercom squawked then Hank announced, "We're coming up to the marina. Vicki arranged for a van and a few personal items – more clothes, toiletries, etcetera."

Walking over to the intercom, Estefan pressed the talk button. "Thanks, Hank. I'll let everyone know as soon as they're awake."

Cardin stirred, his bulky body rolling onto his back as he stretched. "We there?" he mumbled between a sniff and a groan.

"Yeah. Almost to the marina. Should be dark in a few minutes." Estefan headed aft to Karl's bed.

Crawling onto the mattress, he sat near Karl's head. His fingers curled through Karl's tangled hair. A part of him wanted to convince his lover and his friends to abandon the fight. Leave and disappear, try to find some happiness. But he knew the idea was impossible.

If Langley was somehow captured or killed by police, his remains would raise too many questions. The reality of vampires would be thrust upon a world not ready for such knowledge. Vampires would become the new rallying point for hate and fear. No one would be safe – vampire or Watcher.

Karl's lips parted as he drew a deep breath, restoring the regular rise and fall of his chest. His eyes fluttered open, narrowed briefly with suspicion then relaxed as his gaze fell on Estefan. "Is it time?"

"Yeah. Almost."

The boat bumped and scraped against something. Voices above, feet moving as the motion came to a stop. Hank called out, "Thanks for the assist!" Then the noises faded away, leaving only the sound of the river and of cars moving in the distance.

“Hank says Vicki found us a van.”

Karl nodded as his hand ran up Estefan’s arm. “It’ll be over tonight. Then we can concentrate on us.” His fingers caressed Estefan’s chin as his thumb circled up to his lips. “Kiss me?”

Leaning forward, Estefan smiled. “Anytime.” A soft, slow melding of lips, no urgency, no expectation. A simple hello. Or goodbye.

Karl’s hand slid around Estefan’s neck then cupped the back of his head.

Vicki’s voice filtered down into the cabin. Her words weren’t clear but the timbre and cadence of her tone were urgent.

“Time to go.” Karl released his gentle hold. Sitting up, he looked at the ragged bandage on his arm. “Kind of need to redo this.” His left hand fumbled with the wrapping.

Estefan relieved him of the effort then quickly stripped the gauze away.

The deep gash seemed to be healing. The edges were red and puffy. The butterfly stitches Estefan had applied were loose from being soaked in water. “I should have changed this earlier.” Estefan examined Karl’s arm below the wound and his hand. No sign of decomposition. If the hand were truly dead, not receiving any blood flow at all, wouldn’t the hand rot as rapidly as a dead vampire?

“We had other things on our minds.” Karl stared at his arm. “I think I feel the hand.”

Estefan let an inkling of joy seep through his body. “What does it feel like?” His hands sandwiched Karl’s hand between them, squeezing gently.

“Itches and little sharp stings in the tips of my fingers.” Karl’s gaze intensified, his brow creasing in a deep frown of concentration. “They won’t move.” Karl took a deep breath as his frown faded.

"Give it time." Estefan grabbed a first-aid kit from the wall of the cabin. "Let me wrap it again." As he rolled gauze around Karl's arm, Roger and Cardin crossed the galley separating the two beds.

"Let's get this over with," Roger growled. "I'm getting really tired of Langley running our lives."

"I agree." Karl eased into a sitting position, careful not to disrupt Estefan's work. "I have a plan," he announced. "Eventually, I'll probably be able to fight with my left hand, but for now, I'm not going to be much good. We've been arrogant and careless in our tactics. Four to one odds left us believing we could overpower Langley. And innocents have died when they didn't have to."

Estefan glanced at his friends. Both men nodded agreement.

"So tonight," Karl continued, "I'll be bait. The urge to attack another vampire will be worse in Langley's current state. Instead of going to him, we need him to come to us."

After fastening the new bandage with tape, Estefan released Karl's hand. The idea of Karl as bait wasn't sitting well with him.

Roger nodded. "Good idea. Better we lead him into a trap than end up in another one ourselves. But it's a little hard to do when we don't know where he's at."

"True. We need to get him to some place not very populated at night. Less chance of witnesses or interference. If he's still downtown, I think where we met the first night would be appropriate." Karl slid off the bed then strode toward the galley. Pulling a map out of a drawer in the galley, he motioned for the others to join him at the table. At first, he moved his right arm as if to use his hand to open the folded paper then paused.

Estefan bit back an exclamation as Karl's little finger twitched. Could it be his imagination? Wishful thinking? Since Karl didn't say anything, Estefan kept quiet and spread the map on the table.

Karl pointed at the map. "Here. Metal Museum Drive is close enough to downtown," he trailed his finger north, following Riverfront Drive, "that luring him

there wouldn't take all night. Hank can wait with the boat near the bluffs overlooking the river here." He moved his finger to a spot west of Metal Museum Drive. "We should be able to get down them and out of the area fast. The boat is rated for ocean travel as long as we don't get too far offshore. As soon as we're far enough away, we can arrange for flights to Germany. I have a home there."

Moving closer to Karl, Estefan leaned the side of his face against Karl's shoulder. "I think we both need to be bait." Thankfully, the fear his suggestion brought on didn't show in his voice.

"No!" Three voices objected in unison then clamored into separate objections.

Estefan held up his hand. "Enough!" When the three hushed, he continued. "Langley might follow Karl, *if* he's fed already. His first need will rule his confused mind. It's instinct. If he hasn't fed, I'll be irresistible to him."

Karl shook his head. "I don't want you —"

"Not your choice. I'm a big boy. I've been hunting vampires for a long time."

"But he's —"

"I know. Crazy, insane, unusual strength. I know all these things. But I also know you won't succeed without one of us with you. Since Langley already got a taste of me, I think he'll try again." Estefan pointed to the map. "We get him back in here, at the old marine hospital. It's only fitting he dies where he killed Adria." Sorrow tried to form a lump in his throat, but Estefan swallowed it down.

Cardin muttered something to Roger then pointed across the street to the location of the burial mounds across from the old hospital. "What about here? The top of the mounds are concave. No one would see us up there, including Langley. Maybe we could net him. Drop it over him to hamper his movement until we can strike a good blow."

"Then burn the body right there," Roger added. "How old is Langley?"

“Older than me,” Karl said. “At least three hundred, maybe more. We never talked much about the past. Too many painful memories.”

Estefan squeezed Karl’s arm. He knew Langley’s death would add to that list. “I see what you’re getting at.” Looking up at Roger, Estefan said, “The older the vampire, the faster he’ll burn to ash. Unrecognizable ash.”

“Yeah.” Karl nodded. “Left in soil, a body will turn to dust in a year. If he’s three hundred years...there shouldn’t even be bones left, especially if the remains are burned.”

“And the burial mound walls will conceal the fire to some degree.” Cardin took a deep breath. “As much as I don’t like Estefan playing cat and mouse with Langley, I don’t think we have a choice.”

A part of Estefan puffed up with pride that his plan was acceptable to his friends. He’d spent so much of his life with Adria and Cardin being a follower. The idea of being a leader was almost foreign. Of course, a tiny annoying voice listed all the reasons he should have kept his mouth shut. Cat and mouse with an insane vampire was high on the list of really stupid things to do.

* * * * *

Karl walked close by Estefan’s side. Not having his sword made Karl feel more helpless than the loss of the use of his hand. And vulnerable like he hadn’t been since he was first turned. Having Estefan with him only increased his unease. Not only could he not protect his lover, Karl had to rely on Estefan to protect him. The exchange of roles was unnerving.

Few people were out to distract them. By the time they’d gathered all the things they needed, midnight had come and gone. Plus the late hour guaranteed little interference from bystanders.

A tingling warning buzzed at the base of his skull. The irritating sensation increased with each step. “I feel him.”

“Me too.” Estefan kept going, his stride didn’t falter. “East of us, I think.”

“Sounds right.” For some reason, Estefan’s presence helped his ability to sense Langley – with accurate direction. Almost as if combined, they made a divining rod for locating vampires.

Estefan turned at the next intersection. “A little south now.” His step faltered then fell back into the fast pace of before. “Way close,” Estefan mumbled under his breath.

“There’s an alley. Duck in there.” Karl nudged Estefan with his shoulder in the direction of the dark alley. The plan required the use of their ability to run at speeds almost invisible to humans. However, they couldn’t start running in the middle of a crowd.

Estefan gasped a sharp breath. “Really close.”

The grating noise of gravel under a shoe gave way to a growl.

“Fuck! Now!” Karl hesitated only long enough to see a blur as Estefan sped away. Huffing into gear, he followed behind.

The twitchy sense of Langley stayed fairly constant with only slight variations as they twisted through the streets of Memphis, keeping to shadows and side streets where possible. Interstate 55 loomed ahead.

Without pausing, Estefan ran across the lanes of light traffic.

Karl followed with only the slightest hesitation, checking for Langley.

Trees shadowed the area from the streetlights. A soft glow teased the top of one of the old burial mounds. The concave tops were thanks to Civil War troops who hollowed them out as bunkers guarding the mighty Mississippi River against Yankee troops.

Estefan zigzagged a little as he headed for the mound. A slight movement at the top of the hill was enough of a signal. Estefan straightened his path then took off up the hill. Karl followed on his heels.

In the middle of the depression, a hot fire glowed yellow and red in the darkness. Estefan stopped on the other side. Karl went a little to his left before he ground to a halt.

Estefan stood proud and quiet, waiting as Langley topped the hill.

Wondering where his lover found his calm, Karl waited with an anxious gaze, wandering between Estefan and the lip of the hill.

A wisp of wind announced Langley's arrival. A tree growing near the edge of the mound shuddered with the breeze. Or so Langley was supposed to think.

High-test safety netting, weighted with heavy metal hooks, dropped from the tree, catching Langley off guard. A growl of frustration echoed out across the river as Langley clawed at his webbed prison.

Lunging toward the raving vampire, Estefan raised his old cavalry sword. The highly polished edge gleamed in the firelight.

As the blow fell, Cardin and Roger dropped from their perches in the tree.

The heavy netting kept Estefan's blow from taking care of Langley. Cardin and Roger added their swords to the mix.

First, Roger struck straight on. His long, thin blade pierced the net, sliding into Langley's body near the center of his upper back. All they needed was to sever the upper spine, the closer to the neck the better.

As Langley reared up, his fingers ripping through the netting, Karl started toward him. He wouldn't let Estefan die whatever the sacrifice.

In spite of Estefan and Roger repeatedly striking from the behind, Langley hauled his wounded body to his feet. His fangs, fully extended, gleamed in his open mouth. His steps, bloody and slow, drifted toward Estefan.

Just as Karl moved to intervene, a flash of steel, swift and sharp, ripped through the air.

Cardin's samurai sword sheared through the netting, flesh and bone. Langley's head fell forward as his body took another step. In a gruesome splash of blood, Langley tripped over his own head then fell to the ground.

A long, rasping sigh ripped through Karl's body. It was over.

"Quick. Get him untangled and on the fire." Roger rolled the body over, tugging at the net. "We can toss the net in the river. The blood will wash clean before anyone finds it."

Rapidly, the four men tossed the bloody body in then untwisted the head from the nest of nylon netting. With a shudder, Karl laid his friend's head on the funeral pyre. Already, decomposition had started. Within a few minutes, there wouldn't be anything left of the body.

Karl moved close to Estefan. His lover's body stood rigid and foreboding as he watched Langley dissolve to ashes and dust. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Estefan's voice caught and cracked.

"What's wrong?"

Estefan took a deep breath, shaking his head. "I..." he faltered. "Uh, Adria..." His voice cracked on her name.

Instead of wrapping Estefan in his arms and holding him, Karl stood next to him, leaving a few inches between them. Karl understood. Not only was the hunt for Langley over, so too was an important part of Estefan's life.

The night sounds stayed calm and normal for a Memphis night. The sound of cars, boats, the wide Mississippi and a strained hint of music—imagined or real—drifted around the crack and cackle of the fire.

Karl would miss this town, but it would still be here when he could come back. Memphis would mutate and grow, but the home of the blues would last forever. And next time he returned to his city, he'd show Estefan the way Memphis was meant to be.

Estefan's hand slid into Karl's. His fingers squeezed with gentle reassurance before they meshed through Karl's.

Sparks of fire drifted on the wind, adding to the faint stars in the night sky.

Epilogue

Karl ducked his head as Estefan led him into the open courtyard in broad daylight. No pain, no loss of strength, almost as if he'd never been turned.

"I don't understand."

"Watcher blood is capable of giving a vampire the ability to face the sun. Not permanently," Estefan tugged him out of the shelter of a tree, "but for a few days."

His body shook as he looked up. Directly in the light of the sun, Karl closed his eyes and soaked up the heat of the rays.

"And..." Estefan's arms circled Karl's waist. He kissed Karl's mouth as he chuckled, "as a Watcher, I can afford the blood loss every few days. As long as we're together, you won't be restricted by sunlight or the need for blood."

"Amazing!" Karl opened his eyes to Estefan's luminous blue stare. "If only there was a way to make this permanent."

A shadow hooded Estefan's open gaze then he turned away, releasing Karl's waist. "Come on. I want to show you something."

The huge estate belonged to Serena Whitmore. She was the resident vampire of Quebec. Since the city was used as a jumping-off point for vampires traveling to and from Europe, Karl had been here before. Fortunately, Serena wasn't here at the moment so the nervous itch of another vampire's presence was absent.

However, an itch of another kind awakened his cock as he followed his lover down the tree-lined path. And the idea of scratching that itch outside, in full sight of the sun, made him horny as hell.

"Wait up, Estefan." A vision of his lover kneeling on the thick carpet of grass, sucking him off...

Karl rounded a sharp turn in the path and discovered Estefan lying across a hammock in a gazebo, his legs hanging off the edge. Trees sheltered the small area so it appeared to be the middle of nowhere instead of the middle of a major city.

One of Estefan's hands rested on a bulge in his jeans. His fingers squeezed and rolled his hidden flesh. "Like the spot?" The other tangled in the webbed material of the hammock.

"Oh yeah." The gazebo was an octagon with benches on four out of eight sides. As Karl entered the shelter, he noticed a bottle of lube, half wrapped in a towel, on one of the benches. "Excellent idea."

"I was hoping you'd like it." Estefan unzipped his jeans, pushing the edges of the material down. His cock sprang free without underwear to confine it. Sitting up, he yanked his jeans down, toed off his sandals then kicked his jeans off. "Fuck me?" he asked as he lay back.

His body stretched across the hammock instead of lying lengthwise. His fingers twisted into the netting on either side. Drawing his legs up, he caught his heels on the edge of the hammock and splayed his knees wide. His ass dipped off the edge of the mesh. His cheeks spread enough to see the gleam of slick lube.

Open, willing and ready. Estefan grinned. "Unless you don't want to?"

Karl snapped out of the stasis gluing him to the spot. The idea Estefan had prepared himself already nearly made his cock pop. "Oh, you're going get fucked. And good." Fumbling one-handed with his fly, he managed to free his cock. While the feeling and movement in his right hand had begun to return, the inability to grasp anything still hampered Karl. He snagged the lube with his left hand, flipped the lid then squirted the slippery gel directly on his cock. After tossing the bottle on the floor, he ran his hand up and down his cock, distributing the gel.

"I'm still waiting," Estefan called in a singsong tone. He flexed his legs and arms so the hammock began to swing gently.

“You are such a tease.” Karl slipped a finger into Estefan’s well-greased hole. “So how much priming did you do here?”

“I used a dildo.” Estefan’s grin slipped a little as Karl twisted a second finger inside. “A nice fat one so you could just slide right inside me.”

“Shit!” Karl pulled his hand free of Estefan’s ass then grabbed his balls. “You keep that talk up and I’m going to come before I ever get inside.”

“So stop with the talk and stick your cock in me.”

“Yeah.” Shuffling forward, Karl wrapped his hand around his cock then pressed the crown against Estefan’s ass.

His lover relaxed, and with the aid of a lot of lube, Karl slid home in one stroke. “God, you feel good.”

“Fuck me hard. I want to feel you deep inside.” Estefan gripped the hammock a little tighter.

“Whatever you want.” Karl hooked his elbows under Estefan’s legs then reared back, sliding almost free. With a sharp tug, he slammed home.

The hammock rocked to the same rhythm as Karl’s strokes. Faster, harder.

Grunts punctuated Estefan’s moans as Karl rode him as hard as he could. Too fast the heat of desire rose until Karl groaned in frustration.

“Too much. I want to come.”

“Then do it.” Estefan raised his head, his gaze locked with Karl’s. One of Estefan’s hands untangled from the hammock then slid down to capture Estefan’s cock. Abusing his flesh with strokes as hard and long as Karl fucked his ass, Estefan kept his gaze on Karl. “I want to feel you come inside me.”

Too much. Karl shouted as he came. Powerful jolts of pleasure mixed with a strong blast of emotion. Estefan was all he needed from life now.

“Love you.” Karl’s hips jerked against Estefan’s ass. Pushing Estefan’s legs forward and down, Karl locked lips with his lover. “Love you so much,” he gasped between hard kisses.

“You too—” Estefan choked off his words with a sharp cry. Warm wetness smeared against Karl’s stomach.

Hard kisses, warm breezes and the freedom to make love in the sunlight. Karl couldn’t have imagined this life only a few days ago.

* * * * *

“Do you think Estefan will keep our secret?” the soft voice on the phone questioned.

“I don’t know, Mother.” Roger didn’t like keeping secrets from Estefan or Cardin—especially Cardin. “He’s in love. Or he thinks he is.” From his vantage spot high in the mansion, he could see Estefan and Karl in the gazebo. The two of them certainly looked happy.

“How trustworthy do you think Brandt is?”

“I can’t answer that yet. He helped us kill Langley, yes, but it was in his best interest to do so. None of us can afford for either of our kind to be revealed. But we discovered something unusual about Brandt.”

“Like what?”

“Seems his sense of vampires combined with Estefan’s allow them to pinpoint a vampire pretty accurately. Strange and hard to prove, but I thought you should know.”

“That could be useful, but I don’t know if it is worth the risk.” Serena paused. A voice in the background rumbled on for a minute. “I agree,” she said to then-unknown person. “I know you and Cardin wanted to go your own way once this was done but we’d like for you to stick with Estefan and Brandt. There’s no real reason for you to part.”

“Karl isn’t expecting us to go to Germany with him. We’d already said we weren’t. He might be suspicious.”

“Find a way to stay. Or you’ll need to take care of him now.”

“I can’t do that to Estefan.”

“Then you know what you have to do.”

Roger stared at the phone after the line went dead. His mother was right. They needed to know more about Karl. And Estefan had already told his lover far too much, as evidenced by their making love in full light of the sun. Now to convince Cardin they needed to stick with Estefan and Karl.

He would find a way. But he hated lying to his lover more than anything.

Roger watched as Karl and Estefan kissed with the wild abandon of climax. For Estefan’s sake, he hoped Karl would play true and keep their secrets.

About the Author

By day, Shayla Kersten is a mild-mannered accountant. By night, she's a writer of sexy romances. Torn between genres, Shayla writes erotic stories about hot heroes and their sexy women as well as hot men and their passionate heroes.

A native of Arkansas, Shayla spent four years in the Army as a missile specialist, stationed in Germany and Oklahoma. After her enlistment was up, she spent eleven years in New York City taking a bite out of the Big Apple. Even her love of theater and the nightlife of the big city couldn't cure terminal homesickness for the Natural State. In 1995 she returned to her roots in Arkansas.

Shayla now divides her time between her mother, her spoiled-rotten dogs, her dratted day job and her obsession – writing. And no, her mother doesn't know what she writes. That's between Shayla, her dogs and her readers!

Shayla welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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