



**Copper Kiss**

Tempered Souls: Book One

Aislinn Kerry

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### **Blurb**

Reina Campbell used to think that term papers were the worst of her problems. Now, her werewolf best friend has been murdered, the cops are covering it up, and everyone, it seems, is vying for control of her empathic abilities. With the city's sire vamp and his brood at her back, she's out to stop a murderer, and God help anyone who gets in her way. But the truth goes beyond one Were's death, and Reina might have to pay for it with

more than her life.

## Chapter One

The first day of the quarter was going exactly as Reina Campbell had expected—which meant it was filled with paperwork, curricula, and dry introductions—until a student stood up in the middle of her Werewolf Society in the Modern Age class and declared, "I don't see how any of this matters. They're all just monsters, anyway."

A hush fell over the hall. At Reina's side, her roommate and best friend stiffened with rage.

The professor gaped at the interruption. "That is an ignorant, intolerant point of view, and it will not be allowed within my classroom."

"Ignorant?" The student snorted. He turned to face the class. "I know as much as I need to! These monsters walk amongst us, like they're one of us, when they're really no better than the dogs we keep chained up in our backyards." His voice rose steadily. Soon enough he would be shouting, and everyone in the building would be able to hear his tirade. "I know I can't go a week without seeing a news report about another werewolf or vampire attack! These monsters are killing us, and you're standing there preaching tolerance? I *refuse* to be tolerant about the murder of my fellow human beings!"

"No one's keeping you here," Reina snapped. "And you knew the course's subject matter when you signed up."

He rounded on her, his eyes bright with fervor. "I've a right to protest, haven't I? I couldn't just do nothing, not when people are being slaughtered while courses like this show up quarter after quarter preaching *tolerance*." He spat the last word as though it were vile.

"So you're just here to stir up trouble for those of us who intended to come learn something. That's wonderful." Reina shoved her books in her bag and grabbed Adri's arm. "Come on, let's go—"

"No." Adri's voice was as hard as Reina had ever heard it, but mercifully, she kept her voice pitched too low for anyone else to hear. "If I go anywhere, it's only going to be to rip that boy's intestines out through his throat and teach him a thing or two about just how monstrous we can be."

Reina sank back down into her seat. "That's nice." She rolled her eyes. "Become a walking stereotype. That'll be a real help."

"Reina, he said—"

"Shut up."

Adri stared at her, wide-eyed.

"If he hears you, he'll put two and two together, and then you'll be screwed royally, won't you?"

"He can't do anything," she said, but her expression didn't seem so certain. "We've been legalized for years. He so much as spits in my direction and it's a hate crime." She drew a steadying breath. "Anyway, he's not going to hear me."

Reina glanced around the room and admitted that her friend was probably right. The student was shouting louder than ever, and now the professor had added her voice to the commotion, yelling over the phone at campus security.

Abruptly, the boy announced, "I won't stay here and be lectured to by some idiot

who thinks these monsters are *human*. I'm leaving! And you can be damn sure I'm letting the dean know how I feel about this, too!"

Half of the class left with him, leaving only a handful of students sitting around looking shell-shocked. "Well," Reina said at last, getting to her feet and slinging her backpack over her shoulder. "I think that's about all the excitement I can handle for one day." She gave the professor a sarcastic salute. "Fabulous job, really. I can't wait to see how you're going to top this one tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

Two days later, Reina walked the gravel path along the perimeter of Madsen Green, the large patch of trees and grassy hills that sat at the center of Bryson University. She carried a textbook in her hands that she read without seeing. Adri had already taught her more about werewolf funeral rites than any book could have. She'd brought Reina to a pack funeral once, in the early years of their friendship when Reina had been voracious for understanding about her new friend's customs and culture.

The very first lesson she'd learned when her empathy manifested had been to keep herself shielded, always. People left residual traces of their emotions wherever they went, and it was too easy to lose one's self in the hopes and fears of others when unprotected. But the Green was empty and quiet, so she let her shields drop and allowed the peace to wash over her. She knew it was a risk, and she took it anyway.

Even knowing it, she was completely unprepared when she crossed paths with a residual of such terror and violence that it stopped the breath in her throat.

The oaks around her melted and stretched, growing into bare, twisted monstrosities. The sky darkened as though a blanket had been thrown across the sun, and the gravel before her became dagger-sharp, cutting her feet as she ran.

She couldn't remember how or when she'd lost her shoes, or when she'd started running. But she ran, with her heart stuttering in her throat and the knowledge that something terrible followed her. She poured everything she had into her flight, blindly traveling the path beneath her feet as she watched over her shoulder for a sign of her pursuer.

She saw nothing, only a nightmarish parody of the Green, gone cold and black and harsh.

And then the thing was upon her. *It's not real*, she reminded herself. *It's not real. It's not you*. But the scent of blood and death choked her all the same. She fell to her knees, screaming in rage and pain as it tore into her with phantom claws as sharp as knives. Blood spattered across her skin, a stark contrast of black-on-white in the moonlight.

The nightmare dragged her to the ground and pinned her with its weight. Gasping for breath, she groped wildly overhead, and her hand closed around a rock.

She swung it out before her as a crude weapon. Her stomach lurched at the sickening crack of impact and the feel of flesh and bone giving way. She dug her fingers into the dirt beneath her and pulled herself along the path, but only managed to drag herself a few feet away before it pounced on her again with a snarl.

Hot, fetid breath brushed against her cheek. "It needn't be like this." The whisper drifted across the still night air like a half-forgotten memory, soft and oddly sibilant. "Just say the words."

*Yes!* she thought with a rush of desperation. *Anything to end this.*

But when she spoke, it was only to growl, "Go to hell."

The thing sighed, almost sadly, and sank fangs into her throat. She screamed. It tore her throat from her, ripped her open and feasted on her flesh, and even when she died, she could still hear the shrill echo of her cries.

They rang in her ears, slowly fading to the white noise of wind sighing through the trees. Bright light shone against her eyelids. Slowly, she pried her eyes open and found herself back in the Green, halfway across campus from where the vision had gripped her. Gasping from a strange cocktail of exertion, fear, and relief, she ran her hands over her throat and stomach, reassuring herself that she was whole.

"Oh, Christ." Reina lowered herself to the grass. She leaned back against the reassuring solidity of a tree trunk and fought to catch her breath.

She had nearly calmed when a deep breath brought her the faint traces of copper and salt. Her stomach churned. She snapped her mental shields up around herself, pulled them tight, and held herself motionless until certain that she'd left no vulnerable chinks in her armor.

She rolled up onto her knees and cautiously pushed herself to her feet while she cast about for the source of the blood she smelled on the air.

It wasn't until she turned that she saw Adri. Her friend lay sprawled at the base of a bush, half-concealed by its low-hanging branches and so close she could have touched Reina, if she'd been alive. Shreds of clothes barely concealed her body, and scratches etched deep, crimson lines across her face. Her torso was a torn mess, and everything was soaked with blood.

"Oh God." Reina staggered across the few feet between them and dropped to her knees. "Oh Adri. Not you." It had never occurred to her that the vision might have been about someone she knew. Reina reached for her and stroked a lock of black hair that had fallen over Adri's shoulder. Her fingers came away sticky with blood, and acrid with the smell of it.

She jerked back and hastily wiped her hand clean on the grass. She fumbled for her cell phone, dialed 911 with shaking hands. The phone rang for eons before a dispatcher connected.

Reina's fingers clenched tightly around the phone as she held it to her ear. She couldn't stand to look at Adri, yet couldn't bear to turn her back on her. "I'm at Bryson University," she told the dispatcher with a strained voice. "In Madsen Green. There's a body here. No, she—she's dead." A wave of grief crashed over Reina, closing her throat. She pulled her thighs to her chest and pressed her forehead to her knees. Tears burned against the backs of her eyes. The dispatcher kept talking; Reina answered her dully, only half listening. She drew inward on herself, blocking her senses one by one, but the pain refused to fade.

The dispatcher reassured her that the police were on the way and kept up an endless barrage of questions until they arrived. Sirens wailed in the distance, heralding their arrival. A few minutes later, a pair of uniformed cops approached her from across the park. Reina hung up the phone and lifted her head, watching them from where she sat. The man in the lead smiled at her as he drew close. "Are you Reina?"

She nodded and got to her feet. "She—she's over there." She pointed over her shoulder, then wrapped her arms tightly around her chest. The morning sun warmed her shoulders, but she couldn't stop shivering.

The officer nodded and motioned his to his partner. "I'm Officer Thompson, Reina. Are you all right?"

She frowned and pressed her lips together. "I just found my best friend's body. Do you think I'm all right?"

He had the decency to look chagrined. "Are you injured?"

"No, I'm fine. I wasn't here when she—when it happened." She unfolded her arms and rubbed her palms against her hips, scrubbing off the dirt and blood. The sharp physical irritation of the denim against her raw skin was a welcome relief from the heavy ache in her chest.

Thompson gave no indication that he'd noticed her discomfort, but his eyes were sympathetic. "Reina, we're going to need to ask you some questions."

She nodded. Of course they did. "What do you want to know?"

He asked her about Adri, about her habits and schedule, and the last time Reina had seen her. When he asked if she had any enemies, Reina shook her head. "No. You couldn't help but like her, once you got to know her. She was everybody's friend."

He nodded, made a note, and asked her for her address and phone number. When she'd given it to him, he flipped his notebook closed and looked up at her. "We'd appreciate it if you stayed in town, Miss Campbell. We may need to get in touch with you, if any more questions come up during our investigation."

"Of course. Is that all you need?"

At his nod, she hefted her bag onto her shoulder and turned for home. She took the long way back, along the paved brick road; she'd had enough adventure in the Green to last her for a long time to come.

\* \* \* \*

Detective Patrick Keachan's day promised to be full of the usual tedium and paperwork until a thick manila envelope fell onto his keyboard, sending the computer into a chorus of angry tones. He looked up, blinking tired eyes at the officer standing over him.

"The M.E. sent this over," Lyle said. "He wants your opinion on it."

Keachan flipped the file open, frowning. "Why on earth would he need my—" The words died on his lips, silenced by the Polaroid of a young woman's mutilated body. Her throat had been torn from her, leaving a raw, gaping wound, and she had been eviscerated, her organs ripped from her by sheer brute force. A wave of dread washed through Keachan as he flipped the first image aside and examined the detailed shots. A line of gaping claw marks, a spider's web of fractures across bones and a single clear bite mark, photographed with a ruler to show scale and size. The deep punctures of the assailant's fangs were thirty-two millimeters apart.

The distance between the teeth was perfectly average for an adult man. But no man—no *human* man—had canines that sharp, or designed to pierce that deep.

Keachan snapped the file shut and looked up at Lyle. "Tell Dr. Cohen it was an animal attack. Probably a cougar that wandered out of his territory. I'll see to the paperwork and contact Animal Control."

Lyle nodded, his brow furrowed. He reached for the file. Keachan threw it on his desk and set his coffee on it, giving the man a level look. "I'll handle it, Lyle. The last thing Cohen needs is to waste his time on something this inconsequential. Please inform

him of my opinion on the case.”

Lyle started to speak, then snapped his mouth shut, looking like he’d just bit into something rotten. “Yes, sir.” He stalked stiffly out the door.

Reaching out with a foot to push the door closed behind him, Keachan let the façade of indifference drop and released a heavy sigh. He snatched up the phone, pinned it between his shoulder and ear, and dialed from memory.

A smooth voice answered on the first ring. “Professor MacGregor.”

“Mac, you’ve got trouble.”

“Patrick?” The voice warmed with an audible smile. “This is an unexpected surprise.”

“It certainly is that.” Keachan scowled and flipped the Cardeñas file open again. “I’m serious, Mac. You’ve got trouble.”

Fabric rustled over the connection as the other man shifted. “What kind of trouble?”

“The rogue kind.”

Silence fell between them, heavy and oppressive. The other man broke it first. “You’re sure?” His voice was quiet now, tense.

“As much as I can be. I’ll bring the file over tonight.”

He sighed, a bone-weary sound. “Thank you. The brood will see to you if you arrive before I do.”

“Tonight, then.”

Keachan disconnected, then settled the phone back in its cradle and simply stared at it.

A rogue. Dear God.

He jumped when someone knocked on his office door. Swearing at himself beneath his breath, he slid the file off of his desk and into his briefcase. There was no point in fretting on it until nightfall. Until then, he had other monstrosities to investigate.



## Chapter Two

The apartment door swung open. Adri's boyfriend shrugged off his overcoat and smiled at her in greeting, but she couldn't make herself smile back. Confusion flickered through his eyes and his smile melted away. "What's wrong?" He tossed his scarf aside and quickly moved to sit next to her.

Reina stared at him, uncertain how to begin. Adri and Brett had known each other since freshman year, had been dating since sophomore. She'd stood up to her pack to stay with him when they'd tried to pressure her to choose from amongst her own kind. He'd defended her when his all-too-human family had done the same.

"Brett..." Reina sighed and scrubbed her hands over her face. These things were best done quickly, weren't they? She dropped them to her lap. "Something happened to Adri."

"What?" His eyes widened. His hand curled into a fist. Her heart raced in response to the alarm that poured off him in waves. "Is she all right? Where is she?"

"She's not all right." Reina swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. "She's dead. I'm so sorry, Brett."

Brett stared at Reina, slacked jawed. He staggered back and shook his head, watching her with a terrible expression of betrayal, as though Reina herself embodied the horrible truth. "No. No, that's not possible. She's too strong—she's a Were, for God's sake. She's stronger than anyone I've met." He stopped his retreat and stood motionless, watching her with heartbreak in his eyes. "Reina, what could kill a Were?"

"I don't know," she said, and that at least was true. Weres had superhuman strength, even in their human forms. The idea of something or someone strong enough to overpower a Were was terrifying to think of.

She wanted to cry, because she could feel how badly Brett himself wanted to cry. Tightening her shields around herself to buffet the storm of his emotions, she rose and closed the distance between them. "I don't know what happened, Brett, or why. But we'll find out, okay?"

He nodded and wiped his cheeks, as if drying the tears that had yet to fall. "Where is she?"

"The police are taking care of her. They'll figure out what happened, Brett, I promise."

"I want to see her."

Reina felt the blood drain out of her face. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"I need to see her, Reina."

She bit her lip at his fervency. She couldn't believe that seeing Adri's body, mangled and torn, would do anything to help his grief, but she didn't have the heart to talk him out of it. "All right," she said. Let the police decide whether to let him see her or not. "Let's go."

The drive to the station was tense and silent. Brett spoke little, staring out the window with his arms wrapped tightly around his chest, but he projected waves of emotions that echoed Reina's own. She kept quiet, uncertain he would welcome her empathic intrusion and unsure what she could say that could possibly help.

A uniformed officer sat behind a sleek desk in the foyer and greeted Reina and Brett

as they stepped through the station's glass doors. "We'd like to speak with Officer Thompson" she told him. "We're Adriana Cardenas's friends. He's investigating her murder; I spoke with him this morning."

"*Murder?*" Brett grabbed her arm. "Reina, you said—"

The officer turned towards his computer and typed briefly. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, you must be mistaken. The Cardenas case is no longer under active investigation."

Reina's hands tightened on the edge of the desk. "I'm sorry? A girl is murdered, and you're not even investigating it?"

He frowned and glanced back at the computer, typing some more. "I'm sorry, miss, but Adriana Cardenas's death was determined to have been the result of an animal attack. If you'd like more information I can direct you to Detective Keachan. He's the supervising detective for the case."

She bit back an angry retort and simply nodded. "I would, thank you."

He lifted the phone and dialed a number, then waited, watching her from the edges of his vision. "Sir, there's a woman here who would like to speak with you about the Cardenas case. No, sir. No, I believe she has questions about the cause of death."

"You can tell him I'm the one who found her damned body," Reina snapped, "if it'll do any good."

Brett made a low sound and pulled on her arm again. "Reina, what are you talking about? Murder? You just said she *died*..."

"Brett, I'm sorry. I thought—" She dragged a hand through her hair. "I thought it would be harder, if you knew."

"It is." He sucked in air through his teeth. "But I love her. I want to know the truth."

The officer behind the desk motioned them towards a hallway that stretched along the length of the station. Reina set her jaw and started forward. "Well, let's find it, then."

They came to a plain wooden door, unassuming and unadorned but for the crooked plaque that bore Detective Keachan's name. Reina knocked twice in quick succession. She stepped back, arms crossed over her chest, and waited.

The door swung open. A tall, lean man stood on the opposite side. He raised an eyebrow at Reina and jerked his head towards the office interior. "Please come in, Miss..."

"Reina Campbell. This is Brett Daniels." She and Brett stepped inside, far enough to let him close the door behind them. Brett took the chair that Keachan offered, but Reina remained standing. She waited until her eyes had adjusted from the bright hallway to the dim lamplight that struggled to illuminate the small room. She had to navigate around the stacks of files and boxes that lined the room's perimeter in order to stand at Brett's side.

She tightened her arms over her chest and resisted the urge to scowl at the lanky detective. He leaned back casually in his chair and scrubbed a hand through his hair as he looked them over, but it did nothing to calm the disheveled mop.

"The officer I spoke with told me that Adri's case has been closed," she said without preamble, giving him a frosty look.

"Yes." He nodded congenially. "Please take a seat, Miss Campbell." With his untucked shirttails, worn denim jacket and faded jeans, he seemed the epitome of casualness, but when Reina met his gaze she caught a hint of steel underneath. She'd have pegged him as mid-thirties, if she'd been pressed to guess, but that glimpse of the hardness within him made him seem much older. She sank into the chair next to Brett's,

willing to play nice if it would get her the answers she needed.

"Now, then." Keachan picked up a file and flipped through it, keeping everything carefully angled to block their view. "The medical examiner performed an autopsy on Adriana Cardeñas and determined that the cause of death was an animal attack, probably feline. This finding was supported by evidence gathered at the scene, therefore the case has been closed pending preliminary lab results." He leaned even further back in his chair and propped his feet on the desk, for all the world as if he were enjoying a lazy weekend afternoon. His gaze met hers over the tops of his sneakers.

He was unorganized, unkempt, and unprofessional, and Reina decided that she didn't like him one bit. "You're wrong," she said.

Keachan's eyebrows climbed up his forehead, nearly disappearing beneath his fringe of sandy hair. "I'm sorry for your loss, Miss Campbell. I understand you were a friend of the victim's, but we have found no evidence to suggest that this was anything but an unfortunate accident."

Reina leaned forward and slapped her hand down on his desk. "*I* have evidence."

Brett jumped and frowned at her. "Reina... Maybe we should just—"

Keachan waved away his concern. "I would be happy to look at it," he said, smiling.

She sank back with the uncomfortable feeling that he was mocking her. "It was a vision."

Brett shot her a startled look, but didn't interrupt again. Keachan, on the other hand, watched her with a small, crooked grin. "Miss Campbell, I understand that you mean well, but a *vision* can hardly be considered evidence of murder."

"You don't understand. I'm an empath." She thought she might have seen a flicker of interest in his eyes, but he kept his expression schooled to bemused patience. "Detective Keachan, I've been an empath since I was in elementary school. I know how to tell the difference between empathy and imagination. This morning, I had a vision in which I was stalked, attacked, and killed, moments before tripping over my best friend's body. You can't possibly be ignorant enough to think they're unrelated."

"She's never been wrong," Brett said quietly, looking lost and bereft. "Not once since I've known her." He twisted so he could look at Reina straight-on. "You're *sure*?" he demanded. "You're *sure* she was murdered?"

"Positive," she said grimly. "Brett, I'm sorry. I wish I wasn't."

"Your friend *was* attacked and killed, Miss Campbell," Keachan interjected, his voice tight with growing irritation. He dropped his feet to the floor and leaned his elbows on the desk, rubbing his temples with a frown. "And given the nature of predators, she was likely stalked as well. But that doesn't make it murder."

"It wasn't an animal. It *spoke* to me—to her." He started to speak, but she cut him off. "Don't try and pull some psychobabble crap and tell me that it was just a manifestation of my subconscious, an interpretation of my fears or whatever. It wasn't a figment of my imagination, Detective, it was a vision. And I know what I saw."

"As I understand it, empaths don't have visions," Keachan said gently, as though trying to cushion a fatal blow. "Are you going to try to tell me that you're clairvoyant, too?"

"I'm not—I haven't—Damn it!"

Keachan got to his feet and opened the office door. "I truly am sorry for your loss, but I don't think I can help you. If you'll talk with Officer Moran at the front desk, he can

give you a number for a grief counselor."

"That won't be necessary, thank you." Reina stalked out of the station, forcing Brett to jog to catch up.

\* \* \* \*

The evening sun crawled towards the horizon at a glacial pace, surely for no better reason than to try Logan MacGregor's nerves. Though his office was windowless and the light seeping beneath his door entirely artificial, he felt the sun's progress like a physical touch along the back of his neck. Logan found himself growing increasingly restless as twilight approached. His nerves sizzled and he unconsciously held his breath while the last rays of sunlight disappeared beneath the horizon.

As darkness settled, an oppressive weight lifted itself from his shoulders. He shrugged on his jacket, exchanged a brief greeting with the night watchman on his way through the lobby, and slid behind the wheel of his car.

He drove with his windows rolled down, relishing the cool brush of the night air. One by one, stars winked into existence overhead, and the familiar roads through Bryson passed beneath his wheels. An expansive net of starlight shimmered across the sky as he pulled into his driveway.

The light over the porch had been left on, as was customary, but a few within the house glowed faintly through the heavy curtains. Logan tried the door, found it unlocked, and stepped inside.

"Patrick?"

"I'm here." The muted call came from the kitchen; a moment later Keachan stepped out, looking haggard. His hair was a tousled mess, as though he had spent the day raking his fingers through it. His eyes, when he met Logan's gaze, were resigned and mirthless.

Logan clasped his hand in greeting. "I suppose you had best tell me about this trouble, then."

Keachan sighed and retrieved a folder from his briefcase.

Logan settled himself on the couch before opening the police case file. He hissed softly at the images it held. The shots were grotesque in their detail, documenting every horror the young woman had suffered, and the marks of the attacker were unmistakable.

"I had hoped that you were wrong," Logan murmured, pausing at the picture of the bite wound. His fingers lightly traced the line of teeth marks. "I should have known better. You never were the sort to jump to conclusions."

Keachan sank down next to him on the couch. "To tell the truth, I had hoped you would say that I was wrong. It's not a pleasant business."

"No, indeed." Logan read the police report quickly, taking in the salient details of the attack. "Well," he said after a moment of tense silence. "I suppose I'll need to see the scene. Has it been released yet?"

Keachan nodded. "There was little opposition to the idea of an animal attack." He made a face. "Few want to believe a human could do something like this."

"A *human* couldn't." Logan looked up at Keachan. "You said little opposition, not none. There were some who didn't believe the tale?"

"One. A woman." Keachan ran a hand over the back of his neck, frowning. "She yelled at me for being too blind to see that her friend had been murdered."

A reluctant smile tugged at the corner of Logan's mouth. "Did you manage to

convince her otherwise?"

Keachan shook his head. "She didn't want to hear what I had to say, and left in a fury."

"Damn." Logan set the file aside and indulged in a brief moment of weakness, leaning his head back on the couch and rubbing at the tension headache growing in the base of his skull. "This is problematic." A rogue, in his territory. Vampires had been killed for less. A rogue was like a wild beast, incapable of concealing its tracks or controlling its urges. They attracted attention, human attention, and usually spelled doom for any other vampires in the area, even those who had minded their own business for decades.

"Do you think she'll be an issue?" Keachan asked.

"It's not just the girl. Our neighbors have been whispering of my weakness for decades, and they only grow louder as the years pass. Hell, even Alex has started to voice his agreement. A rogue, in my territory..." He trailed off and shook his head. "It's disaster, Patrick. Just what they need to confirm my inadequacy."

"Alex is loyal, Mac," Keachan said quietly. "They all are. They'd never turn on you."

"No," Logan agreed. "But still, it gives my enemies further ammunition, when they already have enough to damn me."

"They're power-hungry fools, and you give them more merit than they deserve by wasting a moment's thought on them."

"Perhaps," he said without conviction. He rose to his feet and dug through his pockets for his keys. "We should be going, then. Fools or not, *someone* has challenged my power by setting this rogue loose on my land. We'd best get what information we can before another day's worth of students trample over everything."

Keachan followed him without comment, but Logan could feel the weight of the other man's gaze on his back, and it set him on edge.

The last thing he needed was more scrutiny, from friend or foe.

\* \* \* \*

"Reina..." Brett's voice was strained with exhaustion. He leaned his forehead against the car's window, watching the bright lights of storefronts and other vehicles flash by.

"What's the point of this?"

Reina's hands tightened on the wheel but her voice, when she spoke, was carefully neutral. "The point is to figure out what happened to Adri. The *truth*, Brett. I promised you we'd find it."

"Do you really think you can do a better job than the police?"

"Under normal circumstances, no, of course not. But when they refuse to even listen..." She looked at him, flooded with a sudden sense of helplessness. "What else am I supposed to do, Brett?"

"Why can't you just accept it? Cougars have wandered into Bryson before. I don't understand why you can't just accept..." He looked at her then, with such a look of vulnerability that a lump formed in Reina's throat. She refused to believe while he was desperate to, clinging to even the slightest possibility that there was a reasonable explanation. Anything, his expression said, was better than murder.

She stared out at the road, fighting the urge to turn back just to keep that haunted look out of his eyes. "Cats that are hungry enough to attack a human don't just wander off

and leave their meal half eaten. And Adri was a Were. Cats are strong and stealthy, but Adri was both of those things—and she had a human's cunning to back it up. You yourself asked me what could kill a Were." She shook her head. "I don't think a cougar's capable of that."

"And the vision?" He stared out the window again. "Which you didn't tell me about."

"Please don't resent me for that." She caught her lip between her teeth. "Would it have helped to know that I lived out her last moments? To know exactly what sort of horrors she experienced?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Do you *really* want to know what her final moments were like?"

Brett swallowed hard and shuddered. "No." His voice was tight again. "But there would have been better ways to find out than overhearing you blurt it out to the detective."

"I was upset. I'm sorry." She pulled into the university lot and parked, but neither of them moved from their seats.

"You don't have to do this," she said after a moment had passed. "If it's too hard... I'll take you back, and do it on my own."

"And end up lying next to Adri in the morgue?" He frowned at her and got out of the car. "If you're right, then whoever killed her is still out there. You shouldn't be here alone."

Reina gave him a small smile, and they walked together towards the Green.

"Are you looking for...emotions? Traces of emotions?" Brett asked as they picked their way along familiar paths that had grown treacherous in the dark.

"Residuals," she corrected him, then hesitated. "No. If I had to go through that again, so soon..." She shuddered at the thought. "I think we should focus our search on the more mundane sorts of clues."

"What exactly do you expect to find? Anything of value would already—"

She grabbed his arm and he fell silent. Without the masking cover of his voice, they could hear the muted rise and fall of conversation just ahead.

Reina stood in the lee of a heavy oak tree and peered around its trunk. Her heart pounded in her throat. No more than a dozen yards away, two figures stood silhouetted against a yellow park light, crouched low and inspecting the ground before them. The cadences of their whispered conversation carried on the still night air, but not the words. Biting her lip in frustration, she squinted, straining to see the features of the strangers. Could they be responsible for Adri's death?

A cool breeze drifted through the treetops overhead, shifting branches and illuminating the two men with moonlight for a brief moment. Reina's breath caught in her chest. One of the men she didn't recognize, but the other...

"That's Detective Keachan!" she hissed, pulling Brett behind the tree with her. "What the hell is he doing here?"

As they watched, the other man picked something from the ground and handed it to Keachan. He inspected it, then dropped it into a small bag and tucked it into his pocket.

"Maybe he changed his mind about the animal attack," Brett whispered.

"And he's out here gathering evidence in the middle of the night, without even a flashlight to see by? I doubt it."

"What, then?"

"I don't know." The teasing hints of conversation only fueled her curiosity. Though

she knew she ran the risk of encountering one of Adri's, Reina carefully let down her shields and opened herself to the residuals in the area.

The park was tangled with a thick web of residuals left by the constant traffic of students making their way to and from class. She sifted through them one by one, casting aside those that were irrelevant and searching for the threads of emotion from Keachan and his companion. There would be worry at the least, or they wouldn't have taken such precautions to avoid being seen, and excitement as well, if the hurried whispers were any indication. In both strength and intensity of emotion, the men's residuals should have stood out vividly against the rest. But even with her shields dropped completely, Reina could find no empathic trace of the men anywhere in the area.

Only one creature could walk the earth without leaving residual evidence of its passing, and the possibility left Reina lightheaded with epiphany.

*Of course... How could I have missed it?*

Edging backwards, Reina gripped Brett's arm and pulled him with her. "We need to go. Now."

Brett followed silently, only casting a single, confused glance over his shoulder as they crossed the Green.

Reina didn't dare speak until they were halfway across campus and she was certain that the men hadn't followed them. Without residuals to guide her, she felt unusually vulnerable. Keachan and his companion could be anywhere, and as long as they were quiet she'd have no warning of their approach. It had been a long time since someone had been able to sneak up on her without her knowledge, and the prospect of it now sent alarm singing through her veins.

They sat in a heavily lit courtyard on Campus Avenue. With her back to the wall and a clear line of sight into the park and both directions down the Avenue, Reina finally felt a small sense of security. She drew Brett down next to her.

"What happened?"

"They don't have residuals."

Brett gave her a blank look.

"Every living creature gives off residuals; they can't help it. Only one animate being doesn't—vampires. The undead."

Brett blinked, startled. "You mean—the detective?"

"Both of them. Damn it, why didn't this occur to me?" Reina ran her hands over her face. "A cat wouldn't leave a meal half-eaten, but a vampire would. They're interested in the blood, not the flesh. And the thing that attacked Adri spoke—I *knew* it spoke!"

"You think he did it?" Brett asked. Anger began to replace the confusion and bewilderment in his voice. "A *cop*?"

"It's the perfect crime, isn't it?" she said grimly. "Take your own victim's case, and tell everyone it was just an animal attack. Who would question it? Hell, I might have even bought it, if it weren't for the vision. *Damn it.*"

"Reina, how on earth do you expect to take on a dirty cop? The minute you accuse him, you'll end up just another unfortunate victim of a cougar attack." He moved suddenly, sliding around on the low concrete planter until they faced each other. "I love Adri, and I know you do, too. But she wouldn't want us to risk our lives for this."

"What if he kills someone else? What if someone else dies, and we could have stopped it? I don't want to live with that guilt."

"But going head-to-head with a vampire..." Brett shook his head. "It's suicide."

"I know." She gave him a sharp, determined look. "So we'll just have to find another way around it."



### Chapter Three

Reina outlined the plan on the drive home, but Brett couldn't dredge up much enthusiasm for it. He fiddled with his keys as she drove, staring at the sharp lines of her profile.

*I don't want to lose another friend. I'm going to have to bury Adri, and that's bad enough. I don't want to bury her, too.*

But nothing he said could sway her. He recognized the fierce determination in her eyes, and felt a growing sense of dread rise within him. She was going to get herself killed, and he couldn't do a thing to stop it.

She parked, and Brett pulled himself out of his thoughts and back to the present. They weren't at the apartment, but instead somewhere downtown, stopped before a street of small shops. He followed Reina out of the car; she led him into a store named *Moonlight and Magic*. The store's interior was spacious and brightly lit. Jewelry hung on one long wall, gleaming gold and silver in the store's bright light. Along another, low transparent bins held an assortment of dried herbs and flowers. Brett drew a long garland of garlic bulbs from one and stared at Reina. "And we're going to do what, exactly? Drape ourselves in garlic, and be rendered untouchable?"

"Don't be silly." Reina took the garland from him and put it back in its bin. "That's just superstition. What we want is over here."

She led him to the jewelry. Christian crosses, Egyptian ankhs, Chinese yin-yangs, and other mysterious symbols hung from hooks on the wall. Reina selected a gold cross on a sturdy chain and set it aside. She gestured to Brett. "Pick one. It'll burn any vampire who touches it."

Brett eyed the display. "You mean that's not a superstition?"

"It is, sort of." She turned her selection over in her hands, fingers caressing the polished metal. "It doesn't have anything to do with vampires being forsaken by God's love, or any of that nonsense. It's all about symbolism." She waved a hand at the wall of jewelry. "Any of these will work just as well. They're symbols of life."

"And the gold?"

"Symbolically linked to the sun, of course."

"Of course." Uncomfortable, Brett selected a small cross that could be easily concealed beneath a shirt. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as they brought their purchases to the cashier. "Are you sure about all this?"

She nodded.

"Where'd you learn it?"

She grinned at him. "I always told Dad my preternatural studies major would come in handy sooner or later."

\* \* \* \*

After a full day at the station and a night spent combing the shadows of Madsen Green with Logan, Keachan could think of nothing better than a dark room, a soft bed, and twelve hours with which to make good use of them.

He staggered into his apartment, numb with exhaustion, and somehow managed to summon the energy to draw his blackout curtains, set his alarm for sunset, and collapse into bed before the weight of the rising sun dragged him into oblivion.

The phone woke him scant hours later. He snatched up the receiver and snarled, "This had *better* be good."

"Fraid not." It took Keachan a moment of groggy contemplation before he recognized the voice as Kynan's, and another before he realized that the young man's tone was as grave as he'd ever heard it. "You need to turn on Channel Forty."

Keachan buried his face in his pillow and prayed for patience. "I've neither slept nor fed in twenty-four hours," he muttered. "It couldn't *possibly* be important enough to wake me."

"Yes, it is." Kynan cleared his throat, and over the connection Keachan heard the creak of couch springs, like the other man was fidgeting.

Since when had Kynan been nervous around anyone, much less Keachan, who had been a friend of the family and adopted kin for centuries?

"You don't want to give this time to spread," he continued. "Seriously."

"Fine. But you owe me blood." Keachan groaned as he dragged himself out of bed. "*Fresh*."

Kynan laughed, and sounded like himself for the first time during the entire conversation. "Sure thing. Now go turn on the tube."

Though he was half-tempted to simply go back to sleep and damn the consequences, the note of alarm in Kynan's voice propelled Keachan out of the bedroom.

He'd left the curtains in the rest of the apartment open. Even though they faced north and didn't receive direct sunlight, what light they did allow into the apartment was enough to make him stumble as he crossed the living room. He drew the curtains shut with an impatient motion, turned the TV on as he passed it, and headed for the kitchen.

He didn't even bother to heat the first bag of blood. He downed it cold in a single gulp and leaned against the fridge, waiting until it sang through his system and fought exhaustion back to the periphery of his awareness. Steadier, he took care with the second bag and warmed it to body temperature before transferring it into a tall glass.

He'd just started to enjoy it, drawing it down his throat in a long sip, when he caught his own name coming from the TV in the other room. He choked on the drink and set the glass down with a clatter. He ran out to the living room, certain that his exhaustion must be playing tricks on his ears—and skidded to a stop as he took in the headline blazoned across the bottom of the screen: *Review Commission Investigates Allegations of Police Corruption*. A woman was on camera, relating the story.

"—the Bryson Police Review Commission received a complaint today that posed allegations of negligence, evidence tampering, and obstruction of justice against Bryson PD's Detective Patrick Keachan. The complaint calls into question the case of Bryson University student Adriana Cardeñas, whose body was found on campus yesterday morning and whose death, we were told, was the result of an animal attack. When we spoke with him, Police Chief Tanner reassured us that the matter would be thoroughly reviewed, and insisted that he has great faith in Detective Keachan's integrity as a police officer and skills as an investigator. Whether anything comes of these actions remains to be seen, but for the time being it's safe to say that every member of the police force will be operating under intense scrutiny."

Keachan sank into the nearest chair, stunned. "Oh *damn!*"

\* \* \* \*

Unlike Kynan, who seemed to delight in living dangerously, Keachan knew that discretion was the better part of valor. He opted not to tell Logan about the incident until after the other man woke. In the meantime, he could do some damage control.

He paid the reporter a visit first.

She rounded on him, alight with indignant fury when he broke into her office. By the time he left, she was pale and trembling very slightly, and had proven most willing to comply with the department's request to air a revision of the story.

A few kinder visits with other news stations ensured him that each would run stories the next day on the desperate attempt of a misguided girl to slander a hardworking, upstanding member of the force, and the faith both the news stations and the police department placed in Keachan's ability to do his job.

The day was drawing to a close by the time he finished. Keachan drove to Logan's house to pass the time until he woke.

Faint light seeped around the edges of the curtains. Keachan unlocked the front door and stepped inside the house.

Kynan glanced up from where he lay sprawled on the couch. "I thought you might be stopping by." He jerked his head towards the kitchen. "Blood's in there. Been keeping it on hot water for you."

"You're a godsend," Keachan said, belatedly remembering the half-finished glass he'd abandoned on his kitchen counter. He retrieved the blood and returned to find Kynan watching the same news report from that morning. "Oh for God's sake, turn that off."

Kynan glanced at him, shrugged, and punched a button on the remote. The reporter flickered out mid-word. "Get up on the wrong side of the coffin?"

"Oh, you're hilarious. I can see why Mac keeps you around."

"Well, I'm certainly more fun than you." Kynan draped an arm over the back of the couch and quirked a brow at him.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs interrupted their repartee. Both men turned.

Logan greeted Kynan with a kiss. He noticed Keachan and shot him a puzzled look. "Back again, Patrick?"

"He just can't get enough of me." Kynan settled back on the couch again with a pleased grin. "If you want to get overprotective and rough him up for messing with your man, I won't stop you."

Logan's lips quirked. "I doubt that's necessary." He turned his attention back to Keachan, sobering. "What brings you by this time? Something more pleasant than the last visit, I hope."

"Less, I'm afraid." Keachan handed him the tape that he'd recorded the news segment onto.

Logan watched the report in silence. The only hint of emotion he showed was in the hand that he raised to his lips when he heard the accusations.

"Well," he said once the tape had ended. "This *is* a problem. Do you know who made the accusation?"

"The reporter wouldn't give me a name, but I have my suspicions."

"The girl?"

Keachan nodded. "I've made arrangements to have a retraction aired, as well as reports on other channels spun to favor the PD. But the girl..." He sighed. "She's going to be a problem."

Logan regarded him with a hint of a smile. "The great Detective Keachan, felled by the determination of a little girl? It cannot be."

"Oh, *you* can laugh." Keachan gave a disgusted snort. "Do you really think you can settle this without my help, and the department's resources? You'll be on your own until the review's finished. And how do you expect to find this rogue if you're tripping over her every step of the way? This isn't just *my* problem, Mac."

"No," Logan agreed. He glanced back at the screen.

Kynan sat up, looking between the two of them. "What are you thinking?" He sounded alarmed.

Keachan glanced at him and swore. "Don't tell me you're sympathizing with this pest."

"Her friend just *died*. Can't you cut her a little slack?"

"Not when it means risking my territory." Logan gave Kynan a hard look. "Or do you think you'd like it better living under Arlais' roof? Or Donovan's? Living as part of *their* broods?"

Kynan crossed his arms over his chest, giving Logan a sulking look. "She's just a girl," he said, getting to his feet. "I thought *you* were above solving all your problems with the fang. At least Arlais and Don make no pretenses about trying to live harmoniously with mortals." He turned on his heel and stalked upstairs.

"Damn it!" Logan spun, slamming his fist against the wall. "Now he'll get them up in arms to protect this girl. Bella will side with them, citing her damned Hippocratic Oath, and Alex will play the older brother and defend them all. Lord, we've enemies enough as it is. We must stand united, or we've no chance at all."

Keachan watched his friend from a distance, familiar with his moods and tempers. His anger, when it flared, did so hot and fierce, but it would settle and duty would take its place.

Until the fire burned itself out, though, Keachan knew better than to tempt his wrath.

"I'll handle it, Mac," he said, heading towards the door. "Take care of your brood. I'll take care of the girl."

## Chapter Four

Reina had expected to sleep fitfully, but the day's events left her exhausted. Staggering home, she changed into a nightshirt, donned her newly-purchased necklace, and collapsed into bed.

She awoke sometime in the middle of the night with her heart pounding in her throat. She lay still, frowning at the ceiling and trying to identify a reason. In the quiet and stillness of the night, her pulse began to steady. Sleep began to weigh her down again, but fled entirely when she heard a soft, faint rustle.

Fear galvanized her. She scrambled up, crouching at the end of her bed like a cornered animal, searching futilely through the darkness for the source of the sound. Her hand rose to instinctively grasp the cross around her neck.

"You're awake then, are you?" The low voice might have come from anywhere or everywhere. Reina strained to hear, but couldn't identify the direction it had come from, much less the source.

"Who are you?" Fear tightened her throat and weighed her words. She cursed herself for being an idiot. So much for putting on a brave front.

His quiet chuckle made the hairs at her nape stand on end. "Not quite as clever as you make yourself out to be, it seems." With a metallic click, the lamp on her desk turned on, flooding the room with light.

Reina was momentarily blinded, but she knew the layout of her room. And now she knew where the intruder was, and knew he'd be just as blinded as she. She took advantage of it and flung herself off the bed, throwing the door open and racing down the hall.

She heard a crash behind her, followed by a string of oaths. A moment later, she was grabbed and thrown roughly against the wall. Reina grabbed at her cross, snapping the chain, and swiped at her attacker with it.

Keachan grabbed her wrist before the blow struck and plucked the cross from her fingers with a gloved hand. He tossed it aside and pinned her wrist against the wall overhead.

Reina stared up at him as her blood turned to ice. *Oh shit. He's going to kill me.* She looked around wildly, but saw nothing that she could use to her advantage.

"That was quite a trick," he said, leaning over her. He flashed her a smile, revealing his fangs. "You've made the news."

"Then you're even stupider than I thought. If I die shortly after accusing you of murder, everyone will look at you." She swallowed and met his gaze steadily. "If you kill me, you'll just damn yourself."

He gave her a scornful look. "I'm not going to *kill* you, you stupid girl. And I didn't kill your friend, either."

"I don't believe you."

"Do you know what I was doing out there last night?" He leaned close, hissing the words at her. "Trying to *find* the creature that killed your friend."

"Oh, well." She laughed hopelessly. "In that case, all is forgiven."

He drew back, though still held her pinned against the wall, and gave her a

measuring look. "The fact is, all we've done is trip over one another since this started. Neither of us will find anything if we keep getting in each other's way. So I propose a partnership—I'll tell you what we *do* know about your friend's death—"

"Murder," she said.

"If that's the terminology you like," he acceded with a tilt of his head. "And you may help us in our search for the killer."

"Why?" She stared at him. "What on earth could *I* do that you and your friend couldn't accomplish on your own?"

"Your empathy could be a valuable resource. And you observed us last night without our knowledge—that says more than you realize about your skills. And," he added, "you have knowledge that we have no other access to."

She waited, uncomprehending.

Keachan sighed. "Your *vision*, Miss Campbell."

"You believe me now, do you?" She gave him a skeptical look.

"I believe you."

"What's the catch?"

"No catch," he said. "You help us. We help you."

Reina shook her head. "I'm not buying it. I have a hard time believing that I've got any 'skills' that *you* don't already have in spades. And I'm not interested in tagging along and waiting to find out what your ulterior motive is." She ducked beneath his arm and started down the hall towards her room. "Thanks, but no thanks. I'll manage on my own, and I'm sure you will, too."

He grabbed her before she could take more than two steps. Reina turned back to him, scowling. Her pulse began fluttering again. She stared up at him and wondered if he maybe he really did mean to kill her.

"I'm afraid I must insist," Keachan said softly, his fingers digging into her flesh.

Reina pulled her arm out of his hold, ignoring the bruises that it created. "Then why bother giving me a choice?"

His grin flashed. "That would be rude."

"All right," she said slowly. She turned to face him, her mind racing to calculate just how much trouble she was getting herself into, and how she could get herself back out again. "I'll work with you. But there are a few things that *I'm* going to have to insist on."

His lips quirked, as though he struggled not to laugh. "What are your demands?"

"I want Brett to be in on this. Adri was his girlfriend, and he deserves to know the truth."

"Very well. And?"

"And I want to meet your partner."

"My partner?" His voice wavered. He *was* laughing at her, damn it.

"The man who was with you at the park," she snapped. "I won't be kept in the dark on this, Detective. If I'm in, I'm all the way in."

"As you like." He smiled and sketched a bow. As he rose, he drew a business card from his pocket and handed it to her. "Here's his information. You may contact him at your convenience."

The card read *Professor Logan MacGregor, Ph.D.* It listed several phone numbers and an address that Reina recognized as a building on campus. She closed her hand around the card and glanced back up at Keachan.

He had disappeared.

## Chapter Five

After Keachan's visit, Reina found it impossible to fall back to sleep. Every tiny, innocuous sound sent her heart leaping into her throat and left her straining to listen in the darkness, certain that he had returned just as silently as he had originally come, or that some other vampire had snuck into her room. After several hours of lying tense with fear, she turned the light on and hoped that the ability to see her surroundings would allay her fears.

The trick worked, but left the room too bright for sleep.

As watery morning sunlight seeped through her blinds, she abandoned any hope of sleep and dragged herself to the coffee maker.

Halfway down the hall, she stumbled over her cross, still lying where Keachan had cast it aside. "Idiot," she muttered, frowning, as she picked it up and inspected the damage to the broken chain.

What on earth had possessed her to make an alliance with a vampire? With Keachan, of all of them?

"Sleep deprivation," she decided and set the cross aside on the kitchen counter.

She didn't trust him, she mused as she settled onto the couch. But she was starting to get the uneasy feeling that she believed him. He'd given no indication during her talk that he was lying. He had simply seemed impatient, as if annoyed at the arrangement he himself was proposing.

"Oh, girl, you've gone off the deep end," she said with a sigh. The only reason she had to trust Keachan was that she hadn't sensed that he was lying. Considering this was a creature who produced no residuals at all—truthful or otherwise—that was pretty flimsy logic.

When her alarm finally went off, she had woken up enough to realize that backing out on an agreement with a vampire was not the brightest of ideas, especially when Keachan had been so insistent on the alliance. That left either blind trust, or deception. Let Keachan think she trusted him and he'd let his guard down, and maybe give something away.

Having made that decision, she felt buoyed with a sense of purpose. She dressed briskly, called Brett and left him a voicemail asking him to stop by when he got off work, and left for class.

Lost in thought as she walked across the campus, Reina took little notice of her surroundings until a hand thrust itself into her field of vision, clutching a piece of paper.

"Morning! Can you spare a minute to keep our campus safe?"

She stumbled back and blinked at the woman who had stopped her. "Sorry," she muttered. "Class." Reina took the flyer to satisfy her and prevent any further delays, and continued on.

Half a dozen strides away, she stopped and looked back over her shoulder, frowning. The woman was speaking with a student, probably some poor freshman who hadn't known better than to stop for her. Reina watched as she gestured animatedly, her voice lost beneath the chatter of the students who walked past them.

Reina didn't recognize her at all. But something was familiar, nagging at the back of



her mind.

When the kid left, looking dazed and not a little overwhelmed, Reina returned to the woman. She was crouching by her knapsack, rifling through it, and it gave Reina a moment to try to figure out what had caught her attention.

A spark of wry amusement flashed through the woman's residuals. She looked over her shoulder, not rising from her crouch, and raised a brow at Reina. "Change your mind, honey?"

"Don't I know you?"

The woman straightened and gave her a once-over. "I don't think so. Do you—Oh, *hell*." Her face broke into a wide grin. "It's Reina, right?"

"I *do* know you." Reina stared at her, bewildered. "I'm sorry. Your memory is better than mine."

The woman laughed. "Fate Dobrzynski. Sixth grade, we had third period home room—"

"—with Mrs. Kimble, of course." Suddenly, it seemed so clear that Reina marveled that she hadn't been able to make the connection on her own. "Wow, it's been ages. How have you been? You seem ... happy." The Fate she remembered had been a somber child, deeply saddened by something that she never spoke about.

Fate laughed and shrugged. "Well, I'd be happier if I could get people to take these things so I could get back inside and thaw out."

Reina looked down at the flyer she'd taken but paid no attention to. The word "PURE" blazoned across the top in oversized letters. Beneath it, a tagline warned students about the "preternatural threat" that lurked amongst them.

The smile fell off of Reina's face. "What the hell is this?"

Fate didn't seem to notice that this was no longer a happy reunion between childhood friends, and babbled on brightly, "It's this on-campus activist group I run. We believe in aggressively removing the threat of the preternatural presence within society. You know, keeping people safe, all that jazz."

Reina resisted the urge to tear the stack of flyers to pieces and hurl them in Fate's face. "And where do you draw the line on aggressive? Harassment? Abuse? Murder?"

"What—" Fate's mouth fell open. She stepped back, then snapped it shut. "You're talking about that Were who died, aren't you? Boy, are you barking up the wrong tree, honey. The monsters are the ones who kill, not us. *We protect*. It doesn't do our cause any good to break the law, no matter how much we might disagree with it. Mostly, we work with legislation, to give preternaturals areas of their own in which they can congregate, where they can be among their own kind instead of in our midst."

"Right. Because Jim Crow laws worked *so* well the first time around." Reina sighed wearily.

Fate stared at her, bewildered. "We're just trying to protect people. I mean, that Were who died is a perfect example. What chance do you think *we* stand against something that can kill a monster like that?"

"That Were who died was my best friend. I found her body." Reina shoved the paper back into Fate's hands and turned away. "She wasn't a monster."

"Reina, wait—"

"Nice seeing you, Fate," she said insincerely. "Don't you have flyers to pass out?"

\* \* \* \*

Reina's anger didn't burn itself out until partway through her Rituals of Death in Were Society lecture. By the time her day was over, she had figured out a way to make use of the encounter.

She stopped at a bench beneath an overhanging oak tree and punched Keachan's number into her cellphone. He answered on the second ring. "Detective Keachan."

"It's Reina. Is it possible Adri's death was a hate crime?"

An audible sigh came from the other end of the line. "I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Because there's no evidence to support it." His words snapped with impatience. "There's no evidence to suggest that her attacker was even human."

"Oh, we're back to the cougar theory, are we?" Reina scowled. "What happened to this supposed partnership, to me having something to contribute to your search for her murderer? If all you're going to do is dismiss me out of hand, I'd rather be doing this on my own."

"Miss Campbell, I do not have time for this." The words were short and clipped, as though he spoke through clenched teeth. "If you want to waste your time with this line of investigation, help yourself, but I don't have the resources to spend on a fool's errand. I have a killer to find." He disconnected unexpectedly, leaving the static of an empty line buzzing in her ear.

Reina swore loudly. A passing student gave her a startled, wary look and changed his course to give her wide berth.

It was exactly what she'd feared Keachan had been proposing: a partnership in name only, and a patronizing pat on the head any time she tried to contribute.

*Fine*, she decided, snatching up her purse and striding towards the Social Sciences. If Keachan wouldn't let her in the front door, she'd come in through the back.

\* \* \* \*

It took little effort to find the looming Preternatural Studies building, and only a few minutes to ride the elevator up to the seventh floor. After that, however, it proved the usual challenge to locate the correct room in the building's maze of corridors. By the time she did find it, Reina was muttering unflattering things beneath her breath about whatever crazy kindergarten-reject had decided upon the numbering system. She knocked loudly on the office's closed door and ignored the listed hours that had been taped to the wall.

No answer came to her first two knocks, but after the third, she thought she heard faint noises from within. A moment later, the door swung open.

"Professor MacGregor?" Reina plastered a smile onto her face and looked at the man standing opposite her. He seemed on the young side for a tenured professor, but he towered over her all the same, and he was scowling.

"I'm sorry but I'm not holding office hours right now," he said impatiently. His voice carried a trace of an accent too faint to identify, though his name suggested it was Scottish. "I'd be happy to schedule an appointment, or you may come by tomorrow at noon."

"This isn't about class, actually." She hurried forward before he could shut the door in her face. "Detective Keachan gave me your information."

"He did, did he?" He gave her an appraising look, and a slow, lopsided smirk spread across his face. He stepped back and sketched a gallant bow. The glimmer of laughter in

his eyes suggested the gesture wasn't entirely sincere. "Well, then, by all means. Do come in."

She followed him into the office. While he closed the door behind her, she took the opportunity to look around. The office was larger than most she'd seen, and kept immaculate. Rows of books sat orderly upon the shelves of his bookcase; she didn't bother to check, but would have been willing to bet that they were alphabetized. There was no art on his walls, no photos on his desk. The only hints of personality in the room came from the leather jacket draped over his chair and the worn briefcase next to his desk, and those were enough to intrigue her.

He walked to his desk and leaned back against its edge, his long legs crossing at the ankle, his hands slipping into his pockets. Eyes the color of rich earth watched her as she paced across the office. "Now, then. What did you say your name was?" Young and handsome, he was exactly the sort of professor girls whispered about between classes, and they probably swooned when he graced them with a smile.

He was not smiling now, and his expression was just shy of hostile.

"It's Reina Campbell," she said, jerking her chin up. She returned his appraising look with one of her own. His shirt was well-tailored and pristine; his trousers were equally crisp, and his shoes polished to a mirror-like shine. As with his office, only a few details hinted at any sort of underlying personality: his shoulder-length dark hair, and the uppermost button of his shirt, which he had left unfastened.

*The girls probably flock to his classes*, Reina thought with a sigh.

"You're here about your friend."

She tried not to let her surprise show. "Yes, actually. I take it Detective Keachan told you about his ... offer?"

"No, I'm afraid he didn't. Why don't you enlighten me?"

Empathically, he was as unreadable as his office décor. The only hint to what he might be thinking was in the faint play of a smile about his mouth. It left Reina edgy. "Well, we spoke last night, and he proposed that we work together." She found herself fidgeting, almost nervous, and quashed it with a ruthless force of will. "A partnership between my skills as an empath, his as a detective, and yours..." She trailed off, suddenly realizing that she knew nothing about the role that he played in Keachan's investigation. Surely an anthropology professor had little to contribute to a murder investigation. But what advantage would Logan's skills as a vampire bring? Keachan already possessed those on his own.

Logan's faint smile strengthened. "And mine?" he prompted.

Reina lifted her chin. She didn't need residuals to know when she was being mocked. "A partnership," she repeated. "Between the three of us. I've met Detective Keachan, he obviously already knew you, but we hadn't met, so I wanted to stop by and introduce myself. And to run an idea by you."

She faltered, and silence stretched between them until Logan sighed. "I'm all ears, Miss Campbell."

"I was walking through campus earlier, and spoke with someone involved in P.U.R.E. Have you heard of it?"

His features twisted into an expression of distaste, but it was quickly masked. "I've heard mentions of it, little more."

"From what I've seen, it looks like a preternatural hate group. And the other day, this

kid interrupted my class in protest over preternaturals. Do you think that Adri's death may have been a hate crime?"

Logan raised an eyebrow coolly. "Do you?"

"Well, it makes sense, doesn't it? To tear her up like that, it would have been a crime of passion. And it explains why she was left there. A cougar would have eaten her, but if it was a hate crime, she'd have been left there to make a point."

"Miss Campbell, you have been watching too many crime dramas." Logan pushed himself away from the desk with a sigh and picked up his briefcase. "Now, I've had a long day, I'm tired, and I'm going home. If you'd like to continue this discussion, you may join me. Otherwise, you may make an appointment, and I'll thank you not to come by unannounced and expect me to cater to your whim again."

He strode out of the room without bothering to see if she followed. Reina regarded him in consternation for a moment, then hurried to catch up. "You know, my mother taught me not to get in cars with strange men," she said wryly.

"We're walking."

"Walking?" Reina gave a startled look at the windows, and the afternoon sun that gleamed through them. "Is that—I mean, can you—"

He stopped and looked over his shoulder at her with a raised eyebrow and a faint expression of amusement. "Exactly how old do you think I am, Miss Campbell? It'll take more than a brisk walk to undo me."

"Older than you look," she muttered at his back. "And it's not the walk I'm worried about." Louder, she said, "I'm not stupid, you know."

"I'll be sure to remember that."

His acerbic manner fueled her confusion into anger. She stopped in the middle of the hall. "Fine. Fry, for all I care." She spun around and continued down the hall in the opposite direction.

*Serves me right for thinking he couldn't possibly be more maddening than Keachan,* she thought with a huff. She strode quickly in her anger, and when a hand grabbed her shoulder, she whirled about in surprise.

Logan stood behind her, though she hadn't heard his pursuit. He watched her with an expression she couldn't quite place. "He told you what I am, did he?"

"No." She pulled out of his grip. "I told you, I'm not stupid. I figured it out for myself."

"Congratulations. But you needn't be concerned on my behalf. I'm old enough that I can tolerate a short time in the sun without 'frying', as you so eloquently put it." He held his hand out with an expectant air. "Now, are you coming or not?"

"Well gee, since you asked so nicely." With an annoyed frown at his back, she fell into place a step behind him.

The walk was short and silent. Logan said little until Reina tripped over a crack in the sidewalk. He was back at her side with startling speed, and caught her as she stumbled. Steadying herself, she looked up to thank him.

"Careful," he said brusquely. He continued walking as soon as she was on her feet. She sighed and rolled her eyes as she continued after him, trying to ignore the dull throb in her ankle.

He led her to a typical-looking suburban home in a small housing community near campus. An SUV was parked in the driveway, and a light shone inside the house. Logan

paused to try the front door, found it unlocked, and with a surprising display of gallantry, held it open and gestured Reina inside.

## Chapter Six

Logan's house was as tidy as his office had been, though possessed of slightly more personality. A cluster of knick-knacks arranged on a shelf; a mahogany sculpture that looked African to her untrained eye; an Egyptian floor mat, framed and hung on the living room wall. Reina took it all in he ushered her inside. "Nice place," she said casually.

Logan glanced at her, but his response was interrupted when a young man came running down the stairs two at a time, threw his arms about Logan's neck, and planted a noisy kiss on his cheek.

Then he noticed Reina. There was a beat of silence, and the newcomer turned to Logan with a startled look. "You didn't tell me you were bringing company!"

"She was a last minute addition." The other man started back up the stairs, but Logan stopped him with a look. "Kynan. See to our guest?"

Reina bristled and started to comment about foisting his responsibilities off on someone else, but Kynan simply gave an overly-comical salute, followed by an equally audacious bow. "Yes, sir, Captain, milord!" He glanced sideways at Reina and gave her a conspiratorial wink.

Reina extended her hand in greeting, but instead of shaking it, he took it in his own and sketched another bow. Though it was just as extravagant as the teasing one he had given Logan, Reina could find nothing insincere about the one he bestowed upon her.

"I'm Kynan Pritchard." He gave her a broad smile.

"Reina Campbell," she said, nonplussed.

"Pleased to meet you. Why don't you let me take your coat, and then I'll get you something to drink?"

"Thanks," she murmured as he helped her out of her jacket and hung it tidily on a coat rack. She followed him into the kitchen because she hadn't the foggiest idea what else to do.

Kynan stuck his head into the refrigerator and began pulling items out and setting them on the island behind him. "Pick your poison. We've got milk, coffee, tea—iced or hot, take your pick—orange juice, apple—" He withdrew from the fridge with a plastic pitcher filled with bright red liquid that made Reina's heart leap into her throat until she saw Kynan's lopsided grin. "And Kool-Aid, if you're in the mood for some quality time with your dentist. I'm afraid Jules loves the stuff."

"Coffee's fine," she said with a bemused smile. "I'm picky, though; if you'll show me where the cups are, I'll get it myself."

Kynan smiled and perched on a stool. "As you like." He gestured towards a cabinet across the kitchen. Reina busied herself to hide her nerves, retrieving a cup, pouring the coffee, and adding sugar and cream, until finally there was nothing left to do but grab a stool for herself and watch Kynan over the rim of her cup.

"Are you..." She hesitated, wary of being too forward with this stranger. "Are you part of Logan's...brood? Is that the right word?" She grimaced. "I've taken a couple classes on vampire culture and society, and that's what they taught us, but, well, it's academia. You never know."

Kynan laughed and leaned forward on his elbows. "That term always makes me feel like livestock, but it's the generally accepted one, yes. I'm the oldest," he said, before she even thought to ask. "There's three of us, in all. Well, four if you count Patrick, but he's not true kin. He and Mac met in Scotland when they were young."

Reina nodded and swirled a spoon through her coffee, watching the steam rise in ribbons.

"All right," Kynan said, grinning. "If we're going to play Twenty Questions, it's your turn. Nye tends towards pretty women, but he doesn't usually bring them home. What'd you do to crack his shell?"

Reina raised her head, then tilted it to the side. "I'm sorry, who?"

Kynan blinked, flushing. "Oh...just, Logan. You know." He jerked his head towards the floor above them. "Mister Congeniality."

"Oh." *Women?* she wondered, and bit her lip. "I thought you—I mean—" *Oh God, just stop, girl.* She frowned into her coffee and tried to focus on the question. "I think I'm here because he was trying to get rid of me." Her lips quirked, curving into a small smile. "I don't think he expected me to be quite as stubborn as I am."

Kynan grinned. "Good for you. Someone ought to give him a run for his money."

"As if you don't," Logan commented mildly from the kitchen doorway. "If I'd known you were going to invite my company in for a tea party, *cara*, I'd have finished our conversation at the office."

"Someone has to observe the niceties," Kynan said lightly, getting to his feet. "I'll leave you to your talk, then." As he passed Logan, Kynan casually reached out and squeezed his hand. Logan glanced at him over his shoulder, Kynan's eyes creased with amusement, and something passed between them that Reina couldn't fathom.

She watched Logan carefully over her coffee cup as he turned back, bracing herself for more of his sarcasm and wit.

"Now then." He poured himself a glass of water before taking the stool Kynan had abandoned. He regarded her across the island in silence for a moment. "In my office you said you think your friend's death may have been a hate crime. What do you expect to do about it?"

Reina blinked, unprepared for having the decision placed in her hands after the impatience both Keachan and Logan had shown for her ideas. She gave Logan a quizzical look. "I haven't a clue, really. I suppose we'll need to find proof to support or contradict the theory first." She scrubbed a hand over her forehead as she thought. "Hate's a powerful emotion. If I look around the area where she was killed, I should be able to pick up on it, if it's there."

Logan nodded, as though satisfied. "You'll need to be accompanied by Keachan or myself, of course." His words became thoughtful. "I'll speak with him, find out when he's available. Between the two of us, we should have a night free within the next few days."

Reina looked at him in surprise. "The next few days may be too late. The longer we wait, the less likely I'll be to find whatever residuals may be there. We need to go tonight."

Logan shook his head. "I have obligations tonight, it's quite inconvenient—"

Reina snorted and drained the last of her coffee. "Well, you'll need to make it convenient. Residuals fade fast, even strong ones. Not to mention all the other crap I'll have to sift through." She raised a brow at him. "Do you have any idea how many people

walk through the Park each day? Hundreds, all spilling out residuals as they go. It'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack as it is. The longer we wait, the bigger that haystack's going to get, and the smaller the needle."

Logan ran a hand through his hair with an exasperated sigh, his eyes narrowing with annoyance. After a moment of consideration, he seemed to come to a decision. "Very well. I'll see what rearranging I can do. Shall we meet at seven?"

Reina checked her watch; that gave her time to return home, fill Brett in, and maybe grab a bite to eat. "Works for me." She slid from the stool and turned towards the doorway. A spasm of pain shot through her ankle.

She yelped and clung to the island for support. "Damn!"

Logan gave her a startled look. "Is something wrong?"

"It's my ankle. I must've hurt it worse than I thought when I tripped. And then just now..." She eased her weight onto it, testing its strength. Pain shot through her foot again and she gave up, grimacing. She glanced reluctantly at Logan. "I don't think I'm going to be able to walk home like this."

He moved quickly around the island and wrapped her arm around his shoulder. His arm curved around her waist. Stooping, he helped support her weight as she hobbled out of the kitchen. "Let's get you seated. Bella will be home soon; I'll have her see to you, then drive you home."

"But the residuals—"

"If you can't walk home, you're certainly in no shape to traipse about through the Park. We'll go another day."

Reina found it difficult to glare at him from her sprawled position on the couch, but she made a valiant effort nonetheless. "What we need might not be there another day."

"Or it might not be there at all." He projected an air of exaggerated patience. "And I won't see you injuring yourself even worse on such a lark. Now stay there. I'll get you some ice."

She could do little more than sit obediently while he returned to the kitchen. At the doorway, he paused and glanced back at her once more, as though uncertain whether she'd comply.

"It's not like I could go anywhere, even if I wanted to," she pointed out.

He returned a few minutes later with a plastic bag filled with ice and wrapped in a hand towel. Reina took it and kept her gaze fixed on her ankle as she pressed the ice to it. "Thank you," she said quietly.

Logan grunted in reply and walked to the foyer. After a moment of searching through his briefcase, he pulled out a cell phone, dialed a number, and pinned the phone against his ear with his shoulder. "Belle? Are you on your way home yet? Yes, good. No, I'm fine, don't worry yourself, but don't dawdle, either. Thank you, Bella. I will." He disconnected, slid the phone into his pocket before turning back to Reina. "She won't be long. How are you feeling?"

"Sore," she admitted, "but the ice is helping."

He nodded and stood around awkwardly for a few moments, his hands in his pockets and his gaze darting about the room. She watched him with a half-smile until at length, he turned and disappeared up the stairs.

Reina shifted, stretching out on the couch, and leaned her head back against the arm rest with a sigh. Kynan joined her a few minutes later and sat on the floor at the base of



the couch, chatting amiably about little of consequence. Reina found herself relaxing, distracted from the throb of her ankle and enjoying his easy camaraderie.

Bella's arrival was announced by the muted grumble of an engine and the slam of a car door. She let herself in, a tall, athletic woman with long, black hair twisted in a practical knot at her nape, and took in Reina's presence with little more than a startled smile. "I take it you're the reason for that cryptic phone call?"

"Fraid so," Reina said with a lopsided grin. She shifted and held her hand out towards the other woman. "Reina Campbell. Nice to meet you."

"Bella Moreau." They shook hands, then Bella nudged Kynan out of the way and crouched to inspect Reina's ankle. "Well, you did a number on it," she said at length. "It's probably just strained, but you should take it easy until you see how it heals up. Ice it, keep it wrapped and elevated, and you should be good as new in a few days."

"What are you, a doctor?" Reina laughed.

"Yes, actually." Bella said it warmly, without any sign of offense. "Though I usually tend more towards trauma surgery than first aid."

Reina glanced between her and Kynan. He had said that there were two others. "Are you part of Logan's brood, too?" she wondered.

Bella hesitated. "Yes," she said at last. She arched one finely sculpted brow, and her gaze turned to ice. "Do you have a problem with one of our kind treating you?"

"Oh, Lord," Reina sighed. "No. It's not that. I was just curious." She waved a hand at her ankle. "Treat away. I trust you."

Bella's gaze softened, and warmed. "Do you?" she murmured. "Well, you're a rare breed. She nudged Kynan. "Put your charm away for a few minutes and go ask Logan to bring down a compression bandage, will you?"

Kynan slid away, but Logan was a step ahead of him, and already halfway down the stairs. He walked to Bella's side and handed her the bandage. "How is she?"

"Oh, she's fine." Bella removed the ice and began wrapping the bandage around Reina's ankle and foot. "It's just a strain. She'll need to baby her foot for a few days, but once it heals, she'll be right as rain."

"Can I walk on it?"

Logan gave Reina a sharp look as Bella said, "Not if you want it to heal, you can't."

"I've got class," Reina said feebly, but Logan's gaze remained suspicious.

"There you are." Bella secured the bandage in place and stood. "Keep that on it, and ice it for twenty minutes every few hours to keep the swelling down."

"Thank you, Doctor," Reina said with a grin.

Logan reached his hand down towards her. "I'll take you home now."

She watched him in silence for a moment, considering. "If you're going to take me anywhere, you may as well take me to the Park."

"No, you're hurt—"

"If you take me home, I'm just going to hobble my way to the Park on my own." She gave him a calm look as his lips thinned into a tight, angry line. "If someone takes me there, I won't have to walk as much."

Logan fumed for a moment longer, then swore violently. The words weren't English—or any other language that Reina recognized—but they were definitely obscenities. "You are quite possibly the most obstinate, headstrong, foolhardy—"

"Thank you." She reached towards him. With a sigh, he clasped her hand and helped

her to her feet. She slung her arm around his neck without prompting, and he gave her a startled look. "After you."

\* \* \* \*

In the dying light of late evening, trees cast long shadows across grassy hills, and created a strobe effect of shade and sun as Reina and Logan crossed the Green. Reina's eyes watered, struggling to adjust.

"Damn it, I'm going to break my other ankle at this rate," she muttered as she stumbled over a loose rock in the grass. She rubbed her hands over her eyes, trying to clear her vision.

Logan's arm tightened around her waist. "You focus on finding that residual," he said, less curtly than she expected. "I'll look for rocks."

"I can't." She stumbled again as she tried to keep weight off of her injured foot. "I can't ground like this, I can't see, I can't—" Logan suddenly stopped walking, and she nearly tripped over her own feet. They stood in a dense patch of shade, in the lee of a tall oak tree. Reina blinked rapidly, waiting for her vision to adjust to the darkness. "Are we there?"

"We're close. Can you ground now?"

She nodded, drew a deep breath, and released it slowly. On her second exhale, she began to relax, releasing the day's tensions with each breath of air. Her mind calmed. She closed her eyes and pushed each sense to the back of her mind, one at a time, until she stood in an oasis of calm. The soft rasp of Logan's breathing and the rustle of the leaves overhead dissolved into white noise. The pain in her ankle faded. She breathed deeply until the scent of earth and grass and Logan's cologne became familiar enough to be disregarded.

With each sense blocked and her consciousness turned inward, Reina slowly expanded her awareness. She reached down into the grass underfoot, up to the branches overhead, out along the limits of her reach. Residuals brushed over her skin, as delicate as spiderwebs. There were hundreds of them, thousands, but most were nondescript, borne of emotions no more potent than anxiety about an exam or the need to get to class on time. Reina sifted through them, acknowledging each and moving to the next, casting about for anything of use.

Something brushed against her, the faintest caress, no different than any other, but Reina turned towards it. She drew another breath, grounding deeper. She let it come to her, wary of disturbing a thing so weak and ephemeral. She opened herself to it, feeling poised on the brink of something important. The last thing she expected was the shock of recognition.

Adri's warmth and laughter flooded over her. Joy filled Reina, as it always had in Adri's presence, buoyed by her friend's love of life. Feeling the sting of delighted tears, Reina reached for her.

The residual crumbled beneath her touch. Reality came crashing back with an oppressive weight, leaving Reina cold and hollow and fragile. The sense of calm that she needed to stay grounded fractured and vanished; the world came back to her in a rush.

Logan's face swam before her, creased with a worried frown. He crouched to look into her face, his hands tight on her shoulders, and she realized that she was trembling violently.

"Miss Campbell? Are you all right?"

She stared at him, disoriented. The lines on his face deepened.

"Reina?"

She drew a ragged breath and tried to tell him that she was fine. Instead, to her horror, she burst into tears.

"Oh, for God's sake." She recognized, dimly, that the words were said with compassion, not exasperation. Logan sat and gathered her firmly against his broad chest. His arms came around her with comforting strength, and Reina wept freely into his shirt.

At length, the torrent slowed to a trickle, and no longer consumed her. Whereas most might have moved to extricate themselves at the first sign of abatement, Logan simply held her, murmuring soothing, incomprehensible words until Reina sat up, wiped her cheeks, and moved back.

"Oh God, I'm sorry." She turned away and pressed her hands to her cheeks, painfully embarrassed.

"There is no need."

"I didn't mean—It just caught me off-guard, is all."

"Reina." He spoke her name with gentle insistence. "Stop. There's no need to apologize."

She gave him a skeptical look over her shoulder, waving her hand in a vague gesture. "I leaked all over your shirt."

"I let you trip this afternoon." He crouched next to her and produced a handkerchief, which he offered to her. "Why don't we call it even?"

Reina gave a watery laugh and pressed the cloth to her eyes. "Sure. Call it even." She handed the handkerchief back to Logan and slid away until there was a comfortable distance between them. "Thanks."

Logan gave a noncommittal shrug. "Perhaps it's time for a break?" He sat in the grass and handed her a brown paper bag he had carried from the car.

Reina gave him a curious look, then a surprised one when she reached in and pulled out a thick, paper-wrapped hamburger.

"I made a bit of a detour when we stopped to get you that ibuprofen," Logan said by way of explanation. "Figured you'd be getting hungry. I wasn't sure what you like on yours, so it's a bit plain, but there are packets of ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise in there if you want them."

Reina quirked an eyebrow as she unwrapped the burger. "You're an odd one, you are." She took a large bite, and savored the taste of bread and grease and meat.

"There are fries, as well." He watched her eat with obvious amusement.

"Well, now." She snatched up the bag and fished out a cardboard carton of french fries. "In that case, I forgive you for my ankle. Happily." She bit a fry in half and offered the carton to Logan. "Would you like one, Nye?" she asked, carefully casual, watching him from the edges of her vision. "It may not nourish you, but they sure taste good."

"Thank you." He selected a fry, but froze with it halfway to his mouth, staring at Reina. "What did you call me?"

"Nye." She set her food aside and drew a deep breath. "That is your name, isn't it?"

He gave a choked laugh. "My name is Logan MacGregor."

"Yes, I know that one. But I think you've been Nye for longer, haven't you?"

"No, actually," he said. "I was born Logan."

Reina raised her brows at him. "Then why does Kynan call you Nye?"

"That's a long story."

"What's the short version?"

Logan inhaled slowly, and exhaled with just as much care. Reina waited for him to refuse her, but he did not. "I went by another name when Kynan met me. Aneirin. Kynan has never been able to keep himself from calling me Nye."

Reina relaxed suddenly, and only then realized the tension that had settled in her. "How long ago?" She picked up her burger and resumed her dinner, watching him curiously.

"That I met Kynan?"

"That, too. But I meant since you've been known by that name."

"Nearly five hundred years." The weight of his gaze settled on Reina as he considered her. "Nearly two hundred since Kynan's been with me."

"Why the alter ego?" She tore the top off of a packet of ketchup and dipped a fry into it, then passed it to Logan. "What are you trying to hide from?"

He tilted his head back to look at the first few emerging stars, obscuring his face from her view. "Things I can't change." A moment passed. He looked at her and smiled. "Isn't everyone?"

Reina gave an amused snort. "I guess so." She hesitated to break the amiable mood that had settled over them, but her ankle was beginning to ache again, despite Logan's constant support as an impromptu crutch, and the temperature was falling rapidly. The thin jacket she'd thrown on that morning was proving remarkably insufficient against the chill. Shifting forward, she gathered up the garbage from their meal, put it all in the paper bag, and offered the remaining few fries to Logan. "You can finish them up, if you like. We should get going."

He glanced at her, and his gaze lingered, concerned. "You don't want to continue?"

Reina leaned her chin on her knees and looked out across the Green, at the shifting shadows and faint lights. "There's nothing out here," she murmured. "Not what we're looking for. There's just Adri, and that..." She shook her head quickly. "I can't do that again. Not yet."

Logan was quiet a moment, thoughtful. "Very well," he said at last. He took the trash bag and the carton of fries and got to his feet with a grunt. There was a note of something in his voice. Reina twisted to look at him as he helped her up, but could see no trace of it in his expression.

She sighed as they began their slow progress back to the car, feeling blinded once again without residuals to guide her.

\* \* \* \*

There were no elevators in Reina's apartment building, necessitating the use of the stairs to climb the two flights to her apartment, and Logan insisted on helping her up them. At her doorway, Reina pulled out her keys and turned to him. "Thank you for dinner, and the ride."

"And the twisted ankle?" he asked with a sardonic grin.

"Well." She smiled. "I told you, you earned your forgiveness for that with the fries. And my foot will be fine in a day or two."

"In the meantime..." He withdrew the bottle of painkillers from a pocket and gave it

to her. "We don't have much use for it in our household, and perhaps it'll keep you comfortable as you heal."

"Thank you." She tucked it into her own pocket, where it pressed against her hip. She unlocked the door, but hesitated on the threshold and glanced back. "Good night."

His expression was grave in the starlight. "Good night, Reina."

## Chapter Seven

Brett leapt to his feet the minute she stepped into the apartment, projecting worry and indignation in both his residuals and his expression. "Where have you been? I got off work *hours* ago! I got your message and came by, but you never showed up, and after everything that's happened, I thought—" He broke off, staring at her.

Reina sighed at the naked fear in his eyes. "Brett, I'm sorry. I'm fine, nothing happened. I just twisted my ankle." She hobbled over to the couch and collapsed onto it with relief. Remembering Bella's instructions to keep the injury elevated, she propped the heel of her injured foot on the coffee table.

Brett's eyes narrowed, then widened. "What happened?"

"What happened is I'm a clumsy oaf. However, I did get to meet Keachan's co-conspirator."

"Who?"

"The other man in the Park." She told him briefly about her meeting with Logan, but left out the details about her run-in with Fate and her suspicions about the motive for Adri's murder. It would only upset Brett if he thought that she had been a victim of prejudice, and she'd found little evidence at the Park to support the theory, besides.

"So, what do you think of him?"

Reina hesitated. "I don't know," she said honestly. "He confuses me. One minute he's a snarky bastard, and the next he's fussing over my ankle and buying me dinner."

"Dinner?" Brett stared at her. "You went to dinner with him?"

"Not exactly. He bought me a burger because he felt guilty about my foot." Except that she didn't think that he had, not really. As attentive as he'd been, she'd gotten the feeling that his actions were borne of kindness, not guilt—and that made even less sense.

"Dinner, a sunset stroll through the Park, and a ride home? Sounds like a date to me." There was a note of levity to Brett's words, but beyond that, he almost sounded angry.

"Don't be silly. He's a professor." Her lips twisted. "Besides, I'm pretty sure he has a boyfriend."

Brett didn't seem nearly as amused by it all as she was. He gave her a brooding look, then sighed and dragged his hands through his hair, drawing it up into blunt spikes.

"You're awfully flippant about this, Reina."

"Flippant?" She frowned at him. "Do you think I've stopped mourning Adri, just because I can make a joke in dark times?"

He didn't reply and refused to meet her gaze. Reina grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to face her. "*Do* you?"

"You just don't seem very sad, is all," he muttered, looking away.

Reina's jaw fell open. "An hour ago, I was crying on the shoulder of a complete stranger over Adri. I have done nothing but try to figure out what happened to her since I found her, and you—How could you think I don't care?"

He pulled at her grip and muttered indistinctly.

"Damn it, Brett, do you think I would be off running around in the middle of the night, breaking my damn ankle, making deals with vampires if I *didn't care*?"

"No," he muttered. He still wouldn't look at her. "But you haven't even seemed sad—"

"

"I've been *busy*. What use am I to Adri if I can't do anything but bawl over her?"  
Reina abruptly got to her feet and left the room, bristling with outrage.

\* \* \* \*

Keachan stopped by the house a few hours before dawn. Logan heard the soft rap at his office door and raised his head from his hands, securing a placid expression. "Yes?"

The door swung open, and Keachan stepped inside. "Hey, Mac."

Logan smiled at his old friend. "Patrick. Have you found something?"

"Yes, and no, I'm afraid." Keachan stepped further into the office, hands tucked behind his back.

Logan's gaze sharpened. "I'm sorry?"

"The blood analysis came back today. It's bad news, Mac." He sighed. "It didn't match any of the local sires, nor their kin."

"Damn!" Logan rubbed at the gathering tension in his forehead. "A newcomer? *Gu sealladh saelbh oirnn!*"

"Well... It's worse than that, actually."

Logan let his hand drop slowly, watching Keachan closely. "What do you mean?"

"When the results came back, I ran another comparison on a hunch." He was fidgeting, which made Logan more nervous than anything Keachan could have possibly said. Keachan paused, then with a bolstering breath, said, "It's a match to you, Mac."

Logan stared at him, certain he must have misunderstood.

"Not a complete match. Partial." Keachan shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders, as though trying to will himself smaller. "You know what that means."

"No."

Keachan looked startled, his gaze flying up to meet Logan's. Whatever he saw there made him sigh. "Mac—"

"Patrick, no. I cannot believe that one of my own... None of them would do such a thing."

"Mac, don't be naive. Your brood loves you, yes, but they're not all content. You know Alex chafes."

"Damn it!" Logan slammed his fist against the desk. "If I can't trust them, who can I trust, Patrick?"

"You can trust me," he said quietly. "And chances are you can trust most of the others. Betrayal I can see, but not conspiracy. They don't have the knack for it."

"No." Logan gave a mirthless laugh. "Do you know, Kynan blurted my name to a girl he'd never met before today?"

Keachan's eyebrows rose on his forehead. "Who?"

"The girl." Logan gestured futilely. "The one we're supposed to be working with."

"The Campbell girl?" Keachan's expression stretched with surprise. "You spoke with her? You brought her here?"

"It was a gamble. I lost." Logan gave a wry chuckle and rested his forehead in his hands. "She came to me at school, spouting some theory about a hate crime. I told her that I was going home, and if she wanted to continue the discussion, she could accompany me."

"And she did?" Keachan barked with laughter. "Ballsy little thing. And Kynan spilled the beans?"

"You know he's never been able to get his head around calling me anything else."

"What'd you tell her?"

Logan paused and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Considerably more than I should have."

"Do you think she'll be a problem?"

"Perhaps. She won't tolerate playing second fiddle, you know. You promised her a partnership, and that's exactly what she wants."

"Yes, I picked up on that," Keachan said wryly. "She called me before she came to you, and yelled at me for it."

Logan chuckled and leaned his head against the back of his chair. "I think she'll be trouble, if she doesn't get her way. But she could also be helpful."

"Oh, Mac, don't tell me you're—"

"She's a strong empath, Patrick. She has control, and that's rare enough, but she's *strong*. She found a residual of her friend tonight."

Keachan's face went blank. Logan could practically see the gears turning as he calculated the odds of such an event. At length, he spoke softly, "But it's been days, and God knows how many others have laid their own down over hers since then."

"Hundreds, I've been told," Logan said, more amused than he ought to have been. "Like finding an ever-shrinking needle in an ever-growing haystack."

"Yes." Keachan's gaze focused on him. Fine lines creased his brow as he studied Logan. "What was her reaction to the residual?"

Logan sighed and scratched the hair at the base of his skull. "She cried," he murmured. And he had held her, murmuring words in Gaelic he wouldn't have dared in English, stroking her hair and rubbing the back of this near-stranger while she grieved in his arms.

Keachan's frown lines deepened. "That's a strong reaction to such a faint residual. They could have been crocodile tears."

Logan shook his head. "I don't think so. There are easier ways to earn sympathy than by making yourself so completely vulnerable in the presence of a stranger. And she was embarrassed about it, afterwards."

"Perhaps," Keachan murmured. "But matters of strength aside, what use do we have for an empath? Her skills are pointless with our kind."

"I don't know." Logan rose with a sigh and moved towards the door. Keachan hesitated, then took the hint and followed. "But *I* am not the one who made the offer of partnership. What did you think to do with her, if not allow her to assist us?"

"Send her on errands. Give her enough to do to make her think she's useful, and keep her out of our way."

"You underestimated her."

"Yes. I'm beginning to think I did." Keachan was still watching him oddly. "What are you going to do about the brood?"

"I don't have much choice but to sleep on it. I'll think of something tomorrow."

Keachan nodded and started to leave. He turned back. "If you want me to run a comparison with someone—"

"Later," Logan said wearily. "Not yet."



"As you like."

Logan saw Keachan out, then climbed the stairs to his bedroom. Each step seemed to require a monumental effort. He closed the door behind him, and made his way to bed by memory, moving through the shadows with ease. At the edge of the bed, Logan stripped, dropped his clothes in the nearby hamper, and sprawled across the mattress. He didn't even bother to pull the blankets over himself before he gave in to exhaustion.

His last thoughts as oblivion claimed him were memories of a warm body clutching his as saline tears soaked his shirt.

\* \* \* \*

A good night's sleep, a liberal application of ice, and a handful of ibuprofen had Reina's ankle feeling well enough the next day that she was able to limp around without assistance. She considered it a vast improvement over the previous day's one-legged hop, and endured it with good spirits.

She spent the bulk of her day in class, and her schedule afforded her no time to visit Logan during his office hours. Wary of his admonition the day before about interrupting him without an appointment, she fished his business card out of her backpack and called him between classes. It rang twice, then went to voicemail.

"Hi, this is Reina Campbell. What with all the excitement yesterday, we never got around to talking about what I found at the Park. I thought I might fill you in, so if you'll call me back and let me know when would be a good time to meet, I'll stop by." She gave him her number, then disconnected.

It rang almost as soon as she'd hung up. Startled, she answered. "Hello?"

"Reina." It was Brett. "Are you out of class?"

"Yeah, I've got half an hour until my next."

"We got out early. Want to grab a quick lunch?"

She glanced at her watch. "Sure. Meet me in five minutes?"

"The café?"

"It's a date." She disconnected, dropped her phone into her shoulder bag, and turned around to head back in the direction of the campus café.

A sparse crowd of students occupied the café, chatting with friends or meeting with professors or typing on laptop with pensive expressions. Reina didn't see Brett, so she took the opportunity to snag a sandwich, a soda, and a table. The sandwich she left wrapped, but the soda she opened and sipped at while she watched the foot traffic hurry by.

"Eating alone, are you?"

"Damn it!" Reina slammed her soda onto the grate tabletop and turned to glare at Logan. "Don't you know better than to sneak up on people like that?"

His brows climbed high on his forehead. He made no comment.

She sighed. "No, I'm not. My friend's meeting me." She glanced at the café, where rows of sandwiches, salads, and other offerings were displayed within glass cases, then back at Logan. "This isn't exactly your type of cuisine. What are you doing here?"

He followed the direction of her gaze, then smiled. "Even *we* get thirsty, Miss Campbell." He uncapped the water bottle he held and took a sip, as though to prove it to her.

"Professors?" she asked with a sardonic lift of her brow.

"Precisely." His expression remained serious, but the wrinkles that gathered at the outer corners of his eyes betrayed his amusement. "Well, I didn't mean to interrupt. I'm sure your friend will be here soon; I'll take my leave." He turned away.

"Actually, we've got a few minutes," Reina said, and he turned back. "Did you get my message?"

"No; I haven't been back to the office in a few hours. Was it something important?"

She shrugged. "I just realized that we never got around to talking about last night."

"So we didn't." He smiled and glanced at the empty seat across the table from her.

"But now's probably not the time, is it? I'll interrupt your lunch with your friend."

Reina thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No, it's fine. He's coming from the other side of campus. He'll be a few minutes."

"Very well." He sank into the seat, a bit reluctantly, Reina thought. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Well, the whole point of going to the Park last night was to try to find some evidence of a hate crime."

Logan inclined his head in agreement. "Did you find any?"

"No." She shook her head. "That's the thing; there was *nothing*. Not hate, not fear or anger, not glee or triumph. Whoever killed her had to have felt *something*, but there's nothing there."

Logan leaned back in his seat, lacing his fingers over his stomach. His mouth quirked beneath his stubble. "Meaning what, exactly?"

"Meaning..." She rubbed her fingers over her brow. A tension headache was starting to gather behind her eyes, and this was doing nothing to help it. "Meaning either he's also an empath, skilled enough to block his residuals, or..." She trailed off. Or what? Or she was back to her original theory that Keachan and Logan had had something to do with it? She doubted *that* would go over well.

"Or?"

Reina bristled at the faint amusement in his expression. "Or the killer is someone who has no need to hide his residuals, because he doesn't project any." She threw the suggestion out like a challenge, defiant, daring him to react.

He sat up straight. "You mean to suggest—"

"—that the evidence seems to be supporting my original conclusion. That you and Keachan were involved in Adri's murder."

All expression disappeared from Logan's face, leaving it blank and cold. "If that's what you think, you're wasting your time."

"Am I? You two were there; Brett and I saw you. Doing what? Why sneak about in the middle of the night?"

"Night is when we conduct our business." The words were dangerously soft, the expression in his eyes as hard as steel. "We had no motive but to find your friend's killer."

"Fine. If not you, then another vampire. What about—" She caught her breath and swallowed the words. *What about the rest of your brood?* She meant to ask. But self-preservation and the sudden sense that she tread on very dangerous ground held her tongue.

"No." The single word lashed out with a violent fury. Reina stared at Logan, startled at its vehemence. "They did not do this."

"Then *who*?" Her voice rose sharply, attracting the attention of a couple drinking coffee nearby. Two girls hunched over hefty textbooks shot her a dirty look. Reina fisted her hands on the tabletop and made an effort to lower her voice. "All I've heard from either of you is who it *isn't*. Not you, not Keachan, not a hate group, not another vampire. The best theory either of you have given me is that it was an animal! For God's sake, do you even have a theory? Who *do* you think it might have been?"

"A rogue!" he snapped, and surged to his feet with a sudden, violent fury. "It was a rogue that killed your friend, a rogue that did this horrible thing!"

Reina jumped back in her seat, frightened by his sudden outburst. Her heart pounded beneath her breast. "I'm sorry? A what?"

"A rogue." The outburst seemed to have drained him; he slowly sank back into his seat. His head drooped forward. "A newly-fledged vampire whose sire has let it go feral. It's little better than an animal."

Reina studied the pattern of light and shadow that the tabletop cast upon her jeans. "And you think this thing killed my friend?"

"I know it."

"Then ... what was last night about? What was the point of it?"

He said nothing, and wouldn't look at her.

"Damn it, Logan, why did you take me to the Park if you knew it was a wild goose chase?"

"Would you have believed me, had I told you that you were wrong and offered no proof of it?"

"No," she said after a moment of thought. "I wouldn't have. But you could have told me that it was a rogue."

"I could not have. And I should not have told you just now. It is not a matter for mortals."

"No?" She gave him a frosty glare. "What about a partner?"

"Not that, either." He sighed. "It is a very bad thing, for a vampire to have let a fledgling go rogue. They are uncontrolled; they feed indiscriminately, and take no pains to cover their tracks. They attract the attention of mortals, and their wrath. An entire community of vampires can be destroyed by a single rogue. If mortals discovered that there was one running rampant in their midst..."

Reina drew a breath to steady and calm herself. "Then we *would* have hate crimes on our hands," she murmured. There was no question that people would take matters into their own hands, were that to happen. "All right, I want you to promise me something."

He watched her, quietly curious.

"Don't hold back from me again. We're working together, and if this is a rogue we're looking for, that means I'm putting myself in danger. Keeping secrets and letting me walk into things unprepared will only increase the risk. I won't work with you if I can't trust you."

Logan was quiet for a long moment, and Reina found it oddly comforting. She'd have been less likely to believe him had his assurances burst forth immediately, without even pause for thought. "Very well," he said at last. "I will tell you as much as I'm able, and do nothing to knowingly put you in danger."

It was, she thought, the best she was going to get from him, so she nodded amiably. "Thank you."

"Hey, sorry, the crowds on the Avenue were crazy." Brett dropped his back beneath the table and snagged a nearby chair. He gave Logan a puzzled look. "Hello."

Logan nodded to him, his expression perfectly polite, but little more.

"Brett, this is Professor Logan, the man I was telling you about. Professor, this is Brett Daniels, Adri's boyfriend."

Logan closed his eyes momentarily, then got to his feet. "Mr. Daniels, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, but I'm afraid I must be going." He nodded at Reina. "Miss Campbell."

Reina stared at his retreating back. "Excuse me, Brett," she muttered and limped after Logan as quickly as her ankle allowed.

"Hey." She grabbed his shoulder, stopping him. "What was that?"

"I beg your pardon?" His eyes were cold and distant. He might as well have been speaking at a stranger.

"Don't play coy. That." She gestured towards the table where Brett was still sitting. "When I spoke with Keachan, I made it clear that including Brett was part and parcel of this partnership. Is that going to be a problem?"

"I told you." He dropped his voice and leaned close, hissing, "This is not a matter for mortals."

"She was his girlfriend. He deserves to know what happened to her."

"And I and my kin deserve to be able to go about our business without being hunted down! You've shown discretion so far, and I thank you for that, but I won't risk the lives of my brood for the sake of some heartbroken boy."

Reina set her jaw. She met his gaze unflinching. "I won't lie to him."

"Then don't. But don't ask me to bring him into my confidence on your word alone."

Reina made a conscious effort to release the tension from her shoulders, which had stiffened with the conflict, and sighed. "I'm sorry. The last thing I want is to endanger you *or* your brood. But I have to be able to tell him something."

"Tell him what you must, then," Logan said, glancing across the café with a resigned expression. "Only be sure to think about what you disclose, and how it might affect those of us who must hide our natures."

## Chapter Eight

Brett's shoes scuffed softly against the sidewalk as he trudged toward his apartment, hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans, staring down at the concrete that passed beneath his feet. A small sense of panic had begun to build ever since his encounter with the mysterious Professor MacGregor, and he worried on it now as he made his slow progress home.

He'd only been half-teasing when he had commented to Reina about their so-called date. There had been something off about the entire situation, and the impression had only been strengthened at the café that afternoon. Would he have rushed after one of his professors with such concern, the way she had with MacGregor? Reina insisted that the very notion of anything more than professional courtesy between the two of them was ridiculous, but Brett wasn't blind. He had seen their body language at the café. They'd stood awfully close to one another for mere acquaintances. Awfully close, for people who had only met the day before.

And hadn't Reina been convinced only a few days ago that both Detective Keachan and Professor MacGregor had been involved in Adri's death? That conviction had certainly died an easy death.

He had tried asking her about it at lunch that day, but had gotten little in return. He had asked her what she'd rushed after MacGregor for, and what they had had such a heated discussion about; she had looked away and said, "Nothing."

He asked her if they had found anything at the Park the night before, and if MacGregor had shared any thoughts of who Adri's murderer might be; she had looked away and said nothing.

The small knot of panic ignited into a hot, seething ball of anger, fueled by Brett's certainty that Reina knew more than she was telling him.

What right did she have to lie to him? What right did she have to run about with such a sense of purpose, and expect him to be happy waiting in the dark? How long did she expect him to wait before he grabbed a torch and went looking for some answers of his own?

He was just approaching his apartment building, and contemplating what he might do about it, when he heard footsteps, the familiar rhythm of Reina's stride. He ducked back into the shadows, though had someone asked him, he couldn't have said why. She was on the phone, the pale blue light of its screen casting odd shadows across half of her face, and gave no indication that she'd seen him as she rushed past.

"Logan? It's Reina. I'm on my way—"

*Logan?* Brett's anger exploded into white-hot fury. She was going back to see him. In the middle of the night. Again.

Just how much did she know about this man? Just how much did *he* know about him?

*Next to nothing*, he thought, and decided to remedy that. When she had put a good amount of distance between them, he slipped out of the shadows and trailed behind her, treading quietly in his sneakers.

He followed her to campus, along a deserted stretch of the Avenue, then back out

again into the city streets, and a small subdivision of houses reserved for Bryson's tenured professors. Anticipation built within Brett with each step, until his heart was racing with it, his breath coming quick and shallow. At last, at last he would get some answers.

When Reina turned up a walkway and approached the door of a house, much like all the rest on its street, Brett did the same, slipping onto the nearest driveway and waiting until the door opened and Reina disappeared inside. He waited a few more minutes, just to be sure, before he crept closer.

Every visible window had shades drawn over it, but light seeped through the ones on the ground floor into the street outside. From the shadows that flickered across them, Brett guessed that there were more people in the house than just Reina and MacGregor.

Who else was there? The detective? Others?

Fear surged within him, worry for Reina's safety, alone in a house full of vampires. He quashed it beneath the weight of his anger. *She obviously knows what she's doing*, he thought with a derisive snort, and, emboldened by his anger, he crept closer to the house.

\* \* \* \*

Reina had barely been at Logan's five minutes before a muffled sound from outside brought all conversation to a halt. As one, they turned to look at the front door. She was on her feet before anyone else, but Logan reached the door first and held her back with an outstretched arm. He leaned outside, searching. Reina strained to see past him.

"What's going on?" Kynan's strained voice beside her made Reina turn. He looked past Logan with a troubled expression. Reina wished she had the acuity of their senses. She had excellent vision for a mortal, but she could see nothing beyond the porch but shadows as thick as soup. She certainly couldn't see anything worthy of alarm, but Logan's breath hissed between his teeth, and he strode forward, off the brick steps and onto the grass.

Reina moved to follow him, but she'd barely taken a step when he held a hand up. "Wait."

"Why? What is it?"

"Maybe something." He crouched beside the flower bed beneath the living room window, barren now in the grip of winter. "Maybe nothing. Something's been in the dirt here." He reached out, but stopped with his hand just above the ground. His gaze flashed up to meet Reina's. "You'll need to come get this."

She released a breath and strode out into the night. At his side, she saw what had caught his attention, and why he'd called her over to deal with it. A flash of gold gleamed from the earth. She reached out and scooped it up.

A fine, slender cross dangled from a broken chain. The cross's braces were as thin as toothpicks, the chain delicate and easily snapped. She brushed the dirt from the metal and sucked in a sharp breath.

Brett had bought just such a cross, and when she'd pointed out that it would be meager protection against anything truly determined to harm him, he had simply blushed, shrugged, and slipped it beneath his shirt.

"Oh, you idiot," she muttered, digging her phone out of her pocket. She turned and walked a few steps away from Logan as she dialed her friend's number.

It rang, then went to voicemail. Reina left him a message, then returned to Logan's side. "Can I keep this? It must be Brett's. I don't want him to be without one."

A smile tugged at the corner of Logan's mouth. He looked up at her, one brow raised. "Do you imagine we'll have much use for it?"

"I hope not," she said, and slipped it into her pocket.

\* \* \* \*

She tried all night to get Brett on the phone, but he never answered. The next day, she called between each class, and left half a dozen messages. When her last lecture of the day finally let out, she still hadn't heard from him.

"Brett," she said into his voicemail, "I guess you know by now that I'm trying to get in touch with you. Call me, will you? Why the hell aren't you answering your phone?" She disconnected with a disgruntled sigh and threw the phone into her car's cup holder as she accelerated up the freeway on-ramp.

She wondered vaguely whether he was avoiding her because of the day before. He hadn't been pleased at her interlude with Logan, and had been even less so when she'd refused to answer his questions. Their lunch had been tense, and they hadn't parted genially. She didn't have any trouble imagining that he might not want to talk to her. She could only hope that he'd get over it before she went out of her mind with worry.

Sighing, she picked the phone up again, redialed his number. "Hey, it's me again. Look, I'm sorry about yesterday. I'm just trying to do what I can to help Adri, okay? I'm on my way to Gabe's. Will you come when you get this?"

After that, her own thoughts kept her company on the drive, and there were enough of them whirling through her head that it seemed to take no time at all to reach the sprawling ranch estate that housed the Bryson werewolf pack.

A gate split off from the narrow country road, marking the edge of the property. Reina stopped before it and then just sat, letting the car idle, as she stared out at Adri's home. They'd been new friends when Adri had first brought her here, shy and uncertain but eager to introduce her new friend to her pack. They'd had many good times here, through the course of their friendship.

Reina climbed out of the car, grief like a stone upon her heart, and opened the gate. She drove through, closed it behind her, and found herself and her car immobilized by a chaotic jumble of swarming, barking dogs. Reina reached down to scratch the nearest behind the ears. His tail thumped hard against the ground, and his eyes narrowed into thin slits in pleasure.

"Have you guys come to escort me?" she asked, running her hands over his smooth coat. He panted up at her, barked once, and sprinted for the house. The rest of the pack followed on his heels.

Reina slipped back into her car and followed the road to the house. By the time she'd parked, the dogs' racket had brought Gabe, the pack's alpha, out onto the porch. He stood waiting for her, as broad and gruff as a bear, his thick arms crossed over his chest. Reina had been intimidated into speechlessness, the first time she'd met him, but his rough exterior hid one of the kindest souls she knew. His square face broke into a smile that held the warmth of the summer sun as she climbed out of her car.

"Reina. This is a pleasant surprise."

"Hi, Gabe," she said, and found herself enveloped in a massive hug. She smiled and gave the brawny man a brief squeeze, then stepped back. "How are things?"

"Ah." Some of the warmth slipped from his gaze. He shook his head. "Not so well,

my dear. Not so well."

Reina nodded in sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"As are we." He drew her close again, and held her tightly. Reina leaned her head on his shoulder and fought the sting of fresh tears.

"Come inside," he said quietly some time later, stepping back and taking her hand in his own. "We've coffee, if you'd like, and muffins from breakfast."

"That would be nice, thank you."

She followed him into the kitchen, and inhaled deeply of the aroma of yeast and fresh-baked bread. Gabe moved around the kitchen with ease, and Reina soon found herself seated at the breakfast nook with a large cup of coffee, a plate of muffins, and a medley of fresh fruit before her. She hooked her heels on the edge of the seat and balanced the coffee mug on her knees. Gabe gave her shoulder a brief squeeze as he passed and took the seat across from hers.

"Now, then," he said. "I take it this isn't a social call?"

"Not quite." She broke a piece from the edge of the muffin and ate it slowly. "I wanted to talk about Adri."

Again, the warmth died for just a moment, swamped beneath tides of grief. But Gabe simply nodded, and kept his gaze steady on hers. "She loved you, you know."

"I know." Her chest felt too tight. Reina lifted her cup with trembling hands and took a long sip. It was fresh, and still scalding hot, drawing a line of fire from throat to stomach as she swallowed. She closed her eyes and embraced the physical pain, so much easier to bear than the ache in her heart. "Gabe, I want to know if there was anything going on with Adri, before..." Rather than finish, she broke off and cleared her throat. "The police think it was a random attack, that she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I just... I want to be sure. If there was anything going on, you'd have known about it, right?"

Gabe was silent. His expression clouded with thought. After a moment, he shot her a regretful glance and shook his head. "I'm sorry, I can't think of anything. But I wasn't the one she confided in." He rose from his chair and gave her hand a brief squeeze, before turning towards the door. "Lily was here earlier; I'll see if she's still around. They were close."

Reina nodded, and focused her attention on picking at her muffin once she was alone. Gabe's easy warmth was unforgettable, but she'd forgotten how easily he found his way to the heart of things. She found herself desperately wishing that she had waited for Brett to come with her.

Gabe returned a few minutes later, Adri's pack-sister Lily following close behind him. Where Gabe was solidly built and darkly colored, Lily was fair and delicate, with a gentle, heart-shaped face and fine hair of palest gold pulled back in a barrette. Despite the differences between them, they both moved with the same easy grace that all Weres seemed to inherit.

"Reina." Lily inclined her head in recognition and sat in Gabe's vacated seat. Gabe leaned against the counter a few paces away. "How are you?"

"Fine," Reina said, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear with an impatient swipe. Despite their mutual friendship with Adri, Lily had never been anything but cool and withdrawn towards Reina. She supposed it was too much to hope that the Were might soften towards her now. She shrugged it off and repeated the question that she'd asked



Gabe. Lily leaned back in her seat with a thoughtful look.

"Was she acting oddly, do you mean? Not that I noticed. She seemed her usual self, just as—Oh. Damn." The last was spoken softly, almost beneath her breath.

Reina stiffened and focused more sharply on the other girl. "What?"

"There was a man who was bothering her."

Reina frowned. "Another Were?"

"No. She'd have let Gabe handle the matter, were that the case. She didn't say much about him, just that he was harassing her about something."

The few bites of food that Reina had eaten suddenly felt like lead in her stomach. "Harassing her?"

"Well, that's not the way she phrased it, of course. But it's the impression I got. She just seemed annoyed by it, though. It never occurred to me she might be in danger."

Reina swallowed hard around the lump in her throat. She stared at the tabletop and whispered, "She didn't even mention it to me."

"It was Were business," Lily said. "He ... wanted her to do something for him. I can't remember what. A bodyguard? Something of the sort. And he wouldn't drop the subject when she refused."

Reina nodded and bit her lip. If it was Were business... "Was she the only one he was bothering? Or were there others?"

Lily shook her head thoughtfully. "I don't know. Would you like me to ask around the pack, and call you when I learn something?"

Reina nodded and took a final sip of her coffee before getting to her feet. "Please." She turned to Gabe, and found herself at a loss for words.

Gabe pulled her close and embraced her again. "It was good to see you, Reina. Don't be a stranger; you're always welcome here."

"Thank you." She clung to him for a moment, taking strength from his wordless comfort, then drew a steadying breath and stepped away.

Gabe and Lily both accompanied her outside, and waved as the dogs herded her back to the gate. As she had when she'd entered, Reina stopped to open and close the gate behind her. When she got back into the car, she just sat there for a moment, leaning her forehead against the edge of the steering wheel.

Most of the dogs had lost interest and wandered off as soon as she'd passed to the other side of the gate, but one remained, pacing back and forth as its tail wagged madly, barking as if in encouragement. Reina waved to him, put the car in gear, and started home.

## Chapter Nine

As she neared Bryson, Reina checked her phone and saw that Brett hadn't called while she'd been at Gabe's. She called him again, and got his voicemail again. Her visit with Gabe had eased her annoyance; it now began to be replaced with a slow, burning sense of concern.

At the apartment complex, she grabbed the first parking spot available and hurried through the buildings, heading not for her own home, but for Brett's.

The door was unlocked, which didn't necessarily mean that anyone was in. She ventured inside and peered around. "Brett?"

There was no response, but she could hear the faint clatter of a keyboard from a nearby room. She knocked on the door softly, then louder, then sighed and stuck her head into the room.

Brett's roommate, Mike, was at his computer desk, playing some game that involved copious amounts of bloodspray and gunfire. She reached over his shoulder and tugged on one of the wires of his headphones to get his attention.

Mike turned, frowning, but his expression cleared when he saw Reina. "Hey. Sorry—you startled me. What's up?"

She dismissed his apology with a wave. "Is Brett here?"

He shook his head. "Don't think so."

"Have you seen him?"

Mike thought about it, then shook his head again. "Don't think so, man. Not since yesterday morning, before he left for class."

"Damn!" Mike's eyes widened at her outburst; she made an effort to restrain herself, and smiled apologetically. "Sorry. It's just that I've been trying to get in touch with him, and haven't been having much luck."

Mike gave a sympathetic grimace. "I'll let him know you're looking for him if I see him."

"Thanks," she said, but he was already turned back to his game.

Reina left Mike's room and crossed the apartment to Brett's. The door was closed, but opened when she tried the handle. Feeling slightly silly, she stepped inside and flicked on the light.

His room was neat and orderly, as it always seemed to be. Reina browsed around, uncertain what she was looking for, or what she expected to find.

The daily calendar on his desk attracted her attention. The top sheet still bore yesterday's date. Reina tilted her head to the side and picked the calendar up.

Adri had bought it for Brett for Christmas the year before. He had opened it, oohed and ahed appropriately, and then nearly had an apoplectic fit when Adri had snatched it up and begun flipping through its pages, reading the comics for days months in advance. The whole point, he had said, was to get a new comic each day, not to read them all beforehand. Then he had explained his routine, how he kept his calendars on the edge of his desk, next to his bed, and how each night he turned the light off, climbed into bed, and only then tore off the day's page, so that there was no chance of seeing the next day's surprise prematurely.

In all the years that Reina had known Brett, she had never once seen his calendar out of date.

She fingered the top page, frowning slightly, then flipped it up and peeked at the current day's page, underneath. Then she set the calendar back on the corner of his desk.

If Brett hadn't torn off yesterday's page, that meant he hadn't slept in his room last night. Where on earth could he have been?

The worry that Reina had carried with her since leaving Gabe's grew heavier by the minute, and left her feeling edgy and restless. She was filled with the desperate need to be doing *something*, but there was nothing to do. To try to calm herself and burn off some of the adrenaline rushing through her system, she decided to jog back to her apartment.

She reached her building in record time, and kept on going.

The burning in her legs as her feet pounded against the sidewalk was comforting in its familiarity. She ran aimlessly, and couldn't have cared less where she was headed. Anything was better than home. Gradually, her pulse steadied and her mind settled into the rhythm set by the slap of her feet against the pavement.

She was somehow unsurprised when she found herself nearing Logan's home. She didn't break her stride until she was on his porch and there was nowhere left to run. She leaned against the door, gasping for air, and each breath sounded like a sob. She slid down, sitting on the doormat, and leaned against the jamb for support.

Above her head, the deadbolt slid through its casing with a rasp that seemed deafening. She jumped, and scrambled away from the door as it swung open.

Logan leaned outside, frowning. "What on earth is—Reina?"

She lifted a hand and let it flop back to her lap in weary acknowledgment.

"My God, what happened? You're crying!"

She shook her head and struggled for enough air to speak. "I'm just ... out of breath ... is all."

He gaped at her. His gaze flicked out to the empty street, and back. "How did you get here?"

"Ran." She stuck her leg out and wiggled her foot. "At least ... the ankle seems ... to be healed."

He stared at her with such shock that she would have laughed, had she had the breath. "But it's *miles!*"

She nodded and reached her hand up. He grasped it, and with his help she managed to get her feet beneath her.

"Come in, and I'll get you something to drink. And for God's sake, sit. Bella will have both our heads if she finds out about this."

Reina nodded and followed him into the house. He headed toward the kitchen, but she froze at the foyer, unable to make her legs move beneath her. Shivers chased across her skin.

Logan returned with her drink. He took one look at her and hastily dropped it on the nearest available surface. He moved in close, crouching until they were at eye level, and took her face in his hands. "What is it? What has happened?"

She drew a ragged breath and began to shake more. "I can't find him. I can't find Brett."

"Surely he's just—"

She pulled his cross out of her pocket, let it swing from her fingers. "It was in the

mud last night." Her fingers closed around the chain. "I called, but he won't answer. He didn't come home." Her breathing hitched. "I think—I think he—I—I need to sit.

"Then come sit." He led her to the couch and gently pressed her down until she sat, trembling. He sat next to her, so close that their knees knocked against each other. He took hold of her shoulders, turned her towards him.

He stroked her sweat-damp hair, and she closed her eyes again. Her skin tightened beneath his touch. He cupped a hand along her jaw and she leaned into it, pulled to him by a desperate need for connection.

"He's gone," she said unsteadily. "And I wouldn't even tell him what happened to Adri. He loves her, and I wouldn't tell him. And now he—" A series of hiccups interrupted her broken flow of words.

"Shhh." His thumb brushed across her cheek. She didn't realize she was crying until she saw the tears clinging to his skin. "There is nothing you could have done."

"I can't find him." She stared up at him. He watched her with a gentle tenderness, his dark eyes gone soft, echoing her own grief. His hand skimmed over her back, offering quiet, simple comfort that broke through every wall she tried to fortify around herself. "He's gone, and Adri's gone, and—" She moved suddenly, coming up against him, her hands clutching at his back. She pressed her face into his shoulder and shuddered. "I don't want to. I don't want to find him like I found her."

"Ah, *nighean*..." He had stiffened when she first threw herself against him, but he relaxed now and tightened his arms around her. He held her firmly, his breath feathering against her ear. "We'll find him."

She shook her head wildly. "I can't," she whispered. "I can't." She drew back to wipe her cheeks, and he turned his head slightly, to console or comfort, and by some accident of arrangement their mouths brushed against one another.

For a moment, she couldn't move, and he held himself frozen. She trembled again, this time from shock, but his lips were warm and soft, his chest like a furnace beneath her chilled fingers. It rose and fell beneath her hands with a quick breath, and his thumb brushed her cheek. The nameless emotion that had held her frozen suddenly shattered like glass on concrete.

Her hands curled around the back of his neck and pressed her mouth to his. With a slow sigh that vibrated through his chest, Logan tilted his mouth beneath hers and softly, gently kissed her.

Heat suffused her, spreading from the places where their skin met. His touch was tender, almost hesitant, soothing her wild desperation. Reina made a soft sound and touched her hand to his cheek.

He wrapped an arm around her waist to draw her more closely against him. He asked nothing of her, but gave selflessly, and when her tears had dried and her mind steadied, they parted.

Reina sank back onto the couch, putting distance between them again. She averted her gaze, looking at the TV on the other side of the room, the knick-knacks on the wall—anything but Logan. "Oh, God. I'm sorry."

Logan slid his fingers through her hair and tilted his head to the side. "Whatever for?"

"I shouldn't have—I mean, you and Kynan—"

"Do you feel better now?"

She cleared her throat and brushed a bit of damp hair out of her face. "Yes. A little."

"Then don't apologize." His hands slid to her shoulders and down her arms. He squeezed her hands briefly, then rose to his feet.

Though she could not bring herself to meet his gaze, she couldn't help but watch him as he moved across the room. He returned with her water and pressed it into her hands. "Drink it," he said firmly. "It will help."

She gave him a weak smile. "I could use something a little stronger, I think."

He brushed his hand over her hair, as though smoothing it into place. A faint frown drew his brows together. "I'm sure. But you ought to rehydrate yourself."

Reina sighed, but drank obediently. She downed the contents of the glass in a long swallow, and allowed Logan to bring it back to the kitchen.

"Would you like some more?"

She shook her head. "I'm feeling better, thank you." She heard the clatter of the glass being put in the sink, then the sound of running water. Logan returned a moment later, empty-handed.

Reina glanced up briefly at his return, then forced her gaze away and stared at her knees. The sense of panic was starting to creep back, this time for a completely different reason than Brett's sudden disappearance. When Logan sat down on the couch with her, she leaped to her feet.

"I should be going. I'm sorry I showed up unannounced, I didn't mean to interrupt you, but I—Thank you for—for dealing with me. I'll call you if—"

He took her hand, stopping both the torrent of words and her frantic attempts to escape. Trapped, she stood very still, and stared at the buttons on his shirt from the corner of her gaze.

"I did not 'deal' with you, Reina." She found the note of impatience in his voice oddly steady. "You were upset, and I did what I could to help. There's no need for thanks, *or* apologies."

"I appreciate it." She turned slightly away, hoping that he would take the hint and release her. "But next time—"

*Next time what? Next time, don't kiss me?* She reminded herself with brutal honesty that *she* had been the one to make the first move. He had only taken his cue from her.

He must have seen her thoughts on her face, because gave a sharp sigh and took her other hand so that he held both, and she had no choice but to face him. "You think this was a mistake," he said, his gaze flicking over her face as if reading a book. "You think you've crossed some line you shouldn't have."

She was rapidly growing to hate his uncanny ability to peg her thoughts. If she hadn't known better, she'd have thought that he was the empath. "You *have* a boyfriend," she said, blushing furiously. "The last thing you need is some girl throwing herself in your arms. And we—We're supposed to be partners, not—"

"Whatever you are afraid of," he said quietly, "you need not be. Kynan is—Ah." He sighed and pulled a hand through his hair. "I love him dearly, yes. But we have done nothing here that might upset him. I offered you what comfort I thought you could use—that is all." He paused for a moment, watching her, and his eyes went soft. "Should I have left you as you were, hysterical and distraught? Would you have thanked me for that? Do you think Kynan would have?"

"I don't know." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm a mess right now." She pulled on her

hands, and this time, he released her. "But I really should go."

He nodded slowly. "I'll drive you home."

"Oh, no, you don't have to—"

"I know. I would like to."

She couldn't quite think of anything to argue that with, and her body was feeling the effects of the run, so she let him herd her outside without further protest.

The drive passed in comfortable silence. Reina watched the trees and buildings flash by, and the tall towers of the Bryson campus grow slowly closer. Logan pulled into the apartment parking lot, and Reina reached for her seatbelt. "Just drop me off here."

He pulled into a visitor space and turned the car off. "I'll walk you up."

She would have protested, but then thought of Brett, who hadn't made it home last night. The words never left her throat. The middle of the day was hardly a dangerous time to be walking alone, but Logan's presence was comforting nonetheless.

At the door, she hesitated with her hand on the knob and turned back to him. "I know you don't want to hear this, but thank you, again. It was very kind of you."

He reached toward her and wrapped a curl around his finger, head tilted to the side as though in thought. "Would you mind very much if I did something a little less altruistic?"

She pressed back against the door. "You shouldn't," she whispered. "You have a boyfriend."

Logan's expression might have been amusement or exasperation. "Call him that to his face," he murmured, "and see how he laughs at you."

"Still." She pressed a hand to his chest, holding him away.

"Kynan is my lover, Reina. Not yours. My concern; not yours." He circled his fingers around her wrist. He didn't try to move her hand from his chest, but somehow it stopped being a restraint, and became a point of contact through which heat flowed between them. "Will you trust my assurance that I would never do anything that might hurt him?"

"I don't know." She fumbled behind her for the doorknob, but couldn't make her fingers work. "I shouldn't—"

He brushed his fingers over her cheek. Heat shimmered through her at his touch. She struggled to breathe. "Yes," he whispered, "or no. Answer me that, and I will abide."

Reina pressed her eyes shut, fighting to keep her thoughts coherent. She thought about Kynan, warm and friendly, and the easy affection between the two men. She remembered the way he had joked with her about Logan's preference for pretty women, without a hint of jealousy or resentment. She remembered the way Logan had held her, his mouth a warm comfort, his strength a steady support.

*In for a penny*, she thought, and prayed it wasn't a mistake. "All right."

In response, Logan brought their mouths together and kissed her, and left her breathless from the shock of it.

The explosion of heat left her dizzy, clinging to him. He moved in close against her, pinning her against the door. Reina gave a long, shuddering sigh at the feel of his body against hers.

This time he demanded and she gave, helplessly. His hands moved over her with a fierce possessiveness, igniting fires everywhere they touched. She closed her fingers around the silken strands of his hair, holding his mouth against hers and drawing the kiss deeper.

He vibrated against her like a live wire, all heat and electricity. She slid her fingers

deeper into his hair and pressed her mouth hard to his.

A small, sharp pain pierced her lip. She would have ignored it, but Logan froze against her. His hands tightened on her arms. He backed away and held her distant.

"Logan—"

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She raised a hand to her lip but felt no pain, only the lingering tingle of his kiss. "Am I supposed to be upset?"

He shook his head like a man emerging from a daze. He staggered back another step and gripped the balcony railing behind him. He never looked away from her. "Please. Would you just go inside, so I know you got home safe?"

She might have been annoyed at his rapid-fire mood swing, but her skin was still humming with the pleasure he had given her. She unlocked the door, somewhat unsteadily, and stepped inside. "Bye," she murmured.

"Good-bye, Reina." He turned and walked away. Just before he'd disappeared down the stairs, he stopped and glanced back at her. She raised her hand, a small wave of farewell. He echoed the motion, and descended out of her view.

## Chapter Ten

Her visit with Logan had calmed her frantic concern, but it only gave her a temporary respite. As the giddiness of his parting kiss wore off, fear began its insidious return.

"It's not like you can go running to him for a kiss every time you get freaked out," she muttered, rubbing her palms on her thighs. Feeling like she was being productive, she decided, would help.

She called Gabe, and half an hour later had a list of the leaders of other nearby packs, as well as brief notations on who would be amenable to discussing pack business with a strange girl, and who would not.

With a brilliant sunset coloring the sky, she called Logan.

"I want to go talk to some of the local packs." She pinned the phone between her shoulder and ear as she looked over the list. "Just to get a feel for things."

On the other end of the line, Logan made a noncommittal noise

"Will you come with me?"

Silence stretched out, punctuated only by the crackle of static. Then, a sigh. "No, Reina, I—"

Her fingers clenched around the phone, so tight her knuckles ached. "Please?"

"Reina."

"If you've got something else you need to do, we can go tomorrow. Or whenever. I just—" She stared down at her lap, feeling absolutely pathetic, and whispered, "I don't want to do this alone."

He said nothing for a long time. She was just about to sigh, thank him anyway, and figure out how to muddle through it on her own when he made a sharp, frustrated sound. "Kynan will accompany you, then, if you can finish your business before dawn."

Her heart twisted in her chest, but his tone offered no room for negotiation. It was the best she would get from him, and Kynan's company was better than no one's. "All right," she said.

"He'll pick you up in an hour."

She had intended to drive, but it didn't seem like a good time to start arguing the point. "All right," she said again. "And—thanks."

Another pause, and another sigh. "You're welcome."

She busied herself in the hour that followed, making dinner, tidying up, reading and rereading Gabe's list. She tried to keep her mind too occupied for nerves, and failed spectacularly. By the time a knock sounded on her door, her stomach writhed with anxiety.

"Hey, there." Kynan smiled at her from behind a pair of stylish sunglasses. "Ready to go?"

"Just about." She grabbed her bag and her list, and locked the door behind them.

"How's the ankle?"

"Good as new." She searched his face in the twilight. His smile seemed guileless and innocent, but what did the shades hide? Had Logan told him about what had happened? If he had, she saw no indication of it.



"So, any idea where we're headed?" he asked as she buckled herself into the passenger seat. "Or are we just gonna find an empty parking lot and spin donuts all night?"

Despite herself, Reina laughed. "I'm afraid the donuts will have to wait." She glanced at the first address on the list. "Harmony, off of Treat Lane. Do you know how to get there?"

Kynan nodded and gave her a disarming smile. "I'm familiar with it."

They were soon on the road, zipping down the freeway in a stream of red taillights. Reina watched the cars flash past for a while, but her gaze inevitably gravitated back to the man sitting next to her.

"Spit it out," he said, grinning. "You've been eyeing me like you expect me to go for your jugular ever since I showed up. What's up?"

She imagined telling him, *I made out with your boyfriend*, and then imagined all the ways the conversation might go from there. Most of them didn't bode well for her continued safety. She mustered up enough courage for a lesser truth, but hadn't enough for the full one. "Do you really need those, for even this little bit of light?"

He looked puzzled, but his expression cleared after a moment. He laughed and shook his head. "You mean the shades? Not at all." He took them off and handed them to her. "But they look cool, don't you think?"

"Sure." She peered out through the tinted lenses into a sea of dim taillights and thick shadows. "If your definition of cool is stumbling around half-blind in the dark."

"It's not that bad. We've got better night vision than you do."

Reina gave in to the moment, and her sense of absurdity, and slipped the glasses on. They were several sizes too big, and slid down the bridge of her nose. One earpiece fell off of her ear, leaving the glasses dangling at a ridiculous angle from her nose. Reina stifled a giggle and looked at Kynan. "Oh yes," she said, deadpan. "They're quite hip."

Kynan took one look at her and burst out laughing. "Aren't you a sight." He reached over and tucked the fallen earpiece back behind her ear, but they still drooped low on her nose, so that she looked out over the rims instead of through the lenses. "They definitely look better on you," he told her. A muscle in his cheek twitched with suppressed laughter.

"You, sir, are a shameless flatterer." She took the glasses off and passed them back over to Kynan. "And completely blind, to boot, if that's what you think. Better night vision, my ass."

His eyes crinkled with amusement before he slipped the glasses back on, but whatever response had occurred to him, he must have thought better of it. He pushed the glasses up his nose with a knuckle and looked out at the road, quiet.

Reina stretched back in the seat, propping a heel on the dashboard and looking out into the night. Silenced stretched between them, and she fought the urge to confess everything, simply to fill it. At last, she couldn't contain it any longer. "Kynan," she said, staring through the window. "Tell me about Logan."

He didn't respond right away. "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about—about the two of you."

This time, he was quiet longer before he spoke. "Oh," he said finally, with a small sigh. "So *that's* what that was about."

Reina looked up at him swiftly, alarmed. "What?" His expression was twisted with irony but not, she thought, with anger.

"Nye's insistence that I come with you." He dragged a hand through his hair and glanced at her out of the corner of his vision. His mouth curled into a small smile. "I've known him longer than I've known anyone else alive, and loved him for just as long. Two hundred years, nearly. I gave up being insecure about it centuries ago. I don't care who he dallies with. I know he loves me, and I know that won't change, and that's all I need."

Reina stared at him, bewildered. "You don't mind?"

"I really don't." He reached over and tousled her hair. "Nye's a good guy. If it would make you feel better to have my blessing, I'll give it. Though," he added, wrinkling his nose, "it's hardly my place."

She gave a despairing laugh and sank lower into her seat. "Whose place is it, then? You're his boyfriend."

And as Logan had predicted, Kynan laughed, long and hard, until Reina feared that his mirth would run them off the road. "I'm sorry," he said at last, wiping tears from his cheeks. "If that's what you imagine is between us, it's no wonder you're confused. I'm not his *boyfriend*, I'm his lover. It's somewhat more—and somewhat less—than you think. And, as these things often are, it's complicated." He turned his head to smile at her, warm and open. "Suffice it to say that I don't mind if he kissed you, and I won't mind if he does it again."

"In all fairness," Reina muttered, her cheeks aflame, "I kissed him, the first time."

Kynan's grin flashed in the dark night. "Good for you."

There was absolutely nothing she could think of to say to that. Fortunately, her mortification was short-lived, because they'd reached Harmony. From their exit, it was only a matter of minutes to the first address on her list.

Reina stepped out of the car and surveyed the house. It was a large three-story Victorian, complete with wrought-iron gate surrounding the property and a paint job that appalled her modern aesthetics. It loomed above them, a menacing silhouette.

"Well, this looks pleasant." Reina gave Kynan a lopsided grin, attempting to bolster her courage with sarcasm. "Pretty spiffy dog house."

He pressed a hand to his mouth, stifling choked laughter. "Don't let *them* hear you say that."

She nodded agreeably. "I can see why it might get their hackles up."

His laughter became even more choked. "If you make me burst out laughing in front of these people," he warned, "I'll tan your hide." The threat might have been a bit more ominous if it hadn't been punctuated by wheezing chuckles.

"I know. I'm horrible. I'm sorry." She patted his back and tried the latch on the gate. It swung inward on silent hinges.

Kynan caught her arm at the porch, stopping her as she reached for the doorbell. "Just so you know," he said seriously, "vampires and Weres ... we don't always get along too well. If we were visiting another sire, I'd take the lead, but as it is... You should probably be the one running the show, as far as they're concerned. The less attention they pay to me, the longer it'll take them to realize what I really am. And if you can come up with an excuse for my joining you, so much the better."

"Right. So I'm the distraught best friend of a murdered Were, and you're my escort for the night?"

He snickered. "Something like that." His hand dropped from her arm. He tilted his head to indicate the doorbell. "Go ahead."

A young boy answered the door. He glared out at them from beneath a furrowed brow. "Whaddya want?"

Reina's brows rose, surprised at such an acerbic manner from such a young child. "Is your alpha home? I'd like to speak with her, please."

The boy heaved a gusty sigh and disappeared back into the house, shouting, "Mo-om!"

A moment later, a woman approached the door and stepped outside with them. "Yes?" She looked at them with polite curiosity. "You wish to speak to me?"

Reina nodded, suddenly wishing that Kynan wasn't a vampire, so he could take the lead. She knew how to operate in Gabe's pack, and they had accepted her long ago because of her friendship with Adri. Dealing with other packs was a completely different story. "I'm Reina," she said, figuring that was as good a starting place as any. "My friend was recently killed and ... well, Gabe gave me your name." At that, the woman's gaze sharpened. Reina briefly explained Adri's death to her. "Her pack-sister said that someone had been harassing her. So I was wondering if this is something that's going around, or if he was specifically interested in Adri for some reason."

The woman was silent for a moment, her lips pressed together into a thin line. "I've heard similar things from a few of our pack members," she said at last. "Someone had been harassing them, trying to get their support."

"Support for what?"

She shook her head. "Either he never said, or he gave them very good reason not to tell anyone. All they ever said was that he wanted support."

Reina chewed on the edge of her lip. Her heart was suddenly racing with excitement; if these Weres could help her find their harasser, she could finally have a chance of finding Adri's killer. "Could I speak to some of them?" she asked. "They might be able to—" But the woman was already shaking her head.

"I wish you could." She looked away. "They're all missing."

Reina's jaw dropped. "They've—they've *all*—"

"Yes." The woman looked at her, then, and her eyes were filled with pain. "I'm sorry I can't help you, but I don't know any more than that. We've tried to find them, and we've failed. They're just ... gone."

Reina nodded numbly, thanked her for her time, and allowed Kynan to guide her back to the car.

They visited several more packs before Reina couldn't bear it anymore. All had a similar story to tell. A few members of their pack had been bothered by someone, and anyone who might have had information on who he was or what he wanted had disappeared shortly thereafter.

Reina said nothing as Kynan drove them back to Bryson, too numb to speak. How could *everyone* have disappeared? What could have happened to them? Had they all been killed, like Adri? Surely someone would have found their remains. And Logan had insisted that Adri had been killed by a rogue, not someone capable of this kind of planning. Did this have anything at all to do with Adri's death? Or was she wasting her time on a wild goose chase?

But Weres were disappearing... It was too much of a coincidence to be unrelated. Wasn't it?

She couldn't make sense of it. When Kynan dropped her off at the apartment, she

mumbled a thank-you and staggered into bed, physically and emotionally exhausted.  
She could only hope that things would look clearer after a decent night's sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Kynan returned home halfway through the night, visibly shaken. He stomped into the house and slammed the door behind him.

"Did she find anything?" Logan asked when Kynan turned for the stairs without even a greeting.

"Ask her yourself," Kynan muttered. "I'm not your messenger." He paused at the first landing, frowning, and looked down at Logan. "But wait until tomorrow. She was a mess when I left her. You shouldn't wake her up."

Logan raised a brow and murmured, "Yes, sir," with an amused half-smile, but let Kynan continue on his way.

It was all for the best, anyway, he thought, settling back on the couch with a sigh. He could certainly use the extra time to get his own emotions settled.

He had been too curt with her. He regretted it, but had been too bewildered to react as he should have.

She had kissed him, the first time, and he had kissed her back because she'd needed it. Because she had lost two friends in less than a week, and she needed someone to hold on to. It had been a lovely kiss, to be sure, but it had been for her benefit, not his enjoyment. And that was as it should be.

The second had been an impulse, and a surprise. He had expected tenderness again, and care. Instead, she had burned within his arms, and he had not been able to get his wits about him since.

And then she had called him, and the carefully guarded fear in her voice had shattered every resolution he'd made to keep her at a distance. And he, bewildered and confused by the power she held over him, had been unable to give her the aid she needed. It was not something he reflected on kindly, but what would have happened had he gone with her? Would they have kissed again? Would he have been able to help himself?

And if they had kissed? Would her fire have consumed him?

And so, he had sent Kynan in his stead. But Kynan would not tell him what he wished to know, and he could no longer avoid Reina.

If he must speak with her, he determined to do so on neutral ground. Rising, he retrieved the phone and dialed a number almost more familiar to him than his own.

Keachan answered promptly, and greeted him warmly. Logan settled back and let the comfortable rhythms of their old friendship soothe him.

"I want to stop by tomorrow," he said once the niceties had been dispensed with. "Some time after dusk, with Reina. Would you mind?"

Logan heard the curiosity in his friend's momentary silence, but Keachan didn't ask. "Of course not," he said. "I'll let the front desk know to expect you."

*"Tapadh leat, mo cara."*

Keachan chuckled softly. "You're welcome."

Logan replaced the phone on the cradle and sat for some time, gazing up the stairs, pensive. At last, he rose and climbed them.

He stood in Kynan's doorway for a moment, watching him, before his presence was noticed. The young man glanced up from his magazine. He watched Logan, cautious,

quiet, waiting.

Logan stepped into the room, sighed. "Forgive me?" he murmured.

Kynan flipped the magazine closed. A hint of humor warmed his eyes. "I always do, don't I?"

Logan inclined his head, an accession, but answered, "God forbid I ever take it for granted."

Kynan sat up and patted the bit of blanket next to him. Logan sat, and he smiled. "*Cara*," Logan murmured.

Kynan tilted his head back and gazed up at him. "Nye," he answered. His eyes were large and dark. Logan brushed his fingers through the dark fringe of his hair. He slid them through the strands and brushed his thumbs along Kynan's jaw. Kynan's chest rose with a quick breath.

"Forgive me?" Logan asked again, and this time, Kynan answered him.

"Of course." He twined his arms around Logan's neck, brushed a kiss over his lips.

Logan's hands tightened. When Kynan withdrew, he followed, until their game of chase bore them down onto the bed and Kynan pulled him close, laughing. "Oh, Nye, I do love you."

Logan held him, face pressed to Kynan's shoulder. "I know."

Hands fisted in Logan's hair. "Show me."

He did, until neither of them could remember anything of anger or forgiveness.

\* \* \* \*

Logan fell asleep before the sun rose and woke after sunset, a luxury his schedule had not allowed for in many weeks. Yet he felt uneasy, not well-rested. It was no mystery as to why.

He called Reina, apologized for interrupting her supper, and asked her to meet him at Keachan's to discuss the previous night. She agreed with only the slightest hesitation.

A half-hour later, Logan and Keachan sat together in the detective's office. They discussed little of consequence until Keachan sat his coffee mug down with a sharp sigh and gave Logan a level look. Logan lowered his own cup, expecting what was to come.

"Now, tell me. Why are you bringing the girl here, when it would be more convenient for you both to use your office, or your home, or hers?"

Logan rubbed his fingers along the center of his brow. After a moment, he sighed. "Because she's getting too close," he murmured. "And the closer she gets, the less I mind if she does."

Keachan gave him a knowing look. "Bedded her, did you?"

Logan straightened with a start, dropping the mug onto Keachan's desk with such force that a wave of coffee crested over the rim and splattered the papers on the desk. "I did no such thing!"

Keachan grunted and grabbed a handful of paper towels to soak up the mess. "Your loss."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means," he said, as if speaking to a dolt, "that she's pretty, and available, and obviously interested, if she's been getting close." He grunted again as he dropped the soaked towels into his wastebasket. "And she's stubborn as an ox. She's just your type."

"So glad she meets with your approval," Logan said dryly.

"Yes, well. It would probably be good for you, my friend."

Reina arrived at that moment, preventing Logan from making a retort. It was for the best, he decided, for he'd have said nothing that Keachan would have thanked him for.

Reina dropped into the empty chair and let her shoulder bag slide to the floor. She looked at Keachan, then at Logan. "I guess I'm filling you both in, huh?"

Logan inclined his head. "Two birds with one stone, yes?"

"Sure." She sat back and hooked her heel on the edge of the seat, draping her arms around her up-thrust knee, and began to tell them about her visits with the other packs. "The sum of it is," she concluded, "every pack we spoke to has had some of its members harassed by this mystery man. And they've all either died, or vanished."

Keachan watched her through narrowed eyes. "How did you find this out?"

"I asked them."

"And they told you?"

"Yes."

Keachan whistled. Logan found himself equally impressed. Reina just looked confused. "I spoke with most of the local Weres already," Keachan explained. "Or tried to. They're very insular about pack matters. The most they told me was that I was trespassing on their property and they had the right to tear out my throat if I didn't remove myself."

Reina covered her mouth with a hand, but couldn't muffle her chortles enough to hide them. "Well, you're a cop, and a vampire. I've been told that Weres don't particularly like your kind much to begin with." Keachan nodded an assent. "Meanwhile, I'm the close friend of one of their kind, and already have acceptance from one pack." Her eyes creased with amusement. "I'm not surprised they wouldn't talk to you. Your bedside manner leaves something to be desired."

Logan laughed. Keachan gave a long-suffering sigh and scooped up the damp papers on his desk. "I'm going to go find someone lower on the totem pole to retype these for me. You two enjoy your little jokes."

The door closed behind him, and tension instantly charged the atmosphere in the small office. Logan floundered for what to say, now that his neutral ground had turned into unexpected privacy.

"You seem well," he managed, glancing at her from the edge of his vision.

She shrugged. "Well enough."

He nodded and fell quiet again, hating his awkwardness. Impulsively, he rose and knelt before her. Her hand found his as easily as if it belonged there. "Now, tell me how you really are, *nighean*."

She bit her lip. Her façade crumbled, leaving her looking weary and ragged around the edges. "I've been better," she whispered.

He raised a hand to her cheek. She leaned into his touch, closing her eyes.

"It bothers you, what you learned yesterday?"

"It confuses me. It's too much. It's overwhelming. I thought this was just Adri, and that was bad enough. Now Brett's gone, as well as half of the Weres in the county..." She opened her eyes, looking at him. The smile she gave him was lopsided and unhappy. "I'm in over my head, I know I am. But I can't stop."

He brushed the backs of his fingers along her jaw. "Perhaps you are, *nighean*, but you have shoulders to stand on."

Her gaze softened at the sentiment. He panicked, afraid she would try to kiss him, afraid he would let her, but she abruptly sighed and scooted her chair back. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Should I be otherwise?"

"You know what I mean. Why do you put up with my shit, instead of telling me to shut up and stop treating you like my personal shrink?"

"Because I want to help." He smiled at her. "And if you shut up and stop treating me like your personal shrink, then I don't get to. I don't like seeing you upset, Reina. At least this way, there's something I can do about it."

She stared at him. "You know, from any other guy, I would think that was a line."

He laughed. "And why am I the exception?"

"I don't know. Because I'm an idiot."

Despite her words, though, she had calmed again. She looked up at him, her gaze steady and trusting. He sighed, leaned his forehead against hers. She brought her hand up and curled it around the back of his neck.

Logan let his eyes slide closed. It had been easier when she'd been hesitant and unsure. Now she was growing less skittish, and he was the one hesitating. Sooner or later, she would ask for something he wouldn't give, and she would get hurt.

*It's too late for that*, he thought. They were already too close. If he withdrew now, he knew the pain that he would see in her eyes, the incomprehension. She wouldn't understand why he would kiss her two days before, but withdraw from her now. Even Kynan wasn't a good enough excuse.

She would heal, if he spurned her. The wounds would mend, and she would move on. But at what cost?

He recalled with an ache the heartbroken, whispered words. *I can't find him. He's gone*. She had lost two friends in less than a week. He was a monster to think of leaving her now, too.

*I offered you what comfort I thought you could use.*

And now, he thought to take that comfort away, because he felt crowded. He *was* a monster.

He opened his eyes, and she was looking back at him. Her cheeks were pale, her eyes red. She sucked her lower lip into her mouth as he watched, but not quick enough to hide its faint tremble.

She needed his comfort now no less than she had before. If he could help in no other way, at least he could give her that.

She seemed to sense his decision, for as soon as he came to it, she met his gaze with her own, separated by scant inches. "Logan," she breathed, "are you going to kiss me or not?"

He closed the meager distance between them, fitting his mouth over hers and answering the question without words. She stiffened against him with a sharp gasp, then pressed forward. The hand at the back of his neck exerted a subtle pressure, directing his mouth to where she wanted it.

And just like that, she turned the tables on him and took control.

Her hands moved over him as if exerting a claim, kneading his chest, his shoulders, his back. It was she who parted his lips, and then drew him into her mouth. She took what she needed, demanded it, and he gave wordlessly.

The low, humming noise she made in the back of her throat made him feel powerful. The rough shove that she gave him, pushing him against the desk when he tried to guide her hands, dispelled that illusion as quickly as it had formed.

When she nipped at his lip, however, he grabbed her arms and pushed her back. "Don't."

Her surprise quickly transformed into a scowl. She tried to pull him back; he planted a hand on her chest and held her away. "I tasted your blood. You can't taste mine, not this soon."

Understanding flickered through her eyes, and knowledge of how close she had come to the razor's edge of danger. Blood exchange was required to turn someone into a vampire, but in some cases, even a drop had been known to suffice. Once she'd recovered from her surprise, she gave him a slow smile. "No blood doesn't mean I can't nibble a bit." She pulled his mouth back to hers.

A well-timed cough warned Logan of Keachan's return. With a final, lingering kiss, he pushed Reina back into her chair and returned to his own just before the door swung open, leaving Keachan with nothing more to hint at their activities than a slight flush on both of their faces.

"All right, that's taken care of." Keachan dropped into his seat. "You two get that out of your system?"

Logan raised an eyebrow at the subtle laughter behind his friend's words. Reina turned a startling shade of pink, but to her credit, held Keachan's gaze without flinching.

"I'm curious," he said, turning to her. "When I told you that it was a rogue who attacked your friend, you seemed to accept that explanation."

She nodded and watched him, obviously waiting for him to get to the point of the matter.

"Why, then, did you pursue this idea of the harasser so avidly?"

"I don't believe in coincidences. And, well, I was thinking about that this morning." She raised her brows at him. "Someone had to make the rogue, didn't they?"

"Of course, but—"

"Wouldn't it make sense that if she ran into the rogue, she ran into the rogue's sire, as well?"

Logan and Keachan stared at each other. For that to be true assumed that the rogue's sire knew of his existence. Knew and, perhaps, used the poor wretch to his advantage. It was a horrifying thought, worse even than the idea of making a rogue by accident, unknowing. Logan would never have assumed that a rogue's sire might know of his existence, and do nothing. Keachan's expression said that he was thinking the same. It was too horrible for any decent vampire to contemplate.

Logan shook his head, torn between laughter and despair. "*Nighean*, you astound me."

"I *told* you you'd be useful in the investigation," Keachan said grudgingly.

"Four hundred years and you two didn't manage to piece that one together, huh?" Reina picked her bag up from the floor and slung it over her shoulder. "Unless you guys need anything else, I'll see you later." She spoke the words to both of them, but her gaze fixed on Logan as she said it, and it trailed into a question at the end. Logan smiled and inclined his head. An answering smile bloomed on her face.

When the door clicked shut behind her, Keachan's expression shifted to a smirk. "If



you haven't bedded her yet, my friend," he said knowingly, "you will."

## Chapter Eleven

Reina woke in the middle of the night, huddling with the blankets drawn over her head to ward off the night's chill. She yawned and rubbed her eyes, wishing for just one full night's sleep. The glowing numbers of the clock on her nightstand would tell her what time it was, and whether there was enough of it left to be worth going back to sleep, but she didn't feel like venturing out from beneath the blankets and braving the frigid room to check it. She curled in on herself to conserve body heat and willed herself back to sleep.

A shiver rippled down her spine, a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room and spread icy fingers up the back of her neck. All thoughts of sleep fled. Slowly, she sat up and reached her empathic senses out, searching for the disturbance.

What she found was a void, an absence where there should have been her own residuals, and Brett's, and Adri's fading ones, still lingering about. But just beyond her door there was nothing, only a cavernous emptiness that made terror run through her veins.

She felt out for the wards she had set around her room the first day she and Adri moved in, reached empathic fingers up to the ceiling and down into the floorboards. And in the doorway, just before the void, she found a tiny opening, a paper-thin slice made with surgical precision, just big enough for a man to slip through without anyone the wiser.

If she hadn't woken, if she'd slept through the tiny shiver of reaction that that breach had sent through her...

She reached blindly for her nightstand, and the cross she always placed there when she removed it for the night. Her fingers grasped metal that burned like ice. She drew it close against her chest and reached out again, found the small, solid weight of her cell phone.

Quiet, she eased the flip phone open and thanked any gods who were listening that she had thought to program Logan's number into her speed dial. Two buttons—one for the number, one to send—and help would be on its way.

She pressed the first, gripped her cross tightly, and hoped she'd be able to last until it arrived.

And, reaching for the second, the button that would connect the call and bring in the cavalry, a slow, sibilant voice whispered, "Oh, little girl. I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

She froze, while every fiber of her being screamed for action. Froze in fear and panic and indecision, and the sudden overwhelming certainty that if she just held absolutely still, if she didn't make a sound, he might forget about her and go in search of other prey.

Flight was impossible, trapped in her room where the only exit led directly into danger, and to fight was sure suicide. Anyone who left an empathic void like that was a vampire, and not a newly-fledged one. Anyone who could slice through her wards with such neat elegance had psychic skills beyond her comprehension.

A low chuckle slid down her spine like razors. "Put the phone down, child, and let's talk."

She lowered the phone to the nightstand, let the plastic case click audibly against the wood. Her bedroom door swung open on hinges that she was sure had never been so quiet for her.

All she could make out was a shadow darker than the benighted hall behind him. He stepped into the room with a slow, purposeful stride, the calculated stalk of a predator who knows his prey is cornered and all that's left is to wait for the proper moment to strike. She curled her hand around the edge of the nightstand and fought the insane urge to run.

"Fine," she said in a voice that somehow managed to sound strong and steady. "Let's talk."

A flash of smile in the darkness, starlight reflecting off of pointed teeth. "You're an empath of some skill." A twist of shadow suggested a head tilting back as he inspected... what? The posters on her walls? "I could use your talents."

"You break into my apartment, cut through my wards, and you're trying to *recruit* me?" Her voice rose to a shrill pitch that belied her terror. He laughed quietly. "Your pitch sucks."

"Does it?" He was laughing at her. She could *hear* him laughing at her. "Well then, how about this for incentive. If you do not offer me your aid, I shall tear your throat out and drink your blood as from a fountain."

Bile rose in her throat. She forced it down and locked her knees against the faintness that threatened her. Lily's uncertain words echoed through her memory.

*There was a man. Adri didn't say much about him, just that he was harassing her. He wanted her to do something for him.*

"Oh God," she whispered.

His smile flashed through the darkness.

Her finger twitched toward the phone. He held up a hand. "I really wouldn't."

"Why? You'll rip my throat out?" Her voice was tight with fear, but anger was beginning a slow burn deep in her chest. "Better get on with it, then."

"You won't help me?" He laughed. He sounded delighted. "Why ever not?"

Slowly, she inched her hand toward the phone. And focused on keeping the other very, very still. "I'm starting to suspect you killed my best friend. That doesn't put you very high on my to-do list."

"Oh, tut. That's such a petty reason. I could give you eternity, child."

"Eternity as one of your relatives? I think I'll pass." With a flick of her wrist, she slapped her hand onto the phone and pressed the button to connect the call. Almost immediately, an iron-cold grip circled her forearm and pulled her away. He was a tall, solid presence before her, still cloaked in shadows. His fingers bit deep into her arm, belying the pleasantries of his tone.

"Well, my dear, that *is* unfortunate." He pushed her back against the bed, bent over her throat. "Are you sure I can't convince you? We're kin of a different sort, you know. Campbells, both of us. Magic always did run strong in our line."

"If you're going to start giving me a 'blood is thicker than water' speech, you can save it."

He slid a finger along her throat. The tenderness of his touch was even more revolting than the blatant hunger in his gaze. "Are you sure? Think hard. I won't ask again."

"Oh, I'm sure all right," she said. And when he leaned in, fangs bared, she twisted the arm he'd pinned between them and shoved the cross she still held against the vulnerable skin beneath his chin.

He howled, a feral scream of rage that had more in common with an injured animal's snarl than any human sound, and threw her from him. She landed against the opposite wall with a force that drove the breath from her lungs.

*Get up*, she told herself, but her body refused to work. *Run. If you can get to the door—*

But it was too late. He was between her and escape, a dark shadow that seethed anger. The cross was on the floor by her feet, dropped from numb fingers when he'd thrown her. She lunged for it, grabbed it and rolled and scrambled to get it up between them.

He crouched to pounce, but hesitated as the cross glimmered gold between them. He tilted his head to the side, chuckled quietly, and straightened.

"No, I don't think I care to risk you using that infernal device on me again. Gold burns are so pesky to care for, even if your blood would speed my recovery." He stepped back, towards the door. "Think on my offer, little girl. Next time, I'll be as prepared as you are."

He stepped through the doorway, and out of her sight. For the space of a breath, she couldn't move. Then she scrambled across the room and down the hall. She turned on every light in the apartment, searched every closet and cupboard, until she was certain that he'd left.

She deadbolted the door, double-checked the locks on the windows, then returned to her room, sat on her bed, and dialed her phone with hands that shook.

"Reina!" Logan's voice came like an explosion. She flinched and closed her eyes. "Are you all right? What happened? I got your call, but weren't there when I answered, and all I could hear was—something. A struggle? What *happened*? Was someone threatening you?"

"I'm fine," she said, but her voice wavered. She tightened her fingers around the phone. "I think. I chased him off."

"You—What? Who?" He broke off with a string of snarled oaths. "Hold on. I'll be there in just a minute."

Reina straightened, stiffened. "No, Logan, you don't have to—"

"I'm already halfway there."

She sighed in defeat. "All right. Thank you."

He kept her on the line for the few minutes it took him to reach the apartment complex. She leaned back against her bedroom wall, eyes closed, slumped a weariness that had nothing to do with the hour, and answered the rapid-fire questions that he shot at her. She clung to the phone like a lifeline, and didn't hang up until he was knocking at her front door.

She threw the deadbolt and he burst inside. He wrapped her in a tight embrace, held her close. Reina leaned against him, trembling.

When they parted, he drew her to the couch and sat her down. He crouched in front of her, watching her with wide, worried eyes. "All right," he said. "Tell me."

Slowly, she told him what had happened, looking down at her hands while she spoke. When she'd finished, she glanced up at him and froze. He suddenly looked very,

very dangerous. "Logan—"

"He said he would turn you?" His voice lashed out like a whip. She stiffened in instinctual response to it.

"Among other things."

He let loose a string of Gaelic that made her grateful she wasn't the object of his anger. "*Go dtachta an diabhal e!* This is too much!"

"Yeah, well, at least I was able to chase him away," she said with a sigh, drawing her knees to her chest.

Logan grabbed her arm, giving her a little shake. "*This* time," he said fiercely. "Do you think you'll be so lucky the next? He as good as promised he'd return. You can't stay here."

She shook her head slowly. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

"Don't you?" He gave her a strange look. "I have a guest bedroom that I would be happy to let you use."

"Oh," she said, softly. "Well... Thank you." She glanced up at him and made a feeble attempt at humor. "You're not going to expect me to share meals with you guys, are you?"

The corner of his mouth curled into a crooked smile. "No, *nighean*."

She wrapped her arm around her ribs and drew a deep breath. "What will Kynan think about it?"

Logan was quiet, forcing her to look at him to see his reaction. He watched her steadily for a moment. "He will be frightened on your behalf," he said. "And pleased that we can offer you a place of safety. Do you still not trust me in this?"

Reina looked up at the ceiling, unable to respond.

He sighed. "Will it take you long to pack?"

"No. I guess not."

Less than half an hour later, she'd dressed and gathered several days' worth of clothes, toiletries, and a few other necessities in a large duffel bag. She found Logan in the living room, pacing before the couch with a cell phone at his ear, snarling quietly into it in Gaelic. He turned, saw her, and cut himself off abruptly. He dropped the phone into his jacket pocket. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah." She hesitated at the threshold, though, and looked back. She had walked through the doorway hundreds of times, but there was something very final about leaving it in fear, without any knowledge of when she might return.

Logan put a hand on her cheek and crouched to her eye level. "You will be back," he said firmly. "I promise it."

She laughed mirthlessly and shifted the bag's strap higher on her shoulder. "That's nice of you to say, but you'll pardon me for being skeptical." She started down the stairs, muttering beneath her breath, "At this point, I'm just waiting to become Bryson's newest missing persons case."

Logan grabbed her arm and yanked her to a stop. "That won't happen!"

"Convince me," she snapped, pulling free.

She made it to the first landing before he caught up and pushed her back against the stairwell wall. Her protest of outrage was cut off by the force of his mouth on hers. Despite herself, her hand fisted on his shoulder, holding on tight lest her knees give out beneath her.

His mouth was hard against hers, unyielding. Fear and frustration and anger coalesced, and she kissed him desperately, her fingers digging deeply into his arms. He held her just as tightly, but she gave no thought to the bruises he would etch on her flesh.

When Logan tried to restrain himself and gentle the kiss, she shoved him back. "Don't!" she shouted when he tried to close the distance between them again. "I'm not five anymore, you can't just kiss it and make it all better!"

She left him gaping at her, taking the stairs two at a time, but he caught her at the next landing. He hauled her against his chest; she inhaled sharply in shock and outrage, then was knocked breathless by his kiss.

His hands gripped her waist, digging in hard and holding her against him. She couldn't have fought him off if she'd wanted to.

She was annoyed enough that she almost considered it. But then his tongue swept into her mouth, teasing hers. His breath mingled with hers, hot and sweet, and his chest was deliciously warm beneath her palms. She slid her hands from his shoulders to his waist and decided she could tolerate it for a few minutes longer.

When her teeth caught his lip, he growled against her mouth and bit back, hard enough to make her squirm. He wore a dress shirt, tucked neatly into his slacks, and it annoyed her for getting between them. She jerked his shirttail free, slid her hands up his back.

Rippled skin met her fingertips. Curiosity distracted her for a moment, but Logan moved his kisses down her throat, and she decided that the things his tongue was doing on her skin were infinitely more interesting. She slid her fingers through his hair and pressed her hand against the back of his head, encouraging him to continue.

Logan's hands tightened on her as his lips explored the length of her throat. He scraped his teeth across her skin; Reina inhaled sharply, but it was all pleasure. Heat burned in her stomach, too powerful for fear, too demanding for hesitation. She dragged her hand further up his back, growling in frustration at the restriction of his shirt.

With a sudden motion, she spread her hands flat on his chest and pushed him back. He blinked at her, his eyes dark and unfocused, but before he could say anything she was kissing him again and unbuttoning the shirt, moving quickly from his throat towards his waist.

Logan turned his face away. He drew a deep breath. "Reina—"

"Shut up." She put a hand on either side of his face and kissed him hard. When he kissed her back, she let go and finished the last of the buttons. His shirt gaped open, revealing a narrow strip of torso from his throat to his navel. Reina slid her hands up his chest and across his shoulders, pushing the shirt off. His skin burned beneath her hands. She took her time to enjoy the exploration, tracing the contours of his muscles across his chest and down to his waist. When she could wait no longer, she stepped back and pulled her shirt off over her head, casting her cross to the ground with it.

Logan's gaze sharpened. His eyes traveled over her revealed skin like a caress. Briefly, he looked away, then back. He cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should—"

"Shut *up*, damn it." She closed the distance between them again and grabbed the waist of his slacks, pulling his hips against hers with a ferocity that had him groaning.

She knew what he wanted to suggest, and she knew why. Making out was one thing, but now they were half naked and still in the stairwell, and someone might discover them.

She didn't care.

He put his hands on her waist. She leaned against his chest and gloried at the feel of his skin on hers. He trailed his fingers down to the small of her back, then around and up, to cup her breast. His thumb traced small circles around her nipple through the bra.

A small sound worked its way from her throat. She turned, putting her back against the wall and pulling him with her. Obliging, he stepped in close and pinned her there. She wrapped her arms around his neck, hitched herself up. Her legs wrapped around his waist, ankles locked at the small of his back, skirt gathered haphazardly around her thighs.

Logan groaned. He moved his hips against hers, stopping the breath in her throat. He swore and wrapped an arm around her back, holding her in place while he undid his slacks and pushed her underwear aside.

He took her with a quick, hard thrust that slammed her back into the wall. She cried out, convulsing around him, fingernails scoring lines down his back. They moved together with little care for tenderness, gasping into each other's mouths, oblivious to everything but the driving, blinding need.

She came first, hauling his mouth against hers to muffle a keening cry, and shuddered around him. He followed soon after. They slumped together against the wall, hearts pounding wildly against each other's, chests heaving for air. They were both soaked with sweat, both thoroughly disheveled.

Reina didn't give a damn.

"I think I may have hurt you," she said at length, lowering her feet to the ground.

Logan made an amused sound. "I'm fine."

"But your back—" There was blood underneath her nails; she knew she'd injured him. But when she grabbed his shoulder and tried to turn him to see, he jerked away.

"I'm fine, Reina. Truly."

She stopped and looked up at him, meeting his gaze. "Is this about your scars? Because I don't care."

His face went slack with surprise.

"Oh, come on, don't be an idiot. I had my hands all over you. I felt them."

He watched her warily. She stepped towards him, resting a hand on his chest. "Will you let me see?"

He didn't answer, and she thought he would refuse. Then he sighed, his shoulders drooped in defeat, and he slowly turned.

"Oh God..." Reina raised a hand, gently tracing the rippled scar tissue that stretched across his back from nape to waist, and further. He was right; whatever damage she had caused had healed already, leaving little more than faint streaks of blood across his back. It was nothing, compared to the scars.

"What did this?" she asked, barely breathing.

He turned his head, looking at the cross she had discarded, lying at their feet. "You know that gold burns us?" he said quietly.

"Yes."

"It was punishment for an escape attempt. I was starved until I was too weak to fight, then bound in a gold coffin."

Reina rocked back, staring at him in horror. "Jesus."

When he turned toward her again he was smiling, his eyes amused, but he hadn't managed to completely mask the pain that lurked beneath. "It was a long time ago. Many

centuries." He tilted his head towards the cross. "You should put that back on."

Reina sighed as she scooped the necklace up and fastened it around her neck. "A lot of good it'll do me," she muttered.

He raised a querying eyebrow at her as he slipped his shirt back on. "Why do you say that?"

Silent, she pulled Brett's out of her pocket and showed it to him.

He went quiet at that, and didn't speak while they finished dressing. With each article of clothing that they donned, reality fell back into place, until Reina was thankful that he kept silent. Her cheeks burned with chagrin at what they had done, and she couldn't think of a single thing to say to him.

"We should go," Logan murmured, his head ducked, and suddenly there was one thing she could say to him, one burning, desperate thing that she *had* to say, or it would swallow her up.

"Logan ... this is—I shouldn't—" She dropped her gaze and smoothed her hands over her skirt in a nervous gesture. Her voice fell to a whisper. "I don't want to make things awkward for you."

"Ah, God. Reina." He tucked a knuckle beneath her chin, raising her gaze to his. "You worry yourself so much over this, and so needlessly. He will not mind this any more than anything else we have done together."

"I don't believe you," she whispered brokenly. "How can he not?"

Logan brushed his thumb along the line of her jaw. "Now that we've shared this intimacy, is the idea of my sharing it with another intolerable?"

"I'm not in love with you."

He inclined his head. "Even so."

She sighed. "No, it's not. I don't have any right to be upset by what you do, or who you do it with."

The corner of his mouth curved. He took her elbow and turned her toward the stairs. "I'll walk you to your car," he murmured, "and try to explain."

She nodded mutely and allowed him to guide her forward. But though they walked, Logan was quiet. With one hand on the handle of her car door, she turned back to him. "Well, that was a very compelling argument, Professor MacGregor. I find myself quite convinced."

"Reina... I'm a vampire."

She raised her brows. "Oh, really? I'd forgotten."

He grimaced. "My point," he said, "is that I am obliged to feed, and no one donor can sustain a vampire. Those of us who prefer to feed without killing must have several. And feeding..." He looked down at his hands, pressed together before him. "The vampire hungers for blood. The man hungers for somewhat else. And one hunger fuels the other. Even were Kynan still mortal, and a donor, I could not be faithful to him without risking both our lives."

Reina drew a slow, deep breath. "You didn't feed from me."

He glanced up, watching her through his lashes. "Intimacy is still intimacy, whether driven by the vampire's hunger, or the man's."

"But—"

"No." Logan shook his head, quick and hard. "Kynan knows where he stands in my affections, and he knows that whoever else may come or go from them, it has no effect



on how well I love him."

Reina stared up at him. "Logan ... what's going on here?" He looked puzzled. She continued before he could interject. "It's obvious you love Kynan, and I don't grudge you that. But now you're inviting me into your home, and I..." She fisted her hands on the ends of her hair. "Is it just feeding a hunger? Is that what this is?"

Gently, he pulled her hands from her hair and wrapped a curl around his finger. "It is what it is, *nighean*. And who can say what it will become?"

She gripped his wrist. "You can say what it won't."

"What do you want of it?"

"I don't know."

He smiled gently and bent. His lips brushed her cheek. "Then we'll figure it out as we go, hmm?"

She shook her head and muttered, "Yeah, sure. And pray no hearts get broken in the process." She released him and dug her keys out of her purse. "I'll meet you at your place."

He watched her like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he only nodded, and turned for his own car.

## Chapter Twelve

Reina was sitting at Logan's kitchen table when Kynan staggered in, bleary-eyed and half awake. "Morning." She offered him a cautious smile and wave, still wary of the repercussions of what had happened between her and Logan.

He gave a distracted wave back, mumbled something, and dropped into the chair next to hers. His gaze fixed on the coffee mug in her hands, and he sat up straight.

"Coffee." He stared at her. "You made coffee?"

Amused, she nodded. "There's a whole pot."

Kynan took her hands and leaned forward, looking at her intently. "Reina. Darling. Marry me." The steadiness of his gaze wavered as fragrant steam rose from the cup. He looked down into her coffee, then back up at Reina. "Pour me a cup, and I'm yours forever."

She laughed and got to her feet. "I'll make you a deal. You go bring in the newspaper, and I'll get you some. How do you take it?"

"No sugar, just a splash of cream."

Reina raised an eyebrow. "What exactly is the metric equivalent of a *splash*, Mr. Pritchard?" She grinned and pushed her chair in with her hip. "Go on, get that paper, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

By the time he returned, she was back in her seat, his coffee waiting for him at his. Kynan handed her the newspaper with a teasing bow, then scooped up his mug and settled back with a rapturous sound.

"Ahh. Perfect. So, where would you like to go for our honeymoon?"

"Sorry, bud," she said with a grin. She pulled out the Local section and pushed the rest into the center of the table. "While it was certainly a romantic proposal, I'm afraid I'm not quite the marrying type."

"Oh, well." He grinned at her over the rim of his cup, unfazed. "We could live in sin, too. I'd be cool with that."

"I just bet you would."

Having drained his cup, Kynan got up to refill it. On his return, he glanced over Reina's shoulder. "Looking for anything in particular?"

"Some mention of Brett. He's bound to show up sooner or later, and when he does, I figure it'll be mentioned here."

He stopped and bent closer. "In the obits?"

Reina sighed, her mood suddenly deflating. "Well, it's the most likely place for him to show up, isn't it?"

Kynan gave her a sympathetic look, shrugged, and sat down.

When she'd finished with the obituaries and had found nothing, she grabbed the rest of the paper and scanned the headlines.

One, on the front page but below the fold, made her hands fist on the newsprint.

*Local Student Killed by Rogue Vampire.*

"What?" Her jaw dropped in shock.

Kynan glanced up at her, startled. "Did you find something about your friend?"

"Not Brett. Adri. Oh my God." She skimmed the article quickly. It said little more than she had already learned from Logan and Keachan, that local Bryson student Adriana Cardenas, whose death had previously been attributed to an animal attack, had actually been killed by an errant vampire known as a rogue, an unnamed source said, and police so far had been unable to identify a suspect.

"Damn it!" She snatched up the paper and ran for the stairs.

The door to Logan's office was closed, but the quiet murmur of voices came from within. Reina pounded her fist against the door, and they fell abruptly silent.

Logan stepped into the hall, frowning. "What—"

"Look at this!" She thrust the article under his nose.

Logan's gaze flicked across the paper. He paled. "Damn," he muttered. He turned and showed the paper to Keachan, who stood a pace behind him. Unlike Logan, Keachan turned livid as he read the paper.

"Son of a bitch! We've got a leak!"

Reina followed them as the two men rushed down the stairs. "You said no one knew about the rogue—"

"Well now *everybody* knows," Keachan snapped. "And we'll all suffer for it."

Kynan met them at the bottom of the stairs, looking worried. "Nye?" He looked at the other man. "What's going on?"

"There's been a leak." Logan sighed and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes for a moment. "Stay here, Kynan. Don't go out, don't let anyone but kin in." He glanced at Reina. "She's staying here for the time being. Keep an eye on her."

Reina gaped at him. "You think *I* did this—"

"No." Logan pulled her to face him. "No, Reina, I do not. But there are others who are gravely endangered by this, and they might hold you responsible. He's not to keep tabs on you, he's to *protect* you. Or have you forgotten your visitor last night?"

She snapped her mouth closed and looked up at him. "Let me come with you."

"No."

"Logan, you know I can help you. Let me come."

"No. You will stay here and do as Kynan says." Anger flared in her at the order, and Logan must have seen it, for he sighed. "I can't protect you out there, *nighean*." He drew her aside, away from the others, and kissed her.

"Please," he whispered against her lips. "Please, stay here and do not argue with me. I do not want to see you hurt."

"I don't want to sit here and do nothing. I don't want to be helpless."

"Please, *nighean*." He stroked her hair and pressed his forehead to hers.

Reina sighed. "All right." He stepped back. She crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. "Go on, then."

He looked at her for a moment, then shook his head. He turned back to Keachan. They left shortly, leaving Reina and Kynan alone.

Kynan stared after them, looking grave. He glanced at Reina, muttered something beneath his breath, and stalked off.

*Oh God, if it's not one thing, it's another.* Reina followed after him. "What's wrong?"

"He's trying to seduce you," Kynan said bitterly. "*Uffar engiriol!*"

Reina looked down at her feet. "Kynan..." Her voice sounded strangled to her ears. "Damn it. He said it was okay. *You* said it was okay. Or, I thought you did." She looked

up at him, desperation squeezing the air from her chest. "I'm sorry! I wasn't thinking!"

Kynan's eyes widened with bewilderment. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Logan. Seducing me." She drew a deep breath. "I'm afraid that ship has already sailed."

Kynan's brows drew together, and Reina braced for an explosion. But after a moment, his expression cleared. He looked, if anything, relieved. "Oh Christ. Reina, that's *fine*."

She edged backwards, mistrusting his quicksilver moods. "But you're upset."

"Not about *that*, you dork." He cuffed her playfully beneath the chin. "I saw him pull you off to sweet-talk you. It's not the seducing that bothers me, it's that he was trying to use it to keep you compliant."

Reina scrubbed a hand across the back of her neck. "Are you sure?" she asked in a small voice. "Kynan, I like you an awful lot. I don't want to do anything that'll hurt you."

His grin flashed. He caught her arm and drew her with him out of the foyer. "Vampire, remember? We're pretty hard to hurt." He dropped down onto the living room couch and tucked his hands behind his head. "Honestly, Reina, I've been with Nye for nearly two centuries. It's going to take more to break my heart than him jumping your bones."

Reina groaned and curled into the other end of the couch, knees drawn to her chest. "If anyone's bones were jumped," she muttered, "I think it was his."

She raised her head and found Kynan watching her with a wicked gleam in his eye. "I got the seduction backwards, did I?"

"Pretty much."

He grinned widely and settled back into the couch with a sigh of satisfaction. "That's my girl."

Reina stared intently at her feet and plucked bits of lint from her socks. She could feel Kynan's attention on her, but couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze. Couldn't make herself trust that he was as accepting of this thing developing between her and Logan as he insisted. When something seemed too good to be true, it usually was.

Kynan broke the silence by clearing his throat. Reina glanced at him from the corner of her eye, but he didn't look upset, only thoughtful. "So," he murmured. "You jumped Nye's bones."

She nodded and pressed her chin against her knees.

"And now you're moving in here?"

Her head snapped up. "Is that what you think?" she demanded. "That I'm here for— Is that what *he* thinks?"

Kynan's smile was crooked, and dimmer than she thought it should have been. "It's okay," he said. "I'm just teasing. I'm sure Nye had an excellent reason for inviting you to stay with us."

It was an invitation for explanation. She drew a breath and told him about the man in her bedroom.

By the time she finished, the smile had vanished from Kynan's face. "Oh, Reina..." He put his hand to her cheek with a worried look. "You have to be careful. I don't like how he convinced you to stay, but I'm glad you're here. I'd hate for something to happen to you."

She made a face. "I wish people would stop saying that. I may not be immortal, but

I'm not helpless, and I'm not fragile. And"—she looked around the house with a sardonic expression—"I don't need to be locked up in the castle while my knight in shining armor goes running off to slay my dragons."

"They're *his* dragons," Kynan said with a quiet forcefulness. "I know you got caught in the crosshairs, but whoever's doing this, it's not about you, or Adri, or Brett. It's about Logan. It's a challenge to his authority."

"Damn his authority," she muttered to herself. "They're *my friends*."

"And we're his kin. If he doesn't respond to this threat, then we're all in danger."

Reina frowned. "I don't want to keep him from doing something about it. I just want to be allowed to help."

"You'd get in his way. He's stronger and faster than you, and he knows more about what he's up against than you do." He held his hand out to her. Reluctantly, Reina placed her palm against his. He drew her with him to sit down on the couch. "You have to trust him," Kynan said quietly. "It's hard, but it's the only way."

Reina blew out a heavy sigh. "If I didn't trust him, I wouldn't be here. But no one's said anything about me having to like it."

A small smile tugged at the edge of his mouth. "It's easier, if you can bring yourself to tolerate it, at least."

"I'm working on it."

Her cell phone rang then, and Reina was grateful enough for the reprieve that she snatched it up and answered without bothering to check the number.

"Hello?"

"Reina? Do me a favor and don't laugh, just listen. I could use your help." The voice was strained and vaguely familiar, but Reina couldn't place it.

"I'm sorry?" She slid off the couch and headed into the kitchen for privacy. "Who is this?"

A pause. "Fate Dobrzynski."

"Fate Dobrzynski, the hate-mongering president of the most shameful club ever to sully the sidewalks of Bryson U? That Fate Dobrzynski?"

Fate sighed. "Thanks for not laughing. Now that that's out of your system, will you listen to me?"

"Oh, what the hell. Let's hear it. What can I do for you?"

"Have you seen today's paper?"

Reina's stomach knotted. "Yes," she said warily.

"I take it you saw the article about your friend?"

"Yes."

"Well, so did just about everyone in PURE, and they've worked themselves up into a frenzy over it. They're out for blood and refusing to listen to reason. I managed to convince them not to do anything until after our meeting later tonight, but I don't know that I'm going to be able to calm them down. I thought—" She paused and cleared her throat. "Well, you've got a bit more experience preaching tolerance than I do."

"I imagine I do. You don't really think they're going to have much interest in listening to *me*, though, do you?"

"Because you support preternatural rights? What they don't know can't hurt them, right?"

"I suppose," Reina said, frowning.

"Look, can I just come over and talk to you about it? If you hear me out and still want to tell me to fuck off, I'll understand."

"Fine—No, wait, I'm not at home." And there was no way that she could invite Fate into Logan's house, even if Kynan could be persuaded to let her in. "I'll call you back," she said quickly and disconnected.

Kynan gave her a curious look when she returned to the living room. "Is something wrong?"

"Well, I don't know. That was a—friend of mine. She wants to come over and talk about something—"

He was already shaking his head. "No one comes in but kin, Reina."

"Then I'll go speak with her outside."

"And won't Nye be thrilled if he finds out about *that*," Kynan said, exasperated. "You haven't seen him mad, Reina. Don't try his patience."

Her lips thinned. "Are you going to stop me?"

*I can't believe I'm pushing on this, for her...*

He gave her a surprised look, then sighed and shook his head. "I won't restrain you, if that's what you're asking. But I won't protect you from his ire, either."

"I don't need protecting, thanks." Reina called Fate back, gave her the address of a nearby coffee house, and headed off to meet her. Kynan gave her a disapproving on her way out the door, which she steadfastly ignored.

\* \* \* \*

Fate arrived at the coffee house a few minutes after Reina. She looked around the café, lightly populated with soccer moms and businessmen on laptops. Humor flashed in her dark eyes. "Well, this isn't the venue the guys in the movies usually choose when they want to meet in secrecy, but I guess it works." She turned her attention to Reina and gave her a smile that Reina didn't think was entirely insincere. "How's the search for your friend's killer going?"

"Just peachy, thanks."

"If what the paper says is true..." Fate blew out her breath on a sigh. "That's some scary shit you're up against, sweetheart."

Reina shoved her hands in her pockets. "Cut to the chase, Fate. What do you want from me?"

"I want you to help me try to talk some sense into these idiots."

"What happened to being aggressive?"

"Oh for God's sake, you won't let that one rest, will you? I didn't mean rule by mob, or running around slaughtering innocents, which is what these guys are going to end up doing, they're so damn scared." The short tirade worked her up enough that she started pacing between the tables. "Besides, we don't advocate blind aggression. It's the sire vamps you really have to get tough with."

"The—what?" Reina felt the blood drain out of her face. She dropped her gaze to the tiles beneath her feet, struggling not to give anything away. She suddenly had a lot more appreciation for Logan and Kynan's concern.

"Sire vamps," Fate repeated, mistaking Reina's shock for ignorance. A crooked grin spread across her face. "The scariest of the scary shit. They're the worst of the vampires. The biggest, the baddest, the most powerful. And they've got the right to create new

fledglings, so they often have a nice little fanged family to back them up in a fight." She shook her head. "Don't get mixed up with one of them, sweetie. Not unless you want to turn into his next meal."

"Right. Sure. I'll keep my distance." Reina turned her back to Fate so her expression couldn't betray her.

Fate fell silent for a moment, the weight of her gaze heavy on Reina's back. She cleared her throat. "Will you come with me? Please?"

Logan was going to kill her, and after what Fate had said, she wouldn't blame him. Sighing, Reina nodded. "All right, I'll help you."

Relief flooded Fate's face. "Thank you."

They drove together, taking Fate's car, and hurried to the lecture hall in which PURE's meetings were held. They stepped through the doors at the back of the hall and Reina came to a sudden stop.

The hall was packed, and choked with residuals. Waves of fear, anger, and desperation crashed over her. Her heart raced, responding to a desire for vengeance that was not her own. She turned blindly towards the doors, too disoriented to remember her purpose.

Fate tugged on her hand, drawing her forward into the mess.

"I didn't realize PURE had so many members," Reina gasped, struggling against the residuals that threatened to overwhelm her.

"We don't." Fate's voice was tight. "Most of these are newcomers, spurred to action by today's article. They're afraid and they want to do something about it, and..." She shrugged. "PURE offers that."

They waited while people found their way to seats. Fate stepped up to the microphone. "Good evening," she said warmly, with no trace of the fear or concern she had shown previously. Reina faded off to the side to listen and watch.

She had to admit, Fate was charismatic. The murmur in the hall died as she spoke, transforming into a focused silence. Even the room's residuals steadied, as people's energies shifted from their fears to Fate's message.

They weren't entirely buying it, though. As Fate tried to convince them to act with caution, resentment began to build, and impatience surged beneath it. Its power was oppressive, pressing in against Reina's chest until she felt like she was drowning in it.

When she could stand it no more, and it seemed like the crowd would tolerate no more, she moved forward and took the microphone. Fate gave her a startled look, but shrugged and stepped back.

"What do you all want to do?" Reina demanded. "Rush out there and kill the first vampire you stumble across?"

A murmur rippled across the room.

"Oh, that's peachy." She gave a disgusted snort. "Do any of you even know *how* to identify a vampire?"

They fell awkwardly silent at that. After a moment, someone called out, "They never go out in the sun!"

"So, what? Now anyone who works the graveyard shift is going to be persecuted for it?" She shook her head impatiently. "You guys want vengeance, I understand that. But if you go running out to kill when you're angry and irrational and unprepared, you're only going to end up killing innocent people. And then you're no better than the vampires

you're fighting!"

They didn't like hearing that, but Reina thought that perhaps the idea of becoming as bad as the creatures they hated was enough to faze them.

Her speech was cut abruptly short when the doors at the back of the auditorium flew open with a bang.

*Oh shit.*

Reina passed the microphone back to Fate. "I'm sorry, I've got to go. Good luck!"

She left the stage and hurried up the aisle, meeting Logan halfway. He grabbed her arm with a bruising grip. Reina was sure he'd have yelled at her where they stood, and the hell with their audience, but she hissed, "*Not here,*" and let him drag her to the doors.

Outside, his control snapped. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" he roared, shaking her. "One thing! *One* thing I asked of you, and still you defy me on it!"

"I'm not yours to command." She jerked out of his grip. When he advanced to grab her again, she retreated. "I came here to help a friend, and you won't make me apologize for that."

"No? Will you apologize for making Kynan near-frantic with worry? For risking his life, and mine, and Keachan's, while we searched for you? Will you apologize for telling no one what you were doing, leaving us all to wonder if that damned intruder had found you again, and this time finished the job he abandoned? What *will* you apologize for, Reina?"

"Excuse the hell out of me, but I thought I might have been *saving* your life, or Kynan's, or Keachan's. And you're a damned fool for setting foot in that hall! Do you even know what's going on in there?"

"I don't care about them, Reina, I care about *you*!"

She might have been swayed by the emotion in his words, had she been less incensed. "You ought to care about them! It's a damned mob in there, up in arms over the article about Adri, and out for blood! Fate asked me to come to try and defuse the situation."

"Fate?" Behind the anger, confusion and fear flickered across his face. "The president of that hate group you came to me about? Reina ... what on earth are you doing here?"

"Helping," she said firmly. "Whatever Fate may believe, she doesn't want them running off killing innocents in their fervor for vengeance any more than I do."

Logan sighed and took her arm again, more gently this time. "Come home," he said wearily. "And if you do nothing else, apologize to Kynan. He fears you've been harmed, and he feels responsible for letting you leave."

The drive back was a tense one. Logan nearly vibrated with fury and barely spoke to her, much less looked at her. Reina, for her part, found that guilt gradually took the place of her anger as they drove. It left her awkward and uncomfortable. She was glad for Logan's silence, and spent the short trip alternately staring out the window and at her lap.

Her anger disappeared completely when she stepped through the front door. Kynan, sitting glumly on the couch, scrambled to his feet. Relief flooded his face, and he threw himself at her.

"Reina! I thought they had killed you!"

She returned his embrace gingerly, feeling like the world's biggest ass. "I'm sorry, Kynan," she whispered, lightly touching a hand to his hair. "I didn't mean to worry you."



He released her. She drew back. "The next time I decide not to listen to you," she said with a tremulous smile, "smack me."

He grunted and hugged her again, his voice rough with emotion. "And you'd deserve it, too, you little idiot."

"I know." She drew away to look for Keachan, figuring she owed him an apology as well, and only then noticed that there were several unfamiliar faces surrounding them. "Oh." She stepped away, self-conscious. "Hello."

Logan guided her into their midst with a light touch at the small of her back. "This is Reina," he said to the others, a man and a woman. "She's been helping Patrick and me with our investigation, and will be staying here for a time. Reina, this is Alex and his girlfriend, Julia."

Reina nodded and gave them each a polite smile. "It's nice to meet you." Alex, she recalled, was the bartender. His hair was cropped short, his jaw square, his features chiseled. He looked like a typical all-American high school football hero, if a bit less pretentious than most jocks she had known, in his Hawaiian-print shirt and slacks. Julia was cute and bubbly, her hair twisted up into two messy buns, a hairstyle that few women over twelve could pull off, but which looked completely in character for her.

The two returned her perusal with equal intensity. Reina wondered just how much they'd been told about her before her arrival. Julia interrupted her thoughts by bouncing over and claspng Reina's hand between hers.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Reina, and sorry we couldn't meet earlier. Kynan's said wonderful things about you, though."

Reina flushed. "Thank you," she murmured awkwardly, glancing sideways at Kynan. "Not so wonderful things from Logan, though, I'll bet."

Julia tilted her head to the side. "Why do you say that?"

"He's not very pleased with me." Reina sat cross-legged on the floor with a sigh, her back up against one of the couches. "With reason, I suppose."

"Oh, he'll get over it," Julia said lightly. She curled up on the couch to one side of Reina, and Kynan took the other. "He never stays mad long."

Reina wondered if that held true for someone who had endangered himself and his brood as she had, but didn't voice her thoughts. If Logan or Kynan hadn't told the rest of the brood about her actions, she wasn't about to break the news.

Logan stood up before the group. He leaned against the far wall, scratching thoughtfully at the stubble that clung to his jaw. After a moment, he spoke. "We must address the issue of the article, above all else. Patrick, I don't suppose there's any possibility of convincing the paper to run a retraction?"

Keachan shook his head slowly. "With a story like this, I don't have enough clout for it. And even if they did, no one would pay attention to it."

"Then we must find this leak, and determine whether the information was released as an attack against us, or simple idiocy. I'm sorry to say it, but at this point it seems the most likely source to have been one of your colleagues, Patrick, so you'll handle the search. Kynan can help you if need it. Julia, if you could keep an ear out amongst the mortals, see if you can catch any gossip and judge how big an impact this news will have. Alex—" He hesitated, turning to the other man. For the briefest of moments, darkness passed across his face. "I'd like you to stay here, when you're not working. We need someone to protect the house, and the people in it."

Alex nodded slowly. "Happy to, boss." His expression suggested that he was far from.

"This goes for everyone. Do what you need to for your jobs and your responsibilities, but otherwise, stay home. Don't take any risks you don't need to, and don't trust anyone who isn't in this room right now."

People nodded and started to disperse. Reina followed Logan into the kitchen.

He gave her a curious look. "Yes?"

"Let's talk somewhere private."

The curiosity deepened, but he nodded. "Your room?"

It was probably as private as they were going to get without going to the office upstairs. She took his hand and walked with him, closing the door behind them.

"Let me do something." She looked up at him. The light overhead threw sharp highlights and shadows across his face. It made it difficult to read his expression. "I'm not useless. I don't want to be stuck here *waiting* for something to happen to me. Please—let me do something."

He sighed and leaned against her dresser. "I don't want to, *nighean*. I don't want to see you get hurt. I don't want to be the one who put you in danger."

"You'd rather I take matters into my own hands and run off on my own again?" She shook her head hard. "I'm not immortal, Logan, but that doesn't mean I'm going to keel over the first time someone looks at me cross-eyed. I can be useful without taking unnecessary risks."

The look he gave her held a mixture of amusement, exasperation, and agony. "I think we have differing definitions of the word 'unnecessary'."

"Damn it, Logan! It's not your job to protect me. I'm not part of your brood, and that wasn't in the agreement when I moved in."

He frowned. "You moved in to stay safe."

"I moved in to get myself out of immediate danger. That's not what you're asking me to do now. I don't want to sacrifice my life for my safety."

Logan sighed. He leaned his head back against the wall, eyes closed. Reina waited quietly, letting him work it out himself. Shortly, he looked at her and sighed. "Very well," he said with a hint of sadness. "If that's what you want, then so be it. I'd like you to go back to PURE and keep an eye on things there. Try to keep them from getting up in arms if you can, and if you can't, warn us so that we can be prepared to meet them." He ran his hand over her curls to cup her cheek. "Would you do that for me?"

Reina considered it. She nodded. "Smart."

"How's that?"

"A vampire would have to be crazy to attack me in the middle of an avid anti-preternatural group. They'd get a stake through the heart before they ever made it to my side." She gave him an amused look. "Figures you'd manage to figure out how to do as I ask and still act the protector."

"Can you blame me for wanting to keep you safe, *nighean*?"

"Not the wanting, no."

His eyes softened. He stepped towards her. Reina took a quick step back, pulling away from his touch. "No, don't."

His brows drew together in a puzzled frown.

"I just—I need some time, to figure things out."

Logan nodded slowly. "As you like." He drew her in and kissed the top of her head anyway.

When he'd left, Reina sat down on the edge of her bed. She looked around her new room, and released her breath on a long, slow sigh.

## Chapter Thirteen

If Patrick Keachan knew anything, it was how to conduct an interrogation. He also knew how to do so subtly enough that Officer Roger Lyle didn't realize that's what it was until a full twenty minutes into their discussion. His eyes rounded and he began to stammer, but Keachan had already asked all he really needed to know, and assured himself that while Lyle still harbored some grudging resentment at his brusque treatment over the Cardeñas file, he harbored no suspicions that the girl's cause of death was anything but what he'd been told.

Keachan spoke to the medical examiner next. This was not an interrogation, but a candid conversation between peers. Keachan respected Dr. Cohen, and too, he relied upon him. In nearly two decades he'd never given Keachan a reason to doubt his ability to keep a secret. He confirmed that he'd neither seen nor heard anything to suggest that someone in the department doubted his judgment.

All of which left Keachan in an uncommonly foul mood. The leak had to come from somewhere, and if it hadn't come from the PD, that left anyone and everyone in Bryson as suspects.

\* \* \* \*

While his brood saw to their responsibilities, Logan saw to his own.

The drive to Bay View offered him ample time to think, but he spent it staring resolutely through the windshield. He tried to keep his mind blank, and failed miserably. The face of a pretty, frightened woman with copper curls filled his thoughts, and refused to be banished.

The last thing he needed was to brood on Reina, he told himself. On how terrifyingly close she had come to danger the night before, on the words she had yelled at him—*I'm not five anymore, you can't kiss it and make it all better!*—or the impulsive encounter that had followed. Certainly not on her rashness, that had put them all in jeopardy, or the brief flicker of fear when he'd tried to kiss her in her room.

*I shouldn't have yelled at her*, he thought, and immediately dismissed the notion with a quick shake of his head. He *should* have yelled at her. She'd been rash and impulsive and gloriously naive, trying to preach tolerance to a mob of bigots. And while they had all made it home safe, it had been a precarious thing, and could have easily had a different, more tragic outcome.

In his time, he'd have tanned her hide for running off like that, and there was still some satisfaction to be had in the idea. But modern sensibilities were much more easily offended now, and women's tempers allowed to flare much more hotly. If he raised a hand to her, she would leave and never return. If he were lucky.

More likely, she'd pull out her cross and go straight for his heart.

Such thoughts shadowed him as he made the hour-long drive out of his territory and into Arlais', and they left him in a dark mood by the time he parked before her looming Victorian house. A small slip of a girl answered his knock, peering out through the narrow crack she opened between door and jamb. Ingrained habit kept his smile

courteous, but only just.

"Hello, Olivia. I've come to pay a call to Arlais; is she home?"

Olivia bobbed her head once, shuffled backwards, and opened the door to him. She led Logan to the great room, offered him tea, which he accepted, and bid him take a seat, which he politely declined.

He knew the games Arlais liked to play, and had no interest in indulging her in them this day.

She kept him waiting for the better part of a quarter-hour, no doubt waiting for him to tire and take a seat, but he didn't allow himself to so much as fidget. At length, she tired of the game and breezed into the great room in a swirl of velvet skirts and expensive perfume.

"Logan, my dear, how good of you to drop by." She offered her hand for a kiss, and he obliged. Power games were one thing; insulting one's hostess was another matter entirely.

"Hello, Arlais. You look lovely, as always."

"It's kind of you to say so, dear." She poured herself a cup of tea from the pot and sat. With that cue, Logan did as well. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"It's not a social call, Arlais." Logan leaned forward, forearms resting on his thighs, his tea cup cradled between his hands. "Have you read yesterday's newspaper?"

Her face crinkled. She waved a hand dismissively. "I never bother with that rubbish, and my kin know not to bring it in the house. All these mortals care about is death; it's depressing."

"Perhaps you ought to start." He drew the clipped article from his pocket and passed it to her.

Her emerald eyes flickered across the page. Her expression dissolved, and reformed into horror. She took a moment to school her appearance into placidity before she handed the newsprint back.

"Poor dear. A rogue in your territory, and you such a young thing." She clucked her tongue. "You'd best find it quick, before the others start to wonder about your leadership skills."

Logan bit back impatience. "The rogue will be found," he spat through clenched teeth. "That's not what this is about."

"What is it, then, dear?"

"Don't you see?" He sat back with a frustrated sound. "The mortals will be up in arms over this. They'll be on a witch-hunt. If they suspect you or your kin—"

"Oh, my dear." She gave him a sympathetic look and a patronizing pat on the hand. "Don't worry yourself about us. I've lived long enough to be able to disguise and defend myself and my own, I should think."

He didn't miss the barb behind the words. *You, on the other hand, are too young and inexperienced to take care of your own.* He fought the urge to bare his teeth.

"Very well, then." Ice crusted his words. "I'll bid you good day, and apologize for occupying your time with such a trivial matter."

She followed him towards the door. "Now, Logan—"

"Adieu, Arlais."

She stood at the door and watched him leave, her lips pressed into a disapproving line. Logan drove away without looking back.

Donovan expressed a similar sentiment when Logan spoke to him, although tempered with somewhat less patronization. Either way, it still boiled down to the same. Logan was the newcomer, the half-grown fledgling with pretensions of being a sire, and threats to his territory were none of their concern. If anything, an attack against him benefitted them, for they stood to occupy his territory if he fell.

It would serve them right to get a stake through the heart while their backs were turned, he decided grimly. Teach them a thing or two about overconfidence.

Of all his neighbors, Marek had always been the kindest to Logan—or in any case, the least condescending. He knocked on the door of Marek's home expecting a polite, if not friendly, welcome. He did not expect one of Marek's brood to peek out at him, go wide-eyed, and slam the door in his face.

"Jonas!" Logan knocked again. "Jonas, you know me. Let me in to see your sire."

Slowly, the door creaked open. Jonas slipped outside and closed the door behind himself, hiding in the lee of Logan's profile. "He can't see you," Jonas hissed. Broken blood vessels traced jagged paths through the whites of his eyes. His cheeks were gaunt, his eyes sunken. He looked as though he hadn't fed in weeks. "And you shouldn't be here."

"Why?" Logan looked up at the house, as though it might provide the answers.

"What's happened here?"

"You must leave!"

Foreboding stirred beneath his breast. "Where is Marek?"

"He's gone!" Jonas wailed. "He's gone and they won't trust you, nor anyone. They'll come for us next, Logan, and if you don't leave now..."

Logan took a few steps backwards, propelled by Jonas' anxiety and his own shock.

"Gone? What do you mean, he's gone?"

"I mean just that. He wouldn't have left us; they've gotten to him. It's just us now. As soon as the others find out..."

Logan's mind whirled at the implications. "Jonas," he said slowly. "Jonas, have you any fledglings in the brood?" None of Marek's brood were old enough or strong enough to raise a fledgling. If Marek was gone, it could explain the rogue.

*But not the stranger who's been harassing the Weres, nor this 'them' Jonas speaks of,* a small voice whispered. *Nor Patrick's blood results.* He brushed the thoughts aside.

"No." Jonas shook his head. "No, it's just us. No one new."

"You can't live on your own like this. Jonas, it's dangerous. Come with me; bring the rest of the brood and come with me. I'll grant you all leave to hunt in my territory."

Wariness shuttered across Jonas' face. He edged back a step. "No. This is our home. *This* is our territory, we don't need yours."

"And what will you do when Arlais or Donovan learn of this? They'll crush you, and they won't be as generous with their allowances."

"We won't leave our home." Jonas's jaw set in a stubborn line. "You ought to return to yours." He retreated into the house, and snapped the locks into place.

Logan hated to leave. It was Marek who had taken pity on him when he'd first come to Bryson, two fledglings in tow and not the faintest idea how to provide for them in this new place, where all the rules were different. Marek had given him Bryson as a lark, because he'd thought it would be amusing to watch this youngster try to make something of a territory that was largely considered useless. There were no good feeding grounds in

Bryson, and he'd laughed to watch Logan and his brood struggle to subsist on cold, bagged blood. Still, he *had* given Logan territory, when Arlais and Donovan had laughed in his face. Logan had never forgotten Marek's aid, nor the debt he owed the other sire. Surely the least he could do was look after Marek's brood in his absence. He wouldn't have wanted them to perish this way.

They'd never last on their own, but Jonas was right. He couldn't force himself into their home, and he couldn't force them out of it.

With a sigh, Logan slid into his car and began the long drive home.

\* \* \* \*

"Back again?" Fate grinned at Reina from the stage. People trickled in behind her by twos and threes. "Don't tell me I've managed to convince *you* to join our cause."

"Ha ha." Reina climbed up to sit next to her. "I'm just here to make sure none of your cronies go running out with torches and pitchforks."

"You did a pretty good job last time, I have to give you that." Fate turned from her idle survey of the hall, looking directly at Reina. "Would've been nice if you hadn't run off in the middle of things, though."

Reina gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Sorry. It was a matter of self-preservation."

"That guy who stormed in?" Reina glanced at her, and saw she was grinning.

"Oh yeah." She pressed her lips together against a laugh. "I think I'm kind of dating him."

"Kind of?" Fate snickered. "Don't you know?"

"It's complicated."

"Isn't it always?"

"Well." Reina grinned. "Sometimes more than others."

Not that she would tell Fate just *how* complicated things were. They seemed to have come to an unspoken understanding in which neither tried to change the mind of the other, but she doubted it would hold up to learning the whole truth about Logan.

As the room filled, the mood gradually sobered. PURE's members had cooled down little in the previous day. Fear and anger continued to roll off of them, as strong as ever. The crisis had been averted for one day, but it was still at the boiling point. It wouldn't take much to set them off.

As the clock reached the top of the hour, Fate grabbed the microphone from its stand and spoke to the crowd from where she sat at the stage's edge. She spoke warmly and personally, as if she was addressing a group of a few close friends, not a hall full of mostly-strangers. It accomplished its goal; those listening calmed a bit, assuaged by Fate's personable manner and words of comfort. Tensions settled to a simmer.

All that lasted until someone at the back of the hall stood up. "A girl is *dead*!" she shouted. "How can you say that we're safe?"

Agreement rippled through the crowd, punctuated by encouraging shouts of, "That's right!"

Fate looked calmly up at the woman. "How many people live in this city? Tens of thousands. And how many people have died? Just one. The odds are in your favor, ma'am."

"One for now!" the woman shouted back. "One that we *know* of. These vampires will get hungry again, and then no one will be safe. We ought to take care of them, before

they take care of us!"

The murmurs of assent grew louder, buoyed by rising fear. Reina's heart pounded in her chest.

Someone else on the other side of the hall got to his feet and joined in. "Our time is now! We should strike while he is sated, not wait for his stomach to start growling!"

Suddenly there were half a dozen people on their feet, all shouting variations of the same thing—that they had to act now, find the vampires before the vampires found them, and protect themselves and their families. The growing tension snapped like a rubber band. The crowd surged to their feet with a roar, moving as one toward the door.

"No!" Reina screamed over the noise of the crowd. "For God's sake, listen to yourselves! You're going to kill someone!"

Someone laughed and shouted back, "That's the point!"

She scrambled off the stage and raced after them. They were gathering themselves on the Avenue just outside the hall, but as she reached them, she heard someone shout that they bet one of the Bryson cops was a vampire, because how else would the girl's death not have been investigated properly.

*Keachan.* Reina's heart felt like a solid block of ice, lodged deep in her chest. She ran for the mob, unthinking. There wasn't anything she could do, but she had to try. She had to—

Fate grabbed her from behind, dragging her back to the lecture hall.

"Let me go!" Reina twisted and fought, but the other woman's grip was too strong. "They'll kill him!"

"Do you think they won't kill you, if you get in their way? Don't be an idiot, Reina." Fate slammed the hall door shut and glared at her. "I don't like it any more than you do, but the best thing to do now is just wait it out."

"Let me go!" Frantic, Reina swung a fist at her. Fate avoided it easily, then shoved Reina back against the wall, pinning her with an arm across her chest.

"Have you gone *completely* crazy? What do you think you could possibly do against a mob like that? They'll run right over you, Reina, and I won't see you kill yourself over this stupidity."

"They'll kill him!" She struggled, frantic, near-sobbing with frightened hysteria.

Fate gave her a puzzled look. "Kill who?"

Even in the depths of her desperation, Reina still had enough sense not to answer that question. Slowly, she relaxed against Fate's hold, though her heart still raced within her chest. Tears drew icy trails down her cheeks.

"I'm calling the cops," she muttered, and pulled her cell phone from her pocket. But it was Logan's number that she dialed. She moved down the aisle and Fate let her go, though her gaze remained a constant weight on Reina's back.

"C'mon," she muttered. "C'mon, answer. Damn it!" It went to voicemail. She dropped her voice to a fierce whisper, wary of the lecture hall's acoustics. "Logan, for God's sake, gather up the brood and get somewhere safe, *now*. Bring Keachan with you. Things got out of control tonight, and they're headed to the police station. They're not going to stop until they've killed someone." Her voice caught, tripping on fear and panic. "I'd really rather that not be any of you. Please, *please* get somewhere safe."

She couldn't think of anything else to say that wasn't redundant or pathetic. She disconnected, shoved the phone in her pocket, and scrubbed her hands over her face.



"Feel better?" Fate asked from the stage.

"Sure. Swell." Reina dropped down into a seat and glowered at the doors at the back of the hall, wondering how to get Fate to release her. Her stomach twisted itself into terrified knots.

\* \* \* \*

Distracted by thoughts of Marek's brood, Logan didn't realize that he'd forgotten his briefcase in the car until a full half an hour after he'd returned home. He retrieved it, checked his phone out of habit, and was mildly surprised to see that he'd missed a call from Reina. He started back to the house as her voicemail began to play.

She'd barely said two words, and he froze in the middle of the driveway. Her voice was tight with panic. If she had said nothing else, he would have known there was trouble from that alone.

Her message finished with her desperate, helpless plea. Logan swore and ran back into the house. "Kynan. Come on. We're going to the station."

They were in the car in moments. While Logan drove, Kynan called the rest of the brood and instructed them to meet at the police station. They all shared Kynan's confusion, but accepted his commands without protest.

They were all there, Logan saw with relief as he and Kynan strode through the station's doors. They stood in a huddle of coats and scarves, speaking in urgent tones among themselves.

Logan moved to them, speaking lowly, reassuring them while he emphasized the need for haste.

"Pat's still finishing things up." Bella's face looked pale, framed by her dark hair and swathed in a charcoal scarf. "We tried to get him out, but—"

Logan nodded and crossed to the front desk. He cleaned in close, using every one of his instincts for intimidation. The officer behind the desk gave him a wary look. "You will contact Detective Keachan and tell him that he is needed right away," Logan said, and the officer nodded eager agreement. "And you will tell him that it is a matter of life or death if he tarries."

The officer glanced away from Logan's gaze and cleared his throat. "Yes, sir."

Moments later, Keachan strode out to the lobby, scowling. "What on earth is this about?" he demanded. "I was in the middle of an interrogation, and—"

"We're going home, Patrick. Now." Logan's tone allowed no room for argument.

Keachan's gaze met his, searched it. At last, he shrugged and spoke briefly with the officer at the front desk. Within moments, they were leaving.

They were too late.

A small crowd stepped out of the shadows, surrounding them in the middle of the parking lot. Gold glinted at their hands, reflecting the dim electric lights. Logan read death in every line of their frightened, angry faces.

He stepped forward, placing himself in front of his brood. Alex and Keachan stepped forward to join him, but Logan put a hand out.

"No. Stay back."

"Like hell I will!" Keachan growled.

"You'd better do as Daddy says," one of the crowd sneered. "Go run and hide in the shadows, why don't you?"

"We would be happy to." Logan's words dripped with exaggerated politeness. "The problem is, you're standing between us and our car. If you'd be so kind as to move, we'd be happy to be on our way."

"You're not going anywhere, bloodsucker," another voice called from the crowd. "You're going to stay right here and answer to what you've done!"

"I have done nothing. Not to you, nor to anyone else."

"You killed that girl!" someone cried.

"No."

"Liar!"

And then, the crowd was on them with a roar, wielding gold crosses and chains, swinging punches and aiming kicks at kneecaps. Logan pushed his brood behind him in a last, desperate attempt to protect them, and prepared to face the onslaught.

## Chapter Fourteen

It seemed to take an eternity for Fate to decide it was safe enough to leave. She even offered Reina a ride home. Reina accepted it without thinking of the consequences. If Logan and the others had survived the mob, they could surely survive one woman.

*And if they haven't?*

She quashed such thoughts ruthlessly. They were all right. They had to be.

Logan's car was in the driveway when they pulled up, and lights glowed within the house. Reina's heart started to flutter with hope, until she saw Kynan walking towards the house from the car. His shirt was ripped and stained with blood, his face and arms smeared with it.

"Oh my God." Reina threw herself out of the car before it had stopped moving. She ran to him. "Kynan! Are you all right?"

He took her arms, held her still when she might have whirled off in a hundred different directions. "*I'm fine, Reina.*" He hesitated and glanced towards the house.

She didn't wait to hear more; she ran for the door.

Inside, the house was in an uproar. People ran from one place to another, shouting to others as they went. Everyone bore wounds, but all were on their feet and more or less intact.

Everyone but Logan, who sat on the couch in a daze, the eye of the storm of activity. Reina ran to his side. She dropped to her knees in front of him, took his hands in hers. "Logan?" Her voice wavered, caught, broke like ice on the pavement.

He turned slowly. His eyes took too long to focus on her. "Reina. Got your message. Too late." He closed his eyes and listed forward. She caught him, held him close, and swallowed panicked tears. "Thank you," he whispered, lifting his hand to her cheek.

It was a clumsy move, completely devoid of his usual grace, but Reina gave him a tremulous smile and pressed her hand over his.

"Don't thank her, you damned idiot," Keachan growled from behind her. He leaned close and spread a pale gel on the wounds on Logan's face. It smelled strongly of antiseptic. "If you hadn't gotten her message, you wouldn't have gone running off like a fool and gotten half your blood spilled on the asphalt."

"What happened to him?" She half-turned to look at Keachan over her shoulder.

"The stupid bastard tried to protect us, to keep us out of it. He took the brunt of the attack on himself."

Reina looked back at him. She hovered her hand just above his heart. Beneath the tattered remains of his shirt, his skin was blistered and blackened in the silhouette of a cross. Tears stung her eyes. She had to look away.

Logan listed further forward. His head rested heavily on her shoulder. Reina stroked his hair and looked up at Keachan. "He ought to lie down. Help me take him to my room?" It would take more manpower than they had to get him up the stairs.

Keachan nodded and slipped Logan's arm over his shoulder. Reina helped, and the rest of the brood trailed anxiously behind them. Keachan laid him down on the bed. Reina knelt by his head, gently stroking the strands of hair that spilled across his cheek.

Logan looked up at her through a heavy-lidded gaze. "*Tá mo chroí istigh ionat, ma*

*mhuirnín.*" He gave her a drowsy smile. "*Tá mo chroí...*" His eyes dropped closed. The Gaelic slurred into incoherent syllables.

"He's going into shock," she muttered. "Damn it. He needs blood." She stripped off her jacket and began to roll up the cuff of her sleeve.

Everyone in the room was suddenly staring at her, motionless.

Reina stopped and looked up at them. "*What?*"

Keachan cleared his throat. "Reina—"

"I'm the only mortal here, aren't I? What else do you suggest?" She didn't wait for a response.

She leaned over Logan and pressed her wrist to his mouth, but the angle was awkward. He barely seemed to notice. "Come on." She lifted his head and shoulders onto her lap. "Come on, Logan, you need this."

The angle was better this time, and he roused at the touch of her skin. His lips parted and his tongue slid wetly along her wrist, but he still wouldn't feed.

Reina pressed her eyes shut against the sting of frustrated tears. She tightened her other arm around his shoulder and pressed her lips against the top of his head. "Please, Logan," she whispered into his hair. "I know what you are, and I know what I'm doing. It's my choice. I offer it to you freely. Please, take what you need."

With a brief, violent shudder, he closed his mouth around her wrist and bit.

It didn't hurt, not like she'd expected. There was pressure, then a sharp, pinching pain as his fangs cut through her skin. She cringed, started to cry out. But the endorphins hit her system before she could make a sound, and left her speechless. She closed her eyes, dizzy from it, and leaned her cheek against his head.

He kept a steady rhythm, drinking deeply from her. She was suddenly aware of the pressure of his lips on her skin, the heated brush of his breath, the silken texture of his hair against her face.

Her breathing hitched. The sensation left her lightheaded, spinning in time to his rhythm. Her heart raced within her chest, struggling frantically to pump a dwindling supply of blood. Her hands tingled, and felt cold.

Reina pulled her wrist away from his mouth and marveled at the amount of effort it seemed to take.

Logan made a plaintive sound. He tried to draw her arm back to him, but she pulled back. "I think you've had enough," she murmured, stroking his hair to soothe him. "I'll be no use to you if *I* go into shock, now will I?"

There was a soft knock on the door. Kynan stepped into the room. He carried a roll of gauze and medical tape, and looked anxiously between the two of them. "How is he?"

"Well, he's got a healthy appetite."

"And how are you?"

"Oh, I'm peachy." Giddiness insulated her from pain and fear. Laughter pushed at her throat, but she withheld it.

Kynan knelt before her. He held his hand out. "May I see?"

Reina put her hand in his, palm up. Two red punctures showed on her wrist. They looked out of place, like a Halloween prosthetic. She prodded at the wounds and felt nothing.

Kynan gently wiped away the blood and began to wrap the gauze around the wound. "That was a kind thing you did," he said quietly, his eyes on his work. "A brave thing."

Reina leaned against the headboard while he tended to her. She let her eyes slide closed. "It needed to be done."

He was quiet a moment, his hands deftly wrapping her wrist. "That doesn't make the doing any easier."

She slid down the bed, curling up at Logan's side. Kynan fastened the gauze with tape and hesitated, lingering with her hand in his. He turned it over and twined their fingers together.

Reina glanced down at him. He leaned his cheek against her hip and sat with them, holding her hand, watching Logan with eyes that were dark with fear. After a few moments, he glanced at her. He gave her a strained smile, squeezed her hand. The concern for her that she saw in his eyes was nothing compared to his concern for Logan.

She squeezed his hand back and closed her eyes, allowing lethargy to sweep over her. She felt oddly at peace, lying there in the dark with Logan and Kynan. Safe.

Darkness claimed her. The last thing she knew was Kynan's hand warm on hers, and Logan's breath against her cheek.

## Chapter Fifteen

She woke disoriented, in a strange bed in a pitch-black room, curled up next to someone warm and solid who, sometime while she slept, had thrown an arm about her waist in a startlingly possessive fashion.

She tried to remove the offending limb. Her wrist throbbed, and memory rushed in on her.

Her room. Her bed. And it was Logan's warmth that pressed against her back, his arm that held her so securely against him.

Blushing, she slipped out from beneath his arm. She tiptoed across the room in the dark, not wanting to disturb him.

She slipped through the door and out to the kitchen. Her head spun if she moved too fast, but her stomach was growling loud enough to wake the entire household.

"Morning," said a bone-dry voice.

Reina's head snapped up.

Fate was the last person she expected to see sitting at Logan's kitchen table and looking quite at home.

*Maybe not quite that at home*, she amended, noticing the scowl that drew Fate's brows together.

Reina dropped into the chair across from her. "I thought you'd gone home."

"Yeah, well." Fate wouldn't look at her. "I thought I'd stick around and make sure you were all right."

Reina frowned. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Fate glanced at the bandage wrapped around her arm. "I'm not blind. It didn't take long to figure out who you're hanging out with here."

"They're not blind, either, you know," Reina snapped. "They know who you are. I can't believe they let you stay here last night."

"I promised to mind my manners," Fate said with a saccharine smile. She sobered. "And told them I wasn't going to leave until I'd seen for myself that you were okay. I've got a pretty good idea of what you were doing last night."

Reina didn't have the energy for patience, nor for tact. "Saving a man's life?" she demanded.

"Saving a *vampire's*."

"You've known my stance on that from the beginning. Don't hold it against me now."

"Tolerating preternaturals is not the same as letting them suck on your veins."

"Really? Explain it to me."

"For God's sake, they're *parasites*! You wouldn't sit around and let a tapeworm feed off of you just because to do otherwise would kill it, would you?"

Reina shot to her feet and crossed the kitchen to the fridge. "He's a *man*." She pulled out a carton of orange juice. Her hands trembled, more from anger than weakness. "Just a man like everyone else. The only difference is he's lived a bit longer."

Fate watched Reina in silence as she poured herself a glass, downed half of it, and topped it off again. When she returned to the table with it, Fate burst out, "He's the one who interrupted the meeting, isn't he? The one you said you were dating."

"Kind of dating," Reina muttered, and hoped none of the brood was around to hear. "I told you, it's complicated."

"How complicated? Does dating him mean letting him suck on you regularly, too? You're just going to lay back and let him drain you, because suddenly that's his right?"

"I *offered* what I gave last night," she snapped. "He asked nothing of me. And I don't see what the problem is with that. Millions of people donate blood for the injured and dying each year. How is what I did any different?"

"Last I checked, transfusion recipients didn't spend much quality time gnawing on their donors," Fate said dryly.

Reina got to her feet again. "Go home, Fate," she said wearily. "I'm fine. You don't need to protect me." *Seems like everyone's trying to do that, lately.* She picked up her juice and carried it back into the bedroom.

The quick transition from the illuminated kitchen to the dark bedroom left Reina blinded. Feeling her way forward, she set her glass down on the end table and edged towards the bed. Her fingers brushed the mattress. She sat down on its edge and tried to figure out how to get back into bed without waking Logan.

What she really wanted was his warmth and comfort. She wished she hadn't been so hasty to push his arm off of her when she woke.

The bed creaked, giving her only a second's warning before hands touched her face. Reina jumped, then relaxed with a sigh.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't." His fingers skimmed across her face, brushed her cheeks and eyes and nose.

"How are you feeling?"

"A bit worse for the wear, all told." He hesitated. "I don't believe I've properly thanked you yet."

Reina glanced away, though he surely couldn't see her blush through the darkness. "You don't need to thank me."

"Oh, but I do." The bed creaked again. His warmth drew closer. "You may have saved my life, Reina. I have no doubt you saved Keachan's."

"He seems to feel differently."

"Yes." Laughter warmed his voice. "He called me something, as I recall..."

"A damned idiot," Reina said, smiling. "And a stupid bastard."

"That's right. The fool seems to think he could have dealt with them all on his own."

Reina shifted onto her knees. She reached a hand out, trailing a finger along the angles of his face. "As I recall," she murmured, "there was another fool who insisted on doing just that, and nearly got himself killed in the doing."

"Reina?"

"Hmm?"

He was silent for a moment. "Thank you."

She closed her eyes, fighting the urge to protest the need for thanks. "You're welcome," she whispered.

He shifted forward. His lips brushed hers, and she found she had been waiting for it. He kept the kiss light and gentle, little more than a brief touch.

When he would have drawn away, Reina curled her hand around his neck and drew him back. He buried his fingers deep in her hair and shifted closer, pressing against her.

She put a hand to his chest. He still wore the remains of his shirt, tattered and bloody from the fight, and it did little to conceal him. He burned beneath her fingertips.

She helped him shed the shirt. She ran her hands over him, careful to be gentle after the previous night's ordeal.

"You won't hurt me," he whispered against her lips. He used gentle pressure on the small of her back to press her hips in against his. "It's all right."

"I know," she whispered back, but kept her touch gentle because she wanted it to be so.

He followed her lead, skimming soft touches across her skin. He finished his exploration of her face and continued on, trailing down her throat, then across her shoulders and down her arms. He moved slowly, with an intense focus that left her breathless. At the gauze bandage wrapped around her wrist, he hesitated.

She dragged his mouth back to hers before he could speak. "Don't even think about apologizing."

Logan seemed taken aback, but only for a moment. He smiled and resumed his study. He continued his touch up her arm and to the hollow behind her collarbone. Slowly, he unfastened her shirt. He released each button with unhurried care. It slid off her shoulders and fell away, forgotten.

He slid his arms around her to draw her close. Reina's heart turned over at the startling tenderness of his embrace. She leaned her cheek on his shoulder. They stayed like that for a moment, holding one another in the dark.

When he drew away, she reached back and unhooked her bra. He rested his touch on the pulse at the hollow of her throat. His fingers traced the line of her sternum down her chest; at its end, he turned his hand slightly and cupped her breast.

Reina leaned into his touch. Her breath hitched as he traced it with the same slow caress, then released with a shudder when he skimmed the pads of his fingers over her nipple. He lingered, exploring her responses, until she clung to him and pressed her face into the crook of his neck, gasping.

With a gentle touch beneath her chin, he raised her face and kissed her. He brushed his lips across the edge of her jaw, the side of her throat, her collarbone. He retraced his path down her chest with soft kisses. His head bent over her breast.

Reina's fingers twisted in his hair. Her entire body stiffened as a rush of electricity swept through her. He stroked his tongue across her nipple, and the tension grew, unrelenting. She trembled against him. "Please," she whispered into the darkness, not realizing she spoke. "Please."

He stroked a hand along the small of her back, around her waist. His touch rested low on her abdomen. He drew his fingers down the fly of her jeans. His thumb ran along the seam between her thighs. Reina shuddered and bit down hard on her lip.

Gradually, he increased the pressure, rubbing the rough material against her. She dug her teeth into her lip, but couldn't stifle the hungry sounds that slipped from her throat.

He trailed lingering kisses down her stomach. Soft, sweet, and not nearly enough. Just when she thought she couldn't bear it, he scraped his teeth over the edge of her navel. Her breath caught. He tugged and released the button at her waist. His mouth trailed lower onto the newly-exposed flesh.

Slowly, he inched the zipper of her jeans down. He followed its progress with his kisses. Anticipation swelled within her, and stole her breath. With one hand on her



shoulder and the other at her waist, he coaxed her to stretch out on the bed.

She obliged, and raised her hips so he could pull her jeans and underwear off. Somehow, the darkness made her all the more conscious of her nudity. Aware of the absurdity of her shyness, she drew an arm over her breasts and pressed her thighs together.

Logan stopped her with a touch. With gentle insistence, he drew her legs apart and knelt between them.

His breath warmed the tender skin of her inner thighs. He scattered kisses along her leg, drawing slowly nearer where she wanted him. His lazy pace made her writhe with frustration.

He kissed the curve of flesh at the base of her stomach first, then moved lower. He lapped gently at her flesh. She gasped and arched against him, urging him onward. The muscles in her thighs trembled with the near-agonizing pleasure of his kisses. He sucked her clit into his mouth, flicking his tongue against it, and it exploded through her like summer fireworks. She fisted her hands in his hair and bucked against him, her body shuddering in a violent climax.

He drew her close and held her while she trembled. Reina rose up on an elbow and kissed him, teasing her taste from his tongue. Her hands slid across his broad shoulders and down his back, settled at his waist. With a lithe move, she flipped him beneath her and pressed him back into the bed. She straddled his hips and smiled down at him.

Logan's hand came up to brush through her hair. Reina turned her head and pressed a kiss to his palm. She drew a hand along his chest; his nipples hardened beneath her touch. He inhaled raggedly.

"*Mo mhuirín...*" He skimmed his hands over her shoulders.

"One of these days," she whispered, positioning herself over him, "you're going to have to tell me all these names you've been calling me."

"One of these days," he agreed. "But just now, there are other things to do." He lowered his hands to her hips and thrust into her.

She gasped, staggered by the tenderness of the moment. His hands moved over her softly, caressing, trailing up her back and down her thighs. And he moved within her, withdrawing and leaving a hollow ache where he had been, pressing forward and filling her again. Her breath caught on a sob.

He pushed himself up, sitting, one arm wrapped around the small of her back to keep her steady. He cradled her against his chest. Reina turned her face to the side, leaning her cheek against his chest, and moved in time against him.

She came on a slow, cresting wave that left her trembling within the circle of his arms. His breath feathered the wisps of hair at her temple, and grew ragged as he neared his own climax. He made a low, hoarse sound and shuddered deep within her. His arms tensed around her, holding her tight against him; she returned the embrace just as fiercely. They held each other, rocking slightly, as the aftershocks coursed through their systems.

Reina made a low sound of protest when he pulled away from her, but he didn't go far; he drew back and raised her face to his. She could see nothing of him in the all-consuming darkness, but she looked towards him anyway. A moment passed, as sweet as any she'd known. She raised her hand to his hair and drew him in for a tender kiss.

A while later, she tucked her head beneath his chin and leaned against him. "Now

tell me what you've been calling me," she said. His hands stroked up and down her back, and she thought she'd be content to stay as they were forever.

"*Nighean*," he murmured.

"Yes. You like that one. What does it mean?"

"Girl." He ran his fingers through her hair. "Or lass."

She smiled, oddly touched. "That's not what you said tonight, though."

"No," he agreed thoughtfully. "That was *mo mhuirnín*."

She waited, but he didn't continue. "And?" she prompted. "What does that one mean?"

"Ah, well." He cleared his throat. "That's pretty much a generic term of endearment, is all."

She smiled against his shoulder. "Last night, you said something else to me. What was that?"

"Ah." His tone cooled some, gaining a note of hesitation. "Well, that I'm afraid I don't remember. I was not entirely myself last night."

"That's a pity. It sounded nice." With a last, lingering kiss, she drew away and felt her way across the room to the light switch. "Kynan was there; maybe he'll remember."

She flicked on the light and turned to see him making a face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. The light." He offered her a smile that looked, she thought, more like a grimace.

She returned to the bed and sat down next to him. "Is it your wounds?"

He looked genuinely surprised. "No, they're fine." He looked down at the cross-shaped burn above his heart. "Burns this bad often don't hurt, I've found. Though I imagine that'll change soon enough as it heals."

Reina grimaced at the thought. "Can anything be done for them?"

"A salve will help it heal cleanly." He shrugged. "Other than that, it simply needs time." He took her hands. "I've suffered worse wounds than this, Reina," he said quietly. "I promise you, I will be fine. It's the rest of the brood you should be worried about."

"The rest of the brood didn't end up delirious from blood loss. I think they'll live."

"No doubt. But being tended to by a pretty nurse aids in the healing somewhat, I think." He smiled and kissed her cheek. "Why don't you go see if Bella can use your help?"

"And you?"

He chuckled. "Well, Bella gave me strict orders to stay on bed rest, and I doubt she'll find news of our exertions amusing. I think I shall attempt to appease her by spending a few hours actually obeying her orders, for a change."

"That sounds like a good idea," Reina said, struggling not to laugh.

## Chapter Sixteen

Fate's cup had been abandoned on the kitchen table, but after their encounter, Reina didn't trust that she hadn't gone upstairs to berate the others. She poured the cold coffee down the sink, deposited the cup in the dishwasher, and headed for the stairs.

Everyone was in the master bedroom, which seemed to have been converted to a makeshift sickroom in Logan's absence. Kynan and Julia were propped up on pillows with one another in the king-sized bed and Alex was sitting on a cushioned window seat nearby, gritting his teeth as he bandaged a long row of stitches that curled around his forearm. Fate, Reina was relieved to see, was nowhere to be found.

Bella smiled at Reina in welcome. She gestured her into the room. "Do come in. It'll be nice to have some company who *doesn't* think she's at the brink of death. Such babies." She aimed an exaggerated sigh at the other three. Reina noticed that she sported her own collection of stitches and bandages, just like the rest.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not just at the moment, thank you." She eyed Kynan with a crooked grin. "Unless you want to keep the biggest baby of them all occupied for a few minutes so I can finish this up."

Reina nodded and moved to Kynan's side of the bed. She sat on the edge of the mattress and smiled at him. "Not taking to invalidity well, are you?"

"It's horrible. I think my arm may fall off." Leaning towards her, Kynan winked and stage-whispered, "Don't worry about me, I'm just hamming it up for Jules. Chicks dig scars, don't you know?"

"You big liar." Julia swatted him on the arm. "You just want someone to fuss over your scrapes."

"Well, there is that."

From his corner, Alex muttered something that Reina didn't catch.

Everyone else seemed to, though, for they all sobered and turned to glare or frown at him. "Oh, Alex, come off it," Julia sighed.

Alex turned his glower on his girlfriend. "I'm sorry," he growled, "am I supposed to be grateful when I end up forced to flee my home, or serve as some tyrant's lapdog?"

"Don't be so melodramatic." She threw a roll of gauze at him. It bounced harmlessly off his shoulder and rolled across the carpet. "Nothing's going to happen to him."

"What do you think the others will do when they find out that he's half dead and laid up in bed for God knows how long, and the rest of us still licking our wounds? We're just begging to be challenged. He shouldn't have taken that risk."

"What *should* he have done?" Bella demanded. "Left Pat to be staked?"

"Pat can take care of himself. And had Logan allowed him to do so, we'd all be fine."

"Or Pat would be dead," Kynan pointed out.

"Better him than Logan! Pat dies, and what happens? We're all sad, we mourn, we get over it. If Logan dies?" Alex swept his hand in an arc, encompassing something vast and vague. The other vampires seemed to understand what he meant to indicate, but Reina didn't. "All this—it's all gone. Everything we've worked for. Pat's expendable, and were he here, he'd tell you all the same damn thing. Logan's not."

"He's not going to die," Reina said with a sigh. They turned to her with surprise, as if they'd forgotten she was there. "He's awake, he's fed, he's fine. He'll have scars, but he's not exactly on death's door."

"He's awake now?" Kynan's face flooded with relief. "We weren't sure. Last any of us knew, you were with him, and..." He trailed off, looking unusually serious. "I'm really glad you're both all right."

Reina saw the same relief reflected on the other faces around her, and began to realize why Keachan had tried to caution her the night before. She recalled the vertigo that had seized her as Logan had drunk from her, the lethargy, and Logan's strength as he had tried to pull her back to him. She had walked a razor's edge without even knowing it.

"I'm okay." She hugged Kynan fiercely. "We're both going to be fine. We're *all* going to be fine."

Bella nodded briskly. "Of course he will. He's survived a great deal worse. And he'll be back on his feet in no time, telling you all to get your lazy asses out of bed and do some work around here. So take my advice, and take advantage of the opportunity to rest while you're able." She rose to her feet and beckoned Reina to follow her out of the room.

Outside, the door closed behind them, Reina stopped the other woman with a hand on her arm. "How is he *really* doing?"

Bella's face clouded over for a moment. She shrugged and gave her a strained smile. "He'll be in a good deal of pain soon enough, but he'll live. He'll just have a few more scars to add to the collection." Her expression softened. She put a hand on Reina's shoulder. "You've done what you can for him, and that means a great deal. The best thing for him now is time."

"Yes, that's what he said." Reina pulled a hand through her hair with a frustrated sigh.

There was still more she could do. Blood loss and his injuries were not the only threat Logan faced. There were still people out there who would kill him, who had nearly succeeded. They would not give up so easily. They would learn, eventually, that he still lived. And then? Would they come back for more?

"I'm going to go out," she decided. "I'll be back in a few hours."

Bella watched her with a grave gaze. "He wouldn't like that."

"I know. Hopefully I'll be back before he notices."

"Stay safe," Bella called after her quietly.

## Chapter Seventeen

Fat, wet clumps of snow drifted down from the sky, swirling in eddies through the alleys between the apartment buildings and melting to slush on the asphalt.

"*Fate!*" Reina pounded on the first-floor apartment door. "Come out and talk to me!"

Only frozen silence answered her.

She slammed her fist against the wooden door, frustration now rather than summons. The chill ate through her sweater and socks, tracing icy fingers along her skin. She stamped her boots on the sidewalk to knock the snow from her and keep her legs warm.

Another burst of knocking received the same response. "Damn it," Reina said with a sigh, and started trudging back to the visitor's parking lot. Anger and disappointment lodged beneath her breastbone, as sharp as knife points.

"If you think I'm going to freeze my ass off out here, you're crazy."

She turned back. Fate stood in the doorway, barefoot and dressed in flannel pajamas, her arms wrapped around herself for warmth.

"If you want to talk, you'd better come in."

Reina trudged back, her breath making clouds against the dark sky. Even the glorious warmth of the apartment was not enough to soften her temperament. "I want their names."

Fate watched her steadily, her brows furrowed over dark eyes that gave nothing away. "Am I supposed to know who we're talking about? I'm half asleep, and I don't, so either tell me or let me go back to bed."

"The asses who spilled Logan's blood! I want their *names*, God damn it!"

Fate sighed and walked away, disappearing into the kitchen. She said nothing for several minutes, while the sounds of coffee-making came from the kitchen. At last she emerged, steaming cup in hand. "I told you, most of the people there—most of the people up in arms—were newcomers. I don't know their names." She snagged a stool at the counter and slid onto it, legs crossed, cup propped on the edge of her knee. In plaid pajamas and sleep-mussed hair, she looked drowsy and casual. But her gaze on Reina was sharp, alert. "Even if I did, do you think I'd tell you? If they found out I violated their confidentiality, they'd be coming after me next." She took a sip, raised a brow. "And I don't heal quite so well as your boyfriend there."

"God damn it, Fate." Reina meant the words to be angry, but they emerged leaded with defeat. She dropped into a chair and dragged her hands through her hair. "He nearly *died*."

"Hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but he's already dead."

She raised her head, glared. "Knock it off."

Fate shrugged, unapologetic. "Truth hurts. Can I go back to bed now?"

"That was illegal, what they did." Her voice shuddered. "That was damn near murder. You're really not going to tell me?"

"I'm really not." But she looked, somehow, apologetic. "It's cold out there. Want a cup of coffee before you go?"

"No, thanks." Reina knew a dismissal when she heard one.

She trudged to the door, burdened by fatigue now that anger had fled and taken all

her strength with it. She pulled her coat close against the outside chill.

She didn't bother with any of the niceties that courtesy demanded, like *Thanks* or *See you later*. She hadn't the will to lie. Frost-rimed grass crunched beneath her boots as she trudged back to the parking lot.

Her car keys were in her hand, halfway to the lock, when a shadow broke away from the darkness and stepped into her path.

Reina looked up into a gaze that held no memory of human compassion. "What—" She groped at her throat for her cross.

A swift blow struck her temple, throwing her to the ground. She dug her fingers into the grass and tried to crawl away, but darkness rushed in at the edges of her vision, and the shadows claimed her.

\* \* \* \*

Logan woke to Kynan's voice in his ear, his hand warm on Logan's shoulder. He twined his arms around the other man, and woke with a smile on his face.

Kynan's expression was grave in the darkness, limned by starlight. Logan's smile froze half-formed. He pushed himself upright and cleared the cobwebs of sleep with a brush of his hand through his hair. "What is it?"

Kynan knelt at the bedside, his fingers twisted in the linens. He bowed his head like a man at prayer. "Nye. It's Reina."

Soft words, that fell on him like blows. He stared down at the top of Kynan's head, his mind gone blank with static. "What about her?"

"She left." He drew a soft, sobbing breath. "But it was hours ago, and she's not back yet."

Logan swore, a string of bastardized Gaelic and English that didn't run dry until he was out of bed and half-dressed. "Where did she go?" His fingers flew over the buttons of his shirt. His heart beat a staccato rhythm, and a single refrain spun through his mind, keeping time to its frantic pace. *Gone. Gone. Gone.*

"I don't know."

"When did she leave?"

"I don't know." Whisper-soft.

"Well for God's sake, what *do* you know?" He spun, hands fisting at his sides.

Kynan scrambled away, buffeted back by the storm of Logan's anger. Fear shone bright in his eyes—and then died, like embers beneath a smothering blanket. He came forward with hesitant steps. He pressed cool palms to Logan's cheeks. Gentle understanding slowly replaced the fear in his eyes.

"I know she meant to come back. You didn't drive her away, Nye."

Logan's breath frayed like a rope under too much strain. Pain crashed into him, though surely it was foolish. Pointless, to feel such agony now, but only numbness at the thought that she'd fled from him.

He rolled his sleeves up, too impatient for the fuss of buttoning the cuffs. Kynan trailed him to the foyer.

"Nye? What are you doing?"

"I'm going to find her." Logan fought to keep his words even. Kynan had done nothing to earn his ire but to bear the news. It was hard, though, so hard to be reasonable when every fiber of his being was livid with fear. "I'm going to bring her back."

And Bella was there, watching him with a doctor's silent judgment, her arms crossed tight beneath her breasts. "You need to rest. You've a lot of healing left to do."

"I'll live." He threw his coat on and burst out into the snowy night, the words he left unspoken rattling through his mind.

*What if she doesn't?*

\* \* \* \*

Her skull throbbed.

She clung to unconsciousness, and the protection it offered from the splitting pain. But that insulation disappeared as soon as she became aware of it, like fog beneath a rising sun. She pressed her hand to her temple, groaning quietly.

Why did her head hurt so?

She had no answer, and that realization eclipsed the pain entirely. She reached for an explanation, groped through her memory, but grasped only fog. What had happened to her?

She pulled herself upright, scrubbed her eyes until they opened, and found a more pressing question.

Where the hell was she?

She sat in a puddle of blankets at the center of an old-fashioned bed. Elaborately carved posts rose at each corner, supporting heavy brocaded curtains. Beyond them, a subtle fleur-de-lis pattern papered the walls. The rest of the furniture in the room looked like fine antiques, lovingly tended.

Where was she? What had happened?

And damn it, why couldn't she *remember*?

She slid from bed and started for the door, determined to find the answers she lacked. Her feet sank into plush carpet, but she'd barely taken a step when the world lurched before her. She grabbed at the bedpost and clung to it, gasping, as waves of vertigo and nausea rippled through her.

"You're up. He'll be pleased."

With cautious motions, she turned toward the voice. A million questions poised at the tip of her tongue. She caught a glimpse of her companion through her slowly-clearing vision and forgot every one of them.

*"Brett?"*

He stared at her. His brow quirked, but he showed no other indication that he'd heard her at all.

"God, what are you doing here? I thought—" She'd thought that he'd been killed, as Adri had. She stammered into silence.

Fear curled in her belly like a viper. "Brett, where are we? What's going on?"

He glanced around the room, his eyebrows raised. "We're in my room, in Eanruig's house. I'm keeping watch over you, in case you try to escape."

His words fell like stones through the surface of a pond, and shock rippled through her. There was not even the palest hint of emotion to color his words. He might have been reading items from a grocery list, for all they meant to him.

Bewildered and terrified, Reina groped for his residuals, for some hint of the Brett that she had known for so long. But she found only her own.

"Oh my God." She closed her eyes and pressed her brow to the bedpost, shaking.

"The bastard turned you."

A sudden blow struck her across the cheek and sent her sprawling. She scrambled to her feet, gaping in outrage.

He gripped her chin, forced her face toward his. "If you insult any of them again, I will beat some respect into you, and damn the consequences."

Reina stared up into his face and trembled. He meant every word of it.

"Oh, Brett," she whispered, broken-hearted. "What has he done to you?"

"He made me."

She pressed a fist to her mouth. "Don't you know who I am?"

"My ward, until I'm told otherwise."

Her breath caught on a sob. Her own amnesia was one thing. Between it and the headache, she suspected she had suffered a concussion, but Brett was a completely different matter. *She* hadn't forgotten who her friends were.

"My name is Reina," she whispered, pressing her face into her knees. She couldn't bear to look at him. "You're Brett. We've known each other for five years. My best friend was Adriana Cardenas. She was your girlfriend, and this man you're holding me for killed her."

Brett shrugged and flicked a speck of lint from his shirt. "Who I was doesn't matter anymore."

"What does?" Surely there was some way to break through to him.

"My sire's orders, and how well I obey them."

"Like keeping me here?" Her voice trembled. It was *Brett*. He wouldn't keep her here, surely. He couldn't have changed that much.

"Yes. Like that."

Her hand clutched at the base of her throat, seeking the comfort of her cross out of old habit. But of course, she had been disarmed. She pressed her fingers to her pulse and watched Brett through a slanted gaze.

He'd always been built like a stick, and vampirism hadn't changed that. He was young, too, not yet grown into his strength. But she was concussed, and unable to move without suffering crippling dizziness.

At full strength, she thought she might have had a chance of overcoming him. Even still, she might be able to break his arm or leg and buy herself some time. Moments, only, before it healed and he'd be after her, but it might be enough.

And it was all moot, because she didn't think she had the heart to do it. Whether Brett remembered it or not, he was still her friend.

The door swung in, saving her from having to make that choice. Reina scrambled back against the wall, knees drawn to her chest, breath hot in her throat.

An ice-blue gaze swept the room. The vampire spared no more attention for her than for any of the room's furnishings. He turned his head, seeking Brett. A long, wheat-gold plait slithered over his shoulder.

Brett shot to his feet. He gazed up at the man, rapt. "Yes?" he breathed.

"He wants her." The voice was soft, impassive, but there was neither sibilance nor malice in it. Reina allowed herself to breathe. Whoever he was, he was not her captor.

"Come along, then."

She raised her head. He was looking directly at her.

"No." She choked it out, and marveled at her bravery—or stupidity.



His brows furrowed. "Don't be stupid. You don't want him to have to come get you himself."

"Let him come!" she spat.

The vampire's eyes narrowed to icy slivers. "I ought to," he muttered. "It'd serve you right." He grabbed her arm and dragged her from the bed.

Reina shrieked and struck at him. He ignored her as one might a bothersome insect, and led her down the hall.

She struggled at first, but he only drew her staggering after him. The soft rhythm of his boots on the hardwood floor never even faltered. He didn't speak to her, or look over his shoulder. He just walked, long purposeful strides eating up the distance, and pulled her along like a dog on a leash, which he expected to keep up or be dragged.

And like a hound, or a child, she quickly realized that those options were the only ones available to her, and fell into step beside him to spare herself the pain.

Vertigo seized her at the stop of her stairs. Her vision blurred, and her head spun in giddy circles. She scrambled at the fingers that dug into her arm, expecting to be wrenched from her feet and tumbled down the stairs.

Instead, to her surprise, he stopped and waited wordlessly while she clung to the banister, gasping.

Slowly, her vision cleared and her head settled back onto her shoulders. She unwrapped her fingers from the polished railing.

"Better?"

Her head snapped around. He stood in profile to her, staring narrow-eyed at the ceiling as though it held some endless fascination.

"Yes." She glued her focus to her feet, and the stairs they carefully descended.

She would *not* say thank you.

But she could, she decided, bring herself to ask his name.

His strange, impassive gaze rested on her face for a moment before he answered, "Faolan."

"I'm Reina."

"Charmed," he said, an ironic tilt to his lips.

Another flight of stairs, and endless miles of hall, and they came at last to a library. Mahogany shelves climbed the walls to twice her height, bearing more books than any mortal could hope to read in a lifetime. Shiny new paperbacks sat cheek-to-jowl with cracked leather tomes that looked like they had seen centuries. And Reina spared barely a thought for any of these treasures, because a vampire waited for them inside.

He stood before a roaring fireplace nearly as tall as he was. With the flames silhouetting him, she could make out little but broad shoulders, a gleam of hair that may have been the color of brandy or may have been dyed by the firelight, a stance that spoke of easy authority.

"Hello, little girl," he whispered to the fire, and Reina's knees turned to soup.

She wanted to turn, to flee, to beg and plead until Faolan released her. But she thought that her fear would only please him, and so she locked her knees and grit her teeth and hardened her expression as much as she could manage.

He turned to face her, but the fire blazed at his back and she could see no more of him than the last time they'd met. "I don't believe we've been properly introduced. I'm—"

"Eanruig."

He raised his brows. Reina didn't make the mistake of interpreting the expression as surprise. Every gesture he made was calculated. "Indeed."

Silence filled the room like carbon monoxide, invisible and deadly. Reina assumed he waited for her to introduce herself, but she'd be damned if she'd give him even that.

"And you," he said at last, brandishing a folded bit of paper, "are Reina Campbell, a student of good standing at Bryson University. Graduate student in Preternatural Studies. Resident of Pine Ridge Apartments, building 482, apartment 37. Roommate, Adriana Cardenas—" His head angled to the side. A smile flitted about his mouth. "—Deceased."

She turned, so that he couldn't read her reaction on her face. "You ought to know." Her fingertips trailed over the spines on the nearest shelf. "You don't expect me to be impressed, do you?"

Terrified, was more like it.

He laughed. "I don't expect anything but obedience, child."

She looked over her shoulder. "Oh, I'm going to be such a disappointment to you."

"I doubt it." He closed the distance between them. "I doubt it very much." His fingers slipped beneath her jaw. Her skin prickled at the chill. She raised her chin to keep away from his touch, and Eanruig smiled as though pleased. "You will obey me."

*Like hell.* She stared straight into his eyes. "All those facts you dug up, and you don't know me at all."

## Chapter Eighteen

The vampire smirked. "I know what is needful." He looked over her shoulder. "Bring the boy here."

"Yes, sir," Faolan murmured. His footsteps faded slowly into the distance.

Reina had never heard one of Logan's brood speak to him in such a manner. Kynan had used the epithet the day she'd met them both, but it had been in jest, and half-mocking.

She pulled a book from the shelf at random. Her fingers traced the embossed gold-leaf letters of the title. Any other day, under any other circumstances, she'd have been unable to resist the lure of warm leather, old words, and yellowed pages. Today, she might as well have been reading the phone book, for all the interest it held. "I suppose you intend to use Brett to manipulate me into accepting your offer."

"Oh no, child." He laughed softly. His boots whispered against the plush carpet, drawing close. Reina's fingers tightened on the book's spine, but she refused to turn to him. "I told you before that I'd only make it once."

Fear trickled along her spine. "Then why am I here?"

Gloved fingers circled her wrist. He jerked her arm out, turned her palm up. His grip tightened around the pale square of gauze taped to her wrist. Reina gasped, and the book fell from her numb fingers.

"What happened to you?"

She turned her face up to him. Cold, merciless eyes stared down at her from a face that might have been chiseled from stone, all harsh angles and sharp edges. With his pale hair tied loosely at his nape, and his lean frame, and the walls filled with books that surrounded them, he might have looked like any other unprepossessing intellectual type. If Reina had seen him in the university library, she might have smiled at him in passing and thought nothing of it.

It was his eyes that ruined the image. There was no humanity in them at all. Looking into them, Reina shook from the effort it took not to struggle like captured prey against his grip. "I cut myself."

His lip curled. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No. There's another word for what I think of you."

"There is no point in lying, you foolish child." He threw her from him. She fell back against one of the bookcases. Her head cracked against wood, coloring her vision with fireworks. "I know you are marked."

Reina braced herself on a shelf, gasping. "Then why—"

"Consider it a lesson." He brought his body close against hers, pinning her to the bookcase. "You will tell me anything I ask of you."

She shook her hair out of her face and stared up at him. "Why on earth would you think that?"

He grinned at her, displaying his canines. Reina shuddered and turned her face away, revolted in a way she had never been with Logan, even when his fangs had been deep in her flesh. "What makes you think you won't?"

She snorted quietly. "Clocking me upside the head and imprisoning me here is a

pretty crappy way of convincing me to help you."

"Do you think that a bump on the head is the worst I can do to you?" He pulled her across the library to an armchair. His fingers dug into her shoulders until she sat. He towered above her.

Reina pressed back into the seat, intimidated despite herself. He saw, and laughed.

"Oh, yes. Fear me, little one. It will save us both some trouble."

"Go to hell."

His lips curved. He said nothing else.

"What do you *want* with me?" she demanded. There must be something else. If she were useless to him, he'd surely have killed her already.

He took her hand again, and turned it so they could both see the bandage. "I want you to bring me the one who made this mark."

She stared up at him. Logan's face swam in her mind's eye, bright with anger, soft in the aftermath of their passion, alight with laughter. "You're wasting your time," she snarled.

"Am I?" Amusement drew deep lines at the corners of Eanruig's eyes.

"Do what you like to me. I won't betray him."

"Oh, I think you will."

Behind him, the door swung open. Faolan stepped into the library, Brett at his heels. Eanruig turned, smiling.

"Brett, my dear. Come here."

Brett crossed the room. Reina stared at him desperately, but his gaze never left Eanruig's face. He sketched a deep, reverent bow. "Sir."

Eanruig tucked his fingers beneath Brett's chin, raising his face. "Look on our guest."

Brett looked at Reina as though she were an ill-done painting, of fleeting interest.

"Sir?"

"Do you see?" Eanruig brushed his fingers along her cheek. "I believe she has been struck."

Brett neither spoke nor moved. He stared at her now as though she had done him a terrible betrayal.

Eanruig lashed out, sending Brett sprawling across the carpets. Reina surged to her feet, but a raised hand and a quiet look from Eanruig stalled her. She sank back into the chair, gripping the armrests, trembling.

He looked down at Brett, lying at his feet. "What were my orders?" he asked with a voice like flint on steel.

"To watch her," Brett breathed. He brought a hand gingerly to his cheek. The livid mark of Eanruig's blow was already fading to the mottled yellow of an old bruise. "Not to harm her, unless she tried to escape."

"Indeed. I appreciate your eagerness to defend me"—his tone said otherwise—"but obedience is also a sign of loyalty, and an important one. Remember that."

"Yes, sir."

Eanruig crouched before him. "Mortals are governed by their emotions, youngling. We must not be."

"Yes, sir." Brett gazed up at him, his expression like a kicked puppy who dared to hope for a kind word from his master.

Eanruig nodded once and stood. "Good." He reached a gloved hand to help Brett to

his feet.

Brett clasped it, and a terrible scream rent the air. He struggled like a fish on a line, but Eanruig's grip closed tight about his wrist. Gold glinted between his fingers, bright in the firelight.

"*Stop!*" Reina threw herself at him. "Stop it! Let him go!" Her fingers pried at his grip. Her fists beat against his arm.

Eanruig shook her off as though she weighed no more than a kitten, and was just as inconsequential. He hauled Brett to his feet. His grip held him there when Brett's legs would have collapsed beneath him.

"You will hold this," he said, voice deadly-soft, "until I instruct you to do otherwise. Perhaps it will teach you some self-control."

"Yes," Brett choked. Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Please—"

"You are dismissed."

Eanruig released his hand. Brett fell to his knees, gasping, weeping. But he didn't let go.

Eanruig looked down at him imperiously. He glanced at Faolan, who still stood just inside the door. "See him out."

Faolan moved forward to obey. His face was a mask, hard and unyielding. Reina didn't know if it signified Eanruig's brand of remorseless cruelty, or if it hid a forbidden reaction.

When they had gone, Eanruig turned his flinty gaze on her. She scrambled away from him, over the chair and across the library until she could go no further. "What do you *want* with me?" she cried. Beyond the closed door, she could still hear Brett's choked sobs.

"I've already told you." He leaned against the back of the armchair and watched her across the distance. "Let's start easy, shall we? Tell me the name of the one who bit you."

"Fuck you!"

He laughed. "Oh, this *is* pointless. I promise you, I know it. It's only confirmation I want. If you're going to make a stand, by all means, be my guest. But do so with the questions that really matter."

She hurled a book at him, and said nothing.

"You are a stupid thing, aren't you?" He stalked toward her, closing the space between them faster than she could recover it. "What harm is there in telling what I already know?"

"I'm not telling you a goddamned thing," she snarled.

He moved too fast for her to see. His blow landed on the side of her head and sent her reeling back in a tumble of limbs.

Stars burst across her vision. She dragged herself to her knees and retched in the corner. "I'm no one," she cried, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "What could you want with me—"

"I want you to answer me." He grabbed her by one arm and hauled her to her feet. "I want you to stop being an obstinate brat and tell me that you let Logan MacGregor suck on you!"

She gaped up at him, slack-jawed.

Eanruig began to swear. "Oh, you stupid, fucking, worthless—*Tá tú glan as do mheabhair!* I told you I knew his name!"

She jerked defiantly against his hold. "Stupid I may be, but not stupid enough to believe a word that comes out of your mouth."

He spun away and dragged a hand through his hair. He paced across the expensive rug. "You don't know the first thing about him, do you?" he demanded. "You know ... what? That he has a pretty face? That he's pleasing to the eye, so long as he keeps his back turned from you? You don't know anything, little girl, about the man you're trying to protect."

"I know that *he's* never hit me!"

"Do you know that he had a wife?"

"After five hundred years, it doesn't surprise me."

"No." Eanruig shook his head. "Back in Scotland. Before he changed. Did he tell you about Cailean?"

She glared at him in silence.

"No, I suppose he wouldn't have." He gave her a soft smile. "She was a pretty thing. Like you." He reached out to finger a curl that fell across her cheek. Reina jerked away. "Young, too. Not even your age when they wed. She bore him three strong sons, and loved him fiercely. Do you know what happened to her?"

"I imagine she's dead," Reina said coldly.

"She is. He killed her, Reina." He gave a quiet sigh, as though he grieved for this woman who hadn't lived for over four hundred years. "This man you're trying to protect killed his wife, and watched her die at his feet."

"You're a liar!"

"I wish it was a lie." He watched her gravely. "But I was there. I saw her body. It was quite the scandal."

Reina turned her back to him. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the window at the gardens, silver with moonlight and snow. "Why don't you ask me something else, so I can refuse to tell you and we can get it out of the way? You're wasting my time."

"Am I?" Amusement slid into his voice. She imagined him standing behind her, smiling slyly. She shuddered. "How impolite. By all means, let us continue." He touched her cheek, turning her face to him. "How many kin does he have to back him?"

She raised her eyebrows at him and said nothing.

He grabbed her shoulder and shook her. "You *will* tell me. If not willingly, then I shall break you, and then you will tell me. The choice is yours."

Reina pressed a hand to her temple. "You know, I'm pretty sure I have a concussion. You probably shouldn't bang my head around too much, or something might get permanently damaged. You wouldn't want me to forget all this precious information you need."

His expression hardened. "As you like." He drove a fist into her stomach.

She doubled over, wheezing. Her eyes watered. She wiped them dry before she straightened. "Thanks. My skull appreciates the relief."

"Oh, you're a spirited one," he muttered, eyes narrowing. "Very much like Cailean." His hand shot out, grabbing her by the back of the neck and hauling her against him. He forced her lips open and kissed her ruthlessly.

She swung a fist at the side of his head. "*Fuck you!*"

Eanruig dragged her back with a snarl. His fangs sank deep into her lower lip.

She froze against him, very aware of the damage she could cause herself if she struggled. Her hands fisted on his shoulder, straining.

It was nothing at all like Logan's bite. Endorphins did not flood her system. Pleasure did not buoy her in a cloud of languor. There was only sharp, burning pain and rhythmic suction on her lip as Eanruig drank. Tears pricked her eyes at her helplessness.

He only drank a few mouthfuls before he released her. "Think about that, little one," he growled. "You'll have a while."

He pushed her toward the doorway, where Faolan stood like a statue, his gaze averted. He stepped forward smoothly and took her arm, but wouldn't look at her.

Reina swiped blood from her lip and allowed him to lead her back to her room. His gaze rested like a weight on her shoulders as they walked, but she kept her chin up and her eyes forward.

He left her alone, and locked the door from the outside. She sat on the bed, drew her knees to her chest, and watched the sky lighten throw the barred window.

\* \* \* \*

Logan went to her apartment first, half-convinced that Kynan had been wrong. If he had driven her away—if she had fled because of the feeding, or the intimacy that they had shared after—then she would have gone there.

The door was locked, and though he pounded on it, no one came to answer. He broke in through a bedroom window, climbed into a darkened room. The Were's possessions lay in casual disarray, her bed half-made, notes stacked haphazardly on the desk. It looked like a room whose occupant might return at any moment, well lived-in and comfortable.

But Adri would not be returning, and that knowledge left the room empty and cold, a portrait of a life interrupted. Logan hurried from it, disliking the sensation and hating the thought that Reina's room might turn into the same.

He passed through the halls, shouting her name, but only echoes answered him. He didn't know what was worse: the thought that she heard him, and avoided him, or the thought that she wasn't there.

He burst into her room. It was just as they'd left it, down to the disheveled blankets sprawled across the bed. He stared into the corners bleakly and knew which of the two he'd have preferred. Better that she had been there and wanted nothing to do with him. At least he'd have known she was safe.

He tried the university next, but couldn't find her anywhere on campus. In desperation, he drove halfway across the middle of nowhere to the Were Gabriel's home.

The man himself answered the door, peering at Logan through the dim, pre-dawn light. "Yes? What is it?"

"Please—"

Logan got no more out before the Were's eyes narrowed. Anger fixed itself on his face. "I'll not speak to your kind," he snarled. "Do us both a favor and go back where you came from. I don't want to have to sweep your ashes off my porch."

Logan stood his ground. "I must speak with you."

"Have you gone senile in your old age, bloodsucker? Get off my property!"

"Please!" He gripped the doorframe. "It's about Reina!"

Gabriel froze. His lip slowly curled, baring his teeth. "If you've touched her—"

"I haven't harmed her," Logan said, aware that it was both not quite true, and not quite what Gabriel had asked. "She's gone, and I can't find her. I had thought—she might—" He broke off and sighed in defeat. "She's not here?"

Gabriel stared at him with an expression that might have been chiseled from stone. Slowly, he shook his head. "No. She's not."

Logan hung his head, exhausted by unfulfilled hope. "If you see her, will you—" What? Ask her to come home? His home was not hers, and he had no right to expect her to come to him. If she had fled, it was her choice, and he must allow her to make it. Squeezing his eyes shut, he whispered, "Will you let me know she's safe, at least?"

Gabriel was silent for a time. "Very well," he replied at last. His gaze flickered to the horizon. "You ought to leave now. As I said, I've no desire to clean up your remains."

Logan trudged back to his car. He couldn't bring himself to care about the rising sun enough to hurry his drive home. He would get there soon enough, and then what would he do?

He couldn't bear the thought that he'd lost her.

\* \* \* \*

Alex, being the youngest of his brood, was asleep when Logan returned to the house, but the others were old enough to be active during the day. He found them waiting for him, gathered in the living room so they'd know the minute he got home.

No one said a word as he stepped inside and swung the door closed behind him, but every gaze turned to him, bright with hope. Logan lowered his gaze and shook his head. His own grief was burden enough to bear; he couldn't take theirs on as well.

"Patrick," he said softly. "A word, please."

Keachan got to his feet and crossed to Logan's side. "Mac?"

He drew a deep breath. "Run the tests."

Keachan glanced briefly at the rest of the brood. "On who?"

"On all of them."

Keachan's brows climbed, but he didn't voice his surprise, only nodded and murmured, "I'll see it done."

"She's gone, Patrick," he rasped, unable to contain his agony. "Bad enough, when this was just a rogue. But I offered her my protection, and now..." He drew a deep breath. "If one of my own is involved, I need to know about it."

Keachan nodded. "Of course." He turned to the rest of the brood, who had, of course, been listening. "I'll need samples from each of you."

The brood exchanged glances, surprised but not yet suspicious of one another. A moment passed, and Kynan got to his feet with a grimace. "Age before beauty. I'll go first, then."

Logan reached out and gripped his hand as he passed. "Thank you, *cara*."

"*Se do bheatha*," he answered. "*Tá grá agam duit*."

The sound of Gaelic on his lips made Logan smile. *You're welcome*, he had said. *I love you*. He squeezed Kynan's hand again, then dropped it so he could follow Keachan. "I know," Logan said. "I always have."

\* \* \* \*



Reina waited until midday, and the zenith of the vampire sleep cycle. Then she began to work.

The bedroom door was locked from the hall, and she didn't dare test its security for fear of waking others with the noise. But the window was barred from the outside. She braced herself against the bedpost and kicked at the bars.

The bones in her heel screamed in protest at their abuse. But Reina ruthlessly recalled Brett's screams, and Eanruig drinking from her lip. She kept kicking, until at last the lower corner came loose.

She pried at the weakening bolts until one whole side hung free. It gave her just enough space to slip out through the window.

She perched on the ledge, gripping the window frame, and searched for a way to get down. A few feet below her, a gable sloped along the length of the house. She lowered herself down to the icy slate roofing tiles and edged carefully along the roof.

Cold winter wind lashed at her cheeks and tugged at her hair. The gusts cut through her thin t-shirt and sent goosebumps rippling over her flesh, but her steps never faltered.

At the corner, she sat on the icy slates and slid down to the eave. A drainpipe stretched from the gutter to the ground. Reina gripped the gutter edge, whispered a brief prayer, and swung herself off of the roof.

Loose nails and rough edges caught at her hands as she slid to the ground. Cold numbed her fingers, and blood streaked her palms. She grit her teeth and ignored it, until she dropped the last few feet into the backyard.

Emerald, velvet grass, pristine hedges, and flower beds that could have graced the cover of any Home and Garden magazine stretched out across a yard that was bigger than some parks she'd seen. Trees lined the perimeter, providing privacy, but they'd been pruned well back from the fence. Reina eyed it, and decided to search for other avenues of escape before she attempted to climb it.

She circled around the house and found a gate in the fence that led her to the front yard, and the street beyond.

She stood in the shelter of a tree and stared out at the street, hardly daring to believe that it had been so simple. Eanruig didn't seem that stupid.

*Don't look a gift horse in the mouth,* she scolded, and strode toward freedom.

A low growl came from the shadows behind her. Reina froze. Slowly, she looked over her shoulder.

A brindled wolf glowered at her from the flowerbed, golden eyes shining through the slender stalks. Its lip curled, revealing long, pointed fangs.

Reina staggered backward, fear knotting her throat. The wolf advanced. Its deepening growl raised the hairs at the back of her neck.

She spun and ran.

A massive weight slammed into her, throwing her to the ground. The sidewalk ripped open her cheek and elbows. Knife-sharp teeth dug into her shoulder. Reina pressed her brow to the cold cement, gasping. She waited for the animal to rip and tear.

The wolf flipped her onto her back and stood over her, legs braced, growling.

"All right, I get the picture." She tried to slide away, but he snapped at her. Teeth closed a breath away from her face.

"Damn it! Get off of me and I'll go back, you great brute!"

It backed away. The animal gave a low, warning growl while she pulled herself to

her feet. It pushed at her leg with its head, sending her stumbling forward a step.

"I'm going, I'm going."

She climbed the steps to the porch. The wolf stopped behind her, and shuddered, and began to shed its fur in great clumps. Bones shifted and stretched beneath the surface of its skin until a man stood before her, brindle-haired and golden-eyed.

He opened the door and shoved her in before him. "Cosette!" he bellowed.

A woman strode toward them, wrapping a silk robe about herself. She saw Reina and faltered.

"My God. He didn't mention that you were an *idiot*."

Reina shook the Were's hand off her shoulder.

"Stand guard," Cosette told him. "I'll take her back."

He nodded and slipped back outside. The last Reina saw before the door closed was a ripple of brindled fur cascading over his back.

Cosette took her hand and pulled her toward the stairs. "You'd think *mortals*, at least, would have some sense of self-preservation," she muttered beneath her breath, navigating the labyrinthine halls easily. "He'll beat you to within an inch of your life for this, girl. If you're lucky."

"My name's Reina," she snapped. "And you're a Were."

Cosette raised a brow at her over her shoulder. "Aren't we clever."

Reina planted her feet and jerked out of the woman's hold. "What on earth are you doing helping a *vampire*?"

"Saving my pack," Cosette snapped. "Come on, or I'll give you a beating myself."

Reina walked, her steps slow and thoughtful. Cosette glowered at her, but made no more threats so long as she kept her feet moving.

Cosette locked her back in the room, and showed no interest in fixing the broken bars. Reina glanced outside.

The brindled wolf sat in the yard, staring up at her window with his eerie yellow gaze. He bared his teeth at her.

Shuddering, she sat on the bed, out of sight from the window, and thought.

*He wanted her to do something for him*, Lily had said.

*Either he never said*, the woman in Harmony had confessed, *or he gave them very good reason not to tell anyone*.

*They've all disappeared*.

*Saving my pack*, Cosette had said.

This, then, was what Adri had died for. Setting up house in another sire's territory was tantamount to declaring war, and Eanruig had wanted allies.

Outside, the brindled were still watched her window.

He had wanted guard dogs.

Reina tore strips from the sheets, and bandaged her hands, and watched the sun crawl slowly toward the horizon.

## Chapter Nineteen

A metallic scraping jerked her awake, the sound of a deadbolt sliding through its casing. The sun had set, and moonlight cast thin silver highlights upon the furniture. She glanced swiftly through the room, but she was alone. Wherever Faolan had taken Brett, he had not come back there.

The door swung open. Eanruig stepped inside and gently closed it behind him. "I hear we had a bit of excitement today."

Reina shrugged. He wore all black, and she was certain it was intentional. But she refused to be intimidated. "A girl's got to keep herself entertained somehow."

"Indeed." He sat on the edge of the bed and watched her, his head canted at an angle. He had left barely an inch of space between them.

Reina slid away from him.

Laughter lines creased the skin around his mouth. He drew a box of cigarettes from his pocket and tossed a silver lighter to her. Reina caught it out of reflex, then stared at him.

"Do you mind?" He held the unfiltered end of a cigarette toward her.

Reina wanted to hurl the lighter in his face. But it would only make him laugh. She flipped it open and held the flame to the cigarette's end, hating that he had given her a weapon she could not use against him.

"I do hope to dissuade you from repeating such foolishness, of course."

It took her a moment to realize they were talking about the escape again.

"Trust me, I'm dissuaded." She massaged the makeshift bandages wrapped around her palms. "I'm not interested in giving that wolf another chance to sink his teeth into me."

"Oh, surely." He took a long drag on the cigarette, its end smoldering crimson. He exhaled a long stream of smoke. Reina resisted the urge to cover her nose. "Still. You must understand that I am your master here in all ways. Disobedience will not be tolerated." His words were almost conversational, but smoldering rage turned his expression hard and threatening.

Reina shrank back. "I understand it fine."

"I'm afraid you don't, child." He studied the ceiling in lazy contemplation. "I'm sure you have not forgotten your friend's punishment already."

"You burned him," she choked. She still held his lighter. Instinctively, she tucked it behind her back.

"Yes." He turned his gaze back to her. Cold, black eyes stared down into hers. "I think I'll give you an opportunity that I did not give him."

*Don't play his game, god damn it.* But she couldn't keep from asking, "What?"

"You may choose your punishment." He smiled magnanimously.

Reina stared at him, aghast. "What are my choices?" she rasped.

"You may take Brett's punishment, if you wish." He shrugged casually, but the gleam in his eye belied it. "Or you may prove your loyalty to me."

"How?" she demanded, mistrustful.

Anticipation glowed on his face like a sunrise. He took her hand and tugged her

sleeve down, revealing the bandage that covered Logan's bite. "You obviously don't mind a vampire's bite. Feed me, child, and I will consider it a sufficient demonstration of your fidelity."

Reina stared at her bandaged wrist, and at the other. Which would be worse? To create a fresh wound, or open a new one over the old?

Eanruig tucked a finger beneath her chin. "No. I want your throat."

"No," she said without thinking, horror rising like gorge in her throat.

"Very well." He pressed the smoldering end of the cigarette against the inside of her arm.

Pain lashed through her like a lightning strike, electrifying every nerve ending with endless, searing agony. She screamed, and thrashed, and fought. She could not throw him. He anticipated every move she made, and kept the butt pressed firmly to her skin. Fire washed through her, turned her to a throbbing mass of anguish. At last he sat back, inspected the crushed end of his cigarette, and casually flicked it into the trash.

"And now, I think you will remember."

Reina curled on her side, turning her arm out to protect the wound. Even the touch of the air was too much to bear. She gasped, breath ripping her lungs like razors, and pressed her face against the bedding to hide her tears.

"Now that that's taken care of, let's get down to business, shall we?" He sat near her on the bed.

Her arm burned as though he still held the cigarette butt to it, the worst pain she'd ever known. But if he had intended it to weaken her resolve, he'd miscalculated. Waves of fire washed over her, clarifying her determination into a bright, shining thing that she could hold close and take comfort in. His questions fell on her like rain, and endless patter of threats and demands. She cloaked herself in the blanket of her resolve and answered him with silence.

She had thought that the burn was bad, and prepared to endure its like. But the things that followed were much, much worse.

\* \* \* \*

"Reina?"

It was not Eanruig's voice that called for her. Reina carefully unfolded from the small space she had made for herself in the gap between the wall and the head of the bed.

Faolan stood within the doorway, a tray laden with food in his hands.

"Leave it."

He set the tray on the bed, but did not go. His expression was set with determination, though fear lurked within his eyes. "I brought bandages, and antiseptic."

"Oh, for God's sake." She'd have thrown the food in his face, but for the hollow ache of her stomach. "I don't want your damn bandages."

A wry smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "It's not easy to come by a first aid kit in a house full of vampires, you know."

She climbed over the bed and sat on its edge, staring at him in bewilderment. "What do you *want*?"

He looked down at the floor. He twisted the bottle open and dampened a cotton ball in silence. He stared down at it, then lifted his gaze to her with a sigh. "You're hurt. I want to help."

"He's only going to undo all your hard work later."

"Then I'll undo his in turn." He moved closer and dabbed the antiseptic to a cut on her cheek.

She jerked away, hissing at the sting. "I'm not interested in being the salve to your guilty conscience."

His lips thinned. "You know what happens to martyrs, Reina? They die."

She pressed her lips together, fighting the rising tide of anger that threatened to spill over onto him. *It's Eanruig you're angry with*, she scolded herself. *Not him. Take what kindness you can get.*

"Is there anything else you need?" His voice softened with sympathy, though he kept his eyes on his task.

"I need to go home."

He grimaced. "Anything within my power to give?"

Of course, it had been too much to hope. "You're breaking the rules right now, aren't you?" She snagged a roll from the tray and studied it intently. "What's one more broken?"

He looked at her, silent for a long time. "It's both our lives, that's what."

She plucked at the roll, shredding it into crumbs. A pile grew steadily on the tray. "You'd better go, then."

"Reina—"

"Good-bye, Faolan."

\* \* \* \*

The doorbell's chimes reverberated through the house. Logan threw himself from his chair and rushed to the door, his heart in his throat, but Kynan had beaten him there. He stepped back from the peephole and glanced at Logan. That one look told him everything that he needed to know.

"I'm sorry, Nye."

Logan pulled the door open, dreading what he might find on the other side.

A man lounged against the doorjamb, his hip cocked at a careless angle, his eyes frankly assessing as he swept them over Logan. "Why don't you invite me in?" he suggested. The corner of his mouth curled in a cold, hard smile.

Logan's fingers tightened on the handle. "No. You'll speak your piece where you are."

"You might want to reconsider that," the stranger said. "For your girlfriend's sake."

Fury roared through him, a flash flood of anger that tore him free of all his restraint. Logan grabbed the stranger by the throat and dragged him into the house. *"What have you done with her?"*

The man smiled. "If you harm me, you never will find out."

"Tell me!" Logan's hand tightened on his throat. Behind him, his brood raised a protest, but fury deafened him to reason. "Tell me where she is, or I swear—"

"I can't tell you that. But I can tell you how to get her home safely."

"If you've touched her—"

The other man laughed, ignoring the threat of suffocation. "You don't really think *I'm* the one who has her, do you? I'm a messenger. And if you'd like to see her again alive, I suggested you let me speak my piece."

"Give me one reason I should," Logan snarled.

"Because," he said, his face bright with harsh delight, "if I don't return by daybreak, she'll die."

Logan's blood froze. He longed to rip and tear and kill, but could not move. If he did, it might cost Reina her life.

He released the stranger's throat, but held him pinned to the wall. "Tell me."

"It's simple, really. My sire proposes a trade. He'll let your girl go, but he wants another to take her place."

"Who?" Logan asked, though he already suspected the answer.

"You."

Protests erupted behind him again. Logan held up a hand and they fell silent. "No," he said.

"No?" The man's smile widened. "You would doom your kin for a bit of pride? He does not wish to war with you. Take her place and your brood will live. Your girl will live. They'll be free to do as they like."

Logan's eyes narrowed at the implication behind the man's phrasing. "He won't take my brood on as his own?"

"Oh no. We've quite enough mouths to feed as it is. He just wants you."

*Ah, God.* Logan pressed his fingers to his temple. If he went, his brood perished. All his kin, whom he loved dearly, who placed their faith in him and trusted to keep them safe in this perilous place he had brought them to. If he went, he doomed them to life as scavengers, at the best.

And if he did not? What fate awaited Reina then?

Logan took hold of the man's arm and pushed him toward the door. "You're wasting your time. Tell your sire that I will not make deals with his subordinates. If he wishes to discuss the matter, he may come to me personally." And when he did, Logan would rip him to shreds.

The messenger shrugged and backed away. "It's just as well. He finds your girl's company quite entertaining."

"Get out of my house!" Only Kynan's touch, soft on his back, tethered Logan's impulse to do something rash and stupid.

The other man smiled, nodded in farewell, and slipped outside. Logan slammed the door behind him. He leaned his brow against the wall and shut his eyes.

If he ever died, he was surely going to hell.

"Nye..." Kynan's fingers pressed on his shoulder. "He's hurting her."

"Yes. I'm sure he is." His throat was tight, difficult to speak through.

"You're going to leave her there?"

"What would you have me do?" Logan paced across the foyer. "Were it just me, I would do it. But he will leave you sireless. Would you have me trade all your lives for hers? Do you love her so well that you would make that sacrifice?" He looked at Kynan, at all of them, and saw the answer on their faces.

"You are my brood, my kin. I have obligations to you, and I cannot shirk them."

Kynan's expression reproached him, demanding things that it was not in him to give. He fisted his hands at his nape, torn with agony. "Marek's gone, do you know that? Gone!" Kynan gaped at him in shock. "And now his brood cowers in fear. Would you have me do that to you?"

"No." Kynan looked away. "But we could do more than just sit here."

"I *cannot*—"

"I know." Kynan took his face in his hands, and pressed a kiss to Logan's lips. "I'm going after him."

"*Cara*—"

Kynan sidestepped his grasp. "I love you. You love her. It's simple, Nye." He pulled on his coat and slipped out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Kynan followed the other vampire, fueled by reckless determination.

He had liked Reina from the start. And Nye cared for her; that was obvious enough. If Nye's hands were tied by his obligations to the brood... Well. Kynan's were not.

If he could find her, they could save her.

He kept a careful distance between his car and the vampire's. Out of habit, he jotted down the license plate number, though Keachan's hands were still tied by the departmental review that Reina's earlier, ill-informed accusations had initiated. It was doubtful Keachan would be able to run the plates at all without gathering suspicion.

They drove through Bryson in a meandering pattern that Kynan could make no sense of. He wondered if the vampire suspected him, or was merely taking precautions. Still, Kynan kept on, despite fear of discovery.

If he turned back, who would help Reina?

The vampire stopped at the curb before an office building, dark and empty. Kynan waited a block away. He watched a shadow detach itself and glide across the sidewalk to the vampire's car. The vampire stepped out and circled to join it.

Kynan's hands tightened on the steering wheel. There were two of them now, and he was outnumbered.

Without taking his gaze off the men, he reached for his phone. But what could Nye do but tell him to come home? He was in it now, for good or for ill.

He put the phone back, and waited.

The two men argued, leaning intently toward one another and making sharp, angry gestures. At last, the newcomer threw himself from the other and stalked away.

He stalked straight to Kynan's car, and before Kynan could react, pulled the door open and dropped into the passenger seat. "Let's go, then," he muttered. His arms folded tightly over his chest.

Kynan gaped at him. "Get out of my car."

"No." He turned his glare on Kynan. "I'm his insurance policy. If you don't take me home, I will call him and tell him and the girl dies now."

"I don't know where your home is!"

The newcomer sank deep in his seat. "It's the same place yours is."

It took Kynan a moment to understand. "He's *giving* you to us?"

"He's *forsaken* me." The fledgling turned a baleful look on Kynan. "If your sire won't foster me, I'll go rogue, you know."

Kynan swore all the way home.

\* \* \* \*

Logan came out of the house to meet them, worry etched deep on his face. Kynan

stepped out of the car, and his passenger grudgingly followed suit. He stared up at the house like a condemned man.

Logan's steps froze at the sight of him. Surprise flashed across his face, and slid quickly into shock. "Mr. Daniels?"

Kynan glanced between the two of them, brows raised. "You know him?"

"His name is Brett. He's Reina's friend. But ... where did you find him?"

"He didn't," Brett snapped. "I was sent to him. To you."

"By who? And why—"

"It is a sire's responsibility to foster fledglings abandoned in his territory, isn't it?"

"Mother of God." Logan swore beneath his breath, his eyes round with understanding. "They turned him." He crouched before Brett. "Mr. Daniels, who did this to you?"

"I won't tell you anything about him," Brett snarled. "I'm his kin, not yours. And he wouldn't have sent me away if it weren't for your stupid girl!"

"My—" Logan swore again, but there was nothing soft about it this time. "Bastard. He wiped his memory. That irresponsible son of a bitch—"

Brett threw himself at Logan. "Don't you speak ill of him! I'd rather be with him, if I had a choice! You're *nothing*, you—"

"Yes, what a kind sire," Kynan muttered, stripping out of his coat and gloves. "Pawning you off without a care for you feelings." His hand whipped out, snagging Brett's wrist. He raised it so that Logan, too, could see the thick bandages that swathed his hand. "What happened?"

"I was disobedient," Brett snarled. Fury twisted his expression. "I was punished. It was my fault, not his."

Kynan snorted and threw his coat into the closet without comment.

Logan clasped a hand on Brett's shoulder. "I am sorry that you are here against your will," he said softly. "But you're too young to be left on your own. You'll have to stay here until we can send you back, or find another to foster you. Have you fed recently?"

Brett gave a jerky nod.

"Very well, then." He gave Brett a small push forward. "Go up and find Alex. There's space enough in his room to set you up there, for a time."

Brett dragged his feet, but obeyed.

Alone, Kynan turned to Logan and brushed his hands over Logan's pale cheeks. "I'm so sorry," he breathed.

Logan shut his eyes. "It's a message."

"I know."

"These horrible things they've done to him..."

"I know," Kynan whispered. Wherever she was, Reina would surely be suffering the same, or worse.

Logan looked up the stairs, but his eyes were blinded by pain. "Perhaps he knows something that will help us find her."

Kynan bit the edge of his lip and followed Logan's gaze. The house looked the same as it always did, but there was no arguing that things had changed. "I don't think he's much interested in helping us."

Logan's expression turned hard and frightening. "I don't intend to give him a choice."



## Chapter Twenty

Voices slipped beneath the door. They crawled through the room until Reina wanted to scream, if only to drown them out. She had grown accustomed to voices passing by her room, sharp with command or drifting in idle chatter. These were different. They hovered just outside the door, raised with anger.

The longer she listened to them, the faster her heart pounded within her chest. Eanruig was malicious enough when in a good mood. She didn't want to see him angry. She didn't think she could endure it.

She hurt. From head to toe, she throbbed from the things he had done to her, and she'd have done anything to gain relief. Anything but what he asked of her.

She would not give him information about Logan or his brood. Nor would she agree to trick Logan and lead him into a trap of Eanruig's devising. He had planned it that way, of course, so that the only things she would not do were the only things he asked of her.

And when she refused, he took great delight in hurting her.

But still, she found the times of solitude the hardest to bear. Sharp, fresh pains distracted her from the ones she already suffered. His presence gave her a focus for her agony, a lance to the wound of her pain.

But the angry voices outside her door changed the equation. For the first time, she awaited his arrival with fear. Anger, hatred, and dread she had all felt before, but not that. She'd known exactly what she faced, and there was no terror to be had in that.

Now, even that small security was gone. She stared at the door, waiting with her heart in her throat. She had learned to cope with his cruelty, to push back just enough to amuse him, to relent in little ways that would make the blows fall a bit softer.

She didn't know how to cope with his anger.

He came without warning. The door swung open and crashed against the far wall, making the whole room shake. Reina scrambled away, her pulse racing. He stood in the doorway, a menacing figure who glowered like Satan himself.

"I'll give you one last chance," he growled. "And then I shall take matters into my own hands. I tire of your games."

"Fuck off," she muttered, turning her face to the wall.

He grabbed her. His fingers pushed deep into her hair, dragging her head back and forcing her to look at him. "This is *your* doing. Remember that. I would have had it happen differently."

He wrenched her head to the side and sank his fangs into her throat.

She kicked and punched and screamed, heedless of the potential for tearing her throat open on his fangs. "*Get off of me!*" She landed a lucky blow to the side of his head that knocked him free, and she scrambled away.

He was on her in a moment, dragging her to the floor, pinning her with his weight.

She fought, but he was stronger. He lowered his mouth to her and resumed feeding, as though she were not crying and hiccupping helplessly beneath him.

Her throat throbbed in time to the section of his mouth. With a surreal clarity, she felt her blood flowing from her, felt the heavy weight of emptiness settle over her. She looked down on herself from above and saw the life spilling from her. Darkness closed

around her. She relaxed beneath Eanruig with a sigh, too numb to care. Let him kill her; then could torture her no longer.

But he stopped before the darkness claimed her completely. She stared up at him through a fog while he tore his wrist open on his own fangs. Blood dripped down his arm. She didn't understand until he pressed the wound to her mouth.

She tried to push him away and spit his blood back in his face, but she was too weak. His blood filled her mouth until she choked on it and, coughing and sputtering, she choked it down.

It burned its way through her throat and settled her stomach like a torch, where it smoldered until she swallowed another mouthful. Heat exploded through her. She convulsed beneath Eanruig, every muscle tightening in agony, filled with the liquid fire of his blood. It spread through her, consumed her, and she marveled that she didn't combust from it.

The fire devoured her, red-hot, and left behind only blackness. She sank into the abyss, and welcomed the cool release of death.

\* \* \* \*

Kynan was elbow-deep in potting soil when a gust of cold air washed over him. He straightened, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his wrist, and turned.

Logan stood in the doorway of the tiny greenhouse, watching him with an unreadable expression. "What are you doing, then?" he asked, though Kynan would have thought it obvious, given the dozens of potted plants that crowded around his knees.

"Oh, you know." He flipped his hair out of his face and gave Logan a tense grin. "I thought I'd work on my tan."

Logan's lips stretched, but there was little mirth in his smile. "What are you *really* doing, *cara*?"

Kynan released an unsteady sigh. "Keeping my hands busy," he said beneath his breath. Because it was the only way to keep them steady, and keep the terror at bay.

Logan closed the door behind him and came to crouch by Kynan's side. He held a hand out wordlessly.

Kynan gave him an uncertain look. Logan just raised his brows. Shrugging, Kynan passed him a bag of fertilizer spikes and slid a cluster of plants over.

Logan bent over his task, his hands moving with sure movements as he brushed aside leaves and blossoms and worked the spikes into the soil. He was silent for several minutes, but Kynan could feel the other man's attention weighing on him like a physical touch. Kynan watched him out of the corner of his eye, wondering what the purpose of it all was.

There was a purpose, of course. Logan MacGregor was not the sort of man to spontaneously develop an interest in horticulture.

At last, very softly and without looking up from his task, Logan said, "You're worried about her."

"I'm terrified for her." Kynan couldn't keep the tremble from his voice. "And there's *nothing* I can do," he snarled, jabbing a spike into the soil so hard it buried itself. "She might be dead, or dying, or any number of things, and I'm no use at all. Look how well I botched up the last thing I tried to do for her." He shot a glare toward the upper story of the house, thinking of Brett and how miserably he had failed in his attempt to follow the

other vampire.

"You care about her," Logan said softly. He sounded surprised.

Kynan looked up. "Of course I do."

Logan released his breath and nodded as though to himself. "I had thought... Well." He ducked his head and pulled more pots over. "I had feared you were upset with me."

Kynan's jaw fell open. "What on earth would I be upset about, Nye?"

"Reina," Logan said, looking down at the greenhouse floor.

"You're doing all you can. We all are." All they could, and not enough. His chest felt too small to contain the pounding of his heart.

"That's not what I mean," Logan breathed. He stared down at the floor, refusing to let Kynan catch his gaze.

Kynan's mouth worked for several minutes before he could make himself speak. "I thought *you*, at least, knew me better than that."

Logan looked up. Kynan's breath caught at the measure of doubt in his gaze. "I don't think either of us expected this to be what it has become," Logan whispered.

"No," Kynan agreed. He looked down at his knees, his jeans streaked with dirt from his work. "I'm not upset, Nye."

Logan reached out and took Kynan's hands in his. He squeezed his fingers tightly. "Are you sure?"

Kynan rolled his eyes. "And if I said I was? What then? You'd leave her to her fate, just to spare my feelings? No, Nye. You've better things to worry about than whether or not I can bear a little competition for your affections."

Logan grimaced, looking chagrined. "You know I love you, *cara*."

"Of course I do." Kynan dusted his hands clean and got to his feet. He reached down to help Logan to his. "Reina needs your worry more than I do, Nye. If something happens to her because you're too busy fretting over my ego, you'd never forgive yourself." He closed his hands around fistfuls of Logan's hair and pressed a kiss to his mouth. "And neither would I."

\* \* \* \*

He stayed with her while she died, and waited with her until she revived, holding her head in his lap. His fingers stroked her hair idly. *Of course Logan was attracted to her*, he thought, looking down at her. She had been pretty in life, if more obstinate than Eanruig generally liked his women. But she was beautiful in death. Copper curls lay in stark contrast against her pallor. When she roused, she would be stunning.

And the obstinacy could be dealt with easily enough.

She woke with a gasp, quickly followed by a groan. Her body trembled, adjusting itself to life once more. She curled in on herself, arms crossed over her stomach, shaking.

"There, now," he murmured, wiping beads of sweat from her brow. "There now, this won't last long."

"What—" She looked around wildly. "What—?"

He touched his fingers beneath her chin. "I am Eanruig." He smiled down at her tenderly. "I am your sire, and you are my kin. I will take care of you."

Tremors rocked through her, but her gaze held steady on him. "I'm hungry," she whispered.

"Of course you are." He helped her sit, then rolled up his sleeve. He held his forearm

to her lips. "Feed, little one. It will sate you."

She sank her new fangs into his wrist and began to drink. He closed his eyes.

It was not a common practice among his kind, to feed one's own fledglings. It came with a rash of complications. Though it would sate her for the time being, his blood would not sustain her as a mortal's would, and he would have to feed to replace what he had lost. The practice could not be sustained for any appreciable amount of time, but he'd found it useful with new fledglings, at least for their first few meals. The bond it created was a strong one.

That Brett had been with him such a short time, and had protested his departure so violently, was a testament to that.

He stroked her hair as she fed. She sucked awkwardly, still searching for her rhythm. When she had had enough, she sat back and drew her legs to her chest.

"Do you feel better now?"

She nodded, then hesitated. She ran her tongue along her lip. "I ache."

"I know. It will ease, in time." He rose to his feet, and helped her to hers. "This will be your room. I'll have clothes brought up for you." He turned her to the window and pointed out the blackout curtains, which he had drawn closed. "You must never touch those. Leave them as they are, or I cannot guarantee your safety."

She nodded and let him guide her to the bed. He sat next to her. "Do you know what you will do for me, little one?"

She shook her head and watched him, waiting to be given the answer.

"You will return to me what I have lost." He stroked a hand over her hair, smiling. "You will bring Logan MacGregor back to me, and restore him to his rightful place. You will give me back what I have most longed for, these many years."

As she listened to him, something flickered behind her eyes, a flash of old memory. "No," she said, then frowned as though uncertain why she had spoken the word.

"Yes." He gripped her chin. "You will do this for me."

"No!" She threw herself backwards. "You—You're—" She pressed her fist against her forehead. Her face scrunched up like a child's, trying to recall a dim memory.

"I am your sire." He rose to stand above her. "And you will do as I say. That is the price of my protection."

He left the room without another word, and locked the door behind him. Let her sit on that for a few days. If the solitude didn't weaken her resolve, the hunger surely would. She would forget whatever fragment of memory had returned to her. She would do as he said. He had not come so far, or waited so long, to be defeated by one girl's pointless obstinacy.

She would bring him Logan MacGregor.

\* \* \* \*

"I swear to God, Mac," Alex growled, flinging himself down the stairs, "if you don't teach that boy a lesson, I will!"

Logan rubbed the tension gathering on his brow. "I take it you two are not getting along?"

The question was pointless. The entire household had heard the shouts coming from Alex's bedroom.

"He's a menace! He won't do as he's asked, no matter how trivial. He does everything

I ask him not to do, simply to spite me! Give him his own room, at least. I wouldn't put it past him to pull the curtains open on me at midday!"

Logan nodded. He felt a measure of sympathy for Alex, who had not known the trouble he'd been accepting when he'd agreed to share his room with Brett. But the only unoccupied room in the house was the one he'd given to Reina, and he couldn't bring himself to move her things from it just yet.

She would be coming home. He had to believe it.

He had no doubt that Brett's insertion into his brood was a carefully planned tactic. It was a warning, if nothing else, of this enemy's strength and malice. And if his enemy had intended to throw a wrench into the cogs of the brood's machinery, then too, he had succeeded. The entire house was in an uproar over Brett, if not for one reason, then another.

"I will speak with him." Logan rose to his feet. "Perhaps I can persuade him to mind his manners."

Alex snorted and stalked into the kitchen with a muttered, "Good luck."

Logan found Brett sitting on the trundle bed they had erected for him, scowling at nothing in particular, or perhaps everything in general. At the sound of the door closing, he looked up with an expression that had suddenly become wary.

"You are making quite a stir in my home." Logan glowered down at him. "Is his how you behaved with your last sire? It's no wonder he cast you out."

"Send me back, then!" Brett glared up at him. "I'd be happier there."

"Would you?" Logan sat and took the boy's bandaged hand in his. "Your sire does not seem very kind, Brett. What was this punishment for?"

"I did something I shouldn't have, that's all." Brett jerked his chin up defiantly. "I threatened your girl. She insulted my sire, and I told her I'd beat some respect into her."

"And you were punished for such loyalty?" Logan's brow climbed. "A kind master, indeed."

"You wouldn't know anything about it. You let your brood do whatever they like. They have no discipline. It's the mark of a weak sire."

Logan drew a long, slow breath. "Is that what you think?"

Brett didn't answer.

"Well, I can assure you, young man, there are certain things I will not tolerate, and my discipline for such things will be as sure and swift as your sire's." He curled a hand around the back of Brett's neck, and ensured that the boy was watching him closely. "One such thing is endangering any member of my brood. And you do so by refusing to tell us where she is being kept."

"She is not your kin."

The implication was that she was someone else's, and it made Logan's heart ache. "She is mine to protect," he growled. "And I will do so. You will tell me where I may find her."

"I'll do no such thing." Brett wrested himself from Logan's hold. "You have no authority over me."

"You will tell me!" Logan grabbed his arm, hauling him to his feet. "Or I will burn you worse than your sire has!"

A cold, distant part of Logan heard this with horror, and feared that he was becoming a brute, and the carbon copy of a man he had hated all his life. Another part, larger and

louder, cataloged him of all the unknowable torments that Reina suffered while he couldn't save her.

He could not bring himself to regret his brutality.

Panic clawed across Brett's expression, but he kept himself controlled, only jerking briefly against Logan's grip. "I'm not afraid of you," he said, almost steady. "I'm afraid of *him*, and what he'll do if he knows I betrayed him. You're wasting your time, because I won't tell you."

Logan sat, and felt his rage slip from him. "I'm afraid, too," he admitted. "I'm afraid he'll do to her what he's done to you. I'm afraid he'll do worse."

Brett looked away and said nothing.

"You're not his brood anymore, you know. If you help me, I'll protect you as my own."

"That won't stop him."

"I will stop him."

Brett sighed, and slumped in defeat. "I don't know if I can."

"Try." Logan gripped his shoulders. "Please, try."

\* \* \* \*

He gathered the brood in the living room, and drew Brett to stand at his side when the boy would have balked. "He's got Weres," Brett said, staring at his knees. "A whole pack of them. You can't get to the house without getting through them." A line formed between his brows. "And you won't get through them."

Exclamations rippled through the gathered brood. Logan waved them to silence. "Weres?" he asked quietly. "He's allied himself with a pack?"

"Extorted them, more like. He knows he's taking a risk, coming in like this. That even though your neighbors dislike you, they might band together in your defense if the alternative is living next to a traitor. He's arming himself for that." Brett brushed his fingers lightly over his bandaged hand. "He doesn't mind hurting people to get what he wants, you know. He doesn't mind killing them, either."

Logan swallowed grief and rage. He kept his voice even through sheer determination. "If it's not a willing alliance, it will be easier to break."

"Do you think you can?" Hysteria tinged Brett's laughter. "His grip is tight."

Logan touched his shoulder. "I broke his hold over you, didn't I?"

"What will you do? Take her pack into your brood as well?" Brett shook his head, his expression twisted with derision. "You cannot take them all under your wing. She will not thank you for it, even if you offered."

"Is she happy, Brett?"

"No. She's alpha, and she can't bear for anyone to have dominance over her. The only thing worse would be to lose her pack. That's how he keeps her."

"They're her weakness, then." Logan nodded decisively. "Take me to Reina."

## Chapter Twenty-One

It did not take Faolan long to figure out what Eanruig had done to the girl.

Fury writhed into a cold knot in his stomach. He had suspected it was coming, had seen this outcome from a distance and watched it approach with all the inevitability of an oncoming train. Even so, the knowledge of what had been done to her curdled the blood in his stomach.

He was the second-youngest of the brood, and he couldn't remember either his turning or Noelle's being like this. Eanruig had turned him, and fed him, and then taught him what he needed to know. Noelle had been drained while Eanruig fucked her, a tale she delighted in telling to anyone who stopped long enough to listen. There had been neither torture nor enforced isolation for either of them.

Faolan recalled the first days of his turning, the gut-wrenching hunger. He knew that Eanruig was starving the girl. Occasionally, when he passed her door, he heard her whimper, or whisper pleas through the crack for something she could not name. Faolan tolerated it for a day, and welcomed the relief that sunrise brought them both. And when the sun set and her cries resumed, he knew that he could bear it no longer.

Aware of the consequences and too angry to care, he unlocked the door and slipped inside.

She lay curled in the corner, legs drawn to her chest, arms curled over her head. The door latched shut behind him. She jerked at the sound, and glared from one eye, looking through the curve of her arm.

"Girl."

Her expression didn't change. She watched him like a cornered wolf.

Faolan sighed and stepped toward her. She made a feral noise and tried to squeeze herself deeper into the corner.

He crouched, several paces still between them. "Girl. Do you know where you are?"

She stared at him for a moment, as though there might be a trap in his words. Her gaze flicked around the room. "A cage," she snarled.

"Yes. Do you know who you are?"

That one took longer to answer. She whispered, "A prisoner."

"That's true." He edged slowly forward, until they were almost in arm's reach of one another. "But you're more than that. Do you remember your name?"

Sudden, overwhelming pain flooded her face. "I don't know," she whispered raggedly. "I don't know..."

"I do." He reached out for her, aching with sympathy. "Would you like to know it?"

She stared at him, agape with fear and wonder.

"It's Reina," Faolan said gently. "Your name is Reina."

"Reina?" She spoke it slowly, then again, trying out the feel of the word.

"That's right." He stepped closer, touched her arms. She jerked away from him, but slowly grew accustomed to his proximity and relaxed. Faolan drew her arms down, revealing her face.

Her eyes were wide and frightened, her face smudged with dirt and blood. Her curls were tangled and dark with grease. She looked wild.

"Reina Campbell," he murmured, and watched thoughts flicker through her eyes. "You're a student at Bryson University. A friend of—"

She suddenly gave a ragged gasp. "Oh God." She pressed a hand to her mouth. Tears trembled on her lashes and dripped down her cheeks. "Oh God."

Faolan's heart ached for her. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry for what you've gone through."

"What—what happened?" She looked around the room, frowning. "What did he do to me?"

Had she forgotten even that? He wished he didn't have to be the one to break the news to her, but no one else would. "He turned you, Reina. He made you like us."

"No, I know that. Why couldn't I remember?" She squeezed her eyes shut. "I still can't. There's only pieces."

"It's very traumatic for the body, being turned. You die. When you wake ... it's confusing. Things are muddled. A good sire will help you through it, and remind you of who you were. Eanruig..." He sighed. "He is not always kind. You were brought here under duress—do you remember that?"

She nodded. Anger chased across her features.

"I suppose he didn't care for you to remember that you didn't want to be here."

"I'm hungry." She leaned back into the corner. Her eyes closed, and her expression turned vulnerable. "I'm so hungry."

"I've some blood in the fridge. I'll bring it for you. I can last a few more days, if I must."

It was the height of foolishness. Had he been seen, either coming out or going back in, they'd both have suffered for it. But he made it back with blood in hand and without incident.

When he opened the door, she was halfway out the window.

"Damn it!" He rushed forward. "Are you crazy? Get back in here!"

"Let go of me!" She fought him like a wildcat as he dragged her back into the room. "I won't stay here!"

"Where will you go? Do you even know how to get home? Do you know that you can make it there before dawn? You'll burn, Reina."

She twisted and fought against his grip. "Then let me burn!"

Faolan slapped a hand over her mouth. "Shut up," he hissed. "Someone will hear, and then we'll both be in for it." He grabbed her arm with his free hand and drew it up, showing her the round, puckered scar that marked it. "Do you remember that, Reina? Do you remember why he did that? He'll do worse to you now."

She froze beneath his weight, wide-eyed. Cautiously, he removed his hand, but she didn't start shouting again.

"How long was I ... was I like that?" she whispered, staring at the scar. "It hasn't been that long." She touched it tentatively, as though unsure whether it was real. "It's too soon."

"You're a vampire, Reina." He moved off of her. "Unless your wounds are inflicted with gold, you'll heal very quickly." He looked down at the wound. "It had already begun to scar before you were turned, or you wouldn't even have that."

She nodded and rested her chin on her knees, looking troubled.

Faolan retrieved the bag of blood from where he had dropped it. "Drink this. It's too



cold to be very appetizing, but it'll ease your hunger."

She sank her fangs into the plastic and drank. When the bag was empty, she handed it back to him. "Thank you." She eyed him warily. "Why are you doing this for me?"

Faolan didn't answer for a moment. "Because I don't agree with what Eanruig did. Because he hurt you, and that bothers me. Because if I were in your place, I would want someone to do this for me."

"But you won't let me leave."

"It's suicide!"

"I thought he was killing me, before." She crossed her legs and looked at her hands, folded in her lap. An eerie calm had settled over her face. "I'd have preferred it to this. There'd have been an end, then. There was only so much he could do to me. Now..." She tilted her head back and sighed. "Now he can do whatever he likes, and I'll just heal so he can do more."

"Unless you do as he asks," Faolan said cautiously.

"Right," she snapped. "And then I'll become my own torturer. No, I won't do it. If I can't leave, I'd rather burn. A few moments of agony are better than an eternity of it."

Faolan dragged his hands through his hair. "Better I had left you feral. He might have convinced you that you were happy with him."

"At least I have control of my fate now. I like this better than being a puppet on a string." She got to her knees and knelt level with him, looking him in the eyes. "You said you didn't like that he hurt me. Why are you forcing me to stay here so that he can continue to do it?"

"I don't want you to die," he whispered.

"It's not your choice."

He pressed his lips together and momentarily considered holding her within the room. But he gazed down into her face, frightened and calm at once, and he didn't have the heart. "All right." He sighed, and moved back. "If you're sure that's what you want."

"It is." She took a step, hesitated, and then embraced him. "Thank you."

For a moment, Faolan could not respond. "You're welcome," he said gruffly. He pushed her back and looked at her. "Try to get back home, will you? Don't wait for the sun."

"I'll try. I promise." She pushed the bars aside and swung her legs out the window.

A moment after she had disappeared, Faolan rushed forward and thrust his head outside. She had almost reached the drainpipe. "Reina!" he whispered, as loud as he dared.

She stopped and looked back at him.

"Do you remember your first escape?"

"Yes." Doubt briefly clouded her expression.

"Go over the back fence."

Her smile was bright in the moonlight. "Bye, Faolan."

\* \* \* \*

Streetlights stretched through the darkness like a string of pearls, casting circles of golden light upon the sidewalk. Brett hid in the shadows behind a hedge and dug his heels in, his face set in an obstinate expression. "I'm staying. I did what you said—I brought you here." His hands clenched and released at his sides. "You said you would

protect me from him."

The mantle of responsibility felt heavier than ever on Logan's shoulders. Brett's pale, guarded face looked up at him, and he fought for patience. "I don't break my promises, Brett."

The boy's lips thinned to a pale line. "And if it comes to a choice between me and her? I know where your priorities lie."

Logan crouched, looking straight into his eyes. "I do not break my promises."

"I'm staying."

Logan sighed. "Stay out of sight, then." He straightened and gazed across the street. The house sat behind its silvered lawn, as perfect as a postcard. Only its size hinted that it might not house your typical suburban family.

"Everyone's ready?"

Brett scuffed his shoes against the sidewalk. "Yes."

Logan nodded once and strode across the street. His foot touched the opposite sidewalk, and a growl almost too deep to hear shuddered through the night air. He stepped on the lawn. A wolf nearly the height of his chest stepped out of the shadows, teeth bared.

Logan did not break his stride. The Were maneuvered himself into position before him, and Logan didn't stop until they stood toe-to-claw.

He looked down into the Were's baleful gaze. "Will you stop me?" he asked softly.

The Were lunged.

Logan grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and used the beast's momentum to hurl him into the street. He landed hard, and tumbled across the asphalt. The wolf got to his feet slowly and shook the dirt of the road from his fur.

He glared hatred at Logan, limping back on three legs. The fourth he held close against his body, curled and useless.

Logan looked down at him, filled with too much anger to spare room for pity. "Fetch your alpha, wolf, or I shall break the other three as well."

The Were snarled.

Logan raised a brow.

With a sound like a sigh, the wolf dropped to his haunches. He yipped sharply. Together, they waited.

A woman rushed from the house, her face tense with concern. She saw the Were, sitting by Logan's side and favoring his leg, and she stopped.

"Leave him!" she snapped. "Leave our home, or I'll call the whole damn pack down here—"

"I have an alternate proposition for you, Cosette."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed.

"Summon your pack and bid them allow me about my business."

"Or?" she demanded through clenched teeth.

"Or..." He angled his head to indicate the injured were sitting in the grass at his side. "I shall give them all a limp."

She snorted and tossed ebon hair out of her face. "You and what army?"

"This one," Kynan said from the shadows. Frost-brittle grass crunched beneath the shoes of Logan's brood as they arrayed themselves behind him.

Cosette's gaze flicked from face to face, counting their number. "Impressive," she

sneered. "All you've done is even the odds. Do you think you can defeat—"

"I don't have to."

She watched him, stony-faced, not rising to the bait.

He smiled and spread his hands. "All I have to do is wound them."

"To what purpose?"

"How long do you think your master will support a pack of guard dogs who can run no faster than a limp?"

Her face, already pale in the moonlight, turned the color of chalk.

"Let me pass," he said gently, "and no harm will come to them."

"He'll kill me," she snarled.

"Perhaps." Logan petted the head of the wolf at his side. The Were growled, but knew better than to snap. "Do you think he won't kill your pack, once they've lost their usefulness?"

"You're a bastard."

"No." He closed the distance between them, fingers closing around her arms. She glared up at him. "What I am is very, very angry. I've no wish to destroy your pack, Cosette, but if that's what it takes to get her back, believe me, I will do it and sleep well after."

She fumed up at him, silent. He saw in her eyes the knowledge that she had lost.

"What's more important to you?" he asked softly. "Your safety or your pack's?"

"Take the damn girl," she spat. "And leave my Weres alone."

He inclined his head and started forward.

"If I ever see you again, I'll kill you."

"I understand." He looked at her over his shoulder. "We are not so different, you know. I, too, must put my brood's safety before my own."

She said nothing, but he felt her gaze follow him across the yard.

The fence that separated front yard from back was easy enough to unlatch. Logan followed Brett's instructions, circling the house to stand beneath a second-floor window that spilled light out into the night.

Her name pushed at his lips. He wanted to shout it, to scream it until she was in his arms again. He wanted to hold her close and whisper it into her hair.

He could not. The Weres may have been dealt with, but he was still standing outside the home of his enemy. Who knew how many vampires slept behind those walls?

A ladder stood in an unobtrusive nook beside the flower beds. Careful not to make any noise, Logan repositioned it beneath the window, and climbed up onto the gable.

Bars secured the window, but hung from only two bolts. He twisted them aside easily and swung into a bedroom that looked like it belonged in another century.

His gaze swept over the old furniture, searched the corners of the room. His heart hammered in his chest. Reina was not there.

A small sound, like an animal's cry, made him spin, braced for an attack.

A man sat on the floor, leaning back against the wall with a twisted expression on his face. "You're too late," he told Logan with a ragged laugh. "Damn my eyes, I should have known. She's gone."

An enraged roar poured from Logan's throat, beyond his ability to restrain. "*Where is she?*" He grabbed the other man and slammed him back against the wall. "What have you done with her?"

"Nothing. I did nothing."

"Do not lie to me!"

"I gave her what she wanted." He closed his eyes. Disordered wheaten hair fell into his face. "She wanted to die."

"No." Pain surged through Logan like liquid gold. "*No*. If she's dead—"

"She's not." The vampire turned his head toward the window. "Not yet."

"Tell me what you've done with her!"

He dragged his gaze to Logan. The other man gave him with a dazed, startled look, as though he'd only just realized Logan was there. "If you think I'm the one who kept her here, you're wrong." He sighed as though the weight of the world bore him down. "I'm the one who let her go."

Logan wanted to tear and maim, to give vent to his pent-up rage. *Not yet*, he cautioned himself. *Not until you've found her*.

It took an unfathomable strength of will to keep his words steady. "Where has she gone?"

"I'll show you," the other man said, and Logan released him.

He got to his feet and leaned out the window, pointing. "There." He indicated the fence that circled the backyard. "She climbed over there, into our neighbor's yard. After that..." He drew back into the room, shaking his head. "I don't know. She just said she was going home."

"Ah, God..." Logan pressed his fists to his brow.

He had rallied the entire brood to come to her rescue. What would she do if she showed up on his porch and he wasn't there to bring her in? Fighting the urge to race home, he took the other man by the shoulder and shook him lightly. "You said she's not dead *yet*. You said she wanted to die."

"She walked," he whispered. "She doesn't know the area, and she's weak. He's been starving her. She won't make it where she's going before sunrise." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I tried to stop her, but she said she'd rather burn than stay. I couldn't keep her."

Logan stared at him for an instant that felt like eternity. Then he threw himself out the window and down the ladder.

In the front yard, Cosette still waited with her Weres, surrounded by his brood. "Come with me!" he snapped at her, striding for the car.

"Go to hell."

He stopped, turned. Advanced. "Come with me, or send a Were who knows her scent in your stead. But I am *not* negotiating."

They stared at one another, bristling, his brood and her pack arrayed around them. Tension stretched thin as a cobweb.

Cosette looked away. Her hand moved, a small, imperious command. "Matt, you've spent time with her. Go, help him find the girl."

A wolf broke from the pack and trotted to Logan's side. Logan nodded curtly. "Thank you," he said, and it even sounded sincere.

She did not smile. "Bring him back in one piece, bloodsucker."

He inclined his head, acknowledging. He looked down at the Were. "Which direction?"

The wolf barked and took off down the street. Logan ran at his side, every pounding

heartbeat counting down the seconds to dawn.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Reina didn't know how far she had come, or how far she had left to go, when her strength gave out. She stood outside a community park, gripping the chain-link fence to keep herself upright, and gazed uphill at the shadowed playground.

It was, she thought, as good a place as any to die.

She dragged herself, one slow step at a time, to a simple merry-go-round at the park's eastern edge. She propped herself against the central pole, like ice against her back, and settled in to watch her last sunrise.

Tears burned her eyes, and blurred the stars overhead to a smear of light.

All she'd wanted was to know the truth of Adri's death. How had she come to this point, sitting in the dark, waiting for the sun's rays to shine death down upon her?

She leaned her head back against the metal struts. For just a moment, she allowed herself to indulge in regrets. Tears traced hot paths down her cheeks. She didn't try to fight them.

She wouldn't have long to indulge herself, anyway. The sky was already lightening.

Nearby, a dog barked. Reina pulled herself upright, fingers curled around the bars, and looked for the source.

At the far end of the park, a man walked toward her, his stride long and purposeful. A dog trotted at his side. Nearer, they broke into a run. Moonlight glinted like gold off the animal's eyes.

Not a dog. A wolf.

Eanruig had found her.

She scrambled off of the merry-go-round and ran. Playground sand bogged her steps, and exhaustion weighed her limbs. There was no chance of outrunning him. The best she could hope for was to fight him off until the sun rose.

"Reina!"

She stumbled, tripped, fell, picked herself up and stumbled forward again. Hands caught her, dragged her back. She fought them blindly. "Let me go! *Let me go!*"

The hands framed either side of her face and dragged her mouth to his.

She couldn't move. His hands clutched at her, his breath whispered against his lips, the wolf danced about their legs, and she could not move a muscle.

"Reina."

She opened her eyes and saw what she had known the moment his mouth had touched hers. It was not Eanruig who had found her.

"Logan?" Her voice broke. She raised a trembling hand to his cheek. His skin burned against her fingertips. He turned his head and kissed her fingers, again and again.

She buried her face against his chest and started sobbing.

"Ah, *mo mhuirín*..." He swept his arms around her. Hot tears fell on her skin, and they were not her own. "What have they done to you?"

She clung to him, unable to answer.

Logan stroked her hair and spoke to the wolf over her shoulder. "There's very little time. Run back and find the others, tell them to bring the car here." He scooped Reina up and carried her back to the merry-go-round to wait.

"I'm sorry," she cried against his chest. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"Shh, Reina." He stroked her hair. "What on earth are you apologizing for?"

"I don't know. I don't—I—They hurt you, and I was so *angry*. I couldn't bear the thought that they might try again."

"Quiet now, *mo mhuirín*," he said firmly. "It doesn't matter."

She gave a shuddering sigh and leaned into him. "Tell me what that means," she murmured, resting her cheek against his chest. His heart beat strong and steady against her ear. "I want to know what it means, if—"

His hand stilled on her hair. "I've told you once before."

"I don't remember." She squeezed her eyes shut against futile frustration. "There's a lot I don't remember. Tell me. Please."

He raised her head from his chest and tilted her face to his. His fingers were gentle on her cheeks. "My beloved," he said, hoarse.

A fresh wave of tears spilled down her cheeks. She burrowed against his chest again, hugging him hard. "I'm scared," she whispered, a bare thread of sound in the night.

His arms tightened around her. "I have not come this far to lose you now."

"But I'm so tired. And the sun—"

"Look at me." He tilted her chin up so that she had no choice. "I will not let you die."

She swallowed hard. "How far are we from your house?"

"Not far." He rested his chin on her head. "Ten minutes, perhaps less."

She looked up at the sky, streaked with the first pale ribbons of color. They might have had ten minutes before the sun cleared the horizon. If they were lucky.

The roar of an engine broke the night's silence. Logan picked Reina up in his arms and carried her down to meet the car. Her fingers fumbled with the seatbelt; he latched it and circled to the driver's seat while Kynan climbed over the console into the back.

He grabbed her hand and pressed a hard kiss against the top of her head. She squeezed his fingers and tried to smile up at him. Words were neither spoken, nor needed.

Logan threw the car into gear and punched the accelerator. They screamed down the streets at a speed that would have had her adrenaline pumping any other time. But lethargy was crowding in on her like a suffocating blanket, dragging her into the depths of sleep. She leaned her head against the window and struggled to keep her eyes open. Outside, houses whizzed past them in a blur.

"Logan," she said drowsily. "If a cop sees you..."

"He may cite me for as many violations as he likes once you're safe."

They turned onto Logan's street. Reina scrabbled to release her seatbelt with sluggish and unresponsive fingers. Logan slammed the breaks on in front of the house, neither bothering to pull out of the street nor kill the engine. He scooped her up, infinitely gentle despite his rush, and ran for the door.

Voices erupted the moment they stepped inside, clamoring in query and concern. Reina curled against Logan's chest and let him fend them off.

Kynan cleared the way before them, opening doors so that Logan didn't have to release her. She pried her eyes open and looked up into his, dark and aching with concern.

"I'm fine," she whispered. "Kynan, I'm fine."

Emotion flashed across his face. He looked away and cleared his throat. "Of course you are."

"You're a lousy liar."

He glanced down at her. A small smile tugged at his mouth.

"Are the drapes in her room still drawn?" Logan asked.

"Yes. I'll get some more blankets."

Kynan broke away, and Logan carried her into the bedroom. The lights were off, the room dark. Blackout curtains blocked the outside light, but Reina didn't need to see the sun to feel its approach, weighing her down, too heavy to fight.

Logan laid her gently on the bed and dropped to his knees beside her. "Sleep now, *mo mhuirín*," he murmured. "You're safe."

Reina grabbed at his shirt. "He kept me alone," she whispered, slurred with sleep. "Please, don't go."

"Don't worry." He climbed into bed behind her, pressed close against her back. His arm wrapped around her waist. "I'm not going anywhere."

\* \* \* \*

She awoke in a blind panic, thrashing against the blankets. She flailed, screams tangling in her throat, and toppled out of bed onto the floor.

"Reina!" Hands grabbed her, restraining her. Terror surged until it choked her.

"Reina, relax. It's all right. You're safe."

Slowly, she stopped fighting. She sat in the middle of the floor, shaking. "Logan...?"

"I'm here, *mo mhuirín*."

"Oh." She slumped, exhausted by her panic. "I thought—"

"It's all right. Wait here. I'll be right back."

His footsteps sounded softly on the hardwood floor. She covered her eyes, and he turned the lights on. Fear began to leave her in a slow trickle. She dropped her hand and looked up at him.

"I was disoriented," she said, by way of apology. "I didn't realize—Did I wake you?"

He smiled and sat down beside her. "No."

"Thank you for staying with me."

He squeezed her hand, silent comfort.

She closed her eyes. "The others. Do they know?"

"Kynan didn't think it was his place to tell them. But they will have guessed."

"What will they think of it?"

"They will welcome you as kin."

She jerked away. "But I'm not their kin. You didn't turn me. I'm *his* kin."

"You are in my territory." He turned her to face him firmly. "Whatever pretensions this man may have of gaining power, he does not have it yet. Your fostering falls to me. That makes you part of my brood, kin or not."

She nodded slowly, trying to wrap her mind around nuances of politics that she had studied for years, but never before had to navigate.

He tucked a curl behind her ear, his touch gentle and undemanding. "Would you prefer a shower or a meal first?"

"Oh God. A shower. *Please*."

He led her from the bedroom, smiling. "Anything you like."

The rest of the brood waited in the living room, expressions drawn with concern, hands gripped to strengthen and comfort. She looked at them, all sitting there frightened



for her, and had to turn away.

"Oh, Reina." Kynan leapt to his feet and dragged her into a crushing embrace. "I've been so worried. We all have."

"I know." She hugged him back, squeezing tight. "I'm all right." She drew back, just enough that she could look up at him. She touched his hair, his cheek. "Truly."

He gripped her hand. "I'm glad."

She squeezed his back, then drew away and followed Logan.

Behind them, very softly, Keachan said, "Mac."

Logan stopped at the foot of the stairs and turned back. Whatever he saw made his lips thin and reluctance flash across his face. "Later, Patrick," he murmured, tightening his arm around Reina's shoulder. "Later."

She followed him up to his bedroom, then through it to the adjoining master bath. "I'll get towels," he said, "and let you adjust the water to your tastes."

She stripped, dropping her dirty clothes into a pile in the corner, and stepped, shivering, into the spacious shower. Etched glass walls surrounded her on two sides, marble tile on the rest. She turned the taps on and adjusted them until the water falling over her was just shy of scalding. She ducked her head under the spray, letting it beat down on her.

The door opened, admitting in a gust of cold air. Logan watched her through the steam. Water droplets clung to his hair like diamonds.

Reina reached out to wipe them away, and found her fingers entangled in his hair. Her other hand braced above his collarbone, fingertips just resting against the warm pulse at his throat.

She stared at him, unable to move. His skin was warm against hers, his hair soft and silky. Running the strands between her fingers felt as hedonistic as the hot, clean water that beat against her shoulders.

Logan turned his head, brushing his lips across her palm. "Reina," he breathed against her skin. "What do you want?"

"I want..." Her voice shook. Her hand closed on his shoulders, nails drawing parallel scratches across his skin.

His gaze held hers, warm but solemn. He waited for her direction, as motionless as a statue, but warm and pliant and wonderful. Moisture dripped down her cheeks, and it might have been water from the shower, but probably wasn't.

"I want you to hold me," she whispered. "I want—"

*I want to remember what it's like to be touched without being hurt.*

His fingers brushed her waist, soft as a whisper. She shivered and stepped in against him. Her hands clutched. Her body trembled against his. Broken sobs pushed their way from her throat.

Logan kept his touch gentle, his hands slow and patient. He whispered tender words against her hair, damp and dark from the shower. He made no demands of her, only offered unconditionally, an unexpected gift after the cruelty and despair she had known in Eanruig's home.

When she wiped the water from her face and stepped back, he filled his hand with shampoo, smelling of lavender and mint, and drew her in again. He slicked it through her wet hair, worked up a fragrant lather. "Close your eyes," he warned, and directed her back beneath the spray.

His hands on her shoulders guided her with gentle insistence. She obeyed without protest, letting him condition and rinse it, as well. She blinked water out of her eyes and shivered, studying the mineral loops and whorls in the marble while his fingers tugged gently at the knots in her hair.

He brushed the weight of it aside and kissed the slope of her shoulder. Her hands curled at her sides. She looked over her shoulder at him.

"I'm sorry," he said, unsteady.

"For what?"

His fingers traced a jagged line over her shoulder, following one of the many scars that Eanruig had left upon her. "For not protecting you," he whispered.

She turned to face him. "You *saved* me."

A sad smile tugged at his mouth. "You saved yourself, *mo mhuirnín*."

He dropped to his knees before her. Startled, she nearly stepped back, but he wrapped his arms around the small of her back and pressed his brow to her stomach.

"Perhaps that's so." Lightly, she touched his hair, the bowed arch of his neck. "But you were there when I had no strength left for myself. Do you think he threatened me with anything more dire than what I faced when you found me?"

He looked up at her, eyes dark with pain and guilt. "I'm sorry," he said, clear and steady.

She brushed her fingers across his face. "I know you are. It's all right."

He kissed her stomach. His lips were warm on her skin, his breath hot. This time, there was more to the touch than simple apology. Reina rested her hands on the top of his head, steadying herself on his strength.

He wrapped his hands about her waist and pulled her down until she knelt with him. She looked up into his face, brushed a damp strand of hair from his cheek, and brought her mouth to his.

His hand at her back drew her close. She braced her hands on his shoulders, rock-hard and sturdy. Hot water pelted down on both of them, rivulets twisting over cheeks and throats and arms. Eyes closed against the spray, Reina kissed him, and felt the warmth of his breath on her lips, the strength of his body against hers. His fingers slid deep in her hair, hands cradling her head. She rested her fingertips against the cross-shaped scar at his chest, still pink and tender with new skin.

He circled his fingers around her wrist, drawing her hand away from the wound. His lips brushed her palm, the sensitive skin at the inside of her elbow. He continued a trail of gentle kisses, up her arm, over the curve of her shoulder. He mouthed lightly at her collarbone.

Reina drew a swift breath and closed her hands around his shoulders. Her head fell back. She twisted her fingers in strands of his hair and clung to him.

His thumb swept over her ribs. Her breath stilled, waiting. She shivered beneath the hot cascade of water.

He took the weight of her breast in his hand. She caught her lip between her teeth, smothering the quiet cries that swelled within her, unbidden. He skimmed his lips over her chest, and the rounded swell of flesh that he held cupped in his hand.

He kissed her, lips soft on her beaded flesh. She stared up at the ceiling, tears burning hot within her eyes.

"Reina." His whisper skated across her skin. She shuddered and leaned into him. "If

you need me to stop—"

"No." She tightened her fingers in his hair. "Logan, don't. *Please*."

He nodded, and brushed his lips over her again.

She dragged a hand down his back, urging him closer. His skin was slippery with water and soap, slick beneath her fingers, and made it difficult for her to hold on to him. She pushed him back until the wall stopped him and pulled his attentions from her breast.

He shook water from his hair like a dog. Tendrils hung in wild array about his angular face, damp and disheveled. Reina filled her hands with his hair and pressed her lips to his throat. His chest rose and fell sharply against her.

"*Mo mhuirnín...*"

"Please, Logan, I need to touch you. I need—"

He silenced her with a thumb against her lips. She stared up at him, aching with trepidation.

"Anything," he murmured. "You need only ask."

She nodded, swamped with relief. She pressed her mouth to his shoulder, tasting of water and salt. His heart beat just below her kiss, pounding against his breastbone.

She flicked her tongue across his skin and listened for his swift gasp. His hands rose, hovered above her shoulders, settled at last on the back of her neck as though he feared to hold her.

"Anything," she whispered, sliding her hands across his stomach. "You promised me anything."

He nodded gravely. "Anything in my power to give."

She pinned him against the tile with a hand on his chest. She raised her head, looked into his clear, dark eyes, so close to hers. "I want your hands on me, Logan."

He smiled and slipped them around her waist. He guided her mouth to his for a long kiss. She cupped the back of his neck and opened to him, allowing him into her mouth, meeting his tongue with her own. A groan shook his chest, but his hands remained gentle, his touch achingly sweet.

He curved his hands around the backs of her thighs, helping her part her knees on the slick tile, straddling his legs so that they could press even closer. Her stomach pressed to his, his hips to hers. She closed her eyes and gripped his shoulder, unsteadied by the surge of heat cascading through her.

"Logan," she whispered, and then again, until it became a mantra insinuated beneath the roar of the shower. Her hands slipped over him, seeking out every inch of flesh. And when she clutched too tight, he eased her fingers open and kissed each in turn, whispering against her skin. His touches fell on her like a summer rain.

He rocked his hips against hers, a gentle, easy cadence. She shuddered and sighed against his mouth. His breath was sweet on hers, his lips soft, his body warm.

"Logan," she breathed into his kiss, for the simple pleasure of speaking his name.

He cupped her breast in his palm, fingers slipping over wet skin. Her breath hitched. She made a low sound and arched into his touch.

He kissed the side of her throat, licked gently. Reina threaded her fingers through his hair, tears stinging her eyes.

A week before, the gesture would have been a wordless request. A week before, she'd have answered it with an invitation, and they'd have shared an even greater intimacy. She hated Eanruig all over again for taking that from her.

"Reina," he murmured on her skin. "Whatever you're thinking about ... stop."

She blinked water out of her eyes. "What?"

He sighed. "You had almost started to relax." He reached behind her and turned the shower off. "Come on. Come with me."

Dutifully, she stepped out onto the bathmat, shivering and dripping. He wrapped a towel around her, thick and luxurious, and used another to dry her hair.

Reina reached out and twined a lock of his own around her finger, scattering crystalline drops on the floor. He rubbed the towel over his hair, and over his limbs briefly, and then ushered her into the bedroom with a gentle hand at the small of her back.

He kept the lights dim, and all Reina saw of his room were rich colors, deep shadows. He patted the bed, bidding her climb onto it. She allowed him to direct her until she was stretched on her stomach, her wet hair darkening the duvet cover, a pillow cushioned beneath her cheek.

From the edge of her vision, she watched him move around the room, his gaze constant on her. Tension cast harsh shadows across his face.

"Logan," she murmured. "Stop fretting and come make love to me."

He stopped still, and his head jerked up. He stared at her, his nostrils flaring. "In a moment, *mo mhuirnín*."

The sounds of a drawer rolling open on casters and the contents being rummaged through filled the dark room. A moment, and then Logan grunted in victory. The bed shifted beneath his weight, and he settled close at her side.

"What—" Reina started, but the scent of orange and nutmeg interrupted her, and a cool dribble along her spine.

His hands followed, spreading scented oil across her skin with smooth strokes. His fingertips dug into her muscles, lingering in places where tension had gathered, easing when she gasped or tensed beneath him.

He spent a long time on her shoulders, until she pressed her face to the pillow and released a shuddering sigh, feeling limp and indulgent. He continued down her back, thumbs stroking broad circles over the muscles on either side of her spine. His lean, strong fingers sought out the places where tension had gathered, and gently unraveled the knots that abuse had tied in her muscles.

He helped her turn over. She lay, staring up at him through a half-lidded gaze. The faint light cast gentle shadows across his face. His hair fell forward, a riotous tumble, obscuring his features.

She reached for him, slid her fingers through the damp strands. He watched her through the curtain they formed, his gaze as soft and warm as candlelight.

He kissed her fingers and her wrist, kissed an aimless path up her arm. He held her hand between his like something precious and delicate. She curled the other behind his neck, urging him onward.

His breath skated across her shoulder, warm and damp. He skimmed oil-slick fingers along the line of her throat. The scent of spiced citrus enveloped her, drawing her deeper into the net that he wove around her with every touch, every kiss.

He curled his hand around her breast, fingers caressing her nipple, tongue caressing the other. She arched, hands twisting in his hair.

He continued until she was crying out, her body shuddering beneath his. Tension

cascaded through her in waves, undoing all the time he had spent easing her, but there was no pain or fear in it this time. She strained toward him, needing too many things to name, burning too hot for restraint.

He murmured to her, quiet syllables meant to soothe, but they fell on her like rain on an inferno. She writhed, hungry sounds clawing their way from her throat, until he held her to the bed with his weight and whispered quiet Gaelic against the skin behind her ear.

"Logan," she sobbed. "Please." She dragged his hips against hers.

"Wait." He reached for her wrists, pulling them away. "Reina—"

"No. I don't want to." She pressed her brow to his, shuddering. "Don't make me."

His hands sprang open like a trap, releasing her from guidance and restraint.

"Anything you want," he breathed.

She looked up at him, his hair burnished by the light, his face gilded by it. "You. I just want you."

"Don't you know, *mo mhuirín*?" He settled between her thighs, slipped easily into her. "You already have me."

She dragged his mouth down to hers.

He rocked within her, a slow, lazy pace, and she cried out against his mouth in frustration. He stroked her hair back from her face, whispering softly between kisses.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, locked her ankles behind him. Her feet pressed against his thighs, giving the leverage she needed to drive herself against him. She caught his lip between her teeth, bit roughly.

His breath caught, and released with a strangled groan. Fingers burrowed in her hair, he rose up on his elbows and stared down at her. "Don't rush it," he breathed, and pressed into her. She brought a fist to her mouth to stifle her cry. "Ah, Reina. We've all the time in the world."

"But I want—I need—"

"I will give you all of it." He brushed delicate kisses over her eyelids. "Don't you trust me?"

"Yes. But I—" He sank into her again, deeper, and the words scattered off the tip of her tongue.

"Just let me do this for you, *nighean*."

She curled her fingers into his shoulders and surrendered herself to the pace that he set, the direction that he led. Warmth spread over her skin, little fires ignited by his touch. She drew a hand down his chest, trying to share it.

Logan smiled at her as though he knew what she intended. He leaned into her touch, eyes half-closing like a sated cat.

She pushed herself up, lifting herself to him. She kissed his shoulder, licked along his throat, breathed softly against the tender skin beneath his jaw. He shivered, his hands fisting on the sheets beneath them.

"I want more," she breathed, gazing up at him, their faces impossibly close. "You promised."

He nodded and sank into her, a powerful thrust. Passion wrapped around her like a noose, closing her throat, stilling her breath. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him close. He pressed his cheek to hers, breath rasping against her ear. She arched into him, soft cries filling her throat, and marveled at the feel of his skin on hers, his body straining to bring her pleasure.

Passion filled her until it ignited every nerve ending and pushed at the boundary of her skin. Her hands raced over Logan, seeking more, and he drove into her with a fierce pace, giving it all back.

The pressure built, contained by the fragile barrier of her skin. She cried out against his mouth, chest heaving, body burning. Every motion she made was pure instinct, driven by the need that had suddenly become an imperative.

The fire coalesced within her, gathering to an incandescent point, and then exploded, rocking her body with the shockwave of pleasure. Her hands scrabbled at Logan's back, clinging, fighting for stability and purchase in a storm of pleasure. She gasped and cried, shuddered and trembled, until the fire banked itself within her to a quiet smolder, and she fell limp back onto the bed.

Logan held himself still within her, his body close against hers, arched above her like a shelter. Lazy and weak, she drew a hand down the curve of his back, fingers tracing the contours of his muscles.

*"Mo mhuirnín,"* he whispered, half wonder, half awe.

She twined her arms around his neck and held him close. His heart pounded against her chest, a steady, comforting beat that lulled her into a sated sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

"Teach me something," Reina mumbled into the pillow. "Something in Gaelic."

Logan's hand drifted across her stomach. His fingers were warm on her skin, his chest solid and comforting against her back. He nuzzled against her nape, and his breath brushed her skin when he spoke. "*Àillidh*," he murmured. He nudged the blanket down her shoulder and skimmed his lips along its curves. "It means beautiful."

She tried to repeat it, and turned her head to look at him. He smiled and drew her closer against him. "That's near enough."

She turned over, so that his arm draped over her waist and her chest pressed against his. The allure of his untidy hair, mussed with sleep, was too much for her to resist. She threaded her fingers through it, tugged on a lock purely to see him smile. "*Àillidh*," she breathed, and traced her thumb along the line of his cheek. "Tell me another."

His hand slipped along the curve of her lower back, tracing up to her shoulder blades. He followed her collarbone, brushed a light caress over the hollows behind them. "*Meallach*," he said. "Beguiling."

She kissed the bridge of his nose, the arch of his brow. "*Meallach*," she murmured against his skin.

He laughed softly, and buried his face in her curls.

She drew him back with a touch at his jaw, looked solemnly up at him. "Now teach me how to say thank you."

He closed his eyes briefly. "*Se do bheatha*."

Reina curled her arms behind his back and drew her hands over the scarred flesh. "*Se do bheatha*," she repeated, perfectly serious.

He drew a long breath. "For what, *mo mhuirnín*?"

She tucked her head beneath his chin, letting her body take comfort in the warmth of his skin on hers. "For helping."

His touch seemed hesitant, his voice unsure. "Did I?"

"Of course." She closed her eyes and held him tight, clinging to the fragile peace of the moment.

He had helped. But it couldn't last.

His hands tightened on her. "I wish you wouldn't," he murmured.

"Wouldn't what?"

His breath gusted across her skin. "I don't know. Do whatever it is that's making you so unhappy."

She drew back and smiled sadly up at him. She let her fingertips trace along the arch of his brow. "Was it this hard for you?" she asked on a whisper.

"Oh, *mo mhuirnín*." He pressed his brow to hers. "It was different. I was my sire's captive for over a hundred years, kept as a slave and a trophy. Was it worse? Who can say? It was different." He touched her cheek lightly. "At least you are amongst friends."

"So I should be grateful," she muttered bitterly, turning her face aside.

His chest rose sharply. "I would never presume—"

"Of course not." She sat up, wrapping her arms around her knees. "I should, I suppose. I *am* among friends. He hurt me, but for days, not years or centuries. I'm

immortal. I'm lucky, aren't I? I ought to be grateful." She looked up at Logan, feeling as though her heart were shattering within her chest. "Logan, I don't feel lucky."

He groaned and pulled her into his embrace. "You've been through a terrible thing, *cara*. Why should you be grateful that it was one terrible thing and not another? You've earned the right to your pain."

She closed her eyes, shuddering. "I don't want it."

He sighed, held her close, and said nothing.

Reina pushed his arms off of her and slid from the bed. He didn't follow her, but his gaze tracked her movements across the room. She dragged her fingers through her hair and stared at herself in the full-length mirror.

Faded scars dripped across her skin like spilled wax. She touched her fingers to each in turn, remembering the wounds that had dealt them. Some she couldn't; they were gone with the other memories that Eanruig had stolen from her. Some were lost in a haze of pain. Some recalled memories so clear and sharp that she caught her breath and had to turn away, shaking and nauseous.

"Will you tell me about it?" Logan asked quietly from the bed. "It might help."

"No," she choked. She wrapped her arms around herself. "I can't."

He nodded slowly, and didn't protest, but continued to watch her with his sad, dark gaze.

"My clothes are downstairs," she said unsteadily, lowering herself to perch on the end of the bed. "I don't want—"

"I'll get something for you." He rose and dressed, and moved to stand before her, his hands gentle on her cheeks. "Will you be all right?" he asked quietly.

"For two minutes by myself?" She forced a smile. "I'll be fine, Logan."

He shook his head, unconvinced, and kissed her brow. "Any requests?"

"Jeans. They're in the drawer—"

"I'll find them, *nighean*." He squeezed her shoulder briefly, and left her alone in the dark, shivering despite the bedroom's warmth.

He returned with a pile of clothes, and she dressed with hurried motions. Clothed, she stopped before the mirror again, her gaze drawn to herself as though to some catastrophe that held a terrible, morbid fascination. Her face was pale, her eyes large and dark from crying. She brushed fingers over her cheeks and thought she looked gaunt, though whether it was an effect of her vampirism or a consequence of Eanruig's maltreatment, she couldn't know.

She was still Reina, still recognizable, but between one thing and another, she didn't look at all like herself. She turned away from the mirror.

Logan was there, standing close and watching her with that same weighty silence. She closed her eyes and dragged her fingers through her hair. "What?"

"I need you to tell me what you can, *mo mhuirnín*."

She shook her head, her throat suddenly feeling too tight, her chest too small. "No, Logan. Not yet."

"It's already been half a day." His voice was calm, his reasoning implacable. "He'll be looking for you."

"He sleeps during the day. He probably doesn't even know I'm gone yet," she said, though she doubted whether it was true.

Logan drew a deep breath and nodded. "That's good," he murmured, and she realized



that he wasn't talking about what she told him, but the fact that she had told him anything at all. "What else, *nighean*? Did he tell you his name?"

"I don't want to talk about him, Logan. Not now. Not yet."

Frustration passed across his features. He watched her without speaking for several minutes. "He endangers my brood," he said, very quietly. "He endangers you."

She shook her head, knowing that it was all true, but unable to put herself back in those days. "I *can't*."

"What about Adri?" he asked softly. "I thought you wanted justice for her."

She opened her eyes and stared at him. "That's a low blow, Logan."

"I know. I'm sorry." He seemed to mean it. "It's true, though. What about her?"

"She's dead." Reina's voice wavered. She sat on the edge of the bed and fisted her hands in the blankets. "And I nearly died—I *did* die—and if I go there again ... if I face him again..." She scrubbed her face with her hands as she fought to control her ragged breathing. "I can't do it."

"Oh, Reina." He reached out and touched her cheek. "I'm not asking you to go back. I just need your help."

But he was. To answer his questions, she had to go back to that place, even if only in her mind.

"I can't, Logan. I'm sorry, I can't. Not for you. Not for the brood. Not for Adri. Not even for myself. I need time."

Logan lowered his head, as though in defeat. Reina waited, trembling from the tension. At last, he sighed and nodded. "Very well, then. As much time as you need." He took her hand and kissed her palm.

"Thank you," she said unsteadily.

He got to his feet, still holding her hand. "Will you come down? We've blood in the fridge, and I'm sure you must be hungry."

She nodded. "I'll come."

\* \* \* \*

Keachan still waited for Logan at the base of the stairs, though the rest of his brood had dispersed to their various activities. "Mac," he said grimly as Logan started down the stairs with Reina.

Logan took one look at the set of Keachan's expression, the bleakness in his eyes, and knew it was bad. He tightened his fingers around Reina's hand, reminding himself that no matter the news, it could have been worse.

Reina was safe. At least there was that.

"What do you have for me, Patrick?"

"The blood tests came back."

Next to him, Reina stiffened. She turned to him. "Blood tests? For what?"

Logan could not look at her. "The rogue who killed your friend was kin of mine. Which means—"

She stared at him. "No, that's wrong. No one from the brood was there when I was—"

He closed his eyes, bowed his head. "They wouldn't have had to be. All they'd have had to do was make a rogue." He looked at Keachan again and steeled himself for the truth. "Well, then. Best tell me, Patrick. Who is it?" *Which one of my kin has betrayed*

*me?*

Keachan cleared his throat. "It's not quite that simple, Mac. The tests—they're negative. All of them."

Logan stared at him. This was a clue, another piece of the puzzle, but he could not make it fit. "It didn't match any of them?"

Keachan shook his head.

"But it was a match to me?"

He nodded slowly. "I'm sorry, Mac. It can only mean one thing."

"What?" Reina demanded. She looked wildly between the two of them. "What's going on? I don't understand."

Logan led her into the living room and sat on the couch with a sigh. "The rogue's blood was a partial match to me. Not mine, but a relative's. I had thought it must have been created by one of my kin. But if that were so, these tests Patrick ran would have shown it. If the rogue is related to me, but to none of my kin, then..." He trailed off, unable to complete the thought for the horror that rose in him like gorge.

Reina stared at him a moment, then completed it herself. "Then you must have created it," she breathed.

"Is it possible?" Keachan asked.

Logan shook his head, despairing. "I do not see how. A rogue cannot survive long on its own. It could not have been more than a few days old when it killed Adriana." He stared up at Keachan. "I fed from no donor in that time. I do not see how this could have happened."

Reina sat slowly on the edge of the couch, her expression distant. "If your neighbors found out," she murmured. "If they heard about the tests, and put two and two together..."

He closed his eyes and leaned his brow against his hands. "It's a capital crime. There's no love lost between us. They would not be lenient."

She nodded. "So if someone wanted to get rid of you—"

"But how? Blood tests can't be faked."

"I don't know." She reached out and took his hand. "But if you say it couldn't have happened, I believe you."

He squeezed her hand, overcome with gratitude. He glanced up at Keachan. The other man nodded gravely.

"I've never known you to be careless, Mac. You've always had my faith, you know."

"I know. You've always been a friend to me, Patrick." He rose to his feet with a heavy sigh. Suddenly, he felt the weight of every one of his nearly five hundred years. "I'd best tell the others, then, before the rumors start flying."

\* \* \* \*

The hardest thing, she discovered, was being alone. When she had the others for company, it was easier to remember the way things had been, and to pretend they were that way still. Julia's easy chatter kept her distracted, while Bella's straightforward attitude made it seem—at least for a time—like a malady as easily overcome as a cold or a flu. Kynan's easy friendship cocooned her until she could not help but feel safe and protected, and even Alex's awkward hesitancy around her was better than solitude.

It was the brief moments alone, when one companion wandered away and another

had yet to take his place, that were difficult to bear. Alone, her mind dredged up unwanted, unpleasant memories, until even the sound of a door swinging open behind her made her jump and sent her heart racing.

She clung to Logan's side like a shadow, and in that first day, she said little, but let the normal patterns of life and conversation eddy around her. When dawn neared and exhaustion threatened to drag her down where she stood, she tugged Logan away to a quiet corner and whispered, "I don't want to sleep alone tonight. Please."

"Of course." He tucked her close against his chest, her head beneath his chin like two jigsaw pieces that were meant to fit together. For just a moment, she held him and let his indomitable strength buoy hers.

He made his excuses, and they made their way upstairs. She stripped and slid into his bed, and he followed after her. His arms wound about her, holding her tight. She leaned her cheek against his chest and let her eyes drift closed.

"Don't leave me," she breathed, and wondered if he would chide her for such a foolish request. Once the sun rose, he could stay or leave as he liked and she'd be insensible to the difference until night fell again.

"I'm not going anywhere until you wake, *mo mhuirín*," he said into her hair. His hands brushed gentle caresses over her back. "I'll be right here."

She tangled her limbs with his and, reassured, allowed sleep to claim her.

\* \* \* \*

She woke to the feel of his arms around her, his heart beating steadily beneath her cheek. She shifted, and he unwound his arms from about her so she could sit up. He brushed a curl from her cheek and watched her with a quiet, solemn gaze.

"What?" she asked, swinging around so that her feet hung from the edge of the mattress.

His fingers rested lightly on the small of her back. "I wish you would talk to me. I wish you would tell me what you're thinking. How you're feeling."

She closed her eyes and shivered. "Not yet, Logan."

He was quiet a moment. "Very well."

She looked at him over her shoulder, hating the coolness that had slipped into his voice. "I can't. I *can't*."

"I understand." He lowered his gaze and drew his hand away. "It's only that I am very much in the dark here." He glanced up at her, and his gaze smoldered with restrained emotions. "And I am terrified of pushing you too far."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Just push. If you go too far, I'll push back."

He grimaced. "That's hardly comforting."

"*Logan*."

"I'm sorry." He sat up and drew her closer to him. "There are things you need to learn, *mo mhuirín*. Tracking. Hunting." He hesitated. His fingers knotted together. "Feeding."

She swallowed the lump that lodged in her throat. "I thought you guys drank from bags."

"When we can, but what if our supply runs out? You do not want to wait to learn until necessity demands it."

"I suppose not." She sighed in defeat. "All right. Let's do it."

There was a moment of startled silence. "Truly? *Mo mhuirín*, if you are not sure, you need only say so—"

"I'm not sure. But let's do it anyway." She slid off the bed and scrounged around for clothes. "In for a penny, right?"

They dressed, and he followed her downstairs. She continued into the kitchen to fill a glass with water. "So how do you intend to teach me?" she asked as she swirled the water around in the cup, letting the ice clink against the sides. "I don't imagine there are many mortals around willing to offer themselves up for practice."

"No," he agreed. "For teaching, it will work best to have you learn on me, so I can give instruction."

"Oh." She frowned out the kitchen window, into the darkness where thick clouds obscured the stars overhead. She drank her water, and didn't speak again until she'd drained it. "What's that going to do for my hunger?"

"It will nourish you for a short time. Not like mortal blood. It couldn't sustain you for any real length of time."

"Okay." She dumped the ice out of the cup and put it in the dishwasher, then turned to him. "So how do we do this?"

He motioned her over, and drew her to kneel with him on the kitchen floor. "Wrist first," he said, and turned his arm up before her. "You'll use this mostly with willing donors. It's difficult to maintain if your prey is struggling at all."

The idea of someone beneath her, struggling, frantic, made her shiver with distaste. She forced the thought aside and laced her fingers with Logan's so she could hold his arm steady. She pressed her fingers to the inside of his wrist until she'd found the place where his pulse beat strongest. "Here," she said, and looked up at him for confirmation.

He nodded.

With one last, deep breath for strength, she closed her mouth around his wrist and pressed the points of her fangs to the vein. But when she sank them deep, he made a noise of discomfort, and only a few drops welled into her mouth.

She withdrew them and tried again, locating the vein and holding his arm immobile so it wouldn't shift before she pressed her fangs to the spot. This time, blood flooded her mouth. She swallowed it quickly out of instinct, but when she shifted to steady her grip, she slipped free again, and before she could return the two small wounds had closed over and disappeared without a fading scar to mark their place.

She sat back and released her breath with frustration. "I'm sorry. It's just, you heal so quick—"

"It's all right," he soothed. "Here. Try this." He shifted her around so they knelt perpendicular to one another, and his arm was at a less awkward angle before her. Again, she felt for his pulse and positioned her fangs, and this time when she bit his blood flooded her mouth, hot and tasting of iron and salt. She swallowed once, then again. She felt the blood slide down her throat and warm her stomach, like a hot drink sipped on a cold winter's night. Her fingers tightened around Logan's, and her mouth sucked rhythmically at the wound while her teeth held it open. Logan made a soft sound that might have been protest or encouragement, and his hand came up to brush over her hair.

Abruptly, she was gripped with another memory, her first. Eanruig's arm against her lips, his blood filling her mouth, his hand stroking with such tenderness over her hair as she fed. Her stomach knotted, and she threw herself away from Logan and scrambled

backwards across the kitchen floor, gasping. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I can't." She drew her thighs to her chest and pressed her brow to her knees. Her body shuddered as nausea roiled within her. "Oh, God."

He knelt before her and reached to touch her, but she shied away and he drew back. "What is it, *cara*?"

"I'm sorry." She pressed her face into her hands and struggled just to breathe. "It's just—it's memories. When I was with him—When I woke. He fed me."

He muttered something venomous beneath his breath. But when she raised her head, his words softened. "I'm sorry, *cara*. It was too soon."

She nodded and dragged herself to her feet. "Yeah. I think so." She reached for him. He hesitated a moment, his gaze searching hers, then took her hand. "Thanks for trying."

He drew her close and held her tight. "Christ, *mo mhuirín*, I'm sorry for what he's done to you."

She held him in return, unable to speak through the tears that clogged her throat.

\* \* \* \*

Logan waited until Reina had fallen asleep—not the deep unconsciousness that would claim her once the sun rose, but a wild, restless sleep born of emotional exhaustion. Once he had seen her safely to bed, he sought Brett out in the room he shared with Alex. He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Brett," he said. "Tell me about your sire."

Brett looked up swiftly. "*You're* my sire."

"Foster," Logan corrected. "Tell me about the vampire who turned you."

Brett's brows drew together. He stared down at his lap. "I already told you—"

"You told me where he lives. You told me he's allied with Weres. I need more than that."

He let out his breath in a rush. "Why?" he demanded, suddenly livid. "I told you that so you could find your girl. You've got her now. Why do you need to know more?"

"Because he is still a threat. None of us are safe. Tell me, how many are there in his brood?"

Brett scowled, but grudgingly admitted, "There are six of us." He grimaced. "*Were*. Five now, I suppose."

Logan nodded, and reached out to pat his shoulder encouragingly. "How old?"

"Centuries."

Logan hissed between his teeth. "So old? Damn, what does he need with *my* territory?"

Brett looked alarmed, as though he thought Logan meant him to answer that question, too. "Never mind," Logan assured him. "What else?"

"If you're going to try something," Brett said miserably, "you want to do it at night."

Logan's eyes narrowed. "He'll be awake then."

"Yes, but the Weres are asleep. You won't be able to use that trick to get past Cosette a second time."

Logan nodded, thoughtful. Which was the greater challenge? Evading a pack of Weres, or surprising a centuries-old sire vampire in his own home before the sun rose?

A harsh sound from Brett drew his attention back. The boy sat curled in a ball, his knees drawn to his chest, glowering at Logan. "You're going to do something *stupid*," he

spat. "You're going to get yourself *killed*. You promised me your protection."

Logan sighed. "I am trying to provide it, Brett."

"He's an empath, you know." Brett threw it out like a gauntlet, a challenge meant to intimidate him away from his course. "He'll know you're coming. It's suicide."

"Do not fear," Logan said, rising, and clasped him on the shoulder. "I am not so desperate as to be willing to throw my life into an enemy's hands."

\* \* \* \*

Logan dropped the subject for the rest of the night, giving Reina the freedom to spend the time as she wished. But the next night, shortly after she woke, he told her, "Dress warm. We're going out."

She looked up at him, startled. "Out where?" Panic stirred beneath her breast. Here, within his house, in the company of his brood, she was secure within the illusion that she was the same as she'd ever been. She was a friend to some, only acquaintance to others, but she was welcomed and accepted.

But when she stepped outside those walls, she entered a world that had turned against her. She'd fought prejudice against preternaturals for as long as she'd been aware of their existence, but always as a bystander. Never before had that animosity been directed at *her*.

"I'm not sure," she whispered.

He glanced away for a moment, then looked back. "We're going out," he repeated, gentle but firm. "It's cold. Bundle up."

"More lessons?"

He inclined his head in acknowledgment. "None so intense as the last, I hope."

"Well, there's that, at least." She tugged on her boots and retrieved a long wool overcoat, thick scarf, and knit hat from the closet.

Logan had donned his leather jacket and draped a scarf about his neck. She eyed him as she drew a pair of gloves from her coat's pockets. "So much for bundled."

"I'm more accustomed to the cold." He held the door open for her. "Shall we?"

The first blast of frigid air against her face made her thankful he'd insisted on the layers. Bryson winters were harsh enough while the sun was up. In the depths of the night, it felt like she'd just stepped out into the arctic. She tugged her scarf up and hurried out to the car.

"Where are we going?" she asked as they pulled away from the house. "Logan, talk to me."

"The Green." He glanced at her. "It's a tracking lesson, *mo mhuirnín*, that's all."

She settled back in the seat, somewhat mollified, and as the road passed beneath their wheels, tried to think if anything had happened at Eanruig's that might cause this lesson to end as badly as the first. To her relief, she couldn't think of anything.

Logan parked on campus, and they walked together into the shadowed, deserted Green. Wind blew through the trees, rattling branches together and sending a chill down Reina's spine. She took a quick side-step, bringing her closer to Logan, and slipped her gloved hand into his as they walked. His presence kept some of the chill at bay.

He stopped at the center of the Green, where they stood surrounded by barren trees and the faint, distant glow of lamps that lit the campus paths. He dropped her hand and took hold of her shoulders, turning her away from him.

"Three students have been through here in the past hour," he murmured. "I want you to show me where the man went."

She twisted, trying to look at him over her shoulder. "But how—"

He turned her forward again, gentle and implacable. "Use your senses, Reina. They'll tell you more than you think."

She fought back frustration and closed her eyes. Logan's presence behind her was palpable, although they only touched where his hands rested on her coat. She dropped her shields and grounded, reaching out for any sign of the students he said had been there.

She had barely begun when his fingers tightened on her shoulders, drawing her back. "No." His tone allowed no room for argument "Not your empathy."

She pulled away and turned to face him. "I'm blind without it, Logan."

"I know." He touched her cheek briefly. "Open your eyes, *mo mhuirín*. Use your ears. Breathe deep. Your empathy is a crutch. You must learn to see without it."

An instinctive protest rose to her lips. She battled it back and reminded herself that his only goal was to help. She could play along for an hour.

Leaving her senses open while searching for something ephemeral went against every instinct she'd ever developed. She ought to be closing them off, sinking deeper into herself so that her empathy could range undistracted. To have her eyes open, her mind alert, her skin aware of the slight weight of Logan's fingers and the icy caress of the night air, seemed counterintuitive. How could she focus with so much to distract her?

She drew a deep breath to steady herself and something came to her on the wind, a subtle scent so faint it should have been imperceptible. She took another breath, drew it deeper and held it longer.

It was the sharp, bitter scent of alcohol, softened by vanilla and jasmine. Perfume. And feminine enough that it was surely a woman's.

She took several more deep breaths, until the scent was familiar and she could move past it. A man, Logan had said. It was his scent that she needed to find.

Her feet carried her, though she had no awareness of deciding to walk. Logan trailed a step behind her as she crossed the Green, following scents so faint only her subconscious recognized them, until at last she caught a hint of sweat and aftershave on the wind. She turned, following it without thought as it meandered through the Green and then out, onto the paved paths.

She stumbled to a stop when, abruptly, the trail went cold. The scent, faint to begin with, disappeared. She looked around, but there was no branching path that he might have turned down. She looked back at Logan dubiously. *Show me where the man went*, he said, and near as she could tell, he'd come here and then vanished. But that didn't make any sense at all. Surely there was more.

Logan smiled down at her through the darkness. "Trust your instincts, *nighean*."

She looked down the path again, and tasted the air. Nothing. But her instincts said that he had to have gone somewhere. He hadn't stepped off of the path and into the ether. She squared her shoulders and continued ahead.

Logan's fingers curled around her arm, stopping her. She turned back and twisted out of his hold. "Now what?"

"Don't overthink it. What was your first instinct when the trail died?"

"That he must have turned off somewhere." She gestured impatiently. "But look, there's nowhere—"

He drew her close against his side and pointed off into the bushes. She didn't see anything at first. But then she noticed, through the skeletal branches, the flat black and pale stripes of a parking lot. Several of the branches had been broken and hung limply, like snapped limbs. The mulch at the base of the plants had been disturbed, packed down by habitual travel.

Reina sighed and turned off onto the shortcut. "They're not supposed to do this, you know."

"I'll see that the dean hears of it, if you like." Laughter lurked in Logan's voice. She glanced back. His lips twitched.

"Very funny." She ducked beneath a low branch and stepped down onto the asphalt. Logan emerged after her and brushed a bit of detritus from her coat. "That's cheating."

"You're hunting, *mo mhuirnín*. How many people do you expect will play fair when they fear for their lives?"

She made a face and followed the trail out into the parking lot. "You feed on willing donors and bagged blood. What's the likelihood that I'll be forced to hunt like this?"

He was quiet a moment. Then, beneath his breath, he murmured, "Better than you think."

She ignored him and continued forward. Halfway across the lot, the trail died again. She turned to Logan. "He got in his car here. You don't expect me to trail that, too, do you?"

Smiling, he shook his head. "No. But tell me, where do you think he was going?"

Reina stared at him. "How do you expect me to figure that out without my empathy?"

"It doesn't take empathy, *nighean*. Just reason."

She tugged the brim of her hat down over her ears and hunched against the chill. "Yeah, well, I'm fresh out," she muttered, kicking at a loose stone.

Logan was silent for several minutes, but she could feel the weight of his gaze on the back of her neck. "Try to control your temper," he said at last. "It'll only hinder you."

"For God's sake, Logan." She threw her hands up and turned on him. "You drag me out here without so much as a by-your-leave, you give me this stupid task and then tell me I have to turn off my greatest strength to do it, and now you expect me to be able to delve into his psyche based on nothing more than smell? What on earth is the point?"

His eyes glittered like obsidian, dark and hard. "The point, Reina, is to learn to rely on all your senses, not just one. They're stronger now than they've ever been, and you need to learn to use them."

"By handicapping myself?"

"If I had let you, you'd have grabbed his residual and taken off, and never spared a thought for anything else. You're stronger for this, *mo mhuirnín*."

"No." She wrapped her arms around herself and shook her head stubborn. "I'm weakened. It's part of me, Logan. You can't just take that away. It's all I've got."

He gave her a bewildered look. "Not anymore."

"Stop." She drew a sharp breath. "Just stop."

His hand fell to his side, and his eyes widened with surprise. "Stop what, *mo mhuirnín*?"

"Trying to make me into something I'm not."

He started to reach for her, but reconsidered. His hand dropped again. "I can't change



what you are, Reina," he whispered. "It's done, and there's naught to be done about it. All I can do is teach you how to survive it."

She stared up at him, feeling sick and panicked. "That's all I have left, Logan. It's all that—" She broke off and turned away as emotion rose to choke her.

He touched her shoulder. "It's all what?" he asked gently.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Forget it. Let's go home."

They walked back together, and she let him hold her hand. But try though she might, she couldn't follow her own advice. The thought had come, unbidden, and now she was stuck with it.

*It's all that is left of me.*

If he took it away, she was nothing but what Eanruig had made her.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Lethargy dragged at her, though dawn was still hours away when they returned. She hung her coat in the closet and turned for her bedroom like a homing pigeon seeking its roost, blind to all thoughts but those of the cool sanctuary behind its walls, where she could be anyone and anything she cared to be.

She closed the door behind her and switched the lights on.

Someone had erected a banner across the wall. Rainbow-hued block letters blazoned, "Welcome home" above her bed. Numb, Reina crossed the room. She reached out to touch the banner, fingertips brushing across the waxy lines drawn by crayons. A handful of signatures had been scrawled in the corner: Kynan's name and Bella's, and Alex and Julia's.

Reina sat down on the bed and stared up at it, blinking tears out of her eyes. They rolled down her cheeks and dripped off her chin, growing in strength until they blinded her. She covered her face with her hands and wept for all that that sign meant.

Logan found her like that, weeping silently to herself, tears dripping through her fingers. He crossed the room in two quick strides and pulled her into his embrace without pausing to give her time to balk. She held on to him, pressing her face to his shirt and staining the fabric with her tears. He held her, gliding his hands over her back and whispering meaningless comfort in her ear.

"Ah, *cara*. Please talk to me. Tell me what's wrong."

She shook her head and wiped futilely at her wet cheeks.

"I don't know. I don't. It's a lovely sign. It's so sweet of everyone to—to—"

He brushed his thumb across her cheek. "Then why these tears?"

She drew a shuddering breath. "Everyone here is so nice. I should be perfectly happy to call it home."

He glanced at the sign above her head, then back to her tearstained face. "But you're not."

"It's not my home," she cried. "It wasn't supposed to be. It was just supposed to be temporary."

"Ah, *mo mhuirnín*." He took her face in his hands and dusted kisses across her features. "You weren't unhappy, before—"

"I know." She drew back and dried her palms on her jeans. "It shouldn't change anything. It shouldn't, but it does."

He watched her in silence for a long time. "Do you not want to be here?" he asked at last, a bare thread of sound.

"I want—" Her voice caught. She dropped down onto the edge of her bed and scrubbed her face with her hands. "Oh God, Logan. I just want to be *me* again."

He knelt before her and took her hands in his. His fingers squeezed hers gently. "You are the same woman you have always been."

She gave a sad laugh. "I wish that were true."

"Isn't it?"

She stared down at him. "Are you still the same man you were in Scotland five hundred years ago?"

He grimaced and looked away. "Time changes us all, Reina. Even humans can't escape that. I am older, and wiser—"

"That's not what I mean."

He sighed and looked down at their hands, curled together. "I don't know. I don't have an answer for you, *mo mhuirín*."

"You don't think the man you were back then would be appalled at what you are now?"

He looked up at her, suddenly tense. He released his hold on her. "Is that what you are? Appalled at this creature you have become?"

"No. Damn it." She reached out and grabbed his wrists, holding him so he couldn't retreat. "I'm not appalled. That's not my point. I'm *different*, Logan. I've spent twenty-five years being this person, and now I'm not anymore."

He shook his head slowly, his brows drawing together. "But you are. You're the same woman, with the same experiences, the same hopes and fears. What's changed but your diet?"

Reina gave a sharp sigh and slid away from him, across the bed. "All right. I'd like to be alone for a while, please."

He reared back in surprise. "Reina—"

She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, closing herself off to him. "I just want to be alone. That's all."

He closed his eyes and hung his head. "Very well," he said quietly. "If that's what you want." He rose and turned away. At the threshold, he hesitated. "You know where to find me, if you change your mind."

"I do." She kept her chin up and her voice strong, at least until he closed the door behind him. She crossed the room to the switch and turned the light off, then sat on the bed in the dark, trying to pretend that nothing had changed. But she could still see the banner's bright letters blazoned across her memory, cheerfully welcoming her into a family she'd never been given the opportunity to choose for herself.

\* \* \* \*

She slept alone that night, and suffered terrible nightmares, in which she found herself lost in a labyrinth, running for her life with Eanruig at her heels. Just when she thought all was lost and he would overtake her, Logan stepped out of the shadows.

"Help me!" she cried. "Please! I can't do this on my own."

He held a glass of water out to her, balanced in the palm of his hand. "Drink this. It will save you."

She snatched it up and drank it greedily, terrified of the nightmare closing in on them. The first sip tasted innocuous, but the second was viscous and bitter. She choked on it and spit it out. She looked down into the cup and saw that the water had become blood, thick and crimson. She threw the cup down and backed away from Logan, staring at him in terror. Already, she could feel the change sweeping through her body, transforming her, destroying her.

"You said you would help," she cried out. "I didn't want this."

She slid down the wall, curling into a ball at its base. Logan came to stand over her, holding the glass in his hand once again. "What's wrong?" he asked, and sounded truly bewildered. "You're better this way."

She awoke, gasping and retching, curled into a ball as her empty stomach tried to purge itself. She dragged herself out of bed, pulled on clothes with trembling hands, and went out to the kitchen to get something—anything—to clear the taste of copper from her mouth.

Someone had made coffee, and the aroma of it filled the kitchen. She drew a deep breath of it to steady herself. She filled a mug with the dark brew and drank it black. The bitterness filled her mouth, chasing away the memory of blood. She drained the cup to the bottom, refilled it, and only then did she add her customary cream and sugar.

Footsteps sounded on the floor behind her. She stiffened and turned, bracing herself to face Logan and at a loss for what to say to him. But it was Kynan who turned the corner. His bright smile and cheery greeting died as he swept his gaze over her.

"God. You look like death warmed over."

She dropped into a chair and rested her head in her hands. "I feel about the same."

He sat down next to her and stole a sip of her coffee. "Want to talk?" His gaze was open and concerned, but its weight on her still felt like a burden.

"No. I really don't." She slid the cup over to him and got to her feet. "Where's Logan?"

A shadow flickered briefly across Kynan's expression. "He went to see Pat at the station. He was hoping to be finished before you woke. You could call him—"

She shook her head quickly. "No. It's fine." She looked around at the tidy kitchen. The thought of spending the rest of the night there, in that house, made a sudden sense of claustrophobia wash over her.

She swore beneath her breath. "Kynan. Are you busy tonight?"

He glanced up sharply, as though warned by something in her tone. "No. Not at all. What do you need?"

"I need—" She looked around wildly, blind to everything but the encroaching sense of panic. "I need to get out of here."

Alarm flashed across his face. She held up a hand to forestall him.

"I just need some breathing space. I need to feel *normal* again."

He nodded slowly. "How can I help?"

She could have hugged him for his simple, unquestioning generosity. "Just... Come for a drive with me?" Shivers stole across her skin. She wrapped her arms around herself. "I don't much feel like going out on my own."

A rueful smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "No, I don't imagine you do." With a hand on her shoulder, he led her out to the entryway. He retrieved his coat from the closet, and handed hers over. She bundled herself up against the cold and chose a rainbow-striped scarf for the sheer absurdity of it.

"Can we take your car?" she asked him. "I lost my keys when I was—"

He nodded quickly. "Sure." He snatched his keys from the hook by the door and opened the door. A blast of frigid air made them both grimace. "After you."

The city streets were dark and empty, the stars glimmering overhead. Kynan propped a heel on the dash and watched Reina as she drove. His gaze was solemn and thoughtful, but he didn't speak until she pulled into the apartment parking lot.

"Running isn't really going to help anything, you know," he said, a whisper in the night.

"I know." She parked and killed the engine, tossed the keys to him. "But I can't think

in that house."

He followed her across the lot, up the stairs to her apartment on the third floor. She stood on tip-toes and fished the spare key off of the lip of the doorframe.

She flicked the lights on as she stepped inside, but the apartment still felt cold and empty. There was an empty glass abandoned on the kitchen counter, dishes in the drain that she hadn't had time to put away before their flight. She tossed the key on the bar and shrugged out of her coat.

"Now what?" Kynan asked.

"I don't know." She pressed her fists to her brow. "I don't know! But I need to be somewhere I know. I need to be somewhere that's *mine*."

"Okay." He took a glass from the cupboard, filled it from the tap, and returned to sit on the arm of the couch. "You've got that. Now what do you need?"

Reina sank down into the armchair with a dejected sigh. "My mortality?"

"Oh, *annwl*." Kynan reached across the coffee table to take her hands. "You'll only break your heart if you yearn for the impossible."

She swallowed back a fresh wave of despair. "I didn't ask for this, Kynan. I don't want it." She pressed her fingers to her eyes. "And *don't* start on me about how it's a blessing in disguise, and how I've got all these years ahead of me now, and I won't get sick or hurt anymore." Her voice broke. "It's not a gift."

"No," he agreed quietly. "When it comes like this, it's a burden. There's nothing to do but bear it, though."

"I know. I'm trying." She leaned her brow on the heels of her hands. "It's not just that he killed me. Kynan, he took my *life*."

He offered her the water silently. She accepted it, gulped it down to ease the empty ache in her stomach. "Maybe," he murmured, brushing the backs of his fingers over her cheek. "But only as much as you let him take of it."

She shook her head. "I don't follow."

He chewed on the edge of his lip, frowning. "I know there's no point in telling you to forget it happened. But if you could try to pretend... It'll help."

She raised a brow, dubious.

"I mean it. You're a vampire now, and that changes a lot. But it doesn't change everything. You're still Reina. Hold on to that, and it'll help with the rest."

She stared at him, threads of memory and suggestion beginning to weave themselves together in her mind. "Kynan. What day is it?"

His expression clouded with confusion. "It's Tuesday evening."

Hope swelled within her, so thick she could hardly breathe. "Want to make another stop?"

He looked at her for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "Where are we going?"

"To reclaim my life."

\* \* \* \*

"Miss Campbell. You're late."

Reina glanced at the clock as she rushed across the stage to snag an open seat at the front of the lecture hall. "Two minutes," she muttered to Kynan, making a face. But then, Professor Claxton always had been one to split hairs.

Absurdly, the literature professor's familiar irascibility made her grin. She schooled it

into a properly penitent expression and murmured, "Sorry, Professor."

He harrumphed, pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose, and turned his attention back to the whiteboard. Reina pulled a notebook from her bag, passed a spare to Kynan to keep up appearances, and joined the throng of students racing to take notes on Claxton's lightning-quick lecture. The smell of ink and dry-erase marker settled over the hall.

The bindings cinched around Reina's heart began to ease, soothed by the familiar rhythms and obligations of schoolwork. She breathed deep, enjoying the opportunity to do so without feeling like she was choking on her own fear, and took the most diligent notes she ever had in her life.

Three hours of Claxton's dry monotone later and half a dozen pages of notes on the role of the supernatural in literature and its political ramifications had Reina feeling more like herself than she had in weeks. When he dismissed the class, she slung her bag over her shoulder and led Kynan into the flood out the back of the hall.

Kynan eyed her from the edge of his vision as they snaked through the crowd. "You look like you're having a ball."

She shrugged one shoulder and rooted through the bottom of her bag for spare change. "Claxton's tough, but he's insightful. It's fascinating, isn't it?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Maybe it would be if I hadn't been living it for the past two hundred years."

She conceded the point with a grin, then triumphantly withdrew a handful of crumpled dollar bills from the depths of her bag. "Want a Coke? My treat."

They spilled out into the night with the rest of the students. Kynan's eyes glittered in the darkness. "I'd love one."

Less than half a dozen steps out of the building, a soft voice came from behind them. "Reina."

She froze. A student bumped into her and swore, but she spared him no thought. She raised her gaze to Logan's, burning like an inferno in his stony face.

"That," he said, biting off each word as though it tasted bitter, "was incredibly stupid."

Without taking her eyes from Logan, she pulled the car keys out of her pocket and passed them over to Kynan. "I guess you're driving home alone tonight," she said. "Looks like I've got a ride."

Kynan wrapped his fingers around the keys, then hesitated, glancing between them. "Nye—"

"I will see you back home, *cara*." Logan's voice softened as he turned his attention from Reina.

Kynan huffed out a breath and shoved the keys in his pocket. "Don't fuck this one up, Nye," he muttered before he turned and stomped away.

Logan watched him leave, then turned his gaze back on Reina, stony and silent. She frowned and split away from the crowd, circling the building to the vending machines. She didn't doubt that Logan would dog her steps no matter where she went. "I had class," she said, as though it wasn't obvious. "There's enough I'm going to have to find a way to make up as it is."

"Did it not occur to you that if someone wanted to find you, this would surely be the first place they'd look?"

She glanced up at him, cloaked in shadows and as imposing as a nightmare. "I suppose you're proof of that." She straightened the bills and fed them into the vending machine. It whirled and groaned, and at last dispensed her drink in the tray at the bottom. She crouched to retrieve it.

"Reina—God damn it." He snatched the bottle from her hands and stared at it as though he'd never seen a soda before. "You don't need this."

"No." She grabbed it back. Before Eanruig's, she'd have had no hope of retrieving it if he meant to keep it from her, but now, they were evenly matched. She dropped it into her shoulder bag, heedless of the havoc that condensation would wreak on handwritten notes. "No one ever *needs* a soda, Logan. They just want one."

He watched her in silence, his expression slowly softening to bewilderment and pity.

"Reina," he murmured, brows furrowing. "*Nighean*, you don't need any of it anymore."

"For God's sake." She shoved her hair behind her ears and stalked off down the path to the Green, where few students cared to walk after dark and they might be assured of at least a moderate amount of privacy. "Do you think I'm not aware of that? I'm halfway to a Master's, you know. I'm not *completely* ignorant." She pulled the bottle from her bag again, twisted the cap off, and took a long drink, just to prove her point. "But I've taken physiology classes. I know damn well that it's not going to hurt me—not any more than all that coffee you and your brood chug down hurts you."

He stalked beside her like a brooding shadow, looking more like a creature of legend and myth than he ever had before. "There is a point to the coffee," he said at length. "A physiological benefit. What's the point of this?"

"Consider it a security blanket, if you like." She took another drink, closed the lid, and put it back in her bag. "Or habit, if that suits you better."

"Reina." He stopped, and took her arm. She jerked her chin up, meeting his gaze through the weak light of the lamps along the path. "God help me, I know it's hard. But you cannot change what you have become. Clinging to what was—it'll only lead to grief."

"How do you figure that, Professor?"

He looked down at her, eyes darkened with grief. "How do you expect to be able to attend classes?"

"I attended this one, didn't I? I'll take night classes, and do independent study for any that are only offered during daylight hours."

"And when your hunger comes? Do you think you have the strength to sit in a room with dozens of mortals, surrounded by the smell of their blood, and not give yourself away?"

She thrust her hands into her pockets and kept walking. He followed after her staunchly. His quiet disapproval, scathing even when he said nothing at all, set her teeth on edge. She wished he would leave her alone and let her be the girl she used to be, just this once. But even with vampire strength, she couldn't outrun him.

The path they walked dumped them back out onto the main thoroughfare through campus, lightly-populated by students trodding to or from their late-night classes. Reina glanced at Logan, and by wordless agreement, they both shelved the argument.

She reached for his hand. He took it, and traced feather-light lines upon her skin.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, his tone carefully modulated to show only curiosity and concern.

"A little," she admitted. But despite his worry she'd been so focused on her lecture notes and the thrill of being back in the classroom that she hadn't even noticed the scent of the others around her.

"Will you last until we get home?"

She raised a sardonic brow. "I think I can manage."

The congeniality between them was as sharp and brittle as ice. Reina wrapped her arms around herself, chilled by the night air and Logan's silent disapproval. She followed him to his car demurely, the recalcitrant child being brought home to be thoroughly admonished, and then embraced once more within the comfort and security of the fold.

Just the thought of it made her want to gag.

He didn't speak to her, even when they'd parked and she followed him into the house. With the door closed and the argument safely insulated from any mortal ears, he still didn't say anything, only stood in the foyer beside her, vibrating with tension.

Reina drew a deep breath and forged into the dangerous waters ahead of her. "Look, let's just forget the logistics, all right? If I take night classes and make sure I eat beforehand, there shouldn't be a problem."

"All right," he said, far too reasonable. "Let's." He turned, eyes blazing with anger and fear. "*What were you thinking?*"

Alarm turned her mouth as dry as sand. She couldn't have spoken a word, even if she'd had an answer for him.

"It has been less than a week since you escaped from your captor, beaten and abused and frightened out of your wits. Have you forgotten that?"

Anger rushed through her, and she found she had words after all. "Of course I haven't—"

"Then tell me *why*, Reina. Why would you go running about, practically begging him to find you again? Surely you know he must be looking for you."

"Maybe he is." She dropped her bag to the tile and stood toe-to-toe with him. "But I'm not going to spend the rest of my life cowering in fear." Kynan's words to her spun through her head, a refrain that she couldn't ignore. "He killed me, Logan, and God damn it, I'm not going to let him take the rest of me, too."

The harsh angles of his expression softened. "You have hundreds of years ahead of you," he said with quiet bewilderment, "maybe a thousand. Decades and centuries to build the life you desire. Why would you throw that opportunity away with incaution?"

"I don't want this, Logan! I didn't ask for it." Tears stung her eyes, an unexpected betrayal. She dropped onto the bottom of the stairs, arms braced across her knees. "I don't want to rely on the passage of time to deal with my problems for me. That's not who I am."

"It is now, though," he said gently.

"It's not," she snapped, hating him for trying to force this on her. "That, at least, I get to choose for myself. Maybe it is stupid, but I have to risk it." She stood. On the second step, she was nearly his height. "I'm not dropping out."

He tried twice to speak, and both times stopped himself. At last, he simply grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her forehead hard. He pressed his cheek to her brow. "Then go, if you must. But know that you take a piece of my heart with you. Be careful with it."

\* \* \* \*



It was not, of course, quite that easy.

He helped her arrange for a leave of absence from those classes that daylight kept from her, and put in a good word for her with those professors who might be amenable to scheduling independent study. And when she headed out to class two days later, she found him waiting in the foyer, coat draped over his arm and keys in hand.

"Oh God," she groaned. "Are you serious?"

"Quite." And he led her out to the car, and drove her to school like a child. Her cheeks burned for the rest of the night.

They only burned hotter when, halfway through her lecture, she glanced at the clock in the back of the hall and noticed him sitting in the last row, as incongruous as a purebred at the pound.

When class let out, she didn't wait for him. He caught up with her halfway to the parking lot.

"How long do you think it will take before someone thinks to wonder why a man with a Ph.D. in sociology is auditing a survey class?" she demanded. "Damn it, Logan, you're going to get me in trouble."

He raised his brows at her and said, quite mildly, "And you, *mo mhuirín*, are going to get yourself killed. You'll have to forgive me if I try to prevent your folly."

\* \* \* \*

Reina opened the sliding glass door that led to the backyard. Brett sat on one of the deck chairs, his back to her, the glowing screen of the laptop he balanced on his thighs casting him in silhouette. His shoulders hunched at the sound of the door sliding in its track, but he gave no other indication that he was aware of her presence.

"Hey." She stopped a few paces away. "I need help studying."

"Go ask your boyfriend," he snapped.

"I would." She was careful to keep her tone light. "But the last time I asked someone else for help, you sulked for a week."

He snapped the laptop closed and glared at her over his shoulder. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'd like to be alone."

"Mmm." She crouched a few feet away from him. "See, you are sulking. The only time you ever seclude yourself like this is when—"

"You don't know me." He set the laptop aside and surged to his feet, hands fisted at his sides. "Stop talking like you do."

She didn't stand, and she didn't rise to his bait. "I do, though," she said softly, looking up at him. She tried to ignore the fury that twisted his expression. "I know you like cheesy sci-fi movies, and quirky humor. I know you like Thai food, but only when it's spicy enough to set your mouth on fire—"

"I like blood now, actually," he interrupted. His words dripped with venom.

"Yeah," Reina said, and sighed. "Me, too. But just because one thing's changed doesn't mean anything else has. You're still you, just as much as I'm still me. And I could really use a study buddy." She held her flashcards out toward him, a stack of index cards hole-punched and strung on a ring clip. "Fifteen minutes, that's all."

He glared at her, and snatched the cards from her hand. He flipped through them, his brows drawn together. "I can't even *pronounce* this."

Reina glanced over his shoulder. "Sophrosyne. It's Greek." Her lips quirked with a

wry smile. "It's the idea of self-control through self-knowledge."

"Sounds stupid," he muttered.

"Well, it's philosophy." She reached past him and flipped to the next card.

Brett gave her a dirty look. "If you're going to do it yourself, then do it and leave me out."

"It works better when I've got help."

"Not my problem." He shoved the cards back into her hands.

"*Mo mhuirín*." The quiet call drifted through the air and cut off Reina's angry retort. She stood and turned.

Logan stood in the doorway, backlit by the light from the house, a study in contrast and shadows. "A word, if you please?"

It was not quite a command.

She followed him inside, through the house and up the stairs to his study. He closed the door quietly behind her.

Reina sat in the plush leather armchair, knees drawn to her chest. The room had the look of an old-world library, all mahogany woods and golden, glowing lamps. She might have taken the time to appreciate its beauty, or lose herself in the stacks of books, if she hadn't been so irritated.

"What?" she demanded when Logan turned to face her.

He watched her quietly for a moment. Finally, he leaned back against the polished edge of the desk with a sigh. "I've never experienced what you're going through," he said at last. "I can't imagine it. But as hard as it is, Reina, you must accept that Brett is not the boy you used to know."

Icy anger flowed through her veins, chilling her. She stared up at him. "That's not true."

"It is, *nighean*. He is not who he was. He does not even remember that boy."

"I remember him." Her voice trembled. "And I remembered who I was, didn't I? Why shouldn't he?"

"Not all of it," Logan reminded her gently. "And it was quite soon after you were turned. It's been too long for him."

"No," she whispered, shaking her head in futile denial. "He might still remember. He has to."

He had to, because if he didn't, it was all her fault. He had wanted to accept the lie Keachan told them and allow the police to conduct the investigation. She had been the one who convinced him to dig deeper for the truth. She had brought him into this mess. If she couldn't get him back out again...

"I'm sorry," Logan murmured, and sounded like he meant it. She raised her gaze to his, and found him watching her with heartbreak in his eyes. He held a hand out toward her. "Reina, I'm sorry. Truly."

"I know, Logan." She sighed and got to her feet. "But what good does that do?"

Pain flashed across his expression. She turned away from it, and left the room before she could see any more, before he could see the tears that dripped down her cheeks.

\* \* \* \*

"She just wants space, Nye." Kynan threw a tennis ball into the air and caught it one-handed. His gaze held steady on Logan's, bright with wry amusement. "Can't you unbend

just a little bit?"

Logan gestured helplessly. "And watch her kill herself with her foolishness?"

"Oh, Nye. It's been too long." He scooped the ball from the air and tossed it at Logan, who caught it purely out of reflex. "Don't you remember what Alex was like? Or Bella, or—" He stopped, grinned. "Lord, don't you remember what *I* was like?"

"You?" Logan frowned doubtfully. "You were—"

"I was a nightmare. Sent you searching all over Montmartre, racing against the sunrise."

"You always found someplace safe to hole up, though," he said, lips twitching with old amusement.

"I've had my fair share of stupidity." Kynan rose and took Logan's face between his hands for a kiss. "You're a good sire, Nye. We all made it through just fine. She will, too."

"You didn't have someone trying to kidnap you," Logan said very quietly, looking down at the hardwood floors beneath his feet. "That changes the odds, don't you think?"

"Maybe." Kynan settled into the chair again. "But it doesn't change how she's feeling. Why not let me take over a couple shifts? I managed not to get her killed the first time, didn't I?"

Logan struggled against the urge to reject the idea out of hand. Instead, he raised a brow. "Sociology? It'll put you to sleep, *cara*."

Kynan grinned. "Then I'll fit right in, won't I?"

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Reina came down the stairs, dread lodged like a stone in her throat. Kynan was waiting in the foyer, Logan's mirror—jacket on his arm, keys in his hand—but for the grin that threatened to split his face in two. Logan had been grave, his expression full of doom; Kynan shuffled from foot to foot like a grade-schooler anxious for his first day of class.

*Well*, she thought, brightening, *at least he'll be better company.*

"I've sat in Nye's lectures before," Kynan commented as they made their way to the car. "But I never remembered anything afterward. I was too distracted."

She snorted with laughter. "Didn't anyone tell you that sleeping with your professor only leads to trouble?"

"No, but I figured it out quick enough." They parted to take their seats, Kynan behind the wheel, Reina riding shotgun. He unfolded his sunglasses and offered them to her, grinning.

She laughed and shook her head. "You wear them. I'll just be blind."

"Not anymore, you won't," he reminded her, and she sobered.

"Well, they look better on you, anyway." She latched her seatbelt, hands suddenly unsteady. "But Claxton will have your head if you wear them in class."

They sat in the last row, and Kynan allowed her to convince him to at least push the shades up to the top of his head for the duration of the lecture, though he grumbled good-naturedly. Reina, however, found it difficult to keep her mind on task.

When Claxton interrupted his lecture to allow questions, she set her pen down and eyed Kynan. "Did Logan send you along because he figured I'd be less likely to bite your head off than his?"

"Actually, it was my suggestion." He slid down in the seat and laced his fingers over his stomach. "So I hope I figured right."

She sighed, then smiled. "I'm not going to. But that doesn't mean that he's safe."

"He cares for you, Reina."

She dragged her hands through her hair. "You know, with anyone else, this need for control would be a warning sign of an abuser."

Humor slid off of Kynan's face. He watched her gravely. "And if you were talking about a mortal boyfriend, I'd say you were exactly right. But you're vampires, and he's your sire."

"I'm twenty-five years old, for God's sake," she muttered.

"Actually," he said, "you're less than a week."

She snapped her head around, scowling at him.

"Well?" He shrugged helplessly. "It's the truth."

Reina sighed and shoved her pen behind her ear. "God. I could use a burger."

"Let's go get one."

She turned her head, studying him straight-on. "What, no lectures about my new diet?"

He wagged his brows. "Share your fries with me?"

"Sure," she agreed, laughing.

"Then no lectures."

She glanced at the front of the hall. Claxton had turned his back to the class to scrawl something upon the whiteboard. His voice came, droning but indistinct, and held the distinctive quality that preceded his most long-winded of digressions.

"Yeah," she decided impulsively. She scooped her notes up and dropped them into her bag. "Let's go."

They slipped between the seats to the aisle and ducked out the back door, running and laughing through the night.

A sleepy-eyed kid took their order at the café, and minutes later carried over a tray laden with thick, greasy burgers and fries still steaming from the fryer.

Kynan snagged a handful from her basket and spread them to cool on a napkin. "Well, that was just about as thrilling as Nye warned me it would be." He shook liberal amounts of salt and pepper onto his fries. "What exactly is your degree in, anyway?"

"My bachelor's is in preternatural studies." She leaned back in her seat and bit the end off one of her fries. It crunched satisfyingly between her teeth. "And I'm working on my master's in preternatural sociology, emphasis in intercultural dynamics."

Kynan ate two at once, and licked the salt from his fingers. "That sounds like one of those majors that make people wonder what you intend to do with it."

"I'm going to go into public relations. Educate people, get some understanding, you know?" She stopped with a fry halfway to her mouth, reality sweeping over the old, familiar topic like a tidal wave. "Was," she muttered, and dropped the fry back into the basket. Her stomach hardened into a knot around the food.

"Hey." Kynan straightened, looking alarmed. "Who says only mortals can work in public relations?"

She laughed sadly, shaking her head. "It's not exactly a graveyard shift kind of job."

"Bet you it is." He pushed his food around on his napkin, as though the idea of Reina having to give up her plans for the future bothered him as much as it did her. "And if there aren't any opportunities now, then you just *make* some."

"Thanks, Kynan," she said, so she could see a measure of hope restore itself on his face. But she couldn't help adding, "I doubt the people who need educating are going to be very to willing to listen to me now, though. *C'est la vie*." She raised her milkshake in a bitter toast.

Kynan ate another fry, but looked like it tasted foul. "This is all my fault, isn't it?"

Her gaze flew to his, startled.

"I told you to keep living the life you intended. Now Nye's worried sick, you two are on the outs, and you're giving up on all your dreams." He sank low in his chair, scowling. "Next time I try to open my mouth, kick me, will you?"

"Don't beat yourself up over it." She took a sip of the milkshake, then passed it to him. He accepted it unenthusiastically. "You're not the one who did this to me."

"That's faint praise," he muttered with a rueful smile.

"Kynan." She circled the table to stand next to him. He looked up at her, expression clouded with confusion. She wrapped her arms around him and held him close, cheek pressed to the top of his head.

"Don't you ever think that," she whispered fiercely. "You've been a wonderful friend."

He drew back and smiled faintly. "I'm glad you think so."

The lingering doubt in his voice, in his eyes, made her wish she hadn't said anything at all. She dropped back into her seat with a sigh, picking at her burger. "Thanks for coming with me," she said at last, eyes fixed on the plastic tabletop.

He didn't say anything. Moments passed, until at last she wrenched her gaze up to his, and found him watching her with a troubled expression.

"What?" she asked, afraid to know.

"Why are you thanking me for it, when you were ready to chew Nye out for doing the same thing?"

"I—You—" She ripped crumbs off of the edge of the hamburger bun, restless and edgy. "You're a friend trying to keep me safe. He's a lover trying to keep me under his thumb."

"No."

She frowned at him, sucking ketchup off her finger.

"He's doing the same thing I am, Reina. Protecting you. That's all."

"You're doing a better job of it."

A wry smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. "If you mean you resent me less for it, maybe that's so. But I promise you, he's the better bodyguard."

She snorted and bit into the burger so she didn't have to respond to him right away. "It feels like he's trying to push me away. Like he's doing everything he can to piss me off, and he's just waiting for me to decide I've had enough and walk out."

Kynan's eyes widened. "Oh, Reina. Don't do that. He doesn't want that, believe me."

"No?" She swirled a fry through a puddle of ketchup. "You've got a better theory?"

He watched her in silence, lips pressed into a thin line. "One of these days, you should ask him what all that Gaelic means, and then see if you still think so."

"The endearments? He already told me. It's sweet, but it's not changing my mind."

Kynan looked at her, expressionless. "That's not the only Gaelic he's said to you."

She started to respond, but another piece of her fragmented memory, lost in the violence of Eanruig's abuse, fell back into place. She stared across the table at Kynan, heart hammering in her throat. "The night I fed him."

Kynan inclined his head.

"He told me he didn't remember what he said."

"Oh, he remembers. Are you going to finish that?"

She looked down at her half-eaten meal. None of it looped appealing anymore. "No," she sighed.

"Let's go, then."

He carried the tray to the garbage. She followed after him, mired deep in thought. The drive home was quiet, the only sound the purr of the engine. Reina looked out the window, watching starlight flash through the trees. Myriad thoughts whirled through her mind, but she couldn't make sense of any of them.

\* \* \* \*

Logan paced across his study, fists shoved deep in his pockets, a scowl fixed firmly upon his face. With every step, images flashed before his eyes. Reina, tortured and broken. Reina, fleeing from him in the park, too terrified to recognize him. Past mixed with present, every torment she had suffered and every fate he feared might befall her.

And now, he was not there to help her. Kynan was with her in his stead. If something

happened—If something happened to either of them—This thought, at last, was too much. His mind shied away from it.

Kynan had thought it would ease his mind to know that he was protecting Reina, should something happen. But all it did was drive Logan mad with worry to know that the two people who meant the most to him were now both in peril, and there was nothing he could do for either of them.

No. Not nothing, he realized. He snatched the phone off his desk and punched speed dial.

The line connected on the second ring. "Mac?"

"Patrick. Tell me you have found something."

Keachan sighed, and Logan's hopes crashed. "Not a blessed thing, Mac, sorry."

"You ran the license plate?"

"Of course, but nothing came of it. The vehicle registered to that plate doesn't match Kynan's description, and the owner reported it stolen six months ago."

"He could be lying—"

"I know that, Mac," Keachan snapped. "There's no evidence to suggest that, but I'm looking into it. Let me do my job."

Logan closed his eyes and leaned his brow against the heel of his hand. "I'm sorry, Patrick. It's just, Reina—"

Keachan grunted. "Yeah, I know. I'll let you know the moment I find anything."

Logan nodded, and thanked him, and disconnected. He paced the length of his study, reexamining all the meager clues they had managed to gather so far, turning them over and struggling to make sense of them, but it was like trying to put together a puzzle with no idea of what the final image was meant to be.

Distantly, he heard the front door open and close. Quiet conversation drifted up to him, not distinct enough to understand the words, but he recognized Kynan and Reina's voices. Relief swept through him, and sapped him of his strength. He sank into his chair, leaned his head in his hands, and whispered thanks to any god who was listening for their safe return.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and paused outside the study door. A knock came, light and hesitant. Logan raised his head. "Yes?"

The door swung in. Reina stepped into his study. Her gaze was downcast, and she gripped the handle of the door as though to ensure that an escape route was open to her, should she need it. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," he answered automatically. "What is it?"

She licked her lips. Haltingly, she lifted her gaze to his. "The night I fed you," she whispered. "You said something in Gaelic. Logan, what did you tell me?"

His breath stopped in his chest. The words pushed at his lips, Gaelic and English alike. *No*, he thought. *No. Look at how she watches you, like a deer poised to flee. It's too soon. The time is not right.* "I don't remember what I said," he rasped through a throat that suddenly felt like sandpaper. "I told you that."

She watched him with her steady, implacable gaze, and he knew she knew he was lying. "Kynan says otherwise."

He swore beneath his breath. "It's not his place."

She took a step into the room, her cheeks flushing with temper, her gaze steady now with her anger. "It's mine, isn't it? Why won't you tell me?"

"I can't," he breathed, and hated that it was the truth. "Not now."

"Damn it." She looked up at the ceiling, her eyes squeezed shut, her hands balled into fists at her sides. "I told Kynan I thought you were trying to push me away. He said I should ask you about the Gaelic, that it would change my mind. I guess I should go tell him 'I told you so.'" She turned for the door without looking at him again.

"Reina!" He shot to his feet, one hand reaching out to her as though he could bridge the chasm between them so easily. His heart pounded painfully within his chest.

"Please—Please, don't—"

"Don't what?" She kept her back turned to him, one hand on the doorknob. "Don't go? Give me a reason not to."

*Oh God. Tell her.*

*You'll lose her.*

*You're losing her now. Tell her.*

By the time he could make himself speak, she was already gone.

\* \* \* \*

The hollow beat of the basketball on asphalt masked all the other sounds on the darkened street, so that Kynan had no warning he wasn't alone until a pair of hands reached past him and neatly stole the ball.

"Hey!" He turned to find Logan standing behind him, ball tucked into the crook of his arm, warmth in his eyes.

"You are a meddlesome young man."

"No, I'm not. I'm an old geezer." Kynan lunged and snatched the ball from Logan's arms. He danced backward, dribbling. "But not so old I can't kick your ass."

"Is that so?" An eyebrow arched, and the corner of his mouth twitched. "Let's see it, then."

Kynan dodged his advance and circled to the other side of the street, but Logan cornered him against a rosemary bush and plucked the ball from his hands. He backed away, holding it securely against his chest.

Kynan stopped and watched him in dismay. "Nye! That's traveling!"

"Yes?"

"It's *cheating*. If you'd actually watch a game with me, you'd know that."

Logan tucked the ball behind his back and stopped Kynan with an outstretched hand. His expression sobered. "*Cara*. You should not have told her."

He did not pretend ignorance. "No, but you should've. She's afraid, Nye, and you're not helping things."

"Afraid?" Logan brought the ball before him, the game forgotten. "How does my protection make that worse?"

"She's not afraid of *him*. She's afraid of ... this." Kynan gestured helplessly.

A hint of a smile tugged at Logan's mouth. "Basketball? Well, it *is* a terrifying sport."

"Don't be daft."

Logan put the ball on the ground and sat on it, knees nearly drawn to his chest, completely incongruous in his navy blue suit. He sighed. "I can't fathom it."

Kynan crouched down on the curb and hooked his arms around his thighs. "Well, I'd hazard to guess that she prepared herself for the idea of you as a lover, maybe even a



boyfriend." Logan scoffed at the epithet. "But I daresay she didn't prepare for the possibility of you becoming her sire. It's hard, Nye."

Logan watched him quietly, his face shadowed. "Are you speaking from experience, then?"

"Certainly." Kynan took his hand and twined their fingers together.

Logan closed his eyes. His brows drew together. "Tell me it has been worth it. Please."

Kynan released his breath. "Of course it has." He rolled forward, kneeling on the asphalt. Patches of snow soaked the knees of his jeans, bitterly cold. "I've never regretted it. *Never*. Have I ever given you reason to doubt it?"

A faint smile flickered across Logan's face. He raised a hand to Kynan's hair. "Well. Maybe once or twice."

"You shouldn't," Kynan whispered fiercely. "Not ever."

"I'll try to remember that." Logan drew him forward into a tight embrace. Kynan held on, face buried in the warm curve between his shoulder and throat. He breathed his scent, intimately familiar, and curled his fingers into the fabric of Logan's jacket. Logan's breath was hot against the side of his face.

"Ah, *cara*," Logan murmured, running his hands through Kynan's hair over and over again. "What am I to do?"

Kynan raised his head, but didn't pull out of the embrace. "What happened?"

Logan told him, and when he had finished, Kynan rolled his eyes toward the heavens. "Oh, Nye. You're such an idiot sometimes."

Logan's expression turned wounded. He started to draw away. Kynan grabbed his lapels, holding him there. "Don't you remember why I left?" he asked, very quiet.

Logan's expression turned distant as his thoughts traced through their hundreds of years together. When he found the moment Kynan had referred to, Kynan knew it by the change in his eyes. Logan groaned, sweeping a hand over his face. "You left because I was keeping secrets."

"Even so." Kynan gave him a lopsided smile and pressed their lips together. "One of these days, you'll learn. In the meantime, you might try telling her the truth."

Logan shook his head. "She won't like it."

"Do you think so?" Kynan laughed and kissed him again, harder. "You really *are* an idiot."

\* \* \* \*

Reina sat on the driveway, staring up at the night sky. Behind her, the wall of the garage blocked the glare of lights from the house, and the stars above seemed endless. Something settled in her chest that might have been peace, had it been able to penetrate the layer of numbness that insulated her.

In the distance, cars rushed by. She listened as, somewhere closer, a solitary vehicle drove at a more sedate pace, and marveled at the acuity of her new senses. She'd never have been able to distinguish it before.

She closed her eyes and listened to its progress, the way the engine roared as it accelerated, and settled to a purr when the driver slowed or stopped. It continued to grow louder, until Reina sat up and opened her eyes, watching the sweep of its headlights across the street.

The car stopped in front of her. The window rolled down with the quiet sound of machinery. "Hey, babe." Fate leaned out and waved. "Hop in. I'm kidnapping you."

Reina eyed the little sedan dubiously. "Kidnapping me where, exactly?"

"I've got a hankering to go kill my ears with loud music and destroy my liver with booze. What do you say?"

She pushed herself to her feet and dusted the dirt from her jeans. A wry smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I don't think you're supposed to give me a choice, you know."

"I'm a new breed of kidnapper. Get in the damn car, will you?"

"Well, since you put it that way." Reina glanced back at the house and sobered. Curtains covered the living room's picture window, but she could see light glowing behind them, and shadows walking by. She sighed. "Logan will hate it." And that, she had to admit, was a compelling reason to do exactly as Fate wanted. "He'll say I'm putting myself in danger."

"On my watch?" Fate scoffed. She reached into the glove compartment and withdrew a cross longer than Reina's forearm. Gold glinted dimly in the starlight; Reina's stomach shivered with visceral fear. "Dracula himself couldn't get past me."

"That's nice." Reina edged around the front of the car and slid into the passenger seat. "Could you put that away, please?"

Fate gave no indication that she noticed the tension in Reina's voice. She put the cross back in its place and shifted the car into drive. She glanced at Reina from the edge of her vision. "Should you tell someone you're leaving?"

"Not if you ever want to get out of here." Reina buckled her seatbelt and stared out through the windshield. "Let's go."

Fate watched her for a moment, but offered no comment. She stepped on the gas, and they rocketed away from the house.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Music blasted through the ornate doors of the club and onto the street outside, filling the night air with a heavy beat and the screech of synthesizers. Reina pulled her jacket closer around her shoulders and eyed the aptly-named Cryptaesthesia with foreboding. Residuals spilled out around the edges of the doors, as overwhelming as the deafening music. Normally, she'd have had no desire to immerse herself in either. Tonight, she could think of nothing she'd like better than to loose herself in the thoughts of others.

"Let's go," she said, and Fate fell in step beside her.

Inside, the club accosted every one of her senses. Music pounded against her eardrums with a pressure that was nearly tangible. Brilliantly-colored lights flashed through the darkness, leaving her dazzled and blinded. Bodies pressed around her, twisted and gyrated in a mass on the dance floor. Wayward elbows dug into her waist and arms. Residuals crashed over her in waves that kept time to the music. A hundred different perfumes mingled into a single heady miasma that swirled through her lungs and coated her throat.

She hated it, and loved it with the same breath.

"Pick your poison!" Fate had to lean close and shout in order to be heard over the bass. "My treat." Together, they threaded through the crowd to the bar, where it was marginally quieter.

Reina ordered tequila. Fate gave her a startled look, then ordered a vodka tonic for herself and passed the bartender a bill. When the drinks arrived, Reina downed hers, put the shot glass back on the bar, and gestured for a refill.

Fate put her hand over the top of the glass before Reina could lift it. "Okay, honey, I think it's time to spill."

"Sure, why not." Reina laughed bitterly. "It's not like you can hear anything I might say."

Fate's eyes narrowed. "I can hear enough." She slid the shot down the bar and gave Reina a stern look when she tried to retrieve it. "If you get plastered, I'm never going to get this story out of you. So 'fess up, and then you can get as drunk as you please."

Reina shook her head stubbornly. The music pulsed in her blood, and the mass residuals softened the edges of her mind. "Hand over the booze, Fate, or I won't tell you a thing."

Fate hesitated a moment, then relinquished the glass. Reina downed it like the first and dropped onto a stool with a sigh.

"Now will you tell me what's wrong?" Fate demanded.

"Oh, nothing. I'm fine. Just peachy."

She snorted. "You're a lousy liar, Reina Campbell. What happened?"

Reina threw up her hands. "I don't know!" And then swore at the curiosity that leaped within Fate's gaze.

"Spill."

"I'm not nearly drunk enough yet." She gestured to the bartender, and took a third shot.

Fate watched her continue to drink. Her expression wavered between amusement and

concern proportional to Reina's success in keeping her seat. At last, she shook her head at the bartender and gripped Reina's arm. "Let's go. You need some fresh air."

"No. I like it here." Reina frowned with the effort it took to keep her words coherent. Her blood felt hot with inebriation, and her head full of strangers' preoccupations with dry cleaners' bills, overdue rent, and workplace drama. She'd never before felt such intense gratitude for her empathy as she did at that moment.

"Come on, honey." Fate slung one of Reina's arms over her shoulders and maneuvered her towards the door. Reina had to concentrate too hard on keeping her feet beneath her to protest.

Outside, the club walls dampened both music and residuals. Reina drew a lungful of clean, crisp air that washed her mind clear of all but the alcohol. Fate steered her down the street; she followed, docile, until the sidewalk began to blur beneath her feet.

"Fate, stop. Stop!"

"What's wrong?" Fate turned back. Reina dashed away the tears that had filmed her eyes, and Fate groaned. "Oh God."

"I'm sorry." Reina sat down on the curb and covered her face with her hands. "I don't know why..."

Fate crouched before her, feet in the gutter. She wiped the tears from Reina's cheeks with a gentle touch. "Don't know why you're crying? Or don't know why something else?"

"Both? Crap. I don't know." Pain and fear and anger had been enough to deal with on their own. Inebriation tipped the scales, and sent her careening into despair. Tears fell down her cheeks and dripped off of her chin.

Fate released a soft sigh. "I should've figured you'd be a maudlin drunk." She sat down at Reina's side and slid an arm around her shoulders. "So tell me. Boy trouble, is it?"

Reina scoffed and raised her head to protest. "He's hardly a boy." She frowned. That wasn't the protest she'd intended to make.

Fate pulled a travel pack of tissue from her purse and handed it over. "I'm all ears."

"It's a little complicated." Reina scrubbed at her face until the tissue fell to pieces.

"Start at the beginning, then. What's he done?"

"I—He—" She grimaced up at the night sky. "He's changed. He's getting all overprotective. Thinks it's too dangerous to even set a foot outside the house."

Fate watched her with large, dark eyes. "That's not good," she said quietly.

"No. It's—Well, it's not entirely without reason, you know. But *God*." She closed her eyes and shuddered. "He's turning into my father."

Fate's mouth pulled into a lopsided smile. "Well, technically," she pointed out, "as old as he is, he's more likely to be your—"

"Shut up, Fate."

She grinned, unrepentant. Despite herself, Reina found herself smiling, and then laughing.

Fate got to her feet and reached a hand down to help Reina to hers. "Let's get you home," she said.

Reina sobered. "I don't want to go back yet."

"I can't blame you for that. But it can't be worse than sitting here crying in the gutter, can it?"

A bitter smile twisted Reina's lips. "Don't bet on it."

\* \* \* \*

A shadow lounged against the side of the car. Reina and Fate both saw it at the same time, and stopped simultaneously. Fate's hand groped at her throat.

"Don't," Reina whispered. She didn't need to see the cross to know Fate had pulled it out. Her skin prickled with awareness. "Put it back."

Fate's gaze didn't waver. "Maybe once we find out who this guy is."

The shadow shifted, raising its head. The orange glow of the street light fell across his face. Reina relaxed, straightening from her defensive stance.

"Fate, put it away." She stepped forward. "It's Logan."

"Oh." Fate's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Well, since you put it that way."

Reina glanced over her shoulder. Fate had lowered her hand to her side, but still held the cross gripped tight between her fingers. "Please," Reina said, and turned back to Logan.

He didn't spare so much as a glance for Fate, or the weapon she gripped. His gaze stayed steady on Reina, as hard and cold as ice.

"You're keeping dangerous company, *nighean*."

Reina's chin rose. "It's my choice, isn't it?"

"Oh, certainly." He tilted his head back, looking up at the starry sky. "It's not as though her acquaintance has ever brought trouble to our doorstep before, now has it?"

With a flash of guilt, Reina remembered Kynan standing in the driveway, weary and battered and bloodstained. And Logan on the couch, too weak to stand and too stubborn to succumb to his injuries. She pressed her lips together and said nothing.

"Get in the car, please." Logan angled his head. Reina glanced and saw his car, parked a few spots away and hidden by the shadows.

Reina took half a step. Fate's hand closed around her arm. "Now hold on just a minute—"

Logan crossed the space between them before Reina could even acknowledge the movement. His fingers dug deep into Fate's skin, just beneath the elbow. Fate's face paled and her lips thinned, but she gave no other indication of discomfort.

"Release her," Logan snarled, softly dangerous. "Or you shall regret it."

"Is that so?" Despite her brave words, Fate glanced away, breaking eye contact. But she didn't let go of Reina's arm. "Honey? Say the word." Her hand flexed at her side. Gold shone like a star in her palm.

Reina couldn't look away from the restrained fury that raged across Logan's face. "Let go, Fate," she whispered. "You're hurting me."

Reina's heart pounded within her chest, and then Fate's hand sprang open, and Logan's lip lowered over his teeth. "As you wish," she muttered, and stepped backwards. She raised her hands as though to ward Logan off, or maybe show that she was no longer a threat. "See you around, babe." Her voice was almost as cold as Logan's.

"That wasn't necessary," Reina said quietly, when they'd both climbed into the car.

"Please do not speak to me of necessity." Logan's words were clipped and sharp as glass. "Unless you can explain to me how this ... *excursion* ... was anything but unnecessary idiocy?"

"Damn it, Logan." Her voice broke, and she cursed the alcohol coursing through her

system. "You can't cut me off from *everything* I know."

"Take your damn classes, then!" His fingers strained around the steering wheel. "Persist in this foolishness, if you like, but for God's sake, Reina, *must* you court suicide?"

"We were just going out for drinks."

He turned his head to stare at her with an expression that suggested she might as well have said she was just going out joyriding with the devil. "You know her politics. You don't honestly think that she'll give them up for the sake of a few weeks' friendship, do you?"

Reina propped her feet on the dashboard and stared out through the windshield. "She doesn't stake every vampire she crosses paths with, you know." She glanced at him out of the edge of her vision. "She hasn't raised a hand against you, has she?"

He grunted and slammed the car into gear. "And you're willing to risk your life on that?"

"If I thought my life was in danger, I wouldn't have gone out with her."

Logan just sighed and shook his head. "You will be the death of me, *nighean*. One way or another."

\* \* \* \*

Despite her assurances to Logan, Reina was not so sanguine of Fate's reaction. When she woke the next night and checked her phone, the display told her that she had missed a call. She brought up the number. A small shiver of nerves rippled through her at the sight of Fate's name. She pressed the button to connect to her voicemail.

Fate's voice came through the earpiece, tight with concern. "Hey, babe. We left on ... well, not the best of terms, last night. Think we could try again? Maybe without the booze, this time. Anyway, give me a call and we'll set it up. You've got my number."

Reina worried her lip between her teeth, drumming her fingers on the countertop. Ultimately, she just disconnected and dropped the phone into her pocket. She didn't delete the message, but she didn't call Fate back, either.

She rifled through the fridge and pulled out a bag of blood, which she drank cold. It took the edge off of the hunger that lurked within her like a chained wolf.

"Oh, hello."

Reina turned. Julia stood at the edge of the kitchen, smiling sheepishly and not quite meeting her eyes. "How are you?"

"Peachy." Reina rinsed her glass out and left it in the dishwasher.

Julia's cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "That was thoughtless of me."

Reina shrugged and boosted herself up onto the counter. Her legs swung, heels drumming lightly against the cupboards. "Don't worry about it."

Julia stepped forward hesitantly. "Is it ... is it very hard for you?"

The question took Reina by surprise. She raised her head and stared straight at the other woman. Such a simple question, and such complex emotions that stormed through her.

"Yes," she said at last, and licked dry lips. "Yes, it's hard."

Julia pulled a chair out from the kitchen table and sat in it backwards, forearms braced against the backrest. "Did it hurt very much? I mean, I've asked Alex, but I don't—I think he's afraid of frightening me."

"Yes. It hurt." Reina raised a brow. Julia's cheeks were flushed now with interest rather than self-consciousness, and her eyes bright with it. "Why? You thinking of offering yourself up to the brood?"

The color drained out of her face at Reina's tone. She swallowed. "Well, we've talked about it. I think he would like it."

Julia's face shone with love and hope when she spoke of Alex. Reina sighed and jumped off of the counter. "Look, you shouldn't listen to me. I'm not a good judge of what it's like. Alex is a decent guy; I doubt it would be anything like it was for me."

Julia nodded slowly. "I'm sorry," she said. "For what happened to you. It should've been a choice."

The phone rang before she could respond. Reina flipped it over to check the display. Fate's name scrolled in a marquee across the screen. She silenced it and put it back in her pocket.

Julia angled her head to the side, eyes faintly curious. "You're not going to answer that?"

"No."

"Oh..." Julia looked like she might have said more, but the moment was gone. Awkward silence descended on both of them, and Julia eyed the fridge as though she wanted something but feared to pass Reina in order to get to it.

"It was nice talking to you," Reina said, and found that she almost meant it. She turned to leave. But on the threshold of the kitchen, she stopped and looked back. "Jules... If you ever feel like talking, just let me know. You've probably got a thousand questions."

Julia's eyes brightened with pleasure, and a smile spread across her face. "I will, thank you."

Reina nodded awkwardly and left. Halfway up the stairs, her phone rang again. She ignored it without bothering to check caller ID.

An hour later, the doorbell rang.

Still toweling dry her hair from the shower, Reina walked to the edge of the second-floor landing and looked over the banister while Logan answered the door. From the angle at which she stood, she couldn't see outside, but she watched tension cascade down his back.

"Miss Dobrzynski, you are not welcome in my home."

There was a moment of stillness in which Reina found herself holding her breath. And then—

"What the hell do you mean, I'm not *welcome* here? I'm here to see Reina—"

"She is indisposed," Logan said, as cold as the winds that whipped outside.

"Is she, now? Well, maybe if I hear the words from her own mouth, I'll believe it."

Logan growled, a sound that made the hairs at Reina's nape stand on end. She tossed the towel back into the bathroom and took the stairs two at a time. "Logan, move over. Let me talk to her."

He looked at her over his shoulder. His expression blazed with fury, but also a desperate fear. Reina touched his shoulder and stepped past him, out onto the porch with Fate. She pulled the door closed behind her.

Fate stood before her, braced as though for battle. She watched Reina with a guarded gaze that made Reina regret more things than she had breath to name. She sighed and

leaned back against the door. "This really isn't a good time, Fate." Her voice dropped until it was barely a whisper. "You should go."

"Well fuck, sweetie, why don't you tell me when is a good time? Since you're no longer taking my calls."

Reina shook her head. "Please, Fate, just go. You're only making it worse."

Fate's gaze sharpened, locking to Reina's like a missile that's found its target. "Is it Logan? Is he behind this? That sonofa—"

"No!" Reina caught her breath and shook her head. "It's not him, Fate. It's me. *I* want you to go."

Fate glowered at her. "I expected better of you than this." She turned on her heel and stomped away.

"I'm sorry." Reina covered her face with her hands. "I'm sorry I'm not what you thought I was."

The footsteps stopped. Reina dropped her hands. Fate had turned back, halfway to the driveway. "What exactly is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"Nothing," Reina whispered through lips gone dry with fear. "It doesn't mean anything."

"Bullshit. You've been acting strange for days."

"You don't know me, Fate. Not half so well as you think you do."

Fate gave a disgusted snort and started to turn. But once again, she paused and turned back. "I've been calling you all day." It wasn't an accusation. She spoke in the slow, wondering tone of voice of someone in the midst of an epiphany.

Reina would have preferred the anger. "I didn't feel like talking," she replied.

"Shut up," Fate muttered distractedly. "You freaked out when you saw my cross last night."

Reina groped behind herself for the doorknob. A sudden, violent oath from Fate made her jump.

"Oh, for fuck's sake! How long?"

Reina shook her head wildly. She struggled to turn the handle and escape into the safety of the house, but her sweaty palms kept slipping on the metal. "I don't know what you—"

"Damn it, *how long*?"

Reina froze, her heart pounding in her throat. "A week and a half," she whispered.

The door swung open behind her. Logan's hands rested lightly on her shoulders, a show of solidarity and support. "Is there a problem?" he asked lightly.

"Yeah, I'll say there's a problem." Fate stared at her. Her expression was somehow both stony and livid. "Christ, it didn't occur to you to *tell* me?"

Reina turned her face away and pressed back into Logan's comforting strength. "It occurred to me that you may very well pull your cross on me if I did."

Fate pressed her lips together until they disappeared into a thin line. "I made it a point not to let my politics interfere in my friendship with you," she said, her voice shaking. "I guess it was too much to expect you to do the same."

"Fate—"

She threw up a hand and kept walking. Reina started after her, but Logan's fingers tightened on her shoulders, holding her back.

"Let her go," he murmured. "Give her time."



Reina watched her all the way down the driveway to the car parked at the curb, wishing there was something she could say to make things better.

When Fate had gone, she walked back inside. She shut the door, then closed her eyes and stood in the foyer, trembling.

*"Mo mhuirnín..."*

She pulled away from his touch. "Are you happy now?"

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Fate's words ate a hole in her heart large enough for doubt to creep in and lodge itself beneath her breastbone.

Maybe Fate was right, she thought. Maybe she should have told her. Maybe she'd have been everything a good friend should be, and helped her through the difficulties she was suffering.

And maybe Logan's instincts, honed over centuries, were spot-on. She couldn't know for sure, but she hated the thought that she'd lost Fate's friendship over it.

Monday evening, Reina sought Logan out. She found him in his study.

"One day," she demanded. "I want one day to myself. Twenty-four hours. That's all."

Logan turned from his computer. On the screen, a document held a jumble of bullet points and half-written lecture notes. "Are you planning on skipping class today?"

"No. I'm not."

He lowered his gaze to his desk, polished to a lacquer shine, and spread his fingers wide upon it. "Then I can't allow it."

"Please," she cried, and hated that he had reduced her to begging. "Logan, I can't do this. It's driving me crazy. I need space. Just one day."

"I can't. I'm sorry." He raised his gaze, dark and sorrowful. "Do you have any idea what it would do to me if I let you leave, and lost you again?"

Her eyes burned with tears that she refused to shed. "Do you care what it's doing to me?"

Fierce anger burned away the grief on his face. "Of course I care!" He rose to his feet and circled the desk. "*Mo mhuirín*, how can you think—"

She shook her head hard, backing away from him. "Don't! You're very good at telling a girl what she wants to hear, aren't you, Logan? Very good at stringing her along with your pretty Gaelic words, making her think that maybe you feel something. And maybe you do, but not enough. Not enough to let her make her own damn choices."

Logan stared at her, mouth agape. Slowly, he closed it, and folded his hands in his pockets. "Reina, what do you want of me?"

"I want some goddamn respect. I want to be able to live my life without having to ask you for *permission*." She backed away from him, shaking her head. "I want something I don't think I'm ever going to get." She turned for the door.

Logan swore and grabbed her arm. "Wait—"

"Let me go!" She rounded on him, snarling with fury. Like a smoldering fire doused with kerosene, she burned bright and hot and deadly. She grasped the nearest, sharpest weapon at hand. "You're an unfeeling brute and I bet you did kill your wife!"

She watched his face transform with shock. She jerked out of his hold, and he didn't even seem to notice. "*What?*" he gasped. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." She glared up at him, daring him to deny it.

"Ah, God." He brought a hand to his mouth. "Who told you that?"

"The asshole who did this to me! The vampire who captured me. He—" Realization dawned slowly within her. Her mouth fell open. She stared at him in horror. "Oh my God, it's *true*?"

Logan squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't know how he knew that, but—"

"But it's the truth." She felt suddenly hollow, empty, devoid of anger and every other emotion. "He was right."

"I daresay he did not tell you the whole story, *mo mhuirín*."

Her laughter was tinged with the beginnings of hysteria. "Of course not. I'm sure you've got some version of your own to justify murdering your wife. Well, by all means—enlighten me."

"Reina."

The quiet word made them both jump. Logan's gaze flickered over her shoulder. She turned to find Kynan standing in the doorway, watching them both with a dark, unreadable gaze. He glanced at Logan briefly, and his eyes narrowed. But he looked away just as quickly, before Reina could identify the emotion she had seen there.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go for a drive."

"I'm not much in the mood for joyriding, thanks."

"I know." With his customary unflappable gentleness, he stepped into the office and took her by the elbow. "Consider it a favor. Please?"

She closed her eyes. Behind her, she could sense Logan, drawn with tension. She waited, but he didn't speak a word of protest. "Fine," she said, sighing. "Let's go. I could use some fresh air."

She didn't even spare Logan a backward glance as she stormed out of the house.

\* \* \* \*

"You're awfully quiet," Kynan murmured, barely audible over the music track that blared throughout the mall. He flipped through sheets of movie posters with a quiet concentration at odds to his words. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Reina slowly released a long breath. Her eyes passed over the racks of DVDs, unseeing. She selected a case, pulled it out and flipped it to look at the summary on the back, more to keep her hands busy than out of any true interest in the film. "I don't know what to think."

"Tell me anyway," he suggested. She looked up from the DVD case she hadn't been reading and found him looking at her over his shoulder. His expression was somehow both inviting and undemanding. "Go on—I can take it."

Her cheeks heated. She ducked her head and replaced the movie. "I shouldn't put you in the middle of this. You're his boyfriend—"

He laughed quietly. "You've got to stop using that word." He leaned back against a display, head angled to the side as he watched her. "Do you think, after two hundred years, he has *any* flaws that I'm not aware of?" The corners of his eyes creased with amusement. "Say what you like. I guarantee, I've said it all before."

She frowned and dragged a hand through her hair. Her fingers tightened at her nap, tugging on a fistful of locks as she tried to force her thoughts into a tidy order. "Is it true?" she demanded suddenly. "About his wife?"

Kynan's expression clouded. He looked away. "That's not my story to tell. He's done things he regrets, though. Haven't we all?"

"Some regrets are bigger than others."

The corners of his mouth twitched, a fleeting smile. "That's certainly true." He sobered again. "Reina, would you believe me if I said that all of this—the pain you're

going through—is one of the biggest regrets he's had in the past five hundred years?"

"No." The word tripped over the pain that choked her. "Kynan, how can I? If he regretted it, he would stop, or change, or find a compromise—"

"Reina..." He sighed. "I wish you could see what he's putting himself through over this. I wish he'd let go of his pride long enough to *let* you see."

"I don't care," she declared, though the moment the words passed her lips, she knew it wasn't true.

"He does," Kynan said, very quietly.

"Oh God." She threw her hands up and stalked out of the store toward the main body of the mall. "Did you just bring me here to try to plead his case for him?"

"No." His quiet voice carried after her. "I brought you here to give a chance to calm down, before one of you said something you couldn't take back. And, if you'll listen, I thought I might explain some of what Nye won't, or can't."

She stopped, frowning at him over her shoulder. "You think you can say anything that will make his behavior tolerable?"

"I think I might."

"All right." She returned to his side. "Let's hear it."

He was silent for a moment, looking off across the mall's late-night crowd. "What do you know about rogues, Reina?"

She lifted a shoulder, shrugging. "He said it was a very bad thing to create one."

"It is. It's a death sentence for the fledgling that's allowed to go rogue, and more often than not, the same for the sire who allowed it."

Startled, her gaze flew up to his.

Kynan nodded grimly. "We take the obligation between sire and fledgling very seriously. Nye more so than most. He feels a terrible responsibility for you, you know. For not being able to prevent this from happening to you."

"He's treating me like a child," she snapped.

Kynan gave her a rueful smile. "You are, I'm afraid." He took her hands and kept her with him when she would have jerked away. "You're a human woman, Reina; no one will argue with that. But that's not all you are anymore. You're a vampire, and in that respect, you're a fledgling, still very much a child. There's a lot you have to learn, a lot he has to teach you before you can survive on your own. Until then..." He trailed off, looking thoughtful and vaguely displeased. "A sire who doesn't give his fledgling boundaries is a sire who risks creating a rogue. There are limitations, ones you're not used to. The relationship between a sire and fledgling is, at its heart, a parental one, and I can't tell you how much it pains him that the relationship he had with you is suffering for it. If he'd had the ability, he'd have warned you of this, and made sure that you took it into consideration before you chose this future for yourself. But neither of you had that choice, and it's hard for you both."

She made a small noise in the back of her throat. "You can say that again."

Kynan grimaced in sympathy. "It's killing him, you know, to see the pain he's putting you through. But he would never recover if he had to kill you."

Reina looked down at her hands, fingers twisted together at her waist. She couldn't decide if she believed him or not. She couldn't even decide whether she wanted to.

"I'd like to tell you a story," Kynan said softly, "if you'll listen."

She sighed and ran her fingers along the plastic CD cases. It was an excuse to turn

away from him, and the sad, quiet sympathy in his eyes. "I don't know that it'll help any."

"It might."

She closed her eyes. "All right. Tell me."

He took her arm and led her out of the store. He didn't start his story until they'd both gotten milkshakes from a kiosk and found a secluded bench to sit on. "I met Nye in Paris in the nineteenth century. We were both running from our past, it turns out, but he was succeeding better than I. He saved me from a thug who was harassing me, but I was injured during the commotion, and he took me home to tend to me."

Kynan paused for a moment. Reina glanced over and saw him bringing his hand to his ribs in an absent gesture, as though tracing a path intimately familiar to his fingers.

He noticed her attention, and looked away. "That's how it started. We became friends, then—well, more than friends. Until my past caught up with me."

"What past?" she asked quietly.

"I knew her as a *gwrach*, but she was a vampire. A rogue. She killed my family and left me an orphan, plagued by nightmares. I fled Wales, and she followed me to Paris. I wanted to run again, but Nye convinced me to stay, to fight. I did, and nearly died for it."

His lips curved with a smile, soft with remembrance. "That was the first time I'd ever seen him truly frightened," he murmured. "All that time, he'd never told me what he was, but he told me then, and begged me to let him save me."

"And you agreed?"

"Oh, no. I loved him, and he'd just revealed to me that he was the very thing I had hated and feared all my life. I refused. I told him I would rather die."

She blinked at him, surprised, but restrained all the questions that threatened to burst from her. A moment passed and he leaned against her shoulder.

"But you didn't," she murmured.

"No, though it was a near thing."

She raised a hand and drew her fingers through the shaggy strands of his hair. He relaxed against her with a shuddering sigh.

"When did he turn you?"

"When she returned. She broke my back. Nye killed her and came to me, and begged me once more to let him save me. This time it was too much to heal from, and I feared death more than I feared him."

"Then what happened?"

Reina kept up the steady motions of her fingers in his hair, until he reached up and stopped her. He lifted his head, met her gaze, and there was an intensity there that she wasn't used to seeing from him.

"You know we're lovers," he said. "You see that we're happy, and you think that's all there is to it. What you don't see are the two hundred years it's taken to get to this point." His hand tightened around hers. "It's the hardest thing I have ever done, and there were a thousand times I nearly walked away, because I thought I couldn't bear it for even one more day. I loved him, and he loved me, and I thought that was enough to make anything tolerable. And I was wrong. It takes more than just love, Reina."

Slowly, she pulled her hand out from beneath his. Condensation had dripped down the sides of her cup and formed a ring on the slats of the wooden bench. She busied herself wiping it up, angling herself away from Kynan. "What else does it take?" she asked, head bowed.

"Strength. Determination. Endurance. Patience. Understanding." He took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face him. "You have all these things. If you understand what you're up against, and you love him enough to endure it all anyway, then you can get past it."

Slowly, she looked up at him. "You're telling me I shouldn't give up. I should try to make this work."

"I am telling you to think very hard about what you want, and what you're willing to sacrifice to have it. And then decide if it's worth it." He drew her close and kissed her cheeks. "It has been, for me. You have to decide if it will be for you."

She closed her eyes, leaned her brow against his chest. "It's hard."

"Yes." He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her close. "It will be for a while yet. But try to remember why he's doing this, that it's out of love, and it'll be easier." He gently brushed her hair back out of her face. "Don't give up on him just yet."

Reina shook her head. "I don't know, Kynan. I'm fighting him every step of the way."

"I know." He took her hand and got to his feet. The smile that curved his lips kindled a small fire of hope within her. "Let's arm you for this battle, then, shall we?"

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

The bright lights of the weapon store made Reina's eyes water, but it wasn't that that had her so tense that she was jumping at shadows. The shops racks were filled with clever little contraptions that catered to those members of humanity who wanted protection from creatures who stalked the night, but were level-headed enough to know that advertising that fact was a quick way to end up on somebody's shit list. The items here were designed to seem either innocuous or all-purpose, but they were all designed to kill or maim vampires. It was the last place in Bryson Reina wanted to be, and if anyone guessed that she and Kynan were not as mortal as any other customer, there would be hell to pay.

She held one of their blades in her hand, her skin prickling at the proximity of gold. Polished wood was smooth and warm against her palm, and the dagger's blade shone like silver in the store's fluorescent light, but the innate awareness of the presence of gold shivered across her skin like static from an electrical wire. There, but not. Promising danger, but still benign.

"I don't think this is a good idea," she said, too low for anyone else to hear.

Kynan glanced at her face and held his hand out without comment. She passed the white-gold dagger back to him hilt first. He slipped it into its leather sheath. The tension gathered in Reina's shoulders released with a shuddering sigh once the gold was safely covered.

"Nye's protective of the ones he loves." His lips quirked. "Sometimes overly so. He'll railroad you, if you let him."

"Or have a coronary any time I'm out of his sight," she muttered.

Kynan laughed. "Precisely. It'll help if you have an answer to his protests." He flipped the sheathed dagger back to her. "You don't have to, of course, but I wanted to offer the option to you. Nye might be a bit less insufferable if he knows you have the means to defend yourself."

Reina fingered the stylized loops and whorls embossed in the leather sheath. "Carving turkeys and trimming beef is about the extent of my experience with a knife, you realize. Armed with something like this, I'm going to need protecting from myself more than anyone else."

Kynan grinned and shook his head. "You know which end to hold, don't you?"

"The one that's not going to give me third-degree burns?" She flashed him a sarcastic smile.

"Smart girl." He selected another blade from the shop's glass-covered display, longer and narrower than the first, and held it up for inspection. "Anyone who's paying attention will realize that the blade is gold, and that'll be enough of a deterrent. Anyone who's not... Well, they'll figure it out the hard way, and the surprise of that will likely get them running in the other direction in a hurry."

Reina unsheathed an inch of the dagger, watching the light play off of the deceptive, silver blade and remembering the possessive gleam in Eanruig's eyes. "And if it doesn't?"

"Run like hell?" he suggested with playful innocence.

She rolled her eyes and threw the leather sheath at him. He caught it midair and

tossed it back to her.

"No weapon can guarantee that it'll keep you safe from everyone all the time. Nothing's foolproof. But these'll help."

She nodded and traded the first dagger for the slender one, tested its heft in her hand. She pointedly did *not* look at the price tag, but that didn't keep her from saying, "There's no way I can afford these."

Kynan raised his brows at her. "Oh, because wandering around unprotected is so much more affordable? Credit card bills can be paid off, but dead is dead. You only get one 'get out of jail free' card, and yours has already been cashed in."

"Not my fault," she muttered, and risked a glance at the price. Her throat closed up, and all she could manage was a small, involuntary sound of shock and protest.

Kynan took one look at her face and started laughing. "Oh jeez." He took the second dagger from her, put them both on the counter with his card, and slid the lot of them toward the clerk. "There. Happy birthday."

"My birthday's in July."

He grinned at her. "Then I'll be sure to remind you about this little bit of generosity six months from now."

Reina shook her head, despairing, but didn't protest. She waited while the man behind the counter slid the weapons into cotton-lined boxes and added both to a large bag.

Walking out of the store together, the bag slung over her shoulder, she glanced at Kynan out of the corner of her gaze. "You know," she said, "if you're going to give me my birthday presents in January, then I ought to get some birthday cake, too."

Kynan's laughter echoed through the mall, and made Reina feel infinitely better about everything.

\* \* \* \*

At last, the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place, and forming a recognizable picture. But the image that Logan saw was one he'd thought he'd escaped from, lifetimes before.

*Eanruig.*

Who else could have known about Cailean? Why else offer the trade he had—Reina for Logan—when there were other, easier ways to gain a rival's territory? And the blood—the blood, at last, made sense.

He picked up the phone and called Keachan, but dialed his home phone number rather than his cell. Keachan would not receive the message until he returned home at dawn. Later, if he worked the day through, as he often did.

"Patrick," he said when the answering machine clicked on. "Listen to me closely. The brood needs you, and I need you to be there for them, as you've always been for me. You're kin—never forget that. You've proved it through the years more than any blood test ever could." He paused, drew a deep breath. "You must know that I have always valued your friendship," he said, then disconnected before he lost his nerve.

He left his cell phone on the desk, because there would surely be calls, and he would not bring that attention to his kin. He removed the car key from his clip, slipped it into his pocket, and left the rest on the desk next to the phone.

He walked swiftly, quietly down the stairs and out of the front door, and did not



allow himself the luxury of looking back as he drove away.

\* \* \* \*

He arrived at the University just as students were beginning to shuffle into their classrooms. A herd of them lingered outside the hall that Reina's was held in, feeding coins into the vending machines for junk food or caffeine to fuel them through the lecture to come, or making use of the last opportunity to socialize before the professor arrived and called the class to order. Reina and Kynan were amongst them, arms crossed tight over their chests and collars turned up against the cold, stamping their feet to keep the blood flowing. Logan saw them and hung back in the shadows. He took the opportunity, while he had it, to watch.

Kynan bent low to speak something into Reina's ear, where the chill wind couldn't snatch the words away, and she threw her head back and laughed. Logan's heart ached at the sound of it, like bells on the crisp night air. He hadn't realized what a rarity it had become.

That, he knew, was his fault. Well—no longer. He would make amends for it this night. When Professor Ng arrived, the students dutifully trailed him into the hall. Reina tried to lead Kynan in with her, but he balked and shook his head. She protested for a moment, but ultimately left him there, shrugging and casting a last, doubtful glance over her shoulder before she disappeared into the hall.

Kynan took up a sentinel position just outside, leaning back against a brick planter in the sickly glow of the campus lights. And when the last student shuffled to his seat and the doors were pulled shut against the night, he looked directly into the concealing shadows, and smiled, and beckoned.

Logan stepped out, grimacing with chagrin.

"It was a nice try," Kynan offered, grinning. "I don't think Reina noticed."

Logan sat on the planter's edge, back bowed with fatigue and dread. "Tell me the truth," he said, hoping for a bit of futile comfort to carry with him. "Have I lost her, *cara*?"

Kynan did not respond immediately. Logan looked up at him and watched the starlight play across his features.

"She's not like Cailean, you know," he said at last.

Logan could only stare at him, too stunned to reply. Old grief lodged in his throat like a razor-edged stone.

"Nor like me," Kynan continued. "She'll stand her own against you on principle alone, and cling to her pride to the death." He broke off with startled laughter. "She's more like *you* than anyone, in that regard." He turned and looked Logan straight in the eye. "I don't think you've lost her yet, Nye. But if one of you doesn't unbend a little, you'll both shatter."

Logan rubbed a hand over his brow. "I have been trying, *mo charaid*."

Kynan's grin flashed like moonlight in the darkness. "Try harder."

Logan said nothing, for it was not yet the time. He reached out, and Kynan's hand was there. He twined their fingers together, gripped tight and tried to imprint this moment so it was as indelible upon his memory. They sat together in the sort of silence that made words unnecessary.

It would not matter, in an hour's time. The damage he'd dealt was already done. All

he could do was try to mitigate it.

"*Cara*," he said a breath of sound. Kynan turned his head to look at him. "You must make me a promise."

"Anything," Kynan answered without hesitation, and Logan closed his eyes. He would regret saying that, in a moment. "Ask me."

"Stay here." He tightened his grip on Kynan's hand. "Stay with Reina. Take care of the others."

He opened his eyes in time to watch bewilderment slip into alarm on Kynan's face. He jerked against Logan's hold, but Logan would not release him. "Why?" Kynan's voice shook. "Why would you ask me that?"

"Because I must." He could not look away from the terrible betrayal in Kynan's eyes. "Because they will need you."

"Where are you going?" Kynan stared at him with a gaze that cut through every lie that rose to his lips. Tears shone bright in his eyes, but his face was set with anger. "Why are you doing this?"

"You are my kin," Logan said, and every word broke his heart. "You are my family, and all that I love in this world. That's why I do it. That's why I must."

"No." Kynan choked on the word and shook his head wildly. "Don't. I don't care where you go, I'll follow you. You *can't*."

Logan drew him close and held him in a tight embrace, burying his face in Kynan's hair. "If you try," he said softly, "I will lose you. And Reina will be at risk until you return."

Kynan shook his head, fingers dug into the fabric of Logan's coat as though he could keep him there, if only he refused to let go. "No. *No*."

Logan drew back and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. "You love them. You will do what you must to protect them, whether you make me this promise or not." He stepped back, and when Kynan tried to follow, he held him at arm's length. "That is all I can do for them now. Protect them. At least this, I can do."

"We need you," Kynan whispered, clutching at his sleeves. "I need you."

"I must do this," Logan said, and forced himself to turn away.

\* \* \* \*

A commotion at the back of the lecture hall interrupted the class, punctuated by a flurry of muttered oaths and the sound of the heavy doors slamming shut. Reina turned with the rest of the class, bewildered.

Kynan staggered down the aisle, looking wildly over the students, searching.

She shoved her things into her bag and pushed out to the aisle to meet him, too alarmed to take notice of the other students she jostled on her way out. Closer, she noticed that Kynan's face was ashen, his eyes wide and frantic. "What's wrong?"

He grabbed her arm and dragged her toward the back of the hall. She stumbled out into the night. The cold hit her face like a slap. She jerked Kynan to a stop, pulling him around to face her. "Kynan!"

He turned back, but his gaze slid right through her. "Nye," he choked. "He has Nye."

Fear flashed through her, made her stomach heave and adrenaline pour into her system. "Who?"

He looked at her with bleak, hopeless eyes. "Who do you think?"

"Eanruig," she breathed, and felt sick. "*Where?*" she demanded. "Kynan, where did they go?"

"His house. He went to his house."

For just a moment, Reina closed her eyes. "There's not much time, then." She grabbed Kynan's hand, and they ran.

Her feet pounded on the pavement, her breath tearing her throat like knives. She pushed herself as hard as she could, and then harder, flying through the campus, skidding around corners at a dead run.

They threw themselves into the car, and Kynan slammed it into gear. The engine roared, the car leapt forward, and they tore through the city streets.

"Do you remember how to get there?" she asked Kynan. She pulled the dagger from her bag, sheathed it, and secured it at her hip. The other she put on the center console for Kynan.

"Yes." He stared through the windshield with hard, dead eyes. "I remember."

She nodded, withdrew her gloves from her bag, and pulled them on, too.

It was a blessing that they didn't get pulled over. Kynan sped through intersections without a care for the color of the traffic lights, dodged around other vehicles at a breakneck speed, clipped corners and left a chorus of blaring horns in their wake.

Reina clenched her hands into fists and found herself wishing he could go faster, turn sharper, swerve quicker. Logan was in danger, and there was no room in her mind for any thought but that.

Eanruig's home loomed ahead of them, as foreboding as any fortress. Reina threw herself from the car before it had come to a full stop. She scrambled across the lawn and stood before the house, staring up at it. Kynan came up behind her, put a hand on her shoulder, and only then did she realize that she was shaking.

"Will you be all right?" he asked quietly.

She was standing outside the home of a man she hated, the man who had killed her. She was preparing to enter a place she'd never wanted to lay eyes on again. Somewhere behind those walls they would find Logan, and all she could do was pray that he would still be alive.

"I'll be just fine." She boosted herself over the gate and landed in the grass on the other side, nearly silent. A moment later, Kynan dropped beside her, as pale and quiet as a wraith.

Ahead of them, light shone across the grass, spilling from an open set of low wooden doors, the sort that gave access to a basement. Reina held her breath, waiting, listening.

From within, the soft, choked moan of a man in torment.

She was moving before she had time to think, running across the grass, throwing herself down the stairs. She knew with every rational fiber of her being that she might be throwing herself straight into a trap, but it was beyond the limits of her strength to stand out there, listening to him suffer, and do nothing.

Inside, garish yellow lights cast a sickly glow over the room. What Reina had seen of the house during her imprisonment had at least had a veneer of civility, of normalcy. But the basement cast off all pretensions. It looked like it belonged in a medieval torture chamber, not a suburban home in a college town. Knives and whips and chains hung from the walls, floggers tipped with metal spurs, a glittering array of weapons.

In the center of it all knelt Logan, his hands bound before him with chains of gold.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Logan's head bowed forward, curtaining his face with hair. He had been stripped to the waist. His shoulders were shaking.

"Nye," Kynan choked, and tried to push past her.

Logan jumped as though he'd been hit. His head jerked around. Terror washed across his face. "No," he cried. "No. Leave!"

"Shut up." Reina dropped to her knees before him and began pulling at the chains that bound him.

He jerked his hands away, raising them high overhead so she could not reach. His arms trembled with the effort. "Leave them! Go home, *mo mhuirín*, and leave me here. You must." He turned heartbroken eyes on Kynan. "*Cara*, please. It's me he wants; it always has been."

Something in what he said, the way he said it, made Reina hesitate as she reached again for his arms. She stared into his face, open and vulnerable and desperately pleading.

"Who is he?" she demanded, and wrenched his arms down so she could free them.

It was Kynan who answered her. "His sire," he said quietly. "Eanruig was his sire."

Reina tore the chains from Logan's wrists, revealing charred, blackened skin beneath. Tears burned her eyes. "Those chains weren't even locked. You could have thrown them off yourself." She looked up into his face. "You're not restrained. The doors were open. You could have walked out, if you wanted."

He hung his head. "Yes."

"Logan, *why are you here?*"

A thin, bleak whisper: "So you wouldn't be."

Her heart tripped within her chest, fear and longing combined. Her breath came hard and fast. "And you thought I'd just throw my hands up and abandon you to your fate?" She pressed her lips together and looked away. "You don't know me at all."

"I didn't think so, *mo mhuirín*." He reached for her, but hesitated with his hand a breath away from her cheek. His fingers curled against his palm, twisted with pain. Slowly, he lowered it back to his side without touching her. "But I had hoped."

"You don't know either of us." Kynan came up behind him. He draped Logan's arm around his shoulders and wrapped his around Logan's waist. "Let's get you home."

"No, *cara*. I can't. I won't." He pulled away, then stood, swaying. "You both must go, and leave me here. You must let me do this for you."

"Like hell," Reina snarled.

Logan's face set with resolve. "It's me he wants. But if I leave, he will destroy us all. I will not do that to my brood."

"Then we'll stay and fight."

"Stay, and fight, and die." He drew her close and kissed the top of her head. "I will not let you throw your life away for my sake."

"But you'll ask me to watch you throw yours away for mine?" She shook her head, her hair whipping against her cheeks. "How can you do this?"

"How can I not?" He looked down on her, immeasurably sad, but resolved. "You

know Kynan's history—you know some of what he has suffered on my behalf. Surely you understand."

"No, I don't." Her chest felt too small to contain the frantic beating of her heart. "You *saved* him."

"I killed him!" he cried, throwing himself away from her. "And Cailean—It was the truth, you know. What you said. What he told you about my wife."

"That you murdered her and stood over her body and watched her die, and never shed a tear of remorse? I don't believe it."

"I may as well have." He tilted his head back and stared up at the ceiling, like a man in prayer. "I cannot undo any of the pain I have caused the ones I love. Not Cailean, not Kynan, not you. But I can do this."

"Better you should tear my heart from my chest." She reached for him, would have taken his hand if she hadn't feared to hurt him, would have gripped his lapels if he hadn't been stripped to his skin.

"Go," he said, and turned his back on them, "before it is too late. I will not go with you."

She stared at his back, the twisted scars that stretched across his shoulders and down to his waist.

*I was starved until I was too weak to fight, then bound in a gold coffin.*

*I was my sire's captive for over a hundred years, kept as a slave and a trophy.*

She could not leave him to face that fate again.

"Logan," she whispered.

He turned and watched her with bleak eyes.

"I love you."

His expression crumpled with something that might have been joy as easily as agony. "*God*. You do not fight fair."

She waited, unable to breathe.

He stared at her, his face a mask of agony. "How can you ask me to do this?"

"How can you expect me to walk away?"

He looked down at his hands, curled uselessly before him. "I will not be able to put up much of a fight, *mo mhuirín*."

"We'll make do." She checked the position of the white gold dagger at her hip, and with Kynan, strode over to the wall to augment their arsenal. She chose another dagger, yellow gold and sharp as a razor, and secured it on her other hip. Her gloved fingers fumbled with the frog, but she settled it to her satisfaction, and moved on.

A sound from outside made them all freeze and turn their faces toward the door like startled deer. Kynan took Reina's hand and drew her back. They stood before Logan, a wall of defense. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs like a death knell. The hairs along her nape and upper arms stood on end. Fear choked her, and resolve settled over her like a mantle.

Step by step, Eanruig descended the stairs until he stood before them, his head angled slightly to the side, a smile flirting about his lips. He did not seem terribly surprised to see them.

"Well, hello again, little girl."

"You really screwed up, Eanruig Campbell." Reina's voice trembled with the strength of her fury.

His smile spread. "Is that so?"

"Damn straight." Her hand hovered above the dagger sheathed at her waist. "You never should have killed me. Now I'm immortal, *and* I'm pissed."

"I'm terrified. Truly."

"I'm taking him home."

"No, child, you are not." His hand lashed out. She ducked aside, avoiding the blow, but he moved with lightning speed, backhanding her while she was off balance and sending her sprawling across the basement floor.

She scrambled to her feet, dagger in her hand, but he was already moving. Kynan faced him, feet planted in a wide stance, his hands fisted at his side. He didn't raise a hand, didn't dodge to the side, only stood his ground, putting himself between Eanruig and Logan.

Eanruig grabbed a fistful of his hair and dragged him aside, forced Kynan to his knees. Kynan glared up at him, his face set with defiance. Reina dragged herself to Logan's side, but his gaze was glued to Kynan, transfixed with terror.

"Now, then." Eanruig selected a dagger from the arsenal behind him. He pressed the edge of the blade to Kynan's throat. "You will do just as I say, or I shall cut your lover's heart out while you watch."

Logan made a noise like a trapped animal. His hands curled into fists, though it must have pained him greatly. "Let him go," he rasped. "I've already given you my word."

Eanruig shot him a patronizing smile. "That's not quite good enough, pet." He pressed the dagger deeper. Blood welled and dripped down the blade, but Kynan never made a sound.

Reina's hands fisted against the basement's cement floor. She could not watch Eanruig harm Kynan, any more than she could watch him torment Logan. She had only one choice, and only one opportunity to make it work.

She got to her feet. "If you want surety of his obedience," she told Eanruig, "then it's me you want. Not him."

All three men stared at her: Logan and Kynan with horror, Eanruig with a mounting delight. "Patience, child. Don't think I've forgotten the stunt you pulled. You'll have your turn."

"No." She jerked her chin high. "Now."

"Sit down, girl. Your bravado will not save him."

She strode forward and struck him across the face.

Eanruig shoved Kynan aside and grabbed her, his hands circling her arms like bands of steel. Bruises flared and faded beneath his fingertips, and flared again when he dragged her to the center of the basement. He threw her onto her back and stood above her. His eyes blazed with a cold, hard fury.

He knelt over her, the dagger shining in his hand like death. Reina turned her face away, shivering with fear.

Beyond her, Kynan knelt with Logan, clutching him as Logan sobbed and tried to fight free with his burned, useless hands. He pressed Logan's face to his chest; Logan's hands clutched at his shoulders. They both shook. Kynan's gaze was fixed on her over Logan's head, and his expression was terrible, transfixed with grief and guilt and desperation. Kynan caught her eye and mouthed, *I'm sorry*.

Reina shook her head. She closed her eyes and forced herself to relax beneath

Eanruig's weight. His voice, a whisper of memory, swirled through her mind like a mantra. *We're kin of a different sort. Magic always did run strong in our line.*

He touched the dagger to her throat and she gasped, made a shallow cut and she pressed her lips together against a cry of pain. She closed her eyes and grounded, sinking away from Eanruig's weight above her, the icy chill of the basement floor creeping into her back, the quiet sounds of Logan and Kynan's grief as they bore witness to her torment.

Every touch of the dagger, every cut and nick and burn, drew her back. It was an uphill struggle, but she fought it with every ounce of strength that she had, every scrap of knowledge and power that she'd gained in the past twenty-five years. She insulated herself until the pain might have been someone else's, a distant irritation.

And then she opened herself, dropped every shield, every wall that she'd erected to protect herself from the influx of residuals that was a part of everyday life. In the house above them, Weres lounged or patrolled or bickered amongst themselves. Reina sought out Cosette, and found her by the thick cloud of resentment that surrounded her.

She found the residuals, and she drew them to herself. Every unpleasant emotion, all the anger and grief and terror that filled his house, she gathered close, until it was nearly too much to hold. She shook with it, tears blazing hot trails down her cheeks, her chest too tight, her heart racing too fast as her body became caught up in strangers' emotions.

And still she gathered them about her, pressed them into a mass of roiling, writhing, knotted misery. And when her head was spinning, her lungs heaving, her grip slipping, darkness closing in around her, she gathered the last vestiges of her strength and *shoved* the residuals at Eanruig.

He reeled back, crying out. He dropped the dagger and brought his hands to his eyes, rubbing. Reina wrenched herself out from beneath him, shoved him back and tried to crawl away. Kynan was already rushing past her, taking advantage of Eanruig's brief moment of vulnerability and the fallen blade. Reina knelt, swaying, battling back the nausea and lightheadedness because she need to *see*, to know that it was all over. Logan pulled at her, saying something, but she fought him off until she had seen for herself the way Kynan bore Eanruig down, a feral light in his eyes, and used his momentum to drive the blade up under Eanruig's ribs. Eanruig cried out and tried to grab for the blade, but the sound trailed off as he slumped back against the floor. A slow trickle of blood seeped out around the dagger and dripped to the ground.

It had all happened in a moment, between one breath and the next. Reina turned away, shuddering, and her strength gave out. But Logan was there before she could fall, his hands raising her up, pulling her close. He dragged her onto his lap and bowed his head over her, hot tears dripping from his cheeks to scald her skin.

"I'm okay," she whispered, but the darkness was creeping in on her, stealing in at the edges of her vision. Logan held her close, her head and shoulders cradled on his lap, his hands running restlessly over her face, heedless of his injuries.

*"Is tú mo ghrá,"* he whispered, over and over again. *"Tá mo chroí istigh ionat."*

They were the words he had spoken the night she'd fed him, the words he had refused to define for her. She tried to speak, but only slurred syllables came from her throat.

Logan pressed his thumb to her lip, silencing her. "You are my love. My heart is within you," he said. "It means I love you."

Her weakness claimed her, though she struggled against it. She sank beneath the darkness, and the last thing she saw was Logan's face above hers, his eyes bright with love and fear.

\* \* \* \*

She kept her eyes closed when she woke, and flexed her arms and her legs, rolled her shoulders. Something impeded her movement, strange and stiff on her skin. She slid a hand up her chest, exploring with the tips of her fingers, and discovered a gauze bandage, taped in place over her collarbone. Further exploration revealed a patchwork of bandages across her skin, and numerous more wounds that had been trivial enough to leave open to the air.

She sat up, groaning at the pain of her abused muscles. She felt like she'd been wrestling with alligators, not ephemeral residuals.

Slowly, she dragged herself out of bed and down the hall. She found the brood gathered in the kitchen, sipping at stale coffee and trading tense, worried whispers.

Her gaze sought out Logan's. "Are you all right?" Her voice came out like a croak. "Is Kynan?"

Logan crossed to her in two long strides and pulled her into a fierce hug. "We are just fine, thanks to you. Are *you* okay, *mo mhuirín*?"

"I've been better, but I imagine I'll live."

He set her away from him and looked down into her face. "Would you mind if I asked what exactly you did?"

"Gave him a hell of a migraine, I expect." She rubbed a hand over her eyes, which ached at the brightness of the kitchen lights. "Myself, too, but I suppose it's a small price to pay."

Logan brushed his thumbs over her cheeks. "No other injuries?"

"I seem to be covered in them." She prodded at one whose tape pulled at her skin when she flexed her arm.

"Bella has seen to those. She says you'll be fine." His tone belied his doubt.

Reina glanced at Bella and offered her a small smile of thanks. "Stiff and sore for the next few weeks, but I imagine she's right."

"In that case..." His hands closed around her shoulders, gave her a small shake. "*Mo mhuirín*, you are the most distressingly obstinate, reckless, maddening woman I have ever had the misfortune to meet in all my centuries, and had you not saved us all, I would be very tempted to tan your hide for that little stunt. What were you *thinking*?"

"I had to get close to him," she said feebly. "The residuals..."

"*Idiot*," Kynan breathed. He sat on the barstool, heels hooked over the rungs, his hands over his mouth and eyes shining with frantic concern. "I don't know how Nye can bear it. I swear, I lost decades from my life over that trick of yours. I can't believe you *hit* him."

Reina laughed and stepped past Logan. She opened her arms. Kynan rushed into them and hugged her close. "A few years less than eternity?" she murmured. "I think you'll manage."

"All right, shove off," a voice behind Kynan said. Reina's head jerked up with surprise. "It's my turn."

Reina watched Fate warily as she approached. She propped a hip against the edge of



the table with a rueful grimace. "I heard what happened, sweetie. I'm sorry."

"That I almost got killed?" Reina asked, with less venom than she expected of herself. "Or that you bit my head off?"

"Can't I be sorry for both?"

She was quiet for a moment. "Where does this leave us, then?"

"I don't know." Fate chuckled her playfully beneath the chin. "But you're my friend, as odd a couple as that makes us. So I guess we'll just have to muddle through it somehow."

Reina nodded and hugged her, too. When they released one another, Reina turned back to Logan. "But what happened to Eanruig?"

"He's dead," Kynan said. His voice was as hard as steel.

*Thank God.* She closed her eyes, dizzy with relief. "And his brood?"

Someone behind her said, "Exile, most of us."

At first, Reina didn't recognize the voice. She turned her head. A man leaned against the kitchen counter, a wheat-blond plait hanging over his shoulder.

"Faolan!" she cried, stunned.

He smiled and pushed away from the counter, but hung back as though reluctant to join the crowd of friends clustered around her. "He made an exception for me."

Reina stared up at Logan. "First Brett and me, now him." She shook her head. "Lord, where's everyone going to sleep?"

Logan laughed and drew her close against his side. "Brett already has his place in Alex's room. As for you two..." Color flushed his cheeks. He looked away. "I thought we might give him your old room."

She stared up at him. "Where do you intend my new one to be?"

His blush deepened, staining his cheeks crimson. He drew her a short distance away from the rest of their kin. "I had hoped," he whispered, "that you might move in with me, *mo mhuirín*."

She couldn't help it; she shot a guilty look at Kynan.

He had his arms wrapped tight around his chest, grinning like a kid on Christmas morning. "Say yes, you idiot!" he called to her.

She turned back to Logan and put a hand on his cheek so that he had to look at her. "Did you mean it?"

He didn't have to ask what she meant. "Did you?"

She bit her lip. "Yes."

He kissed her, soft and sweet. "I meant it from the start, *mo mhuirín*."

"Oh." A smile bloomed across her face. "In that case, I'd love to."

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Aislinn Kerry wrote her first romance on a whim and hasn't been able to stop since. She has always been fascinated by the misfits, the misunderstood, and the things that go bump in the night. She blames it on an unnatural obsession with Beauty and the Beast at an impressionable age. You can drop her an email at [aislinnkerry@gmail.com](mailto:aislinnkerry@gmail.com).

Aislinn currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with two cat-shaped hellions who keep her on her toes.

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