



FAUSTIN BROTHERS

EVIE BYRNE

DAMNED BY
BLOOD

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Power play...or duel to the death.

Faustin Brothers, Book 3

Mikhail Faustin is the prince of New York. His authority is absolute, his power unquestioned—and his heart is empty. The pain he carries inside leaves him with nothing to offer a mate. When he discovers that Alya Adad is not only his destined bride but also the source of his misery, his fate is sealed. He must claim the woman he despises most. Or die trying.

Alya Adad is the most powerful of her kind born in generations and a prince in her own right. She's accountable to no man, certainly not to her first lover, Mikhail. Now he has the gall to not only invade her territory, but threaten to take her by force—for a prophecy she doesn't believe in? She'll kill him first.

Their battle for the upper hand is no-holds-barred...until she discovers the one thing his pride didn't want her to know. That she still holds the key to his heart—and his innermost desires. And when a rival vampire clan strikes, letting her guard down is the only way to save him.

Warning: Contains explicit sex and violence, including violence between the hero and heroine. The sexual content includes but is not limited to bondage, blood play, and some rather creative uses for cling wrap. The author and her attorneys caution readers that the use of a taser to resolve relationship issues is a strategy best left in the realm of fiction.

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Damned by Blood

Evie Byrne

Dedication

To J.W.

Chapter One

Mikhail kicked in the door of apartment 501. The chains and bolts securing it tore from the frame with a clatter. Kobryn bolted for the window. It didn't matter where he ran, because Mikhail had a man on the fire escape, another on the roof, one on the ground and one in the hall to intercept the neighbors. He caught Kobryn before he made the window—caught him by the hair, spun him around, and shoved a polished steel spike through the hollow of his jaw and into his brain.

“This one's alive.”

Mikhail let the body fall and went to his brother, who crouched over a human female sprawled face down on the blackened floor of the kitchenette. A male, obviously dead, slumped in the corner behind her. By the smell, other bodies rotted in the apartment, or had recently. It was a wonder the neighbors hadn't called the police yet.

He flicked on his radio and called his men. “It's done. Omar, I want you to take his body to 313. Daniel, come in for clean up. There's two, maybe more.”

“Jesus, why do they all have to live this way?” Gregor said. Under his breath he added, “Fuck me if she's sixteen.”

Mikhail gave a half shrug as he knelt down by his brother. Kobryn was trash. This is what trash did. If Gregor could still be shocked, he hadn't spent enough time patrolling.

The girl had long, magenta-streaked hair. Tattoos covered her skinny arms. Examining her, he found plenty of scratches and bruises, but only two bite marks—one below the ear, the other on her inner thigh. Her pulse told him she'd live. Mikhail scowled. Survivors caused complications.

Gregor said, “Do you want me to take her to the clinic?”

At the clinic, his people would give her some plasma, treat her wounds and distort her memories so she never could say exactly what happened to her. Memory wipes were expensive, time consuming, and in his opinion, made the survivors victims twice over. Mikhail turned over her pale hand and examined her broken, dirty nails. She was a street kid, the kind no one would listen to if she started talking about *vampyr*. The city hospital would rehydrate her and drop her back on the streets. With her memory intact, she might learn to be more cautious. He drew one of his knives.

“We'll give her back to her own kind.”

Pressing her to the ground to be sure she didn't move, he obscured the puncture wounds with a few quick slashes. She didn't even moan.

Daniel and Omar arrived to secure the scene. Mikhail told Omar to go to a payphone, call 911, and leave the girl next to the phone. Gregor gave him a look. It wasn't quite a challenge—but he was definitely questioning his judgment.

"You're too sentimental about them," Mikhail said. His phone rang. He answered it, narrowing his eyes at Gregor as he did. No matter what Gregor thought, they'd leave as soon as he hung up. He was too busy to babysit foolish humans.

It was his father. His father who never picked up a phone. "Come to the hall as soon as you can."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. No emergency. Is Gregor with you?"

Mikhail frowned at this vagueness. "Yes."

"Bring him, too." The line went dead.

Faustin family business played out in two places—the hall and the house. The house being the brownstone where Mikhail and his brothers had grown up. If his parents called a meeting there, the subject was likely to concern only the immediate family. The hall was their place of business, a basement bakery their father had transformed into a wood-paneled, antique-stuffed sanctuary back during Prohibition using funds he'd hijacked from bootleggers. Back in those days, the hall could have doubled as an elegant speakeasy, and in some ways it was one. It served a very exclusive group of East coast *vampyr*.

A meeting at the hall meant the business was public, something to be deliberated by the council. But his father had retired two years ago. If anyone were to call a meeting in the hall, it should be Mikhail himself.

Gregor called their other brother, Alex, and learned he and his wife had been summoned too, as had Gregor's wife, but none of them knew anything. Something extraordinary had happened, and all Mikhail could imagine as he and Gregor sped uptown were the grimmest of scenarios. Their consortium with Europe had collapsed. Their brokers had bilked them.

They made it to the hall fast, descending beneath the street, sweeping past the defensive rings of both personnel and magic protecting their sanctuary from intruders, making their way to the heart of the building—the library. Mikhail pushed open the doors and strode straight to his father, who waited there with his back to the fireplace. They burned a fire all year round in the library, because the room was damp, and vampires could never be too warm.

"Well? What is it?"

His father said, "We wait for Alexander and Helena."

"You can tell me something."

"No."

They locked eyes and tested wills—the old *knyaz* versus the young one. His father had diminished some in retirement, but he was still formidable. Mikhail was stronger than ever, but not strong enough—not quite yet—to stare down the old prince.

“Soon enough, you will know.”

Mikhail’s mother arrived next, along with Gregor’s wife, Madelena. His mother, who usually dressed in kimonos and fringed shawls, wore the smart black suit that she only pulled out for funerals and meetings with lawyers. It showed off her legs, legs which once made men weep in the cabarets of Weimar Berlin. It was not a good sign that she’d put it on. She offered him a worried smile and gave him a dry kiss on the cheek.

He was beginning to get annoyed.

Madelena hugged him. No one else in the world hugged him, but he tolerated it from her, perhaps because so much of his own blood ran in her veins. She’d been converted from her human state via massive transfusions of Faustin family blood—including his own—making her one of the strongest converts in recent memory. Not that she seemed to notice, since she spent all her time sitting at home, writing science fiction.

“Big drama, huh?” she said.

Gregor had poured himself a scotch and found a comfortable chair. There was something to be said for his pragmatism, but Mikhail wanted to keep a clear head.

“Alex,” Gregor said. He didn’t have to say more. Everyone sighed in agreement. Alex was always late.

Madelena went to perch on the arm of her husband’s chair. “Give them a break. I don’t think those two have left bed for days.” She grinned at him. “They’re loopy. You remember how it was.”

“Yeah, I’m going all mushy just thinking about it,” Gregor said, throwing back his drink. But Madelena kept grinning at him until he cracked a smile, and they shared a look so full of private communication that Mikhail had to turn away.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and scrolled through his text messages, trying to ignore their...whatever it was. Happiness? As much as he’d approved of his two younger brothers marrying and settling down, he found he could do without all of the preciousness of the newly bonded.

Though he’d always been solitary, he’d never realized how different he was until he watched his brothers fall in love. He couldn’t imagine sharing his life with another person. The thought was as alien and repulsive as the prospect of growing an extra limb. Besides, he had nothing to give a wife. Nothing inside.

Perhaps that was why he was born to be *knyaz*. Living like a monk, he could devote himself entirely to the work of protecting and leading the East coast families.

Not only was he unfit to marry, he had no compelling reason to marry. His brothers would breed, and he’d make one of their boys his heir. He’d take the child into training as soon as it was biddable. True, it

was irregular for a prince to have no children, but not unheard of. If Gregor and Madelena couldn't have children, he'd take one of Alex's sons. Now that Helena had finally decided to convert, he suspected it wouldn't be long until she was pregnant.

As he considered that possibility, Alex and Helena staggered into the room like a pair of drunks. Which was essentially what they were—blood drunk. They were completing their blood bond, feeding off one another until they were one, and converting Helena along the way. Only an extraordinary emergency would induce his father to call them to this meeting.

"Sorry we're late," Alex said, straightening up. Though he was too thin, and spots of high color stained his cheeks, his dark eyes gleamed with contentment. His lanky bride, Helena—who also resembled a fever victim—nodded in agreement, nervously pressing the pad of her thumb against the sharp new point on her right incisor.

Mikhail planted himself in the center of the room, folded his arms and looked at his father expectantly. No more waiting. No more—what did Madelena call it? No more drama.

His father hadn't left his place by the fire, and his face, as always, was unreadable. His mother joined him there, taking his hand. Something was very wrong.

To his surprise, his mother addressed them instead of his father, another unusual event outside of their home, and particularly in the hall, which was a man's place. Nerves made her English more eccentric than usual.

"I bring news. You will not like it, I know. But it is the will of God. So it is right, yes? Even if for now we do not understand it yet." Gathering courage, she put her hand to her heart and closed her eyes. When she opened them she said, "I have dreamed the name of your true bride, Mikhail Ivanovitch."

Mikhail shook his head, the denial automatic. As sure as he knew the sun rose, he knew he had no mate in all the world.

And why would they tell him here in the hall, instead of at home, where his brothers had learned the names of their wives? And why were they so grim? Why the secrecy?

Then his mother answered all his questions. "She is Alya Adad."

Her words hit like a bat to the knees. In an instant, his father was at his side, holding his arm to keep him upright. Though the man had passed his hundredth year, his grip could crush bone. The pain cleared Mikhail's head.

"I'm sorry." His mother wrung a handkerchief in her hands. "But we must believe it is right."

Mikhail could only gape at her, his lips numb, the blood roaring in his ears.

Gregor broke the silence. "Are you out of your frigging mind, Ma?"

"Gregor!" their father said. "Don't speak to your mother that way." As he said this, he pressed Mikhail into a chair and put a glass of scotch in his hand. Had that glass been poured and waiting? Had

they guessed how this would affect him? Talked about it in advance? Was he shaming them with his weakness? “Drink.”

Mikhail did not drink. The room buzzed with his brothers’ excited voices, his parents’ low, slow answers to their questions. It was just noise, static to accompany him as he fell down a deep hole.

Alya.

Even in his shock, his analytical mind did not retreat. It turned the idea over and over and around and around, trying to understand...

Like a corpse breaking the waters of a dark lake, a single memory surfaced in his mind. A warm summer night. The blaze of torches and the flash of knives. A drop of blood on her hand. Her laughter. His kiss.

He’d tasted Alya’s blood. Just a single drop, and so long ago, but she’d been his destined bride. *Merciful Jesus.* All this time, all these grey years, he’d been bonded to her.

The truth was perverse. Unjust. Appalling.

And it made perfect sense.

Helena’s shrill whistle cut through the sludge of noise. Mikhail lifted his head and looked around the room with fresh eyes. In just a few seconds his world had collapsed and been rebuilt in a terrible new form. Helena threw out her arms in frustration. “Excuse me. I’m new here. Could somebody please tell me who this Alya Adad is?”

His father said, “The eldest child of Prince Zouhair Adad of Morocco.”

His mother said, “Mikhail’s first love.”

Gregor said, “She’s the fucking queen of the damned.”

Mikhail stood. That surprised them all, he could tell, and he hated their worried glances. He cast a long, slow gaze around his family circle, warning them against pity. “You should know her name, Helena. She rules the entire West coast. And we’re at war with her.”

Throwing back his head, he downed his scotch in a single swallow and pitched the glass into the fireplace. A plume of embers shot up the flue. “Excuse me.”

He stalked into his office, which adjoined the library. On the wall behind his desk hung an ancient banner bearing the Faustin dragon crest, hermetically sealed in a glass frame. It was over one thousand years old, but the brown sprays of blood and the marks of fire on the fragile silk still told the story of the battle in which his ancestors established themselves as lords of Kabarda. The Faustins were always at war, one way or another.

He dropped into his desk chair and leaned his head back against the cool leather. *Alya Adad.* God was laughing.

In a dynastic sense, it would be a perfect match. Alya’s lines were impeccable, more ancient than his, running back to the line of Darius the Great if the Adads were to be believed—and believing an Adad was

always unwise. Nonetheless, she came from an old family, and a powerful one. A child born of the two lines would be a prince among princes.

But what chance would a child have born to a mother like her? Alya was power hungry, ruthless and cruel. She'd shown herself to be so at sixteen, and over the intervening thirty years her appetites had only sharpened. When she was younger, she took only the most powerful *vampyr* as lovers and took what she needed from them before moving on. Men were stepping stones to her. He'd merely had the privilege of being the first.

Like him, she had two brothers, and as far as he knew, both were still in Marrakech waiting for her father to step down, or for their chance to kill him, or however the Adads managed matters of accession. Alya, the girl child Adad planned to marry off to seal some alliance or another, turned out to be the wild card.

After refusing an arranged marriage, she'd run away from Adad and traveled the world. Along the way, as far as he could tell, she'd slept with most the *vampyr* princes of Europe and Asia. Eventually she settled down in California. From her home base in Los Angeles she gathered power. Over the course of ten years, she systematically challenged the old families who once held California, Oregon and Washington—and, to everyone's surprise, won all those territories. Since then she'd claimed the title and privileges of a prince. The only other woman to have done anything similar was three hundred years dead.

One of those privileges was the right to exsanguinate her enemies, a right he'd exercised himself. This was a dangerous privilege. It granted you the power of your opponent, as well as his memories, but it could also drive you mad. Mikhail counted on his fingers the vamps he knew she'd exsanguinated and the number made his skin crawl. She'd be unspeakably strong.

His father knocked. Mikhail gestured him in. Even after two years it still felt odd to invite his father into the office he'd occupied all of Mikhail's life.

His father said, "You see now why I called the meeting here."

"It would be a marriage of state."

"And it has bearing on the situation in Minnesota."

"Where her actions there are making less sense every day."

"If this goes forward, you can ask her herself what the hell she is doing in Minnesota. In the meanwhile, we will need to consult the lawyers, and ask the council's permission to move forward. We'll send an ambassador to Prague to lay the groundwork among any families who are her supporters. We don't want any of them giving her shelter. You understand she'll have to be taken by force."

Mikhail leaned back in his chair, glancing up at the tattered battle flag. *Here we go again.* "I wouldn't imagine she'd be pleased to marry me after all these years."

"Don't forget she's your destined bride. She will be pleased. Eventually."

"It doesn't make sense." They'd already been together—and it had ended.

“Back then, it wasn’t the right time. Now it is.” His father began to pace the rug, his hands behind his back, thinking aloud. “You’re coming into your full power. The families love you. They’ll back you in this. Everyone agrees Alya is dangerous. Everyone will thank you for bringing her under rein.”

“And let’s not forget the small matter of her territory.” Mikhail knew this, more than anything, drove his father’s interest in the marriage.

Whirling around to face him, his father said, eyes gleaming, “Claim her, my boy, and we rule both coasts.”

If Mikhail did not know his mother considered her dreams sacred and would never lie about them, he would suspect this entire scheme to be a pretext for war. In his way, his father was as much as an expansionist as Alya. Mikhail had deep reservations about expanding their holdings across the country, when their own territories needed all of his attention.

Mikhail steepled his fingers under his chin, imagining all the players in this game as pieces on a chessboard. As *knyaz* he spent a good deal of his time enforcing law at the street level. But what he really loved was the intricacies of politics, unwinding the thin strings of self-interest that kept their world united. Considering the possible reactions, and how the various interests played off one another, was such an engaging problem that, for a moment, he was able to forget Alya. Until his father said,

“But you may not wish to marry her. It is within your rights to refuse the dream. This is what you must decide before we take another step.”

Mikhail watched his father over the tips of his fingers, wondering how he would take the news. “I can’t deny the dream. I’ve tasted her.”

His father stiffened and his eyes darkened with interest. Master of understatement, he said, “Ah. I see.”

Mikhail hadn’t bitten Alya. He hadn’t been that stupid. But one night she’d nicked herself while practicing with her knives. A single, ruby drop had welled on her knuckle. Without thinking, he’d kissed it clean and sealed his fate. Because she was his destined mate, that one drop was enough to alter his chemistry and bond him to her for life.

If he’d tasted any other girl in the world, nothing would have happened.

If he’d had more than one drop that night, the mistake might have killed him.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “So you see, I’m damned already, and twice damned if I take her as a bride.”

His father leaned on the desk, his gnarled hands splayed wide across the glossy wood. “If I’d known, I swear I would not have rested until—”

Mikhail waved his apology away. “I wasn’t strong enough. That’s why she left me. Even if we’d known, I couldn’t have claimed her. Pity isn’t her strong suit.”

“It isn’t ours either.” His father pushed up his coat sleeve. A fine, silken black rope wrapped his arm from the wrist up. “Give me your hand.”

The black rope came to life and slithered across their joined hands, unfurling from his father’s arm to twine around Mikhail’s right wrist. Mikhail watched wide eyed, but did not flinch. This was old vamp magic. Rarely used, and seen less.

“It is called bride rope. Have you heard of it? This my father gave me to capture your mother, long ago.”

“She didn’t come to you willingly?”

That was hard to imagine. Even after sixty years, his mother doted on his father, and his father, though less demonstrative, loved her still. It was in his every look.

His father only smiled at that question. So, tracing the lines of the rope around his wrist, Mikhail asked another. “And Gregor? Alex?”

“They did not need this to claim their little girls, but one such as Alya will never respect you unless you bring her to heel first. When you capture her, give her no quarter. A proud woman will never trust her heart to a man who isn’t strong enough to protect it.”

“And the rope?”

“The rope knows your desires. It will teach her how to bend to them.”

His father spoke man to man rather than father to son. The suggestion was clear. Mikhail supposed he should imagine Alya hogtied on the floor, naked, and begging. But the thought did not excite him. He’d been shut down so long, he couldn’t remember what it felt like to desire someone.

Not in that way, at least. All his adult life, no matter how often he hunted, hunger gnawed at him. Now he knew it was all because of her. Only she could satisfy him. What he desired was her flesh between his teeth, her hot blood flooding his mouth. The next conclusion followed naturally, an idea as sharp and ruthless as Alya herself.

“I do have a choice. Roland’s Choice.”

His father’s brow creased. “There is that. If you take her soul, you’ll be free of the blood bond, but in doing so you make yourself a monster. Remember the story. Illysia was already dying when Roland exsanguinated her. No one will forgive you for murdering your destined bride in cold blood.”

“And who has ever been cursed with a wife like her?” He spoke too loud, and his voice cracked with frustration. Reining himself in, he continued in a lower tone. “We have the cover of war. We claimed Minnesota first—she is the aggressor there. If I take her down, who will blame me? No one need know the truth.”

As he spoke, his mother rushed into the room and threw herself at his feet.

“*Mat’!*” Appalled, he leapt from his desk chair, taking her outstretched hands in his. He tried to make her rise, but she would not. For all her smallness she was very strong.

“For so long I prayed, Misha. You have been alone too long. I hoped to bring you joy.”

“I don’t blame you for this. You know I don’t.”

“Who do you blame if not me? Do you say God is wrong? The dreams come from his angels. No one else.”

Mikhail sat back down in his chair to be closer to her, keeping hold of her fine-boned hands. “Yes, I call God wrong.”

Angry at his blasphemy, she snatched her hands away. “You loved her.”

“Once.”

“And she loved you.”

“It didn’t keep her from turning to that swamp rat Jean Courtableu in front of everyone. From humiliating all of us. From starting her long glorious fuck to the top at the tender age of sixteen!” He realized he was shouting and turned his face aside. “I beg your pardon.”

His mother stood, unfolding herself with her dancer’s grace. “You don’t know what was inside her head back then. She is an Adad. They are like jackals, that family.”

“I don’t want a jackal for a wife.”

“That girl, she is your only chance at happiness.”

Mikhail laughed aloud, for the first time in a long, long time.

“The. Dreams. Do. Not. Lie.” On each word she jabbed at him with her finger. “There is a path for you to follow. Have faith.”

“What faith should I have in a God that has left me to suffer for thirty years, and then completes my misery by giving me this woman as a bride? *She* is my salvation? *She* is my future?”

His father stepped forward. “Do you feel the pull?” He thumped his own chest with a closed fist. “Here. Now that you know?”

At the question, a fine tremor passed under Mikhail’s skin and he realized after long years in dormancy, his body was waking, his emotions churning. He wasn’t altogether in control, and he didn’t like it at all.

“Mikhail?” his father said, relentless.

“Yes, I feel it.” But numbness was better.

“Good. Follow it. Win her or kill her by your own strength. But do it like a man, not a machine. Love her if you can. If not, take her down hard and free yourself.”

Mikhail unclenched his fists. “That I can do.”

Later, when he thought everyone was gone, Madelena stole into his office and came to stand at his shoulder. She took in the maps on his laptop, leaned over the list he was writing and read aloud, “E-kit, tool

belt, surveillance pack, fiber optics...putty explosives? Oh, hon. A first aid kit with an epi pen. Nice touch. Cold packs and six pints of blood. Titanium cuffs and a hobble?"

She sat on the desktop. Her tight leather pants creaked as she crossed her legs. Leaning back, she cocked her head at him and waited. And waited. He gave up on working and threw down his pen. "Yes?"

"I'm worried about you." Absentmindedly she fingered the sleek battery pack on her hip that powered her heart, a device she'd wear forever unless they found a suitable heart for her. Gregor had very nearly lost his mate by seeking her too late. Mikhail's mate, meanwhile, wasn't awaiting rescue. His mate would as soon kill him as look at him. "Gregor says you won't take him or Alex or any of your lieutenants along with you."

"By tradition the groom goes alone to collect his bride. I know someone in LA who I'll bring on to help with surveillance and some systems hacking. I think that's fair. I'm under an obligation to do my best not to harm her people. And, of course, I want to take her alive. The more of my people I bring along, the more firepower I have, the less likely that is to happen."

"So...you're saying this is more like a ritual abduction. A show of strength, but not so much that there's no one left to be in the wedding party." When he didn't disagree with her, she smiled and squeezed his shoulder. "Thanks, I'll worry about you less now."

Mikhail suffered the hand on his shoulder, and chose not to tell her that Alya had no similar obligation toward him.

Chapter Two

Alya buzzed her assistant. “Tina, push back my mani-pedi by half an hour.” She came around her desk to stand in front of the miscreant du jour.

“So, Frank. You tried to drain your friend...” She turned toward her first lieutenant, Dominick.

“Jason. Jason Biggs,” Dominick offered. “We’re rehydrating the poor sod.”

Frank, a broad built vamp lacking both a chin and any discernible fashion sense, shifted his glance between the guards on either side of him. Both young men looked like they’d be right at home in a skate park, but Alya suspected Frank already understood they’d snap his neck without hesitation.

Shuffling in his ankle shackles, he grimaced as if she already had her fist up his ass. Someone had used a Sharpie to scrawl “Lecter” across his forehead.

“Your Majesty—”

“Alya, Frank. I’m a prince, not a queen. This isn’t Windsor Castle.”

“I’ve never hurt no one—”

“Until you took a fancy to Jason Biggs’ blood.”

“We were fighting.”

“So?”

“It just got out of control. I mean I got out of control, I guess. I just...bit down...and I couldn’t stop.”

Alya leaned forward and whispered, “How’d you like it?”

Frank shook his head. “It was weird. Too weird.”

She turned to Dominick. His eyes twinkled with amusement. This Frank was no shining example of a vamp, but she believed he hadn’t attacked Jason meaning to drain him, and he didn’t have a taste for vamp blood. So far, so good. That meant she didn’t have to kill him. But she was sure Dominick had brought him to her for another reason. Finding out why would be half the fun. Needing some alone time with Frank, she dismissed the guards and turned to Dom.

“Dominick, you sorry Irish bastard. Why didn’t you kill him on the spot? Why is he here? Why is my mani-pedi delayed?” She thrust her hand at him. “Look at the chips!”

Dominick squinted at her nails. “Frightful chips indeed, sir. Well now, you see young Frank here, while not being the sharpest tool in the box, can fairly lay the claim of never doing anyone harm. Until recent events, I should say. Mostly he just trolls around Santa Monica pier, snacking on those even less fortunate than himself.”

“Admirable. And what else?”

“I’ve been noticing that he spends his spare hours in Jimmy Smith’s pool hall. Frank is tight with Jimmy himself.”

Alya grinned. They’d been trying to get a line on Jimmy Smith and his gambling operations for a long time. It was time Jimmy started giving them a bigger cut. “Do you mean you’ve caught me a rat? Good kitty.”

On cue, Frank let out a high-pitched squeal. “I’m no rat.”

Alya caressed Frank’s stubbled cheek. “Darling, draining another vamp is a mortal offense. You leave me no choice. Rat or die.”

“Jimmy will kill me. Slow. I won’t rat. I’d rather die now.”

Alya let her hand trail from his cheek, down his neck and chest. Rotating her hips like a pole dancer, she lowered herself into a crouch at his feet. From under her lashes, she watched his reaction. She smelled his fear—and his arousal.

“Last chance, Frank.”

“Last chance for what?”

She grabbed his ankle hobble and gave it a hard tug, pulling his feet out from under him. His head hit the floor with a loud, all-too-hollow *conk*. Picking up his legs, she dragged him along by his hobble like a huge, wondrously ugly rolling bag. As she passed the sofa, one of her feeders, Matthew, glanced up from the *New York Times Review of Books*, barely mustering interest in the scene. They became jaded so fast.

Her destination was a winch in the ceiling near the windows. The big, east-facing windows.

The office was rigged with various restraining devices, more for her pleasure in feeding than this sort of work, but handy enough in a pinch. Frank was just starting to fight back. But it didn’t matter. She pulled down the winch, hooked the hobble to it and hoisted him up like a side of beef. He dangled upside down, groaning, his fingers scraping the carpet.

“Alya?” Matthew said.

“Yes, love?”

“Why is it okay for vamps to suck on us but not other vamps?”

“What a good question. Frank, can you tell Matthew why?”

Frank only made sad noises, so she wound him up and let go. While he spun, she answered Matthew herself. “It’s simple. You’re our natural prey. It’s right that we feed from you. When we feed from each other, it’s cannibalism.”

“But you’ve done it, right?”

“Yes—but for good reason.” She went to sit next to Matthew. Pliant as a friendly cat, he put his head in her lap. While she talked, she stroked his silky chestnut hair away from his neck. “You see, the blood is the voice of the soul. When we drink, we hear the souls of our victims.”

“You can hear my soul?”

“When we’re little vamps we’re taught not to listen to our dinners. It’s too confusing.” Fleeting memories of Marrakech crossed her mind. The garden with the fountain. The orange tree in blossom. Her mother bringing her a servant to practice upon, saying, *You must only sip, child, as a bee sips honey. Never take too much.*

“But when you drink another vamp, you can’t cut off the stories in the blood. They’re too strong—you have to listen. It’s so confusing it’s dangerous. Just not a smart thing to do.” She traced her finger along his neck and up and around his ear, enjoying the way he shivered in response. “But in formal combat among princes it’s traditional for the winner to drain the loser to the dregs. This is so the knowledge of that leader isn’t lost from the race—only transferred. That’s the only reason I’d ever drink vamp blood.”

Frank said, “I’m going to puke. Seriously.”

Alya glanced over at him. Matthew was pleasantly warm and smelled of soap and coffee. If she had her druthers, she’d be feeding off his fine naked body that moment instead of jerking Frank around.

“If I were you, Frank, I wouldn’t be worried about puking. I’d be worried whether I’d be off that winch before dawn. The sun will come through that window bit by bit. You won’t go fast, that’s for certain. And we won’t be around to help you if you change your mind.”

“I’m not a goddamn rat!”

“Suit yourself. What else do you have for me, Dominick? Oh, wait. Matthew, will you lend poor Frank your iPod?”

Dominick took the iPod from Matthew and poked the buds into Frank’s ears.

Frank said, “I hate Emo.” Dominick smiled and adjusted the controls. Alya suspected he’d just hit “repeat” and raised the volume.

“Latest information out of New York says Faustin himself might go to Minnesota.”

Alya clapped her hands. “You bring me nothing but happiness, my wild Irish spring. I’m so glad to hear the Faustins are as predictable as I remembered.”

Maya, one of her favorite feeders, walked in, swinging a Chinese takeout container. Her red, white and blue polyester mini dress, gleaned from some thrift store bargain bin, clashed loudly and cheerfully with Alya’s Zen-minimal office. The smell of cooked meat drifting out of that takeout container made Alya’s nose twitch, but she let the girl have her food. Maya gave Dominick a flirtatious wink then leaned over to kiss Alya. Their tongues touched and Alya caught a hint of the delicate flavor of Maya’s blood.

“Long time no see,” Maya said, her voice breathy.

“You all fattened up?” Feeders had to have breaks between visits—otherwise they turned anemic. For that reason she had a large, precisely managed stable of them.

“I’m brimming with goodness.” She turned to Matthew. “Tina told me I was on today.”

Matthew stretched lazily, his shirt riding up to reveal a tempting expanse of lean belly. “You snooze you lose, M.”

Maya stuck her tongue out at him, dropped onto the opposite sofa and tucked into her Chinese. She may or may not have been aware that everyone could see her red knickers. “What’s all this I’ve been hearing about Minnesota? Why’s everyone mad at them?”

Alya said, “Where to begin? A consortium of crazy hicks from the North Woods has overthrown the city families—the decent vamps. These northern families have gone feral. They’re drinking beast blood—moose, deer, beaver, heaven knows what. And worse, they’re preaching that we should all eat that way.”

Dominick made a face at the thought of it, but Maya, being human, shrugged. “And that’s bad?”

“It’s bad, trust me. They’re leaving drained carcasses around for the authorities to find. That’s causing talk. And you know how much we like talk. And the Faustins especially don’t like talk.”

Through a mouthful of food Maya said, “So he’s just going to take over the state because he doesn’t like their dietary choices? What a fascist.”

Alya shrugged. The Faustins definitely had fascist tendencies, but in this case she understood. “I don’t blame him. If they’ve sunk to eating animals, they’re obviously not going to care about keeping up appearances. And if the rest of the families could be thrown over by these lunatics, they’re incapable of defending their own territory. It’s easier just to take over.”

It was convenient for the Faustins to involve themselves so actively in Minnesota. She’d been waiting for years for an opportunity to take New York, and finally her patience had paid off. Her intelligence told her the Faustins were in a particularly weak moment. If she could just get Mikhail out of Manhattan, she could take it. He’d never get it back.

The problem was Mikhail was a homebody. Not only did he never leave New York, he spent all his time on the streets with his ear to the ground. So she’d been skirmishing with his people in Minnesota, pretending she wanted it. It looked like she’d almost lured him out.

“Dom, I want you to put out a rumor that we’re going to hit the North Woods, the whole territory, not just Minnesota. Move some of your men up there, have them make themselves conspicuous. Say we’re going to take out their leader...who is he again?”

“Halverson.”

“Yes. Say we’re going after him. Say I’m coming kill him myself and make a formal claim. That will get Faustin on a plane right away—along with his lieutenants. Soon as he leaves for Minnesota, we’ll stroll into Manhattan.”

That idea made her very happy. New York City was a vampire’s paradise, and she hadn’t been able to set foot there for thirty years. She wanted it. Bad.

“What about *pere* Faustin?”

“Way past his prime. And the brothers are no match for me. Mikhail is the only one we have to worry about.”

“Your Majesty?”

Alya slid out from under Matthew and went to crouch by Frank’s head. His head resembled an eggplant. Remarkably so. She pulled off the earbuds. “Yes?”

“I’ve been thinking.”

“Astonishing.”

“It’s not fair. You drink vamp blood, and no one kills you for it. And then what about those whatchyacall them? Bonded mates?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you had feelings for Jason.”

“No! What I’m saying is why am I going to die for tapping that asshole when all this other shit going on and that’s okay?”

Dominick strolled over and looked down at Frank with folded arms. “Sure now, we haven’t sunk to citing medieval customs for our defense, have we? Though I must admit I’m impressed you know any medieval history at all.”

“Fair is fair, that’s all.”

“I don’t think this argument is going to save you, Frank.” She popped the earbuds back in and gave him another twirl.

The intercom buzzed. Alya went to her desk to answer it. “Ms. Adad, I have a call from security. Mikhail Faustin and his attorney, Joshua Silver, are downstairs.”

“You’re joking.”

“No, Ms. Adad. They say they’ve come to...parlay?”

Alya’s skin prickled. *Never speak the Devil’s name.*

Chapter Three

She widened her eyes at Dominick, covering her mouth in mock horror. But he, of course, turned dead serious. “Should I go downstairs?”

“Security will screen them. Stay here.” She waved at Maya, Matthew and dangling Frank—who couldn’t hear her. “All of you can stay and watch history unfold. I don’t know if a Faustin has ever set foot in California.”

To the intercom she said, “Tell security to send them up once they’re cleared.”

Alya settled herself behind her large desk. She swept a few pens, paper clips and notes into her top drawer, then took them out again. She wouldn’t tidy up for Mikhail Faustin.

Why would Mikhail ever—*ever*—visit her?

It must have to do with Minnesota. But why a parlay now?

She wasn’t worried about him ambushing her. If his intention were murder, he wouldn’t come to her office under a flag of truce. If Mikhail struck, it would be a complete surprise, scrupulously planned, utterly devastating and yet perfectly legal under vamp law. That was how he’d taken out all his enemies thus far. So she had to assume he had some sort of legitimate business with her.

Security took their sweet time. Wisely. In the meanwhile, she relaxed into the idea of Mikhail being in LA, and even began to like it. It was so damned convenient, almost as though the universe had dropped him in her lap.

It was also a bit sticky, because she’d figured they’d fight over New York, and she’d kill him in battle. That was how she liked to work. It was direct—and fair.

But if he was going to come uninvited into her town and stroll right into her office, she’d be a fool if she didn’t grab this opportunity to take him out quickly and quietly. Then, in the confusion following his death, she’d take New York. It would save lives in the long run.

Mikhail Faustin. She hadn’t seen him since he was younger than Matthew and Maya. She glanced their way, admiring their supple, slender bodies and their flawless skin, her mouth quirked into a smile. She and Mikhail had been very young indeed.

It seemed like there should be a law against killing your first lover, though considering their history, Mikhail probably wouldn’t mind driving a spike through her head. She wondered exactly how much he hated her.

Dominick paced, checking his weapons as he did.

Alya kicked off her heels and put her feet up on the desk, all the while keeping one eye on the front office monitor. “I hope security remembers to use plenty of lube. Did you get some of that *knyaz* lube I asked you to stock for distinguished visitors?”

Dominick scowled at her. This would be his first face to face with a genuine Faustin, and it had him all riled up.

Maya spoke through a yawn. “Is the Iceman as gorgeous as they say?”

Alya shrugged. Iceman, Ice, Frost—these were all street names for Mikhail. He must have changed a lot over the years, because when he was young, he ran as hot as any man she’d ever met. Even his pale blue eyes burned like the heart of a flame.

Mikhail walked into the front office that moment. The security camera caught him from a high angle, showing her a sleek animal in a severe black suit. Her chair hit the ground with a thump as she leaned close to the monitor.

Rapt, she chewed on the side of her thumb while she watched him speak to her secretary, marking all the ways he’d grown up. He was taller, broader through the shoulders, and the sweet lines of his face had turned austere and sharp as a blade. His straight, platinum hair brushed his collar. That hadn’t changed. She remembered his hair well, how it slid through her hands, heavy and fine.

As she’d heard, he did absolutely nothing to hide his vampirism anymore. Some vamps could pass naturally. Others made adjustments in order to pass. For instance, she wore contacts and sunglasses when she went out, and she did her best to move slowly, like a human. If you knew what to look for, it was easy to spot a vampire in any crowd, but no one would ever mistake Mikhail for human.

The power he held as his family’s leader shimmered around him like a second skin. He made a beautiful prince. Once upon a time she could not resist the draw of that power, but she wouldn’t pay the price for it anymore. Princes demanded absolute submission from those around them, especially their lovers. Now that she was a prince herself, she submitted to no one—not on the street, not in the council chamber and never, ever in the bedroom. She’d done her time on her knees. She had no intention of kneeling ever again.

Tapping Mikhail’s image on the screen with her fingernail, she murmured, “Very pretty. Too bad I’m going to have to kill you.”

He chose that moment to look up, directly into the camera. Straight into her eyes. Alya snatched her hand from the screen.

Her assistant buzzed. “Ms. Adad? Mr. Faustin and Mr. Silver are here.”

Mikhail continued to stare into the camera lens. She could not shake the feeling that he was tracking her with his uncanny eyes. Alya turned off the monitor, annoyed that he could rattle her with a trick like that. She checked her knives and leaned back in her chair. “Send them in.”

When Mikhail walked through the door the curtains stirred and the air temperature dropped. In a glance he took in every detail of the room, just as she would, memorizing the layout, cataloging the feeders, Dominick, and hanging Frank, and tucking that information away for future use.

Alya stood to greet him. She sampled his power, letting it brush over her skin before shaking it off with a shiver, like a cat that's been stroked backward.

Their eyes locked and held without the camera as intermediary. She'd not been challenged so directly for a long time.

For the briefest moment, she glimpsed him as the angelic boy he'd been, kissing her with a smile. Was that really him? Had that girl been her? Some version of them, maybe. An incarnation on another plane. Butterflies filled her stomach, a visceral memory of how he'd once thrilled her. She hardened herself against the unsettling feeling. Sentimentality was a dangerous luxury.

"*Knyaz*," she said, inclining her head without lowering her eyes. She used the title he'd be known by among his own people.

"*Knyaginya*," he said, his gaze level, his hands folded in front of him, his expression that of a church saint. His use of the feminine honorific made her smile. It was quite an ugly mouthful. And properly, she should be *knyaz* too. She was no one's princess.

"To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Mikhail gestured to his lawyer. Alya had forgotten the man even existed, but he'd been standing there at Mikhail's left shoulder all along, grey and unobtrusive. He stepped forward with a letter sealed with black wax and dropped it on the table.

"Ms. Adad, I've come to testify that this sworn affidavit from Natalia Faustin is certified as genuine prophecy by the Council of Mothers."

What in the hell did that mean? Now she'd have to call in her lawyers to find out. She didn't touch the letter.

Mikhail pulled back his coat sleeve, revealing a strange bracelet—no, rather a slender black rope coiling up his arm. She hissed as she recognized the magic crawling over it. How had security let that by?

Shit. Hoping against hope, she pushed her panic button with her toe. Dominick raised a brow at her. She made a subtle "wait" signal with one finger.

"Alya Adad, I declare you mine by right of dream, bound to me by fate and blood—"

And then she understood. He hadn't come to kill her, he'd come to marry her.

"You are fucking kidding me."

Mikhail didn't falter. He continued reciting the proposal. There was probably some rule that he had to say the whole thing, and Mikhail was never one to break a rule. And it wasn't a proposal, she realized, it was a declaration of intent.

"This rope, woven of both craft and magic, symbolizes the unbreakable bonds of marriage."

The rope came alive, uncoiling itself from his arm, slithering into a loop between his outstretched hands. From the corner of her eye, she saw Dominick tense, ready to leap at her slightest gesture. She also knew that Mikhail could kill him with a single blow. And security was not coming.

She had to get out of there. Lead Mikhail away from her people, and get some distance between herself and that rope. Then she could take him on.

“It will ensure your submission to me as a bride—”

Saying this, he stepped into range. She kicked the desk, sending it hurtling against his legs, knocking him backward. Seizing the second she had before he recovered, she sprinted out of her office, down the corridor to the central staircase, praying Dominick wouldn’t engage him.

Her building had a central staircase made up of wide oak steps and curving banisters which wound three stories down to the marble clad lobby. She bypassed the stairs entirely, vaulted the railing and plunged down the well. Landing on the ground floor in a deep crouch, she sprang toward the exit. No one was down there. Security was gone, the lobby still and silent as a tomb.

Just as she hit the doors, Mikhail landed exactly where she had. He’d come slower than she expected, and that meant he’d spent a second or two on Dominick. *God damn him.*

As he sprang up from his landing crouch, she drew two knives from her waist and sent them spinning at his face. He blocked the first with his forearm and got nicked at the hairline by the second.

She sprinted out into the sparkling lights of Sunset Boulevard. Barefoot and fleet in her jeans, she ran straight into the crawl of Saturday night traffic and bounded onto the hood of the first car that got in her way. He jumped on another. Hopscotching cars, they crossed the boulevard, shouts, honks and camera flashes in their wake.

She hit the opposite sidewalk, leapt for the low roofline and swung her body over the top, legs extended, toes pointed like a gymnast. He was right behind her, his hands gaining hold of the roof just as she rolled to her feet, so close that his fingers grazed her back through her thin silk blouse, raising goose bumps.

But by the time he swung over the side, she was two rooftops away, waiting for him, exactly where she wanted to be.

Mikhail jumped the last gap between them, and paused, letting the vibrations fade under his feet. Alya waited for him, straight-backed and tall, her long black hair shifting and stirring in the breeze.

Long ago he’d known her well, and he’d heard what she’d become since. But nothing could have prepared him for seeing her in person. Or for wanting her so much.

In the office he’d used every ounce of restraint in him to hide this desire from her, but from the moment he’d scented her from the outer office he’d been possessed by a stupefying, blinding lust. If he couldn’t figure out how control it, it would get him killed. Soon.

Still, he wanted to see her move, because her every gesture flowed like water, so he began to stalk her in a slow circle. She matched him step for step, her amber eyes watchful but fearless.

The air on the rooftop was fresh and cool and the city spread out around them, white, gold and red lights blurring and flashing. The only sound was the rumble of engines beneath them. Their feet made no noise at all. She was evaluating him, waiting for him to speak, but he didn't plan to say much.

"So, you want a bonded wife. Tell me, are you keeping serfs too? Doing that whole feudal thing?"

Silence did bother her, it seemed. They continued their slow dance.

"If you killed my people—"

That he had to answer. "No one is dead."

Her voice was deeper, and her accent had changed. As a girl, she'd arrived in New York speaking English with an Arabic-inflected French accent. The first time she spoke to him, that accent struck him dumb. It made her sound sophisticated and exotic. It made him want to kiss her every time she moved her lips. In the intervening years, her accent had faded, and she'd picked up plenty of Americanisms, but intriguing traces of it still survived in the sensual vowels and throaty consonants.

She stopped circling, widened her stance and snapped her elbows straight. A gleaming knife dropped into each of her hands. "I assume you came here to die?"

Death would be a relief. As would murder. Or rape. As far as he was concerned, any release would be welcome after thirty years in purgatory. She wouldn't remember that he'd tasted her, or know what it meant if she did. That was to his advantage. She thought he could walk away, like she could. She thought he'd act sensibly. The idea almost made him laugh aloud.

He threw aside his coat and unfurled his rope. It slithered into a loop between his hands. Alya's full lips hitched into a snarl. She raised her knives, daring him to approach. He played the rope out into a wide loop. Casually, almost carelessly, he tossed the loop in her direction, trusting the magic to guide it over her head. It opened wide. She sidestepped it, but it followed her, centering over her head again. Angry, she lashed out with her knives, her movements a blur even to his eyes. Any other rope would have fallen to the ground in confetti. Not this one.

With a sharp tug he pulled the loop tight, pinning her upper arms to her sides. Another tug and she was against his chest. He spun behind her, pressing his forearm tight against her larynx.

"Drop the knives." Mikhail whispered the command because he could not draw a full breath. Not with her hair against his lips, not with her body against his. He ran his free hand along her left arm, closing his hand over hers. When she didn't release the knife, he increased the pressure on her throat.

Her grip softened reluctantly. He opened her fingers and took the knife, forcing back memories of them holding hands. She let the second knife fall to the ground and he kicked it away.

The pulse in her carotid artery leapt against his arm. His heart pounded against her back. She was rigid. Seething. But her scent wound through him like honeysuckle vines. He brought the knife in his left hand to her throat.

“Let’s review,” he said, unable to restrain himself from swiping his nose along the edge of her ear as he spoke. “The rope is binding your arms. You could still struggle, but if you do, I’ll snap your neck or cut your throat. And I’ll do it, believe me, because I know you’ll kill me if you get an opening.”

He dragged the knife down her sternum, letting it catch on the first button of her blouse. “Isn’t that true?”

She said nothing. He flicked the knife and sent the button flying. Still she made no noise, but a faint tremor rolled down the length of her spine. He was holding a storm in his arms. There was no turning back for him, and no quarter for her.

He cut off another button. Her chin jerked up like a horse fighting the reins, and her weight shifted ominously. He didn’t intend to wait to see what she was planning. Instead, he spun her around and slammed her head into the ventilation shaft behind them. The sharp, metallic reverberation thundered down into the building.

It wasn’t his noblest moment, but it was completely satisfying.

Face pressed against the dented steel, she said, “Where’s the romance gone, Misha?” Her voice was frighteningly even. Mocking. The use of his pet name, insulting. And as she spoke she was trying to hook her leg behind his to throw him off balance.

“You tell me.” He slammed her head into the shaft again. Harder.

This time her body softened from the shock. Knowing this was his chance, he swung her around again, slamming her back against the nearest wall and pinning her there with his body and the knife. The bride rope slithered around her arms and torso, securing her more tightly still.

Stunned from the blows, she struggled to focus on him, her head swaying, a livid patch of red blooming on her temple.

At last she straightened her chin, like a prizefighter ready for another punch. His breath hitched. He’d never seen a woman so beautiful. She spat in his face. He let the saliva trickle down as far as the corner of his mouth, then caught it with his tongue. It wasn’t her blood, but it was a start.

He pressed his forearm under her chin so he could continue his destruction of her blouse—only this time he’d have the pleasure of seeing what he was doing. He popped off the third button, then the fourth. She was breathing fast, biting her lip, waiting for him to slip up. With the tip of the blade he spread the blouse wide.

Alya’s skin had always been tawny, as if she’d been born gilded. Underneath the blouse she wore a filmy black bra that didn’t hide the tautness of her nipples. He cut through the center of it and the cups fell

away, revealing her high, round, honey sweet breasts. He pressed the flat of the blade against the curve of her left breast, just under her heart.

“And thus a *knyaz* claims his mate.” Her voice was low and full of scorn.

“As is his right.” Ignoring the hatred pouring off her in waves, Mikhail dragged the blade sideways so that the dull side scraped over her nipple. If only he had a free hand to run over her body, or the time to taste her with his tongue. He shook his head, trying to stay focused.

“I am not your property.”

Teasing her lower lip with the point of the knife he said, “What are you, then?”

She took a deep breath and let out a long, shuddering exhale. “Your destruction.”

“You’ve always been that, Alya Adad.”

The pupils of her eyes shot wide, liquid black swamping the iris. They both knew he spoke the truth, and for a moment, it was enough to surprise her into stillness. Her brows drew together, and her lips parted with an unasked question. Then and there he lost his battle for control, and lowered his mouth to hers, wondering how many times he’d risen from a long day’s dreaming tasting her. Hundreds? Thousands?

Her breath still smelled of cinnamon. He eased his forearm off her throat, drew her close, and kissed her the way he did in his dreams. The stiff resistance in her spine gave way. Her lips parted, accepting him. He groaned, his fist clenching in her thick hair. Together they slid down the wall. She rolled onto her back. He straddled her, his hands coasting greedily over her breasts. *Magnificent knyaginya*.

Alya thought what she had to do next should be easy. They were at war. She was a prisoner. She liked to be in control. Being tied up, straddled and mauled by a determined *knyaz* did not constitute being in control.

But it wasn’t easy. She’d never been kissed by anyone so hungry. His urgency stirred her despite herself. And he was not just anybody—he was a hungry prince. Her body had been trained to respond to them, even though it had been many years since she’d played that way.

More confusingly, he wasn’t just a prince, he was Mikhail, and he palmed her through her jeans as they kissed, just as he had when they were teenagers. She’d come for the first time ever rocking against his palm, just as she was now.

What do you think is going to happen? He will take you home, drain you half dry and fuck you over and over again until you submit to his will. That is their way.

And this one is worse than all the rest, because he thinks he owns you.

She had to take the upper hand and fast, so she writhed, surreptitiously testing his rope. It had loosened. It obeyed his will, and his will had turned to just one thing.

Moaning into his mouth, she strained for the knife she kept at the small of her back, tugging and twisting her right wrist until she tore her skin. It didn’t matter. Like a trapped animal, she’d gnaw off her

arm to be free. To distract him from the smell of the blood coursing off her wrist, she kissed him hard, mimicking his ferocity.

Abruptly he broke off the kiss and hauled her to her feet by her collar. “Not here,” he said, his voice rough.

The change in position allowed her to pop her hand free. Her elbows were still bound to her sides, but she had some mobility in her wrist and forearm. She stretched her wet, sticky fingers toward the small of her back, straining until she grasped the knife hilt.

Making a noise that she hoped sounded like resignation, she slumped against his chest. He tangled his hands in her hair and kissed her again. She had all of five inches of play against the rope, and she used it to stab him in the thigh. The groin would have been better, but she couldn’t reach that far. Her slender, wicked blade sliced upward, splitting muscle and nicking bone.

He let go, looking down, as if he couldn’t quite imagine what had just happened. As if someone else might have stabbed him.

She pivoted and kicked him under the chin, sending him reeling backward. She bounded after him and kicked him in the head, this time knocking him unconscious. The rope slackened and dropped from her arms.

When the rope fell, so did all traces of that sentimental, erotic fog that had almost overwhelmed her.

He’d tied her up. Cut off her shirt and bra. Smashed her head.

She knotted the remains of her blouse under her breasts, cursing to herself.

“That’s—for—my—head!” She punctuated each word with a kick to his body, rolling him across the roof like a rag doll.

Chapter Four

Her last kick left Mikhail in an awkward sprawl. Yet his saint's face was serene. The roof could have been his bed, the tar paper and gravel a pillow for his brilliant hair.

She straddled his chest and drew her knife. It shook in her hand, crazy lights glinting off the polished blade. Her hand never shook. Never. The knife was her friend, and her hands were trained well.

As a child her father had made her balance an egg on a spoon for five minutes, ten minutes, thirty minutes. If she dropped it, the time doubled. If she dropped it again, he beat her.

She steadied her wrist with her opposite hand and forced the knife to be still.

It wasn't fear that made her shake. It wasn't pain, either. The torn skin around her wrist was a superficial wound. Desire? She had to admit she felt it, whether she liked it or not, but desire didn't make her tremble either. Her lovers needed her hand to be rock steady.

This was something else, something more like an illness. It was disconcerting to be near him after all these years. More than she would have ever expected.

"Why did you bother trying?" she whispered.

He had to be insane to try to capture her. If he wanted a bride, vamp families all over the world would fight to offer their daughters to him. Vampire society didn't consider her bridal material anymore, that was for sure.

It was hard to believe something as insubstantial as a dream could induce him to walk into enemy territory, or stranger still, convince him that he should marry her. If she'd been in his place, she would have said, "Fuck the prophecy, I'm not going."

Something else brought him there. Some plan of his. A plan that had failed.

Well, game over. She pressed the blade beneath his left earlobe, wondering if she should exsanguinate him. It was within her rights—more or less. It hadn't been formal combat, but she doubted any other prince would pass up the opportunity to acquire Faustin's strength.

But if she really were his destined mate, would drinking his blood bind her to him? Could she be bound to a dead man? Best not to find out.

No exing, then. Just one swift cut from ear to ear.

But at the thought her hand began to shake even harder and her teeth chattered in sympathy. She clamped her jaw shut.

Fucking hell, what is this? Palsy?

It came to her that the only other time she could remember being this unsteady, she'd also been with Mikhail. The first time they had sex she'd trembled violently before, during and for a long time after. Mikhail had tried to hold her tight to stop the shivering, but it didn't do much good, because he was shivering too.

Until that night she'd expected that sex would be...well, sexy, like in the movies. Instead, it had been strange and intense and blindingly intimate. They'd both cried. She remembered looking up at the willow branches overhead while he pressed inside her—they were in Central Park—and the leaves were shimmering silver and shaking in the night breeze. It seemed like the whole world trembled with them.

It was only like that the first time, fortunately, or they'd probably both have ended up celibate for life. And she never trembled again after that. Not in bed and not during fights.

She tucked her hands under her arms and fought to control herself, but long forgotten memories kept rolling through her. That night under the willows Mikhail had kissed her a thousand times. He'd adored her as she'd never been adored, before or since, and she'd loved him foolishly, wildly, as only a hormone addled sixteen-year-old could love.

This is no time to go soft, Alya.

She was pondering teenage love while sitting on one of the most dangerous vamps in the world. This cold, ruthless Mikhail wasn't *that* Mikhail. The Mikhail of the willows would never have cut the buttons from her blouse, or slammed her head against the wall. He was a prince intent on claiming his mate. They both knew she had two choices: submit to his will, or kill him.

The practical side of her nature shoved forward and suggested she strangle him. That way she wouldn't risk getting arterial spray in her mouth or eyes.

But strangling was a death for thieves. It was no way for a prince to die. Contrary to public opinion, she had a few standards. Honor meant something to her; she didn't want to execute him like a criminal. He was nobility, and once, long ago, they'd been friends.

Above, the low-slung sky winked with helicopters and airplanes instead of stars. It offered her no signs or omens. Below, the traffic on the boulevard roared like a river. Between her legs, Mikhail's chest rose and fell in a steady, sleeping rhythm.

Using the point of her knife, she plucked off the buttons of his shirt and spread it open. His once smooth torso was riddled with scars. Pinched bullet holes. Gashes. Teeth marks. Scars she could read all too well. Like her, he was a warrior.

She sighed and said aloud, "This is such a mistake." He'd come after her again. And after she'd shamed him like this, his next attack wouldn't be nearly as gentlemanly.

But she could indulge herself a little. Her hand turned steady. Smiling, she carved a large letter A, one with a fancy, curling tail, into his sternum, so he'd know she'd held his life in her hand and showed him mercy.

It was possible that he'd not wake up before dawn. But if that was so, it was the will of God. She gathered up his rope and leapt off the roof.

*

The noise hurt his ears. It started and stopped, started and stopped, tearing his head apart. After what seemed hours of torture, he recognized the sound as his phone. He pulled it out of his coat pocket and silenced it. His eyes were crusted shut. His head hurt. Where was he?

Outside.

He jumped to his feet. The sudden motion brought with it a wave of pain that blurred his vision. He shook his head to clear it, preparing for her next blow, and then he realized she was gone.

He dropped to his knees, thankful to be alive. Wincing, he explored the lump on the back of his head, and dragged his hand over his swollen jaw. Just lifting his arm made his ribs hurt. They had to be cracked. His shirt flapped in the wind. He looked down and discovered a huge letter A carved into his chest. It was as big as his hand. Astounded, he traced the outline with his finger, trying to figure out what it meant. It itched, but didn't hurt. Compared to the rest of the damage she'd done, it was a tender kiss.

Why hadn't she killed him?

His phone rang again. This time he checked it. Gregor.

"You alive?"

He didn't think his head would hurt so much if he were dead.

"You didn't check in. Did you get her?"

He'd promised his brothers he'd check in with Gregor at dawn every day. Mikhail glanced at the sky. What time was it? Los Angeles was never truly dark, especially when it was overcast. Low, murky clouds reflected the streetlights, but he could read the signs well enough to know that dawn was closing on him. "No. I have to go. I'm out."

"What? Why the fuck didn't you let us come with you? Where are you? Are you—"

Mikhail hung up. Cradling his ribs, he walked to the roof's edge and looked down, wincing at the thought of dropping to the ground. Instead, he chose the somewhat less painful option of leaping over to the next rooftop. That one had a doorway, which meant a stairwell down. He broke the lock and slipped into reassuring blackness.

Inside he leaned against the cold, cinderblock wall and rested. The pain, the close darkness, and the brush with the dawn reminded him of that morning after Alya left him and Courtableu beat him senseless—a morning he'd forbidden himself to think about for many years.

After the fight with Courtableu—though calling it a *fight* was giving himself too much credit—he rode his bike to the beach, numbed by pain, humiliation, and most of all the profound, bleak nothingness he

felt in her absence. In the faint, predawn light he'd walked knee deep into the water, ready to greet the rising sun. The sea would have washed away his ashes.

His father found him moments before the sun crested the horizon. Mikhail fought him, and his father beat him for it, pounding him in the roiling surf until he couldn't fight back anymore, then dragged him to the family van before they were both incinerated.

They had to hide in the back of the van until sunset. Hunched in the darkness, salt and sand festering in his wounds, Mikhail tried to be strong. But somewhere during that endless day, he broke under the weight of his anger and shame and wept like a girl, shaming himself yet more.

His father didn't say much, but what he did say stuck. Looking back, Mikhail wondered if his father hadn't put a subtle compulsion on him. But for whatever reason, Mikhail emerged from the van reborn. He'd sworn to his father that he'd live, if not for love, then for duty. And he never cried again.

At the time neither he nor his father understood he was fighting against a blood bond. And that was for the best. If he'd known the truth, he'd probably have gone back the next day and finished the job.

Admittedly his standards were low, but he thought this was a better dawn. A much better one. His hand drifted up to touch the letter A on his chest and his lips twisted into a smile.

Chapter Five

Alya woke cold and damp, kicking against her tangled sheets.

“Oh,” she said, opening her eyes to find her cat, Lulu, on the pillow next to hers, staring at her in alarm. “Oh, thank goodness.”

In her dream she’d been fighting her brothers. They’d pinned her down. They were going to roll her in a carpet and toss her into the sea. It was just the sort of thing they would do.

Shaken and depressed, she reached for Lulu. The cat hissed at being moved, but Alya needed to hold something, so she ignored the warning and drew the cat’s warm, fluffy body to her chest. Lulu yowled and chomped down on her hand.

Alya let go and the cat stalked away, her black tail high and twitching. “You are such a bitch,” she called after her. “You are a bitch’s bitch.”

Falling on her back, she hugged the cat’s pillow instead. It was warm, at least. A terrible loneliness fell on her, which she interpreted as a dangerous form of self-pity.

The lights on her bedside panel blinked peacefully, telling her all security systems were active. She untangled herself from the sheets and padded over to the armoire in the corner of her room. Monitors lined the inside, surrounding a terminal. On the monitors she could see her human security guards standing at their posts. In a few minutes they’d switch with her nocturnal team—all vamps. The log reported a quiet day.

No sign of Mikhail.

She regretted letting him go. It wasn’t like her to let sentimentality cloud her judgment. If she’d been thinking straight, she would have stuffed him in a shipping container bound for China. Waiting for him to attack again was making her crazy.

And he knew it, the bastard.

I really could use a cigarette. Her eyes fixed on the drawer where she knew she’d accidentally on purpose left a half pack. *No, I don’t.*

What she needed was a distraction. Checking her phone, she confirmed that Christian was coming over to feed her first thing. He’d be a lovely distraction. Shrugging a thin robe over her short white nightgown, she went into her bathroom and splashed her face with cool water, cleaned her teeth and ran a brush through her hair. Despite these gestures at starting a new night, she still felt dirty, tainted by the dream and haunted by her family.

Fuck them all. She strode back into her bedroom, snatched up the cigarettes and a book of matches, slammed the drawer shut and headed out to the garden.

The house was silent and empty, the terra cotta tile of her halls smooth and cool under her feet. She lived in a fantasy castle, a Spanish-style extravaganza redolent of old Hollywood. Legend had it that Errol Flynn had once swung from her wrought iron chandelier. Ordinarily it cheered her just to look at the stained glass windows, the heavy, carved beams in the ceiling, the ancient bearskins on the floor, but not that night. Until Mikhail was gone she'd have no comfort or real rest.

Lulu met her at the bottom of the stairs and wound around her ankles, hoping to lure her into the kitchen for some wet food.

"Now I'm your best friend? Why don't you go kill something like a proper carnivore?"

Alya deactivated the alarm on the French doors and threw them open. She'd bought the house because the massive olive trees, twisted pomegranates, and swaying palms in the back garden reminded her of her childhood home. Tonight she felt like selling it and moving far away. The problem was, there weren't many places where she hadn't left a trail, and no place at all where memories wouldn't pursue her.

Forcing her shoulders to relax, she stepped outside. The first hour after dusk was her favorite time of night, that magical time when the world seemed to heave a sigh of relief—*another day gone*—and the night creatures yawned and spread their wings.

Lulu pursued her, yowling insistently. Alya sighed and snatched one of the aforementioned night creatures from the air—a huge death's head moth. Lulu stood on her hind legs to take it, delighted with the gift.

Alya grinned despite of herself. *Happy cat. Peaceful vamp.*

She lit a cigarette. Nicotine worked. There was no denying it. Smoking in long, appreciative drags, she walked circles around the pool, collecting herself for the night to come. Alya Adad wasn't allowed to have meltdowns. Not in front of others, at least.

That damned dream. Her shoulders tensed all over again. Mikhail had dredged all this up. She hadn't given her brothers a moment's thought in years. Forcing her family from her mind, she stubbed her cigarette out in a planter and picked up her phone. That was the past. The present was pressing in.

While she dialed Dominick, she walked into her night blooming garden. Standing among drooping angel's trumpet, falls of jasmine, soporific hop vines, and bizarre flowering cacti, she plucked spent flowers to make new ones grow.

"What do you have for me?" she said when he picked up.

"Not a hair of him to be found. Perhaps he decided to withdraw—"

Alya laughed, cutting him off. "He's not going anywhere."

"With due respect, sir, how long can he be away from New York? How much time will he waste on a marriage proposal?"

“It’s more than that.”

“You think he’s out for revenge? After all this time?”

Like every other vamp in the world, Dominick knew the story of how Alya Adad threw herself at Jean Courtableu, prince of the Bayou, in front of the cream of the nocturnal society. How the Faustin heir had challenged Courtableu on the spot and had been soundly thrashed for everyone’s amusement.

No one knew what happened to her after that night.

“No...not revenge.” She struggled to articulate what her body knew from the way he kissed her. He was committed. There was no going back for him. What drove him? What had changed?

Or what hadn’t she known all along?

Alya froze midstep, an image solidifying from her memories: Mikhail kissing her hand. He was always doing that. Even when he was a kid in ratty tennis shoes, he’d been courtly. He could actually pull off a bow...

Her fist closed over a dried trumpet flower, crushing it to dust.

“Sir?”

He’d tasted her.

That warm, moonlit night. She’d nicked her knuckle while playing with knives. He’d lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed the blood from her wound.

Later that same night they both lost their virginity.

Alya sank to her haunches. Struggling to keep her tone casual, she said, “Dominick, how much do you know about blood bonds?”

“Nothing worthwhile.”

“Can you do some research for me? This isn’t going to be on the Internet. You’ll have to go to Master Wilhelm’s library in Ojai. He’ll let you in as a favor for me. Find out how much blood you have to ingest to initiate the blood bond. Anything on it, really.”

“Will do. One last thing. Frank the rat just called and gave me some nice little tidbits on Jimmy. I’d say he’s working out fine.”

“Good news,” Alya murmured, too distracted to make a rat joke. Before Dominick sensed her distraction, she hung up. Unable to move, she stayed where she was, squatting on the brick walkway, dead flowers all around her bare feet. Thinking hard, she cradled her head in her hands and closed her eyes.

Mikhail had changed after their first time together. Always intense, he’d gone off the deep end. Every moment he wanted to be with her, touching her, staring at her.

At first she’d basked in the attention, but after a while his intensity began to stifle her. Even then, before everything, she couldn’t stand confinement, and his love began to feel exactly like that. Beneath the willow they’d been perfectly matched, but soon his passion left her feeling shallow and inadequate. She couldn’t imitate it; she couldn’t even understand it.

In the end, she ran from him. She stepped into the arms of a man who fascinated her, and whom she knew Mikhail could not harm. And she did it at the New Year's ball. It was hard to remember exactly how she thought then. Perhaps she had loved the theatrics of a public break-up, perhaps she thought the setting would force Mikhail to take the news quietly. Perhaps she was a little frightened of him. She never dreamed he'd challenge Jean and embarrass everybody.

She wandered out of the flowers, lowered herself onto the cushioned daybed she kept poolside and clutched a pillow to her chest.

A blood bond would explain a lot.

When Mikhail kissed her cut that night, he'd taken her breath away. Blood sampling was the ultimate no-no between teenage vampires. To dare it was twisted, naughty and very sexy. How could she have kept her panties on after that?

But could such a small amount of blood bond him to her?

Could one drop still be driving him after thirty years?

She remembered the feral, starving way he'd kissed her on the rooftop. Like he hadn't kissed anyone for years.

Come to think of it, she'd never heard of Mikhail Faustin being romantically attached to anyone.

Ah, shit. She fumbled for another cigarette.

But if he was bonded to her, how had he survived so long? Though she didn't know much about the bond, she'd heard that bonded vamps were supposed to go mad when deprived of their mate. Mikhail had thrived. He was the fucking prince of New York.

She fell back on the couch, mussing all the neatly stacked cushions. There was no way to know more until Dominick got back to her. All she could do was focus on what he'd do next.

If Mikhail was bonded to her, even in some small way that she didn't understand, he would not give up. But now she had the advantage of knowing that. He'd never kill her. He'd threaten it, but he wanted her alive. It also meant that if she didn't kill him, he'd never leave her alone.

The guard at the gate called. Christian had arrived. She told them to let him come in and listened for the sound of the door. When she heard it, she darted through the shadows of the house, stalking him. Golden Christian, surfer and aspiring actor, brought with him the scents of seawater and board wax and motor oil. Hopefully he'd be a big star someday.

"Alya?" He spun around, looking for her. "Hello?"

When she held still, he could not see her. Frowning and scratching his head, he stepped outside. He paused near the rumpled day bed. "Where are you?"

Closing silently, she hovered behind him. Even mock hunting got her going. Christian knew something was up, but domesticated humans were very bad at listening to their instincts. She watched the hairs lift on the back his neck. Uncertain, he whispered, "Alya?"

Repressing a laugh, she opened her mouth and exhaled on his nape. He jumped. She caught his arms from behind. She liked the way a little baby fat still softened his muscles, making him as sleek as a seal.

“Surprise,” she purred into his ear, sliding a hand up his T-shirt, over his smooth belly. He waxed it.

“Oh, fuck.” He laughed, a little shaky. “You’re so good at that. I knew it had to be you, but I still almost pissed my pants.”

She sent one hand coasting down the front of his jeans. Danger made him hard. As did domination.

“I think you almost came.”

Turning in her arms, he answered with an eager kiss. She ripped his T-shirt over his head. Kissing him all the while, she walked him backward to the couch. When his legs hit the frame, she gave him a firm shove and he fell on his back, his palms above his head, ready for whatever she wanted.

“Maya isn’t visiting this morning, is she?”

He shook his head.

Oh well. She could have done with two lovers—one to drink from, one to fuck. If she drank from Christian as much as she wanted, his erection would be for shit. If she fucked him first, she might die of hunger. All she could do was be expedient. She whipped off his belt and ripped open his jeans. Like a good surfer, Christian went commando. Unencumbered, his cock sprang into her hand.

“I wish I could move as fast as you,” he said.

“We’ll go slow now.” She spread her robe wide and straddled him with a sigh. She needed this bad. Ever since her rooftop encounter with Mikhail, she’d been wearing her feeders out.

“Alya,” he whispered. “You’re so damn... I can’t hold—”

“You will.” She touched his chin so he’d look her in the eye.

His eyelids fluttered and he turned his head to one side, baring his throat in instinctive submission. Crouching low, she kissed the underside of his jaw.

A cool, emphatic voice interrupted her. “Get off the Happy Meal.”

She was moving before Mikhail finished his first word, but it didn’t matter. Cold prongs pinched the back of her neck, the scent of ozone filled her nostrils and she lost control of her body.

Next she knew she was flat on the floor, her limbs locked and stiff.

He’d Tasered her.

Mikhail pressed the heel of his boot down on her throat.

“Leave now, Christian Rider,” he said, his voice flat as a psychopath’s. “Go straight to the beach and stay there. If you tell anyone, do anything at all to disturb us, I will find you and kill you. Then I’ll fly to Madison and kill your parents and your sister, Carrie, her children and their Golden Retriever. Understand?”

Alya prayed Christian would do as he was told. Her feeders were bound to her by a combination of written contract, mutual respect, a few well-placed threats and a dose of compulsion. Basically, they had to

keep the secret of vampires, and not blab anything about her that would aid her enemies. In return, they were paid well to enjoy an occasional bloodletting. If they stepped out of line, though, the consequences were severe. On the other side of the coin, she worked hard to keep them safe. Christian knew she'd want him to follow Mikhail's directions. Often enough she'd told them to stay out of vamp business at all costs.

Christian ran.

Mikhail straddled her chest.

Just like the dream. Fuck me! Exactly like the dream.

He captured her weak, rubbery arms and pinned them over her head. Her heart slammed against her ribs and her breathing went fast and shallow. To stop hyperventilating, she forced herself to take stock of the situation. Starting with her fingers. She could wiggle them, but they tingled, as if they'd been asleep. The shock's effects were fading fast.

"What do you know about me?" Though he was nose to nose with her, he shouted. His hands hurt her wrists.

Pinned. Shouted at. Controlled. The absolute horror of the situation drove her close to panic, but instead she checked out, went numb, and observed from a safe distance.

"I know *everything* about you. Don't you study your enemies? Do you even know what I did for a living before I became the head of my family? I designed security systems. World class ones. The one you use, in fact."

Oh.

But that was interesting, actually. Something to focus on. Her head cleared a little, and she wondered why he was so angry. Wasn't he supposed to be the Iceman?

"So yes, you are breached. Your men are down. Your cameras are feeding a prerecorded loop offsite. Your assistant is enthralled and lying for me. No one is going to come to help you."

Mikhail couldn't know she was frightened. She couldn't even come off as surprised. Gathering her self-control she offered him a sickly sweet smile. "I suppose we'll just have to live happily ever after."

"Something like that." His lips retracted over his incisors.

Never in her life had she been prey. She'd been betrayed, beaten, imprisoned and abandoned. Once she was even run over by a truck. But no one had ever sunk so low as to steal her heart's blood.

"You're a dead man."

But he knew he'd won. His eyelids lowered as he scanned her throat. "I've been dead for years—and I'm tired of being hungry."

She pushed against him, muscle and bone screaming under the strain, but he had the advantage of weight and inertia. Burning bile crept up her throat.

Stretching his body over hers, he dragged his hot mouth from her clavicle to her ear. *This is really going to happen. Now.*

His teeth locked down like a vise, stretching, hurting and finally penetrating her skin. Inside, she screamed. Growling softly, he tugged at her flesh, opening the wound wide before he sucked. Her blood obeyed his call and siphoned out of her body in a dizzying rush.

There was nothing to do except endure. She kept still, every muscle in her body rigid with the effort. As much as she wanted to fight—needed to fight to remain sane—thrashing like prey would only provoke him. He might lose control and drain her dry.

She hoped he could taste how much she hated him.

Over the sound of his sucking, she heard his selfish, satisfied moan. His body grew even heavier, crushing her while he drank like a greedy pig.

She measured time in swallows. On the seventh, he broke the bite, gasping like a diver coming up for air. His pupils had gone huge and unfocused, like he'd just taken a hit of something strong. *Yeah, me.*

With a huge heave she shoved him off balance. Before she was half up, he was on her again, dragging her back down. They tumbled across the concrete, smashing each other with elbows and fists and knees. Each time she landed a strong blow, she grinned with manic satisfaction. It felt incredibly good to hit him. She broke free and bounded onto her feet, her hands raised in front of her. He faced her squarely, a head taller but not as fast.

They began to dance. Again and again he let her strike home, absorbing her kicks and punches into his body, showing almost no reaction. He struck at her, not so much to hit her as to force her to block. He wanted to tire her out.

She pivoted on one foot and sent a roundhouse kick toward his head. He ducked and caught her foot, yanking her off balance. She spun free of his grasp, twirling horizontal to the ground and landing on her feet. But even as she did, he was behind her, trying to catch her arms. She snapped her head back to smash his nose. He lurched but did not let go. Together they tumbled backward into the pool.

Opening her eyes underwater, the first thing she saw was a rosy red cloud blossoming around his head. Finding bottom, she shot out of the water, panicked, swiping the tainted water from her face. He surfaced, his face twisted with bitterness and green with pool light.

“What’s wrong? Afraid to join me in hell?”

Using his fingernail, he slashed a vein open in his wrist and snapped his arm in her direction. She turned her head, sealing her mouth while the hot spray pelted her face. He grabbed her by the ears and tried to kiss her with his blood-smeared lips. She slammed her knee into his balls, and followed it with an upper cut to his solar plexus.

Alya was strong as sin and slippery as an eel. Whenever he grabbed her she turned boneless, impossible to hold. Once she broke free, she was all sharp blows and cutting edges.

Now that he'd tasted her and he knew exactly how strong she was, he calculated his odds of winning as being just above half. To her core she was made of steel and ambition. He'd heard her mind. All she thought about were different ways to kill him.

But he didn't regret giving in to his hunger. After thirty years spent in fog and shadow, tasting her had been like drinking pure light.

For the hundredth time she broke from his grasp. This time she sprang out of the pool and ran for the house. Ran for her weapons.

He pursued, expecting knives. She met him at the door with a shotgun blast. Luck kept him alive. Luck and his fantastically expensive bulletproof shirt. He dove behind her sofa, and rolled behind the fireplace. He couldn't stay there for long.

"Marry this, you son of a bitch." She pumped the shotgun.

He leapt over her dining room table, pulling it over with him just in time to deflect the blast. He picked out the route he'd take to the long hall. Knew it led to her kitchen from studying her floor plan. Didn't know what he'd find in her kitchen, but hoped for knives.

"I didn't come here to hurt you." As he said it, he picked up a broken vase and tossed it to the left while he dove right. She fired at the vase first, giving him time to reach the hall.

The next blast blew a hole in the wall between them. He sprinted for the kitchen. It was stocked for humans. For her lovers. Gritting his teeth at the memory of her riding that skinny, pathetic human boy, he grabbed a butcher knife, ripped the fire extinguisher off the wall and pulled the pin.

Poking his head around the corner, he saw her advancing down the hall, confident behind her big gun. He stepped out, spraying the fire extinguisher, blinding her.

Flipping the canister around, he clocked her under the chin with its butt end. Her rifle blew another hole in the wall. He clocked her a second time and the rifle dropped from her hands.

Disarmed, she bolted to the living room. Mikhail followed, holding the fire extinguisher and the butcher knife, and found her pulling a decorative scimitar from the wall. Holding the hilt in a two-handed grip, she swiped the blade through the air. It made a wicked *wooshing* sound. He sighed. It was real.

"I'm tired of you, Faustin."

Tell me about it. He presented his weapons. Such as they were. The white foam on her face should have made her look clownish. It didn't. It made her look damned scary,

She swung. He blocked with the extinguisher. The force of her strike shook his arm.

"I remember, you know. That one drop."

She swung at him again. He spun, protecting himself with the canister, using the knife to keep her a decent distance away. He couldn't play offense against a scimitar.

"What did it do to you?"

"It made me a ghost."

“Do ghosts bleed as much as you do?”

She struck low, slicing open his thigh. At the same time, he reached out with his kitchen knife and drew a ragged cut up her arm. They both retreated, nursing their wounds. Mikhail cast around for a better weapon. She probably had them stashed all over her house. He did.

Dancing forward, she swung her scimitar in decorative arcs, showing off. He backed up grimly, watching for any opportunity. As he passed a long, low leather bench, his instincts whispered to him. Sweeping it up, he used it to block her next blow. Her blade sliced the cushion open. But he didn't want a shield—he wanted to see what was under it, and sure enough, he found a Ruger P89 holstered to the underside.

She rushed him, but he scrambled backward, bringing the pistol to firing position.

“You're not going to shoot me,” she said, raising her sword.

He shot her in the shoulder. The impact drove her against the wall. Stunned, she dropped to the ground, her hand over the wound. The blood wicked fast through her wet nightgown.

Holding the gun on her, he took a couple of cautious steps forward, kicked the scimitar across the tile, and wondered what the hell he was going to do next.

Long ago he'd lost her because he was too weak to hold her. A show of strength had brought him this far. But he knew in his gut strength couldn't take him any further. His father said to give her no quarter, but he couldn't press the gun to her temple and abduct her. It wouldn't work. Not with her.

Alya Adad wasn't a willful woman who would respond to a strong hand. There wasn't a submissive bone in her body. She'd die before she knelt to him. He'd tasted her. He *knew*.

Echoing his own thoughts, she pointed her chin at the gun. “Finish it.”

“No.”

“I never loved you, you know.”

He tightened his grip on the gun. “You're lying. I was there. Remember?”

“And they call women sentimental.” She scooted along the wall, trying to escape him even though she couldn't walk. “I never did. I never will.”

He didn't listen. He couldn't afford doubt. If they were destined to be together, then there was a path to follow. But the way was perilous, and the thread of hope fine as a spider's web. Holding the gun behind his back, he squatted down in front of her. With his free hand he swiped the extinguisher foam off her cheeks.

“Alya, I shouldn't have bit...”

She caught him with an upward jab. His head snapped back and his teeth cracked together.

“Damn it!” He struck out instinctively, slapping her cheek so hard that his hand went numb to the wrist, but she slapped him right back, a stinging blow to his ear.

He took that one, and she gave him another. And another. She hit him until his face burned and his ears rang. He took all of her blows, paying for her blood, letting her fury spend itself. Even coated in powder foam and bleeding—bleeding from the gunshot he'd inflicted on her—she was full of grace, quick and bright as a flame.

God help me, I think I've gone insane. A bit of tooth floated under his tongue. He was wonderfully, obscurely happy.

When her blows slowed, he spat out the broken tooth and said, quite truthfully, "I could do this all night."

Eyes snapping with fury, she slapped him extra hard for that. "Fuck you. What are you doing here? Is this your idea of revenge?"

"You think this is my idea?"

"You're in my house, asshole. Holding the gun you shot me with."

There was that. Mikhail emptied the semi-automatic in front of her, releasing the magazine and tossing it onto the sofa and carefully ejecting the loaded round.

If he were Alex, he'd say something charming and give her a lopsided grin. Gregor would...well, he didn't understand what women saw in Gregor, actually. But whatever it was, he didn't have it. Mikhail knew he was cold and dry and unappealing to women, and he didn't have any experience at courtship.

All he could be was practical.

Chapter Six

Mikhail's fair skin flamed with her handprints, and his eyes were filled with some unholy brightness. He said, "Your shoulder—is there an exit wound?"

In answer she glanced at the bullet hole in the wall above her. The bullet had passed just under her clavicle, but she could still move her arm, so the damage couldn't be that bad.

"May I see your back?"

Blood loss must be getting to her, because the way he spoke almost made her laugh. Such a caring, considerate home invader he was. She'd been shot before, as had he, by his scars. Both of them knew she would live. It took a lot to kill a vamp.

"Stop playing doctor. That's not why you came here."

"I didn't come here to hurt you."

"Really? It didn't seem like that when you were slamming my head against the ventilation shaft."

Mikhail considered this. "That's true." He nodded, absolutely serious. "I enjoyed that."

The blood loss won out—she laughed. He blinked at her, confused.

"But I promise, it's out of my system now."

She laughed harder, covering her face with her hands. This was one conversation she'd never, ever imagined herself having.

From between her fingers she saw Mikhail's brow crease with concern. "Please, let me see your back."

Alya stopped laughing abruptly. She didn't like turning her back on anyone, and she liked people looking at her back even less.

He held up his empty hands. "I just want to see if it's a clean wound."

Grimacing with pain, she hitched her shoulder forward, just enough that he could see the wound, but not her whole back.

Gently, he poked her shoulder in a few places. She bit her lip to keep from crying out.

"It's not too bad. I suspect your scapula is nicked, but not broken." His fingers traced away from the wound, following a line toward her spine. "What made these scars?"

Damn. Of course he'd notice them. Of course he'd ask about them. She never told anyone the truth, but she decided to tell it to him. Maybe because she was too exhausted to lie. Maybe because it was part of his story, too.

“My father gave me those.”

He sat back on his heels, so he faced her. “For what?”

“For you.” She couldn’t help but smile at the idea. It was an uncomfortable smile. “For leaving you. Well, really, for running away with Jean. When my father found us, Jean handed me over without a fight. But I fought. I tried to get away. When he caught me, he pinned me down on the boot of the car, snapped off the aerial and lashed me with it.”

“He beat you until you couldn’t fight back.” Those Russian eyes of his did sad so well, and they did it now, turning into dark wells.

She nodded. After the beating, he’d flown her home from Louisiana to Marrakech and locked her up in the old cistern in their basement, where the water was ankle deep and the walls crawled with bugs. He didn’t let her out until she’d agreed to a quickly arranged marriage to some pudgy Albanian excuse-for-a-prince, a marriage intended to salvage the family’s reputation. She “agreed” to this arrangement while her brother, Driss, sat on her chest and her other brother, Sami, hobbled her ankles.

Of course she bolted at her first opportunity: directly from the altar. Her father vowed to kill her. She ran all the way to China and threw herself on the mercy of Sun Bin, the Prince of Hong Kong. They’d met briefly in New York the summer before, and she’d remembered how he’d looked at her.

Sun began her lessons in power. All their lessons took place in the bedroom. He wouldn’t deal with a female on any other level. That was true of all princes, she learned as the years passed. All of her lovers back then were princes, because no one else could protect her from her father.

Princes were the *crème de la crème* of vampire kind. No prince rose to that title through heredity or corruption alone—though both helped. A prince wasn’t a prince unless he had the strength, will and wits to hold his position against all challengers. The vampire race was not made up of pacifists. The men who controlled it wielded their power with a fine blend of brutality and precision, and as Alya learned, the innate dominance of a prince found its most creative expression through sex.

Every prince she met wanted her. Not because she was young and attractive—they had their pick of women—but because they could sense her latent power, which made bringing her to heel more satisfying. And she was literally brought to heel, again and again. She’d even worn a golden leash for one of them.

None of them imagined she would ever be a threat. She didn’t even imagine she would be. At first, all she wanted was protection. And for many years, she resigned herself to sexual submission, though it did not come naturally to her. That was the price you paid to sleep in a prince’s bed. Some of her princes were sadistic thugs. Others were accomplished doms who taught her well. But none of them understood how closely she listened to and watched what they did *outside* the bedroom.

She became a commodity of sorts, a treasure that switched hands. Usually she managed to engineer her transfers, but sometimes she was outmaneuvered and ended up in bad places. But no matter where she went, she kept learning. As arm candy, she had almost unlimited access to their lives. She sucked their

cocks while they strategized with their lieutenants. She hung in cuffs while they carved out businesses empires.

By the time she broke out on her own, she understood perhaps better than any other vamp the tangled strings of power and influence that governed their world—because she'd seen it from every side.

Using that knowledge, she'd won the privileges of a prince, including the right of dominance in the bedroom. She'd not give over this hard-won power to anyone, for any price.

Mikhail might sympathize with her for a few moments. Once they'd been equals—friends—and in that he was different from any prince she'd ever known. But if he married her, he would expect her to submit, just like all the others. He'd arrived making imperious demands, armed with a rope that had been used to tame brides for centuries. The Faustins were nothing if not Old School.

Mikhail said, "I don't want to give you more scars."

She cocked her head at him, confused.

"I want to heal your shoulder."

She held his gaze, trying to read his intentions. He stared back steadily, pushing at her with his will. If he were a lieutenant of hers, she'd throw him to the ground for staring at her like that.

Yes, vampire saliva healed. It had evolved to close wounds on humans, but it worked well enough on vamps too. But he wasn't proposing to close a tiny puncture wound—he wanted to suck on her torn-up flesh. The idea turned her stomach. But at the same time, she had to admit that the prospect of him tonguing her skin made her a little hot. *I'm injured worse than I know. I've gone delusional.*

"You've lost a lot of blood."

"Really? How did that happen?"

She drew her knees tight against her chest. Her body temperature was dropping. What she needed to do was move. Go to her room. Get warm. Clean up. Call her doctor. But she couldn't move.

"I know, it's my fault." He pried one of her hands off her knees and pressed her fingers between his own. "You're cold."

She yanked her hand from his. "That's what everyone says."

"Admit you need help."

"Tell me, is cannibalism an inherited or an acquired trait?"

The muscles in his jaw tensed and his eyes narrowed at her. She realized she kind of liked pushing his buttons. He said, "First, you and I are meant to feed on each other, whether you believe that or not. Second, we have to stop your bleeding. Now."

Raising his hand slowly to show her he meant no harm, he lowered his fingertips to the crest of her shoulder. He didn't move, just let his fingertips rest there. She couldn't draw breath and he seemed to be holding his.

Turning his hand over, he hooked one finger under the strap of her nightgown—or what remained of her nightgown. “Let’s call a temporary truce.”

“Why bother?” Blows would be better than this faux intimacy. He was her enemy. “Just what do you think is going to happen here?”

“I can’t see past five minutes from now.”

Hunger gave his voice a raw edge. Her resolution slipped, and her own voice cracked as she made her last protest. “I can see the future, quite clearly. Even if I let you do this, I’m not going to marry you. We will fight again. I promise you it won’t end well.”

The grim turn of his mouth told her he understood, but he was going to do what he wanted anyway. Of course he would. He was a *knyaz*.

He peeled her hand off the wound. The pain flooded in with the fresh air. Wincing, she turned her head aside.

“Wait,” she said. “Do you have any blood in your mouth?” No way was she going to end up bonded to him through accidental fluid exchange.

Solemnly he spat into his palm and showed her the clear fluid, then wiped his hand on his trousers.

She turned her face away again.

He bent to her shoulder and dragged his rough tongue across the ragged hole.

Maybe he’d mistake her gasp for pain—she hoped so—but all the pain vanished at the first stroke of his tongue. After that, every precise lap, every gentle, sucking kiss gave her nothing but pleasure. Obscene, shameful, disgusting pleasure.

Jaded as she was, she’d never experienced anything quite so kinky. She closed her eyes and inhaled the mingled scents of blood and gunpowder and chlorine and...Mikhail. His scent had always reminded her of fresh grass and new leaves.

He lifted his head from her shoulder. She gave him her best poker face, so he wouldn’t know she was as perverted as him.

“Your back?” His tone was clipped, but a hint of a growl slipped into it nonetheless. She knew what that growl meant and her body responded. Years of training, years of fulfilling the whims of haughty, dangerous princes taught her to be open and wet when they wanted her.

She gave him her back, but as she did, she slid her hand under the sofa cushion and found the knife she kept stashed there.

He circled the exit wound with his tongue, and the absurd pleasure began all over again. Just as intense. More. As he lapped, his hands inched up her waist, and she let it happen.

Not good. Not good at all, Alya.

She clutched the knife hilt, but sighed as his hands cupped her breasts. All she wanted in the world was for him to thrum her nipples while he sucked at her flesh. And as if by magic, he did exactly what she wished. She could not repress a low moan of pleasure.

“Do you trust me?” he murmured against her skin.

“No. Do you trust me?”

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

She could not help but be thrilled by the low timbre of his voice. Or rather, the power that vibrated through it. He swept her hair to one side and kissed her nape. “So, when are you going to use that knife on me?”

“Soon. So soon.”

Pushing his luck, he pulled her onto his lap. She spun in his arms and pressed the point of her knife under his chin. He grinned.

It was the first real smile she’d seen out of him, and what a smile it was: crooked, brilliant, reckless. The smile of a man about to jump out of an airplane. She wanted to kiss him for it. She wished she could be that reckless.

Instead, she twisted the knife in warning. “A prince can’t trust anyone. He sits facing the door. Sleeps with a blade under his pillow.”

“That’s true,” he said.

“A prince can’t even trust those closest to him.”

“I trust my family.”

Figured. Those smug, virtuous Faustins, all Beaver Cleaver cozy in their little Brooklyn brownstone.

He continued. “And I’d trust my wife.”

“Then you’d be a fool.”

They were so close she could see a tiny, star-shaped scar marring the skin under his right eye. So close she could count the sunburst rays of white that surrounded his pupils. Those hoarfrost stripes were what made his eyes uncanny from a distance.

His lips softened and parted, just a little. Electricity crawled thick between them.

This was a dangerous, dangerous desire. Her wound was closed and the pain gone. She didn’t need him anymore. There was no reason to stay this close to him.

And there was no way she could walk away.

Damn it, what’s happening to me?

Her mouth dry, her heart loud in her ears, she eased the point of the knife from his chin, tilted it, and slid the flat of the blade up his cheek. A shiver passed through him and he lowered his eyes, his long silver lashes sweeping his cheeks. In anyone else she’d take it as a gesture of submission, but she guessed he was

battling for self-control. A *knyaz* took what he wanted, when he wanted it. Mikhail was being too good. He was up to something.

His intentions deserved to be tested.

Tilting her head, she brushed her mouth over his. Both of them had bruised, swollen lips. Even a light kiss hurt. Mikhail made a short, pained noise, but drew her closer, threading his fingers through her hair.

Again she kissed him, open mouthed this time. He groaned again. Anguished. He stopped being careful and good. She caught fire. They pressed one another hard, the pleasure of their kiss laced with pain, the pain spurring them on.

Mikhail took her down to the floor. He wedged himself between her legs, his cock pressed exactly where it wanted to be. But there was a problem. She'd gone still.

He raised his head and looked down at her. Her eyes were wide. Fear? Not likely. Anger, maybe. The knife glinted in her hand.

"I won't. You can't top me," she gasped, breathless.

"Top you how?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "That's cute, Faustin."

In one slippery move she flipped him on his back and straddled him. He grabbed her wrist, staying her knife. She didn't fight his grip. All he could focus on was how much he wanted to kiss her.

Her knees tightened against his ribs. "This is how I play. I call the shots."

He opened his hands. "Tell me what you want. I'll do it."

"Anything at all? I find that hard to believe, *knyaz*." She gave him a sardonic little smile that he found unspeakably sexy.

Anything to be inside you again. "Try me."

She stood. "Get up and strip."

He knew she didn't expect him to obey, but he was more than happy to be rid of his cold, wet clothes. It seemed she believed power resided in control. To him, it meant getting what he wanted.

In a couple of quick movements he threw off his shirt and peeled off his clinging pants. He couldn't remember ever being so hard, so heavy, so tight.

Kicking his clothes aside, he met her gaze again, only to find her gaping at him, completely aghast. Was he that repulsive?

Pointing at his chest, she said, "What have you done to yourself?"

Ah, that.

The monogram she'd cut into his chest should have faded quickly, but he'd made it permanent. Using a broken pen in his hotel room, he'd rubbed ink into the lines of the A, giving himself a prison tattoo.

It was gratifying to see her in a state of complete shock. He just stood there, waiting, until she managed her next question. “But...why?”

He shrugged. He couldn’t even explain it to himself very well. The A was an oath to himself that he would never retreat. A preparation for battle. A means to remember her touch.

“You are seriously disturbed.”

That made him smile. Smiling hurt his face, but it also helped wake him from his long stasis, just as kissing her did. She shook her head as if he were a hopeless case, but her lids lowered as her attention drifted downward—toward his cock. Just knowing it had her attention, it hardened by a few more excruciating degrees. She’d been the first person to touch it. And later, under the willows—

Hell. He could come just thinking about it. It was time to move this along.

She murmured, “This is such a bad idea.”

But she wanted him. Out of practice as he was, there was no mistaking the gleam in her eye, or the quickness of her breath.

Before she could change her mind, he said, “What do you want me to do?”

She pointed at the sofa with her knife. He sat, and she stepped between his knees. Drawing her fingernail up the length of his shaft, she said, “Do you have a condom?”

Mikhail stared at her, blank, rendered an idiot by her touch.

She said, “I don’t. I haven’t fucked another vamp in a good ten years.”

Her toys couldn’t impregnate her. He could.

“I suppose you came here ready to start breeding.”

He snorted. No. Mostly he’d been thinking about survival. But yes, breeding seemed...dandy. Breeding seemed like a fantastic idea. His cock seconded the motion.

“Don’t tell me you don’t carry one? Or do you only do humans, too?”

“I haven’t fucked anyone in ten years, vamp or human.”

She went very still, wary as a prey animal.

Maybe she thought he was lying, but it was true. After she’d left him, and the grey veil descended, he’d gone through the motions. He took a lover, and then another, but he had nothing to give them, except, ultimately, indifference. They learned to hate him, and rightfully so. Eventually he gave up maintaining any semblance of a relationship.

When he needed sex, he’d find a female vamp in the park who had just hunted, and approach her. Feeding made the blood run hot, so they almost always agreed to take him. Those rough, anonymous couplings sustained him for a long time. But even they lost their thrill, eventually, and he became a monk.

Alya recovered herself and crossed her arms. “So you come to me with my initial tattooed on your chest and ten years of seed stored up in your balls.”

“I thought I’d make myself irresistible.”

That almost made her smile. Almost.

“Look at you, Mikhail. You say you’ll do whatever I want, but it’s not in your eyes. It’s not in your posture.”

“I am a *knyaz*.”

“See? You don’t even say *knyaz*. You purr it. You’re just like all the rest.”

“I am *not* like them.” He’d glimpsed things he didn’t like in her blood. Images, memories, fears—he didn’t know what they were exactly—but he didn’t think her princely lovers had been kind to her. “There is no one else like me.”

She put her hands to her head. “Ugh! They all say that. You are *exactly* like them.”

He couldn’t talk any more, couldn’t understand all these barriers. Yes, he was a prince. Who else would be fit to mate a queen like her? He stood. She jumped back.

Holding his hands in the air, he walked forward until the head of his cock grazed the thin, wet silk that clung to her belly. She didn’t move away. Carefully, he lowered his hands onto her smooth, cool arms. “Forget what I am. Tell me what would make you happy. Happy right now.”

Flushed with anger, or something more than that, she spat out the answer. “I want to see you lose control. I want to see you beg.”

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other and his cock slid an excruciating inch across her belly. “Believe me, I’m very near to losing control.”

“That’s the problem.”

“I thought that was what you wanted.”

She stepped backward, and as she did, she cooled. The hints of anger and fear he’d sensed in her vanished beneath a smooth veneer. It seemed she’d made a decision. “You’re going to do as I say.”

Her words weren’t playful. They were sharp as a lash.

No one spoke to him like that. Ever. He opened his mouth to snap back at her, but curiosity got the better of him, and he changed his mind.

If he refused, they’d be back at zero. Fighting. At this point she was weak enough that he’d win, but as he’d already determined, a “win” like that would be hollow. If he wanted to understand her, he had to enter her world.

He awaited orders.

“Sit there.” She pointed to the low leather bench instead of the sofa. The one he’d used as a shield. The one she’d eviscerated. Foam protruded from its split hide. He righted it.

“The other end.”

He moved to the far end, and sat facing a mirror on the wall. One side of his face was scraped up, and the eye on that side was swelling shut. Hardly an inch of his body was not bruised, and the spidery letter A crowned his many other scars. His cock stood at the ready, flushed and ridiculous.

She couldn't possibly want him. This was some kind of trap.

But she came to stand in front of him, unarmed and equally battered. With slow, deliberate movements she tore her nightgown down the center and peeled off the transparent scraps. Hard muscle defined the sinuous curves of her long torso. Her breasts were heavier than he remembered, the nipples high and dark. A white scar arced around her right breast. He longed to tongue it. She stepped out of her panties. Her long, strong legs were built for speed. Her pubic hair was shaved into a thin strip.

Straightening, she studied him for a long moment, stern as a goddess. His pulse sped up while he waited for her next move. He tried to keep his breathing even. He tried to stay still when all he wanted to do was drag her to the floor and fuck her until there was nothing left of either of them.

Slowly, she lowered herself into a crouch. In the mirror he could see her heart-shaped ass and the wet twist of her hair down her back.

She put her hands on his knees and shoved them apart. His heart lurched.

"How's your self control?"

"Perfect."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"Then you won't come until I tell you to. Swear it."

His mouth went dry. "I swear."

Again, he surprised her. This time she controlled her response much better, but still he could see it. She couldn't believe he'd agreed. He liked keeping her off balance.

She walked away. He swung around and watched her pull a small, black box from a Chinese cabinet. On her return, she walked with a serpentine twist of the hips that fascinated him, even while the black box worried him.

Kneeling in front of him again, she put the box to one side and slipped her hand under his balls. His limbs locked and his mind emptied out. She may as well have Tasered him. Cupping them high, she breathed on his cock. Nothing more. First she opened her mouth wide and puffed a hot, wet breath of air over his shaft. Then she pursed her lips and blew on the damp skin. Her gorgeous, bruised mouth stretching wide, then closing, stretching wide, then closing, waking and teasing his flesh. He watched her, entranced. She reached for the box and pulled a feather from it.

The feather she swiped up and down his shaft, and around the head. The sensation was tickling light, but his cock twitched and leapt in response. It ignited his senses, but did nothing to satisfy. He leaned back on his hands and took a big gulp of air.

"What do you think of the feather?"

"I don't think I have to tell you anything."

She laughed. "You tell me plenty."

Tossing the feather aside, she tilted her head and licked him from base to tip, until his cock shone with her saliva. Faint tremors began in his thighs and forearms. He forced himself to relax.

“What’s this?” She quirked an eyebrow at him over his cock. “Pre-come? Already? Please tell me your come won’t bind me to you.”

“Not blood,” he gasped. “Safe.” *Keep going. God in heaven please keep going.*

With a smile she stretched out her long, pointed tongue and neatly captured the drop. Mikhail closed his eyes.

But he couldn’t block the sensations. Her hot, wet mouth dropped over the head and slid down his shaft. Her lips sealed and the suction began. He grabbed the sides of the bench and held tight.

“Why so tense?” she said, pulling off him, playing the understanding wife. “You need to relax. Let go.”

“Is that an order?”

She winked and dropped her mouth over his head again. Meanwhile she took up his balls again, this time squeezing lightly. She flicked at his frenulum, her tongue fast as a snake’s. He’d forgotten pleasure altogether, he realized. Forgotten it could be exquisite torture.

Sweat began to trickle down his temples. Again she pulled off him. The skin over his head was red and distended, and so tender he thought it would split.

“Would you like to come now?”

He nodded. The mere suggestion made his testicles tighten.

“Will you beg me for it?”

He shook his head, puffing through his nose.

“Stubborn.”

“Won’t beg.”

“You said you want to please me. Begging would please me.”

“No.”

“Then you’ll lose control. You will break your oath.”

He shook his head.

The box came out again. From its depths she pulled a long string of pearls and a small jar. He took a deep breath.

Leaving him to watch, and wonder, and suffer, she took her time untangling the string of pearls. Holding them high, she let them cascade over his cock, smooth and cool. Then she pulled them off, leaned over and took him in her mouth again to suck and let her hot saliva cascade down the sides. He grabbed hold of the bench again.

When he was as wet as she wanted him to be, she wrapped his cock with the pearls, starting at the base and winding her way up. Cupping her hand around this sheath, she moved her hand up and down. The pearls rolled and slid against his wet skin like a hundred caressing fingers.

“Agh!”

It was an agonized sound, even to his own ears. And it gave him no relief. Still stroking him with the pearls, she bent low and began to kiss his inner thighs, supplementing her kisses with cruel scratches.

He writhed, fighting the desire to pump his hips. Orgasm was a semi bearing down on him, horn blaring. He tried to scoot backward out of her reach.

“Uh, uh.”

“Ahhh!” He stamped his feet. He ducked his head and ground his teeth. “Errrr!”

“Say please.” She leaned forward to taste his navel.

The wood snapped under his hands. The bench went lopsided.

Frantic, he dug his fingernails into the cut on his arm—the one he’d threatened her with in the pool—opening it wide. The pain pulled him back from the brink.

The scent of his blood distracted her. She lifted her head, her nostrils flaring. Though he suspected he must look insane, she didn’t bat an eyelash, just said, “You’d better get down before the bench collapses.”

Keeping hold of his cock, she guided him to the floor. He stretched out on the cold, hard tile, grateful for its brutality.

Her hand still on him, stroking slowly up and down, she said, “How do you want to come, Mikhail?”

“Inside you.” His lips retracted involuntarily, baring his teeth.

Her purr turned to frost. “You’d like that. Thrusting into me over and over until we were both sweaty, until I was screaming for mercy, tight, hot, slippery. Or maybe you’re imagining taking me from behind—”

“Shut. Up.”

“You’re going to come, Faustin. You can’t control it. Say please before you break your oath.”

“Not going to happen.”

She stripped the pearls off his cock and sent them sliding across the tile. Wearing a wicked expression, she straddled him backward, giving him a magnificent view of her ass and her gleaming wet sex. But she said, “Don’t touch that.”

Hips high, she lowered her head over his cock and drew him inch by slow inch into her mouth. Her fingertips tickled his balls and she started to move her head up and down. His hips lifted off the floor. He heard grunting and realized it was his own.

The sound of a lid being turned. The little jar from the box. Her warm, greasy finger slid back along his perineum and circled his anus.

No one had ever touched him that way. He had no idea it could feel so good. Combined with the slow suction on his cock, it was unbearable. He heaved a breath, slapped his palms against the floor, and fought not to give in.

Her finger pushed at him delicately, teasing him until he opened to her and the tip of her finger slid inside. *Taking him.* Meanwhile her head was bobbing, her suction relentless, her saliva hot and slick. His cock leapt in her mouth. Pulsing. Alive.

“Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!” He saw red. Nothing else. But he would not come. He’d implode first. He’d die.

Her fingertip wiggled gently, stroking him deep inside. Tears started to pour from the corners of his eyes. She backed off his cock and said quietly, like the Mother of Mercy herself, “Come for me now, Mikhail.”

The ejaculation was so immediate, so intense, he screamed. His hips jerked as jet after jet tore out of his body. Vaguely he knew her mouth was on him. Swallowing. Sucking. Vaguely he knew her finger was still massaging his prostate, demanding that he give more.

He gave and gave, twitching and moaning, emptying into her mouth. For the first time in his life he let go. He didn’t try to control it, or come out of it. He rode it as long as it lasted, until she was finished with him, and he lay there, wet and exhausted, a shipwreck survivor washed up on the beach.

Chapter Seven

She thought he'd passed out. The transition from his screams echoing off the walls to total silence unnerved her. His body, which had been sweat soaked and corded with frustration, was now soft and pliant.

Alya pushed her hair out of her eyes and wiped her mouth. No one had ever fought her so hard before. But she shouldn't have expected anything else from him.

And he hadn't just surrendered, he'd surrendered over and over, allowing layer after layer of resistance—all his training, all his natural defenses—to fall away. He'd given himself to the moment and made himself vulnerable. It made her domineering heart go pitter pat.

He could have struck out at her. Or made a joke of it. Or tried to change the rules. But he played her game with more heart than she'd ever seen. None of the princes she knew would have let it go so far. She couldn't read his motivations.

Mikhail Faustin had grown up fascinating.

Leaving him there, she stepped over shotgun shells, broken glass, and hunks of plaster, making her way to the kitchen, where she grabbed a bottle of wine and two glasses. When she returned, he was still sprawled next to the settee he'd demolished.

While she was pouring the wine he stirred. "I figured you would kill me in some spectacular way."

She warmed with pride to hear how raspy his voice was, and how lazy, too.

Nudging him with her toe, she said offered him a glass of wine.

He scowled at the offering. She took a sip out of her own glass, wincing as it stung the cuts inside her mouth.

"Purist." She returned to the kitchen to get him a glass of water, remembering that his parents drank only blood, water and medicinal scotch.

His voice followed her down the hall. "Why would I play human? Why would I pretend to be less than I am?"

But even though Mikhail and his parents were old-fashioned, his brother Gregor ran a nightclub where vamps and humans mixed—and where no doubt many vamps drank unauthorized beverages. Alex Faustin, she heard, took it one step further. He cooked. She wondered if that was a source of tension in the family. *Always searching for weakness, aren't you, Alya?*

Returning, she handed him the water and he drank it down thirstily, still sitting on the floor. She perched on a chair nearby.

The few swallows of wine she'd had were already going to her head. That meant she was dangerously weak.

"I need to eat. I'm going to call in a couple of feeders for us."

He jerked his head her direction, a disapproving gleam in his eyes. "You shouldn't use feeders. Hunting keeps you sharp."

"It's okay to hunt in New York, but not in LA. You have to drive around to find victims. The traffic is horrible. Then you have to park..." She waved her hand. "It's easier to order out."

"I'll go. I'll find someone and bring them to you."

Alya folded her arms. *Knyaz*. Not only was he already trying to change the way she ate, he was also reminding her of another small fact. "How could I forget? You're not hungry, are you?"

An unexpected flash of pink grazed his cheekbones. "I ate very well this evening."

"I'm amazed you can meet my eye while you say that."

"I went about it wrong, that I admit. But I can't say I'm sorry I tasted you."

He stood in one fluid motion. She knew his strength now. Intimately. But she let him close with her. Let him press her hand against the leaping pulse at the base of his throat. When he spoke, his deep voice vibrated against her fingers. "Tell me you're not tempted."

Alya swallowed hard, remembering his tongue on her wounds. What would his blood taste like? His sweat and seed were compelling enough. But she couldn't sink into this madness. "The idea sickens me."

He covered her hand with his. "You know how they live on inside us. After."

After exsanguination, he meant. Yes. Her enemies were always with her.

"Imagine that intimacy with a living person. Live communication, soul to soul."

Intimacy. Her favorite thing in the world. She turned away.

"You're afraid you can't bond like that."

"Why would I want to?"

"You're afraid...you're afraid you don't even have a soul anymore."

She whipped back around to glare at him.

"I heard it in your blood."

Knowing that made her feel soiled and far too tired. "I hope you enjoyed all your gorging and eavesdropping."

He tilted his head, a bit puzzled, as if he were still reading her. "I like you more for it. And it's not true, by the way."

Alya's eyes stung. Were those *tears*? What the fuck? She brought her heel down on a chunk of fallen plaster, crushing it into powder. "I'm so relieved. Because that's what I really care about. Whether Mikhail Faustin likes me or not."

"You have a right to be tired." He swept her knife from the ground and handed it to her with a bow. "Come, rest with me. We can fight later."

She swiped at her face impatiently. Whether he saw her tears or not, they still made her weak, and stupid. And because she was weak and stupid, she let him lead her to the sofa. They stretched out on it together, Mikhail behind her. He gathered her against his chest. It was a familiar gesture, as comfortable and familiar as a pair of old jeans. But it was also disconcerting. No one had held her like that since she left him. She'd never been able to trust anyone that much.

Alya laughed to herself. *And what, now I trust him? A marriage-minded Faustin who—so far this night—has Tasered me, tapped me and shot me?*

She kept her knife clutched to her breast, just in case.

Mikhail said, "Sleep a little, and I'll bring you food."

"And then you'll want to feed from me again."

He didn't answer.

"What happens to you now...now that you've really fed from me?"

"I'm no different than before."

"You're lying. I remember a story, a fairy tale about a bonded man who couldn't feed."

"Roland. Roland and Illysia."

"That's it. What happened to him?"

He sighed. "It's a sad story."

"I like those best."

"I remember that."

Mikhail swept the hair off the side of her face. The gesture reminded her of her mother. For a long time she'd resented her mother for being so delicate and forgiving. For dying young and leaving her alone in a house of men.

Going to live with her aunt in New York had saved her life, she was sure of it, and meeting Mikhail and his family had been a revelation. She'd never known a family could be so tight. For a magic space of time, she'd been one of them. Until she betrayed them all.

"Only angels and demons have no regrets," Mikhail said.

"Can you still hear my blood?"

"No. I just know you're sad."

Alya closed her eyes. Being with him was too much like being flayed with a scalpel. It had to end, and as she'd told him, it couldn't end well.

"Please, tell me the story." Following old habits, she nestled her head in the crook of his arm.

"It's a story from the Caucasuses."

"Where the Faustins come from."

“That’s right.” She heard the smile in his voice. “Long ago there was a powerful prince named Volchok who had a beautiful daughter, white-shouldered Illysia. All the young *vampyr* lords desired her hand in marriage, but Illysia’s mother had a prophetic dream. Her destined mate was a foreign lord named Roland. She told her husband of this dream, and he made her swear to keep the dream a secret from their daughter. He wanted to investigate the man first, he said.

“The truth was that he knew of this Roland. Roland had killed his brother. Over the years, he’d contemplated revenge. Now he saw his way to a perfect ending. He went to Roland and told him about the dream, that all was forgiven, that he was welcomed to the family. After all, they could not deny fate, could they?

“Roland was amazed, but pleased. He’d seen Illysia once at a tournament, and remembered her fine figure, and her skin like white rose petals.

“Volchok brought Roland home with him, speaking all the way about his daughter’s beauty and worth, but also her passion. How he was glad to get her married off safely, because she burned hot and flirted with his men incessantly. He even insinuated that while he’d tried to keep her a virgin, she might not be one still.

“By the time they came within sight of the castle Roland was on fire, thinking about this girl who appeared a lamb but was a vixen inside, a girl who’d been given to him by destiny, a girl who could not help but love him.

““And she knows about me?” Roland asked.

““She knows all about you. She’s chomping at the bit. Mind you, she’s spirited.” He winked at Roland. ‘You’ll enjoy putting her to saddle.’

“They arrived in the keep just before dawn. Everyone had retired to their chambers. Roland was crushed he could not see her until the next night.

““Nonsense, boy,” said Volchok. ‘Go to her now. She’s yours by right. No need to wait for the wedding.’

“Roland rushed up the stairs to her rooms and threw her women out. He spoke the words, ancient even then, ‘I declare you mine by right of dream.’

“Illysia, of course, knew nothing of him, and didn’t believe him. Roland didn’t care, because once he was near her, he lost control.”

Alya rolled her eyes. “He raped her in fine old *vampyr* style.”

“More important—to the story, at least—he fed from her.”

“How many times?”

“I don’t know. The story says he sated himself on her in every way. Volchok ordered the household to ignore her screams. He knew his daughter well. A practical girl would turn the situation to her advantage, but sensitive, idealistic Illysia would never forgive Roland. Roland would be damned by her hatred,

damned by her blood. She'd never feed him again, and eventually, he'd starve for lack of her. One daughter's virginity was a small price to pay for Roland's slow, painful death. What he didn't understand was that his daughter was smart enough to figure out that her father had sacrificed her."

Alya tensed, all too sympathetic with Illysia. "This is a horrible story."

Mikhail hooked his leg over hers and began to caress her earlobe. No one else—no one alive, anyway—knew how well that calmed her. She was amazed that he remembered.

"When Roland finally slept, instead of going to her parents, she crept away and hid in the dark recesses of the castle. At first darkness she ran away alone, and on foot, telling no one where she'd gone.

"Roland woke up, saw the blood on the sheets, remembered what he'd done in his frenzy, and ached with shame. He searched the castle for her, and when she could not be found, saddled his horse and took off in pursuit of her."

"How did he know which way to go?"

"By drinking her he'd forged a connection with her. He probably knew which direction she'd gone."

"Could you follow me now?"

"I think so. Yes."

Great. "But the one drop didn't tell you where I was?"

"No. Let me finish."

Alya nestled into his arm, yawning. A million years ago they'd curled together exactly like this in his room and listened to Leonard Cohen albums. Back then their days were endless. They wandered the city aimlessly. They made out for hours.

"Roland soon realized he was cursed. He was hungry, but all blood turned to ash in his mouth. He burned, but he couldn't perform with other women. He was bound to Illysia. For two months he pursued her, slowly wasting away, slowly losing his mind.

"Always he was close to her, but always she eluded him. In that part of the world, huge, flat boulders litter the steppes. They call these rocks The Bed of Roland. Little blue flowers cover the grasslands in springtime. Those are called Illysia's Tears."

"Blue flowers..." Alya murmured. She couldn't keep her eyes open. It would be okay to close them for just a minute, wouldn't it? While he finished the story?

A second later, she woke to a roar.

Chapter Eight

She woke in a fighting crouch. Three rifle muzzles surrounded her at close range. Grim-faced vamps held the guns. The strangest vamps she'd ever seen.

Just a few feet away, Mikhail was already fighting with six more of them. She lunged his direction, but her captors rammed their guns into her body. One under her left breast, another against the small of her back, and the third in her side. She imagined them firing in unison, her torso exploding in all directions, and held perfectly still.

All of Mikhail's teeth were extended and blood coated his naked body. None of it his own, she hoped. He caught hold of one of his attackers, a burly man in a plaid shirt. With a brutal twist, he broke the man's neck and threw him aside.

Two more bodies lay at his feet. One didn't have a head at all. That's where the blood came from.

He'd captured some sort of club or baton and fought with it like the devil himself. They were trying to close on him, but he kept spinning that club, keeping a perimeter open around him, striking anyone who entered his range. The sight of him filled Alya with a fierce, unexpected pride.

One of the people holding guns on her, a rosy-cheeked kid in a trucker's cap, said, "I think that guy is...him. You know? Ice. Michael Faustin."

He was speaking to a stocky woman wearing a Mall of America T-shirt that hung down to her knees. She said, "Yeah?"

"Oh yeah. I'm pretty sure, too."

"Well, all the luck." She raised her voice. "You better take that big feller alive, Paul!"

Who were these people? Alya tried to make sense of the situation. If they wanted her dead, she'd be dead already. There had to be a way to turn this around.

One of the men snuck up behind Mikhail with a long length of pipe.

"Watch out!" Alya shouted. She heard a cracking noise, and an explosion of pain filled her head with white stars.

*

Mikhail opened his eyes. He was flat on his back and tied down. He saw only the tops of skyscrapers and open sky. They were outside. Rooftops were never good news.

He jerked against his restraints, “Alya!”

“I’m here. I’m okay.”

If he craned his neck to the left, he could just barely see her. Coils of heavy chain bound her from the shoulders down. He assumed they’d bolted the chain to the wall. Her eyes were shining and wide. That meant she was pumping with adrenaline.

He guessed they were about twenty stories up, and in downtown LA. He knew they were still in LA because it smelled like LA.

His own situation was worse than Alya’s. While primitive chains held her, he was stretched out on a steel table, his wrists and ankles cuffed by a sophisticated restraining device. These cuffs were broad steel bands integrated with the table. He couldn’t move his wrists or ankles a millimeter.

A woman he could not see said, “Okay, fellas, thanks a lot. We got it now.”

Three vamps walked into his field of view. They positioned themselves at the foot of the table, so that they could see both him and Alya behind him. One was a big man in a faded denim jacket. He had a red, weathered face, soft jowls, and a bushy blond mustache. Mikhail remembered fighting him at Alya’s. He was strong.

Next to him stood a short, plump woman with no-nonsense hair wearing an oversized T-shirt and jeans. Though she was a vamp, she resembled a typical tourist mother—he’d watched plenty of them shepherding their families around Times Square—but there was shrewd intelligence about her that put him on his guard.

The last of the three was a young man, still in his teens, clean shaven, with round, ruddy cheeks. He twisted a hat in his hands, fighting to keep his lips over his fangs. That one wanted him dead.

The older man spoke. “My name is Paul Halverson.”

Mikhail groaned to himself. The North Woods rebel.

“So you’ll know what this is all about, then. This is my wife, Anna, and my son, Gunnar. We’re real sorry it had to come to this, but we can’t have you messing with us like you’ve been, and putting a call out on my life took it way too far. And I mean both Miss Adad and you, Mr. Faustin. Folks like to be left in peace. Our friend Frank—” He gestured another vamp into Mikhail’s line of view.

This Frank didn’t even look at him, but focused on Alya, visibly shaken.

“We heard through the grapevine that Miss Adad put a call out on our life, and Frank here—Frank is Anna’s cousin, did you know?—told us you’d come to Los Angeles to see her. We thought it would be a good time to visit, too. Turned out better than we expected. We came for the lady, but found you both together, and the doors wide open. Couldn’t have been easier.”

“Hadn’t heard you two were friendly,” Anna Halverson interjected, her face sour.

“Oh yeah, real lucky I’d say. We’re not set up for war where we come from. No, it’s best to do it like this. Straight to the point.”

Mikhail didn't have to ask what they meant to do. He was strapped down on a rooftop. They meant to let him and Alya burn with the dawn. It was a particularly disdainful form of execution. There'd be no formal combat. No ritual exsanguination. And that was surprising, because both he and Alya were well worth draining.

"Gunnar got this nice table for us," Anna said, drawing her hand along the slick metal. "He ordered it over the Internet. They say it's strong enough to hold an elephant. More than we needed, I'd say—"

"Mom, you said the very best."

"It's a beauty, I'll give you that. Never thought we'd need two at a time, though. Hope those chains aren't too uncomfortable, Miss Adad."

"Oh no," Alya said. "They're fucking lovely."

Mrs. Halverson pursed her lips at Alya and turned back to Mikhail. "Isn't this straight out of a James Bond movie? No one but Paul can set you free—"

"Anna," her husband said, his voice quiet but cutting.

Mikhail knew the table. The locks were coded to handprints. Halverson's prints, apparently. Knowing the table, he knew there was no escaping. Little Gunnar had done his research well.

Alya's bonds, however...

Gunnar stepped forward. "You killed my best friend back there. I wish I could watch you die."

Mikhail raised a dismissive brow at him and rolled his head toward Halverson. "New York doesn't want your land. House Faustin never attacks sovereign territory unless there is compelling reason. I'm sorry you gave us one. The code we all must live by is discretion."

"I'm sure sorry, too. But folks have a right to live as they see fit without other folks coming from hundreds of miles away to tell them how to do it. Our kind keep to themselves. Always have."

"You are eating animals. By choice."

"We've come to realize it's the right thing to do."

"Humans are our perfect food. Swallow anything else and it degrades you."

"And I'd say it's degrading to hunt our close kin."

Every so often a group of vamps would get it in their head that it was wrong to feed from humans. As if they hadn't evolved side by side to do just that. As if all *vampyr* society wasn't built around the safe and controlled consumption of human blood. Idealistic vamps who decided to live on animal blood inevitably became animals themselves. Blood was not just so many liquid calories. Vamps quite literally were what they ate.

Mikhail was sure the degradation had already begun in these families. That's why they weren't even cleaning up after themselves anymore.

Curious about their reasoning, he said, "The media has picked up on the carcasses. That's our immediate concern."

The boy smirked. “They blame it on Satanists—or space aliens.”

“How long do you think those answers will satisfy them?”

The boy lifted his chin. “When they realize we eat animals, like they do, they’ll be okay with us. One day we won’t have to hide anymore.”

Mikhail sighed. The Halversons hadn’t been reading their history books.

Alya finally spoke—he wondered how she’d managed to keep her mouth shut so long. “Bloody fucking hell. Why don’t you just kill us now so I don’t have to listen to this idiocy anymore.”

Anna stepped forward. “You know, I’m real tired of taking my marching orders from people I’ve never met. You have nothing to do with us. We ask you for nothing and we’ve never caused you harm. And yet you decided to put a hit on my husband, Miss Adad. Why?”

Had she? Mikhail wondered why she’d targeted Halverson.

Her voice dripping with scorn, Alya drawled, “Oh, I don’t know. I suppose I thought it would be fun to declare open season on lunatics.”

Anna took hold of her husband’s arm. “And you call us animals.”

It was hard to make convincing threats when you were naked and strapped to a table, but Mikhail gave it a try. “If you go through with this, I promise you my family will seek revenge. Faustin revenge is extracted straight from the flesh. I assure you they will not stop until they slaughter you and all your kin. I’ll die now, but you’ll not live another week.”

Halverson smiled under his mustache. “Now why would your family think we have anything to do with your death? Our intelligence told us you and Miss Adad were fighting. And in fact, it looked like you’d been fighting before we got there.”

Mikhail bit the inside of his cheek. There was that. They might think he and Alya had killed each other.

“And Miss Adad doesn’t have any family to speak of—or at least that’s what we understand.” Anna Halverson smiled sweetly at Alya. “At least, not since your father disowned you for being a whore.”

Mikhail’s hands curled into fists. Halverson jabbed a finger at him. “Don’t look at my wife like that.”

“Tell your wife not to speak to my—” The word *mate* came to his tongue, the certainty of it surprising him. In an instant he recovered, rephrasing the sentence. “Tell her to apologize to Prince Adad.”

Halverson chuckled. “Sorry. Don’t think I can do that for you.”

“Don’t worry, Mikhail. I’m not impressed by apologies from filthy animal eaters.”

The Arabic tinge to her English came out under stress. It pained him to hear it. She was his mate, and he’d failed her back at the house. When she crept into his arms, exhausted and vulnerable, instead of making her safety his first priority, he’d fallen asleep. He couldn’t stand the thought of the sun blackening her skin. *Lord, take me. Let her live.*

“That’s enough.” Halverson put up his hand. “Each to his own, that’s what I always say. You think the way I eat is an abomination. We think the same of you. I’m not even going to exsanguinate you, Miss Adad. Or you, Faustin.”

“In a couple of generations, you will be animals,” Mikhail said with absolute certainty.

“We’ll see about that.” Halverson took his wife by the arm and popped a toothpick in his mouth. “We’ll just see.”

The vamp named Frank started to slink away.

“Enjoy yourself while you can, you sneaking rat bastard!” Alya called after him.

Frank stopped and turned around. He pointed at her, opened his mouth, then closed it again. His face flushed purple and he began to shout. “No more high and mighty threats from you, your royal bitchiness. No. It’s over. Sometimes the little guy wins. Like now. So...so...fuck you.” He gave her the finger, stepping backward as he did, ruining the effect.

Alya said, “I should have killed you for biting Jason Biggs.”

“You should have, ’cause I did it on purpose,” Frank said. “But I gotta go. Sun’s coming up. That always makes me a little, you know, edgy.”

Frank left his field of vision. Mikhail heard a door slam shut behind him.

Alya said to the Halversons, “I’ll give you all one more chance. Let us go, and we’ll call it even. Force me to take matters into my own hands, and I won’t answer for the consequences.”

Halverson laughed. “You’ve got a pair of brass balls on you, missy, I’ll give you that. But nope, best you both just die quietly, so we can sort out our own business in peace.”

Anna added, “Better than war, you know?”

Alya said nothing more. Mikhail said nothing. He wanted them to go, but they just stood around. Apparently they intended to stay out there until the last possible moment. Close to writhing with impatience, he forced himself to be still and profoundly uninteresting. *They had to leave.* If they left, Alya might be able to escape. The awkward silence grew and grew until the parents began to look like they might go inside, but then the boy plopped himself on the corner of the table.

“So, does that A on your chest stand for asshole?”

Alya let loose a long, trilling cry, as wild as a coyote’s, but far more menacing. Mikhail’s hair stood on end. The Halversons instinctively moved closer together. At the end of it, Alya gulped a huge mouthful of air and began to chant—pray—rant—he didn’t know what, because it was in Arabic. It sounded like a curse. Her chains creaked and groaned as she rocked against them, her words fast and husky with emotion.

Anna Halverson mustered a weak smile. “Well, time for us to go in.”

Mikhail twisted to see Alya. She leaned against her chains, snarling and spitting as she screamed, her eyes burning. He’d go inside, too.

“Wish it could have been otherwise,” Halverson said to him.

“No you don’t,” Mikhail said. “If you did you’d let us go.”

“Got me there.” He touched his forehead in a brief salute and ushered his family off the roof.

“Have a nice day,” Anna called from behind him.

When the door slammed closed, Alya stopped ranting. “I thought they’d gloat until we were ash.”

“What did you curse them with?”

“I don’t know any curses. I was just making shit up.”

Mikhail grinned. He enjoyed smiling, now that he’d remembered how to do it. “How long until sunrise, do you think?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

“That building to the east will shade us from the first rays, give us a few minutes more. Can you get out?”

Alya had always been an escape artist. When she was a teen, she’d had a poster of Houdini on her bedroom wall. Every bit of his hope rested on this memory.

“I’m working on it. What about that thing they’ve got you in? It looks like they bought it at a *Star Trek* convention.”

“Wish they had. I know this manufacturer. These are state-of-the-art locking mechanisms. They can’t be picked or broken.”

“What if I smashed your hands and feet? Could we pull them through the cuffs?”

His toes curled at the idea, but he liked her thinking. She would have been a good wife for him.

“Not going to work here. The cuffs contract automatically. They keep constant pressure on whatever is inside them.”

“Fucking hell.” He didn’t know if she meant his situation, or if she was just struggling with her chains.

“Alya, what are the odds you can escape?”

“Not too bad. I’m going to dislocate my shoulder. I don’t see any cameras. Do you?”

“No, but they could be around. We could be miked. There could be lookouts in the adjacent buildings.”

“We’ll find out, won’t we?” He heard her grunt and a length of chain clanked to the ground. “Progress.”

“Excellent.” If she could escape, he knew what he had to do. The horizon glowed purple. “I’m going to finish the story.”

“Roland and Illysia? Now? Ow! Son of a bitch.”

“You’ll understand.” Mikhail rushed through the story as fast as he could. “Roland found her at last. She’d taken shelter in a monastery. He came to her a walking skeleton, repentant as hell, but he came too late. She was dying.”

“Dying?” Another chain hit the ground.

“She’d eaten poison mushrooms. It doesn’t matter. Point is she accepted Roland’s apology. And she gave him a choice. Either die with her, or drink of her and be free.”

“‘Drinking of her’ is what fucked him over to begin with.”

“The choice she offered was to drink her to the dregs. Take her soul.”

“He wasn’t a prince, she wasn’t a combatant. He had no right to do that.”

“He was her bound mate. Listen to me. One mate can free themselves from the bond by exing the other.”

Even the chains went silent while she considered that.

“You understand? If you swallow the soul, you won’t pine for it.”

In a quiet voice she said, “You could have done that right off. You could have finished me by the pool and walked away.”

Mikhail jerked against his cuffs in frustration. “No! Well, yes. I could have. But that’s not the point right now. Not at all.”

“Hold on a second. I’ve almost got it.” Then lower, to herself she said, “This is going to hurt.” He heard a soft pop, and she shouted, “Motherfucker! Cocksucking Minnesotans! Goddamn them!”

Suddenly she was above him cradling her arm, tightlipped with pain, but free. “Open your hand,” she said. “Hold this.” She put her elbow in his palm. He clamped his fingers around it, and she used the leverage to pop her arm back in its socket.

When it was done she sighed and smiled at him gratefully. The beauty of her smile took his breath.

Her gaze lingered a beat too long on his face, and then she turned away, coloring. She made a show of trying out her arm. “All better. Now how are we going to get you out of this?”

“You’re not.”

“No?”

“Adrenaline can only get you so far. You have no weapons.”

“I’ll take a length of chain.”

“And they have guns.”

“Maybe they cleared out. Maybe there’s no one down there.”

“I doubt it. They won’t go until they know we’re ash.”

“But I need Halverson to open this lock.”

“Give it up. I want you to think about yourself. How are you going to make it past them? Think. They’ll be in there, the three Halversons and five others that I know of, probably more. All men. All strong. And you’ve been tapped, Tasered, shot—”

By me. Gritting his teeth, he slammed his head against the table.

“Mikhail!” She slid her hand beneath his head. “Don’t. I’m going to get you out.”

“No. You’re not. This is my fault. I’m going to get you out. Listen to me.” He held her eyes. She had to understand. “You’re going to make Roland’s Choice. You’re going to ex me.”

She blanched.

“It will give you the strength you need to get out of here. And if you take my soul, you’ll not suffer afterward.”

“*Not suffer?*” She shook her head. “No. That’s not even an option.”

“I’ll live on inside you.”

“I’ll get Halverson. I’ll make him—”

“*Alyaushka.*” He used his old pet name for her. “I know how strong you are, but you’re outmanned and outgunned.”

“I won’t do it.”

“Then we’ll both die.”

“You underestimate me.”

“I understand odds. You know it’s the only logical plan. Tap my strength. Get out of here, however you can. Go home, get your men, call my family and rain hell down on these people.”

She stared at him, trying to break his resolve, but he just stared back, knowing he was right. Somewhere, a bird began its morning song.

“There is no time!”

Alya turned toward the mountains, as if some last hope might be found there. A second later she turned back, her jaw set. “Okay.”

Mikhail let out the breath he’d been holding.

She leaned over and kissed him fiercely, her hands deep in his hair. This was right. It would work.

She climbed up on the table and crouched over his body. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to do this.”

“Lust.”

They’d both ex’d at the climax of a fight. The passion of violence helped drop the inhibitions against cannibalism. Lust would work the same way.

“Lust? You’re feeling lust *now*?” She wiggled backward. “Oh. So you are.”

“You’re on top of me. Naked.” That was incitement enough, but strangely, he found that the idea of imminent death aroused him. The cuffs and the smooth steel at his back aroused him. The prospect of her bite aroused him.

“You’re disturbed. I’ve said it before.”

She didn’t even begin to know. The things you learned about yourself when you were dying.

He lifted his head to meet her kiss. He closed his eyes and savored the taste of her mouth, remembering the powerful ambrosia of her blood, and how it warmed his throat and blew open his mind. She took hold of his cock. He was so ready. He groaned aloud and thrust into her fist. "Hurry."

She spat into her hand, rubbed her spit on the head and then guided him in. Her brow creased as she settled over him. She wasn't ready. But she bit her lip and wiggled until she took him anyway. He couldn't repress another groan as he sank into her heat. "Okay," she whispered, "I've got it."

Mikhail said, "Tell me when to come."

He meant to remind her of her wicked blowjob. It might have worked, because she turned slick and took him deeper. With the first hints of pink breaking over the horizon, she began to ride him.

She ran her palms over his chest and pinched his nipples hard. He jerked under her. But then she stroked the pain away and gave him a sad smile.

"You'll come when I bite you."

He smiled to reassure her. But instead of reassuring her, it made her cry. She didn't sob, but tears flowed down her cheeks. He wished he could wipe them away, but all he could do was watch her fight her embarrassment, lock down her emotions and transform herself into a predator.

And it was this predator, not Alya, who fell upon his throat.

Play biting was highly stimulating, and once started, it took an iron will to back off. Each vamp had a point of no return, and she was racing toward it. In no time, her nips became more aggressive, the licking more frantic, the kisses bruising. Her hips rocked faster and faster. She was losing control—and he loved being devoured by her.

This is an excellent way to die.

She growled low in her throat. The sensual, satisfied sound curled around his spine.

One of her hands slid behind his neck, lifting his jaw skyward, exposing his veins and arteries. Her scratchy tongue traced his neck. Her sucking kisses called up his blood. He went lightheaded, loose limbed and warm. No wonder feeders begged for it.

She jerked upright with a short cry, climaxing fast and hard. Just as fast, she swooped down and ripped open his throat. The pain jolted through him, spurring his release. As he ejaculated, she began to suck. He flowed into her. His spirit soared free.

"Misha." There was no holding back from her, no secrets, no half-truths. Her consciousness flowed into him and saw all of him. At the same time, everything he ever was or hoped to be rushed to join her.

"If there's a child, I'll keep it."

A child of theirs. He'd never even considered...

Her inner voice pushed into his reverie. *"I'm sorry, so sorry."*

Outside he heard her swallowing convulsively. His heart lurched crazily, trying to compensate for blood loss. Fascinating. What had she been saying? She was sorry for something that happened a thousand years ago. It didn't matter.

She was still drinking, but she was crying again. He smelled her tears. They made him thirsty. He wished he could have tasted her one last time. Dying under her mouth was like sinking into a velvet void. Summoning his strength, he opened his eyes to see blazing wisps of orange clouds reflected in the windows of the skyscrapers.

“Finish. Go.”

Alya tore a fresh hole and sucked viciously. The black closed in gently.

Chapter Nine

Mikhail flowed through her, icy and powerful as a river roaring out of the mountains. She'd known all along that it would come to this. That she would kill him. But now that the time had come, she hated it. He belonged in the world. He deserved to live.

But his blood leapt into her mouth, insistent. She didn't even have to suck. His strength renewed her, giving back all he'd taken and so much more. His goodness staggered her. She rubbed up against it, hoping some of it would rub off.

Alya knew exactly how much blood she could take from anyone before she did harm. Mikhail had reached that point. He slipped into unconsciousness, but still his blood sang, *yes, take me*.

He was perfect and beautiful. His dying thoughts were of her. He loved her. As if she deserved it. As if she'd done anything decent in her life.

The compulsion to finish the kill was strong, almost too strong, but she tore her mouth away. With a few quick strokes of her tongue she halted his bleeding and paused, gasping, confused, her head and heart brimming.

I've got to save him.

She had no plan. No hope at all, really. More than likely she'd be dead within five minutes. But if there was even a sliver of a chance that she could get him out too, she had to try. And if she failed, well, with any luck he wouldn't wake before the sun hit him.

Resolved, she sprang off the table and grabbed a six-foot length of chain.

Mikhail was with her. Not his consciousness, but his essence, unabsorbed and unsettled. Like a drop of dye spreading in pure water, it tinted everything she did. His caution tempered her recklessness. On her own, she would have rushed the building. Instead she crept through the door on assassin's feet, descended a few stairs and entered a long hall, her senses prickling. There were guards at the end of the hall, she could hear them talking. A TV blared in the room to her right, and men shouted at it. She recognized the sound of sports. Using her finer senses she took a second sweep of the area and realized a single vamp was in a room to her left. Quiet. Maybe sleeping.

She slipped into that room, hoping to find Halverson, and walked straight into the butt of a rifle. The blow to her forehead bounced her off the nearest wall. Anna Halverson spun the rifle around for a killing shot.

Alya swung out with her chain and caught Anna's leg by either chance or luck, because she couldn't see straight. But she felt the chain grab hold and she yanked hard. Anna fell on her back and Alya was on her.

Unable to shake images of the sun igniting Mikhail's flesh, Alya wasted no moves. She strangled Anna with the chain and claimed her gun. The room contained another treasure: an acetylene torch. With the chain around her neck, the gun across her back and the torch in her hand she crept back into the hall and began to set the place afire. As the smoke spread, the men came out to investigate. There were more than Mikhail had guessed. She picked them off one by one, first with the rifle, then with the chain, and then with her bare hands.

"Halverson!" she called, retreating to the stairs, hoping to lure him out to the roof.

Gunnar attacked out of nowhere, pushing her out the door. A cloud of black smoke rolled with them, obscuring the morning sky. He was brave, but he was just a boy. In a couple of moves she had his arm wrenched behind his back.

"You bitch!" he cried, his voice breaking with fear. "I'll kill you for this."

"Stupid child. I eat boys like you for breakfast. You're going to tell your people what happened here. You're going to tell them to live clean and stay quiet or I will come to the fucking North Woods and paint them red. And believe me, I will start with you."

She pitched him to an adjacent rooftop some eighty feet below. Young vamps had some bounce to them. Usually.

"Gunnar!"

She turned to see Halverson running at her with a fire axe.

Mikhail knew he wasn't in heaven. Black smoke billowed around him in smothering clouds, stinging his eyes. A terrible stench filled his nostrils, a noxious combination of burning plastic and flesh. He'd killed too many people in his life to go to heaven. Thou shalt not kill was a basic commandment, after all.

A man screamed, agonized, but his cry was ominously short. After that he couldn't hear anything else except the roar of the inferno. And then, out of a fountain of glowing embers, walked Alya—or some demon goddess that looked like Alya. She was naked, her skin shining black. Ash whitened her hair. Her face was contorted with blood lust. Her eyes, red. In one hand she carried a battle axe. In the other, a club.

No, not a club. A dismembered arm.

"I'm getting you out of here," she said.

Chapter Ten

Night. Home. Bed. Uninjured. The window is open.

Before she opened her eyes, Alya went through her checklist. If it were daytime she'd be lethargic and cold. She was warm. She knew her sheets down to the thread count. The jasmine outside her window scented the room with heavy perfume.

And then she felt him. Inside her, his blood colonizing her body. And physically close. Within reach. Watching her sleep.

Oh my God. What have I done?

She scrambled to protect her mind from him, throwing up crude barricades and no trespassing signs. It wasn't enough. He was there. Right there. Reading her. Well aware she was awake.

She opened her eyes.

And freaked out even more.

He looked like the Angel of Judgment, come to claim her. Clean and composed, dressed in a black shirt and trousers, he sat in a chair by her bed, his hands spread on his knees, his feet bare. He met her gaze with absolute confidence. He'd won. They were bonded.

She sat up warily. Her skin felt too tight. She glanced down and realized her body was glazed with dried blood. Her face, too, by the feel of it. She rubbed her temple and a shower of brown flakes fell on her sheets.

"The blood of our enemies." Mikhail's voice rang inside her, his eyes glowed with approval.

No. No. No. Get out of my head. Her head was no place to be. She clutched the sheet to her chest as the memories of battle came flooding in. Black memories. Red memories. She'd fought and killed before, but never like that. Never like a bloodthirsty djinn. Nothing stood in her way that awful dawn. They'd fallen before her like lambs.

Even Halverson. She'd thrown him to the ground and ex'd him while he struggled. She'd enjoyed it. Afterward, she dismembered him. She'd enjoyed that, too.

Somehow, during all that madness, she'd managed to box up his essence and store him away with the other dead princes inside her. As carefully as she'd touch a wound, she probed this fresh tenant. How could she ever bear to access his memories?

How could she when she'd almost popped his wife's head off her shoulders?

The blood would never come off.

Mikhail put one hand on the bed, and then the other. Then a knee. The bed sank under his weight. Trapped in her thoughts, she could not stop him.

He took her head between his hands. "You did what had to be done."

When she finished her slaughter in the hallway, the bodies had lain so thick that she had to walk across their broken backs and tangled limbs to return to the roof. She could remember how their hair felt between her toes.

Mikhail shook her. "Stop it. Leave it alone."

Her lips parted but no words came out. All she could see was Halverson's face.

"You know how to compartmentalize."

Yeah, so why can't I compartmentalize you? She whispered it to herself, not knowing what he could hear or see inside her. She knew she could see more of him if she wished, but didn't go there.

Strangely enough, his question worked. It focused her attention on him, instead of the Minnesotans. And Frank. Oh yes, she'd caught up with Frank.

Mikhail probed her mind, grabbing at anything she let slip. Unlike her, he'd use this connection between them any way he could. She fought back, making her mind slick as glass, as reflective as a mirror.

"Why are you locking me out?" he said.

Alya would have laughed, but feared if she laughed, she'd start to cry. Why would he want in? What if she was carrying his child? Could this be any more fucked up? When she rescued him, she'd stepped in a cell of her own making and tossed away the key.

Mikhail spoke slowly, as if she were brain damaged. "You're safe with me."

That wasn't true. She was safest alone. Like a gun in a box.

He looked hungry. Beat to hell and hungry. That was her fault.

"Alya, don't. Don't."

He pushed back her hair, searching her face. He lowered his head and sniffed her, skimming his nose over her forehead and nuzzling her hair. She couldn't help but sniff too. The skin on the underside of his jaw smelled good beyond belief.

"You've changed." Mikhail's eyes shut in ecstasy as his nostrils flared again. "Your blood. Your scent. My God."

Yes. His scent had changed, too. It had become an airborne drug. She clenched her jaw to stop her teeth from chattering. She wanted to rub her face against his skin. She wanted to cut him open and climb inside.

Mikhail pressed her to the sheets. His mouth slanted over hers. Primal masculine satisfaction radiated from him, body and brain. It flooded her mind. It flavored his kiss. It said, *Mine*.

She turned her face aside, gasping for air. He was too heavy. She couldn't breathe. She needed to get out. Couldn't he tell? Was the bond a one-way street? Maybe he was too far gone to notice her panic. The intensity of his desire paralyzed her.

She read the plans he had for her, the images as clear as her own thoughts. He wanted to twist her body into a sigil of perfect submission. He wanted her on hands and knees, ass up, face ground into the carpet...

"Mikhail! Stop!" The weakness of her voice appalled her. She squirmed beneath him, trying to push him off.

Another series of visions arrowed through her. While he had her on her knees, he'd wrench her head back, exposing her throat. Still fucking her, he'd tear into it. Tear into it like a mad dog, to drink and drink and drink...

Mikhail's teeth sharpened. He buried his face in her neck. Hydrated on sugar water alone, his body was consuming itself by the minute. He needed her, in every possible way.

Spurred on by her heady fragrance, dark erotic fantasies spun out in his imagination. He'd take her soon enough, but he needed to feed from her first.

His mouth stretched wide.

Her fist smashed into his left ear. A millisecond later the heel of her hand slammed into the bridge of his nose. White stars filled his eyes.

With a roar he slapped her back down to the bed. The anger was primal, the reaction instinctive. No one—not even the bride—interrupted a claiming.

She bared her teeth, her eyes murderous and wild. He pinned her by the throat, growling his disapproval. The blood pouring from his nose dripped across her face. She drove her knee into his balls.

Paralyzed with pain, he fell over on his side. He thought she'd kill him, but instead she sprang into the air and landed on top of her armoire. She crouched up there, blood stained and feral and shaking like a junkie.

"Alya." Wiping his nose, he sat up, his head considerably clearer for having been emasculated. He sent out feelers, soothing thoughts, silent reassurances. "It's okay."

She produced a heavy pistol that she had stashed up there and pointed it at him, her arms outstretched between her knees. She reminded him of a gun-toting gargoyle.

"Get the hell out."

He put his hands up. "Why?"

"You were about to bite me, you son of a bitch." She pointed to a pair of scratches on her neck. "Again."

Blood ran warm down his chin. Moving slowly, so as not to panic her, he pinched his nose to slow the bleeding. “And that’s wrong? You gorged on me.”

It sounded like “Yoob gorbed on muh.” He sighed and squinted up the barrel of the gun. His brothers would pay good money to see him right now.

“That was different.”

“I’m your mate.” That he knew with absolute clarity. That was non-negotiable. “It’s your duty to feed me.”

“My *duty*?”

Livid, she leapt down from her perch and advanced on him with the gun outstretched. He didn’t move, and she didn’t stop until she pressed the barrel between his eyes. He let his hands fall to his sides. The blood started to flow again. He licked it from his upper lip. He couldn’t afford to waste it.

“Give me one good reason why you want me. Besides the fact you’re hungry. Besides my territory.”

Mikhail couldn’t see past her finger on the trigger. “At this moment I have to say I’m drawing a blank.”

That hurt her. He heard echoes of confusion and disappointment, faint and fleeting, passing through her defenses. She took three steps backward and lowered the gun.

“There you are. You don’t like it, and neither do I. We don’t have to submit to this curse. There’s got to be a loophole.”

“There’s no way out.”

Was marrying him really worse than starvation, insanity and death? She glared at him, as if confirming this was, in fact, the case.

He tried again. “I can’t hunt anymore. Neither can you. Believe me, I tried, and couldn’t get past the first swallow. We’re like Roland now. We can’t feed unless we feed on each other. And the more we feed on each other, the more tightly we’re bound. There is no escape.”

“There is always a loophole. There is always a work around.”

Mikhail laughed. Let her shoot him. He couldn’t be worse off. He dug a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to his nose.

Alya lowered the gun and paced in a circle, her face tight with concentration. Only she could look regal barefoot and crusted with blood. She didn’t even seem to be aware that she was naked.

He glanced at the bathroom door and back at her, a fantasy forming. He wanted to pull her into the shower and soap her from her ears to her toes and then take her—wet, warm and slippery—against the tile.

Her head whipped his direction. He shoved the fantasy aside. She had her mind locked down so tight, he couldn’t tell if she could listen in on him or not.

She sat on the bed, placing the pistol next to her. Crossing her legs, she leaned back on her hands and cocked her head at him. “I know your family sets a lot of store by this bonded bride thing, but even you

will have to admit that ultimately it is an outdated, unnecessary and rather distasteful tradition—even among the hopelessly retrograde *vampyr*. There must be a cure nowadays. An unbinding of some sort.”

“An *unbinding*?” The woman was insane. “Good luck with that. If you find this spell, please bring me back a pet unicorn, because they must be kept in the same place.”

One corner of her mouth curled up. “You want the virgin who comes with it, too?”

He wadded the handkerchief in his fist, trying to keep hold of his temper. Knowing that she was pushing his buttons on purpose didn’t make it any easier to take.

“Have you ever considered that submitting to our destiny is the right path? The only path?”

She picked up the gun again. “If you think that the word submit is in my vocabulary, Mikhail Faustin, you don’t know me very well at all. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to take a shower. And then I’m going to get us a divorce.”

He closed with her. “We all submit to hunger, Alya. Even you.”

Unblinking, she stared back at him, her eyes hard and gold, like a hawk’s.

Dominick and four of his men burst into the room. When had she triggered an alarm? All the men except Dominick reeled backward at first sight of her.

“Ah, Dominick!” Alya smiled pleasantly, casually raising her pistol again. “You see Mikhail is in need of an ice pack. Could you help him with that?”

Turning so Alya couldn’t see him, Dominick gave Mikhail an apologetic look and gestured to the door. His men parted into two neat columns and let Mikhail pass.

Alya’s cat waited for him in his room, purring. He scratched its ears absentmindedly. Alya was scared to death of him, and he didn’t know why.

Chapter Eleven

Alya wondered why she should bother with clothes at all anymore now that Dominick, her guards, and half of Minnesota had seen her nude. But clothes did offer a measure of moral support, and she needed all the help she could get. In the shower, the dried blood reawakened, turned bright red and swirled thick around her feet. It streaked down the shower walls, just as it had in that narrow hallway.

Are you a sissy girl, Alya? Her father's voice was always right there, ready to shoot her down when she felt the worst. She wasn't a sissy girl. But between defending her thoughts from Mikhail, and avoiding reading him in turn, compartmentalizing Halverson and dealing with blowback from the fight, it was a wonder she was sane at all.

She put on a crisp white blouse with wide sleeves and deep cuffs, close fitting trousers and riding boots. The more structure, the more cover, the better. If she could have worn armor, she would have. She twisted her hair into a tight knot and went in search of Dominick. And her cat. She hadn't seen hide nor hair of the beast.

Good lieutenant that he was, Dom had cleaned up the living room and transformed it into a temporary command center. The transformation he'd wrought in such a short time was amazing. No trace remained of the bullet holes that had riddled the walls. The broken glass and fallen plaster were gone, not to mention the bodies and buckets of blood. The only difference was that the ruined settee had vanished, leaving a gap in her furniture arrangement. Four guards sat with him, cleaning their weapons. Two of them blushed to see her. She dismissed them.

Rising, Dominick kissed her cheek. "What a charming outfit. What are you riding today?"

"Ass, darling. Nothing but ass. Where's Mikhail?"

"In his room. I gave him that guest room at the end of the hall the night we came home. With him so weak and the possibility of retaliation high—"

Alya waved her hand. "That's fine. Have you seen Lulu by chance?"

"She might be with Faustin. He...er...inquired if he might borrow a cat brush."

The traitorous creature. Dominick scratched the side of his nose, trying to hide a smile. *Make that two traitorous creatures.*

"Dominick, you're enjoying this too much. It's not seemly."

"Forgive me, sir. Cats are peculiar, without a doubt."

"She's welcome to adopt him as her new scratching post, if that's what she wants." Alya shrugged. "I don't care. Not at all. She's a poor excuse for a cat anyway."

He nodded in sympathy. "Indeed. No more need be said on the matter."

"Of course not." Alya checked her phone and put it away. "And just when has Mikhail had time to be making himself cozy with my cat anyway?"

"Last night, it was." His puzzled expression cleared. "Ah, he didn't tell you? You've been out a while. You slept through a day, a night and a day. It's Wednesday."

"Wednesday?" Mikhail had been fasting longer than she thought. She had to find a way out of this, fast. She put all other business aside. "Tell me everything you learned about blood bonds with Master Wilhelm."

They sat on the long leather sofa. Where Mikhail had told her the story of Roland and Illysia.

Dominick stared into the middle distance as he downloaded his report. "It takes only one taste to initiate the process. The intensity of the early bond is directly related to quantity of blood consumed. One-sided consumption leads to obsession, and eventually death. Two-sided consumption forms the bond. The bond is strengthened and completed by feeding so continuously from one another that the two parties permanently alter one another's chemistry. After bonding, they are not individuals anymore, not in any true sense."

Alya shuddered at the idea. "That doesn't make any sense. How do we—they—feed off one another exclusively without starving?"

"It's a lean time, to be sure, but that bit only goes on a few days, then they can feed normally again. Apparently in the old days the bride and groom were fattened before marriage to prepare for the bonding."

"Like calves. How romantic."

"There's a spiritual component too, which I couldn't make head nor tails of. But as you know, I'm a practical sort."

"Physical is enough for me. How do you break the bond?"

He shook his head. "You can't. It's called 'The Unbreakable Tie' by all the historic sources. Master Wilhelm confirmed this. He says it can't be undone once initiated."

"He's wrong. I know of at least one way. One of us can ex the other."

"Roland's Choice. There's that, but I didn't exactly categorize that as a solution." Dominick leaned back against the cushions, solemn. "I take it this means you've fed from him?"

"I fought out of that place on the strength of his blood."

"Escape at a price?"

The idea that Mikhail might have trapped her shook her for a moment, but she dismissed it. She hadn't tasted any deception in his blood. In that moment, all he'd wanted was for her to live. He'd been ready to give his life for her. Now the question had changed. Would she give up her whole life for him?

Not likely. She'd ingested some of his goodness, but she hadn't turned into a saint.

She went to her study and dug around for her old address book. There were other options. She dialed a number in Bali, hoping it was still good. Hoping Sevrin was sober. What time was it there? It didn't matter. Sevrin never slept.

"Sevrin, I need you to counter a spell for me."

The shrieking of his damned parrot collection almost drowned out his response. "Fuck me dead. Is that you, Alya Adad?"

"You know it is. I'll pay you in gold."

"What kind of spell?"

"A blood bond."

"Break up destined mates? You can't do it, at least not after blood's been exchanged. Is that what we're talking about here?"

She told him it was, and he belched long and loud. "Major juju, that. You got astrological forces, chemical adaptations, and nasty dark shit I don't know half enough about. Don't know of anyone who does."

"This is important. I will pay you anything, just to try. What do you want, Sevrin? Just to try. I would do...anything." She took a deep breath, knowing how many years he'd wanted her, and how decidedly she did not want him, and continued on, weaving both suggestions and compulsion into her words. "You know I'd be indebted to you."

Her compulsion skittered across his Teflon defenses. "Tempting, but no can do. Don't fancy frying my brains in the attempt, darling. No one screws with blood bonds."

"There must be someone willing to try. Tell me. I don't care who they are."

"There's no one. Believe me. But nice to know I'm on your mind. Next time you're in Bali, we should get together, for old time's sake—"

Alya threw her phone across the room. "Fucking git."

She'd just debased herself for nothing. Sevrin was the most unscrupulous, reckless sorcerer in the world. If he wasn't crazy enough to try the spell, she didn't know who would. They knew all the same people, anyway. If he said no one would try it, she had to believe him. If she had years, she could search the world for a counter spell, but she didn't have years. She had days. Hours, even.

Dominick appeared in the doorway. "Any orders?"

"I have to fight him."

The words just popped out of her mouth. One of them could escape this curse and go back to their normal lives. They'd been destined to fight it out since he'd walked into her office. And if they fought right away, before Mikhail got weaker, the fight would almost be fair.

"With all due respect, sir, I wish you wouldn't."

“Then you marry him.”

“If only I could.”

He was joking—and not joking. “Don’t ever be telling me you have a crush on the lad.”

“Your Irish accent is execrable, sir. And yes, I think I do. I like him a lot.”

“Fantastic.” Alya buried her face in her hands. “He’s seduced you *and* my cat.”

“Faustin was up at first dark, not today, but the night after the rescue. Before I was up. He could scarcely walk, but he was restoring your defenses. He disposed of the bodies. He set everything to rights, not me. And you should see the mods he’s made to your security system.”

She raised her brow at the idea of Mikhail mucking with her security system, and hitched it higher at the idea Dominick would allow him to do so.

“We’ll go over all his changes, of course. But it’s not back door stuff. It’s just smart.”

“So he’s a good security man. A good housekeeper, even. I hire useful men. I don’t need to marry them.”

“He cares about you.”

“It’s an illusion, don’t you see? He has no choice but to want me.” After thirty years with a curse gnawing on his brain, he’d do anything to complete the bond. Even fancy himself in love with her.

“But it seems you have a choice in the matter.”

“I won’t submit to the bond.”

“In that case, how do you know he’s not exercising choice, too?”

That bit of logic made her brain twist. Her stomach grumbled, making her peevish. “I don’t care. I know what I want and what I want is not to be the wife of goddamn Mikhail Faustin!”

Dominick clasped his hands behind his back. “Sir, you’ve always listened to my opinions, which is more than most princes would do. All I’ll say, and it will be the last I say on the matter, is that it would be a shame for the two most promising princes in generations to kill one another when there may be alternatives.”

“Just suppose I do this. Say I marry him. What are you going to do when House Faustin moves west to claim its new territory? Ah, I know. Perhaps you’ll find a role in the civil war that breaks out as a result.”

After the wedding, she’d be nothing. In a legal sense, she’d hardly exist. All her property, including her territories, would go to him. The families who’d sworn fealty to her would not be happy about that. Behind closed doors, she’d reassured several patriarchs she’d never marry before signing treaties with them.

“Perhaps he’ll agree to let you keep some—”

“Stop. Listen to yourself. I don’t rely on anyone’s benevolence.”

“A prenup?”

“Human law? Right. That’ll hold water. And no matter what he agrees to, he’ll be squeezed on all sides by his council, his families, and his own father. Old Faustin is an acquisitive bastard if there ever was one. I can’t give an inch to those people. They hate me too much.”

Most of vamp society thought she was a freak, because she didn’t live by their rules. But they couldn’t deny her existence when she was ripping land right out from under their noses. She was already a legend, the only female prince in three hundred years. If she married, and began to breed Faustins, they’d get the ending for the story they wanted. *Once there was this strange girl who called herself a prince, but she married and settled down. It took a Faustin to tame her, but tame her he did.*

Dominick said, “He won’t fight you. He knows he just has to wait you out.”

Alya wasn’t worried. She wasn’t called the queen of the damned for nothing.

It took a long time for Mikhail to staunch his nose, so long he fell asleep with the ice pack on his face. He woke with a start, his stomach twisting, his head aching. Under normal circumstances he never napped, but he was running on empty. The longest he’d ever gone without feeding had been a week, but he hadn’t been tapped when he did it.

He lifted Lulu off his chest and changed into a black shirt and a black pair of pants, identical to those he’d been wearing before, which were identical to all the other shirts and pants folded in his bag, which were identical to those hanging in his closet at home. Madelena said he had the wardrobe of a morbid obsessive compulsive. He called it functional.

His nose had acquired a decided leftward slant. Grimacing into the mirror, he popped the bone back into place. *Better.* He washed his face and straightened his collar and cuffs. It was time to continue the conversation, whether Alya liked it or not.

The bond led him straight back to her bedroom. As he neared her door, he stretched his senses, listening for her thoughts or any hint as to her mental state. What he picked up was too muddled to understand, and it didn’t begin to prepare him for what he saw when he walked in.

Alya was lying on her bed, splendid in a voluminous crimson robe. Two lithe bodies twined around her. One was the female feeder he’d met the day before. Maya. The other was male. Not Christian Rider, but another of the same type. Alya had her face buried between the girl’s full breasts. The boy was nuzzling between Alya’s thighs.

Maya rolled her head his direction, her eyes fogged with pleasure.

Alya turned toward him and smiled. Blood smeared her mouth. She put her hand to the boy’s head, stilling him.

“Mikhail,” she purred. “Come try a sip. Maya is the sweetest feeder I’ve ever found. Maybe you’ll be able to drink from her.”

Impossible. It wasn't possible for her to eat anymore. And why were these creatures in her bed, touching her...

Struggling for control, he made himself speak. Speak instead of explode. "You're not bound?"

"I don't know what I am—" she paused to lick her lips clean, her eyes bright with mockery, "—but I know I'm not going hungry."

No hunger. No leverage. No hope.

In that moment he understood with cold certainty that he'd never win her over. He snapped his fingers at the feeders. "You. You. Out."

They both cringed. Alya gestured for them to stay and left the bed to confront him, equal parts scornful and defiant. Her mind was closed tight, but she knew as well as he did what this meant for them.

In fact, she must have arranged this little viewing for his benefit. "You want me to be the aggressor."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Damn you to hell, Alya Adad. I challenge you to a combat before witnesses. Weapons of your choice."

She put her hand to her heart. "But I thought I was your lady love."

Mockery. She was deliberately destroying any possible future for them, and she was laughing as she did it. He backhanded her. The feeder girl shrieked. The bedroom lights flickered.

"You disgust me," he said. Killing Alya would violate all the laws of love and nature. And he looked forward to it with all his heart.

The blow staggered her, but she didn't return it. She didn't say anything, either. Just closed her red robe tightly around her throat.

Mikhail growled through locked teeth, "Give me your throat or name your second."

Ghostly pale, she raised her chin. "Dominick, of course."

"Gregor will second me. There will be no retaliation from my family if you should win. I'd like to do it as soon as he can fly in from New York. Do you need more time than that?"

"Oh no. I'm quite at your convenience."

They exchanged bows.

The moment Mikhail left, Alya bolted to the toilet and vomited until she thought she'd damage herself. The regurgitated blood scalded her throat and tongue like vitriol. It didn't hurt half as much as her conscience.

Jared retreated downstairs, but Maya stayed with her, holding her hair out of the way during the worst of it, and staying to dab her face with a damp cloth. "Poor Alya! What's wrong?"

Alya fought a bad case of the shakes. "Nothing, love. Just something I ate. I'll be better soon."

Mikhail stalked into the garden. He visited the place he'd pinned her down and sucked the honey from her veins. He should have drained her then and there and saved himself a lot of trouble.

Coming into this, he knew her character. He knew she could not be made into a wife. If he'd followed his common sense he would have finished her off that night. But he'd followed his so-called heart, only to end up at the same place but with worse odds.

Reaching up, he grabbed a stout branch of her old olive tree and swung up among branches bobbing with unripe fruit. Trees calmed him. Always had. He had several favorites in Central Park, but he'd never sat in an olive before. Resting his back against the trunk, he called his family. Gregor first, not only because he was his second, but because Gregor could be trusted to be pragmatic. Alex would be worried. His parents, disappointed.

"I knew it," Gregor said when he'd told him. "I knew all that 'gift of the angels' talk from Ma was crap. The woman is a freak."

"Alya's no more a freak than me."

Gregor heard the threat in his voice and backed down. "Okay. Whatever. The challenge is on the table. How strong is she?"

Mikhail rolled a velvety green olive between his fingers. "She's ex'd six princes. That I know of. Halverson two nights ago."

"Halverson? What was he doing in LA?"

"I'll explain later. Point is she's amazingly strong. Fast too."

"But you've got height on her, and weight. Longer reach."

More to the point, this time he'd honestly be trying to kill her. She hadn't seen him determined yet, so she'd be overconfident. Still.

"I'm fasting. She's still eating. We have to do this before I get much weaker."

"Understood. I'll be there at sundown tomorrow."

"Good."

"What are the weapons?"

"She's choosing. Her second is named Dominick. I'll get you his number."

He heard Madelena's voice complaining in the background. Gregor muffled the phone, then said, "Maddy says she has to talk to you."

Mikhail rolled his eyes. He'd ask Gregor not to give the phone to her, but he knew Gregor couldn't refuse his wife anything.

Maddy said, "Talk to me."

"Talk?"

"Talk. It's when you open your mouth and let other people know what you're thinking. Tell me what's going on. Tell me how you feel."

Feel? At this point all that mattered were facts. “She’s fed from me, but isn’t bound. And she’s made it clear she doesn’t want anything to do with me. It’s hopeless. Only one of us can live now, and I’m going to kill her to get my life back.”

“Wait. Just wait. Something is wrong. That woman could not taste you and remain unmoved. I promise. Your blood ran through me when I was on that hospital table. I’ve never told you, but I do remember every moment of it. I know you inside and out, Mikhail Faustin. You’re a good man. She’d have to be crazy—”

“It meant nothing to her.”

“That’s complete bullshit. She’s your destined bride. Your blood should mean everything to her. *You* should mean everything to her. She’s lying to you, pretending she doesn’t like you when she really does.”

“This isn’t high school. I’ve just offered her a formal challenge. She’s accepted. That means she’d rather die than be with me. That’s not ambiguous.”

“Something’s up. Count on it.”

Mikhail grunted. She’d had her chance. He’d given her everything, up to and including his life, and it wasn’t enough for her and he was tired of playing her games.

Madelena’s voice tugged him back to the moment. “...sure everyone hates her, but everyone hated Catherine the Great and Cleopatra, too. You and your brothers are pretty open minded, but you know vamp society isn’t exactly progressive—”

“I have to go.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“No. Absolutely not. I forbid it.”

“Mikhail, I have to. You sound like you need a hug.”

Chapter Twelve

The feeder, Maya, stopped him before he got in the cab.

“Where are you going?”

“I left a note for your mistress.” It was inappropriate for him to stay in the house before the challenge—and intolerable.

“But she wants to talk to you. She sent me to find you.” The girl’s doe eyes were guileless, but he’d just seen her writhing under Alya’s mouth. Even though she was just a feeder, he hated her.

But she was brave, because he knew his dislike showed on his face, but she took his hand anyway and said, “Come. Please.”

He told the driver to wait and the girl led him through the house to a door padded in burgundy leather and studded with brass tacks. It led to the cellar. He knew that from studying the house plans. The cellar would be the most secure room in the house, light proof, defensible. Mikhail nodded to himself in approval. Considering the likelihood of retaliation for the slaughter of the Halversons by the Northern families, she would be smart to conduct her business in a safe place. But there was one problem—she wasn’t down there. He could tell.

“She’s not down there. She’s...” He spun on his heel like a compass needle and pointed to the northwest corner of the house. Upstairs.

“You’re right. She’s coming right down. She told me to bring you here.”

He consented to go down. They rounded the corner of the stairs and he walked into a torture chamber. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Maya said.

Mikhail scanned the sumptuously finished, low-lit room. He’d heard of such places, but had no experience of them. The room was not big, but it was packed with exotic objects. A tall, person-sized cage, a padded wall fitted with many hooks and rings, something that resembled a gymnast’s vault, and a towering ebony chest of drawers. That he went to first, perhaps because it reminded him of the little black chest that held her pearls. The upper part of the chest was topped with a cabinet, and in that were prosaic items like bottled water, lubrication, cleansing wipes, folded towels, rolls of tape and, most strangely, an enormous stock of cling wrap. He shut the door with a snap, feeling uncomfortably like a voyeur.

But that didn't stop him from going on to open the drawers. The first one was long and thin with delicate silver pulls. It held a row of paddles on a black velvet bed, one a heavy wooden rectangle, a second a soft oval of red patent leather, a third studded with steel knobs.

The next drawer held coiled lengths of rope, some rough, some slick. Among them sat his bride rope. At his touch, it stirred and crawled up his arm like a fond pet. If he died, at least this could be returned to the family. Maybe his brothers' sons would find better use for it.

The next drawer held a selection of flails.

Alya was a complicated woman.

Maya peeped around his shoulder. She reached over his arm and pulled a small buckskin flail out of the drawer. Sighing, she drew it across her throat. "This is my favorite."

"You let her beat you with it?"

"It's very nice, really."

"But why?"

"I don't know. It's like...have you ever had a fever so high you felt like you were floating?"

Mikhail had never been sick, not as humans became sick.

"It's hard to explain. I like the rush. I like letting her take care of me—"

"With a whip?"

She returned his gaze frankly, very bold for a feeder. "Yes. With a whip. Or a paddle. Or a length of rope. She takes me to new places. When it's over, I feel relaxed, clean inside." She tapped her temple. "It's like being rebooted."

"Absolute submission," he said.

"Yes, but by my rules."

"That's not true submission."

She lowered her eyes prettily, while simultaneously thrusting out her chest. Was she actually *flirting* with him? "Some people say the sub is the one with real power. Alya respects my limits, otherwise I wouldn't be here."

Alya was one of the strongest vamps in the world. This girl was a feeder. She had no power at all. If she thought she did, she was delusional. Among the *vampyr* power was not negotiated, it was quantifiable. The strongest always won.

He shut the drawer and walked away. "I don't play with my food."

But he was remembering a game. A game of wills, where Alya teased him mercilessly, brought him to the darkest place within and out again into the light. Afterward he'd felt reborn.

I am not one of her toys.

"Where is she?"

Maya flinched. "Please, sit." She gestured to a black chair with a high back and scrolling arms. Alya had a damn throne. He didn't even want to think about what went on around that throne.

"I'll go check."

Mikhail slumped in the throne, his chin on his fist, thinking about power.

Dominick met Alya on the stairs. "Faustin's in the cellar. He wants to talk to you there."

"What is he doing in my cellar?"

Dominick shrugged. "Damned if I know. It's private?"

Alya didn't want to be anywhere private with Mikhail. Ideally, she wouldn't set eyes on him until they fought. Fighting the bond took all her strength. If she allowed herself to think about him for even a second she'd go soft. She'd start to think about the way he'd caressed her ear, and how his voice resonated in her bones, and how every step he took was perfection and grace, and how, just possibly, she might be tempted to give up an empire just to curl up on the sofa with him again.

"Surely you don't think I should go down there?" She paused, and closed her eyes, fatigued. "Of course you do. You want me to change my mind."

Fortunately, Mikhail was furious. No matter how much she girded herself against his thoughts, his emotions reached her. She'd succeeded in pissing him off so thoroughly that he was looking forward to killing her.

That was good. She couldn't fight him if she knew he was pulling his punches.

"My job is to keep you safe. The code of honor protects you. Until the challenge, both of you have to mind your manners. There's no harm in hearing what the man has to say."

"There's nothing left to say."

Maya loped past and waved. "Hiya, guys!"

Dominick frowned at the girl and waited until she went out the front door before he continued. "By the rules of the challenge, you must give him a hearing if he asks it."

"Oh, hell. I'll give him a minute. But no more than a minute." She couldn't keep up her defenses for long. "And you're coming with me."

Dominick bowed. "Of course."

They went down the hall. She swung open the heavy, padded door and hesitated on the first step, Dom at her back. Though she couldn't see Mikhail, she could sense him. It was so eerily clear, the knowing of the bond. He was down there, he was agitated, in motion—pacing, she guessed.

You can do this. Just hear what he has to say and get out.

The door slammed behind her and the lock turned.

Chapter Thirteen

“Dominick!”

She threw her shoulder against the door, knowing it had a steel core and reinforced hinges. Outside, she heard the sound of a power drill, and an enormous amount of thumping. Dominick was securing it shut. It sounded like he had assistance.

The betrayal made her reel. Made her mind go terrifyingly blank.

Mikhail ran up the stairs. “He locked us in?”

Alya threw herself against the door again. Mikhail joined her. They hit it together and the wall shook, but the door held.

“What does he have out there?” Mikhail whispered, echoing her own thoughts. What would they meet if they broke through the door—a firing squad? The noises outside were confusing. She sniffed the air for hints, but a lot of people had been in and out in the last couple of nights. The inside of her nose was a little scorched, too. She shook her head. She had no idea.

Mikhail leaned close. Their foreheads nearly touched. Her skin prickled, waking to his nearness. “Show me your bolt hole.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your secret exit. What did you think I meant?”

Alya thought it best not to answer that question. “Oh. There isn’t one.”

Mikhail narrowed his eyes at her. “You spend all this time and money outfitting this place with...laundry lines and...and...rotisseries and iron maidens and whatever the hell you’ve got down here to play your twisted games, but you couldn’t even bother building an escape hatch? I’m glad I’m not marrying you, because you are an *idiot*.”

Alya jabbed her elbow into his stomach. He tumbled backward, but righted himself midair and landed on his feet at the bottom of the stairs. She marched down to join him.

“Who would he sell us out to?”

“I don’t know. It must have to do with Halverson. I can’t imagine. I trusted him implicitly.”

“Maya is in on it too. She brought me here.”

Even Maya, her best feeder. Trust no one. Ever. It was her constant truth, but it hurt. Her throat constricted. This was bullshit. It was all bullshit. Hiding her face from Mikhail, she bent to pull her knives from her boots. Mikhail jumped into a defensive posture. Smiling grimly, she tossed him one.

As he caught it, she realized he'd reclaimed his magic rope. It was the least of her problems now.

Hefting the knife he said, "So you trust me—or are we dueling now?"

"Hell if I know what's going to happen in the next few minutes. But I figure you should be armed."

He nodded his agreement and tucked the knife into his belt. Whatever happened next, she knew he'd fight well. Working together, the two of them could take any— *Don't go there, Alya.*

"I don't keep guns down here." She realized she was babbling to fill the silence. "But there are whips...and such."

"That's great. Maybe they'll send down tigers and ponies."

They turned in unison toward the stairs, toward the door. All was quiet. She said, "I suppose they could just leave us here to rot."

"It would be the safest course. Unless they're working for someone who wants our blood hot."

"I've known Dominick for seven years. For the last three he's been my first lieutenant. He's had so many chances to betray me. I just don't understand why he'd act now."

"Have you had any disagreements lately?"

Alya snorted. "Only about you. He doesn't approve of the challenge."

Mikhail sat on her spanking horse and rubbed his chin. "Put yourself in his place. If we duel, and I win, he loses everything. He'd have to go searching for work under some other prince, most likely starting at the bottom again. If you win the challenge, he's still unhappy. Why?"

"Because I've killed you? He has such a crush on you."

Alya suppressed a smile. This was all deadly serious, of course, but his face went blank, as if she'd just lapsed into Swahili. He didn't understand. Not that Dom was gay, but that anyone, male or female, would find him attractive. He'd been like that as a boy, and he hadn't changed at all.

He dismissed her comment with a wave of his hand. "That's absurd. I think he doesn't want to work for someone cold enough to kill her destined mate."

That hurt. More than it should, since it was true. "That's you talking, not Dominick."

"Dominick and I are honorable men."

"And I'm not. That's what you mean. Honorable!" Sputtering, she pointed her knife toward the locked door—and Dominick beyond it. "Honorable?" She pointed the knife at his nose. "Where is the honor in being cruel?"

He got off the horse, took a step toward her. "Oh? Have I hurt your feelings? I wasn't aware that you had any."

Self-righteous son of a bitch. "As if! As if you are the injured party here! You came to LA. You attacked me. Twice. You took my blood by force. Even so, I saved your life. Twice. And now you're standing here talking to me about feelings? I know all about your feelings. I know what you want, what you dream about. Me. Bending me to your every whim."

“Just how have you seen this?” His pale eyes fixed on her and he took a menacing step forward. She realized she’d just made a big mistake.

“You’ve been reading my thoughts. In depth. Are you bonded to me?”

Alya kept him back by knifepoint and tried to diffuse the truth. “I don’t need to be bonded to you to know how you think. You’re a prince. You’re all alike. *We’re* all alike. We take what we want. We don’t take anything by halves.”

“You’re afraid I’d devour you. I wouldn’t.”

“Of course you would. You couldn’t help it.” Even while he claimed he wasn’t a threat he was advancing on her, step by step.

“I don’t want your territory.”

“It would be yours anyway. The moment we married. And maybe you don’t want it, but the New York families will pressure you to take what is yours by right—”

“This isn’t about territory at all, is it?” He searched her face, intent as a dog on a trail.

Oh no, what is he seeing? She tried to close her mind to him, but it was getting harder all the time. They were too close together, their emotions too charged.

“There is only one good path out of this cellar. If we don’t find it, one of us will die. And I am certain I can kill you, Alya Adad.”

Alya sniffed.

In a low, strained voice, he added, “But I am also certain my life will not be worth living afterward.”

Her lungs seized up. She’d never heard anything so terrifying. He could *not* depend on her. She didn’t even know how to love. All she knew how to do was fuck and fight and scheme.

Reaching deep, she found the strength to hold on to her composure, to answer airily, “Nonsense. You’d be free. You could hunt again, go back to New York—”

“Don’t.”

“It’s true.”

“You insult us both. And you’re lying—either to me or to yourself.”

“Don’t lecture me about my own heart.”

Mikhail closed his eyes. She could hear his inner turmoil. He might be more confused than her. Which was saying something, because she was on the verge of a full blown panic attack. She couldn’t think in captivity, only beat her wings against the bars.

“Fine,” he said abruptly.

“What?”

“I won’t marry you. I don’t want you to bear my name. I don’t want your goods or territories. In fact, I don’t even want to live with you.”

Alya just stared at him, confused. He couldn't walk away now. Neither of them could. His words were measured, but desire radiated off him, hot as a furnace. He said, "I don't want anyone to know this ever happened."

"But it did." Saying it aloud made it real. Made it huge.

He agreed. She saw the enormity of it in his eyes. "It did."

They'd fed on each other. She lowered the knife. A long silence passed between them as she remembered drawing his body into hers and drinking his crystalline soul.

"All we have to do is complete the blood bond."

Alya choked. "That's all?"

"It doesn't make us Siamese twins. Once the bond is complete we can live separately. We'll be able to feed as usual, and we can learn to control our minds, to give each other privacy."

"You mean, make this a disease we can live with?" It was a dubious premise.

"I've been angry. But we both have responsibilities beyond ourselves. What will happen to your territories if I kill you tomorrow?"

"More to the point, what will happen to yours if I kill you?"

"Let's make a deal. Neither of us takes Minnesota."

"That's fine. I never wanted Minnesota. I wanted New York."

One corner of his mouth quirked up, not so much amused as rueful. "You already have New York."

Alya's stomach flip-flopped. Who was this man? Why was being near him so sweet and bitter and scary?

"You've had me for a long time." He stated it as a plain fact. "Give me your hand."

Alya locked her hands behind her back. "No. You have to fight me tomorrow. For your own good. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise what?"

She drew a shaky breath. "Otherwise you'll end up marrying me."

He threw his arms wide and shouted, "I came here to marry you!"

"I can't." She retreated, her stomach threatening to heave. Couldn't he see what a bad idea it was for both of them?

"I don't want to be your cage. I want to be your shield. Give me your hand and let me prove it."

Blazing with righteous sincerity, he thrust out his hand. She glanced at the door, hoping for an attack. Where were the bad guys when you needed them?

He didn't withdraw his hand, and she knew she couldn't hide from him anymore—not when he lived in her heart and swam in her veins.

She put her palm across his. Their fingers intertwined. A faint electrical charge passed between them. The rope came to life. It slithered over their joined hands and headed up her arm.

Terrified of being bound, she tried to jerk away. When he wouldn't let go, she aimed a kick at his kneecap.

"Easy!" He dodged her foot. "It's for you. I'm giving it to you."

"Why?"

"Because a *knyaz* makes his own rules."

The rope had reached her shoulder. She wanted to rip it off. Mikhail wasn't making sense. She needed to get out of there. "I don't understand."

For the first time in this conversation he faltered. For a moment he seemed unable to speak at all. "We'll live apart, but I imagine sometimes we'll...visit."

His mind pressed against hers, flashing images of their skin sliding together, their mouths joined, his cock hot against her thigh.

Alya's mouth went dry. "Visit? Under...uh...what terms?"

His expression flat, he began to unbutton his shirt. "I'm willing to meet your terms of engagement."

Alya had never been a nervous virgin, but suddenly she felt like one. Pretending to be uninterested in his state of dress, she said, "Are you?" She gestured at the equipment surrounding them. "Do you really understand how I prefer to engage?"

Spreading open his shirt, he shrugged it off first one shoulder then the other. The rough A on his chest stretched and contracted, riding on the muscles that girded his lean torso.

"Didn't I give you the rope?"

Holy hell. "Are you saying you want me to use it on you? That you want me to tie you up?"

Instead of answering, he sat on the spanking horse again and began to pull off his shoes.

"What are you thinking? Someone might come through that door any second."

"No one is coming."

"Dominick is—"

"Matchmaking. It's the only logical conclusion. He wants us to work it out."

"What if you're wrong?"

Mikhail leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his bare, high-arched feet vulnerable and tempting beneath the hems of his tailored trousers. "You trusted him implicitly, you said. If you can't trust your own judgment, what can you trust?"

Nothing. That was the problem.

"Trust me. I'm sure of it. We're safe." His focus shifted to the rope on her arm. He eyed it like an adversary.

"I'm not going to do it." Even as she said it, the rope slid across her shoulders and down her opposite arm, delighted with the idea, apparently. Irritated, she shook her arm and it calmed down. "This isn't your scene. I'm not going to blue ball you into doing something absolutely contrary to your nature."

“I want the rope.” He spoke to the ground.

She squatted next to him, tried to see his face behind his hair. “That’s impossible.”

He jerked his head up, meeting her eyes for a brief, intolerably intense instant. “This is about the bedroom. Only the bedroom. And I said I was making my own rules.”

Confused, she shook her head. “Just because I have to...because I can’t...?”

“Not just that.” He clasped his hands together and brought them up to his bruised face, like he was praying. “Not just that. When you took me in the living room. *Took me*. I’d never felt so free. And on the roof. Bound, with you on top. I swear to God I knew I was dying but I’ve never been so happy.” He made his hands into fists and brought them to his knees.

“Mikhail.” Her hand hovered over his shoulder. *God help me if I touch him I’ll never let go.*

“I’m not ashamed.” The words were a lash, his posture anything but submissive. “This is our path. I understand that now.”

Of course she remembered how completely he’d let go when she’d blown him, and how much she’d enjoyed taking him over the edge. There’d been little time for her to think about it, but she’d categorized that encounter as just another kind of fight in a night of battles. And the roof—he’d actually *enjoyed* it?

“I’m not sophisticated. Not this way. I don’t understand this world, this scene, whatever you call it. I don’t know what you do down here. I don’t know what this makes me or you. The outside world might think me weak—”

No one would ever mistake him for weak.

“Test me.”

And he said it with such vehemence that a shiver passed through her. A prince yielding to her. Mikhail yielding to her. All that strength, that enormous will. The possibilities...

She inclined her head, accepting the challenge.

Chapter Fourteen

It was like walking into a dream, but she assumed her role effortlessly, natural dominance wrapping her like a cloak. She stepped closer, so that the toes of her boots threatened his bare feet, sending a little thrill of erotic pleasure through her.

“You say you wish to be tested, Mikhail. How? By pain?”

“Pain? Pain is my friend. It’s pleasure I don’t know anything about.”

She folded one of his hands between hers. His skin was freezing. “You truly desire this?”

“I want it. Yes.” His eyes glittered in the low lights. “I feel like I did when I met my first formal challenge.”

Alya knew that feeling well, how the adrenaline that made the heart pound, the nausea that rose but was soon forgotten, the narrowing of her focus until she could see nothing but her enemy.

He said, “I’m ready.”

Mikhail Faustin was a submissive.

Her whole world had just turned upside down and inside out.

A little dazed, she went to her treasure chest, thinking about how best to challenge him. This first encounter should be more about her learning about his mind rather than him being impressed with her equipment. If he was faking it, or simply confused, she wanted to know that, too.

She bypassed all the whips and paddles, clamps and plugs, choosing only two coils of rope, one white and thick, the other black and slender like the bride rope, and, after some consideration, a black leather half mask, the sort a bandit would wear. But instead of having eyeholes, the leather was molded into the shape of closed eyelids. It was a blindfold.

He stood where she left him, rapt, taking in the rope and mask. She walked slowly, making each movement deliberate and provocative. By the time she stopped in front of him, the air between them buzzed.

She showed him the mask. His jaw clenched in response. Blindfolding threatened him, definitely.

Laying it aside, she uncoiled a length of the white rope. “Take off your trousers.”

He obeyed and stood naked in front of her, semi-erect. She looped the rope around his neck.

“What is that for?”

She put her fingers to his lips. “No questions. You may only speak when spoken to, unless you’re telling me to stop. I have no safe words. If you tell me to stop, it’s over.”

As she spoke, his gaze flicked rapidly from side to side, reading her, memorizing the details of the room, perhaps planning an escape. He'd gone hyper-vigilant. She could almost taste the adrenaline coursing through him. As for his thoughts, he had a tight seal on those—for the moment.

Resisting the impulse to kiss his worries away, she tucked his hair behind his ears and tied the mask at the back of his head. The cord cut into his heavy, silver blond hair. The black leather, buttery as it was, appeared coarse against his alabaster skin. Beneath the mask's tranquil sleeping eyelids, Mikhail's lips tightened into a thin line.

Mikhail clamped down on the urge to rip off the mask. He often dreamed of going blind in the middle of a fight, at the worst possible moment. This was no time to be blind, either.

"You're inconveniently tall." Her breath stirred the hair at his nape and warmed his skin. She was the tallest woman he knew. The only one he'd not have to stoop to kiss.

Kiss. His lips parted at the thought, his chest swelled. She heard his wish. He heard the echoing desire in her. Using this sonar, he realized they could please one another perfectly. But she didn't listen to it. She was still afraid to listen.

He was following the spider web path. It led to the truth between them, but it was a hard path to follow. As in his nightmares, he had to fumble along in the dark.

Letting her blindfold him was part of it.

Accepting this truth about himself was part of it.

The hope that lit her face when he made his confession was part of it.

This dungeon version of Alya surprised him. She wasn't nervous or sarcastic anymore. Instead, she radiated serenity. He'd expected whips and chains, but her hands were gentle and her throaty voice buoyed him in the darkness.

She wrapped his torso in heavy rope. He tried to picture what she was doing. She asked him to raise and lower his arms, tied knots here and there, passed the rope between his legs and over his shoulders. Every so often she slipped her fingers beneath the rope and let them rest against his skin.

He liked the rope's soft texture, the pressure of it as it tightened. Most of all, he enjoyed Alya's light, deft touch. His breathing slowed. He forgot to be vigilant.

"Lovely," she breathed, passing her hands over his shoulders, and then down, outlining her work with her hands. Only his torso was wrapped. She tugged on points across his chest and back, testing their strength. It was a body harness of some sort.

"Put your hands behind your back." She ran her hands down his arms, straightening them. "Roll your shoulders back. Open your chest. Good."

Something warm slithered around his elbows.

"It's your friend, the bride rope," she said. "You know you can't escape this one."

She crisscrossed the rope up and down his arms, pulling his shoulders back until his shoulder blades met. The binding extended from his elbows to his wrists. Again, his body welcomed the process and his mind drifted. It wasn't comfortable, but it was...comforting. It reminded him of an embrace.

"Mikhail? Are you there?"

Had he been sleeping? He fished around for words, trying to remember how to speak. "I'm here."

She pushed his chin back with one finger. His head lolled back. Heavy. She drew her hand down his exposed throat. "I like this side of you."

Next she bound his ankles together.

When she was done, she led him by the harness to a new position about five paces distant, but it took a while to get there, because he was hobbled. On the way he realized he didn't have the faintest idea where he was in the room. Ordinarily he could orient himself anywhere, but he'd lost all his bearings.

At their destination, she said, "Kneel."

With his ankles and arms bound, he could not kneel without falling, but he did as she asked, without hesitation. He'd gone too far to turn back. He folded his knees.

Her strong hand caught hold of his harness and lowered him to the ground.

He was beginning to understand this game. She was putting herself on the line, too. Earning his trust. Tilting his head forward, he rested his brow against her belly. After a moment, her hands settled lightly on his head.

At that contact, a brilliant flash of emotion escaped from her, so strong, and so fast, he couldn't name it. He pricked his ears and listened to her fight to bring her breath under control.

"Alya?" He wasn't supposed to talk, he knew, but he was worried about her. She ignored his silent query and began to connect the ropes dangling from his wrists to the ones binding his feet.

When she finished, he heard the squeal of a pulley. She snapped something cold to the web of rope covering his sternum. Another screech came from above, and she clipped a second something to his harness at the level of his navel.

What was she going to do? She wasn't going to hang him, was she?

"Mikhail. Breathe." Her palm caressed his cheek. "Everything to this point has been prep. This is the test you asked for. Are you ready?"

He nodded.

"Don't fight it."

That little piece of advice didn't make him any less nervous.

The pulleys clicked and strained, and he lifted off the ground, his body rotating until he hung from those two points on his chest. Hung like a piece of meat. Helpless to defend himself.

"Do you trust me?" she'd asked him three nights ago.

And he'd answered, "Do you think I'm crazy?"

He'd gone crazy.

Alya walked around him, testing connections. Everything hurt. Nothing she did helped. This wasn't good. This was the worst idea he'd ever had. She tightened the rope connecting his hands and feet until they crossed, stretching muscles not accustomed to being stretched.

I'll snap the ropes around my feet. Maybe I can find the floor. I don't need my hands...

"Take a deep breath." Her hand quieted his heaving chest. Another hand cupped the back of his skull, taking the weight off his neck. "Let your head fall back."

An old memory came to him. His father supporting him in the water, showing him how to float. *Trust the water, Mikhail.*

He filled his lungs.

"Release your shoulders. Relax your hips."

Trust the water.

He let go, and nothing hurt. He let go, and he was floating.

Alya dropped to her knees, torn between weeping and praying. Bless Natalia Faustin's dancer's genes. She'd never seen anything so beautiful as Mikhail Faustin bound.

Mikhail's long, lean body, as flexible as it was powerful, hung from the ceiling, bent into a circle. His powerful neck arched back, utterly exposed. On the opposite side of the circle, his erection was rising in perfect counterpoint. Her intricate rope work enhanced and celebrated his every line.

For a moment, when he'd first gone up, she feared she'd lose him, but he'd found his equilibrium. He was a natural.

She didn't know how long she stared at him, open mouthed, before she remembered what she was doing. He couldn't stay up there for long.

On hands and knees she crawled over to his head. Though his every line spoke of peace, and she heard no echoes of panic, she checked his pulse. Slow and deep.

To remind him where he was, she circled her fingers behind his ears. A few tears escaped the mask to streak his brow. No doubt he was feeling much, however quietly.

"You're okay?"

"Mmm." His lips curved into a smile of heartbreaking beauty. She leaned in and gave him an upside down kiss, relishing the lazy sweetness of his mouth, but not allowing herself to linger there too long.

Her lips traveled up his neck. The blood beat strong under his taut skin. It reminded her that she was hungry. She let him feel that hunger. His languor vanished.

Smiling, she drew a nail along his neck, from the hollow of his jaw to the hollow of his throat, leaving a thin line of blood in her wake. He was officially on notice.

She'd woven the harness so that two rope-work diamonds isolated and outlined his pecs. Since that time, his small, flat nipples had flushed from pale pink to deep cherry red. Beautifully tempting. Securing his torso with her hands, she bit into the firm muscle above his left nipple

Like a designer drug, his blood passed directly into her bloodstream. Her eyes flew wide and she struggled to draw breath. It seemed impossible, but his blood had only grown more powerful since her first feeding.

A thin red rivulet ran down his chest and soaked into the rope. She wiped up the trail with her fingertip and licked it clean. *Mmm. Mikhail.* She leaned over and opened up the other side of his breast.

This was how she treated feeders—taking them one sip at a time, opening them over and over again until they begged for mercy or passed out. She thought being treated so might bring out his true dominant colors, but on the first bite, he'd only moaned softly. On the second, he actually relaxed into the bite. She knew if she took off his blindfold, she'd find his eyes unfocused and heavy lidded beneath.

It's really true.

She wanted to remain suspicious, but the joy filling her could not be repressed. It made her giddy, buoyant, and utterly unable to concentrate. He was her mate. As no one else in the world could be. She covered his beautiful body with kisses, as she'd wanted to for so long.

Sensing the change in her, he stirred. His body responded to every stroke of her hand, twisting and turning in the ropes. She traced his ass and cupped his heavy balls. She nipped down the center line of his belly and lapped blood from his navel.

"You won't come until I tell you. Swear it."

"Swear it," he said, his voice low and slurred.

The smell of his arousal, close up, drove her wild. Her pulse throbbed between her legs. She was wet. She imagined grinding herself against his mouth, but it wasn't enough. She wanted to ravish him, body and blood.

His cock stood fully erect, and as vulnerable as his neck. The broad head was the same rosy red as his nipples, and the veins purest purple. The rest of it was as alabaster as the rest of him. What little body hair he had was the color of burnished silver.

She cupped his shaft in her hands. He gasped, his chest swelling, his thighs tensing. She wrapped her tongue around the head, savoring his salt. His pulse beat powerfully under her fingers, like an invitation. She honed in on the dorsal vein with her tongue, and opened it at the base of his cock.

He cried out and arched high in the ropes, but he didn't come. His hot blood sprayed against the back of her throat. The storm inside him swept through her. His blood begged to be consumed, at any cost. It took all her strength to back off and close the wound.

Legs wobbling, she made her way to his head. Mikhail was sucking in huge, heaving breaths.

"First I'm going to drink my fill of you," she whispered in his ear. "Then I'm going to fuck you."

His lips parted in anticipation.

Her incisors sharpened and she swooped down on his throat. She knew he couldn't afford it, but her every instinct drove her to tap straight into his heart's blood.

She mainlined his soul. The cellar, the ropes, all of it faded away. In her mind's eye they embraced on a high promontory. The world spun around them in fiery colors. He kissed her throat, her mouth, her ear. Her hands coursed over the hard muscles of his back, down his strong flanks. His arms folded around her. Together they were safe. Together they were whole.

Her barriers began to give way.

All that mattered was his need. Her need. Their staggering need to be one.

"Hands."

"Hands!"

"HANDS!"

Waking into the dungeon, she raised her head, licking her lips clean. Mikhail thrashed against his bonds like a shark in a net.

She understood. He had to hold her. He'd die if he couldn't. And she'd die if he didn't.

The pulleys tore from the ceiling just as she willed the bride rope to release his arms.

Mikhail spun in midair and landed on all fours, blind, rope spilling all around him. The next moment she was in his arms. Their mouths met, their kiss deep and searching.

He threw off his mask. She unclipped the lines from his chest. The harness would have to wait. They rolled across the floor.

Her shirt was in the way. Mikhail ripped it off. *Yes.*

He lapped her aching nipples through the lace of her bra. The lace abraded her tongue. No, his tongue. She smelled her wet skin through his nose. They were trembling, both of them, fevered.

Rolling. No one on top. One boot off, then the next. Trousers. Gone. Mikhail sliding down between her legs. *Yes.* His broad, strong tongue parting her flesh. She was flooding wet, crying out each time he stroked her.

He loved her sweet salt. She tasted herself. *Yes, like that, that. Just like that.* Knyaz tongue, devouring her.

His lips closed on her clit. His fingers thrust into her, curving them, teasing her deep nerves until her back bent with the sweetest agony and her heels ground into his back. *Mikhail!*

She came again, clutching his fingers once, twice, three times while a new surge of wetness spilled over his tongue. He lapped it up, knowing exactly what she wanted, how she wanted it, his brain hardwired to hers.

Her ecstasy coursed through him, driving him up her belly, which he covered with kisses, her breasts, which he adored, her golden breasts, the peaks taut and straining in his mouth. He sucked them deep, used the edges of his teeth to make her moan. Her claws raked his back. Her mouth, hot on his, could never be satisfied.

Tear me to pieces.

He cradled her face, nipped her swollen lips, sucked her tongue, sent a hand down to caress the long lines of her back.

She hooked her leg over his hip and guided his cock to her center. He pressed inside, her hot, slick walls embracing him. Again her sensations blurred with his. He knew what it was like to be filled, stretched. They clung to each other, becoming one exquisitely joined body. *Tighter, closer, there, don't move, never leave...*

Alyauskha.

He fingered her face, tracing her high-bridged nose, the arches of her brows. How wonderful to see her soft and open again, just like she'd been so long ago, under the willows.

They didn't have to move much, not when each touch, each passing sensation reverberated between them. A hitch of the hips, a hand passing over a hip, another slow kiss. No need for more.

But she was so slick, so inviting, after a while he had to move, to strain deeper, to call up those fluttering responses inside her.

She rolled on top of him. Braced her hands on either side of his head and began to fuck him in a slow slide. He ran his hands around her waist, up her spine. She leaned over to kiss him, her black hair a curtain.

He fingered her clit. At his touch, she threw back her head and gave a long, throaty cry. She was so close—but she pushed his hand away.

"Up," she said, hauling him up by his harness. As he sat up, she wrapped her legs around his hips. He leaned back, finding the perfect angle between them. But her face had turned troubled, and she studied him warily.

Sending out questioning thoughts, he stroked her cheek with his knuckles.

"I'm afraid to let you bite me."

It cost her to make that confession. He knew how it mortified her to admit any fear at all. All he could do was pull her close. She rested her cheek on his shoulder while he stroked her hair. Their hearts slammed together. His cock pulsed inside her.

They were linked in so many ways, but he couldn't say exactly what about biting frightened her. When he'd taken her blood at her house, he'd raped her. There was no sugar coating it. But he didn't think that was the problem now.

This incomplete bond was a curious thing. He knew exactly how she needed to be touched, but had no idea what to say to her. Again he was on that very slender path. He could lose it so easily.

Maybe silence was what she needed, because he hesitated for so long she spoke aloud, her voice muffled and heartbreakingly young. “You’re not going to like what you see.”

“I’ve already tasted you.”

“Not deep. You haven’t seen much at all. You’re going to see everything.”

“I don’t scare easily.” He drew her hair over to one shoulder, baring the side of her neck. Her hands tightened on him. Nuzzling her ear, he murmured, “I promise.”

She made a small, despairing noise—but it wasn’t a no. If she meant no, she’d knee him in the balls. Instead, she hooked her hands through the ropes on his chest and braced herself.

This time he would take her blood the right way. He found her clit again. She questioned him with her eyes. With his free hand he caressed her throat until the questions faded away and her neck swayed under his touch. Her sweet spot was exactly one inch beneath her earlobe.

“I’m not biting.” He sent the assurance as he bent to that vulnerable spot, first tasting it with the tip of his tongue, then lavishing it with tiny nips and sucking kisses. A long shiver passed down her spine. At the same time he increased pressure on her clit, making her pant.

Her pulse beat faster and faster, the sound of it dragging him into insanity. He left the sweet spot, plundered her whole throat.

“Mikhail! What are you—? Oh!”

As she peaked, he sank his nails into her lush ass and held her tight against him, stilling her. She stiffened, breathless, suspended on the brink. He took her throat in his teeth.

“Don’t hate me—”

He broke her flesh and she came, jerking helplessly in his arms, her consciousness shattered, along with all her defenses.

Like a city after a long siege, she opened her gates. He walked in, unarmed.

And inside, all he found was the heart which he already knew as well as his own. There was nothing there that could not be forgiven.

“Don’t you know you’re the other half of my soul?”

“Filthy as I am?”

“Perfect, as you are.” Brave, fierce, strong, resilient, clever, passionate and tender. Yes, tender, beneath it all.

The stories of her life passed into him as he drank, one glimmering image after another. They rushed to fill up all those vacant spaces he’d held open for her all these years.

When he came back to himself, he found they’d fallen on their sides. For the first time in his life, he felt replete.

Alya lay limp in his arms, flushed and tousled and oddly shy. She touched his cheek.

“Mikhail?”

“Hmm?”

The corners of her mouth curled into a wicked smile as she slid off of him. “You can come now.”

He’d forgotten his body entirely. “I don’t—” he began, but didn’t finish, because the orgasm was there, waiting, and at her command it hit him like a knockout punch.

“How do you feel?”

He’d stopped twitching, but his eyes still hadn’t focused.

“Deboned,” he croaked.

“And you like it?”

He rolled his head her direction and met her eyes. A slow, satisfied, unspeakably sexy smile spread across his face. He was happy. She wanted to keep him that way. She’d spend all her spare hours contriving ways to make him give her that smile.

He drew her to his chest. She felt safe there, pressed against his heart.

“I underestimated you. I’ve been such a bitch.”

When he didn’t rush to reassure her otherwise, she laughed. Mikhail was no flatterer.

“And what was I? Some asshole threatening you with a rope?” he said. “I’m no good at courting.”

“Courtship? Is that what this has been?”

“Isn’t this how other people do it?”

He was perfectly deadpan. The man did indeed have a sense of humor. Propping herself up on her elbow, she smoothed his hair out of his eyes. “This is for real, isn’t it?”

He caught her hand and kissed the palm. The warm lights in his eyes said *believe*.

“And the terms you named—you can live with them?”

“I wouldn’t have named them otherwise.”

“But a *knyaz* is expected to take a wife. To produce heirs.”

“I don’t need that to be happy.” Lazy, he circled her breast with his forefinger. “All I want is you. Exactly as we are now.”

“But your family will demand that we marry—”

“They will be told what they need to know. They’ll support whatever I choose.”

“Easy to say, but I remember your mother.”

Mikhail laughed aloud. He sounded like a consumptive seal. He needed more practice. She added another item to her to-do list.

“What are you going to do with Dominick?” he asked.

“Skin him alive.”

Mikhail grunted his disapproval. There was a definite man crush going on between those two.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she admitted. “Depends on why he did it, and I can’t know that until we get out of here. Do you want to try the door again?”

“I don’t want to go anywhere.”

Alya stretched, a long, luxurious flexing of the spine, trying to remember the last time she felt so good. “We do have a blood bond to complete, I suppose.”

“And I have questions.” He rolled over and picked up the discarded mask. “Questions about these things of yours. How you use them.”

Even after seeing him in bondage, she couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe that he was still curious, that he might want to do it again. “What would you like to know?”

“Well, first I’d like to know why you have fifteen boxes of cling wrap in your cabinet.”

“Oh, my sweet innocent.”

Chapter Fifteen

Dominick planted himself in front of the door. “They’re not to be disturbed.”

“Goddamn you. You’ve sealed my brother in the cellar—”

“Along with my prince.”

“Exactly. You’ve entombed my brother in a cellar with the Wicked Witch of the West.”

“Gregor.” Maddy put her hand on his arm. “Hear him out.”

“They’ve not murdered each other, that I’m sure. I’ve heard them laughing.”

Gregor said, “Mikhail never laughs.”

Maddy liked Alya’s handsome lieutenant, and she didn’t think he was lying. If Alya Adad employed men like him, she couldn’t be all that bad. But Gregor wasn’t patient at the best of times, and all the way to Los Angeles he’d been on edge, worried for Mikhail and for the whole family. Something had to give, and soon.

Gregor picked up the screw gun. “I’m not waiting. I don’t trust this fucked-up matchmaking scheme of yours.”

Dominick stepped forward, fist raised.

Maddy slid between them. “Dominick, you’ll agree they have to come out sooner or later, right? Why not now?”

“If they’re happy just now, I want them to stay that way. Let it sink in to their thick heads that they’re good for one another.”

Maddy said, “You think they’re a good match?”

“Mrs. Faustin, I know my prince.”

She squeezed his arm and they shared a smile of understanding. The tension dissolved. “That’s wonderful, but they can’t live in the basement for the rest of their lives. Let Gregor unscrew the door. Mikhail will want to see us, I’m sure of it.”

Dominick agreed reluctantly. It took a long time to take the bracings off the door. Considering all the racket, she was surprised—and a little worried—that Mikhail didn’t come up and speak to them through the door.

Gregor ventured down first, moving cautiously, keeping her behind him with one hand. Dominick brought up the rear. She supposed he had more to fear than either of them. The narrow stairway emptied

into a dim room, very leathery and red, like the door above. The first thing Maddy saw was a scary looking cage. The next, a set of broken chains dangling from the cracked ceiling.

“Sweet fucking Jesus,” Gregor whispered.

She followed his gaze to the floor and saw Mikhail and a tawny goddess lying together in gorgeous tangle of flesh. Not dead, but deeply, profoundly asleep.

They slept in a nest of what looked like yards and yards of shredded plastic wrap. Around them lay a debris field made up of every sex toy Maddy could name, and others she’d never even imagined.

Mikhail was smiling.

Epilogue

Six months later, Central Park

“That one.” Mikhail pointed to a man walking alone fifty yards away. Alya leaned forward to see him better. The tree branch they shared creaked in protest.

“Too skinny.”

“Picky.”

“I’m famished. I want someone I can really tap.”

He lifted his nose, testing the air. “Snow’s coming.”

Alya caught the scent. “You’re right.”

A woman with a stroller walked beneath them, followed by an old lady with a tiny dog. The dog glanced up at them, tucked its tail between its legs and scooted away. Alya kicked her heels in the air, admiring her cashmere tights and new half boots. She’d missed shopping in New York. Beside her, Mikhail scanned the darkness, intent on hunting. She didn’t want to go home the next night. Though she never would have believed it a year ago, she liked sharing a bed with Mikhail Faustin and waking up together at sunset. When he was with her, she didn’t need pills to sleep and never had nightmares. As he’d promised, he was her shield.

“Dominick says I’m intolerable when I come back from visiting you.”

Mikhail glanced her way with a half smile, but said nothing.

“And I smoke way too much.”

That got his attention. “Since when do you smoke?”

“When I’m alone. I have to do something with my mouth.” She batted her eyes at him. He was learning to laugh, but he didn’t laugh now. Instead his gaze flicked across her lips.

Alya’s breath caught in her throat. Living separately was almost worth this love junkie’s paradise of intense good-byes and sweat-soaked reunions.

“And Lulu. She’s a wreck without you.” *Invoking the cat. How pathetic can you be?*

“I suppose this means I should visit more often.” He dropped his voice to that suggestive rumble that gave her goose bumps. He knew it did too, the bastard. “That way I can save you from yourself, Dominick from you, and the cat from despair.”

“I have a better idea.” For a moment she lost courage, realizing how much she needed him to agree. Even now, it was hard to admit how much she needed him. She made sure her tone was breezy and her

mind tight. "I've been thinking maybe we should go bi-coastal. Alternate households by quarters. Say, fall in the city, winter in LA..."

Mikhail frowned. She wilted inside. She knew he'd hate this idea. He said, "We'd each leave our territories unattended for half the year?"

"That's what the Internet and airplanes are for."

"Dominick could hold things on your end. Maybe. But Gregor isn't ready, and he's so busy with his clubs."

"Spoken like a true big brother. Gregor's all grown up. He could do it if you gave him a chance. You're a phone call away, and he'd have your dad to advise him and Alex to back him up."

"I don't know. I don't know if I could ever rest easy." He stared off into space, considering, his face troubled. Suddenly, he tensed and lifted his hand. He'd caught scent of something interesting. A moment later, a hairy giant of a man strode out of a stand of trees. He was a teamster, or a lumberjack, or maybe a sasquatch. Something huge. Three hundred pounds of good eating.

"Go get him."

Alya wanted an answer to her question first.

"I'll think about it." Mikhail never did anything without thinking. A lot.

"I'm serious." She leaned over to kiss him. At first he just accepted the kiss, his lips molding under hers. Neither of them made any move to part. The kiss continued, his mouth hardened and he grabbed the back of her neck. His strong fingers were encased in a fine leather glove. The world tilted at a crazy angle, and she started sliding down, down, down...

Back down the rabbit hole.

Eavesdropping, he said, "*I like getting lost.*"

Alya smiled into the kiss then nibbled his lower lip, but he found his self-control and pushed away.

"Go. You might lose him."

When she hesitated, he pressed his lips to the back of her hand. It was the gentlest of dismissals. "Go."

Too hungry to argue anymore, she dropped noiselessly from the tree and took off after her prey. In the dark, and at the speed she moved, humans would perceive her as nothing more than a shadow, a trick of the eye.

She tailed him until he passed a promising clump of shrubbery. The classy thing to do would be to talk to him, fascinate him into joining her in the shrubbery, but she didn't feel like being gentle. Instead she ran straight at him and tackled him, driving him straight through the shrubs to the hidden ground behind. He fought for half a second, until she captured his will. Hidden by the darkness, she drank deep, rubbing herself against his knee. She was so accustomed to combining sex and feeding, she could hardly separate the two. Mikhail might be a pristine hunter, but feeding turned her on like a light bulb.

Still, she didn't violate the man too much, just indulged in a little surreptitious frottage. Nothing worse than he might get on a crowded subway. When she was done, she carried him to a park bench to recover.

Despite his general disdain for humans, Mikhail protected the humans in his territory more vigorously than any prince she'd ever met. He enforced strict rules of vampire/human conduct, and driving a victim through a shrubbery and draining him into unconsciousness while dry humping him broke a few of those rules. Feeling guilty, she lingered in the shadows to make sure her lumberjack was okay. He'd remember nothing of the attack, only wonder how he'd gotten dirt and twigs all over his clothes. But if she'd taken too much blood, he might not wake up anytime soon, and end up mugged or arrested, or both. That wouldn't be very nice.

Bored—and horny—she reached for Mikhail's mind and learned he was just finishing up a light feed nearby.

Her victim slouched to one side. She righted him, holding him in place for a few seconds to make sure he balanced. When she let him go, his head fell backward and he began to snore.

Shit. She tapped his cheek to see if she could wake him. "Hello? Excuse me?"

"Did you enjoy taking him down rough?"

Mikhail. Nearby. She swung around, searching for him. His position was shifting, his mind closed. He was fucking with her. Stalking her. She spun, spotting him out of the corner of her eye, then losing him again. Gooseflesh broke out on her outstretched arms. Her new boots cleared a circle in the fallen leaves as she turned around and around, trying to pinpoint his location.

"You know I'm not housebroken."

"How would you like to be taken down like that?"

The threat made her pulse jump. "I'd like to see you try, pretty boy."

"Christmas."

"What?" The question lingered around her lips as a puff of white fog. The temperature was dropping fast. She whipped her head around, certain he was closing.

"We'll split the year, just as you say, but I want to spend Christmas here."

Alya blinked in surprise. *"Of cour—"*

He tackled her from the side. They ploughed through the shrub border and hit the ground. She landed fighting, but he had an advantage—a plan. In a few moves he had her pinned down, her arm twisted behind her back.

He flipped her skirt up and circled his hand over her ass. "You know my word is law in this park. You have to be punished for breaking the rules."

"You're going to pay for this," she said, spitting out a dry leaf.

“How?” He slipped his hand between her legs, his harsh breaths rasping in her ear. She knew she was burning hot. That she’d been wet for him since that kiss in the tree. “Tell me how I’m going to pay for this.”

She knew he was serious. He wanted to know what she’d do to him later. It would make him all the wilder now. She named her best weapon, the toy that fascinated and appalled him most. “You’ve yet to meet my strap-on. You know I’ll...” His hand cupped her. All her thoughts scattered. She couldn’t threaten anymore. Only want. “I’ll...I’ll...”

“Tell me.” With one tug he ripped the crotch out of her brand new tights.

“Hey, I just—”

He crammed something in her mouth. Leather. One of his gloves. Her first response was to stiffen with anger, but he shoved her thong aside and pressed his fingers inside her. Her deep muscles throbbed around his fingers, welcoming the invasion. She bit down on the glove, shuddering, already perilously close to orgasm.

“Why are you so wet? Were you thinking about fucking that human?” Mikhail slid his fingers back and forth, stroking her inner walls. “Did you rub against him? Did you put your hand on his cock?”

Mikhail had never been so aggressive with her. It had been a very long time since she’d let anyone treat her like this. But she realized she trusted him enough to let him play rough. The realization washed over her, bringing with it a profound sense of relief.

I’m safe.

He withdrew his fingers, leaving her empty and aching. Still he kept her arm pinned with one hand. She could hear his harsh breathing, feel the hot, insistent weight of his cock pressing between her cheeks. “This,” he snapped. “Is this what you need?”

She moaned into the glove. “Mm hm.”

“Show me.”

She tilted her hips up and spread her legs wide, trembling to have him inside.

“Tell me!”

“Yes. Please.”

And he was parting her flesh, pressing inside, stretching, filling, possessing her entirely—but oh so slowly. When she tried to push against him and take him faster, he twisted her arm. He wanted her to be passive.

She recognized in him the brutal satisfaction of taking what you want, exactly how you want, and didn’t begrudge him it. Instead, she found the strength to surrender, and when she did, she began to climax. The orgasm lengthened and deepened with each inch of his penetration. It was all she could do to keep quiet. She knew she was losing control, and she couldn’t stop it. Her eyes rolled up in her head and she began to convulse under him.

Grunting, he grabbed hold of her hips, hoisted them high and thrust into her over and over, while she hung limp in his hands, destroyed by pleasure.

“*Alya!*” He thrust once more and held. She shuddered in response. One last echoing spasm passed through them—and they spun to earth in freefall.

Mikhail raised his face from Alya’s shoulder. Snowflakes spangled her black hair. Her mind was quiet. Unreadable.

“Love?” he turned her over. Her eyes were unfocused. Dirt smeared her face. The wadded up glove distorted her beautiful mouth. He plucked it out and threw it aside, then drew her to his chest.

With anxious hands he swept her hair out of her face. “Where have you gone?”

Her eyelids fluttered. “Here.”

“You’re okay?”

“Mmm,” she said, burying her face against his shoulder, radiating quiet affection, her fingers, as always, seeking out the A. He stroked her head, relieved.

At first, he’d been closely attuned to her, and he’d known how much the danger of his pursuit had excited her. But once he had her pinned down, he’d tuned her out and claimed her like a *knyaz*. Like all those princes had claimed her when she was young and on the run from her father.

He’d never done that before. Usually he let her lead in the bedroom, and given that freedom, she tested the limits of his body and mind. And usually that was exactly what he wanted. Sometimes he preferred to lead, and she trusted him enough to let him take control. But he’d never pushed her this far. He prayed he hadn’t violated her trust.

With gentle fingers she stroked his cheek and gave him a wry smile. “*I make all sorts of exceptions for you.*”

“*I was thinking too loud.*”

“*You’re not like them. I didn’t feel trapped just now. I felt...mmm.*”

He kissed her brow and pulled her even closer. She sighed, a wonderful, contented noise.

“*But that doesn’t mean you’re not going to meet my strap-on when you come to LA.*”

He snorted. They laughed, burying their mouths in each other’s coats so passersby wouldn’t hear them.

When they stopped laughing he said, “*I came inside.*”

He had a condom in his pocket, but once he started stalking her, it hadn’t crossed his mind again.

“*I know.*” The snow was falling harder now. A few flakes clung to her lashes. In the dark he perceived her eyes as luminous grey instead of amber.

She cleared her throat, choosing to speak aloud. “I’ve been thinking it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to get knocked up.”

He wondered if she'd ever stop surprising him.

"I need an heir."

"Oh, I see. This doesn't have anything to do with Alex and Helena?"

"Me, competitive?" Grinning, she toyed with the buttons on his coat. "No, like I said, why build an empire if it breaks into a hundred pieces when you die? I want our child to have it." She gave him a sly glance. "If you're good, I'll make an heir for you, too."

"I'm surprised by this sudden turn to the maternal."

"Well, the second kid is conditional. We'll see if I like the first one."

"I told you, I don't expect an heir."

"But I'd like you to have one." For an instant she turned sincere. "I want us to make a child together." Love shone in her eyes, so honest and unabashed it hurt. It frightened him that he could love her so much in return. Fortunately for both of them, she retreated to safer ground. "Besides, considering the genes we've got between us, I reckon it's our duty to breed super vamps and conquer the race."

"The world will tremble before us."

"Won't it?" She grinned, satisfied at the thought. But she sobered quickly and touched his cheek. "But she might turn out to be a clumsy, nearsighted little bookworm."

"And?"

"And I'll love her anyway." She spoke in a half whisper, the true weight of her decision settling in her eyes. He understood. She knew he understood. A prescient shiver passed through him.

"It might have started tonight."

"It's a good spot for it." Alya rolled onto her stomach and pointed down the hill to a silvered pond and the stand of barren willows that framed it. He rolled over, too, and rested his chin on her shoulder. They'd first made love under those willows, long ago.

"Look at the moon's reflection on the water," she said.

"It's a perfect circle."

"You don't suppose our kid would be a dork, do you?"

Mikhail nipped her ear and she rolled away, laughing.

From the other side of the shrubbery they heard a dreadful groan, like a bear waking with a hangover. Alya's supper had finally come-to. Stealthy as ghosts, they slipped down the hill to skip stones in the pond.

About the Author

Many author biographies claim that the author has been writing stories since she could first wrap her stubby little fingers around a crayon. Not me. All my life, I've been an artist. If I picked up a crayon or pencil, I drew a picture with it. Now I'm drawing with words and have never been happier.

Please visit me at www.eviebyrne.com, or send email to evbyrne@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you!

Look for these titles by Evie Byrne

Now Available:

Faustin Brothers

Bound by Blood

Called by Blood

Dante's Inferno

Love is the most dangerous enchantment...

Dominique's Release

© 2009 Kimberly Kaye Terry

A Captive Souls Story

All her life Dominique Fouche has chafed under her coven's "protection". It's time she found out why she has never been allowed to explore the darker side of her nature. She ventures forth to get answers from the father she has never known, only to learn he is dead and she's the new owner of his mansion.

The house is as mysterious as her past, where just opening an ancient book releases the pent-up fury and lust of a handsome, larger-than-life creature. Her strange new lover leaves her weak, satiated—and deathly afraid.

Bacclum, a mixed-blood angel, will not allow a mere witch stop him from finding his family and claiming his rightful heritage. Even if it means using every means at his disposal to siphon off Dominique's power. Yet once deep inside her sinfully sweet body, he finds himself bound by a magic far stronger than any spell.

There's a reason her blood calls out to his—and it's made her an unwitting target of the same deadly forces bent on denying Bacclum his birthright...

Warning: Contains angel lovin' hot enough to send you to confession for a month of Sundays—even if you're not Catholic.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Dominique's Release:

A long-legged, lushly naked woman was straddling Bacclum's body.

Coming to a hazy semi-awareness, he pushed the hair from his eyes and raised his upper torso, glancing down. The ends of the woman's long, curly hair were wrapped like silken fingers around his hips, embracing him, caressing his skin, as surely as her soft lips caressed his erect shaft.

Her warm breath blew across his aroused flesh, and her lips, warm, wet and soft, suckled the underside of his cock. Her slick tongue stroked around the base of his shaft and she licked the thick vein that ran the length of his shaft from stem to root.

"Who...what are you?" He could only rasp the words. What she was doing to him, the short flicks of her tongue up and down his cock, made all rational thought fly from his already foggy mind.

She didn't say a word, simply continued to lick and caress him, her head slowly bobbing up and down his shaft in hot, wicked undulations.

He felt his dick grow and knew it would grow too big for her mouth if she continued to torment him as she was. Bacclum shut his eyes tightly and clenched his jaw until it ached.

One part of his mind nagged at him the closer he came to orgasm. A buzzing, insistent nagging that he was hell bent on ignoring.

It had been too long since he'd felt a woman's caress...too long since...

He groaned, exhaled a harsh breath, and grasped both sides of her head.

His intent, despite the exquisite feel of her warm silken mouth on his dick, was to push her away. It took a moment for his mind to orient, for him to understand that something or someone had pulled him out of the book. And that someone was the one between his legs suckling his cock.

His eyes shot wide open. "Fuck!" The expletive was ripped from him.

The last time it happened he hadn't been ready, hadn't known what was going on, but this time he was ready for it. He reached down, grasped her shoulders and yanked her to him, forcing her head to snap back, ready to force her to help him out of the book. He stopped cold after one look at her.

Sexual energy vibrated from her, hallowing her body in a sensual glow of power that was tangible. Stimulating, electrifying...she was earthy, raw, woman.

Her dark hair, lush with wild curls, tumbled to her shoulders and beyond, partially obscuring her face. He reached a hand out and pushed her hair away from her face. She turned her head to the side as he observed her, transfixed. To say she was beautiful was too mild of a way to describe her.

Her complexion was the color of deep honey, her skin appeared soft, silky...he ran the tips of his fingers down the side of her face.

"So smooth," he whispered.

She drew back as though startled, her hair moving away from her face, her eyes widening as she focused on him.

And that's when he noticed her eyes. Large, they were slanted mildly in the corners, with dark, dense lashes that framed them, and so unlike any he'd ever seen throughout his long life, he inhaled a swift, disbelieving breath.

The iris of one was the color of liquid amber, dark brown with a tiny dark ring surrounding the pupil. The other was the same colored iris, but the matching dark ring surrounded a horizontal pupil, like that of a goat.

When she reached a hand out to touch him, he flinched.

"The eye of the demon," he said, unknowingly aloud.

Her expression shut down, instantly. Her earthy vibrancy seemed to dim, her body literally closed in on itself and she glanced away from him. But not before he caught the shine of unshed tears in her eyes.

She sprang away and he put a hand on her arm, pulling her back to him.

"No! Don't leave. I didn't mean..." He stopped. He didn't know why he was trying to explain, or even *what* he was trying to explain. He only knew he didn't want her to think he was rejecting her.

The temporary spell holding them mesmerized vanished and with it, she pushed away from him, her strength surprising him, even as he lurched forward to grasp onto her.

His hand closed around some type of medal suspended from around her neck, the medal searing his flesh. The unexpected pain made him snatch his hand away.

She stood and glanced at him over her shoulder, her eyes glistening. Before he could reach for her, her form began to shimmer, becoming nearly invisible.

Bacclum fought against what he knew was coming next.

He could *feel it*. Sweat poured from his body, dormant muscles screaming in agony as he concentrated all his will on just staying awake...aware.

"Not this time," he rasped.

The first time it had happened, when he'd been drawn from that damnable book, he'd come close to getting out. He hadn't known what or who had been the source of power that brought him to awareness, but in the end it hadn't been enough.

This time was different. He could feel it. This time he would fight like hell to stay aware.

Before the woman could completely disappear, his jaw locked and he concentrated all of his considerable power into his hands.

She gasped.

"What are you doing?"

He lurched forward with his last strength, grasped her around the waist, his hold on her unflinching, strong.

"Say the words."

She struggled to pry him loose. "Wha...what words?" she gasped. "What are you talking about?"

"Say the words, damn it!" Sweat poured from him, the amount of energy he was exerting was almost more than his body could take, caught between two worlds, not quite in the world of the book or the outer world. They were somewhere in-between, somewhere the witch had brought him.

He didn't know who she was, didn't know if she knew where she was, but he was damned if he wasn't going to hold on to her until she pulled him completely out.

"*Pe', te ou, caw et me, pe' te ou, caw et me...* Say it!" he demanded, struggling to focus his waning power on maintaining his hold on her.

Even as she struggled with him, he felt the power radiating from her body in hot waves, and the halo of power shrouding her fading form, vibrating, through the sweat obscuring his vision.

"Please..." He closed his eyes and concentrated. With his mind reaching out to her through their physical connection, Bacclum felt strength flood his body, a renewed energy shoot through his veins.

Pictures flowed in and out of his mind, in a kaleidoscope of images all surrounding Dominique.

He *saw* her in his mind. Her life, who she was, *what* she was...her differences from those she called sister, the pain that her difference had caused her throughout her life.

As a child at first, often playing alone, he saw her with her thin long arms wrapped around her equally skinny long legs, hugging herself as tears fell from her eyes after being mocked. As a young teen lying on her narrow twin bed, the images assailed him of her, absorbed in reading a book, alone. The images changed, shifted, and then he saw her as a young woman who, although she no longer showed the world her pain, it was still lodged deep in her chest, like a sharp arrow.

Always hovering in the background was an older woman, one who Bacclum recognized as her mother, diligently watching the young girl as she matured into womanhood.

One image bled to another, but more than the images were the emotions... Bacclum inhaled deeply, anger flooding him at the sheer isolation she felt, had felt, throughout her life of being different, her cries at night as a child growing up, being taunted for being different...always isolated, alone, even with her mother, he felt a sense of detachment—separateness, surrounding her.

Just as suddenly as it started, it ended. The exchange, although he had seen her entire life, had been fleeting and had taken no more than minutes. Yet it took a tremendous toll on him, the last of his remaining strength fleeing.

Bacclum opened his eyes and their gazes locked. He knew that just as he'd seen her life, who she was, she had also seen him during their exchange. Within the depths of her unique eyes, he saw the truth. No words were necessary, in fact none could really do justice to what he'd seen...what they'd both learned, about the other.

It was as complete as it was devastating.

Invasive, yet intimate.

A moment of understanding swept between them, despite questions he knew she must have, confusion...her spirit had reached out to him during the exchange and they'd connected on levels he'd never imagined possible.

She broke their visual connection. Too weak to stop her, he watched as she stumbled away, breaking free of him.

Once free, she clasped the glowing amulet resting between her breasts with both hands. Despite the fear, he also saw a gleam of strength blaze brightly in her eyes.

With her eyes on his she gripped the amulet tighter, and began chanting. She was speaking in no more than a loud whisper, yet he *felt* her words seek him out, right to the heart of him, and strike. The pain was as sudden as it was unexpected.

Bacclum felt his remaining physical strength completely dissipate and his mind, which had been sharp and clear, moments earlier, again became cloudy and disorienting.

"No!" he cried out.

Before she could completely vanish, and with her he knew his key to escape the hell he'd been bound to for a century or more, she glanced at him one last time.

"Come back for me, Dominique."

Three days. One wish. If the Fairy Queen keeps her promise...

Man of Her Dreams

© 2009 Robie Madison

A Shifting Dreams Story

Workaholic web designer Megan Jones exudes sensible and practical by day, but in her dreams she truly lives. Her nights are filled with erotic trysts with a dream lover—who also defends her against the dangerous wild stallion of her nightmares.

When she inherits a Victorian-era Welsh locket, she opens it to a shocking revelation. The tiny portrait of a black-haired man with a sardonic smile is none other than the man in her dreams. There's only one way to learn the truth about him—head to her ancestral home town in Wales.

A member of the ancient race of Tylwyth Teg, Owain Deverell has spent the last 170 years suspended between man and beast—punishment for loving a human woman. Weary of his cursed existence, and longing to be more than the object of Megan's dream desire, he strikes a bargain with the Fairy Queen. In exchange for retaining his human form, she grants him three days to win Megan's unconditional love.

Or remain the object of her nightmares. Forever.

Warning: Contains graphic sex, dream sex, picnic sex, magic sex, a meddlesome Fairy Queen, and did we mention sex?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Man of Her Dreams:

He led her around the side of the building and deep into the darkness. His pace was confident, suggesting he was familiar with the lay of the land. Less certain of her surroundings, she hesitated slightly when they reached a line of trees. Firm pavement gave way to the soft crunch of leaves and twigs under her feet. When she tripped over an exposed root, Owain caught her easily, but instead of holding her steady, he backed her up against a tree.

"Owain." She whispered the word on the night air. But unlike all those other nights when she'd spoken his name with a sense of frustrated longing, this time her voice was filled with awe. She reached out and skimmed her fingers across his cheek, just to make sure. His skin was warm to the touch and slightly rough with a five o'clock shadow. He was real all right.

Capturing her other hand, he pulled them both behind her around the trunk of the tree. The move forced his body closer to hers. So close his warm breath laced with a hint of ale fanned her face. He groaned low in his throat and his erection nudged her belly.

A cornucopia of sensual experiences assaulted her—the rough bark of the tree against her back, his hard body pressed against her own. She inhaled and caught a heady masculine scent that was all Owain. Only unlike in her dreams it was sharper, more pungent. Oh, yeah, he was definitely the real thing.

Her own breathing grew harsher as a primitive lust surged through her body. Her nipples hardened, pushing against the lace of her bra, demanding to be released from their confines. She suppressed the desire to grin. Dream or real, her reaction to him hadn't changed one iota.

"I'm sorry I dragged you into the woods," he said, though he didn't sound the least bit regretful. "But I couldn't wait any longer. I need to kiss you."

A bolt of heat shot through her as he bent his head. The anticipation alone was enough to induce a heart attack. She'd waited so long, believed it impossible that he was real. His lips touched her jaw right next to her ear, at once tickling her and stirring something deep inside her that hungered for more. Instead of being sated, her hunger grew as he ran a string of kisses along her jawline. Her body trembled each time his lips touched her skin. He might as well have been tracing a path to her core. That's where the fire burned. By the time he reached her mouth, she'd creamed her panties.

On a groan, he rocked his erection against the apex of her thighs. He caught her at just the right angle and her clit welcomed the friction. Demanded more.

"I can smell you, sweetheart." Words whispered in the darkness, only this time it was no dream. His breath mixed with the sweet summer breeze caressed her ear.

Her tiny gasp of longing was all the invitation he needed to slip his tongue inside her mouth. Their dream kisses were absolutely nothing like the real thing. For one, her senses were sharper—she tasted a hint of the bitter ale he'd been drinking and the flavor of Owain himself. For another, there was nothing gentle or teasing about this kiss. His tongue explored her mouth with an exquisite thoroughness. He traced the edges of her teeth and then plunged deeper, stealing her breath and giving her life.

Emotions assaulted her, battering her wits. When at last he broke the kiss, she swore she could hear their hearts hammering a duet between their bodies.

His eyes burned with a hunger that mirrored hers and she decided she'd been cast under a spell of some sort. How else to explain walking into a pub and finding the man of her dreams sitting there as though he'd been waiting for her to arrive? Psychic phenomenon or not, the situation defied any attempt she could make to rationalize it. And suddenly she no longer wanted to. For once in her well-ordered life she wasn't going to ask for explanations or analyze the situation to death. If this was an enchantment, she didn't want to wake up.

He stepped away, pulling her arms from around the tree at the same time. Then he ran his hands up to her shoulders, easing any strain. Despite the small distance, she was still keenly aware of the sexual tension arcing between them.

"I don't think I can stop touching you," he said.

Now that her hands were free, she settled one against his chest. Heat radiated through the soft cotton of his T-shirt. All this clothing between them was an unexpected novelty. An enticement to bare some skin.

"What about me touching you?"

“Dangerous, very dangerous.”

“Sounds like fun.”

Her fingers caressed his chest, grazing over his nipple. It hardened on contact. He hissed and she felt the slight tremor of his muscles beneath her fingers. Her lips parted. His descended. Her eyes blinked once and then closed on a sigh. The tiny sound quickly morphed into a whimper of need when his tongue traced a path along her collarbone. She arched her neck, offering him more. He lifted his head instead.

“I like your dress,” he said.

It was white and patterned with whimsically styled deep-red flowers. It was one of her favorites, which was why she’d chosen to wear it. But that didn’t change the incongruity of his comment given the erotic thoughts tumbling through her brain.

“Except,” he continued, “it’s far too long.”

She frowned. The dress fell to mid-thigh. What was too long about that?

“And it’s in my way,” he muttered, finally releasing his hold on one of her arms.

The next instant his hand slid beneath the hem. She cried out when his hot, calloused fingers brushed against her bare flesh.

“Hush, sweetheart. I’m going exploring.”

That he was. Straight up what was left of her leg to the elastic edge of her modest white panties. She jumped as one long finger slipped beneath the cotton barrier. Not that he noticed.

“This is also in my way,” he said, a hint of annoyance in his tone.

Her fingers crushed the thin fabric of his tee. Not that he noticed that, either. He was otherwise occupied. His brow furrowed, his eyes intently focused on her face.

The backs of two of his fingers skimmed against the dampened curls of her mound. She bit her lower lip to keep from screaming in frustration. They’d barely started and yet she was on the verge of falling apart. Thank God for the solid tree trunk at her back.

“Let go, sweetheart.”

All too familiar words whispered across the shadows. She groaned softly and shook her head. Her body trembled with the need to find release and yet—

And yet she was close. So close she could swear that this time his fingers would finish the job before she woke from the dream.

Think it's glamorous being a vampire? Think again.

Called by Blood

© 2009 Evie Byrne

The Faustin Bros., Book 1

Alexander Faustin is ready to settle down. He travels from NYC to sunny Colorado to find his destined bride. His delicate mission: to explain to her that vamps exist, that he happens to be one himself, and that he'd like her to be one, too. But the moment he lays eyes on Helena MacAllister, talk is the last thing on his mind.

It's not like Helena to make out with a stranger on her front porch, much less invite him into her bed. Somehow Alex makes her feel safe, even while he's dismantling her defenses. But in the wake of an accident, her faith in him is shattered. She learns her dream lover is a monster.

When a vampire betrays and terrifies his beloved, what can he offer her to make it up? Pancakes, of course. It's a start, at least. And Alex has to think of the next step quick, because if Helena won't take him back, he'll never love again.

Warning: Contains graphic sex scenes, blood play, and one scene of voyeurism. There's also a scary part in the middle. The author and her lawyers remind you that this is a work of fiction. In real life, a one-night stand with a stalker is a bad idea, unless the stalker is a vampire, in which case it's an amazingly bad idea. (Note: No actual elk were harmed in the writing of this novella.)

Enjoy the following excerpt for Called by Blood:

She hadn't been able to concentrate all day. At an important lunch meeting she'd embarrassed herself by spacing out mid-sentence. More than once. After that she'd gone straight to the high school track. That seemed a safe enough place to run. But even running failed to do the trick.

Alexander Faustin just wouldn't leave her thoughts. It was like she was in heat or something, and as her temperature rose, her intellect dropped by equal degrees. She didn't want to tangle with him again, but another moonlight talk was tempting. Because as horny as she was, she was also curious. The journalist in her wanted to know more. Why would a man like that stalk her? She had good instincts—not for relationships, admittedly, but for strangers—and he honestly didn't seem dangerous. If he didn't mean to harm her, why did he lie to her? Was it a habit of his? Did he get a buzz from the risk? Maybe another talk would help her see the outlines of his subtle insanity. Then she'd feel better about turning him over to the police.

That morning she'd Googled his name, trying different spellings and came up with nothing. A Lexis-Nexis search revealed nothing about Alex or Alexander but did yield some hits on a Gregor Faustin who was some kind of nightclub impresario in New York. A small picture of a man in his thirties or early forties

scowling at a flashbulb accompanied one of the articles. All she could say was that their coloring was the same. A relative?

Hell, she didn't even know if Alexander Faustin was his real name.

As soon as Lacey left, Helena stepped out onto her balcony and surveyed the back yard.

"Looking for me?"

She yelped. He was on the balcony with her, standing in the shadows.

Helena backed away. "How'd you get up here?"

He advanced, stepping into a pool of light. He wore the long woolen overcoat, the one that had rubbed against her naked body. It was open. Beneath, he wore a black turtleneck sweater, the chunky fisherman kind, jeans and expensive work boots. GQ Italy. He shrugged. "Ladder?"

What ladder?

Helena darted back into the house, slammed the sliding glass door shut and clicked the tiny locking arm into place, thinking that maybe this home-alone thing was not such a good idea after all. She picked up the phone, but didn't call anyone. Instead, she returned to the door.

He stood just on the other side of the glass, smiling a crooked smile. What beautiful lips he had. Oh God, he was hot. Why did he have to be so hot? He drew his finger along the glass as if he could touch her face through it.

"Helena..." He spoke as if they knew each other, as if he'd been missing her for years. "You shouldn't be afraid."

"I don't know you." Helena's voice wavered. She tried to strengthen it. "This is too strange. It's just not right."

Yet she wanted to touch him more than anything in the world. Instead she splayed her palm against the glass and he matched it with his own hand, so much bigger than hers. She had thought of those hands all day, how they held her breasts and circled her waist. She'd thought of his mouth on her throat, open and wet.

"It's an unusual way to meet, I'll give you that, but that doesn't make it wrong. What do you want to know about me? I'll tell you anything."

The glass muffled his voice a little, made it sound like it was coming from a distance. She didn't know what else to do, so she thought of a question.

"Well, where are you from?"

"New York. I live in the city."

Ah ha.

"What are you doing in Colorado?"

His dark eyes bored into hers, sincere, yet so forceful she lowered her lashes. "I came to meet you."

"Why?"

“My mother told me to find you. That you’d be my perfect one.”

Mother? Like Norman Bates’s mother? Oh man, that was creepy. “Who is your mother?” she snapped. “And what the hell does she know about me?”

Faustin was a model of patience, standing out there in the freezing cold. It didn’t seem to bother him. His nose wasn’t even red. And he didn’t seem to mind her shrewish tone either. “My mother’s name is Natalia Grigorevna Faustin.” He ground through those hard consonants like a real Russian. “She lives in Brooklyn. She...well...she dreamed about you, dreamed you and I were meant for each other. It’s sort of an old world thing.”

“And on the basis of her dream, you came here to find me?”

He lifted one shoulder and smiled, as if the whole thing was a little embarrassing, but unavoidable. “It’s better than internet dating.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’ve had to resort to that.” Helena sniffed, imagining him striding around Manhattan with hordes of Sarah Jessica Parker types staggering after him in their expensive heels.

“My family, our traditions, they mean a lot to me, Helena. I’m ready to settle down and I want to do it in the old way. It worked for my parents.”

“They met by dream?”

He nodded and leaned his head on the glass. “I think my mother dreamed right, Helena.”

The longing in his voice stopped her breath. *His perfect one*. To think that such a thing might exist—a perfect mate. Two halves coming together to make a whole. Never lonely again.

That was delusional thinking. A good relationship was all about hard work, compromise and mutual respect—not magic destiny crap. That’s why happy couples were as rare as hen’s teeth.

She put the phone down and twisted her hands together, trying to think of something else to say when she had all of two brain cells firing. “Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“Two older brothers, Mikhail and Gregor.”

Gregor. His name really was Faustin, and he really was from New York.

He slid his palm down the glass and straightened up. “Do you have any siblings?”

“No, I’m an only child.”

“Where are your parents?”

“They’re...they’ve passed on. A year ago. This is their house, actually.” *That’s it, tell him you have nobody.*

His brow creased in concern. “So you’re all alone? I’m so sorry.”

The empathy in his voice brought tears to her eyes. The hormones were surging again, making her sappy. Yes, it was hard to be alone. She loved her friends, but they were not family. Family had to put up with you no matter what. She wanted them back. Before she started bawling outright, she changed the subject. “You’re Russian. Your background, I mean?”

"Right. But I was born here."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I trade in foreign currency."

Whatever that meant, exactly. Helena never had enough money to spare for investment or trading and so paid little attention to the subject. She imagined him sitting at a big table with piles of exotic coins stacked in front of him, even though that was retarded.

"Do you have a card?" she asked. Also retarded. But she wanted to see something solid, something that proved he had a life outside of hanging around her house.

His lips twitched in amusement as he reached in his jeans pocket and brought out a slender wallet. "Do you want to see my driver's license? My social security card?" He flashed these things at her, all legitimate looking. He showed her a couple of credit cards, a library card, a subway pass and a Borders gift card in there too, decorated with candy canes. Then he pulled out a business card and pressed it against the glass.

"FFS?"

"Faustin Financial Services. I also do some investment consulting." He tucked the card in the door frame and left it there like a salesman. "What about you? What do you do?"

"I'm a freelance radio producer. I do a lot of work for NPR."

"Really? I listen to NPR all the time."

A public radio fan? Then he must be her life mate. Well, unless maybe he was Garrison Keillor's life mate.

But he seemed interested, truly interested. "Tell me something you've produced that I might have heard."

"Uh..." Helena's mind went marvelously blank. It was hard to remember anything when he looked her straight in the eye. A warm fluttering started between her legs. *Oh, jeez.* "Uh, last week they aired a story about the little kid who rode his bike across America..."

"To commemorate his brother's death? I heard that one." He had the strangest look to him as he said that. Something like pride. "That was your idea?"

She nodded, dry mouthed. "Look, this is a ridiculous way to talk. I should let you in, but I..."

"No." The sudden harshness of his voice made her take a step back from the glass. "Don't let me in if you have any doubts in your mind, because once you invite me in, I'm going to make love to you. It is the first thing I will do. We will not have dinner or a glass of wine first. We will not chit chat or watch a movie. You let me in this door and I'm taking you. Understand that."

Scared of him once again and scared of her own reactions to him, Helena took another step back and hugged herself. "Why are you like this?"

If looks could melt glass... "You were on the stoop with me. Answer yourself."

Helena paced back and forth in front of the sliding glass door, chanting her inner mantra, *Dang, oh dang, oh dang*.

Since the first moment she'd laid eyes on him, she'd wanted him, and that was the truth of the matter. He didn't hide his desire, he was clear in his intentions. That was the difference between them. He told the truth while she waffled and flirted and lied and called the cops when things got too intense. So who wasn't playing fair?

Let him in.

He'd probably talk to her through the door all night, but she didn't know if she could do it. She couldn't think. Hell, she could barely stand. Either she had to take him up on his offer or go lock herself in the closet.

She'd been thinking of him as caught on the deck, behind glass, but she was the one who was trapped. He had all the world behind him.

I'm tired of being afraid.

Faustin leaned against the door while he waited for her answer, head down, palms flat against the glass as if he was thinking about pushing the door off its tracks. "I need you," he said, almost too low to be heard.

Her breath caught in her throat. Frightened, she wrapped her arms around herself. That gentle pressure made her breasts ache and tingle. Her skin was oversensitive, stimulated by the soft knit of her sweater dress. She'd never been so aroused. Part of it was knowing a man wanted her that much. Another part was knowing that she'd have to risk her life to find out if her instincts were right. The instincts that told her to open the door.

Trust yourself.

He's a public radio fan, for crap's sake.

Do it.



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