

She sat and instinctively crossed her legs.

"No," he said softly and though he didn't move, she swore she felt his hand on her knee. "Uncross your legs but keep them together as you will be gazing toward the fire."

She followed his instructions and focused on breathing. So close, his every little motion noticeable to her. The way his wide shoulders flexed beneath a form fitting black designer linen shirt. The way his dress slacks stretched over long, well-muscled thighs. She could hear Alex mixing her paints and knew she was adjusting the lighting in the room. Still, Gabriel towered and directed and made thought impossible.

He crouched in front of her and took her hands in his. The stroke of his fingers on her palms drew her eyes down. The gesture struck her more intimate than a kiss. Without a word, he took one of her hands and placed it on the chair's armrest, closest to the fire and laid her other over it.

"Now," he whispered and her eyes flew to his lips. "Turn your head toward the fire, Calah."

She did.

"No." His knuckles gently brushed her cheek and turned her chin more. "Like that."

She hadn't meant to whisper back. "And what of my expression?"

His hand covered hers. "Just as it is, with unleashed passion caught within a mask of confusion and whimsy." He leaned closer. "I've put that look there. Alex will capture it and every time you look at this portrait, you will think of me. You will think of this moment."

Darkest Memory

by

Sky Purington

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

Darkest Memory

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Dedication

This is dedicated to T & T. Ladies, your friendship and support mean the world to me. May we forever keep writing.

Praise for Sky Purington

The King's Druidess

This story is suggestive, and haunting. It is carried by the power of desire, the power of passion, and the

power of desperation. There is a richness here that is hard to convey.
author Nancy A. Lindley-Gauthier

Destiny's Denial

...Ms. Purington writes a compelling novel...With surprises down to the last chapter.
nce Upon a Romance Reviews

Highland Muse

I love a story with unexpected twists, striking dialogue and happily ever after endings. Sky Purington's Highland Muse kept me guessing toward that happy ending.
reviews by Aithne

Prologue

He stood unnoticed across the busy street. Loud techno music boomed before the bouncer shut the door to the nightclub. A drop of rain hit his cheek and the air steamed with the coming of a violent summer storm. Thunder crashed and his gaze followed a streak of lightning overhead. Mesmerizing and blinding, edged with a unique sharpness, it represented an omen, the arrival of something or someone important. What could possibly possess such a strong compulsion?

An intense wail of pain pierced his inner ear. Every muscle in his body locked. He closed his eyes and focused. Like the lightning overhead, an image of an ambulance shot across the blackness of his mind. Time was running out.

In a split second, he covered distance no mortal could. When he opened his eyes, an ambulance screamed into Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. Eyes narrowed, he crossed the street. A woman was hoisted out of the ambulance on a gurney.

"Come on, get her in here now!" A young doctor frowned and helped the paramedics wheel her in. "What are her stats?"

He let the doctor's words fade out; he knew the woman was dying. Bright colors blurred and thoughts swamped him. Why was he being pulled here? He stood in the hospital now. Time did not allow them to get her beyond the Emergency Room.

Curtains drew shut. Nurses fought to remove clothes and get a gown on her. She kicked, panted and flailed. Blood stained the material between her legs. He stepped forward and caught her eye-willed her to engulf the pain and not fight it.

She met his gaze and whispered, "Who are you?"

He gave no answer but held her gaze before slowly looking to her swollen belly. It moved beneath the fabric. This life wanted out, needed to be here. A gush of bloody water splashed to the floor.

One of the nurses looked to the doctor. "Who is she talking to?"

"No time," he muttered and cupped his hands between the woman's legs.

The woman let out another long agonized wail but did not sit up, didn't fight the pain. The doctor grimaced and repositioned his hands. "We're going to need a blood transfusion after this baby's out, STAT!"

He stepped back and watched the doctor. The blood should have already been on its way. Too late now. A low roar began in his head and another crash of thunder boomed. The lights flickered overhead and went out. The generator kicked in and a dull glow filled the room.

The woman whimpered, while the doctor cursed and wiped a bloody latex-covered hand across his forehead. "Of all the nights."

A small cry filled the room, loud and glad to be alive. The doctor fell to his knees and shook his head. "It's coming now."

he woman gave a weak smile, her head lolled to the side, and she passed out. He stepped around and watched the doctor pull the child free. Blood poured from the woman, so much blood...but none of it mattered. Nothing mattered but what the doctor held in his hands. What he held as he slowly stood.

A baby girl, new and more perfect than anything else on Earth

is world came crashing down and darkness receded. She had returned. Beautiful and whole, a gift he had watched born into the world, his light in eternal night. He reached out and let his hand hover over the child. She turned silent when his hand shadowed her small form. He could not touch her, knew that already, but he could protect and love her. Love would be all he could ever have for this small creature.

He threw back his head and felt the mother pass. His eyes opened to her white light going where he never could. He dropped his head and pulled back his hand. The doctor cut the umbilical cord and handed the baby to the nurse.

His eyes never left the tiny child and never would. As the child had been born this night he had been reborn. For all of his very long existence, he'd given up hope. No more.

Life had just begun.

Chapter 1

Boston, Massachusetts
27 Years Later

It should have come easier. She was losing her touch. A simple article shouldn't be this difficult to write. Get out of here, already."

Calah sat back and tore her eyes from the computer screen. Frank leaned against the cubicle door with his arms crossed over his thin chest and eyes red-rimmed from exhaustion. Bless her editor. He was as driven as she, if not a bit more. "Are you closing up?"

"Yep." He nodded toward her computer. "Shut it off and call it a night."

"But I'm right—"

"Now, Calah." He sighed. "Tomorrow's another day."

She leaned forward, saved what she had written and hit the off button. The machine whirred down but not before her disk shot out. She would work on her latest piece at home.

Frank kept a level gaze. "It's nearly nine. Take a break and don't work when you go home tonight, please."

She shoved the disc into her briefcase and stood. "Never."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "At some point you need to sleep."

Nope. Not in her vocabulary. Not when there's work to be done. She offered a small grin and followed him to the elevator. "I'll have this piece on your desk first thing Monday morning."

The elevator doors slid shut. "It's not due until Friday."

"It'll be early."

"They always are."

"I'm efficient."

Frank snorted. "I know."

She shot him a warm smile and squeezed his shoulder.

The elevator door swooshed open, and they stepped out. Rain poured beyond the glass doors of the lobby. He put out a hand to stop her. "You're going to wait for a taxi, right?"

Calah shook her head and headed out the door. *No*. She needed to be alone, feel the rain on her face.

Though she didn't want to say anything, her desire for journalism wasn't what it used to be. Was she getting tired of this job? Impossible, this was her whole world. However, for the past month, though she'd portrayed nothing but her usual workaholic tendency, the lust for writing had gone on sabbatical. Writing was all she had. To lose that would be horrific.

The air warmed when the swinging doors ushered her onto the sidewalk. There was no more perfect smell than a summer storm. How the rain fell in sheets and the humidity made love to the air, steaming the car exhaust into the clouds overhead. Boston's sky-high signature red gasoline sign blared against the nightline and shimmered through the rain.

She removed her suit jacket and smiled, unconcerned that she was getting soaked for a blissful moment until she remembered her briefcase was too. With a quick grab into her purse she whipped out her umbrella and opened it. Not even a second of freedom was worth losing her work.

The occasional car drove by, causing water to splash onto the sidewalk. She kept to the walls of buildings and tried to mentally work out her latest piece. It should be simple; Lea Holmes was determined to try out for the New England Patriots next spring. That's why she was writing the article. Did she think it was foolish that a woman wanted to play professional football? Not at all... perhaps a bit painful!

"Excuse me... please. I've been mugged."

Normally she would have kept on walking but something in the man's sad, whispered tone stopped her. Hand in pocket and a strong grasp on her mace, Calah studied the shadows of the nearby alley. "Where are you?"

"Here. I'm here."

She took two steps forward and squinted. A slim, dark figure hunched down while rocking back and forth.

"Are you injured? I'll call 911."

The figure lifted his hand. "Yes, call them. Please, come help me up. They stabbed me. I need to get out of this alley."

Figure the odds. Raised in South Boston, she knew better. She would call 911 anyway. Juggling her briefcase, mace and umbrella, she reached into her purse to grab her cell phone.

That's all it took.

Everything whirled away, and she was slammed back against a hard concrete wall. *Foo!* Her only thought as cool rain gushed over her face and the attacker's hot hand covered her mouth. Why hadn't she kept walking? She'd known better. Knew the shaking, huddled figure had her. Of course, he had been playing the wounded victim all along. He leaned close and held her pinned, leaving her no room to move. He yanked the watch off her wrist and his filthy calloused palm slid up her arm, down over her breast and stomach before it slid into her pocket. "Have anything in here for me, sweetheart?"

She breathed rapidly through her nostrils, shook her head and tried not to panic. What good would that do? *Think*. How to get out of this? Remain calm, look for an opportunity to retaliate, her only option. Then a flash of silver caught the lamplight. He had a knife.

The metal met her neck. "You smell like money. Where's yo—"

Movement shifted off to her left and a growl replaced whatever the man was about to say. Her knees

gave way, and she fell sideways when the man's grasp was torn from her. She gulped air and slid down the wall until she sat on the wet pavement. What was going on? The man had completely vanished, as though he had never been there. There was no sound. A sob broke from her throat, and she peered into the alley.

Nothing.

he had just been accosted and now there was nothing—no one. *Impossible*. Shivers raked her. Calah tried to stand but her body shook too hard. Bile rose in her throat.

The rain fell harder and lightning illuminated the empty alley, though, somehow she knew someone watched. A fresh trickle of fear slithered down her spine. Had she been saved by someone who intended far worse than what she had nearly endured? Calah bit her lip and wiped sodden hair away from her eyes. Her briefcase and umbrella lay nearby. The mace was gone. She had to get out of here.

Now.

Crawling forward, Calah kept a wary eye on her surroundings. Cold puddles swallowed her knees and soaked her dress slacks. She had to stand. Be strong. Survive. As though the Heavens heard, strength poured through her limbs. She grabbed her belongings and stood. Without a backward glance she ran until the door to her apartment building became visible, ran until her shaking hands managed to slide the key into the front door.

A shower was all she wanted. Five minutes later, deadbolt in place, she stood beneath a steaming gush of hot water. She probably should call 911, something. But what would she say? I got mugged by a stranger and another stranger saved me, at least I think he did. Do I have a description? No. The mugger had nothing of hers save a watch. So she shouldn't worry. But what if he'd been watching her all along? No, if he had he would have found a way to get in by now.

She scrubbed harder at her body and flung open the shower curtain so she could see the whole bathroom. *Ridiculous*. Fear in itself was a weapon. She shut off the water, dried and jumped into bed. She wouldn't call the police, but she would pull the blankets up over her head and will the attack away.

Calah should trust the police and call them. There was no reason not to, save the fact that she'd never trusted anyone. Independent, self-sufficient, she'd never depended on anyone but herself. But it was a lonely existence not trusting the world. Not letting anyone in. She counted two people here friends, her editor and Alex, that's it.

Calah breathed deeply beneath the covers, pulled them down an inch and tried to calm her nerves. She liked the darkness, the seclusion of it. It made the world go away. Lightning flashed and lit up the picture hanging on the wall. Alex had painted it years ago.

She stared and let the brief blips of lightning take her into the picture. Let herself become the blurred woman caught mid-spin as she looked up at the man approaching on horseback. She could almost smell the dampness of the green forest surrounding them, the sound of raindrops dripping from leaf to leaf. Perhaps even the sound of a trickling river.

She reached over and clicked the radio switch next to her bed. The strains of classical music filled the room. She closed her eyes and worked at breathing deeply. Let it all go.

Light seeped in from somewhere far off. Through the curtains? Not likely. A beautiful building filled her mind. The eve of a day somewhere, she didn't know. The music faded and worry went away as she drifted off to sleep.

The *Other's* eyes snapped opened.

If someone else had been standing nearby, they would have thought the sound comparative to the rip of old wallpaper being torn.

The *Other* ran her sticky tongue over the roof of her mouth and tried to smile. She had been asleep for a very long time, too long. No more. Life had just taken on new meaning and vengeance. This place, *England*, had been all wrong.

What were the odds of this happening?

She flicked her unused finger and waited. Servants had been maintaining her estate for years. One would come now. As she waited, she explored what had awoken her, the hidden truths. Her love had been deceiving her, had kept a secret so deep and thorough she did not know which emotion prevailed, that of revenge, hunger or anger. He would pay for this.

She would pay for this.

There was no time. As it was, he sought to protect *her*. She needed to regain strength as soon as possible and travel quickly. Once he had her within his realm, it would become far more difficult.

Not impossible, however. Oh no, never impossible.

"You called?"

The servant's soft murmur came from the doorway, and she urged him forward with a small smile. How she relished his fear, far better than the best aphrodisiac. The way his heart sped up and the blood pumped like a freight train through his veins. At last, he stood over her, timid and shaking, wonderfully afraid.

"Come closer. Lean down," she whispered. He did, just a bit. She met his eyes and pled the plea of the living dead. "Closer my love...closer."

No struggle reflected within his eyes. No willpower of his own. He only wanted to please her. As they all did. He leaned close, so close his cheek fell next to hers.

"Good boy," she whispered. "Put your neck to my mouth, be my prince."

He did. Silently, obediently, he followed her order.

The *Other* breathed deeply. A fresh round of vengeance, sweet and thorough, consumed. Bloodlust in its most primitive form overtook. Payback would be a wicked thing.

As she sunk her teeth into her easy prey, she had but one thought.

The hunt had begun.

"I've called five times. If you don't pick up you're fired."

Calah sat back and rolled the kinks from her shoulders. She'd been writing for hours trying to capture the

dream she'd had. Powerful! Yet she'd re-written it a million times. It happened in a very precise way. She had to get it right.

"I'm not kidding, Calah."

She grinned and picked up the receiver. "Frank, you would never fire me."

"So you think," he grumbled. "It's two o'clock on a Saturday morning. I've been calling you since midnight. Don't tell me you haven't been listening to every message I've left. You've been sitting there in front of your laptop purposely ignoring your editor. Not good practice and definitely grounds for canning you if I were so inclined."

"All assumption." Calah stretched her legs. "You can't prove a thing."

Frank became crisp. "Enough with the banter. Did it ever occur to you that I might be calling because something important came up?"

She shrugged and fixed a sentence in the last paragraph she had written. "No, I assumed you wanted to chat. We're both night owls, especially on the weekend. If it was important you'd be at my door."

"Go look out your window, Calah."

"No way!" She stood and padded over to the front window. There he was, standing on the street below with his legs splayed, brown hair spiked, cell phone in hand and green eyes glaring up from beneath the street lamp.

"Oops! Hang on, let me buzz you in."

What was Frank doing here at this hour? He must have some fantastic story up his sleeve. She walked to the door and hit her buzzer. She felt great. Yes, the evening's event had been horrible and the dream—no nightmare, which had plagued her even more so, but she still felt like she was walking on a cloud. As though she had figured something out that she'd forgotten. Strange as it was, she'd woken up, hit her laptop and struggled to capture the dream detail for detail. What this feeling was, she had no idea. Perhaps the inspiration to write her first fiction novel? That wouldn't be such a bad thing.

She opened the door, and Frank breezed past her. "I'm not happy with you."

"I gathered." She smiled.

"Tell me you have coffee." He walked down the short hallway toward her kitchen.

The phone rang, and she glanced at the caller ID. *Alex!*

"If you answer that phone, I'll be incredibly offended," Frank called from the kitchen.

"Wouldn't think of it," she yelled and answered the phone. "Hi, Alex!"

"Hey sweetie, how are you?" Alex's British accent flooded the phone line.

"I'm not happy, you shrew," Frank grumbled as he poured coffee into a mug.

She ignored him and yanked a chocolate Popsicle out of the freezer, pushed it off its stick into a bowl and poured chocolate syrup over it.

"I'll ring your neck if you use that whipped cream," Alex said.

She held her hand over the whipped cream she was about to add. "You wouldn't, and you know it."

Alex laughed. "You were reaching for it. No, retract, it's never that bad!"

"Oh yes it is, when the exact words you're looking to write won't come to you." Calah slammed the refrigerator door shut. She spooned the melting blob of icy sweet into her mouth and continued to talk through mouthfuls. "You stink. I really wanted that whipped cream."

"Aye, I'm sure you did."

Frank frowned and looked into her bowl. "You're still eating popsicle sundaes, huh?" He shook his head emphatically. "That's just nasty."

"Only on the weekends and after long nights," she replied in defense. "How different is it from my normal coffee?"

Alex piped up on the other end of the line. "I tend to agree with Frank. It's a bloody odd habit you have."

Frank motioned for her to hang up. "We need to talk. Pronto."

"Have you heard?" Alex asked.

Calah took another bite and motioned Frank to hold on. "Heard what, Alex?"

Frank shook his head. "No. Now, Calah."

She cast a stern look at Frank and held up one finger.

Alex continued. "My brother is granting you an interview. Hasn't Frank told you? This is it. At long last. The piece of a lifetime."

Her hand went numb, and she nearly dropped the phone. *What?* She couldn't be hearing correctly.

Frank grabbed the phone from her hand and held it up to his ear. "Alex. She'll see you on the boat tonight."

On the boat tonight? Alex? An interview with whom?

"Oh, wipe that look off your face." Frank waved a loose hand in the air and set the phone aside. "If you'd taken my call you would have known this already."

"You couldn't have said this on the machine?"

"No, and you know it. Only in person would do." They stared at each other for a long five seconds before they burst out laughing.

"Was she serious? Is he?" she squealed in delight.

"Yep! I got the call at midnight and phoned you immediately." Frank toned down his exuberance just long enough to take a long swig of coffee and wink at her. "This is it. This is a career maker. Your current assignment is put on hold."

She nodded avidly, dumped the rest of her Sundae in the trash and whipped back around. "I think I'm going to need a cup of coffee." They shared a knowing look. "After all, today's not my day off now is it?"

"Only if you truly want to be fired."

"Do you know how long I've been trying to get this interview?" She shook her head and stared aimlessly around the room. There was so much to do.

Frank walked over and brought his mug to her lips. "You need to breathe and focus, then get packed because the limo will be here in half an hour."

"Half an hour! But I thought you said tonight, as in Saturday night?"

Frank shrugged and headed for her bedroom where he pulled a small suitcase from the closet. "Never a good thing to assume, you know that. Come on, I'll pick out some great clothes for you."

"Oh no you won't, you'll have this suitcase full of tight tops and skintight pants. Not going to happen," she said.

He glanced back at her closet and chuckled. "If you owned such things then you're absolutely correct. Regrettably, your clothing is so conservative, you would do the president's wife proud. But I *am* packing a pair of jeans and at least one slightly snug sweater."

"Whatever you say, boss." She gave the military salute and sipped coffee. When she lowered the mug, they both smiled at each other. This was it, her chance at the all-time, career-making interview. He knew it. She knew it. It was now or never.

Chapter 2

Forty-five minutes later, sitting in the back of a stretch limousine, Calah could barely contain her excitement. She would soon be interviewing Alex's mysterious, multi-billionaire brother, learning about his trade, and writing an article on him. He owned at least thirty, high-class nightclubs throughout the States and United Kingdom. She had never even met the guy. Always on the go, that one.

But this was what she was good at. Get the facts, add an angle and write an article. In this case, it would be a three to four page magazine spread with a few pictures.

Not his, of course.

He didn't publicize his face. She had been to his club's websites and seen the usual spacious buildings, gleaming dance floors and beautiful people, but never the man who had built the empire. Well, today she'd meet him and get his picture to rest alongside her article.

Gabriel. She rolled his name around in her mouth. *Strange name*. Not that she disliked it. In fact, she found it somewhat sexy.

She shook her head and grinned as the car came to a halt. Excitement built, she was about to board a luxury yacht and cruise up the coast to Bar Harbor, Maine.

The limousine dropped her off at the end of the pier where a tall, reed-thin man with silver hair greeted her with a thick French accent. "Miss Calah Arlington?"

She smiled and accepted his arm. "Yes."

They walked down the pier together. "I'm Stephen, a friend of the family's. Please do not worry about your belongings; Gerard will take care of them."

She cast a sidelong glance at the squat brown-haired man who scurried forward and scooped up her things. He nodded in her direction, expression blank.

Salt-tainted wind whipped her hair, and she brushed it out of her eyes. *Whoa!* A beautiful, sleek yacht glistened beneath the harbor lights. Though many other boats lined the slips, she knew this was the one. Not overwhelming and massive but made to perfection with clean sporty lines and...money. She wondered, did it reflect its owner? Alex had always been so vague about Gabriel, only saying enough to belie how fond she was of him.

She almost gasped when she saw the interior. Plush, black leather seats grouped along either side of the room, three facing three. The rich cedar furnishings gleamed and the cream carpeted floor appeared made of velvet. A mammoth built-in television lined one wall and a crystal loaded bar, the other.

"Make yourself comfortable, Miss Arlington, Alexandria should be along shortly." He walked to the bar. "Would you like a cocktail?"

"Please, call me Calah." She sat in one of the seats and couldn't contain a sigh of pleasure. "Sure, thanks."

"I believe Merlot is to your taste?"

She grinned. Alex had thought of everything. "Yes."

He poured the red liquid into the crystal goblet and crimson dots of light reflected and scattered around room. She took the glass from Stephan and relished the first smooth sip.

He glanced out the window. "May I offer you a hors-d'oeuvre, Calah?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you."

He nodded, poured himself a drink, walked around the bar and sat down across from her. After a brief sip he spoke, his French accent nearly as luxurious as the furnishings. "So what do you make of all this, Calah?"

What did she make of all this? What did he think she made of it! "I think I'm extremely lucky to have been given this opportunity."

"*Oui*. Yes." He smiled and tapped the side of his glass with his manicured pinky. "You are. But a friend of the family deserves such, no?"

Something in his tone almost made her narrow her eyes. Who was he anyway? She did well to keep the journalist in her at bay, the ever-inquisitive writer. She worked at a small smile. "Yes, I suppose so."

Silence descended, and she studied her fingernails. She probably should have painted them. She almost started to bite one and stopped. Stephen's gaze remained steady on her face. His eyes gave nothing away. She would not squirm but wanted to. *Seriously, what is this guy's problem?* She inhaled the smell of leather and wished Alex would arrive.

Stephen leaned over, opened a cedar box and plucked out a cigar. He snipped the end, lit it with what looked to be a solid gold lighter and released a thin stream of curling smoke into the dimly lit interior.

Her cell rang. "Excuse me Stephen, I need to take this."

He nodded, and she flipped her phone open. "Yes, Frank?"

"Are you on the boat?"

"Yes."

"What does it look like? Money dripping from the bow?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I want to hear all the details that you leave out of your interview. Every last one!"

She wanted to banter with Frank but Stephen's eyes continued to drill a hole through her. How depressing it must be to be so stern. She sighed and looked to the floor. Who was she to talk? If it wasn't for Frank, she would be without humor altogether.

A clatter erupted outside followed by hurried footsteps down the stairs. "Calah!" Alex, raven-haired and beautiful as ever, hurried across the cabin.

"Gotta go, Frank."

"Sweetie!" She jumped up and met her friend halfway in a warm embrace. "So great to see you again."

Alex pulled back, held her at arm's length and eyed her up and down. "You too, you look as fantastic as ever."

Calah made a show at rolling her eyes. "Please, I never could hold a candle to you."

"You always said so but I'm convinced you just never took the time to look in the mirror." Alex held both of her hands and squeezed them affectionately. "Truly, it's so wonderful to see you again, my friend."

Calah bit her lip and refused to tear up. "I agree."

Alex nodded at Stephen. "Stephen, thanks for making Calah comfortable."

He smiled and blew another stream of cigar smoke into the air. "*Naturellement ma petite.*"

Alex waved him off. "No French right now, English only."

Stephen inclined his head. "But of course, as you wish."

No French? Since when was French a main language with English-born Alex? Calah was just about to plunk down on the sofa again but stopped. It felt as though her body wouldn't allow it, as though forced to remain standing. No sound, no shift of expression emanated in either Alex's face, as she explored the bar, nor Stephen's as he focused on his drink.

Yet.

She turned and wasn't surprised at all to see a stranger standing in the doorway. Tall, stoic and dressed in a Black Armani suit. Oddly enough, she focused on his shiny black shoes first and traveled upward from there. Up over the slim hips, to the broad chest, the white collared neck, right up to his face. Her fingers relaxed their grip, the glass tipped and blood-red Merlot spilled to the floor.

From far off, she heard a voice, Alex's? She felt the glass slip from her fingers but continued to stare. What else would a woman do? He stood poised and unnaturally exquisite.

Powerful.

His face. That was the key. She focused on it, by all accounts, visually devoured. But as a writer, how would she describe it?

Familiar.

But no, how could it be? Lord, she would remember that face. Framed by raven, expensively cut hair, one brow arched over the darkest eyes she'd ever seen. They were soul-searching, searing eyes that sat above high cheekbones and a not-quite-square jaw.

He spoke and his baritone voice kicked her pulse up a notch. "Miss Arlington, I presume?"

Alex shook her head. "Hun." She waved a hand in front of Calah's face. "Anyone home?"

Calah nodded vaguely, only now aware of the Merlot she'd spilled. *Oh no!* Her mind hit overdrive, she snatched the towel from Alex and crouched down to dab at the stain, a furious blush burning her cheeks. "I'm so sorry. I can't believe I did this." She dabbed more and only made matters worse. "What was I thinking?"

A strong hand clamped around her wrist. "Please, stop. Let Gerard handle it."

She breathed deeply and met his eyes. He crouched with her, his face so close she could see his lips were as perfect as she had thought they were. He stood and pulled her up with him. Slowly, with the finesse and precision of a king, he raised the back of her hand to his cool lips and kissed it softly. His midnight eyes held hers, his accent aristocratic and articulately British. "In case you missed my sister's introduction, I am Gabriel Knight, so good to finally meet you, Miss Arlington."

Calah had one thought. My, don't you put the best version of James Bond to shame. Then she had another, I'm acting like a besotted idiot! Pull it together girl. She donned the most genuine smile she could muster under his intense regard and said, "and you, Gabriel." It couldn't hurt to flirt just a bit. "Very much so."

"Oh, please." Alex rolled her eyes and cast Gabriel a stern glance. She tugged Calah away, poured her another glass of wine and ushered her back to the couch where they sat beside each other.

She took a deep sip and couldn't contain throwing a sheepish grin at her best friend. "Sorry."

"Don't be." Alex shot a pointed look at her brother who stood at the bar pouring himself a glass of wine. "You're not the first to react that way to him."

She gave a loose shrug and sipped her wine again. "I would imagine not, he is extremely attractive."

Gabriel came around the bar, his long-gaited, loose stride carrying him to the seat across from her. He sat and crossed one leg over the other. Where had Stephen gone?

"Stephen is our captain, amongst other things." Gabriel said.

Had he read her mind? Of course not. Seconds later the engine purred to life with only a slight vibration felt underfoot. Calah ran a hand down her off-white dress slacks, tried not to cringe at the Merlot drops speckling them and kept a smile plastered on her face. If she had been thinking straight, she would have remembered that this was a professional meeting with the echoes of an interview and shaken his hand. It would seem silly to do so now. After all, this was a less than formal meeting in that she was a close friend of his sister.

Really, she should say something in the way of introduction. "Thank you so much for the opportunity to interview you, Mr. Knight."

"Call me, Gabriel." He offered a sexy grin. "Please."

"Yes, come on, he's family!" Alex elbowed Calah and shook her head.

Family was about the furthest thing she thought of when she looked at Gabriel.

"There is one thing I would ask in return for granting you this interview, however," Gabriel said.

How was it that he could be motionless yet seem as if he'd moved closer, that they were alone in the room? "Anything, just name it."

Tsk, tsk, you should never be so quick to grant requests until you know what they are, ma petite. She blinked and nervously glanced around. Who had whispered that? It had sounded like Gabriel but that was impossible. His lips hadn't moved.

"I would like you to allow my sister to paint you," he said.

This caught her off-guard, and she glanced first at Alex then back to Gabriel. "Well, of course. I don't see why not." She cleared her throat. "May I ask why?"

Alex spoke. "You know I've always wanted to paint you. Everyone should have a portrait done."

Gabriel's eyes appeared to magnify. "It would please my sister and that would please me. A small boon I believe given the opportunity presented you with this interview." His gaze traveled over Calah's face. "And such beauty should be remembered on canvas for all time."

Slow warmth burned to searing fire in her blood, and it felt as though his hands touched where his eyes just had.

"Alex has wanted me to pose for years." Calah took another sip of wine and couldn't seem to pull her eyes from his.

Alex smiled. "No doubt, we've been friends how long, ten years?"

She sank deeper into his ebony gaze and no longer felt the lull of the boat, only the encumbrance of his all-consuming presence. The pull between them was strong, undeniable.

"Calah?" Alex tapped her shoulder. "What's the matter with you?"

She snapped to attention, slightly embarrassed. "So sorry, yes, ten years."

Alex patted her knee; mock sympathy lit her clear blue eyes. "Actually, that was a few sentences ago, sweetie. I had asked you if you wanted to step outside and see the city from the water."

"Oh yes, I'd love to." She stood, anything to escape the intimacy of the cabin.

Gabriel stood as well. He barely masked a smile while allowing her and Alex to precede him up the steep stairs to the deck. She caught her breath at the site. *How beautiful!* The yacht cruised slowly, and Boston's lights shimmered off to their left, cresting the small waves like diamond chips off black silk.

"Come." Gabriel held out a hand to Calah. She took it and tried to keep her heartbeat under control when they left Alex behind, and he led her up another set of steps to the highest level of the boat. A chilly wind whipped her hair, and she shivered.

"Here." Gabriel removed his jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

"Thank you." Calah was caught somewhere between the starched smell of his coat and the way his white dress shirt plastered against his chest in the wind. She almost reached out and touched him, confirmed what she thought might be beneath, man and muscle, absolute perfection.

"Would you have preferred to go to England for this interview?"

England? Well, yes, maybe, but how could he have even suspected that was what she might have ultimately hoped? "No, why do you ask?"

Black hair blew across his brow, his dark eyes stared deeply. "Because you have not been out of this country, Calah and it strikes me this interview may have taken you there."

She dared not move. He stood too close, the salty wind a bereft barrier between them. "No, I thought we'd interview in Maine." She pulled his jacket tighter around her shoulders, held his gaze and told a half-truth. "I'm not so presumptuous that I would've expected such expenditure simply because I'm your sister's friend."

"Of course not." He looked as though he would touch her cheek but stopped. "But you would like to go to England, yes?"

With all my heart. "Of course, who wouldn't? But honestly, though you're British, I don't need to be in England to capture who you are when I write this interview."

And that was the truth. Through the right questions, she could capture how his English upbringing had shaped and formed him to be the man he'd become. She didn't need to be in the country where he was born to create a masterpiece. His sleeve brushed her and awareness shot up her arm. The man needed to step away. In direct contradiction to her thoughts when he leaned in and spoke, she didn't move back an inch.

"I would not have sought you had I any doubt in your abilities, Calah." His dark regard nearly suffocated her. "I look forward to hearing your questions."

She took a deep breath and felt as though she drew in his breath. "I won't disappoint you, Gabriel."

"I know." He smiled and pulled back a fraction. "But for now we will not worry about it." The back of his hand brushed her chin. "We have plenty of time."

Did they? Something inside her screamed in denial, did not believe him. An indefinable urgency rose within and made it hard to swallow. Time didn't seem to exist with him, as though it could filter away as quickly as water through a strainer. She almost reached out and grabbed him, wanted to hold onto him for dear life. Mentally, she chastised herself. *Ridiculous.*

She turned away, watched the lights of the city with a blind eye and felt more outside of herself than ever. He's just a man...yes, the brother to her best friend, famous, rich, attractive, but still just a man. Why did she feel as though if she blinked he would be gone and an eternity might go by before she met him again? The yacht switched direction slightly and the oncoming wind pushed against her. Gabriel steered her to the railing and his body protected her from the bulk of the wind. Before she could speak again, the yacht hit a wave and lurched.

All she could think as things spun out of control was one thing. Why had she worn high heels on a yacht?

Chapter 3

Gabriel missed no time and caught her. Why had the woman worn heels? He smiled, grateful for her poor taste in nautical attire. Wrapping one arm around her waist, he pushed her back against the railing and caged her. He couldn't contain the tremors that rocked him.

At long last, I have her here.

He inhaled... Lilac. Always Lilac. Her scent and perfection. He ran his tongue over his lips and breathed in the scent of her skin, the fast pulse of her heartbeat aroused him. He had waited so long for this. It was too soon to kiss her but he did not care. He flicked his tongue, ran it up her slim neck and before she could speak, seized her lips. She quivered in his arms, moaned softly and met him with more vigor than he thought possible. He dove into her warm mouth, tongue swooping and searching, and found a kiss that outdid all kisses.

Calah.

Could she remember, did she? He ran his hands the length of her, cupped her buttocks, and pulled her lower half against him, let her feel his arousal, his *need*. This was Heaven, his one light in eternal darkness. Teeth, lips, blood mixed, her blood, like molten silver and sugared wine.

Like a slap in the face.

He pulled back, shook his head and searched for air. Lust reddened his vision.

She breathed rapidly and pushed her hands against his chest while simultaneously clenching the material of his shirt, her voice a strained whisper. "I shouldn't have done that Gabriel, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have. I don't know what came over me. I just met you!"

He closed his eyes and tried to tune out her rapid heartbeat. She thought she'd been the one to instigate? He gazed into her face, swollen lips and glazed eyes. So beautiful. Her long, straight platinum hair blew in the wind. Her wide, golden eyes shone bright within his supernatural vision. Her frame, as it had been before, willowy and tall with legs that went on forever. She appeared an angel.

Calah looked the same, delicately beautiful and innocent as no other could be.

But she wasn't that way anymore, not according to Alex, not according to her life. He had watched and relished the person she had become, so strong, vibrant and independent. Calah, still herself yet different—evolved. He saw the way she acted around him, understood the complexities of it though she did not.

Her heart beat rapidly beneath his palm. "I kissed you, Calah." A warm smile came naturally, the first in centuries. "You merely kissed back."

Her full lips curled in at the corners, she released his shirt and dropped her eyes. "This is inappropriate, Gabriel." As though she awakened from a dream, she glanced around frantically. "Where is Alex?"

He pulled back and ran a hand through his hair. Then he thought twice, drove his hand into her hair and tilted her head back until her eyes met his. He let his long repressed emotions overtake. Saw no reason to take this slowly. "I desire you for more than your writing abilities, Calah, do you not realize that?"

She spoke but no words came out. She behaved as all females did with him. Did she not *feel* this, *know* this? He felt his incisors grow again, for the fourth time since he had laid eyes on her. He growled in frustration and pushed away. He was too old for this, knew better. He had done nothing but practice self-restraint for far too long.

Touching her once had snapped his self-restraint in half.

She straightened and turned from him. He moved forward, stood beside her and gripped the railing, watched Boston's lights fall into the distance and focused on the choppy black sea. How could one night have made him feel a young fool again? He covered one of her hands with his and stared at the elegant profile he knew so well. "This time I am sorry. Please forgive me."

He didn't have to touch her to know her pulse jumped and her palms became sweaty. Regardless, when she spoke her voice rang strong and clear. Her gaze remained straight ahead. "I think...perhaps." She turned her head slightly and her golden gaze cut. "We've started out on the wrong foot."

The wrong foot? How eloquently phrased. He leaned against the railing, faced her and smiled. "I quite like how we started out."

Calah didn't falter, her expression resolved. "Well, I don't." She pulled his jacket even tighter around her shoulders. "I'm here to interview you. Nothing else."

He didn't want her to feel pressured, had never meant to be so confrontational. It was simply in his nature... who he was... *what* he was. He offered his most charming smile. "Then we shall interview, Calah... tomorrow." He held out his arm to her. "Let us go have dinner."

Hesitant for a flicker of a moment, she stared at him then took his arm and forced a smile. "Yes, tomorrow."

Gabriel guided her downstairs to endure a dinner in the cabin. He sat next to her as they all commenced to watch the late news. But always, without her knowledge, he watched her, could not help it, she was everything. And she was clueless. Cast into the mold fate had created for her. How he wished he could turn back time and make her see. Should he wish such a thing?

No, he wouldn't wish such remembrance on his worst enemy.

But some part of him wished and wanted. Such desires were weak emotions and had no room in his life. So when the yacht hit harbor and his house loomed beyond he did nothing save stay professional. Let Alex lead Calah up the dock to his home.

What could she be possibly be thinking at this moment? Why did he care? For all his wealth, he had nothing to offer her. Yet he found himself taking Alex's place and guiding Calah up the dock.

"What do you think, Calah?" He knew what she thought by the look on her face.

She smiled, still not comfortable with him, pulse rapid. "I think I'm glad I've got my sneakers on now."

He looked down and grinned. "Yes, good move."

"You think?" She looked to his home. "And your place isn't half bad either."

He knew what she saw, understood what she really thought even though his presence dulled her senses to all but him. It was not a matter of being cocky, it just *was*. Women, especially *this* woman would be tuned into only him, be dazzled in his presence.

Calah's expression stayed rather cool when they entered the foyer. He walked her to the bottom of the staircase and stopped. "Calah, Alex will show you to your room." He brought the back of her hand to his lips, closed his eyes, and kissed it gently. "I look forward to the interview tomorrow."

She focused on her hand and then his lips, her response quiet. "As do I."

He watched until Calah and Alexandria vanished upstairs before making his way to the study where he received a glass from Stephan and sat before the fire. He sipped, hungry for more than what the liquid in the cup offered. Shadows fell across the room and left him in the darkness he craved.

Now there was no turning back. He could only offer protection. He swirled the liquid in his cup. But who would protect her from him? Could he be as strong as he'd fantasized? Let her go now that he had her? He ran his tongue over his teeth.

Or was he no better than who he protected her from?

Perfection proved too mild a word. This was bliss in its truest form, bliss like a thousand extra thick down comforters, better than perfect. Calah stretched, languished, then rolled over and smiled. Until she opened her eyes, sat up and screamed.

Gargoyles, everywhere!

She lay in a mammoth bed caped on all sides with blood-red velvet and mahogany bedposts carved with gargoyle faces. She pulled the blankets over her head. She hated gargoyles. They'd always made her sick to her stomach. Why, she didn't know. Silly really, they were just grotesque faces. They ultimately had a good meaning, didn't they?

A knock resounded from beyond the door. "Calah, are you okay?"

She swiped aside the curtains and jumped from the bed, needing to escape the endless faces. Her feet hit cool hardwood floor. "Yeah, come in, please."

Alex burst through. "What's going on? I heard you scream."

She waved her away and looked around the room. "I'm fine, really."

"You are not, look at you, you're shaking!" Alex grabbed her hands and rubbed them, her black hair tousled, blue eyes narrowed. "And I only knocked first because of your..." She rubbed her hands more forcibly. "Your aversion to people not knocking first."

She nodded and clenched Alex's hands. "Thank you...the gargoyles threw me off is all."

Alex's eyes flickered over the bed, and she frowned. "I didn't realize you had such an aversion to gargoyles. I'm so sorry. Do you want to move to another room?"

She shook her head. "No, that's not necessary. They just surprised me."

"Are you sure? There are a ton of rooms in this place."

She looked around and murmured, "No really, this is fine." Where was she? This room was completely foreign. She looked down. As was the nightgown, she wore. She had slept in nothing but sweatpants and a t-shirt since she'd been a kid. This garment had frills and went to her ankles...*Please!*

Calah frowned and pawed her outfit in confusion. "What am I wearing?"

Alex smiled and backed away. "Sorry, you were determined to wear it."

"Huh?" She frowned at the garment. "No way, have you ever seen me wear anything like this? Come on. Where did it come from?"

"From that chest." Alex pointed at the large chest sitting at the foot of the bed, turned away and threw Calah's small suitcase open. "I would suggest you get into something a little bit more modern."

A little bit more modern? Calah looked down at what she wore again. She couldn't agree more. In what century was this thing made? She opened the chest and the smell of cedar wafted out. She fingered the dresses inside. They looked ancient. "Why on Earth would I have worn something out of this?" she whispered.

Alex kept her back turned. "You said it reminded you of home."

Home? She laughed nervously and shut the trunk. This was too strange. She pulled the garment off and couldn't smell mothballs. Not that old, then, but wow, did it look it.

"Here," Alex said over her shoulder and whipped a pair of stonewashed jeans her way followed by a white turtleneck sweater. She dressed and eyeballed the high ceiling, heavy brocade curtains and mahogany furniture.

"Alex, where am I?"

Her friend turned back, face open and alive. "You're at my brother's home, don't you remember?" She walked forward and gave her infamous grin. "Please don't tell me you drank that much?"

What, drink that much? She'd barely drunk a drop! Well, maybe a few drops but in her defense, it had been a hell of a night. Gabriel had been...*Gabriel*. She stopped and ran her hand lightly along her mid-drift. *Gabriel*. He had been beautiful, mesmerizing, all consuming...dangerous. She shook her head, it felt as though a cloud had enveloped her mind but now dispersed, as though she awoke from a dream.

"You've slept the day away." Alex held out her hand. "Come, let's find you some food."

She rubbed her hands down her thighs and tried not to panic. How did she not remember this room? She glanced again at the bed with its velvet hangings and gargoyle faces and swallowed hard. This all seemed surreal. As if she'd walked between two dimensions. Yet Alex stood there solid and real. So her mind hadn't completely cracked. It was time to whip up a smile and try not to not act as insane as she felt. "Food, yeah, okay, sounds good."

Alex smiled and led her out the door. A cool breeze came out of nowhere and grazed her skin like flint on ice. The hallway was long and narrow, elegant and cold, with dark wooden walls and random brass lamps. The floor was hardwood and the ceiling alabaster white. There was no smell. Not the acrid cleanliness of cleaning detergents or the well-worn mildew musk of an ancient building.

"Hun, are you sure you're all right?" Alex grabbed her hand and pulled her along. "Is this place making you nervous? I know it looks like it should smell ancient."

Calah almost stopped short. Had Alex read her mind? Not likely. She tried to convince herself she was probably just overtired. She'd let herself get stressed over this whole interview thing, about where her writing career was at this point. Stupid, seriously stupid.

But memory, she searched for memory. She remembered eating Maine lobster on the yacht, dipping the succulent meat in warm butter and recalled the crisp, cool new air as the yacht had banked in Bar Harbor.

Then, like the dream one wishes they could close their eyes and recreate, she remembered walking up the dock with Gabriel's arm entwined with hers as though she were royalty, some mystical esteemed woman from another time. She remembered his proud profile, his hair whipped back by the wind, eyes intent on his home.

His home!

On a half cliff, like a castle caught in a tornado, his home. Black oily waves uncoiled in slow motion beneath a nearly full moon's shadow, enchanting, beyond comparison. With stones and pillars it appeared gothic but subdued, as though it were the castle a knight might bring his true love, his bride. It didn't look like a home one would find in Maine but rather one from a time forgotten, a fairy tale.

And his kiss on the boat! He had kissed her, told her he wanted her for more. How could she have so easily forgotten? Never had she been kissed like that. So thoroughly and with enough passion that she'd had no sense of herself or anything around her, only of him.

"Calah, come on!"

"Coming." She traveled down the spiral staircase into a very modern kitchen. What had she expected? A huge fire burning on a stone hearth? A rabbit rotating on a spit?

"Here." Alex shoved a plate full of scrambled eggs and bacon her way. "Eat."

"No." Nausea overtook her. "Sorry, not hungry after all."

Alex shrugged and pulled the plate away, face wary. "What would you like, Calah, because usually you like scrambled, no matter what time of day."

Her stomach grumbled in defiance but she ignored it. "I want coffee."

"Fine." Alex slid a heavy mug her way. "Then drink, enjoy."

She cupped both hands around the mug, lifted it to her lips and drank deeply. The coffee tasted strong. She lowered the mug and waited. Alex wasn't herself, not the Alex she'd come to love for so long. Yes, her skin appeared fresh, eyes alive, but something was amiss. This was the problem with seeing a friend once every two years or so, one didn't know quite how much they'd changed.

Yet, maybe it was more her than Alex. "I'm sorry. I'm just not feeling myself. What time is it anyway?" She buried her face in another sip of coffee and enjoyed the steam as it rose and covered her lips.

When she looked up, she swore she saw compassion and something else in Alex's expression—sympathy? But of course, she was here to interview a billionaire, and she'd done nothing but flirt and forget the end of the previous evening. Not even a double, but triple negative.

"It's four o'clock," Alex said.

Four! She *had* nearly slept the day away! She sighed inwardly, set the mug aside and gave her widest smile. "So what's on our agenda then?"

Alex grinned and winked. "Well, for you an interview with a certain Englishman."

She looked around. "The interview's now? Where is Gabriel? I really should go change into something more professional."

"You look fine, and he'll be down in a few minutes." Alex grabbed her coffee. "Come on, I have something for you."

"What, why?" She followed her friend up the stairs into the living room. Nothing but well polished mahogany furnished the room. The carpet, plush and wide, was dark crimson. A large chandelier hung over a huge tan colored suede couch.

"Did you think I forgot about your birthday tomorrow?"

She trailed Alex to the sofa where a large box wrapped in silver waited. "I'd hoped you had but should have known better."

Alex picked it up and held it out to her. "Here, open it! I know it's something a guy would usually give a girl but I remembered that night shopping how much you loved it."

"Shush, say no more!" She quickly tore off the paper and smiled. Her best friend was horrible at giving gifts, if she didn't hurry up and open it Alex would tell her what was inside.

Carefully she removed the top of the box and pushed the tissue paper aside. Her jaw dropped. "Alex, you shouldn't have!"

"Oh, I should have. After all, you *will* be wearing it when I paint you later."

He had hated every minute of it, no doubt about that.

Calah set aside her notepad, tape recorder and refused to fidget. Gabriel made a mess out of her. She was still surprised how offbeat she acted around him. Thankfully, her voice had not shaken when she interviewed him. It wasn't just his fantastic looks, definitely not that, she had been around handsome men before and always kept her cool. With him, it was something indefinable. Sitting behind that imposing, Victorian era desk with the lights glinting blue off his hair and the shadows carving his eyes into secrecy, the man swallowed the room with mere presence.

That she'd experienced the most amazing kiss of her life the night before had nothing to do with it. Nor the fact he'd declared he was interested in her beyond a simple interview.

But how much had she really learned about him? If she wasn't mistaken he'd easily skirted around some

of the questions and given her half responses to others. She would have to review her notes again. She had gleaned a few new things. Interestingly enough, Stephen was more than just his yacht captain. He was the face for the clubs, the one who met with the individual managers. Gabriel remained behind the lines and took conference calls via phone.

Apparently, he saw no need to elaborate on why neither he nor Stephen were shown on his website and, in all honesty, it wasn't necessary to the article she would write. She already visualized the piece as one that spoke of the 'man behind the scenes' or 'the man without a face, but a business mind worth a billion.' The public ate up stuff like that.

"So that concludes it then." Gabriel stood, walked around and leaned against the desk with smooth casualness.

His proximity and height more than overwhelmed but she looked up and met his gaze. "You're quite accomplished, Mr. Knight."

"Gabriel."

Again, she had the same feeling she'd had on the yacht, as though he moved closer, so close the world ceased to exist. "Gabriel."

He offered an alluring smile, and she had the distinct feeling that, though he'd tolerated the interview, he'd much rather have her beneath him at the moment. "Now, Calah, tell me more about you."

His soft tone and bedroom eyes should offend but they didn't. With any other man whom she had just conducted a professional interview she'd pack up her stuff, rent a car and be out of here. Not Gabriel. She still hadn't looked away. He held so many secrets. What were they?

"There's not much to tell." Don't fidget, she preached to herself, don't let him see your discomfort. "You already know the basics about me."

His gaze seemed to crawl inside her, and she released the pen she'd been holding. It clattered to the desktop.

"But not the truths, Calah. Tell me the truths."

Why not? Because there weren't many. "I was always the kid who struggled to prove my intelligence. Went to Boston University and majored in journalism when I should have majored in history. Fell in love too young only to learn the hard way I'd never been in love to begin with, have no concept of what it means to love and know for a fact, I never will."

What had she just said? She couldn't have said those things to him. Like a whirlpool, sucking her in further—No, quicksand, his low tone wrapped around her.

"You never needed to prove your intelligence, Calah. You have always been naturally bright. Journalism was the right major, history just got in the way." His hand moved slightly, as if it encompassed her cheek but seemed to have never left his side. "And as for love, you are right. You have never been in love... But you will be."

His gaze left hers, and she slammed back to reality. This was absolutely absurd! Why was she still sitting here? Why had she just unloaded her heart to a perfect stranger?

Enough. She grabbed her notepad and recorder, stood and held out her hand to shake his, needed to make this whole bizarre conversation normal. "Thank you for the interview."

Protocol wasn't part of his vocabulary because instead of a nice descent handshake he brought the back of her hand to his lips once again. "My pleasure."

She nodded and left the room with the uneasy if not disturbingly persistent feeling that before all was said and done on this little trip to Maine, the word *pleasure* was going to be a massive understatement.

Alex intercepted and urged her spend a few hours exploring the house. They chatted and caught up on things. She'd forgotten what it felt like to spend time with another female.

"You've really done quite well for yourself, Calah," Alex said as they climbed the stairs to a balcony with a big bay window.

"Thanks. Sounds like you have, too!"

"Yes, I have three galleries now in England and one set to open next year." Alex opened one of the side windows slightly and allowed the wind to blow in.

Calah eyed her friend and leaned against the railing. "What of your dream to open one here? You know New York City like the back of your hand, and you have a connection like your brother. What's the hold up?"

Alex scraped her fingernail over the wooden railing absently and shrugged. "I don't know. It's not as easy as it looks bringing a business from Britain to America. Gabriel is a rare example. His clubs were so huge, the American news loved to cover them. It was a logical and easy expansion for him. I run small art galleries. That's a bit different."

"It is only if you let it be." She put a hand over Alex's and met her eye. "Fear is useless. You are the only one holding you back. Hate to coin the phrase, but the world is your oyster. Nowadays, the American public relishes foreign influences such as clubs, restaurants, and most especially, art galleries. You should keep that in mind. You're a beautiful Englishwoman educated not only in England but in America, and you're so talented it's ridiculous. An art gallery in Boston would worship you. An art gallery in New York City would relish you like a holy icon."

Alex took a deep breath, leaned her head back and let the wind blow her hair. She spoke so softly Calah almost didn't hear her. "If it were only that simple. I was never supposed to be in America to begin with. To dream to stay here and be successful is more than I could hope for."

She frowned at her friend. "But you have been educated here. Surely, you decided to do that for a reason."

"Oh sure." Alex tipped her head forward and her expression shifted from a dreamer's to a realist's. "But for an Englishwoman to be educated in her own country as well as America is simply practical."

She didn't know what to make of that response. Artists didn't typically follow practical sense but instead, their creative inclination. None-the-less, Calah pulled Alex close for a hug. "Well, I think you should follow your dreams."

Alex nodded and pulled back. "Thank you, I just might."

Calah followed her down the stairs a few minutes later, grateful they'd been able to reconnect. They had always been close. She couldn't, however, shake the feeling Alex hadn't told her the whole truth. That she was in America for a reason totally unrelated to her art galleries. With that thought, her mind drifted to Gabriel. Everything that had happened with him thus far felt odd. Every encounter *off* somehow, as if slightly beyond rational comprehension though nothing abnormal occurred.

She walked into her room and sat on the trunk at the end of the bed. Soon she would dress for her painting and flinched at the dress hanging nearby. It didn't suit her at all. Yet she was eager to see how it would look.

More than that, she was eager to see what Gabriel, if he saw her, would think of it on her.

Gabriel leaned back and stared at the row of paintings in his gallery. Should he put up the picture? No. It was wrong. Oh, but to see if she remembered.

He ignored the thrill shooting through his heart at the thought of Calah. Blood pooled on his tongue, straight from the glass, the only way he would drink it, warm and fresh. He turned from the paintings and gazed out the windows onto the still night. The moon gleamed overhead and appealed to his baser instincts.

Lust.

Blood.

Bliss.

But he was strong. Stronger than most. Older than most. He leaned his forehead against the windowpane and grimaced. The empty pit in his stomach had always been manageable. Not anymore. Calah made him crave more than he ever had for the taste of human blood. She was only here because she needed protection, not to appease his desires and needs. He must remember that. But the pull became stronger. Her blood sang to him, her soul reminded him. Could there be more for them? Should he make her remember and show her where fate had led them?

When the *Other* came, Calah would not know of it. He would keep that ugliness from her. He had already chosen to fill her bedroom with pieces of a reality she couldn't possibly comprehend, what harm could it really do to show her more and assuage his hidden curiosities? He had the ability to make her forget, and he would.

He swore to himself and scowled. She was here because there was no other place for her now. None of this was his fault. He ground his teeth and breathed against the cold windowpane. If he wondered now, if he taunted her on levels she could not understand, it was fate's fault, certainly not his.

He looked beyond the windowpane and sought ease to the discontented conscience he hadn't known he had. It was *not* his right to know if she remembered nor was it his right to inflict memories on her. Hell, this was torture.

"My Lord?"

He didn't move. "Yes, Stephen."

"She still communicates with her editor. Do you want that to stop?"

He breathed deeply and turned to his friend. "I'll take care of it." He looked to the paintings. "I want it shown tonight, hang the painting."

"What possible re—"

"Is it your job to question me?" Gabriel growled.

Stephen bowed his head and backed away. "No, my apologies, my Lord."

Gabriel turned away and tremors consumed his body. His inability to do the right thing appalled him. Stephen knew it; he knew it. He wanted her to view the bloody painting and see the possible recognition register on her face, wanted to feel the thrill it would give him. It would mean a connection to her for which he was so desperate.

Furious, he threw his glass against the wall. Blood ran down the white wall, swiveling along the crevices of age.

Did he not have the right?

Chapter 4

"Wow, I have *never* worn anything like this." Calah stared at herself in the mirror. "It's a beautiful gift, and I'm thankful but how did I let you talk me into this? What was I thinking?"

Alex smiled and brought a jewelry box over. "You were thinking that it was about time you got out of those neutral, conservative business suits."

She adjusted a spaghetti strap and chewed her lip. Her black satin gown had a sleeveless bodice which fell below the center of her breasts in a loose "U" shape, leaving enough of her cleavage to barely borderline decent. The bottom hugged her hips then flowed gracefully to the floor. "Look at me, I don't look at all like me, I look like...like..."

"Something out of a sexy fairytale?" Alex nodded with approval and chuckled.

"Oh yeah, that's ripe, Cinderella turns naughty." She stared at her hair, swept back into an elegant French knot.

"Ha ha, very funny. Stop it, you look beyond fantastic. You did fall in love with this dress in the store."

Alex opened up the jewelry box as the sound of classical music drifted up the stairs. "I want you to wear these."

She was sure her jaw hit the floor when its contents were revealed. "You can't be serious."
"I am." Alex removed first the necklace and brought it around Calah's throat. A string of glittering diamonds, the piece came to a point just below her collarbone. "It was a gift from my brother years ago."
"My God," she whispered and fingered the exquisite gems. "I shouldn't!"
"You should." Alex held out two earrings dripping with diamonds. "And these as well."
She shook her head while putting them on. "This is crazy. I was only supposed to interview your brother yet I'm dressing up for a painting."
"At his request might I remind you?" Alex stepped back and nodded with approval.
Calah eyed herself in the mirror again. "No, this is at your request." She tried to meet her friend's eye in the mirror but Alex had moved. "And why do you want me dressed in this anyway? Shouldn't I be wearing something I usually wear? Something that depicts the *real* me?"
Alex grinned. "What do you think Frank would say to that if he were here?"
"Ugh, you know what Frank would say." She narrowed her eyes and shot a mocking glare at her friend. "Is this all a conspiracy to get me out of what you two think are hum-drum clothes?"
Alex put a hand to her chest and appeared properly wounded. "Who, us? We would never do such a thing!"
She laughed a little. "Yes you would, devious swines."
Alex shrugged. "Such is life. You look wonderful. I can't wait to paint you. Come on, let's go get started, this will take a while."
Calah groaned. "Couldn't you just snap a picture and paint off that?"
"You wound me." Alex made a hand flourish as though she held a paintbrush. "A true artist finds valid inspiration and absolute depth perception when their subject poses for them."
"Ah ha." She ushered Alex toward the door. "Then let's go get started."
Her cell phone rang, and she stopped. "I'm sure that's Frank. I have to take it. I'll be right down, Alex."
"No problem, meet me in the library," Alex said and left.
She nodded, yanked her phone out of her purse and flipped it open. "I've done the interview."
"And you didn't call me right away? Why?"
"Would you have called me had you been in a beautiful mansion in Maine?"
She could almost see him narrow his eyes on the other end of the line. "It's not because the mansion is so beautiful that you didn't call me, is it?" She mentally saw him switch his phone to the other ear and drum his fingers on the side of his sofa. "Please don't tell me you've fallen for this guy. Obviously he's good looking and so rich you and I could combine our salaries for a lifetime and come up a couple hundred million shy."
Best to be honest, Frank would see right through her even over the phone. "I'm attracted to him, yes."
"Dear Lord." Now she knew Frank was sitting up, fiddling with his remote control and turning on the evening news to keep his suddenly frazzled mind level. "Do you know what I'm thinking right now?"
"Yes, Frank."
He was turning up the volume now.
"What am I thinking, Calah?"
She smiled and perched on the edge of the bed. "You're wondering whether you should speak to me as my editor or as my friend."
And now, he would hit mute. Sure as she thought it, silence filled the background on his end. "And how do I feel about such a position, Calah?"
Poor guy. He really was on the tough end of things. "You don't like it and can't stand when you're put in such a position."
"Correct. And what are you going to do, Calah?"
Wish to holy heck he was here to give her a big hug. Now that was something she couldn't let him detect. With her best attempt at humor she said, "I'm going to write a damned good article!"
Melodramatic as ever, Frank responded. "I'm beyond worried. I know you too well. You haven't merely fallen for him! In one day, you've become completely infatuated with him. He's all you can think about. You can't let this affect the article, and I'll be damned if you get hurt by this guy. I'm coming, be there tomorrow, this situation is still salvageable!"
Before she could say a word, the line went dead. *Damn*. She should have known better. She refused to get aggravated. Frank knew her like the back of his hand, knew when she needed him.
She was tempted to call him back but wouldn't. No matter what she said, Frank would see through it, best to get on with the evening and pose for the painting.
When Calah entered the library, Alex was busy setting up equipment. The last person she expected to see sitting on the sofa, reading a book, was Gabriel. He stood when she entered and his dark gaze flowed down her body so slowly she couldn't help but blush.
Calah touched her necklace. Had this really been such a good idea? Posing for this painting, right now? Perhaps she could have tried to persuade them to let Alex do it when they returned to Boston. But no, some corner of her mind wanted this, right here, right now.
It had to be Gabriel.
Of course, it had to do with him. Frank was right; he was all she'd thought about since she had first laid eyes on him. She ran her forefinger and thumb down one earring. Had he touched this very earring before giving it to Alex? She pictured the delicate piece of jewelry lost in his big palm, then that same palm running up her thigh. She'd never been more turned on. This was crazy. For someone never prone to fantasies, she'd had enough about him today to last a lifetime.
He smiled and stared, as though he mesmerized every inch of her. "You look incredibly beautiful, Calah."
She couldn't move. To dress like this for a painting was one thing, to be seen by a man she was attracted to, dressed as such, another. Her conservative appearance stripped away and replaced by very much the opposite.
She tore her gaze away and smoothed her dress. "Thank you, Gabriel."

He still hadn't moved but somehow pulled her gaze back to his, ebony eyes as direct and intimidating as ever. "Did you enjoy the rest of your evening after the interview?"

"Yes, I did, you have a gorgeous home, well worth exploring."

Gabriel lowered his head slightly in acknowledgment and a lock of hair fell over his forehead. "Yes, it is."

He approached slowly and the room vanished. Within six inches, he stopped. The air sizzled between them. He lifted his hand and his fingers skimmed just beneath the line of diamonds at her throat. Blinding awareness tore through her. His eyes dropped to the necklace. "This was made for you." His dark gaze met hers again. "Calah."

"All right." Alex piped up. "There's work to be done, brother. You'll have to admire her from afar."

Calah cringed and pulled her eyes from his. For a moment, she had completely forgotten her friend was in the same room but no, there she was with her easel ready, smock on and rearranging her paints. A fire burned on the hearth and the room held the pleasant smell of rosewood and lilac.

Gabriel led her toward a lovely wing-backed chair set somewhat near the fire. Made of dark wood and near white satin padding, it struck her Victorian in design. "You will sit here for the painting."

She sat and instinctively crossed her legs.

"No," he said softly and though he didn't move, she swore she felt his hand on her knee. "Uncross your legs but keep them together as you will be gazing toward the fire."

She followed his instructions and focused on breathing. So close, his every little motion noticeable to her. The way his wide shoulders flexed beneath a form fitting black designer linen shirt. The way his dress slacks stretched over long, well-muscled thighs. She could hear Alex mixing her paints and knew she was adjusting the lighting in the room. Still, Gabriel towered and directed and made thought impossible.

He crouched in front of her and took her hands in his. The stroke of his fingers on her palms drew her eyes down. The gesture struck her as more intimate than a kiss. Without a word, he took one of her hands and placed it on the chair's armrest, closest to the fire and laid her other over it.

"Now," he whispered and her eyes flew to his lips. "Turn your head toward the fire, Calah."

She did.

"No." His knuckles gently brushed her cheek and turned her chin more. "Like that."

She hadn't meant to whisper back. "And what of my expression?"

His hand covered hers. "Just as it is, with unleashed passion caught within a mask of confusion and whimsy." He leaned closer. "I've put that look there. Alex will capture it and every time you look at this portrait, you will think of me. You will think of this moment."

She couldn't help but enjoy his arrogance, he wore it so well. Gabriel was right, she would think of him. In fact, would another man ever make her experience what this man made her feel simply by being in the same room? She doubted it.

"Gabriel, time to step aside, I'm ready," Alex said.

In one fluid movement, he stood and returned to the sofa to read. She closed her eyes briefly. The last thing she needed was for him to stay. If he truly read, that would be one thing but she knew he did not. She knew that he watched her from the corner of his eye.

Some time later, she heard Alex muttering to herself over the dim classical music playing in the background and the crackle of the fire. Every once in a while, she heard Gabriel turn a page. Posing for a portrait was harder than it looked. In fact, it was rather boring. She tried to work out his interview in her head but her thoughts kept drifting back to the man himself and his close proximity.

"I have your face finished, Calah, so you can talk now if you'd like but don't turn your head if you can help it," Alex said.

"Thank God." She smiled. "I've heard of painters that wouldn't allow that."

Alex chuckled. "I'm better than most."

She thought of the painting hanging in her bedroom of the woman and man in the forest. "You're right, you are."

"So, what are your plans for the future, Calah?" Gabriel asked.

Of course, he was paying attention and would jump right in.

"Actually, I'm thinking about writing a novel."

"Really?" She could tell he moved closer. "Nonfiction?"

She laughed. "You would think so, but no. This is pure fiction."

Calah heard the smile in his voice. "And what will this novel be about?"

"That I can't tell you."

"No, why is that?"

"Bad luck."

"I see." He stood and walked to the hearth. Locking his hands behind his back, he stared into the fire.

"Do you have much knowledge of the medieval period?"

A shiver of warning ran along her spine. How much did this man really know about her? Did he have the capability to hack into her computer?

She cocked her head and ignored Alex's faint curse. "Why would you ask me such a thing, Gabriel?"

He nodded to one of the side tables. "I can only assume it was you who read that book earlier."

Her gaze followed his to the thick book she *had* been reading earlier. It was about English castles built during the medieval period. She could have sworn she'd put it back on the shelf.

"Actually, no, I'm not particularly interested in the medieval period. The book simply caught my attention, and I decided to browse through it."

He arched a brow. "I see."

"You sound as though you doubt my explanation," she said.

"Do I?" He did not release her gaze. "I suppose that I was interested in what sort of literature interests you. I assumed you were interested in English castles because you intended to write about them in your book."

He looked back to the fire. "Call it the businessman in me to want to understand the way your mind works."

She studied his profile and wondered about the man inside. The man she had not discovered in the

interview. She didn't care that Alex stood there listening. "I don't think the businessman cares at all but the man himself does very much."

He turned on his heel and faced her directly, gaze amused.

"Perhaps you are right but back to you. Why does a woman who dresses overly conservative and has always written straight non-fiction, suddenly want to dive into the imaginative world of fiction? I am most curious."

She bristled at both his question and acute perception. She had no desire to share anything about her story with him or why she wanted to write it. He bordered on rude and because of such she retaliated. "I really can't imagine how it's any of your business."

He rocked back on his heel. "Everything you do is my business now wouldn't you think?"

"To a certain degree, yes, however, any fictional projects that I take on now or in the future have nothing to do with why I'm here." She bit the inside of her cheek and cursed this line of conversation, it wasn't good for business, and Frank would have a conniption if he heard her. Still, she'd hold her ground to some extent. "Perhaps, if you're still interested down the line, I will consider sending you a copy of the manuscript."

Alex sniggered though they both ignored her.

"I would be very interested. After all, I have many connections. I may be able to help," Gabriel responded.

Inwardly, she thrilled at his statement but not for the reason she should. As a writer starting her first novel, she should be ecstatic at such an offer. But that wasn't what thrilled her. What made her heart beat faster and a small smile erupt and linger was the fact he wanted her to stay in touch. That was what he implied, wasn't it?

"Thank you, Gabriel. When it's finished I'll definitely keep you in mind."

"Excellent, I have everything I need!" Alex interrupted.

She frowned and turned to her friend. "That's impossible."

Alex smiled over the portrait. "No it's not, it's nearly finished."

Calah looked from Gabriel to Alex. "But you just finished painting my face."

"Ah...no." Alex nodded to the clock over the mantle. "I finished that three hours ago. I have what I need now."

She looked to the clock. Three hours *had* passed! How was that possible? She and Gabriel had been talking mere minutes, she was sure of it. "But I've only been able to talk for a short time!"

Alex appeared concerned. "No hun, it's been awhile. You've been talking for a bit."

"No, that's impossible!" she said.

Gabriel walked over and held out his hand. His dark eyes drilled into hers. "What is it that American's like to say? Time flies when you're having fun?"

True, time did fly when one was having fun. But had she been having fun? It'd felt more like an attempt to protect her privacy and maintain professional integrity. She didn't shy away from his gaze when he pulled her to a stand. Maybe time had gone by that fast. He had been reading for some time and then they had been talking. The clock didn't lie. She had entered this room at ten o'clock and it was one o'clock in the morning now.

"Come walk with me. I want to show you something." Gabriel pulled her after him. "Alex, we'll see you tomorrow."

Calah stopped and turned to her friend. "Wait. May I see what you've done?"

Alex shook her head. "No, not until it's finished. Go with my brother. Thanks for posing for me, Birthday girl."

She nodded and let Gabriel lead her away. Again, she had that strange feeling of awaking from a dream, as though time was misplaced.

"So, what do you think?" Gabriel asked.

She stopped short. She hadn't been here when exploring earlier. They stood in a long galley. Moonlight poured through endless stately windows and sparkled off a long line of unlit crystal chandeliers. They cast a mixture of moon and stars over the paintings lining the opposite wall. It was breathtaking.

"How beautiful, Gabriel."

"Come, walk with me. Let me show you my family."

His family! She looked closer at the huge, framed paintings. Most were dressed in older clothing, some newer. Enchanting. She stared in rapture; some even wore knight's armor. "You can trace your lineage back this far?"

He squeezed her hand and continued walking. "I *am* English."

"Ah yes." She heard the click of her high heels on the parquet floor. "English, much older heritage than we Americans."

"Indeed."

She peered closer at some of the paintings. "Amazing, some of these bear a striking resemblance to you, others to Alex."

Before she could inquire further a painting caught her attention. It depicted a woman sitting on a stone wall, her flaming crimson hair caught in the wind, cheeks red with delight. There was something carefree and rebellious about her, as though she was eager to live life, sick of waiting.

"Who is this?" She reached out and touched the frame as if it would give insight into what the woman was thinking. Before her fingers made contact, a strange burning sensation started under her fingernails and she pulled back.

Gabriel's voice was soft. His hand covered hers. "She is a relative."

She couldn't remove her eyes from the painting. "Which relative, Gabriel?" She covered his hand with hers. "Please, I need to know."

"One of the first." He responded.

"I can't hate her," she whispered. "I can't." Why had she said that?

He spun her away from the picture abruptly and grabbed her by the shoulders. His eyes seared black against the moon beyond. "You could never hate anyone, Calah." His eyes traveled over her shoulder briefly,

met the painting and then returned to her sharply, his grip tightened. "You never knew hate." He shook his head and squeezed her shoulders tighter. "You could never know hate, it's not in you."

She shook her head, confused. "I don't understand, Gabriel, you're making me nervous. Am I missing something?"

Before she could stop him, she was wrapped up in his arms, head tucked against his chest, his voice a deep rumble against her eardrum. "No, everything is all right, I promise."

She knew something was terribly wrong and pulled back. "What aren't you telling me, Gabriel?"

His features were closeted in shadows but she didn't miss the set jaw or the offset timbre of his response. "I am telling you that everything is all right. It always has been and always will be." She could have sworn she saw red flicker in his eyes. "Do you not believe me?"

Calah blinked and looked closer. No red. This was quickly becoming out of control. She felt it with every ounce of her being. What was he hiding? Why had her response to that portrait upset him so?

Of all emotions, anger rose to the surface. "What are you hiding Gabriel? What aren't you telling me?"

He walked her back against the windowsill and swung her around so that while she faced the paintings they were lost in darkness. "I am not hiding anything, Calah, nothing that you cannot see in front of you if you look."

What? She was about to say exactly what she thought about that response when he cupped her backside and lifted her onto the ledge, spread her legs and settled between them. One hand grabbed her jaw almost roughly, the other her thigh. "I am in no mood to talk, Calah."

She couldn't breathe. All she could think about was their kiss on the boat, how much she had wanted him then and still did. He came so close their lips hovered within inches of each other. His hot breath traveled from her lips, over her chin, and down her neck until his tongue connected with the hollow at the base of her throat and ran the length of the necklace.

Calah closed her eyes, her chest rose and fell, heartbeat slammed rapidly, but she didn't touch him, just braced her arms to her sides, palms against the wall. When he kissed the area just above her cleavage, she gasped.

He had to stop, she had things to say, but her next words were cut off by his lips. They were so savage, intense...distracting. He tilted her head back further and captured her mouth. Defiance and reason slithered away beneath his persuasion. She wanted this, had wanted this for hours. His lips molded to hers, his tongue explored beyond.

She gripped the ledge and tried to think beneath his ardor, it was impossible. Wrapped in a spell more thorough than magic, she gave up on the ledge and clutched his shirt. His hands cupped her face and then neck, squeezed lightly, then angled her head in such a way that even if she wanted to pull away she couldn't.

His strong legs trapped her, his wide chest walled her in and his lips plundered. There was no escape. A memory dusted the crevices of her subconscious, and she knew she should pull away, that this was wrong.

Until he slanted his head once more and took her tongue deeper into his mouth. Calah didn't run, didn't pull away. No. Instead, her legs gave way. Fast, faster than she would have thought possible he pushed her dress up and his arousal pressed against the hot dampness between her thighs. She should push away and question more. The man held more secrets than the Egyptian pyramids. Somehow, her upper dress lowered, and he clamped upon her breast, bit, soothed then bit again. She groaned and moved against him. This was wrong. She had something to say...a thought. He ground his rock-solid erection against her and whatever might have been in her mind vanished.

Calah grabbed Gabriel's hair and pulled his mouth to hers. He pushed her back more, and she felt the cold glass against her backside. Wind blew and an eerie whistle filled the hall. It wrapped around the floorboards and crept beneath her skirts. Fresh lust seized and she ran her hand up under his shirt, clenched her fingers in the light dusting of hair on his chest and then ran her hand down his abdominal muscles. He was so tight, cool and masculine. He made her head spin.

His shirt smelled of starch and his hair of shampoo, the combination so arousing for its basic qualities, she nearly came undone.

Nothing existed now but burning desire. He was clothed. She didn't care. Life snapped shut and became something else. Something made of broad shoulders clothed in rich material, sensual lips sucking once again on her breast and hips pinning her against the wall. She ground her teeth and wrapped her legs around his waist. She heard his zipper. Heard him swear but the roar of blood in her ears wiped it all away.

"*Je suis amoureux de toi,*" he whispered.

"Yes," she breathed and her head fell back. Yes to whatever he had said. Yes to this. He moved into her, and she cried out, tried to accommodate. Moonlight and classical music vibrated off the long hallway, then faded. There was no holding back. He wrapped his arms around her back and pulled her tightly against him. Moving deep and hard, he nipped along her neck.

She kept her head flung back and eyes closed when instant climax rocked her. Guttural and deep throated, she groaned and lost control.

"*Tu pron,*" he whispered. "Mine."

More swiftly than should be possible another climax took her, and she shook with pleasure. Still he moved, his face intent, eyes on hers. His pace stayed steady and his hands traveled to her face, leaving her legs limp. His palms encased her cheeks and his thumb ran over her bottom lip as he moved. "Don't let go of me yet, Calah."

Ripples rolled over her. All she could see was his dark eyes. To speak would be impossible. She bit her bottom lip and shook her head. He stopped moving, leaned in close and kissed her as though she was being given her first kiss. It was tender, tentative and loving. Then it grew, his tongue skimmed her upper lip, slipped into her mouth and swung around her tongue.

Sweet and arousing, he brought her back to the beginning.

Calah whimpered, lost in a dangerous head-spinning level of ecstasy. This time she did something she had never done with another man. She let her vulnerability show. Just as he had. Let him see what she was feeling. Why, she didn't know. Just that she could. That it felt right. She traced his arched eyebrows, the bridge

of his straight nose and his erotic lips. He was so beautiful and real and here. Like nothing she had ever experienced. At this moment, she knew she could pretend.

Pretend that he was hers.

Someone sent from above to protect and love her, someone to share with. Wrapping her arms around him again, she moved and took him, forced him to feel what she felt, the freedom of it. He moaned and met her. Heat swelled and passion flared. This time he had no choice. His eyes became intense, lashes lowered. He thrust harder.

"You feel so good, I knew you would...I knew," he murmured, breathless.

Moonlight held him in thrall, perfect, animated, like nothing she'd ever seen, his expression intense, lost. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead, and she bit her lower lip hard, tasted her own blood.

Slowly he leaned forward and ran his tongue over her bruised lip, groaned and closed his eyes. She stared at his dark beauty. Spellbound. Sensation wrapped around her core. His heavy breathing filled her eardrum and her fingernails dug into his shirt.

A swoosh of breath left her when he nipped her neck, thrust one last time, and cried out against her skin. When shudders of release found him, explosion consumed her, stars flashed in her vision and her feet went numb then tingled. Electricity traveled up her legs, swallowed her womb and blew her arms from him. Had she ever had three orgasms in a row?

He pulled her tighter against him. Thought was useless. They stayed close, body to body. After some time, she opened her eyes to his intense and searching gaze. She should be embarrassed, mortified, something! Instead, she felt sexy and alive.

Gabriel's hands cupped her cheeks gently, his voice husky. "I'm so sorry."

Sorry? This didn't sound good. She covered his hands with hers. "Why, we're both consenting adults."

He moved away and left her feeling hollow. They both readjusted their clothing and silence reigned. So they'd had sex, what was the big deal? They knew it was coming and it had. Yet his response hurt. She had never been intimate with a man so soon after meeting him.

Calah grimaced. They had just had sex, and she'd given no thought to the consequences, hadn't cared. What sort of fool was she? This was her best friend's brother. Her shot at an award-winning interview and article. Would he still want her to write it after she had behaved so loosely? What did doing such a thing say about her character? Then again, what did it say about his?

Gabriel offered his hand, his expression closed and unreadable, as though nothing of importance had occurred. She could not get over how foolish she'd been. She had played the whore for him, as no doubt many women had willingly done before her.

He stopped before they entered the library and turned to her, his face lost in darkness, ebony eyes somehow shining through and intent. "This changes nothing, Calah. I still expect you to write the interview."

She stood straighter and refused to back down from his gaze, best to salvage her dignity and move on. "It will be a good article." Calah struggled for a smile and nodded. "What just happened will not hold sway over it."

He nodded and opened the door.

Later that night, lying in bed alone, every time Calah closed her eyes she saw his face. Saw it in ecstasy when lust had taken over and then saw its closed countenance before they had returned to the library. She had been an idiot to have had sex with him but some part of her wouldn't take it back if she could. That was the crux of it really. She wouldn't want to undo something that had felt so good whether right or wrong.

Calah sat up and flicked on the light. There really wasn't any reason to be upset. He still wanted her to write the article. Why not get started now?

She grabbed her laptop, notes and recorder, and sat, legs folded beneath her, on the bed. Pen in mouth, she pulled up her previous notes based on his website and began to cross reference them with what she'd learned today, scribbling new thoughts alongside the questions. She smiled. If she could use his picture with this, it would sell like hotcakes without anyone reading a thing.

After she was satisfied with the initial phase, she clicked the recorder on to catch any details she might have missed. The tone of his voice when he answered different questions could tell her a lot. She listened to the first five questions and took notes. It was the sixth that gave her pause.

Her voice came through first. "What made you decide to expand your business into the United States?"

His reply. "The time was right. The clubs were making a large profit and expanding to the States seemed like the next logical step."

A whisper. "And you were here."

Calah frowned, rewound the tape and hit play. She must be hearing things. Again her question and his reply, this time, no whisper. Okay, good, she wasn't losing it. She listened to the next question.

Her voice. "Do you intend to expand further, perhaps other parts of Europe?"

His voice. "Perhaps, if the business continues to do so well."

Another whisper. "No, there is no reason, my sweet, unless you are there." A pause. "I *will* seduce you."

She scowled and replayed again. Nothing. A viscous chill ran down her spine, and she tossed the recorder aside. Surely she was just hearing things. Had to be. He'd said none of those things while she'd interviewed him.

But he had seduced her that very evening after Alex painted her.

Calah rolled her shoulders to ease sudden tension. She'd get started on the article and go over the recorder later when she wasn't so uptight. An hour later, she'd worked halfway through and felt beyond pleased. The words were flowing better than she could have ever anticipated.

The wind howled outside and carried the boom of the ocean below. She sat back and relished the thrill of satisfaction every writer feels when they're writing the perfect piece, when everything is falling exactly where it should.

Without thought, her eyes drifted to the gargoyles carved into the bedposts and another shiver ran through her. She wished they'd stop staring at her. Hmm. She leaned forward, saved her article, then Googled gargoyles.

Just as she had thought, though they weren't much to look at, they were meant to protect against evil. Her eyes ran the length of the old bedposts. They were covered with the eerie faces. She supposed it was just to Gabriel's taste. Everyone has their peculiarities, some more eccentric than others.

A wave of fatigue rolled over her. Calah shut the laptop, crawled under the covers and flicked off the light. She would leave tomorrow, well technically today, in that the hour was so late, and leave all of this oddity behind. Would she miss Gabriel? More than she was willing to admit. In less than forty-eight hours, he'd worked his way into her mind, her subconscious.

She groaned and pulled the blanket over her head.
Leaving proved the only option.

Chapter 5

She graced the computer screen better than Mona Lisa did the Louvre. Where Mona held her secrets, Calah made obvious who she was and what she thought. Open, honest, beautiful and put together, a woman who had flourished in the journalism world that dared to challenge all. It was all right there on her website. In everything she had accomplished thus far.

He clicked to another screen and frowned at something else she'd typed. She had crawled inside his head. Had written something so profound it would change her life irrevocably. Damn it.

Gabriel slowly closed the laptop and glanced around his room. Antique mahogany, crimson velvet curtains, a bed too large for four people. It was all superficial and unending for him.

She was not.

Gabriel had taken liberties and gone someplace irreversible. It was his fault. He should have never taken her down that gallery and felt her skin, heard her heartbeat and blood accelerate for him.

Her blood.

She had been perfect, innocent and unknowing. He had battled with the urge to sink his teeth into her neck, had wanted so much to feel the rush of ecstasy. Her warmth and perfection, like no woman alive was capable. He'd brought her bliss and she him, but nothing like what it could have been.

What he wanted it to be.

He lay unclothed on top of the coverlet. He breathed and the lone candle he'd lit blew out. Darkness enveloped and caressed like a long lost mistress, like Calah's silky limbs. Sleep, he needed sleep. To escape and refresh, and try to make sense of his actions, what his next move should be.

A pinprick of white light filled his vision and an unseen wind blew the light closer before turning it into gossamer tendrils. Mesmerized, he sat up, watched it drift closer, flowing and soft.

Calah. Had he summoned her?

No.

"Gabriel." She spoke his name, her voice soft and feminine, alluring.

He reached out his arms and beckoned her forward. "Calah, come."

"Come." He whispered and took her hand. "My love."

Like sunlight, pure and direct, she came into his arms, let him bring her onto the bed, let him cover her with his weight. She floated beneath him, a perfect entity. But no, she was flesh and blood, seething and sumptuous. He took her hands, brought them over her head and urged her to clutch the bedpost.

Her wide eyes met his. "Why are you here?"

He arched a brow and ran his tongue over her bottom lip. "You came to me."

She caught his mouth and devoured him. He returned the kiss with fervor, gave everything he had.

Sweet, thorough, she gave back. Every breath he took was made of her skin and tasted of her very essence.

Her nightgown still lay between them, a wisp of enticing fabric, made for touch and sensation. He caressed her breasts and she arched. He skimmed his hands over her stomach, and she lurched. His teeth grew, his chest ached. Could there still be something left of his heart?

He ran his hands around her back and felt her spine. She licked her lips. "Now, Gabriel." She didn't let go of the bedpost but clutched it tighter. "Take me."

No choice. His need too great. He rose up, bared his teeth and moved into her with his head thrown back and lack of soul bared. A whirlpool engulfed, all reason fled. He thrust, and she cried out. Still he couldn't bear to meet her eyes and see the absolute horror in them.

Yet she didn't struggle. Was her lust as all consuming as his?

"Yes, Gabriel, more consuming."

His eyes shot open in horror, in complete fury at the sultry voice. Calah no longer lay beneath him. Now he looked into the eyes of the *Other*. She had used Calah, taken her soul and let her see.

He had no choice now. None of them did. Time had run out.

This was much better.

Calah eyed herself in the mirror. Gone was the sexy dress. In its place, a dark grey, two-piece pant suit with a white, collared shirt beneath and low heels. She narrowed her eyes and buttoned one button more, which left one button open at the top, professional but casual. No, that didn't feel right, and she unbuttoned it. Somehow she'd gone from a button to the top girl to a two buttons undone girl.

He had to pull herself together. Nothing but odd dreams had plagued her all night. Aftermath flashes, she liked to think. She had been with Gabriel again.

"Hey, you're up, thought you would be!"

She turned at the sound of Alex's voice and smiled. "Yep, up and ready to face the day."

"Night I'm afraid." Alex walked into the room, dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt. "You slept all day!"

How could that be possible? She walked over to the window and flung open the curtain. Indeed, twilight had descended and light purple grazed the ocean beyond. How embarrassing!

"I'm so sorry, this is so unlike me." She walked over to the bureau, grabbed the jewelry case and handed it to Alex. "Here, thank you so much for letting me wear them."

"You're welcome."

Concern lit Alex's eyes. "Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

She didn't meet her friend's eyes. "Very much so."

Alex didn't probe any further, and they headed downstairs. Again Calah reminded herself she was starting out fresh today, well, tonight, and the events of yesterday were a minor setback. When she faced Gabriel, she needed to be level, strong and completely uninhibited by the fact she'd had casual sex with him.

"Good evening, ladies."

Ridiculously good-looking, Gabriel sat in the dining room adjacent to the foyer, newspaper open, wearing a fitted black knit shirt and khaki's. His hair shiny and brushed back, his ebony gaze clear and piercing.

She nodded and met his eyes, no use in playing shy though she dearly wanted to. "Good evening."

They made their way to his end of the table and sat down on either side. Within moments, fresh platters of food were being laid. Pancakes, waffles, scrambled eggs, hash browns, pitchers of orange juice and coffee. All she could think was nineteenth century England goes modern day. Minus the food served on the sideboards and the fare a bit different, with current company and the staff in black suit and tie, she could have been in another time.

And what was with the household serving breakfast so late in the day? Not that she was complaining. Like Alex had said yesterday, she'd eat breakfast at any time of the day. Seriously though, it made one wonder what delicious dinner this household might serve at sunup.

"I trust you slept well," Gabriel said, his eyes never leaving hers.

Not really. "Yes, thank you." She smiled and thanked a waiter when he filled her plate and poured coffee.

Gabriel folded his paper and set it aside, his gaze sliding to Alex. "And you?"

Alex sipped from her coffee cup and shrugged. "Good enough, thanks."

"Good." Gabriel's attention returned to her as he sat back, one hand resting lightly on the table. "I would like to show you more of the estate, Calah."

She nearly choked on her coffee. Hadn't he shown her more than enough already? Did he think her that easy? Of course he did. She couldn't blame him. Calah set down her mug, kept her posture stiff and met his gaze. She should say no, say that she was leaving but instead said, "I would like that, Gabriel."

Had she just sounded flirtatious? She had, she was sure. For all she tried to sound professional around him every word came out sounding as if good girl wants to turn bad girl. It wasn't fair. If she'd really thought this whole thing through, she would have simply met him at some café in Boston, gotten the interview, and been done with it. But she wondered, would that have made a difference?

"Calah?" His voice cut through her thoughts.

"Yes?"

"I asked you if you wanted some sugar for your coffee?"

He had? Calah eyed the small sugar bowl he held out to her. She always drank coffee with sugar, she hated it otherwise. Carefully, she set down the black coffee she'd been drinking and reached over to take the bowl from him. "I'd love some, thanks."

As her fingers wrapped around the handle, their hands brushed. Pain rushed up her arm, and she let go. A vicious roar filled her eardrums and made eyesight nearly impossible. All she could envision was a huge bed with crimson velvet hanging from heavy posts. She was back in a forgotten dream, one that had plagued her all night.

Gabriel lay on his bed, nude and beckoning. He took her hand and brought her down on to the bed. Then he pulled her arms above her head. She felt her white nightgown, the old-fashioned one she'd worn the first night, plastered against her skin, sheer and stretching, a weak barrier between their bodies. She heard a light wind, smelled fresh linen, and felt the weight of his body on hers.

She'd clutched the bedpost and held on for dear life. She had needed him. But this need was different than what she'd felt earlier with him. He'd called her his love. It had felt *right*.

Love.

Calah started to shake and pushed away from the table. He was right here. She closed her eyes and saw him, opened her eyes and was in the dream. Gabriel rose, came over her, pushed into her and...she saw his face.

She released a blood-curdling scream.

Time to get out of here! She ran for side door. Before she could blink, she was pulled back. What the hell was going on? Horrified, she ran for the front door only to find Gabriel standing in front of it.

"Let me out of this house," she exclaimed. Her body started to shake.

His expression darkened. "No, Calah."

Her stomach flipped over and sweat broke out on her brow. This was beyond crazy. Calah looked back into the dining room. Where had Alex gone?

She had to get away from him so she darted up the stairs, ran into her room and slammed the door shut. No lock on the door. She picked up her cell phone to dial 911. Of course, no signal.

She wouldn't panic. Panic accomplished nothing.

"Calah."

She spun around and slammed into Gabriel's chest. Shaking her head, she backed up against the door. "How did you get in here?" She slithered a trembling hand along the door behind and searched for the knob.

A loud crash of thunder reverberated overhead and shook the floor. He moved closer, his dark eyes viciously piercing. Terror seized her limbs and made movement impossible. Fear had never been this overwhelming. So thorough she couldn't swallow nor breathe. This was evil. He was evil. Her nightmare made her head pound. It couldn't be truth. He was a psychopath. She tried to shake her head again but it only jerked once.

At last, words came out in a squeak. "Let me go."

His hands fell to the door on either side of her. "I can't do that, Calah. You have seen too much."

"I've seen nothing." She tried to move but his hands slid closer.

"Oh, I think you have." He moved within an inch and his sheer size became an unbreakable cage of height, muscle and willpower. "Tell me what you dreamt, Calah."

How could he know of her dream? Perhaps she still dreamt now. This all seemed surreal as did everything around her. Calah tried to look away from his eyes but found it impossible. They were sucking her in again. "I didn't dream last night."

He ran the back of his hand down her cheek and took hold of her jaw. "You were with me last night in your dreams."

With all of the willpower left to her, she pulled her gaze from his and looked about, tried to locate solid things in the dim light, the heavy furnishings and cream-colored walls. Her suitcase sitting on the chair and sneakers lined up neatly on the floor. The sound of rain driving against the window and wind outside. All of it was *real*. What she'd seen in a nightmare, that which he couldn't possibly be speaking of, wasn't.

He pulled her forward roughly and cradled her against his body. Calah tried to struggle but he held too tightly. She could see nothing but the wall of his chest, could hear nothing but the deep rumble of his voice. "Do you remember, Calah? Do you?" He pushed her back but still held her arms, shook her a little, dared her with his ebony eyes. "Your nightmare? Me? Did you see *me*, Calah?"

Lightning hot shivers ran through her, and she tried to respond. Nothing came out.

He shook her again, face close, eyes searing. "Did you see me?"

"Yes!" Calah shook her head in denial as she gave confirmation. "No, it was just a nightmare, a horrible nightmare!" She nodded her head to reassure him.

"No, Calah, look at me closely, it wasn't a nightmare, it was real, some part of it was, you came to my bed, you wore your white nightgown and you lay beneath me. You held my bedpost, took me into your body—"

"No!" She tried to yank away but he held tight.

Her world was falling away. It made no sense. This was all some horrible, weird nightmare. Where was Alex? She would make sense of this. He was her brother. Yet some corner of her mind told her Alex wouldn't be able to help here. That she, Calah, was in way over her head.

"*Oui Calah, s'il vous plait*, it is real. You saw what you saw."

"You just spoke French, why would you do that? You're an Englishman!" She tried once again to lurch from his hold to no avail. This was craziness. Why hadn't she asked Alex why she and Stephen had spoken French on the yacht? She almost laughed, wouldn't it be something if she was involved with a bunch of spies! Gabriel's intense face held hers enthralled. Oh no, it was much, much worse, and he was going to drive home that fact, going to make all of those silly Hollywood Sci-fi movies real.

It didn't take him long.

"Your dream was real enough, Calah. Do you understand?"

She grasped his arms and closed her eyes, saw his face once again as it rose over hers in the heat of passion. Saw his feral look, saw his incisors lengthen. Just like in the movies.

Just like a vampire.

"Look at me, Calah." His hand cradled her jaw, and she could feel his face moved closer. "Open your eyes and look at me."

She did. Like a strike from Heaven, she looked at him. That was the only way she could describe it because he didn't look evil. He didn't look like the Devil. He was beautiful, too beautiful. With the same ebony hair, midnight eyes, long eyelashes, intense gaze, he was still Gabriel.

But different.

His lips parted, the white of teeth obvious. If there was ever a moment when one lost true sense with reality, as though caught in a nightmare they struggled to awaken from, she was living it at that moment.

He had fangs... Gabriel had fangs... just like he had the night before.

"No!" She screamed and yanked away. "Leave me alone!"

Calah tried to open the door. It wouldn't budge. Dear God, she was going to die. This was horrible. She needed a weapon, something to defend herself. But what? She spied her high heels from the night before. Something was better than nothing. She made a leap to pass him but he grabbed her arm.

She kicked and flailed but he held her easily at arms length. "I'm not going to hurt you, Calah. Stop this."

She almost choked on her words. "Not going to hurt me? You're some kind of monster that shouldn't even exist!" Tears blurred her vision and nausea overwhelmed. Calah refused to look at him. "And I slept with you. Let you touch me."

A low growl filled his throat, and he dragged her toward the bed. Why had she said that? Now he'd rape her, then kill her. He shoved her down on the bed. She tried to scramble back but he fell to his knees, spread her thighs, came between her legs and locked her in place. Waves of rage rolled off him, and his eyes glowed a faint red. It appeared self-restraint held him as tight as a bow.

"*Oui*, I am a monster, Calah. You are right. But I am your monster. I will protect you, not destroy you. You are here at my estate because you have seen too much and in having done so you have awoken a monster that *will* destroy you." He touched her thigh and something akin to calm started to creep into her body. "You cannot leave my home until that monster is destroyed."

She stared at him, caught somewhere between blatant fear and bizarre acceptance. Something hypnotic in the raging way he looked at her let her know he spoke the truth. That he intended her no harm. This perception didn't fit in with anything she'd ever heard about vampires. She tried to sidle back a bit and cleared her dry throat. "What exactly have I seen besides the fact that you are a... whatever exactly you are."

Out of nowhere he held up some papers. "This. You have seen *this*."
Calah slowly took the pages from him and ran her eyes down the top sheet. It couldn't be. But it was. This was the story she'd started writing early the next morning after she was nearly mugged. The one based on the dream she'd had. How was this possible? How had he gotten this? "You invaded my privacy."

His eyes never left hers. "I knew the moment you dreamt this. Why do you think I requested the interview?"

Indignation flared. "Because you knew I was the woman for the job."

Nothing changed in his expression. No quirk of the lip or arch of the brow. No show of humor or disbelief. "I would never grant anyone an interview. Not even you."

A strange tingle slithered up her spine when she thought of the dream. When she thought of what she'd written and how she was unable to remember certain details. How she couldn't capture what the characters looked like or what their names were.

This couldn't be happening.

He stayed before her and took the papers. "I will read your words back to you, Calah. This time I will read them as you saw them in the dream. I will pull the curtains of slumber away and read clearly what you witnessed and *who* you witnessed."

Chapter 6

Gabriel had known it would come to this the night when he'd seen the Other, Amelia, in his bed. It did not make Calah seeing him as he was, a monster, any less painful. He would read her words back but with the correct names. Make her remember the truth. He looked to the paper. She had written it from his point of view. He started to read.

3 September 1189
London, England

Frigid wind whipped across the stone face of Westminster Abby and ushered in a new king, a new era. All in attendance watched the crown settle on Richard's head, unease and speculation a whispered rumble far and wide.

"'Tis a bat about his head, do you see?" Alexandria whispered.

Gabriel Sainte-d'Aignaux seized her wrist before she could point. "Aye, I see well enough, sister. Keep quiet now lest you draw attention."

or once, she took heed to his words, eyes swiveling to follow the errant rodent around the king's head. Others were not so tactful and distress marked the fidgety bodies of his fellowmen. Damn the luck in this superstitious age, naught good would come of this.

At last, the coronation ended, King Richard reigned over England and the banquet began. The crusade enthusiasts had done them no favors this night and left Richard with little choice but to proclaim that no Jew attend either the ceremony or banquet, therefore hopefully preventing trouble with the Christians in attendance. Rumor had it he'd proclaimed much more to protect the Jews than anything else. Yet it didn't look promising, trouble brewed.

Amongst the favored court for his knightly status and devotion, Gabriel sat with his sister within sight of the king. He offered her his goblet. "Drink Alexandria, your discontent shows too clearly on your face."

She refused the wine and shook her head. "There's evil afoot this night brother, mark my words."

"Aye, but 'tis naught we can do but wait." He frowned and drank little, his muscles locked, ready. He could hear the shouts outside, the anger of the Jews, edging closer, an echo through the halls. But dare they enter? Would Richard not entreat his closest knights to act? Or perhaps he thought it would incite further distress. He dared not question his new king.

Alexandria leaned close, her whisper burned within his ear. "We must flee. We are Christian!"

He looked to his new patriarch, saw the sweat upon his brow and swore upon this situation, knew naught what would come of it. He clasped his sister's cool hand and leaned close. "If they flood the hall, stay close. I will defend the king." He closed his eyes and again cursed the fates. "But I will defend you first."

"With what weapon?" she hissed.

He spoke through clenched teeth. "With that which I carry at my side."

Her nostrils flared but her voice stayed low and steady. "You think that sword you carry will do any good in a mob?"

"It will do its job, be grateful you have it at your back." His hand skirted the hilt at his waist.

"I'm grateful for nothing. The Jews should have been welcomed." Alexandria straightened and clenched his hand. "And then with the bat! We're all doomed!"

He eyed his surroundings, heard the sounds beyond and knew her stress was not unfounded, yet what could he do? He didn't have the king's ear. Even if he did, he could do nothing!

Alexandria neared hysterics now in her whisperings. "We must find a holy man, stay with him!" She nervously eyed the halls, the ceiling. "'Twill be bloodshed and horror this eve!"

Gabriel drew in a sharp breath and gazed upon his sister with all of his wrath. "Hold your tongue, woman, I tell you now, hold your tongue."

At that moment King Richard gave the cue, his present knights were to move, defend. Gabriel laid a

hand on his sister's shoulder. "He wants us outside, stay here, do not move!"

Alexandria scowled and fought his hold. "But didn't you just say you would defend me bro—"

Gabriel cut her off. "And I will!" He unsheathed his sword. "They're not here yet."

A mockery of his statement, a wave of boisterous men flooded in with sticks, clubs and whatever weapon they'd put their hands on.

Gabriel leaped over the table, sword held high. Pandemonium broke loose. Rocks were thrown. People snarled and clawed. He pushed back, tried to protect. King Richard vanished into the hall, safe for now, but Gabriel battled on, not wanting to slay but hard pressed not to.

Eventually the mob filtered back outside and streamed into the streets of London, fires began to erupt throughout the city, one flickering orb at a time. He wiped the sweat from his brow and let his fellowmen chase them if they so desired. For him, bloodshed over religion made no sense, he'd not give pursuit.

"Gabriel!"

He swung back swiftly at the sound of Alexandria's echoed voice. At a dead run, he raced into Westminster Abby. A few men staggered about, women cried, the king had vanished. Alexandria wasn't here.

"Gabriel, help!"

Dear God, where was she? He'd kill any man who dared harm her. He sprinted down one of the hallways, convinced that's where he'd heard her cry. He screamed and his voice bounced off the stone walls. "Alexandria?"

Torchlight flickered, cast shadows and hid dusty crevices. Where was she? Then he heard it, a gurgle, as if a person inhaled water, fought for air. He searched the darkened corners, refused to panic. "Alexandria, where are you?"

A beautiful woman he knew well emerged into the firelight. "There, she's there, my Lord!"

"Where?" He asked, still frantically searching.

She took his hand. "Here, follow me."

What was she doing here? Why hadn't he ever noticed how divine she was? Saints be, but she was glorious, smooth skinned, pale, with streaming red hair. His loins stirred, ah, but to have her! He shook his head and tried to clear the lust. This was wrong. He loved another. It felt like a spell wrapped around his mind, and he saw everything differently. He had to have her! Would she be willing, here, now? A simple lift of her skirts, brace her against the stone wall, feel her heated depth. Her hand moved to his wrist and caressed his vein.

"Gabriel." His sister's voice was weak, nearby, garbled. Alexandria! How could he have so easily forgotten her?

The redhead swung back and put a finger to his lips. All his cares and concerns fell away as if a blanket fell across his mind. "Shhhhh, she needs her rest now my love."

Her rest? Yes, that sounded right. The redhead smiled playfully, slid her arm around his neck and ran her hand the length of him. "Me first, my Lord, me first."

Mesmerized, he ducked his head and studied her face, neck, cleavage, skin like pale silk. Eyes like fire, how delectable and perfect. Without thought he shoved her against the wall and she laughed, full, throaty, the most sensual sound he had ever heard. Desire swamped and consumed. He had to have her, now. He bunched her skirts and pulled them up. Her leg rode his thigh. Her torso pushed back and encouraged. He grabbed her thigh, ran his hand up, grabbed the other and lifted.

"Yes, my love, just like that," she purred and tangled her hands in his hair.

Wind rocketed down the hallway and blew tendrils of her hair across his face, scentless hair, silky with promise, crimson with lust. Near violent he took her lips, opened them beneath his, and accosted her tongue.

"Good. Very good." Her murmur was full of promise, fingers nimble. Her tongue roamed his jaw and her teeth clenched his earlobe.

She made sound, he knew she did, heard it from a distance, half moan, half laugh. Then he felt something else, her teeth sinking into him. He had never felt anything so exquisite. She pulled away just before her wrist came to his mouth, dripping with blood. "Here my sweet." She ran it across his lips.

A shiver raked his body and without thought, without a real grasp on what was happening, he licked. Harsh pain snaked down his throat then spread outward, like sparks of lightning blowing out of his fingertips and toes.

Her body vanished as he slid to the cold, hard floor beneath. He tried to speak, to fight the ice spreading through his veins. His cheek hit the stone floor, eyes wide open. Another face filled his vision. Alexandria! Her eyes were vacant. He'd forgotten her again! How had he? What was this? What was happening?

He tried to reach out to her but his body convulsed. Agony unlike any other tore through and ripped him of reason and sanity. If he screamed, it was not nearly loud enough. If he cried he couldn't feel the tears. His vision clouded, black at the edges, gray at the center. Still, through it all, he saw Alexandria's outstretched hand, palm up and saw the glow of the crucifix she held, saw its golden glow fade.

With all that was left of reason and a connection to his body, he dragged his hand forward. Shaking, foreign, his limb edged along the stone, inch by inch. He didn't recognize his own fingers, his nails.

He had to take her hand, had to touch what she held, one last time. But all was fading too fast. A shrill, evil drill filled his ear and his tongue turned to stone. His heart struggled to beat as life ebbed away.

He couldn't make it, within a centimeter his hand stopped working and his mind clouded. Gabriel pulled all the power left within him to the surface, focused on his hand, raised and turned it until it fell into his sister's. As if the fires of hell recognized his action fresh agony seared his hand, arm and torso.

Then night fell and there was no more.

Gabriel finished reading and met Calah's eyes. He knew what she was feeling. Fear, shock and very angry as she tried desperately to get a grip on things. He cupped her cheek, and she turned her face away.

"Please don't touch me," she whispered.

He stood and fought the beast her words aroused, the dark side, which wanted to lash out and demand respect. He could never let the monster out with her. That would be saved for the *Other*.

"So that was the night you became a vampire...and Alex, her as well." She clenched her fists on the coverlet and released a strangled burst of nervous laughter. "You mean to tell me I dreamt of the night you became—" She looked up at him with a look near disgust. "Then wrote about it."

Calah stood suddenly, amber eyes burning, anger replacing all else. "And because of this you mean to make me a prisoner to protect me from another vampire?"

Gabriel looked down at her. Watched the heat burn over her cheekbones and listened to her heart thrum out of control. She was no longer terrified of him. Disgusted, certainly, but not terrified. He urged her on, wanted to make her remember all of it. "Yes. But that's not what worries you the most, is it Calah?"

Fresh defiance flared in her posture. "I have no idea what you mean."

"You had not finished writing your dream in its entirety when your editor showed up at your apartment." He held up his hand and new sheets of paper appeared. "Shall I read what you would have written? Only what you recalled? Or should I read the dream as I have written it, as it actually happened?"

She swallowed hard and tore the paper away from him. Her eyes fell to the words and she slowly sat back on the edge of the bed.

"I will leave you to your thoughts. Do not try to escape. Come to me when you are ready, and I will explain everything."

Calah looked up but Gabriel had vanished into thin air.

She could still feel the remnants of his presence like a thick weight. He remained on her skin where he had touched her and in her thoughts where she could not push him away. Trying to keep her hand steady, she started reading the page written from Gabriel's point of view. She read the rest of her dream.

Amelia was glorious. His new mistress struck him enchanting, perfect and in complete control. Her castle was immense with golden wall sconces burning bright with flame, tapestries woven for the great matriarchs of Europe, and food beyond a peasant's wildest dreams.

He remembered her first words to him, such as he was. How her clear, sumptuous greeting had reverberated through the great chamber. How her slender arms spread in welcome and her wild, red hair fell like a halo down her voluminous body. "Welcome Gabriel, mine own." She'd walked toward him, hips swaying. "Is it not all you might dream of?"

How confused he had been, like a youth given their first treat but struggling to understand what they had done to deserve it. He remained silent, too enthralled with the picture she created, with the sweet sound of her voice.

"Now we can be together for all time." Her cool hand caressed his face and the torches flickered. "You can be with your maker, Amelia. Your one, true love."

"No." The whisper came from off to his left. Confused, he looked and saw his sister.

"Silence!" Amelia demanded though her gaze never left his. "Consider yourself lucky you're in his presence." She turned her head slightly, eyes intent on Alexandria. "I should have never allowed you here. I have the power to remove you."

"Then do so. I do not wish to be what you have made me!" Alexandria cried.

"ush, vixen!" Amelia's face twisted, and she flung out an arm. Alexandria catapulted across the room and landed in a heap against the far wall.

"What is the meaning of this, Amelia? Where are our parents?"

Amelia waved a loose wrist. "Oh, they're dead. I wished the place for my own."

The last of the spell he had been under vanished when Gabriel saw the woman who appeared. How could he have forgotten his betrothed and true love, Calah? So beautiful, elegant and dignified, the complete opposite of all the fire Amelia depicted. Calah glowed with peace, white light...a crystalline pool untouched by life's harsh elements. He knew his sister stood, that she was well, but he could not look to her, he could only stare at Calah. Dark and lustful thoughts began to thrum through his blood. He sniffed and drifted closer without moving. Such untouched perfection.

Calah took a step back in terror. Amelia growled, and he stopped. "You are *mine* now, Gabriel."

"What has happened here?" Calah looked from Gabriel to Amelia and her body began to shake. She touched a finger to her lips. "There is blood on your lip, Amelia." She looked to Gabriel and touched her neck. "And on your throat, Gabriel."

She stumbled back a few steps and made the sign of the cross over her chest. "What evil is this?"

Dark, throaty laughter bubbled up from inside Amelia. "I have loved Gabriel since the moment I laid eyes upon him." She sneered and narrowed her eyes at Calah as she drifted closer. "Yet he took one look at *you*, and you became all he wanted in life, his one desire." She flicked her hand and moved faster toward Calah. "Never again! I have been turned and now he has turned. He is a creature of the night, forever, and I am his love."

Calah screamed Gabriel's name and turned to flee. Unable to move, newly made and trapped within Amelia's power, he watched in horror as one sister pounced on the other and sunk her teeth into the other's neck, watched in horror as Amelia sucked the life from Calah. All he could hear as Calah's husk of a lifeless body fell to the floor was Amelia's joyous laughter as it bounced off the stone walls of the great hall.

Calah snapped back to twenty-first century reality and released the papers. She had been Amelia's sister and Gabriel's betrothed in another life. With every ounce of her being, she knew it, remembered clearly waking up in a cold sweat with the remnants of death upon her soul the night after she had been mugged.

She wondered at the emotions that had flooded her after such a dream. Excitement and the feeling of a new beginning had surpassed all and inspired her to start writing the book. That's what she remembered thinking. Now she wondered. Was she simply just happy to be alive...again? And what of Gabriel? He said he had brought her here to protect her from another. Was it Amelia? There were still so many questions to answer, so much confusion. She recalled Gabriel's words "come to me when you are ready and I will explain everything."

That was about the last thing she wanted to do at this moment. Calah walked to the window and flung

back the curtain. Rain trickled down the windowpane and lightning flashed over the ocean. A chill ran through her. Did it ever stop storming here? Was this sort of weather naturally attracted to vampires? Calah laughed at her musings. She was cracking up. No doubt about it. In her approximation, if she did snap and become completely insane right now, she had every right.

She had to focus and try to make sense of things. Calah thought of the picture in the gallery. That had been Amelia! Why would Gabriel show it to her? She wrapped her knuckle lightly on the window pane and tried to plan her next move. She would work through all of this somehow.

"Calah."

Calah spun at the sound of Alex's voice. Best friend for ten years and the woman had done nothing but lie to her. "Alex. Or should I call you vampire?" Fear had become an absent emotion. She was furious. "You had best kill me or let me go."

Alex flinched. "I would never kill you." She closed the door and walked to the chest. "I'm really sorry. You have to know that. We had hoped it would never come to this, that you would never have to find out who you were or what we are."

She stalked toward her former friend. "This is all completely nuts. Find out who I am? I'm a writer born in Boston without parents. I work hard and have always supported myself. *That's* who I am. Who you are is a completely different story."

Alex removed her hand from the chest and met Calah's eyes. "I am your friend. I was then, and I am now."

"Then!" She came nose to nose with Alex. "I don't care about then. What I care about is now, this reality, the only one that exists for me. Our friendship was built on a lie of mass proportions. How can that be called a friendship?"

Alex squared off with her. "How do you think I felt the night you were murdered eight hundred years ago? I watched you die. What was I supposed to do when we first met in this life? Introduce myself as a vampire and explain our past life together so that our friendship wouldn't have been built on a lie? Really Calah, listen to yourself."

Calah could barely assimilate this. By far, it was the oddest argument she'd ever had. She recalled the contempt Alex had for Amelia, the love she'd had for her brother. "Why bother to befriend me at all? Am I the only reason you came to America?"

Alex backed away slightly and took a deep breath. "No, I came here also to educate myself further in this decade. True, I found you here and I shouldn't have befriended you, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to see what you were like. If our friendship could be as strong as it was before. Gabriel had put a protection spell over you at birth so Amelia would never know that you had been reborn. He—"

She cut her off. "At birth?"

Alex nodded. "Yes. He had loved you so much before. Apparently the night you were born he knew you were coming, knew that Amelia hadn't sensed you yet."

Her mouth went dry. He had really been there the night she had been born? She closed her eyes and struggled for breath.

"Come, sit down." Alex led her to a chair and then sat down on the trunk across from her. "He has watched over you every single day after that. Do you remember the night when you were nine and riding your bike home from the pizza shop? You were crossing the street and a car came to a screeching halt before it hit you. Gabriel stopped that car. Better yet, that night when you were fifteen and that guy meant to rape you after your softball game. He hadn't made it within a foot of you before he vanished. Again, Gabriel."

Calah leaned over and held her head in her hands, remembering both accounts very clearly. She hadn't called the cops then, had not needed to. Had it become part of her disposition to count on what she thought was dumb luck? Had some part of her known deep down, she already had a protector? She groaned. Was this why she thought herself so independent and untouchable? No. If all of this was truth, which she had little doubt it was, he couldn't walk by day. He did not find her first job or put her through school. He did not help her get her first apartment or land the job she had now. She had done that.

She looked at Alex. "I don't love him. I don't know him. Yes, he was there for me, and I'm grateful but I hope neither you nor him expects me to love him for it. He's a vampire! A monster!"

Alex grimaced before a flicker of irritation flashed in her blue eyes. "I don't expect you to love him. I don't believe he expects it either. But he does love you, always has." She nodded toward the bed and then patted the chest she sat on. "See that bed you're sleeping in. That was yours in 1189. He's kept it with him all this time. When he knew you'd be coming here he put the gargoyles on the bedpost to protect you from him just in case the beast in him reacted strangely to your presence here. This chest holds your clothes. Again, preserved and saved and put in this room in case you remembered everything. In case for some reason your old life infiltrated your new one."

This was all too much to absorb. She felt alone and confused, smothered almost. "I need to be alone."

"Of course," Alex said.

She looked up but Alex had vanished. How convenient to be able to move with supernatural speed. To not be in her shoes right now. But then again, would she want to be in Alex's shoes? No. Alex had never wanted to be a vampire. What had it been like to live eight hundred years in the body of a beast? Did she crave blood? Were the vampire myth's correct? How terrible and petrifying.

She walked over to the chest, kneeled down and opened it. Fingering the clothes, she searched for memory. Nothing came, not the slightest sense of recognition. All she saw were old-fashioned, completely unfamiliar clothes. She sat back on her heels and looked around. It was time to make more sense of this. She could try to escape but she wouldn't. Curiosity had won.

It was time to confront Gabriel.

Chapter 7

She walked slowly down the hallway. Where would Gabriel be at this time of night? Did he feed on humans? The thought seemed off. He appeared so human to her. But he wasn't, and she would do well to remember that. Though Alex painted quite the picture of him, Calah was no fool. He was dangerous. She'd always sensed that right beneath the surface. Power, domination, these things were Gabriel. Not because he was a multibillion-dollar conglomerate, no, because he was a vampire.

She walked up the next set of stairs. Alex had told her his room was on the third floor. Even if he wasn't there, she was curious to see where he slept. That it wasn't in the cellar in a coffin was one to grow on. Guess the movies overdramatized. At the top of the stairs, she paused. The air cooled. This hallway was different. Where the other one was dark wood this appeared made of stone. She ran her hand along the wall. *It was stone!* The dim, recessed lighting looked as though it were part of the stone.

A door stood slightly ajar halfway down the corridor and allowed a faint light to spill out. Calah crept forward until she could peer in unseen. He sat at a massive desk and stared unseeing at whatever lay before him. Dear Lord, he wore no shirt. She licked her lips. He had broad shoulders, long lean muscles and a set of abs so perfect she nearly drooled. She wouldn't have thought a vampire would look like him. A very light layer of jet-black hair ran across his chest. Her eyes wandered down past his flat stomach to the waistline of his pants.

"Come in, Calah."

Apparently she had not been as quiet as she'd thought. Then again, he ran on the supernatural side. Not embarrassed in the least to have been caught spying she walked in and stopped short. Enormous, the room appeared to take up the entire floor. Not only that but it looked as if she had walked into a real castle save for one staggering feature.

A massive rounded glass structure jettied off the room. It stemmed about twelve feet out and stood as tall as the room. Made completely of glass, even the floor, it was a window unlike any other. The moon hung perfectly round. Heavy and boisterous, it canvassed the windowpane in splendor.

"Come. Eat. You ate nothing at breakfast." She started at the nearness of Gabriel's deep voice. He stood beside her though she'd never seen him move. Gabriel had adorned clothing as well, done so with unnatural speed...had to have. Her eyes widened at his new attire. With black slacks and a black silk shirt, he portrayed casual elegance. She stared up into his ebony eyes.. He was gorgeous. How could so much black look so good?

He nodded toward the window. She followed his line of vision and gasped. Where the window alcove had previously been empty, it now hosted a clear glass table laden with two long stem deep burgundy candles. Two glass chairs sat on either side of the intimate setting inlaid with cushions of the same dark burgundy. He took her hand and led her forward. She should pull back and demand all her answers now.

"I'll tell you everything you want to know, Calah." Gabriel released her hand and pulled out a chair. "Over dinner."

She took her first step onto the glass and stopped. The view was unbelievable. Far below, the waves broke over the rocks. On all sides, the ocean swelled and danced within pewter, silver and blackness. Stars twinkled and tried to fight with the moon's gloriousness. At last, no storm. The violent weather had simply vanished. Hypnotic and glorious, she couldn't help but smile. It felt like a castle caught in a fairytale, just as she had thought when she first saw the place.

The aroma of lobster and cream sauce filled her nostrils, and she glanced down. Red wine filled the goblets. The food steamed from golden plates. This was wealth at its best.

Dark magic at its best.

Brought back to reality she frowned and sat. Velvet curtains now hung to her right, closing them in an intimate world of moonlight, ocean and stars. She took a deep sip of wine and carefully set the glass back down. "I think we should start at the beginning, Gabriel."

He sat across from her and leaned back, his long fingers rolling casually back and forth over the stem of his goblet. "I agree."

"You were there at my birth. You saw my mother."

He stared at her with a mask of impregnable indifference. "Ah, that beginning, yes, I was there. I saw your mother."

Emotion clogged her throat. She hadn't meant to say that or start here. It had just seemed natural. According to her aunt, her father had died before her birth and her mother during it. Had she been curious about them? Of course. Her aunt had shown her pictures and told her many things about her brother, Calah's father, but she knew little of her mother. Somehow, all of a sudden, knowing this man had been at her actual birth, struck a cord in her. She wanted...no *needed* to understand more about the woman her aunt had spoken so little of.

Calah looked away from him and gazed at the moon. "What can you tell me of her?"

"That she loved you very much." A pause before he spoke again. "That she was very happy that you were safe when she passed on."

She took another sip of wine, and her gaze flickered to his. There was truth there. At this point, she knew all would be truth from Gabriel. "Was she in pain when she died?"

"No, Calah. In the end, she felt no pain at all, only bliss. I watched the light take her."

Her breath left her. He had seen a light? What would that have been like for him? She thanked God her mother's passing had been easy. Felt privileged to be told such. Her eyes stayed locked on his, and she felt not only a new peace but a new alarm. What sort of man...vampire, held such knowledge, could say something so

entirely lacking an evil element? She had to fight this lure of his.

"Did you crave her blood, Gabriel? Did you crave mine that night?"

One eyebrow slowly rose but his gaze never wavered. "Naturally."

There. She had things back in perspective, somewhat. "What has it been like for you watching me my whole life?" She refused to thank him.

His black brow lowered and a small smile actually crept onto his face. "Pleasurable."

The rake! How closely had he actually watched her? She almost smiled but instead looked away and focused on the undulating sea beyond.

"Please eat, my love."

Her eyes snapped to the untouched food then to him. "I'm not your love, Gabriel. Know that. Everything we've experienced so far was because of your unnatural lure, no other reason than that."

Gabriel nodded once. "As you wish."

"Not as I wish, as I know!" She took another quick sip of wine and continued. It hadn't taken him long to irritate her. "You can't bring me here, dump a pile of crap in my lap the size of the London tower and expect me to fall at your feet. It won't happen. Honestly, many aspects of you appall me."

His face fell back into its mask of indifference and one finger left the stem of his wine glass to caress the table. "Interesting that you would mention London." He leaned forward slightly and only the glint in his dark eyes taunted her. "You have a draw to England. Now you know why. As to those aspects of me that disgust you, I could not care less. I am a vampire. Your vampire."

Calah narrowed her eyes and leaned forward as well. No reason to back down from this conversation, laughable as it seemed. "Yes, according to my dream and what I've written I was born and raised in England. You, however, were simply a Norman invader. Oh yes, that you didn't write in your renewed version of my story but I remembered as you read it. You served under..." She held her hands up and made quotation marks in the air, "William the Conqueror." She continued. "You came from Normandy, you were French!"

He held his glass up in a toast. "Very good, *ma petite, comme vous dites*. I was indeed French for the first thirty three years of my life." He sipped, set the glass aside and sat back. "But I have been very much an Englishman for the last eight hundred and nineteen years of my existence. As do many Englishmen to this day descend from the Normans, so do I, just more directly than most."

Anger had restored her appetite, and she took a bite of the lobster. It melted on her tongue. "Why, French born and newly made into a vampire, would you stay in England?"

He looked at the sea and seemed lost for a time. "I did not at first. I had to leave Amelia behind and get away. I took Alexandria with me, and we traveled. But eventually I returned." His gaze landed on her like a tidal wave. "I had to be where you had been."

Calah froze with a forkful of lobster halfway to her mouth. He was serious. She lowered the fork back to her plate and couldn't stop the next words if she tried. "You loved me that much?"

"More," he breathed. He leaned forward and took her free hand in his. "As did you, me."

She fell into his gaze for a moment, dived into the sweetness of his lull. *No!* She pulled her hand back. "No. I'm sorry. Maybe I did in another lifetime but you can't expect me to now. You just can't."

Gabriel pulled back inch by inch. "I do not Calah. You are here. You are learning so much. I cannot but tell you how I felt then. How I still feel."

And he did, so strongly it hurt.

Gabriel cursed fate once again and watched Calah closely. The moonlight turned her pale blond hair to spun silver. It fell around her shoulders in a soft blanket of silk.

Her full lips curved down at the corners before she spoke. "Why now? I know that you have protected me since birth. I know that when I dreamt of my story, of the night you were made, she awoke. Why didn't she know about me previously?"

He had followed her every thought process when she'd read the rest of the manuscript, when Alex had talked to her. She was bright. It was one of the things he had always appreciated about her. "The last night you were attacked on the way home from the office. I touched your attacker when he had his hands on you. Through that brief touch, you established contact with me. Because of that you dreamed of my past. Of your past. That's all Amelia needed to awaken."

Calah's mouth fell open and then snapped shut. "You saved me," she whispered. "That was you."

A low roar filled his ear and the smell of blood became sharp in his nostrils. He could still smell her attacker's fear; still taste his blood when he killed him. Normally he kept to blood banks but he wasn't above the occasional taste of a criminal. The rush and justification it brought. Her attacker had tasted especially sweet.

"Yes, I saved you," he replied.

Gabriel watched Calah's nipples harden beneath her light shirt and licked his lips. The dark side of him craved her blood, craved to make her his. The other roared to fight Amelia and gain Calah's freedom, to give her the chance to live a whole life and not be subjected to eternal damnation. She had died so young before.

"Tell me more about my previous life. Tell me about us."

He came to attention. This was more than he had expected. He took another sip of the wine and locked eyes with her. Golden eyes he could swim in forever. "We met in the forest on an early spring morning. Leaves were just sprouting and the streams had swollen from a heavy rainfall the night before. I already knew your family, including Amelia, but I had never met you. I did not know who you were that morn."

Gabriel looked to the moon, then the stars. "You blended with the slender tree trunks and the mist, as though you were part of the woodland around you. I rode up behind you on horseback." He smiled. "You were so engrossed in whatever you were thinking you never heard my approach. It both annoyed and intrigued me. England was an extremely dangerous place at that time and you walked through the trees without a care in the world. Then, as though you had known I was coming all along, you turned when I was nearly upon you."

Calah placed a hand over her heart and whispered, "The painting hanging in my bedroom. The one Alex painted. That was you and I."

He returned his gaze to hers. "Yes, I remember the way I felt when you turned and looked up at me, when I saw your face for the first time, so incredibly beautiful, wide-eyed and innocent. Your face was the same

as it is now but different, far less defiant and independent, so eager for life. Before I said a word, you reached up and handed me something. You said it was a keepsake, your lucky pebble. You said I should take it because I brought good fortune to your family with my love for your sister.”

Calah had her elbow propped on the table and chin propped in her palm. “Amelia?”

“Yes, as I later found out, that’s exactly of whom you spoke.” He gave a loose shrug. “But I never loved Amelia. She merely wished it.”

“So you hurt Amelia with your love for me.”

“Yes, I did. But as I said, the feeling was hers, not mine. I loved you the instant I saw you. I pursued you and you denied me for the longest time because you knew of her feelings.” He sighed and remembered. “But as all the best and worst of love stories go you eventually returned my feelings, those which you claimed to have had from the moment we first met. Did I feel guilty at the time? In some ways, yes; in other ways, no. I was young and fresh from war and in love. A man tends to see clearest at those points in his life.”

Calah’s voice broke through his reverie. “That I wouldn’t know about.” He saw she struggled for a response. “But I do know your story has what we Americans would label a ‘European Ending’ meaning the hero and heroine don’t end up together and one way or another, the story ends tragically. I much prefer an American ending myself, the ‘happily ever after’ theme.”

He smiled and it hurt. “I would tend to agree, Calah. Regrettably, most times, real life does not turn out that way. Europeans tend to be realistic and overall I think, tell a better story.”

Calah visibly bristled and swirled the wine in her glass. “Do you think so? Did you like our ending in another lifetime?”

Again he raised his glass. “Touché.”

She raised her glass in response.

“So what is your next question, my love?”

Calah knew what Gabriel was up to. He enjoyed watching her response to his constant declaration of love. This time she would not debate with him. What was the point? He was determined.

It was obvious he had very fond memories of her. His story about how they met had mesmerized her thoroughly. He *had* loved her; it was obvious. He still did, that became more obvious. It was a bizarre revelation about a man she had just met, technically. Calah looked away from him and fingered the handle of her spoon. She knew nothing of love. Sure, she had been intimate with men and had even managed to maintain long relationships, but when it reached that level of intimacy that felt like a marriage proposal was on the horizon she pulled away and ended it.

She depended on her.

Yet this man sat across from her, a vampire, more beautiful on the outside and inside than any other man she’d come across. There were certainly parts of his inside she knew couldn’t be pretty but the things he had done...and said...felt so real. So attainable in a way she had never expected.

Still, Gabriel wasn’t natural. She shouldn’t entertain any thought which compared him with the men from her past. What were his intentions? How trapped was she?

Calah released the spoon and twisted her lips, best to get to the point. “My next question is what do you intend to do with me after you save me from Amelia?” She mumbled under her breath remembering her dream. “If you’re even strong enough to defeat her.”

He hissed and everything vanished from the table. No wine, no food, only his palms face down on the glass remained. A grumble roared across the sky, and she looked to the moon. A black cloudbank tumbled across half its surface. She looked back and met the red of his eyes, saw clearly the fangs.

“I will kill her,” he growled. “Do not doubt my strength.”

Calah didn’t back down an inch. What use was even an ounce of fear to her now? She placed her palms on the table and felt vibration tear through it. If he could be pushed to a limit, she would do it now. If his goal was to kill her, let him get it over with. She didn’t want to run. She didn’t want to constantly be looking over her shoulder into the darkness wondering. “So you can get irked? Good to know. I’m less worried about what you’ll do to her than what you’ll do to me if you defeat her. Either way, I’ve an enemy to deal with.”

His fangs vanished but his eyes still glowed red. “I will set you free.”

“Free?” She laughed. “Just like that, you’ll set me free? Your love, the one you’ve watched over my whole life. You’ll just let me go?”

Gabriel’s eyes returned to black, and he seized her hands across the table in a vise grip. He spoke through clenched teeth. “I would never wish this curse on you. Don’t you think if I wanted you as my own I would have already done so?” Anguish met his words. “I have lived for eight hundred years when I only wanted to live another thirty with you. I have killed, yes, drank human blood, yes. Now, with modern technology, I drink from blood banks. Do I still kill on occasion, yes, criminals, those worthy of death. Have I turned any to what I have become? Never. You are my heart and the very last I would doom to such a fate as my own.”

She heard his accent change with passion. Become more fluid and less crisp. She could clearly hear the man who once lived speaking through a vampire’s voice. She squeezed his hands and gazed into his eyes. “You will protect me then you will let me go?”

“Yes, you have my word. As both the knight who fell in love with you and the vampire that still is.”

Calah nodded. She believed him. She’d like to tell herself she had no choice but to believe him but it was more than that. Whatever he had left of a heart was in his eyes. She had to accept this new reality. As she watched him, hair shining in the candlelight and handsome features intent, she wondered at what her reality would be like after he defeated Amelia, and he let her go. Assuming he could defeat Amelia. She shuddered to think what would happen if he could not.

Beyond all that, what would reality be like knowing what she now knew, that vampires existed, that there was one whom had loved her more than any man she’d ever met? The cloudbank completely blotted out the moon and left them in near darkness. She should pull her hands away but didn’t. His fingers made a slow path over her knuckles and then the inside of her wrist. Her pulse jumped. She could still make out his eyes, intense and darker than the night itself. The wind picked up and the first drop of rain hit the window.

Everything she had recently discovered about him, all the truths told, felt as though they had already

melted into her core, were part of her, as if she had known them longer than a few hours. Was her other life starting to merge with this one or was she simply accepting knowledge she had no choice but to accept? Two days ago, she hadn't even believed in reincarnation. What a concept.

Had she lived other lives?

His hands stroked hers. "I don't know. I never felt you before this one. If you had it was God's secret."

Had she spoken aloud? No. "You can hear my thoughts."

"Yes, on occasion," he replied. "It is one of my gifts."

She pulled her hands away. "How convenient."

"Aren't we a bit vulnerable in this window?" she asked and stood.

The table and chairs vanished, and he stood as well. "No, you are completely safe within these walls.

She cannot touch you. A vampire can only enter a home if invited."

She rolled the tense kinks from her shoulders and walked to the outer edge of the window. "No worries here. I can't get near a door."

"Exactly." He stood beside her.

A long, arched train of lightning made a jagged path across the sky and reflected in the heavy swells of the ocean. A loud clap of thunder rolled from the sky and seemed to crash directly into the window. Rain fell heavier and created a slight blur. Awareness crept into her body. He stood too close, his strength and power too potent. Warmth pooled below and her stomach quivered.

"Please don't lure me again, Gabriel," she whispered and closed her eyes.

His arm brushed hers. "I cannot control what you feel when you are near me, Calah. It is part of who I am, what I am. You know many more aspects about me now, they will affect you."

She opened her eyes and looked at his profile when the lightning flashed again. He stared intensely at the sea, searching, waiting. "She's close, isn't she?"

He turned his head slightly in her direction. "Yes, and she is very angry. Our powers equal one another but she has blocked me. She did the instant she found out about you."

"How powerful are you, Gabriel?"

"Very." He placed his hand over hers on the window. "Let me show you."

Chapter 8

When his hand closed over hers, Calah's breath caught. A surge of energy poured over her. She felt like a beacon of energy in the night and watched with alarm as lightning streaked across the sky again.

Gabriel stepped halfway behind her, his front to her back, his hand never leaving the back of hers. "Don't be afraid. This won't hurt," he murmured close to her ear.

She gasped when he pressed her palm against the pane and wrapped his other arm around her waist. The rain on the glass slid off as if wiped away with a windshield wiper and the wind ceased. Lightning arched and skirted across the black sky toward them. Thunder boomed and echoed in her eardrums. The waves crashing below became louder. She tensed and watched with wide eyes when the lightning danced and jumped even closer, dangerously close.

Again, his cool breath caressed her ear, face close. "Shhh. Relax, *ma petite*. No harm will come to you. I promise. It is all an illusion."

He pulled her tighter against him, and she felt his lips brush her neck. "Now you see through my eyes, *mon amour*," he whispered. "Through the eyes of a vampire."

The ebony sky pulsed with life, and she could discern each individual thundercloud. Her eyesight sharpened further, and she could clearly see each droplet of moisture as it rose from the sea and touched the sky. The lightning took on a blue-white hue and appeared to roll forward until it was within feet of the glass. It hovered, a sparkling array of quivering light, before, like a viperous snake, lurched in one solid streak and met the center of her palm on the other side of the glass. It felt as if an icy cold cloth was thrown on her hand and then steamy hot water poured over shortly after.

Speech became impossible. It was glorious. *Night* was glorious. Had daylight ever looked this good? Talented, eager lips moved lower on her neck, his tongue swirled over her skin. Lightning arched from her fingertips beyond the windowpane. As it did across the sky, it did so across the glass until it covered the whole window. Zigzagging, it moved like heat lightening, brilliant and mesmerizing. A sigh escaped when his lips met the top of her outer collar bone. Head flung back, she watched the white hot-lightning caress the glass. His hand left its protective perch over hers and slid up her arm. Every pore came alive, every single inch of sensitive skin a thrilling burn beneath his touch.

Calah moaned and her eyelids slid shut, still the lightning jetted across her vision as though it followed the path of his hand, of his lips. She turned her head and nuzzled her cheek against his hair. The whisper of his thoughts brushed her mind, the honesty of them. No manipulation remained between them. He responded to her as a man would a woman he found ravishing. Gabriel also responded as a vampire would to lust and blood. He didn't hide a thing from her. For all she searched for terror within, none could be found. .

Again, he felt right.

This time Calah knew it had less to do with him and more to do with her. She knew so little of him in this life, so little of him in another life. But she felt a bond. Something she hadn't even known she searched for. Until this moment, had had no use for. Someone she could depend on even if he wasn't human, even if he would let

her go. Gabriel had always been there, would always be there, and did not expect a thing in return.

Calah opened her eyes to the lightning moving away from her palm and scattering like a million stars over the window. This time was different. This time she wasn't beneath his lure unknowingly. This time he was undeniably visible. There were no more secrets. She turned in his arms and looked up. Saw clearly the lust, the want... and the fangs.

He didn't move, only watched her closely.

Beast or not, Calah thought him masculine perfection. With a light touch, she ran her finger along his cheekbone and the line of his jaw until she paused at his sensual lips. With a long, measured release of breath, she allowed the tip of her finger to move past his lip and over his teeth. He remained a statue, open to touch and evaluation. She tilted her head back, stood on tiptoes and brought her mouth to his. Gingerly, she removed her finger and replaced it with her tongue, felt the sharp edge of his incisors, first one and then the other. Gabriel released a strangled groan but didn't move or urge her on.

Pulling back slowly, Calah stared into his shadowed eyes. "I want you to be who you are this time, Gabriel. I want you to make love to me as the man who loved me then and the vampire that does now."

He clenched his fists but made no move. "All of me, what I am, will not be gentle, can not be. I will try."

She smiled. "You weren't exactly gentle in the gallery and that didn't feel so bad."

With supernatural speed, he seized and spun her into the other room. The curtains closed and something heavy came down, sealing off the window, leaving them standing alone save a small fire burning on the hearth.

To breathe would be impossible when faced with the dark passion blazing in his eyes. Placing a hand on his chest she said, "I have to know. If you do bite me, will that kill me? Will it change me?"

"If I bite you and drink too much of your blood it will kill you. You can only be changed if I bite then you drink my blood. I will not allow such a thing."

As eerie as the whole situation seemed, she wasn't afraid. She wanted to love him knowing who and what he was. Calah started to unbutton his shirt, eager to touch and see him. Gabriel waited, muscles locked and patient. He understood that she needed this, to touch and humanize him as much as she could. Cool to the touch, she ran her hands over his shoulders and chest. Like steel beneath tight skin, his muscles rippled in response. She smiled and ran her hands inch by inch down his abdomen. "You really are well made."

Still he did not move. Only his half-lowered lashes showed that he felt anything. "Thank you."

Emboldened, she ran her hand along the top of his pant line. "You're welcome."

The corner of his lip inched up, and his eyes ensnared hers. He said nothing more, let her run her hands over the arousal beneath his slacks, let her unzip his pants and touch what she hadn't had a chance to the night before. He gave her complete control, and she relished every minute of it. Still, the beast radiated from him. The power he held tightly leashed. It was evident in every clench of his jaw. In the vivid intensity of his close regard, in those strange vampire eyes.

She slid his pants down and stood back. Beautiful. Pleased, Calah smiled, pushed him back until he sat on the edge of the bed. Like he had earlier, she fell to her knees, came between his legs and ran her hands over his thighs. They were so strong, pure muscle. She leaned forward and ran her tongue slowly down his abdominal muscles. When she looked up, the beast flickered in his eyes, hungry and intensely aroused.

His words entered her mind. *I can wait no longer.*

Before she was able to go any further, he pulled her up and had her beneath him on the bed. She wasn't afraid and wanted him as viciously as he wanted her. A red shroud of lust clouded his vision. She knew, she had been forewarned. Gabriel ripped her shirt and bra away and she arched.

"So lovely," he murmured and ran his tongue between her breasts. Gabriel inhaled the scent of her skin and relished it as though she smelled of the sweetest flower. He scraped one incisor across her sensitive nipple, and she cried out.

When he ran his tongue along the vein in her breast somehow she knew she wanted to sink his teeth into it. To have her feel the rapturous pleasure that would only mean her death. He struggled against the fever raging within him. A fever so great he wondered how safe she really was with him and paused.

"Don't stop," she pleaded and brought his lips to hers.

I long to taste you, ma petite, it is a compulsion unlike any other.

Calah felt his thoughts swirling with hers. He had not realized how much he had wanted to make her his for all eternity, never to escape him again. Would he be able to control the beast or was he a fool to have thought so? He kissed her with all he could remember of the man he once was but the vampire took over. Gabriel flipped her and removed her pants. Took pleasure in the site of her long elegant spine and well-rounded buttocks. He brought her hands over her head and spread her legs. With one smooth motion, he ran his teeth down her back and nipped one tight buttock. She squirmed but he held her in place.

He leaned close to her ear and whispered, enticed. "Look forward my love. See me. I am that powerful. I can be seen if I wish."

Calah heard Gabriel's words through a haze of desire so thick he seemed a million miles away. The wall was a mirror. How was that possible? It hadn't been before. He pulled her hips up and back. They looked beautiful together, he with black hair and dark eyes, her with pale blond hair and golden eyes. From somewhere she thought she heard dark classical music, throbbing and intense. When he raised his head she saw his fangs, saw the red feral gleam in his eyes, and unadulterated passion made her thrust her hips back against him.

He grabbed her offered pelvis hard, nails digging into her flesh, and entered her. She cried out in pleasure. Moving closer, thrusting harder, he seized her shoulder with his teeth. He didn't pierce the skin though some strange part of her wanted him to, wanted him to take her in every way possible. She gazed into the mirror again. Though he had vanished from view she still felt him. How odd to see herself in bliss with nothing there.

It didn't matter, nothing did. Sensation built so fast she started to sob. Just before climax broke over, he slipped away. Panting, she cried for release only to find herself flipped beneath him. Intense, his face came close to hers and dared her to defy him. "I want to see you climax without the aid of a mirror. I want to see that

look of glory on your face and know I'm the reason for it."

With his last word, he thrust and a million colors filled her vision. A wave of release unlike any other raked her soul and put to shame what he'd done to her the night before. Her body quaked, no longer her own. Calah tried to grab for him but couldn't. The world became one rush of ecstasy after another with no end in sight.

Like the brush of warm wind, something else slipped into her mind and a strange calm overtook. A man and woman filled her vision.

Peace surrounded her.

At first, she couldn't see them clearly. They lay beneath a willow tree. The long wisps danced around them and dusted the ground. Moonlight fell, splintered the leaves across the grass and spiked long shadows across their forms. The willow leaves parted, and she moved closer, could very nearly taste the cool night air on her tongue. She fell to her knees and watched through the darkness. They lay on their sides facing one another, faces cloaked in darkness.

I'm still here, Calah. Touch me.

She heard his words from a great distance. Gabriel? She moved closer to the couple under the tree.

Kiss me, I'm right here. You're remembering, my sweet. Don't be afraid.

"Gabriel." She mouthed the word. Where was he? That couple, who were they? Then his lips were on hers, safety. She kissed him and wrapped her legs around him. He was still within her, still moving. Now she lay beneath the willow tree. His hair was longer, features intent.

Gabriel cupped her face and stayed close. It is just a memory. *We made love once back then. Just one night. We are back there. I did not inflict this memory, you did.*

One part of her wanted to explore this but another part, a much stronger part, fell into the feel of a forgotten time and a forgotten moment that was too intense for words. She smelled the lilac in the air and saw the willow sway in the breeze overhead, remembered clearly her country, the perfection of England in late spring. She was home. He was her home, a mortal man mad of flesh and blood and scent. Tears poured from her eyes, and she clutched him. Gabriel, her knight, her perfection from the moment she had first seen him.

He moved in her, slower now, an easy passion found between lovers that had the time to cherish love, that knew nothing of evil. Lord, she remembered that night, how she had wished it would never end, wanted to feel him inside her forever, had prayed for it.

He rose up and watched her as he thrust. Her eyes fluttered, and she tried to keep them open but couldn't, it felt too good. She had been a virgin, given herself to him, had wanted to do so with all of her heart. She was in love with him. Ripple upon ripple of pleasure washed over and carried her once again to the place only he could. This time she saw the rapture in her mind, saw that he could not hold back. He roared and clutched her to him.

Calah opened her eyes, and they were back in his bed in the twenty-first century. She didn't know what this meant. Only that everything had changed once again. He held her tightly, as though he did not want to move.

Calah stroked the back of his hair gently. He had not bitten her. The beast hadn't won. She closed her eyes, more sated than she had ever been in her life, more at peace than she had ever been. She felt as though she had come full circle. She had just had sex with a vampire...again, but didn't see it that way. No, she had just made love to someone that meant so much. Did she love him? Impossible to say. Just that she had never felt this way about anyone before and losing him would be brutal. She bit her lower lip. This thing with Gabriel would not be easy to walk away from.

In fact, how would she? She would have to. They were from different worlds. She would grow old while he stayed young. Yes, she would have to walk away. He said nothing, just held her, stayed in her, so she stroked his hair and closed her eyes.

She would have to walk away. There remained no other choice.

Amelia had fed well and thrilled in the feel of flight. Clever and seductive, erotically remnant of a dark handsome stranger pleading in creative ways for his life, nighttime uncoiled around her like a long forgotten lover.

Too much time had passed since she awoke. Gabriel already had Calah under his protection. How dare he? Ungrateful demon spawn. And after all she had done for him. Amelia hated that she had needed to sleep so long but a vampire did need its rest and the world had become quite boring. She had much preferred the sweep of the plague and its lack of cure. Medicine had come far and now people actually lived entire lives with sickness. In her opinion, it took the whole ambiance out of living.

Whores still existed but even they were a bit stingy in their demands nowadays. What happened to the good old days of forget the price, you're beautiful, and I want to sleep with you? Again, boring when she had to use her vampire lure, her looks should be enough. And politics? She bloody hated them. Go to war, have some fun. Yes, granted, there was still a lot of fun to be had here and there but she much preferred the world when it didn't *think* so much. Maybe she was backwards, no doubt Lucifer thrilled in the present day, but for a beautiful woman with old-fashioned values it just didn't measure up.

Until now...

For the first time in centuries, she had the glory of revenge pumping through her veins. So nice to have a mission, a goal, a sweet enemy on the horizon. She flapped her wings and let the wind flip her, let the waves below wet her belly. Sweet bliss. Tonight would be the night.

Perhaps loved renewed? Maybe. Not important.

Vengeance wrought for a second time in eight centuries? Yes.

She squealed in delight and flew up higher, away from the ocean. Oh, yes. Sweet vengeance was hers once again.

Chapter 9

Calah awoke and instantly searched for Gabriel. . He sat silently with his back to her, his form defined by the faint orange glow of the dying embers on the hearth. She stood, located her clothing and began dressing. Her body still tingled with awareness, every nerve alive. He had tempered his beast for her yet let out just enough so the thought of what he'd done to her body aroused her anew.

Gabriel had taken her somewhere she'd never been. It had felt strange at first to be lying beneath that willow tree remembering another life with him. The whole experience lent undeniable credibility to everything Gabriel and Alex had told her. Could he have inflicted that long lost memory found within the midst of their passion? Sure. But she believed him when he said he hadn't.

Calah believed everything he had told, showed and made her feel.

She found him interesting and compassionate as well as intense and mysterious. There was no denying her emotional involvement had progressed swiftly. That she was eager to learn more about him, to talk with him more. Mentally and physically, he was everything she could ever want. He held intrigue, which the writer in her found addictive and stamina, which the hot-blooded female in her found irresistible. Suddenly, she knew, deep down inside, further than her heart, into the recesses of her soul, she would not flee after he defeated Amelia. Such an option would be impossible. How could she walk away from learning about a previous life? About the existence of vampires? Most of all, how could she walk away from him?

When she drew closer to Gabriel, she saw something she hadn't seen before. Had they even been there? In the corner sat an easel with the painting Alex had just done of her. It was astounding. She had captured the fire's glow and made Calah look like an angel. An angel with a secret, one so mysterious the viewer knew it had to do with a man, a man that affected her deeply.

It was the painting above the hearth which quickly caught her attention, however, and she put a hand over her mouth. It depicted a man and a woman standing beneath a tall willow tree embracing. Her face buried in his chest, his face averted and bent over her head. The viewer knew that wind blew because the willows parted and sunlight danced within the bright green leaves.

Gabriel spoke softly. "Alex painted it off of my description of that day."

Calah removed her hand from her mouth. "Why didn't I see this last night?"

He didn't move. "It hung here. You simply weren't ready to see it."

She almost denied it, but knew he did not lie. That painting had been with him for a very long time. That memory had been with him a very long time. What had it been like for him to have her finally remember that day and them making love? She squeezed her eyes shut and turned away.

"I'm not sure what you expect from me now, Gabriel. I'm not sure what I expect from myself. I've been alone for along time. You are a vampire. I've come to care for you but what sort of life could we have together?" She turned back and didn't care if he saw the tears in her eyes. "I will grow old. You will stay young."

His face was paler than normal and his black eyes an endless abyss. He turned his gaze to hers. "When this is over I have the power to erase me...us from your memory, and I will. No pain will come to you."

Calah took a step back, put a hand over her chest and choked back a sob. "Don't you ever take what we had from my memory." She shook her head. "That would be the cruelest thing you could ever do to me."

"That would be the kindest thing I could ever do for you."

Angry, she made a wide sweep with her hand. "You would erase my memory now when you had the choice from the beginning? You would take all of this from me? My story and remembering my past."

Her anger grew as she thought more about it and didn't care if she contradicted herself. She needed to understand his heart. "You could have simply taken me here as a prisoner until you'd battled Amelia then set me comfortably back in my Boston apartment none-the-wiser. Why tell me now that, with your vampire powers, this could have been avoided? Why would you be so cruel as to put me through all of this?"

He stood in temper, his expression tight, fangs bared and fists clenched. First, he spoke in French but quickly switched to English. "I did not incite you to have the dream where you saw my fangs. That was Amelia's doing. Could I have cast you into slumber the moment you realized? Yes, and I should of." He ran a hand through his hair and a mix of pain and frustration filled his eyes. "I did not have to make you remember anything. But did I not have the right to see if you remembered loving me? You were the one woman that surpassed all. In eight centuries there have been none like you."

She stared at him. Looked at the misery of a vampire who still believed in love, one that had never let go of what he thought was his true love. The simple fact he knew the minute she was being born told her how close they must have been before and how intensely he felt.

It was all so heartbreaking.

Perhaps the only real logical solution was to have him erase her memory. Cast her into a slumber this very minute and wake up clueless when all was said and done. She knew he followed her line of thought. He would do that to her...for her. The rest of her life would be one of ignorance for her and torture for him.

Calah took a few steps back. She had to think. "I need time alone."

She turned and left. Thankfully he didn't follow her nor erase her memory, at least not yet. She made her way to her room and stopped short at the door. Her story lay on the bed, her laptop on the bedside table.

Obviously, the interview wasn't going to be published. As though her thought was a sharp reminder she was here to do a job, her cell phone rang. *Frank!* She had completely forgotten he had said he was coming. She glanced at the number, it was him. No, Amelia might be out there!

She flipped open the phone. Static crackled on the other end of the line. "Frank, can you hear me? Frank!"

The static receded and a muffled sound ensued. She turned the volume up to its highest and hurried down the stairs. "Frank, I can't hear anything. Where are you? Please say something."

"Calah, help...please."

Frank's whisper sounded distant and tortured. Her heart pounded into her throat and tears welled in her eyes. She was halfway to the front door when Gabriel, Alex and Stephen appeared. Calah cared nothing about the deadly vampire most likely just beyond the door. All she cared about was saving Frank. Gabriel, his posture tense and eyes glowing red, blocked her path. She had never seen him dressed like this. With supple black leather pants, a skin tight black t-shirt, combat boots, he was dressed for movement, for battle.

"Step out of my way, Gabriel! He's my best friend. You can't leave him out there, she'll kill him!"

His voice was lower than normal, dark with evil intent, roiling with a vampire's bloodlust. "Frank is not out there, only Amelia."

Pain and anger pierced her. She had clearly heard Frank's voice. She could not, *would* not let Frank be slaughtered. He was unknowing and innocent, this was wrong. *Damn them all!* A mere second before Gabriel read her intent she screamed loud enough so the sound would be heard through the phone receiver in her hand. "Amelia, I invite you in!"

She staggered back at the roar of rage Gabriel emitted. The banister hit her backside and she froze as pure hell unfolded. Alex hissed and leapt back. In a split second, Gabriel lurched forward at what came through the door. Just like the picture, just like in her dream, Amelia looked the same, young, beautiful and blatantly evil. Fangs bared, long red hair, and very much alive, she crashed into Gabriel two feet off the floor. They spun and battled before they flung apart, both landing on their feet, legs splayed, across the room from one another.

Amelia flung back her head and laughed before her eyes settled on Calah. Like a whip of pure loathing, they narrowed as they studied her from head to toe. She ran her tongue over her teeth and grinned. "I will enjoy draining you of your life's blood once again, dear sister."

Gabriel's voice turned dark with liquid rage. "Not this time, Amelia."

Moving in a snapshot fashion the mortal eye could not comprehend, the vampires came within a few feet of one another, circling in an eerie dance. Calah clutched the banister and glanced at Alex. Her friend edged closer but seemed to be biding her time. Stephen had vanished.

"You have been a very naughty boy, Gabriel," Amelia said as she shook her head and wagged a long, crimson fingernail back and forth. Her blood red bodysuit hugged every curve while she circled him on stiletto heels. "Hiding her from me as you did. Very clever."

"You evil bi—"

Gabriel's hand shot up. "Silence, Alexandria."

Amelia cocked one eyebrow but never lost Gabriel's gaze.

"I'm surprised you kept your weaker sibling by your side all this time. What was the point, my love?"

Dark humor swirled black with red within his eyes. "Didn't you know? My inept ability to keep good company, rather than surround myself with decay such as yourself."

Her tongue snaked out and ran slowly over her full lower lip. "We could have been so good together." She cast a sly glance in Calah's direction. "Honestly, I never understood what you saw in my sister's visage." A long fingered, nimble hand ran down her front. "When mine was always so much more ample."

Calah tried to swallow but found it impossible. It felt as though a strong hand squeezed her windpipe. She slid down the banister, and sat on the bottom stair clutching her throat.

Gabriel's hand shot out and seized Amelia's throat. "Release her. *Now*. Are you still such a coward that you would fight a mere mortal?"

Amelia released a strangled laugh and seized his manhood. She whispered, "Not quite as aroused as you were last night I see." She clutched and squeezed. "At least, not yet."

The invisible clutch on Calah's throat vanished, and she gasped for air. Tension thickened in the room, throwing off a midnight like haze from the two vampires. *Last night?* Instead of being jealous, she realized the emotion clogging her veins was fear. Fear for Gabriel and his vicinity to Amelia. Fear for the outcome of this blasphemous reunion between such powerful beings. Alex sidled closer, a welcoming presence in her peripheral vision.

Gabriel yanked Amelia closer until she stood within inches of him. The air crackled with electricity and a crash of thunder sounded between them until it could be heard rumbling through the ceiling then the sky above. The house shook and the parquet floor at their feet became a mesmerizing whirlpool of black and white without solidity.

"Your existence will end this night, my maker. Can you feel Hell upon you?" Gabriel's eyes turned jet-black, so black they appeared oil slicks, petrifying windows reflecting clearly Lucifer and all he offered. Amelia's hands fell lax by her side as his one hand lifted her higher, strangled more surely. "Did you think me weaker than you?"

Amelia's eyes turned to pitch, and she hissed. Her voice thickened with the raspy note of death, and she started chanting in an ancient language. Latin perhaps? Calah had no way of knowing. A streak of black lightning shot from her, and Gabriel was flung backward, his body held securely against the wall, six feet off the floor.

"I will admit. I do so enjoy fair play." Amelia rolled her shoulders and cracked a bone in her neck. Hips swaying, she strode toward Calah. Alex went to move in front of Calah, defend her, but was easily tossed aside. Calah tried to move but the vampire grabbed hold and yanked her to her feet. Fear unlike anything she'd ever felt before burned through her, made logical thought a forgotten notion.

Gabriel struggled against his unseen bonds, a feral growl rumbled deep in his throat. Amelia tossed him a cool appraisal. "What's the matter, sweet love? Are you feeling what you Normans call... *Déjà vu?*"

When Amelia turned her attention back to her, Calah felt bile rise, felt her pulse skitter like a rabid disease through her veins. Looking into the vampire's icy cold midnight gaze, she knew true horror, watched as the pits of hell sucked her in. At once, she felt mummified and eaten alive by darkness and evil in its truest form. In that moment, she knew she would die. Some say before you die your life flashes before your eyes. Not now. Not the way she would die. There would be no God to bring her to the light. No. Amelia would escort her

directly to the Devil, her clutch was too strong. How could it be any other way?

Amelia cocked her head slightly; breath laced with the coppery smell of her most recent kill. "You remembered me when you gazed upon my painting. How selfish and curious of Gabriel to have put it there." She licked her lips and bared her fangs. "And you couldn't hate me even when you saw it. Just like you couldn't hate me when we were children in our *life* together, such as it was. Do you know how much I hated you?"

Calah couldn't tear her gaze away from Amelia's but she *could* find her voice and though the end was near, she didn't have to face it without courage. "Do you imagine, for even a second, that in this lifetime, I give a shit how much you hated me?"

"Ohhh." Amelia smiled and nodded with approval. "I think under different circumstances I may have liked you a bit more this time around." She shrugged, and Gabriel

struggled harder, a ferocious sound emanating from him. "But I guess we'll never know."

When Amelia's teeth sank into her neck, Calah froze. Pain coursed through her, and she struggled to pull away but Amelia was too strong. The time had come. Death was upon her. The room dimmed and then brightened. She locked eyes with Gabriel and saw only rage. She struggled to get through to him, to say goodbye but darkness moved closer.

At last, Amelia released her, and she fell to the floor, body weak and almost useless. Her gaze fell to the blood pooling on the floor, her own blood. She made one last attempt to look at Gabriel, to lock eyes with him one more time, but darkness shrouded her..

Time had run out.

The monster in Gabriel had clawed and screamed in denial when Amelia's teeth sank into Calah's neck. History repeated itself. Thick, putrid vengeance seized his black heart and gave the beast in him the free reign he had never allowed it. Only blood, death and blazing rage drove him past Amelia's bond.

It should have never gotten this far. He should have warned Calah, Amelia would use Frank as a tool, Frank, who had never left Boston because Gabriel had compelled him to leave the situation alone.

He flew across the room and attacked Amelia. Alex, released from her bounds, grabbed a wooden stake Stephen tossed her way. They had to move fast, while Amelia walked with a slight stagger and licked her lips with pleasure, thrilled in the lust, vivid euphoria their kind dwelt within after consuming the pure perfection of mortal blood. Just as Gabriel thrust her aside for the killing blow, Amelia's fingernail pierced his jugular vein. Alex had already thrown the stake and it blew through Amelia's shoulder, missing her heart.

She screeched and spun around. "'Tis against the code to kill one of your own, Alexandria." Amelia clutched at the stake and started to pull it free. "But you never did have an ethical bone in your body."

Gabriel fell to his knees and flexed his muscles, willed his body to heal quickly. Amelia wouldn't think twice about killing Alexandria now, not that she ever had, though she spoke eloquently of code. Screw code. He closed his eyes and concentrated on healing his wound. Felt his dark blood tickle down his neck and drip to the floor.

"Gabriel. I'm so afraid. I don't want to die. I don't want to lose you. Which is worse? Losing you or death?"

He opened his eyes at Calah's strangled words, at her form tugging on his, struggling to hold him so she could kneel. Sweet Calah, his beautiful, innocent Calah, she still lived, barely. He gently pulled her up to give her one last kiss, to say goodbye once again. Just as he did he felt the warmth of her tongue touch his neck, feather light, a warm lick that sent shivers of ecstasy through his blood. For a split second, he couldn't make anything clear in his world. There was only Calah inside him as she had never been. He exhaled long and slowly and drifted away, dwelled within eroticism unlike any other in the immortal world.

"Gabriel, help!"

Alexandria's cry ripped him from oblivion, and he pulled back in horror. His blood, rich and crimson, dewed Calah's lips. Her eyes met his one last time before she fell away. He screamed in denial, in a fresh fury so thorough the walls shook. How could this have happened? How had he allowed it to happen?

He wailed and spun around. All the death he had ever witnessed, all the rage he had ever felt, channeled and became a weapon of incredible power. Now, with nothing but evil as his internal mistress, Gabriel transformed and tapped into what he never could before. Hell's rage, a fiery torch, with nothing but destruction to light the way. With a flick of his wrist, he slid Alexandria's body clear of Amelia's wrathful intent.

Amelia turned her head and met his eyes. For the first time ever, he saw a flicker of fear enter her eyes, knew he had at last come into the fullest power he was capable...one that was far stronger than hers, his maker. Stake free, she bolted from the foyer out the back door. Did she think to fly back to London and refresh herself? He laughed and lurched into the air after her, the foolish whore.

Rain pelted his face, lightning danced over the ground beneath, through the clouds overhead. Oh no, this wouldn't do. He was not in the mood. Rain turned to mist, mist turned to thin air. Clouds fizzled and shied away. A huge, round moon burst free, curious and watching, waiting and ready.

The wind rushed up off the cliff and awaited his command. "No, no, we'll not part ways quite yet."

Amelia stopped short at the edge of the cliff, caught in a burst of wind, a moment before she meant to take flight. He felt her struggle for dignity as she turned back to face him. Her eyes glowed, their original blue in the moonlight. Her red hair flew in long tendrils. "Gabriel, my sweet, you are being unreasonable." She touched her collarbone with a seductive caress. "I am your maker. Do you truly understand what that means?"

She pouted and took a small step forward. "To destroy me will cause you such pain, could very well be your undoing. After all, what is a vampire without its creator?"

He did not move closer but slowly lured her with his words and form. "You speak the truth. It would be..." He lowered his lashes a fraction. "...most unfavorable."

She took two steps closer, enthralled. "It would. Might we not reconcile? Start anew?"

He kept a strong hold on her eyes and drew her ever nearer, allowed her to drown within his newfound desire. "Perhaps we might."

She stopped within a foot of him, throbbing and receptive. "I thought you might come to this conclusion, my love."

"Did you?" He smiled and let the evil this woman had given him coil around his dark soul. Then, knowing

what this meant, that what he did would have his own kind shun and fight him, he grabbed the wooden stake thrown to him from his sister, his comrade, and plunged it deep into Amelia's heart. Her eyes widened as they stared into his, locked until final death found her.

"You would do this for a mere mortal?" She whispered and clutched at his shirt, her nails twisting in the fabric.

He wrapped his free hand around her back and held the other end of the stake in place, enjoyed the shivers of agony raking her body. "I would do this for Calah a thousand times and more if I had to."

Amelia's body lurched and jerked, seized and trembled. She tried to speak but could not. Unyielding, a wall of pure granite, he held both ends of the stake, that which protruded from her chest and that from her back. He listened and watched with his superior sight as her black heart fought to pump around the wood, tried to burn it away with its acidity. Her perfect porcelain skin began to flake off as though she peeled from sunburn. Her red hair turned silver then gray beneath the moon, her blue eyes became sunken and dull. A pinprick of red tried to flare to life within but died.

She shook her head in denial, the sound like an old creaky door moving on a century old shed. He slid the stake to drive a splinter or two through her innards and leaned his mouth close to her ear. "Fight it, Amelia, please. This is the feeling I have wanted for you for so very, very long. For all the evil you have done me and my family and my love, true love, your sister. For the life you ripped from me eight hundred years ago. Never embrace the pain Amelia, always fight it."

Her lips peeled away and caught on the wind. Her skin blew off and left only sinew and muscle. Then her eyes were gone and only bone remained. Still he held the stake. Still he waited. A final, long cry filled the Maine night and rose above the crash of the waves. Like ashes in the wind, her bones fell apart and the stake fell free from his hands. All that was left of Amelia rose and dissipated in a cloud of remembrance before the wind whipped and threw it in all directions.

He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. For the first time in hundreds of years, her oppressive presence was gone. He was free. There was no pain, not the pain that a vampire should feel when he killed his maker. Instead came a new pain, far different than any he had ever felt before, one that consumed more thoroughly than any other could.

He had become the maker.

There is no light in darkness. Darkness is complete.

The sunset flared very low in the sky. It contained every color of crimson, salmon and yellow, even some purples. It was glorious. Calah sat in a patch of spring grass, green and bright. She looked at the rocks, so many shades of gray. She looked at the sky in the distance, a deep blue black now, ready for night.

Night.

Him.

Pain.

So much excruciating pain she didn't know how she'd make it through. She knew the sunset, the colors, had been a dream.

A goodbye.

Now she was in the midst of a nightmare. Everything shifted between black and red, pain and ecstasy.

The ecstasy was almost as bad as the pain.

Calah willed him to her, made him come into her body again. Felt life leave even as love stayed strong. Impossible but true. Gabriel had found her, made her his. Oddly enough, for the first time, their lovemaking felt like the truest bond. When he pushed into her it was slow and carefully, as though she would break beneath the merest touch and somehow she knew she would, that this loving they did now showed her in the purest form his need. Not violence but a love felt more intensely than what she had ever contemplated existed. Everything screamed clarity now,

When climax found her, the world opened wide, bright with the colors of nighttime, with the silver prisms of moonlight and starlight, more glorious because Gabriel was here with her.

Then she took her first breath.

Everything was different. The air had taste and scent visible. She opened her eyes and found herself in Gabriel's lap. The moon was much lower in the sky but he was right here.

She looked up into his face and smiled. "Gabriel."

He looked down, compassion, sympathy and love in his eyes. "Calah."

"I'm a vampire now aren't I, Gabriel?" She hadn't meant to put it so bluntly, did not want to upset him. Though she was now something beyond her wildest imagination, she felt that in an odd way she had come home, was right where she was supposed to be.

"Aye." He did not seem pleased and pulled her closer. "I'm so very sorry, my love."

She shook her head and laid a shaky hand on his chest. "Please, you have no reason to be sorry. I invited Amelia in. I'm the one who should be sorry. I was just so afraid for Frank."

He closed his eyes briefly, obviously pained. "I should have told you. I ensured Frank would not come. None of this would have happened had I told you. There is no excuse for my actions."

With her new vision, she gazed into his glowing red eyes and studied the sweep of his long black lashes. "Now I am what you are. I know all of your memories, all of your feelings. I know you inside out. At the time, it seemed perfectly reasonable for you to say nothing about Frank, about keeping him away. You could have never foreseen me purposely inviting a vampire who meant to kill me into your home."

He ground his jaw and kept his eyes on her. "You take all of this too casually. You do not understand what you have become."

Calah swallowed, tore her gaze from his and looked at the ocean. "I take none of this casually." Her gaze swung back to his. "I have a lot to learn but I'm not dead, am I?"

"Yes!" He hissed and pulled her even closer. "Do you not realize that? You are dead, Calah. At least in the sense of the mortal man."

He started to speak but she put a finger to his lips and whispered, "I'm not afraid of what I've become,

Gabriel. I know I should be petrified but I'm not. I chose this path."

Gabriel scowled and closed his eyes. "I never wanted this for you."

She ran her finger down his chin and neck. "And I never wanted you to live the rest of my life knowing I lived but I had forgotten everything you made me remember. I didn't want to live a life of ignorance while you lived one of torture."

He opened his eyes. "Ignorance is bliss indeed. You would have never known I existed in torture without you."

She leaned in and kissed the corner of his lip softly then ran the tip of her incisor across his lower lip. "The list of scenarios that *could* or *should* have happened are endless but that's beside the point. I wanted this, to be with you, or I would never have taken your blood. I didn't do that because I was afraid of death. In the end, I did it because I was afraid of losing you." She took a deep breath, pulled back and traced his jawbone. "I know it may sound foolish and believe me, for a woman that doesn't like commitment, one who has always prided herself on independence, I was shocked by my own feelings when I saw you fight Amelia, when I saw her injure you, I knew that I couldn't stand to lose you."

He put his hand over hers. "It was all the lure of the vampire, my sweet."

"No." She looked deeply into his eyes. "It was not. And it wasn't what you had done in our other lifetime either. Gabriel, it was all what you did in this life. In two days time you showed me a man that I had never, ever come across in this life. A man of such compassion, one that protected me from birth and then risked existence, as he knew it, for a woman he loved. I hope you realize that I fell in love with you as a mortal but fought it."

Calah laid her hand on his thigh. "I know what you carry in your pocket. I felt it when we made love in your room and though you were wearing something different. I know that you still carry it in your pocket. That you always have."

She slid her hand into his pocket and pulled the item out.

He stared down into her open palm at the shiny, palm worn, brown stone and said nothing. Yet in her new form, that of a vampire, she could feel how difficult it was for him to not take it from her and put it back in his pocket. It had been his talisman, his connection to her, for so very long. A new thrill rolled through her. He was so glorious and powerful in this form.

And he was all hers.

"This was my lucky stone. The one I gave you the first day we met in the twelfth century. You have kept it with you all this time, eight centuries," she said.

"Yes," he whispered and kissed her open palm beside the stone. "All of these years."

She broke eye contact, leaned her head against his chest and hoped he would give the right answer to her next question. "Gabriel, what's done is done. It is eight hundred years later and even though I've just been turned into a vampire I'm in love and want to start a life, a *long* life with you, is that possible?"

A stretched silence ensued before he spoke but when he did his tone was that of a man starting over. "Calah, my love, nothing has ever been more possible."

Calah released a sigh of relief. Tonight she had been reborn, and she wasn't afraid because life was just beginning for her with him. Gabriel, her darkest memory, her brightest memory, the only love she'd ever known. The only love she wanted to know. Now they would have the life they never had before.

So instead of the vibrant colors of sunset, they watched the moon sink, the pewter ocean waves roll and night's end be life's beginning.

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