

Tears of a Vampire

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Chapter I

1893

Something in the blackness drew a deep breath, out of reflex rather than any necessity. He sat alone, in the darkness of his book-lined study – no lamp or candle to light to the room, yet the predator in him could see as if the sun shone. Another deep breath, but no ease of mind accompanied the action – instead, he continued to worry the same thought: it was getting harder and harder to exist alone since he had tried to forsake the darkness of his soul for the light of forgiveness. He had much to repent for, and the scant few hundred years of general goodness could in no way begin to make up for the sheer violence and hedonism of his notorious career. Surprisingly, it felt good to know that he was honoring his Isabella's last wish, turning toward the light as much as possible in character and conscience, if not physically. It was she who had brought about the change in his personality, and he knew he would take his dying step trying to live up to her pure, sweet love.

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The Prince was coming. He was coming here. Today. Jacques Armand DuBois was almost beside himself with expectation. The house had been cleaned to within an inch of its life; the servants sparkled with their own anticipation of trying to get a glimpse of their elusive employer's employer. The mistress

of the house, Armand's daughter Elizabeth, was the only person who had taken no notice of the impending arrival of royalty. Her heart was beating fast not because some faceless member of the ton was expected sometime late this afternoon, but rather because her favorite mare was foaling.

Kneeling in the muck with the horse's head in her lap, Elizabeth crooned softly, hoping to ease Angelique's obvious distress. Luke, the stable hand, clucked his tongue disparagingly at the sight of Beth's straggly hairdo, dirty fingernails, and white muslin gown getting progressively blacker with each moment she spent in the stall. She looked up and grinned at him, and despite himself, he grinned back. "This is an old gown, Lucky. And even if it weren't, I wouldn't let it stop me from helping Angel in her hour of need."

Luke had not needed to be told that. Animals were Miss Elizabeth's downfall, as far as he was concerned. She was four and twenty, and should have been married long since with babes at her feet. Instead, she spent her time at the stables, with her many stray dogs and cats, or worse yet, in his opinion, with her father – reading and studying, of all the useless things for a female to do. His boss - her permissive, liberal father - had contributed to the fact that she was a beautiful, intelligent, headstrong old maid with no prospects in sight, who had succeeded in driving away every suitor so far by either verbally dressing him down or emotionally freezing him out.

It was much later that afternoon that Prince Vlad of Szeklys did, finally, arrive at Armand's small townhouse in one of the better sections of London. Armand bowed low before his Prince, who nodded in acknowledgement, then kissed the older-looking man on each cheek in the European fashion. "It is good to see you, Radu. How have you been?" The soft, rolling tones washed over him like a familiar smell, settling in the area of his heart. It had been almost a century since anyone had called him by his given name.

“I am well, my Prince. And you?” Armand motioned him into a wingback chair by the window then seated himself in the twin chair.

“I am old, my friend. Very old.” A sad smile passed over his unlined face.

“You certainly don’t look it, Sir.” And he didn’t. He looked like the old portraits Armand had seen in the castle in Romania. The Prince was a tall, imposing figure, more so probably in his own time, when men were generally smaller. He stood approximately six feet, two inches, with very broad muscular shoulders and arms, remnants of yielding a heavy broadsword in so many successful campaigns against the infidel Turks. His blood red hair hung long about his face and down his back in waves and curls, a matching color to the mustache and small goatee under his lower lip. The paleness of his complexion let Armand know that he had not yet fed.

Without a moment’s hesitation, he knelt before his master, offering his wrist in nourishment. Vlad pressed it back against Armand’s chest, shaking his head, but Armand insisted, and Vlad accepted with a grateful murmur. Later, when he was satiated, they discussed their lives and brought each other up to the present day like the two old friends they were.

Their quiet conversation was rudely disturbed when Elizabeth burst into the room, almost completely covered head to toe with muck, and ran excitedly up to her father to share the happy news. They both rose when she entered the room. “It’s a boy! It’s a boy!”

Armand was completely mortified by her appearance. He rarely found it necessary to adopt a stern stance with his daughter, who was genuinely a good girl, but this was beyond the limits. “ELIZABETH JACQUELINE!”

Her heart lurched at his disappointed tone. Her father’s angry demeanor and deep frown immediately cowed Beth. His

opinion of her was the only one of consequence, and she couldn't bear to have him unhappy with her. Elizabeth clasped her hands nervously behind her back, staring dejectedly down at the peep of a dirty-toed slipper from beneath the mud-encased hem of her gown. Armand turned a red, embarrassed face to Vlad. "I am so sorry for the interruption, my Prince. My daughter's manners are usually much better than this."

To his surprise, he noted that Vlad was fighting a grin. "Not to worry, Armand. You must introduce me to this charming creature." No one in his right mind could describe Elizabeth as charming in her current state, but Vlad was ever gracious.

"Prince Vlad of Szeklys, this is my irrepressible daughter, Elizabeth."

Beth curtsied deeply, for despite her rather unorthodox upbringing, her father had not skimmed on the need for etiquette. Vlad bent and, with two gentle, gloved fingers beneath her chin, made her stand and meet his eyes. Despite the streak of mud that marred her lovely face, he recognized the fresh perfection of the creamy skin beneath. Her bright, almost violet eyes spoke of happiness and sunshine, and his body tightened suddenly with a need that had nothing to do with blood. "Such beauty need never bow to the likes of me."

His shocking, startlingly blue eyes and deep, sensual voice insinuated themselves physically into her body, sending her heart pulsating madly in her chest. To Elizabeth's shame and horror, she felt her nipples spike to tight, aching points and a slight dew collect between her legs. She had never reacted that way to any man, and the fact that her body was responding beyond her control annoyed her enormously. His fingers remained unnaturally warm at her chin for heartbeats longer than was polite. "P-please forgive my appearance, Your Highness." Dammit, she'd never stuttered a day in her life! Why now, in front of him? "I was assisting with a foaling in the stable."

“You must call me Vlad, Elizabet,” he breathed with the hint of a smile. “I trust all is well with the new mother?” Animals were near and dear to Vlad’s heart, although he generally sided with the predators such as wolves and cats.

Her smile radiated natural pleasure as she whirled like a little girl to grab her father’s hands with her grubby ones. “Oh yes! Papa, he is the most beautiful little colt with a white star on his forehead!”

Armand chided gently, “You’re getting me dirty, Beth,” but with a broad, indulgent smile.

She seemed to be forever apologizing. “I’m sorry, Father. I’ll go change.” When she would have curtsied again, Vlad clucked his tongue in admonishment and held her up so that she could not manage a proper curtsy. She turned quickly, practically sprinting to the door.

At Vlad’s silent urging, Armand called out, “Wear something nice and join us for dinner, Elizabeth.”

This stopped her. She hadn’t expected to be allowed to accompany them. “May I?”

He looked to Vlad for confirmation, and he nodded. Her company would inhibit their conversation, but he seemed quite taken with her, surprisingly.

“She is very beautiful, Armand,” he said thoughtfully when she had left.

Her indulgent father wore a wry smile. “How could you tell through all the dirt?”

Vlad seated himself. “She looks like your Julietta.”

Armand landed in the chair with groan. “She is her mother’s daughter, through and through. Smart as a whip, headstrong, but loving and warm and funny.”

“Ahhh. She must need a firm hand.”

Armand knew Vlad’s tastes. “Elizabeth is like a young pup, eager to please, easily guided – easily crushed.”

In a tired, sad voice, the centuries old vampire uttered three words Armand was sure he’d never hear. “I envy you, my old friend. I envy you.”

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When Elizabeth reappeared, she looked much more presentable. Her golden-copper curls were pulled back into a simple chignon, face scrubbed clean and smelling lightly of Lily of the Valley. The shades of lavender dress accented her creamy skin and tiny waist – achieved with the artificial help of an uncomfortably tight corset - while small amethyst drops glittered at her ears, almost but not quite matching her eyes. Dinner was an enjoyable event. Armand was amazed to see Vlad smile on occasion, but Elizabeth was like that. She brought out the best in everyone around her, man or animal. As Vlad was a combination of both, he supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. They retired to the study, when Vlad excused himself. Armand knew what he was doing – having eaten sparingly of the meal for Elizabeth’s benefit, he was going to rid himself of the unwanted and unneeded food. He returned shortly, and as the gentlemen reminisced, Elizabeth listened raptly, leaning forward toward the Prince.

Several times during the evening, she dissolved in a fit of coughing, remnants of a lung inflammation that plagued her as well as the occasional asthma attack. In general, her lungs were the weakest part of her, although she never let that stop her from doing anything she wanted. It was another reason that her father despaired of the fact that she had spent untold hours knee deep in muck in the cold, damp stable.

The miniature grandfather clock on the mantle above the roaring fire chimed ten-thirty when Armand, wincing as he heard his daughter succumb to yet another coughing spasm, murmured softly, “Bedtime for you, Elizabeth.”

Despite her obvious pain, Beth detested being sent to bed, especially when there was something much more interesting going on – and this Prince was turning out to be infinitely more interesting than her bed. “But Papa, I –” she wheezed until Vlad slid forward in his chair, laying his warm fingers full length against hers, so that his fingertips rested lightly in her palm. His touch had exactly the same effect on her as it had before, causing her nipples to tighten painfully, her breath to quicken, and a dull ache to throb between her legs.

“Elizabeta,” his tone chided gently, “you must not argue with your father when he has only your best interests in his heart.” He watched her back go up at his soft, deliberate rebuke, measuring her reaction curiously. She had such a bright soul; although it reminded him of his beautiful Isabella and though that pained him, he wanted to be near her. He needed to be with her. Here was a reason to get up in the afternoon. Someone to pursue and win, to challenge him and keep him interested - to hunt, for and with.

Armand almost expected his Beth to directly challenge the Prince, but to her credit she did not. Instead, she rose and kissed her father goodnight warmly, murmuring her love. To Vlad, she curtsied stiffly, no pleasure or smile in her manner, her voice cold as winter wind when she addressed him formally, “Your Highness.”

Duty fulfilled, she stalked angrily toward the door of the study, but Vlad, quicker than any human, met her halfway there. “All evening I’ve been Vlad, Elizabet,” he pointed out, willing her to meet his eyes. “Am I not in your favor because I dared remind you of your manners?”

Armand instantly recognized the set of his daughter's head from across the room – chin down and jaw clenched – and nearly ran for cover. Elizabeth's eyes flared at the man's presumption. No one, not even her father, had ever taken that tone with her. Prince or not, she was going to put him in his place. "As you are not my father, my brother, or my husband, you may keep your thoughts on my manners to yourself, Sir."

Vlad stood there, watching her, saying nothing. Suddenly ashamed at her outburst, especially knowing he was basically right – which she hated - her eyes crept up to his, and she found herself drowning slowly against the tide of his strong will. Vlad captured her small hand as his hypnotic voice crept into her head. "Your father will be coming to visit me at my new country home at the end of the week. It would please me greatly if you would accompany him."

His hand touched hers, creating that same uncomfortably sharp spark of feeling all over her body, in the most embarrassingly intimate of places. Though he could have done much, much more, Vlad carefully reached out with his mind and planted only one thought in hers – "breathe easy." Holding her eyes with his, he whispered, "You need never fear me."

It was a very strange thing for him to say, she thought, but he was definitely an unusual man. Royalty was often quirky, however. Elizabeth's will was a match for his – he had recognized this instantly - and although she found his unblinking stare unnerving, she was not frightened, nor was she bowled over by his dominant stance. "I -," she swallowed convulsively, "I will have to check my schedule."

A small smile played about his full lips at her obvious coyness. "I will hope that you can make the time to see the new litter of wolf pups I have there." Vlad knew he'd caught her by playing on her love for animals, but didn't gloat as he kissed her hand then released it, bowing low to her and clicking his heels in a

courtly fashion. Elizabeth fled to her lonely bed, experiencing her first full night of sleep without bouts of coughing and wheezing in almost two weeks.

Vlad remained at the door, appearing almost as if he were in a trance. Instead, he was listening to the sound of her voice as it carried through the house, talking to her maid, cuddling with her pups around her in a big canopied bed. He liked the fact that she seemed to treat everyone very much the way she did him – openly, happily, with a friendly air.

Armand rose and lit a cigar. “She is a handful.”

The words brought him out of his reverie. “You have had two wonderful women in your life, Armand.”

“I have been most fortunate, Viovide,” he executed a short bow to his master, in acknowledgement of Vlad’s role in his good luck.

Vlad took care of those who took care of him. That had been Armand’s role for many decades, until he’d met Julietta, and asked his master to release him from service so that he might live out the rest of his expanded lifetime with his wife and whatever children there might be. It had turned out that his Julietta had gifted him with his extraordinary Elizabeth, then died several years later trying to birth him a son. His grief had been so great he had nearly tried to crawl into the grave with her, until he realized that he still had a part of her in his baby daughter, who became everything to him. Money not being a worry after so many years of faithful service to the Prince, Armand took his daughter from her birthplace in Paris to London to grow up, ever mindful that he was still at the disposal of the Viovide if he should call.

This evening was the first time in over ninety years that he had seen Vlad, after whose first wife Elizabeth was named.

“I like her.”

Those words caused Armand to shudder inwardly, as he well remembered what violence Vlad could inflict on an unwitting soul. “I am glad she pleases you.”

“Why do you let her challenge your authority like that?” As a true alpha male, it was almost impossible for Vlad to resist a test to his dominance.

The older-looking man took a deep breath, thinking carefully before he spoke. “Elizabeth means no disrespect. She finds it hard to simply accept another’s control of her. She’s never been deliberately bad, just occasionally thoughtless, usually in regards to her own health or well being. Beth has the softest heart since Julietta – the over abundance of stray animals in this house can attest to that. She can’t stand to see any animal hurt or starving. I’ve only ever found it necessary to punish her once for something, and on those occasions I think it truly is much worse on the parent. She’s very receptive to the slightest admonition in my tone or manner. I think she finds my displeasure or disappointment in her much worse than any punishment I could dish out.”

Vlad nodded, absorbing all of this eagerly, taking all of it to heart with the intent of putting it to the test in the future. When he saw what he wanted, he knew it immediately. Vlad had been right to come back to England – here was the purpose he had sought, all wrapped up in a beautiful, head-strong, intelligent package that he intended to unwrap slowly, layer by layer until she was laid bare beneath him, accepting him as her lover, her master, her husband.

Chapter II

It just so happened that Elizabeth didn't have anything pressing going on at the end of the week, so when her father set out for a day trip to Vlad's country estate on Thursday morning, she did accompany him, after grilling her father to make sure that she was not going to be an imposition. He reassured her that Vlad was quite eager for her to see his wolves, which was truly his pack. When they arrived, Vlad greeted them warmly – Elizabeth more formally than Armand, whom he kissed on both cheeks. With Elizabeth, he bowed over her hand and pressed warm, full lips to its back. “Elizabeth. I am very glad that you were able to find the time in your busy schedule to come with your father to see me.” His eyes captured hers as he gently mocked her mention of having to consult her schedule before knowing whether or not she could come.

Elizabeth reclaimed her hand almost too quickly, feeling unnaturally shy. What was it about this man that made her act like a simpering goose with not a brain in her head?

Armand cleared his throat gruffly, saying, “Well, I'll leave you two to the wolves, as I have no interest in the beasts, and I shall avail myself of some of that wonderful port I know you keep.”

Vlad smiled. “There is a bottle ready for you in the study, my old friend. We will not be long.”

A father's best instincts taking over, he stopped Vlad just as he turned away. "You will see to her safety?"

His prince responded gravely, "I will allow no one and nothing to harm her." Reassured, Armand continued into the house while Vlad offered his arm to his daughter.

Elizabeth allowed herself to hesitate only an instant before putting her small hand into the crook of his elbow. She could feel the strong muscles of his upper arm under her fingers, and somehow touching him reassured her. Vlad guided her slowly down a well-trod path, adjusting his usual long stride to accommodate her clumsy skirts. "Where do you keep your wolves, Sir?" She was intensely curious about them, having never known anyone to associate with animals more dangerous than a Pekinese.

"Vlad, Elizabeta," he reminded gently.

"Vlad." He liked the sound of his name on her lips.

"One does not keep such creatures of the wild as much as provide them with a place to inhabit if they should choose."

Her excitement was like an aura around her; his body thrummed in time with hers. Her eager attention fed an age-old male ego. She thought about what he said, then stated, "I thought wolves were nocturnal." He led them deeper into the forest, until they came to a small clearing. Vlad seated her comfortably on a fallen log that had been covered with a blanket for her benefit, and then took a seat next to her. There were no animals about that she could see, and he seemed in no hurry to produce any. Despite his lack of proper morning attire – being dressed only in close fitting, buff-colored breeches, a long sleeved cream shirt and a cream, white and gold patterned vest, Vlad managed to look as if he were wearing the most formal of outfits. Elizabeth felt positively frumpy in a simple day dress next to his immaculate perfection.

“That is a myth. A wolf is as capable of roaming around during the day as is any canine. But it is not when he would prefer to hunt.”

He felt her slight unease at being so alone with him, but, unlike most people, she was not compelled to fill the silence with a lot of chatter, which he appreciated enormously. They sat companionably, quietly for a few more minutes before Zeus, his beta male approached cautiously, sent ahead to scout out the newcomer for the pack. He approached Vlad slowly, head down, then lay belly up in a sign of submission. Vlad immediately bent down to pat him reassuringly, and he became bolder in regards to learning about the only woman his leader had ever brought to the pack. In his own language, low and harsh, the pack leader told his second to greet his new mistress.

Vlad watched her behavior toward the wolf with interest. How she treated and responded to these wild creatures was a measure of how she would act with him. Zeus sniffed in all of the usual embarrassing “doggy” places, yet she did not flinch or try to coyly deter the animal. Beth stood still, not yet having tried to touch the beast herself, letting it learn her and her scent – a scent that held no fear or threat of violence toward the pack. When the beast’s nose became decidedly intrusive, pressing itself to the place between her legs that she most smelled of herself, he felt compelled to say, “He’s not trying to be uncouth – “

Her quiet, calm voice interrupted him. “I know what he’s doing.” Divesting herself of her gloves, she presented the back of her hand to Zeus when he had finished scenting her, and he licked it delicately, and then rubbed his face into the palm of her hand. That was all the invitation she needed. Vlad watched how she involved her whole self in patting and praising the animal, who went into spasms of ecstasy at the feel of her soft hands deep in his fur. He began to try to lick her ears, in acknowledgement of her dominant status, and she giggled as his tongue tickled the sides of her face. Unmindful of her audience, she squatted in a most

unladylike position as the rest of the members of the pack began to appear out of the forest. They paid homage to Vlad first, then spent the rest of the time being stroked and petted by the girl their master was telling them – by her position beside him - was the newest and most honored female in their family.

Vlad, for his part, was nearly undone by the force of her natural sensuality. She had immediately rid herself of the very proper white gloves and had delved her slender fingers into the pelt of each of the animals, scratching and petting and praising in a high-pitched soft voice that the beasts obviously loved. For a moment, he wished could appear to her as a beast, too, but then he brought himself out of his reverie with a jolt. That was never likely to happen.

“We should go back to your father, Elizabeta.” Her disappointed pout was charming, but he was firm, simply holding out his hand for her to place her small fingers into his. With an exasperated sigh, she did as he commanded. Vlad put her gloves back on her hands himself, dressing her like a little girl, then took the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. “It is getting chillier, ma petite, and your lungs are still recovering.”

She walked within the close circle of his arm which was ostensibly helping her keep the blanket around her shoulders, but she kept turning back to watch the wolves disappear into the woods. “Thank you so much for letting me see them, Vlad. But I wish I could have seen the pups, too.”

“Athena is very protective of her babes. I’m sure if you come again, she will let you see them.” He could feel the sincerity in her words, and wanted to reassure her. “You are quite good with them. They are not as affectionate with everyone.”

Elizabeth beamed at his compliment, lighting up his world. “Papa despairs of my love for animals. He says it is not ladylike.”

“You love your father very much, no?”

“He is my world.”

Vlad stopped suddenly, turning her to face him. “Surely, only your husband would be that?”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Vlad, I’m twenty-four years old with no husbandly prospects in sight – nor do I desire any.” Suddenly, the intensity of his gaze made her uncomfortable, and she could not meet those eyes. “I don’t want to be married, anyway,” she stated to the ground at their feet, and Vlad knew the truth of her feelings. “I have no wish to become some man’s chattel, to have no life of my own beyond that which a husband permits. To me, marriage would be a prison of sorts.” She cleared her throat and turned to continue back to the house. Vlad kept up with her easily, his hand burning through her clothing at the small of her back. “Please forgive my inane babbling. I don’t know what’s gotten into me today.”

Once they were inside the house, he solicitously helped her out of the blanket and her coat, then caught her wrist and pulled her close to him. “You do not fear marriage, Elizabeta, as much as you fear the dominance of a man who would not love you with the passion and care you would show him. Control in the hands of a boorish man has boorish results.” He lifted her chin and Elizabeth found herself drowning in his eyes, again. Vlad had a sudden insight. “Has someone hurt you?”

She stiffened and drew away, but not before he felt a flash of a memory – a younger Elizabeth fighting some man off. Had he been alone, he would have roared with indignation that she had been subjected to the unwanted advances of some oafish clod. As it was, he clamped down on his explosive temper with an iron will, and all she saw was the muscle in his left jaw jump as he clenched his teeth.

Beth tried, unsuccessfully, to laugh it off, walking towards the sound of her father’s voice emanating from the study. “No, as a matter of fact, I rather fancy that I hurt him much more than he did

me.” Her father had seen to it that she knew what to do with her knee, should the situation arise. Unfortunately, it had, but she had escaped with no harm done and a little more wary of wandering in a garden maze with any man.

Strong fingers clenched her upper arm tightly, but careful not to hurt. “Tell me who it was,” his voice rattled harshly in her ear from behind. She jumped at the raw command in his voice. This was the warrior she had heard stories of, the man who had sent men to their deaths and killed many himself, who expected – no, demanded – obedience from those around him.

“It is not a matter for you to concern yourself with, Vlad.” Beth walked into the study to greet her father, glad for a reason to step away from that intense, exciting man who set all her senses on edge.

Her father asked how it went with the wolves, and she snuck a peek at Vlad, who met her eyes pensively. His look told her that he did not consider their conversation to be finished, but that, for the sake of her father, he would let it rest for the time being. Vlad could easily invade her mind at any time to gather the information he wanted; she was amazingly receptive to him on many levels – some she didn’t realize herself. But he wanted her to trust him enough to tell him herself. How had she put it? He wanted her to expect it to be a matter he would be very concerned with.

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They had spent so much time with the animals that it had become quite late. Vlad insisted that they stay overnight. Armand seemed inclined to accept, but turned to Elizabeth, who guessed she didn’t have anything going on in the morning that couldn’t be put off till later. A thought lit up her face. “That means we could

maybe go see the puppies in the morning, please?” She actually got up and went over to where Vlad was sitting in a comfortable wing-backed chair to look at him pleadingly.

He smiled at her obvious wiles, realizing this was the first thing she'd ever asked of him – and it was nothing to do with money, sex, power, or immortality. She was simply asking to be with more of his kind. How could he turn her down? “Yes, Miss Elizabeth, we will go down to see my wolves before you leave.” For a smile like the one she gave him at his words, he would have slaughtered entire villages to get her what she wanted. “But – “

She bit her lip uncertainly, wondering what he would demand.

“If you get up before I do, you are not to go wandering in the forest by yourself.” He stood and looked down at her, his hand hovering about her hair as if he would delve his fingers into it at any moment, drinking in the pure, excited expression on her lovely face. “You must wait for me.”

Elizabeth nodded eagerly and, unable to contain herself, she grabbed his big hand with both of hers, grinning ear to ear. “Do you think we will see the babies?”

She had touched him of her own accord, and it was almost his undoing. “I think Athena will be proud to show them off to you.” His body was responding to her nearness with a damning predictability that had nothing to do with blood lust and everything to do with plain old-fashioned lust. Elizabeth was so open and innocent; he felt guilty that he wanted to sully her with his hands and mouth and various other rampant parts of his body. Vlad cleared his throat out of old habit. “Well, if we’re going to get up early and see the pack, then you, my Elizabetha, should be getting to bed.”

Bedtimes were only a little less of a hassle since she'd grown up, and this was twice Vlad had imposed one for his little firebrand. It was barely nine, and Armand waited for the sparks to

fly at this command. To his utter surprise, there were none. Elizabeth appeared to consider it for a long moment – during which Vlad said nothing, simply expecting obedience. When Beth rose, she grumbled and groaned in a comical manner, as was usual. She kissed her father warmly, and they affirmed their love for each other verbally as Vlad's heart ached for the day when she would say that to him as easily. Beth really didn't know what to do in regards to Vlad, but he saved her by saying, "I will show you to your room, Elizabeta."

The house was vast, and Vlad guided her the whole way through it with his hand proprietarily on the small of her back. The room he guided her to was the compliment to his master bedroom, which he kept looking lived-in for appearances' sake. The room was done in shades of pink and sea foam green, the exact colors she had chosen for her room at home. There was a gorgeous canopied mahogany bed with matching nightstands and dressers, as well as vase after vase of roses in shades of pink from lightest to almost red. "Oh, Vlad, this room is too gorgeous for me to use!" A maid appeared with a flowing, lacy nightgown, as she'd not brought clothing for an overnight stay. Vlad leaned against the frame of the door, enjoying himself enormously just watching Elizabeth.

"The room pales in comparison to you, Elizabet," he said gallantly. "I bid you good night and sweet dreams." He closed the door behind him.

Beth was pampered to within an inch of her life, first with a long, hot bubble bath, then by the tiny, dark haired maid who toweled then brushed her hair until it was dry and shone like spun glass. Before she knew it, she was popped into the voluminous gown and under the warmed covers. Sleep came with frightening ease; as soon as her head hit the pillow she was out.

Chapter III

It was nearly nine when Beth finally awoke from a marvelously refreshing sleep. She rolled over onto her back, letting herself dwell for the first time on the mysterious man in whose house she was ensconced.

Vlad was everything she could have wanted in a man – tall, broad and unabashedly masculine. He wore his dominance like his title – it was there, an indisputable part of him that he never concerned himself about. Vlad accepted the responsibilities and the accolades that came his way as a result of it with equal grace. He was entirely unlike any man she'd ever met – not likely to be put off by her independence or her intelligence. He could hold his own in any conversation – politics, sociology, history . . . It was as if he had been tailor made to her specifications, but had added his own unique twist. Here was a man who would neither be put off by her nor be twisted around her finger. He was a force to be reckoned with, and she knew that he would demand all of her in response.

With the assistance of the little maid that Vlad had provided, she dressed again in the outfit she'd worn last night, although she knew by the fresh smell that it had been cleaned for her use. When she entered the dining room, disappointment flooded her – Vlad was no where to be seen. “Where is he?” she asked, kissing her father absently then seating herself across from him.

Armand grinned at her consternation. “Are you sorry about having to breakfast with just your dear old father?”

Elizabeth grimaced and wagged her finger at him. “You know what I mean, Father. I was so hoping he’d be up to show me the cubs.”

“You, daughter, have a one track mind.”

“Humph.” She ate sparingly, too excited to be interested in food and expecting him to appear at the door at any moment. Beth retired to the study with her father to await him, impatiently tapping her foot. “Is he ever going to get up?”

“We should probably be leaving shortly if we’re going to make it home at a reasonable hour.”

“No, Papa, I want to wait until Vlad gets up,” Elizabeth could hear her voice taking on an unflattering, bratty whine, but was unable to stop it. If she was spoiled, so be it. She wanted what she wanted, when she wanted it. It wasn’t usual for her plans to be thwarted.

“Well, I don’t know if we can wait that long, my dear,” Armand stated firmly.

Suddenly, Beth made up her mind. “I want to go explore the grounds a little before we leave. Do I have time?”

Armand gave her a funny look, as if he knew what she was planning. His eyes narrow suspiciously. “Yes, there’s time, but do you remember what Vlad told you?”

“Yes, Papa,” she sing-songed back at him while shrugging into her coat.

Although he knew his warning fell on deaf ears, Armand felt compelled to voice it anyway. “Listen to me, Elizabeth. You do not want to have the Prince angry with you. It is NOT a pretty sight.” That was a deliberate understatement.

“I know.” She kissed him lightly on the cheek then stepped out into the cool air.

Armand sighed exasperatedly as Vlad materialized beside him. “She’s going to disobey you.”

“I know.”

“This was a test.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Of sorts.”

“You knew what she’d do.”

Vlad drew a breath, nodding. “I had a feeling.”

Armand finally asked the question that had been plaguing him. “And what will you do, Viovode?”

His mouth set in a grim line, Vlad replied, “Why, I will punish her, Radu. How could I do any less for her? You have a father’s weakness for his daughter. I do not.”

“It is not a weakness, my Prince. It is love,” he defended.

Vlad was halfway through the door when Armand heard him say quietly, “As it is with me.”

~ ~ ~

The innate predator in him made him stay invisible to the human eye until he spotted her in the same glade that he had brought her to yesterday. She was having the time of her life – laughing and giggling at the young pups’ antics. She literally had a skirt full of them. Athena stood next to her as Elizabeth spoke in very soft tones of praise. Vlad’s extraordinary hearing picked up every word.

“Look at your beautiful babies, Athena. You must be such a good mother.” All the while, she was petting and stroking and playing with the wild beasts. Anger that she would disobey him and deliberately put herself in such danger roared through his veins, but he stood stock-still and watched.

Athena must have sensed his nearness; her ears pricked to attention and she whined. Suddenly, she took off, with her brood following closely behind. Elizabeth stood and brushed off her skirt, silently congratulating herself on managing to elude Vlad. He’d never know what she’d done. She bent and retrieved her gloves from the ground, turning and straightening in one movement, only to bump abruptly up against his muscular solidness.

Beth’s mouth hung open unattractively at her surprise, until a telling guilty blush began to spread up her neck. Vlad did not trust himself to say anything, thus increasing her unease. He had half a mind to put her over his lap right here and blister her bottom now, then do it again in the study, where episodes such as this were meant to be conducted. Instead, he clamped a hand over her elbow in a tight, inescapable grip, and marched her back to the house.

Realizing that this was not a good situation, and remembering her father’s warning about not angering the Prince, Elizabeth felt it necessary to defend herself, however weakly. “Vlad, I only meant to explore the grounds – “

“Do not compound your disobedience with deceit, Elizabet!” he hissed in a clipped, angry tone. “You knew exactly where you were going when you left the house.”

Dammit! It was as if the man could read her mind!

When he finally dragged her into the study, she noticed that her father was no where around. Turning loose his death grip on her arm, Vlad closed the heavy wooden double doors behind him.

Beth stood in the middle of the room, confused and mildly afraid. Perhaps it was better to deal with this head on, and put it behind them. When she spoke, her voice rang with sincerity. For some reason, it bothered her that he was angry with her. He was the only man besides her father whose opinion seemed to matter to her. "I'm sorry I disobeyed you, Vlad. I let my heart rule my mind as I am apt to do and I put myself in danger. You were right. I'm sorry." He had said nothing through her nervous little speech, just looked at her in a manner that reminded her of her father's expression before the rare occasions when he had to spank her – disappointed but resigned. Well, it was not like Vlad was going to take her over his knee . . .

He sat on the big couch and beckoned her to him. "Come here, Elizabeth."

Hesitantly, but not wanting to compound her problem, Elizabeth obeyed. Vlad wrapped his big arm around her small shoulders. "I know you are sorry, Beth, but I think you are more sorry that you got caught than that you disobeyed me in the first place. When I implement a rule, Elizabeth Jacqueline, it is not so that I can hear myself talk; there is a reason for it. Those wolves, however friendly they may seem to you, are wild creatures. They are a little tamer around me because they know me. If you had startled her or she had somehow sense even the slightest threat to her pups, Athena would have torn you apart before I could get to you." That much was the complete truth, and the animal would have been in the right. "I may not be your father, your fiancé, or your husband, but this is my house and I make the rules. I expect you to obey them and me."

Her answer was given very meekly, especially for her. "Yes, Sir." He made no move to let her up, but studied her for a moment. "I am sorry for disobeying you."

"I know you are, Elizabeth, but that is not going to save you from your punishment." Before she knew it, she was face down

over his lap, skirts up, stockings and pantalets down, completely bare to his gaze.

Beth struggled for all she was worth, but his arm across the small of her back was like a steel band as it held her wrists clamped together. “Let me up, Vlad, this is most improper!”

“No, Elizabet, what is improper is your naughtiness and I intend to affect a cure right now!” He smiled grimly and began tanning her bottom ferociously.

Papa had spanked her very occasionally and always with much reluctance. He usually bent her over the back of a chair, always left her pantalets up, and only gave her ten or so swats. Nothing she’d ever experienced had prepared her for the fire Vlad was lighting from the top of her bottom swell to just above the dimpled backs of her knees. He spanked methodically and unrelentingly, up one side and down the other, working with frightening efficiency to impart as much pain as possible with each stroke. His palm felt like a brand each time it smacked itself onto her flesh.

“I had hoped you would obey me, so that it would not have to come to this. Let this be a lesson to you in the future, Elizabeth,” he punctuated his words with repeated applications of his hard palm to her tender bottom. “That I expect nothing less than complete obedience from you, and that any misbehavior in the future, will be dealt with in exactly this same method.”

“I’m sorry!” The word was long and drawn out by her breath and her sobs.

Vlad set his jaw determinedly. “I intend to see that you are, little girl.”

She wiggled, she bawled, she kicked her feet, and made promises that a saint couldn’t keep, but there was absolutely nothing she could do to stop the spanking. Vlad was intent on making this a punishment to remember, so that she would think

twice about defying him in the future. He may have succeeded a bit too well. When he finally stopped, her flesh was a sunset red up as far as the eye could see, and he could feel the heat generated by her swollen skin. Elizabeth had screamed and cried so much she was hoarse and croaking rather than moaning by the end. When he released her, though, she jumped up as if her life depended on it, almost tripping on the pantalets that had gathered at her ankles. He bent to offer his assistance, but she scurried as far away from him as she could, hurriedly arranging her clothing while sniffing and sobbing uncontrollably.

Feeling somewhat better once she'd put herself back together, she didn't spare him a glance, but rather left him alone in the study to find her father, who didn't seem surprised at his daughter's emotional state and obvious agitation to leave. Elizabeth, who had counted on the fact that Vlad's treatment of her would outrage her beloved Papa, felt betrayed that they were obviously in cahoots together, and said not a word to either of them while they murmured their own good-byes. Vlad offered his hand up into the carriage and she ignored it as if it wasn't there, stepping inside to notice that there were several big, fluffy cushions thrown onto the seats, obviously for her benefit. Despite the fact that she knew she was sacrificing her own comfort on a long journey home, she flung open the door of the carriage and out sailed each and every pillow, several of which hit Vlad square in the face.

Armand harrumphed loudly to keep from laughing at Vlad, but only achieved limited results. "I did say she was a somewhat spirited girl, didn't I?" he threw back, chuckling while he took his place opposite his daughter as the coach pulled out of the driveway.

~ ~ ~

Elizabeth spoke not one word all the long way home. She was stubborn, his little girl. This would be an insult not soon forgiven or forgotten. Armand wondered if Vlad knew exactly what he was doing. When they arrived home, very close to dinner, Elizabeth walked straight-backed up the stairs to her room. She dismissed Biddy, her maid, and took care of her own things, which was not unusual. The older woman saw the swollen eyes and tear tracks down her precious girl's face, knowing that something was not right. But Beth didn't want comfort right now, and Biddy left her on her own to work things out.

Alone, huddled miserably under the warm covers of her big bed, even the comfort of her animals did nothing to assuage her feelings of betrayal and pain. Elizabeth could not believe that he had punished her like a little girl, bare bottomed over his lap. Her embarrassment was almost worse than the pain, which was considerable. And she had thought this man might be the one. Her instant, fleshly response to him when they met, his wry insightful intelligence, a love of animals that almost superceded hers . . . She let the tears flow again and sobbed in great gulps until there were none left to cry. Finally, exhausted and bedraggled, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

~ ~ ~

Vlad had kept Elizabeth consciously in his mind since she left, remotely feeling every bump and jolt the carriage inflicted on her inflamed nether parts, and also experiencing the jumble of her emotions, the foremost of which was anger, at himself and her father. She had accurately deduced that Armand had been complacent regarding Vlad's administration of a thorough bottom smacking, and was freezing him out, too. He watched in his mind's eye as she ascended the stairs, as regal as any queen, not about to let anyone see how utterly hurt she was, physically and

emotionally. His heart wrenched with each terrible, hoarse sob when she was finally alone in the darkness of her room and let it all out, where no one could touch her, or comfort her, tell her it was all right, that she was still loved and wanted.

He was in the dark in his own study; eyes closed, head back, concentrating on his mental connection to her. His hands clenched spasmodically at her dry, painful sobs until he finally could stand it no longer, and he projected one thought to her. “Sleep.”

Vlad kept a vigil for a few hours as he busied himself with the paperwork that accumulated in running a financial empire as diversified as his, checking in on her every few minutes to make sure she was still resting peacefully. Just before he was about to retire, about an hour before sunrise, he deliberately insinuated himself into her subconscious, conjuring for her a most realistic dream scenario. For all intents and purposes, Vlad transported himself to her bedroom, although Elizabeth would only remember it in the context of a dream.

He suppressed any pain from the spanking while he was there, and planted the suggestion that they were married, thus he was, of course, allowed into her bed. Not wanting to startle her, he appeared to her next to “their” bed, in a bright red dressing gown, embroidered on the breast with his crest, the golden dragon. His dream-self slipped carefully under the covers, leaving the robe – his only clothing – in a pool of blood red material on the floor. Vlad touched her shoulder very gently, pulling her back into his embrace. She nuzzled her bottom against his raging hard-on and the both of them sighed contentedly. “Vlad. You’re late.”

“I had some business to attend to. But I would much rather be attending to my wife.” He lifted the heavy scented curtain of her hair away from the back of her neck and licked a fine line to her ear. Elizabeth squirmed, and giggled, but he could feel the taut

peaks of her breasts against his forearm. “Oh, you like that, do you?”

She moaned her agreement, and he became bolder, laying her back on the bed and capturing her lips with his. Their tongues mingled, and her hands roamed freely over him, her little fingertips teasing his own nipples to tight buds. “Turnabout, my love, turnabout.” He ran his wet lips down the line of her neck then up the slope of her breast to claim the sweet prize of her berry-ripe nipple. Vlad consciously noted how she arched into him and moaned loudly at his gentle suckling. Her breasts were terribly sensitive.

“Husband, I can’t think when you do that!” she breathed heavily, pulling his face up to hers. She claimed his mouth as passionately as he could ever want, and he knew that they would be even more than this explosive together in reality. Elizabeth explored his mouth with her delicate tongue, then ran the tip over his bottom lip just enough to make it tickle and tingle.

Vlad growled. “I want to taste all of you, my wife. Tonight, you will put me off no longer. I will take you with my mouth and drive you wild,” he promised, kissing his way down her naked body to the juncture of her thighs.

The dreaming Elizabeth knew that Vlad had promised her that he would eventually love her with his mouth, but she had forestalled him, claiming that it was an improper thing for a husband to do with his wife. Vlad would not be put off, and, despite her protestations, she knew that he would do as he said and drive her to the heights of ecstasy with his lips and tongue, and that there was no longer any way she could deter him.

He proceeded to do just that, worrying and laving and suckling as if she had a third nipple, occasionally raising his head to encourage her surrender to him, to compliment her on how beautiful she looked in the throes of uncontrollable passion, and reaffirm his love for her. It was after he had told her how lucky he

was to have such a wonderfully passionate wife that, when he returned his mouth to envelope her entire pleasure center in warm wetness that she could no longer bear the intense pleasure and she screamed.

Quickly, Vlad listened for signs that anyone else in the house might have heard Elizabeth's cry, but everyone else was still snugly tucked into their beds. He brought himself back to his joyous chore and wrung every ounce of pleasure out of his beloved's first orgasm.

Still shaking with reaction and breathing heavily, Elizabeth cried, "Please, no more."

Tenderly, Vlad lay full length on top of her, soothing and shh-ing, wiping away the tears that gathered in the corners of her eyes. "My precious love." He kissed her lips, and then bent down to press his lips to her breastbone, just above her heart. "Mon petite coeur," he whispered softly, and melted himself away, into and through her.

Alone in his study, Vlad was ragingly hard, but anticipation was nine-tenths for him. He would wait until their wedding night for his own completion. He smiled secretly to himself as he prepared for bed alone.

Elizabeth stirred restlessly in her sleep, caught unawares by an embarrassingly explicit dream that caused dew to collect on her underwear. The only thing she would have changed about it was the husband.

Chapter IV

It was much later than usual when Elizabeth finally descended the stairs. After the events of yesterday, and that terribly unsettling but extremely realistic dream, the last person she wanted to see was Vlad. She felt terribly confused and disturbed by what happened yesterday and even further upset by the intimate detail of the dream that made her lower stomach clench just thinking about it. She'd had no idea such things existed, and to have dreamed about being given exquisite pleasure by the very man whose unyielding hand had brightened her bottom and made her bawl like a child while he did it was more than she could handle. But there he was, just being let in by Gregor, the butler.

“Ah, there you are, Elizabet.” He greeted her with a smile as if she had not been bare-bottomed over his lap yesterday afternoon.

Her full-bodied blush was entirely uncontrollable, and to her horror, just the throaty timbre of his voice made her pleasure center contract. Before her stood the man who yesterday had - in reality - dished out the most excruciating and humiliating pain she'd had in her life. But for some unknown reason her subconscious decided to make him into her husband for a decidedly unladylike dream. Vlad knew what she was thinking – the dichotomy was hard for her to understand; the fact that the same man – one she didn't know very well - had given her so much pain

and so much pleasure, all within the space of hours. He had put her forcibly into a very embarrassing position, bottom up over his lap, then that night had taken the ultimate in liberties with her body and mind.

“I trust you are feeling well?”

Beth didn't trust herself to speak without sputtering. What could she say when her butt hurt and her body tingled just looking at him? She nodded, refusing to meet his eyes. She headed for the library, where her father would be waiting. Manners be damned, she wasn't going to kowtow to him. Her anger about yesterday resurfaced, although it had been considerably lessened by the effects of the dream.

Vlad followed her, frowning slightly. After he'd left her last night, exhausted by the force of her orgasm and sleeping peacefully, he decided to take a more aggressive approach to winning her, and designed a campaign in his usual organized, military fashion to insinuate himself into her life. Being here this morning was the first step in that tact. He was not about to allow her to avoid him because of one small punishment when there likely were many more to come - some more, some less severe. He contrived to be one of the first people she saw in the morning and last at night over the next several months. Despite the inconvenience of having to rid himself of the food he ingested, he ate with them regularly and joined in their customary dinner table discussions, voicing his opinions and arguing with both father and daughter when he felt passionately about something.

Elizabeth and Vlad were at loggerheads about almost everything – he was a warrior, a hawk by nature. Beth had a much more humanitarian bent, siding with the suffragettes fighting for women's right to vote, as well as the newly formed RSPCA. It was one of her favorite charities, and she worked several days a month caring for the stray cats and dogs they took in. Because her anger was not easily overcome, it made her virtually fearless when she

argued with him. Sometimes, he thought she took the opposite side of an argument just to get in his face, and he had to keep himself from smiling while she so earnestly presented her case. He liked her gumption, and wondered if she'd act so bravely even if she knew the truth about him.

Eventually, his constant presence, charming manner, intelligence, and humor wore her down, and she was able to put the unpleasantness of her punishment behind her and see through it to him, and how much she liked him. He was not afraid of her independence, treated her as an equal, and listened to her thoughts with respect and admiration. The only mild setback occurred when her father saw fit to inform her that he had granted Vlad his permission to see to any further "correction" that she might need in the future. This set Elizabeth off again, and for several days she was not quite civil to either of them.

Finally, Vlad had had enough of the cold shoulder, and one morning after she had deliberately snubbed any attempt by himself or her father to draw her into their conversation, he pulled her out of her chair in the dining room and angled her, with a tight grip on her arm, into the library. She shook his hand off as soon as he closed the door, eyeing him warily.

Vlad walked to her slowly, capturing her chin with his fingers and tilting her face up so that she had to meet his eyes. "This is fair warning, my Elizabeth. I will not tolerate your rudeness. If you continue to have a disrespectful attitude toward your father and myself, then you will find yourself over my knees again. Is that understood?"

She grimaced and said nothing.

"I asked you if you understood me," he snapped. "I expect an answer."

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

Elizabeth had a hard time not rolling her eyes. “Yes, I understand.”

“Very good. Go stand in the corner until I tell you differently.”

Beth’s expression was one of disbelief. “Stand in the corner? Aren’t I a little old for that?”

“Judging by your recent behavior, no.” His voice took on more of a commanding tone. “Do as I tell you. I dislike having to repeat myself.”

He ignored her exasperated sigh, watching her flounce her way to the appointed corner, facing away from him. Vlad sat down in a comfortably overstuffed chair and read the morning paper for about fifteen minutes. Elizabeth hadn’t said a word, and had fidgeted much less than he had expected. “Come here,” the softness of his voice did not conceal its firmness.

For once, she did exactly as she was told. Vlad gathered her onto his lap, cuddling her like the precious child she was. He didn’t say anything, merely holding her close, enjoying immensely the feel of her in his arms. His strong hand rubbed up and down the slender line of her back soothingly. “Do you feel better, ma petite?”

Strangely, she did, although she didn’t really want him to know that. She shrugged her shoulders, but he’d already had the truth from her mind. “If I didn’t care about you so much, I would never take such an interest in your behavior, you know.” Beth nodded her head. “I wish I could find a way to make it easier for you to accept this and me.” Elizabeth was toying with one of the solid gold buttons on his morning coat, but said nothing. He didn’t sense any hint of rebellion in her attitude, merely confusion at her conflicting feelings for him. She was truly angry that he’d spanked her, and was none too happy with being called on the carpet about her bratty attitude, either.

Sighing heavily, he practically dumped her off his lap when he rose. With a deliberate change of topic, he asked, “I understand you and your father will be playing cards this evening.”

“Yes, it’s our usual night.”

“I would like to join you, if that’s all right with you.” He was asking her permission, for once. How unusual.

“Please yourself,” she responded, too neutrally. Vlad could deal with happiness or anger, but neutrality was a concern. He watched her carefully for the rest of the day because she seemed somewhat out of sorts.

That evening, Armand, Vlad, Clarence Monroe – and old friend of the family – and Elizabeth played low-stakes poker. Vlad noticed that Beth played with a unique combination of eagerness, skill, and a lot of luck. She was bold in her bets, but sometimes too impetuous for her own pocketbook. Clarence bowed out first and left, then Armand went to bed, leaving the end of the last hand to the two of them.

Elizabeth had a great hand, but nothing left to bet. “I fold.” Before she could toss the cards into the pile, he captured them and gave them back to her.

“Wait.” Vlad pushed all of the money he’d won tonight – well over 100 pounds – into the center of the table. “I will bet this as well as another ten thousand pounds as a donation to the RSPCA.”

Suspicious about where this was going, Elizabeth repeated. “I just said I fold. I have nothing to bet so I have to.”

“You may bet one kiss.”

Her jaw dropped, but she recovered herself quickly. “No kiss is worth ten thousand pounds, Vlad.”

A thick red eyebrow quirked up. “That would depend on who you asked about its value. To me, a kiss from you, given freely with no reservations would be worth ten times that.”

Elizabeth scoffed, but the offer certainly was tempting. She had a great hand – four kings. What were the chances that he had four aces?

Vlad could see the wheels turning in her head. He had used none of his powers to win this evening, and had no idea what hand she held. What she didn’t realize was that he was going to get a kiss regardless of the outcome of the hand.

But Beth was taking the offer to heart, thinking how much good that ten thousand would do for the shelter. She nodded her head. “All right. Ten thousand for the RSPCA against a kiss from me.”

She had acquiesced a little too easily for his comfort. He eyed her consideringly. “I don’t mean the kind of dry peck you’d give a maiden aunt, cherie.”

Her lips pursed. “I realize that, Vlad.” Really. What did he think of her? That she had no idea how to kiss a man?

“I just want you to know what you’re agreeing to.”

“Who calls who?” she prompted, causing him to show his cards.

Four aces.

Elizabeth folded her hand and threw them into the pile. “You win,” she stood beside the table and inquired with false sweetness, “Whom do I have to kiss? Clarence has already gone home.”

Vlad let loose a low growl at her teasing. To his surprise, she grabbed a low footstool from in front of one of the wing-backed chairs to set it down directly in front of him, then kicked the toe of his boot before stepping up onto the stool. “Stand up.”

Curious as to her machinations, he did as he was told with a confused frown on his face.

The added height brought her nearly eye to eye with him, instead of at the usual height disadvantage of having him towering over her. “HmMMMM.”

“Shhhh.” She silenced him with a kiss, and he thought she could do that any time she wanted. His concern that she would kiss him in a sterile, perfunctory manner fled immediately when her lips slanted eagerly over his. A bold little tongue found its way between his lips, where he bit it lightly for its temerity, eliciting a squeal from her. An arm of steel wrapped tightly around her when she would have leaned away, holding her right where he wanted. He got his money’s worth, and then some. No woman short of Elizabeta had excited him the way she did. She never failed to surprise him, and this kiss was just another proof to him that he’d never become complacent about his petite.

They were equal aggressors, kissing and being kissed until Vlad thought he’d die of the pleasure coursing through him. His palms cupped her cheeks as he rubbed his nose against hers. “Mmm. I like this equal height idea.”

She melted her lips to his one more time. “So do I. Thank you for letting me experiment on you.”

He frowned. “Experiment?”

“Yeah. I’ve never really kissed anyone but my pillow like that. It’s fun,” she said pertly, stepping down with his gentle assistance. As she put the stool back, she threw over her shoulder with a wicked grin, “And it helped me realize that I need to look for a man that’s my height.”

In the blink of an eye, he was behind her, wrapping his arms tightly around her waist. He pulled her back against him, growling sensually into a tiny ear, “I don’t think so.” But before he lost control of himself completely and took her on the floor in front of

the fire, he set her away from him, patting a bottom that was amply protected by voluminous skirts. “Bedtime for you.”

Beth turned and stamped her foot angrily. “Vlad! Why are you always trying to get me into bed?” She spoke first then realized how it sounded after the words left her mouth. She brightened like a sunset, right to the roots of her hair and beyond, covering her mouth with surprise and embarrassment.

Vlad sputtered a laugh, then chuckled. His hand caressed her burning cheek, and he bent forward to answer her impertinent question huskily, “Because that’s where I want you – lying soft and sweet beneath me while I love you.” His lips caressed hers very, very gently then he hugged her to him rocking back and forth soothingly. Kissing her temple noisily, he murmured, “Off to bed with you, alone.” For now, he thought, watching her leave.

Several days later, much to Elizabeth’s surprise, she got a glowing note from Carl Mathis, who ran the RSPCA where she volunteered, thanking her for her 10,000-pound donation. Despite her loss, Vlad had sent the money anyway, only in her name.

Chapter V

Vlad's handling of her "corrections" was a point of never ending embarrassment to Elizabeth. He was much, much more exacting of her than her father would ever have thought of being – it seemed that she was forever being spanked for something. Within the first few months the Prince had been with them, she was spanked almost daily by him, always bare, usually over his lap. Stamping, stomping and being generally bratty afterward only earned her another spanking on an already terribly sore bottom, she discovered, so there was no help there. There was nothing she could do to stop him, as her only ally – her father – had defected to the enemy's camp.

Vlad, however, felt things were going swimmingly, although in his vow to insinuate himself into every aspect of her life, the one thing he had avoided like the plague was the endless round of balls attended by all levels of London's aristocracy. As woman of older than marriageable age, it was true that Elizabeth didn't receive a lot of invitations, but she usually went to the ones she was invited to just to catch up with the few friends she had in the ton who were willing to overlook her idiosyncrasies.

The Wentworth-Holmes' annual ball was one she never missed. Upon her arrival, she was immediately surrounded by the tight knot of her friends, including Catherine Johnson, who, though somewhat of a dim bulb, was one of her best female friends, despite the fact that she was always trying to set Elizabeth up with

some poor unsuspecting gentleman. Catherine had been on the Continent of late, and Beth had written her in lurid detail about Vlad. However, since Elizabeth had arrived at the ball escorted only by her father, Catherine had become skeptical as to whether her friend had been pulling her leg about the tall, redheaded warrior who had come so very close to capturing Elizabeth's well-guarded heart.

Elizabeth was just taking a sip of punch when she turned and saw him arrive. Vlad was a magnificent specimen in a black velvet coat, matching pants, white silk shirt and cravat, and a white, red, and black vest embroidered in gold thread with his dragon crest. His outfit was impeccable, at the height of style, and together with his confident masculinity he put ninety-nine percent of the men in attendance to shame. His blatant, arrogant belief in himself, in who and what he was, broadcast itself loudly across the room. When his name and title were announced, a hush fell over the crowd.

The sea of people parted in amazement, however, when Beth walked toward him with a bright smile as he descended the stairs toward her and into the grand ballroom. She stopped several feet in front of him to execute an exquisitely low, graceful curtsy. The answering smile on his face said it all. Every older woman in the room knew he was taken, not that that would deter them from trying to pry him away from her. He bowed low over the back of her hand, kissing it lovingly, then tucked it into the crook of his arm to escort her proudly back to the group of friends she had come from, well aware of the stares they were attracting. Vlad's sensitive hearing caught all of the sly whispering going on behind heavily jeweled hands and silken fans regarding how that little nothing old maid knew a Prince when no one else in the ton did. Apparently there was some resentment of the fact that she had turned down several lucrative marriage offers well above her station – one that would have made her a duchess. The gist was that it was okay for her to advise them about or treat their cherished

animals or even be friends with their dearest daughters up to a point, but she was clearly not in a position to be so selective about whom she married.

Well, she would outshine them all. He would make her a Princess.

The murmuring swelled as Elizabeth made the introductions, and then the parade began. All of the anxious mammas with eligible daughters dragged them over, and when that didn't work, several of them made a bid for him themselves, but Vlad only had eyes for Elizabeth, much to their obvious consternation. He was unfailingly polite and charming, but kept her close beside him. When the dancing started, several young gentlemen of quality appeared at Elizabeth's elbow to ask her to dance. All Vlad did was extend his gloved hand to her, palm up.

Beth was flustered as he guided her onto the floor. "I don't dance very well, Vlad. You're likely to limp out of here if I try."

He recognized her self-deprecating humor and smiled broadly, pulling her into his arms a little more closely than was proper. Elizabeth met his eyes as he meant her to, and everyone and everything else fell away from them. He glided them magically around the room; their feet barely touching the floor as they flowed in time with the music. Beth's heart swelled and Vlad felt how free and happy she was. He wanted her to feel that way with him always.

When they returned to the sidelines, he went to get her another glass of punch. She begged off other dance requests while waiting for him, but when he returned Catherine's younger brother, Jeffrey, came over for a dance and she really could not politely refuse.

Elizabeth had the strangest compulsion to glance at Vlad for his permission, but restrained herself. She danced with others the rest of the evening, but predominantly with him. Vlad declined all

attempts by other women to get him onto the dance floor. He had made his choice, and wanted it to be painfully obvious.

They were between dances, laughing and chatting with the others in the group when Vlad felt Elizabeth's entire body tense. She turned away from him and the door as if protecting herself from someone or something. He spotted a man of medium height, small beady eyes, and unkempt dark hair being introduced. In those seconds, he got enough of a flash of Beth's memory to know that this was the man who had hurt her. Vlad's lips tightened as if he would bare his fangs and a low growl built from the pit of his stomach, but he realized that his main concern was Elizabeth. She stood a little away from him, shoulders hunched, looking like a frightened little girl.

He took her to a quiet room away from the festivities. "Are you all right, ma petite?" Deep concern rang through his voice. Vlad stood directly in front of her, willing her to meet his eyes, but she evaded him. He would not tolerate this, and simply picked her up, seating them in the nearest chair to comfort her on his lap. He hoped to make her feel safe and secure enough to trust him with the details of what had happened. Vlad was worried and amazed to feel her tremble in his arms. She, who hadn't shrank from confronting him once when she felt the situation warranted it, or she felt strongly enough, was shivering in fear in his arms. He pressed his lips to her temple, murmuring, "What is it, Sweetheart? Do you not feel well?"

Almost in tears but feeling enormously better within the safety of his embrace, Elizabeth sniffled and tucked her head against the side of his neck, putting her hand over his heart. Vlad melted, and very nearly forgot to project the thump-thump of a heartbeat. This was what he had craved, what he had missed for so long – someone to need him, to turn to him for help and guidance. A special woman to love and correct and worry over. It had been so long . . .

Elizabeth seized on his suggestion, leaning a little ways away from him. “No-no, I don’t feel well at all, Vlad. I want to go home.” A normal, over-used social lie.

Unfortunately, he knew it was not true, so he ignored it for the moment. His voice was soft and husky when he met her eyes. “I think it’s something much more important than that, isn’t it?” She nodded reluctantly, biting her lip. “Tell me and we will face it together.”

Beth swallowed tightly. “H-he’s the one,” she whispered pitifully.

“He who?”

“Ramon St. Peters,” she shuddered as she gave voice to his name, as if just saying it gave him some sort of power.

“And who is he to you?”

That delicate lower lip trembled until she again caught it with her teeth. “You asked me once if someone had hurt me.” Vlad nodded patiently, hating to see her in such distress. “He didn’t hurt me so much as scared me.” She laid her cheek trustingly on his chest.

Vlad kissed the top of her head, wishing he could will her some of his strength. “And what did he do?” he asked, not letting her see the grim line of his face, or the fact that he wasn’t really sure he wanted to know the full answer.

He traveled with her in her mind back to a time when she was younger, the summer of her seventeenth year. “He – we were courting, and it was the Fitzsimons’ summer ball. They throw it every year, although I haven’t been back since then.” The sadness in her voice made his heart crack, but he stayed still, patting her back soothingly. She would tell him in her own good time. “They had a garden wh-where couples go t-to . . . “

“Kiss and cuddle?” he supplied, when she seemed out of words.

Beth nodded vigorously, glad he had understood. “Ramon took me deep into the maze, where we were alone. He started to kiss me, and at first I liked it. But he wouldn’t stop when I told him to, and he pushed me down onto the ground.” Vlad could not keep himself from tensing violently as Beth relieved the frightening experience. “His hands were all over me at once – he was touching my br – chest and he pulled up my skirts . . .” She was shaking from the force of the memory, and Vlad shared the terror she had felt at being so helpless.

At his continued silence, Elizabeth thought that he might have blamed her for what happened, as many men would. “I tried to fight him, but he was so strong! I couldn’t get him off me – I didn’t want him to do that!” She dissolved into tears against his chest.

Vlad simply continued to rub her back. “I would never think that of you, Elizabet.” His unflinching faith in her character made her cry even harder. He gave her a minute to cry it out, then prompted, “And then what happened?” although he was almost afraid to hear.

Elizabeth sat up some, drying her eyes on a cloth of gold hanky embroidered with a red dragon that Vlad produced from somewhere. “Then I remembered what Father had told me to do if a boy got fresh – I kneed him in the family jewels, and he let me go.”

Vlad hugged her very tightly and laughed, glad that she had been strong enough to find her way out of a bad situation.

An almost-smile hid around Elizabeth’s mouth. “I think I made him throw up,” she whispered conspiratorially.

Vlad rubbed his nose to hers. “If you didn’t, I will,” he stated in all seriousness.

Luckily, Elizabeth took no notice or gave no credence to that threat. She had slid off his lap and was setting her appearance to rights. “I just want to say good bye to Catherine, then we can leave.”

Vlad caught her wrist and drew her back to him. “No, Elizabeth, we’re not leaving.”

He hated the fear he saw in her eyes at his pronouncement. “But –“

“Listen to me: you cannot run from this man all your life. You give him too much power.” She began to struggle away from him. “Cease!” His voice snapped like a whip. “I would never let anyone or anything hurt you. I will be there beside you, with my arm around you the whole time. But I cannot let you take the coward’s way out – you, my love, are not a cowardly woman.”

Beth met his eyes and knew that he would stick to his guns, and also that he was right. It was one of the most annoying habits he had – always being right.

And he was. Vlad stayed right next to her, arm securely anchored about her waist when Ramon came over to chat with her friends. Elizabeth made the introductions and also some very unfavorable comparisons. It seemed that every man paled in comparison to Vlad – he was so powerfully understated, so obviously had nothing to prove. Vlad was tall, muscular, striking-looking, strong and intelligent, titled and accomplished. Ramon began to remind her of a rodent, all beady eyes and innuendo.

Vlad carefully positioned himself behind her, a strong presence at her back with his hand splayed possessively over her stomach. His lips caressed her ear as he whispered, “Looks rather like a mouse, doesn’t he, Sweetheart?”

She had to stifle a giggle, rather unsuccessfully. Ramon shot her a look, but it was more an assessment of the man behind her. Vlad returned a fiery, contemptuous gaze as he pulled

Elizabeth back against him in a blatant territorial claim. He did not need to assess Ramon St. Peters. He knew what kind of man would force his attentions on an unwilling young girl. Ramon was very, very lucky that he had not completed what he had attempted, or Vlad would simply have had to kill him. As it was, he merely intended to frighten him enough to help him see the errors of his ways. Holding the younger man's gaze, Vlad reached into his mind quickly to show him a terrifying preview of exactly what evil would be visited upon him when Vlad got the opportunity. Ramon paled visibly and ran from the group, his hand over his mouth as he began to empty the contents of his stomach at the vile images Vlad had planted.

All innocence and light, Vlad commented at Ramon's fleeing back, "Poor man. Perhaps something he's eaten didn't agree with him."

Elizabeth looked up at him with a quizzical expression, until he smiled down at her, and batted his impossibly long eyelashes innocently. His expression became serious when he held her eyes and said, "I am so proud of you, Elizabetha. You were braver than most men, in both bad situations."

She swallowed awkwardly, but acknowledge, "Only because of you." Beth stood on tiptoe and bestowed a gentle kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

He looked away and cleared his throat, eyes full of tears of emotion. "You are welcome, my Valkyrie." To wipe away the bad thoughts she might have stewed in, he danced her around the room one last time, throwing his entire heart and mind into making it the best dance she'd ever experienced. Whereas Beth hoped this song would never end, Vlad was hoping for a lifetime of songs just like this.

Vlad preferred to deal with unpleasant things as quickly as possible, so it was only a few days later when Ramon St. Peters received a visitation that would change his life forever. During the time he waited for the confrontation, Vlad did some investigating and found out that Elizabeth was just one of many young women of the ton that Ramon had ruined, or come close to ruining. It was very late in the evening, around three a.m. when the young man finally made it back to his room in his parents' house – drunk, as usual, and smelling of a cheap whore's perfume. Naked, he climbed awkwardly into bed, falling face first into his pillow, snoring loudly.

He didn't see Vlad's form meld out of the corner shadows of his room, but even if he had he wouldn't have recognized it or the ethereal spirit next to him whose aid he had enlisted this evening for her special talents. Tonight, there was precious little of the warm, affectionate, loving human he did his damndest to portray every day. Ramon St. Peters was going to see exactly what demons Vlad kept under tight lock and key within himself. With any luck – but no active participation on Vlad's part – he wouldn't live through the experience.

Vlad nodded to Aeisha, who appeared to Ramon in his dream as an unbelievably gorgeous woman of sexual experience who laid Ramon back on his own bed and, after kissing and massaging him all over, began to deliver the most incredible, erotic, mind-blowing oral sex the man had ever experienced. A complete hedonist with no thought for anyone but himself, Ramon readily gave himself over to the wet dream, turning over in his bed to move his hips in his sleep with the rhythm of that fantastic, warm, wet mouth.

All of a sudden, the nature of the sucking on his manhood changed, and the pleasure descended rapidly into pain. Ramon sat

up, completely awake just in time to see a skeletal demon with a bloody red mouth swallow down his penis.

He opened his mouth to scream, and nothing came out. Ramon looked down to see where his manhood used to be, and there was a gaping hole – he had nothing left, no penis, no balls, no nothing, just a bloody red wound. He began to wretch uncontrollably at the thought of what had just happened.

Vlad appeared as himself at the end of the bed, dressed in the armor of his time – blood red and striated like the heavy muscles beneath his flesh, the hilt of his huge broadsword resting at his hip. “I know you!! I know you!!” Ramon screamed after emptying the contents of his stomach. “You’re that Prince that bitch Elizabeth’s been leading around by his –“

“ENOUGH!!” Vlad roared, his voice echoing in Ramon’s head so loudly that the man had to cover his ears. “You are not fit to even think her name, you filthy worm! She told me what you did to her, and I know what you’ve done or attempted to do with other young girls.” He hefted the sword experimentally, the weight a comfortable presence in his hand. Vlad chuckled. “Well, you’re not quite equipped to do that kind of thing any more, are you?”

Ramon’s screams became a high pitched keening as he scrambled away from Vlad, up against the headboard of the bed, cowering like the yellow-belly he was.

“What do you think, Ramon? Do you think that is a fitting punishment for one such as you, who uses his superior strength to force himself on innocent young women?”

Shaking all over, Ramon shook his head. He did not want to die. “Well, if I leave you like this, you will likely bleed out in a very short time, and in tremendous pain.” Vlad projected one steady thought into Ramon’s mind – pain. Unrelenting, unadulterated pain.

Ramon writhed, screaming, on the bed, caught in the terrible feeling Vlad was conjuring.

After a moment, Vlad let up and Ramon panted on the bed. He appeared next to Ramon's bedside, paralyzing the boy with fear while leaning over him wearing the face of the devil himself – bone white, with festering yellow skin pulled tightly over each curve of his skull. His eyes blazed fiery red, long razor sharp fangs extended past the taut parted red lips. Vlad's forked tongue poked obscenely out from between those fangs, licking toward Ramon's belly like a snake. His fetid breath wheezed out of hell itself as he drew himself and the sword up over Ramon's body in a flash, screaming, "Or would you prefer a quick death, split from stem to stern like this?" Vlad poised the tip of the sword over Ramon's unprotected belly, launching it downward in a terrible arch fit to split the man in half.

Ramon screamed and screamed and screamed, until he realized that he was alone again, and shaking badly, but unharmed. He lit the bedside candle, and the first thing he checked was the family jewels. Everything was where it was supposed to be, despite the vivid nightmare. There were no bloodstains on the crisp white sheets, and eventually, near dawn, he convinced himself that it had all been the result of too much absinthe.

"Have to stay away from the hard stuff for a while," he chuckled nervously to himself. For the first time since he was a boy, he donned a nightshirt, for all the protection it would give him from the insane meandering of his own mind.

After blowing out the candle, he lay for a moment on his back, still breathing a little heavily, then shook his head as if to clear out the unpleasant thoughts and rolled onto his left side - right into the demon Vlad who was stretched out on his side next to Ramon like a lover. Vlad hissed almost lovingly, "If I hear of just one more girl that you have even begun to frighten with your

advances, you will die. By my choice, not yours. In Elizabeth's name, I have spared you. Make amends before you see me again."

The long, snake-like tongue flicked over his cheek while Ramon lay paralyzed, his mouth hanging open. Vlad didn't bother to conceal his exit as he melted away in a green fog, leaving behind him a mental devastation it would take years for Ramon to truly recover from. In truth, sleep would elude him every night for the rest of his life until he became so exhausted that he could not keep himself awake. It was precious little to pay, Vlad thought, for the devastation he had wreaked on innocent people's lives. This Vlad knew from personal experience.

Chapter VI

The time had come, Vlad decided – after several successful months of what he considered “pre-courting”- for the real courtship to commence. The master bowed to the servant one afternoon when he asked for Armand’s permission to formally court his daughter.

Armand wondered what the Prince thought he had been doing all these months, but kept his comment to himself. He knew that he could deny him permission, and there would be no reprisals. But if he was aiming for marriage, then there could be no better man for Elizabeth than Vlad, and no better woman for Vlad than his little Beth. He was a man that had known much tragedy in his long life, but she seemed to keep him from dwelling on darker thoughts, and could draw a smile from him effortlessly. It was very obvious that Vlad was besotted with her, although Armand was less sure about Elizabeth’s feelings for him. She would benefit if he actually took her – his great strength would heal her weak lungs, and she would have a longer than usual life.

“You have my permission. Now all you need is her consent.”

They shook hands, as equals, then hugged as old friends.

When Vlad formally asked Elizabeth if he could court her, it was after he had delivered a blistering spanking for sassing him, and sent her to bed in the early afternoon. The cause of her unusual, unreasonable behavior puzzled him. Perhaps it was a lack of sleep. He had been visiting her quite regularly in her dreams; wringing tremendous, exhausting orgasms from her that left her practically passed out. That would have to end, or at least taper off, he could see.

She had been out of sorts all day, lashing out at first her father and then him, when all they were trying to do was help her. It was unlike her to be so bratty. When her attitude descended into outright nastiness, he had had enough, and said so out loud. Her mood was so atrocious she didn't even see it coming when he bent her over the back of the overstuffed couch in the library, folding her skirts up to expose her bottom then pulling down her frilly pantalets. But she recognized the position and knew what he was going to do. Beth began to scream immediately, not even attempting to maintain any sort of decorum. Armand left the room. It was hard for him to accept how Vlad handled her misbehavior, as his method was quite different from the way Armand would have handled it. But he also knew that she had been better behaved since he trusted the Prince to correct her.

Elizabeth's struggles were to absolutely no avail. Her wrists were caught efficiently at the small of her back by one of his big, long fingered hands, while the other hand descended with terrible regularity on the plump cheeks of her seat. Unlike the other times he had corrected her, Vlad did not lecture through this punishment. Why talk to someone who was so obviously not listening? The only thing she would respond to and remember in the future was a hot, sore bottom, and he was surely going to see that she got that. Although the spanking was a truly thorough one, she had not surrendered to it. Her cries were of anger and rebellion, and she continued to struggle in earnest trying to get away from his stinging palm.

His face set in a sad, grim line, Vlad jerked her up by the wrists and brought her over to Armand's desk, bending her over it into the same position she had been in over the couch. Elizabeth, who was now beginning to utilize a vocabulary that would make a sailor blush, heard a drawer open and then close.

The next thing she felt and heard was not his broad, open palm but something decidedly harder and unbelievably less forgiving than that. Now, Vlad knew, she was screaming for the right reasons. The paddle he was using on her was one used on school children the world wide, and it was just the right severity for her - light oak, fourteen inches long with holes drilled in its surface to increase the sting. He continued the spanking with unrelenting determination; paddle rising and falling swiftly and mercilessly.

He knew the moment she gave in and accepted her punishment, finally sobbing that she was sorry for her behavior and no longer struggling against his correction.

She shuddered under the paddles relentless assault on her bare butt. "No, more please! I'll be good! I promise!"

He administered at least twenty-five more strokes after that, leaving her bottom a mass of swollen red welts. Vlad let the paddle drop to the floor where he was, gathered her into his arms to carry her up to her bedroom, horrifying her maid at the impropriety of his actions. He bespelled the irritating woman and ordered her out of the room, undressing his precious girl while she leaned against him, still sobbing heartrendingly. A quick search through her dresser drawers found a white, high collared nightgown, which he slipped over her head like a child, then tucked her into her big bed on her tummy.

He stretched his length out next to her as she arranged herself carefully under the covers. "I'm so sorry, Vlad! I don't know why I was so crabby today - I said some horrible things . . ."

Vlad gently stroked the hair away from her eyes soothingly. "It's all right, angel. You're forgiven. You must apologize to your

Father, though. I think you're just overtired from all of the running around you've been doing and I've been occupying your time. It's also close to that time of the month – “

“VLAD!” she squealed at his improper comment.

He genuinely couldn't help it. He had always been able to tell when a woman he was close to was nearing her period. Perhaps something to do with his sensitivity to the smell of blood. Vlad caught her gaze. “Sleep, little one,” he suggested hypnotically, and she did.

Vlad mentally called Armand, who came running as if there must've been some emergency. “I'm going to stay with her. I just didn't want to offend your sensibilities. I want to be the first thing she sees when she wakes, and I will ask her then.”

Armand was taken aback. “When you've just given her a spanking? Do you think that's the wisest time, my Prince?”

With a small, knowing smile, he answered, “Yes, I do.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Armand left them alone.

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It was several hours before Elizabeth awoke. Vlad had called for small tray of finger foods to have on hand. He could feel her slow trip back to consciousness from where he sat in a chair next to the bed, and was staring into her eyes the moment she opened them. “Did you sleep well?”

She nodded; shy about having a man in her room, especially one who seemed to be the star in her recent bout of erotic dreams. Her eyes bugged when he joined her on the bed, stretching out in front of her so that her entire field of vision was filled with him.

Vlad took her small left hand in his and kissed the ring finger. “I have a very serious question to ask you.”

As asleep as she was, he had her full attention.

“Will you be my wife?”

Her heart melted through the floor. She’d had no idea he was going to ask something like that. “Vlad, I –” she sputtered.

He forestalled any negative response she might have by rushing almost nervously through a small speech. “I know it’s moving a little fast for you, and I really only meant to ask you if I could court you, but I don’t just want to court you, I want to marry you. I want to snatch you up before anyone else does.”

Elizabeth grinned wryly. “Does it look to you like gentlemen have been beating down my door?”

He grinned back, then growled playfully, “Well, you never seem to want for a dancing partner . . .”

“Dancing and courting are not comparable, Vlad.”

His expression became frighteningly serious as he pulled a small jewelers’ box out of his pocket, opening it to reveal a female version of the big dragon insignia ring he always wore. It was done in 18-karat gold, with a more delicate golden filigree, as opposed to his bolder, heavier ring. “Will you accept me, Elizabeth Jacqueline? Into your mind, your heart, your bed?” his voice was the stuff of her dreams, and she answered him with a soul-rending kiss. Vlad slipped the ring onto her finger, whispering, “As of right now, you are mine and I am yours. No ceremony, no church, no one and nothing more than our everlasting commitment to each other will keep us together. Please never remove the ring. I like you wearing my symbol.”

She surprised him by blurting “I was going to ask you for a ring like this if you – if we . . . I love the ring you wear, but it would fall of my finger.” Vlad, of course, had known this. “I

like wearing your symbol, too,” she whispered, “I love you,” and his heart swelled with the potent combination of their happiness.

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Unfortunately, it had gotten to the point where Vlad could no longer delay the necessity of traveling out of town for about a week. He hated to do it, especially when they had just committed themselves to each other, but there was nothing he could do to avoid it. Several situations were demanding his exclusive attention. Beth, who was used to her father traveling, understood perfectly when he explained it to her. Vlad promised that in the future, when they were married, he would always try to take her with him when he traveled.

On the return trip home, he had the driver whip the coach’s horses into a frenzy trying to get home to her before she tucked herself into bed. There had been literally no communication between them in the past week, and he missed her terribly. When he stepped into the house, he knew immediately that there was something wrong, for this house was always active and vital, and somehow it was almost deathly still. No one greeted him at the door, not even Armand.

As Gregor took his cloak, Vlad commented wryly, “Well it appears I was not even missed, hmmm”

Stiff and formal as always, Gregor responded, “I’m sure Miss Elizabeth would be down here to greet you, Sir, if she were able.”

Those words stopped him in his tracks. “Why wouldn’t she be able?” he frowned.

Gregor looked befuddled. “Why, because she’s deathly ill, Sir. She’s upstairs surrounded by those blood-letters as we speak,

not that they've done her a whit of good - " Vlad didn't wait for him to finish his sentence, but took the stairs two and three at a time. He could smell the blood they were draining out of her well before he reached her door.

He burst into the room, growling like a madman. "Leave her alone!!! Get out of here!" He practically threw the doctors and Armand bodily from the room. Alone with her finally, he was terrified to hear how labored her breathing had become. As he bent over the bed, he took in the bluish tint to her lips and the coldness of her fingertips. She wasn't circulating enough air to her extremities. His beautiful Beth's usually healthy, roses-and-cream complexion looked like paste, and he sprang into action, commandeering the whole household staff to await his orders.

First, he called on the cook to brew very hot, very strong coffee. Then he had Elizabeth's maid, Biddy, stoke the fire in the room and hang a kettle of hot water to boil, spreading steam into the air. Carefully, he raised Beth from her bed, frightened at how frail she had gotten from her illness, and put several big pillows behind her head and back, keeping her at an incline that made it easier for her to breathe more and wheeze less. When he had pumped several cups of steaming black coffee into her unwilling body, and the room was so humid he had stripped to just his breeches and shirt, he thanked all the servants – who would have done anything he commanded for their Miss Elizabeth – and closed the door behind them, so that they were alone.

Vlad sat gingerly on the side of her bed, knowing she was not really with him. She was so exhausted from trying to breathe that she had practically given up. Well, he was not about to let her do that. Knowing that he had to be extremely careful not to take too much blood, Vlad bespelled her to sleep, then sank his fangs quickly and efficiently into the bend of her elbow, taking just enough to exchange some of her blood for some of his strength. A special enzyme in his saliva healed the wounds almost instantly, but the exchange created a closeness between them that hadn't been

present before. He knew more intimately now how horribly awful she felt, and how very terrifying it was for her to be suffocated slowly by her own body.

She bore his first mark, for now and for ever. The only thing that could release her was his own death.

His total devotion to her recovery completely won the hearts of Armand's staff. Vlad never left the Miss's side once. He made special accommodations so that he could sleep in the wing-backed chair by the side of her bed, alert to any movement she made, and would let no one - not even her father - tend her but himself. Even Biddy was given other duties, but because she could see that her charge was recovering, she bowed out gracefully.

Elizabeth was aware of very little for the first few days, merely a feeling of being cared for, and the constant presence in her head and at her side of Vlad's deep, comforting voice. He talked to her through out the whole episode, either idle chatter or explaining to her what he was doing and why, knowing that though she wasn't always conscious, she could hear him and could especially detect the tone of his voice, which he kept calm and soothing. She had terrible coughing spells, at first, crying at the pain they caused in her lungs. But Vlad knew it was the best thing for her to get all of that stuff up and out. When she'd finished a particularly bad spasm, he laid her back against the wall of pillows he'd created for her. Elizabeth shut her eyes, breathing heavily, and straining against her compulsion to start another round of coughing. Almost clinically, Vlad untied the decorative ribbon at her throat, and unbuttoned the neckline of her nightgown until he could separate the two sides and expose her breastbone. Elizabeth felt a sudden draft and looked down, startled to see that he was reaching his hand out toward her nakedness. "No," she croaked.

"Shhh. Do not be afraid." His touch was entirely sexless, meant only to heal. Vlad's big palm covered her breastbone, and

she could feel the warmth emanating from it into her lungs. His touch bathed away the pain in her chest. “Sleep now, my love.”

He took care of her in even the most intimate of ways. Elizabeth was terribly embarrassed when she realized this, but Vlad downplayed it. “You would do the same for me, no?” Honestly, she didn’t know if she had the strength to do so, but she nodded her head weakly. “Do not concern yourself with this, Beth. I do not.”

Vlad’s major challenge during this time, once it was readily apparent that his efforts had been successful and she was recovering, was how to keep his little termagant from trying to recover too soon. Worse than that, she knew that the seriousness of her illness would definitely keep him from administering any form of correction that might bring her to tears, which would complicate her breathing. He did everything he could to keep her occupied – he read to her, talked to her, told her stories each night before tucking her in, played (and lost, mostly) at every known manner of card or board game with her. Luckily for her, she was basically a good girl, but occasionally, especially when she fretted about being bed-bound, she lashed out nastily.

If she were healthy, he would not have hesitated to put her over his lap and redden her bottom with the palm of his hand. He would never endanger her health just for a spanking. So he clenched his jaw at her whiny rants, until, after having spent the day dancing attendance on her, he – who was lying on his side on the bed in front of her, propped up on one arm playing a game of chess – stopped playing and merely looked at her after her most recent diatribe about how bored she was. It took her several minutes to realize that he wasn’t making a move, but was merely staring at her intently. Elizabeth flushed with embarrassment and bowed her head. She knew she was sounding like the meanest fishwife, but she was so damned sick of being sick!!

When Vlad spoke, it was with the kindest, softest voice. “You realize, Elizabet, that I am remembering each and every naughty outburst for rebuke later.”

Her mouth hung open because she knew exactly how he would rebuke her, then snapped shut, clacking her teeth loudly. Tears filled her eyes as she pouted her lips unhappily, which was precisely what he didn’t want. Well, he was not going to take back a true statement, but it was not something he wanted her dwelling on now. Instead, bundling her up as best he could, he picked her up in his strong arms and carried her out to the veranda, letting her breathe the warmish air for a few moments, knowing it would do her a world of good, both mentally and physically to draw some deep breaths of fresh – but not too cold – air.

She fell asleep in his arms, which had been his intention, and he laid her back in the bed with the most tender of care. For a few moments, he merely watched her sleep, wondering at his good fortune and what he had done to deserve finding such a precious love.

Chapter VII

Their betrothal permitted Vlad even more entrée into her private life than he had already claimed. He purchased several entirely new wardrobes for her, from the skin out, as well as spending extravagantly on jewelry. He knew her favorite gem was amethyst, and got her a set of earrings, pendant, ring, and bracelet that were well sized and of nearly perfect gems. Then he bought her sets each of rubies, sapphires, topaz, etc. She thanked him prettily for each gift, but he knew nothing he had presented her so far had turned her head until he gifted her with her own wolf cub. Her squeals of delight filled the foyer as she drown him - and the dog – in kisses. As she sat cuddling the puppy, he shook his head.

Beth glanced up at him. “Why do you have that ridiculous grin on your face for?”

Well, he’d never get conceited around her, anyway. He squatted down in front of her and said, “You, my dear, are the most unusual woman I’ve ever met. I’ve just spent a veritable fortune on you in clothes and jewels, and you thanked me perfunctorily for all of it. But I bring you one mangy hound, gotten at no expense to my pocket, and you melt in my arms.”

Her smile shone radiantly up at him as the pup tried to lick her ears. “I am not your average woman, my Prince.”

“Which is a very good thing, since I’m not your average man,” he answered, kissing her lightly.

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Vlad invited father and daughter out to his estate the next week, but to Vlad’s consternation, Elizabeth declined. Catherine Johnson’s family was having a ball, and of course, as Catherine’s dearest friend, she was invited and intended to go.

Her fiancé, however, was not being very cooperative. She knew that stubborn look on his face meant trouble for her. “Your father and I have to conduct some business so I cannot be here. I will not have you attend the ball unescorted.”

She stood her ground firmly but politely. “As it is the only ball the Johnsons host all year, and, as Catherine is my best friend, I will attend the ball. Jeffrey Johnson has offered to escort me.”

He took a step closer to her; feeling the force of her will and letting her feel his. Although he would punish her for misbehaviors, he had no interest in breaking her spirit, merely bending her to his will. Vlad was glad she had taken a stance, though he would not allow her to have her way. “Elizabeth, you may stay behind if you wish, but I forbid you to go to the Johnsons without me. Is that clear?”

Her eyebrow rose. “Do you doubt my fidelity that much, Vlad?”

“Not in the slightest,” he replied without hesitation, and she knew it was not jealousy that made him lay down the law. “As your betrothed, I prefer to be the only man who escorts you anywhere. Is that understood?”

As she intended to disobey him regardless of what he said, she could not meet his eyes. “Yes.”

He tipped her chin up so that she had to look into his eyes. His voice lowered several octaves. “And you realize there will be serious consequences if you disobey me?”

Creamy cheeks blushed a dusky rose. “Yes,” she whispered, knowing what would happen to her if he found out.

“Good,” he replied, knowing there was a high probability that she would do exactly as she pleased, despite his command. In fact, he was betting on it.

~ ~ ~

When Elizabeth arrived at the Johnsons’ she was out of breath – not because of her asthma, but because of the excitement she felt at openly defying Vlad’s order. She had been terribly nervous all day, jumping at every little sound, as if he was going to appear out of the mist with a disappointed look on his face, chin tucked to his chest, paddle at the ready, as if the mere thought of her disobedience could conjure him to deliver her chastisement.

Jeffrey had been the soul of a gentleman, but despite all his attempts at putting her at ease, she was practically shaking when they got to the dance. Catherine greeted her friend with a huge hug and kiss, congratulating her on her recent engagement. Every eligible woman in the ton was terribly jealous, as well as those who weren’t so eligible. Not one woman who had plied her charms in Vlad’s direction had been able to turn his head from Elizabeth, even a little. Whatever she was doing, she would need to keep it up to keep the sharks at bay.

As the evening wore on she danced with several men she knew and slowly began to relax, realizing that nothing was going to happen. Vlad and her father were probably sharing a bottle of port in the study at Vlad’s estate several hundred miles away. As

always, any man she came close to compared unfavorably to her dashing fiancé, and she had already decided to make it a fairly early night – not so early as to seem impolite, but early enough.

It was as she was stumbling around the floor with Darius Hemmingway – who was almost as atrocious a dancer as she was unless she was in Vlad’s arms – that she felt him stop abruptly, then found herself unceremoniously thrust into her fiancé’s arms. Vlad never blinked, merely lifted her over his shoulder and carried her unceremoniously from the room like a sack of potatoes. Embarrassment made Elizabeth think her face was going to explode, but she wasn’t about to give everyone a show and try to struggle from her upended position, butt up over his shoulder, one wrist caught in his hand to keep her in place.

When they were clear of the doors, she commanded, “Put me down!”

But Vlad continued as if she hadn’t spoken, depositing her in his royal coach, then quickly following her in, shutting the door with a final sounding thump. Suddenly, the realization of her precarious position came home to roost with a vengeance. Well, her father had always said that the best defense was a good offense . . .

“How dare you carry me out of the ball like that, in front of all those people? I’ve never been so embarrassed in all my life!” Good. Angry indignation might help.

As he pulled her into that uncomfortably familiar position over his lap, Vlad murmured, “Embarrassment is the least of your problems, Elizabeth.” In no time, she found herself naked from the waist down, exposed to his heated gaze and blistering palm. *THWAP!!!*

His first stroke was enough to make her reconsider her naughty behavior, but much too late to stop the inevitable. God, he was spanking her so hard!

“Ow, Vlad, stop!”

Her pleas fell on deaf ears, as he was delivering a stern lecture punctuated by severe, stinging slaps to her quickly reddening cheeks. “You’ve been punished for this before, Elizabeth. I guess those punishments were just not hard enough to make you remember to obey me when I tell you not to do something!”

“No more, aiiiiiow, I’m sorry!” Within fifteen swats, he’d reduced her to a blubbering five-year-old, and it seemed he had no intention of stopping. A small hand found its way to cover her bottom, but it did her no good. He simply caught both of her wrists at the small of her back and continued with the thrashing, spanking her relentlessly until the coach stopped in front of her house. Vlad stripped her undergarments off her legs, then grabbed the sobbing girl by the upper arm and marched her into the house. “Into the library. Now!”

She entered ahead of him. “Get your nose into that corner this instant! And don’t even think of rubbing your bottom. I’m nowhere near finished with it yet. I am very disappointed at your behavior, Elizabeth.” Elizabeth’s nose was in the far corner of the book-lined room, once her favorite escape, but now also a place of terrible punishment. When he was here, he almost always punished her in this room. His last words struck fear into her heart. Her butt cheeks were stinging terribly, and she didn’t know if she could take much more. Apparently, she would have no choice but to take what he deemed a necessary punishment.

Sooner than she would have liked, but longer than she wanted, his voice – soft but firm – called her over to him where he sat at the desk. He had cleaned off the top, and Beth knew that he was going to bend her over it to continue her chastisement. Tears leaked out of her eyes uncontrollably, but she swallowed and assumed the position without having to be asked. An exceptional

young woman, Vlad thought admiringly, though he was still going to have to spank the daylights out of her.

He drew a deep breath, and laid his hand just at the small of her back. “I’m sorry you found it necessary to defy me, little one. You know I don’t like to have to spank you, but I will not shirk from it, either. I expect obedience from you, Elizabeth. You’re my fiancée. An extension of me. Your behavior reflects on me, and it must be above reproach. Hence the strictness of this punishment.”

Vlad cleared his throat, terribly, terribly excited by Elizabeth and the situation itself. It was both a boon and a detriment to him that he could feel exactly how his punishments felt to his victim. He knew just how much pain Elizabeth was in, how truly sorry she was that she’d misbehaved, and that she could take much, much more. “I am going to give you thirty hard strokes with the strap. I will count them for you. You must stay in position for them, my darling. It will not be easy.” He moved her up just a little, so that her fingers could clench the edge of the desk.

“One.”

The first stroke cracked against her already abused bottom as violently as the last, eliciting a scream that echoed off the walls of the room and back to Vlad. He paid it no mind as he fell into a terrible rhythm, arm rising and falling with exactly the same strength from beginning to end. Elizabeth would never have the luxury that some women have, where their exacting partners get tired and the last strokes are nowhere near as hard as the first. He could lay the strap to her bottom for days and never tire.

“Ooh, no, I c-can’t stand anymore!” She would be good, she would never disobey him again, she would do anything he wanted if he would please, please, please, not strap her any more. Eventually, her screams and pleas died out as she lost her voice and almost herself completely to the pain of that vicious leather strap.

But he continued resolutely through the entire thirty, laying the strap down next to her after the final stroke. “Stay right where you are. Don’t move.”

Elizabeth was such a mass of pain and suffering that she couldn’t have moved if she’d wanted to. Her fingers were permanently curled into position, clutching at the desk as if it held her salvation from the unrelenting rise and fall of the terrible implement the man she had decided to marry wielded with such awful accuracy.

Vlad sat on the couch, watching her sobs slowly wind down to sniffles. She had been very good, had not moved during her punishment, and was still in the same position he had left her in, regardless of the embarrassment he knew she must be feeling at being draped and exposed - skirts up over her back - over her fathers big oak desk with an swollen bottom that shone red like a beacon behind her.

“You may go stand in the corner, Elizabeth, hands on your head. If you rub your bottom at any time, I will give you fifteen more strokes.” He snapped open the evening paper and pretended to read it, covertly watching her make her way stiffly to the assigned place. To make her humiliation complete, he came up behind her and tucked her skirts up into the neckline of her dress, exposing the mess of her bottom again as a gentle but effective reminder of her of her naughtiness.

After what had seemed like an eternity to Beth, he spoke from behind her. “You have my permission to go up to bed now, Elizabeth. I will be up shortly to tuck you in. We will leave tomorrow for my house. Be sure you’re ready.” He had half a mind to make her travel tonight on that sore bottom, but decided she’d been punished enough. Tomorrow would be bad enough bumping and bouncing on one very swollen and blistered butt.

When Vlad entered her room, it was completely dark, but he could see as well as any predator in the night. She was on her

tummy, of course, wide-awake and still sniffing a little. He kissed her cheek and touched her hair with her fingertips. “Goodnight, my angel.”

To his surprise, Elizabeth snorted derisively. “H-how can you call me an angel after you just p-punished me so severely for misbehaving?”

He sank into the chair that hadn’t been moved since that time she was sick and he had tended her. “Just because you are naughty occasionally doesn’t mean you can’t be my angel.”

She struggled up onto her elbows. “Why do you want to marry me, Vlad? It seems I am forever falling short of your expectations of my behavior. Maybe I’m not submissive enough to be a good wife to you.” She was voicing some deeply felt concerns and he was listening intently. Somewhat sarcastically, she blurted out, “If you want a lapdog, why don’t you just go buy one? Why would you marry a woman who is so obviously not what you want?”

Vlad growled low in his throat. “I do not want a lapdog, Elizabet. I want an intelligent, obedient wife. I want you.”

Another snort. “Intelligence I have too much of. Obedience, not nearly enough for you.”

He could not control himself; he had to bury his fingers in her hair. Vlad sighed heavily. “I do not ask for perfection, merely that you try not to be so willfully disobedient. You had no intention of obeying me when I made my request, did you?”

Elizabeth diverted the subject. “You don’t request, Vlad. You order, and it gets my back up.”

So here was the gist of the problem. She didn’t like to be told what to do. Well, she’d just have to get over it. “You must forgive me, Sweetheart, I am not a civilized man. I am a warrior, used to giving orders and having them followed without question. Lives depended on it.”

“Well, my life doesn’t depend on your orders – “

He sat next to her on the bed, taking one of her hands in both of his. “How do you know? What if your survival did depend on obeying me – would you want to pick and choose what you obeyed and what you didn’t then?”

“That’s not the issue now - ” Beth tried to retrieve her hands.

He would not release her, not now, not ever. “That is the only issue, my love. I will protect you, Elizabeth, even from your headstrong self.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead in an almost fatherly gesture. “I will not expect or accept anything less than your obedience in all things. You have experienced the consequences of disobedience. Is it not easier to obey?”

Vlad left her to figure things out for herself, trusting that she would come to the right conclusion. Elizabeth was not so sure.

Chapter VIII

In the end, of course, Elizabeth stayed with Vlad despite the fact that he smacked her bottom almost daily. She felt drawn to him like a moth to flame. When he entered a room, because of her embarrassingly erotic dreams, her nipples came to point and she felt a twinge in her lower stomach. Though he was very strict with her, he was also very physically affectionate, and encouraged her to return it. He liked to have his arm around her, and kissed her at any given opportunity. Sometimes he played with her hair, and allowed her the same access to his long red tresses. Elizabeth loved to cuddle up with him and read the paper together, or take a stroll in the garden, or just sit and watch the fire all evening while his hands took improper, but somehow familiar, liberties with her body, and she with his.

Vlad didn't know how much longer he could wait to truly consummate their relationship, so he insisted that they marry no more than three months after their engagement was announced. The ceremony would be conducted in Roumanian – a family tradition, he told Elizabeth, hating the small white lie. Considering the state of his soul, he could not enter a church, so the person who would be conducting the ceremony would be an old friend of his that used to be a priest, who could make everything look and sound religiously engendered, but at no danger to Vlad.

His bride was the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen, bar none, and he was sure that God would have been upset at the

marriage regardless, as he spent the entire time fully erect, waiting impatiently to take his new wife to their chambers. There were few people in attendance, just Armand and some of the servants. He had asked Elizabeth if she minded a very small, private ceremony, and she had readily agreed, not needing to display either her catch or his wealth in an ostentatious manner.

It was the happiest day of Elizabeth's life, and she fairly glowed with it. Her smile spread from ear to ear as Vlad watched her indulgently. Armand left after a polite time, and they were alone in their house. Everything Vlad owned now had Elizabeth's name on it. He would share his wealth and his knowledge with her, binding her to him not with children but with shared experiences over a very long life together. He both anticipated and dreaded the day when he revealed his true self to her, wondering if he had had enough time to prepare her for the reality of his existence, or if she would reject him as the monster he had been once upon a time.

He drew a deep breath, chasing his nervous thoughts away with it. Now was not the time to worry about what would come years and years in the future. Vlad extended his big, long-fingered hand to Elizabeth and she placed her smaller one within it trustingly as he guided them up the staircase to their chambers. He had had all of her things moved into it when she first arrived a fortnight ago, so that she would feel comfortable there when they finally came to share it – well, share it as much as he could share any room with a woman. Vlad would have to depart each morning early to get some sleep in the coffin he had secreted behind a wall in the west wing of the house. He had perfected the act before, with Isabella, until he finally confirmed for her one night what he knew she had begun to suspect. It had amazed him that she had taken it completely in stride and the hundred and two years they had spent together were, up to this point, the happiest he had known since his time as a human with the original Elizabetha.

But now he had a new beginning with a new bride, who was looking at him a little apprehensively. His erotic visitations had

dwindled off somewhat out of sheer necessity. If he had continued to visit her in her dreams, he wouldn't have been able to keep himself from her in reality. He was of a mind that his invasion of her dreams would help ease her mind about what occurred physically between a husband and a wife. Victorian women were purposely kept in the dark about matters of the flesh. But Elizabeth had already known the mechanics from being around animals, and she was basically an extremely sexual person herself – at least in her subconscious. Vlad intended to bring that to the forefront of her personality.

Right now, however, she was looking at him like she was the prey and he was the hunter, as if she expected that he was going to throw her down and rape her where she stood. It seemed he was ever playing roles with her that he'd never experienced before. She kept him on his toes, his petite. Elizabeth shivered with nervousness, and he stoked the fire a little, then helped her off with her gown. Ladies maid was never an occupation to which he had aspired, but he had seen it done enough to know what he was about. Despite the fact that he would eventually disallow any clothing in the bed between them, Vlad buttoned her into a voluminous nightgown, then tucked her into bed. Elizabeth had not made a sound during his entire performance, and as she lay on her side watching him disrobe, he thought her eyes might burst, they were so round and startled looking.

Vlad owned no pajamas, and he wanted to at least attempt to conceal his aroused state, so he belted a purple silk dressing robe at his waist and crawled into bed beside her. He had sensed her fear mounting ever since her father left and she knew they were expected to consummate their marriage this evening. It was not a direct fear of him, merely of the general unknown, and of the pain of losing her virginity, as she had no way of knowing that he would keep her from feeling anything but the utmost in pleasure. Elizabeth's eyes settled on the broad, muscled expanse of hairy chest revealed by the opening of his robe and were caught there, as

if she couldn't look away. Vlad merely held his arms open to her patiently, allowing her the time to realize that he was not going to force himself on her, and let her come to him.

Her eyes crept up to his, and he smiled in what he hoped was a comforting manner. Beth launched herself into his embrace, bowling him over a little. He cuddled her naturally to his shoulder, holding her against him by his brawny left arm, then arranged the covers over them. "Are you warm enough, my wife?"

She nodded, feeling his chest hairs tickling her soft skin, not trusting herself to speak with out a shaking voice.

"Good." Vlad kissed the top of her head, then snuggled into the warm blankets and concentrated on breathing deeply and slowly, while other parts of his body ran rampant at the soft, warm feel of her against his side.

After a few moments of silent darkness, she peeped up at him. "Aren't we going to – to –" Elizabeth could not quite bring herself to finish that sentence.

Vlad's big hand rubbed up and down her arm soothingly. "I think you're a bit too excited right now with all the planning and the ceremony and everything. We'll wait a little, until you're more comfortable."

Beth thought her jaw would drop onto Vlad's chest. But wasn't he supposed to be doing that thing that would hurt her between her legs by now? Didn't he find her appealing in that way? Had she done something wrong? Biddy had half-told her what to expect, since she had no mother to address such a delicate issue. Biddy had said she must submit her body to her husband, that it was a very distasteful matter that would hurt like the dickens the first time, but that she must open her legs and think of England until he was done. Oh, she had also said that a considerate husband didn't bother his wife with the horrid matter but once or twice a month.

This information clashed terribly with her volcanic nightly orgasms. What if one was not supposed to enjoy the act with one's husband? What if Vlad thought she was a low, common woman for her pleasure in his touch? Would he then regret having married her?

Vlad knew the disturbing bent of her thoughts, and took matters into his hands, bespelling her to sleep when she continued to worry into the night. He would solve her problems in the magical pre-dawn hours, before she had a chance to make things worse in her mind than they already were.

~ ~ ~

Her night-lover came to her in a dream again, and for some reason, she knew he shouldn't have, but in truth she responded to him automatically in a way that could no more be prevented than the tides. Floods of pleasure washed through her body at his familiar touch as he suckled at her nipples greedily, razing each delicately with just the edges of his teeth while his gentle fingertips tickled low over her stomach. When her legs came up reflexively to bar his way, Vlad whispered huskily at her lips, "Let me in, my wife," and Elizabeth came fully awake as her legs fell apart at the familiar command.

Vlad was leaning over her, much in the same way he had in her dreams, loving her as relentlessly with his mouth, hands, and body as he punished her bottom when she misbehaved. When his fingertips found the source of her pleasure, she could not prevent a low moan from escaping the back of her throat, but she brought it up short lest its animal nature disturb him, clamping her jaw shut with a click of teeth.

An answering growl leapt from his mouth as he gently bit the spot at the inside of her elbow where he had first marked her as

his. “Do not suppress your feelings with me, Elizabeth. I would hear from your own sweet lips if you enjoy what I’m doing to you. You must always be completely truthful with me in our bed. It is a magic place where pleasure reigns and nothing is forbidden.” With that he began to rub her special spot over and over, watching her bite her lip as if she would defy him, but after he dipped a little lower and gathered a finger full of dew only to return to worry her pleasure button mercilessly, she could tolerate it no longer and gave in to him, arching her back, raising her hips to greet his intimate caress with a full-throated moan.

“Yes, that’s it, Sweetheart,” Vlad encouraged, all the while testing her readiness, checking how well seated her maidenhead was.

Elizabeth’s lower body was achingly clenched; poised for the release only he could give her. Slowly, he moved between her legs and positioned his swollen member at the entrance to her body. Beth shrank from him in fear, until he began to speak in a low, hypnotic voice, bespelling her so that she would have no pain from him this night.

“No, darling, do not cringe. Look into my eyes to know the truth from me.” The eyes she turned to him were brimming with both fear and tears. “I would never, ever hurt you in this way. Ever, my love. Trust me.” Before she was completely under, two tears trailed down her flushed cheeks.

As he had no doubt as to her innocence, Vlad considered this merely a matter to be over with, so that they might enjoy each other. He entered her swiftly, in one thrust to the hilt, and was very glad that she had felt nothing, as it would not have been easy without his special abilities. As it was, her adoring gaze and the smell of her blood drove him completely mad. He reached out to connect his mind with hers, so that they could feel each other’s orgasms. Hers was of such strength and duration that it careened him into his own. As he recovered on top of her, he could still feel

her contracting around him. What a marvelous woman he had found!

Vlad left her gently, pulling out before he undid the spell that captivated her. Tears flooded her eyes again, and he was already out of bed to retrieve a cool compress for her. She almost fought him when he went to place it between her legs, but his sharp “Elizabet!” made her recline back against the pillows. His touch as gentle as a butterfly’s, Vlad cleaned her up then joined her again to pull her back to his front, keeping a strong arm around her waist and his lips at her neck, teasing himself that he would bite her, but knowing he wouldn’t. “You must never deny me access to your beautiful body, mi vida.” A big hand brushed the hair away from her face.

“But you – we – what if what you want to do is not proper?” she whispered.

His voice was firm. “If it brings us pleasure, then it is proper within this bed, or in the garden – “

“The garden?” she was aghast.

“Or on the dining room table – “

Elizabeth tried to sit up and look back at him. Vlad was grinning like an idiot at her outraged expression. “In the dining –“

He moved in a flash, putting her under him, where she belonged, positioning himself between her legs, where he belonged, although he would not take her again this soon. “You are mine to take and touch where and when I please. I am the master of this house. You will do well to remember that.”

She stuck her tongue out at him impudently, not cowed in the least at his arrogant words. “And I am the mistress of this house, and I will let you know if you behave improperly. Perhaps I will have to get a paddle for you - ” Elizabeth threatened, until he began to tickle her around her waist. “Nononononono!”

She squealed and begged for mercy, not unlike when he had her over his lap. It ended in passionate, loving kisses. Vlad pulled her back against him again, cuddling her bottom to his raging hard-on. “Elizabeta. Ma couer. Mi vida. How did I get so lucky as to find you?”

Her reply was pert but sleepy. “You looked beyond the layer of horse manure I was wearing when we first met.”

“To the rose beneath, my love.” With a sloppy, wet smack, he held her in his arms while she fell back asleep, until the time came that he had to literally tear himself away from her and make his way, lonely, into the night.

Chapter IV

As strict as he was with his wife, he was that indulgent of her, also. She could never be called spoiled, because spoiled wives never experienced any consequence to their naughty actions.

Elizabeth experienced them in myriad ways; all of them specifically designed to be humiliating and painful, and to teach her the error of her ways. But as much as Vlad punished her frequently, he also showered her with love and gifts. He told her within days of their marriage that she could completely redecorate the house if she wished, in any style that suited her. Her only restriction was not monetary but physical: she could not touch the west wing. In fact, the only door to that wing was kept under lock and key, and although he had shared absolutely everything else in his life with her – so she thought – he had remained very secretive and mysterious about that area of the house. It piqued her curiosity, and Vlad knew it. Nothing –not crosses and holy water, not vampire hunters with their stakes and incantations, not facing the fiery pit of Hell itself – frightened him as much as Elizabeth discovering his secret before he had had time to consolidate his love for her. He would tell her, yes. In time. In a lot of time, when he was sure she wouldn't run screaming from him, mistakenly in fear for her life. He could no more harm a hair on her head than he could emerge unscathed from a bath of holy water. But how could she possibly understand that yet, when she really barely knew him? He knew the best approach to take, and

would reveal all when the right time presented itself, in thirty or forty years.

He recognized a small sign of her acceptance when he found her reading a book by Bram Stoker called *Dracula*. It was supposed to be about him. He read it one evening after she had gone to bed and found it a most amusing tale. Stoker was indeed a comic genius. Vlad liked to read a few other authors that Elizabeth read, especially the Bronte sisters. Beth confessed to him that her favorite of the sisters' stories was *Jane Eyre*, and they discussed how she might have reacted in Jane's place, having just found out that the man she was about to marry already had an insane wife.

"And would you, too, have run away from him, into the streets, nearly starving to death rather than facing down convention and standing by that poor, innocent man?" Vlad asked; her answer terribly important to him on a level she couldn't understand.

Elizabeth took a moment to consider what she would likely do. "I honestly don't know. I hardly think that I'm a slave to social convention, or I'd already have been married for four or five years by now, wouldn't I? I wouldn't work with animals like I do, or read or study or argue, if I were the perfect woman of today. But to commit bigamy . . . I don't know." Her gaze narrowed. "Why do you want to know? Do you have a wife hidden somewhere that I don't know about? Perhaps the west wing?"

"Nonsense, Elizabeth. For the record, I don't have another wife hidden anywhere, especially not the west wing." One wife was almost more than he could handle, he thought ruefully.

Vlad and Elizabeth proved to be a novelty amongst the jaded ton; a husband and wife who actually loved each other and preferred to spend time in each other's company. Many couples in the ton maintained not only separate bedrooms, but completely separate houses, his in the country, hers in town, or vice versa. Whenever they appeared about town, they were always together

and had been caught spooning in the garden at nearly every ball they attended. They were so obviously in love it was almost painful to see them, especially if one did not enjoy that special type of relationship.

Their “special type of relationship” continued much as it had prior to their marriage, with the addition of multitudes of sexual activity. He sometimes took her three and four times a night until she slept exhaustedly almost the same hours he preferred. Her punishments became naturally less frequent as she settled into the role of wife; Vlad found fewer occasions when he needed to spank her bottom, not that he shrank from the duty when it presented itself. It almost settled into a pattern, where he knew it was getting to be that time of the month not because he could smell blood, but because his wife’s usual sunny disposition went out the window, leaving in its place a termagant with the vocabulary and temperament of a sailor on an all night binge.

When occasions like this arose, he enforced strict discipline and even introduced to her cringing little bottom some new implements, like a schoolroom cane and a thick leather two-tailed tawse he had picked up in his travels at a shop in Scotland. Many a time she found herself stripped from the waist down, bent over the back of the couch in her morning room, or even over the dining room table if need be, receiving six (or twelve, or even eighteen on one occasion) of the best from his unforgiving cane, only to be stood in the corner for the rest of dinner then put to bed at an embarrassingly early hour without supper after having to apologize to whoever their guest was – usually her father – for her nasty attitude or foul mouth.

One evening, after a particularly exhausting bout of lovemaking, she lay with her head pillowed on his muscular, hairy chest. Eighteen months of wedded bliss had not dulled their explosive sexual combination one iota. He could still practically make her come with just a look, and she was just as potent for him. He loved her more now than he ever thought possible, and she returned his love a hundred fold. Elizabeth wondered if other marriages were like theirs – where the wife was spanked regularly for her misbehaviors, then loved to distraction by her dominant, masculine husband. Or was she just one of the few lucky ones? They were blissfully happy in their own little world, where he made the rules and she followed them, or paid for it with a red, ripe bottom.

Vlad was so relaxed from his orgasm that he forgot to maintain the façade of humanity - a steady heartbeat and breathing. His mind was too befuddled with pleasure for him to notice Elizabeth's startled reaction. Her whole body tensed completely, and she listened carefully again at his chest.

Absolute silence. Deafening silence.

Before she allowed herself to panic, she listened and felt for something else.

No breathing. No rise and fall of his chest as he sucked in the air every human needed to exist.

She rolled away from him slowly, so as not to alert him to her concern, and curled herself into a ball, which was not unusual to Vlad because she often slept that way. But she was wide-awake and scared out of her wits.

Somewhat preoccupied with the coming day's work, Vlad kissed her gently, saying, "I'm going to get going. I have to leave early tomorrow morning for the city, so I'll sleep in my own room." He maintained a room several doors down from hers and it always appeared lived in. It was where all his clothes were stored, and the bed always looked used in the morning.

“Night.” Elizabeth hoped her voice didn’t give her rampant fear away, and it mustn’t have, because he left without incident. She sat straight up in bed and hugged her knees, rocking back and forth in an old habit designed to comfort herself. What the hell was he? Why hadn’t she noticed that he didn’t breath? Was he a witch? A demon? Her mind settled on the correct answer while her heart rejected it completely.

No, he was neither of those.

He was a vampire.

And he was her husband.

~ ~ ~

She remained awake all night, needing to satisfy her morbid curiosity about whether he used his bedroom as more than just a façade. Elizabeth dressed completely, not wanting to be caught at a disadvantage half-naked, then made her way quietly to his room. The door was open, and the bed was still made up.

She swallowed hard, closing the door with a final thud. Elizabeth sucked in a breath and straightened her back resolutely. It was time to find out the secret of the west wing.

It took her about five seconds to pick the lock on the door – it was old and she had had the advantage of hanging around the stables with Lucky, who “dabbled” a bit on the side to subsidize his income. Behind the door was a hallway like the one she’d just left, with doors on either side. She peeked into each door, finding nothing until the last door, where there was a familiar coat lying on the unused bed. Elizabeth ventured inside what looked like an average guest bedroom and began to look for something unusual, something different. A half an hour later, she sank down on the bed in defeat, having found nothing to either confirm or disprove

her suspicions about her husband. As she rose, she pulled herself up tiredly by the knob to the bedpost, which turned in her hand to reveal a secret panel.

Behind that panel, she saw what she sought but dreaded finding: a coffin – new and gleaming with polished gold. It stood about waist high to her on a short bier. She could barely bring herself to advance into the room. Her heart was banging against her ribs as she had expected his to be that morning – ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump. But she forced herself to stand next to it – she needed to know whom – what she had married. What she had let touch her so intimately, punish her so severely. All in the name of love.

She opened it immediately, and her worst fears were confirmed. Vlad lay in complete repose, hands folded over his chest as if he were dead – which, of course, he was. Tears coursed down her cheeks unheeded as she looked at the man to whom she had given her heart and her body. A salty tear splashed onto the back of his hand, and, despite the trance-like state he entered when he slept, he knew she had discovered him.

Iron fingers curled around her wrist in an instant, before she could react, his eyes opened and he sat up.

Her husband was awake.

Chapter X

Fear overrode each and every rational thought in Elizabeth's head. All she wanted was to get away from him, and she did, surprising him by snapping her wrist out of his hold, picking up her skirts, and running from the room like the devil himself was chasing her.

Uncharacteristic indecision paralyzed Vlad for a few moments. If he went after her, there was the real possibility he would drive her out of the house. If he didn't go after her, he knew she would leave anyway. He was damned if he did, damned if he didn't. What the hell, he was damned before all this started; it might as well be for the wolf that he was as for a lamb that he would never be.

Elizabeth had made it to her room, only to lean back against the door while her heart tried to beat its way out of her rib cage. Oh, why did she have to be so nosey? Why did she have to disobey him? Couldn't she have lived happily without knowing the absolute truth?

She knew what she had to do, hoping against hope she could get out of the house before he came after her. As she found her overnight bag and began to throw various pieces of unnecessary clothing in its general direction, the tears that had been held back by abject fear now flooded down her cheeks, dampening everything she touched. Her heart lay broken and bleeding inside her chest, aching with each telltale squeeze of blood through her body. How could she have loved such a creature? How could he have deceived her so? The things he had done to her, secrets shared between lovers in the silence and comfort of the night . . . How many others had he shared those same secrets with? And how many of those

had he killed, draining their life's blood from their bodies to provide his sustenance?

When Vlad entered the still, quiet room, she was standing at her dresser, balling up clothes and throwing them haphazardly at the bag on the bed behind her. She looked up, taking an automatic step backwards as her eyes widened with fear.

He, too, leaned against the door for a moment for support against her rejection of him; however expected it was, it still cut him to the core. Vlad clasped his hands in front of him, careful not to come any closer, not wanting to cause her to panic. She had already backed herself into a corner without any movement from him.

Her fear of him was a palpable thing in the room with them, keeping them apart. "Do you remember what I said to you the night we met?" His deep, sensual voice echoed in her mind.

She swallowed nervously, mouth dry as the Sahara. "Is that a parlor trick of yours?"

"I said you need never fear me. It is still the truth. I would never harm you, my Elizabeth."

Beth clamped her hands over her ears as if to prevent his voice from entering her ears and mind. "I am NOT your Elizabeth! Get out of my head!" Suddenly, she remembered something she had read in Mr. Stoker's book. "I hereby revoke any invitation given willingly or unwillingly into my mind!"

There was a loud whooshing sound and then a pop. Elizabeth staggered a little, but when Vlad came toward her as if to help her, she righted herself immediately and glared at him. But it had worked. She was again alone in her head, and all the lonelier for the loss. At least she knew her thoughts were her own, and not controlled by him. "I revoke any invitation given willingly or unwillingly into this room."

Nothing.

“My love, I own the house,” he said by way of explanation.

Elizabeth began to straighten the clothes into her bag. “I shall remove myself from it momentarily.” She kept herself busy, so as not to allow herself time to think about what she was doing to him, to her, to them.

A weaker man might have staggered at her pronouncement, but Vlad stood stock-still, watching her, drinking in as many visions of her as he could in the time he had left. “Where will you go?”

Beth refused to look at him, and even without their innermost connection, he could feel the fear and disgust he evoked in the woman he revered above all other women. It was an unspoken confirmation of how evil he was that this warm loving woman could not see past his unusual existence to love him.

“I had Gregor call a cab.”

“The livery is yours - ” he protested.

She rounded on him, meeting his eyes for the first time. “I will take nothing with me of yours,” Elizabeth stated proudly, voice shaking. He watched her take her dragon insignia ring off her finger and put it on the dresser.

At that gesture, Vlad, who had never been defeated in either life or death, bowed his head and faded away.

Elizabeth collapsed onto her bed in great gulping sobs, which he could hear from everywhere in the house. Each rent his heart until it was nearly in two. She sobbed as if her heart were being torn into from the inside out. And it was. What could he do to help her? How could he prove to her that she had nothing to fear from him? For the first time in his existence, he was at a complete loss.

She was standing bag in hand in the foyer when he materialized near enough to touch her. Beth backed away from

him, eyes swollen and cheeks ruddy. She clenched an old hanky in her right hand till it hurt.

“I am truly sorry that you feel the need to leave.” Beth would have sworn she heard his voice crack, but then thought he must’ve been playing with her mind again. “This is your home. It will always be so. We are connected, you and I.”

Anger welled up inside of her, and she forgot to be afraid. “We are so connected that you hid from me exactly what you are? That’s not very connected.”

He bowed to her. “You are completely right. I should have told you from the beginning so that you could have made an informed choice about whether or not you wanted to become my wife.” His finger went to lift her chin, but she shied away from it. “But it appears that I was right since, having discovered the truth, you are leaving me. At least I have the happy memories of several months with the woman I love.”

Beth snorted. “It’s too bad all I have to think about is whether or not I’m going to grow fangs and howl at the moon.”

His voice was quiet but strong. “I have never and would never harm a hair on your head, Elizabeth.”

She glared at him. “And all those spankings?”

Vlad demurred. “I would have spanked you regardless of whether I was a human male or a vampire, mi vida.”

Elizabeth hissed. “Don’t you call me that! You call me your ‘life’ and your ‘heart’, only because you have neither!”

He could hear the coach coming up the driveway, and quicker than the human eye he dragged her into his arms one last time. “My endearments tell the story, Elizabeth. You are my wife, my heart, my life. Don’t you think that if I had meant you harm I would have done it by now? Why bother to marry you at all when I could have bespelled you and taken what I wanted a thousand

times over in the past two years. I could have made you my slave when I drank your blood while you were so ill. Instead, I gave you some of my strength, some of my life force, to help keep you healthy.”

Elizabeth blanched at what he was saying, but he gave her no time to think before his lips descended on hers, claiming her, dominating her, reminding her of her place in the world – beside him.

The driver brought the coach to a halt at the end of the steps.

“Do you not think I could keep you here now if I truly wanted to?” She gasped, having obviously not thought of that. “I would never expect you to stay with me when you are so terribly uncomfortable about what you’ve found out. I had hoped that our love would be enough for you to cling to and see clearly with, but I miscalculated its strength. Please send Biddy word that you’re all right so that she will not worry.” After kissing her again as if she were his lifeline, he stepped aside and let her pass out the door. It was the hardest thing he would ever do, bar none. When she left, she took the sunshine with her and he could not even bear to watch the carriage leave the drive. Instead, he walked to the roof and stood unprotected against the cold November rain, waking the house with a howl of such misery as to call forth the dead themselves.

~ ~ ~

Elizabeth went to stay with an old aunt, her mother’s sister Caroline who lived in a small quaint house in a tiny country village just outside of London. Although the visit was entirely unexpected, it was the one place Elizabeth knew she would always be welcomed for as long as she needed to stay, and no embarrassing

questions would be asked as to why she wasn't with her husband like a good little wife.

Caroline was a feisty, independent woman who had become wealthy when her parents died. She cared for Elizabeth's mother, Julietta, and saw her married happily to Armand. But marriage was not right for Caroline, who was an extremely contented, proud, and opinionated spinster.

She put Elizabeth to work immediately without so much as a peep about what had caused her to arrive in the middle of the night. Caroline deduced that there was something wrong between husband and wife, and was very happy that Elizabeth felt comfortable enough to come to her rather than running off to a friend, who might demand she return to her husband immediately. There was no evidence of bruising, and although the child seemed exhausted, there seemed to be no outward signs of abuse. She thoroughly enjoyed the company and the conversation. They carried on like teenagers, laughing and talking and arguing well into most nights. It was just what Elizabeth needed – carefree time to not think about what she'd discovered.

Caroline's staff was extremely competent, and she had given them strict instructions that if the Prince should call, that Elizabeth was not there but had moved on to a distant cousin's house in northern Scotland. Beth maintained a generally low profile, and felt that if Vlad had been coming after her, she would have known it somehow.

It was early one evening, just after sunset that she decided to go out for a walk. As she stepped out on the veranda, pulling the door shut behind her, a shadow removed itself from the wall and the dashing figure of a man appeared before her, with long curly black hair, sharp blue eyes, and a ruddy complexion. She didn't know if she'd somehow garnered a sixth sense about these things, but she knew immediately that he was a vampire.

“What do you want?” she asked, with more bravado than she was feeling.

He bowed to her. “I am Alexander Nicholai – a friend of your husband’s. I mean you no harm.”

She smiled wryly, and moved toward the steps. “I’ve heard that somewhere before. Is it a line in the Vampire Code of Ethics?” Keeping him in front of her at all times, she asked, “And what do you want of me, Mr. Nicholai?” Despite what he’d said, she didn’t trust him as far as she could throw him.

“Why are you not with your husband?”

Elizabeth leaned against the railing in a stance that made her look much more at ease than she was feeling. “What are you, a vampire marriage counselor?”

“He is the same person you married.”

Her eyebrow rose. “He is not at all the person I married, Mr. Nicholai.”

Alex turned away from her with a dramatic flair. “Well, perhaps not any more.”

Beth had been worried about how he was, but had no way of finding out. “Is he all right?”

“He is dying,” Alex stated bluntly.

Elizabeth covered her hand with her mouth, tears crowding her eyes. “But he can’t –“

“Sometimes a wounded animal doesn’t want to live.” An appropriate analogy, Alex thought.

Elizabeth bit her knuckles tentatively.

He added, in just the right sorrowful tone, “Especially one with a broken heart.”

A nice touch, if he did say so himself.

“Did he know you were coming here? Does he know where I am?”

He smiled, and she knew that he had broken many women’s hearts himself. “He did not know. But if I could find you . . .” With those prophetic words, Alex faded away, concealing himself from her eyes easily to watch her go back into the house. Well, he’d laid the groundwork for his friend. Hopefully, she would take the bait and go back to her husband where she belonged. Vlad would never know it, but he would owe Alex one.

~ ~ ~

Later that night, with Aunt Caroline gone, Elizabeth went to bed early. A new maid, who had not yet been briefed regarding the situation between the houseguest and her husband, let Vlad in. He found his own way up to the room she was using, following the flowery familiarity of her scent. She had been sleeping peacefully when he entered her room, but jolted awake immediately when he entered, flattening herself back against the headboard of the bed. It was pitch black in the room, but she could see him clearly, another one of his “gifts” to her.

He said nothing, only drank her in with his eyes. Elizabeth couldn’t bear the silence a moment longer, commenting wryly, “Well, you don’t look like you’re wasting away.”

Vlad was confused. “Huh?”

“Your friend Alexander came here tonight to plead your case. He made it sound like you were going to expire at any moment, although we both know that’s not likely to happen. I guess he was hoping I’d go running back to you to make sure you were all right.”

Pacing at the foot of the bed, he slapped his leather gloves sharply against his thigh, a sure sign he was annoyed. “Alex should mind his own damned business.”

Beth said nothing, merely watched him warily, hugging her knees to keep herself from reaching out to him. Just looking at him made her ache; she had missed him so much – missed his touch, missed touching him, the familiarity of two strong arms to turn to in the night that would hold her close and fill her with pleasure. Why, she even missed the spankings, sort of.

Abruptly, he stopped and caught her gaze. “I have come to take you home.” It was a bland, raw statement that conveyed none of the turmoil of emotions behind it. “I have had enough of your little temper tantrum. You’ve had enough time to come to grips with the situation, but now it’s time for you to return to your place as my wife.”

“Really?” Elizabeth threw back the covers and in a moment of bravery confronted him angrily, nose to nose. “And what if I refuse to join you, big man? What are you going to do about that?”

His answer was entirely non-verbal. Vlad’s hands shot out to pull her against him tightly. Sweet heaven, he’d missed her! In one swift motion, he lifted her into his arms and carried her into his waiting coach the old fashioned way. Despite the early hour, there were people around who talked for weeks about how the Prince had finally come to claim his Princess in such a masculine, no-nonsense manner. People had been wondering how long he would allow her defiance to continue, but now there was no debate about who wore the pants in that family!

The moment the carriage door closed, Elizabeth began struggling to get out of his arms, but they remained rock strong around her. He was murmuring softly in Roumanian and caressing her hair; Vlad looked at her as if he would drink her up with his eyes, like he hadn’t seen her in centuries rather than just a few months. She was in her nightgown, and he didn’t want her to

catch a chill, so he threw a lap blanket over the two of them, never letting her out of his arms or off his lap.

The estate was too much of a drive to get to before dawn, so Vlad had them taken to a small house he owned in London, instead, carrying her kicking and screaming into the master bedroom. As soon as he set her down, she scurried to the other side of the room. He busied himself closing the door, and then faced her with a carefully neutral expression. "If need be, madam, I will tie you to the bed, but you will never leave me again. You are where you are supposed to be, wife. With me."

Vlad took a step toward her and she backed away, cringing. He froze, hating himself for what he was that caused her to fear him. "Don't touch me, please!" she begged, holding out a delicate, if ineffectual hand. "I can't think when you touch me," she breathed heavily.

"Please, my heart, do not be afraid of me," he whispered softly, taking a small step forward. "I cannot bear it."

Elizabeth had wedged herself into a corner, hands out as if warding him off as he advanced toward her. "No, don't." Her pleas only made him want to hold and comfort her more. He put a hand on each wall, trapping her against him, then did nothing more threatening than press his face into her hair, drawing a deep breath of her precious scent.

"Home," Vlad whispered raggedly, amazed to find himself trembling with the need to touch her.

Moments later, Beth finally had to meet his eyes, and all she saw shining out from them was warm, safe, solid love. Love to cuddle up with on a gloomy day, to make her laugh, love enough to hold her to the highest standards of behavior.

In that moment, she realized that his love was returned a thousand fold, regardless of who or what he was – Prince, pauper, vampire, werewolf . . . What did she really care?

On his knees, face buried in her belly, he was mumbling something. “I want you to want to be here with me, but I will keep you here any way I can.”

“Oh, Vlad, I love you,” she stroked his beautiful long hair and bent down in front of him to cover his wet, salty lips with hers. When she looked down at her pale white gown, she saw several wet, pink splotches. The tears of a vampire.

The End

Tears of a Vampire

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Backside of Love: the *Intimacy of Authority*

<http://BacksideOfLove.com>

Dearest reader:

Are you... *there* yet? ☺

If the sorts of loving, unyielding attentions that make up most of Elizabeth's days are the stuff of fantasies you thought you could never share, then please join Carolyn and her "Daddy" (husband) at their *Backside of Love* community.

There we explore the profound sorts of romance which include the giving of *authority* to your trusted Other, structure and *consequences* for behavioral control, and sexual *intimacy* winding through it all.

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--Carolyn and Unka Bobby (her "Daddy" and husband)

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