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**Mia Bailey**



**Of Night  
and Desire**

# **OF NIGHT AND DESIRE**

**Mia Bailey**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

**OF NIGHT AND DESIRE**

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# DEDICATION

Night Flights

I escape my fears in the Night  
I touch the moon and stars  
They are my companions—

They guide me, and give me Purpose  
They console me, and give me Strength  
They challenge me, and give me Courage  
They embrace me, and give me Love

I fear not the Night  
As Selena's radiance bathes me in warmth  
she cradles me in her arms

For a time, life is Serene

To my friends and family for their love and support as I strive to make my  
dreams a reality.

# OF NIGHT AND DESIRE

**MIA BAILEY**

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## **Prologue**

*Immortals are an ancient race—as old as the mountains lining the European border. Powerful and mysterious, they possess great power. Governed by an elemental Code of Morality, they walk the Earth protecting their race and the lives of those in the mortal world.*

*Dedicating their lives to protecting all from evil, Immortal males become hunters. Their prey are all those who seek to destroy life, whether it be mortal or immortal. They can be found in all walks of life, in every land seeking to protect the innocent, and render swift justice upon the guilty. They can be found in moments of war on the battleground with those to whom they have sworn allegiance. They can be found in moments of peace, pursuing wisdom, serenity, and love.*

*If they are fortunate, they will find their true life mate and complete an ancient ritual that will bind him to her and her alone. Giving all to protect and cherish her, he will fight even to the end of his very life. Together, they serve their race in the hope that one day they can save all those of their people who walk alone.*

*An Immortal's life mate is the light that fills the dark void within him, saving him from the emptiness of his soul and memories of violence, retribution and death from centuries of lonely nights. Only with her does he continue to feel the raw emotions and see the beauty and color of life. She is the day to his night, the heart to his soul that come together as one. Their*

*love is a power, an undeniable energy that promises light and life. Without her, faith and hope are destroyed, and there is only desolation.*

*When an Immortal does not find his life mate, they lose all hope and plunge into a despair so deep there is no return. They turn to the darkness and become Vampyres, destroyers of light and life. Desperate creatures with no morals, no ethics, no chance of hope, they terrorize humanity, still searching for their lost life mate. It is a search that is destined to fail. For once an Immortal turns Vampyre, no life mate can save them.*

*The Living Death—where all rhyme and reason vanish and all that is left is an unquenchable thirst—for the life in the light they can never have as the darkness consumes their bleak soul; for the blood that sustains their cruel lives as the blood of their life mate is the only essence that can truly sate their hunger; but most of all, for love, as their life mate remains lost forever. It is this dark irony that serves to feed their madness.*

*Between these two lines of light and darkness, there is only death. An Immortal who can no longer face the isolation without his life mate will find his way to the mountains for the Final Sacrifice. He will stand on sacred ground and make his peace with The Great One, healer to the Immortal Race, before he faces the morning dawn. In this way, he can save his immortal soul rather than be condemned to The Living Death.*

*For Valya, the Guardian, it has been more than an eternity he has walked the narrow line between good and evil, between darkness and light, his soul tormented. He has searched for his life mate. He can hear her voice calling to him on the night air and sense her close to him while he dream-walks through the World. He can feel her reaching to him, beckoning him to find her and join with her, to become one.*

*For reasons unknown even to himself, he leaves his beloved home for a new world, a strange place called Detroit. He does not understand why, he knows only that he is compelled to go. With no fear, no reservations, he seeks what destiny is drawing him so far from his home in the Mountains.*

*Valya has spent centuries as the hunter, and now, in this new world, he will become the hunted.*



*The Beginning*

Adelaide Sommers wore a somber expression while she hustled her daughter along, dragging a suitcase behind them. She had only enough time to pack a few clothes, a bit of food, and her journal in the worn bag before she woke her daughter and dressed her for the evening chill. The dream that had roused her from her sleep had been vivid. There was no doubt. *They* were close. Too close.

It was what she had feared—that *they* would find her. When they caught up to her, they would also find Richelle. She had to protect Richelle.

Adelaide was a rare phenomenon. She was a Germanic witch with the power of sight, inheriting her gifts from her mother, and her mother before her. As a young child, she was taught the craft. Meticulously honing her skills with herbs and spells, her psychic powers grew. It was when she tried to save a young schoolboy that her powers were discovered and the hunt began.

She remembered the day with great clarity. She was only eleven years old when she *saw* a classmate slip into a diabetic coma. She tried to warn the boy, his parents, and the teacher, but no one would listen to her. When she told her father, an eminent pediatrician, what she had seen in her vision, he interceded and convinced the parents to bring their son in for a check-up.

But by then it was too late. He had slipped into the coma on the way to the doctor's office, seizing with severe convulsions before expelling a breath and closing his eyes. His parents were hysterical when Adelaide's father met them at the office. They rushed to the hospital, but the damage was done. The poor boy passed away four days later, never awakening from the coma.

His parents were inconsolable, out of their minds with grief. All they could think was that somehow Adelaide had known what was going to happen. They accused her of vile, derisive acts of malevolence. They called her a devil child, spawn of Satan. It wasn't long before the town believed that Adelaide had something to do with the boy's death. A local pastor had come to speak with Adelaide's family.

All through their conversation he kept staring at Adelaide, who quietly sat on the hearth combing the hair of her cherished porcelain doll, a gift from her now deceased grandmother. She remembered being afraid when

the old priest sprang from his chair and began his manic ranting, coming toward her. She remembered how her parents had to pull her from the priest's grasp against his proclamations that she was a weapon for God. The demented look in his eyes as her parents spirited her away into the night struck a chord of fear in her, even at her young age.

Her parents had left everything behind when they escaped to America, making their way to New York. Her father had changed their names, even returned to school to change specialties to veterinarian medicine. At every turn, he would be watching, ever vigilant against those who were seeking his family, his daughter. Adelaide's mother warned that there were others pursuing them, coming for her. It was several years before any of them realized to what extent they would go to get their hands on Adelaide.

Adelaide was celebrating her sixteenth birthday when the old priest found her. He had approached her on the street walking home from school. He seemed a benevolent clergyman asking for directions to St. Paul's Cathedral. Then he began to speak with her about her school, her home, her family, questions that were less curiosity and more invasive. He became insistent in his questioning, wanting to know more about her, her friends, her life.

She tried to evade his pervasive probing as she dodged his hands reaching out to her, trying to touch her. He kept pressing with his questions and his grasping hands, becoming more and more infuriated each time she avoided him. It was when he began to accuse her of lewd acts of wantonness and how she needed to remain pure to fulfill her destiny that she broke away and ran home.

Her mother was frantically waiting for her, having seen all that had transpired in a mind flash that came to her unexpectedly, the strength of the vision forcing her to her knees. Adelaide melted into the warmth of her mother's embrace, trying to hide from the eyes of covetous men. Adelaide saw the priest come around the corner with two men close on his heels. Peeking out from her mother's embrace she could see they were taking his directions.

Her father came running from the house but it was too late. When Adelaide was wrested from her mother's embrace by one, her mother protested against her daughter being thrown into the arms of the priest, and then was stabbed in the chest by the other henchman. She slumped to the

ground, a pool of bright red blood staining the sidewalk. Her father flew into a rage. He wrested the knife from the murderer and stabbed him in the heart. He withdrew the dagger and spun to face the second assailant. He plunged the dagger into the chest of the second man, piercing his lung, leaving him dying on the pavement.

He turned, his eyes glowering at the priest. Hastily, the priest released Adelaide, who rushed to her mother's side, crying for her to be all right. Her father turned on the priest, his fists pummeling the spongy body of the vigilante despite his attempts to shield his body from the powerful attack. Only Adelaide's wailing bought him back to reality. He let the priest fall to the ground and ran to his wife's crumpled body. He gathered her lifeless form in his arms, her blood covering the front of his white shirt.

Adelaide's father looked up with a murderous glint in his eyes. He searched for the priest to vent his rage at her senseless death, but the priest was gone. His eyes scanned left and right. The bodies of the two men lay sprawled on the ground. They were dead but it did little to appease his vengeful hate. His heart softened as he watched Adelaide weep softly at the loss of her mother. Bowing his head, he held his wife tightly against his body before laying her back upon the ground. Tenderly, he kissed her forehead.

He rose up, taking Adelaide in his arms and lifting her to her feet as he guided her away from the ghastly scene. She continued to weep until he put her in the passenger seat of his car, buckling her in. It was only when he sat behind the wheel of the car and started the engine that she snapped back from her daze. She began to struggle to release the belt, but her father placed his hand over hers, preventing her from unbuckling it.

"We have to leave her behind," he tried to explain. "We need to get away. They'll be back. For you."

She wept softly as they drove off well into the night. They had up and left everything behind, heading over the George Washington Bridge, heading west. She had no idea where they were going, but she was too overwhelmed with her grief to ask her father. She had been warned every night by her mother, *Be watchful, for they are coming for you*. She had never truly believed what her mother had told her. She thought it was paranoid delusion.

But her mother was dead.

The years had passed, and it still hurt. It hurt every time she and her father had to pick up and move. It hurt when she married in her senior year of high school to appease her dying father. She'd lost him less than a month later, and then lost her husband when she was four months pregnant. It hurt when she gave birth to her own daughter, knowing Richelle would never know her father. The craft she was taught, the powers that had lain dormant within her, came flooding back on the eve of Richelle's birth. It came to her in a terrifying dream.

*The old priest, the one from her childhood, was there in the hospital. Adelaide watched him as he stared at Richelle lying in her cradle in the nursery. He watched her with an insidious gleam in his eye. He just strode calmly into the hospital's maternity ward. No one stopped him. After all, who would think anything of a priest in a hospital?*

*He stood there and watched Richelle like a proud father, smiling and waving at her through the glass. Adelaide shuddered at his seemingly caring act, remembering only the demented behavior he had exhibited when she was a small child. He then turned his head to Adelaide and smiled, reminiscent of the final scene of Psycho, his grin full of silent malevolence that reached in and took hold of her soul.*

*He didn't approach her. He merely lowered his head as his eyes burned into her mind. The smile fell from his face and was replaced with a malicious grin. He glowered at her as he spoke. "You escaped me. But now, she is mine." He pointed to the nursery. Unable to resist, she followed his gesture to see that Richelle's cradle was empty. She screamed as the priest laughed.*

Every night for the past year she had dreamed of an empty cradle. And every night she would wake screaming, bathed in sweat.

It was that vision that kept driving her farther and farther from home. Her parents were gone, her husband was gone. All she had left was Richelle. She would move heaven and fight the fires of hell itself to keep her safe. Whenever she felt the evil presence coming near, she would take Richelle and leave. The insurance from her late husband as well as her parents' amassed wealth gave her the ability to disappear without a trace. Still, they seemed to find her. Then she would have to leave to start over again in a new city with a new name and new identity.

In Detroit, she had redefined herself as a legal secretary for a major downtown law firm. She had worked for several partners in the prestigious firm. She made a decent salary and her hours afforded her ample time to be with her daughter, Richelle. They lived quietly, comfortably, at least until Adelaide would feel a foreboding sense of malice encroaching upon her as oppressive as a humid summer day.

As she did yesterday.

The feeling overcame her as she was preparing breakfast, her vision attacking all of her senses. The power behind her vision—the heat, the pain, the nausea—left her a quivering mass on the floor. Richelle ambled into the kitchen to find her mother holding her head, frying pan upturned with the morning's scrambled eggs lying on the floor and the dog happily licking them up. Richelle rushed to her mother, but Adelaide waved it off as a simple accident and hustled her off to school.

However, it wasn't an accident. She had seen the future in great clarity. Her future. And she was not afraid, at least not for herself. For Richelle. After she sent her to school, she took the day off from work. There was a lot to do in such a short time. When Richelle returned from school, they had an early supper and went to bed. They needed the sleep before leaving this morning.

Adelaide knew Richelle didn't want to leave. She had already moved so many times in her young life. It seemed like whenever she trusted enough to make friends, that would be the time they would have to leave. But this time was different for both of them. Richelle, with her innate sense, seemed to understand that but was reluctant to leave. Adelaide didn't have the luxury of naivety. She knew the harsh realities of life and was determined to shelter Richelle from them, for as long as she could.

"Hurry, Richelle, hurry!"

"But, Momma, I don't wanna go."

Eight-year-old Richelle Sommers held tightly onto her mother's hand as she was pulled through the streets of a northwest suburb of Detroit. It was early, the morning stars just starting to fade from the evening sky. There were no people on the streets, just the faint sounds of a nearby freeway with the few nighttime travelers that were speeding along.

“Richelle, please, we need to get away from here as fast as we can.” Her voice was unsympathetic to her daughter’s plea, but rather held a quiet resolve.

“Why, Momma? Why do we have to leave?” Richelle wailed, crying softly. Part of her understood the urgency to escape. But she was still a child, unable to cope with the upheaval or the pain of leaving everything behind.

“They’ve come back, baby. We have to get away before they find us,” she cooed as she gripped her daughter’s hand tighter and brought it to her waist in a reassuring gesture. She continued hurrying down the street and had turned the corner when a tall figure stepped out from the shadows, blocking the sidewalk between Adelaide and her car. She stopped short, shielding Richelle with her body as she took two steps back. She quickly turned on her heels and went in the opposite direction, but another figure, slightly taller, stepped out from behind a row of tall hedges.

She stopped short again as her heart, on the verge of exploding, began to pound in her chest. She looked back to see the first figure walking toward them, his heels clicking on the sidewalk like a time bomb. She turned to see the other figure stalking toward them, trapping Richelle and herself between the two of them. She quickly scanned her surroundings, looking for a means of escape. She grabbed Richelle’s hand and ran across the street. As she reached the sidewalk, *he* stepped out from the shadows.

His ghostly white skin all but shone under the dimming streetlight. His sunk in at his cheeks, made his eyes protrude, bulging from their sockets and shooting daggers at her. His scraggly green-gray hair stuck out from under the brim of his minister’s hat. He smiled at her, his crooked teeth stained yellow with age. He looked ancient and decrepit. She had no idea how old he was, but her family had been running from him for nearly thirty years.

She felt a chilling tingle in her spine as he spoke.

“I’ve come for her.”

\* \* \* \*

*Valya opened his mind to the city. Dawn was approaching, and he needed to know. He had felt an impending sense of doom since rising with the moon. He could feel destiny calling to him, drawing him into the night.*

*The oppressive smell of death permeated the air and surrounded him. He couldn't pinpoint where the danger was coming from, but he could feel that there was no escaping it.*

*Fate had chosen a thread from the tapestry of life.*

*There would be a death tonight.*

*Up till now, it had not happened. But it was near.*

*He opened his mind to the night, absorbing the sounds, the smells, the sight into his dark soul. He had walked the Earth for several hundred years. He had seen many things, and had done much evil. He was known as The Guardian, a hunter seeking out those who preyed on the suffering of others to feed the dark hunger devouring their spirit. Each rendered judgment was another stain on his soul, stripping the color from his world.*

*Without color, all he could see was the black and white in the world around him. There was good and evil, right and wrong, black and white. Compassion had slowly seeped from his body and faded away as the hues of the spectrum faded from his vision. There was no compassion, no sympathy, no empathy, no...love. He had searched for a hundred years, longing to find his life mate. He wasn't sure how much longer he could wait for her. He could already feel the pull toward the darkness.*

*He could hear the voices of the others who had gone before him. The Destroyers. He could hear them whisper on the night wind to forsake his search and join them. He listened to the voices as they tried to entice him from the light. He listened to their persuasive arguments and the promise of power and wealth. He had followed the whispers, finding The Destroyers and ending their misery.*

*Yet there was another voice in the night, calling to him and beckoning him to remain steadfast. Although unknown to him, ancient wisdom shared among Immortals declared it was his life mate's spirit calling to him, leading him to her.*

*He yearned to follow the soft and lilting alto, which more than spoke to him but sang in its melodic tone. Each night, it seemed to grow softer, while the voices of The Destroyers became more insistent. It was harder to hear her, to be soothed by the calming resonance.*

*He didn't know how many more nights he could stay strong and refuse the enticements of the whispers. He didn't know how many more nights he could bear to be alone, wandering the streets of the city, searching for love*

*and finding only evil. As a Guardian, it was his purpose to dispose of the evil that plagued humanity and his people. He was growing weary. Without love, he sought the peace of eternal night, The Final Sacrifice.*

*The stars were fading from the night sky, and the ill-omened sense of boding evil had not dissipated. He reached deeper into the night, letting his mind wander through the city, trying to sense what destiny had fated for him this evening. It was difficult to get through the minds of the city dwellers. There was much unhappiness, greed, loneliness, despair, and discontent. It was hard to separate the seemingly bottomless pools of emotions that threatened to pull him into a whirlpool, leading him to his end.*

*Then he felt it.*

*What was that?*

*He reached deeper into the night and concentrated. It was her. It was very faint, but it was her—the one he had been searching for all these centuries. His life mate. She was in peril. He stretched his arms out and rose on the night wind and prayed that it was not too late.*

\* \* \* \*

“I’ve come for her. Give her to me.”

His gravelly monotone chilled Adelaide to her bones, but his voice was strangely hypnotic. She could feel his will trying to force her to submit. Providentially, with her will and powers as a witch, she was able to resist. She would never surrender her daughter to the evil monster. She would die first.

“Do not be foolish, Adelaide. There is no way you can defeat me,” he droned on. “She is an instrument of God, created to fight the Evil One. She is to be taught by me. God has decreed it. She is mine.”

“She’s a little girl. You can’t have her!” Adelaide shouted, placing her body between him and Richelle.

His laugh was sinister, as cold as his eyes, as dark as his heart, and as sinister as his intentions. She could see into his mind. The fragmented pieces of sanity were held together by disjointed delusions of divinity. He was utterly mad, his grasp on reality long since gone, if he’d ever had one. She sheltered Richelle’s body with her own, as if hiding her from his sight



would save her from the devious plans in his twisted mind, plans that she could see in complete clarity. She shivered at the thought.

“You can’t stop me.” His voice grated like fingernails on a chalkboard. He took a step toward her, unmindful of the rising wind that ripped the hat from his head, leaving his hair flailing wildly about his head in a frightening halo. “It has been decreed by God. She is mine!”

Adelaide turned and scooped up Richelle, wrapping her arms around her as she took off sprinting away from the madman. From the shadows, two accomplices stepped out and blocked her path to her car. She quickly scanned the area. No one was up at this time of the morning. The stars were just now starting to fade, another hour before the sun rose. It was the dawning of a brand-new day that she *knew* she would not see.

No matter the price, Richelle had to be saved. She opened her spirit to the Goddess, praying that she would send her an angel to save her daughter. Adelaide felt a hand wrap itself in her long dark hair, so different from the auburn locks of her daughter, and pull her head back. She could hear Richelle screaming as her little hands gripped her tightly around her neck. She could feel the cold tip of a dagger pressing against her throat, moving with her as she tried to shield her daughter.

She felt two pair of hands trying to pry Richelle from her. The tiny speck of a girl had more strength in her than these villains anticipated. Finally the two men each took an arm and forced Richelle to release her mother. Adelaide grew cold at the lost warmth of her daughter’s precious body pressed against hers.

At that moment, her mind filled with an overwhelming sense of power the likes of which she had never felt before. *The Goddess is sending me my angel, someone to watch over Richelle.* She felt totally at peace even though she knew what destiny had in store for her. Her final thought was not of Richelle, but of the angel that was coming to protect her, a Guardian that would save her from the demented cult that, if they followed through with their plan, would ultimately destroy Richelle.

*Please, don’t let him be too late.* She felt the cold steel plunge into her side although she felt no pain. She sighed audibly and stared up at her assailants as her body slipped to the cold pavement. The old priest fell to one knee and touched her face with his cold fingers and gnarled hands. His

lips stretched over his crooked yellow teeth in a half smile, half sneer as she felt her spirit draining from her like water from a bathtub.

“May God have mercy on your worthless life,” he harshly whispered in her ear, the stench of his breath reeking like the kiss of death.

*No, she thought, may she forgive your damned pitiful soul.*

Adelaide lay helpless, her life force slowly slipping away. She prayed to the Goddess for strength so Richelle would not be left alone with madmen. She prayed Richelle’s guardian would arrive in time. She prayed for a miracle.

\* \* \* \*

The old priest stood up as a dark shadow passed overhead. Scanning the night sky to see what caused such a large shadow he saw nothing. He looked at his companions quizzically as the shadow passed overhead again. They all began to look around nervously as Richelle began struggling in their arms to get free. One man squeezed her arm causing her to yelp in pain, her feet kicking the air as she tried to get loose from his grip and go to her mother.

Without warning, the man’s face contorted and began to turn blue. He released his grip on Richelle, the other man still holding onto her tightly so she could not get away. The first man began clutching at his throat, gasping for air. He collapsed unmoving, his windpipe crushed. At the death of his comrade, the second man released his hold on Richelle and began backing away from an unseen force.

“Stay where you are,” the old priest bellowed. “We have God on our side.”

The man laughed as he tried to scurry away like a rat in an alley, but tripped over his feet and fell to the pavement. The old priest stomped over and kicked him in the side.

“Get the girl!”

The man’s eyes darted about the lightening streets. He couldn’t see or hear anything, but still he felt something, something cold yet alert. He scampered to his feet, joining the priest as they approached Richelle kneeling by her mother.

From nowhere, a tall figure appeared before them, blocking their path to Richelle. It was the Guardian, Valya. He held the stance of a powerful warrior from an ancient time. His jet-black hair hung straight to his shoulders, and he wore his black leather duster as a knight wore his armor.

His eyes glowed in the early morning haze, freezing both men in their shoes as surely as Medusa the gargoyle had turned the Phoenician soldiers to stone. His face was set in a grim scowl, glaring at the two men who were malignantly accosting a child after killing her mother. Among his people, there was no greater crime than that against a child, and many a Guardian had sacrificed their life to save the innocent. Their heinous crime was reprehensible. They must be punished was his only thought as he approached the two men.

It was the soft crying of Richelle that drew his attention from the villains seeking her out. He turned his head to gaze at the child lying prone near her mother, her hand lying on her chest. No longer frozen by Valya's intimidating glare, the attackers took advantage of his momentary distraction and fled. As he retreated, the old priest was bellowing about the wrath of God be upon him and vengeance would be his. Valya paid no heed to the ravings of the zealous fanatic. There would be another time for justice to be meted out, but for now, his only concern was for the child and her mother.

He approached slowly, quietly as to not startle the child, but he needed to see the woman. He had felt her presence before he came upon the scene. He felt the knife as it pierced her body, and he howled as a banshee at the foreign invasion. He had waited so long. He had come so close that she could not die now. He needed his life mate. An Immortal without their life mate was no more than half of a whole.

Richelle did not even acknowledge his presence as he leaned over and gazed into Adelaide's eyes. The orbs were dark and empty save for her welling tears as he stroked her hair. From the shading, he could tell that her hair was very dark, maybe a rich brown almost black shade. But he couldn't quite tell. He shook his head in confusion as a sense of power struck him. Color had not returned to his world, but he could feel his life mate near.

"I know you," Adelaide rasped, her breath becoming garbled. "I've seen you...in a vision. You are the Guardian." She stared into his somber eyes,

their chocolate richness filling her with a sense of serenity. His hair fell forward as he leaned over her.

His brow furrowed as he stared at her in confusion. Very few mortals knew of his world. Most preferred to live their lives existing in an invisible and self-made plastic bubble, oblivious to the battle between Good and Evil being fought around them. They failed to recognize the power in the world around them and refused to admit their lack of supremacy in the grand scheme of things. Man was not the center of the universe but rather a link in the chain, or rather, a thread in the tapestry of life. All living creatures were, man and beast alike.

But this woman was different. She had recognized him as a Guardian.

"I am one of many Guardians." His voice was sedate. The rich baritone reached inside of her and calmed the lingering fears of her impending end. "Lie still and let me help you."

"No, you are the Guardian the Goddess has sent for Richelle." She began to cough, a thin line of blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

She spoke of the Goddess, so Valya surmised she must be some form of Wicca, a witch. This explained why she had recognized him. Wicca tried to live their lives in tune with nature and the world around them. She would have accepted the power of the world in which she lived and incorporated it into her daily life.

The young child clung to her mother, her silent sobs racking her body. He watched as Adelaide struggled to raise her arm to stroke the small child's hair, cooing softly, trying to soothe the child. He stepped in closer, trying to hear what she was saying. *Richelle. That's what she called the child. Richelle.*

"Shh, sweet baby. It's all right." She coughed, turning her head as to not frighten Richelle and turned back, giving her daughter a wistful smile. She would miss seeing her grow up, watching her blossom into a lovely young lady and fall in love. She'd miss her daughter's marriage and the birth of her children, her grandchildren. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye at her loss, but at the same time, she was filled with renewed tranquility that Richelle would live and fulfill her destiny.

The Guardian would see to that.

She gazed up at Valya, giving him a knowing smile. Yes, he would watch over her precious child and see that no one would ever harm her. He would make Richelle happy. No mother could want more for her child.

He reached out and touched Adelaide's cheek with his fingertip, stroking the softness as he gazed into her eyes, trying to decipher their color. They were light. She brought her hand to his, pulling it from her face and placing it on Richelle's head. He began to stroke the long hair, amazed at the silkiness of the soft waves that fell, hiding her face.

Richelle slowly raised her head, and he stared dumbfounded. She was an exquisitely beautiful child. He held a tendril of her hair between his fingers, rubbing the silky curl before tucking it behind her ear. It was a light shade, blond. No, blond on the top but a darker shade underneath, auburn, a rich red so unusual in a young child. Her eyes were large as they stared at him unafraid. They were the most remarkable shade of green, like sea foam, pale yet striking.

He jerked his hand back as if he had gotten too close to a flame. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He could *see color*. He could see the flaming color of her hair, the extraordinary color of her eyes. *Could this child be his...life mate?* He stared at the mother, her rich chocolate hair framing her heart-shaped face and emphasizing the pale blue eyes gazing back at him knowingly.

Adelaide looked at her child and almost inaudibly spoke to her.

"My precious little one, you know that I will always love you."

"Yes, Momma." Richelle sniffled.

"You remember what I taught you about the Goddess?"

Richelle nodded.

"You must have faith in her, in your destiny. You remember what I told you, what your name means?"

Richelle nodded again. "It means *brave one*." She sniffled again, wiping the tears from her face with her sleeve.

"You must be brave now." Adelaide turned her head and began to cough hard as some blood trickled from her mouth, her face grimacing at the pain from her midsection. She turned back to Richelle and smiled. She took Richelle's hand and placed it in Valya's outstretched palm, squeezing it lightly and looking into his eyes.

"She is yours now. As she was meant to be. Protect her. Love her."

He bowed his head, humbled by the faith and trust she held for him as she bestowed her only child, the daughter she was dying for, into his care. When he raised his head to tell her he would always protect her child, her eyes were closed as if she had fallen asleep. He listened intently to hear a breath or a faint heartbeat, but it was too late. She was gone.

He stared at Adelaide's face incredulously. In spite of the trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth she looked so peaceful, so serene. He used the pad of his thumb to wipe away all traces of the offensive color from her face...*the color from her face*. He was dumbstruck. Color had returned to his world. He had found his life mate. *She is nothing more than a mere child*, he thought, amazed.

Looking away from the mother, he gazed down at the child, at Richelle. She was looking up at him, her lower lip slightly trembling. He looked at her tiny hand lying in his palm—her hand was so delicate and frail. Yet when he looked back to her face, her eyes held no fear. Yes, her eyes were large as she gazed up at him, but he was a stranger to her and massive in comparison to her diminutive frame. He was a mountain, and he would move mountains to keep her safe. His life mate. His.

"My momma is gone." It wasn't a question, more a statement of fact, a statement that seemed so grown-up from such a small child.

"Yes," he curtly replied, harsher than he should have, but he had no experience in dealing with a child. He didn't want to frighten her, but nothing in his centuries of walking the earth had prepared him for this. She didn't flinch. She simply stared at him as children do when they are fascinated, like watching a praying mantis walking on a leaf.

"She called you Guardian."

"Yes."

"Do I go with you now?"

"Yes," he replied again. He didn't have the words to comfort her. He didn't have the strength. He was feeling very tired. He looked toward the horizon and saw the sky lightening with the approaching dawn. Turning back to Richelle, he watched her flaming hair fall forward as she kissed her mother's cheek softly, like a fairy lights a kiss upon a child's cheek.

"I love you, Momma," she whispered softly as she stood and went to Valya, a single tear rolling down her cherubic cheek. He effortlessly picked her up. Her arms naturally curled around his neck as she buried her face in

his shoulder, and with a whimpered sigh, she quickly fell asleep. He wrapped his duster around her to warm her against the early morning chill with his back to the rising sun.

He didn't pick up the suitcase that lay open on the ground, the contents scattered about. He didn't feel any remorse at leaving the body of the dead man on the ground. He had paid for his crimes with his life and sacrificed his immortal soul. But the feelings he felt at the death of Richelle's mother as he gazed at her lying on the hard pavement ran the gamut from sorrow and regret to pride and humility.

Sorrow at the loss of such a powerful life spirit so young and before her time.

Regret at not having the time to know that wondrous spirit.

Pride at the unselfish sacrifice of her life for that of her child.

Humility at the trust she had placed in him by giving him her only child.

He could do nothing for her, but she had done everything for him. He could see color. He could feel emotions. She was the mother of his life mate and all he could do was leave her lifeless body behind for the police to find. It seemed so cold and heartless. He felt Richelle tighten her grip around him as she snuggled into the crook of his neck.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tighter into his frame, his duster wrapped protectively around her. She was a wisp of a child, no heavier than a baby bird, yet she had the strength to make him fall to his knees, willing to be subservient to her safety, willing to move mountains if that would make her happy. His heart was full and ready to burst. She was here, the part that would make him whole.

His long wait was not completely over. She was still a child, but girls grow up to be women. He had found his future life mate. The fates had smiled upon him and decided that his tapestry would become complete with the thread of life that he held in his arms. He would need to be patient a bit longer. He would have to wait until she was a woman to come to her. Until then he would continue his ways as a Guardian. He would defend the innocent and punish the evil.

Carefully, he tucked his precious passenger against his body and took to the sky. He inhaled her scent and absorbed the memory of it into his reborn soul. She needed a new home. She couldn't be with him. Not yet. Not until she was ready. Until then, she must be protected, kept safe. She would not

be safe if she stayed with him. He needed to take her somewhere where she would be sheltered and grow up healthy and happy. He would be close so he could watch over her as she grew until he could come to her as a man.

He knew where she should be, but not tonight. The dawn was coming too quickly. He needed to go to ground to replenish his depleted energy. He would take Richelle with him tonight. When he rose with the night, he would take her to her new home, someplace far from the city where the old priest could not find her. Someplace wonderful. Someplace beautiful to help her forget the ugliness she had seen in her young life. She would grow up happy and loved.

He would watch over her, always near when she needed him. When she was ready, a woman, he would come back and make her his forever.

\* \* \* \*

Richelle rubbed her eyes as she turned in the bed and pulled the comforter away from her face. There were sheers on the window, but she could tell that it was early evening as the sun was just sinking below the horizon. She saw the first evening star appearing in the dusky sky as if winking to her, ensuring her that everything was going to be all right.

She looked about the stark room. There was very little in furnishings—the bed where she was sleeping and a nightstand with a wind-up alarm clock and a kerosene lamp. On the wall across from the bed was a dresser with a round mirror. There were a few accessories that were indigenous to a young girl's room—a small musical jewelry box, an antique silver vanity set with hand mirror, brush and comb, and a bottle of hand lotion.

In the corner was a cane-back rocker with a quilt folded up and draped over the back. More importantly, Molly was sitting on the seat of the rocker. Molly was her stuffed wolf. It was a special gift from her momma. They had moved to Detroit just before Christmas and Momma had not found a job yet. As a surprise, Momma had taken her to the zoo. Before they left, Momma had made a donation to the zoo by adopting a wolf. Richelle named her wolf Molly after her best friend she had left behind before moving to Detroit.

Just as she had left Molly behind when Momma woke her up and hurried them out of the house.

Before the bad men caught them.



Before Momma went away.

Before the man with the dark hair carried her away.

She wanted to cry. She didn't know how Molly got here, but she got out of bed to grab her and hug her to her chest. She buried her face in Molly's soft gray-white fur and inhaled. She smelled like Momma.

A soft tap on the door preceded the slow opening, and a kindly old man entered the room. He was big with white hair and a white beard in direct contrast to the giant man with dark hair and eyes and smooth face who had held her after Momma died. Richelle gazed at the man warily, hiding a portion of her face behind Molly, wishing her momma was here. Or at least the giant man who held her after Momma died. The man smiled at her, looking like the kindly grandfather from *Heidi*. Richelle looked up at him and tried to smile but couldn't quite manage it. He understood.

"You shouldna be outta bed, little missy. 'Tis a bit nippy tonight. I didna have time to chop wood for a fire." She giggled at his accent and gave him a coquettish smile. His strong baritone lilted through the room and wrapped around her like a warm blanket.

"Where am I?" she asked shyly.

He smiled warmly. "This is me home. 'Tis but a wee cabin in the mountains, but it is verra warm and big enough for a wee bairn like ye."

"What's your name?"

"Duncan. And yer name is Richelle."

Her eyes grew wide, and she smiled. "How did you know?"

"Valya told me."

"Who's Valya?"

\* \* \* \*

Duncan walked over and picked her up off the floor so her feet wouldn't get cold and carried her back to bed, tucking her in.

"Valya, the Guardian. He was the man who brought ye to me home. He is me good friend."

Richelle settled back into the pillow but was smiling brightly.

"I know the Guardian. Momma told me about him. When she died, she put my hand in his. Where is he?"

Duncan took a deep breath. There was so much she didn't know about Valya and his people, so much that she needed to know, but not tonight. The years would stretch out before them and he would be able to teach her all that he knew, all that she needed to know. He had known Valya for a long time, since he came to Iron Mountain from his home in Scotland.

It was Valya who had helped him escape from his home in Scotland. Duncan had become a Vampyre hunter when one had taken his beloved wife. The first thing he had done was kill the very Vampyre who had murdered her. However, it was too late to save his wife, as she had taken her first blood victim. Duncan had no choice but to save her soul and drive a stake through her heart as she slept. Since that fateful day when he had to destroy his love, he had dedicated his life to fighting evil.

Duncan had sent many a Vampyre to the fiery hell they deserved. His last battle in Scotland was against three Vampyres who had joined forces to find and destroy him. Duncan was losing until Valya arrived. Valya had been drawn to Scotland by the combined energies of the Vampyres. The final battle had been intense, and Duncan was critically wounded. Valya brought him to Iron Mountain, Michigan, to nurse him back to health. Later when he had recovered, Duncan stayed on Iron Mountain as it reminded him of his beloved highlands.

Duncan's home became a sanctuary for Valya. While he never returned to Vampyre hunting, Duncan helped Valya in many other ways. He was a confidante, a doctor, a researcher, a teacher, and now a nursemaid. Valya had brought the small child to him earlier this evening after taking her to ground with him. They slept the entire day in Valya's cavern home and yet he could still see the need for sleep in her eyes. She had been through much and needed her rest.

Tonight was not the night to talk to her about the Immortal race. Or to tell her why her mother had died. Or to tell her of her destiny with Valya. There would be more than enough time to help her understand. Valya would keep his distance and watch Richelle from afar. He would come back one day, and then together, they would fight the Evil One, the most ancient of all Vampyres. This was the most important job he had ever held in his life, protecting Valya's life mate.

"Valya had to leave. He has a verra important job."

"Will he come back soon?" she asked with earnest childlike innocence.

“One day he will, little missy. Until then, ye will be safe with me. The men who took yer mother away will not find ye here.”

A fat tear pooled in her eye as she clutched Molly closer to her heart, inhaling the scent of her mother.

“My momma is really gone.”

His heart clutched at the pain in her trembling voice. So young to have suffered so much.

“Aye, little missy. She lives with the Goddess now.”

“You know about the Goddess?”

“Aye, I know of her. I know of yer family. And I know of Valya. And I will tell ye all I know. But tonight, tonight ye must get yer rest.” He pulled the comforter up under her chin and bundled her safe and warm. “I have a verra long time to teach ye about yer destiny, what the Goddess has fated for ye. But ye have a verra little time this short night to sleep.”

Richelle nodded and curled into a fetal position, holding Molly close to her heart. In the blink of an eye, she had fallen back asleep, as soundly as if she had never been awake. Duncan reached out and smoothed the hair away from her face. An exquisite beauty for such a young child, but her hair was the most striking feature. It held two tones; blond on top while the length of it was a vibrant red. The first thing he planned to do was change the color of her hair to hide her identity. Later, after she had learned how to use her powers to protect herself she could wear her hair naturally.

Duncan stood and closed the drapes over the sheered windows. Come the morning, the sun’s rays would not wake her. She could sleep late. Tomorrow they would get to know each other; he would show her around her new home and walk for a while in the mountains. Then, her education would begin.

\* \* \* \*

Valya came to Iron Mountain when he could, to see Richelle and secretly observe her growing up in love and in the safety of the mountains. Each year at her birthday, when the moon was full, he would come and silently watch her from the window. Duncan would see, winking and offering a silent invitation to come in and join them. He always refused. He

would only visit her in the form of a wolf, ironically, to avoid the bestial nature inbred in Immortal males.

When he came to her, he felt her emotions, her need for something to fill the emptiness within her. He offered her peace and protection, but never as Valya the Guardian. She seemed more at ease with the animals of the forest. He rarely found her at the cabin. She was usually walking in the mountains when he felt her mind calling out to him. He would find her sitting in the meadow, the animals of the forest coming out of hiding to sit with her, keeping her company. They sat together in peace. The deer, rabbit, skunk, owl, even a gray timber wolf sitting peacefully together basking in the warm glow of early evening as the moon was beginning to rise.

He remembered vividly the last time he saw her.

She was beautiful, a picture of serenity surrounded by the beasts of nature. The sun struck her hair, with its unusual coloring. He remembered her hair as two-toned—blond and auburn—but she hid her hair of fire behind brunette coloring, rich and chocolaty like her mother's had been. She cocked her head to the side as if in conversation with the fawn that sat beside her. He caught a glimpse of her eyes, still the pale sea foam green from her youth that had captivated his heart.

A soft breeze wafted around her, catching the scent that was uniquely her. His nostrils flared as her scent permeated his mind, sending him reminiscing to when he carried her in his arms to his cavern home and kept her with him until night had fallen and he could bring her safely to Duncan and this mountain oasis. She was still a child, not ready to become his life mate. He transformed himself into the large timber wolf and sauntered into the meadow to sit beside her. The other creatures eyed him warily, recognizing the man within, but moved aside as he entered the clearing to have a seat beside Richelle. She looked over and placed her hand upon his head, petting him lightly and crooning to him.

"Well now, where did you come from?" She opened her mind, but he gave her no response as usual. The silver-gray beast just rubbed his head against her thigh, encouraging her to stroke along his back. He tried to be content in just being beside her. She was taken aback. Never before had she run across a beast who she could not reach with her mind, whose thoughts she could not read.

Valya was very careful to shield his thoughts from her. He had heard her in his mind, had felt her probing to communicate. Her openness had almost broken down the walls he had built around his heart waiting for her, waiting until she became a woman. Even now, resisting her pure aroma was challenging. Its scent was changing. Her virgin's blood flowed with the start of her menstrual cycle. She was becoming a woman, his woman. For the present, she was nothing more than a mere child, innocent, chaste, and unaware of all the danger the world held for her.

Her hand drifted to his chest. She began to rake her nails through his soft fur to reach his skin. It tingled where her fingers touched him. No longer able to sit idly by her side, he ran to the woods, the distance doing little to abate the call of her blood. He stopped at the edge and looked back to Richelle, standing on her feet and reaching out toward him.

She called after him, but he quickly trotted into the forest. He could feel her confusion, her vexation at not being able to talk to him. He turned away, vowing not to return until she had reached her twenty-first birthday. By then, Duncan could teach Richelle what she needed to know about Immortals and Vampyres and the true reason behind her mother's death. Duncan and Valya had agreed to tell Richelle when she graduated and then Duncan would teach her the rest.

Years had passed since then. He continued to serve as Guardian, staying far from Iron Mountain, but this night, he could feel there was something wrong with the fabric of fate. He arose from his cavern home and lifted his head to the sky. The scent of death was carried on the night wind. That was not new to him since, as a Guardian, it was his duty to seek out this evil and to protect the innocent. Tonight, the moon had turned to blood and there was a force that was calling him, drawing him from the city.

In a flash he knew where he needed to be—with Richelle.

He took to the sky, and in a blink of an eye, he was at Duncan's cabin. Or what was left of it. From the look of things, there must have been one hell of a battle. The repugnant smell of blood and rotting flesh was akin to the war he had fought centuries before. Filled with rage and disgust, he searched for Richelle.

Valya scanned the clearing. The carcasses of several wolves, two mountain lions, and a black bear were decaying, their throats ripped out and gaping wounds at their sides. The ground was torn asunder, the sod and

plants uprooted and thrown about. His eyes scanned the landscape for any sign of movement. There was a peculiar, creepy silence unnerving him, and the door had been left wide open. Stepping through, he looked about to find no one there.

Where was Duncan? And where was Richelle? He returned to the clearing and sniffed the air and the ground for any trace of Duncan or Richelle. He found Duncan's. It was far away.

Valya transformed into the wolf and began the chase, following Duncan's scent to a river three miles from the cabin where he lay dying. Transforming as he approached, Valya crouched down on one knee to turn Duncan's limp body over. Duncan was clinging to life, the flame within him slowly dying, yet he smiled in genuine happiness.

"It is good to see ye, me friend. I dinna want to leave this world without saying farewell."

"Save your strength, Duncan. I will take you back and heal you." He leaned over to pick him up, but Duncan shook his head and gurgled.

"No. I dinna want to be healed."

Valya stared at him in confusion. Duncan had a zest for life and met every challenge head-on. He had never known him to give up so easily.

"Dinna look so unhappy, my old friend. It has been a long time since I have seen my beloved Fiona. She was me one true love. Now I go join her."

Fiona, Duncan's wife, had left this life nearly fifty years ago, but had never left Duncan's thoughts or his heart. Valya nodded in understanding, knowing the near agony he had endured being apart from his life mate. And a new fear gripped at his racing heart.

"Where is Richelle?"

"Gone." Duncan began to cough furiously as Valya stopped breathing at the one word before Duncan could continue. "She's gone. She left a few days ago after I told her about her mother, how and why she was murdered."

"Why did you let her go?"

"I couldna stop her."

She must have been so frightened, to take off when she had nowhere to go, Valya thought, but she must have gone somewhere. "Where did she go?"

Duncan's smile fell.

"I dinna know. She wouldna tell me. She went to the bank, withdrew the money left by her mother, and left."

“You should have sent word to me.”

Duncan nodded.

Valya felt as if he were being compressed in a vise. Every muscle in his body constricted, and he couldn't get enough air into his lungs. He should have been here. He should have come to her after Richelle graduated. Then he could have been here to protect them, and Richelle would not have run in fear and Duncan would not be lying in a pool of blood, dying.

“I should have been here,” Valya stated.

“Dinna berate yourself, lad. The Fates have made their decision. There is nothin' to be done when they select yer thread.”

Duncan mutely nodded. The Fates were impartial and immovable. Valya also knew that destiny could be changed by turning a different corner, by going left instead of right. Richelle had changed her destiny by leaving. Duncan started coughing again as Valya held his head up trying to ease his discomfort, his pain. He wished there was more he could do for him.

“Lissen carefully, me lad. Richelle left before I could tell her everything aboot you, about the Immortals, and the Vampyres. She left because she dinna wanna put me in danger. Do ye understand what I'm sayin'?”

Valya shook his head.

“She dinna know the true danger. She dinna know what her true destiny is. Ye must find her quickly.”

“Do the Vampyres know where she is?”

“Vampyres?” Duncan questioned with his brow furrowed. “’Twas not Vampyres that came here. ’Twas the old priest with His Believers. ’Twas them who came here lookin' for the lass. The old priest went mad when he couldna find her here. He destroyed the cabin. He killed her beloved animals that were protectin' her home.”

Valya's fear was minimally dispelled. He thanked the Gods that it wasn't Vampyres who were coming for Richelle. She would have no defense against them alone, without him. While the old priest was relentless in his pursuit of Richelle, Valya had hidden her well. However, the old priest wouldn't stop searching for Richelle, and Valya would not rest until Richelle was safely with him as his mate.

“She wouldna tell me where she was goin'. She left a note. She wrote she would be fine and she dinna want me to come lookin' for her. She dinna want me to worry. As if her bein' away would stop me from worryin'.” He

scoffed, laughing before a fit of coughing over took him, leaving him wheezing in its wake. He grasped at Valya's jacket, pulling himself up, his voice raspy but deathly calm in his request.

"Find her, Valya. I've loved that wee lass since you brought her here to me home. I couldna love her less if she were me own daughter. Find her, Valya. Protect her." He coughed again, the last of his breath burbling from his throat. With a final gasp, he fell back as death claimed his soul.

Valya reverently laid his friend gently on the ground. He offered up a silent prayer to the Gods that Duncan find peace in the arms of his gentle wife, who had waited so long for him to join her. He hung his head. Twice now he had been too late to save the life of an innocent protecting Richelle. Twice the life of his mate had been placed in his hands and twice he had failed.

He threw his head back and howled his anguish into the night. The earth trembled at his rage. He would find Richelle. Never again would she have to run and hide in fear. He would find her and claim her as his mate. Then she would never need to fear anything ever again. He would find her. He would not fail again.



## Chapter 1

Richelle Sommers shifted uncomfortably in her airplane seat, rubbing her temples with her fingertips to stop the incessant throbbing that had persisted since taking off.

It was more than the claustrophobic sensation of too many people pressed together like sardines in a can.

It was more than the stench emanating from the poor disabled man, sitting in his wheelchair at the head of the aisle, who had urinated on himself during the flight.

It was more than the unwanted attention she was receiving from the businessman seated next to her and his indecent proposal for drinks, and more, when they landed.

She closed her eyes as she leaned her head against the window. She tried to block out the jumbled thoughts of those around her. Faceless voices filled her mind with a flurry of meaningless claptrap that clouded her mind with the incessant ringing of white noise...

*I can still make dinner by seven as long as the plane lands on schedule.*

*I can't believe Aunt Martha married that man. Can't she see he's only after her for her money?*

*I'll simply tell her that we can't see each other anymore, that we're just not right for each other.*

*Damn that stewardess is hot. I wouldn't mind joining the mile-high club with her.*

*I should have gotten that promotion. That place wouldn't run if it weren't for me spending every weekend in the office.*

Richelle had hoped that taking a red-eye flight non-stop from Tampa to Detroit would be a quiet trip. She usually avoided large groups, knowing full well she wouldn't be able to silence the chaotic ramblings and noise she sensed from the minds of others. But there were times when there was

absolutely no choice but to endure the inexpressible pain, like now, as she was returning home. Especially when some thoughts were too close for comfort.

Like the lewd interest directed her way by that businessman.

She didn't have to look at him to know he was watching her every move. She could feel the heat of his gaze and lust in his heart every time she adjusted her seating position to move away from him. And each time he would invade her space a little more. Earlier during the flight, he had tried to make conversation with her, complimenting her on her eyes, her hair, her perfume, bragging about his business conquests, trying to convince her to join him for dinner and, to put his crude invitation delicately, spend the rest of the evening with him.

His seemingly sincere approach was belied by his unspoken and crass thoughts about her looks, and he could do nothing to hide the truth behind his *business conquests*. They were more like exercises in corporate espionage and sabotage. And as he tried to lure her into his web under the pretense of drinks, he made no mention of the wife and two children he left behind in Tampa visiting her mother to fly back to his office to scam a loan from one of his company's lenders.

She smiled politely and declined, but he saw her refusal as a challenge. He became aggressive, ruder in his implications and more vulgar with his remarks. He even became so bold as to lean over to whisper a crude intimation while his hand drifted over her breast, giving it a callous squeeze. Her skin burned as if frostbit by the winter wind, and it felt as if sharp icicles were driven into her brain.

She turned away from him as much as she could, crossing her arms across her chest and feigning sleep, trying to protect herself. Any other woman would have called for the attendant, but Richelle did what she could not to draw attention to herself. She had learned it was easier to run and hide than it was to stand and fight. While she guarded her body against his touch, her mind wasn't as he eyed her form, letting his imagination run wild. Richelle suppressed a shudder as she saw every bawdy act he fantasized.

Her experience with men had been very limited, both because she was uncomfortable around people in general, being a shy and private person, and because a simple touch could cause her excruciating pain physically as well as mentally. So his improper and offensive machinations coupled with his

hand upon her breast left her in dire need of an escape. And there was none to be had. Groaning, Richelle focused her mind. She tried to clear away the unsolicited interest and all the random thoughts echoing in her head from those around her. In doing so, she was startled by the spoken words that resounded in her ears.

“Are you all right, miss?”

She jerked and turned to see the flight attendant leaning over her annoying suitor. His gaze ineptly drifted to the attendant’s ample chest, temporarily diverting his attention away from her. His lascivious thoughts stabbed into her mind as the stewardess repeated the question.

“Are you all right, miss? Can I get you anything?”

“No, I’m fine, thank you,” she croaked, her voice betraying her parched throat.

“It would be no problem, miss,” she said brightly despite the glaring look she threw at the male passenger. “I’ll bring you some water.”

“No, really, I don’t want to be a bother.”

The attendant beamed warmly at her.

“It’s no bother. As a matter of fact, you look a bit pale. Are you feeling all right?”

“No, really...I’m...”

“I think we should move you up front...until you feel better.”

Richelle cringed as the passenger next to her began to raise a fuss over the attendant’s comment.

“If you’re upgrading seats, lady,” the repugnant man interrupted, “then I should be moved. After all, it was your airline’s fault my flight was cancelled and left me stuck in coach when I had a first-class ticket.”

“As I recall, *sir*, your flight was not canceled but delayed. You opted to take this flight because it was non-stop rather than take another flight that would require a transfer in Atlanta. And you didn’t have a first-class ticket, it was business class.”

He began to fidget in his seat as his gaze darted about. His embarrassment at being caught in a white lie to get his way had made his face turn beet red and perspiration bead in his brow as the stewardess continued her gentle, but firm admonishment.

“I am simply moving the young lady up front as she looks ill. I certainly wouldn’t want her to get sick and accidentally get your suit dirty...*sir*.”

He cleared his throat and settled back into his seat without another word as the attendant assisted Richelle to the front and closed the drapes behind her. Richelle looked about at several other passengers traveling first-class. A few were asleep, one was listening to music on the headset, three were reading, and two looked like they were working. Not one had so much as raised their head to look at her as the flight attendant led her to her seat and helped her get settled. That suited her fine.

"Thank you..." Richelle murmured quietly, giving the attendant a soft smile while trying to find a name tag.

"Joanna," the attendant finished, smiling warmly.

"Richelle," she said.

"It looked like you needed some help."

"I did," Richelle admitted. "I don't do much traveling...he seemed fine at first, but then...well, then he...and I didn't know how to tell him..."

Joanna patted Richelle's hand and gave her a reassuring smile.

"At least now, you can try and get some rest without being harassed." Joanna reached into the overhead to pull down a blanket and pillow. Handing them to Richelle, she flipped the overhead light switch off while Richelle settled back in her seat, unfolding the blanket on her lap.

"Thank you again, Joanna," she said as the attendant went back to her duties. Placing the pillow behind her head and tucking the blanket under her chin, she settled into her seat, the pounding in her head subsiding to merely a dull ache. She closed her eyes, trying to relax as she blocked out the murmuring white noise of those around her. *This is why I liked living alone in the mountains*, she thought wretchedly. She didn't know what to expect when she returned to her mountain home after so long. Duncan was gone. She wouldn't be returning home at all except for the notification of a trust fund Duncan had left for her. She could collect it. Everything from her childhood days, such as they were, had long been left behind. All she had left from that time were memories, stretching back to the death of her mother.

Memories of Duncan tucking her in at night and telling her stories about a magical race called the Immortals.

Memories of spending her time walking in the mountains, sitting in the meadow with her studies, and conversing with her animal friends.

And memories of a dark and handsome man who took her to Duncan the night her mother died. Her Guardian.

As a child, when she felt scared or alone, she would wish her Guardian would come and protect her. But he never came. Only a strange and sad silver-gray wolf would come. And those feelings would disappear. She would try to speak with her wolf, reach out and try to touch his mind, but they never communicated. He was a blank slate. But he was a true companion, and she spent much of her time in his company. And then he was gone, probably poached by some hunter.

She never saw him again except in her dreams. He would come to her almost every night in her dreams. He never interacted with her—he just stood there, watching her.

Those dreams stopped when she left Iron Mountain to attend the University of Florida's veterinary program. Now, many years later having been given the opportunity to return home, she accepted. She just hoped it wasn't a mistake.

\* \* \* \*

Valya exploded from his balcony, bursting into the evening sky and spreading his arms wide, his chest expanding as he inhaled the sweetness of the night air.

There was power he could feel that wouldn't allow him to stay motionless or silent, blending in with the night as stealthily as a panther lies in wait for his prey. The commanding force compelled him to shriek into the night, expelling his energy in search of...in search of something. But he wasn't quite sure for what. He had only felt this way once before...just once.

His huge body stilled, his figure illuminated against the golden hue of the full moon. He rose to ride the night winds, carrying him higher into the night sky, where he could reach out and touch the stars as they appeared. He stretched his arms out, his fingertips opening to accept the celestial blessings into his grasp. There had only been one other time in all the centuries he had walked the earth when he had felt this way...and his heart sang with the joy of the thought.

She had returned.

Richelle.

He could feel her presence as surely as he could feel the night breeze caressing his face as tenderly as a lover. As surely as the fading colors began to regain their vivid hues after the ten long years he had searched for her, he knew she was coming. He closed his eyes and opened his consciousness, seeking the spark of life and light that was uniquely her. He needed to find her.

He needed her.

He wanted her.

So much time had gone by. So many nights he hunted the streets searching for some clue of where she might be. And then he would return to his lair, to lie alone, his dreams filled with images of his touching her, kissing her, making love with her only to awaken to another night, abandoned and alone, to fulfill his duty as Guardian. He roamed the deserted streets except for those he encountered with evil on their minds.

His life was empty without her soul touching his. The joy he had found was suddenly taken from him. Despondent without his life mate to light the way through a gray and emotionless world, he contemplated ending his wretched existence.

But then a glimmer of hope would shine through the darkness. She was alive somewhere. If he faced the dawn, she would be left alone to face the same empty, desolate, lonely world. She would be alone to face the demons of her world, and of his. She would have no Guardian to save her from the old priest or the Evil One.

For her...Richelle...he went on, searching and praying to the Gods he'd find her and bring her home.

And now she had returned.

Finally, he would claim her as his mate.

And he made a solemn vow to the Moon Goddess as he reached out into the night to touch Richelle's essence, to find her. *Never, never again will we be apart. She is the heart that will mend my broken soul. She is my better half. She holds the best part of me. And I will never let her go again.*

\* \* \* \*

Richelle didn't get much sleep. During the long flight, she was awakened several times by the unspoken thoughts of the other travelers. They didn't mean to wake her with their innocent thoughts. They weren't even aware that she heard their silent musings she tried to block unsuccessfully from her mind. She missed her quiet home.

She had lived alone in a quiet retirement community in Florida while she finished her college education. She tried living on campus for a short time, trying to meet people her own age, but it was no use. She couldn't shut their thoughts out of her mind, and their immature, almost adolescent thoughts and feelings bordered on pain. She stayed as long as she could but found peace of mind in the friendship she had with an elderly woman, Alma Douglas.

She reminded Richelle so much of Duncan—his spirit, his joy, his humor—it was as if it had all come back to life for her. She had met Alma strictly by chance at a grocery store and immediately felt at ease with her. They spoke for hours, going to a local diner for some coffee. After she had listened to Richelle talk about how difficult it was for her to live on campus, she offered her a room in her own home. Richelle had no reservations about accepting the generous offer and moved in the next day with her meager possessions.

*Alma was sent by the Goddess*, Richelle surmised when three days later the police contacted her about Duncan's death. Having been raised in the Wicca faith, she strongly believed in Karma, destiny. She was destined to lose Duncan just as Alma was sent to stand beside her at her time of loss. And she felt the loss of Duncan keenly, even more so than the death of her mother.

She was so young when she lost her mother that she held only vague memories of their time together. It was Duncan who had raised her and loved her and what did she do? She left him alone. She could have gone to a college near their mountain home. She could have gone to any college in Michigan. But she left. No, that wasn't quite true—she ran away.

She had earned several scholarships for college, including one in Florida. She could have stayed in Michigan. She had earned enough funding that she could have stayed and attended Northern. She could have completed her degree in veterinary medicine at Michigan State. But more and more she

began feeling uneasy and unnerved, like an animal being hunted, alert to every sound, every smell.

And then there were the dreams.

She dreamed of the night her mother was murdered. She remembered the priest who had come after her, unrelenting and unwilling to let her go. She remembered how her mother had sacrificed her life for hers and how her spirit had faded away as she held onto her. But mostly, she remembered...*him*.

He was such an imposing man, his massive size like a mountain. She remembered how he had lifted her from her mother and carried her in his arms. She remembered how safe she felt as he held her. And she remembered his eyes, so dark, intense, and soulful as if he had seen a thousand worlds and held the memory of each in his eyes.

And then that mysterious, massive, soulful stranger spoke to her. More than spoke to her. It seemed he was beckoning to her, drawing her to him. He warned her to beware of the old priest and his followers. He crooned soft, soothing words to calm her fears.

The dream terrified her...and excited her.

When she tried to explain it to Duncan, he became fearful, turning white as the snow on the mountain itself. It was then that he tried to tell her of things he had tried to teach her before and failed. He spoke for the first time of the history of her family in the Carpathian Mountains and how they escaped to America. He spoke of the night that her mother had died as they tried to escape and hide from those who were seeking her family. He told her of cults and Vampyres, of witches...and Valya.

Valya. That was his name. Valya. Her Guardian.

She was a child when she clung to his neck as he carried her from her mother's side. As she grew, she had visions of Valya coming to her. He told her of her mother, how she came to live with Duncan, and his people on the Carpathian Mountains. His voice was melodically hypnotic.

He enticed her.

He enthralled her.

He frightened her—it all frightened and overwhelmed her.

It was too much to take in at one time. She told Duncan of her visions. When he began to speak of the Immortals and their search for life mates, she couldn't bear any more. She ran out of the cabin into the mountains. She ran



to the den of her friends, the wolves who were waiting for her. They consoled her with their mournful cries, and she stroked their soft fur until she fell asleep. She felt safe with them as she did when she came to live with Duncan or when Valya held her in his arms.

No, she wouldn't think of Valya.

She would think of her animal friends, her dreams of going to college and being a veterinarian. When she returned home the next day, she packed her meager belongings, kissed Duncan on the cheek, and left. He didn't argue, didn't question her decision. He smiled sadly and hugged her.

*"Always trust yer heart"* were the last words to her before she left for Florida. She never wrote him, never contacted him. She wrote several letters, but then something would stop her from mailing them. Innocuous things, like misplacing the letter, or getting waylaid by classes, or when Alma got sick.

It was as if the Goddess were intervening; the Goddess stopped her from contacting Duncan, sent her Alma to comfort her as she grieved for her poor dear Duncan, and again when she sent the officials to her when Alma had passed away.

It took the Detroit police two years to find her to tell her of Duncan's death. The art of disappearing was as much ingrained into her being as breathing air. Moving after she completed her associate's degree, it took the lawyer another two years to find her to deliver her the news of the inheritance that Duncan had left her, not that she needed it.

She had money. She had money from her mother's family. Since Alma had no other relatives, she left all her money and possessions to Richelle. Then the lawyer came to her with the news of an inheritance from Duncan. She was grateful that her finances were so secure in off-shore accounts, although she felt melancholic about the circumstances behind her current stability.

Money she had. It was family she lacked and never did she feel it so intensely as when she boarded the plane to return home. She missed the mountains and she missed her wolves.

Finally, after so many years she was able to return home to help her beloved childhood companions. Doctor Frederic Samuels, eminent leader in veterinary medicine specializing in animal husbandry, was heading a field study on the timber wolves of the Upper Peninsula for the purpose of

repopulation of the species. And she had been accepted for his lead assistant. She couldn't believe it! The opportunity to give back to her friends, her family, for giving her childhood memories of joy and laughter instead of death and tears.

And the closer she got to home, the more intense her emotions became. She started having nightmares. They had diminished while she was away at school but returned once she decided to return home. They grew in strength as did her happy dreams.

Dreams of home, the mountains, her wolves. And of Valya.

Valya, who was a child's knight in shining armor one terrible night.

Valya, who she knew only from her dreams.

She wanted to see him. Her emotions churned at how much she wanted to find him. She didn't know why, but she placed her hopes in the hands of the Goddess to show her the way.

She lay her head back against the seat, trying to clear her mind as the dull ache began to subside in the calmer surroundings. She closed her eyes and tried to get a little sleep in what time there was before the plane landed. She had to find a way to deal with the emotions she tried to bury before her dreams and visions drove her insane.

\* \* \* \*

Valya casually walked through the airport. He didn't know exactly which way he was heading, which flight she was on, or what terminal she was in, but he didn't have to. He could feel her presence. It was drawing him like a moth to a flame, and he went willingly. The world exploded around him in starbursts of light and color. The colors that had begun to fade over the past ten years became bold and stark again.

She was near. He could feel faint sensations of emotions that had long since been dead to him. He could barely sense the emotional turmoil she was feeling—loss, regret, pain, and loneliness. Each pang tore into what was left of his soul. He would find her and together they would mend the wounds that cut so deeply in each of them. She would fill the emptiness that clawed within him, and he would take away all the pain and never let her be hurt again. He would give her happiness and joy.

This time she would belong to him and he would never let her go.

He picked up his pace, taking no heed of the mortals he passed as he opened his mind to his surroundings, seeking out Richelle's life force. The feelings were faint. She was so near. He wouldn't lose her this time. The darkness closed in around him. The color he once saw when he held Richelle as a child had all but faded. He caught only glimpses of red and gold, the same colors as in her hair.

Compassion and empathy, happiness and love, all the noble emotions, had ebbed from his soul until the only emotion he felt was anger. His fury built inside him to the point where he had almost lost control. He had almost killed an innocent mortal who had happened to cross his path as he meted out justice to a Vampyre and two of his minions. To kill an innocent was unforgivable. Unpardonable.

Death was decreed by The Council.

But more than that, it went against everything the Guardians upheld. Guardians did not kill innocents. The Council would not have to condemn him and send the Lawgivers to protect the Immortal Race by destroying him. If he had lost so much of his soul that he could harm those he had vowed to protect, then he would willingly meet the rising sun and end his existence. Without his life mate, he would always be half, never whole. Never complete.

Feeling the void desperate to be filled, his mind screamed out.

"Richelle, where are you?"

Her essence was fading. She was so close but he could feel her spirit walking away from him. The glimmer of hope that had sustained him these past years was diminishing like the evening stars as the dawn approached. Frantically, he opened his mind and soul. He couldn't lose her! He wouldn't lose her! He tried to ease his mind. He needed to think. Then it came to him.

There would only be one place that Richelle would return to. Home to the mountains. That is where he would find her. Home.

\* \* \* \*

It had been a long time since she had been to the mountains, but they still felt like home to her. From the moment she stepped into the small cabin, she felt the same warmth and love that she knew as a child. She could feel the touch of Duncan's hand as he calmed her fears on stormy nights.

She could hear his voice as he churlishly admonished her when she did something wrong. And she could feel his love cocooning around her, making her feel wanted, safe, and protected.

Richelle wiped the solitary tear that slipped from the corner of her eye. Duncan had given her so much. He had taught her so much. He had died for her. And what did she do for him? She never so much as told him that she loved him. She didn't even return after she was told of his death.

It was obvious that nothing had been touched since Duncan's death. While the home had been placed in trust with Father Harrison, Duncan's longtime friend, to handle the taxes and finances, little had been done to maintain the condition of her childhood home. There were dust and cobwebs throughout the entire cabin as she walked into Duncan's bedroom.

Duncan's meager possessions were still where they always were. His pipe was sitting near the canister of the tobacco on the nightstand next to his bed. She lifted the lid and saw it still held a small amount of tobacco. The scent wafted to her nose, stale but still rich and woodsy. She picked up and lovingly cradled the pipe. She remembered how he would sit in thought in front of the fireplace as the smoke curled around his head, creating fuzzy halos.

She placed the pipe down and turned toward his closet. Opening the door, she found his clothes hanging as they always did. She moved the hangers as she gazed at each shirt—the crisp white linen that he wore on Sundays, the blue chambray that he had purchased on their last visit to Marquette, his brown suede that reminded her of doeskin when she leaned her cheek on his shoulder, and his red flannel, so old that it had taken on a life of its own with all the mending she had done on it. She buried her face in the faded cotton and could sense, almost smell, Duncan after all these years.

She couldn't bear it any longer. All the emotions that she had hidden had escaped and were trying to destroy the brick wall she had built around her heart. She wiped the tears with the sleeve of Duncan's shirt. She needed to get control over her emotions—a walk through the meadow, to the mountains to see her animal friends. She had always been able to find comfort and companionship with the animals. She opened the door and stepped out into the night, eager to see her friends again.

\* \* \* \*

It had been a long time since Valya had been to the mountains, not since the night of Duncan's death. It was a painful reminder of how he had failed just as he had failed Richelle's mother, Adelaide, so many years ago. The night air filled him almost completely. The night was different in the mountains than it was in the city.

In the city, even in the middle of the night, there was always some type of activity. There were cars on the road, people still walking the streets, and people working in their offices. It held an iridescent illumination, the contemporary version of burning the midnight oil. Here in the mountains it was so quiet one could hear the gentlest breeze as it whistled through the pines.

One did not merely a part of the surroundings; it became a part of one—from feeling thunderstorms, raindrops like fingers drumming along the back, to thunder rumbling through the body and rattling the spine. Every living thing, every spirit, became more alive—the trees, the birds, the animals—exuding a strong life force that touched everyone and everything around them.

And then there was Richelle.

She was here. He could feel her everywhere.

She was in the cabin. He could sense her sorrow as she stood in her childhood home now that Duncan was gone. Her sorrow was profound and he wept for her. *He wept*—he could *feel* her sorrow, her pain, and he welcomed it.

It had been far too long since he had experienced any emotion that even the negative ones brought him joy. Richelle was here. She was his. And he would never let them feel pain again.

He shifted to wolf form to find her, following her scent as she ambled into the mountains. He remembered this path well. This was her path, the path he traveled with her as a wolf to her secret place in the meadow. When she was sad, or lonely, or angry, she would sit quietly for hours and talk with her animal friends to calm her anxieties. He picked up his pace as her scent grew stronger.

Finally, at the end of the path, he stopped.

He saw her, and she took his breath away.

Illuminated by the moonlight, she sat quietly with several animals from the forest. Two does were napping quietly by her side as she stroked a rabbit that was sitting in her lap. On the far side of the meadow, he saw a pack of wolves sitting and watching her, and on a stump three feet from her sat an owl, hooting into the night as she vigilantly surveyed the world around her. The ease with which she sat in the company of the beasts and the calmness radiating off her filled him with awe. Never had he seen anything as beautiful.

He sauntered into the meadow. The owl turned her head sharply to gaze at him intently. Just as quickly, the pack of wolves sprang to life to run over to where Richelle was sitting, forming a line of defense between him and Richelle. He opened his mind to speak with them. He saw no fury in their minds, only the need to protect Richelle.

"I am Valya, the Guardian. I have come for Richelle, my life mate. Have no fear, she is safe with me."

Their response was to growl and posture.

"I am Valya. Richelle is mine."

They growled some more, their fur ruffling about their necks. One large black wolf came up. The alpha.

Unspoken words coursed through Valya's mind. "Richelle has never mentioned a life mate. She is ours to protect."

"Nevertheless, she is mine," Valya growled.

"How do we know what you say is true? You could be the Vampyre seeking her again."

Valya growled louder. "I am Valya, the Guardian. I have come for my life mate. Move aside."

"Make me." The black wolf growled and lowered his head and tightened his haunches to launch himself at Valya. Valya did not want to destroy the big black wolf. He was only protecting Richelle, but nothing—man, immortal, or beast—would ever come between him and Richelle again. He bared his fangs as he readied himself for the attack, an attack that never came because of the sharp command that came from behind the black wolf.

"*Stop.*"

\* \* \* \*

Richelle turned and saw the great silver-gray wolf approaching her even though he was blocked by her pack. She stared in amazement. She couldn't believe her eyes. It couldn't be the same silver-gray from her youth. She smiled and stretched out her hand as she opened her mind, trying to touch his.

But she heard nothing and she felt nothing.

He was a paradox.

An enigma.

Just like the silver that was her constant companion.

While she was never able to read him, he always seemed to know when she needed him as her friend, confidante, protector, as her guardian.

Guardian. How ironic that she should think of this beast of nature in that way.

Valya, who haunted her dreams.

She had left the safety of her mountain home and tried to forget the sad events of her childhood. She even tried to forget her visions of the Guardian. But she couldn't forget. She couldn't forget his courage in rescuing her from the old priest nor his strength as he fought off several men. Yet in contrast, there was a gentleness as he cradled her with his body and carried her to safety. No matter how she tried, she couldn't forget his face, his rugged, handsome face.

In her dreams, he spoke to her, comforted her, and made the pain go away. His deep, rich baritone lulled her and soothed her nerves. It was as if he had wrapped his arms around and rocked her to the lullaby of his crooning. Even when the old priest came to her in her nightmares, Valya was there to protect her and make her feel safe. She didn't know how or why, but he came to her dreams just when she needed him most. He was her guardian.

Just like her silver wolf was her guardian. Chances were that this big fellow was a descendant of the wolf she'd known from her childhood. That would explain why she could not read him. But despite the fact she could not read his thoughts, she felt an amazing kinship with this beast.

\* \* \* \*

She reached out her hand again, and Valya sauntered over, walking past the black wolf and the rest of the pack. The other animals moved away into the forest as Valya took his place beside Richelle, sitting beside her close enough that she could stroke his fur. He leaned against her. He could feel her mind probing for his thoughts. He wanted to open his mind, explain all to her, but not at this moment. He found contentment sitting beside her as she stroked him. It had been a long time and now that she had returned to him, he would never let her go.

But now, he basked in the serenity of the moonlight with her hand upon his back as she gazed at the stars. He could feel an energy surge emanating from within and encompassing them both with its power. He was content in the moment just being with her. There would be enough time later to tell her the truth, to tell her of their future together, and that they were destined as life mates. But for now, he would enjoy this moment. Together, they both soon fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Richelle woke several hours later as the stars faded from the lightening sky. She had fallen asleep, her arm draped about his neck, her silvery wolf protector, as his warmth sheltered her from the chill of the night. The wolf pack lay several yards away, still asleep. There was no movement, no sound other than the trees swaying in the soft breeze. And yet, Valya felt there was something wrong. He felt eyes watching them.

Valya rose to his feet swiftly. He stared at Richelle. Her eyes scanned the meadow as warily as a rabbit. He opened his mind to the night but could not sense anything beyond Richelle's nervousness and alarm that someone or something was watching her. He stepped closer to her, trying to ease her tension. She smiled weakly and placed her trembling hand on his head. He looked about the meadow, trying to discern any shadows that did not belong on her mountain. Nothing. But he knew of Richelle's gifts inherited from her mother. If she sensed something, then there was something there.

He mentally called to the wolf pack. They became instantly alert and trotted over to Valya and Richelle, surrounding them as they scanned the edge of the forest, raising their snouts to the air, trying to catch the scent of anything that was out of place. He knew they could not sense a thing except



for Richelle's growing tension. A bead of perspiration dotted her brow as her eyes kept darting across the meadow. Making little noise, she slowly got to her feet. She kept her hand on Valya's neck as they started toward the trail.

Valya took the lead. Although he could sense nothing, he had the dubious sensation of *déjà vu* as the skies became lighter with the approaching dawn. It reminded him of another night so very long ago. When he had failed to save one bright soul, and in her death, she had given him the most precious gift of life. He had failed before, but he would not fail now. He would never let any harm befall Richelle again. And while he could not sense any danger, Richelle could. And he trusted the power in her gifts.

With every step, he could sense her apprehension. Returning to the cabin should have calmed her fears, but instead, they were mounting. That didn't make any sense to him, but still he led on, each step becoming more lethargic as the dawn approached. He needed to go to his rest to replenish his strength, but he would not leave Richelle alone again. She belonged to him.

He willed his feet to go faster to the safety of the cabin. There was a hidden cavern beneath where they could hide, where she would be out of harm's way and where he could sleep. But each step they took made her more frightened. She stopped, her hand tugging him to a stop as well. He raised his head to the night as the other wolves did, trying to sense anything. It was faint at first, barely noticeable. But it became stronger—the scent of malevolence, hatred, fear, and sweat.

He growled low, the hair on his neck standing on end. The others in the pack followed suit, baring their teeth, ready for a battle. Valya moved in front of Richelle and backed into her, forcing her the other way along the trail as he continued to growl at the tree line. The scent was becoming stronger, coming closer. He could not wait any longer. He lowered the barrier to his mind to issue his silent command to Richelle.

*“Run! Quickly, down the path and into the woods. Hide! I will find you!”*

\* \* \* \*

Richelle backed away from the silver wolf, aghast. She had heard that voice before, she remembered. But how could it be?

*“Quickly, go! I will find you!”*

She turned and ran into the woods. Just as she reached the shelter of the trees, she heard men yelling and screaming and the growling and barking of wolves as they safeguarded her escape. She wanted to turn and see what was happening, but there was no need. She could feel what was happening; she could see it in her mind. Her stomach churned at the thought of her friends fighting, dying for her. *I’m going to be sick*, she thought frantically.

As quickly as it had begun, there was silence from behind her. The wolves were quiet. She stopped, straining to hear, opening her mind, trying to sense her friends. Nothing. She turned and mentally called to the wolves, begging them to respond. Again she heard nothing except the sound of footfalls on the forest floor, breaking twigs with each step. Again she mentally called for the wolves. Nothing. They were gone. She wanted to die with them.

But an overwhelming sense of self-protection overcame her. She turned and ran faster, as fast as she could. Her hair whipped wildly around her face as she tried to escape the echoing footsteps behind her. She didn’t know from whom she was running. She didn’t know what he wanted from her. She didn’t know where she was heading. She didn’t know what she would do when she got there. All she knew was to run. To run away. To escape.

Out of breath, she kept running, not caring where she was going. The footfalls behind her becoming louder, coming faster. She couldn’t see where she was running. In her mind, all she could see were several of her beloved wolves lying bloody on the ground beneath the waning moon—they had sacrificed themselves for her. She was heartbroken.

Without warning, a hand gripped her hair and pulled her back. She yelped with pain as she was swung around and faced her aggressor. He was tall, dark, with dark eyes, unshaven, and disheveled, with blood trickling from his mouth. He grinned viciously, his crooked teeth discolored from tobacco stains, and his breath reeked of alcohol.

*“Preacher wants you.”*

Her brows furrowed as she tried to close her mind to his hateful thoughts. She could see his thoughts, the perpetual devotion he held for the man he called Preacher. She knew who Preacher was. He was the old priest

who had come for her when she was a child. He was the man who murdered her mother. She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the painful memories and covered her ears to shut out his vicious thoughts.

Her assailant chuckled low as he released her hair and grabbed her wrists, shaking her so she would open her eyes and face him. His grin had changed. He was now leering at her, licking his lips and pulling her against his body. She could feel his sorry excuse of an erection pressing against her thigh. She could see his ugly thoughts and they sickened her. She tried to pull her wrists free, but all he did was laugh at her pitiful attempts. He pushed her against a nearby tree and released her wrist, clutching one of her breasts instead. He gripped it painfully and smiled when she cringed.

“Preacher wants you. He can have you...after.”

He leaned in, his foul breath hot against her skin as she turned her head to avoid his lowering mouth. She opened her mind to reach for anyone who could help her. In that moment, all his evil and twisted thoughts entered her mind. She screamed as his lips touched her cheek. He pressed against her harder, trapping her between the tree and his body. He enjoyed tormenting her. Richelle knew what would happen if she couldn't get away. With all the strength she could muster, she reached up and clawed his face, leaving deep gouges along his cheek.

He flung her away and screeched in pain. Landing with an oomph amid the branches and brambles upon the forest floor, she scrambled to get to her feet. He grabbed her foot and pulled back. Turning over, she kicked wildly trying to get free. But his vise-like grip was impossible to break. He pulled himself up over her body, gritting his teeth against the sting of his face. He gripped her chin in his hand to turn her face toward him.

“You will pay for that, bitch!” he spat. She struggled to turn away to no avail. Closing her eyes, she tried to squelch the revulsion she felt as he lowered his lips to kiss her.

Suddenly, the crushing weight fell away, and she was free. She heard growling intermixed with shrieks of panic. She turned and opened her eyes to see that he was struggling against her silver-gray wolf. He was gripping the wolf on both sides of his jowls, trying to hold him off, but to no avail. She watched in utter shock as her wolf grabbed hold of her assailant's neck and, with one mighty jerk, ripped out his throat.

She didn't move as she watched his life force flicker out with the blood that drained from his body. She felt no remorse in his death, for his life wasn't worth living. He was a pitiless man thriving on the pain and humiliation of others who had chosen to follow a religious fanatic. There was no remorse nor joy, only relief that he was gone. The silver wolf released the man and came to her. He fell at her feet, exhausted. She leaned over and placed her head upon his, trying to ease the pain that radiated off him. Stroking his fur, she tried to ascertain the extent of his injuries. Behind her, the black alpha wolf limped to where they sat. He whimpered, sensing her distress at her silver's injuries.

*"Richelle."*

She raised her head at the sound of her name. Looking about, she saw no one. She lowered her head to her wolf again.

*"Richelle."*

She raised her head and looked at her wolf, his eyes boring into hers.

*"Follow the black alpha. He will lead you to safety."*

*"But what of you?"*

*"I am tired. I need to find sleep."*

*"You saved me. And I don't even know who you are."*

*"You know me. You have always known me."*

*"Who are you?"*

*"I am he who has always watched over you and protected you from those who would do you harm. I am he who has been destined to be your life mate."*

She gasped at the words *life mate*.

He was an Immortal. Could it be him? She tried to see into his mind, but she couldn't. It was as if he had surrounded his mind with a shield she could not penetrate. Her brows furrowed as she tried to delve deeper, to see who he was. Nothing. She was perplexed. She had never met anyone who could keep his thoughts secret from her. It was a singularly unique situation, leaving her feeling almost at a disadvantage. Yet, she still needed to know.

*"Who are you?"*

*"I am Valya, the Guardian, and I love you."*

Like a dam bursting, emotions she couldn't name flooded her being at his words of love and endearment. Feelings she didn't understand clenched at her heart as silent tears trailed down her cheeks. And while there was an

awareness of the world being reborn into something unfamiliar, she wasn't afraid. Rather, she was encased in a great serenity.

She had sensed there was something about the silver that gave her soul peace and now she understood.

He *was* the wolf from her childhood, coming to her when she needed comforting.

*He* was the man who came to her in her dreams, holding her and chasing her fears away.

And she would not desert him when he needed her.

*"I cannot leave you."*

*"You must. You must be protected."*

*"I cannot be without you."*

*"Another will find you. You will not be alone."* Barriers that had prevented her from touching his mind disappeared. He was lying to her. *"I don't want another. I want the one who has always been there for me, protected me, loved me. I want you."*

Richelle didn't know where these emotions came from. Nor did she understand why she affirmed them so vehemently. But in her heart she believed she could not be without him.

Valya did not answer. Richelle could feel his energy ebb from him as the dawn approached. She looked beseechingly at the black alpha.

*"Help me,"* she implored.

The black alpha stared at her and then turned his gaze to the wolf dying in her arms. Richelle sensed his admiration of Valya—how bravely he had fought. When Valya was injured, the black alpha pressed on and protected her from the man who had gotten away from the rest of the pack.

*"He is an honorable creature worthy of survival,"* thought the alpha. He turned back to Richelle and nodded his head.

*"I will help."*

## Chapter 2

Valya's mind wandered in the realm of dreams. They had to be dreams because they could not be real. They could not be happening. In his mind, he saw Richelle, coming to him without fear. She cleaned and tended his wounds. She bathed him and laid him on a bed. She stayed by his side, stroking his brow and speaking soft words of endearment to him as she lulled him to sleep with her voice.

How he wanted it to be true. If he could only believe that Richelle could truly care for him. But he knew it was all too much for a mere mortal woman to handle, even one as extraordinary as Richelle. If there were only a way he could break through the walls she had built around her heart, he would show her such love that she would never feel the pain of loneliness again. She would never feel any pain.

Pain.

Like the pain coursing through his body; his chest and shoulder were on fire from where he had been stabbed by the followers of the old priest. He knew the old priest would not stop coming for Richelle. He was insane, driven with his desire for recognition and lust for power. What he didn't know was how the old priest had found her. She had traveled so far, had covered her tracks to well.

Pain.

It was a ramrod in his chest as he labored to breathe. Try as he might to will his body to sleep, thoughts of Richelle being alone and unprotected kept him awake. He needed to slow his heartbeat and his breathing so that his body could find rest and he could regain his strength, to heal. Not only for himself, but for Richelle. He vowed she would never be alone again. His body shuddered.

Pain.

Sharper than before. His body shivered with cold. And then he felt warmth, calming and comforting. The pain ebbed because of a hand. Touching him. So soft, tender. He dreamed it was Richelle touching him, tending him. *Richelle, she is so beautiful.* He reached out to touch the vision of her face. He cupped her face in his dream, and she leaned into his palm. How he longed to kiss her, but she was not real. She was only his fantasy. Despite his injuries, his body cried out for Richelle.

Pain exploded through his shoulder into his head. Then there was blessed darkness. The night enveloped him in her warm embrace, and he finally fell into a deep slumber.

\* \* \* \*

Richelle couldn't believe her Guardian was so beautiful. Not handsome, but beautiful. When he first began to shift as they reached the wolves' cave, she was startled. But she continued to watch in fascination as his body morphed from his wolf form into the fine specimen of masculinity she now gazed upon. Oh, she had seen handsome men before but none like Valya. It wasn't merely the beauty of his finely chiseled features, his Roman nose, and square jaw. It was the beauty of his entire physique.

He was muscular and sinewy, like a man who had used his body well for both physical and pleasurable motivations. It was sleek and toned, not unlike the form of the wolf, with strong arms and legs. She could see him running wild through the forest as either man or beast with the same loping grace, his long chocolate hair whipping in the wind. She willed him to open his eyes, longing to see their color. Rich brown. She knew they would be the same rich color as his hair.

Her body ached in a way she had never known before. Having long since shed her torn dress, she should have been embarrassed sitting there in nothing more than her slip, but she didn't. She felt surprisingly...natural, as if it were completely normal for her to be sitting half-naked with a man she remembered vaguely from her childhood and from her dreams. Her body tingled, crying for something more that she couldn't explain.

She started a fire to warm the cave and then tended his wounds, instinctively knowing they would heal despite the damage that was done. When she finished applying the dressing, she lay her hand upon his chest,

letting it rest there as she felt his chest rhythmically rise and fall. She felt his body shudder. She could not resist as her hand slowly traced from his shoulder wound over his well-developed pectoral, hairless and smooth. Her hand continued trailing down to his abdomen, taut and rippled even with his body at rest.

Yes, there was no other way to describe him. He was beautiful.

He had a fever, and his body was covered with perspiration. This was not uncommon with his injuries, but she did what she could to make him comfortable. She wiped his brow and chest. Her touch was light as a feather but she moved swift and sure, using strips of her discarded dress to wipe away the sweat and blood. As she tossed the damp cloth aside, his hand came up and tenderly cupped her face. His body shivered and she was taken aback when he spoke one word. *Richelle*.

She stared at his perfect mouth as he uttered her name. Even in his stupor, his voice was hypnotic. It called to her, compelling her to move closer to him. When his hand fell away, she wrapped her arms around him. She tried to warm his body with her heat. Falling into a deep slumber his breathing had slowed to almost a standstill. She touched her fingertips to his throat to check his pulse. Startled, she pulled her hand back as if she had touched a hot stove.

There was no pulse. *How can that be?*

She stared into her rescuer's face in its repose. Ruggedly smooth, it reminded her of the perfect complexion of a wax figure. She could not resist letting her fingertips trace over his features. She should have felt fear or repulsion. He was an enigma, a man who lay beneath her still as death, could take the form of a beast, who showed such compassion and came to her in her times of need, and yet killed swiftly with no mercy. But those were not the feelings she felt.

She felt a strange empathy with this man who seemed a kindred spirit. Even as a child, it appeared that he sought her out and preferred her company to that of the other wolves. *But why has he hidden his true nature from me all these years? Why did he never appear to me as the man he was?* She didn't understand what had happened. All she knew was that with the Guardian, she felt safe.

Nestling her head in the crook of his uninjured shoulder, she gingerly placed her palm on his chest, careful not to disturb his wound. The large



black alpha sauntered over to their makeshift bed and lay behind her, his fur acting as a blanket to keep her warm. The remaining wolves of the pack soon encompassed where they lay, using their body heat to keep her and her Guardian warm. With a sigh of peace, she closed her eyes and joined Valya in blessed sleep.

\* \* \* \*

It was near dusk when Valya slowly awakened from his healing sleep. He tried to remember what had happened, where he was. He remembered encountering followers from the old Priest on the trail. He fought them off with the wolf pack to give Richelle time to get away. But one was able to stab him in the chest and shoulder several times before Valya was able to tear out his throat. When the battle was over, there were only two wolves left—the black alpha and his mate.

They told him that one of the strangers had gotten away and was going after Richelle. Valya did not need to hear any more. He took off down the trail, leaving the two wolves behind as he came upon Richelle being accosted by the follower. When he saw how he had touched his Richelle, Valya took great joy in killing him. It was one of the few times he wished there was time so that he could kill him slowly. Valya did not usually experience such emotions as he performed his duties as the Guardian, but his emotions were becoming stronger since he had found Richelle.

*Richelle.*

Opening his eyes, he looked down to see Richelle sleeping in his arms. He could not believe it was really her. He thought he was only dreaming last night. But here she was, with him. Her head rested upon his chest dangerously close to his flat nipple, so close that without moving she could open her mouth and let her pink tongue lave that nipple until he was crazed with want of her.

He leaned his head down and inhaled her sweet scent. It had been so long since he had touched her. And even then, she was a mere child, and he had been unable to do more than protect her and carry her to safety. But now she was a woman. Now he could come to her as a man, her mate. It took every ounce of control he had to not lean down and waken her with a kiss, his kiss. He was so hungry for her. He was hungry.

It had been some time since last he fed. It would be so easy to take what he needed. As his mate, she would be there to fulfill all his needs, to sate his hunger, both sexual and for blood. And he would fulfill her every need. But she was so naïve. If he moved too quickly, she would fear him. Although, the realization that she had seen him shift from wolf to man and yet she still tended his wounds and lay snuggled against him through the night filled him with hope. Perhaps she would accept all he would teach her. He would have to be patient. There was so much for her to learn about his race, about her past...about him.

She sighed softly, but it was enough to have his cock stirring against his thigh. He craved her so badly that his body ached from want of her. He was naked, and yet, she lay serenely snuggled upon him with her arm draped around his waist, unaware of the fires that she stoked within him. How easy it would be for him to turn and take her, both body and blood to sate the hunger she had aroused in him and only she could fulfill. She sighed again, nestling her cheek against his chest as she brought her hand up and delicately placed it upon his chest, stroking it briefly before her hand settled over his now-aroused nipple.

His body tensed as he clenched his jaw. He felt his fangs descend in anticipation of the sweet richness of her life's blood. Closing his eyes against the image of her supple form lying against his, he tried to still his clamoring body. But it was no use. He had waited so long. So damn long. He couldn't resist as he lowered his head to kiss her eyelid. It fluttered against the feather-light caress of his lips. He lowered farther still and kissed the tip of her nose, rubbing his lightly against hers.

When she tilted her head up at the gentle motion, he took her lips. Gently. Tenderly. Warmly. Her lips parted on a soft moan, and he accepted her invitation as he deepened his kiss. Feeling her hand stroking up his body to rest on his shoulder, he let his fingertips trail lazily up her spine until he reached her nape. There, he threaded his fingers through her hair in an unbreakable grip as he began to greedily consume her lips and her mouth. He was starved for her, and she tasted so damned delicious. She tasted of earth and fire, of night and desire.

He felt her body stir against his, but she did not pull away. Rather, she pressed closer toward him, her leg slowly rising and her knee brushing softly against his scrotum. He moaned into her mouth at the intimate yet

innocuous gesture while he continued to feed his voracious appetite. His tongue explored the moist recesses of her mouth and tentatively touched her tongue. Stroking and coaxing, her tongue entwined with his, and she returned his kiss with the same ardor, the same passion.

Dazed, he opened his mind and was shaken to the core to find her mind reaching for his, willing and receptive. He felt the emotions pouring from her mind and her heart. There was no trace of deception or fear in her emotions. There were only feelings of acceptance and passion. His arm encircled her waist, pulling her body closer. The simple slip she wore was little barrier to his thickening cock pressing against her pelvis.

Shifting her body he felt her lush breasts squash against his chest. Her fingers timidly combed through his hair. She dragged the length through her fingers before she returned to rake her fingernails over his scalp, eliciting a low rumble from a primitive man reveling in his mate's touch. He was desperately trying to control the inner urges of the beast that begged, that demanded, to claim its mate. That delusion of control evaporated with the morning mist as she moaned her compliance at his touch.

"Valya," she sighed softly before licking and sucking his lower lip. She slipped her tongue into his mouth, to explore and taste him.

Crushing her body to his, the beast seized her mouth with a deep-timbered growl. She was his to protect, to taste, to take. The beast would not tolerate her resistance. She belonged to him. His instincts rose to the surface while she sucked and nipped at his lips, purely exploring the passion of his kiss.

Like aged brandy, she was potent and went to his head. It was a unique experience, having this slip of a girl/woman be both the spirit that made his soul sing and his heart dance and yet be the anchor that kept him grounded in this world. He couldn't stop himself. Surging forward he captured her lush lower lip, nipping it with his fang and drawing a few drops of blood falling sweetly upon his tongue.

But, at the same time, it awoke Richelle from the slumberous and sensual dream, the night spell that he had her under. She pulled her head away. He gazed at her intently; her eyes were closed as his tongue skimmed his lip, licking up a single drop of her blood. She gasped at the sight. Valya opened his eyes to see her watching him with her expressive doe-eyes, eager yet nervous. He could sense her apprehension at the simple taste of the

sweet nectar of her life's blood he had taken. Yet it did nothing to alleviate his growing hunger for her or ease his throbbing cock.

"You bit me," she squeaked as she raised her fingertips to stroke along her lip where he had nipped her.

Her voice was melodious. He realized it was the first time he had ever heard her speak as a woman. Before where she had an impish quality to her child's pitch, now she had a huskier depth to her voice that struck him to the core. He was conflicted as he balanced his impulses to place her on a pedestal where he could worship and adore her, hide her away in a tower where she would be sheltered and safe, or flip her over on their makeshift bed and sate his base desires to feed and fuck. Sheltered and safe won out over feed and fuck.

"My apologies, *mio dusa*," he crooned as he stroked her back, trying to ease her fears. "I could not help myself. I have waited so long for you that I momentarily lost my senses."

Perplexed, she ran her tongue over her nipped lip, weighing his words while he watched in rapt fascination. She caught him staring at her, his eyes drinking her in, and that sent a tremble through her entire body.

"You've waited for me?" Her voice was filled with confusion and wonder at the thought that such a magnificent man would take leave of his senses over her. He chortled at her thoughts, her mind as open as the night sky to him.

"Yes, *mio dusa*. I have long awaited your return to me. At times, I thought I would go mad at your absence. But now you are in my arms, and I could not resist a taste of your sweetness."

\* \* \* \*

Richelle blushed at his soft words spoken with such reverence. Her body flushed as she felt his body harden against her, his cock cuddling intimately between them. She lowered her eyes for a moment, searching for a modicum of secrecy, to conceal the confused emotions he created within her. When she raised her eyes, she saw him gazing at her intensely, as if he could peer into her soul.

She knew he could see into her mind. She had felt his mind merging with hers, wrapping his thoughts around hers, offering her comfort, as if he

could protect her from the confusion and noise...and then it struck her like a bolt from the blue. There was no noise, only silence. Usually, her mind was filled with garbled thoughts from those around her, unable to shut out the chaos and keep out the voices. Even in the solace of the mountains, there was still some amount of white noise that echoed in her mind.

But being near Valya, there was nothing but silence. It was as if there was a wall built around her mind to shield her from the disorder and commotion of the outside world. It was a peace she was unaccustomed to and thought she would never have. She couldn't remember a time when she was without her so-called gift. It was not merely a part of her, but what had defined her over the years. She had no control over it. The inability to control her *gift* had made it impossible for her to have any type of normal relationship, with anyone.

Being near people caused too much pain from hearing their every thought, feeling, and emotion. Her senses were always on overload, leaving her stressed and drained. She would pray to the Goddess for assistance in shutting out the noise but to no avail. She also prayed the Goddess would take away her psychic abilities, but those pleas also fell on deaf ears. She quietly accepted her fate and hoped one day to learn why she was cursed with such a *gift*.

Lying with Valya, there were no thoughts, no emotions, and no noise, nothing. There was no one else, just the two of them. The rest of the world had evaporated into thin air, leaving the night to her and Valya alone. For as long as she could remember, she had prayed for release from the mayhem and pandemonium she had lived with all her life. Now, the answer to that prayer left her feeling unsettled...and vulnerable.

And Valya was there. He *was* her knight in shining armor, her Guardian. His hand drifted over her back, her muscles tightening beneath his touch. He began stroking her like a kitten to calm her fears. She settled back onto his chest, his light touches sensitizing her skin. She sensed the unease in him. She knew it was because of her, but she didn't know what to do to soothe him. She had no experience with these types of emotions. She had no knowledge of men, but there was something deep within in her that wanted, no, needed to ease his pain. His hand felt warm against her skin as he continued to stroke and pet her. It felt so good to be held and touched. Perhaps Valya would find ease with her touches.

Raising her hand slowly, she began to stroke his chest, mimicking the motion of his own hand as a guide. At first, there was a sharp intake of breath as she stroked her fingertips over his nipple down toward his abdomen. When she flipped her hand over to drag the back of her nails upward, he shuddered and grabbed her wrist. His voice was strained as he spoke.

“Don’t, *mio dusa*. You hold much power over me, and I fear what would happen if I were to lose control.” Without releasing her wrist, he settled it over his heart, trying to regulate his breathing and restrain the beast from claiming what was rightfully his. She didn’t pull her hand away. She accepted his will and his strength, and for that, he was pleased.

“That is the third time you called me that,” she stated softly as she lay motionless so as not to cause him any more pain. “What does that mean? *Mio dusa*.”

“It is old language. It means *precious heart*, for that is what you are to me.”

She blushed anew, embarrassed at such an intimate name after knowing each other for so short a time. Then she remembered she was lying atop of him, and he was naked. Where she felt comfortable before, now she blushed with embarrassment.

“Please don’t call me that.”

“Why not?”

“It doesn’t seem...proper.” Shyly, she averted her eyes. She couldn’t face him as she made her request, silly as it sounded. He chuckled, huskily, sending an erotic shiver down her spine. He moved his hand again, lower toward the rounded curves of her backside. He chuckled again as she gasped, both recognizing their state of undress. She couldn’t meet his gaze. She had no thoughts, no words for him. She just wanted the embarrassment to end. He took pity on her.

“As you wish, Richelle. I will not call you that again.”

“Thank you,” she meekly said as she exhaled.

“Until you ask me to do so.”

Then she did meet his gaze, his dark eyes smoldering like red-hot embers as he looked upon her. Their eyes locked for what seemed an eternity.

\* \* \* \*

He wanted an eternity with her, and he would have to convince her of the same. It would take time to teach her and even then, many things about Immortals would frighten her. He could only hope she would learn to accept their life together, for there was no other choice for either of them.

However, now was not that time. Night was upon them and he had to rise. He had to hunt, to feed. With great difficulty, he set Richelle aside and began to rise. She tried to hold him down.

“No, Valya, you need to rest.”

“No, *mio*...Richelle. I need to fly. Night is upon us, and I need to fe...find food. To build my strength.”

“Then let me go and find food for you.”

He growled low at her innocent suggestion, staring at the slender length of her throat and then lower to the creamy swell of her breast. He refrained from licking his lips as he tamped down his baser longing to take her up on her offer. She had no idea what he truly hungered for. Only the blood of his life mate would sate that hunger. His life mate’s blood, her blood.

With her porcelain skin and delicate taste, she reminded him of moonflowers, large white trumpet flowers that carried a subtle scent and bloomed only at night. He pictured her sitting in the meadow bathed in moon glow. She was an ethereal beauty, and she belonged to him. He shook his head to rid himself of her enticing image before he did something they would both regret. She was young and green. She had to learn about Immortals and what that would mean to her, to them.

“No, you cannot provide me with food, not now. You need time to learn, to understand wha...who I am.”

\* \* \* \*

Cocking her head, her brows furrowed in confusion. *Does he believe I am that naïve? That Duncan would have neglected telling me anything of his people?* Since she was thirteen years old, she had known of the Immortals, not everything, but enough to calm her when fears would plague her in the night. She would waken from nightmares of faceless, dark figures

chasing her. Faceless all except for one...the old man in the priest's collar. She could never forget that face in a thousand nights.

Malice was reflected in those brutal eyes. They were the ones she remembered from the night her mother died—black as coal they were. His eyes bored through her as if to find her heart to rip it out. There was no mercy in him when he murdered her mother, and there was no mercy in him when he chased her in her dream. She somehow knew that if he caught her in the dream, then she would be destroyed. No matter how hard she tried, she never was able to elude him.

Until Valya appeared.

Valya would appear in her dreams and stand between her and the old priest. He did not kill the priest, but he stood as an immovable wall between them, protecting her and keeping her from harm until the priest dissolved into the evening mist. Valya would then turn and take her in his arms, stroking her hair and whispering words of comfort and of love.

He was there only in her dreams, but she could feel him as if he were in the same room. It confused yet calmed her. She should have been afraid of him. She was merely a child of thirteen and he was a man, but she never felt fear when she was with him. She felt safe. She felt...excited. A young girl's blossoming at her first love.

It was then Duncan began to tell her of Valya and the Immortals. It was fantastic—a race of people who lived to be centuries old and whose sense of duty protected all people, be they mortal or Immortal, from evil. She found it hard to believe Immortals subsisted on the blood of living creatures, but she was enamored by the romanticism of spending your lifetime searching for your one true love.

With so few female Immortals, many of the males sought their life mates in the mortal world, choosing to live among them and protecting all they could from evil until the day they found and claimed their mate. It made sense to her why she had visions of Valya in her dreams, not merely because he had saved her as a child from the old priest, but because she was indeed Valya's life mate.

She found comfort in her dreams, but during the day, she teetered on the edge of anxiety. It was difficult enough closing out the world invading her mind every moment. Then Duncan told her about her past filling her mind with terror: movie myths of Vampyres and the living dead; evil men hunting



her, and death. She withdrew into herself, trying to shield and protect herself from the outside world. Yet the thought of being Valya's life mate filled her with a giggling glee. He was powerful and handsome, and though she was a wisp of a girl in the throes of adolescent adoration, one day she would become a woman.

And now that day was here. She was lying with Valya, he naked and aroused and she wearing nothing but a slip. She was waiting for her fears from her youth to resurface, but they didn't come. Rather, being alone with Valya, she felt tingly, and her heart fluttered in her chest, racing like a hummingbird's wings. Every part of her touching him felt as if it were electrified, leaving her skin sensitized to his touch, especially as he stroked her lower back, encouraging her to arch farther into his embrace. The anxiety didn't come. Instead she was as aroused as he.

"I know what you need, Valya. I know of your race and I know what you need to sustain your life. I know how you...feed."

He stared at her wordlessly, as if gauging her reaction to the knowledge of what *he* was. Richelle sensed he was waiting for the feeling of revulsion mortals experienced when they learned of the nature of the Immortals. She did not feel revulsion, but rather she emanated understanding and compassion. His body hardened against her. He pulled her closer into his body, if that were even possible considering she was already lying atop him. He leaned forward and inhaled the fragrance of her hair. Lifting his hand, he touched her tresses lovingly, wrapping them around his hand. His desire for her she sensed was almost reverent compared to the lustful feelings she had sensed from her attacker.

"You may know much, Richelle, but you understand very little," he crooned hotly into her fisted hair before lightly pulling her head back so he could gaze into her eyes. "You are still so young and have never dealt with any of my people. You will need time to learn all that you need to know, and I will not always be a patient teacher. But, for now, believe me when I say I must find my own food this night."

She gazed back into his eyes, filled with a longing she could not name but one she had a growing desire to fulfill. Perhaps he was right to call her young, to think of her as naïve. In all her twenty-eight years, she had never had a man affect her so much and fill her with so much emotion. She had always stayed away from people, men especially, as their licentious

thoughts infected her mind like a virus. She couldn't block them, get rid of them, or escape them, so she found it was easier to avoid them.

She did not experience the jabbing pains of uncontrolled thoughts when she was with Valya. With him, she felt the gentle waves of his emotions filling her with power. Even when she could feel his more intense emotions, the mounting desire that seeped from every fiber and pore of his being, she felt no pain. He was using his power to build the wall around her mind, something she had never learned to do. Again, he was protecting her. She was filled with such longing and wanted to fulfill his needs as well.

"Please Valya, let me do this for you."

\* \* \* \*

Her eyes pleaded with him and almost unleashed the beast he was trying so hard to restrain. Almost. He felt the warm muzzle of the black wolf nuzzling his shoulder, drawing his gaze from Richelle. In the black eyes of the wolf, he could see the offering of life. Without alarm, without concern, he willingly offered his blood to feed him.

*"You do not know what you offer," Valya said.*

*"I know you saved Richelle."*

*"She was mine to save."*

*"And for that, I offer freely what you need."*

Valya contemplated the noble beast that was offering his life for saving the life of Richelle. While it was not uncommon among his people to take the blood of a beast of nature, it was not as rich or as plentiful as that of a healthy mortal. Taking enough to sate his hunger would kill Richelle's wolf companion. There was no way he could accept the death of such a noble creature, but he had very little strength left—certainly not enough to return to the city to find mortals. *"I will be as gentle as possible, brave alpha."*

*"Shadow. My name is Shadow."*

Valya nodded in acknowledgement as he flooded the beast with pheromones to soothe him and lull him into a calm. The great wolf lifted his head, exposing his throat. Valya drew his head back as he widened his jaws and his canines elongated. Valya felt Richelle's fretting concern as he raised his head and bit into the black wolf's throat.

Reserved as he fed so as to not frighten Richelle, he kept his hunger at bay. He took only enough to renew his strength until he could leave the cave to find another to slake his hunger. Mindful not to cause any undue damage, he carefully withdrew and swept his tongue over the pinpricks to close the wound. The large wolf's head lolled as he loped to a corner of the den. He toppled over, joined by his mate, who licked his nose before curling beside him.

Valya fell back upon the makeshift bed and was immediately covered by Richelle. Though his eyes were closed he could feel Richelle's hands stroking his hair and face just as he had stroked hers to calm her. When he opened his eyes, he could see hers were glittering with unspilled tears.

"Will he be all right?"

"He will be well when morning comes," he replied with tenderness as he stroked her hair, then let his arm fall to his side.

At his words, she let her head drop to his chest. He opened himself to her emotions of relief and gratitude for not taking the life of her wolf companion. Lifting her head, she smiled shyly as her fingers trailed over the bridge of his nose and then over his lips. She shivered as he sensed a feeling of uncharacteristic wantonness wash over her—she wanted to kiss him. He did not sense disgust at the sight of him taking blood, she simply accepted it...it was what it was. He watched as she stared at his mouth while chewing on her bottom lip. He smiled devotedly and removed her dilemma by leaning up and brushing his lips against hers. He smiled against her lips when she tried to prolong his kiss, but he pulled back. She watched his smile fade as his expression took on a serious countenance.

"Night is upon us. We need to return to the cabin. You will need to gather your belongings for you will not return there. They know where to find you now."

"Who are they?"

Valya didn't want to tell her, but she needed to know the truth. The last thing he needed was for her to fight him in his decision. He needed to hide her away, at least until he could take care of the old priest.

"They are called the Believers, religious fanatics who follow the preaching of a madman."

"Why would they kill my mother? And what do they want from me?"

He could hear the pain in her voice. Although it had been more than twenty years, she still keenly felt the death of her mother.

“He believes you are the key to destroying my people, or rather what he believes us to be.”

\* \* \* \*

She thought on his words. She recalled what the old priest had said to her mother: *God has decreed it. She is mine.* She felt a cold chill down her spine and shivered against Valya. And he, in response, wrapped her tighter in the warmth of his embrace, his expression unchanged.

Her heart skipped a beat at his pronouncement that she would not be staying at the cabin. She had just returned home after being gone so many years and now he was taking her away. He placed his hand upon her cheek and lovingly stroked her skin with his thumb. Gazing up at him, she could feel his regret at the decision.

“I know how much you love it here in the mountains, Richelle. I would not take you away from your home unless it was necessary.”

Richelle leaned against his palm and nodded. Shifting her to his side he began to rise. She watched in rapt fascination as he stood. His chest expanded when he spread his arms wide embracing the night like a welcome lover. The muscles in his biceps flexed with every movement. He stretched his arms upward and leaned his head back, taking a deep breath of the night air. She let her eyes roam over his body and smiled in appreciation.

There wasn't an ounce of fat on his powerfully built body. The soft glow of the campfire played against his tawny skin and gave it an unnatural golden glow, as if it could absorb the power of fire and then emit its own illumination. With the exception of the chocolate brown hair that hung to his shoulders, his body was devoid of hair. Smooth, she could see every dip and ripple of his lean and muscular frame.

Abruptly, his arms dropped to his sides, and his head snapped down where his gaze could meet hers. His eyes were the same chocolate brown as his hair but darkened to black as he gazed at her, the muscle in his cheek ticking. She could not stop the onslaught of his emotions under his intense scrutiny. She felt the admiration of her strength and courage, his devotion to her, and his mounting desire.

Her body grew hot as his gaze intensified. His nostrils flared like a beast scenting his prey. Her eyes grew wide and she was overcome with a feeling of panic. So many emotions in such a short time she didn't know how to handle them. Happiness, sadness, hatred, fear, desire—it all left her with an overwhelming need to run away.

Her heart beat faster, thumping like a drum in her chest. Used to hiding from everything and everyone, she didn't know if she could adjust to her changing world. She shrank away from him, only for a moment, but Valya had seen it and sensed her agitation. Reining back his growing lust, he extended his arm, his hand upturned. He waited for her to place her hand in his, a show of trust. He stood motionless while she stared at his hand contemplating. It seemed like an eternity, though it took no more than a few moments to make her decision. With misgivings but a look of wonder and trust upon her face, she placed her hand in his and he helped her to her feet.

“We need to return to the cabin and gather your things. I am sorry to take you away, Richelle. But it is necessary for your safety.”

She nodded as he began to lead her out of the cave.

“Wait, Valya. We can't go out there like this. You have no clothes and my slip...”

Before she could finish her sentence, they were clothed. She was in a long, flowing dress similar to the one she wore earlier, with longer sleeves to protect her from the chill of the night. It was so much softer, like doe-suede, only the fabric floated softly as she moved. Valya wore the same black pants and shirt she had always seen him wear in her dreams.

*His jeans and t-shirts don't fit him. They're the right size, but the style is wrong,* she mused. With his courtly manner and affected speech, she imagined him better suited in the Renaissance period. Her romantic fancies pictured him upon a dark horse, wearing a burgundy bard shirt belted with a scabbard. His dark breeches would blend into the horse he rode bareback, with his high-top boots pressing into the sides. Wearing a long black cape flowing in the wind, he looked every inch the lord of the manor. She liked that vision...a lot.

*The man has absolutely no imagination when it comes to his wardrobe,* she thought wryly.

He turned to face her, his face stoic at first but softening as he smiled at her.

“No, I have no imagination. I need only the basics, something to cover me and help me blend into the night. No more, no less.”

Richelle smiled back as he squeezed her hand, gently pulling her to the mouth of the cave.

“Come. There is a bit of a walk to the cabin. We must gather your things and leave before the dawn rises.”

## Chapter 3

Their walk back to the cabin was silent. There was nothing to say. Valya wrapped his mind around hers, creating a calming effect. Richelle thought it felt more like weightless armor protecting her against anything in the night that might infringe upon her mind and cause her pain. It was a new sensation, having someone this close but not feeling any pain. It was more than comforting. It was comfortable.

Despite the urgency to leave the mountains before Preacher and his followers could find them, they walked along looking like nothing more than a young couple taking a moonlight stroll in the woods. Neither of them said a word. Valya held her hand gently in his as he led the way and she followed a half step behind. All the while she stared at his muscular form as he strode assuredly along the darkened path.

In spellbound fascination she watched his strong and agile figure move with each step, in graceful beauty similar to a ballet dancer. With each step, his hair swayed in the night breeze. Intermittently, he would look back at her and give her a small smile, his eyes flashing golden glints like a cat prowling through the shadows.

Richelle admitted she had never seen a finer specimen of masculinity, at least not one that made her feel like she was being roasted slowly over a bed of coals. She could feel her face reddening, growing warm, feverish, almost as feverish as the heat she felt building in her stomach and spreading downward between her legs. She gasped inwardly and then admonished herself for such scandalous thoughts.

Valya stopped suddenly and tightened his grip on her hand. A low growl rent the night's calm and caused her body to tingle. He hung his head, his dark mane falling forward to hide his eyes as his voice timbered low.

"You shouldn't think such thoughts."

"I'm sorry," Richelle stammered. "I didn't mean to offend you."

Valya whirled on her and took her by the shoulders, forcing her to rest her flailing hands upon his chest to steady herself from slipping on the uneven path. She gazed into his eyes, the golden glint swirling with shades of brown and scarlet as his emotions coursed through him.

“You did not offend me,” his rich voice crooned, reaching deep into her soul and hypnotically drawing her to him. She couldn’t tear her gaze away from his eyes piercing her with their intensity and causing her heart to beat faster. *You aroused me.* She gasped at his unspoken words. Standing so close, her panted breaths brushed against his skin while her womb clenched. His nostrils flared as if he could smell her budding arousal. He growled low and long. He leaned down toward her shoulder and inhaled her scent deeply. She tipped her head toward the side, baring her throat while he continued to breathe in her aroma. He placed warm, wet kisses up her throat column.

When he reached under her chin, she tipped her head back, letting her hair cascade along her back. Valya’s chest rumbled his approval. His hand slipped into her luxurious mane, the silken strands caressing his calloused hands. He pulled back to gaze at her lovely face, her eyes dreamy, her lips parted slightly.

Moaning low, he lowered his head slowly and placed a chaste kiss upon her lips. The gentle brush of his mouth was not nearly enough to douse the fire burning within her. She raised her hands to his chest to steady herself as he slipped his other arm about her waist, pulling her closer into his steely embrace. Deepening the kiss, he thoroughly tasted every portion of her mouth— her lips, her tongue, the soft upper palate, the smoothness of her teeth. No nuance was left untouched.

She felt his body growing excited in response to her movements in his arms. She shifted closer, stretching her entire length against him. With a sharp hiss, he pulled away. Confusion along with pleading warred in her eyes as she stared up at him. She could sense his need for more.

“Not here. Not now.”

She lowered her eyes in contrition. She didn’t understand what was wrong with her. She had spent her life keeping her emotions under tight control, but whenever she was near Valya, she had a compelling urge to let them run free like a child through a meadow.

“You’re right,” she concurred, but she couldn’t help but feel disappointment at the abrupt ending of their kiss.



“But later. Definitely later.”

Mesmerized, she gazed into his eyes. Placing her fingers against his lips she nodded. He took her hand in his.

“We need to get to the cabin.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but she was not able to get her voice to work so she mutely nodded. Her legs trembled slightly as he turned and continued walking down the path. Mindlessly, she followed, unable to think clearly after that soul-scorching, toe-curling kiss he had given her. She could still feel the warmth of his lips pressing against hers. Unseen by Valya, she placed her fingertips along her mouth. Her lips still tingled from the contact.

She tried to control the emotions rising to the surface, the emotions that he was drawing out of her with his mere presence. She wasn't sure if she could handle these new feelings. This was unfamiliar territory, having suppressed her feelings since childhood. In many ways, it was easier to go through life without the entanglements of emotions. *If you didn't get close to someone then you didn't get hurt.*

Everyone she had been close to, anyone she loved, died—her mother, Duncan, Alma. She lived in fear of losing anyone close. She lived in pain caused by the unrestrained emotions of people around her. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life in fear of living, but she didn't know any other way, and change was scary. The more time she spent with Valya the more she realized she had been merely existing, not truly living. Of course, it was a tiring existence, holding everyone off at a distance, pushing those away if they got so close as to find a weak link in the invisible shield she wrapped herself in.

It was also a lonely existence.

And she had grown tired of being lonely.

\* \* \* \*

Valya felt the turmoil within her and empathized with her plight. His emotionless demeanor was a result of nature, while Richelle's had been a direct result of nurture. Her childhood had been burdened with detachment, distance, and duplicity. How he wished she could have had a “normal” childhood—days spent playing in the sun, exploring and experiencing all the extraordinary miracles of ordinary adolescence, learning the new things only

a child could understand instead of the cold and sheltered existence that was the foundation of her upbringing.

He speculated on how different she would be now with the carefree remembrances from childhood. He had noticed she never smiled, and he had never heard her laugh. She was so very serious. Children's lives should be filled with laughter, and yet not once had he heard her laugh. His heart filled with the enviable thought he would be the one to make her smile, make her laugh. It became a compulsory need that Richelle be taught to be carefree and frivolous.

He looked back at her and smiled at the brooding expression on her face. When he squeezed her hand lightly and raised it to his lips to give her a chaste kiss, her expression softened. He flipped her hand over to kiss the skin of her sensitive wrist, and on impulse, he licked at the beating pulse. He chuckled as she closed her eyes and released a soft sigh. He drew her hand to his chest, placing it over his heart as he petted along her arm to offer her comfort.

"Have you been very lonely, Richelle?"

\* \* \* \*

She opened her eyes to see him staring at her, concern evident in his earnest expression, and her heart softened. She raised her other hand and placed it on his cheek, trying to ease some of his apprehension. She smiled back at him.

"Not very."

He pressed her hand closer against his heart as the tension drained away from her gentle efforts to relieve the anxiety he felt at leaving her alone for so long. He pulled her hand from his face and kissed her hand and wrist the same way as the first before placing it on his chest as well.

"Liar," he muttered inaudibly, so quiet she almost didn't hear him.

Her eyes dropped for a moment before she met his steely gaze.

"Not at first. I had Duncan. I had the wolves on the mountain, and the other animals from the forest to keep me company."

"And later?"

She licked her lower lip before capturing it with her teeth. He groaned at the image.

“Later, it was different. I was away studying. I was far from home and it was all so very big and scary.”

He stroked her hands, so small upon his chest, as they began to tremble.

“Why didn’t you come home?”

Her voice quivered.

“I couldn’t.” She tried to slip her hands down, but he held them, not wanting to release the warm sensation of her touch, his mind slipping to thoughts of feeling them pressed against his naked flesh.

“Why not?”

“I could feel them. They were so close.”

“They?”

“The ones looking for me all these years. I wasn’t positive. I told Duncan, but he told me it was just nerves from running for so long, never feeling safe. But it wasn’t. No matter what I did, I could feel them. So close.” Her hoarse whispers conveyed fear from a remembered past.

“I didn’t want to lose Duncan the same way I lost my mother. I didn’t want to be responsible for his death.” She paused as her body shuddered. She thought it would be better to be on her own than take the chance of losing someone else she loved. In the end, it made no difference.

“And then I lost him anyway.” Without thinking, she lowered her forehead to rest on the back of her hands, the need to be close to Valya overwhelming.

Valya wrapped his arms around her, hugging her so close that not even sound waves could pass between them. He surrounded her with his body, an impenetrable wall of solid rock. *He* became her mountain, her sanctuary, her home. He swayed with her and stroked her hair, her back. Silent tears she had never learned to cry racked her small frame as she accepted his consolation. He held her, rocking gently like a mother calming her baby.

“Why won’t they leave me alone?” she mumbled, not expecting an answer. There had never been an answer. Since she was old enough to understand who the Believers were and question why they would be looking for her, there was never an answer.

Valya stilled and placed a chaste kiss on the top of her head.

“Everything will be all right.” He pulled her tight against his frame, offering her a safety she had seldom known, offering her the vow of a Guardian. “I will see they never hurt you again.”

She shivered in his arms at his words, which struck a chord at the very core of her being. She believed him.

They stood there, huddled in each other's arms under the starry sky and the moon smiling down on them, basked in her silvery warmth. The shimmering moonbeams surrounded them, casting a ghostly aura and giving the appearance of an otherworldly coat of armor protecting them. She had never felt so safe. Valya radiated a profuse power surrounding them.

Dawn was fast approaching. Valya was the first to break their embrace.

"Let's go get your things."

Richelle mutely nodded as she followed behind him again. She was consumed by memories running through her mind—her mother, Duncan, the Believers, the old priest, as well as reflections on the direction her life had turned since her graduation. It was when they reached the edge of the woods that she noticed the smell of burnt timber. She rushed into the clearing and saw the ashen remains of the humble cabin she had once called home.

At first, she stared at the smoldering embers, her mind unable, or rather unwilling, to conceive what her eyes were telling her. When the shock passed, her chest clenched as if constricted by an invisible fist squeezing tighter and tighter until she could no longer feel her heart beating nor could her lungs draw in a breath. All she could do was stare at the flickering cinders, her mouth gaping as her once beloved home was destroyed.

She pulled her hand from Valya as she shuffled forward, scanning the remains for some trace, some remnant, of her past. There was none. She left so many years ago with only the clothes on her back and a few necessary items packed in a bag. She had left all her beloved treasures behind—her books, the small photo album holding the few pictures she had of her mother, the jewelry box Duncan had carved for her sixteenth birthday, her beloved Molly. All of it was now gone.

She wanted to scream in outrage condemning the men who would so cruelly destroy precious memories. She wanted to cry bitter tears at the loss of irreplaceable treasures tying her to the mother she lost so long ago. But all she could do was stand amid the destruction in mute defeat, feeling more vulnerable and alone than she had ever felt before. And she hated feeling like that, like a perpetual victim subject to the whims of Fate.

\* \* \* \*

Valya, sensing her despair, came up behind her and placed his hands upon her shoulders, drawing her back to his front. While he sensed her torment and sorrow, all he could feel was blinding rage and the urge to hunt down the Believers who had destroyed this idyllic place with their blind obedience to a man whose lust for power was exceeded only by his belief that he was above retribution.

He would find the Preacher.

The Preacher would learn what it meant to draw the wrath of a Guardian.

But, for now, he tried to suppress his lethal state of mind, focusing all his energies for the moment in giving his strength to Richelle. He leaned his head down to speak softly into her ear.

"I'm sorry, Richelle." Words. That's all he could give her at this moment. They were useless.

But she accepted them, just as she accepted his touch by leaning back into his embrace. He radiated warmth, offering her refuge from the early morning chill, the dew starting to frost on the grass. She turned her head to the side, caressing her cheek against the broad expanse of his chest. Her chest rose and fell in soft heaves at the disparity, the injustice of the loss of the only home she had known.

Unable to stand the sight of the burning rubble of her home, she turned in his arms. It was a perfect excuse to hide the gentle tears as they fell upon her cheek.

"Why would they do this? Why won't they leave me alone?"

With every utterance, with every teardrop dampening his shirt, Valya felt the rage swell within him.

Yes, Preacher and the Believers would feel the wrath of a Guardian.

With a firm hand about her back, he bent to place his other arm underneath her knees and swept her up into his embrace. Cradling her against his chest, offering her comfort, and taking her tears into his heart and soul felt natural. Richelle's arms slipping around his neck as she nuzzled her face into the crook of his shoulder felt right as he hefted her higher.

His mind drifted back to when he lifted a much younger Richelle into his embrace and carried her away to a new home. This time was different. Before, he took Richelle the child and entrusted her care to another. *Not this*

*time*, he thought as he tightened his grip. Feeling her body press against his filled the void in his life that he had barely acknowledged until he had found Richelle.

Richelle was no longer a child. She was a woman...his woman. And he would never leave her alone again. This time, she would be protected and safe with him. Valya closed his eyes and savored the weight of her in his arms as her tears fell against his throat, washing away the wasted guilt he had held onto over the years. His resolve was indomitable. Never again would his woman shed tears in sorrow.

He dropped a consoling kiss upon her forehead as sniffing morphed into placid hiccups, her arms still clinging tightly around his neck. He smiled at her actions, which spoke louder than the empty words of solace he offered her. He looked forward to the endless possibilities for their future. Now her life, a life with him, would truly begin.

He opened his eyes, taking a final look at the desecration and vowing to exact justice for this crime. "Sleep now, Richelle. Tomorrow you will awake in your new home."

## Chapter 4

*“You will never be able to hide from me, Richelle. No matter where you run, no matter where you try to hide, I will find you. You belong to me, and I will never let you go.”*

*Panicked, Richelle ran into the darkness. Her footsteps echoed into the night, sounding like a clock ticking down the final minutes of her doom. Her hair whipped wildly about her head as she rushed into the unknown, her heart thumping uncontrollably, feeling as if it were ready to explode.*

*She kept running, trying to escape the ominous voice that relentlessly haunted her. Everywhere she turned, she seemed to hear his voice, see his face. He was always shrouded in shadows, there in front of her and yet as intangible as the wind. But more menacingly, she could feel him—his hatred and rage. No matter where she ran, where she turned, she could not escape the sensation of his hands grasping at her. At times, it seemed as if his withered hands seized her throat like a bird of prey uses his talons to grasp his victim.*

*She hit a dead-end and turned, scrambling to find an escape route before leaning back against the wall like a cornered rabbit. She clutched at her throat, at first trying to scream for help and then, trying to breathe. She found herself gasping for air as she dug her nails into her skin, trying to force herself to breathe, to speak, to scream.*

*She was aware of his approach before she heard his footfalls, the empty thud of his steps grinding the bits of rubbish beneath his feet, mimicking his heartless attitude toward those around him. There was a coldness, a desolate, endless winter surrounding his icy heart. As he neared, the freezing tips of his fingers grazed across her skin in an obscene caress.*

*Finally, he came into view. Clothed in the same black clothing, tattered with the passing years, he approached her. His hat was pulled low, hiding his eyes. But she could see his sardonic grin with his yellowed teeth now*

*turning black with decay. As he stood before her, she could smell the horrible stench of his breath.*

*“I told them all,” he rasped boastfully. “No one can stop me. It has been decreed by God. You are mine.”*

*As he raised his withered, claw-like hand, he laughed, a chilling laugh that cut into her soul. She pressed her back into the wall, trying to get as far from him as she could, but to no avail. As he began to walk toward her, she closed her eyes, squeezing them tightly so that tears escaped from the corners.*

*She thought of her mother, how she had died trying to save her, and it was all for naught. She had been chased all her life by a madman and did not know why. She thought of the injustice of it all. The running and hiding. The senseless death of others. She was terrified of the old priest, but she was beginning to experience a new emotion—outrage. She opened her eyes to see him standing before her, his eyes as empty and cold as his words.*

*“You...are...mine.”*

*She found her voice and let go with a bloodcurdling scream.*

\* \* \* \*

Valya embraced Richelle as she shot up from the bed screaming, holding her tightly while he tried to wake her. She clawed at the air, trying to break his embrace. She hadn't opened her eyes, so she didn't realize it was him she was fighting, not the monster from her dream. Valya groaned as she beat her arms and fists about his chest and head.

While Duncan spoke often of her nightmares, he hadn't believed they were as bad as he made them out to be. She was young, and young ones often had nightmares about things they didn't understand. Valya had simply assumed that she would outgrow them as she became an adult. But then again, he should have realized they were not truly dreams for Richelle. With her Wicca gifts, they were so much more, and so much more powerful, than a childhood nightmare, more like a psychic premonition.

He held her tight, crooning soft words in his native tongue. She wouldn't understand them, but it would still be the raging of his heart to have her hear them. She calmed with the lyrical sound of his voice. She opened



her eyes tentatively and looked about the room, confusion etched on her forehead.

\* \* \* \*

After a nightmare, it took her a few moments to gain her bearings and realize where she was. Her dreams were always vivid, so real. But her nightmares had a different feel to them, as if there was only a silken thread holding her to the real world and preventing her from falling into that nightmare realm. Her fear was one night that thread would break and she would be forever trapped in a nightmarish hell with no way to escape.

But that did not happen tonight.

For she awoke, in a cool room, in a soft bed, with strong arms around her. She looked around the sparse apartment, illuminated only by the light from the moon and a nearby street lamp. She turned to see Valya, his face a mask of concern as he watched her, his hands stroking her arms as he pulled her back down to lie in his arms. And she let him, peculiarly comforted being held by a man she knew only from her dreams.

“Are you all right now, Richelle?”

“Yes,” she croaked, her throat dry and hoarse from her screaming. She straightened her slip, which had twisted around her hips, before she settled her head upon his shoulder.

He held her so tight she could hardly breathe, but it wasn’t the suffocating grasp of the old priest. She relished the feel of him and, in some way, could not help but believe his presence had saved her this evening. This was the closest the old priest had ever come, the closest he had ever been to her in a dream. She could smell him. And if Valya had not been here, holding her, holding on to the end of that silken thread...

“What did you say about the Preacher?” he asked, not releasing his hold.

She smiled and snuggled closer into his embrace, absorbing the heat from his body to stave off the lingering chill from her nightmare.

“It isn’t nice to eavesdrop on other people’s private thoughts.”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping,” he replied as he stroked her hair, letting it spread across his chest like silky fingertips, exciting and arousing him. “You were broadcasting loud and clear. You need to watch your barriers to protect your thoughts from any interlopers that may be lurking about.”

She frowned. He was right. Losing her mother the way she did, she never did learn to control her gift. That was why she had chosen to live so isolated from others. She couldn't block her own transmitting thoughts, let alone block those that others transmitted to her.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I will teach you all you need to know to conceal your thoughts."

"Where are we?"

"My home in the city."

"Yes, I assumed that, but where?"

"A loft in Royal Oak—just one of my homes."

She smiled and snuggled against his chest. She stroked the skin over his heart as she sighed in contentment.

"I don't really know you, Valya. I was a child when you took me to Duncan. I've only seen you in my dreams. Yet, I feel so very safe with you, as if I've known you all my life."

"I have always been near, watching you," he admitted freely. "I only wish there was more I could have done to protect you, keep you safe." She sensed his guilt as he remembered his failures, each a regretful occurrence driving her further and further away from him. His inability to save Adelaide, leaving her to grow up without a mother's love, was for him unforgivable.

But for Richelle, who was able to feel his sorrow and regret for his failure and her isolation, forgiving was as easy and natural as breathing.

"You've done more than many men would do."

"I'm not a man—I am a Guardian and I should have been able to protect you."

She placed a kiss in the center of his chest as he held her tight.

"You are here now...and I feel safe."

She felt his guilt melt away like winter snow with the coming of spring. He had to stop dwelling on the past. She was with him now...that was all that mattered. In almost every way, her life had been as empty and colorless as his. Yes, she had achieved her goal of becoming a veterinarian, but she had no family, no friends, and no fun in her life.

Not only did her sparse life lack emotional intimacy, there was also no physical intimacy. She stroked her hand over his bare chest, and his body hardened beneath her touch. She found she enjoyed touching him. There

was still some part of her mind cautioning her to run and hide, but she, too, would have to stop dwelling on the past.

“What time is it?” Richelle mumbled, her eyes still closed.

Valya glanced at the clock by the bed.

“Eight o’clock.”

Yawning, Richelle pushed herself up from Valya’s chest to sit up.

“It feels later than that,” she murmured a little louder, wiping the sleep from her eyes. She barely remembered their journey, but it was still dark when Valya had picked her up and tried to comfort her. With the way she felt, she was surprised she had only slept a few hours.

“It’s eight *p.m.*,” Valya offered, answering Richelle’s unspoken observation. “You slept through the day.”

Richelle stared at him incredulously, absorbing the information. While she had adapted her lifestyle to that of a second shift, she had never slept an entire day. She would rise around noon, have her breakfast, and prepare to face the outside world. She was so amazed, all she could manage to say was a half-hearted “oh” before she cocooned herself back under the covers and nestled her head against Valya’s shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

Despite the outward appearance she portrayed as she lay in his arms, her head resting upon his chest, she still exuded an air of distance. Though she appeared relaxed and rested, he could feel an agitation festering beneath her skin like an infection that needed to be cut out.

She kept everything bottled up inside. He could sense her fear in reaching out for an emotional lifeline and her fear of losing another person she loved. Valya recognized he would need to go slow, take his time, and earn her trust, no matter how he ached for her. He would give her a legendary courtship, taken from the pages of a fairy tale. She deserved to be romanced. Seduced. He would give her all he had before he took her for his bride. He wanted her desperately to the point of pain. He hoped it wouldn’t take so long to erase all her nervousness and fears. While he didn’t want to take a nervous bride to bed, he wasn’t sure how long he could hold out, especially when her fingertips skittered over his skin, leaving a tingling trail in their wake.

“Do you wish to sleep longer?” Valya asked as he absentmindedly stroked her back. He had noticed the dark circles beneath her eyes, barely fading after a long sleep, and was concerned. It had all been a shock to her, and she was still adjusting to the newness, the profound changes she had to accept in a very short time. And the changes yet to come.

“No. I’ll get up in a moment.” She lay quietly as he continued to stroke her back. As her breathing became more even at his soft caress, his became harsher, more erratic. Just feeling her skin beneath his hand was enough to have him wanting more. He wanted more than to touch her. He needed to absorb her very essence into him, her taste, her smell.

His body trembled at her nearness, her innocence. He had vowed to take things slow with Richelle. He needed to give her time to adjust, but he didn’t know how much longer he would last.

The ancient instinct to take first claiming, to take her virgin’s blood in the cave, had been almost overwhelming. His skin was on fire at her touch and his canines ached to descend and fully taste her, to truly become life mates.

Lying with her as the evening rose, he could feel an aura of serenity surrounding them and instilling him with a peace he had never known. He knew Richelle could sense it as well. The vibrating power coursing through his blood evened out and became steady as he continued to hold her. .

“This is nice,” she remarked idly as she closed her eyes and let the security and peace wash over her.

“Nice?” he chortled. “With you in my arms, the last thing I feel is nice.”

She smiled at his sentimental words.

“What I meant is I’ve never felt this safe before. Not ever.”

His throat clenched at her blunt words. *Never felt this safe before?* It was a cardinal law among Immortals to protect and cherish their women and their children, but above all else, their children, as they held the future. No child should ever live in fear, afraid of the world and those around them. He held her closer, letting her sweetness seep into his pores and trying to squelch the desire to go out and destroy those who had hurt her.

“You will never be haunted again. I give you my promise.”

She pulled away and looked up at him, her eyes misty, and filled with admiration and trust.

“I know.” She raised her hands and let her fingertips trace along his lower lip.

*Who knew a man whose muscles had the feel of steel would have lips as soft as velvet.*

His body hummed at her thoughts. Her skin was so soft against his lips. The slip she wore was for her modesty, but was a thin barrier as he felt her hardened nipples against his chest. She pressed her body to him as she tipped her head back. Her lips were slightly parted, inviting him to kiss her. His stomach tightened at the appetizing vision—her peaches-and-cream complexion tinged pink in maidenly virtue and her strawberry red lips lush and plump, ripened sweetness he had to taste.

He accepted her invitation with nibbling kisses. He nipped and sucked her lower lip while he licked along the upper. Parting her teeth with his tongue, he delved into her mouth. His tongue swept in and around, tickling her palate and cheeks before it touched the tip of her tongue.

He reached up, capturing her hair in his grasp, and covered her mouth with his. She held perfectly still as the kiss deepened, his tongue stroking hers. She sighed softly, tilting her head to the side, giving him better access to her mouth. He took advantage of her movements to ravage her mouth, his tongue twining with hers.

Without breaking their kiss, he sat up and moved her to sit upon his lap, wrapping her legs about his waist. She gasped into his mouth as his cock nestled into the juncture of her thighs. He didn’t give her a moment to think as he ardently kissed her. She raised her arms in shock and then, as he continued to slant his mouth over hers, she rested her hands upon his shoulders.

Rumbling in satisfaction, he slid his hands along the sides of her throat. She shivered when he lightly traced down to the straps of her slip and slid them off her shoulders. Slowly, he trailed lingering kisses to the underside of her chin, down her throat to her shoulders. Richelle tipped her head farther allowing her hair to drift along her back.

Valya pulled his head away to look at her. Her slip stretched across her full breasts, outlining her areoles. He bent his head and sucked her nipple into his mouth through the silky fabric. She moaned as she ran her fingers through his hair to pull his mouth closer to her breast.

He flicked his tongue over the fabric, bringing her nipple erect. Opening his mouth, he ran his tongue over the bud before enveloping it. He sucked hard, eliciting a squeal from Richelle. She gripped his hair tighter. He sucked her teat harder.

When he had her panting, he switched his attentions to the other breast, repeating his actions until her nipple was fully erect as well. He pulled his head back to admire his handiwork. The wet fabric clung to every bump and showed the slight pink coloring of her areole.

Using his pinky, he tugged the fabric down to reveal her breasts. They were luscious and deliciously inviting. He bent his head to suck the sweet treat into his mouth while his hand cupped her other breast. Her hips rocked against his erection as he continued his suckling. He bit down on her nipple and Richelle yelped, thrusting her hips forward.

Valya smiled and switched to her other breast, treating it to the same pleasure as Richelle continued to moan and thrash in his lap. Reaching between them, he placed his hand over her pussy. She jumped at his touch.

“Valya!”

He didn’t respond—he just rested his hand there as he flicked his tongue over the very tip of her nipple. It didn’t take long for her to relax into his touch. He began to toy with her damp curls. He slid his finger along her slit, aided by her dewy desire, until he found her hidden nub.

“Valya, what are you...oh, oh.”

He growled and she shifted faster against his rigid proof of desire. She moaned louder, throwing her head back. He flicked his tongue faster as he played with her clit. His cock began to leak. He desperately wanted to be in her as she came, but he wanted to give her this moment even more. He wanted her to know the pleasure he would give her for eternity.

“Oh, please...please.”

“That’s it, that’s it. Reach for it and I promise I’ll teach you to fly.” He opened wide, covering her fleshy mound, and sucked hard as he squeezed her clit. Her body began to shake

“Oh, my...oh, Goddess,” she yelled, clinging to him. He released her breast to watch her as she came. She wore an expression of sheer bliss as beads of perspiration formed on her forehead. He opened his mind to share her pleasure. She held her breath through the waves of ecstasy he created within her.

He rocked his hand against her pussy to bring her down gently from the pinnacle he had taken her to. When her aftershocks subsided, she dropped her forehead to his.

“I never...” she panted, trying to catch her breath.

“I know,” he replied and then kissed her quickly. He pulled his hand away, her cream sticky on his fingers. He brought them to his mouth and sucked her sweet taste while she watched. Her eyes grew large as he licked his fingers clean.

When he was done, he stared at her mouth. He wanted to kiss her. Actually, he knew what it was like to kiss her. He wondered what it would be like for her to kiss him—to have her take the lead and show him how she wanted to be kissed. His hunger grew at the thought of how she would press her lips to his—would she be sweet, or demanding, or curious. He growled at the thought.

“Kiss me,” he commanded. Tentative at first, she did as he ordered. She leaned in and touched her lips to his. *Such a shy little temptress*, he mused. He remained still as she mimicked what he had done, licking and sucking his lips before covering his mouth with hers. She parted her lips as she gently wriggled her tongue between his lips. Their tongues met, dancing slowly together.

Her kiss was soft and delectable, yet she could stir the beast within him. Wanting more, he sucked her tongue into his mouth, inviting her to explore his mouth in much the same way he had explored hers. She was an avid student, copying the movements of his tongue as she traced his palate with the same tickling wriggles, tasting the sides of his mouth before running her tongue along his teeth.

It was when she ran her tongue over his extended canines that she pulled back with a start.

\* \* \* \*

She expected to find sharp fangs, but was surprised when she actually felt the points at the end of the incisors. She still pulled away from Valya, as nervous as a cat in a rocking chair factory.

They were so different...he was an Immortal. But more so, everything was moving so fast. These new experiences left her wanting more from

Valya, from life. But how does a child who never learned to walk learn to run? Her body craved Valya in ways she'd never imagined; her mind rationalized to back off and think things through; and her heart needed time to catch up.

"I'm sorry...I mean, I want you, but..."

"It's all right, Richelle. I understand."

"But I..."

He stopped her short, placing his finger upon her lips and shushing her.

"I understand."

His eyes conveyed such consideration, she relaxed. She took a deep breath and smiled.

"Thank you."

She realized her ignoble position—sitting in Valya's lap with the top of her slip about her waist. Blushing, she pulled up her slip to cover her breasts and placed the straps on her shoulders. The way he watched her as she dressed unnerved her. He looked at her like he was ready to pounce, and her breath came in short pants.

"It's all right, Richelle. I *do* understand."

He placed his hands on her hips and slid her off his lap to sit beside him, their hips touching.

"Do you want to look around?"

She nodded. Straightening up to get her bearings, she perused her new home.

It was big. No, it was humongous! Architecturally designed as an industrial loft, it was one large room with a twenty-five-foot ceiling. A kitchenette was off to the far right with a dining set for two beside it. To the left was a seating area with a contemporary entertainment center holding an elaborate stereo system and music library, but no television.

On the front wall hung a set of double doors framed by two large windows on either side. Wide-slat blinds offering maximum defense from sunlight covered the glass. There was light from six hanging bell lights, their soft light highlighting the colors of the room and shapes of the sparse furniture. There was additional track lighting and several artifacts and pieces of artwork hanging on the wall.

The entire apartment looked like it had been professionally decorated in shades of wine, gold, and black, chicly tasteful. It exuded a sense of



masculinity, but was cozy despite the enormity of the room. Everything was so enormous—the size of the room, the entertainment center, the ceilings...even their bed.

On display as if it were the focal point of the room, the bed was oversized and made of brass, sitting upon a step-up floor so it was slightly elevated from the rest of the room. The mattress was plush and soft, a direct contrast to the metal spindles of the headboard. With black silk sheets and burgundy comforter, an air of decadence surrounded her as if she had stepped into the sultan's tent to share his bed.

"I thought Vampyres slept in their coffins." She giggled, unable to keep the laughter from her voice.

"I am not a Vampyre, I am an Immortal," he responded and then did an extremely good impersonation of Bela Lugosi. "Besides, sleeping in a coffin would not be nearly as enjoyable as having you sleep in here with me," he replied as he wagged his brows at her.

"And not nearly as roomy either."

"Soft bed, soft woman, what more could a man want?"

She averted her eyes and giggled like a flirtatious high school cheerleader with the quarterback of the football team.

He held her chin between his thumb and finger and turned her to face him. His expression was solemn, and his eyes were sincere.

"But seriously, don't believe everything you've seen in old Vampyre movies. Mortals have a habit of explaining things they don't understand. They take facts and twist them into fiction, sometimes for the better. But mostly, for the worse."

"So I shouldn't worry about being turned into the undead by having an Immortal drink my blood?"

Valya flinched. She would pick that.

"There have been some mortals who were changed to the *undead* by a Vampyre. But it is against Immortal Law to do so. Converting someone in that way takes away the person's choice. And in all matters, we cannot make the decision. It must be *their choice*."

"Free will, and all that, huh?"

"Yes." He nodded. "We are Immortals, governed by ancient laws determining right and wrong. And if an Immortal chooses to turn away from those laws, he becomes what men call a Vampyre, bent on destruction and

mad with the lure of power. A Vampyre is judged and sentenced; to death. It is a matter of choice. Even in the matter of our life mates. When an Immortal finds their life mate, whether they be mortal or Immortal, they must *choose* to bond together and complete the ritual.”

“You mean, after all this...I can say no?”

\* \* \* \*

His gut clenched again. *What if she says no?* He had waited so long for Richelle. He could just complete the ritual and then spend eternity making her happy, begging her forgiveness. But that would be abandoning all he had been taught, everything he believed. And he would not be able to live if she never forgave him for forcing the decision upon her.

“Yes, you could,” he affirmed through clenched teeth.

She could sense his uneasiness, his agitation if she would turn away and leave him. She snuggled back into his arms, resting her head in the crook of his shoulder.

“You were right about what you said in the cave,” she started as she ran her fingertip over his pectorals, making large figure eights around his flat male nipples. She liked the sharp intake of his breath as she came dangerously close to touching them. “I know about Immortals but understand very little.”

“I have had centuries to learn the teaching and laws of my people. You cannot be expected to learn so much. You will learn in time.”

“What’s involved with this bonding ritual? I mean...what happens?”

Clearing his throat, he raised his free hand and placed it behind his head, propping himself up.

“The first blood is the easiest. It is when I taste your blood for the first time. If you were Immortal, we would both taste each other for the first time.”

“And make love the first time?”

“No, not necessarily make love, but it is more pleasurable when we do. It is much like how we feed. Those who haven’t found their life mates usually have to hunt to find their sustenance.”

“Couldn’t you just go to another Immortal for your...sustenance?”

“We could, and do, if we are in the same area. But there are so few of us, and even fewer females among my race. It was decided long ago by the elders that if our race is to perish, then we would spend what time we have left in the service of mankind, finding ways to help men survive and destroying evil.”

“Well, why are there so few Immortal females?”

Valya sighed heavily as his thoughts drifted to the past. Images from history filled his mind; untrained Immortals eager for battle, sacrificing their lives for others; those who chose to turn away from Immortal Law humanely put to death; humans, not understanding the difference, hunting Immortals and Vampyres and gruesomely killing them. It was a shadowy history filled with anger, betrayal, chaos, and death. But he was leaving the darkest part out.

“And the females?” she questioned again.

Valya shielded his mind from her so she could not see the horrific images of their torturous deaths.

“Although stronger than humans, Immortal females are not as powerful as males. They make easier targets, so many of our females were murdered by so-called *Vampyre hunters*.” Involuntarily, memories of his sister surfaced. She had a joyous spirit, so innocent and giving, a child of the world not unlike Richelle. And her existence, like a candle in the wind, was snuffed out with no more remorse than swatting a mosquito.

His parents’ anguish when he carried her small, lifeless body home was inconsolable. His father threw himself into battle, vowing death before dishonor, and kept that vow three years after he buried his daughter. His mother, without her daughter or her life mate, faced the Dawn, leaving him alone to carry on. It was then he began his training as a Guardian, an elite sentinel dedicated to the protection of good and destruction of evil.

As a Guardian, it was his duty, his right, to seek out the guilty and bring them to justice. When he finally found them, the unbridled rage he unleashed upon those who had destroyed his family did not compare with any justice he meted out in battle. It was a dark episode in his life that he would not let be repeated.

He was blocking his mind from Richelle. He didn’t want her to see the images of how Vampyre hunters killed their victims. He was grateful when she didn’t press the issue.

“What about the second blood?”

“Second blood is a little harder. At first, there will be a physical sensation unlike any other you’ve known.”

She winced. “Pain?”

He snickered. “Hardly. A wondrous, euphoric feeling like nothing you’ve ever experienced or imagined.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with that.” She smiled like a Cheshire cat and giggled. “Although I can’t imagine it being any better than when you kiss me or touch me so...intimately.”

His cock jerked at her words. Closing his eyes, he growled low as he reined in his lust. He took a few deep breaths before responding slowly.

“Afterwards, you’ll feel lightheaded, dizzy, and nauseated. You won’t be able to eat or drink anything. You’ll feel like you’re drowning in murky water, unable to think clearly. And part of your memories will be affected.”

“Affected?”

“Missing. Muddled. Some will be intact without any problems. Others...will be just be gone.”

Understandably, she gulped. It was an unsettling thought not having your memories to rely on, to guide you.

“For how long?”

“Until the third blood and we complete the ritual.”

“Wait a minute. I thought you said it was my choice to bond with you.”

“It is.”

“Well, if I’m not able to think straight and my memories may have more holes than Swiss cheese, then how can I choose?”

Valya held her close as he began to stroke her hair, trying to soothe her as much as he was trying to calm himself, wanting to give her the answers she wanted but fearing her reaction to the truth.

“Life mates *choose* to bond but have been pre-destined for each other. For that reason, some intuitive, instinctive need in our genes draws us together. We recognize our mates, and based on that sixth sense, we complete the ritual.”

“But I’m not Immortal,” she argued. “What if, when the time comes, I don’t recognize you?”

Squeezing her tightly against him, he kissed the top of her head.

“You will.”

Her head jerked up at his words. She stared at him with anxious eyes.

“But what if I don’t?”

He rubbed the tip of her nose with his before kissing it lightly.

“Then we don’t complete the ritual.”

“Has that ever happened before? An Immortal not completing the ritual?”

“Just once,” he replied gravely.

“What happened to him?” she asked.

He didn’t want to answer but she deserved the truth. “He is a Vampyre.”

\* \* \* \*

Her face scrunched in disbelief. She stared at Valya for a moment before she lay her head back down against his chest.

“How terrible.” She lay silent, trying to absorb everything Valya had told her. It seemed that the only way to get everything they dreamed of was to let go of everything they had. And trust fate. She didn’t know if she could trust anyone like that again. She had already lost everyone she had loved. How could she take this leap of faith?

What if she lost Valya because she didn’t recognize him?

What if she lost Valya because she didn’t complete the ritual and he turned Vampyre?

“I don’t know, Valya. There are so many variables, so much to think about.” She started fidgeting in his arms, and sensing her emotions bubbling beneath the surface, he loosened his hold.

“It’s natural to be nervous. After all, this is akin to a bride’s pre-wedding jitters.”

“But usually, it’s the groom who has the jitters, not the bride.”

His smile was one of genuine warmth and sheer love.

“This groom has waited for his life mate for too long. I knew the moment I saved you as a child you were destined for me. Even if you do not trust yourself, I do.”

She calmed slightly, reassured for the moment. She didn’t know what to do. Should she turn left or turn right? She was making this decision for a lifetime. And in the case of Immortals, a lifetime was...forever.

"I-I just don't know. I know I've never, *ever* felt about anyone the way I feel about you. But I was alone for so long..."

"So was I," he interrupted, taking her head and pressing it against his chest. Her sleek tresses fell forward and caressed his hot skin in a silky promise. "I know we are destined for each other. I don't want to be alone, without you, another moment longer."

Her heart was pounding in her ear, but as she pressed closer to Valya's chest, she heard nothing.

"You have no heartbeat," she whispered.

"You are my heart. I am incomplete without you. Once the ritual is complete, our hearts will beat together as one forever."

Many women would have given their eyeteeth to have a man declare undying devotion for a lifetime. After all, wasn't that the stuff of romance novels? But Richelle was scared.

"I need some time to think this through. Can you understand?"

Valya sighed.

"I can give you time."

"Thank you."

"As long as you spend that time with me," he added quickly.

"All right. I can do that." She sat up with her back to him and diffidently covered herself with the sheet. She glanced over her shoulder and gave him an affectionate smile. She could see how his cock spiked beneath the covers, ready to lay her back down and complete the ritual this moment.

Instead, he released her to wave to a closed door off to the side.

"I suggest you go get bathed and dressed before I insist we spend the rest of the night in bed."

She jerked up, dragging the sheet with her and wrapping it around her body.

\* \* \* \*

He chuckled at her maidenly modesty. It did little to curb his desire, knowing full well what those luscious mounds looked like, how they felt against his hands, how her nipples melted on his tongue like sugar. He watched as she sashayed off to the bathroom, his hungry eyes devouring her

with each step. When she closed the door behind her, he quickly got up. His black leather pants materialized on his body along with a t-shirt.

But then, remembering her words about his choice of wardrobe, the t-shirt disappeared to be replaced by a burgundy poet shirt. *That should please Richelle.* Stepping over to the glass doors, he placed both hands on the two handles and pulled the doors open. As he stepped onto the balcony, he inhaled deeply, invigorated by the myriad of smells.

The downtown district of Royal Oak was alive with activity and energy. Music filled the night as people sat at outside cafes and walked along Main Street going from bar to bar. There weren't many cars traveling the street, but the foot traffic was plenty, which was good for him. He needed to feed. It had been too long since he'd had the taste of human blood. Wolf's blood had a better taste, but there was more energy and power in human blood.

Impatient, he jumped from the balcony to the street below, concealing himself in shadows along the building. No one noticed him as he swooped down from the sky to walk among them. Immortals were able to shield their presence from those they hunted, whether it was to feed or root out the evil. That's what made them extraordinary hunters.

He watched and waited. Finally, he found his mark. Two lovers aimlessly walked arm in arm, passing the various cafes and shops, talking idly and enjoying being with each other. They glowed, having just made love, not that anyone else on the street noticed. His stomach tightened as he felt their joined hearts, their communal energy. He wanted that for himself and Richelle.

Following close behind, he basked in the power flowing from them. As they rounded a corner, he swamped them with a pheromone designed to lure and calm an Immortal's quarry when they fed. Placing his hand upon the man's shoulder, Valya greeted him like an old friend. The man responded in kind, introducing his fiancée, whom Valya met with a chaste kiss upon her cheek.

He walked along with them, listening as they chattered on about their wedding next weekend, their plans to leave for California to spend two weeks in a rented beach house. Longingly they gazed at each other as they talked, and for a moment, Valya envied their intimacy.

He guided them along to a deserted street between two avenues before turning to face them. His eyes swirled with colors and light, and he spoke to

them in another language, his lilted accent mesmerizing them. His canines descended, but the couple showed no fear as Valya stepped forward and drank from the man first so he would have more time to recover from the bite and be there for his woman.

From the first swallow, he felt revitalized. The man's blood was thick and heady, like fine brandy. It was concentrated with strength of conviction and filled with passion for his lady. He was careful not to take too much as the woman watched on, her breathing steady and shallow. He pulled back to seal the pinpricks with a lap of his tongue before steadying the man against the wall. Then he turned to the woman.

She had an innocent beauty, like a doe walking in a meadow. Unafraid, she walked into his personal space and tilted her head to one side. His fangs slid into her delicate neck. Her taste was light and bubbly, like champagne. As their blood mingled within Valya, its power slammed into him like a freight train. He took one last, long draw before pulling away. Her skin more fragile, he had to lap at the pinpricks and the surrounding skin to repair the bruising already starting to show.

He leaned her against her fiancé and continued to speak with them while their senses returned with the fading pheromones. When he felt they were ready, he led them from their hideaway onto the main street. Bidding them both a fond farewell, he left them as they walked along to a small coffee house and stepped in to take a seat at a window table. They were none the wiser for their encounter.

Valya watched them for a few more moments as a waitress brought over their coffee and a piece of cheesecake. They talked, sipping their coffees as he fed them both the cheesecake. He slid the fork from her mouth and leaned in for a lingering kiss. For a moment, Valya envied them in their ability to freely share their love. He decided to give them a gift. He surrounded them with an aura, intensifying their love for each other. It wasn't long before they left their dessert behind and left arm in arm.

He watched them until they entered an apartment building on the corner. When he was satisfied they were in no danger, he decided to walk back to the loft, letting the rhythm of the night imbue him with its power. He would need to be at full strength to prepare for the battle ahead. He knew far more about Preacher and the Believers than he wanted to share with Richelle.



Many of the Believers were nothing more than Vampyre hunters who had banded together under the direction of the man known as Preacher. Claiming to have spoken to God, Preacher was delusional in his beliefs. He prophesized Richelle had to be rescued from evil Vampyres bent on the destruction of man to be delivered to God and become the next Queen of the Heavens. It was a twisted version of the truth. Preacher was merely a pawn in one madman's race for victory, for domination—*Luka cel Rau*.

Once a celebrated champion among the Immortals, Luka found his life mate among the Immortals and *chose* not to bond with her. From that moment he began a descent into the depths of insanity. He abandoned the ancient teachings and turned Vampyre. A few Immortals, tired of serving ungrateful mankind and wanting to find riches and power of their own, joined his ranks.

Luka found followers amidst the mortals. Preacher and his faction believed Luka's warped version of the truth: that Richelle was *Luka's* life mate; that *Luka and Richelle* were destined to bring a new order to the World; and that *Valya and the Immortals* were the evil ones endeavoring to destroy mankind. For some unknown reason, Luka had fixated on Richelle, and his perverse lies would destroy her and all mankind.

Valya would never allow that to happen. Luka would have to kill him first before he would allow his precious Richelle to be sentenced to the Living Death. Having battled before, Luka would find it to be a formidable, if not impossible, task to defeat him. In the end, one of them would perish, and with that death, the world would either be saved or condemned to damnation.

But for the moment, the only way to protect Richelle was if they completed the bonding ritual. If they were bonded, Luka would not be able to take her as his life mate as part of some unknown dastardly design for domination. Somehow, Valya would have to find a way to sway Richelle to complete the ritual and become his life mate. *But how?*

The memory of the lovers as they strolled along, talking, sharing, so obviously enamored with each other played over and over in his mind. In their lover's world, no one else existed. That's what Richelle needed, a chance to get to know him. Not Valya the Guardian or Valya the Immortal, but the man Valya. No courtly gestures or grand exhibits of adoration, but a

simple *date*, something typically human she could relate to and relax so they could get to know each other.

But what did humans do on a date? Where did they go? He had no experience in what Immortals considered a primitive sexual ritual. As Immortals, there was no finding out if someone was right for you. They were either your mate or not. All others were consenting sex partners. And having lived in solitude, he was positive Richelle had never gone out on a date before either. He wanted it to be memorable, special, magical.

He picked up his pace. While he needed time to think of something, he didn't want to leave Richelle alone for too long.

\* \* \* \*

Richelle gasped when she walked into the bathroom. It was palatial, just as awe-inspiring as the rest of the loft. Done in the same shades with gold fixtures, the room had a regal air. The décor was more Victorian than contemporary, with a claw-foot tub and vanity with feminine touches of scented soaps, bath salts, and candles. Next to the vanity was a dressing table holding a few bottles and a silver brush set. Beyond the dressing table was a small closet where two dressing gowns and several dresses hung.

She fingered the dressing gowns. They were so soft, some satin, some silk. She'd never had anything so fine. She removed a satin lavender one and draped it over the seat of the dressing table and then turned. Leaning over the tub's edge, she adjusted the water temperature and put in the stopper. Spotting a jar on the vanity, she lifted the lid and sniffed. *Mmmm, smells nice.* She threw some of the bath salts in and put the jar back.

Dropping the sheet to pool at her feet, she looked at her reflection in the mirror. Reflectively, she ran her hands over her breasts, down between them, over her stomach to rest on her hips. She turned her head from side to side, examining her features. *No, I don't look any different.*

Nothing outwardly had changed, but on the inside, something had definitely changed. She felt completely different even before she returned home. Before, she had always been afraid—of other people, of being alone, of change. Then the opportunity came to be a part of Dr. Samuels' elite team.

She was terrified and excited at the prospect of doing something important with her life, something that mattered. Her biggest fear had been

she would spend her life merely *existing*, never truly *living*. She had learned with the death of her mother and Duncan life was a precious commodity not to be wasted. She had always expected to live in fear from the old priest...Preacher.

Having little confidence in herself, she was unsure in her decisions and actions. Nonetheless, she had completed her education, which had helped her grow in poise and self-assurance. More and more she could see she had shut herself off from the world and now she wanted to become a part of it. She just needed to learn how to face and overcome her fears.

Turning to shut off the water, she stepped cautiously into the steaming tub, the soothing salts seeping into her skin and relaxing her. She lay her head back against a folded towel and closed her eyes. She thought of everything that had happened over the past few days and marveled on how wonderful and unexpected life could be.

Never dreaming she would be able to leave a mark on this world, here she was ready to embark on an exciting new career as well as have a chance at a true relationship, a never-ending romance. If she was brave enough to take a chance.

Dipping her head beneath the water, she pondered, *What if I take a chance and fail?*

Coming up and pulling her sopping curls away from her face, she countered, *What if I don't take a chance? I'll never know.*

Shampooing her hair, she weighed all the pros and cons.

*I could leave and focus on my career, live alone for the rest of my life. But Valya could turn Vampyre. I could agree to the ritual. But what if I don't recognize him? What if he's wrong and we aren't destined to be together?*

She dipped below the water again, to rinse the soap from her hair as she tried to wash away her fears and insecurities. Coming up, she pulled back her squeaky clean tresses before resting her head on her makeshift pillow.

Valya had been a physical presence in her life for two days, and yet she felt as if she had known him all her life. He said he had watched over her, protected her as a child, loved her. *Would it be so unbelievable if we were destined life mates?*

Standing, she let the cooling water cascade over her body. She grabbed a bath towel from the towel bar and wrapped it around her. Stepping out of

the tub, she sat at the dressing table and picked up a comb. She parted her hair and began to comb out the tangles. When she was done, she stared vacantly at her reflection in the mirror.

*My entire life has been a series of secrets and hiding. I always prayed to the Goddess for the possibility to stand in the sun with my head held high and yell, "It's me, Richelle. I'm here. I'm real, and this is my life."* Her hair neatly clipped up, she threw the comb disgustedly on the table.

"This is the chance you've been waiting for, so why are you so afraid to take it?" she yelled at the woman in the mirror.

She put on the dressing gown and loosely tied the belt around her waist. She needed to find Valya, to talk to him. She didn't know what she was going to say to him, as she still hadn't figured out everything, but one thing was for certain: She *wanted* to take that leap of faith.

\* \* \* \*

Valya was sitting on one of the high stools at the bar in the kitchenette. He was sipping a dark red liquid from a wineglass. Richelle was a little grossed out at the thought he might be drinking blood from a crystal goblet.

"Is that...?"

"Cabernet, 1956. A very good year," he replied. "I have an exceptional wine collection."

She nodded as she surreptitiously peeked up from downcast eyes. He had changed his clothes. He wasn't wearing the black t-shirt from earlier. Instead, he wore a flowing shirt in a rich shade of burgundy paired with his black pants and boots. His leather pants perfectly outlined his firm thighs and taut butt as he sat on the stool with one foot resting on a slat and the other touching the floor. All that was missing was a saber and he'd fill the bill as pirate—dangerous, sexy, and mouth-wateringly hot.

"Richelle?"

"Oh...I'm sorry. What?"

"Would you like some?" He held the glass out to her. Hesitantly, she accepted the glass and took a small sip. When she handed the glass back to him, he turned it and without taking his eyes off her, he drank from the same side her lips had touched.

She was an ingénue, inexperienced in the ways of seduction between a man and a woman. She couldn't think of anything to say. She had things she wanted to say to him when she was in the bathroom, but they had flown out of her head as she watched Valya's sensual lips touch the rim of his glass to drink his wine.

"I thought Vampyres, I mean Immortals, only drank blood." She took the seat next to him, watching her hands as she nervously played with the long drape of her robe sash.

"We enjoy food and wine for the taste, but we can only get nourishment from taking blood."

"So, did you?" She didn't want to bluntly ask if he had gone out and hunted, taken blood from some faceless person. She hoped she would never have to hunt. She didn't think she could hurt someone like that.

"Yes. And to put your mind at ease, I did not hurt them."

"Them?"

"A man and woman. Affianced."

"Oh, Valya." Concern laced her voice. "Are you sure they're all right?"

"Yes, sweeting. Do not be afraid. They're perfectly fine. They are enjoying coffee and dessert at the corner café."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, they won't even remember what happened. I was very careful, as careful as I was with your wolf friend."

She sighed in relief. She didn't like the idea of anyone getting hurt so someone else could live.

"Tell me, Richelle. Does it repel you to think Immortals drink blood to survive?" He held his breath, waiting for her answer.

"Well, not really. I mean, it's your nature. I just don't like the idea of anyone getting hurt."

"Remember that. It's our nature. Immortals are not Vampyres. We take great care to not hurt a person when we are feeding. Much like some Wicca honor Mother Earth for their sustenance, whether it's flora or fauna. Do no harm, and all that."

"You studied Wicca." More a statement than a question, she was still surprised.

"I have studied many things, from music and art to strategy and weapons. Maybe I will teach you."

"I'd like that. I love art. I went to the Detroit Institute of Art with my mother before she died. I always wanted to learn how to draw."

"If you'd like," he paused to clear his throat, "we could go to the DIA tonight. They have a special exhibit of paintings this week."

Cocking a brow, she looked at him suspiciously. "Are you asking me out?"

Valya coughed and sputtered. "As a matter of fact, I am."

"I don't know." She was hesitant to say yes. The thought of going out in public, around other people. Yes, the continuous voices had stilled...for the moment. What if they came back while they were on a "date"?

"You're broadcasting again."

"What?"

"You're worried about being in public—hearing voices, sensing feelings."

She nodded. "Yes."

"I will teach you how to build walls around your mind."

She eyed him for a moment or two. If she learned how to control her gift she could go out in public and not worry about feeling pain. Yes, she would go out with Valya. She'd love to see the exhibit at the DIA, but not tonight. Tonight, she wanted to run and jump and shout. And you couldn't do those things in a stuffy art museum.

"Perhaps another night."

"Oh." His dejected tone brought a slight smile to her lips. He really wanted to do something for her, to do something she wanted to do. And there was one thing she had always wanted to do.

"What I mean is, I don't want to go to the museum. Can we still go out tonight?"

He smiled broadly, his eyes dancing with the possibilities of where they could go and what they could do.

"Anywhere you'd like." His voice cracked excitedly. "We could go dancing at DB Coopers, or have dinner at Memphis Blues and listen to the band."

"No. There is one thing I've always wanted to do. I asked my mother once, but she told me it was too dangerous. And then there were too many people. But with you, I think I'd be safe."

Valya puffed up but was humbled by her trust, a trust he was sure never given considering her bleak existence.

“Tell me. Where would you like to go?”

“I want to go to a carnival.”

## Chapter 5

Valya wasn't sure if taking Richelle to the carnival was the best idea, but she seemed so excited to go. And all his worries were soon allayed by the sheer joy she exuded at the novelty of all she was experiencing. Like a child at a circus, she oohed and aaahed at the bright lights, loud music, and carnival food surrounding her.

He almost laughed when she dragged him to a shooting gallery. He had never picked up a gun. With the strength and skill of an Immortal coursing through his veins, there was never a need. The forged metal and carved wood mass felt strange in his hands. He grew impatient at his first few feeble attempts, missing his targets. He became irked at Richelle's snickers and the barker's chant of "better luck next time."

But he knew what Richelle would want and nothing was going to stop him from giving it to her. With a wicked grin, he took careful aim, and without so much as batting an eye, he knocked down the targets in smooth succession. Laying the rifle on the counter, he turned to see the barker staring slack-jawed at him.

"I believe that makes me a winner," he idly remarked.

The barker had to blink and shake his head a few times before responding.

"We have a winner," he announced, reaching overhead to one of the stuffed cats hanging above. "A sweet little cat for a sweet little lady." Richelle's smile faded as she limply reached out for the prize.

"No," Valya corrected. "That's not what she wants." Turning and smiling at her, he paused expectantly. "That one," he stated as he raised a hand and pointed at a snowy white wolf with blue eyes. She smiled widely when the barker took down the toy and handed it to her. She held it gingerly, running her fingertips softly over the fur, the muzzle, and the ears before she



hugged it to her chest. A happy tear trailed down her cheek as she rocked and hugged the toy wolf closer.

*"Molly."*

Valya watched her lavish such emotions on Molly, and his outrage escalated. It tore at him to see her weep even if they were joyous tears. Molly was more than a toy wolf—she was a physical bond to Adelaide. He remembered how Richelle as a child clung to her wolf as he carried her away.

He wasn't able to stop the Believers from destroying her home and belongings. All he could do was to protect her, hide her away from them until he could teach her how to use her gifts to sense danger for herself. He would teach her the ways of the Immortals so she could protect herself. Until she accepted him as her life mate, he would not leave her side. She would never be unprotected again.

He himself had never known the solace to be found with a childhood toy, but then again, he was never truly a child. He had been born an Immortal, a Guardian. And from the time of his birth, he had been raised with the knowledge and gifts of a Guardian. He had always borne the weight of good versus evil on his shoulders, knowing that his destiny was honor or death.

But Richelle had been a child, an innocent. She knew nothing of the harsh realities of life, of the evil that existed for the sole purpose of destroying the good of the world. Her life should have been filled with laughter and gaiety. Instead, all she knew were secrets and death. He could not take away the pain of her loss, and her pain was his.

But the delight he saw in her laughter through tears mended his torn soul and withered spirit. Then she looked up at him, her tear-rimmed eyes filled with an adoration that filled him completely with emotions he could not define. It was more than devotion, more than love. He knew that this was the woman he had waited centuries for and would spend eternity with. Her life was his but more so, *his* life was hers, 'til the end of their days together.

It was Richelle who took the first few steps toward Valya. Up until now, it was always he who approached her. His heart swelled as she neared him, the thrumming of her heartbeat as intoxicating as her scent. His nostrils flared and inhaled her body's perfume, cutting through the myriad scents

from the carnival surrounding them. The expression on her face was mesmerizing. It made no difference how many people were around them. She was the only one he saw, the only one who mattered.

She stood before him, still cuddling the wolf to her heart. She leaned down and rubbed her cheek against the soft fur, the ears brushing against her skin, before turning back to stare into his dark eyes. They were dark with desire, each holding a golden flame in the center as he watched her.

“For a moment, I didn’t think you would truly know what I wanted.”

He stood motionless as he listened to the words echoing the uncertain feelings tying her in knots he sensed. She was afraid to trust and to love. But when he claimed her, she would never again be afraid. She would know that she was loved above all others for eternity.

Tentatively, she placed her hand upon his chest and took a step closer. It burned, branding him as hers. He struggled to breathe at the nearness of her, as she leaned in until she was a kiss away from his lips. Her words were feathery when she spoke.

“I should never have doubted you. I will never doubt you again.” She closed the hairsbreadth space to kiss his lips. Soft as rose petals, her lips slid over his in a sweet promise. He stood, fighting the ancient power coursing through his blood demanding that he take her from this place now and claim her as his life mate.

As she pulled away from him, he had to tamp down the beast roaring to be released and assert his dominance. But he could not fight the genetics of his race—his canines elongated. His lips pulled back in an unpremeditated hiss, flashing the gleaming white of his fangs assured to instill fear in his enemies.

But not in Richelle. She didn’t flinch or back away. She stood and watched him as if spellbound. Taking his hand, she stepped closer, showing no fear as his Immortal nature emerged. She pressed against him, leaning in to kiss him again. She let the tip of her tongue trace over the length of his canines. He stopped breathing altogether at her actions. This time, she showed no fear.

Oh, how he wanted to take control of her kiss, to dominate, to mark her. He wanted to take her to her knees, fuck and feed from her as all Immortals took their life mates. But he would not...not yet. Despite the fact that his body was hard and ready, she was not. He would not take her virginity that

way. He would take things slow, until she came to him with no dread and absolute trust. Then he would show her how an Immortal was meant to love a woman...his woman.

She broke her kiss away and slipped her arm around his. She leaned her head against his shoulder as they leisurely strolled through the crowds.

\* \* \* \*

A set of malicious eyes hidden in the shadows glowed red with rage. He watched as Valya and Richelle strolled down the corridor. A low growl rumbled from his chest as he watched them turn a corner. He stepped out into the corridor, bumping into a rather burly rube. The stranger recognized him as the man depicted on the posters about the carnival—Big Huey, Strongest Man in the World

“Hey! Watch where ya goin’, bud!” he said gruffly, “or someone’s gonna get hurt.” Big Huey flexed his pectorals. Both men were of the same height, but Big Huey outweighed his unintended challenger by at least seventy pounds.

It didn’t make a difference. The stranger sneered insidiously.

“Maybe it will be you.”

The singsong quality of his voice was the direct opposite of his malevolent intent as he took a finger and pushed the behemoth lightly on the shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

Big Huey groaned. It felt like a dagger slicing into his skin, hitting his shoulder blade. It took all the strength he had not to fall to his knees as he was moved out of the way and the stranger passed. He gripped his shoulder and turned quickly, trying to see what direction he went.

Gone. There was no sign of him. He straightened up and rolled his shoulders back, relieving some of the burning.

Now the bastard had made him mad. He turned and started down the corridor, looking between the booths and tents. *I’m gonna find that bastard, and when I do, I’m gonna make him sorry for ever crossing Big Huey.*

\* \* \* \*

Richelle couldn't believe the ease she felt being with Valya. Before he came into her life, there was no way she could attend a carnival. She would have been overpowered with all the thoughts and emotions running rampant, the strength of which could kill her. But not only was she able to block out the feelings of others, she found herself very relaxed, almost serene, walking through the crowds of people.

In teaching her to control her telepathic and empathetic gifts, Valya had opened a new world to her, one of excitement and freedom and love. She did not have to hide away from other people, to hide from the unbidden pain of their thoughts and emotions closing in on her, suffocating her with their presence. In opening the door to that world, she was also able to open her heart to all the experiences that she had seen others enjoy from a distance.

She could be normal.

She could be happy.

She, finally, could be free.

Gripping Valya's forearm a bit tighter, she burrowed closer into his side, rubbing her head against his chest, loving the way the silky fabric of his shirt caressed her cheek. He turned his head to gaze at her. He clasped her hand as he held her firmly against him. She felt no fear. In fact, she felt empowered. Here was a being, a man, a Guardian of all good. He had seen the world age and change over the centuries. He had seen and done things she could only dream of. He held the power and wisdom of the world in one hand, and her heart in the other. He had entered her dreams to become her reality, a reality that celebrated the night instead of hiding within it. She inhaled deeply, intoxicated by his uniquely masculine smell. But she also was enticed by another scent, just as intoxicating, but sweeter. "Mmm."

Valya grinned at her murmur of glee, sensing her delight at the scents of caramel, sugar, and apples.

"Would you care for one?"

"Yes, please. It smells so wonderful."

He laughed at the excitement and enthusiasm in her voice. "Wait here for me." He disengaged her arm and headed over to the stand.

Richelle looked around at the different attractions, idly stroking the fur of her new wolf. She couldn't help herself, she couldn't stop smiling. The

emotions were so overwhelming, but in a good way. She never imagined it could be like this. To be in a crowd of people and still feel like they were the only two people on earth.

But they weren't alone. Richelle heard something.

At first it sounded like a bee buzzing, but then she heard the soft murmuring.

*"Richelle, come to me."*

She looked about, trying to get a bead on where the voice was coming from.

*"Richelle, come to me."*

The voice was husky, cracked. She didn't recognize it, but it became clearer as it called to her. It was an old woman.

*"Richelle, come to me. I have a gift."*

She looked to the left and there, just off the midway, was a solitary tent. It was dark with navy blue curtains decorated with stars and moons. She walked toward the tent, drawn by an inexplicable sense of urgency, but she couldn't separate if it was her feelings or those of the old woman beckoning her.

The noise of the carnival drifted away like an old memory until only the tent remained. She parted the curtains and stepped inside. The smell of patchouli and sandalwood filled her senses as her eyes adjusted to the darkness inside, illuminated only by a few candles lit on the table. Sitting at the table was an old woman dressed in green and purple with gold coins adorning her clothes. Her hair was silvery-white, and her voice aged, indicating that she was very old, but her skin was unmarred by any lines or blemish, smooth and untainted like fine porcelain.

But most startling were her eyes...sapphire blue, bright and shimmering like jewels. They held a fire deep within their depths, but looked upon her softly. She motioned to the chair opposite where she sat, and Richelle accepted the offer. As she sat down, she noticed there was not a sound to be heard. There was no noise from the carnival outside and no noise inside. She saw chimes hanging, swaying, but they did not ring. Absolute silence.

"Welcome to my home, Richelle." Her voice, despite the faint Slavic accent and husky cracking, was melodious to Richelle, like a grandmother speaking to a child.

"How do you know my name?"

The woman chuckled softly. “There are a great many things I know.” She struck a match and slowly lit a pillar candle in front of her, illuminating her face and giving the illusion of serenity and wisdom. “There are many things you need to know.” She casually placed the snuffed match in a copper censor to her left.

Richelle watched the old woman’s calculated movements as she blessed the table with burning incense and chanted a quiet incantation over the pillar candle.

“I am Madame Selene.”

Richelle was fascinated by Madame Selene’s hand motions, the way they swayed as if she were dancing to music despite the fact that she didn’t rise from her chair. The whole scene was surreal. Atop the table were the tools of the craft arranged similar to an altar, but not quite. A silver chalice, an athame, a mortar and pestle, and a cauldron all circled a tarot deck.

Madame Selene picked up the tarot deck and began to shuffle the cards. There was a strange image of a pentagram with a circle on a mottled background of black, blue, purple, and green. It was mesmerizing watching Madame Selene handle the cards. The images seemingly pulsed with life as the colors swirled rhythmically. It was spellbinding.

Meticulously, Madame Selene laid the cards out before her three in a row—the Empress, the King of Pentacles, and the two of cups. She studied the cards for a moment and then looked up at Richelle.

“We have waited a long time for your arrival, my child.”

“You have?” Richelle asked, her brow furrowing.

“Oh yes. Your coming was foretold long ago.” She picked up the cards on the table and added them to the deck. She held out the cards for Richelle to take, which she did, clasping them between her hands.

A plethora of questions ran through her mind as the cards grew warm in her hands. *Who are you? What am I to become? Why am I here? Why did my mother and Duncan have to die? Who are these crazy people following me? Why does the Evil One haunt my dreams? Will I ever be safe? Know life? Know love?* As her mind burned with all her queries, Richelle noticed that her hands were becoming increasingly warmer, the cards seemingly drawing energy from her until they were almost too hot to handle.

The seer held out her hand for the cards. As Richelle handed them back and looked at her hands, she could swear she saw the strange image from the

tarot cards engraved into her palms, very light, similar to a henna tattoo, but definitely there. And then it disappeared before her eyes.

“So many questions for one so young. And so many that you know the answers for but are unwilling to accept.”

“How do you know my questions? I haven’t asked anything yet.”

The old woman chortled lightheartedly, amused at Richelle’s responses.

“You have the heart of a child who has ridden a unicorn, but the doubtful nature of an adult who will not believe unless you ride the unicorn yourself.” She began to lay the cards out in a pattern on the table. First one, and then another lying sideways across the first. One to the left, one to the right. One above and one below. And then she placed three face down beneath the pattern.

“Who I am is of no concern. Who you are to become is up to you. You are here to fulfill the prophecy. It is your destiny. And Adelaide and Duncan died because that was *their* destiny.”

Richelle swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump in her throat. She had not wanted to believe her mother’s death and Duncan’s were preordained. She believed one’s path in life was determined by one’s choices. But there were a finite number of choices in each decision, which led to other paths, which led to other paths.

But ultimately, no one was beyond the reach of the Tapestry of Life the Fates wove. Death was a bitter fact of life. It could not be avoided. It could be rejected and delayed, but in the end, it all fell on the Circle of Life.

Her eyes became misty as she thought of her mother and Duncan. She had never mourned the passing of either. She loved them both so dearly, and yet she had never truly grieved for them. Instead, she spent her energy on the unfairness of their needless deaths, her emptiness at being left alone, her vow to live in solitude so no one would get hurt because of her...so she would never know such hurt again. Selfish castigation. Never once did she celebrate their lives, the joy they brought to her life or the sacrifices they made for her.

As if sensing her self-reproach, Madame Selene patted her hand and smiled ruefully, her eyes reflecting the wisdom that came with age and the empathy of one who had suffered much pain and sorrow in her life. Richelle sniffed as she wiped her eyes.

“All my life I have been told about this so-called *prophecy*, but no one will tell me what it is. What is this prophecy and what does it have to do with me?”

Madame Selene’s smile fell, and she became somber. She spoke in a hush, as if the walls of her tents had ears.

“Long ago when the mountains were young, mortals and Immortals shared the land. A village at the base of their mountain became aware of the nature of the Immortals, of their great power and their need for blood, and they feared the Immortals even though no one from their village had ever been attacked or injured by one. The villagers raised crops, raised livestock, and raised families. They lived in fear the Immortals one day would destroy their village.”

Richelle stared at the crystal ball sitting upon the pedestal as it began to glow. An iridescent mist filled the orb, and figures appeared in the shimmering haze.

“But their fear was misdirected towards the Immortals. There *were* evils threatening their lives, but they came from outside their peaceful mountain home, evils in the shape of both man and beast.”

Richelle watched silently as violent images appeared in the crystal—raiders pillaging hapless villages, women tortured and raped, men and children murdered. Mythical demons she had seen only in children’s fairy tales descended upon villages and utterly destroyed them. Horrified, she stuffed a fist into her mouth to muffle her scream of repugnance and to drive down the nausea churning her stomach.

“The Elders of the village, in the hope of saving their people, went to the Immortals and implored for their protection. The Immortals knew well how the humans feared them. The humans were distrustful and suspicious, even of their own kind, let alone a powerful race such as Immortals. The Great One, leader of the Immortals, saw this as an opportunity to bridge the gap between their two peoples and show the humans they had nothing to fear from them.”

Richelle gasped at the image of The Great One. He was strikingly handsome, with long, flowing silver hair and silvery eyes. He was an imposing image and was unquestionably the most handsome man she had ever seen...aside from Valya. He shook hands with a portly man, no doubt an elder from the village.



“From that day, the Immortals became the protectors of mankind. They used their strength, wisdom, and powers to protect the humans of the mountain from evil.”

The images in the crystal ball showed Guardians such as Valya fighting off armies of invaders as well as demon spawn, driving them from their mountain home. Richelle gasped as she saw a familiar face in the battle. Valya, a much younger, leaner version but still her Valya. She watched in schoolgirl admiration as he battled fiercely against the marauders despite his young age in comparison to his comrades.

As the images faded and turned to fog, Richelle leaned forward and touched the crystal with her hands, willing the pictures to return. She felt the seer’s hand cover hers, drawing her attention from the absent images. Richelle met Madame Selene’s compassionate expression. She settled back into her chair as Madame Selene pulled a slim black cigarette from her cloak and lit it from the burning candle.

After a long inhale, she blew out a stream of smoke that hovered over the table like a halo. Cloves. Richelle smelled the distinct odor of cloves. The scent was both invigorating, yet calming as Madame Selene continued, her somber expression foretelling the appalling change in the history of Valya’s people.

“For many centuries, the pact between man and Immortals was upheld, and there was peace in the mountains. Humans lived their lives in peace with no fear, believing the word of an Immortal to be unbreakable.”

She paused again to take several draws from her cigarette. The smoke lingered, creating a mimicked image from the tarot cards, the same image Richelle had thought she saw burned into her palm.

“Time passed. And as the destiny of all things, with the passage of time came change.”

Shimmering again, the mist of the crystal ball faded to reveal two men, apparently Immortals based upon their size and features, arguing with each other. One was The Great One. The other was a young blond. Although he was as handsome as any other of his race, she sensed there was inexplicably something sinister about him.

“Though a proud and honorable race, Immortals were not immune to the temptation of evil or to the lures of the seven deadly sins. There were those

who sought only to fulfill their basest needs and desires, thereby desecrating the pact made by The Great One with the humans.”

Images of deceit and betrayal appeared in the mist, of humans fighting in vain against ostracized Immortals. She stared aghast at the level of malicious cruelty they inflicted as the weak were tortured and murdered. The sheer barbarism as they fed and enslaved the minds of their victims appalled her.

“They believed humans were nothing more than chattel to serve their needs. As those corrupted blatantly exhibited their power and enslavement of those they were bound by oath to protect, humans began to hide in distrust and fear of all Immortals. Over time, the humans came up with a new word to call those who had fallen and preyed on the helpless, consuming their blood and destroying their souls. Vampyre.”

Madame Selene became silent as the images faded and the crystal ball became dark. Richelle sat back in her chair, not realizing that she had been so intent in viewing the images that she was all but standing atop the table. She rubbed her eyes, sore from staring unblinkingly at ghostly images from the past.

As Madame Selene took the last draw from her cigarette and snuffed it on a brass plate to her right, her expression softened. Richelle could swear there was a twinkle in her eyes. Madame Selene reached over and took Richelle’s hands, squeezing them reassuringly before lifting her hand to stroke a few stray tendrils from Richelle’s cheek.

“And now the time for change has come. It has taken many centuries, but with your arrival, the prophecy can be fulfilled.”

“Madame Selene, all my life I have been told about being part of some prophecy,” Richelle stated calmly. She reached up and pressed the old seer’s hand against her cheek, seeking some small measure of comfort. “Please, Madame, won’t you please tell me why I have been hunted? What is this prophecy?”

Richelle’s hand hovered in midair as Madame Selene pulled her hand away to place it on the table, almost touching the tarot cards lying before her.

“Among the Vampyres, there was a very powerful Immortal called Luka cel Rau, who was particularly cruel. When Immortals first started to protect mortals, he took great delight in openly defying The Great One. He was

chosen to train the Guardians in their duties in service to the humans. But instead, he searched for those who believed as he did, that humans were nothing more than cattle to work the field and serve as food.

“When The Great One learned of the deception, he cast Luka out, condemning him to the outside world, never to return to the mountains again. Luka vowed vengeance. He vowed to enslave mankind, destroy the Immortals, and create his own lineage of Immortals.

“It was then the Great One revealed the vision from his dreams. Luka would not fulfill his legacy of evil. He would be thwarted in his plans by a union between the Immortals and the humans. A Guardian would take a human bride descended from aristocracy, blessed by the Goddess, as his life mate. Their joining would unite the peoples from both races, and together, they would destroy Luka and his followers. *You* were born to save our world.”

Richelle’s brow knitted in bewilderment. All the devastation and death that had followed her through life was based upon what? A future wedding that *may* come to pass?

“Madame, how can they be so sure that *I* am the woman of the prophecy?” Richelle questioned as she tried to process this new information. “Over the centuries, I’m sure there have been other women who have been more powerful, more deserving than I.”

Madame Selene’s chuckled response only confused Richelle more. She didn’t see anything remotely funny about being targeted by religious fanatics and Vampyres with visions of supremacy for believing she was something she wasn’t. Her family, while affluent in the old country, was not descended from aristocracy. And the so-called blessing from the Goddess had never been more than a curse to her. *It has to be a mistake.*

“No, my child. There is no doubt you are the one to fulfill the prophecy.”

“But how can you be so sure?”

Madame Selene smiled and pointed to the cards lying before her.

“It is in the cards. You must accept your destiny.”

With her lower lip starting to tremble, Richelle shook her head as if her disbelieving would negate the reality of the prophecy.

“Please. It can’t be me,” she stated, trying to remain calm. “I don’t do well with people. I can’t be in a room for more than five minutes without

trying to escape the pain. I know little about the Immortals and even less about humanity. I've always lived alone with minimal contact with other people. How can *I* be expected to save the world?"

"With faith and love. You must believe in yourself and your love for Valya. You must believe that when the time comes, you will have the strength and courage to do what needs to be done."

Richelle's lip stopped trembling as she gazed into the immeasurable depths of Madame Selene's eyes. They were as boundless as the universe, filled with stars twinkling in their rich blue hue. Her eyes still reflected the wonder of a child and belied her advanced years and the troubles of the world. They were the eyes she imagined belonged to a kindly grandmother to whom you could tell anything and she would understand.

"I'm not that strong," she confessed.

Madame Selene reached over to clasp Richelle's hands again. With a raise of her chin and a proud smile, she lovingly reassured her.

"You will be."

\* \* \* \*

It took some time, but Valya finally made it to the head of the line and purchased a caramel apple for Richelle. Before he had lost his sense of taste, he was taken in by the enticing aroma, just had Richelle had been. But one taste was enough, especially since the rich sweetness of the caramel was deflated by the gooey substance sticking to his fangs. He looked like a dog eating peanut butter, and it was an experience he did not wish to repeat.

But it was an experience he was excited to share with Richelle. To watch her enjoy this sweet treat with all the relish and jubilation of a child pleased him. More than he wanted to admit.

It had been a long time since he had felt any emotion. But when he did, they weren't like this. Before, his emotions were harsher, darker. And now, those were overshadowed by the tenderness he felt for Richelle. Now he wanted nothing more than her happiness and would do anything to lay the world at her feet. For him, those feelings were both intimidating and empowering. And on some level, that scared him.

But not as scared as he felt as he returned to where he had left Richelle and found her gone. Frantically, he looked about, but she was nowhere in

sight. He closed his eyes and tried to sense where she was. Nothing. He broke into a cold sweat as bile rose in his throat.

The caramel apple slipped from his fingers as he began searching, trying to rein in his emotions. If she were still at the carnival, he should have been able to sense her. Again, nothing. Going from tent to tent, he tore through amidst confusion and chaos of the inhabitants. His mind screamed out trying to reach her. He had just found her. He would not lose her now.

As he searched, he prayed to the Gods she was all right. He hoped whoever was trying to take her from him would also pray to the Gods for mercy.

For he wouldn't show them any.

\* \* \* \*

Richelle gaped at the strange pictures on the cards before Madame Selene, trying to decipher the message the seer could read. To Richelle, it was merely a jumble of colors and eccentric imagery. *It doesn't make any sense. None of this makes any sense*, she thought as she slouched in her chair and rubbed her temples.

Everything was coming at her so fast she barely had time to catch her breath. Finding out about Duncan. Losing the cabin. Learning about Preacher and his Believers. About Luka. And Valya.

*Valya. Oh no!* Richelle abruptly sat up in her chair. *Valya has no idea where I am.* Looking about, she tried to find the opening in the tent where she entered.

"Do not fear, my child. Valya is near, searching for you."

"I have to go to him." With the attacks by the Believers, she didn't want to imagine what Valya could be thinking. Saying he was overprotective was an understatement. At the least, he reminded her of a mother hen hovering over her chick as she took her first steps. And at the most, he was a predatory hawk, ready to swoop down on anyone who threatened her. She rose from her chair to leave, but Madame Selene patted her hand, encouraging her to stay.

"Before you leave, I must warn you."

Richelle gave a quick harrumph under her breath. Religious fanatics and evil incarnate were chasing her, not to mention her so-called "boyfriend"

appeared to be more than a few centuries old. What more could there possibly be?

“Valya is a good man. He loves you like no other.”

In that, Richelle had no doubt.

“And he is a strong man,” Madame Selene continued. “Strong enough to defeat Luka to protect his rose, but so strong he may crush the rose he holds in his hand. You must learn from his strength as he must learn from your trust. Otherwise Luka will defeat you both.”

“What must I do?”

Madame Selene chuckled as she drew another cigarette from her robe and lit it. After taking a long drag and exhale, she quirked a smile at Richelle. She stood, taking Richelle by the hand to pull her from her seat and lead her toward the flap of her tent.

“You, my dear child, must grow thorns.” She pulled aside the curtain and gave Richelle a small push outside the tent. “Now, go find Valya as I fear he may be causing some trouble as he searches for you.”

Richelle stopped a moment to let her eyes adjust to light. She hadn’t realized how dark it was in the tent. And as her vision cleared, the silence she had enjoyed disappeared. It crept up on her slowly, but soon her head was filled with the voices of those around her. Remembering what Valya had told her, she closed her eyes and inhaled slowly, deeply. She envisioned a wall around her mind, trying to shut out all she didn’t want to hear.

Slowly...as slowly as the voices had crept in...she was able to shut them out. She smiled at her accomplishment, as easy as leaving a room and closing the door behind her. She opened her eyes and looked about. She watched people walking arm in arm, waiting in lines for the rides, talking, screaming, and laughing. But in her head, it was blessedly silent, and she could have wept for joy. She couldn’t wait to tell Valya.

That is, if she could find Valya.

Looking around, she didn’t see any sign of him. *How am I going to find him.* She hurried down a few of the corridors, searching for him. He hadn’t left the carnival she was sure. Like a tickle she could sense his presence in the outer reaches of her mind.

*I wonder. Can I open my mind enough just to see what I want to see and find Valya?* Gathering her resolve, she inhaled deeply and envisioned herself opening a window just slightly before she stopped and called out. “Valya.”

No response.

Pressing on, she opened the window a little farther and called out again.

*"Valya."*

*"Richelle?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Where the hell are you?"*

*"I'm still here at the carnival. I can't find you."*

*"Stay where you are."*

An image of a cool breeze rushing through the window surrounded her. As the coolness touched her skin, she felt it grow warm. Like fingers, it caressed her skin before it evaporated around her. And then suddenly Valya was standing before her. She stared at his hard expression as he glared at her, his chest heaving as if he had run fifty miles. His displeasure and anger roiled off him, and she stood motionless under his scrutiny. She felt another emotion much stronger rise to the surface. *Is that fear?*

Before she could offer any explanation, he crossed the distance separating them, crushing her in his arms before his mouth captured hers in a possessive, soul-scorching kiss. Her head swam under his onslaught. He angled her head to give them both better access, and forged his tongue into her mouth. There was no resistance as he thrust repeatedly into the warmth of her mouth. Savoring her taste and relishing every soft contour, he licked and stroked, encouraging her to tongue to dance with his.

And she met that challenge, lick for lick and stroke for stroke, as he wrapped his arms around her, constricting her like a python until she couldn't breathe. She tried to pull away. Hearing his grunt before he twirled her around, he gripped her tighter. She heard his thoughts as they slipped into her head.

*"Mine. Mine."*

*"Valya. Please let go of me."*

*"No! Mine."*

She felt his hand threading through her hair to grip the back of her head and pull her mouth even closer, his mouth devouring her as his fangs nipped and scraped her lips. Her mind was filled with his echoes of "mine," over and over, and he refused to release his hold.

*"Valya. Please let me go."*

His answer was nothing more than a growl.

*"Please, Valya. It's hard to breathe."*

He loosened his grip and pulled his mouth away from hers. With his hand fisted in her hair, he gently pulled her head to rest on his chest. Feeling the rise of his chest as he breathed heavily, she tried to think of something to calm him. She brought her hand up and stroked a length of his hair while she snuggled into his embrace. His breathing had slowed but was still erratic.

"You scared the hell out of me," Valya growled.

"I didn't mean to," Richelle replied.

"But you did." He idly stroked her hair. His voice broke as he spoke. "I couldn't find you or sense your presence. I will never feel that way again."

"I'm sorry." And she was. She didn't mean to worry him. She hadn't noticed the time or how long she was in the fortune-teller's tent.

"Where were you?"

"I was talking with Madame Selene."

"Who is Madame Selene?"

Pulling away, she gazed into his eyes and nodded toward the direction she came from.

"She's a fortune-teller. She's amazing. You've got to meet her. Her tent is over there."

"Over where?" he asked, looking over the top of her head down the fairway. He grudgingly loosened his hold as she turned to point in the direction she came from but the "over there" died on her lips. The tent was gone. Richelle blinked several times, unable to believe her eyes. Pulling herself from Valya's slackened embrace, she hurried down the corridor to where the tent once stood, with Valya close on her heels.

There wasn't a trace of Madame Selene's tent. Not even the grass was disturbed.

\* \* \* \*

She kept circling where the tent had stood, muttering under her breath. "It was right here, it was right here."

Valya watched her with concern, unable to do anything to help. Yet another new emotion he didn't want to experience again...helplessness. All he could do was stand, watch, and wait until Richelle came to him.



He didn't have to wait long. She turned and looked at Valya, confusion marring her innocent beauty.

"She was right here. Her tent was right here."

"Madame Selene?"

She nodded. "I don't understand. What's going on?"

"Are you sure she was here?"

"I was with her from when you left to get us some caramel apples until you found me."

Valya didn't doubt her. Living alone as she did, she had no wily or designing ways. Part of her allure was her candid sincerity. The fact that it was a part of his life mate's nature was a piece of good fortune he was afraid to question. If Richelle said there was a Madame Selene, then it was so.

But Valya knew he had to do something. Her unsettled emotions were driving him to the brink of madness. Crazy when he couldn't find her, he was ready to tear the carnival apart to find this Madame Selene, to give her some peace. He couldn't sense anything other than what his eyes could see. Whoever this person was, she knew well how to hide herself. And until he knew why, she was a threat to Richelle.

"Am I losing my mind?" she asked, interrupting his thoughts. His heart sank. He wanted this evening to be special, to give Richelle a taste of some of the wonderful, magical things she had been denied. Not to be yet another reminder of all she had lost. She stood her ground with those damnable silent tears brimming in her beautiful sea-foam green eyes.

Valya did the only thing he could think of to try and erase the tears. He opened his arms to Richelle, his eyes reflecting understanding, offering comfort. She accepted by walking into his embrace and resting her head upon his chest. Stroking her hair and back, he crooned words of encouragement, of peace to calm her. Unconsciously, he began to rock her in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

She relaxed further into the warmth of his embrace, letting the heat seep into her pores, easing the eerie chill she felt to her bones. Thinking over the past few days, Richelle admitted her lack of knowledge about Valya but also her inexperience in expressing her emotions, in sharing herself. She tried to

sort through the bombardment of emotions consuming her thoughts of Valya and of them together.

Her feelings were not merely schoolgirl fantasies of hero idolization or gratitude for his saving her life. They ran so much deeper than that, so deep she felt she was drowning in a fathomless sea. While she knew it would take time to sort through everything she was feeling, she knew one thing for certain. She loved Valya, with a love she hadn't believed she would ever know. She now believed that she and Valya were destined to be life mates.

And being unable to express what she was feeling in words, she chose a way he would understand. In her mind, she went to the part of herself she kept locked behind a door. Never once had she left herself open and vulnerable, keeping her most intimate thoughts deep within herself where no one could reach them or use them to hurt her. But now she wanted to share that part of herself with Valya. Opening the door, she invited Valya in.

\* \* \* \*

Startled, Valya pushed Richelle away so he could look into her eyes. Her eyes were filled with an overabundance of trust and love. Richelle was opening herself willingly, choosing to be vulnerable enough to invite him into her mind, an invitation he would not ever refuse.

Cautiously, he walked through the open door and was amazed by the depth and intensity of emotion. How she managed to hide her burning passions beneath her icy cool exterior proved to him the immense power within her. But now that she had opened her every emotion to him, there was no hiding the deepness of her abiding love...for him.

*"You never said anything."*

*"I didn't know how to say it," she meekly conveyed. "I've always been so afraid of feeling anything. I've lost so much."*

*"I know."* His thoughts wrapped around hers, cocooning her in a blanket of warmth and trust. He wanted to give her the same gift she had given him, to show her the same amount of trust. So he opened his mind and offered his thoughts and emotions to merge with hers. Richelle started to cry, and Valya pushed her away again.

*"I'm sorry, Richelle, I didn't mean to hurt you."*

“You didn’t hurt me,” she stated, stepping back into his embrace. “I was just a little overwhelmed.” She giggled nervously. “Emotions can be a little scary and a little difficult to deal with.”

He hugged her tightly to him, planting a kiss on her forehead. “I know what you mean.” They stood there for a few moments, just enjoying the nearness of the other. Valya didn’t want to bring up her absence again, but he needed to express his anxieties.

“Richelle, promise me you won’t disappear like that again.”

She tensed for only a moment under his hand, but it disappeared quickly. “I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“I know you didn’t. I want you to be able to enjoy yourself, explore your new world. But until I can take care of this matter with Preacher and his Believers, I need you to be more careful.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know, but you must learn not to be so trusting. You know nothing of this Madame Selene. She could have been sent to hurt you.”

Richelle’s brow furrowed. She didn’t believe Madame Selene was going to hurt her. She didn’t sense any deceit from her. If anything, she felt serenity.

“I don’t think so. I think she was sent to help.”

“What makes you think so?”

“I don’t know,” she uttered as she shook her head.

“Who do you think sent her?”

She looked up into his concerned face. “I don’t know.”

He leaned down and kissed the confusion from her brow before softly kissing her lips.

“It will be all right,” he murmured against her mouth as he kissed her again, thoroughly, deeply. And Richelle believed him.

They were both breathing raggedly when he pulled away. He was immensely pleased with himself as he gazed at her glassy-eyed expression and swollen lips. He rushed in and quickly pecked those lips again. And again. With a smile, he led her down the fairway, strolling like newlyweds, his hand resting on her hip. She lay her head against him with her arm slipped around his back and hand resting atop his shoulder.

Tonight, he knew Richelle would accept him, offering her blood to him willingly. It would be the first of three times, binding them as life mates. But

for now, he was content to show her the wonders to be found in the night. *Maybe I'll share with her the joy of flying*, he mused as he gazed ahead grinning like a love-struck teenager. Still in a daze, he pulled her by the hand and led her down the aisle toward the Ferris wheel.

Strolling along, Valya realized Richelle never got her caramel apple, but he wasn't going to go back for another. He had a better idea. Stopping at a nearby vendor he bought a bag with mixed pink, blue, and yellow tufts inside. She watched him open the bag and then raised her gaze to him.

"Cotton candy," he stated as he pulled off a piece and fed it to her, letting his fingertips graze her lips before he pulled them away. He watched her rapt expression as she tasted cotton candy for the first time. She closed her eyes and sighed.

"Do you like it?"

"Mmm," she answered as she nodded her head. "It's wonderful. Sweet, it just melts on my tongue."

He held up another piece. She opened her mouth and let him place the cloud-like confection on her tongue. She held it there for a moment before she closed her mouth, giving an impish smile.

Valya watched her keenly, his cock responding eagerly. His body sang with want, but the night was young and there were still sights and sounds he wanted to share with her before they returned to his...no, *their* home. Still, he couldn't resist the sweet temptation she presented. He rushed in and kissed her soundly, his mouth muffling her shock as his tongue swept in. Richelle was definitely sweeter than cotton candy. He felt her hand upon his chest as she pushed against him. She did her best imitation of his rakish smile.

"Did *you* like it?" she asked, raising a brow and feigning innocence.

His steely rod surged against his tight leather pants at her playful flirtation. He pulled her back against him, trapping her hands between his hard chest and her soft mounds.

"Mmm," he growled licking both the sugar confection and her sweet taste from his lips. She lowered her lashes shyly as he gazed at her lush mouth. His body burned with the need to feel them against him again. Her eyes flashed to his giving him an inviting smile.

"Would you like another taste?"

Valya growled again, nodding his head. But unlike before, there was no mad rush to capture her lips in a searing kiss. Instead, he bent his head slowly. His lips slightly parted as he gently laved her lower lip with his tongue.

\* \* \* \*

Flames of desire licked her neck as she felt her face grow warm.

Just when she thought she would be burned alive by his touch, his tongue slipped past her lips and delved into her mouth. Her toes curled with the fervor of his kiss, and his hand slipped into her hair, holding her head in place, where all she could do was receive his kiss. As he dipped her, deepening his kiss, he opened his mind and let her feel, completely feel, how they were together. And how they were going to be when they came together physically.

Richelle gasped as she experienced the overpowering gift Valya was giving her. No pain, no fear, no voices invading her mind, simply the encompassing adoration a man felt for his woman. That Valya felt for her. Sighing, her body went limp, and Valya set her upright. Her feet were on the ground, but her head was in the clouds.

When Valya had steadied her, he planted tender kisses over her lips and her face. She felt his hands slide from her hair to cup her face as he gingerly kissed her eyelids. And then she felt the warmth of his skin as it pressed against hers, his cheek caressing hers. Slowly, she opened her eyes and gazed up at Valya. He was mesmerized by the misty-eyed longing reflected in her eyes along with the twinkling stars from the night sky.

“Thank you,” she murmured. It felt as if her heart would burst, it was so full of love. Rubbing his nose against hers before he kissed the tip, he hugged her tight. They had not yet made love, but she sensed his feeling of completeness of being with her.

“No, *mio dusa*. Thank you.” He waited for her staunch reminder to not call her *precious heart*, but it didn’t come. Instead, she kissed him lightly on the lips.

“*Come with me, mio dusa, and know what it is to soar thru the night.*” She smiled and nodded enthusiastically

\* \* \* \*

He watched from the shadows, his hatred of Valya escalating minute by minute. The cool night air simmered around him as he watched them—together.

*Damn Valya. Damn all Immortals!*

He would bide his time. Wait until the right moment.

And then Richelle would be his. As she was meant to be.

He was not going to let the so-called prophetic ramblings of an ancient healer who should have ceded his position centuries ago dictate his will.

*Mine is the only will. My power, the ultimate power. And all Immortals, the entire world, will kneel before me and proclaim me Master.*

He continued to watch. His hatred of all Immortals, of Valya, grew with each passing moment. He would *enjoy* watching them suffer as his plan came to fruition, before he destroyed them and took his place as ruler.

He would wait until they exited the ride. He would create some diversion in order to control a few minds to challenge Valya. And while Valya was defending himself, he would have his opportunity to steal Richelle away. They would be gone, their trail covered so Valya could not follow.

*Richelle, and the world, will be mine.*

\* \* \* \*

As they approached the ride, Richelle was amazed by the size of it as well as the mixed feelings she sensed from the passengers. It was awesome with the light and music, watching it spin on the axle and the expressions of anticipation, fear, and amazement on the riders. And she was overcome by an urge to experience it for herself, to not merely live vicariously through other people's lives, but to know firsthand what it felt like to ride the night air.

It only took a few moments for them to reach the head of the line and be assisted into a seat. The carny pulled down the bar as Valya settled his arm about Richelle's shoulder. Stepping back, the burly operator pushed the lever, and they began to rise slowly as more passengers got on.

Stopping at the top, she could gaze out across the grounds. From up here, it all looked so...new, so unlike the world she was accustomed to. And then, the wheel lurched forward as it started its descent. The ground came up fast, and then they were rising again to the top. On and on it went. And she loved it. She settled back into her seat, snuggling against Valya's body, and let herself be taken away by the new sensations.

She felt as if she were truly flying as the wheel continued to turn. She looked out over the carnival. The lights twinkled in the night like earthbound stars but nonetheless brilliant in their illumination. Richelle knew that there was ugliness in the world, but there was little she could do. She had cloistered herself away from the dismal existence of the outside world and survived. But she had never lived.

Down on the ground, the fairways were dirt, littered with rubbish from the carnival goers. But up here, it looked almost...beautiful. Looping her arms with his, she nestled her head upon Valya's shoulder. He placed his hand over hers and gave it a little squeeze. Gazing up at him, she gave him a little smile.

"Do you like this?"

"Oh, yes," she cooed dreamily. "It's wonderful."

\* \* \* \*

His heart soared. Even as a child, there was always some part of her soul she kept locked away from him. In his wolf form, he assumed she would open up to him. But here, now, she was so open. He could feel her heart skipping with childlike delight, which spilled into him so his heart felt like it was ready to burst.

Slipping his arm free, he draped it over her shoulder pulling her closer, her hand settling on his chest. He could feel the heat of her touch through his shirt, enflaming his body as his cock thickened along the length of his thigh. She had no idea how much she affected him. He reined in his lust, not wanting to frighten her.

Despite her age, she was an adolescent and naïve to the basal needs of a man, of his needs. And the last thing he wanted was to have her be afraid of him the first time he made love with her, the way a man should love a

woman. He wanted her to feel joy, feel ecstasy. He would lay the world at her feet to make her happy.

And up here on the Ferris wheel, with the night and stars embracing them and the carnival grounds illustrating the beauty that could be found around them, the world *was* laid before her feet. If he had his druthers, he would keep her high away from the world...safe and untouched...like she was in the mountains.

He leaned over and inhaled. Her scent, a combination of roses and mountain air, coursed through him, his body becoming hard in response. Unable to resist his animal urges as he caught scent of her pure essence and her growing arousal, he rushed in to steal another kiss.

She accepted the swift intrusion of his tongue as she accepted her destiny as his life mate. There was no denying it any longer—she couldn't deny it was what she wanted with all her heart. By the time their kiss ended, they were both panting, gulping for air. Richelle wrapped a strand of Valya's dark hair around her finger, marveling at how soft it was—how soft he was, with her.

"In case I forget to tell you later..."

"Yes." Valya raised a brow.

"I had a wonderful time tonight."

He placed a chaste peck on her forehead as he held her close, happy he could do this for her.

"And I love you," she whispered quickly, trying to get the words out before she lost her nerve.

He squeezed her so tight she could barely breathe. He held his breath, to capture and keep this moment in time. This moment, when Richelle had declared her love for him. They hadn't known each other long. She'd had to face so many changes in that short time. He thought it would have taken much longer to earn her trust. But she loved him.

"Are you sure?" He didn't know why he had asked. It was what he had hoped for since he found her. But he had to be sure.

"I am sure."

Dumbfounded, it took him a few moments to respond to her avowal.

"Am I that easy to read?"

"No. Even though you didn't say it out loud, I can feel your hesitation. I'll admit so much I'm feeling is scary. But it's scary in an exhilarating kind



of way. I didn't realize how empty I felt until you came. And now I feel as if I'm going to burst. I don't want to lose that feeling. I don't want to lose you."

Valya tried to swallow the lump in his throat. He could feel his blood thrumming through his veins, responding not only to her words, but also to her growing arousal.

"I want to be with you."

Valya's smile was genuine and hot, melting her insides like butter on a hot stove.

"We have all eternity."

"No. I mean I want to *be* with you."

With a hungry look, Valya gazed into her wistful eyes, causing her to gasp. Not in fear, but in unfulfilled desire and wanton hope. Mesmerized by her beauty, he had forgotten himself with his lustful gaze.

"Are you sure?"

Never breaking their gaze, she took his hands in her own.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life." She brought his hands up, letting her tongue lightly trace the outline of his thumb, tasting the saltiness of his skin with the sweetness of the cotton candy, before she nipped the tip. "I'm yours, for eternity. Take me as your mate."

With the growl of a beast that had waited too long between meals, he feasted on her lips, her face, her hands. In his rush, he didn't know where to begin to touch her so he opted to touch her everywhere.

It was when she felt his hands in her hair, gripping her by the side of her head, that she moaned, opening herself completely to him. And he took full advantage of it, letting his hands cup and stroke her body boldly with her shocked gasps and lusty sighs spurring his advances.

She was giddy, dizzy, light-headed, all the while wanting, begging for more. Her head spun as the Ferris wheel spun faster and faster, matching the pace of her racing heart.

Valya broke their kiss, whispering hoarsely into her ear.

"You need to calm yourself, *mio dusa*," he rasped huskily. "Your desires are driving the ride faster."

"How can that be?"

"Perhaps it is a latent power part of your Wicca heritage, I'm not sure. I do know it is *your* desires driving this ride. You must relax."

She could barely reply as he ran his tongue over the delicate shell of her ear.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” he chortled, sending a thrill she felt to her toes. “It’s like closing a door.” He stroked her lobe before nipping it. “You opened the door, you can close it.”

“No,” she shivered. “It’s not that I can’t. I mean I don’t want to.”

No, he didn’t want her to either. With a lusty growl he devoured her mouth using his teeth, his lips, his tongue while several ride attendants tried to slow the racing wheel.

*“Close the door, Richelle.”*

The wheel started to slow until it came to a halt with a slight jolt.

“Start bringing the passengers down!” one of the carnies shouted. “Shut this ride down!”

One by one, the attendants helped the riders off and had them exit. Finally, Valya and Richelle’s chair came down. But it was empty.

“Where the hell did they go?”

\* \* \* \*

At first, Richelle had the sensation of falling. But then she it felt like landing on a cloud with Valya’s masculine form weighing against her. She looked around. They had returned to the loft and were lying in Valya’s bed. How delicious it felt—Valya’s hard physique pressing against her breasts and into the soft mattress beneath her. She wrapped her hands behind his neck, drawing his face closer to hers.

“How did we get here?” she asked against his mouth.

He kissed her soundly as his body covered her like a blanket.

*“How do you think?”*

Not wanting his kisses to stop, she used the same mind link to speak with him.

*“Did you bring us here?”*

*“No.”*

*“Then how did we get here?”*

*“You brought us.”*

*“Me? Impossible.”*

*"No, not impossible."*

He pulled back, gazing at her face. His body responded, his cock seemed to reach for her through his leather pants. There was no denying his desire as she felt his steely length pressing against her leg.

"Do you really wish to discuss this *now*?" Valya asked.

She shook her head. He leaned in to kiss and nibble her neck. Trailing his kisses up over her chin to claim her lips again, she shifted beneath him and moaned.

*"I cannot believe how lucky I am to have found you."*

Pulling away, Richelle wanted...needed to say the words.

"No. I'm the lucky one you found me."

His motions stilled as he lay atop her, her soft body a gentle respite from the harsh life he had led. Here with her, there was no war, no crime, no evil.

Just her.

With him.

Together.

Forever.

"Yes, Valya. Forever," she murmured against his lips. "Claim me. Take me as your mate. Forever." Before he could say anything, she kissed him, putting all the love and emotion bursting from her heart into that kiss.

And then the kiss changed. It went from soul-wrenching first love to blazing passion as he took control of their kiss, slanting his mouth over hers so there was no part of her, body or soul, that he didn't touch as he joined his mind to hers.

Mine. Forever.

\* \* \* \*

People were rushing around the Ferris wheel, looking for the missing couple as he watched from the shadows.

Scurrying around like rats. Hatred oozed from every pore as he watched the humans hunt for Valya and Richelle.

*Where the hell did they disappear to?*

*"Damn Valya!" Damn all Immortals.*

Stalking away, he tried to sense where they had gone. Nothing. Usually he could feel the presence of an Immortal nearby and could even track them to a certain degree. But now, nothing.

*Valya is certainly cloaking her, keeping her from me. But he will fail.*

Leaving the main fairway heading toward the woods, he conceived a plan to capture Richelle. He merely needed to be patient. She would return to the fairgrounds. That much he could sense. He couldn't decipher why, but she would return.

He would have Preacher and his Believers wait. And watch. When she returned, they would take her and bring her to him. Then he would take his revenge against Valya. Against Nicolae. *The Great One*. The mere thought of Nicolae made his blood boil. He was the one to blame! If not for his interference...well, no matter now. *Great One, you have been judged and now it is you who will pay.*

*All the Immortals will pay.*

So caught up in his thoughts, he had no warning when a double-fisted blow to the middle of his back sent him to the ground.

"I told ya I would find ya! No one makes a fool of Big Huey!"

As he began to rise to his feet, Big Huey gave him a kick to the stomach to flip him onto his back. And then another so he was lying on his face again.

"Not so tough now, are ya, pretty boy," Huey remarked with a sneer. "Maybe now you'll learn. No one messes with Big Huey!"

Huey leaned over to grab him by the neck when he disappeared.

"What the..."

Huey spun around and back, trying to see where "pretty boy" had disappeared to. Then, appearing like a bolt of lightning, the handsome blond stood before him wearing an evil smirk.

"How the hell..." he stammered. "Who are you?"

"Pretty boy" kept disappearing, then reappearing somewhere else, causing Huey to spin on his heels like a whirling dervish.

"What are ya?"

The man's eyes flickered from icy blue to fiery red, causing Huey to recoil in fear, a real fear that he'd never known in the past twenty of his forty years.

“I am Luka cel Rau, descendant of Marvoloe cel Rau, oldest of the Immortals. I am destined to be Supreme Master of the World, the giver of Life or Death.” With viper-like movement, his hand snatched out to grab Huey by the throat, squeezing until his eyes popped and he gasped for breath. “And you are nothing more than a rabbit at the bottom of the food chain.” Luka threw Huey away, leaving him staggering on the ground as he approached him with the stealth-like movements of a panther on the prowl. Looming over him, Luka stared down at him with predatory eyes. Like molten lava they burned into Huey’s soul. The stench of fear reached Luka’s nostrils, and he surreptitiously licked his lips.

“I missed my lunch. But as she is not here...you’ll do.”

And with that, Luka made a powerful lunge toward Huey, pinning him to the ground. Luka’s fingernails grew in length to resemble claws, scratching and raking through Big Huey’s shirt and finally through his skin. All the while, Huey was screaming as each pass lacerated deeper and deeper into his flesh.

The slashing stopped.

Through tears and splattered blood, Big Huey looked up at his attacker. Luka stared down at him in derision, his contemptible sneer pulling his lips back while his canines descended. Huey’s eyes grew large, and he was unable to move as he felt the blood spurt from the gashes on his chest with every beat of his racing heart. Luka’s nostrils flared at the smell of fresh blood.

\* \* \* \*

Lunging in, Luka sank his fangs into the flesh in Huey’s throat, finding a vein so he could gorge himself on his prey’s hot blood. Several Believers approached, surrounding the clearing to watch as Luka feasted on his midnight meal.

Some of the Believers turned away in revulsion as Luka gorged himself while others watched on in fascinated malevolence, feeding on the violence of the situation. Luka fed while Huey lay twitching on the ground, still alive. That is until the final moment when Luka crushed Huey’s windpipe, snapping his neck and sending him into blessed oblivion.

Preacher stepped forward when Luka stood. Throwing back his head in a silent howl, his fangs withdrew as he licked his lips, savoring every last morsel of his meal. Preacher watched on helplessly. Too late he had learned of Luka's deceptions and now all he could do was follow orders.

Luka first approached him in Romania, telling him tales of Immortals and Vampyres and the battle of good versus evil. Luka proclaimed he was on a mission to help a girl, Adelaide, fulfill her true destiny. Preacher willingly offered his allegiance. It was later when Luka had killed the girl's parents that he realized he had aligned himself with evil itself.

By then, he served Luka in fear of losing his life if he did not obey. Adelaide had escaped and had a child of her own. Luka then proclaimed it was Richelle who was destined to be the mother of a new race as his bride. Unwilling to face his own death, Preacher led his followers, damning his soul and theirs. "Master." Preacher spoke softly, knowing from years of service to approach a Vampyre cautiously, especially one feeding, since a Vampyre was dangerous as a lion as it consumed its latest kill. "We are here by your command."

Luka's eyes had returned to their pale blue color. There was nothing warm or friendly about the disdainful glare he shot the Believers who dared to venture nearer to the grisly scene.

"She was here."

"The one from the prophecy?"

"Yes. *Richelle*." Luka murmured her name almost reverently.

"Where is she now?" Preacher asked, sorry he had when Luka lowered his head and growled menacingly.

Preacher stepped back as Luka's eyes flashed in rage, while his hands transformed into those of the beast, his nails growing into claws.

Lashing out, Luka struck several of the Believers, slashing through skin and tissue but not taking blood. Rather, it was the outraged tantrum of a spoiled child, Preacher thought. When the rage had subsided, Luka's claws retracted and he spoke.

"She was saved, yet again, by the interference of Fate," he hissed. He sniffed the air. "There is a lingering presence. Faint, clinging to Richelle's scent." He sniffed again, inhaling deeply. "I cannot place it, but it is not...unfamiliar."

*I will not be defeated.*

"I will not be defeated," he declared and then whirled to face Preacher. "I will not tolerate any more interference. I will not accept any disobedience or failure."

Luka pointed at Preacher, who grabbed his head. It felt as if his skull were being crushed in a vise. His eyes bugged out from the pressure, and then it stopped and Luka released him. He fell to his knees as the lightheadedness began to pass. Luka stepped before him.

"Do not fail me again, Preacher."

Preacher coughed and nodded his head.

"You and your Believers will remain here. When Richelle returns, you will capture her and bring her to me. No one is to harm her. Do you understand? Anyone who dares touch her will have to face me. And you know how I punish disobedience."

Preacher shivered. Yes, he knew all too well the punishment for disobedience. No torture ever devised by man was equal to the pure evil that Luka embodied. It was only Preacher's devout servitude that allowed him to avoid Luka's *displeasure*.

He would not fail.

"Have your men scattered through the fairgrounds by twos. They are to remain inconspicuous. They are to *kill* anyone who is with her. Do you understand me, Preacher?"

"I understand."

"I will be waiting at the castle." With a flourish, he turned to leave, but one of the Believers dared to speak.

"What makes you so sure she will return?"

Luka stopped in his tracks. He did not turn or acknowledge the question. But an eerie wind rose uncommon to a warm spring evening, bringing a chill similar to a northern gale.

The other Believers backed away from the one who had spoken. At their reaction, he tried to turn and run but found he was frozen in his tracks, unable to move. He struggled, using his hands to try and lift his feet with no success.

He began to whimper as his body shivered, the cold wind surrounding him and the debris on the ground swirling around him like a tornado. The air grew colder, and he shuddered, wrapping his arms around himself and rubbing his hands against his arms to generate some heat.

In a matter of moments, he stopped moving. His body was as icy blue as Luka's eyes. He was frozen solid. But as Preacher stood and looked closer at the man, he could see his eyes still moving, darting back and forth, from man to man. Stark fear screamed from the bloodshot orbs, although he was forever silent, entombed in a block of ice. And then, with an audible pop, the block of ice disappeared.

"Master?" Preacher wanted to know what was to become of his follower but did not have the chance as Luka turned and gave a charming, beguiling, nonetheless completely evil smile. "I said I would not tolerate any more interference. And I will not tolerate disobedience. So I sent him where he can think about his transgression. For all eternity."

Preacher involuntarily shivered.

Luka commanded with a wave toward Big Huey, "Have two of your men take that carcass to the edge of the forest. Let the wolves finish with the flesh."

Turning again to face the night, he stretched out his arms as if embracing the moon.

*"My bloodlust is sated, and now I go to sate my lust,"* he spoke to Preacher's mind. *"Do as I command. And if you or your followers fail me again, there is no place I will not find you and render my punishment."*

With a great leap, he flew into the night air. His body transformed into nothing more than a shadow, a formless cloud streaking across the night sky.

Preacher stepped over and looked down at Big Huey—his eyes were wide and wild in death. *May the God who deserted me so long ago have mercy on those who stand between Luka and his Richelle,* Preacher prayed disheartedly. *Lest they be damned to darkest depths of Hell.*



## Chapter 6

Valya groaned at the feel of Richelle's breasts as he lay atop her, her aroused nipples poking against the fabric of her dress as if begging for his arduous attention. Like beacons, they drew his gaze and his mouth watered at the thought of suckling them, licking and teasing until Richelle felt the spikes of her first climax.

Knowing that he would be the only man to ever touch her this way, to see her writhe in sexual torment and then her expression of sensual bliss as she came apart in his arms primed his body harder than it had ever been.

He wouldn't feign innocence. He had walked the earth for several centuries. He had known women, many women. But none had ever aroused him to the point where his body was stretched to the point of pain. And he had desired none like he craved Richelle now.

It was more than desire, a physical act of sex and finding succor in the warm embrace of a willing, passionate woman. He wanted to bury himself in Richelle's body, until he felt her in every pore, every muscle, every drop of his blood. And from this day forward, his body would never be able to find succor, to find complete release with any other woman than his Richelle.

Leaning down, his mouth melded with hers, kissing her with reverence and sweet homage, making her body ache for more, which he delivered as his hands began a slow exploration of her body.

Richelle never knew a woman could feel so much pleasure. His hands skimmed over her thigh, his fingertips dipping into the curve of her waist. Stroking and nipping the fullness of her lips his mouth never left hers pleading for entrance. Not wanting to miss a moment of the firestorm building within her, she withheld her reactions with the art of a much skilled lover, wanting to see what he would do to entice her. She was driven by

urges she didn't understand, guiding her as she skirted the roles of both ingénue and seductress.

She shifted her hips, her back arched, pressing her breasts and erect nipples against his chest, causing her to moan as sharp shards of pleasure tingled the tips of her nipples at the abrasion.

Valya was humbled by the soft surrender of the precious gift of her flesh into his waiting arms. *"Open your mouth, mio dusa. Open for me."*

She resisted for a moment more until she felt the tickling of his tongue trying to slip between her lips. She relented with a sigh as his tongue forged forward. He mated his tongue with hers in a seductive tango, a dance of heat and passion between two lovers.

With maddening slowness, he raised the hem of her dress, his fingertips tracing circles along the ticklish creases behind her knees, trailing along the delicate skin of her inner thigh until he reached the juncture of her thighs. His path impeded by her panties, he removed the barrier to the prize he sought. With a sharp tug he tore her panties in two and tossed them aside.

He gently fluffed the curls before he dipped between her folds, seeking the source of ultimate pleasure and knowing he had found it when he felt her slight start coupled with a gasp.

*"You liked that." Oh, yes. She definitely likes that.*

Especially when he nibbled his way along her chin until he could lick and suck on her earlobe as he played with her...*"Oh, yes, Valya. Right there. Oh, Goddess."* He body sang with delight as he touched her.

His fingers parted her folds, rubbing her and tweaking her clit to keep her senses on edge.

And Valya hummed along with her, the taste, the smell, the sight of her flooding his senses as he continued his loving ministrations. His pleasure would be her pleasure. And he wanted to pleasure her, to hear her scream his name as she came.

He continued to kiss her cheek, her forehead, and each eyelid. He paid homage to every part of her before his mouth pressed against hers. Sealed together he captured each small gasp of breath as his own, savoring every bit of her delight.

She was enraptured with the corporeal sensations he created as he slowly dispensed of her clothing. He unbuttoned her dress. Parting it, he revealed the upper swell of her breasts barely clad in the delicate lace

brassiere. Trailing his kisses down the column of her throat, he licked the seam where her skin met lace, causing her to shudder.

She murmured “oohs” and “aahs” as he continued to taste her, enticed by her delicate flavor. Wanting more, he broke the clasp of the front closure to expose her breasts. Her nipples became taut, wantonly begging for his attention. Bowing his head he began licking around her areoles in turn as the rhythm of his fingers strumming her core matched the rise and fall of her breasts.

Her body tingled with pinpricks, delighting in every touch, every sensation. Her eyelids fluttered as he continued to lick and nibble at her lips, chuckling as she shifted uncontrollably beneath him. She didn’t know if she was trying to get away or get closer. *No...closer*. She wanted to get closer. She needed something. She didn’t know what, only that she needed something more.

And she got it when Valya surrounded her areole and sucked, his tongue flicking over her nipple as it bathed in the warmth of his mouth.

*“Mio dusa, you are soft and dewy like a pink rosebud. So perfect for me.”*

Her body bowed, lifting them both off the bed. He chuckled again as he released his succulent treat with an audible pop.

“Did you like that?”

“You know I did,” she answered shyly.

\* \* \* \*

Valya’s body pulsed at her femininely polite response. She had no idea how sexy and desirable she was, from her titian hair and sea-green eyes reminiscent of ancient sea nymphs to her supple body with its lush and rounded curves that beguiled a man so. He thought of nothing else but sinking into her and luxuriating in the silk and satin texture of her skin.

His appreciative ogling warmed her as her porcelain skin took on the shade of champagne blush and Valya’s thoughts turned to enjoying her body like a fine wine, enjoying the flavor and the dizzying feelings of lightheadedness. He licked his lips, knowing he would be the only one to ever sip her sweet nectar, both the sweet flavor of her blood as well as the heady musk of her core. He could not contain his feelings of adoration.

\* \* \* \*

His chocolate eyes watching her entranced Richelle. They sparkled like starlight in the night sky. His gaze was intent, full of longing and lingering loneliness and so much tender desire she could weep.

She remembered the first night in the cave, when his intense stare made her cringe in nervousness and apprehension. But now, all she felt was desirable and the insatiable need for him, body and mind. She wanted to remove the buried emotions of solitude and seclusion Valya was only now beginning to share with her. She wanted to share everything with him, no longer afraid of life or love.

Richelle watched as he sat back on his knees and lifted his shirt over his head. She stared in rapt fascination at his muscular build and broad shoulders, his pectorals rippling as he threw his shirt to the side. She gazed longingly at his tanned, smooth skin accentuated by his flat male nipples. She imagined licking those nipples as he had licked hers, laving and sucking them until he was mindless with need.

He groaned at her implicit fantasies, their mind-link getting stronger as they explored and learned about each other physically. His body throbbing with a yearning that skirted the edge of pain, it craved release. It demanded Richelle. She was in no better shape. She had waited all her life to find someone who made her feel whole. Now they were together, and she wanted that union to be complete, absolute.

With her body surging, stretched taut and waiting to explode, she reached for Valya with a quiet whimper. His response was a low growl as he fell upon her, his mouth covering hers and absorbing every sound as she moaned beneath him. Without the barrier of their clothing, his chest deliciously abraded her nipples to where she couldn't stay still, couldn't remain silent.

As she squirmed beneath him, Valya slipped his hand under the arch of her back, meticulously inching her dress down, sliding it over her legs, both of them fidgeting to remove clothing without breaking their kiss. He tossed it alongside his shirt and then leisurely dragged his hands back up to the juncture of her legs to palm her damp panties.

With the same painstakingly slow pace, he divested her of those panties, taking his time as his fingertips drifted along her thigh, her calf, until the silk and lace was dangling from his hand. He rubbed the damp panties between his thumb and forefinger, growling at her response and at how wet the smooth fabric had become from her creamy essence. He tossed them aside so he could touch the core where her honey flowed.

He touched her folds gently, feeling the slickness of her plumping vagina as he slid his finger in easily. Her tight muscles gripped at his thick digit as it pushed in and out, in and out, careful not to go too deep. At least, not yet.

*"Gods, you feel so good."* He moaned while he continued to slowly stroke and stretch her, preparing her for his cock.

*"I do?"*

*"Gods, yes! And it will be better when I'm inside you."* To emphasize his statement, he thrust his hips, his erection pressing through the leather against her thigh. The fluttering she felt in her womb had escalated to a deep longing blossoming from the tips of her nipples to the pussy he was finger-fucking.

*"I want you inside me. Please, I need you inside me."*

*"Soon, my love. And then for as long as you need."*

*"No. Please. I need you now."*

*"Easy. You need to be very ready, so very ready."*

She wanted to scream in frustration. But he was right. She trusted him to make this good for both of them so she lay back and let him continue his touches as he wanted, letting the sensations course through her and prolong the hunger gnawing at her. But that didn't mean she couldn't do a little touching of her own.

Raising her hands, she began to stroke him lightly. Her fingertips grazed over his shoulders and she raked her fingernails down his back. With the first pass, Valya threw his head back, rumbling at the thrilling feeling of her hands upon him as he dove back into their kiss, ravenous for her taste, greedy for all he could take.

She continued her strokes, enjoying the velvety steel of his skin, marveling at the similarities and differences in their bodies as her hands roved over his frame. She traced figure eights in his lower back, knowing

how much Valya liked the tickling sensation by his broadcasted thoughts, not to mention with every push of his lower body against her.

She wanted to reach even lower, to lay her hands on his rear and feel those muscles clench as he moved, but she was met with frustration. *He still has his pants on.*

He chortled. *"I can take care of that for you, my love."*

He startled her with how quickly he stood, as impatient as she for the feel of their bodies pressed together, skin to skin. She propped herself up on her elbows, watching as he popped the button and undid the zipper. She watched avidly as he peeled the skintight leather over his derriere and over his muscular thighs to kick them aside. When he finally stood before her in all his glory, her eyes grew wide in fascination.

"Oh...my."

"Yeah," he drawled lazily as a corner of his mouth curled and he gave her a lopsided grin. She knew he was large, having had *that* part of his anatomy pressed so intimately against her, but she had no idea.

His hand encompassed the base of his cock, leisurely stroking his thick member as his gaze rolled over her supine figure like water over stones in a river. The crown was an angry ruddy color and glistened as a tiny pearl formed at the tip and trickled over the head. Mouth watering, Richelle merely stared transfixed as he stroked himself again, squeezing just behind the head on the upstroke. Another bead formed and lingered at the tip.

*If I just licked that drop off the tip, would I like how he tastes?* Richelle gasped at her brazen thoughts, her eyes flying to his, searching for...she didn't know what. She had never had such thoughts before. Oh, she had seen naked men before. She had graduated medical school. But beyond the anatomical and analytical study of a man's body, she didn't know what to do.

*"Do not worry, my love. There is nothing you could do that would displease me. It can only bring me joy. As I intend to give to you joy."*

"Oh, Valya." Her heart was full to bursting as tears of happiness formed in her eyes. Valya took a step forward, wanting to bask in the warmth of her gaze and take her in his arms until she became a flame burning bright with their love. He was going to give her the world, his world, to hold in the palm of her hand, to play with as she wished or to treasure as he would always treasure her.

But he needed things from her first: her acceptance, of him and his people; her permission, in the blood ritual binding them together; and her blessing, on their union and for the eternity they would be together. All of it would be meaningless without her happiness. He would rather face the dawn than do anything to bring her pain. He had to be sure that this was what *she* wanted.

He took a step forward, holding her gaze with every step. His hands were fisted at his sides as he took another step toward their bed. His cock was heavy and hard as granite, impressively pointing directly at the object of his desire lying in wait, unconsciously rubbed her legs together. His nostrils flared when he caught scent of her heady arousal, but he was firmly resolved to have the words he needed to hear.

“Do you accept this, Richelle, of your own free will? Do you accept me as your life mate?”

“Yes.” No questions. No hesitation. The time for virginal misgivings were long gone. This was what she wanted. To be with Valya. To be part of his world. “Valya, come to me. You *are* my life mate. Take me as yours.”

Valya’s body throbbed with need at her declaration. His dark eyes became golden with the fire of desire. Placing his hands on the edge of the bed, he placed his knee between her legs, nudging them apart. His eyes flitted back and forth from her curious expression to the glistening red-gold curls hiding her most precious treasure.

He moved down her body. “Spread your legs for me.”

She gave a little.

He moved down a bit more, his nostrils flaring as he caught the musky scent. “A little more.”

She gave a little more.

“That’s it.” Her nether lips spread, her nub peeked out from its hiding place. “So pretty,” he murmured before he lowered his head and swiped at her clit with his tongue. She jumped at his touch, never, *never* expecting he would want to put his mouth *there*.

“Oh, yes. I want to taste you everywhere.”

To prove his point, he swiped at her clit again and again as her hips wriggled away from him.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he growled. His fingers flexed into her hips and he pulled her toward him. He used his mouth and tongue alternately to delight

her delicate tissues. Like a ripe and succulent peach, he lapped up her juices as they spilled from her, licking every drop that trickled from her clit to her perineum. And when she was licked clean, he thrust his tongue deeply into her vagina, his hands holding her in place as he dined on her sweet nectar.

Richelle twisted and squirmed at the pleasure Valya was giving her. It was both marvelous and frightening, the vibrations pulsing through her. When she couldn't push away, she ran her fingers through his hair, grabbing his long locks to pull him away. She was no match for his strength. He simply growled at her feeble attempt and continued to devour her pussy with hungry slurping and sucking sounds. Each pass of his tongue opened her a little more to him, allowing her to prepare her passage so she would feel no pain in his complete possession.

Richelle fingered the strands of his hair, enjoying the contrary differences between the feel of his silky hair and the strength of his solid muscles, and she reveled in each. She opened herself to every nuance, every sensation as Valya plied her body masterfully. The fluttering she had felt in her womb when Valya kissed her had blossomed into an all-consuming ache, a need for fulfillment she didn't understand and didn't know how to reach.

"Help me, Valya."

"Just a little more. And then you will know true ecstasy."

"Oh, please, oh, please, please," she moaned.

"Just a little more. Give me just a little more."

With desperate pants and a slow gyration of her hips, she gave him everything he wanted. He licked faster, delved deeper, and then she felt his finger probing and parting her folds. As he inserted his finger, she felt her tight walls giving, accepting the invader easily. And then she felt him add a second finger, flexing within her, going deeper and deeper.

Richelle was mindless with sensations bombarding her from every side. His mind linked with hers escalated every sensation. Slow and steady, his fingers continued their questing search, stilling when they brushed against the thin membrane attesting her womanly virtue. He growled, triggering a fresh rush of cream that he consumed voraciously.

He stroked faster, lashing her clit with his tongue as she writhed in magnificent agony and combed her fingers through his hair, drawing him



closer. Her mind connected with his and he coaxed her with loving words of encouragement and then his stern demands for her release.

"I can't, Valya." Her voice bordered on pain as she reached out, desperately trying to grasp the gift of ultimate bliss Valya offered.

"You can."

"Oh, please. I can't, I can't!" Her body was bathed in sweat as she began to quiver under his unceasing ministrations.

"You will," he snarled. His tongue, mouth, and fingers worked in unison, unyielding in his demand, in his love for her. Settling his mouth over her clit, he sucked hard as she arched from the bed, her body convulsing with a mind-shattering, screaming orgasm.

And while she was in the throes of her first climax, he shoved his fingers into her grasping pussy, breaking her hymen. She felt no pain. Her mind barely registered what was happening. All she knew was clinging to his touch, his scent as she flew off an unknown precipice, trusting in him to catch her. And he was there, zealously and greedily drinking her cum as the imprint of centuries of ancestors fired his blood and loins.

"It is time," he declared. Richly generous, Valya used his wickedly delightful tongue to drive her up again, her body responding willingly, quicker now as he continued his amorous lessons in pleasuring her. Forcing himself to leave the nestled sanctuary between her thighs, Valya kissed and licked a trail to her thigh, his fingers continuing their thrusting as his thumb passed over the hood of her clit. He licked salty skin once, twice as his canines descended. And when he felt her on the verge of yet another orgasm, he sank his fangs into a femoral artery and drank deeply of her life's essence.

At the moment he took his first drink of her blood, Richelle experienced a blinding orgasm, white-hot stars exploding behind her eyelids. She tried to pull away from the sheer rapture but was met with Valya's immovable resolve when he slipped his free hand under her thigh. Holding her to his mouth, he swallowed her red nectar. His cock became engorged to the point of pain as her blood flowed through him

*"I need you, Richelle. Let me love you."*

*"Yes, Valya. Oh, yes."*

Valya lapped at the tiny pinpricks, sealing the wound as he pulled his fingers from her gripping vagina, stroking the slick walls to capture more of

her dewy juices. Languorously opening her eyes, she watched as he sucked those fingers into his mouth, enjoying every last drop of her cum before he began crawling up her body.

Her heart raced at the stark want reflected in the mysterious depths of his eyes alive with the flames of passion. When he completely covered her body, he paused for a moment, savoring the feel of her body molding to his, made only for him. And then gingerly, as if she were made of fragile crystal, he brought his lips to hers.

Their kiss was soul wrenching, and he aligned their bodies for his possession. His steely rod nudged her mound, sliding easily along her dripping slit. Mimicking the movements of making love, she hissed every time the head of his cock caressed her, high on her mound. He was driving them both mad, each desperate for this moment in time when their lives would merge as one.

When they both had been driven to the brink of insanity, he grasped his ready cock by the base and placed the head against the mouth of her vagina. He held himself in place and cupped her face, his thumbs stroking her cheeks as they gazed into each other's eyes.

"I love you, Richelle. Now, and for all eternity."

Her breathing stilled as she placed her hands over his. Her heart was filled to overflowing. Growing up, her gifts made being a part of everyday life a series of luckless moments and unfulfilled hopes. She believed that she would have to be happy with her life tending to her animal friends and watching others find love and have relationships and children. She dared not dream of those things for herself, having lost everyone who ever meant anything to her.

But now, there was Valya. And she acknowledged his presence in her life as destiny. She wanted to spend eternity loving him, experiencing life as it came to them...both good and bad. She wanted this. She wanted him. Desperately. She would die without him. She would die for him. But at this moment in time, the past was dead, and there was only a future filled with life and love.

"I love you, Valya. With all my heart. Take me. Make love with me."

Valya needed no more urging, and his cock slipped easily into her pussy, his gaze holding hers. He wanted to see the look in her eyes as they were joined completely, pelvis to pelvis.

Man to woman.

Heart and soul.

He slid in a few inches and withdrew. He pushed forward a few more inches, his thick root parting her moist walls with every thrust. He planted quick, searing kisses on her lips as her hands rested upon his shoulders.

She closed her eyes, trying to ease the bubbling cauldron of emotions churning within her. Valya nipped the fullness of her lower lip, and her eyes flew open.

“Watch, *mio dusa*. Watch and feel us joined.”

She nodded wordlessly and he continued to advance, each lunge setting him deeper and deeper. Her head fell back in a silent groan, her mouth open and eyes slumberous, but still holding his luminous gaze. He pulled back so only the head remained within her, and with a mighty lunge, he breached the last of her resistance and seated himself to the hilt in her tight sheath.

His balls nestled against the rounded contours of her ass. Her vagina pulsed around him like tiny kisses worshiping his manhood as he held himself motionless, delighting in the warmth of her welcoming passage. Slowly, carefully, he began an age-old rhythm in a measured cadence orchestrated for lovers dancing to a private tune and escaping into a world all their own.

His body weighed upon her, her engorged nipples stabbing into his chest as he took her mouth in a silky kiss. The taste, the feel of her made him delirious. He loved her, each thrust of his cock was strong and steady. He pulled back from their kiss with a loud groan as his body shuddered.

“You feel so good,” he moaned, nuzzling her neck and inhaling the springtime fresh scent of her hair.

“I do?”

He chuckled, sending vibrations through his cock that she felt in her clenching walls.

“Oh, yeah.” He continued to lick and nip her slender throat. So new to lovemaking, she had no idea how desirable, how intoxicating she was.

It was her turn to shudder. His touch, his kisses made her a senseless being driven by an insatiable need to feel every corporeal sensation he could offer.

And Valya offered much. In fact, he offered her everything he had, his body showing her all the emotions he was unable to convey with words.

Raising himself on one arm, he slipped his other behind her back. He lifted her body, letting her head fall back as she bent backwards into a deep arc. In this way, her firm breasts were thrust high into the air, an invitation he answered by taking long swipes over her plump red nipples. His tongue feathered lightly over the very tips and then circled around her rosy areoles.

When her body was in a state of constant shivering, he covered her teat with his mouth and sucked hard. Probably harder than he intended, but he had waited so long, so very long, for her. He needed this, her willingness and acceptance.

She speared her fingers through his hair, pulling him closer, encouraging, begging him to suck even harder.

*"Please, Valya."*

*"Please, what?"* He gave several quick nips at the full strawberry tip before he dragged his tongue over the swells of her creamy white mound. Her mind screamed in pleasure. *"Please, what?"* he repeated.

She dug her nails into his scalp and arched her back farther to force more of her breast into his mouth.

*"Harder."*

Valya no longer chuckled. Instead, his chest rumbled in a triumphant purr as he did her bidding, sucking harder, faster, longer. He tormented the ripe buds—nipping, pulling, tweaking with his teeth before switching to the other breast. Her hair swayed as her head thrashed, feeling the maelstrom of passion climbing again with his cock plunging in her tight passage in sync with his manipulation of her breasts.

It was all too much, and she erupted into an all-consuming orgasm, burning through her like a firestorm. And when she thought she could handle no more, Valya released her teat and grunted against her throat. His pistoning hips slammed against hers until with one vanquishing thrust, his climax burst, and he roared in completion. His body quaked as jet after jet of cum spurt into his woman, her pussy milking him until he was completely spent and collapsed on top of her.

Both were heaving as they lay together, his member still imbedded in her heat only slightly diminished despite the strength of his orgasm. It was some time, as they lay there joined so intimately, before he slipped from the warmth of her pussy and collected her in his arms. He pulled her across his

chest and rolled on his back. Her damp hair cascaded forward to obscure her face as it tickled his neck and chest.

"I never knew...it could be...like that," she stammered. "I mean...I knew...I'm a doctor. I knew about...sex. But..."

"Making love."

"What?"

"Not sex," he corrected. "Making love."

*Yes, making love*, she thought. Sweet, tender, devoted, passionate love. At this moment, in Valya's arms, she didn't think she had ever felt more loved, more cherished. He knew her every desire, could feel her body's needs and had made sure she found pleasure in their union. She didn't realize she was crying until Valya moved with a start.

"Gods, don't cry." His face was alive with dismay as he held her away from him. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I thought I had taken care of... Just tell me where you hurt and I'll make it better. I promise."

Richelle smiled and touched her face, damp with tears. Not tears of pain or sorrow, but of joy. This type of tears was unknown to her. How could she tell Valya how to make it better when *she* didn't know how to stop the tears? She touched his face, etched with worry. Then to appease them both, she cupped his face and pulled his lips to hers.

The kiss was meant to be gentle, comforting. It ended up being scorching, singeing her to her soul. And then, she was no longer in control of their kiss. Valya was. He raised his hands and ran his fingers through her hair, holding her head in place as he avidly devoured her mouth, his tongue delving into her mouth, mating with hers.

Changing the angle of the kiss, he groaned and felt his body growing hard again. His cock lengthened and pressed against her most intimate region, begging, whining for an invitation to enter as it jerked against her. Richelle adjusted her hips, aligning his ready rod along her slit, each twitch giving them both a jolting sensation, gliding easily with their combined juices easing the way.

Soon, she was the one moving, grinding her hips against his rigid manhood. She felt a mounting need in her womb. She leaned her head back, her eyes closed as she tried to mollify the growing tension. Panting, she opened her eyes to find Valya staring at her intently, a bead of perspiration forming on his brow and upper lip. Her brows furrowed and she continued

to slide along his penis, the heady sensation spurring her on and yet not quite fulfilling the craving she felt.

*“Valya, help me. Show me what I need to do. To give you the same pleasure you have given me.”*

*“You tempt me, my love. You make me want to lose control.”*

“Maybe...I want you to lose control.” She leaned down and gave him a long kiss, mimicking his licks and forays, accepting his groans as greedily as he had.

Placing his hands upon her hips, he guided her movements to give them both the most pleasure as she sat up. She linked her hands behind her nape and raised her hair, his eyes raking over her blushed skin and settling on her breasts, her nipples taut and proudly displayed. Up and down, she rode his cock, thrilling at the feel of his velvety steel as it slid up and down her labia and gasping when the broad head struck her distended clitoris, spurting his cum over the sensitive bud.

Watching his face, she felt empowered with his eyes squeezed shut and his nostrils flaring. She leaned down to lick a bead of perspiration trickling from his brow.

*“Mmm, salty.”* She tried to sit back up, but Valya quickly latched onto her teat, suckling her as his cock slipped into her slick passage.

“Oh, Goddess,” she moaned. Drawing him deeper, she tried to fill the emptiness only Valya could satisfy.

No longer needing to guide her movements, his hands fondled her pillowy breasts, molding them, as he liked, his golden skin contrasting with her milky whiteness. Rumbling a feral purr at the image of her light to his dark, he pressed them together, shaping, sculpting them. His mouth watering, he alternated between using his mouth and fingers to manipulate her succulent tips. The faster he toyed with them, the faster she rode him. The harder he plucked and pulled, the harder and deeper she took him.

He kept on plying her body with his large hands until she was undulating frantically with sweat trickling down the fine line of her spine. Instinctively moving her hips in small circles, she searched for the right pace, the right movement, and shrieked in surprise when she found it. She continued shifting, rocking against him. Each time she pulled away, her pussy clenched, refusing to release his impressive length. She was nearly

sobbing, trying to find release when Valya decided to take pity on her, on both of them.

Placing his hand on her back, he pulled her roughly to him, his mouth latching onto one nipple while his thumb and finger pinched the other. She threw her head back in a silent scream, unable to pull away, anchored by his hand on the small of her back and his grip on her nipple. If it were possible, her cunt squeezed him tighter to the point of delirious pain as he pinched her tip firmly. The plum-like head of his cock breached the mouth of her cervix, and in that moment, the image of her becoming round with his child consumed him. The beast within surged to the surface, demanding his mate.

Taking over, he powered his hips upward, pistoning his cock into her as he held her in place. His balls burned and grew tight, ready to explode. Faster and faster, he drove through her cushioned folds, the muscles in his thighs and butt clenching with each thrust. Yanking her hard to him, he latched onto her neglected nipple and suckled at her with a naked hunger that could not be sated. He would never have his fill of her.

Richelle threw her head back when the intensity of sensations and emotions sent her careening over the edge. She screamed his name over and over as she came. With his fingers gripping her flesh, he bit down on her nipple, sending her into another convulsing orgasm. With one, two, three powerful thrusts, he filled her with his seed, roaring in the hopes he could frighten the Gods into granting his wish—a child with Richelle.

Releasing his bite on her teat, he continued to lightly lick and suck her nipples. Rolling the neglected nub between his thumb and forefinger, he brought her down slowly. Finally, he released his tasty treat and laved the puckered areole, enjoying the bumpy feeling of her skin on his tongue. When he was finally spent and his cock stopped pulsing, he let his head fall back upon the pillow in depleted wonder, in total comfort and absolute peace.

She collapsed on his chest, her hair fanned over her face. Her breathing irregular, she lay there lifeless, riding the rise and fall of his own erratic breathing. Unable to stop himself, his hands continued roving over her body. Even in complete exhaustion, he was incapable of having her this near and not touching her. Her skin, her hair, her face - he touched her as a blind man would memorizing every nuance that was her.

Richelle placed her hands one atop the other on his chest. Resting her chin on the back of her hands she looked up at him. When he met her gaze, the dreamy, faraway look she cast upon him startled him. Truly, she had the look of a woman in love. He gave her a brief yet poignant kiss as his cock finally slipped from her.

“No,” she hoarsely whined, “not yet.”

“You need to rest. Dawn is approaching.”

“I like the way you feel when you’re inside me.” Inhaling sharply, she blushed at her bold comment. Valya chortled at her demure response.

“How could a woman who made love with such abandon have the audacity to blush?”

Richelle smiled shyly as she moved her hands and rubbed her cheek against his smooth chest. She inhaled deeply, loving his rich, warm scent. It was clean, but intrinsically wild and untamed, like a wolf running free in the mountains. Feral, and yet so masculine, it made her feel safe, protected. She placed a few kisses in the hollow of his pectorals before she ran her tongue lightly across his skin to see if he tasted as good as he smelled.

He did.

“Stop that,” he growled. His manhood sprung to life, rock hard and ready, pressing against her stomach. “Or you’ll find yourself on your back with my cock in your pussy. Again.”

“Like *that* is supposed to convince me to stop.”

She giggled as he closed his eyes and purred contentedly while she gave him a few more light kisses interspersed with tiny licks. When he couldn’t trust himself any longer under her gentle petting, he wrapped his fingers through her hair and pulled her head back. His lips brushed across hers in a tender promise before he covered her mouth in a potent kiss. Literally, he kissed her senseless, and every thought evaporated from her mind until all there was left was an awareness of “belonging.” Grudgingly, he ended the kiss.

“You need to sleep,” he reiterated.

She didn’t feel tired. On the contrary, she felt energized. Her body was sore and her throat was raw, but she had never felt so vibrant. On one level, she knew Valya was right. So much had happened in such a short time. Her body needed sleep to keep her strength, but another part of her wanted to spend the rest of the night making love with Valya.



Her body's need for sleep won as she tried to stifle a yawn and her eyelids started drooping. Without a word, he adjusted her body so that her head rested upon his chest. He draped her leg over his thigh, turning her body into him. After a few slight corrections, she yawned again and melted into his embrace. She was drifting between sleep and awake when she questioned Valya.

"Will you be leaving tonight...to feed?"

As much as he felt his body's hunger for blood, his need to be near Richelle and sleep with her in his embrace after their passionate lovemaking was stronger. Taking her blood during the first blood would appease the need to feed this night. He would hunt before the second blood to fully sate his hunger when next he came to Richelle.

But for tonight, they could lie in each other's embrace and bask in their endless love.

"No. This night is ours."

She snuggled closer, letting his warmth and power wrap around her as she fell asleep cocooned, safe from harm. And Valya, after thanking whatever Gods could hear him for sending Richelle to him, joined her in perfect slumber.

## Chapter 7

Tower of the Red Dragon was the foul bastion of Luka cel Rau—a citadel of iniquity and immorality. If it were possible for a place to take on the characteristics and personality of its inhabitants, then Tower of the Red Dragon was the embodiment of Luka's sinister essence. And the entire castle reeked of evil, inhabited by a legion of followers, both mortal and Immortal, scurrying about like a horde of rats.

Very few Immortals had chosen to abandon the ancient laws to follow Luka. But those who did also resided at Red Dragon, no longer able to return to their mountain home. Many of his minions who resided there were nothing more than poor, lost souls that unwittingly had crossed Luka's path. Breaking the code of the Immortals, Luka had converted them into Vampyres who had no minds or wills of their own anymore. They were subservient to his will alone.

And there was also Preacher and his followers, those who foolishly chose to align themselves with evil. Some were misled by Preacher's religious prophecies, others deluded by the alluring promise of power. They were a multitude of sycophants, idiots, and fools, all at the beck and call of one malevolent being—Luka cel Rau.

Suddenly, all those who were scampering about the main hall stilled and turned toward the high arched windows. The sky was dark, clouds obliterating the stars that were twinkling earlier. The air was filled with an ominous electrical charge; then like a burst of lightning, Luka leapt through the window to land in the center of the room.

He held his arms out at his sides, and his servants rushed in to surround him, fawning and gushing. A few of the Vampyresses tried to entice him to their beds. The bite of an Immortal was potent and intoxicating, like hundred-year-old cognac. Once bitten, there was an unconscious urge to seek out that pleasure, as all other sensations seemed pale by comparison.

But a bite from one as ancient and powerful as Luka was more like an infection, a gnawing need never to be satiated, leaving the wounded an agreeable pawn, a perpetual victim to be used as nothing more than fodder and then discarded as refuse.

There was no love or beauty in Luka's responses to the eternally beautiful females and males attempting to seduce him to see who he would favor this evening. Like all of Luka's actions, it was nothing more than control, the sense of power in his domination over the weak. Sex was about his pleasure and his pleasure alone.

"Enough." An authoritative voice echoed throughout the hall. The throng of Vampyres parted. There standing opposite Luka was the most beautiful of all his followers. She was a dark beauty, with long ebony hair and coal-black eyes. She was the quintessential Vampyress.

"Good evening, Terezia."

She curtsied decorously. When she stood, she dismissed the others with a wave of her hand, and she approached him. Her hips swayed seductively as she crossed the room, her form-fitting black gown and long black hair a stark contrast to her white skin. Luka's thoughts drifted to Richelle and how her skin reminded him of starlight, white hot and fiery, whereas Terezia's left him as cold as a winter morning.

Standing before him, Terezia rested her hands upon his chest, eager to touch him. It had been so long since he had shared her bed. It tore at her, as she truly loved him. She leaned in and kissed his lips, parting hers slightly as an invitation for him to take control.

He did, not because he felt any desire to do so but because his very nature required he be in control.

She first saw him when she was a young girl. She saw him as he spoke with several Immortals trying to convince them to leave the mountains and join his ranks. She was enamored by Luka's charming charisma and raw animal magnetism. He was a most magnificent specimen, with his golden hair and pale blue eyes, his muscular physique. Her mother dragged her away as he spoke against the Triad, warning her that Luka was an outcast amongst their people. Yet Terezia was undeterred. She knew she had met her life mate.

She would sneak away from her lessons to listen to him speak. She had seen him fight as other Immortals tried to drive him from the mountain. She

swooned at his rippling biceps as he wielded his broadsword. His strength was unmatched, undefeated in battle save for his last battle...with Valya. The Triad intervened, stopping the battle to bring Luka to trial. *The fools.* Luka escaped and left the mountains.

When she came of age, Luka had sought her out. Their lovemaking was wild and furious, not at all what she had expected. Steadfast to a lover's daydreams, she believed he would claim her as his life mate. But he never did. And as time passed, his drive for sex became more bestial and hedonistic. Willingly, she offered her body to any self-indulgent, self-gratifying act. She became his slave, doing *anything* to please him and prove to him that she was his destined life mate.

Luka ended his kiss and placed his hands upon her shoulders. She did not shrink away when his hands did not embrace her, but rather grabbed her bodice and ripped it in two, baring her breasts. His hands were smooth, absent of calluses, as he stroked her perfectly formed orbs. Only for a moment did she flinch when his fingertips grazed over the fading scars that marred her bountiful globes, a permanent reminder of some of his baser demands.

He had tutored her well on how to meet *those* demands.

Terezia learned so well that she too had found gratification. She learned so well that she became a tutor for his other conquests, preparing them to spend an evening with him, with them. It had been a long time since he had come to her bed, but once his irrational obsession with this Richelle he sought had died, he would see and realize she was his true life mate.

Until then, she found solace in being a part of his world, in fulfilling *all* his needs. To feed...and to fuck.

"I brought you a gift," she purred.

He found her nipples, pinching them roughly between his thumb and forefinger. "And what is that?"

"Come with me and I'll show you." She backed away from him, dragging him with her until he released her nipples and she could turn to lead him to a closed door at the far end of the room.

"I knew you would be hungry when you returned," she cooed. She placed her hand upon the brass door handle. "I prepared a feast for you."

She opened the door and allowed him to enter the adjoining room. The room was dark, illuminated by three dim candles in a sconce on the wall.

"I certainly hope you like what I prepared for dinner." With a wave of her hand, four more candles lit up. They were positioned at each of the four corners of a heavy black table placed in the center of the room. Atop the table was a young girl, stripped, spread-eagled, and bound by chains. No more than eighteen, her blond hair cascaded around her head like a halo. Her tear-filled blue eyes grew large, pupils dilated in terror as he stepped closer and inhaled deeply. Her milky-white skin shimmered, framed by the dark wood.

A perfect sacrificial offering.

"Mmm," he growled. He circled the table before stopping at the foot where he could get a good view of her naked cunt. Her body had been oiled and glistened in the flickering candlelight. While her pussy also gleamed, he did not smell the sticky-sweet cream from arousal. He smelled...fear. He liked that even better.

"She's a virgin."

His cock throbbed at the thrill of being the first to enjoy her nubile flesh.

Terezia sidled up beside him, placing her clasped hands on his shoulder so her arms draped over his as she leaned in to murmur in his ear. Her hot breath fanned the fire burning in his loins.

"Only the best for you, Luka my love."

His body became hard as he watched the girl's pert little breasts heave. Recently pierced, the blood was still trickling from her teats. He grabbed hold of the gold ring on her right breast and pulled up on it. She screeched in pain, and his cock jerked at the sound. He hissed as he palmed his erection through his pants, squeezing to relieve the throbbing ache mounting.

"I am pleased."

"I thought you might be." Terezia sauntered to the head of the table and turned to face him. With a shimmer, the remnant of her dress disappeared, and she bent down closer to the young girl's face, never taking her gaze from Luka.

"Let me introduce you, my dear." She raked a fingernail down the girl's cheek, leaving a thin white scratch in its wake. "This is Luka cel Rau, Lord and Master of Tower of the Red Dragon. It is at his command that you are here. He insists that you stay for dinner. And by that I mean you...are...the...dinner."

The girl began to wail, begging to be released as she struggled against the chains that held her, the cuffs biting into her unspoiled flesh. Terezia snickered, waving her hand to the left. A covered tray floated over from a built-in shelf and hovered at table height so that their quarry could see it from where she was helplessly bound.

“I was not sure of your tastes this evening, so I prepared this for you.” She removed the cloth to reveal an array of sex toys and torture devices. Luka gaped in excitement at the assortment. There were three different-sized anal plugs, a blindfold, a ball gag, a crop, and a cat-o’-nine-tails. Several of these instruments, depending on the person handling the tool, could administer pleasure...or pain. The girl turned her face away and cried.

*Ah, the benefits of the modern world*, he thought as he picked up the crop and lightly traced circles around her trembling stomach, delighting in her revulsion and growing dread.

“Terezia, my dear. You thought of everything.”

Whimpering, the young girl squeezed her eyes shut as tears streamed down the sides of her face. She pulled and tugged trying to get her hands free. When that didn’t work, she began to beg to be set free.

Luka stood motionless as he stared down at her.

“Oh, no, my dear. We have the whole evening before us. This is not the end. It is merely the beginning.”

She wailed mournfully at his cruel words and made a final attempt to free herself from her bonds, the chains resisting every tug as blood poured from the gashes on her wrists, staining her hands red. Luka’s face became level with hers, his foul breath overwhelming her with the stench of evil. Terezia waved her hand and the door behind them slammed shut with an audible click of a deadbolt.

Behind the locked door, a bloodcurdling scream rent the stillness of the night.

Then, silence.

## Chapter 8

Valya groggily awoke from his deep slumber, awakened by the coolness of the morning and the lack of Richelle's warmth. He rolled over and gathered her pillow in his arms, nestling it against him much as he had held Richelle all night as they slept. He inhaled. Her scent still clung to the pillow, the sheets, even his skin.

He cracked an eye toward the window and saw a seam of light. Although his body registered that it was still too early in the day for him to rise, it also became an irresistible need to have Richelle sleeping beside him.

Dazedly, he lifted his head to scan the room, thinking she may have toddled off to the kitchen. After all, she was still human. Humans were used to being up and about in the daylight. It wouldn't take long for Richelle to adjust after the conversion, but for right now, he would have to deal with her human idiosyncrasies and sleep with one eye open. Just to ensure her safety.

Not seeing her in the kitchen, he glanced over to the bathroom. The door was closed. Trying to rise, Valya simply fell back onto the bed. *Definitely too early to be up.* He called mentally to her. No answer.

"Richelle?" Again, no answer. Wiping the sleep from his eyes, he struggled to sit up, only to fall back and hit his head on the brass headboard.

"Richelle...where are you?" The room was spinning as he tried to shake the dizzy feeling overtaking his senses. Sleep was beckoning to him. The sun was still out, and he hadn't fully regained his power.

He was already weakened by not feeding. Virgin blood was potent, but not as powerful as a life mate's blood. With Richelle as his life mate, there would be little need to hunt anymore, only in situations of extreme emergency, such as when his powers were all but diminished in battle. But she was not his life mate...yet. And he had been careful to not take too much of her rich nectar as it would make her a corpse's shell driven only by the need for blood and sex.

He needed to replenish his powers, to sleep and then feed so he was at his full strength. But Richelle...she was out there, alone. Unprotected.

Dragging himself to his feet, he managed a few steps before he collapsed in a heap on the floor. He turned over to stare at the ceiling, his eyes straining to focus as his vision began to blur around the edges. Weakened, it was difficult for him to call out to any other Immortal for assistance. He prayed to Richelle's Goddess to protect her and bring her safely back to his arms. So he could break her fool neck himself.

He made a last attempt to reach another Immortal for assistance. Nothing. There was nothing but a painful ringing in his ears, drowning his swimming thoughts at his inability to protect his mate. Soon, night would fall. Then he would rise to find her, and render his retribution on any who dare hurt her.

Cursing his powerlessness against the noon sun and his inability to return to his bed, he succumbed to the welcoming sleep of the Immortals.

\* \* \* \*

Richelle walked slowly around the fairgrounds. She was unsure if it was the light of day or the fog surrounding her mind, but the carnival did not have the same allure for her as before. At night, the fairgrounds were alive with music and magic. But now, it was animated with the hustle and bustle of groups of people rushing from one place to the next.

When she first arrived and saw the number of people enjoying the carnival, she didn't think she would be able to stay. She thought the noise from their thoughts would have driven her away. But surprisingly, there was very little noise, at least from their thoughts. There was plenty coming from those thoroughly enjoying themselves with the games and rides.

Yet, there was no mind-jarring pain from the intrusive thoughts she had grown accustomed to all her life. She picked up bits and pieces, but like a duck to water, she seemed to effortlessly be able to shield her mind from most stray and random thoughts from passersby with only a few comments making it beyond her automatic barriers. Like a reflex, those barriers popped up to protect her when she needed it most.



On an unconscious level, like osmosis, she must have learned what she needed from Valya. Pleased with herself, she smiled slyly as she continued her search for the fortune-teller.

*How odd Valya didn't see her, couldn't find her. She couldn't have taken down her tent alone and left so quickly.* Arriving at the same spot, there wasn't a sign a tent had been pitched there. No stake holes, no upturned dirt or matted grass. Nothing, as if it were all a figment of her imagination.

*Someone must know where she is,* she mused as she began going from carnie to carnie asking about the fortune-teller. Everyone she spoke with stared at her blankly with the same response—what fortune-teller? *How can no one with the carnival know who Madame Selene is? She was here!*

Richelle pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger as she furrowed her brow. Shielding her eyes, she gazed up at the midday sun. *About one, maybe one-thirty.* Closing her eyes, she tried to clear her head by shaking it a few times. She couldn't shake the hungover feeling, like she had slept too long, since she had left Valya's loft.

Usually her day started about eleven, but today she had overslept and hadn't slipped out until noon. She tried "thinking" her way back to the carnival, the same way they arrived at Valya's loft, but it didn't work. Maybe Valya was teasing her and she hadn't actually been the one to transport them. Maybe she didn't have enough power to do it on her own. Or maybe she could only do it with Valya's help, although she was able to erect mind blocks on her own.

It made no difference. She wasn't able to transport on her own, so she had to call a cab to take her the thirty-five miles to the carnival. *You could have asked Valya for his help,* she chided herself. *No, I couldn't. I have to do this on my own.* Why she felt the need to do it on her own, she had no idea, she just couldn't ask him. Perhaps it was because she knew he would say no.

But she had to find Madame Selene and ask for her help. She seemed to know so much. Possibly she would be able to tell her how to prepare for the second blood, so she would be able to recognize Valya. Richelle knew in her heart that completing the ritual wasn't what was making her so nervous; it was the vulnerability that lay with the second blood.

The thought of losing a portion of her memories, albeit it temporary, was unnerving enough, but having to rely on “Swiss cheese for brains” was downright scary. *What if I don’t recognize him? What if I turn him down?*

Life was already riddled with so many “turn right instead of left” what-ifs, it seemed unnecessary to test lovers by relying on destiny to intercede. That may be fine for Immortals, with their seemingly infinite powers and wisdom, but she was a mere mortal. Mortals were notorious for their ability to make the wrong decision at the wrong time.

And in this matter, she *could not* be wrong.

She had never felt so alive, so complete. And it was more than just sex...um, making love. She felt empowered, as if there were nothing she couldn’t accomplish if she set her mind to it. Her mother had taught her to walk. Duncan had shown her how to stand on her own two feet, but Valya gave her the strength to step out on a cliff and stand against the storm without faltering.

She felt no fear when she was with Valya. More than his ability to protect her, she wasn’t afraid to enjoy life. She would never have thought to go to a carnival by herself. She would have been petrified. Yet here she was, and she wasn’t afraid.

On the contrary, she hungered for more. More explorations, more adventures, more experiences...more *life*. That’s why she needed to find Madame Selene. She wanted to make sure she recognized Valya and not rely on the whim of the Fates. *I need a guarantee.*

“There are no guarantees in life, my child.”

Richelle whirled to find Madame Selene standing behind her, her hands crossed in front of her, resting across her midsection. She was wearing the same green and purple robes and the compassionate expression of understanding.

“We must all take our turns at the Wheel of Fate and accept the, as you say, the whims of the Fates.”

“How did you know what I was—”

“Why do you seek me, my dear child? Did I not answer all your questions yestereve?”

“Yes...I mean, no...I mean, I have a few more questions,” Richelle replied hastily. She fought the nervous knot forming in the pit of her stomach as she pressed Selene for answers.

Madame Selene chuckled softly as she walked past Richelle toward the clearing where her tent was *supposed* to be. Richelle turned and followed, taking larger strides than usual to keep up. For an old woman, she moved quicker than she appeared.

“What can I answer for you, my child?”

“Why is it no one here knows you? I’ve talked to patrons and employees, asking about Madame Selene and where your tent was. No one knew what I was talking about. No one knew anything about you. Why?”

She shrugged. “Others see only what they wish to see. They believe only what they wish to believe.” The coldness of Selene’s tone spoke volumes of what she thought of others’ attitudes. “But that isn’t what you came to ask me, is it?”

“No. I need your help. You seem to know much about me, about Valya. I need to know. Are you an Immortal?”

Madame Selene stopped and turned sharply to face Richelle. Her eyes were clear and bright, the sparkling sapphires vivid features against her white skin and silver hair.

“You see much, my little butterfly, though you have recently emerged from your cocoon.”

“Are you?”

Madame turned away to gaze off into the clear sky, wincing as the sunlight kissed her cheek.

“I am many things. Daughter of Luna and mother to Eternal Night, a fallen Jezebel destined to walk the Earth alone. I am Wisdom, sister of the Moraie, watching and protecting the tapestry from those who would unravel the woven threads. And I am the servant of Athena, ensuring justice for the righteous and retribution against those who would align themselves with Evil.”

“Please, no more riddles,” Richelle demanded. “Just tell me. Are you an Immortal?”

Madame Selene did not answer, but a slight nod of her head gave Richelle the answer she needed.

“Then you know why I’ve come.”

Again, a slight nod.

“Then tell me. How can I ensure I will recognize Valya after he takes second blood?”

"It is dangerous to tamper with the intentions of fate. There are reasons why things are designed the way they are. Life mates must rely on destiny to guide their steps in making the right decisions. Only then do they know if they are guided by Eternal Love or the trappings of lust."

"That's fine if you're Immortal, but I'm a human. We make mistakes."

"Immortals are not infallible," the seer uttered, her voice tinged with remorse. And regret. "Sometimes...we make mistakes as well."

Richelle was taken aback. Madame Selene spoke as someone who understood the sorrow and joy of love. Then she lowered her barrier to allow Richelle to see the man she had loved.

He was handsome, with the same aristocratic demeanor as Selene as they walked side by side through a mountain glade. They spoke with the same lilting accent. They had the same vivid features, with silver hair and bright eyes. The only difference was his eyes were pale blue like a summer sky while hers were dark blue like the sparkling ocean.

With the personification of water and sky, Richelle couldn't help but think of an old Tao lesson: a bird and a fish may love one another, but where would they build a home? She felt Madame Selene's distress when he sent her away, then her wrath as she vowed revenge. But then she felt something else. As she tried to probe Madame Selene's thoughts, she was shut out and walls were erected to hide whatever lay behind.

*"His name was Nicolae."*

*"He was very handsome."*

*"Yes, he is."*

Richelle waited impatiently for Selene to continue, but she didn't. She started walking to the edge of the carnival with Richelle following a step behind in mystified silence. When they reached the edge of the forest the fortune-teller turned and spoke.

"You must leave. Return to your Valya and complete the bonding ritual."

"Won't you tell me what happened?"

"It was a long, long time ago. A past that must remain...in the past."

"Please," Richelle coaxed. "Tell me what happened."

Selene couldn't look at Richelle, couldn't speak the words of the pain she had caused.

*"I betrayed him."*

*“How?”*

*“I did the unforgivable. I defied the Fates and tried to deceive him into completing the bonding ritual with me.”*

*“You were not life mates?”*

*“No. When he realized my deception, he was incensed. He took me before the Triad and demanded I be exiled.”*

Richelle took Selene’s hand and held it to her heart. When Selene turned, she did nothing to hide the tears forming in her eyes that she refused to shed. So Richelle cried for her.

*“He was hurt, Selene. And angry. What he did was cruel.”*

Selene shook her head in staunch rebuttal.

*“No, I learned he was right when I found the man who was destined to be my life mate.”*

*“So, you completed...”*

*“No, we did not bond. When I found Michael, it was too late. His mind was gone, ravaged by old age. He suffered from Alzheimer’s and could not willingly complete the ritual.”*

The tears that she refused to shed for Nicolae fell freely as she spoke of Michael, her eyes brilliant with remembered love.

*“He was a wonderful man with a good heart. In his more lucid moments, he spoke of his dreams and visions of my people. How he never married because he never found his ‘one true love’ and how I made him happier than he had ever been.”* She wiped away the tears and smiled wistfully.

*“I stayed with him, lived with him, and took care of him until his death. Upon his deathbed, he recognized me as his life mate. When he died, he promised he would wait for me to join him, and in death we would be together for eternity.”*

*“So why didn’t you join him? Oh, I’m sorry, I mean...”* Richelle couldn’t believe how callous her remark was. It was like she was saying, *So, why didn’t you kill yourself?* But Selene didn’t say anything. She just pulled Richelle’s hand to her chest. Beneath their joined hands, she felt a soft thump. And after a moment, another. And then another. Surprised, Richelle stared at Selene unbelievably.

*“You have a heartbeat!”*

“Yes.” Selene nodded, closing her eyes. Her face was glowing in sweet bliss as if she were savoring the feeling of the beating in her chest.

“But how? You didn’t bond and...”

“The world abounds with magic, mysteries, and miracles—these mystic gifts allowed me to surpass my body’s limitations to come and help you. Though not bonded, Michael’s love taught me the true depth of emotion between life mates. He healed me. So though we did not become as one, his love filled me and brought me to a new life I would have never known without him, one filled with mercy, forgiveness, and hope.”

“Forgiveness? Hope?”

Selene released Richelle’s hand as she backed to the edge of the forest.

“Nicolae was correct in my punishment, but I did not see that at first. And I am here to right the wrong I did to him and to our people. I am the reason Luka now searches for you.”

“Luka? Who is he?”

Selene swallowed hard and her eyes grew cold as the ocean depths. Her mouth was set in a firm grimace as she spoke.

“Luka is an abomination. Born Immortal, he has rejected his people and has become Vampyre. He leads Preacher and the Believers in their search for you. He, too, defies the design of the Fates and wants you for himself.”

Richelle choked on words of denial and stepped away from Selene, shaking her head as she refused to accept Selene’s explanation.

“How are you the reason?”

Selene stood rigid, proud, ready to accept Richelle’s anger.

“I was the one who told Luka of the Prophecy. I was the one who led him to your mother, Adelaide. And to you.”

“Why?” Richelle wailed.

“I was hurt and angry at Nicolae’s rejection of me. I wanted revenge. But I see now I was wrong. And I try to make amends for my foolish deeds. You must leave here and not come back.”

“What?”

“Luka’s followers are here, searching for you.”

Like a frightened rabbit, Richelle was on alert, her ears picking up the sounds all around her. Finally, she was able to discern the agitated conversations of several groups of Believers, about ten or eleven men in all.

“You must run and hide,” Selene continued in a harried tone. “It is too late for you to get away without their noticing you. Wait until evening and then call for your Valya. Complete the bonding ritual to destroy Luka and save your world.”

“What do you mean—destroy Luka?”

Selene didn’t answer as she began to disappear into the forest behind her, much to Richelle’s dismay.

“Wait! You didn’t tell me. How can I be sure to recognize Valya?”

Selene shimmered from her sight, her body disintegrating amidst the trees of the forest until only her voice with its hypnotic cadence could be heard over the whistling wind.

*“You and your Valya, you are our future. Trust in the Fates as you must learn to trust in yourself...trust in yourself...trust in yourself.”*

Selene’s voice faded off in the air. Listening intently, Richelle tried to locate in which direction she headed. All she heard were the rustling leaves from the trees as the wind blew. Selene was gone.

But the Believers weren’t. Richelle’s eyes darted from tent to tent, trying to locate a clear path of escape. There was none. Like a football team, they formed a line of scrimmage giving her no way through. She had no choice but to hide in the forest, try to get around them, and make it back to the entrance.

Backtracking into the woods, she did the best she could to find someplace where she could hide. At least she could get a better grasp on the situation and know what she was up against. She tried calling to the wildlife to help her, but she couldn’t sense any present. Not a beast, bird, or bug. Reaching further, she sensed an underlying sense of foreboding. Evil.

It must have been the Luka that Selene spoke about. He must have been here. The longer she stayed in one spot, the more the foul stench of corruption assailed her mind. It was as if the ground were polluted with evil, like toxic waste affecting every living thing in a forest that should have been teeming with life. Running her hands over the blackened bark of the trees, she could feel the infection passing through them as well. Springtime, and yet the leaves were changing colors and falling from the trees as if preparing for the dead of winter.

Preparing for death.

This forest was dying, and her heart clenched, for there was nothing she could do to prevent it. In fact, she would have to leave and find somewhere else to hide as the oppressive atmosphere was infecting her as well. Its corruption was seeping into her mind, which was becoming engulfed in a strange and overwhelming blackness.

She had to get out of this forest, but she had no idea how far it stretched. As much as she didn't like it, the quickest way would be to go back through the carnival. She remembered Selene's words. *Run and hide. Wait until evening and then call for your Valya.*

Quietly, she made her way back to the forest's edge and peeked from the trees, trying to sense where the Believers were, to find the weakest link in the armor closing in on her. Scanning along the edge of the carnival, she sensed fewer of the men. Some had turned back and were searching for her in frustration among the carnival attractions. Others formed sentries along the perimeter.

Her heart leapt as she found a gap farther to her right. There was a hole by the carousel. She could slip through and find someplace to hide amongst the hustle and bustle of the carnival, at least until she could get word to Valya. *Why, oh why, did I have to go off without him?* She knew the answer, but it was little consolation now. She had to do her best.

Slipping through the trees, she made it to the edge near the carousel and took a deep breath. *Just twenty feet, and then you'll be all right.* With her eyes affixed to her target, she precariously came out from the trees and headed for the carnival's edge. She had only taken a few steps when two scraggly-looking men roughly grabbed by her arms.

"Gotcha!"

\* \* \* \*

Deep in slumber, Valya's eyes popped open at the sensation of something gripping his arms. He heard a scream in his mind while the sensation on his arms heightened, as if someone tightened their grip against struggling.

*Richelle.*



Still lying on the floor where he had collapsed, he was struggling to get to his feet when two hands physically picked him up and carried him to his bed. With great effort, he peered through his slit eyes.

*The Great One, Nicolae.*

Nicolae Voda was the oldest among his people, as well as the wisest. He was revered among the Immortals. And yet, there always seemed to be an air of sadness about him. He had never found his life mate still he had never felt the compulsion to face the dawn, to make the Final Sacrifice. He had continuously found a higher reason to fight the despair and loneliness, to find the will to survive.

Fighting against sleep, Valya tried to sit up only to have a hand placed in the center of his chest and push him onto his back.

*"Do not worry, my friend. I will bring your Richelle back to you."*

*"How can this be? How can you move about in the day? How can you avoid the call to sleep?"*

*"I have powers that Luka is not even aware of."* Nicolae chuckled.  
*"Sleep. Regain your strength."*

*"I will not let you go alone."*

*"I will not be alone."*

*"She is mine to protect!"*

Outside, the wind rose, opening the balcony doors and letting the heat and light of the day enter the darkened room. Valya forced his eyes open to see Nicolae standing at the foot of his bed, his arms outstretched. He was surrounded by an aura of yellow fire.

*"Sleep, Valya. Obey me."*

Valya's eyes began to droop. As hard as he tried to stay awake, he could feel sleep overtaking him.

*"Sleep, Valya. Obey me."*

*"I will get you for this, Nicolae."*

Again, deep chuckling.

*"Sleep, Valya, sleep, Valya, sleep, Valya."* Nicolae's voice chanted over and over until Valya had no will and drifted back into slumber. Between the realm of reality and dreams, Nicolae questioned Valya.

*"Where would she have gone?"*

*"She would have gone to the carnival."*

Nicolae turned and swooped down from the balcony to the street below. Like a ghost, no one noticed him. It was as if he didn't exist. Without turning, he flicked his wrist and the doors on Valya's balcony closed with a snick as he continued walking down the busy street.

He stayed within the shadows when he could. Though he had enough strength to be out in the daylight for brief amounts of time, he didn't want to drain his energy by standing in the full sun or teleporting. He would have to walk to the carnival. From beneath a canopy, he looked at the position of the sun. Three forty-five. At least three more hours until dusk. That would give him some time to contact reinforcements.

He would call for the Protectors. Much like Guardians, Protectors protected mortal and Immortal alike as they fought evil. But whereas Guardians were trained soldiers for battle, Protectors were more like policemen. Answerable to the Triad, they were to protect and serve, bringing the guilty to be judged and punished. Guardians served no one. They were a law unto themselves, serving as judge, jury, and executioner.

And while Guardians lived and fought alone, Protectors were always stationed nearby, ready at a moment's notice to aid in the constant battle between Good and Evil. Nicolae groaned. Despite his ancient years, the concept of Good versus Evil was a tired cliché, but there was a ring of truth in old clichés.

Reaching out with his mind, Nicolae contacted someone he trusted who could help until he could arrive with his reinforcements.

*"Richelle is trapped at the fairgrounds outside of town. Find her and protect her. I will come as soon as I can. And I will bring the Protectors."* He knew his message was received but hoped his friend would be able to help.

He steeled himself against the battle to come, but despite his bravado, his foresight was limited. There were many paths to the future depending upon the road chosen. He knew what the future should be, but like many things in life, just because things should be didn't mean they always were. All man or Immortal could do was strive to do good in this world and have faith. The future would be revealed with the passage of time.

Mistakes would be made. With a bit of luck, few and far between, but there would be mistakes. No one was beyond reproach, not even the Great Nicolae. He thought back on his biggest mistake. He had been too hard, too

unforgiving. And look at all the sorrow he had caused. By the time he realized his mistake, it was too late. Judgment had been passed and the sentence carried out.

He hoped this time he would not be ruled by his passions but rather by the ancient teachings of the Immortals.

He hoped this time he would not be too late.

\* \* \* \*

“Thought you’d get away from us, did ya?” The older of the two sneered at her, what remained of his teeth as crooked and yellowed and decayed as his soul.

Richelle twisted and jerked, trying to wrench herself from their grasp, but all it accomplished was the tightening of their grips on her upper arms as well as clasping her wrists in their beefy hands.

“Pretty thing, ain’t she, Abel?” the older one commented to his partner as if Richelle were not trapped between the two of them. He leaned in and smelled her hair, lingering close to her face where she could smell his foul odor. “Smells good, too.”

“Soft,” he replied, digging his fingers into her upper arm.

“Wonder if she’s soft all over.”

*Oh Goddess, not again!* She started thrashing at the lecherous thoughts starting to pound in her mind. Cackling like chickens, they dragged her toward an outlying vacant tent. She dug her heels into the soft dirt, which simply made them laugh at her feeble attempts to escape.

“Don’t worry, sweet thang,” Abel rasped hoarsely in her ear. “We ain’t gonna hurt ya. We just wanna play with you until Preacher gets here. Just a little taste before you’re given to *him*.”

Richelle didn’t have to ask who the *him* was. She knew from the awe and fear in his voice. Luka. There was no image in either of their minds of what Luka looked like. They either blocked his image out or they saw him so little they did not hold the image. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to see what he looked like anyway. All she knew was she had to escape.

Struggling with all her might, she pulled Abel’s hand close enough she was able to sink her teeth into it. He released her with a yelp, and with her freed hand, she drove her fist into his crotch, sending him to his knees. Her

arm and hand free, she reached up and raked her fingernails across the older man's face.

Pushing away from him she tried running for the carousel, but Abel had grabbed her by the ankle, and she went sprawling face first on the grass. Scrambling to get back on her feet, she managed to crawl a few steps away before a heavy weight landed on top of her. The older man fisted his hands into her hair and pulled her head back.

He rubbed his bloody cheek against hers and screamed hotly into her ear. "You goddamn bitch! Yer gonna pay for that! Oh yeah," he gritted through clenched teeth as he ground his erect cock into her ass, "you're gonna pay!"

He rolled off just as Abel grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to her feet. She reached back to grab his hand, trying to pull her hair from his grip. He snorted. Too late, Richelle realized that with her arms in that position, her breasts thrust toward them in an unwelcome invitation.

She brought her arms between them, trying to cover herself and push away from the wiry man who was stronger than he looked. The other man fell against her, pressing her into Abel and trapping her arms, both men wrapping their arms around her so she couldn't move. Crushed between their dirty, reeking bodies, she fought the nausea welling in the pit of her stomach.

They managed to haul her to the tent before Abel released her. The other man grabbed her arms and wrenched them behind her back, causing her to wince in pain.

"Hold her, Lot." Abel snickered as he licked his cracked lips. With his meaty paws, he reached out and grabbed her breasts, digging his fingers into her tender flesh.

"Soft. Real soft, just like I figgered."

Richelle braced herself against his mauling as he continued to knead and squeeze her breasts. Without warning, his hands gripped her head and as his mouth covered hers. Tightlipped, she held her jaw firm as he slobbered over her face with his lips and tongue.

"Abel, are ya sure about how soft she is? Maybe it's just the shirt."

Abel pulled back and leered at her. Richelle wriggled, her eyes large with fright, but she wouldn't cry. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

Grabbing the front of her dress, he ripped the bodice open, sending buttons flying across the tent.

Both men were breathing hard. Their stinking breath hot against her skin inflamed her ire, but she wouldn't cry. She would survive. Abel stepped into her personal space, his knee gliding between her legs and rocking against her mound as his hands continued to bruise and molest her breasts.

Lot kept pulling her tighter against him, resting his chin on her shoulder so he could watch. He rubbed his cock against her ass, his excitement mounting as his breath came in short pants.

"Come on!" he said. "I wanna see them titties!" He licked his lips, his blood and sweat dripping onto her skin.

"Easy, man. We got time," Abel taunted. He leaned in closer, his mouth hovering over hers as his nostrils flared. "Ever had a three-way, baby?"

She reeled back and screamed as his mouth crashed over hers, his tongue thrusting in and out of her mouth, drooling like a mad dog as his saliva pooled in her mouth. This time when he pulled back, she spat in his face. Laughing, he wiped himself and then she flinched when he wiped his hand on her cheek.

"I think she liked that, Lot."

"Then do it again."

Richelle steadied herself as Abel took a step toward her, but he stopped short when an angry voice rang out from behind him.

"Stop at once!"

Abel whirled, allowing Richelle to see the man standing behind him. He was just as unkempt as the other two, with his shaggy, dirty blond hair, scraggly beard, and filthy black-on-black clothing, but there was an aura of strength around him. And she could feel their fear as he glowered at them.

"What were you two thinking? Don't you realize who she is? Who she is promised to?"

The two started shuffling their feet. There was something about this newcomer. Outwardly he appeared the same as the others, but there was something inherently compelling about him. She tried to read his thoughts but they were too well safeguarded.

"We were just havin' a little fun," Lot muttered pathetically. "We were gonna bring her to Preacher."

“Did you think Preacher would let this go unpunished? That *Luka* would?”

Both men trembled at the mention of Luka’s name. Abel looked contemptuously at the newcomer, who stepped forward and took Richelle by her upper arm. He pulled her from Lot’s grasp, walking them toward the tent flap.

“You two tell the others to withdraw and return to Red Dragon.” He jerked Richelle into his side. “*I* will deliver her personally to Preacher. Now, go!”

As he lifted the flap, Abel grabbed him by the arm, pulling them both into the tent.

“You liar!” he screamed, spittle dribbling from the corners of his mouth. “You want her for yerself!”

Releasing her arms, the newcomer put himself between Abel and Richelle, shielding her with his body as he spoke authoritatively.

“Get a grip, man! There are plenty of vamps back at Red Dragon. You don’t need her.” He indicated Richelle with a jerk of his head in her direction. “Is a little fun with her worth facing Luka? Now, get going and do as I said!”

Abel crouched to a fighting stance and pulled a dagger from his boot. Waving it in front of the other man, he issued his challenge.

“She’s mine! So come on, you prick. If you want her, yer gonna have to kill me.”

Richelle was surprised when the newcomer stood his ground. He took a deep breath and sighed resignedly.

“As you wish.” And with the skill and speed of a Ninja, he dropped his arms to his side and two small daggers fell from his sleeves. He threw them at her two assailants, striking them directly in their hearts.

Richelle covered her mouth with both hands, trying to stifle her stunned gasp as both men fell to the ground, dead. Their assassin spun to her, his eyes cold from the kill as he stared at her. He then raised his arm, offering her his upturned hand.

“Come with me and live.”

She stared at him in disbelief, her hands still covering her mouth. He shook his palm at her again.

“There isn’t much time. They’ll be here soon. Come with me and live.”

She lowered her hands to pull at her bodice, attempting to cover her breasts as she blushed furiously. She had no idea who he was or why he had saved her. She couldn't read his thoughts or feel his emotions, and yet something told her he was not like the other two. *Should I trust him?*

And then on the wind she thought she heard something. It was Selene's voice echoing on the wind: *trust in yourself...trust in yourself...trust in yourself*. Still a little hesitant, she placed her hand in his.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Jonathon."

\* \* \* \*

Jonathon couldn't believe he'd found her.

When he received the message from Nicolae, he started checking in with the other Believers. He figured Richelle would have been too smart for them. Hell, an umbrella stand was smarter than most of the Believers. Thank God, he'd started looking for her when he did and was able to get to her in time.

Her hand looked so small as she placed it in his, so frail. He gazed at her, admiring her even features and unique coloring. With her titian hair kissed by the sun and her skin pale as moonlight, she could have been a sea nymph. But what caught his attention the most were her mesmerizing eyes. Fathomless pools, he could swim forever in her beautiful green eyes framed by dark lashes.

Jonathon shifted uncomfortably at her state of undress, one arm crossed in front of her torn dress and her cheeks stained red.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. He pulled her behind him so he could peek out the opening and make sure the coast was clear. He was still scanning the area when he started giving her directions.

"We'll make our way across the fairway. Head for the fun house. It will be the easiest place to hide, at least until dusk."

"Dusk?" she croaked, her throat raw from her scream.

"Dusk," he reiterated as he pulled his head in and looked at her. "Then they'll come."

“They?” She felt like an idiot, but her nerves were frazzled and her head was still muddled like she was trapped in a fire. She couldn’t breathe and couldn’t see through all the smoke.

“The Immortals. They know. They sent me. And when night falls, they will come.” He paused. Her face was white as a sheet with shock. Her body shivered with cold and her hands felt like ice. He took her by the shoulders and shook her once to rattle the dazed look from her eyes. “Hey, are you gonna be all right?”

Mutely, she nodded rapidly. When he released her, she wrapped her arms around herself, using her hands to rub her arms for some warmth. Jonathon slid his heavy leather jacket off and helped Richelle into it. Seeing her dwarfed by his jacket three sizes too big, Jonathon shuffled his feet in embarrassment. As part of his cover, he lived with the Believers as they did, and he knew the smell was enough to offend Mother Teresa.

However, Richelle did not recoil from the offensive smell. Instead, she wrapped the jacket around her, touching his arm and giving him a little smile.

“Thank you.”

His return smile warmed her, like a little boy finding approval with his teacher after bringing her an apple. Taking her by the hand, he gave it a quick squeeze.

“Ready?”

Nodding, she followed as he led them out of the tent. He draped his arm casually over her shoulder and they strolled leisurely along, looking like nothing more than a couple on a date. But standing next to him, her body was drawn tight as a bow. Her eyes darted down every aisle as they stayed on the outside of the tents where there was less of a chance they’d be seen. Seeing the fun house ahead, he excitedly picked up the pace. *We’re going to make it!*

Without warning, Jonathon was strong-armed by two Believers, leading him to a closed-in area behind some of the rides, while a third grabbed Richelle by her upper arm and pulled her away and followed behind. He held her close to his side as his two compatriots tried to subdue Jonathon, dragging him along while they argued until they reached an area hidden from view from the rest of the fairground.

“Do you think we wouldn’t have found out!”



“You traitor!”

“You’ve betrayed us!”

“Preacher will give you to Luka for your betrayal!”

“Luka will destroy you!”

“Preacher is a lunatic driven by his delusions of Luka as God!”

“Traitor!”

*“Traitor!”*

Richelle bent at her hip, trying to pull her arm free as she kicked and clawed her captor. While Richelle tried to free herself, Jonathon continued to fight the two men. One grabbed him from behind, pinning his arms behind his back as the other pulled a knife from his boot. He made a wide arc, slicing open Jonathon’s shirt, creasing his skin and drawing blood.

Using the man behind him for leverage, Jonathon leaned back, kicking the man who held the knife in the gut, and dropped him to the ground. While the man on the ground lay moaning, Jonathon threw his head back once, twice, striking the man behind him in the face. He heard the crunch of the man’s nose breaking with the second head-butt. He was released when the man brought his hands up to cover his nose, which was spurting blood.

With the skill of a champion boxer, he threw two kidney punches before using his open palm to drive the cartilage from the man’s broken nose into his brain, killing him. While his back was turned, the other assailant threw his arm around Jonathon’s throat and stabbed him in the side. Jonathon grunted but held his ground. Dropping to one knee, he threw his attacker over his shoulder to land flat on his back. Withdrawing the knife from his side, he plunged it downward into the Believer’s heart. He pulled it out, whirling to face the man holding Richelle.

“Let her go...and just walk away.”

He could smell the fear of the coward as he used Richelle as a shield, but still he had not relinquished his hold on her. He looked at the knife in Jonathon’s hand and then looked to the woods then back to the knife. As roughly as he had grabbed her, the Believer shoved Richelle toward Jonathon and ran into the forest. Luckily, Jonathon was able to drop the knife and catch Richelle before she hit the ground, but then staggered, trying to stay on his feet. She slipped her arms around his waist, holding him tightly so he would not collapse.

“Put your arm around my shoulder,” she commanded and began leading him back to the main fairway. He swayed as they walked along, but still he tried to not put too much weight on her. Jonathon tripped over some electrical cords as they came around one of the semis and braced himself against the side of the trailer.

“Just a little farther,” she uttered encouragingly. “You can make it. Just lean on me.”

He gave a slight nod, wincing in pain, but pulled himself upright. Tightening her hold around his waist, she headed for the fun house a few feet away. He did what he was told as she supported his weight to help him. When they reached the building he led her around the side and stole away behind the back to the employee entrance. Richelle reached her hand out and turned the knob. It didn’t turn. The door was locked.

\* \* \* \*

“The key...shirt pocket,” he rasped. She fumbled for the key, but it wasn’t there.

“It must have fallen out during your fight,” she whispered as she tried searching his other pockets. When she couldn’t find the key, she tried frantically yanking and pulling on the door, with the same results as someone hitting the elevator key several times to make the elevator go faster. Jonathon moaned and leaned heavily against her, his loss of blood making him weaker. She looked along the wall, looking for another door, and found none. *I’ve got to open this door. I have to!*

She kept trying, jerking on the handle until her shoulder hurt. *I can’t let it end like this*, she bemoaned with tears forming in her desperate eyes. *I can’t let the Believers find us*. Her sole focus was to open that door...*Now!* Closing her eyes, she leaned her forehead against the door and prayed to the Goddess for her help as she kept trying to turn the doorknob. The handle became searing hot beneath her touch, but she refused to give up. She frantically twisted the doorknob with all her strength. *Open, you damn door. Open. Open. Open!*

*Click.* Richelle’s eyes flew open at the sound. She slowly turned the knob and opened the door. With no time to think about how the door had

unlocked itself, she helped Jonathan inside and leaned him against the wall for a moment.

As she closed the door, she saw the Believer had made it to forest and disappeared into the black, dead woods. Not normally vindictive, her thoughts were of revenge. *I hope you get everything you deserve as the dark evil in those woods finds you.* And as she shut and locked the door, she heard a spine-chilling scream and knew her thought had become his final reality.

## Chapter 9

She had no idea how long they were in the fun house. It took her some time to find a secluded area where they could hide. She heard people walking through, laughing and screaming. But she had made sure their dark corner was private where no one could see them.

And then she was busy tending to Jonathon's wound. There was so much blood she was afraid she was going to lose him. She used his shirt as a sponge for the wound on his side, binding it with the sleeves. And as she had little choice, she tore the hem of her skirt into several strips to bandage his chest. He had lost consciousness a few times, so she kept nudging and talking with him to keep him awake.

They had talked about his childhood. He was the offspring of two drug addicts. He told her how he met Valya when he was fourteen, out on the street after his parents' death by overdose and he was about to fall prey to a drug lord/pimp. Valya had taken him to the mountains and left him with his adoptive Immortal father to be cared for and educated. When the opportunity came up to repay their kindness, Jonathon didn't think twice.

He became a mole, joining the Believers and keeping the Immortals apprised of their activities. It was easier in the beginning, but then Luka became more and more active within the cult. Jonathon used the skill of mind shields he was taught to hide his thoughts, but it was becoming more difficult as Luka's power and dominion grew.

A few years older than Richelle, Jonathan had spent his entire adult life living with the Believers. It spoke well of his character that he had not been corrupted by Preacher and his manic beliefs. Watching him as he spoke, Richelle found he'd be quite handsome if he'd clean up a bit and shave. When he lapsed into unconsciousness again, she moved a damp curl from his forehead.

*Fever*, she thought as she lay the back of her hand against his forehead. Tearing another strip from her skirt, she wiped his brow. She needed to bring down his fever and give him some water so he wouldn't dehydrate. She didn't want to leave Jonathon alone and she most definitely didn't want to go running around in what looked to be a miniskirt, but he needed water. And she needed to find out what time it was.

Hiding him under some drapery from the walls, she pulled her skirt down as much as possible to give her some modicum of modesty. Casually she walked out of the fun house, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. *Yeah right*, she thought. *Walking around in a miniskirt, black leather jacket, and red-gold hair—real inconspicuous.*

Watching carefully for any of the Believers, she stole two bottles of water from a nearby vendor and hurried back to the fun house. She didn't know what time it was, but the sun was going down. The carnival lights started to go on, their amber hues indicative of the ending day.

*We need to hang on for just a little longer.* She hoped Jonathan was right about the Immortals coming. She had already had two run-ins with Preacher's fanatics, and felt she wouldn't be so charmed the third time around. With Jonathon's injuries, there would be no escape. They'd kill him as a spy, and she'd be taken to Luka.

She shivered. She didn't want to think about what would happen if Luka ever got his claws in her.

She was heading back to Jonathon when she spotted the first two Believers. She scurried between two vending stands, hoping to get lost among the crowd. She spotted another two walking over to join the first two. And then she sensed another two coming down the main fairway in a rush, knocking the passersby out of their way as they joined the others and started talking.

She was too far away to hear what they were saying, but she needed to know. The mental shields protecting her mind from invading thoughts and emotions had popped up automatically when she arrived at the carnival. She could try controlling that energy, to focus and hear the conversations she *wanted* to hear and filter out the rest. But if she couldn't control it, she would be overwhelmed by all the turmoil going on around her.

As scared as she was, she needed to know what they were saying. *Focus...focus...focus.*

*"Found Abel and Lot in a tent over there."*

*"And we found Jacob and Joseph behind the truck."*

*"What about Gad? He was wit' them."*

*"Don't know. Chicken shit pro'bly ran off."*

*"And Jonathon?"*

*"Got word from Preacher. Jonathon's not a Believer."*

*"He sure?"*

*"You kiddin'?"*

*"What'er we s'posed to do?"*

*"Orders ain't changed. Find the woman. Kill anyone stands in yer way."*

Richelle covered her mouth with her hand to stifle her shocked gasp. *Kill...anyone*. How could they be so cruel? So pitiless? With or without the Immortals' help, she had to get Jonathon out of here.

*"Found a trail of blood. Led back here to the fair."*

*"They gots to be 'round here someplace."*

*"Couldn't get far, losin' that much blood."*

*"Gotta find 'em fast. Night's a'comin'."*

*"Yeah, so's Preacher. And he's bringin'...Him."*

*"You know what'll happen if we don't find her before they git here."*

*"Spread out!"*

*"You two head towards the front entrance. You two head over to the rides. We'll backtrack around the tents."*

Oh, Goddess. They went off in separate directions, but like vultures, they were circling where she left Jonathon hiding. It would be only a matter of time before they found him. She had to get to him and find another hiding place. They'd go back to the tent where she was attacked. She doubted the Believers would go back there and look for them.

Astutely she watched, waiting for an opening to get back to Jonathon. If she had to strap him to her back and carry him out of there, she would not let those men find him. Within moments, the six men had disappeared out of view. She made her way quickly to the back of the fun house. Although she knew she had locked it when they first slipped in, it turned on the first try and she entered the darkened building, closing the door with a *click*.

\* \* \* \*

Nicolae felt the strenuous effects of being out in the daylight rather than taking sleep. His powers diminishing, he made his way slowly to the abode of the Protectors. Much younger and not as highly skilled, Protectors did not lead the solitary life as Guardians did. They preferred to live in groups of two or three. Some had even found their mates and formed packs, like wolves, to serve man and Immortal.

Much like Valya's industrialized loft, these Protectors lived in a loft architecturally functional and artistically designed with the main difference being in colors. While Valya's had been in colors of black, gold, and wine, this loft was in shades of the woods, with forest green, midnight blue, and dark brown.

The sun had finally gone down. It was time to wake the Protectors.

"Roman. Stefan. Awake."

Although there was no thunder clap or lightning strike accompanying his command, his authoritative voice left no doubt as to the urgency or the uncompromising tone of his demand, and, much to his surprise, *three* large figures appeared before him. All stood over six feet tall with the archetypal build of a warrior.

"Pieter? I thought you were hunting to the west."

"I was. But I felt a need to be here."

Pieter had long, dirty blond hair and piercing blue eyes. He was a Guardian like Valya, hunting to the west in search of terrorists who had made a base camp in Montana. Nicolae wasn't aware of any other Guardian in this vicinity as all preferred to work alone, but was grateful for his presence in case they needed help.

Stefan was the typical Hollywood blond, blue-eyed, pretty boy resembling a young Robert Redford, while Roman bore the resemblance of his warrior namesake, with black hair and eyes, his classical features sharply cut as if carved from marble.

Roman was the older of the two Protectors, although looking at him you would believe him to be forty instead of six hundred and twenty-five. Stefan, a baby at two hundred and fifty, was learning his role as a Protector as Roman's apprentice.

"What brings you to us?" Stefan questioned.

All Immortals lived with the knowledge that Nicolae's powers were beyond imagining, so he did not need the assistance of Protectors nor Guardians. It was whispered that centuries ago he brought trial against an Immortal female and demanded her banishment from their mountain home, but everyone knew he did not need a decree of punishment from the Triad. It was merely an ingrained code of chivalry preventing him from harming a female that spared her from his wrath.

"She has been found."

"Who?" Pieter asked.

"The woman from the prophecy."

"Truly?" Hopefulness laced Stefan's voice.

"Are you sure?" Roman interjected, not as optimistic as his compatriot.

"Her name is Richelle Sommers. She is under our protection. And, she has been claimed...by Valya."

They all nodded in stunned silence. Immortals had searched for centuries for the woman destined to save two worlds, wondering who her intended life mate was. But no longer. Before they could ask any questions, Nicolae relayed the grim news.

"The Believers have found her. Jonathon was able to save her from capture, but he has been injured. They have been trapped at the carnival at the State Fairgrounds. We go to their rescue before Luka cel Rau reaches them."

"Valya has completed the bonding ritual?" Pieter was somber in his question.

"No," Nicolae replied, angered Valya had not done so. Their bonding would remove the immediate danger to Richelle.

In taking blood, whether it was during feeding or bonding, the use of pheromones was common, to allay fear, decrease resistance, remove the memory, and minimize pain. But in minimizing the pain, it heightened the pleasure lingering beyond the encounter.

The pheromones would be absorbed in the blood and released slowly, affecting anyone around that person. With a surge in testosterone, men would become more powerful and virile. And woman became more alluring, more sensual and desirable. The more pheromones released during the taking of blood, the more compelling the reaction. As he was taking first



blood as part of the bonding ritual, Valya would have unconsciously released huge amounts of pheromones to heighten her arousal and pleasure.

Until they were fully bonded as life mates, Richelle was a walking sex magnet, attracting every male near her.

But still unknown to the Immortals, Valya and Richelle's bonding would be the key to destroying Luka's plot to rule the world. Nicolae needed to get to Valya and tell him the truth behind the prophecy. But first, they had to get to the carnival.

"We must return Richelle to Valya without delay."

"Valya is not searching for her?"

Nicolae glared at Stefan, causing him to take a step back. While Nicolae had never harmed an Immortal, it didn't mean he couldn't. And there was always the persistent fear that without a life mate, he would turn Vampyre.

"I have commanded Valya to sleep. Until the bonding is complete, we cannot risk a confrontation with Luka. He will remain asleep at his loft until our return. With Richelle."

"Then let's go," Pieter chirped eagerly.

"No," Nicolae replied. "You need to be available to warn Valya, in case we are not successful with our mission."

"You need me at the carnival to fight Luka and the Believers."

Nicolae shook his head. "Do not be so eager for battle. It will come soon enough. Stefan and Roman will accompany me. Wait here until our return."

Pieter curtly nodded, obviously perturbed at not being able to go.

"Yes. It's time to settle some old debts."

Nicolae knew Stefan was out to prove himself being a new Protector. Roman also had ulterior motives for facing Luka, as he was responsible for the death of Roman's brother. Nicolae did not want the focus to be on revenge or validation. "No!" Adamant, Nicolae threw up his hand to stay their leaving. "This is not the time for retribution. Focus on the task at hand. We will return Richelle to Valya. When the bonding ritual has been completed..." Nicolae lowered his hand, trying to rein in the uncontrollable rage welling within him before his beast became unleashed. "...then we will deal with Luka and his followers."

\* \* \* \*

Richelle supported Jonathon's head as she helped him to drink the water she had brought, which was difficult. With the loss of blood, he kept lapsing into unconsciousness. She had to shake him several times in order to get him to drink half a bottle, which she knew wasn't enough. She had to find help. She had to get Jonathon to a doctor or else he could... *No! No one else is going to die because of me.*

Tearing another strip from her dress, she poured half of the remaining water over his head and the other half she used to soak the fabric remnant. She wiped his face and forehead, brushing his hair back. She turned to wring out the cloth, and when she turned back, Jonathan was staring at her, his eyes dull and empty.

"You will...tell my father...I tried." His lips were chapped, and his voice gravelly as he forced the words. She laid the cloth against his lips, wiping the spittle and dirt from the corners of his mouth.

"You'll be able to tell him yourself."

Jonathon captured her hand in his and held it close to his cheek.

"But you...will tell...him."

She swallowed hard. She refused to let him lose hope, but she wasn't able to refuse the pleading in his eyes. She nodded quickly, refusing to say the words lest they became a self-fulfilling prophecy. She dashed away the tear that was about to fall before giving him a weak smile.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "If only...I had met someone like you...before. So sweet. Things could have been...different...for me."

"There'll be time. You'll find her."

He shook his head as he coughed violently. "No. Too late. Not fair."

"That's enough, Jonathon. I won't listen to any more. You are going to make it, do you hear me?" He closed his eyes without responding. Pulling her hand from his cheek, she placed it on his forehead.

"You're going to make it, Jonathon," she repeated, but he still didn't respond. She shook him lightly and he opened his eyes to meet her gaze. "Jonathon, we need to go." The concern in her voice was evident as she helped him to a sitting position. He winced in pain, placing his hand over the blood-soaked bandage while he struggled to his feet with her help. He stumbled at his first step, and would have tumbled to the floor had it not been for Richelle's firm grip around his waist supporting him.

“Leave me...Richelle,” he groaned, unable to muster the effort or stifle the pain of each step. “Slow you down...you can...make it...without me.”

“No,” she grunted, grabbing his arm and placing it over her shoulder. “We are getting out of here. The both of us...together.”

Straining, she half-carried, half-dragged Jonathon to the rear entrance. Opening the door cautiously, she scanned the outside, making sure the coast was clear before exiting the building. Not quite night, the shadow of evening was edging out the daylight. If Jonathon was right, then the Immortals should be here soon.

She was turning around the corner onto the main fairway when she caught sight of the first group of them, two Believers coming from the front entrance with a young boy leading the way. He didn’t look old enough to have graduated high school, with his slight form and stringy hair, but that made no difference as he was leading the Believers to the fun house. She tried backing them up before they were spotted, but it was too late. The Believers began sprinting to where they were.

As she changed directions, she saw another two coming from the left and then finally from the right, all converging on her and Jonathon. There was no choice now. She would have to lead them toward the woods and take their chances against the foreboding forest.

Jonathon did his best to keep pace with Richelle as she dragged him toward the carnival’s edge. He made it as far as the semi-trailers before his legs gave out and he fell to the ground, rolling over onto his back as his head rolled from side to side. Richelle grabbed the front of his shirt, trying to lift him, but he was a dead weight.

“Run...to the forest...get away...run.”

“Not without you!” she shouted. “Now get up!” As he made it to his hands and knees, she was grabbed roughly by her hair and pulled around to face the man who appeared to be the leader of the group.

“You led us a merry chase, didn’t you, my little witch? But it’s over now.”

She struggled against his hold, trying to see where Jonathon was. He cast her aside and one of the others caught her, spinning her around and holding onto her wrist with a vise-like grip. She watched as the leader walked over to Jonathon and kicked him in the stomach, making him land face forward in the dirt.

"No, leave him alone!" she screamed, but she was ignored. Jonathon tried to stand up but could only make it to his knees. The Believers began circling around him like Indians around a wagon train, while she watched helplessly.

"So what have we here?" one taunted.

"Thought he was gonna git that bitch fer hisself."

"Is that it, Jonathon? Did ya think you would get a chance to fuck her before giving her to Preacher?"

"Too selfish to share?"

"Did she seduce you?"

"She's a witch castin' dem evil spells. Bewitchin' a man to do things."

"Damn purty witch, though. Damn purty."

Richelle could feel lustful urges rising as the men began eying her, some licking their lips while others blatantly rubbed their crotches. *Oh, Goddess, not again.* She struggled against her captor's hold but could only watch helplessly as the Believers taunted Jonathon.

"Is that it, Jonathon? Did you fall in love with her?"

"No. I think the answer is much simpler." All the men stopped as the leader walked over and bent over to be face to face with Jonathon, his reeking breath blowing in his face as he spoke. "I think what we have here is nothing more than a disbeliever...a traitor."

He backed off a few steps and sneered as Jonathon swayed on his knees.

"Is that it?"

"Get an attack of conscience?"

"Nah, he a chicken-shit coward," the boy who had led the others to them sneered. "Just turned yeller."

"'Fraid of dem 'mortals?"

"I'm not afraid," the boy emphatically declared as he puffed up his chest in a prideful gesture.

"It makes no difference. There is only one punishment for his betrayal."

"Just make sure you tell them all," the boy whined, "I was the one that found 'em."

"They will know, Isaac."

"An' I wanna be there when he goes before *Him*. I wanna watch him be punished."

"He will not be going before *Him*."

Jonathon struggled to get to his feet, forcing his body to stop swaying as he looked into the eyes of his accuser.

“There is only one punishment. Death,” the leader stated coldly. Reaching into his back waistband, he pulled out a gun and pointed it at Jonathon.

“No!” Richelle screamed.

“May you rot in hell, traitor.” The leader raised his gun, smiling vindictively as he aimed it at Jonathon’s heart. With a strength she didn’t know she possessed, Richelle yanked free from her captor. She broke through the ring of men rushing forward to stand between Jonathon and the leader.

“Good-bye, Jonathon.” As the leader fired the gun, Richelle threw her arms around Jonathon, her mind envisioning an invisible shield surrounding them to protect them from the bullet. She closed her eyes as she clung to Jonathon, waiting for an explosion of pain from a bullet finding its mark, which never came. Opening her eyes, she turned to see the bullet hovering in midair no more than six inches from her face. And then it fell harmlessly to the ground. The Believers began to fidget and the wind began to rise. Richelle still clung to Jonathon as he toppled to the ground. She shifted so she could cradle him in her arms, his head lying against her chest. She used her hand to cover his face, protecting it from debris swirling in the air.

The wind began whipping her hair wildly, and the Believers began to back away into a group before Richelle with fear in their eyes. All except for one.

The leader stepped forward and aimed his gun at Jonathon’s head. Richelle cradled him closer but didn’t hide her eyes this time. Instead, her gaze bore into his head as if daring him to pull the trigger, realizing he was nothing more than a cowardly bully. *He wouldn’t be so brave if he didn’t have a gun.*

She kept repeating that thought—*He doesn’t have a gun, he doesn’t have a gun.* She felt her face grow hot. *He doesn’t have a gun.* His hand trembled at first until he took a deep breath, and with great effort, he pulled the trigger. *Click.* He stared in frustrated disbelief at the gun in his hand. He aimed again. *Click... Click.* Nothing happened. *Click, click, click.* His rage evident, he threw the gun aside and pulled a knife from a bootstrap.

She showed no fear as he towered over them, raising the knife to drive it down. She waited, but he never completed the downward stroke. His arm began to shake as he tried to force the blade down into Jonathon's heart, but he stood immobile, as if someone or something were holding his arm in midair.

"The...Immortals," Jonathon whispered.

Then suddenly from thin air, two figures appeared behind the Believers, their eyes red as flames of fire. Each flailed an arm and Believers went flying through the air in all directions, and then each of the two figures went after the men individually. Richelle watched in awe as each man was handled efficiently...and permanently.

"Noooo!" the leader wailed as he tried to strike with the knife. "He cannot be allowed to live!" Laboriously, he took a step forward with a malicious curl to his upper lip. Then his sneer disappeared and was replaced by confusion and hatred. "He must die."

Richelle pulled Jonathon tighter against her as the leader's eyes bulged out. Gasping for air, he dropped the knife to clutch his throat. After a moment he fell to his knees and then after a few more moments he fell prostrate on the ground, motionless.

He was dead.

Richelle buried her face against Jonathon's head, her hair falling forward to block her view of the dead man who lay at her feet. In her heart she wanted to feel a pang of regret for the men's demise as they fell under Immortal justice. Instead, she cried with relief, kissing Jonathon's forehead and hugging him. The wind died down as the Believers either lay dead on the ground or had run away. She looked up to see the two Immortals approaching her, one dragging the boy along with him. But before they could reach her, another hooded figure materialized before her.

He was dressed differently than the other Immortals. While they wore black contemporary clothing, he was clad old-worldly breeches and a poet shirt covered by a long robe. The first two radiated a passion and intensity rivaling the Believers' fanaticism. But when this one removed his hood, his long silver hair and eyes gave him a serene and ethereal appearance.

Despite the immense power he emanated, Richelle could sense a deep sadness and vulnerability in his wise soul. She could feel the pain cutting him to the bone as he skirted the edge of dark and light, of Immortal and

Vampyre. And as she peered deeper into his memories, she was shoved out of his mind, and the walls locked down tight. But she didn't need to see any more. She had recognized him immediately from Madame Selene's visions. With a breathy quality in her voice, she whispered his name in reverence.

“Nicolae.”

## Chapter 10

*"Awake, Valya."*

Feeling sluggish, Valya slowly awoke to the commanding voice calling to him from a distance. He was finding it difficult to come fully awake and then he remembered. *Nicolae.*

*"Awake, Valya."*

*"Nicolae, you son of a ..."*

*"It would not be wise to insult she who was my mother."*

*"Wait until I get my hands on you!"* Valya sat up quickly, resulting in a bout of dizziness he was unaccustomed to. Nicolae must have exerted a great magnitude of energy to send him into a deep sleep, so deep he could not awake without help.

*"We have Richelle."*

Valya closed his eyes and sighed with relief. There was no one more powerful than Nicolae. She would be safe with him until she was in his arms again.

*"We have to tend to the wounded, and then I will return with her."*

Valya tensed immediately at the mention of injuries.

*"Is she hurt?"*

*"She is not hurt."*

*"I will come to her."*

*"No. You will remain there until I bring her to you."*

*"You press your luck, Great One. She is my life mate."*

*"Yes, she is," Nicolae concurred. "And as such, she is at risk as long as she is un-mated, from Luka as well as other mortals. You need to prepare to complete the bonding ritual."*

Valya reluctantly agreed. At this moment, he felt like he had imbibed large amounts of spirits. As Immortals were not immune to the effects of alcohol, he was always careful not to ingest the blood of those who had been



drinking, as it also diminished the potency of the blood. It was his supposition that this was what a hangover felt like. *Why do mortals do this to themselves?*

*“Because they are fooled by the delusion that they are in control,” Nicolae replied to Valya’s rhetorical question.*

With any luck it would not take long for the effects of the sleep inducement to dissipate. He didn’t like feeling as if his head were immersed in a vat of mud.

*“How long will you be?”*

*“Not long. Roman and Stefan will take care of the bodies. Richelle will help me take Jonathon back to the Protector’s lair so I can heal him. Then I will return her to you.”*

Valya didn’t respond, but he grew agitated, like a caged tiger smelling blood. He didn’t like the idea of waiting, sitting on his hands so to speak. But Nicolae had spoken. After the Triad, Nicolae’s word was law.

So he would do as he was told.

*“Bring her safely back to me. I will wait.”*

\* \* \* \*

Richelle was a little wobbly materializing across town to the Protector’s home, and though Nicolae offered to carry Jonathon, she refused to relinquish her hold.

*“Where should I put him?”*

*“Follow me.”*

Nicolae led her through the apartment to two closed doors. Opening the one on the right, he waved his arm and Jonathon disappeared from her arms to materialize on the bed, his clothes removed but covered from the waist down by a sheet. Richelle, her eyes downcast, blushed and Nicolae chortled.

*“After all you have been through, you blush.”*

She ignored him as she went over to Jonathon and sat on the edge of the bed. Brushing his damp hair away from his forehead, she was struck by how much he resembled a little boy sleeping. When Nicolae removed Jonathon’s clothes, he must have cleaned him in some way as well. His dirty face and hair were washed and the odor indicative of the Believers was gone, although he hadn’t reeked as the others did.

“That is because his odor was of dirt and sweat. Much like the Guardians, you were able to smell the evil corrupting the Believers’ souls like an infected wound,” Nicolae remarked.

“But how could I—”

“How could you smell their evil? Your gifts.”

Richelle shook her head.

“My gifts are empathic and telepathic in nature.”

“Your gifts are so much more than that.” Their eyes locked. His gaze was kind and gentle, like a father’s. Like Duncan’s. She mulled over things that had happened, transporting from the carnival to the loft, the door lock, the bullet, the gun not working. *Was it really me who did all that?* She shook her head again as if denying it would make it not so.

“Believe me, little warrior witch, your gifts are more than you have imagined. Within you lies an untapped power that will be realized as you complete the bonding ritual with Valya—enough power to destroy Luka and thwart his evil plans.”

“To feel and hear thoughts and emotions in both man and beast is enough.” She harrumphed softly as she checked Jonathon’s wounds. She wasn’t surprised to find that they were healed, leaving jagged scars as reminders.

“It’s funny. We call them animals and yet their thoughts and emotions are so open. Wolves don’t cruelly hurt each other or kill for sport. They hunt for food and fight to protect the pack. They say man is superior, and yet, how often do we hurt and maim and kill for nothing more than empty prizes as glory...lust...power?”

“But yet, there is a power struggle in the pack to see who will dominate as the alpha wolf.”

Her eyes shot to Nicolae. Infuriated, she defended her wolves the same way she defended them to critics who were against Dr. Samuels’ wolf re-population program.

“It’s their nature. And once the alpha male has been established, he doesn’t try to dominate or take over other packs. He simply leads the pack in their daily search for food, shelter, and protection. In this way, they are no different than man. They want to live a peaceful existence.” She turned her attention back to Jonathon, brushing a stray lock away from his forehead. “It

is man who goes against nature and destroys what he touches to satisfy his own selfish needs of self-worth.”

“Not *all* men,” he chided calmly. Richelle looked down at Jonathon and placed her hand over his heart.

“No. Not all men.” She leaned down and kissed his forehead. “Will he be all right?” She touched her forehead to his, trying to sense his thoughts, but he was as blank as Valya was when he came to her in the meadow as a wolf.

Nicolae watched her gentle act. So good and kind, she would breathe fresh air into his people. But as a woman alone, she needed protection. Jonathon would heal and be available to aid Valya, but he could use help, especially during the daytime.

“You miss your wolf friends,” he asked, changing the subject.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I miss them.”

Nicolae closed his eyes as Richelle watched, not sure what he was doing. After a moment he stretched out his arms and leaned his head back. He brought his hands together creating a loud clap. The lights flickered for a moment, and the next thing she knew, a black fur ball came jumping against her almost knocking her from her seat.

\* \* \* \*

“Shadow?” she asked incredulously before throwing her arms around her black wolf. “Oh, Shadow!” She laughed and cried, not realizing how much she had missed her friend from the mountain.

*“Richelle, loosen up. You’re choking me.”*

“I’m sorry,” she said as she let go to sit back and look at him. His wolflike eyes filled her with relief. He had been so brave to offer his blood to Valya, but then they had to leave before she had seen to his recovery. *“I’m sorry we left you the way we did.”*

*“It was necessary.”*

*“But still, after what you did...”*

*“It was my choice. My gift.”*

She kissed his nose, happy to see him, and he retaliated by licking her face before she gave him another hug.

*"Tell me, Richelle. Are you happy?"*

*"I'm not sure I know what happy is, Shadow. But I think I may be,"* she replied mentally as she scratched behind his ears.

*"Who is this one?"*

*"His name is Jonathon. He saved me. He is...my friend."* Richelle stumbled over the words. She had never had a human friend before. Duncan was more like the codgerly grandfather from *Heidi* and Alma was the kindly grandmother. It was a unique sensation, the feelings she felt for Jonathon. One she didn't intend to lose. She directed her attention back to Nicolae.

*"You never answered me. Is Jonathon going to be all right?"*

*"He will be fine. He will sleep for an hour and then, as humans say, he will be right as rain."*

Richelle sat up smiling, glad that her new friend would be all right, but still, she wouldn't leave until she saw for herself.

*"I don't think that would be wise."*

Cocking her head to one side and raising a brow, she peered at Nicolae.

*"You don't think what would be wise?"*

*"Staying here. Valya awaits your return."*

*"You know,"* she reprimanded, *"it isn't polite to read other people's thoughts. And don't hand me that garbage about me 'broadcasting' them. I have been very careful about placing my mind shields."*

*"My apologies, little warrior witch,"* Nicolae replied, looking appropriately contrite at his actions. *"Much like you with your gifts, I cannot always control my powers of telepathy, and I instinctively read those around me. That is a part of my nature."*

Richelle nodded in understanding. Until she met Valya, she fought against her *gifts* by avoiding the use of them, so she had little control. Nicolae had lived for centuries where his gifts were accepted, as much a part of him as his unique hair and eye color. Embracing his gifts, he would use them as naturally as breathing, sleeping, and feeding.

*"I will stay until I see for myself Jonathon is all right."* She stood and went into the living room with Shadow trailing close behind, the *tic-tic-tic* of his paws ticking like a clock indicating the passage of time.

Giving an exasperated sigh, Nicolae nodded.

*"Whether mortal or Immortal, there is no sense in arguing with a woman once she has set her mind. Valya will have to wait a little longer."*

\* \* \* \*

Luka's roar could be heard throughout the tower. The Protectors had returned the young boy to the Tower of the Red Dragon, and Preacher had brought him before Luka to relate what had happened at the carnival. Needless to say, he was not pleased.

"Imbeciles! Nine men and a boy couldn't handle a female and a traitor!"

Preacher said nothing when the boy rushed forward and fell to his knees, groveling before Luka. All his boasting and crowing dissipated as he had to face Luka's wrath.

"There was n-nothin' we c-could do! They h-had h-help!" He cowered.

"Nothing you could do? The Immortals did not arrive until *after* the sun had set! You should have found her before nightfall!" he screeched. "I will not listen to your excuses!" He spun to face Preacher.

"And *you* should have known there was a spy in your midst," he spat. Preacher was terrified as Luka's ice blue eyes changed to blood red, but to his credit, Preacher didn't offer any explanations or excuses. He didn't flinch from Luka's rage.

Luka whirled and began flailing his arms, sending Vampyres and loose stone flying as he directed his rage onto others.

"Damn those Immortals!" A few of the Believers tried to escape the main room, only to find themselves dragged back and then thrown high in the air into the stone walls. He continued his rampage until most of his rage had been spent and he stood in the middle of the great hall, panting and heaving.

"What is your bidding, master?" Preacher dared to ask, risking Luka's anger.

"Nothing's changed! Find her, dammit! Send your followers into the city and find her! Kill anyone standing in your way, but I want Richelle found! Now!"

Preacher bowed at the waist as the Believers left the great hall, some limping after suffering Luka's temper tantrum. Even the boy had tried to leave the hall, only to be stopped by two Vampyres blocking his path.

“No...not you, boy,” Luka growled. He waved a hand toward the boy, and two minions brought him forward. Preacher looked on, knowing what was going to happen and knowing there was nothing he could do to stop it.

“You failed me, boy.” The boy’s eyes grew wide with fright as he began to whimper.

“All your puffing and crowing like a rooster, and yet you failed me.” Luka pointed his finger at the boy, who began to twist and contort in pain, growing smaller and smaller. Feathers sprouted from his body, and his cries of pain and fear turned to squawking cackles until he was gone, transformed to a rooster. One of the Vampyres caught him and took him to Luka.

“Take him away,” he cooed as he stroked the back of the rooster. “Take him to the kitchen. Tell the cook I want roast chicken for tonight’s feast.” The Vampyre did as he was commanded, the rooster screeching and flapping its wings, trying to escape as it was taken from the room. “As for the rest of you, begone!”

\* \* \* \*

Preacher and the remainder of the followers left the hall until only Terezia remained. As always, she was hauntingly beautiful, dressed in midnight blue, which emphasized her white skin and ebony hair. But Luka felt only disdain when he looked at her, sauntering her way across the room to stand before him. She was not what he wanted—she was not Richelle.

“Perhaps there is a better way we can work off your...negative energy.” She ran her hand over his chest, the black silk brushing against her hand. She brought up the other and removed the shirt from his body, admiring how his muscles rippled beneath her touch.

He grabbed her wrist, pulling it back behind him, and drew her body hard to him, her breasts squashed against his chest as she rubbed herself against him like a cat in heat. He could smell her arousal as his nostrils flared, but it did nothing to fire his loins.

He bent down and brutally kissed her, trying to ignite a flame that had long since been snuffed. Nothing. She was merely a vessel. He felt no passion, and his mind was filled with dark fantasies and how he would fulfill them with Richelle’s fresh blood and form.

Yet tonight, he needed to find release and Terezia would not be enough.

"I need more," he snarled.

"I thought you might. Pamela."

Luka looked over and saw a blond Vampyress dressed in a matching shade of midnight blue come out from the shadows. While her angelic appearance had transformed into one of a sultry vixen, he recognized her as the young girl he had enjoyed so thoroughly the night before. So thoroughly, he was not aroused by the thought of taking both.

"I need *more!*" he emphasized, pulling on Terezia's arm harder, causing her to wince.

"I have a brother."

Luka's head jerked up as Pamela spoke. *A brother, eh. Yes...that might do nicely.* He released Terezia and stepped back, anticipation lighting his dead eyes.

"A brother."

"Yes, my lord."

"It has been several seasons since you last enjoyed an evening with a young man, hasn't it, my love," Terezia teased. "Just think...a young, virile man and the nightfall to take your pleasure."

"Yesss," he agreed, his tongue slithering out to lick his lips. "I would enjoy that immensely." His mind began to spin at the possibilities.

"Of course, my lord," Pamela continued, "he is not as innocent as I."

"Are you saying he's not a virgin, my dear?" His tone was dripping with sarcasm.

"Yes, my lord."

He chuckled menacingly, his eyes growing large in excitement.

"Do not worry, my dear. For what I have in mind, he *is* a virgin." He spun and began to climb the stairs to his chambers in the highest tower. "Go. Be quick and bring him to my chambers upon your return."

Terezia and Pamela smiled derisively as they soared upward to leave through an arched window. Luka's crowing echoed through the great hall thinking on his evening's pleasures when they returned.

\* \* \* \*

It had been several hours since Nicolae had sent word to Valya. He could sense Valya's impatience, so it was no wonder he rushed forward when Nicolae appeared with Richelle and Shadow.

Valya gathered Richelle in his arms, giving little notice to her companion from the mountain by her side. He kissed her with such passion she swooned and collapsed into his embrace. He picked her up gently, unwilling to break their kiss. Wrapping her arms around his neck, Valya carried her off to the privacy of the bathroom.

As Valya closed the door behind him, Nicolae looked down at the wolf staring up at him and whining.

"Don't worry, my friend. He will not harm her. But still, as I believe he intends to take second blood this night, I suggest you find a quiet corner somewhere and I will aid you in your sleep. You will awake in the morning and be able to protect Richelle as Valya sleeps."

As if in approval, Shadow walked over to the kitchen and lay down by the stove. Nicolae waved his hand and Shadow drifted seamlessly to sleep. And Nicolae, content that Richelle was safe, returned to his lair, where he, too, could find sleep and fully restore his powers. He would need them as they faced Luka in the final battle.



## Chapter 11

Valya placed Richelle on the vanity so she could sit up, but even so, he still had to bend down slightly to kiss her. And he planned on kissing her all night. Richelle was just as passionate in returning his kiss, and her hands rested on his waist, her thumbs looping into his waistband to steady herself.

He cupped her face in his hands, so afraid she would break beneath his heavy touch. Worse, he was afraid she would disappear again and he would lose her, forever. He broke their kiss and threaded his fingers up into her hair behind her ears and leaned his forehead against hers. His chest expanded as he took great gulps of air.

“Why didn’t you wait for me? Why did you go to the carnival alone?”

She was in no better shape, panting as she tried to catch her breath after his zealous kiss. It took her a few more moments before she could answer him.

“You know why.”

“The old woman.”

She nodded.

“I was hoping to find Madame Selene. She seemed to know so much about Immortals. About you. I needed to ask her something.”

“What did you need to ask her?”

“How I could recognize you after you take second blood.” She said it all in a rush. Pulling back he stared at her. Her cheeks turned red under his scrutiny.

“You said you needed time. Are you sure?” He had to ask. She had to be very, very sure. She raised her hands and dragged her fingertips along the backs of his hands to rest lightly around his wrists.

“I’m very sure. I love you, Valya. And I want to be with you. You are my life mate.”

“*Mio dusa*,” he exclaimed before his mouth crashed down upon hers. Hot and insistent, his tongue parted her lips and delved into her mouth, thrusting and tasting as his blood raced through his veins.

Her arms went around his waist and her hands rested upon his back. He stepped between her legs, pulling her body toward him until her derriere rested on the edge of the vanity and he could step fully into the cradle of her thighs, his dick throbbing behind the zipper of his leather pants.

\* \* \* \*

She could feel it pressing against her thigh as he spread her wide, trying to get closer to her. *If he gets any closer, he'd be behind me.* But she didn't say anything. She liked the way he felt, every part of him hard and ready as he flattened himself against her. His chest, his arms, his legs, his...cock. The man was built like steel as he did his best to wrap himself around her.

And his wickedly talented tongue! He was just as good at this kissing thing as he was when he kissed her...down there. Oh, my! Either way, the things he did with his tongue made her toes curl. Every part of her fluttered with desire to the point where she thought she would die if she couldn't be with him. Oh, yes, she was sure.

His hands moved her head as he kissed her deeply, changing the angle of his approach to kiss her thoroughly, soundly. He slipped the leather jacket off to let it pool on the counter and then raised his hands to undo the bodice of her dress and stopped his kiss abruptly to look at her.

He scowled as he looked at her chest. She looked down at the ripped bodice exposing her breasts clad in her lace brassiere. Hastily, she used her arms to cover herself. Tracing the outline of the red finger marks and bruising on her arms, he growled low. Before she could say anything, he looked down the length of her body. She dropped her arms to use the remnant of her skirt to try and cover the bruises and scratches on her legs. He clutched her upper arms. She looked away, not daring to meet his eyes, but he shook her until she looked him in the face.

“What happened!” he demanded.

“It's nothing, Valya. I'm here with you now.”

“I can smell the stench of another man on you! I want to know what happened!” She felt his mind probing hers so she swiftly erected a wall. She

didn't want him to see, didn't want him to know. He would overreact and never allow her to be out of his sight if he knew. He kept trying to get past the blocks, but she held them effortlessly, causing him to become more agitated.

"Please, Valya. You're hurting me." She made the comment nonchalantly, but he released her as if she were on fire. She slid down off the counter to open the door and head for the kitchen for a glass of water, also, to put some distance between them as she could feel his energy vibrating off him like a tuning fork. Without turning, she could feel him following her, watching her with the eyes of a hunter.

Richelle stepped carefully around Shadow, asleep on the floor, as she took a glass from the counter and filled it half full with tap water. After finishing it, she went around the bar on the opposite side from Valya, not wanting to get too close. But he was not letting her off the hook.

"I want to know what happened, Richelle."

"It was nothing. There were some Believers at the carnival, that's all. Jonathon and I had to hide for a while until we could get away."

"There's more to it than that. Jonathon was hurt. Your dress, your arms, your...legs..." Valya snarled. "They *touched* you! *My* woman! Tell me what happened, Richelle!"

"Let it be, Valya. It's over, and I don't want to talk about it."

"From now on, when you leave this apartment, it will be with me! You will not be alone again!" His nostrils flared as he issued his command.

He continued to try and see inside her mind, to see what had really happened. He couldn't penetrate the wall she had built around her thoughts, but Richelle could feel his fury.

She stood defiantly against him, her eyes flashing in anger as she defended her actions.

"You have no idea what it's like, Valya, to live your whole life in secret, in hiding. To not be around other people because their thoughts are painful to you. And to have every person you ever cared for ripped away from you." Her body was trembling, not in fear but in resentment as she continued on with her tirade. "I've missed a lifetime, *my* lifetime. And now those doors have been opened and I can finally step out into the world and be a part of it."

He grunted his disapproval. The air tingled with electricity as well as their rampant emotions. His rage was flagrant, his body shaking with rage as she saw a flicker of his animalistic nature in his eyes. She held her ground.

“And now you want me to go back into hiding, forget everything I’ve seen and done, forget being a part of the human race because it’s too dangerous? The world is dangerous, Valya. As long as men are consumed by their own pettiness, jealousies, and lust, the world is dangerous. But it’s also exciting and wonderful and beautiful. And I want to be a part of that beauty. Can’t you understand that?”

His eyes narrowed, fixating on her as his tone lowered to an ominous pitch.

“I understand that there is a crazed madman searching for you. No, not just searching, *hunting* for you. He has spent *his* lifetime hunting for you. If he finds you, if he takes you to Luka, then you will be lost to me forever. I have searched for you for centuries. I waited for you until you became a woman and could become my life mate. I will not allow you to be taken from me. And I will kill any man who dares try.”

She felt a shudder run through her at his bold words, not doubting for a moment their sincerity or his ability to carry out his vow of retribution. But despite his authoritarian manner, he had to allow her freedom. She refused to live life as a bird in a gilded cage. She had just found her wings and wanted to learn how to fly. In the end, she knew she would succumb to Valya and his mastery of her heart but not now.

She raised her chin in a weak show of bravado. He was powerful and potent. He was her life mate, and she could deny him nothing. If he commanded her, she would obey because he was powerful, and she truly loved him with all that was in her. But she would not obey meekly. Her self-respect demanded she show how strong she could be even though in the end she knew Valya would win.

“You will obey me in this, Richelle. I will not let you put yourself in danger.” His hands were clenched into tight fists. “You are my heart, Richelle, and I will never harm you. However, there is punishment for disobedience, even among Immortals.” But she was not an Immortal. She was human, born with free will.

“You must trust me, Richelle. Your safety, the safety of our children takes precedence over anything else. Obey me.”

“No,” she replied quietly. He stared at her in disbelief. His knuckles turned white as he clenched and unclenched his fists at her refusal. She felt his anger simmering just beneath the surface ready to explode, but she held fast.

“No? What do you mean ‘no’?”

“What part of ‘no’ didn’t you understand? I will not be treated as a child to be sent to her room without dinner. I am a grown woman and I will do as I like.”

He rumbled at her insolence, his eyes becoming bright, colors swirling before them. She knew how difficult this was for him. No one had ever defied him over the centuries. He was a Guardian used to everyone bowing to his will.

But she had a will, and mind, of her own and she refused to let him take it away from her. He would have to learn to trust her as well. He had to understand that, as his life mate, she would look to him for protection and surrender her love to him, but he could not arbitrarily take her freedom. She lowered her chin and softened her words in the hopes of swaying him in his demand for obedience.

“Valya, please, I want you to teach me to fly. Show me all the wondrous things in this world there are to enjoy. But, please, don’t lock me away like a nightingale in a gilded cage. Please. Let me sing.”

\* \* \* \*

Furrowing his brow, he searched her eyes as if he would find the answer there to all the emotions churning within him. How could he give her leave to come and go as she wanted, as she needed, to find and define the woman she was becoming and yet, have her stay where she was safe from the world and from those bent on destroying her?

The beast in him roared his displeasure. *She is mine. Mine to cherish, to protect, to love!* The man he was wanted to be reasonable and compromise. He didn’t want Richelle to hate him. But the beast wanted his mate, he wanted to fuck! And the beast didn’t care about understanding or approval or love. All the beast wanted was her obedience and submission. His face became taut, the harsh lines giving the appearance of a fearsome scowl as he drew his lips back, baring his fangs and emitting a low growl.

“You will obey me in this, Richelle.”

“No.”

He focused on Richelle, her small gasp barely audible as he listened to her rapid heartbeat thrumming in his head. He was slipping into the maddening bloodlust fed by her intoxicating pheromones laced with her mounting fear.

“You will obey me in this, Richelle!”

“No!”

His anger vibrated through the room. She made the mistake of taking a step back toward the door, and he sprang like a wolf at her.

He crossed the room separating them in a blink of an eye, grabbing her roughly by her shoulders and pulling her to his chest. One hand fell to the small of her back, pressing her body against his, while the other fisted into her hair, turning her head to face him.

In that moment, she let the walls down surrounding her mind, and Valya was able to glimpse what she had been so desperately trying to hide. He saw the other men’s hands on Richelle, trapping her into their embrace. He saw how one man pawed her breasts as the other rubbed his cock against her ass. And then how he leaned down to capture her mouth, taking... The beast within him roared, and he released her only for a moment to rip the offensive clothing from her body.

There was no shimmering to remove them nor any gentle peeling to reveal the skin he loved to taste and touch. He tore her clothes to shreds, destroying what *that* man had touched so it would never again touch her before gripping her, his fist pulling tightly on her hair, pulling her head back and baring her throat to him.

Her naked skin became sensitized, the buttons of his black silk shirt rubbing unmercifully against her aroused nipples. He gave her no choice as he wedged his leg between her thighs. Her clit rasped against his leather pants causing her labia to grow thick and swollen. Her juices flowed until she felt the slickness along his pants leg.

And then his mouth came down on hers in a fanatical possession, his tongue thrusting into her mouth as she whimpered against the sensual assault. He had an intensity simmering just beneath his skin much like an electric shock from shuffling across the floor wearing wool socks. No, it

was fiercer, like when your skin felt prickly during an electrical storm. No, like being struck by lightning.

She should have been frightened with all that power humming between them, but all she could do was moan in ecstasy at his possession, so complete and commanding. She knew he would never hurt her. So while he was reasserting his ownership of her body, she reveled in the knowledge she controlled his heart.

She mewled as her body softened against his, trying to soothe the savage beast, but Valya was not having any of that. She sensed only the beast and his need to dominate and fuck his mate - there would be no pacifying him back into his cage. The bloodlust rode high and hard, running like hot lava through his veins as he imprisoned Richelle's lips beneath his own questing mouth. He was unrelenting and unyielding in his demands with the need to mark Richelle permanently as his. His body demanded he mark her with his scent, to sate his hunger with her blood and body, and fill her with his seed so that no man would dare come near her. Before the night was through, she would know the punishment in her defiance and the ecstasy he could give her for obedience. Abruptly, he released her, pushing her away. As she struggled to regain her balance, he turned and tore the shirt from his body, and buttons flew across the room. She stared in awe at his manly chest, broad and smooth as it tapered to his slim waist and washboard abs. He was mouthwatering in his masculine beauty, so virile and so...male.

He tossed his shirt aside and reached for her again, crushing her to his frame. His chest abrading her nipples elicited another long moan. His hand fisted in her hair; pulling her head back, he leaned down and began to devour her neck. His fangs scratched the delicate tissue and then his tongue and lips came and laved the hurt away. It was a delicious torment, one she didn't want to stop as her hands drifted down his back, his sinewy muscles twitching beneath her touch.

She pulled at his hair, trying to draw his lips to hers, to have him possess her mouth as he did before. He threw his head back, hissing as he bared his fangs in savagery. He gripped her wrists, pulling them from his hair and then covering her mouth. His tongue forced his way between her lips to battle with her tongue for dominance. She was no match for him as he plundered her mouth, and all the while, one thought ran through his fevered mind...*mine*.

He tightened his grip to the point of pain as she tried to pull her wrists free. It was to no avail.

“Valya, please,” she pleaded. He didn’t respond to her plea. Instead he demanded her mouth, kissing her fully with a fevered obsession. She wasn’t sure of what she was pleading for. His actions should have her terrified with his strength and power. But instead of being frightened, he had aroused her to a point where she felt mounting pain as she tried to reach a rapture he had only begun to show her. He could never truly frighten her, understanding his primitive reactions better than he did with what she had learned about Immortals.

They had lived through the times where women had no rights and were considered to be no more than chattel—to be picked up and discarded at the whim of a man, be it her father, brother, or husband. But because their race was dwindling in numbers due to the lack of females, the survival of their women had become the utmost priority. An Immortal female became more than just a possession. She became the most prized treasure a man could hold, and he would go to any length for her protection.

Little wonder an Immortal viewed the protection of women as a sacred duty. No sacrifice was too great to ensure the survival of their females or of any female. Each male took it upon himself to protect their race, their future progeny. For each female held the future of her race in her womb, in her ability to bear children. And if an Immortal found his life mate, then he would take ownership of her life, not allowing her to come to any harm.

As a child, Duncan would tell her tales of Immortals who had lost their life mates and chose to perish beside them, not merely because of their bonded life forces and love, but also because they could not live with the guilt of failing to protect the one they cherished most.

Pride and love—taken to excess—were considered two of the seven deadly sins.

They were the true demons killing the Immortal race.

And because of the lessons she had learned about the Immortals, Richelle knew Valya was not trying to control her or hide her away from the world. Rather he was trying to save her from it in spite of herself. As much as she wanted to experience the world she had been denied, that was how much Valya was trying to protect her from it. She pulled her head back.



“Valya, please,” she pleaded again. She looked into his eyes, glazed over with desire, with lust and something else—a longing hunger she had never seen in him before. There was no trace of the Valya she had come to trust and love in those black eyes, smoldering as they gazed down at her. This was a Valya she didn’t know, and he was beginning to frighten her.

His nostrils flared, smelling the heady combination of fear, pheromones, and womanly arousal emanating from her. He drew his lips back and revealed his fangs, bared and ready to take advantage of that combination. He wanted to hold back and not reveal his baser instincts. His Guardian training fought for control against the beast within battling for his freedom to claim what he desired. And the Guardian was losing.

She shivered in alarm and anticipation. She knew she had nothing to fear from Valya, but at this moment, this was not *her* Valya. She tried to pull her wrists away and was met with not only resistance, but also an escalating fortitude as he crowded her space, yanked her wrists, and dragged her into his arms. His head descended and took her mouth again, his tongue thrusting callously, demanding entrance.

As she parted her lips to accept and placate him, he swept in, his fangs brushing against her lips, nicking them and drawing blood. As she tasted the slight metallic taste of her own blood she whimpered, defenseless against the violent storm within Valya. She tried to press herself against him, mold herself to his body, and try to calm his inadvertent raging.

But the savage beast would not be calmed, did not want to be calmed. The beast wanted to claim his mate, to mark her with his scent, to fuck her into submission, to obey his will. He crushed her to his body, renewing his hold on her so that she could barely move as he continued to devour her lips. He tasted her blood from where he had nicked her. Blood, which should taste of metal and salt. But to him, it tasted of sinful desire, warm and delicious.

Valya growled as the minute taste lingered on his tongue, doing little to abate his ravenous appetite, threatening him with madness if he did not abide by the need, the craving to feed. At that moment, the beast attacked, demanding to be fully sated by her life’s essence, to fulfill the endless hunger that had gnawed at him over the centuries. Waiting. For her. The man tried to pull the beast back, but it was too late.

The beast was free and demanded blood.

He pulled back, heaving as he tried to catch his breath. But all he succeeded in doing was inhaling more of her intoxicating scent, reminding him of the night air of the mountains in its freshness, its clean purity. It did nothing to still the fire that burned through his veins.

“Tell me you will obey me in this, Richelle. Tell me you will not leave this place until I have destroyed the Evil One,” he snarled.

Richelle tried to focus, but with her eyes glassy, glazed over with expectation and apprehension, she found it difficult.

Clearing her head so she could think was difficult.

Hell, breathing was difficult.

He had pulled his face away a scant few inches as he spoke, but he still held her body captive in his arms, her breasts cushioned against his steely frame, not allowing her any freedom to pull away. He held fast, as all Immortals did with their life mates.

He pulled her tighter into his embrace, closer, as if trying to absorb her into his body, taking all of her in, body and soul, where no one would be able to touch her and she would be safe.

“Tell me, Richelle! Tell me you will obey me in this!”

She stared at him mutely, unable to answer. She could only stare up at him, sea-green eyes large and unblinking, trying to form the words he wanted to hear. But she couldn’t say the words he wanted so desperately because she didn’t believe in them and didn’t think that she would be able to keep her promise to obey him.

She loved him with all her heart, but a gilded cage was still a cage. With a despondent expression, she shook her head.

Valya’s eyes narrowed for an instant, the blood-red changing to black before he threw his head back and roared, a roar that shook the walls and made her tremble. She gasped at his predatory rush as he closed the distance between them to capture her mouth. She panted as he thrust his tongue into her mouth, rubbing and caressing her tongue, thrusting harshly, mimicking what he would soon be doing with his cock.

She moaned as he crushed her, covering her mouth with his in brutish abandon. As she struggled against his grip, he growled and seized her tighter, kissing her harder. She knew her struggling was in vain, but she had to try, had to reach him before he did something he would regret. But she could already sense the change in him and knew it was far beyond too late.

Valya did not suppress his superior strength when he took her to the floor, cushioning their hard landing with his knees before he pressed her to the floor, his body covering hers like the dark covers the land on a starless night. His hand enclosed her already aroused nipple, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger as he rolled the tight bud, taking the moan he elicited into his mouth.

She pressed against him harder, trying to push him away. But the only response was Valya pushing back, forcing her down against the hard floor as he covered her, acting upon his core passions and commanding the possession of his coveted woman. He didn't ask her permission nor did he request her submission. He would accept nothing less than her complete surrender, and he grunted, grinding his body against hers. His chest rumbled as he scraped her lips, her throat with his fangs at her resistance.

Ancient callings screamed to the beast to restrain her, for her safety. For her pleasure. But the man wanted her acceptance in her acquiescence. He didn't want her restrained. He wanted her unbound and free. He wanted her to accept him, openly and willingly.

Richelle realized that he was not going to relent, so she gave her assent to his insistent caresses. She opened her embrace and welcomed him into her life, into her love. The more he took, the more she gave, with no hesitation. Her body trembled at the power he exuded and how he made her body respond despite her fears. He was neither man nor beast at this moment. He was an Immortal, her Guardian. And despite her worries, she loved and wanted him...all of him. Desperately with all her heart.

With the hardwood behind her providing resistance, he groaned as he sank into her lush body. She lifted her arms, circling her hands around his neck, and he growled with animalistic satisfaction but was no less demanding for her surrender. He pressed against her, pinning her beneath him where she had no room to move, nowhere to run.

She felt his rock-hard cock pressing against the apex of her thighs through his tight leather pants. His buttocks clenched as he pushed against her, the button bearing down near the top of her mound. She moaned against the pleasure/pain of his assault, and he took advantage, thrusting his tongue between her parted lips, delving into every recess. It was a sensual exploration brooking no refusal as he touched and tasted what he wanted, as he wanted.

He pulled away, breathing heavily as she gasped for her own breath. She was not allowed any before he let loose with a hungry growl and rushed in to devour her mouth again. He nibbled on her lower lip, soothing it with his tongue before nibbling again, his fangs causing nicks and cuts he healed as he licked the tiny droplets of blood to whet his appetite.

But it made no difference how much he touched, or tasted. When it came to Richelle, his hunger was insatiable. He would never be able to stop the burning desire that filled his loins with a scorching heat whenever he looked at her. He would never be able to slake the unquenchable thirst, leaving him feeling as if he had crossed a thousand deserts without a drop to drink.

He growled into her mouth, pressing harder against her. His hand roamed between their compressed bodies to grip her breast. Snarling his satisfaction when she responded with a low moan, he took advantage of her open mouth. His tongue thrust in and out, mimicking his hips undulating against her pussy. Her body responded by creaming heavily, trickling along her thigh.

His body responded to her wetness, and his cock surged in his pants, as if reaching for her through the supple leather. He shifted, trying to ease the tightness of his groin as his cock lengthened and stretched. The taut constriction from his pants around his erection was far from the velvety firmness of being enveloped by her snug pussy that he craved, that he needed. He needed her as he needed the air he breathed, the night in which he hunted, and the blood he fed upon. All was life to him.

And she was life. His life.

He couldn't get enough of her, couldn't get close enough to her, couldn't form her body against his tight enough to satisfy his obsession. If he could, he would absorb her into his body, to hold her with him forever. For that's where he wanted to hold her soul, within him forever. Loving, touching, feeling, tasting her, it wasn't enough. He wanted to take her in until there was no separation of where he ended and where she began.

He wanted to spend the next century exploring every emotion she felt, every myriad of taste she offered. He needed to learn anything and everything that made her happy. He sought to discover her every dream, her every desire, her every fantasy. And when he learned all he could, he wanted to spend the rest of eternity fulfilling them. For as isolated and

distressing as her childhood was, that was how much joy and pleasure he wanted to fill the rest of the days of her life...their life, for eternity.

He pulled back to look down at her face.

Her lovely, beautiful, trusting, innocent face. She stared up at him. Her fathomless green eyes were turbulent, like a stormy sea. Filled with trust. Filled with desire. Filled with love. She touched his lips with her fingertips, stroking them over his chin and back up to touch his cheeks. He leaned down, gentling his approach as he took her lips, softly with reverence. Her soothing touch had tamed the beast momentarily with her acceptance and love.

For the briefest moment, sanity crept into his fevered mind as her soothing pets gentled his tortured soul. But it lasted for only the briefest of moments.

As her hips shifted, his body fell atop her, pressing her breasts into his bare chest. Her hardened nipples offered a teasing massage into his smooth pectorals, their nipples brushing briefly against each other, causing both of them to groan in pleasure. In an instant, he reared back and, with several sweeps of his arms, ripped the remainder of his offensive clothing from his body before he fell back on top of Richelle.

*Heaven.* That's what he found as he squashed her—full body contact. To feel the suppleness of her contours against his solid frame as he stroked his open palms over the fullness of her breasts was no less than paradise. Pressing high against her mound, seeking out her feminine secrets, his cock slid easily along her slit, the lips warm and slick from her arousal. He grunted as her body rose up to meet his, forcing her breasts deeper into his waiting grip, his fingers lingering over her pert nipples before tweaking and twisting them, her unbidden responses feeding the beast's need to dictate his mate's pleasure.

She twisted her hips repeatedly, trying to force his cock into her aching cunt. Her eyes were brimmed with unshed tears at the sexual frustration, her silent plea for Valya to fulfill the escalating need starting between her thighs, leaving an empty twinge deep in her womb. His response was to pull his hand from her breast with a growl and place it upon her hip to still her movements as he continued to rock his penis along her slit, rumbling each time the mushroom head of his cock rubbed against her engorged clit.

So little was his control at this point, he couldn't help when he spurted a bit of his cum. It leaked onto her erect nubbin, causing her to moan. She raised her hips to rub her clit against the plum-like head of his cock, smoothing his essence across the engorged crown. It was when she pressed her clit into his leaking slit that the last remnant of his civilized façade disintegrated.

With a howl, he tore his lips away to stare down at her. Her chest was heaving, and her eyes widened at the stark and feral expression on his face. He could feel her apprehension at the almost instantaneous change in his demeanor, the fire that crackled around them and threatened to burn them alive. He could feel her confusion, thinking she would be able to calm the beast into submission, to lead him back quietly to his cage to stomp and paw the ground while she made love to the man.

But she would be the one to submit, as the beast fucked his mate, claiming her in every sense, in every way, using every orifice. No man would ever come near her again. He would mark her with his scent. On her. In her. Never again would she defy his will, for his will would become hers. For their lifetime. Forever.

She whimpered, wanting more, needing him as he aligned the broad head of his penis with her dripping pussy. He stilled for a moment, willing Richelle to look at him. The restrained, sane part of his mind, the one belonging to the man, wanted that connection when he joined with her. He wanted to show her, to let her feel the love he had for her.

When she did, the look of adoration and complete love ripped away his steely control as he lunged deeply, filling her to the hilt as his mouth crashed down on hers, taking her yell of dominated pleasure/pain into his mouth. He continued to power into her slick channel as he subjugated her mouth, his tongue thrusting and exploring every corner, every moist recess, and accepting her moans of pleasure into his soul.

Unlike before, he could not sense her emotions. Before, when he made love to her, he had joined his mind with hers so each touch, each sensation was theirs to share. But the beast had shut Richelle out of his mind the moment he sank into her delectable lushness. There was only the call of bloodlust driving the beast to take what belonged to him.

He could feel her hands upon his chest, touching him, adding fuel to the fire licking along his spine as his blood boiled and his balls tightened against

his thighs. She didn't push at him, just touched him as he devoured her lips, not getting enough of her taste. Her scent invaded his brain as he pistoned faster, her hips rising up to meet each punishing thrust. The harder he fucked, the more she dug her fingernails into his pectorals, leaving a stinging mark in their wake.

Repeatedly, he fell on top of her until he felt her walls begin to contract around his cock. Her muffled cries of completion into his mouth were drowned out by his own grunts of approval at her satisfaction. He continued his fevered thrusts through her aftershocks, her body quivering against his sensitized skin.

When he felt the last of her tremors subside, it was only then that he dragged himself away from her mouth, his lips drawn back in an arrogant sneer to bare his fangs. He reluctantly compelled himself to withdraw from her wet passage despite her cries of dismay and his body's clamor for release.

She had no time to blink as he grasped her legs behind her knees and brought them up to her chest, lifting her ass slightly off the ground. Without warning, he dropped his mouth to cover her throbbing clit and sucked. And sucked hard. Her screams at the sensation did nothing save feed the beast's desire to continue, releasing her nub only to lick out the sweet cream pouring out of her dripping pussy after her hard orgasm. Richelle tried to reach for him, but he wouldn't allow her to touch him.

Staying just beyond her reach, he pulled her body up, lifting her legs over his shoulders as he rested upon his knees. He was ravenous as he ate her womanly core with ruthless abandon, lapping at her pliant tissues, her pleas for mercy going unanswered. No spot was left untouched as he ran his tongue from her vagina to the tender skin between her ass and vagina and back up so he could suck on her clit. She panted and heaved as he held her clit between his teeth and lashed it with his tongue before dipping into her sweet well to lap up a fresh surge of her ambrosia.

She pounded her fists into the floor, her hips thrashing beneath his hungry mouth, unable to get away and unable to stave off the climax that rushed over her like a comet, fiery and intense. Stars exploded behind her eyelids, like supernovas, at the intensity of her response. She wanted to touch him, but he gripped her legs, holding them fast against her chest as he fed on her release. Insatiable, he kept at her, feeding his obsession until she

climaxed again, and then a third time. Her cry of release tinged with an edge of pain pierced the passion-laden fog enveloping his mind, but it was enough.

Releasing her legs as he sat back on his haunches, he ran his tongue over his lips to capture every last morsel of her juices clinging to his mouth and skin. He looked down to see her gazing up at him, tears streaming down her flushed cheeks. She had the astonished expression of someone who had been asleep for a hundred years and had awakened into a new and unknown world. The beast was smiling in smug approval but was far from through with his feisty life mate, as his painfully swollen cock reminded him.

Richelle was still dazed by her multiple orgasms when Valya deftly flipped her over so she was kneeling. He tilted her hips, putting her ass and cunt on lewd display for him. Her nether lips glistened with moisture and were red and swollen from his loving. Her puffy labia cushioned her erect clit, beckoning him as it peeked out from the lush folds. He didn't resist as he trailed his finger over her red bud, swirling around the bit of distended flesh while she wriggled her hips, reaching for the pleasure only he could give her.

He chortled at her efforts. The entertaining show of his bitch seeking, begging for his touch, pleased the beast. He gave her what she craved and dipped his finger into her cunt, her slick walls clenching at his digit and sucking him in. Slowly, he stretched her, thrusting his finger in and out, watching her thrust back against his touch. He added a second finger, and then a third, mesmerized by the sight of his thick digits disappearing into her tight hole as she sighed in delight but continued to push back, wanting more.

Placing his hand in the middle of her back, he pushed her down and pulled his fingers out. He used them to tickle the puckered rosette of her ass, spreading her juices around the virgin orifice. She whimpered against the foreign sensation, but continued to writhe against his fingers, searching for something that she couldn't quite comprehend.

He grunted at her response, his cock surging upward, reaching for her cunt. Finally he could wait no longer. Removing his hand from her anus, he used it to grasp his throbbing cock and position it at the entrance of the weeping pussy. Richelle felt tight as a bowstring as the broad head of his cock nudged at the entrance to her vagina.



She looked over her shoulder to see him poised behind her. A light sheen of perspiration coated his body as he held himself still, savoring the feeling of her velvety skin across the receptive tip of his penis. As he stared down at the creamy, smooth globes of her ass, his hand lightly stroked her heated skin, and she moaned. His eyes flew to hers at the seductive sound.

Richelle saw his expression change from sensual contemplation to fearsome determination as he held her gaze. She tried to sense his emotions, but the walls around his mind were solid, and she didn't have the knowledge to break through. She opened her mind fully, nothing held back, in the hopes that he could sense her true feelings. She had to tell him, he had to know—no matter what happened she would love him.

She was his mate. He had already declared it. It was his duty and responsibility to protect her. But also, it was his pleasure to love her. Their destiny gave her little choice, but he gave her everything that was within him. However, there was a price. Obedience. His steely stare focused on her face, glowing with the radiance of his harsh lovemaking.

"Tell me, Richelle. Tell me you will obey me until I have destroyed the Evil One."

She swallowed hard, knowing full well that before the evening was through, she would agree to his demand for obedience. She was a woman in love and would agree to anything, become what he wanted to make him happy. But the prideful, independent spirit in her would not disappear silently into the night, no matter how great the desire. She had but a taste of freedom and was not willing to lock herself behind castle walls. He had captured her body, but he had surrendered his heart.

She struggled to find her voice. "I'm sorry, Valya...I can't."

With a bellow, he lunged forward and pierced her womanly core with a single punishing thrust. Her own shout of pleasure/pain left a ringing in her ears as she threw her head back and allowed the sensations of his cock pummeling into her to wash over her. She felt his fingers digging into her hips to hold her still as he drove into her harder, faster, deeper. She was so close to climaxing, it was pure torture to be held motionless when all she wanted was to thrust back against his cock, to give them both relief as they toppled over the cliff falling into ecstasy.

"Please, Valya. Help me...I need...I need, oh, Goddess, please," Richelle moaned, begging for release. His response was to snarl, then growl

as he reached around her hip to pinch her clit just hard enough to stave off her orgasm. He settled his grip on her hip again, continuing his onslaught, driving her higher and higher. His mastery over her body was complete. They both knew it. And they both were rewarded by it.

Richelle still struggled against his grip, trying to get the release she needed. No, that she begged for. But whenever she would approach that crest, he would exert his control and manipulate her body to hold off her orgasm. On and on it went. Just when she thought she would find relief, he would bring her back down only to guide her higher each time. The respite between the highs and lows became shorter as he used all his strength to fuck his mate.

The suffering was a sweet agony she didn't want to stop. It was a gratifying punishment to teach one lesson—only he would be able to take her to heaven, give her the rapture she sought. Yet beneath his dominant nature, Richelle could sense the true power lay in their union together, and while he held dominion over her body, it was she who commanded his heart. Richelle forced the walls around her heart and mind to stay down. When he sent them both soaring, she wanted him to share her emotions. She wanted him to know, no matter what, she accepted and loved him.

Valya's head was swimming, unable to stop his excited body, slick with perspiration, from pounding his woman. He stroked on the rounded curves of her backside, pleasing to his senses, with his thumb as he dug his fingers into her flesh, bruising her porcelain skin. His eyes drifted lower, to focus where they were physically joined. The sight of their union fed the beast's manic craze to possess her. He removed a hand from her hip and dropped it to their conjoined flesh.

Richelle gasped as she felt Valya's fingertips stroking the delicate skin around the opening of her vagina, tickling her labia before circling around her enflamed clit. The sensations he induced rolled over her like waves crashing against the reef, one right after the other. It was too much. It all was too much. She wailed, praying Valya would give her reprieve and take them both soaring to the sky.

"Please, Valya."

"Tell me, Richelle," he grunted, not stopping the motion of his hips as he fucked her pussy. "Obey me."

She shook her head, her hair falling over her face. The damp tendrils stuck to her neck and back like crooking fingers summoning Valya, drawing him nearer. He leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“Obey me,” he whispered as he thrust hard and high, touching her deep in her womb. She threw her head back and groaned, her face awash in such pleasure he released a spurt of cum. He slipped his thumb into her pussy, stroking his steely rod as he coated his digit with their combined juices. The man crept into the beast’s mind and gave the command. *Now. It’s time.*

Valya pulled his thumb from the warmth of his refuge and centered it over her anus. There wasn’t much time as he could feel his balls burning ready to burst, his semen and blood burning through his body. Pressing his front against her back, he growled as he shouted his command a final time.

“Obey me!”

“I can’t,” she uttered inaudibly and reluctantly shook her head.

With a roar, he pulled his head back and bared his fangs. Behind his blood-red eyes, he could not see Richelle. He could only smell her, feel her. In an instant, he slipped his thumb beyond the tight ring of her sphincter to claim her ass while he sunk his fangs into her shoulder and fed. He fed as his cock slid in and out of her slick heat and he slowly fucked her ass with his thick digit. His thumb pressed against the thin membrane to stroke his cock as he took her.

Richelle moaned and gasped beneath him, writhing with pleasure. But this had nothing to do with pleasure, or with love. This was the beast taking his mate, fucking her, as he wanted, asserting his dominance. Valya grunted as he continued his sensual punishment, his body alight with raw energy while he drank in her life force. Her blood was thick and sweet, and he gulped it down, his appetite undiminished with each swallow.

She felt herself succumbing to a strange languor, and then white-hot desire coursed through her veins. Her body shook in ecstasy at the power flowing between them as he forced her to climax again. His almost purring growl signified his pleasure at her responses, at his mastery over her. Through her dreamlike trance, she felt his rock-hard penis ramming relentlessly, her walls convulsing at his insistent invasion. She felt every thrust, every pulsation of his steely rod as she slammed into another climax so hard that her body bowed and she pressed her palms against the floor and lifted them both up.

Valya snarled and gripped her hip tighter. The thumb in her newly deflowered orifice stilled as he pushed her back down to the floor. Scraping the floor with her nipples, she whimpered at the delicious torment, not sure if she wanted him to stop, and knowing full well, he couldn't stop. With another orgasm building deep within her womb, she did the only thing she could do.

Bending down as low as she could, her breasts pressed against the wood floor, she widened her thighs and welcomed him into her body. And Valya purred low and husky, sinking into her deeply and thrusting so high she felt as if his cock was hitting the back of her navel. His balls pulled up to his thighs. Full and ready to burst, he quickened his pace. In a final thrust, he pushed his thumb to the hilt in her tight ass, jetting load after load of cum into his woman as he drank long and deep on her life's nectar.

Richelle's body was racked with tremors as she came. Her senses were on overload. His scent, his heat, his body reaching to her very core were all too much. His cum filling her was a liquid fire, like hot lava as he erupted. Her head was swimming in that lake of fire. Her mind went blank as her vision dimmed and her breathing became shallow.

"I love you, Valya," was all she could whisper before she surrendered to the darkness and fainted.

Her love's declaration was barely audible, but Valya had heard her. *She loves me.* Her affirmation was enough to snap him back to reality. As sanity crept back, he released her throat, swallowing the last mouthful of her blood before the vision came back to his eyes. As the red haze dissipated, his eyes settled on her. Disbelieving, he withdrew from her body and rolled her over to cradle her in his lap. Holding her head to his chest, he slowly rocked her, as if trying to soothe a crying baby. Only Richelle wasn't crying. He was.

Valya felt the stinging tears damp on his cheek and realized what he had done to his love. His fingertips lightly stroked her cheek, pushing a loose tendril from her face, pale from loss of blood. He ran his tongue lightly over the pinpricks on her neck, tantalized by her taste and reviled at himself for enjoying it. He sealed the wound and then brushed her forehead with a light kiss, his tears falling upon her ashen cheek.

He threw his head back and roared. His anguished howl filled the night. His eyes brimming with tears stared up at the moon as he begged the Goddess to forgive him for what he had done to her daughter. He found no

absolution, no solace in the night. He only felt regret and self-loathing for taking Richelle so roughly. He embraced her, closing his eyes. Holding her cheek to cheek, he wept bitter tears.

\* \* \* \*

“Y’ello?”

“Hey, Jonathon.”

“Val, is that you, buddy?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Kinda late for a chat.” Valya heard the sheets rustle as Jonathon rolled over. “It’s four in the morning. This better be damn important, like the world is coming to an end.”

“My world is,” Valya responded despondently.

His body still achy despite being healed by Nicolae, Jonathon sat up. “What happened?”

“I messed up.”

“Hey, Val, it couldn’t be that bad.”

“No, man, I mean I *really* fucked up...*bad*.”

The line went silent for a few moments before Jonathon spoke.

“What do you need?”

“I need you to stay with Richelle. Can you get over here...now?”

“Yeah, give me ten minutes, and I’ll be on my way.”

“Thanks,” Valya murmured as he closed the flip phone and looked toward the bedroom where he left Richelle sleeping; he couldn’t bring himself to walk back into the room to gaze at her as she slept. He was too ashamed of what he had done.

He had come so close, so very close, to killing Richelle and damning himself to destruction. The Cardinal Laws of the Immortals were very clear. You do not kill while feeding. You do not turn a mortal. To do so would bring judgment from the Law Enforcers to which there was only one punishment—death.

But even as he felt her life draining away as he took her blood, she was willing, giving, open. She did not put up a fight. Instead, she opened herself more to him, offering all that she had. And even though he knew what the penalty was, he could not stop feeding. It was only when she softly

whispered his name that the bloodlust left and his sanity returned. It was almost too late, but he stopped.

And when he pulled back and saw the damage he had done, he wanted to kill himself. Her neck was ravaged from where he had fed, bruised and swollen. Her skin was pale and showed the marks of how he held her, restrained her, while he took her in his blinded bloodlust. Her form was limp and lifeless as he cradled her in his arms and brushed the hair away from her face.

In anguish, he threw his head back and roared into the darkness. When his voice had grown hoarse, he leaned down and did the only thing he could do and began to tend to her wounds. He could not give her his blood to renew her strength as it would turn her. Instead, he softly kissed and licked her wounds, his saliva acting as a magical balm and instantly sealing her wounds, removing the ugly blemishes that insulted her beauty. Thorough and fastidious, he examined and scrutinized every part of her body to remove the offending eyesores.

When he was satisfied all of her injuries were cared for, he gently carried her to their bed, laying her upon the thick mattress before he covered her with the red satin coverlet, the color mocking him, reminding him of the blood he had taken in his fury. She moaned softly as she turned into the pillow and sank down into the mattress, cocooned in warmth. He stared at her smooth features, serene in her repose but marred by the dark circles beneath her eyes. He had cursed as he left the bedroom.

That was the vision he held in his mind of his beloved Richelle as he stared toward the bedroom, not daring to come near her for fear of finishing what he had started, to make the third exchange while she was weak and confused. After the third exchange, she would have more of his power to blend with her own, and they would be irrevocably bonded...then she would be safe.

But until then, until he had destroyed the Evil One, he would need to keep a distance from Richelle. More and more, he had no control when he was near her. Give him thieves, rapists, murderers...he could handle them.

But when it came to a slip of a woman with hair of fire and ice and sea-green eyes, with skin as pale as moonlight and a voice that called to him in the night to draw him into her secret circle and give him peace... How could

one woman hold so much power to make him feel such fear of the world he had mastered for centuries?

He ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head. He would have to leave her for a while. He couldn't trust himself. How would he act when faced with her heedless defiance? Jonathon would stay with her as he went on the hunt for the Evil One. Valya needed to be clear-headed when he faced Luka. He couldn't be hindered by emotions or thoughts of Richelle.

After he had removed the danger to Richelle, they would make the third exchange. They would be bound heart and soul, sharing one mind and sharing powers. Then she would be safe and he could love her the way she should be, with reverence and joy.

He felt a shifting in the energy around him. Reluctantly turning away from the bedroom, he went to the front door, opening it before Jonathon had knocked.

"Jeez, man," Jonathon remarked as he pulled his hand back.

"Sorry about that, Jonathon."

"No problem. I just keep forgetting about those superhuman powers of yours."

Valya shrugged as he stepped aside to let Jonathon come into the apartment. Jonathon was one of the few people he trusted enough to allow him access to his home. Jonathon would stay with Richelle during the day and the Protectors would stand guard at night.

"So, tell me, Val. What's the big problem?"

Valya sighed as he closed the door. "Have a seat. This may take awhile to explain."

## Chapter 12

Richelle awoke slowly, feeling a bit dazed and lightheaded like she had been asleep for a week. Sitting up in the bed, she realized her entire body ached. She rotated her head, trying to work the kinks out of her neck. She tried to remember what had happened last night, but couldn't. She was having a hard time remembering anything, including where she was...or who.

She closed her eyes and was rubbing her temples with her fingertips when a thought came to her. *Richelle. My name is Richelle.* Opening her eyes, she looked around the room. It had a vague, familiar presence to it like a childhood memory, but not anything she could put her finger on. She should have been upset or nervous about not recognizing her surroundings but she wasn't.

Oddly, she was calm, almost serene. And when she inhaled, there was a unique scent that overran her senses. She couldn't define it, but it was warm and spicy, very masculine. It comforted her on an intrinsic level. She sighed as she inhaled deeply, gathering her strength to go and find out where she was. As she threw back the covers, the chill in the room assailed her body, her nipples puckering in the cold. Underneath the warmth of the comforter, she hadn't noticed that she was naked.

"Well, good evening, little miss. Whoa, so sorry."

She was expressionless as some man sauntered into the room with a tray of food and a wolf trailing behind him, trying to dart past to join Richelle on the bed. He abruptly turned around, spilling a bit of juice and coffee when he saw Richelle sitting upon the bed naked from the waist up.

*She is so beautiful.*

Richelle looked at him with a start. "Did you say something?"

He cleared his throat, glancing over his shoulder instead of turning around.



“Who, me...no. I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh, I thought I heard...”

“I thought I’d bring you a bit of breakfast.”

“Breakfast? What time is it?”

“Well, it’s almost six. I thought since you’ve slept all day, well...”

“Thank you,” she interrupted. “That was very thoughtful.” She didn’t say anything else. He glanced over his shoulder again. Petting the wolf who had sat down beside her, she didn’t move to cover herself. She merely stared at him trying to remember who he was. Like everything else here—the room, the wolf who seemed extremely comfortable with her—he was faintly familiar and she didn’t fear him. Clearing his throat he stammered when he spoke.

“There’s a gown, um...draped over the chair to your left. If you’d like to, um...I mean to cover.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” So caught up in trying to remember missing portions of her memory, she hadn’t thought to cover herself. She turned her back to him. Quickly grasping the gown, she threw it over her head and smoothed it down her body before settling herself comfortably under the covers.

“I didn’t realize—”

“It’s all right, Richelle. It’s understandable, considering everything you’ve been through.”

The sheets rustled as she reached over to grab the robe. The silky fabric slid over her skin. She flipped the back of her hair over the collar and cinched the robe at her waist.

Jonathon glanced over his shoulder before turning around. She propped herself against the headboard with a few pillows while he carried the tray to the bed and placed it across her lap. Oatmeal, toast, juice, and coffee...it looked and smelled wonderful.

“I’m sorry breakfast isn’t fancier...”

“No, this is absolutely fine.” She picked up her coffee and took a sip. It was laced with a touch of amaretto and cream, just the way she liked it. At least it was the way she thought she liked it.

“So... You know me?” she asked as she took another sip.

He cocked his brow and looked at her.

“We’ve...met,” he replied casually.

“When?”

He hemmed and hawed, shuffling his feet on the floor before he answered.

“Um, yesterday.”

“Yesterday.”

He sat down beside the bed as she began to eat.

“So we haven’t known each other very long?” She took another bite and then dabbed her mouth with the napkin.

“No, we haven’t.”

She ate the remainder of her meal in silence, saving the coffee for last. She settled back into the propped pillows and gazed intently at him, trying to decipher his inscrutable responses. She sensed he was telling her the truth, just not completely. It was more than a sense. It was more like she knew, like she could see inside his mind. And while he still was an enigma, she knew she had nothing to fear from him. Maybe he could give her the answers she sought

\* \* \* \*

Valya prowled the city streets with a vengeance he had rarely known. After he filled Jonathon in on his transgression, he had changed into a hawk and flew into what was left of the night. While soaring amongst the stars offered him some respite from his misdeeds, it was not enough to overcome the guilt at the pain he had inflicted on Richelle. He needed to be away from her, to give her time to heal, and to give him time to get control of the emotions that churned through his insides and twisted him into knots.

He thought of returning home, to the mountains, but he couldn’t bear to be that far from Richelle. Now that he had found her, he never wanted to lose her again. Knowing she was warm in their bed while he had slept cold and alone on a lumpy sofa in the basement of Jonathon’s apartment was part of his penance. He hadn’t even bothered to put up safeguards before he slept. If someone did come for him he would fight, which would also be penance for what he had done.

He realized now how idiotic that had been. If he had been injured or killed, that would have left Richelle alone to face Luka. And again, it would have been his fault. Like the death of her mother. Like Duncan’s death. He had been consumed with anger and lust, which was no excuse for taking

second blood in such an atrocious manner. He was a Guardian—he should have maintained control.

*I am such an ass.*

He crouched low before leaping into the night sky, repelling off buildings walls until he reached the rooftop. Landing like a lethal cat, he stood and stalked over to the edge. He looked over the city. The bright lights from the buildings and freeways below twinkled like the stars above. It gave the city an iridescent beauty that concealed the ugliness of the mean streets.

And out there, somewhere, was Preacher, his followers, and Luka. Luka cel Rau, Vampire—the Evil One. Long had the Hunters of the Immortals been seeking him but to no avail. He always managed to stay one step ahead of the Hunters with the aid of those mortals he had turned. Luka had left a bloodbath in his wake, and Valya would not allow Richelle to be tainted by that bloodshed.

Since Valya had taken Richelle into his protection as a child, he had sought the reasons why Luka had fixated on his life mate. And while the answer was not absolutely clear, he had learned that it had something to do with Richelle's ancestors in Romania.

"Valya." Nicolae's voice called from the night. Valya turned to face the brilliance of the moon and closed his eyes.

*"I hear you, Nicolae. Do you have news for me?"*

*"I have learned many things."*

*"Did you learn why Luka is seeking my life mate?"*

*"Yes."*

Valya waited for further elaboration, which was not forthcoming, and became impatient.

*"Then tell me!"* he demanded harshly. *"Why must you be so cryptic?"*

There was a silence in the still of night, as if the world had stopped revolving on its axis, awaiting the hand of fate to set it spinning again.

*"I can sense your agitation, Valya. Tell me what is wrong."*

Valya took a deep breath, trying to compose himself before he responded.

*"The Evil One is searching for Richelle, and for all our powers, we have not been able to stop his evil nor find him."*

*"You have faced adversity in your duties as Guardian."*

*"Not like this."*

*"You have faced great evil before as Guardian."*

*"Not like this!"*

Valya's eyes flew open, the bloodlust riding high in his thirst to find Luka, to destroy the Evil One before he destroyed Richelle. Before *he* destroyed Richelle. He threw his head back and shrieked into the night, demanding blood and vengeance. It was the rich, stirring voice of Nicolae that brought him back from the brink of madness.

*"I feel your pain, Valya. Hear me. Open your mind and soul to me."*

Valya needed no further encouragement as he reined in his rage and allowed Nicolae to touch his mind, to probe the memories of the last few days, and enter into the increasing darkness of his soul. For the moment, he was filled with a sense of completion akin to the sensation when he was with Richelle. Not passionate, but intimate just the same, like an embrace from a close friend. And then it was gone, leaving the transitory sense of emptiness in its wake.

*"You have left your life mate."*

Valya sighed in remorse, for both leaving his life mate and the reason why he had to, knowing that Nicolae had seen everything that had transpired. He tried to find consolation in gazing at the moon.

*"You know I had to."*

*"You are not to blame, Valya. The bloodlust resides in all Immortals. Your reactions are not uncommon and are understandable."*

*"I hurt her."*

*"But you did not mean to."*

*"I almost killed her."*

*"There is always that risk."*

Valya recalled a fellow Guardian, too far gone in his despondency, who had accidentally killed his life mate at their first blood exchange. Grief-stricken and devastated, he had faced the dawn.

*"I should have controlled my hunger, my lust."*

*"The call of bloodlust is difficult to ignore. It is difficult to overcome."*

*"You overcame it."*

There was silence. A weight hung in the air and the moon itself appeared to be weeping in unrequited anguish.

*"At a price."*

Valya did not ask what that price had been, for he knew Nicolae would not tell him. Nicolae, for centuries, had walked alone. While those who chose to face the dawn usually did so with a fellow Immortal present to bear witness of the Final Sacrifice, it was common knowledge Nicolae would face his death as he had lived...alone.

*"Clear your mind and gather your strength. You will need all your faculties to face the demons that await. I will join you tomorrow evening and I will share what I have learned."*

*"Thank you, Nicolae."*

*"Do not thank me, Valya. We must all dance the tune the Fates choose for us. But at the end of the dance, we must pay the musicians, no matter what the cost."*

The all-powerful presence left, and in its wake, the earth seemed to come alive again, revolving as it had for eons through the cosmos. Valya felt the soft night air as it caressed his hair. He stood motionless, bathed in the moonlight, deep in thought over their conversation and the unspoken suffering behind Nicolae's words.

Before he had found Richelle, he had hoped to be as strong as Nicolae to survive the centuries. But having found Richelle and discovered the joy of living that came in loving her, he recognized how desolate his life had been. Valya reflected a moment on his words, trying to imagine the price Nicolae had paid, resulting in such quiet sadness and solitude.

Moreover, he couldn't comprehend how Nicolae had survived the inconsolable loneliness of wretched immortality. He couldn't fathom centuries of endless nights without a life mate to hold and cherish, to make love with, and fall asleep in her embrace in perfect solace.

But survive Nicolae did, and now he was the last hope Valya had for finding the truth behind Luka's obsession. He only hoped that the truth would not be too late in coming.

Suddenly, the night air changed, and there was a hateful surge, a vindictive and almost spiteful flow of energy filling the night. Jumping from the building top, he alighted upon the streets below as soft as thistle down, landing in a crouched position. From beneath hooded eyes, he scanned the area, sensing the nearness of evil and death. Finding none, he stood and began to walk the perimeter, following his senses to home in on his enemy.

The presence of evil was strong, stronger than he had ever sensed before, filling him with an irrepressible rage. The further he searched, the more rage exploded through his being, pervading his mind. Frenetically, he searched alleys and shadows, trying to root out the inexplicable malevolence.

Without warning, he was struck from behind and went sprawling face forward on the pavement. A heavy pressure landed on his back, pinning him to the ground as blows and claws struck his back and head. With great effort, Valya pushed against the cement and threw his assailant off. Dragging himself to his feet, he staggered to the building to brace himself. Before he could turn, his attacker pounced and jammed him against the wall, raining blows into his body as claws tore into his skin. Again, Valya pushed against the hard surface and threw his attacker off as he spun to face a coward who would attack a man whose back was turned.

He stared into a grinning face not unknown to him. The attacker's fangs were bared, and saliva and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. And his blue eyes bore through Valya like a red-hot poker with vehement hatred.

Valya stared incredulously at the Immortal now turned enemy, now turned Vampyre.

"You!"

\* \* \* \*

He wondered how much Richelle did remember. After what Valya had told him, he hoped she would never remember the night before. Memories were tricky things, especially short-term memories. The pheromones that Immortals used while feeding were potent, and how much memory would be suppressed would depend entirely on how many pheromones were released. It could suppress a few hours to a few days. There was just no way to predict.

He would have to tread slowly while he watched over Richelle. She had already been through much, and the last thing he wanted to do was frighten her.

Jonathan sensed he was already treading on borrowed time with the way that Richelle stared at him. He got the distinct impression that if she wanted to, she could read his every thought the same way schoolchildren read

classroom lessons off a chalkboard. He bided his time, sitting quietly as she slowly sipped her coffee while all the time never taking her eyes off of him.

He could see why Valya had fallen in love with Richelle. She had an alluring beauty with her unique green eyes, luminescent, fringed with dark lashes that could hold a man captive in their depths. There was an undeniable air of royalty surrounding her, demanding acknowledgement. If there were a hundred people in one room, Richelle would still stand out among them.

He could have stared at her exceptional loveliness for a lifetime, but he was already going to have a hard time explaining to Valya how he caught a glimpse of her nudity. And Valya would know.

He had known Valya for years, working with him in bringing the guilty to justice. He had always been a stoic figure, impassive and detached in his duties as a Guardian. He had seen Val go after thieves, rapists, drug lords, and murderers with the same detached methodology of a detective. No hatred, no vengeance, no emotion. He merely saw it as his duty to protect the human race against evil, no more, no less.

The thought of another man being near Richelle, wanting her, touching her, would drive Val to the brink of insanity. Val spoke of Immortals who had lost control of their passions and killed their life mates accidentally while taking blood. How ironic to kill the one you love above all others with your love. He didn't know how he would live with the guilt if he had killed someone he loved.

And now Valya was trying to live with that guilt—that he had almost killed Richelle in his inability to control his emerging emotions and passions. According to Val, she hadn't even resisted him. She just lay back and accepted his passion. Damn! As a dominant male himself, he could understand how easy it would be to lose control. There was something addictive about a woman who would accept the baser nature of a man without resistance. It could tempt a lover to go too far.

And with someone as soft and vulnerable as Richelle... He could feel the tightening in his groin at the thought.

*Damn those pheromones!*

Their lure was potent but unnecessary as he was already enamored with Richelle. She was more than just a beautiful woman. She was strong—she wouldn't let him give up as they hid from the Believers until help arrived.

She was compassionate—she had cared for him until Nicolae came. And she loved animals. Shadow had all but crawled into her lap and she patiently stroked him.

Once the bonding ritual was complete, the effects of the pheromones would dissipate. He couldn't help but feel a pang of regret. She was the type of woman he could fall in love with himself, but she belonged with Valya.

Valya was one lucky bastard.

"Excuse me?"

"What, um..." he stammered. Like a beguiled schoolboy with his first crush, he hadn't noticed she had spoken to him. "I'm sorry, Richelle, what did you say?"

She didn't seem to take offense at his inattention to her words as she repeated her question. "I asked you what your name was. I can't seem to remember." She blushed at her admission.

"Oh," he replied shortly as he smiled. "It's Jonathon."

Richelle held out her hand and he took it. "It's nice to meet you...Jonathon." She returned to petting the wolf's back while sipping her coffee.

"That fellow is Shadow."

"Well, it's nice to meet you too, Shadow." She scratched behind Shadow's ears as he lay his head against her hip. After a few quiet moments, Richelle asked, "So, how do we know each other?"

He cleared his throat again. He didn't want to be the one to remind her of the incident at the carnival. "We have a mutual friend."

She raised her brow at that comment. He was obviously uncomfortable at her question prior to his mentioning their *mutual friend*, but it had recalled a memory. Somewhere in the back recesses of her mind, she had a fuzzy recollection of a formless figure, both intimidating in stature and a dark foreboding she somehow recognized. A presence she somehow...missed.

"Who?" she asked nonchalantly as she took another sip of her coffee.

"Who what?"

She gave him a *don't be stupid* look.

"Who is our mutual friend?"

He hesitated for a moment. She deserved an answer to her question, but he wasn't sure if she was ready to handle the reality. Her expression was



unruffled as she awaited his answer. *She'll learn sooner or later*, he reflected. From what he had learned, the effects from a second blood exchange were only temporary. It was only a matter of time before the confusion and memory loss dissipated. The only question was how long it would take.

“Valya cel Mare.”

\* \* \* \*

*Valya*. The name drifted through her mind aimlessly. In a flash, without warning, the name found a face. The fog that had settled over her mind and clouded her thinking was lifted and she saw him. Masculine beauty, dark hair and eyes, chiseled features—the face of the man she loved. In the next moment, the memories of the night before appeared. She gasped, spilling her coffee.

Jonathon sprang to his feet and grabbed a few napkins from the breakfast tray trying to clean up the spill. She shrank back as his hand touched the fabric resting over her thigh. She could feel the heat from his hand penetrating through the downy coverlet, and she tensed.

The sporadic recollections of the heated argument with Valya, his anger, his threats, integrating with lingering reminiscences of passion and desire left her reeling with mixed emotions. Despite the nature of her memories, she wasn't afraid of Valya or worried for herself. Despite Valya's bestial behavior, she knew he would never harm her. With him she felt a love like she had never known. But Jonathon was a different matter as she heard his voice echoing in her mind. *I will kill any man who touches you*.

She jerked her leg away from Jonathon's hand, feeling badly when she saw the hurt expression on his face. She tried to relax in his presence, but her memories were returning in a rush, and she was having a hard time sorting through them. In her agitated state, the walls she had recently been able to erect around her mind to block out the thoughts of others were beginning to crack. She brought her fisted hands to her temples and closed her eyes, trying to block everything out—the memories, the thoughts, the emotions.

“Are you all right, Richelle?”

She opened her eyes to see Jonathon staring at her. Confusion was etched in his expression, but his voice was laced with concern. Her slight wince had Jonathon sitting on the edge of the bed watching her, but he placed his hands at his side not attempting to touch her. She was jumpy as a leap frog as he wiped up spilt coffee. She hated to think what she might do if he actually tried to comfort her by placing his arm about her shoulders or offer her a hug.

Smiling weakly she slowly managed to reestablish the walls around her mind. She got up from the bed, trying to distance herself from Jonathon.

"I need to get ready to go."

"Go where?"

*Yes. Go where?* She pinched the bridge of her nose as she struggled against the fog clouding her mind.

"I have to...get...ready...to go." Feeling a slight twinge of nausea, she placed her hand over her stomach to ease the queasiness. She started walking toward the bathroom.

"Go where?" he prodded gently.

She stopped and turned. *Go where?* Staring off into space, she moved her head side to side as she tried to remember...tried to remember. She became absolutely still.

"The university!" she shouted triumphantly. "I have to go the university. I have a meeting with...with...Dr. Samuels."

"Who is he?"

"He is heading the wolf study at Porcupine Mountain. He's meeting with me and two other vets to go over the repopulation plan."

Jonathan nodded his head at everything she had remembered. Since strong memories came back first, this project must be very important to her.

"All right. We'll go," he said as he pulled a cell phone from his pocket and started punching numbers. "But first, I want to call in a little backup."

Richelle placed the empty tray at the foot of the bed as she got up and headed for the bathroom with Shadow trailing close behind. She could hear Jonathon on the phone through the closed door.

"Hey Stefan. I need your help. Yeah, I'm here with Richelle. She wants to head over to the university, and I was hoping you and Roman could tag along... No, Val's on the hunt. Stuff happened. I can't. Val will tell you, if

he wants. She seems okay. And I want to keep it that way, so I'd appreciate it if you guys could come along."

Richelle paid no attention to the conversation as she removed the robe to stare at her reflection in the mirror. Running her hands over her hips and the rounded part of her belly, she moved her hands upward until she could run them over her firm breasts. She lowered her arms to her sides so she could look at her face in the mirror. It was a face she barely recognized.

She pulled her hair back and fastened it with a clip sitting beside the sink. She noticed faint dark circles under her eyes as she washed her face. She allowed her tears of frustration and emptiness to wash away the depressive tension weighing down on her. After she patted her face dry, she looked at her eyes reflected in the mirror. They were a sparkling bright green but somehow empty, like a garden with no blooms. Shadow whimpered, and she gave him an understanding smile.

"If you could talk, I bet you could tell me everything I want to know, couldn't you, boy?" She reached down to scratch behind his ears as he growled contently.

*"Don't worry; everything will be okay."*

Startled, Richelle turned her head abruptly to see who had come into the bathroom. The door was locked. *Then where did that voice come from?*

She looked around and then her eyes settled on Shadow, his tail wagging and tongue hanging out. It almost looked as if he was wearing a half-cocked grin. With a knowing smile, she stroked his head and gave him a quick peck on his nose before she got ready for her shower.

"Thank you."

\* \* \* \*

Jonathon paced as he continued his phone conversation.

"This meeting with Dr. Samuels is very important to her. I'd hate to disappoint her by keeping her incarcerated here like some convict... Nooo! It's not like that! I mean she is very sweet and lovely, but she's Val's woman. Just tell me if you and Roman are gonna help... All right... Yeah, it'd be great if you could convince Pieter to help, but I thought Guardians had their own territories... Okay, probably about an hour. Thanks, Stefan. See you then." *Click.*

Jonathon went and cleared the tray into the kitchen, wiping the dishes to place them in the dishwasher. *All the comforts of home*, he thought wryly. Immortals did partake of mortal food on occasion, not for sustenance but for the mere taste of it. And Val kept his cupboards fully stocked with dishes, glasses, and utensils, mostly for the comfort of his mortal friends, mainly him.

As solitary a life as Guardians were supposed to lead, Jonathon always found Valya a considerate and amenable host. Oh, there were times when his anger and frustration from a hunt turned him into a cranky sourpuss, but who, Immortal or mortal, didn't get that way when things didn't go right?

According to what Nicolae had told him, being a Guardian was the last step for redemption before an Immortal turned Vampyre. It was their chance to find their mate or find the resolve to make the Final Sacrifice. Over the years, Valya had proven himself to be more than a Guardian. He was a good and true friend who Jonathon would die for.

With a soft click, the bathroom door opened, and Richelle emerged, fresh as a daisy in her white and yellow suit and white pumps. Her hair, freshly washed, hung in damp curls as she clipped it back. She smiled at him shyly as she did a pirouette.

"Do I look all right?"

"You look beautiful," he said, his voice full of longing. When she looked at him dubiously, he looked away and busied himself by going into the kitchenette and wiping some invisible dirt from the counter.

"I, um, got hold of Roman and Stefan," he stammered, trying to repress his embarrassment at his schoolboy adoration. "Pieter, another Guardian, will be coming with them." Richelle walked over and gave him a light peck on his cheek. Her smile was warmer than a spring day.

"Thank you for your help. And thank you for allowing me to attend this meeting. You have no idea what it means to me." And she walked away, just like that, leaving Jonathon trembling in his shoes.

*She kissed me*, he thought as he touched his cheek with his fingertips. The enormity of his feelings for Richelle flooded through him, everything from pride, admiration, compassion, adoration, and back. Being with her made him want to be a better man, and he would not disappoint her or the Immortals.

He had given his word to Val to watch over Richelle and he intended to keep his word, no matter what. And he hoped Val would beat the odds and be able to complete the bonding with Richelle.

## Chapter 13

Stunned after her meeting with Dr. Samuels, Richelle walked in silence down the hallway not waiting for Jonathon. Her heels on the tile floor ticked like a time bomb waiting to explode. She threw open the doors and exited the science building out to the parking lot where Shadow was waiting. The overhead lights were coming on as the evening sky darkened. Her infuriated pace made her companions stride double-time to catch up with her.

Jonathon pulled up short so as to not run into her as she stood at the head of the stone steps, staring off into the distance, misty-eyed with her lip quivering slightly. Shadow instinctively sidled up beside her, nearly knocking Jonathon off his feet, rubbing his head against her leg. She dropped to one knee and hugged him fiercely around his neck. He nuzzled and licked her cheek as a single tear slipped from the corner of her eye.

“Don’t cry, Richelle. Samuels is an insensitive ass who doesn’t deserve to head up this program.”

Sensing his agitation, Richelle looked up and gave him a lopsided smile as she wiped her eyes.

She couldn’t believe it when he referred to the plight of the gray wolves as if their dwindling population was of no consequence, just an “acceptable loss to the diminishing habitats of wildlife to the progression of man,” or some such bullshit.

“I’ve admired Dr. Samuels and his work for the last two years. I can’t believe it didn’t mean anything to him. That he was only heading up the project for the grant money.”

“Samuels is an egotistical, pseudo-intellectual who must have a relative on the board who got him the position. You have every reason not to like him.”

Richelle gave a half-hearted laugh. “Was I that transparent?”

“Only to someone who knows you.”

“And you think you know me?” She arched her brow at him.

“I’m beginning to,” he reassured her as he took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“The wolves have done so much for me,” she idly commented. “They took care of me, comforted me when I was scared, and kept me company when I was lonely. They are my friends.”

“So what will you do now?”

“I know what I won’t do. I won’t work for a man who is spending his time and grant monies simply documenting the extinction of a species instead of doing something about it.”

“So what are *you* going to do about it?”

She knew *exactly* what she was going to do about it.

“I’m going to report him to the Foundation...let them know how he is conducting his *research*.”

“And then?”

“This project means so much to me and means survival for them.” On the verge of tears, her voice quavered. “How can I just give it up and walk away?”

“You can’t. That’s what makes you so special, because you care for your friends.”

For so long she hid from the world. As her memories returned, she had an inexorable sense of loneliness lingering from her past. She found she truly enjoyed being in the company of others. She didn’t want to give that up.

But there was also a suffocating presence invading her mind—a terrible presence manifestation haunting her. *Luka*...his Immortal followers, Preacher, and the Believers. As much as she wanted to deny it, she sensed great danger as if Death were reaching out to touch her. She gasped, startled when Jonathon placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Whoa, it’s okay,” he said, holding his hands up in front of him. Slowly he lowered them to hook his thumbs in the back pockets of his jeans. “I can’t stay here anymore. I need to get away.” “You’re upset and you’re getting all mixed up, dwelling on Samuels’ misconceptions and inaccurate statistics about the sanctuary.” Jonathon blathered on, saying anything to get her to change her mind and stay. “We’ll get you home where you can get some sleep. Then you’ll feel better.”

A foreboding chill had come up from the east, and Richelle had a disturbing misgiving. Death was getting closer.

She shook her head. "It isn't just Dr. Samuels." It was everything. She had lost everything and everyone she loved. And it wouldn't end until the preacher and Luka were stopped.

"No, I've made up my mind. I need to leave. Go somewhere safe where they wouldn't dare follow. I need to go back to Romania until Luka and his followers can be stopped."

"You're going alone?"

Smiling softly she shook her head. "No, I will go with Valya and live with his people until we can return in safety. Then I will return and help my wolves."

He took her hands in his, holding them gently. She fidgeted under his intense stare.

"Are you sure?"

"I love Valya."

A breeze kicked up, and she had the sense of icy fingers brushing the back of her neck. Pulling her hands away, she backed up against Jonathon.

"We need to get back to the apartment. Now." She sensed an urgency on the wind. "Where are the Protectors?"

*"We are here."*

Richelle gave a startled yelp as two men appeared before her. She should have known they were everywhere and nowhere and that the mere mention of them would elicit their materialization.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"I know," she panted, taking deep breaths.

"I am Roman. This is Stefan."

Richelle stared at them noting the striking difference in their appearances but still, both extraordinarily handsome. Looking around the area, she directed her question to Roman.

"I thought there were three of you."

"Pieter, a Guardian. He is near." His tone was as stuffy as an English butler, but Richelle's opinion of him went up when she saw him hold his hand out to Shadow. The big black wolf trotted over, standing beside him like they were old companions.



“We need to get Richelle back to the apartment,” Stefan harshly stated. “It seems there is a betrayer among the Immortals. We must get her to safety until we can return her to Valya.”

Jonathan took her by the elbow and scanned the seemingly vacant parking lot. His nostrils flared as he raised his head to the wind. Stefan, Roman, and Shadow followed suit, subtly pronouncing there was danger afoot.

“*You feel it too, don’t you?*” she asked, establishing a mind link with the Protectors. “*Death is near.*”

Stefan nodded his head slightly while Roman continued to scan the area. Shadow stepped in front of Richelle and growled low, his ears flattening back on his head as he bared his teeth. She listened in on the Protectors mind linked.

“*Do you feel it?*” Stefan inquired, knowing full well Roman did.

“*Yes. There are six of them.*”

“*Can you sense where they are?*”

“*Three are on the far side of the parking lot, behind the building. The other three are hiding among the trees to the left.*”

“*Divide and conquer?*”

Roman nodded and turned to Jonathon.

“You need to get her out of here. Get in the car and take her back to the apartment.”

“No,” Richelle interjected, “I need to get to Valya. We need to leave and go to Romania, to the Immortals.”

“Return to the apartment. We will join you there and take you to the Immortals.”

“No. I want to be with Valya.” She was adamant. Truth be known, it was the only place she felt safe despite the presence of the Protectors. It may be their calling to defend an innocent, but Valya was her life mate. She didn’t just want to be with Valya, she needed to be with him and conveyed that thought to her Protectors.

“Take me to Valya.” She felt the uneasiness between the men. Roman and Stefan exchanged intermittent glances as they scanned the area for more intruders. Jonathon shifted his feet uncomfortably, switching between staring at the ground and stealing dubious glances at the Protectors. She

tried to sense their thoughts but disbelievingly found them guarded, including Jonathon's.

She felt Roman and Stefan conversing as they looked at each other, even though their minds, their thoughts were blocked from her. Tension thickened in the night air as she probed deeper, searching for answers to their secretive behavior. But each wall she broke down led to another, and then another. Apprehension rose with each obstacle they erected until she bordered on frantic with the need to know what they were hiding.

*"Where is Valya? Take me to him."*

*"We cannot,"* Stefan replied.

*"Why not? Where is he?"*

No answer, only silence as the Protectors stared off into the night.

*"Dammit, Stefan, answer me. Where is Valya?"*

All three men groaned. Roman looked to Stefan and Jonathon as if silently asking for permission. Stefan gave a slight nod.

"Valya is with Nicolae." He was still hiding something from her, causing a shiver down her spine. Her body trembled slightly, fearing the worst.

"Is he dead?" She couldn't keep her voice from breaking, as she feared the answer more than she feared the Believers.

"No, he isn't dead," Jonathon intervened as he slipped his arm around her.

"Please, Jonathon, you're scaring me. Just tell me."

"Valya was injured." She tried to pull away but Jonathon held fast. "He's all right, honey. But he needed to see a Healer." She was silent for a moment as her head swirled with the news.

"When?" she croaked, holding onto the last bit of fortitude she had. Jonathon didn't respond. She shifted her gaze to Roman, then Stefan and back to Jonathon.

"When, Jonathon?"

"Yesterday evening."

This time, Richelle would not be held and comforted as she stared at him in both disbelief and anger.

"And no one thought to tell me," she admonished, her disapproving gaze chastising each one of them.

She should have been there to help him. To let him know that she loved him, which she did so willingly and completely. Filled with resentment at being kept in the dark, she slapped Jonathon across the face. He just stood there. When he didn't move or say anything, she slapped him again.

"I'm sorry, Richelle," he apologized. "I should have told you."

"Yes, you should have. I should have been with him."

"We didn't want you to get hurt."

"It hurts more that you deceived me."

"I'm sorry."

"Like that is supposed to make me forgive you?"

"Can you save this for later?" Roman interrupted. He moved Richelle closer to Jonathon, sheltering her between their bodies, his eyes never leaving the shadow of the woods. "We need to leave, now."

Richelle followed his gaze to the edge of the forest, her eyes wary like a deer that had caught scent of the hunter. And there was no mistaking the unnatural quietness surrounding them. They were being hunted.

Without provocation, Shadow started to bark and head off toward the science building opposite where they stood. In an instant, Stefan shimmered into invisibility, transporting himself to the edge of the parking lot before reappearing and giving chase to their unseen attackers.

"Get to the car and get her out of here! We'll meet back at the apartment and take her to Valya," Roman ordered, leaping off the steps toward the woods without waiting for a response.

"Come on." Jonathon gripped her elbow and started leading her to the solitary car. Her heart was racing, trying to keep up with his long strides as they crossed the lot. Stumbling, she lost a shoe but she didn't miss a step as she quickly recovered to keep up with Jonathon. They were almost at the car, just a few more feet.

*"Richelle."*

Stopping abruptly, Jonathon's hand slipped from her elbow. She turned and stared into the night, trying to determine from which direction the voice had come.

"Come on!" Jonathon yelled as he grabbed her by the arm and started dragging her to the car.

*"Richelle."*

She kept running toward the car, ignoring the voice calling out to her. She banged into the car when Jonathan released her arm and went around to the driver's side, fumbling for the keys to unlock the door.

*"Richelle."*

She kept her head down, setting up walls around her mind, not wanting to hear the looming voice.

*"Richelle, come to me."*

*"Leave me alone."* Covering her ears with her fists, she felt the walls around her mind crumble like dust under the onslaught of mental powers far beyond her own. *"Please, leave me alone."*

*"Get in the car, Richelle!"*

*"Please, leave me alone."* She whimpered at the first lance of pain that invaded her mind, commanding her attention, demanding her obedience.

*"Come to me, Richelle."*

Her mind reached into the darkness, struggling to find the other part of her soul, to renew her strength. Her mind called to him. *"Valya."*

*"He is dead."*

*"You lie! He lives."*

*"You belong to me."*

*"I belong to Valya."*

*"I will never let another have you."*

*"No! Let me go!"*

*"You are mine!"*

"Get in the car!" She hadn't seen Jonathon come around the car. He shook her by her shoulders, jostling her as he tried to open the door.

*"Richelle, come to me."*

Taken aback, they both turned and faced the embodiment of evil— Luka cel Rau. From what she had learned, Richelle expected him to be a hideous monster, but it was quite the opposite. In an almost uncanny contrast to Valya, he had long golden hair that rustled in the breeze. And his eyes were an astonishing shade of blue, pale, almost translucent, like ice. Even the bitterness in his voice dripped like icicles.

Pressing her back against the car, Jonathon shielded her body with his, standing between her and the Evil One. He raised a gun he pulled from his coat pocket and aimed for Luka's heart.

*"She isn't going anywhere with you!"*

Laughing haughtily, Luka tipped his head back, flashing his elongated canines. His chin dropped and he glowered at Jonathon.

“And how will you stop me, human? With that?” He motioned to the gun in Jonathon’s hand.

“Get in the car, Richelle. We’re leaving.” He walked backward, keeping Richelle behind him. When he reached the car he fumbled for the door handle. Luka took a step forward as Jonathon got the door open and shoved Richelle in, slamming it quickly behind her.

Luka laughed again, sending chards of pain through her mind, stinging her face like frostbite. He took another step forward. Jonathon waved the gun in front of him.

“Back off! I said we’re leaving!”

Luka stopped and glared at him, his eyes sparking to gold, like fire, but it still did nothing to conceal the coldness that lurked behind the blue orbs. Stretching out his arms, he lowered his head and smiled darkly. He took a step forward.

“I said back off!”

He took another step toward the car. Jonathon cocked the hammer and took careful aim.

“I’m warning you. Stay back or I’ll shoot!”

“Richelle belongs to me,” Luka stated. He took a step forward before Jonathon fired a single shot, striking his mark. Luka’s smile faded as he staggered backward, his arms still open. After a few backward steps, he regained his balance. He looked down to where the bullet had struck, blood soaking the front of his shirt. He looked back up and smiled. Grabbing the opening of his shirt he ripped it open.

They watched in stunned awe as Luka’s chest began to pulse, in and out, until a single silver bullet popped out of his chest, landing on the ground covered with blood and turning black from the contact with pure evil. Then, the skin seemed to meld together and seal the wound.

“My God!” Jonathon exclaimed as he raised the gun and emptied the barrel into Luka’s chest. The results were the same. The silver bullets lay strewn at Luka’s feet, black and covered in blood. Luka raised his head and howled into the night. When his head lowered, he glared at Jonathon.

“There is no God, only Luka cel Rau. And I will take what belongs to me,” he arrogantly commanded, his gaze fixated on Richelle.

Dropping his gun to the ground, Jonathon backed away, going around the back of his vehicle when he bumped into a large body behind him. Startled, he jumped away and spun to see Pieter standing behind him, his arms tucked by his side, his stance casual, not the stance of a Protector defending his charge.

"Pieter, thank God," he murmured, casting his eyes between Pieter and Luka. "The silver bullets are having no effect on Luka. I need you to hold him off while I get Richelle out of here."

Pieter didn't reply. He remained immobile, like a statue carved in granite.

"Pieter," he repeated. "Did you hear me? I need to get Richelle out of here."

Pieter cocked his head to one side and stared unblinkingly at him, as one would do when encountering some type of puzzle needing to be solved.

"Pieter?" Perplexed, Jonathon could only gape at him. "Help me. Help Richelle."

Pieter began to move, circling around Jonathon, each time drawing him farther and farther away from the car. All the while he chuckled, a mocking sneer set on his grim visage. When he finally stopped, he quietly gawped at Jonathon, his cheek muscles ticking. Jonathon looked at Pieter's eyes, the vivid blue fading to a pale, icy blue, the same as Luka's.

"Oh, my God."

"You've already been told. There is no God." Pieter's voice was as cold as his eyes.

Richelle watched the scene unfolding before her with dread. They had been duped. She, Jonathon, Valya, Nicolae, and the Protectors had all been fooled. Pieter was the betrayer and was in liege with Luka. The Protectors drawn away by Believers. Jonathon would have to deal with Pieter himself.

Pieter laughed and began to circle around Jonathon again, taking him even farther from the car, from Richelle, while Luka looked on.

"Richelle! Get out of here! Now!"

Richelle tried opening her door but was met with resistance. The door wasn't locked. It just wouldn't open. She experienced a dizzying nausea and felt the icy grip of evil holding the doors of the car shut. Looking out the front window, she saw Luka watching her, insidiously grinning at her. In spite of his handsome appearance, she was repulsed.

"I can't," she hollered to Jonathon. "The door won't open." She tried to unroll the car window, thinking she could slip out, but she couldn't get a firm grip on the handle with her shaky hands. She continued to struggle with the door, throwing as much of her weight as she could against it, trying to force it open, but it was no use. She was trapped.

"*You are mine,*" Luka repeated as he slowly advanced.

"Jonathon!" she screamed. "Help me!" Her body broke out in a cold sweat. Unable to control her hands shaking, she started beating against the window, believing she had the strength to shatter the tempered glass. "Jonathon, please!"

Reaching into his pocket, Jonathon pulled out a dog whistle and blew. Pieter began to laugh, low at first but then wildly, sounding like a rabid hyena.

"Do you think that mangy lupine will be able to save you?" Pieter taunted.

Nonchalantly, Jonathon shrugged as he replied, "You never know."

"You're a fool."

"I've been called worse."

"You humans. You believe you have the right to stand beside an Immortal as an equal. Humans are nothing!" Pieter spat, malice dripping from every acerbic word. "You are dogs! You're only good to trail at your master's heel and serve him."

Jonathon roared in rage as the words hit their mark. Pieter laughed mockingly. Jonathon's anger did not deter him as he continued his taunting.

"You should fall on your knees before your master, Luka, and beg him to spare your life, you worthless cur!"

Jonathon lunged at Pieter and tackled him midsection, sending him backward to land with a thud on the ground. Richelle was screaming from the car as Jonathon threw a right and then a left cross that landed squarely on Pieter's jaw.

Pieter retaliated by placing his hands upon Jonathon's chest and using his Vampyre strength, propelling him through the air to land on the back of the car. Rolling off the trunk, stunned, Jonathon staggered to his feet prepared to do battle. Unsteady on his feet, he reached down and pulled a dagger from his bootstrap.

Banging on the car window, Richelle began to shout.

“No, Jonathon! Get away! Run! Run!”

Pieter drew back his lips in a vicious snarl, revealing his fangs in intimidation. In the blink of an eye, the pale blue orbs became blood red as he glowered at Jonathon.

“No, you are not dogs,” Pieter mocked. “Humans are nothing more than cattle, the blood on which Immortals feed. And right now, I’m starving.”

Jonathon switched knife positions, the blade overhead so he could thrust it downward into Pieter’s heart, and charged forward. Pieter grabbed his wrist to prevent the killing blow and used his other hand to seize Jonathon by the throat. Jonathon gasped for air. Vainly, he grasped Pieter’s wrist, attempting to pull his hand away from his throat. It only resulted in Pieter tightening his grip.

“Please, no!” Richelle cried from her makeshift prison. She turned to Luka, nearly upon her. *“Please, release him, and I will go with you.”*

Luka laughed in disdain. *“You bargain with what is already mine.”*

Richelle turned back toward Jonathon, tears of frustration and sorrow streaming down her face. Jonathon was going to die, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. *“Oh, Valya, where are you?”* She looked toward the sky as if he would magically appear and end this horror.

Luka’s laughter still hung in the night air when Shadow attacked from behind, his jaw clamping on Luka’s neck and changing his laughter to howls. Shadow took his quarry to the ground, biting and tearing at Luka. Taking advantage of the disruption of his power, Richelle opened the door and flew out of the car to try and help Jonathon.

Pieter twisted Jonathon’s hand until the dagger fell from his grip and landed on the cement with a heartbreaking clink just as Richelle rushed over and tried to pull his hand from Jonathon’s throat.

“Let him go, you monster!” Richelle screamed as she tried desperately to loosen the hold he had on Jonathon, but she didn’t have the strength.

Jonathon struggled to speak, but his words came out as piteous gurgles. Pieter grinned evilly and probed Jonathon’s final thoughts. His laugh was a vile cackle, revealing how truly treacherous he was by nature.

“You truly are a fool to fall in love with your friend Valya’s woman.”

Jonathon closed his eyes as Richelle continued to pull at Pieter’s hand to pry his fingers loose and free Jonathon. “Know this, you pathetic excuse of existence,” Pieter sneered. “Neither you nor Valya will have Richelle. She is



to become the Mistress of Tower of the Red Dragon. She will become Luka's bride, fulfilling his every sexual desire while Valya watches on, unable to protect or save her. Valya will die and Richelle will become the instrument of destruction as Luka takes his rightful place as Ruler of the World."

Pieter pulled Jonathon in closer, almost nose to nose. Richelle could smell the foul scent of death lingering on his breath.

"And, as for you, you wanted to give Richelle your heart. Let me help you." Pieter's condescending tone made his words ugly, but not as ugly or as loathsome as his meted actions.

Releasing Jonathon's wrist, he pulled his arm back, his fingers coming together to form a point, and with the speed of a bullet, he drove his hand into Jonathon's chest. Blood splattered over Richelle's face and arms. Her screams of horror joined Jonathon's screams of agony. Pieter dug his hand in deeper, twisting it around before he ripped Jonathon's heart out. He held it out to Richelle, an offensive and sickening gift.

Richelle continued to scream, fisting her hands in her hair while she backed away from Pieter. Unable to put up her mind blocks quick enough, she felt every agonizing and tortuous moment of Jonathon's murder. She could do nothing to prevent it and nothing to save him. She tripped and fell, landing on her derriere as she tried to back away from the abominable scene.

Pieter's attention was now focused on Richelle. Without a thought, he tossed aside Jonathon's lifeless body as if it were nothing more than yesterday's trash. He held out his hand, the mass of muscle still beating as he offered it to Richelle.

"Take it, Richelle," he jeered. "It is his heart he wanted so desperately for you to have."

She continued to back away along the ground as Pieter advanced with Jonathon's heart held out in front of him.

"*You don't want it?*" Pieter jeered. He pulled his hand back, bringing the heart toward his face. "*Ah, well. To the victor of the hunt go the spoils.*" He drew back his lips and sank his fangs into the heart she had rejected, taking the last of Jonathon's pure life spirit as sustenance, relishing the surge of malevolent energy he found in the taking of an innocent's life.

She screamed, scrambled to her feet, and turned to run away. As she reached the car, she was met by another horrific sight. Luka was bent over

her limp black wolf, his fangs fastened ruthlessly to his neck. Shadow's legs were still twitching as Luka gorged himself on her beloved companion. She screamed in revulsion, drawing Luka's attention as he released his hold on Shadow. He leered at her, his face covered in blood.

*"You are mine."*

She turned the other way to escape, but ran into Pieter's large frame and was engulfed by his massive arms. The pain caused by his touch and all his degenerative thoughts and emotions battering her mind in an unrelenting barrage blinded her. She was so overcome by the onslaught of horrid images, she was barely aware of Luka's presence behind her until his hand snatched her by the hair, yanking her head back and baring her throat to him.

Like a viper, his fangs slashed through the delicate tissue where her neck and shoulder blade connected. Gripping Pieter's biceps, her fingernails raked against the sinewy muscles as she endured the lacerating torture and cruelty from her faceless attacker. Her feeble attempts to break free from Luka's bite resulted only in his tightening his grip as he voraciously fed on her heated blood.

Her thoughts turned to Valya while she suffered the sadistic passion and excruciating pain of Luka's bite, trying to block out her captor's spiteful intentions. Visions of Luka touching her, replacing Valya as her lover, were more than she could stand. She tried to hold onto the remembrances of their love, imagining that it was Valya touching her, loving her, taking her blood.

As the agony of being held by the two dark demons became more than she could bear, she was overcome by an unnatural languor. Bright lights burned behind her eyelids, and she succumbed to the pain, collapsing into blessed oblivion.

The last image she saw was Pieter's face covered with the blood of one of the finest men she had ever known.

## Chapter 14

Richelle awoke slowly, feeling a bit dazed and lightheaded, like she had been asleep for a week. Sitting up in the bed, she tentatively ran her hand over the ache on the side of her neck. She felt two puncture wounds, the skin around them being extremely tender.

She sat up with a start to find herself in a large ornate bed with lewd and lascivious carvings along the heavy headboard. She rubbed her temples as she tried to remember where she was and how she got there. For that matter, she tried to remember who she was. This whole scene seemed surreal, like *déjà vu* as she struggled with jumbled thoughts that held no rhyme or reason.

Feeling cold, she looked down and, with a gasp, grabbed a corner of the sheet to cover her chest. The blood red sheets looked obscene against her alabaster skin, but she had no choice but to wrap them around her as she was naked, her clothes nowhere to be seen. But she did notice some flitting about in the shadows by faceless figures.

“Who’s there?” she yelled, scooting back against the headboard nervously. Three young women emerged from the shadows. They were all voluptuous, exotic beauties, although there was an eerie, haunting quality to their attractiveness that left her unsettled.

“Why, it’s only us, my dear,” the blonde said. Her voice was as soft as silk, but it still grated Richelle’s nerves.

“Who are you?” she asked, not really wanting to know.

“We serve the master,” the brunette responded.

“Yes, the master,” the redhead chimed in. She came over and began stroking Richelle’s hair. Richelle flinched away, not wanting to be touched by any of them. But they closed ranks around her, crowding her. “We are here to serve you.”

“Serve you.”

“By the master’s command.”

“His command,” they all echoed.

They kept touching her hair, stroking her skin with cold fingers that felt like spiders crawling on her skin.

“You are very lovely, my dear.”

“Yes, very lovely,” the brunette said as she leaned in and kissed Richelle’s cheek. Her lips were ice cold.

“You will become our sister.”

“Our sister,” the redhead repeated. She licked Richelle from cheek to temple while her blonde counterpart kneeled on the edge of the bed, leaning into Richelle, who retreated as far away as she could. She pressed hard against the carvings, trying to avoid their intimate touches.

“What’s the matter, my dear?” the blonde asked as her hand caressed Richelle’s cheek. “Don’t you like us?”

“We like you.”

“Yes, we like you very much,” the redhead agreed, her hot breath singeing Richelle’s neck. The brunette reached out and fondled Richelle’s breast through the sheet. Drawing back, Richelle smacked the hand away and then slapped the redhead.

“Get away from me!”

All three backed away, hissing and baring their fangs. The blonde snatched Richelle by the throat as Richelle clutched at her fingers, trying to pull the icy claw away.

“What *is* the matter, my dear?” the blonde rasped gravelly. “Don’t you like us?”

“Don’t worry,” the brunette continued leaning in. Grabbing Richelle’s chin, her blood red nails scraped and scratched Richelle’s delicate skin. “You will like us in a moment.”

Richelle fought, struggling as the three Vampyres converged, their mouths gaping open. Their fangs descended to chafe her neck but before they could draw any blood, they were stilled by a booming voice that shook the castle’s stone walls.

“Stop!”

Cringing in fear, they slunk away to hide in the shadows, and Richelle warily eyed the figure approaching her. His face was unknown, still hidden by the shadows, but the silhouette of his form was familiar. With

confidence, he strode about the room, his long hair swaying with each step. His broad chest and shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist and hips. His masculine saunter kindled a forgotten memory, which in turn sparked a hidden desire in her womb as she peered into the shadows trying to recognize who was approaching.

As he emerged from the shadows, the dim lighting illuminated his image. His golden blond hair and light blue eyes were highlighted by the candlelight. But it added no warmth. She could feel the chilly air emanating from him even at the distance separating them. The air grew icier with every step he took until he stood over her, his presence enveloping her in an arctic embrace.

He was not what she expected. The right size, the right build, but it wasn't golden lights and blue eyes that warmed her. It was the haunting dreams of a dark-haired, dark-eyed stranger, but not a stranger, that made her face grow hot with an intimate familiarity, beguiling her.

"Did you sleep well, Richelle?"

"You know me," she stammered. She started to fidget, uncomfortable with his presence. She searched her fragmented memories for some hint of recollection but could find none.

He chuckled sardonically as he came closer, taking a loose tendril of her hair and wrapping it around his finger to pull her face toward him. Richelle jerked her head, attempting to pull her curl free, but all she accomplished was to pull her hair. Winding the curl around his finger one more time, he yanked on it to pull her face up, meeting his gaze.

"You are mine," he stated coldly.

*You are mine...you are mine...you are mine.* The words echoed in her mind as she recalled abrupt flashes of scattered memories, images of unspeakable brutality and bloody carnage. And Jonathon...gone. Her eyes welled with tears at the loss of her friend. She had known him for such a short time, and he had given his life for her.

Another life gone. Because of her. Her heart ached in anguish.

"Why did you kill him? Jonathon was no threat to you."

"He stood in my way. He dared to keep from me what was mine."

Richelle stuck her chin out defiantly. "I am not yours."

She prayed to the Goddess for help as she strained to fill in the missing pieces in her memories. Her prayer was answered when the stirring visage

of a man with dark hair permeated her mind. She felt his dark eyes enter and burrow into her soul. *Valya's* dark eyes.

Luka had said Valya was dead. But in her heart she knew he wasn't. She could still feel his life's energy. It was weak and distant. But she felt it growing in strength. He was alive! And he would come for her. Until then, she would need to find a way to get away from Luka.

As she was drawn into Luka's circle of malevolent wickedness poisoning her mind, the memory of her Guardian wrapped her in security and comfort. Even as this immoral spirit drew closer, his thoughts an open book revealing the insidious plans he had for her and for all mankind, she felt no pain. She felt no fear. His rancid breath blew into her face as he spoke to her.

"I am Luka cel Rau, master of Tower of the Red Dragon. And you are mine."

"I belong to no one but myself," she asserted calmly, although she trembled inside as she spoke the words. "Release me."

Luka threw his head back and laughed. When he lowered his gaze to meet hers, his eyes were filled with such hate he nearly broke through the wall of composure encompassing her. Fisting his hand in her hair, he yanked her head back to bare her throat to him.

Luka stroked her throat. Richelle closed her eyes to fight back the revulsion, shivering slightly from his icy touch. He leaned in and licked her wound, his tongue leaving trails of frostbite along her tender, sensitive skin. She balled her hands into fists as the sheet slipped away to reveal her nakedness, displaying her like a sacred sacrifice to Luka's avaricious and marauding needs.

"You are divine, aren't you, Richelle?" he ground out hoarsely. He continued to lick and taste her skin as his hand came up and crudely grasped her breast. She twisted away from his touch. He just snickered at her discomfort.

"Please," she moaned softly. "Release me. If there is anything good left within you, anything Immortal left, then please release me."

Luka pulled back. His brow creased in confusion, in uncertainty. It was only a moment before it faded to be replaced by an unsympathetic scowl. He

growled pulling her head back farther, raising himself to loom over her restrained position.

He sneered at the tears escaping from the corners of her eyes to trail down her cheeks.

“Release me!” she screamed. “Never!”

“Valya will come for me and he will stop you.”

He snorted. “I told you...Valya is dead! There is no one to save you! There is no one to defeat me!”

“Then *I* will defeat you!”

He gripped her hair forcefully, painfully, and she squeezed her eyes shut against the pain she knew was about to come.

“*I am Luka cel Rau, Master of Tower of the Red Dragon, and I will claim you as my life mate. You are mine!*”

Rapid as the crack of a whip he drew back and lunged, sinking his fangs into her already despoiled neck, creating a new wound as he took second blood.

And Richelle held herself motionless steeling herself against the revulsion and blinding lights behind her eyelids. She descended into a black pit of despair clinging to only one thought to retain her sanity.

*Valya will come for me.*

\* \* \* \*

Preacher watched in trepidation as Luka descended the staircase, his smug expression evidence that he had taken second blood from Richelle. While he had chosen his path, freely pledging his allegiance to Luka, his fear of the wrath of the Immortals intensified every day. And every night Luka delayed in completing the ritual put them all at risk. He needed Luka to put aside his petty scheme of revenge against the Immortals who had judged and condemned him to death.

Luka was dressed in only his black pants as he came down the stairs. Uncaring of his half-naked state or the drops of blood that marred his bared chest, he reveled in the admiring stares from his paramours hidden in the shadows of his mansion. As Luka reached the foot of the stairs, Preacher held out an ornate red and gold cape and draped it over Luka’s shoulders, leaving the front open.

Luka crossed to the dining room as Preacher followed behind.

“Pour me a nightcap, Preacher,” Luka commanded. He took his seat in the throne-like chair at the head of the table, and a bevy of exotic and beautiful women materialized and flocked to his side, each fawning and touching him. Luka ignored them.

Preacher turned and poured him a glass; the crystal decanter twinkled in the soft glow of candlelight from the chandelier, disguising the ugliness of the vile liquid it held. Luka was close to achieving his goal of domination, and Preacher’s increasing doubts troubled him. Luka had made no mention of how he and the Believers would fit in this new world order.

Preacher knew he had damned his own immortal soul by imparting his allegiance to Luka. After losing his faith in a benevolent God and mankind, he had turned to Luka and his promise of a new and better world. Later, he willingly continued to serve Luka under the delusion it was better to rule in hell than serve in heaven. And fear of retribution in purgatory was a poor substitute for entreating God for forgiveness as he realized his mistake too late.

If Luka claimed Richelle and destroyed the Immortals, he would be omnipotent, with no one powerful enough to stop him. He could wipe away the Believers for knowing too much. If Luka was stopped and Richelle escaped, he could destroy them all in his rage. No matter what happened, no matter what he did, he was facing his demise.

There was only one way to leave the service of Luka cel Rau—death. While he was afraid of what the Immortals might do for his part in Richelle’s abduction and the death of Valya the Guardian, he was more afraid of his master’s *displeasure* if he failed to serve him, or tried to leave.

Not knowing what to do, Preacher handed Luka the glass and stood to the left, awaiting his next commands.

\* \* \* \*

Swirling the red liquid, inhaling the pungent bouquet much as a sommelier would do when sampling a fine wine, Luka congratulated himself on his triumph over Nicolae and the rest of the Immortals. Valya was dead! Richelle was in his power. When he took her as his bride, he would send out his soldiers to capture the world. He would reign supreme with Richelle by



his side to satisfy his every desire and bear him strong sons to perpetuate his legacy.

He would father a new race, destroy the Immortals, and enslave mankind to serve his descendants, with body and blood. He toasted his brilliant plan as he finished his drink.

From the far side of the dim room, Terezia approached, her voluptuous body draped in white silk silhouetted by the darkness. She exuded sex with every step, every movement she made. The silky fabric drifted around her, an obscene homage to innocence in direct contrast to her image of wantonness. Her exotic eyes, vacant of life and love, held assurance of decadent sins to be found in her willing bed. But the bed he wanted was Richelle's, willing or not. His lips curled in a vindictive smile.

*At the feast, I will take what is mine. Then she will come to me of her own volition, to do my bidding. I will take her as I please. And often.* He felt his cock harden, his bestial imagination running wild in the ways he planned on taking her. There was no remorse or guilt in his lustful thoughts other than Valya would not be there to watch as Richelle became his sex slave.

Luka watched as his sometime lover came closer, her hips swaying in promise of pleasures that could be found as he thrust his steely length into her welcoming pussy. Fucking her hard and long until he spewed his seed into her, filling her, until it dripped from her cunt and she was begging for his bite. And all the while, he would picture Richelle beneath him, writhing in ecstasy as he feasted on her blood.

"What is it that you want, Terezia?" he questioned, idly swirling the liquid in his glass.

"You know very well what I want." She circled behind his chair and placed her hands upon his shoulders. She leaned down to whisper in his ear. "You know what I offer." She ran her hands down his shoulders, over his triceps, and back up again. "You remember the pleasure, the ecstasy, only I can give you." She came out from behind his chair to stand before him.

His gaze transfixed on her mouth as she ran her tongue over her blood red lips in practiced seduction. She cupped her large breasts in her hands, forcing them together. As she trailed her hands down her torso to rest on her hips, her hardened nipples strained against the fabric stretched across her well-endowed chest.

She took a step forward, her hands roaming over her hips, lower, until she was able to fondle her crotch. She released a throaty moan as her hand rubbed over her mound. She took another two steps until she was able to settle in his lap, her hands resting upon his chest. Dispassionately, he placed his arm over her legs, drawing her soft backside against his aching cock, hardening with thoughts of Richelle.

“Come with me, my love. Let me take you to my chambers and show you the pleasures you have forgotten.” Twining her arms around his neck, she leaned in and kissed him passionately. He responded, but not with the rapacious hunger Terezia was trying to incite.

Kissing him harder, her sharp incisors nicked his lower lip. In fury, he shoved her off his lap, leaving her to cower on the floor as he rose to stand over her. His rage bubbling to the surface, he backhanded her. Her head reeled to one side and then he slapped her the other way.

A trickle of blood formed in the corner of her mouth, staining the death white pallor of her chin. She wiped it away and stared at him in disbelief.

“Why, Luka? What did I do wrong?”

“You dare take *my* blood?” He did not mask the vehemence in his voice.

“I love you. Your blood is meant for me. I should become your bride.”

“I do not want your love!” he spat. “You are here to serve my needs, not to question and disobey my commands! Richelle is to become my queen.”

“Why Richelle?” she whined, rising to her feet. “I have given you everything, never denying your wishes.”

“She is who I have chosen. Do not question my decision!” he said, pushing her away.

She rolled her shoulders back, thrusting her ample breasts up as an open invitation. “Richelle is a child who knows nothing of the world. She knows nothing of the corporeal delights derived from pleasure, or from pain.” She stepped toward him, placing her hands upon his chest.

“I remember the nights of ecstasy as you took me to your chamber.” Terezia leaned in and licked his ear, murmuring low, continuing her litany of sadistic debauchery, of torture and pain. Luka was inflamed by her words, but in his fantasies, it was Richelle who became the recipient of his demonic affection.

Terezia smiled as she crushed her breasts against him, letting her silk-covered nipples caress his bare chest.

“Take me as your bride, Luka. Together, we will rule the world.”

He grabbed her wrists, exerting pressure to make her wince as he held her away at arm’s length. The condescension as he spoke to her was abrading. “*I* will rule the world. With *Richelle* as my bride. And *you* will serve Richelle.”

Enraged at being cast aside, Terezia made no attempt to hide her resentment.

“I refuse,” she bit out, her voice laced with bitterness. Luka’s fingernails grew longer, cutting into her wrists and drawing blood.

“You *will* serve Richelle. Or you will answer to *me*!”

“I will not!” she screeched, trying to pull her wrist away. “I refuse to serve a woman beneath me! You may banish me from your bed, take that pathetic pretext as your bride and make her your queen, but I will never serve her! By all the demons of hell, I will see her burn first!”

\* \* \* \*

The moment the words left her mouth, Terezia realized her mistake. But by then, it was too late and her eyes grew large in panic. In the blink of an eye, Luka’s face became black as night with his eyes becoming burnished orbs of red fire. Blazing at her. She could feel an unforeseen hand encompassing her throat, squeezing tighter and tighter, like a boa constricts its prey.

Luka released his grip on her wrists, resting his arms at his side as he took three steps away from her. He watched her with a morbid fascination. No words were spoken as he cocked his head to one side and watched as she staggered, gasping for air.

Terezia clawed at her bare throat, trying to get free from the crushing hold. She felt her talon-like fingernails shredding her skin and her blood oozing between her fingers while she tried to pry away the invisible fingers. Her eyes were bulging as her fingernails sliced her carotid artery and blood squirted down her chest to stain the lily white of her gown. She bled until her entire bodice was stained scarlet red, depicting her true licentious nature as her sisters of the night wailed from the dark corners bemoaning the suffering of she who had trained them.

Stumbling forward, straining to stay on her feet, she took a step toward Luka. Stretching her arms as if reaching out to him, she opened her mouth, gurgling her broken, impassioned plea.

“Lukaaaa, mercyyyy. Pleease! I looove youuu!”

He cocked his head to the other side and gave her a derisive smile.

“I *will* give you mercy,” he answered, raising his hand and pointing his finger at her. “And bestow upon you the death you wished for my bride.”

Terror gripped her heart as the hem of her gown caught fire. With her bloody hands, she began to beat at the flames that lapped at her gown until her entire body was aflame.

\* \* \* \*

Preacher turned his face away, not able to bear the ghastly image of Terezia’s porcelain white flesh being charred from her bones as her bloodcurdling screams rent the turbulent night.

And then there was silence.

Preacher turned back. Where Terezia once stood, only a pile of glowing embers remained. The bloodcurdling screams were replaced with muted moans and whispers, fading away from the shadows. Standing beside the banquet table, sipping from his wineglass, was Luka. He drained his glass and set it on the table. His satisfied visage was that of a satiated lover after a night of carnal pleasure.

Preacher was sickened by what he had seen. For as long as he had served the Tower of the Red Dragon, Terezia had been its mistress, as Luka’s intended. Yet Luka had destroyed her without a moment’s thought, with no more regard than a pebble in a shoe to be removed and tossed aside. His heart filled with a stomach-turning dread at the merciless method of Terezia’s demise and of his awaiting rendezvous with death when he’d outlived his usefulness.

“Preacher, have one of your followers dispose of that mess.” Without so much as a glance, Luka waved at Terezia’s remains.

“As you command, master.”

With a flourish of his cape, Luka turned and headed toward the staircase.

“I want you to personally oversee the preparations for the Beltane Feast and the Bonding. I will not have one of Terezia’s harlots harming my bride. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, master. But...”

Luka stopped short. Preacher felt icy cold fingers settle on his shoulder, chilling him to the bone.

“But what, Preacher?”

He regretted second-guessing Luka’s command, but there was no backing out now.

“You have already taken second blood from Richelle. Wouldn’t it be simpler and quicker to take her now and make her your queen?”

Luka spun in anger; his eyes were blood red as he raised his fist to the preacher, backing him against a wall while he ranted. Saliva dripped from his canines, stained with blood from his recent feeding.

He glared at Preacher. He could take Richelle now and complete the bonding, but then he would lose the magic of Beltane, when the planets would be aligned heralding the birth of powerful paranormal child that would change the course of the world. He would wait until he claimed her as his bride to consummate their union. And he would thoroughly enjoy *consummating* their union. He would fuck her as the Immortals watched on helplessly, watching the creation of a new order as she became impregnated with his son.

“I don’t want quick and simple,” he spat out. Spittle landed on Preacher’s cheek, but he dared not move to wipe it away.

“I want Nicolae to watch me take the life mate of his defeated best Guardian. I want him to see her crawl on her knees, begging for my cock and eager to please my every perverse and animal desire. I want all the damned Immortals to bear witness knowing there is nothing they can do to stop me. They will watch as I become omnipotent and enslave the human race they have fought so hard to protect, just as I will enslave Richelle!

And as quickly as Luka’s rage had escalated, so it ebbed. His eyes returned to mysterious icy blue orbs, piercing and cold. His manner was aristocratic, befitting those descended from noble blood. But there was no nobility within that dark soul.

“Do not think, Preacher. Just do as you are told.”

Preacher bowed his head, in deference, in fear.

Luka turned his back on him and strode up the staircase, bellowing his orders as he walked away, his hair and cape flowing behind as he sped up the stairs.

*“Tomorrow night, Preacher! She will become my bride. The Immortals will be destroyed and mankind will become the fodder for a new race. And there is nothing Nicolae can do to stop me.”*

When Luka reached the middle landing of the staircase, he stopped and turned with a flourish. A few of the Vampyresses not frightened away by Terezia’s destruction peeked out from the shadows. They gazed at him in adoration like star-struck teenagers.

But as Luka stood in front of the Gothic stained-glass art portraying the appalling image of Lucifer falling from heaven to take his place as ruler on earth, Preacher had simply one mental picture of Luka’s plan for world supremacy—the same picture he painted and perpetuated about Valya in the minds of his followers. Armageddon and the coming birth of the Anti-Christ in the firstborn son of Luka cel Rau.

*“Take her to my chambers and see to the arrangements. Prepare her for the Beltane Feast.”*

## Chapter 15

Valya felt warmth on his chest. Unable to open his eyes, he groggily touched his chest with his hand. He felt a wet, sticky substance. Another hand grabbed him by the wrist.

“Leave be, Valya, and let the herbs do their job.”

Nicolae.

He felt warm hands touching his skin again, gently but with a natural strength that commanded obedience. The sticky application was cool on his flesh at first, but then began to warm, and the pungent aroma calmed his hypersensitive senses.

“You’ve been here for three days, getting your strength back. There was much damage. Luka was very precise in his attack.”

Valya found he didn’t have the strength to verbally respond, so he opened his mind instead.

*“Yes, he was. But why didn’t he kill me?”*

When Nicolae didn’t respond immediately, he tried to tap into his mind to find the answer he sought. But Nicolae erected a mind block to his intrusion.

“Cease. Valya. Do not waste your strength.”

*“Why didn’t Luka kill me?”*

Nicolae’s hands never stopped their healing ministrations as he reluctantly answered Valya’s question.

“Luka has sent word to the Triad.”

Impatience welled in Valya as he waited for the rest of the information. He struggled to sit up and open his eyes, to force Nicolae to continue, but he was no match for his fellow Immortal’s strength.

“Cease your struggles or Richelle will be lost.”

At the mention of his life mate’s name, Valya settled back onto the mattress. Nicolae continued to tend to Valya’s wounds while he spoke.

“Luka has sent word to the Triad. On the morrow, he announced he will take a bride.”

“*Richelle.*”

“Yes.”

“*What happened?*”

“Jonathon had taken Richelle to the university so she could continue her animal research. According to Roman, Jonathon was against the idea, but Richelle was adamant about her duties. They were stalked by the followers of the Preacher as they returned to Jonathon’s car to leave. The followers were waiting for them. There was no possibility to escape.”

“*Where were the Protectors?*”

“Roman and Stefan were lured away by Luka’s underlings. Their presence became known, and Roman and Stefan pursued them. The followers took flight, inviting their deaths.” More like they were ordered to their deaths. Luka knew there was no escaping a Protector when they gave chase, so they were either willing martyrs or indisposed victims. Nicolae believed the latter.

“*And what of Pieter?*”

Nicolae’s hands stilled as he heaved a bitter sigh, not wanting to tell Valya, but the truth needed to be known.

“Pieter betrayed the Immortals. He is in allegiance with Luka and led the followers to Jonathon and Richelle. By the time Roman and Stefan learned of the deception and returned to the parking lot, it was too late.”

Controlling the rising anger within him, boiling like an overflowing cauldron, he inhaled the heady aromatics and focused on his thoughts rather than his emotions.

“*Richelle?*”

“She was seized by Pieter. And Luka.”

“*And Jonathon?*”

“I am sorry, Valya. He is dead.”

Valya groaned, feeling the pangs of remorse at Jonathon’s unwarranted demise.

“*How?*”

He did not want to tell all the gruesome details. But Valya was persistent in his demands for the truth.

“*How!*”



Nicolae couldn't bring himself to speak the words of Jonathon's tragic end. So he opened his mind and allowed Valya to enter, to see all that had transpired. Valya, through his psychic link with Nicolae, witnessed Pieter's traitorous duplicity and his betrayal of his people and all the Immortals' beliefs. Valya wailed in anguish at such a cruel death. *Jonathon, my friend through happiness and comrade through adversity, is dead.* His death was yet another on the long list of deaths as a result of his failure to protect Richelle.

He observed Jonathon's valiant efforts to get Richelle to safety. He also witnessed how Jonathon had paid the ultimate price, suffering needlessly to fulfill a promise to him. And for that, Valya vowed to place Jonathon's name in the Book of Honor, a ledger held by the Triad that listed the greatest Immortal warriors who had fallen in the battle against evil. It was the highest honor among his people, and Jonathon would be the only mortal listed - a fitting tribute to his courage and sacrifice.

And then there was Luka. In abject misery, he observed the loathsome and unforgivable acts of atrocities Luka committed against his beloved Richelle and life itself in his quest for supremacy. He experienced her every emotion, every indignity, every injury she had suffered at Luka's hands. He felt her sorrow at Jonathon's death, the helplessness in not being able to prevent it, and the agony as Luka took first blood. He mentally tallied each dishonor and every tear she shed. For each one would be avenged.

His Immortal blood boiled as he absorbed the mayhem and anarchy released into the night. He accepted it, freeing the world of the negative energy it epitomized so that there would be no lingering residue of the evilness it embodied. It churned and boiled until there was nowhere else for it to go. In a fit of tormented angst, Valya threw his head back and roared, trying to dispel the sorrow and guilt, mourning the loss of Richelle's respect and Jonathon's life.

*If I had been able to control my emotions, there would have been no need for Jonathon to be put in the line of fire. It was our friendship that killed him.*

"Do not berate yourself for an evil you do not deserve. You had no control of your actions while in the throes of bloodlust. It was Luka who chose to follow the call of his amoral desires. It was Luka who sent his

subordinates to capture Richelle. And it was Luka who commanded the destruction of all who stood between him and his unfounded prophecies.”

Valya felt an intense heat radiating from his chest where the medicinal herbs had been spread, their piquant scent and healing powers filling him with renewed strength in mind and body. He opened his eyes to see Nicolae staring at him, his eyes filled with the resolve of an ancient who had lived for thousands of years, had seen too much suffering, pain, and death. Behind the resolve was the anguish of an Immortal who was weary of battle and was looking to end it.

“It is Luka who deserves our pity, and justice. It is Luka who must be destroyed.”

With a determined set to his jaw, Valya nodded in agreement. He cocked his head to one side and cast Nicolae a scrutinizing glance.

*“How do you know what happened at the university?”*

“Stefan was able to apprehend one of the followers. Roman had to curtail him from killing the disciple, but I was able to...interrogate him.” Nicolae’s face was set in stone as he made the last remark.

*“Interrogate him?”* Valya thought, perplexed.

In the still of the room, a slight breeze picked up, blowing the silver strands of Nicolae’s hair back, revealing the hostile glare. There was an energy hovering over the room, and the breeze became stronger. In a flash of lightning, Nicolae’s features turned dark, the veins in his temples becoming prominent as they pulsed. His silver eyes turned yellow-gold, burning like fire as flames emanated from them. Electrical sparks shimmered from the ends of his silver hair, similar to that of an electrical storm, as the faraway sound of thunder echoed in warning.

He raised his arms, his hands outstretched, palms up, bringing them together in front of his body. Between his hands appeared a bright blue orb, floating but not touching his skin. It was mesmerizing in its power. Valya was taken aback as it began to surge and radiate heat, turning bright white. Then with an energy that shook the room, it exploded like a miniature supernova, the force pressing Valya back into the pillows with the brunt of its power.

But Nicolae remained steadfast, immobile in the face of the awesome power he had generated. Gradually his features returned to normal, his eyes the same silver-gray as before, filled with awareness and empathy, his

countenance taking on the same placid self-possession that came with age and wisdom. Sensing Valya's disquiet, Nicolae answered his unspoken question.

"He is still alive. I released him, and the Protectors are monitoring him. We will let the fool lead us to Tower of the Red Dragon, and to the Evil One."

The startling display left no question as to how the follower was *interrogated*. He had no sympathy for the man, who had made his own pact with the devil. He didn't know if he could have stopped himself from executing the bastard if he had been the one to interrogate him. He refused to dwell on it. At the moment, his only concern was getting to Richelle before Luka could complete his nefarious scheme.

He tried to get out of bed, only to be halted once more by Nicolae. But this time, he was not so yielding as to defer to the elder's urging to rest. He continued his vain efforts against Nicolae's confines, relenting only when he felt the phantom-like restraint being exuded, forcing his submission.

"Must leave. May be too late," Valya croaked, his throat parched.

"No, Luka has done nothing. He will wait until the morrow, until Beltane."

"How do you know?" he asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Beltane is a Wiccan Sabbath celebrating the return of fertility to the earth after the long winter. It is a fire and fertility rite that celebrates the virility of the young man and the transformation of a maiden to mother." Nicolae removed the invisible restraints and allowed Valya to prop himself up against the pillows as he applied the last of the herbal balms.

"Perverting the tradition of Wiccans, he will commemorate the feast by performing the ritual mating of the May lord and lady. He will take Richelle as his bride and sire a child."

Revulsion roiled through him at Nicolae's words. His body tensed at the thought of Luka touching Richelle's beauty and purity for his own perverse pleasure. There was no way he would allow Luka to take his life mate as a bride, let alone bed her as a vessel for his demonic spawn.

“Why Richelle? After centuries, after finding his true life mate and spurning her, why does he stalk and claim Richelle?”

“Because she is my daughter.”

Stunned, Valya stared at Nicolae, trying to grasp the enormity of his statement. Immortals had been having children with mortals for a little over a century but only after they had bonded as life mates. He had never heard of such a child being born out of that bonding.

“What do you mean—your daughter?”

Nicolae sat back, his haunted expression expressing the pain of his empty years alone.

“Adelaide’s parents were friends to the Immortals, offering food and shelter upon our travels and aid and comfort in times of battle. When they announced they were going to have their first child, we could not have been more thrilled, especially I when they asked me to become their child’s Guardian.

“When Adelaide was born, there was such a celebration the mountains sang. She was presented to the Triad to receive the blessings of the Immortals. It was then I knew. *She* was my life mate. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I looked into her pale blue eyes. I told her parents, and they were as thrilled as I.”

Nicolae paused, releasing a heavy sigh at the memories of happier times. Valya had to prompt him to go on.

“If they were so thrilled about the prospect, then what happened?”

“Luka.”

Not daring to speak the words, Nicolae dropped his mind barriers and allowed Valya to see how Luka had kidnapped Adelaide and was preparing her for death. It was Nicolae who had saved her and brought her back to her parents. It was Nicolae who gave them the money to leave Romania and escape to the United States in the hopes Luka would not be able to find them. But Valya still didn’t understand why.

“Because Adelaide was born seventh-generation Wicca. In her own right, she would have powers beyond those of mortal men. And when coupled with my own, Luka would not be able to carry out his nefarious plans to destroy the Immortals. He decided to destroy her as a child, leaving me without hope of claiming my life mate. I would either commit the Final

Sacrifice or turn Vampyre. He had hoped I would turn Vampyre and join him.”

“You were able to survive all those years alone because you knew Adelaide was in America,” Valya surmised.

“Yes. I began searching for her in her eighteenth year. I didn’t want to know where she was before then. I didn’t want Luka to find her through me.”

“And then.”

Nicolae stood and walked to the balcony. He stared up at the moon, full of promise for some and mocking the pain of others.

“I was too late. She had already wed another.”

“But Richelle...”

“I went to her. I knew I shouldn’t have, but I needed to know.”

“Know what?”

Nicolae turned. Valya could have sworn there were tears in his eyes.

“That she had found a life for herself...that she was happy.”

“Was she?”

Nicolae shook his head as he walked back toward the bed and sat down.

“She wasn’t unhappy. They were friends, husband and wife. But the love between them was not the love she would have had with her life mate. With me.”

“What happened?”

“She recognized me,” Nicolae stated with a tinge of pride in his voice. “So far from each other, so long. And still, she recognized me. She ran into my arms and embraced me, weeping.”

“Weeping?”

“She wept because she knew there was a missing part of her out there somewhere and now she had found it. She wept because she had already married another, and there was nothing she could do about it.”

“They could have divorced! She could have completed the ritual with you!” Valya heatedly asserted, but Nicolae sadly shook his head.

“She had pledged her life to another, a friend, and she would not hurt him. And even if she would, I wouldn’t have allowed her to.”

“And yet, you took her to bed and impregnated her!”

“Yes.” No explanation, no excuses. Just yes.

“Why!” Valya demanded.

“She was my life mate, the one I had searched for all these centuries. I knew she would not be mine, but I had to lie with her. If only for one time before I left for home...to prepare for my death. When I returned home there was a telegram waiting for me. She was pregnant...with my child. I rushed back to the States, but again I was too late. They had left. I tried to find her, but I was always one step behind.”

“Is that why you sent me here, for Richelle?”

“You are a Guardian, sworn to protect mankind from evil. Luka is Evil Incarnate. When he had been told of Richelle, he decided rather than kill her, he would take her as his life mate, taking her power as his own in order to destroy me and the Immortals. I sent you here to bring Luka to justice. I only hoped you would find Richelle, to protect her. And prayed to the Gods my visions were true that *you* were her life mate.”

Valya covered his eyes with his forearm and groaned. Now he knew how Richelle felt when he first told her about the ritual. It was all too much to comprehend. Why had all this been concealed from him?

“It wasn’t concealed,” Nicolae said. “It just wasn’t revealed until it was necessary.”

*“I’m a Guardian! I do not operate on a need-to-know basis! I should have been told.”*

“There was too much risk, too much to lose. As it was, Luka had been informed of Adelaide. And Richelle. I was hoping you would have completed the ritual by now and Luka would have been foiled.”

*“I still should have been informed,”* Valya fumed. Had he known, he wouldn’t have taken her out into the open. He would have completed the bonding and Luka wouldn’t have her now. But there was still a portion missing in this equation.

“Luka’s powers are no more than mine, a shadow of the powers of the Great One. How did he learn of Adelaide and her daughter?”

“His mother, Selene. She read the cards and told him of them. How to use them to destroy me.”

“And who is this Selene?”

“An Immortal, gone from us now. In our youth, she believed me to be her intended. When I explained to her she was mistaken, she refused to relinquish her claim. She seduced me to her bed and tried to trick me into

completing the ritual. As a member of the Council serving the Triad, I banished her. This was her way to take revenge on me.”

Deafening silence pounded in Valya’s ears. This was like something from a bad daytime soap opera—tragic love affairs, illegitimate children, and sadistic revenge. But he had to get beyond that and focus. He would not let Richelle become the hapless victim of a badly written melodrama.

“Where do we go from here?”

“Luka contacted the Triad to behold his victory as he enslaves Richelle in the same manner he intends to enslave mankind.”

Nicolae reached down and gripped Valya’s hand in a warrior’s hold, his body and words as hard as tempered steel.

“We must not allow Luka to carry out his malevolent design for domination. He must be destroyed, no matter what the price.”

There was no room for doubt as their eyes met. Valya would rather take Richelle and face the dawn together than allow Luka to win this battle. He vowed Richelle would never endure the antipathy of the Living Death, and he nodded to Nicolae in agreement.

“No matter what the price.”

## Chapter 16

Preacher climbed the stairs slowly, leading a processional of Vampyresses bearing gifts, resembling a twisted Magi, he thought dryly. The moon had not risen yet, the sun barely asleep beneath the horizon when Luka summoned him. He lolled in bed, the room reeking of blood and sex while he dismissed the females who had lain with him to go with Preacher and prepare Richelle for the Beltane Feast.

Preacher kept a tight lid on the revulsion he felt as the three Vampyresses left. Luka stretched, not bothering to cover his nudity or open his eyes as he gave his commands.

Nor did he hide the fact he had spent the night with three lovely seductresses, all the while declaring that Richelle was his destined life mate and that he planned on completing the bonding ritual as part of the festivities of the feast. The Vampyresses tittered as he averted his eyes from their nakedness, refusing to look at them until they clothed themselves. Of course, the flimsy layers of silk did little to hide their bodies. They even taunted Preacher, flaunting their nipples and pussies, daring him to look as they seduced him.

Preacher was sickened by them and at Luka's idea of his *destined love*, Richelle. Luka's preferred ways of expressing his *love* were repugnant to Preacher.

*Love*. Luka didn't know the meaning of the word and of what love truly was, Preacher thought. Not that he knew any better what love was anymore.

In the dark recesses of his memory, he had a vague recollection of love. He had loved mankind, his congregation. God. But years of watching mankind deteriorate, becoming more and more amoral, a race with no conscience or compassion, had drained him of his hope and faith until all that remained of his belief in God had faded away like an unfulfilled Christmas wish, leaving him bitter and cynical.



It was then, when his despair and despondency had left him wallowing in a pool of misery with thoughts of suicide, that Luka had approached him. Luka was a strong and shining beacon, a light in the darkness of his life. He prophesized about a new world, where the wicked and unjust would be destroyed and a new race would rise to bring order to the world. Preacher willingly pledged his allegiance to Luka in the hopes of saving mankind.

Little did he know that rather than saving mankind, he was damning them.

Luka's vision *did* include destroying the wicked and unjust. What Preacher didn't know was that Luka considered *all* humans wicked and unjust. The new race Luka spoke of would be his prodigy, who would annihilate the Immortals who opposed him, leaving him the omnipotent ruler of those who remained.

By the time Preacher realized his mistake it was too late—too late to save mankind and too late to save his soul. He had sold his soul to the Devil. So whether he lived or died, it made no difference. He was in Hell, damned beyond all redemption at his folly of a perfect world comparable to that of idyllic Eden.

He followed Luka's commands, not because of some higher ideal but because he was a coward—afraid of Luka, afraid of Luka's wrath, afraid to live, and afraid to die. As much as he hated his master, he hated himself more.

Without knocking, he opened the door and was taken aback by the picture Richelle made lying in the majestic bed. The red satin sheets framed her porcelain skin. Her hair cascaded over the pillows as one hand rested lightly against her forehead and her other arm lay draped over her stomach.

He stepped closer as he gazed, mesmerized by her lovely face, slightly blemished with dark circles under her eyes. Reaching out, he picked up one of the tendrils of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers before abruptly releasing the strand and letting it fall back on the pillow. If he still believed in them, he would believe she was an angel.

Richelle's eyes fluttered as she woke slowly. Preacher expected her to be startled by his nearness, at the very least be upset by his presence, but she merely looked at him with an expectant expression. *Ah yes*, he remembered. *Second blood*. That would work in his favor.

“Good morning, madam,” he bid in a patrician tone. “Did you sleep well?”

Slowly she sat up, covering herself with the sheet and looking over her surroundings with an expression of puzzlement.

“I said, did you sleep well, m’lady?”

“I, um...I’m sorry,” she replied absently as she raised a hand to brush her hair away from her forehead. Her fingertips strayed to lightly rub her temples. “I don’t seem to... Do I know you?”

Preacher chuckled. Yes, this would work very well.

“Yes, m’lady. I am the major-domo at Tower of the Red Dragon. You may call me... Victor.”

“Victor?”

“Yes, m’lady.”

\* \* \* \*

She looked around slowly, trying to remember, but it was like trying to catch raindrops with a sieve. If not remembering who or where she was wasn’t distressing enough, the leers she was getting from the three women giggling in the shadows behind Victor completely intimidated her. She pulled the sheet up, wrapping it around her tighter as she watched the women from beneath hooded eyes, their giggling more pronounced at her modesty.

One thing was certain. She had a strange feeling of déjà vu. She had gone through something like this before. Her brows furrowed and she tried to remember.

“I...didn’t sleep very well. I don’t seem to remember...”

“That is understandable, m’lady. You were up rather late...celebrating.”

“Celebrating?”

“Yes. The entire household was celebrating late into the evening. Master would let you sleep longer, but then there would be no time to prepare.”

“Prepare?” *I sound like a dimwitted parrot.*

“For your wedding.”

“My wedding?”

“Yes, you and Master are to be wed this evening at the Beltane Feast. It is no wonder you didn’t sleep well with the excitement of your nuptials.”

“No. It was the dreams.”

“Dreams, m’lady?”

“Yes. I kept having these dreams, and they kept waking me. There was a red haze and people coming in and out of the mist. They kept reaching out to me but disappeared into a fog. And then there was...him.”

“Him?” Preacher questioned, his face impassive.

“He was so...so...I couldn’t see his face as he kept calling to me, *Richelle, Richelle...* Richelle! My name is Richelle!”

“Go on,” Preacher urged, his voice calm. “Who was he?”

“I don’t know,” Richelle replied, shaking her head. “I never saw his face. I only heard him calling my name over and over again.” She rubbed her temples, trying to remember more, but everything was cast in darkness. She could make out his shadow, large and steady. His muscular frame swaggered from the mist with the grace of a panther.

Although she couldn’t see him, she could *feel* him. She could feel his intensity, hear the need in his voice. She was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. And when he stood before her, his face shrouded by the murky miasma, his dark eyes raked over her through the darkness. She should have been afraid, but she wasn’t. Instead she felt alive with an exhilaration that resonated a chord embedded deep within her soul and wanted to make her heart sing.

“I couldn’t see him, but I *knew* him.” The memory of his dark gaze bore into her brain. No matter what else she couldn’t remember, she would never forget those eyes.

“Well, that explains it, m’lady. The master is a very handsome man indeed.”

“The master?”

“Luka cel Rau. He is the master here at Tower of the Red Dragon. It’s no wonder you would be having dreams before your wedding. The two of you are very much in love.”

“We are?”

“Yes.” The three women sniggered from across the room. They stopped when he shot them an icy glare before turning back to her. “You two have been nearly inseparable since your arrival here.”

Richelle eyed Preacher suspiciously and then the three women. They stiffened at her gaze, but were unable to maintain a stoic expression as they

smirked and whispered among themselves. Richelle's gaze returned to Preacher.

"So where is he now?"

"He awaits in a lower chamber. Sleeping, before *his* wedding night. I daresay, he admits to having a sleepless night as well." The women laughed outright, tapering off to annoying tittering.

She gripped the sheet tighter, drawing it up to her chin. Becoming increasingly uncomfortable with several people in the room while she lay in a bed naked save for satiny sheets to guard her modesty, she became a little stiff in her conversation.

"So why are you here?" she asked, a little more curt than she would have liked.

"Why, we are here to prepare you for the Beltane Feast."

Yes, Richelle thought. *Beltane, the celebration of new beginnings.*

"And your wedding," Preacher finished, clapping his hands. The three women emerged from the shadows, their arms outstretched bearing several gifts.

One carried a clear jar holding a liquid. From the scent of patchouli and cloves, Richelle surmised it was some type of scented oil. The strong scent permeated the room and served to further addle her disjointed thoughts and memories.

Another woman carried a red gown, draped over her arms so Richelle could not admire the style, although the color was as rich as rubies shimmering in the limited lighting of the chamber.

The third carried a red bejeweled crown. It had to be at least a foot tall with a widow's peak in the front where a teardrop jewel hung.

Richelle frowned and her eyes darted back and forth from the gown to the crown and then back.

"Red? For a wedding? Aren't brides supposed to wear white?"

"In this case, the red gown is in honor of the master's lineage from the old country as well as your duty to carry on his *bloodline*."

\* \* \* \*

Preacher waved for the blonde carrying the tray to come forward. He poured red liquid from the decanter to the goblet, picked it up, and then

offered it to Richelle. Hesitantly, she took the goblet, bringing it to her lips. She stopped. Sniffing at the contents, she eyed him again.

“What is this, Victor?”

“It’s a special vintage from the master’s private cellars.” All she had to do was take one sip and then there would be no more need for explanations. Her tentativeness was wearing his patience thin, not to mention amplifying his feelings of guilt.

“You’re sure to enjoy it. Drink.”

Again, she brought the goblet to her lips and stopped short.

“Thank you, Victor.”

Preacher swallowed hard. She was...thanking him? He was left speechless. She wouldn’t meet his gaze. She just stared at the contents of the goblet as she spoke. “It’s very disconcerting, not being able to remember. I’m...grateful...for your assistance.”

Preacher just continued to gape at her. If she had her memories, she wouldn’t be thanking him. She would be running from him in fear. She would hate him. And yet, in her vulnerability, when she was the most defenseless, she had shown a hint of trust, of faith that he had lost oh, so long ago. He felt as if he had been punched in the stomach.

He had been called to the priesthood to study and be a man of God. Nevertheless, when his faith had been put to the test, he failed miserably. Richelle had lost so much, her mother, the Scot from the mountains, her Guardian. Indeed, being on the run, she had lost most of her life largely due to him. And still, she had faith and trust in her fellow man.

In that moment, he despised what he had become. He fought an internal battle to turn away from Luka’s dominion and take Richelle away, returning her to the Immortals. But before he could do anything, Richelle took the decision away from him as she brought the goblet to her lips and drank. He leaned forward but it was too late. Preacher watched as Richelle suppressed the urge to gag while she drank. She lowered the goblet and began to sway. Her head lolled from side to side. She looked at the liquid in the goblet again before she met Preacher’s gaze. Her hand began to tremble, and Preacher reached out and snagged the goblet before she dropped it.

“What was...what did you do?” Her speech was slurred and she fell back onto the bed.

Preacher watched in silence. He idly swirled what was left of the liquid in the goblet as the Vampyresses took Richelle away to prepare her, both physically and mentally. Once they had finished their brand of brainwashing, Richelle would have no will left when she appeared at the Beltane Feast. There would be no fight as Luka took Final Blood and completed the bonding ritual. More's the pity.

There was much about Richelle he was coming to admire. His self-loathing weighed heavily on him as he thought of what lay ahead for the evening.

\* \* \* \*

Quickly the Vampyresses approached, laying their items at the end of the bed and pulling back the sheet to help Richelle to her feet. Two led her to an adjoining room where a bath had been prepared. The blonde picked up the bottle of oil and followed with Preacher on her heels, bringing the goblet.

They lowered Richelle into the tub and began to wash her. The blonde poured some of the oil directly onto Richelle's hair and then some into the water. Richelle struggled against the fog clouding her brain as some of the memories she recalled vanished into an unnatural haze. She closed her eyes and focused on one memory that gave her the most comfort—the man from the mist with the blazing dark eyes.

Heedful eyes peering from the darkness filled with passion and need watched over her. Strange as it was, though, it was almost as if she could hear him calling to her. *I am coming...remember me.*

She tried to ignore the hands roaming over her body, stroking her hair, and the combination of her drink and heady perfume flooded her mind until all other thoughts had been pushed away, leaving her mind empty and needing to be filled. The women began to speak in her mind, their voices blending into one.

*"How fortunate you are, my dear."*

*"Fortunate."*

*"Luka is a handsome and powerful man."*

*"Many have wanted him."*

*"But he chose you."*

*"Chose you."*

*"To become his bride."*

*"To become mistress of Tower of the Red Dragon."*

*"He is so very handsome."*

*"Yes, handsome."*

*"Powerful."*

*"He will rule the world."*

*"The world."*

*"And you shall be his queen."*

The women stood her on her feet and began to massage the remaining oil into her alabaster skin, leaving it glistening and smooth. She spied Preacher glancing in her direction while the women caressed and stroked her body, seemingly enjoying her jerky movements and discomfort. He glared at the women before averting his eyes.

"Cease this moment!" he ordered.

They ignored him, giddily giggling as they continued.

"Cease this moment, or I will tell Luka of your disobedience." His warning was effective and they stopped immediately but with deadly glares at him. Helping her from the tub, they wrapped a large towel around Richelle. Preacher turned and approached, offering her the goblet.

She looked up at him. She tried to concentrate, his features fading in and out of focus. Her mind was a whirling with disconnected thoughts tumbling in her head: *Where am I again? The tower...something...something. Who are these people? What are they doing? What am I doing here? Yes, the Feast. A wedding? My wedding. To whom? They told me...Luka. I am here to marry Luka. But I don't know him, do I?*

She hadn't taken the goblet from his hands so Preacher held it higher, nodding his head as she reluctantly accepted it.

"You must drink to your impending wedding and husband-to-be," Preacher insisted. "To Luka cel Rau, master of Tower of the Red Dragon, and soon, the world."

"To Luka," Richelle uttered softly before she drank more of the vile liquid. Her brows furrowed at the distaste of Luka's "special vintage." She didn't finish it all but handed the goblet back to Preacher

Preacher handed the goblet to the redhead, who walked into the bedchamber and returned with the gown and crown. They removed the

towel to let it pool at Richelle's feet. Her unsteadiness was more pronounced as she swayed on her feet.

She gazed at Preacher, but he became misty, vanishing into a thick fog. She heard him issue one more command before the haze engulfed her in mind-numbing darkness.

"Finish preparing her for the feast."

\* \* \* \*

The night air sparked with agitated electricity. Valya was non-approachable, and anger roiled off him like surging ocean waves. Even Nicolae wouldn't approach him. It was safer to let Valya pace from one end of his loft to the other while he growled his dissatisfaction. They awaited the arrival of the rest of their compatriots so they could plan their stratagem in their battle against Luka and his army.

Valya was unable to stay still and his constant movement further fed his vexation until his rage was ready to burst, lashing out at the nearest bystander. Fortunately for him, it was Nicolae who stood between him and his obsessive tirade. Valya could feel his frustration and fury rising like a tempestuous, tumultuous storm, devastating the land in its wake.

Nicolae was the eye of the storm.

He was the center, the control directing the force of the storm.

Nicolae was Valya's lifeline, as his own control was slipping away the longer he was separated from Richelle, as long as she was in Luka's clutches. But lifeline or no, in the throes of bloodlust, he hungered for the hunt, the kill. He bared his fangs. Hissing he lunged for Nicolae.

Nicolae merely held up his hand, and Valya was held immobile as if surrounded by an invisible wall holding him at bay. He snarled glaring at Nicolae, a trickle of saliva forming at the corner of his mouth.

"Release me!" he demanded trying to use his powers to free himself. It was an act of futility. Not only was he losing his emotional control, but also his powers lacked the focus needed to bring down a mortal, let alone an Immortal whose powers were of the magnitude of Nicolae's. "*Release me!*"

Nicolae's smooth features became harsh as his brows furrowed and he directed a bolt of energy, striking Valya in the center of his chest. Valya closed his eyes and threw his head back. His body absorbed the deflecting



blow. Slowly he opened his eyes to return Nicolae's penetrating gaze. He lowered his head in weariness and resignation.

"You must remain steadfast," Nicolae chided while he withdrew the energy surrounding Valya. "It is from *you* that Richelle will draw *her* strength."

Valya nodded. His canines receded. He inhaled deeply to calm himself, letting the air fill his lungs, and then exhaling to release his pent-up infuriation. As he reined in his anger, his body shuddered in impatience. He groaned, struggling to steady his breathing and strengthen his will in preparation for the battle that lay ahead.

Richelle being in Luka's possession was just the tip of the iceberg for Valya. His remorse and shame were embedded to the bone in the realization and acceptance that his inability to protect Richelle had led to this final confrontation. If the bonding ritual had been completed, Luka's plot would have been thwarted.

But Valya had lost control. He had hurt Richelle and rather than stay and face it like a man, he up and left her. In his selfishness, he planned on facing Luka alone. It was a contemporary version of the gallant knight in a quest to slay the evil dragon and return to his lady fair bearing a trophy to lay at her feet and prove his devotion, his undying love.

To some degree, it was Valya's long-developed sense of self-preservation that prohibited him from going to Richelle after he had taken second blood so thoughtlessly. For centuries, he had been the sole defender of mankind against evil such as Luka. After the last bloody battle, so many Guardians were lost, it took centuries for other Immortals to be trained. He did as he wanted with no questions and no consequences. His judgment was final, and his decrees became law.

Then he found Richelle.

He was no longer alone.

After centuries of fighting for right, fighting for duty, there was now another reason to fight.

For love.

*But after so many centuries of seeing crime, war, and death, how could he learn to love?* His soul was tainted by his exposure to iniquity and vice, seeing only the worst in life, while she was a wide-eyed ingénue who found solace in the care of the animals she treated. Unaccustomed to emotions, he

lacked the ability to control the emotions elicited by Richelle. Perhaps it would have been better if he had never found her.

But then he remembered her face as she looked at him so tenderly. Her eyes, filled with trust and love, were windows to her gentle soul, overflowing with understanding and compassion. He didn't even give her the chance to forgive him for using her so thoughtlessly. And in hindsight, he realized only too late she would have. She would have taken him into her embrace and forgiven him everything.

Even now he could feel her touch on his skin, smell her unique scent, reminding him of night and moonlight, taste the sweetness of her blood on his tongue, inflaming his passion as his body hardened. His fangs descended and his body was gripped in painful longing for his mate. He balled his hand to a fist and smacked it into the other to try and dispel the hunger gnawing in the pit of his stomach that wanted, no demanded, his mate.

Nicolae approached and placed his hand upon Valya's shoulder, the warmth seeping into his body to help ease back the desire threatening to overtake him again. He needed to maintain his control and not let the beast dominate the man.

"The others have arrived. We are ready to finalize our plan."

Valya nodded, and they both turned to join the others. Valya jerked his chin in acknowledgement toward Stefan and Roman. Neither looked worse for wear after their altercations with the Believers, although he could sense their profound sorrow at the loss of Jonathon. The Fates had woven an ugly tapestry for his life. Valya could do no more than hope Jonathon had a better lot in his next life.

There were six other Immortals waiting, four Protectors and two Guardians, none of whom he had worked with before. All had the striking features indicative of warriors of his race. All were garbed in the traditional Immortal armor. Raising his arms he called for his armor. His shirt disintegrated, leaving him standing in black leather pants and boots. In the next moment, steel bands materialized in a crisscross pattern to cover his bare torso. Steel bands encircled his wrists while two small quivers holding steel shards appeared, strapped to his leg, and an ornate dagger in its hilt appeared at his hip.

Properly attired, he joined his fellow warriors. With a wave of his hand, Nicolae introduced them all to Valya.

“Ivan and Jorge left their post in New York to fight with us. They dealt with Luka and the Believers when Adelaide and her family first came to America. Mikhail and Marcus are brothers. They have been patrolling in Texas and, much to my disapproval, have adopted an outlaw gunslinger approach to their duties.” Valya gave them a curt nod before turning his attention to the Guardians.

“Gregor has been in Washington DC for the past two centuries doing what he can to cleanse that den of iniquity. And Andre is a Guardian from the west and joins us from the desert, where he has honed his skills in a place called Sin City.”

Valya stared at Andre and growled low in greeting, lowering his head as he opened his mind. His ire was piqued from the moment Nicolae mentioned the desert. Pieter had come from the same region. He had learned too late of Pieter’s traitorous treachery and was not about to make the same mistake.

Valya stalked over to stand before Andre with the demand “*Open your mind to me.*” Cocking his brow, Andre looked to Nicolae. When Nicolae nodded, Andre turned to face Valya and opened his mind, allowing Valya to probe deeply until he was satisfied there was no subterfuge.

\* \* \* \*

“There isn’t much time.” Nicolae’s rich voice resonated as the other Immortals drew near, encircling him. “Night has fallen. Luka has contacted the Triad and informed them the Beltane Feast has begun. At midnight, he will take Final Blood, completing the bonding ritual, and impregnate Richelle with his demon spawn. If that happens, the world we know will come to an end as Luka sends his progeny to destroy mankind and repopulate the earth.”

All nodded as he continued his address.

“Luka believes Valya is dead, the Immortals crushed, and the Triad defeated. He will not be expecting an assault on Red Dragon.”

“Then how are we to proceed?” Gregor questioned as he stepped closer. As old as Valya and nearly as proficient a Guardian, he walked dangerously close to the edge between light and dark. More and more, he hungered for the kill for the thrill of it. Nicolae feared that within the next few years, they

would lose Gregor as he turned Vampyre, but for now, he would be a formidable combatant against Luka's army.

"We will silently steal into the castle, kill any Immortal, Vampyre, or Believer who stands in our way, and take Richelle back to our mountain homeland. There she will be safe."

*"You are wrong."*

Nicolae was startled by the unseen voice.

"Who said that?"

The Immortals stared at him in confusion.

"Said what?" asked Andre.

"Nobody said anything," Valya offered in a hushed whisper as he leaned in to speak privately. "What is happening?"

Nicolae stilled. He sensed another presence. No one else was expected. It would be the eight of them against Luka's legion. Nicolae concentrated, trying to get a picture of who was intruding. Nothing.

"Who is—"

Nicolae cut Valya off with a jerk of his head. He could sense the presence coming nearer. He motioned to the others. They fell in formation, and Nicolae joined them, turning to face whoever was calling out to determine if they were friend or foe.

*"What do you mean... 'I'm wrong'?"*

*"Just what I say."*

Nicolae took note at the feminine tonal quality. It was lilting and...familiar. He could feel the presence now in the room with them, and it filled it with a powerful, positive energy. In some odd way, he also felt a comforting warmth filling his bleak soul and renewing his essence in a way he had not experienced since Adelaide.

*"I know you." "Yes."*

*"Why do you come?" "To offer my help."*

*"We do not need your help."*

*"If you wish to defeat Luka, you do."*

Nicolae paused, reflecting deeply before he responded.

*"Why do you want to help us?"*

The wind picked up, blowing the patio doors open. Standing together, the Immortals braced themselves against an attack as a form slowly materialized before them.

*"She's beautiful,"* Valya said to Nicolae. *"Who is she?"* Her long silver-white hair hung loosely and flowed softly in the gentle wind. Her skin was flawless, translucent like a pearl. Sparkling like bright jewels, the sapphire shade of her eyes swirled with silver streaks. Dressed in a long white gown with the rising moon shining behind, she was luminescent.

Nicolae just stood staring at her, mesmerized by her beauty. An intense longing stirred within him, born of rueful regrets and bittersweet memories of lost love. He never showed any emotion. He was immobile as a Greek statue, steadfast and sure except when it came to this woman.

Valya felt Nicolae's angst and was taken aback. But the emotions he was sensing from Nicolae were akin to his own anguish. In that moment, he knew who she was...Selene. "Because I have much to answer for, far more than you realize. Because I have betrayed our people and your love. Because I do not want Richelle to suffer as I have by not being with her true life mate." Her eyes were misty as she turned her gaze to Valya.

"I am sorry for the pain I have caused you. In my own vindictive misery, I lashed out at all Immortals with little thought or care for the consequences."

She took a step forward, closing the distance between her and Nicolae. Standing no more than three feet in front of him, she held her arms open in supplication.

"I have no right to ask your forgiveness, and you have every right to hate me. But, upon the love we once shared, I swear I am here to help."

"Do not trust her!" Ivan yelled vehemently.

"If she betrayed our people before," Jorge continued, "she will do it again."

Nicolae heard their words as he gazed at Selene standing before him expectantly, patiently awaiting his decision. She was still as lovely as the day he fell in love with her, still as proud as the day she stood before him and the Triad. Despite his decree of banishment, despite all she had done, he still cared for her.

He still loved her.

He stepped forward until she could feel his breath on her cheek and smell the same scent of patchouli and clove she wore in his honor. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her into his embrace.

"There is nothing to forgive," he whispered hoarsely. Her hands drift around his waist to return his embrace.

"There is much to forgive," she replied as tears fell from her eyes and streamed unchecked down her cheek. "Luka's hatred of you and the Immortals is my fault."

"I know," he crooned softly while he stroked her hair, trying to calm her. "I know you told Luka of Adelaide. Of Richelle." He kissed her softly on the cheek before pulling away from her. He let his hands smooth down her arms to take her hands in his. She frowned. Pulling her hands away she walked toward the patio, turning her face to the moon.

"There is more." She paused, taking a deep breath. "I am afraid to tell you."

Coming up behind her, he wrapped his arms around her waist and leaned in to whisper encouragingly to her.

"Any woman brave enough to come here alone and ask for forgiveness can face anything."

Closing her eyes, Selene leaned back against his chest, into his embrace.

"You will hate me."

His grip tightened at her words. *Hate?* He had been disappointed. Angry. Even hurtful in his punishment. But hate?

"I could never hate you, Selene. Our friendship meant more to me than I ever told you, which is why I felt so betrayed by your trickery. Adelaide was my life mate and made my heart come alive. When I lost her, I realized how wrong I was in punishing you. Though we were not destined to be bonded, I did love you. And still do."

She turned in his arms and leaned her forehead against his chest. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she hugged him tight.

"Luka is my son," she squeaked, her voice cracking. Nicolae's response was to raise his hand to stroke her hair as he pulled her closer to him. She tried to pull away but when he refused to release her, she settled back into his embrace, allowing his rocking and crooning to calm her. She took a deep breath.

"I was so very angry with you and cursed you for not taking me as your life mate. I seduced another Immortal and became pregnant. Luka was going to be the means of my revenge against you. I didn't want him raised under the Immortal Code of Ethics. So I took him far away. I raised him to hate you and all Immortals. I used my clairvoyance to help Luka find the best way to destroy you."

"You saw Adelaide."

Selene nodded.

"When I saw Adelaide, I knew her lineage would bear out the Prophecy, that her child would be the woman to strengthen the Immortal race. I set Luka and the Believers on their path to destroy her. I'm so sorry." She looked up at him, and he saw fresh tears in her eyes. Tenderly, he wiped them away with the pad of his thumb.

"My poor Selene. You have suffered so much. Frightened and alone."

"Not always alone," she stated, smiling wistfully. "You were right when you said we were not destined to be life mates. And just as you found Adelaide, I found Michael."

Nicolae returned her smile. He could understand the sadness she felt. He remembered it well when he found Adelaide.

"You didn't bond with Michael."

She wiped away the tear in the corner of her eye.

"I, too, was too late. He couldn't choose freely. Alzheimer's." She straightened her back and gave a nostalgic smile, her eyes bright and shining. She couldn't help her voice cracking as she spoke. "But what time Michael and I had together was beautiful. It was the most special and precious time of my existence. And I thank you for it."

"Why did you not leave this world with your Michael?"

"For the same reason you did not leave this world with Adelaide."

They looked solemnly at each other and silently concurred—"Luka."

Valya stepped forward. Selene pulled completely from Nicolae's embrace to stand before Valya.

"As my beloved Michael slipped away, I promised to amend the wrong I had done before I joined him. I went to Luka and told him everything. That it was I who hid him from Nicolae, denying him the father he so desperately wanted. I told him I was wrong, but by then it was too late. Luka was filled with hatred for his father and was determined to destroy him and his people.

“He even grew to hate you, Valya, for no other reason than Nicolae favored you over all other Guardians. In his mind, taking Richelle as his life mate would serve his purpose on three levels. It would prove he was a stronger Immortal than Nicolae. Taking Richelle away from you would prove he was a better warrior. And completing the ritual with her would fulfill the Prophecy, making him the father of a new race.”

“Luka’s plot is nothing more than a demented litany of revenge and annihilation—the sick ramblings of a spoiled, petulant child,” Nicolae stated.

“Yes. But he still has Richelle.” Valya shuddered as he spoke.

“No matter how I tried to sway him, he could not be moved. In the end, he demanded Richelle’s blood for all the harm inflicted upon him. He banished me, condemning me to die with the ‘humans you love so much.’ I left, but my purpose was clear. I had to make sure that Luka did not succeed. I vowed that somehow Valya and Richelle would find each other and fulfill their combined destiny.”

Selene stood silently. Nicolae watched, waiting to see how Valya would respond.

Valya crushed her in a hearty embrace. “It was you at the carnival, wasn’t it?” he asked. “You were the fortune-teller Richelle spoke about.”

“Yes,” she squeaked, trying to breathe while Valya held her. “It is because of you we must battle Luka. You have suffered because of your actions, but you did try to stop Luka. I cannot completely forgive what you did, but I thank you for your help.” Valya released her and she turned to face Nicolae.

“We have all made mistakes, Selene, and lived with the consequences. And we all must make peace in our own way to atone. When this battle is over, you will have to face the Triad to be judged. But for now, we must defeat Luka. I do not speak for all Immortals, but I would be honored to have your assistance in this fight.”

She wiped away another tear. She took Nicolae’s hand in hers and kissed it. “Thank you.”

\* \* \* \*



“So where do we go from here?” Mikhail asked.

“Yes,” Marcus piped up. “If we are to trust you, tell us how to defeat Luka.”

Selene looked from one face to the next, knowing not all would survive, knowing who would die. But she was determined that Valya and Richelle would find the happiness she’d deprived herself and Nicolae of through her selfishness.

“There is only one way to defeat Luka in his plan of world domination. Valya *must* complete the bonding ritual with Richelle. And then couple with her.”

“I have every intention of completing the bonding ritual. She is my life mate, the soul that will fill my heart. But it is Richelle who must accept me.”

Selene cupped his cheek in her palm as she gave him a heartwarming smile. Her eyes brimmed with a sad kind of loneliness reserved for the brokenhearted with the bittersweet memories of lost love.

“She has accepted you.”

Valya closed his eyes and shook his head. He opened his mouth to speak, but Selene placed her fingertips over his lips.

*“She has accepted you.”*

He opened his eyes to see her smiling at him, shining tears brightening her glittering sapphire eyes as she nodded.

“She has accepted you, both man and beast, and loves the best and worst of both. It is you who must accept her acceptance and her love as she freely offers it.”

“She may forgive but she could not accept.” “She could. And she has,” Selene affirmed softly. “She has accepted you in all the ways a woman can accept a man, physically, mentally, and spiritually. And in accepting the best and worst in you, she has set you free to be the man you were meant to be. And now, it is you who must accept and be *that* man. Be her love, for eternity.”

Like a bolt of lightning from a blue, clear sky, it hit Valya. *Selene was right*. In his desire and driving need to show his complete mastery over Richelle, it was she who had mastered him. Before Richelle, he would do what was necessary, what his training dictated he do, because as an Immortal, he could do no less. He was a Guardian. There was no quarter for

those who chose a path of destruction. There was no question or debate with his decision. As a Guardian, his judgment was final.

But it was different now. Now...everything he did, every decision he made was for her.

*She is mine.*

The awakening of his emotions, of his passions, had done more than release the inner beast bent on controlling and dominating his mate. She had also released him to love as she did, with her whole heart, and with that came empathy and compassion dueling with the conflicting desires of devotion and obsession.

*She is mine!*

Yet she opened her arms and let him in. Despite his body responding to the call of bloodlust as he fucked her hard, driving her higher and higher in his need to dominate, his heart would have responded had she asked him to stop, if she had succumbed to his command to obey. But she did neither. She had accepted him, taking the beast's unquenchable raw lust and the man's unassailable adoration into her body, into her heart, and into her soul.

"She is mine!" he shouted, gripping Selene's shoulders tightly as if he had to prove it to her. But her knowledgeable smile reflected what he should have known all along. Richelle was his life mate by prophecy, his love by destiny. "She is mine!" he yelled again as he released Selene.

She stepped back and watched Valya with approving eyes. Palpable waves of energy rolled off him, and his body vibrated from the intensity of his emotions, his need to reclaim his bride. His dark eyes flickered with a flame brighter than the sun, so intense that his glance burned her skin.

"So, Valya finishes the bonding ritual and has sex with Richelle," Ivan growled. "Tell us something we didn't know."

Nicolae's admonishing hiss had Ivan taking a step back, bowing in contrition, appropriately chastised for his out-of-line remark as well as reminding him who was the dominant male.

Nicolae came to stand beside Selene, placing his arm about her shoulder. Selene turned her face toward him. She had forgotten how gallant he was and how quivery it made her feel. And in the midst of strangers who didn't trust her, she was grateful for her momentary hero as she lay her head upon his broad shoulders.

Valya took a step forward to stand before Selene. His mind, undisciplined, circled around a single thought, projecting it to everyone in the room—*Richelle. I will do anything to save you, even if I need to sacrifice my own life.* She had accepted him. She loved him. And he loved her, with a passion that surpassed his deep-rooted duty as a Guardian. Richelle was all that mattered, and he would do anything to save her. Anything. He fell to his knees before a stunned Selene as he lay his head against her abdomen. She wasn't quite sure how to react. He wrapped his arms around her legs submissively embracing her. His large body shuddering, he looked up at her. The pain in his beseeching gaze touched her. He could not keep his voice from quavering when he finally spoke.

"Help me. Please. I...I don't know what to do. I...don't know how to...save her."

Selene stroked his hair as a mother would to soothe a frightened child. It was something she had never done with her known son, and only now was she feeling the depth of her regret at the neglect she had visited upon Luka and the mothering bond she had denied herself. After all the damage she had created, the mistakes she had made in raising Luka to hate Nicolae and the Immortals, this was her opportunity to set things right.

"Listen to me. Richelle is stronger than you know, stronger than *she* realizes. Her powers grow stronger by the minute."

Valya looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes. She felt his need to believe her, to believe his beloved was not completely at Luka's mercy. She placed her hand upon his cheek, leaned down, and kissed his forehead.

"Believe me, Valya. Believe in Richelle. Believe in your love. Luka does not understand the concept of love, and *that* is how he will be defeated."

Valya clasped Selene's hand as he stood. Holding Selene's gaze, he raised her arm and kissed her hand in a chivalrous gesture.

"I know how we can enter Tower of the Red Dragon and finally defeat Luka," Selene stated. "I have a plan."

The Immortals gathered into a makeshift football huddle around her. They would only have one chance to save the Immortal race and all mankind. Unaccustomed to praying, she beseeched the Gods they would be successful.

For the sake of the entire world.

## Chapter 17

Music filled the grand hall, and Vampyres and Vampyresses moved and swayed to the hauntingly rhythmical tunes filling the air. All dressed regally in black under Luka's command that they celebrate his impending nuptials.

Each dancing couple exhibited their power and sexual prowess as they moved about the dance floor, impressing the mortals watching from the sidelines.

Luka sat at the head of the table in an ornately carved throne, smug with arrogant self-satisfaction in his victory. Several Vampyresses fawned over him as he watched, his passion mounting with each passing moment.

Licking his lips, he eagerly anticipated Richelle's arrival. The thought of touching her innocent flesh, taking her blood as he completed the bonding ritual, had his body growing hard. His cock pulsed, aching to find release. For a moment, he entertained the thought of taking one of the Vampyresses who were flaunting themselves before him, but he withheld.

He would find his release with Richelle tonight and every night. He licked his lips again, relishing, savoring the anticipation of living out his debauched and vile fantasies with her fresh and delectable body for the rest of eternity.

He continued watching the lewd displays of sexual exhibition on the dance floor, his desire being driven higher as in his mind's eye he imagined Richelle enticing him, flaunting her body before him. He could see her cupping her breasts, offering them up to him as she held his gaze, her tongue running over her lush lips.

Raising his brow, his mouth quirked at the thought of using Richelle to appease his sexual fantasies and desires. Killing two birds with one stone, so to speak—revenge against Nicolae and retribution against all Immortals who had defied him. His body grew harder, the pain striking him as he adjusted himself, waiting for Richelle's appearance.

He stole a glance to the head of the stairs when a figure caught his eye. He was disappointed when he realized it was Preacher coming from his chambers. He expected Richelle to be with him. Midnight was approaching, and he wanted to complete the ritual, fulfilling the prophecy and taking his rightful place as Supreme Ruler.

Preacher was silent as he approached Luka's throne. Luka's visage was one of impatience and vindictive hatred, his maliciousness evident in his contemptible sneer. He bowed his head before Luka, trying to choke back the bile he could taste in the back of his throat. He had never before questioned his servitude to Luka and his Vampyres in his many years. Too many years.

But being in Richelle's presence had brought about a change. He remembered past family and friends. Emotions that he had long buried or had forgotten began to resurface. But more importantly, he experienced moments of self-examination, which had rekindled some sort of spark in his otherwise dark and dismal existence.

If he had to put a name to it, it was akin to the flame of faith that had at one time burned brightly in his soul. It had been snuffed out by the fall of men into a pit of self-importance, greed, and lust for power.

With the rebirth of his emotions, he also experienced regret...and shame.

He'd felt the first pangs in Luka's chambers as he prepared Richelle for the Beltane Feast, and now it felt as though he were carrying the world upon his shoulders as it pressed down, threatening to crush him beneath its weight. The only alleviation was when he heard Richelle's voice. It was so pure and angelic, almost divine.

He had turned away from his faith and God because of the evil of men. He placed his trust in something he could see and touch, believing Luka's lies and deceptions. With eyes wide open, he followed, believing the ends justified the means, and he became what he had despised most. When he realized his mistake, he hoped to find something good and pure to restore his faith in God, and when he did, what did he do? He aided in its destruction.

*I can't. I can't go through with it.*

"You can and you will, Preacher."

Preacher met Luka's mocking stare. Preacher felt the icy grip of death clutching at his throat as Luka glared over the rim of his wineglass. Preacher waited for the gnawing sensation of imminent death that always accompanied Luka's foul mood to clutch at his throat, yet to his amazement, it did not come. He felt no fear. He didn't...feel anything. He was like an empty vessel waiting to be filled, but filled with what he wasn't sure.

He stood straight-backed, staring at Luka. Before he would have seen Luka as an imposing figure, sitting upon his ornately carved ebony throne, ruling the world with his right hand while wielding death with his left. But now he was nothing more than a pathetic picture of a petty pubescent playing with power.

Luka stood, draining the last bit of the amber liquid from his glass before tossing it aside, his murderous glare bearing down on Preacher, who refused to back down, standing his ground as Luka started toward him.

"Do you think you can hide your thoughts from me, Preacher? Like an open book, I have read you. Do not delude yourself. You will go through with the ceremony, Preacher." He waved his hand, causing Preacher to double over in unbearable agony. Falling to his knees as unseen acid ate at his flesh, writhing in a pit of Luka's creation, his tortured screams drew the attention of the Vampyres, who crowded around eager to see his excruciating death.

Then as suddenly as it began, it was over.

Preacher got to his feet, heaving in great gulps of air. Surrounded by Vampyres drawing closer—some wearing expressions of disappointment and some baring their fangs in preparation to complete what Luka had started—Preacher stood waiting for the inevitable, grateful he would be delivered from his miserable existence.

"Enough!"

The Vampyres retreated slowly, hissing and slithering away like snakes as Luka came forward and began circling like a vulture over carrion. Preacher held himself absolutely still, trying desperately to maintain what little composure and strength he had under Luka's stark scrutiny.

"You *will* go through with *this* ceremony, Preacher. Do not forget it was *you* who first led me to Adelaide as a child, and then as an adult with a child of her own. It was *you* who found the mountain where they had hidden Richelle and finally found her at the carnival."

Preacher closed his eyes in remorseful guilt while Luka listed each of his sins. Luka stopped circling to stand nose to nose with him, his foul breath curdling the hairs of Preacher's nose. Preacher couldn't help himself. He opened his eyes and found himself staring into blood red eyes rimmed with black. He recognized the signs of bloodlust and groaned inwardly. Many would die this night, and for once, he hoped he would be one of the many.

"You surrendered your soul years ago, Preacher. You're pissing and moaning about the sins of man, about man's fall from grace in the eyes of *God*. And yet you buried yourself in your pious vision of a better humanity and sold your soul for golden dreams and thirty pieces of silver. You are as contemptible as the mankind you declare to despise, and yet, you are as beyond redemption as they."

Luka turned abruptly, striding triumphantly to his throne while Preacher stood dejected, wallowing in an abyss of self-pity. He wanted to help desperately, and that, too, was a new sensation. Wanting to do for someone else and not because he was told to. He just didn't know how he could help.

*"Then wait until you receive word from me."*

Preacher started for a moment. What was that? *Who* was that? He distinctly heard a woman's voice, but hadn't...it was in his head.

*"Do not be afraid, Preacher. I know all you have done, but I can see into your heart. We are here to save Richelle. If you truly wish to help her, then wait for word from me."*

Preacher drew a deep breath, ignoring the stench of evil and death filling his nostrils. He didn't know the woman speaking in his mind, yet there was such purity and strength emanating from the sound, it filled the last empty hollows of his heart with hope. And trust. He would wait and help if he could.

\* \* \* \*

Nine figures materialized outside the Tower of the Red Dragon, each carrying a satchel and arsenal, except for Valya. Warily, the men crept up to the walls of the castle, watching for any of Luka's sentinels. Selene, on the other hand, moved assuredly about the castle perimeter, eying the open windows as she worked her way toward Valya.

*“Luka has gathered his followers in the great hall to witness the bonding.”*

The mention of Luka bonding with Richelle sent a ball of fury into the pit of his stomach. Raising his head, he sniffed the air. Faint, so faint he could barely notice it, he caught Richelle’s scent. Inhaling deeply, he let her unique scent fill him, sending a powerful surge of lust to his loins as his head swam with untamed desire.

He rumbled and hunched low, preparing to spring to an upper window. Selene grabbed his arm to stop. He turned on her like a mad dog, snarling as he grabbed her by her upper arms. Baring his fangs, he hissed menacingly. Selene’s expression remained serene as her mind touched his.

*“You must regain your senses, Valya. I know your first instinct is to attack, but you must resist the urge to charge in like a bull in a china shop. Stop. Think.”*

Her words cut through the haze of his mind. Releasing her arms, he quelled the murderous rage within him.

*“So what do we do?”* he questioned impatiently.

*“We enter the castle, like ghosts, unseen. We take our vantage points and when the moment is right, then we attack!”*

*“How will we know the moment is right?”*

*“Don’t worry. You’ll know. But until then, you must control your emotions.”*

Control his emotions? After centuries without them and surviving by instinct alone, he was to control emotions after a few days? He didn’t want to control them! His inborn sense of Immortal justice was joining forces with his justified wrath, and both were in total agreement to destroy those who had taken *his* woman!

*“Selene is right,”* Nicolae concurred. *“We need the element of surprise if we are to defeat Luka.”*

Valya reached out into the night. The mountain air was crisp and cool, caressing his skin like a lover as the wind blew his hair. Closing his eyes, he remembered how Richelle touched him, how her fingertips danced across his skin to finger the length of his mane. It was the only time he had felt any serenity in his long, lonely existence.

And he wanted that serenity back.



His eyes snapped open and focused on the large window on the tallest turret. Richelle was in that tower. He knew it. Like a wolf greeting his mate, he reveled in her rich scent of moonlight and lavender as it wafted about him. He grew in strength as he breathed in her scent, focusing his mind and body on the task at hand.

*“We will not be alone,”* Selene announced to her warriors. *“There is one of Luka’s followers with a change of heart. He will help.”*

*“Then we are ready.”* Nicolae’s voice rang in their minds, his rich timbre a rallying call to battle.

*“Then let it begin!”* Valya cried, and he dematerialized.

## Chapter 18

Luka became increasingly impatient as the evening waned on. Sipping his wine resignedly, he watched the festivities of the Feast as they unfolded before him. It had been nearly an hour since he sent Preacher to bring his forthcoming bride. *What the hell was taking him so long?* Standing abruptly, he sent his goblet crashing to the center of the dance floor, scattering the Vampyres to the safety of the shadows.

*“Preacher!”* Luka bellowed as the stone walls vibrated beneath the sound of his voice. “It is nearly midnight! It is time to complete the bonding!”

Luka’s motley assemblage of sycophants came out from hiding. Their sniveling and groveling disappeared as they animatedly anticipated the evening’s promised festivities. Vampyres ran their tongues over their extended canines, awaiting the vulgar exhibition as Luka claimed his bride. Believers quivered in sexual expectation, openly masturbating in hopes of participating in a Romanesque orgy.

Silence ensued when Preacher appeared at the top of the stairs. As still as a statue, he surveyed the scene playing out before him. His stomach roiled in revulsion at the debauchery and corruption of those gathered to witness Luka’s “victory.” He was sickened at being a willing pawn in this squalid chess game, where Richelle was the queen sought by the black-and-white kings.

He could feel a change in the night, like the smell of the air when a thunderstorm approaches. The end was near. He just wasn’t sure if it was going to be the end of Richelle, Luka, or himself. Placing his long-surrendered faith in a faceless voice from the night, he pressed forward, waiting for Luka’s fanatical command.

“Bring forth...my bride,” Luka demanded darkly as his eyes flamed.

Preacher reluctantly motioned to three Vampyresses dressed in black carrying candelabras for light. They came forward, forming a single processional line as they came down the grand staircase, bridesmaids in this unholy ceremony, to take position along the wall. Preacher walked over and took one of the candelabras and walked to the head of the stairs. The assembly took their cue and came farther into the great hall, staring at the top of the stairs, waiting for their soon-to-be queen.

\* \* \* \*

Valya and the rest of the Immortals were hidden amongst the shadows, watching, waiting. Nicolae was troubled by the power he felt Selene exerting to keep their presence and mental conversations hidden from Luka. Although he was distracted, caught up in his self-inflated importance and seemingly uncontested success, Luka still was a powerful Vampyre. *“Can you continue, Selene?”*

*“Y-y-yes,”* she responded falteringly. She didn’t fool him. He could feel her strength waning, being sapped in her singular attempt to right the wrongs she had done. He opened himself and fortified her power with his own.

*“Nicolae, no!”* Selene tried to erect shields around her mind, adamant in an effort to block Nicolae’s assistance, but he was too powerful, and she was too weak, so she tried to appeal to his sensibility.

*“Please stop. You and Valya are the key to Luka’s downfall. You will need to be at full force.”*

*“Take what I offer, Selene, as I offer it freely.”*

*“No. I am not worthy.”* Choking back her tears, Selene was sincere in her plea, but they fell on deaf ears, and she felt the renewing energy flow through her, mingled with Nicolae’s concealed emotions of pride and love.

*“Take what I offer as I offer it freely,”* he repeated.

Graciously she accepted his gift, fortifying her diminishing power until she was once again at full capacity. She felt Nicolae’s mind withdraw as she reinforced the cloaking shield protecting them from Luka.

*“Thank you, Nicolae.”* Selene’s gratefulness was overshadowed by her concern when she felt Nicolae wavering at the sudden loss of energy.

*“Do not fear for me. We need to reach Richelle.”*

Selene silently agreed, and she mentally conveyed the vantage points each Immortal should take. Feeling Valya's emotions beginning to rise, she tapped into his mind and constrained him before he could rush headlong into the throng below and reveal their presence.

*"Release me! Richelle is near! I can reach her and take her away before—"*

*"Before what?"* Nicolae interrupted. Despite how weak he was, his anger was unmistakable. *"Before Luka sets his Vampyres and followers upon us? We are few against many and we are depending on the element of surprise to take the upper hand in this battle."*

Valya reined in his emotions as he spied Luka below demanding his bride. *His bride!* It took every ounce of constraint he could muster to keep himself from rushing forward and ripping Luka apart with his bare hands. Instead, he curbed his lust for revenge and infiltrated the castle, observed Luka's actions, and waited for the right moment to lead the attack. The Immortals formed a united front as they turned their attention to the activity below.

Luka stepped forward to the foot of the staircase. *Victory is mine*, his mind raced triumphantly. *Richelle is mine!* He heard his chamber door close, followed by the slow and steady click...click...click echoing from the darkness. His cock pulsed steadily in expectation of his bride's appearance, and he was not disappointed when she emerged into the flickering candlelight of the great hall.

There was a gasp of awe from the audience as Richelle stepped forward and placed her hand upon Preacher's outstretched hand. Valya even drew a ragged breath as she was prominently displayed for all. Regardless of the significant change in her angelic appearance, he immediately recognized her—he would always recognize the other half of his heart.

She was compellingly beautiful.

No one in the castle could take their eyes off of her as she descended the staircase led by Preacher. Her hair cascaded like a waterfall from the top of the ornate crown upon her head with a teardrop ruby dangling from the widow's peak. Her face was powdered while her lips were ruby red. Her eyes were exotic, painted with dark eye shadow, but no amount of makeup could hide her sea-green eyes.

The shimmering blood red dress was seemingly prim in its design, with its high collar and floor-length fabric covering Richelle, but sinfully hedonistic as it clung to her every curve, revealing every sinuous move of her hips. Valya's eyes roved over her luscious figure. The fabric lovingly hugged her breasts. His eyes fell on the cutout of her dress over her left shoulder, revealing the evidence of Luka's two blood takings.

Valya's vision was tainted red and he growled low in discontent at Richelle being displayed like some battle trophy. *His woman!* He growled again, deeper, louder. As he watched her descend the staircase, his fury rose, threatening to overpower his Guardian breeding of control. His hands shook as he gripped the edge of the wall, his fingers biting into the stone, crushing it to dust beneath his incensed grasp.

*"Steady, Valya. It is nearly time."*

Nicolae spoke reassuringly, fortifying Valya's resolve as he released the wall, breathing deeply to push down his rage. Selene directed the others into fighting position behind the Vampyres in the Grand Hall below, while Nicolae and Valya stayed near Richelle. Watching. Selene disappeared and reappeared in the great hall. Waiting. She would need to time her entrance perfectly if she were to create a diversion.

Valya followed Preacher closely as he led Richelle down the staircase, keeping in step with them, being sure to stay hidden by the darkness created by the candlelit procession. His need for blood and revenge was as strong as his need for Richelle's blood. He could feel his body clamoring for its mate, but he mutely followed Selene's lead and watched.

Selene held herself in strict equanimity despite being besieged by Valya's wild emotions surfacing erratically, Luka's conceited self-assurance in his conquest, Preacher's guarded manner at entering the arena, the lustful droning of the Vampyres and the Believers, mingling with the testosterone-laden heaviness from Immortals primed for battle. The air crackled with static electricity, setting her hair on end. And then there was Richelle.

Untouched by the imminent upheaval, Richelle regally descended the staircase. Selene recalled brief glimpses of Richelle's childhood from her short reading at the carnival— living in the mountains, romping through the meadow surrounded by her guardian wolf pack. The contrast of her idyllic upbringing versus a potentially brutal future resulting in this surreal present, which would determine the future for the entire world, boggled her mind.

Richelle wore a blank expression as she descended the staircase, but Selene sensed that her spirit felt...troubled. With every step, it became increasingly difficult for her to breathe, each footfall becoming more and more heavy and lethargic. Staring at the handsome face of her soon-to-be husband, through the haze of confusion, she couldn't help but feel there was something...wrong...about this situation.

Even with the gaps in her memories, she knew expectant brides were supposed to be happy, almost giddy, their hearts pitter-pattering at the realization of spending the rest of their life with the man they loved. Yet when she looked at Luka, she felt...it felt wrong. Instead of being happy, she was filled with a longing she couldn't name and couldn't explain.

It was as if...*he* was wrong. She still had unclear flashes of a man with dark hair and eyes. The thought of the man from her visions made her legs weak and her womb flutter. She tried to focus on her intended, but her mind kept drifting to dark eyes that looked at her with such passion she could weep from its depth and devotion. Her anxiety increased with every trepidatious step, but she found herself unwillingly following Victor's lead, like a lamb being led to slaughter.

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, she stared at Luka's outstretched hand. Slowly, she removed her hand from Victor's to place it in Luka's, but then she stopped, pulling it back haltingly as she debated what to do. Luka's expression turned intense, and he raised his hand a bit higher. She stared at his open palm, but she could not bring herself to accept his gesture. Overcome by an inescapable fear, she took a step back, preparing to turn and run up the stairs.

Sensing her panic, he took a step forward and used his mind to control Richelle, forcing her to stop. He probed deeper into her mind, commanding her to take her hand. A bead of perspiration formed on his brow as he met the challenge of Richelle's will resisting him. Her own brow furrowed, refusing to surrender, while her mind reached out to seek assistance.

Nicolae was the first to feel Richelle's power reaching out for help. He was buoyant that she was able to fend off Luka's power, but his hopefulness turned to alarm as Valya was straining to respond to her cry for help. Acting quickly, Nicolae encompassed Valya in a force field to prevent him from rushing in and revealing their positions. Valya struggled in vain, but it took almost every ounce of power to restrain him.

His mind reached out to calm Valya but to no avail, so he turned his attention to Richelle instead. If he couldn't put out the fire, he would stop the one fanning the flames.

*"Be at ease, Richelle. We have arrived."*

Richelle stilled and listened to the rich, melodic tones of a voice speaking to her mind. Although she did not recognize the voice, it felt...familiar. Still not the *rightness* she hungered for, but more secure, safer than she felt in Luka's presence. With the gaps in her memory, she had to rely on her emotions and instinct, and with every fiber in her being, she sensed this marriage was wrong. She needed to escape.

*"Help me, please."*

*"We will help but you must trust in us."*

The sound of his voice, the strength in his words filled her with a positive energy erasing all her fears. She inherently did trust him.

*"What must I do?"*

*"Take Luka's hand."*

*"No!"* Fear gripped at her throat. Maybe she was a little hasty in her decision to trust him. The more she thought on it, the more she believed Luka was...there was no other word for it...*evil*.

*"Trust in us. We will not let Luka harm you."*

Slowly, he began to release Valya from his constraints, giving Richelle his trust that she would comply with his wishes. Valya did not dare speak as he stalked his bride. *When this is over*, he thought heatedly, *I am going to kill Nicolae*. Nicolae was steadfast despite Valya's mental outburst, watching for Richelle's response to his plea for trust.

Richelle hesitated, weighing his words before meeting Luka's gaze, as she gave the appearance of compliance and smiled warmly at him. Luka's superior grin when she took his hand and let him lead her onto the dance floor of the great hall made her stomach roil in repulsion. Making a wide sweep, he paraded Richelle before his obsequious underlings, showing off the spoils of his conquest.

*"Behold, my bride!"* he announced victoriously.

*"The time has come,"* Selene announced to the Immortals. *"Be ready."*

She walked slowly from the shadows, lowering her shields as she approached Luka. He turned and sneered at her. *"Welcome, Mother. So nice of you to join us on this, my wedding day."*

A wave of protectiveness washed over her. Despite all he had done, what he was planning to do...he was still her son. And what he had become was her fault. Her bitterness and anger at Nicolae for his refusal had denied Luka his mother, and her a son. For both their sakes and for what could have been, she had to beseech him this last time.

"Please, Luka. Forget this vendetta. Forgive me, forget your hatred, and embrace peace."

Luka laughed haughtily, his minions joining in until the raucous laughter filled the hall with an intimidating thrumming. With a wave of his hand, the laughter was cut short, and he walked over to stand before her with his bride in hand.

"Forgive and embrace peace, *Mother*? And how would you suggest I do that? Should I give you a kiss? Forgive Nicolae for his treatment of you? Embrace peace by facing the Dawn? You are a fool! I stand upon the threshold of victory as the midnight hour approaches, and you want me to throw it all away on the obsolete beliefs of a dying race and the delusion of love?"

Selene kept her voice soft, pleading her case.

"Nicolae did no wrong. I had no right to do what I did—try to trick him into bonding. The Triad was right in sending me to exile. Everything I suffered was because of my own actions."

"No! They had no right! Sanctimonious prigs all of them with their holier-than-thou attitudes."

"They are protecting the Immortal teachings to give a sense of heritage and purpose—to protect mankind from evil."

"What gives them the authority to tell us how to spend our existence? What gives them the right to pass judgment on others?"

"They are Immortals. It is their duty."

"Fuck duty!" Luka became red-faced, tightening his grip on Richelle's hand. She grimaced in pain but remained silent. "All my life, I had to watch the Immortals from afar, spouting their Ethics Code and duty to protect *mortals*. Nicolae, that self-righteous hypocrite, cast you out to pursue an idealistic notion of a life mate. Well, I defy that notion!"

He grabbed Richelle by the arm and shoved her in front of Selene. Richelle stifled a surprised gasp as she recognized the woman—the tarot reader from the carnival. *Madame Selene*! Selene mentally cautioned



Richelle to remain silent. It was difficult, as Luka's fingernails had grown and were biting into her skin through the skin fabric of her gown. "You see *this!* The woman from the prophecy, the key to my supremacy over the world! *My* bride, not the destined mate of Nicolae's favorite Guardian, Valya, but *my bride!* Do you hear? *My bride!*"

Luka whirled Richelle around, dragging her to the middle of the great hall. Standing in the middle of the room he raised his arms overhead, strutting around Richelle like a peacock.

"Hear me!" he bellowed into the night, mentally casting his commands thousands of miles to the mountain home of the Immortals. "I welcome you to witness the bonding ritual of Richelle Sommers to Luka cel Rau, master of Tower of Red Dragon."

Richelle's stomach lurched but she stood fast, unwilling to let Luka know the idea of him touching her, of being his wife sickened her. At first, standing in the center of the room being gawked at, she felt a little shaky, but then she felt a warmth, as if someone had wrapped her in a blanket.

As Luka continued his condescending proclamation, Richelle sensed another presence—stronger, imposing, more...dominant.

*"Remember me, mio dusa, for you are mine."*

Richelle raised her hand to clutch her throat. *I know that voice.* Her legs trembled as his husky voice touched something deep within her, making her feel all shivery. *This is how a bride should feel,* she affirmed and in that moment she knew. That voice... He was the dark-eyed man from her dreams. She was meant to be *his* bride.

*"You are mine."*

She listened as he mentally conveyed his love with his elegant and courtly words of devotion, the underlying passion sparking a flame within her that had been all but extinguished with her arrival at Red Dragon. Madame Selene was here. So was her mysterious lover. *Were there others?* She reached out and sensed the presence of several others, all focused, determined, and prepared for battle.

And so was she.

Ignoring Luka's narcissistic oration, Richelle focused her will to communicate with Madame Selene and the mounting presence of justice entering her unguarded mind. Following her growing confidence, she welcomed the presence without hesitation or regrets.

*"Madame Selene!"*

*"Yes, my dear child. It is I...and I brought help."*

*"I know,"* she acknowledged. *"I feel them. I feel...him."*

*"Feel...who?"* Selene knew who Richelle was referring to, but *Richelle* had to freely choose him to complete the bonding ritual—she had to remember and say his name. *"Him...I can't remember his name but I know him."*

*"Think, Richelle...who?"*

*"The man from my dreams. The dark warrior. My...my..."* Richelle grasped for the right word for her faceless dream man. In a flash, it came to her. *"My Guardian...Valya."*

Hearing her call, Valya growled and his chest puffed in satisfaction. Selene was right. Richelle *did* recognize him. Dangerously close to rushing forward and destroying all who stood between him and his bride, he wanted to complete the ritual that he had irrationally delayed in his shame and stubbornness. But instead, he closed his eyes and astrally projected himself to her side.

*"I am Valya. I am with you. You are mine."*

Richelle gasped in astonishment as she felt his arms wrap around her. Feeling his spirit holding her in his arms and then flowing through her, filling her mind and body in a tender caress that could not be seen, only felt, she sighed in pleasure. The shattered bits of her memory and fractured segments of her soul melded together.

*"Valya. Valya."*

Over and over again, she said his name as he cocooned her in a warmth and love, in heat and passion. How could she have ever doubted, how could she ever believed she belonged to another? Linking her mind with his, their spirits became one. His joy and elation became hers as their souls communed, a blissful reunion. She felt her spirit rising, rising, rising higher, about to leave her body to join Valya when she was ripped away by a vicious pull on her arm, wrenching her back to reality.

*"And so I present the future mistress of Tower of the Red Dragon!"*

*"Please, Luka!"* Selene rushed forward

Luka turned up his nose at her debasing supplication. *"Begging? Hardly the behavior one would expect from the mother of the master of the world."*

“Luka, for your sake as well as mine, stop this madness! Release Richelle.”

“Silence! I will hear no more of your pleas! Accept my decree and remain! Refuse and die!”

Selene sighed in defeat. Nothing would deter Luka from his path of destruction. Hanging her head in feigned obedience, she walked toward his throne and stood at the base of the steps in the appearance of acceptance.

In triumph, Luka paraded Richelle in a wide circle amidst the cheering of his followers before he led her to his throne. Looking ahead, she was bathed in a cold sweat as she spied Pieter standing to the right of the throne. He was dressed in black leather pants and jacket over a black t-shirt with a goblet in hand as Victor...*no, not Victor*...as Preacher came up and stood a step behind Pieter.

Her eyes grew wide as she was towed ever nearer. The recovered memory of his face covered in Jonathon’s blood was a dagger in her heart. Dragging her feet, she tried to slow Luka’s pace. He yanked harder until they stood before the throne, where Pieter stepped down to stand on her left.

She felt faint standing between Luka and Pieter, each taking an arm as Preacher came forward with a worn Bible in his hands. Disgraced and humiliated, Preacher opened the Bible and, in a final irony, prepared to give the rite of holy matrimony. His sorrowful eyes met hers, expressing his repentance for his actions.

Casting a sideways glance to Selene, she looked for a hint of what to do. Selene gave a curt nod as the Immortals closed in, taking their strategic positions, bottling the Vampyres and Believers in the center of the great hall with no means to escape.

“Luka cel Rau, master of Tower of the Red Dragon, has found his bride!” Preacher proclaimed the empty words. “We are here to bear witness to the bonding ritual and welcome the birth of a new order!”

*Not bloody likely!* Valya seethed, advancing, his sword in hand, his grip tightening on the hilt. He motioned to Nicolae. They both disappeared to rematerialize on the alcove overlooking the throne, hidden behind the draperies.

“Luka cel Rau, this be your bride. Will you take her as your mate, taking her life and power into your keep for all eternity?”

"I will take her." No declaration of love or respect, no giving, only taking. Richelle squelched her need to retch.

"Richelle Sommers, this be your master. Will you accept him as your mate, to bear his children and obey his commands for all eternity?" Richelle opened her mouth to refuse, but not a sound came out. Her mind was screaming *no*, but she couldn't utter the word. She looked at Luka. His head lowered as he focused his gaze upon her. He was preventing her from saying *no*.

"She is speechless," she heard Pieter state, and she whirled to look at him. "Continue with the ceremony."

"I cannot," Preacher stated with a condescending smile. "You know as well as I, she must *accept* him as her life mate. She must *say* the words, otherwise they are not truly bonded."

Luka grabbed her by the shoulders, his nails biting into her skin through the dress. She felt them puncturing her skin, and she threw her head back in pain. His angelic features had morphed into a horrifying gargoyle-like image, his eyes ablaze with hatred as his canines elongated. His putrid breath filled her nostrils as he lowered his face to hers and heatedly issued his command.

"Say the words, Richelle!"

Richelle could only make squeaking noises as she felt Luka probing into her mind, his will overpowering hers and trying to force her to accept him. Closing her eyes, she shook her head, trying to regain control. He shook her violently, forcing her to open her eyes.

"Obey me! Say the words!" He lowered his head toward the opening of her dress, revealing his previous two blood takings. Baring his fangs, he readied to take third blood and complete the ritual whether she accepted him or not.

She felt as if she were falling into a bottomless abyss, flailing for something to hold onto to stop her descent. She searched within herself and just when it seemed she didn't have any will left, the cloud of confusion lifted. She remembered...everything. All that she had been through, good and bad, had made her the person she was. Being with Valya had given her the strength to accept herself and to give her love to him freely.

She was imbued with an astounding sense of peace. It radiated out from her core like a white-hot star, energizing her. Luka released her arms as if he was burned and stared at her in confusion.

“No. I do not accept Luka as my life mate.”

“You are my bride!” Luka screeched in disbelief. “Obey me!” He transmitted his mental commands, but Richelle deflected his control with no more thought than swatting a mosquito.

She had found her power. Through Valya. It was through their love that she had found her inner courage and the strength to defy Luka.

“I do not accept you as my life mate. I am Richelle Sommers and I am the destined life mate of Valya cel Mare of the Immortals.”

“Valya,” Luka spat, “is dead!”

At that moment, Valya sprung into action, leaping from the alcove, his feet landing on the arms of Luka’s throne. He held his sword before him with both hands. Preacher ran over to where Selene and Richelle stood while Luka stared in outrage, taking a step back.

“*You!* You’re dead!”

“No, Luka. I am very much alive.” Valya grinned menacingly as he pointed his sword directly to where Luka’s heart would have been. “And I have come for my bride.”

“You shall not have her,” he jeered. “Pieter!”

\* \* \* \*

Richelle ran to Selene’s arms. Pieter stepped forward, removing his jacket and tossing it aside as a sword appeared in his hand.

“You’re a fool, Valya,” Pieter mocked. “To come here alone. You should have stayed dead.”

“You are the fool if you thought I would allow another to take my life mate,” Valya retorted. “Or that I would come here alone.”

On cue, the other Immortals appeared, weapons in hand. Richelle watched as the great hall exploded in battle. The Immortals faced insurmountable odds against the Vampyres and Believers...and were defeating them. Luka fisted his hands, his nails cutting into the palms of his hands. He spun, pointing his bony finger at Valya.

“I command you to destroy him!”

Pieter wasted no time and lunged toward Valya with a howl, his sword raised overhead. Valya flipped over Pieter, landing behind him as he turned to face his attacker. Held at bay by Selene, Richelle watched from the sidelines as Valya fought, his skill with the sword evident with every thrust and block. What lasted only a few moments seemed like an eternity to her.

They were in a tight clinch until Valya gave Pieter a succession of three head-butts, which sent him staggering back. Pieter reached his fingertips to his forehead and drew them back bloody from a small cut above his eye. He licked the blood from his fingers and scowled at Valya.

“You will pay for that, *Immortal!*”

“No, Pieter, it is you who will pay...with your miserable excuse for an existence!”

Pieter held his sword like a lance and drove at Valya. With the skill of a superior swordsman, Valya deflected the blow, twisted around with sword in hand, and, with one final blow, lopped off Pieter’s head. Screaming, Richelle covered her eyes and buried her face in Selene’s shoulder as Pieter’s head rolled about to lie at Luka’s feet.

Wide-eyed, Luka stared down at the dismembered head of his best warrior. Heaving, Valya widened his stance, facing Luka, and again pointed his sword at his absent heart.

“Now, Evil One. It is your turn.”

“I don’t think so...*Immortal.*”

Using his telekinetic powers, Luka began hurling furniture and weapons at Valya, the wind rising in the great hall as objects went flying through the air. While Valya deflected the objects, Luka turned on his heel and ran toward Richelle. Selene quickly thrust herself between Luka and Richelle. She struggled, only to be thrown twenty feet and sent crashing into his throne.

Luka spun to face Richelle. Reaching into his boot, he pulled out a jeweled dagger and raised it above his head. Richelle raised her hands in defense as Luka glared at her. Shrieking, he brought the blade down, meaning to destroy her, but instead, the dagger was thrust between the shoulder blades of Preacher, who had thrown himself in front of Richelle.

He grunted as the knife entered his body. Richelle stared into Preacher’s eyes as she watched the life spark dim. Luka pulled the dagger out, and Preacher collapsed into Richelle’s arms. Gently, she lowered them to the floor. His eyes watery, he gazed up at Richelle.

"I'm so sorry...for everything. I didn't know...or maybe I...didn't care. But believe me...I'm sorry." He coughed violently and spit up blood.

Cradling his head in her lap, she murmured words of encouragement, saying he would be all right. He merely smiled and shook his head as he coughed up more blood.

"It's all right. I don't fear death anymore."

In truth, he didn't fear death. What she sensed was his fear he was beyond redemption.

"You helped save me." She chastely kissed his forehead. "There is nothing to fear." He felt the numbing chill of death pass as he basked in the warmth of her gaze.

Preacher smiled longingly. With everything he had done to her, she still had forgiveness in her heart, for him. The unrecognized heaviness of guilt weighing him down dissipated. He was ready to die. He took a deep breath and then slowly closed his eyes, willingly surrendering his soul to whatever lay beyond this life, whether it be purgatory or hell.

There was no time for Richelle to weep. Luka grabbed at her, knocking the unwanted crown off her head. Fisting her hair, he dragged her to her feet until her back was at his front. He wrapped his arm around her throat, cutting off her oxygen as he leaned in, whispering heatedly in her ear.

"Do you think they can stop me, bitch! Everyone who has stood between me and my plan of world supremacy has been destroyed—your mother, Jonathon, Preacher. No one can defeat me or stop me in my conquest. And now this pathetic band of obsolete Methuselahs think they can defeat me. They will perish like all the others. You, and the world, will be mine to command and control!"

Richelle shivered in disgust when he licked the shell of her ear. She desperately clawed at his arm, trying to obtain some leeway, some type of leverage to get away, but he just tightened his grip. Yanking her head back to expose her neck, his teeth grazed along the column and her fear intensified.

He forced her to look at him. When their eyes met, she could feel every negative emotion bottled within him—envy, jealousy, hatred, and something deeper, a self-loathing so profound and unfathomable she couldn't help but feel pity for what he had become.

He became incensed. “Pity! *Pity!* I don’t need your fucking pity! *I* am in control, not the Triad. *I* have defeated all who have challenged me!” he screamed, shaking violently, his rage barely contained as the walls reverberated with his intensity. “I have proven to them all that *I* am the superior warrior.” Contemptuously, he spat his loathing.

“So pious and so self-righteous, espousing the laws of the Immortals as absolute and then he breaches them to suit his own intentions. He refuses to bond with Selene. Then he fathers a child with Adelaide even though she is married to someone else and is unable to bond with him.”

The meaning of his statement was a slap in the face and explained so much—her apparent ease around Nicolae, the almost unseemly bond she felt with him. Nicolae was her father! It explained why she was able to control the speed of the Ferris wheel and get into the fun house at the carnival. She was part Immortal! She and Valya were not so different, and she was euphoric at the prospect. She struggled against his grip until she freed her hand and raked at his arm around her throat several times, leaving deep lacerations in his appendage, causing him to howl in pain. Free from his grip, she headed toward Valya, who was using the sword to swat flying objects away. But in an instant, Luka’s arm was around her waist, and he pulled her against his body.

Richelle pushed down the need to vomit, disgusted by the feel of his cock pressing against her buttocks. Sensing her revulsion, he ground his hips into her backside. Wrapping her locks around his hand, he pulled her head back until she thought he was going to snap her neck. He lapped up her fear-induced perspiration, nipping along her neck.

He stopped short of taking her blood, ceasing his mental attack upon the Immortals so all could watch as he claimed his final victory. His head bent over her throat, fangs bared for the Final Blood. He looked up to catch Valya’s fearful stare as he hovered over the pulsing vein of his lover. Valya gripped the hilt of his sword and with a roar, raised it over his head and prepared to charge when Luka touched his mind.

*“Stop! Or I won’t stop at third blood. I’ll kill her.”*

Valya halted. He looked about the room, dismayed by the carnage left in the wake of Luka’s dishonorable ambitions and treachery. It had been a bloodbath. The Believers had all been destroyed while only a handful of Vampyres lay dead about the great hall. Ivan had fallen and would be a great



loss, while the remainder of the Immortals came forward to join Valya, a united front against their common enemy.

*“You have nothing to gain from Richelle’s death. Release her!”*

“I have nothing to lose, either!” His Vampyres were gone—lying dead or fleeing the castle. His Believers were gone. He was alone as he faced Valya, his plans on the brink of ruination and his absolute faith in his omnipotence faltering, but he still had the upper hand in his battle with Valya. Richelle was Valya’s Achilles’ heel, and if he was to be thwarted, then he would destroy the thing that Valya valued more than his own life—his woman.

There was no reasoning with Luka. Valya recognized the crazed glint of his eyes from other madmen who had been lured by the promise of power and were drunk on the taste of dominated blood. Luka would never willingly release Richelle for any reason. Valya would have to take her. He motioned the other Immortals back. He would have to face Luka...alone.

Dropping his sword, he took a step forward with his arms opened wide in surrender. Luka arched a brow, but let Valya continue to come forward. Valya moved cautiously with no sudden movements to spook Luka, who still lingered over Richelle’s throat like a viper ready to strike at the first sign of danger.

“You don’t want to kill Richelle. You don’t want to bond with her, either. She is merely a tool, a weapon to be used to obtain your true desire.”

“Don’t use that humanistic psychobabble on me!” Luka snapped. He didn’t like how close Valya was getting. “Stay back! Or I will rip out her throat and let her bleed to death slowly while you watch!”

Valya stopped, not willing to take the risk. The air was charged with a heady testosterone as the Immortals began to encroach silently upon Luka and Richelle while Valya diverted Luka’s attention. Selene added to the diversion as she came forward to stand beside Valya.

“Please, Luka. It is not their fault. It’s mine. In my bitterness and hatred, I poisoned you against your own people. I did wrong by you, focusing on the sins of others and the punishment they deserved. I never taught you about the sins I committed, the karmic rules I disobeyed and then used you to exact my revenge. Do not blame Nicolae and the Immortals for having learned frailties from those they protected. If you must blame someone, then blame me.”

She stretched out her hand to him, wishing he would take it. "For the man you should have been, forgive them and me. Release Richelle. Take my hand and we will face the Dawn and find atonement for our sins."

Luka stared at her open hand with the bewildered look of someone who had never seen snow before. She could understand his confusion. Looking back, she had always been so angry...at him, at the world. She never spoke a kind word, never held him, never told him she loved him as all mothers loved their children. She had given all that up for revenge, and it was an empty trade.

But his confusion passed quickly, enraged by her offer.

"I told you before, woman! Why should I embrace peace on the eve of my victory! Begone!" With a nod, he sent her flying across the room to crash into the wall while Valya, Nicolae, and the others watched on, helpless. Nicolae rushed to her side where she landed.

Nicolae motioned toward Valya. "*She's alive*," he stated as he laid her down, making her as comfortable as possible.

Valya raised his sword and turned to face Luka, who was grinning sadistically.

"There is only one way you will be able to save Richelle." Luka's eyes narrowed as he fixated all his hatred on Valya. "Toss aside your sword and face me."

Valya knew Luka would never release Richelle no matter what he did. He tossed aside his sword to the lamented outcries of his brothers, but he could do nothing else. It was his only way to get close enough to Luka to strike. He took several steps forward until he stood an arm's length from Luka.

"Stop!"

Valya reluctantly stopped. Just another two steps and he could wrap his hands around Luka's throat.

"Now...kneel before me. Kneel before your master."

Richelle watched as Valya slowly fell to his knees. Although he was in a supplicant position, his expression was set in grim determination. Luka was a coward who could never have made Valya fall to his knees. He would only do so because he was using her against Valya. Tears spilled down her cheeks, frustrated and angry that she could be used as a pawn in Luka's twisted game.

She met Valya's gaze, strong and loving, and it rejuvenated her sagging spirit. She could feel his love for her radiating from him, touching her, filling her with the same determination and resolve he had to defeat Luka. Pulling her up by her hair, Luka forced her to look upon Valya, pointing at him as he screamed.

"See how I have beaten him! How I have beaten all Immortals who have defied me!" He raised his head and bellowed into the night, knowing the Triad was still watching. "Your best Guardian, Nicolae's chosen! And *I* have defeated him!"

"You haven't defeated anyone." Richelle spoke loudly. She'd be damned if she would allow that to happen.

"All you have succeeded in doing is manipulating those around you as a means to an end."

He gripped her hair tighter and twisted her to face him. His face was red with fury. His handsome features had melded into a contorted gargoyle-like mask. She waited for fear to override her purpose, but it didn't come. To the contrary, she felt strangely calm as she faced him boldly.

"Who do you think you are, bitch!" He shook her violently through his tirade. "I am the most powerful Immortal there ever was! No one can defeat me! No one!" He backhanded her and sent her tumbling to the floor. Valya's blood boiled as he watched Richelle fall, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. He tried to rise and charge but found himself restrained by Luka's mind control. Richelle raised her head to see Luka surrounded by a red and black aura as he pointed down at Valya.

"No one will ever be able to defeat me! Richelle will be mine and I shall rule the world! Not that you will care for *you will be dead!*"

Richelle felt her heart stop, and Luka gathered his power to vanquish Valya. She forced herself to breathe and slowly rose, disoriented and unsteady by Luka's blow. After all they had endured together, she couldn't lose Valya. She wouldn't allow it to happen. Luka drew back ready to strike with his deadly blow when without a second thought, Richelle rushed forward.

"Nooo!"

All three yelled at the same time as Richelle threw herself between Valya and the lethal assault. Luka's blow struck her squarely in her chest, sending her across the room to land a few feet away from Nicolae and

Selene. Nicolae reacted quickly and ran to Richelle. A single tear trailed down his cheek as he cradled his daughter's head in his lap. He could feel her life's energy draining away, and he used his power to stop the threads of her tapestry from unraveling.

Luka began cursing and, in the commotion, lowered his shield around Valya. Released from his invisible chains, Valya created a ball of energy and threw it at Luka. Luka's body shook as the energy enveloped him in an electrical field. After a few moments, the charge exploded, sending Luka crashing to the floor.

Valya rushed to Richelle's side. His hands hovered inches over her body as he reached out, but he was afraid to touch her. He looked imploringly at Nicolae, his mouth gaping, but he was afraid to speak. Nicolae just stared at him, misery reflected in his fading silvery eyes as he lovingly kissed her forehead.

Grabbing her from Nicolae, Valya crushed her in his embrace and began to cry aloud. Rocking her gently, he murmured softly into her hair, begging her not to leave him. He looked up to Nicolae. Richelle's flame was flickering, nearly extinguished. He bowed his head to her chest, willing her back to life, knowing it was useless and vowing she would not leave this world alone. He would join her in death.

She raised her hand to capture a strand of his hair in her fingertips. She stroked the length as it fell to his shoulder, where she rested her hand. She was so cold, so tired, but there was still something she had to do. She leaned into the warmth of Valya's body, absorbing his heat as she gathered the remaining energy within her.

Luka stood slowly and began to rant against his thwarted plot. "You will all die! No one can defeat me! And if I can't have Richelle, no one shall! You...will...all...*die!*"

His destructive powers lashed out in all directions as he raised his arms above his head, creating a lightning storm within the castle. The walls trembled under his fury and the stones began to crumble beneath the wind and lightning. Immortals threw fireballs at Luka only to have them deflected by the power of the storm.

Valya pulled Richelle tighter into his embrace, using his body to shield her. Richelle weakly pushed against the immovable wall of his chest. "*I will not let Luka win,*" she proclaimed. Focusing her will, she gathered her

life force into a flame within her. It started to burn brighter until a blinding white flame encircled her and Valya.

She let her head loll back and began chanting. At first her words were imperceptible, but she continued to chant them over and over and over again.

*“Triple Goddess, hear my plea...Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, hear me. And as I will, so mote it be. I cast this spell, invoking the powers of the Universe. Karma, do as ye will, do as ye will. Karma, do as ye will. So mote it be.”*

The lightning ceased and the storm winds died down. An eerie calm settled over the room like the eye of a storm. Luka stared wide-eyed into the calm air, waving his hands and shaking his fists, ineffectively trying to re-summon the storm. Raising his head, Valya watched as Luka screamed like a banshee. Valya’s gaze shifted from Luka to Richelle and then back to Luka as she continued to repeat her chant.

*“Karma, do as ye will, do as ye will. Karma, do as ye will. So mote it be.”*

Then there was complete silence.

Luka visibly began to shake. At first with rage. Then...with fear.

He began gasping for air, his hands immediately going to his throat as he began to grasp at invisible hands. He clawed at his throat until he shredded his skin and blood oozed between his fingertips. He spun around, trying to break free from the forces strangling him. A freezing cold wind whipped around him like a tornado; ice formed and his skin turned icy blue. His eyes were stark with terror as he was slowly entombed in a block of ice.

Selene awoke groggily and crawled to Nicolae, who embraced her. She had wanted to save her son from the wrong she had done. But in the end, she had chosen to save the Immortals and mankind, so all she could do was watch in wretchedness as the Fates decided upon her son’s punishment. She buried her face in Nicolae’s shoulder and wept forlorn tears.

As the Immortals looked on, the tomb of ice shattered, sending shards flying about the room. Luka was still gasping for breath, his hands around his bleeding throat as he was levitated several feet above the floor. His arms shot down to his side, and he threw his head back in an agonizing screech. Before their eyes, his chest expanded and decreased until his black heart exploded out of his chest, landing on the floor and bursting to flames.

In a final horrific scene, the flames began to lick at his pant legs, rising higher until he was engulfed in a fiery inferno. The smell of burning, rotting flesh permeated the air. Luka's screams cut through the night like a knife. Selene covered her ears to block out the death throes of her prodigal son all the while acknowledging Karma as a vengeful bitch. His screams died off as his body burnt to ashes, a pile of glowing embers upon the floor the only remains of the Evil One, Luka cel Rau.

*"Karma, do as ye will. So mote it be."*

Valya gazed at his love lying limp in his arms. She gave him a weak smile and touched her fingertips to his lips. Never again would she feel the softness of his kiss, she thought ruefully, but she had to do what needed to be done. She stroked them lightly, tracing the outline and ingraining the shape and texture to memory.

"It...is done," she whispered as her hand fell away.

He grabbed her hand before it landed on her chest and raised it to his lips, kissing the backs of her fingers. *So cold. So damned cold*, he thought.

"I...do not...regret...a thing." She struggled to get the words out. *She had to tell him. He had to know.* He merely looked at her with a love's reflection that would defy the ages as he clung to her body, willing her spirit not to leave.

*"I will love you, Valya. For all eternity."*

Only now did he understand the profundity of her capability to love. She had sacrificed herself to save the world, and with her dying breath, she declared her devotion to him. Closing his eyes, he bent his head until his forehead touched hers, where he wept bitterly.

His comrades neared, forming a circle around them, but none dared approach. Richelle was dying. Valya was losing his life mate, which meant he would be unpredictable as to his actions and reactions. Nicolae alone was able to approach, and even he was wary of Valya's changed demeanor. If Richelle perished, Valya would readily follow her into oblivion but not without accidentally taking out several of his brethren.

Nicolae stood beside Valya and placed his hand upon his shoulder. Valya's head snapped up with a jerk, but he never took his eyes from Richelle's ashen face. He couldn't imagine his world without her radiant smile to light his way through the darkness of his empty soul. She was his shining star and she was fading into a darkness from which she could never

return. He could not save her from it. All he could do was blindly follow her.

“Oh Gods...help me. I cannot live without her.” He shook his head and looked up beseechingly at Nicolae. “Save her...please.”

Guardians rarely asked for help. They never begged. Yet here was Valya begging for the life of his woman, his life.

Nicolae’s daughter.

Nicolae was as unwilling to let his daughter’s light fade from the world as Valya. He had the power to save her. No price was too high to pay to ensure her survival and her happiness. He remembered the words he had said to Valya—*“No matter what the price.”*

Holding out his arms, he nodded to Valya. *“Give her to me.”*

Valya was reluctant to let Richelle go, but the look in Nicolae’s silvery eyes tore through him. Valya lifted her into his arms and stood, gingerly handing her to her father.

Nicolae choked back the lump that had formed in his throat. Mimicking Valya, he touched his forehead to hers. He regretted all the time he had missed with her, where he could have helped her. But most of all he grieved, knowing he would miss her future with Valya as they lived and loved, had children—*his* grandchildren. He kissed her cheek softly, prompting her to speak.

“Father, I wish...” she slurred as she leaned into his embrace, struggling to raise her face to meet his eyes. She had no strength left.

“I know,” Nicolae replied. She was light as a feather in his arms, as if she could float away into the night sky.

*“I love you.”*

*“And I love you, daughter. For all eternity and beyond.”*

She held his gaze for only a moment, but the memory of that moment would last ’til the end of time. She smiled as her eyes fluttered shut. Nicolae checked her pulse...*so faint*. *“I love you, Richelle. Be happy.”* With a final embrace, he walked toward the center of the great hall.

The rising moon sent silvery-white beams of light through an upper window, creating an ethereal spotlight in the center of the room. The moonlight cast a mystical glow through the rest of the room, banishing all shadows and gloom from their dark hiding places. Using his powers, the

bodies lying scattered throughout the hall dissolved like mist in the morning light.

“What are you going to do?” Valya’s emotions were riding high, but right now, he was unsure and operating in a state of confusion. Nicolae gazed at him with understanding and apologetic regret.

*“You need to complete the bonding ritual. Take her someplace holy where your union can be consummated, untouched by this evil.”*

*“What are you going to do?”*

*“Take good care of my daughter. Be happy in your life together.”*

Valya delved into Nicolae’s mind and caught a glimpse of his intent. His body began to vibrate with the intensity of Nicolae’s determination and then with the energy surge as Nicolae prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. He was going to give his life for Richelle.

“Noooo!” Valya’s outcry fell on deaf ears as Nicolae closed his eyes, leaned his head back, and began to chant in the Immortal language. The other Immortals drew near, watching in amazement as the moonlight became a bright white aura encasing Nicolae and Richelle in a blinding ray of purity, and the wind began to rise.

Nicolae offered Richelle to the moonlight, and she began to levitate from his arms. She was lifted higher and higher by an unseen force as Nicolae raised his arms above his head. He was unaffected by the wind whipping at his hair and body, and his chanting grew louder, using his power to infuse Richelle with his life force. Richelle’s body turned in midair until she was upright with her arms spread out to her sides.

Valya reached out to grab Nicolae, but was repelled by the energy of light surrounding them. It threw him against Roman and Stefan and they each took an arm.

*“No, Nicolae! There has to be another way!”*

*“Leave be, Valya. This is as it is meant to be.”*

*“Our race needs you,”* Valya replied, trying to dissuade him. *“You cannot—”*

*“No. I am obsolete, You and Richelle are the future for our people. There is nothing left for me here. But I do not fear death for there is one waiting for me. I go to join her.”*



Nicolae did not have to mention her name for Valya knew he spoke of Adelaide. After all these years, he had never stopped thinking of her, loving her. His sole purpose in not following her in death was to save their child.

*"I am joyful at joining my love. Consider this...my wedding present."* With his palms turned upward beseechingly, he completed his chant. His body began to shift, becoming translucent until he was nothing more than a shimmering mist. The mist floated upward and began encompassing Richelle, swirling around her in a loving caress.

The red of her dress faded, dripping away like blood as it stained the floor beneath Richelle and then disappeared, leaving her clad in a glimmering gossamer-like second skin. The exotic makeup also disappeared, leaving her fresh-faced, natural beauty. Bathed in moonlight, she all but glowed with innocence and hope as she slowly descended to the floor wrapped in the sparkling mist.

Valya struggled to reach her, but Stefan and Roman held him at bay. He struggled against their holds. The mist began to lose some of its sparkle—it was seemingly absorbed into Richelle as if by osmosis, becoming a part of her. Her toes touched the floor, and the mist disappeared entirely. As her arms slowly lowered to her sides, the room returned to its candlelit ambience.

She stood shakily for a moment and then collapsed when her legs buckled out from under her. Valya broke free from his restraining hold in a flash and was on his knees by her side. Timorously, he ran his fingertip over her cheek, afraid that she would vanish beneath his touch like a bubble bursting.

Her eyelids fluttered and the corner of her mouth twitched at the slight contact. Perspiration beaded on Valya's forehead as Richelle awakened slowly with no more concern than a plump kitten rising from an afternoon nap. She arched into his touch, encouraging him to stroke her cheek with his open palm, which he did so gratefully. *She's alive!*

He grabbed her by her shoulders and pulled her into a bear-like hug. She expelled a whoosh of air at his embrace. He knew he must be hurting her, but he couldn't contain himself. *She's alive!*

Working her hand between them, she palmed his cheek, gasping when he turned his face to tickle the center of her palm with his tongue. Before she could pull her hand away, he sucked a finger into his mouth, causing her

to sigh. The warmth of his mouth wrapped around her digit sent a tingle up her arm to her spine. She could feel a heat radiating from her core until her body felt it was on fire.

“Valya...” He grimaced as her voice broke on an edge of pain. Gazing upon her, concern was etched into his features.

“What is wrong, *mio dusa*? Tell me.”

“I feel so...so strange.” The tingle began to prick at her skin like pins and needles. Even his breath wafting across her skin sent her senses reeling. She inhaled deeply trying to soothe the sensations plaguing her, but it only heightened them as she caught Valya’s scent. He smelled of sweat and blood, all heat and primal male. She inhaled deeply again and her womb clenched.

Her body clamored with the need to feel him against her, in her. It was more than just need. It was a hunger that gnawed at her to the point of pain, to where she thought she would either go crazy or die if she could not satisfy that hunger. And as he clung to her, his scent intoxicating, his blood surging through his veins, she knew what she needed. She needed his body...and his blood.

“I need you, Valya.” Her declaration was raw, her eyes raking over his masculine form in carnal appreciation.

His gaze turned to molten lava, and he rushed in and kissed her with all the possession and dominance of a life mate. He had been telling her since he had found her that she belonged to him. But that wasn’t accurate, as reality hit him like a runaway train. She was the center of his world, his reason for being. Without her, he was as dead inside as Luka.

The truth was not that she belonged to him.

It was he who belonged to her.

He pulled away. They both were breathing heavily as their bodies vibrated with unfulfilled desire, but unfulfilled only for the moment.

“You are my life, my bride. I love you and will love you until the end of time. Will you complete the bonding ritual with me and become my life mate?” It seemed a lifetime before she answered. He waited with bated breath, but her response came on the heel of his proposal.

“Yes, Valya. Oh, yes. I am and always have been yours. And I want to become your life mate.”

A cheer went out from the band of warriors joining the mental jubilation of the Triad and the Immortals from across the sea who had witnessed the whole confrontation. But unlike Luka, he was not going to let them witness his bonding with Richelle.

“Then hold onto me,” he whispered hotly into her ear as he stood and swung her into his arms. “I know the perfect place.”

Together, they dematerialized. He wanted privacy for their “wedding night.”

## Chapter 19

Richelle felt as if she had been swept into a magical fairyland as Valya carried her into the moonlit meadow. After they had materialized, it took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but she could never mistake the beautiful midnight mountain landscape as anything but home. Illuminated, it held an aura of mystery, with the low chirping of the crickets blending with the melodious ripple of a nearby brook.

For Richelle, no place could have been more spiritual, more sacred.

And Valya knew that.

He leaned down and kissed her—not with the raging desire thrumming through his body but thoroughly and completely, like a man enamored to the point of fascination. He reveled in every taste, every smell, every texture of her. As if he were sleepwalking, he never broke their kiss as he walked through the waving high grass, not releasing her until he reached the bank of the brook, where he set her down.

Demurely, she sat with her legs bent to the side, leaning into his touch while his hand rested on her nape. She could barely sit still when he kneeled before her on one leg and gazed at her with such intensity she felt he was going to pounce on her at any moment. And what surprised her the most was that was what she wanted...not just wanted, but craved and needed.

She palmed his cheek. His skin vibrated beneath her touch, sending a shiver down her spine. She rubbed her thighs together to alleviate the insistent throbbing that was begging to be satiated. He gripped the back of her neck and pulled her face to his until their lips were separated by a scant inch and a gush of moisture dampened her thighs.

His nostrils flared and he inhaled her rich, musky scent, beckoning to him like a siren's song. Valya gave her a devilish smile, flashing his canines as he laughed huskily. The sight of his fangs sent a jolt of feminine fear through Richelle, knowing full well what was to come. Several days ago,

she would have been terrified at the thought of being Valya's life mate. Contrarily, she felt strangely empowered.

Closing the miniscule gap between them, she ran her tongue over his canines. He groaned at her touch as he trembled and fell to both knees. She delighted in the power she held over him to draw such a heartfelt response. His hand dropped to her shoulder and lightly trailed down her arm. Her skin prickled at her novice attempt at playing cat and mouse until the sensations were unbearable. She captured his lips, molding her mouth over his, giving them both what they desired as she ate at his lips with the same ravenous hunger he had demonstrated before with her.

Valya's growl created titillating vibrations against her lips, spiking her need higher. Soon he was avidly nipping and licking her lips, trying to take control of their kiss, but Richelle was enjoying herself and the thrill of the chase too much to relinquish her foray into feminine domination.

Framing his face with her hands, she slanted her mouth over his to deepen the kiss. Thrusting her tongue into his mouth, she undulated in synchronous rhythm, rubbing her breasts against his massive chest. Beneath the fabric, her nipples tightened into turgid peaks, aching to be sucked and laved. Valya tried moving his head one way and then the other, trying to take control, but for every thrust, she parried.

Thrust and parry. Thrust and parry.

On and on, they clashed in a battle of wills, each trying to outdo the other, each skirting the precipice between dominance and submission. Together they slipped into an oasis, a haven they created for a glorious obsession of unimaginable pleasure. Driving each other to the verge of madness, they strived to reach the ultimate summit of love and devotion to then bathe in the afterglow of spent passion.

In the end, Richelle's newfound confidence and sensuality were no match for the centuries of inbred dominance of Valya's ancestry or his masculine strength. In a predatory rush, he knocked her onto her back as he captured her mouth in carnal bliss. Her arms automatically wrapped around his neck, and she opened herself further to him, welcoming his heat, his primal need to take control of her body and her passion.

Richelle felt their clothes disappear. She sighed at the beautiful sensation of skin against skin. Smooth and hot, their bodies fit together

perfectly. Trapped between the soft, grassy patch and Valya's rock-hard physique, Richelle moaned, caught between too much and not enough.

She needed more.

And she told Valya so.

Valya chuckled, his chest rubbing against her nipples deliciously. She cried into his mouth in sexual frustration as the abrasion left her panting and writhing beneath him. She wriggled as much as she could, bringing her swollen mound in contact with his engorged manhood. They groaned in unison at the intimate contact. He pressed his hips forward again, and again.

Every thrust drove their need for one another higher. Each pass brought his cock closer and closer to the core of her desire. On his final thrust, the head of his dick caressed her aching clit. She screamed as her pussy convulsed and starbursts went off behind her eyelids. Her unexpected orgasm lifted both their bodies from the ground until she collapsed in satisfaction but not in satiation.

When she opened her eyes, Valya's passionate gaze, so profound with adoration, touched her to the deepest depths of her soul. She never believed she would ever find happiness with the love of another man, and now that she had an eternity to live her dreams of "happily ever after," her heart was ready to burst. A tear slipped from her eye, which drew a concerned expression on Valya's furrowed brow.

Smiling, she placed her fingertips against his lips. His brow smoothed and slowly he returned her smile. Her heart nearly stopped. He was *so handsome*. His grin broadened at her unguarded thoughts.

"You think I'm handsome?"

"You know I do," she replied.

His expression became somber. He closed the gap between them until their lips barely touched, and she could feel his hot breath as he spoke.

"And you are more beautiful than anything on earth or in the heavens."

She swallowed hard as his mouth covered hers. His kiss conveyed the veracity of his statement, gentle yet strong, controlled yet passionate. He kissed her thoroughly, meticulously paying homage to every contour, and when she parted lips in invitation, he accepted. Their tongues danced and mated, stoking the eternal fire burning within them.

Their skin was slick with perspiration, yet neither was chilled by the night air as their bodies entwined, becoming one body, one heart, one soul.

The apex of her thighs was damp with her cream, easing Valya's sensual torment as he began pressing his cock against her again. She broke their kiss and moaned.

"Please, Valya. Don't tease me."

"I am not teasing you, *mio dusa*. I am pleasing you."

She held her breath as he thrust rapidly against her several times, the broad head of his manhood striking her clit with each upstroke and tantalizing her with the promise of fulfillment as he stroked downward along her slit. She tried to move her hips so he could enter her, but he withheld what they both wanted. What they both needed.

"Valya, please."

It was the stark neediness in her whispery plea that undid him, and on the next pass, his cock found its home. He surged into her so deep she could feel him hit the top of her womb, drawing a sharp gasp from her lips. In self-satisfaction, he held himself high within her, cherishing the silkiness of her feminine heat.

When he began to move, it was slow and steady. Like time in a bottle, there was no past, no future. For them, there was only this moment together. This was the moment he had waited a thousand lifetimes for. And he would spend the rest of his lifetime worshipping at her feet and thanking the Gods that she was his, and he was blessedly hers.

She strained beneath him, urging him to go faster, deeper. He denied her. He wanted to give her so much more than what she was asking, no begging, for. He wanted to give her everything he had, and all that he was, the way he wanted to give it.

He bent over and kissed her.

It was soul-wrenching...so beautiful.

Richelle opened herself and accepted Valya's gift, allowing him to set the pace of their joining no matter how maddening. She felt every emotion coursing through him, and yet, it wasn't enough. Her body clamored for more. Now. She couldn't remain still. She couldn't remain silent. It was as if she had lived her life for this moment alone. So much pain. So much death. But none of that mattered. Just him. Just them.

Their thoughts were merging. Just as their bodies were merging, so were their minds...and their hearts.

Their coming together in this moment was so much different. They both felt it. When they made love, there was always a deep connection binding them to one another despite the fact they had not completed the bonding ritual. And yet, this time it was so very much more than it had ever been—emotional, physical, spiritual. It was all of those things and so much more. Overwhelmed, her vision became black around the edges, and she feared she might faint. She reached out for something to hold onto, clutching his massive shoulders.

“That’s right, my darling,” he drawled huskily. He seated himself so fully within her that their pubic bones were crushed together. “Hold onto me.” Her clenching pussy gripped his penis greedily bemoaning its absence each time he pulled back. Each forward thrust parted her delicate tissues eliciting a husky moan from deep within her.

“Valya,” she moaned as his muscles flexed beneath her touch. His cock stroked her innermost core. “Oh, Valya, I cannot bear it.”

“Yes, you can, my love.”

“So much...soooo goood.”

If he had feathers, he would have fluffed them at her innocent pronouncement.

“It will become so much better.” He could barely speak as he began to feel a hunger gnawing at him, not merely for her body but for her blood as well. Her blood, thick and rich, pulsing through her veins, enticed him into a mesmerizing trance, drawing him nearer to sate his thirst.

*“Can you not feel it?”*

She felt something, but she wasn’t sure what. He pulled back and surged forward again. She threw her head back as she gasped with sensual delight.

*“Do you?”* he insisted.

She nodded quickly, nervous and unsure of what she felt as she sucked her lip into her mouth. She nicked her lip and tasted the sweetness of her own blood. Humming in approval at the syrupy flavor, she ran her tongue over the fullness of her lower lip, capturing every delectable morsel. Like a flash of light, the unnamable yearning that had been plaguing her flashed into her mind.

*Blood.*

More specifically, *his* blood.



She had denied her Wiccan heritage all her life, maintaining a tight control on her emotions and thoughts. Through Valya's love, she had learned to accept herself, embracing her Wiccan and Immortal heritage. The Immortal part of her was aroused by centuries of inbred desires that would not be denied as she bonded with her life mate.

She stared at his throat, his tawny skin stretched tight so she could see his vein pulsing. Her nostrils flared. Her mouth watered as she inhaled the scent of his thickening blood blending with his potent, musky aroma. Her womb tightened and her stomach growled. She needed him. She needed his blood.

Valya sensed the shift in her—the awakening of her long-buried Immortal genes she inherited from Nicolae were emerging and guiding her. She may not recognize what it was she sought, but her body knew. She felt her canines elongate slightly and become sharp points. They were not as long as Valya's, but they would do as she took his blood while bonding. *“Do you feel it now, my love?”*

*“Oh, Valya. I do feel it.”* She wriggled beneath him, lifting and straining, trying to reach his neck, but he kept pulling away. Tormenting her, he goaded her by leaning in, allowing her lips to graze his neck, permitting her to only sample the heated saltiness of his vibrant skin. She whimpered, her needs desperate as she reached for him repeatedly only to be deprived of what she wanted. Using her feminine wiles to do some tormenting of her own, she tightened her vaginal muscles.

Valya let out a long groan as her pussy clenched around his cock like a velvet fist. He pulled away when she reached up for him, so she clenched around him again, holding him longer until his groan became a low growl. He rushed in and captured her mouth in a voracious kiss.

*“Oh, yessss,”* she moaned. His hands covered her breasts and molded them as he liked, kneading her pliant flesh until he reached the resilient red-tipped nips topping each mound. Trapping the engorged nipples between his thumb and forefinger, he twisted and squeezed, her scream of pleasure muffled by their kiss.

Lowering her arms, she raked her fingernails over his pectorals. Bearing his weight it was difficult to move, but her determination won out as she wedged her hands between them. Her fingertips circled his tawny areolae

before capturing his tight male nipples between her thumb and forefinger, matching his motions until they were both panting and squirming.

*"I love you, Valya. Oh, Gods, I love you!"*

Valya released her nipples and reared back, supporting his weight on his arms. The veins in his biceps popped as he hovered above her, staring down at her with a flaming look. She felt as if she would spontaneously combust.

"And I...love you." Her eyes welled with happy tears at his heartfelt declaration. Still gripping his nipples, she gave them a light squeeze before placing her palms over his pectorals. She rubbed her palms lightly over his chest.

"I want you, Valya," she murmured. From deep within her she heard the words she knew he wanted to hear. The words he needed to hear to complete the ritual—her acceptance.

"I accept you, Valya cel Mare." He stopped breathing. His pupils dilated so large his eyes were as black as a starless night. His whole body stilled as he focused on Richelle alone. "You are my master, my protector, my Guardian. I give my life and the life of our children to your keeping. I accept *and want* you as my life mate."

Supporting his weight on one arm, he cupped the back of her head with the other, pulling her up to his chest.

*"Taste me. Do it now."*

She knew what he meant, and it filled her with a longing only he would be able to fulfill. No other would come between them. And when he left this world, she would willingly follow.

Her gums ached, yearning to sink her teeth through his skin into a vein. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of the hot rush of his blood into her mouth, which would fill the emptiness of her soul.

She licked the tip of his nipple once, twice, three times before sinking her fangs into the meaty flesh just above his aroused flesh, above his heart. With a howl, Valya surged into her body as she pierced his skin. His eyelids fluttered at the unbridled rapture while she drank from him. When she tried to pull away, he ran his fingers up through her hair, grasping it tightly and pulling her closer to his chest, demanding she take more.

Addicted, she continued to drink from him, her thirst unquenchable. His flavor was addictive, heady and spicy like mulled wine.

It was a dark ecstasy, unlike he had ever known before. He should have felt weakened by the loss of blood but instead he grew stronger. Harder.

Richelle released him with a startled cry as his girth stretched her to the point of endurance. And still she wanted more. She licked the pinpricks to seal the wound and then thrust her breasts forward in an open invitation.

Valya licked his lips at the delectable sight before him—his woman supine in his arms, eyes closed as her pearly moonlit flesh quivered in anticipation. He was honored. “I accept you, Richelle Sommers, as my bride. I take your life into my keep, your blood into my soul. I accept and want you as my life mate. Binding our hearts, we are forever one. For all eternity.”

Reverently, he bent his head to nuzzle the crook where her neck and shoulder met. His lips nibbled her skin, her breath coming erratically as she eagerly anticipated the Final Blood that would bind them together. She used his words against him.

“Taste me. Do it now.”

His canines slid easily through her tender flesh, like a hot knife through butter. *Oh what indescribable bliss!* Her sweetness was honeyed nectar. Ambrosia. He sipped her like fine wine as his hips began to move, encouraged by her sighs of sheer joy. All too soon, his movements became a fevered pitch.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she welcomed each powerful lunge and reached behind to place her hands on the small of his back. *So warm, so giving.* Valya’s mind raced as he fell on top of her, rutting like a beast. And still she welcomed him with open arms and open mind.

His hands clamped onto her hips, holding her in place while he stabbed her with ramming thrusts, driving their passion higher until they were riding through the night on wings of eternal love.

“*Complete me, Valya,*” she cooed delicately, like a snowflake dancing upon a winter breeze.

With one final vanquishing thrust, he obeyed her subtle command. Richelle’s scream of satisfaction echoed into the night, uniting with Valya’s gruff roar. They exploded in each other’s arms, the power of their unity engulfing them in a white light and heat like a supernova. It surrounded them, growing in intensity as they came until the meadow around them was

encased in the brilliant light as well. As the last tremors of their orgasms faded, so did the light surrounding them.

Completely spent, Valya pulled back, closing the wound on Richelle's neck. Neither one moved from their amorous embrace, content to lie replete in the basking glow of their lovemaking. She tightened her arms around him and felt a slight thumping against her breast. At first she thought it was her own heartbeat, but realization dawned. It was Valya's heartbeat. It was erratically strong as Valya struggled to gain control. Slowly, it began to beat regularly, steadily, matching her own heartbeat's rhythm until their hearts were beating as one, their breathing synchronous.

They were one, always.

Afraid he would crush her, Valya rolled them onto their side, still snug in her tight sheath. It was some time before either of them broke the relaxed silence.

"I feel so strange," she whispered.

"Strange?" Valya tensed at her words, afraid she was regretting her decision. "How?"

"Well, not strange...different."

Relieved, Valya held her close, stroking her back as she rested her head in the crook of his shoulder.

"Tell me."

She didn't think she could. Not that she didn't want to. It was just that she had a difficult time finding the words to describe everything she was feeling.

"Try," he encouraged. His hands roamed freely over her body, petting and soothing her, all the while his body hardening as she snuggled against him. She had to feel his cock jerk against her thigh when she rested her hand upon his lean hip. He placed his hand over hers to still it before it moved any lower, which would have her lying on her back beneath him again. "Try."

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, using her mind to convey her thoughts and hoping it would be clearer.

*"When we make love, it is so...so..."*

*"So..."*

*"It takes my breath away. I lose myself in you and yet feel everything around us. I become hypersensitive to every sound, every scent. We become one with the world."*

He hugged her close, placing an endearing kiss on her forehead.

*"That is how it should be."*

*"But this time was different."*

*"Tell me."*

She raised her eyes to meet his. There were tears in his eyes as well, his emotional state mirroring hers. She palmed his cheek as she kissed his lips, parting them to allow their tongues to touch intimately, showing him more than words could say how much she loved him.

Ending the kiss, she gave him a quick buss and burrowed into his arms. He rested his chin on the top of her head and she lay her head across his chest. She felt the thump of his heart against her cheek and smiled contentedly. Stretched out across him like a lazy cat, she all but purred. Safe and warm, she blushed furiously as she continued.

"But this time it didn't feel as though we became part of the world. It was more like the world became a part of us." Her brows furrowed, and he remained silent. She began to shake her head. "I know that doesn't make any sense."

"You felt people around you as if you could reach out and touch them even though no one was there, sensing their emotions. You wanted to gather them in your arms and protect them, feeling as if it were your responsibility to watch over and guide them, as if they were your children."

She jerked away and stared at him incredulously. She nodded her head slowly, her eyes wide in amazement that he was able to put so eloquently in words what she was experiencing.

"That, too, is how it should be."

Perplexed, she lay her head back down upon his chest. She stroked her fingertips over his shoulder, down his tricep to his hand, tracing the outline of each finger before lacing her fingers through his. She marveled at his strength, outer and inner. No wonder Nicolae had charged him to be one of the chosen, a Guardian.

*A Guardian.* She went over all the events since she had met Valya, both good and bad. She raised her head and rested her chin upon his chest, looking up at him with renewed curiosity.

"This is how you feel as a Guardian." It was a remark not a question. He laughed and shook his head.

"I was duty-bound to be a Guardian. It's what I was meant to do. These new emotions are confusing."

"More like intimidating." She laughed.

"Be that as it may, there is one inalienable fact. They are correct. It is how I am supposed to...*feel*...when I am with you. How *we* are to feel about one another." He framed her face with his hands, bringing her mouth a hairsbreadth from his. "And I would want it no other way, *mio dusa*. My precious heart. I love you."

"And I love you," she whispered back before his mouth took hers in a soul-searing kiss. *Forever*.

Valya rolled over onto his back so Richelle could sit atop him.

"Ride me."

Taking his cock in her hand, she stroked him lightly. He groaned at her touch but he needed more.

"Please, *mio dusa*, I need to be inside you."

Using his newly aroused flesh, she caressed her throbbing clit before slipping the head into her pussy.

"Oh, so tight," she moaned.

"Yessss."

Inch by glorious inch she took him deeper, her swollen and most intimate tissues slick with their combined juices easing his passage. Taking him fully, she placed her hands in the middle of his chest, steadying herself as she rode him.

Meeting her stroke for stroke, he surged upward as she came down on him to give her the most pleasure. He took her globes in his hands, fondling them, flicking the turgid nibs with his thumbs to urge her on.

She threw her head back, her tresses falling back and tickling the skin of her already sensitized back. She giggled like a child with their sensual play.

To Valya she looked like a pagan Goddess sitting atop her rightful throne, regal and sacred. They were in no rush, and he gazed up at her illuminated by the moon and stars twinkling down in approval as they made love.

They took their time as they explored each other like first-time lovers discovering the nuances and pleasures of lovemaking. They took their time

to enjoy each other, knowing full well they had time to learn all there was to learn.

In truth, they had the rest of time.

## **Epilogue**

The dawn was approaching when Valya and Richelle returned to the Tower of the Red Dragon. They materialized in the center of the great hall clad in matching shades of green. Richelle wore a flowing gown with a high waist. Her hair was piled in a mass of curls atop her head, secured with a golden clamp in the shape of a butterfly. Valya donned a velvet waistcoat with gold trim, green breeches, and his leather boots.

Richelle accepted the chivalrous gesture of his arm as he escorted her to the head of the room, up the stairs to where Luka's throne was positioned. The heaviness of the ornate throne as it stood alone in the hollowness of the castle was a stark reminder of the emptiness of Luka's diabolical plan. With the flick of her wrist, the throne vanished. Standing where the throne once stood, with Valya by her side, they turned to face the gathering Immortals, becoming a symbol of hope for a new beginning.

For Immortals and mankind alike.

As she watched, each of the men who had risked their lives to save hers fell to one knee. Each looked up at her with reverence and respect, mentally conveying their allegiance and honoring their bonding. A single tear fell on her cheek at their display of admiration. She never imagined a life filled with so much love and hope. All were proud, virulent men from an ancient and wise race that would not dwindle into extinction. There was hope in helping their race find their mates and create new life. She placed her hand protectively over her abdomen, where the spark of a new life she and Valya had created was taking root.

Taking a step down, Valya gazed in adoration at his life mate. She stood there majestically, imbued with the dedication of a Guardian, a gift from their union as he became a part of her and she became a part of him. And as her hand rested above her womb, lovingly cradling another gift from their union, he was filled with a profound love.



No longer motivated by mere duty, he was driven by the insatiable hunger for his life mate and his love of family. She turned to meet his gaze. A knowing smile passed between them, and their hearts beat faster. If it were not for the fact that day was approaching, he would lay her down and take her again, witnesses be damned.

*"Later, my darling,"* she promised. *"When we are alone."* Valya growled low and long as he willed his body to behave. They turned to the task at hand.

"I can never thank you for rescuing me at such a loss. Jonathon, Ivan, and Nic...Nicolae will be..." Richelle choked back her tears, recalling how he had chosen to give his life for her. "You have all fought well and are to be commended. But it is time to rest."

"What do you mean?" Gregor stood and stepped forward, his disagreement in her statement evident in his frown. The other Immortals stood and remained silent.

"The time for battle is done. It is time for Immortals to establish a new order based on peace and trust."

"So we are to lie down with the sheep and allow the wolves to strike at will?" he argued vehemently.

"What I am saying," she said quietly, "is we do not need to go looking for a war. I am saying we need to regroup, gather our strength. You and the others must focus on finding your life mates—it is there we will find our future."

Gregor shored up his shoulders, showing his obvious dissent, but was cut short in his dispute when Valya stepped between him and Richelle.

"We will return home until we are needed."

Andre joined Gregor in his quarrel, although he was more reasonable in his points of contention.

"We are needed now. Not all humans have a Guardian watching over them. We do more than dispense with Vampyres. We also dispense justice on all those who choose to do evil."

Mikhail and Marcus also came forward in Gregor's defense. Their Slavic accents had been replaced by mild but distinctive Texas twangs.

"We no longer consider the mountains our home."

"We have lived in Dallas for too long."

"That is our home."

“And we want to return. To do our jobs.”

“To protect mankind and seek for others. Like you.”

Stefan and Roman said nothing; however, they came forward to stand shoulder to shoulder with their brethren, their expression mirroring the views of the others. She had heard from all but one of her Immortal warriors. She sought out the last and saw him still on bended knee with his forehead leaning against the hilt of his sword.

“And what say you?”

Jorge raised his head, his eyes reflecting the centuries of disease, evil, and death he had seen. She could feel his pain in the loss of his comrade-in-arms, his friend.

“I am tired. If I may, I wish to return home. I need peace.”

They were all sincere, and while she believed they needed a rest, they were not ready to return. She still believed the best way to save their race was to stave off Immortals turning Vampyre—the search for their life mates needed to take precedence. As foretold by the prophecy, she *would* be the mother of a new race—not as their queen, but rather the beacon that would shine a light in the right direction for others to find their life mates.

“Then as you wish. It will be your individual choice if you return to your guard posts or return to the mountains with us.”

Bowing at the waist, they stepped back. Then Richelle sought out the female warrior without whom all would have been lost. Selene came forward to stand before Richelle. Through all her help, Richelle thought, Selene was still an outcast, banished from rejoining her people. But not for long.

Selene bowed her head before Richelle.

“Welcome, little one. Luka has been defeated.”

“Thanks to you. We are much in your debt.”

“You owe me nothing. It was my fault Luka was as he was. I only righted the wrong I had done.” Selene raised her head and Richelle saw the tears she had fought for so long flow freely down her cheeks.

Richelle hoped welcoming Selene back would alleviate some of her anguish.

“Then be at peace. Return with us to our mountain home.” Richelle opened her arms wide as if she were going to embrace Selene. “Come back and learn again to find happiness in peace and comfort.”

Selene slowly shook her head and smiled sadly.

"I *will* find peace and comfort, but it will not be in our homeland."

"Then where will you go?"

"Where I long to be most," was Selene's enigmatic reply. Richelle probed gently to see where her newfound friend was planning to go. She lay her hand against her throat, aghast at what Selene intended to do.

Richelle tried to speak, tried to find the words to sway Selene, but she could sense her determination. There would be no way to convince her to change her mind.

Valya joined her by her side, slipping his arm about her waist. Her worried expression stabbed at him, and he sensed Selene's intentions as well but knew there was nothing he could do to help. He was more concerned with Richelle's safety.

"Morning approaches. We must leave."

Richelle began to tremble. She didn't want to lose her friend.

"*But why, Selene? All is forgiven, you can come home. You can find peace.*"

"*I will find peace, just as Nicolae has found peace in joining Adelaide in the hereafter.*"

"*But why?*"

Selene smiled wistfully. "*Because there is someone who waits for me as well. And I wish to go to him.*"

Richelle took in Selene's words. She had forgotten the pain and suffering Selene had endured over the many, many years of wandering. She was rejected by her lover, rebuffed by her people, and reviled by her son. But still she believed in love and found her life mate, although it was too late. As much as it pained her, Richelle begrudgingly accepted Selene's decision.

Streams of the dawn's first light cast its amber glow through the high open window as silence hung thick over the band of Immortals. Valya pulled Richelle tighter into his embrace, taking her apprehension and sorrow into himself.

"It is time for us to leave."

"Yes," Selene agreed. "It is time to leave. For each to seek and find their destiny."

Richelle ran down the steps until she stood before Selene. Embracing her, Richelle kissed Selene on the cheek like a child would kiss her mother. “*Thank you. For everything.*”

Breaking her hold, Selene backed away, resolute with her penance. Placing her hand upon Richelle’s cheek, she kissed her forehead.

“Fulfill your destiny.”

Selene turned to leave and was met by the Immortals standing three on one side and four on the other, all standing at attention. They did not turn away from her as they did when she was banished. Instead they met her gaze with respect as they bowed before her.

She walked through the aisle they had created, each waiting until she had passed by them before they disappeared like wisps of smoke into the air to return to their homes. They would sleep through day and replenish their powers to return with the rising of the moon. To fulfill *their* destinies—Immortals duty-bound to protect the world.

The heavy doors opened as Selene bravely walked out into the daylight to welcome the Dawn. The light cascaded shades of purple, red, and orange over her skin as she was encircled by a bright yellow aura. Selene walked forward, her arms outstretched to the rising sun as she shimmered, becoming miniscule points of light dispersing into the sky until there was nothing left.

*It’s so beautiful*, Richelle thought. Valya told her it was called the Final Sacrifice, when an Immortal chose to leave this world. But it was nothing like she expected. A product of humanity’s misconceptions of Immortals, she had expected Selene to burn under the sun or explode. Instead, it was a quiet and serene ending, like a sunset sinking below the horizon at the end of the day.

Richelle heaved a dismayed sigh. Although she was glad Selene’s journey had ended peacefully, it was another example of how anyone she cared for was taken away. A pang of fear intruded into her thoughts, as all that remained in the empty castle were she and Valya. She turned in his arms and lay her head against his chest. Hugging him close, she sniffed.

“Do not be sad, my love. Selene has joined her life mate. She will never be alone again.”

“It’s not just her. It’s all of them. Selene, Nicolae, Ivan, Jonathon, Duncan...my mother.” She sniffed again as a lump formed in her throat. “So much pain and suffering, so much death.”

The fear of losing Valya was more than Richelle could bear, and she burrowed into his arms, holding onto him as if he, too, would disappear like a puff of smoke, and she would be alone once more. He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. Tipping her head, he looked into her eyes as he spoke the words that would dispel the last of her fears.

“There will be no more death, no more running and hiding.”

She wanted to believe him, but with all they had overcome, it was hard, so she did the next best thing. She gave him her trust to keep his promises.

He cupped her face in his hands as he gazed into her sea-green eyes brimming with hope and desire and love. Leaning in, he kissed her lips tenderly with the love he had accumulated throughout the centuries he had searched for her. Together they faded and shimmered, rising into the sky to ride on the wind.

“There is only our love, our destiny. Forever.”

# THE END

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing is the culmination of a lifelong ambition for romance author Mia Bailey. She remembers as a child spending summers on her grandparents' farm creating little books from rolled paper her grandfather would bring home from the store. She would cut and fold the papers, stapling them to design the little books, and then spend days creating her own personal library with tales of imagination and wonder. Never one to waste a moment, she charges in headlong to face new challenges and experiences to broaden the mind, body, and spirit.

Mia lives near Detroit, Michigan, with her daughter, her cocker spaniel, and her four cats. She continues consulting through her public relations company, IDEAS – Innovative Designs for Entrepreneurial Advantages, as well as conducts training as a career mentor in career development. But most importantly, she writes daily and looks forward to the day when she can walk into someone's home and there, on the bookshelf, she will see their library of Mia Bailey novels. She truly lives by the mantra...

"Embrace Every Dream...Live Every Moment...Fulfill Every Fantasy."

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