



Candice Gilmer

*Broken  
Shine*

Book Three

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## Back Cover Copy

Felicia Hunter earned herself the nickname Leeza early in life, and well as the reputation for being a klutz. How she landed a job in a glass store was a miracle. The bigger miracle is the mysterious designer who brings in the most beautiful glasswork she'd ever seen. Little does she know, he's an Immortal Knight Templar.

Sir Liam has spent the last 700 years as a Knight Templar, faithful to the Balance Mandate. His charge is to protect humans from all manner mythical creatures. In the past 24 years, he's become more attached to Leeza than his vows of chastity allow.

The closer Liam gets to Leeza, the more love and need surge through him. His feelings for her bring him to the very edge, but if she pulls him over, he may end up broken.

Warning: This story contains unbounded passion, a little bite-and-bleed love action and a Knight to die for.

## Highlight

“I want you,” Liam whispered.

“I want you,” Leeza replied.

“I am not supposed to want anyone. And I want you.”

She didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry.” It seemed the only appropriate answer, yet truth be told, she wasn’t sorry. She didn’t want him to feel bad for wanting her. She didn’t feel bad for wanting him—why should he feel bad about it?

She laced her fingers through his, and surprisingly, he let her, holding her hands as though his life depended on it.

“I want to tell you everything,” he whispered, his eyes not leaving hers, the dark pools filled with so much emotion, he looked like he could explode.

She leaned in a little bit closer. “I want you to.” And she did. In that second, she knew whatever it was that he was going to tell her would change her entire being.

But she wanted it.

She wanted to know.

He released her hands and put a hand on each one of her cheeks. “If I tell you everything, you will never be the same. You will never see the world around you the same. You will never see me the same again, either.”

# Broken Shine

by

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Moonlight and Shadows: Book 3

Broken Shine

978-1-61650-118-1

Copyright © 2009, Candice Gilmer

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Book design by Brian Hunter

Cover Art by Renee Rocco

First Lyrical Press, Inc. electronic publication: February, 2010

Lyrical Press, Incorporated

17 Ludlow Street

Staten Island, New York 10312

<http://www.lyricalpress.com>

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Published in the United States of America by Lyrical Press, Incorporated

## Dedication

For Emma. You wanted this book, and OMG, YES, I DID... but it all worked out in the end.

## Foreward

This is the third book in the Moonlight and Shadows series. The first two, Unholy Night and A Darker Trinity are available from Lyrical Press as e-books, and soon will be available in print.

## Acknowledgements

As always, I have to thank my muses for the ideas, because without inspiration, I wouldn't be able to do this.

To Ann, as always, thanks for being my sound-board, listening to me rant and rave when the story won't listen to me.

And of course, thanks to Camila for editing me—you stepped in and did your thing, and allowed me all my line breaks.

One last one, to my husband Bob. You listen, you nod and smile, and sometimes help with the ideas. I couldn't do this without you.

# Chapter 1

## *Twenty-four years ago*

“You have a sick sense of fun,” Sir Ewan whispered to Sir Liam as they, along with Sir Adrian and Sir Tomas, wandered through the gates of the Renaissance festival. The wind blew, sending a soft haze of dust through the fairgrounds as they accepted the programs and started scanning the listings for exhibits they wanted to see.

Mostly because it would be funny to see human reproductions of medieval castles and courts.

It was Liam’s turn to find something to do for them, and he had read about the fair in the local newspaper. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. They very rarely had a peaceful moment to go out and enjoy themselves. Keeping the peace between all mythical beings was a full-time occupation.

And had been for these men for the last seven hundred years. The last time they had a spare moment was six years ago. And it had been Adrian’s turn.

They went bowling.

Liam had wanted something different for his turn.

Upon entering the fair, Liam was second-guessing his idea. They were actually alive when the Renaissance period happened.

And it didn’t look like this.

“Didn’t we just leave this era?” Adrian muttered as they started to walk around. He fiddled with the earphones of his Walkman, trying to adjust it to fit him better.

Most men and women in the fair were dressed in current trends, but another large portion of the people milling about wore costumes from the period.

A woman walked by, pink and blue and green streaks in her hair, a bodice cut lower than anything remotely resembling period, and far too much makeup.

Okay, so nothing here was exactly period. They didn’t have big blue toilets available in the era. It was a modernized version of the period costumes.

Great.

The four men were stopping traffic as they stood in the large open space near the entrance. Artisans had tents set up, and a small area had been designed to resemble a royal court. Further down the row, a couple of staging areas were set up.

Liam glanced at the map he’d been given when they entered. A sword-fighting arena was supposed to be along the far west border, and a jousting tournament was slated to start later in the day along the south border.

He really wasn't here for any of that. He merely wanted to see the artisans. He read his map, trying to locate the ones he wanted to visit.

"Good morrow to ye, handsome knaves!" A pack of women, and a pack was exactly what they were, headed straight for them, all dressed in wench costumes. And they were making eyes at the four of them.

Adrian covered his mouth and looked away.

Ewan and Tomas burst out laughing. Neither one of them knew the art of subtlety. The wenches surrounded them all, handing gifts of beads to the men.

Liam glowered.

Not that any of the women appreciated the power of his glare.

"A pleasant sight this early morn to see such strapping gentlemen!" one said, sashaying up next to Liam, pushing her bosom out even further.

"Aroint, wench." Liam stepped away from her.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What's that mean?" she asked, her Renaissance speech lost.

"Go away," Adrian said. "Thy lustful passes are wasted on us. Fare thee well."

The woman stared at him for a moment. Then she glanced at the other women who were frozen stock-still at Adrian's words.

"Fare thee well," she said, and the troupe wandered off into the crowd.

"Maybe this was a good idea," Tomas said, laughter filling his features. He gazed at a collection of women dressed as gypsies. "I really think I may have to look around now."

Ewan snorted and glanced to his right. "Oh, look, funnel cake."

"What is a funnel cake?" Tomas asked, not taking his eyes off the gypsy women.

"I have no idea, but I think we should investigate," Ewan said, staring at the food. Though Tomas headed after the gypsies instead of the funnel cake.

Adrian and Liam watched them wander off toward the snacks. And the eye candy.

"You don't think..." Adrian said, watching them walk away.

Liam said nothing. There was no need.

"Since they've lived this long..." Adrian's words trailed off, more for himself than Liam. Their laws were absolute. To be a Knight Templar, to live an eternal life protecting mythicals from humans and vice versa, the Knights had to lose something.

They sacrificed physical intimacy.

It was a fair enough trade. All the Knights had been celibate when they joined the brotherhood before the turning, anyway. So it wasn't a major loss.

Some Knights still enjoyed the beauty of the female form.

Liam found it, well, boring.

After all the centuries, women seemed to take on a similar look to him. He had yet to see one who made his heart flutter like so many humans and mythicals mooned over.

And after seven hundred years, surely someone would have enticed him.



Occasionally, he wondered if his ability to admire the female form had been lost. Had he repressed it so much that he had broken that part of himself?

A woman in a barbarian costume wandered by, her clothes too tight for her curves, and patches of skin hung over the edges. Liam raised his brow, glancing at Adrian. Adrian followed his gaze and shook his head.

Maybe it wasn't just him.

"This is not what I expected," Liam said as he and Adrian headed off in the opposite direction toward the artisans' tents.

Adrian eyed a woman in a more vintage Renaissance costume. Or maybe he was looking at his ghost. With Adrian, it was hard to tell. "Nara, who can't stop laughing, says you need to lighten up and have a little fun."

"Tell Nara she can find her entertainment somewhere else."

"If only it was that easy to get rid of my indentured ghost." Adrian had been given the ability to not only see but to communicate with the dead. While the talent had given them a certain amount of assistance over the centuries, Adrian had never been terribly comfortable with his gift.

Or maybe he wasn't terribly comfortable with Nara as his liaison to the other side. Nara had been with him since the turning in 1307, cursed to stay with a small rock talisman he wore around his neck.

Liam had to admit he preferred his own special gifts to Adrian's. At least Liam's gift didn't control him like Adrian's did.

They walked in silence, observing the traveling musicians playing their instruments, while different music floated out of all the little tents.

"What is that?" Adrian asked, gesturing to a—was he a man?—dressed as, well, as something. He had horns atop his head, black and red face paint, and a pointed chin, making him resemble a goat.

"Is it Baphomet?" Liam asked.

"No." Adrian shook his head. "Baphomet was more cat-like. Maybe it's supposed to be the Devil?"

Liam snorted. "And the Devil always looks like that..." Lucifer was far more handsome, quite debonair for the troublemaker that he was. "Maybe we should take a picture and give it to him."

"I think Lucifer would be offended."

They moved on, trying not to stare at the man and his outlandish costume.

One tent they passed had swords and chain mail in it, and Adrian stopped to admire the armor. Though more than likely he stopped to laugh at it.

It had been a lot of years since the Knights Templar actually had to wear chain mail. They now preferred Kevlar vests whenever possible. But it didn't mean the mail didn't get brought out on certain occasions.

Liam found the booth he'd been looking for. Inside were dozens of bowls and other pieces, all blown glass. Some were quite pretty, others not so much, but it wasn't the worst he'd ever seen.

Unfortunately, though, the artisan wasn't making any at the moment. He merely stood in the back, setting out display items and otherwise looking over the booth.

Liam inspected the set-up, looking at the materials and such. He was always looking for tips and tricks to help with his own glassblowing. He'd done it for centuries, having learned from an old artisan. The pieces he made he sold at auction or in boutiques, anywhere he could, to make extra funds for the Templars.

Not that they needed it, but if his selling a set of four goblets got him a new vest when he wanted it or more cigars when he desired them, then they were worth it.

And everyone needed a hobby. Even him.

As he examined the materials, he sensed another person entering the booth, quiet steps he associated with females. He paid her no mind as he focused on his own interests.

"I like the pretty glasses."

Liam turned to look, half expecting to see an adult, or at least a teenager standing next to him. Instead, he saw a little girl, maybe five years old. Though she was tall, she had a thin body and long, delicate fingers that stretched out to caress a bowl.

Liam didn't see any adults standing around to claim the child. "Where is your mother?"

"Oh, she is over there," she said, not bothering to take her eyes off the brightly colored glass. "Where?"

She turned her head and glanced. "She's over there, looking at the pretty necklaces and the pretty men in silver."

Liam scanned around. Sure enough, there was a woman talking to a few of the men in full knight armor. And she didn't seem to care that her little girl wasn't at her side.

"Well, do you not think you should be with her?"

The little girl turned again, letting out a very dramatic sigh. "She told me to go play." She picked up one of the glass bowls and stuck her face in it. "Ohhh..." she said, her voice echoing in the bowl.

She giggled and made more "ohh" sounds.

"Hey!" the artisan in the booth hollered at Liam. "Don't let your kid play with that." He charged across the tent, snagging the bowl from the girl, and set it back on the table.

Liam raised an eyebrow. "Come on." He took the girl's hand and started to walk toward where her mother had stood.

But her mother and the men in the armor had disappeared.

Perfect.

"What is your name?" he asked as he tugged her across the grassy field.

"Leeza," she said. Her hand felt so delicate in his, so tiny, he reminded himself not to squeeze for fear of hurting her small bones.

As she held his hand, she shifted her fingers around so that they encircled just his pinky finger, and her grip was strong for someone so short.

“What’s your name?” she asked him.

“Liam.”

“Leeza and Leeeeham!” And she giggled. She started repeating the chant over and over. “Leeza and Leeham, Leeza and Leeham, Leeza and Leeham.”

He looked down at her, raising his eyebrow.

Most people would have been terrified of that look. He’d brought mythicals down to their knees with just a glance.

This little girl just gave him a big toothless grin.

Surely she lacked some of her senses.

“Do you see your mother?” From his vantage point, he couldn’t see the woman anywhere.

“No,” she said, and returned to her chant.

Liam let out a growl. This was not pleasant. The thoroughfare started to get clogged between workers and people dressed in costume just for sport.

If they had lived through this period, they wouldn’t be so fond of repeating it. Humans tended to look at the past with nostalgic lenses, casually forgetting the horrors in favor of the more romanticized visions.

A woman in a formal golden dress, similar to that style of Anne Boleyn with the V front and sleeves that were almost as long as the dress, came up toward Liam and the girl. Her eyes shined with mirth, and while she met his gaze with a grin, there was a presence to her that made humans separate without her raising a finger.

The costume merely accentuated her regal nature.

Great, exactly who he didn’t want to see.

“Sir Liam,” she said with a broad grin. “It is so pleasing to see you about the world without your sword drawn.”

“I wanna see your sword!” the little girl said.

“I do not have a sword,” Liam said to her.

“Yes you do. I see it there.” The little girl pointed to the sword on his hip. Of course, humans weren’t supposed to be able to see the sword, with it being magically enchanted from mortal eyes.

“It is not there.”

“Fine.” Her lip stuck out in a pout, but she didn’t let go of his hand. “I still see it.”

Dropping the subject, he turned to the woman who’d started walking in time with him. “Aphrodite, you look lovely. A temptress just as Lady Boleyn was.”

Aphrodite raised a smug brow at him. “Where do you think she learned it?”

“I hate to speculate.”

“Good boy,” she said.

He glanced down at the girl, who was tugging at his arm, dancing around, her chant having changed from “Leeza and Leeham” to “Lady Boleyn... Lady Boleyn!” The second one she’d say in a strange version of singing, her voice going extra high on the last syllable.

Aphrodite smirked as she watched the little girl. “And where did you find this little treasure?”

“About to break glass in one of the artisans’ tents.”

“Something so offensive you felt the need to drag her from the tent?”

“Surely you have someone else to bother.”

Aphrodite glanced around, and pointed her finger at a couple walking together. Suddenly, the man laced his fingers in the woman’s, and the woman’s cheeks blushed as they walked.

“Must you do that?”

“Why, Sir Liam, it is what I do.” Aphrodite extended her finger as if to point it at him. “Surely you would not presume to tell a goddess what she can and cannot do?”

He glared at her through the corner of his eye.

She leaned in close. “I am a goddess, you know. The Balance Mandate does not apply to my abilities.”

“The Balance Mandate applies to every being on Earth, and you know it.”

The corner of her mouth tipped up in a sly grin. “You should read the Balance Mandate closely, Sir Liam. You might be surprised.”

“I am certain you and Eros have spent enough time looking for loopholes to save me the trouble.” The two of them were notorious for their need to find trouble in any situation. Liam glanced around—he was surprised that the God of Love wasn’t here with the goddess.

Aphrodite laughed. “You are an ornery one, Knight.” When Liam didn’t join in her amusement, she raised her brow at him. “You should try laughing on occasion. It might soften your heart.”

“A soft heart does not allow me to do my job.”

“On the contrary, Liam. An emotional heart might allow you to do your job better.” While the words could have come from Aphrodite, instead, they emerged from a man who’d appeared on Aphrodite’s side—Eros, the God of Love, dressed in a formal King Henry ensemble, complimenting her ornate dress—albeit Eros did not have the girth of King Henry.

Just exactly who he didn’t want to see. Of course, most all the ancient gods and goddesses made his skin crawl. They were all intermingled in his mind. And every one of them found the Templar Knights highly amusing. “I highly doubt that.”

Aphrodite smirked at him. “Did you handle that problem you found?”

Eros smiled. “Love blooms as we speak.” A twinkle sparkled in his eye, so he looked as mischievous as Aphrodite. His gaze ran over Liam while keeping a casual look on his face. Liam knew him well enough to know that the god was taking in him with this little girl in tow. “And it is a great pleasure to see a servant of The Divine out and about on such a lovely day, caring for the welfare of the little ones.”

"I'm not little! I'm a big girl," little Leeza said, her hands on her hips.

"Indeed you are," Eros replied, reaching down and brushing his finger down her nose.

Leeza giggled and smiled, twisting her hips as though she had on a dress. "I like you."

"And I like you too." He glanced between Liam and the girl. "Such a lovely companion you have there, Sir Liam."

Liam snorted. "Did you need something, Eros?"

"Merely was searching for, uh, Lady Boleyn." He raised his eyebrow at Aphrodite.

She ignored him and pointed her finger at another couple; this time, the woman dragged the man around the corner, between two of the tents.

Liam wanted to growl at her.

Eros shook his head. "You are going to get into trouble doing that," he muttered, then pointed his own finger at a different couple walking by, and the man wrapped his arm around the woman, pulling her close to him.

"And the difference between what I did and what you did?"

Eros sighed. "Because you work in lust and beauty. I work in love—the purest form of emotion."

"And the most reckless," Liam muttered.

"Are you two brother and sister?" Leeza asked, staring between Eros and Aphrodite.

They glanced at each other for a second, amused, and then Aphrodite answered her, "In a matter of speaking."

Leeza tipped her head to the side. "Like, for pretend?"

Eros got down on one knee before her. "We have grown up together, living like brother and sister for many years." He leaned into her ear, cupping his hand around it. "We forget we really aren't."

Leeza laughed. "Are you gonna get married?"

Eros smirked. "No. Our love is not that kind."

She looked back and forth between them. "You match. People who match should be married."

Liam let out a sigh. "Leeza, enough of this foolish talk. We need to find your mother." He started to walk away from the two, but unfortunately they followed him.

And they weren't going to let the discussion just lie, either.

"Certainly all your years haven't turned you into a cynic, Sir Liam," Aphrodite stated, touching his arm as they walked. Eros remained on the far side of her, and Leeza bounced in front of the troop, walking intentionally in a crooked line like only a child could.

"He was like that before," Eros whispered to her, but plenty loud enough for Liam to hear them.

"I see what love does to people." And he'd seen enough—men and women, fools who were willing to destroy everything in their lives for the sake of stupid emotion.

Pointless.

“So you see their happiness,” Eros said.

“Emotion rarely brings happiness.”

“Spoken like someone who’s never loved before.” Eros arched his eyebrow at Liam, a smirk spreading across his face.

Liam didn’t reply, only shooting a warning glance at the god.

Leeza started tugging on his finger. She suddenly wanted to go see the gypsy women who danced in a small staging area not far away.

Thankful for the girl, he allowed himself to be dragged away from the gods. “If you will excuse me.”

“Of course,” Aphrodite said, smiling as she faced Eros. “Debate goes to you, Eros. Sir Liam has bowed out.”

Liam gritted his teeth as he walked away. This was not the first time a god or goddess tried to engage him in a debate of humanity. The nature of his heart, or any Templar heart, was not up for discussion.

A soft heart indeed—how would that possibly benefit him in his life?

A mere hindrance.

Emotions always were.

Little Leeza giggled as she bounced ahead of him toward the dancers. Liam followed, taking a seat on one of the bales of hay set up around the dancing area.

The girl sat very close to the front, and a few minutes later Liam, seeing how the girl shifted around on the hay bale, decided he should sit next to her to keep her out of mischief.

She smiled at him, wiggling around on her little sliver of the bale, her face lighting up at his attention. “I like you, Mister Leeham.”

“I like you too, Miss Leeza.” And he did. Her eyes were clear, her mind pure, and her innocence awesome.

She watched the dancers, shaking in her seat, trying to mimic their dance moves while still sitting down. One of the gypsies winked at her and she started to giggle, standing up to clap and trying to shake her hips like they did.

Liam rolled his eyes.

Yet as he watched the little girl’s innocent movements, he couldn’t help but be a bit taken by her. Her pure soul made his empty one feel alive in ways he hadn’t experienced before.

He turned around, half expecting to see Eros behind him, his finger pointed at him. Then he’d have to kill a god, and that was never pleasant. They were such a pain to kill, not to mention trying to explain to The Divine why one of the gods had been deemed worth disposing of.

And shooting his magic love potions at Liam certainly wasn’t worth his death. It wouldn’t be the first time Eros, or one of the other gods, had shot some of their magic mojo at a Templar.

The little girl, though, she was why he did what he did—to make sure that the pure, the innocent didn't see the ugly side of the world.

When the dancers finished, she giggled and squealed, clapping and cheering for them. She was by far the loudest person cheering for the women. Most of the viewers seemed only mildly entertained with the dancers.

But Leeza was not—she loved it. She was about to run up to the dancers, but Liam caught her arm.

“Leeza, I don't think you should bother the women.”

“But I wanna dance like they do!”

One of the dancers spun around, the one who'd winked at her, and came forward. “Hi there, little one,” she said, grinning at Leeza.

“That was so neato-torpedo!” Leeza grinned, reaching out to touch the beaded skirt the woman wore.

“It takes a lot of practice,” she said. “Want me to teach you a move?”

“Yes!”

Liam stood up while Leeza and the dancer stood next to each other, and the woman showed her a basic rocking of the hips, back and forth. Leeza could barely follow, but she tried very hard. She bit her lip, squinted her eyes, and watched the woman for several minutes before trying herself.

She was close, but not quite there.

Liam gave them a few more minutes, and headed over. “Leeza, I think we should find your mother now.”

“No!”

The dancer patted her shoulder. “You should do what your daddy says, sweetheart. But maybe you can come back later and dance some more.”

“This is not my daddy. It's my Leeham.” She walked back over to Liam and he scooped her up in his arms before walking away.

He didn't say anything about her calling him “my Leeham”. He was thankful none of his fellow Knights were around to hear the girl's little words. Odds were they wouldn't let that go for at least a decade.

Probably longer, knowing them.

“What is this?” she asked, tracing the small red cross on his shoulder.

“The iron cross,” he replied.

“What does it mean?”

He looked into her bright eyes. “Safety.”

She grinned at him. “You feel safe.”

They continued to walk a little further and she started wiggling in his arms, unable to be still. He let her down and she grabbed his finger again: they headed off through the crowds.

“That was very nice of the woman to show you the dance,” he told her as they started to look for her mother again.

“I bet if I practice, I can learn to do it.”

“Probably.”

“I’m gonna work really hard.”

“Good.”

They walked in silence, Liam scanning around for the girl’s mother, but he could not find her anywhere. Anger curled in his gut—what kind of mother would let her child just roam around a huge fair like this without supervision? Anyone could have found the child; even among humans, there were evil people.

The more they walked, the more distraught the child got. Her grip got tighter around his finger, her head darting about in worried jerks. Tears welled up in her eyes and her lip quivered as they maneuvered through the stands, looking for her mother.

Liam knew they were at a critical moment—she was near hysterics. He’d been around enough children in his long life that he knew if she wasn’t quickly calmed down, he’d be dealing with a full-blown tantrum.

Or worse.

“Leeza?” She glanced up at him with big, tear-stained eyes. “How would you like a piggyback ride?”

Her eyes widened. “On your back?”

“On my back,” he said, kneeling down.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Can you hold me? I am five and a half.”

“I can hold you.”

Her little arms gripped his shoulders as she climbed up. He held onto her legs as he stood. She was as light as a feather, her legs not long enough to wrap around his chest, so they just dangled at his sides. She squealed and giggled as he stood up.

“I can see the whole world from up here!”

Liam let out a laugh as they started trudging through the fair.

“Ohh!” Leeza started wiggling around. “I think my mommy is over there!”

“Hold still,” Liam said.

“Okay,” she said, patting his head.

Liam couldn’t help it—he started to smile.

\* \* \* \*

Adrian walked alone through the fair, visiting with patrons dressed in Ren Faire attire. He’d been looking around for Liam, but he couldn’t find him anywhere. Knights Ewan and Tomas remained near the food, the women no longer interesting, and stuffed their faces with whatever they could get. Tomas was bellyaching about not being able to get mead like it used to be, and Ewan was trying to remind him that their mead would probably incapacitate most of the crowd if consumed.



They'd both be sick tomorrow; the junk food they were loading up on would keep them in the bathroom for the next twenty-four hours.

Still, after seven hundred years, one would think they would learn that with the Templars' high metabolisms, they tended to expel all junk much faster.

One would think, anyway.

Adrian left them to their binge and headed off to find Liam again. He was pretty sure he'd find Liam around the glassblowing tent, but lo and behold, he wasn't there. The artisan was working, but no Liam.

Odd.

He continued to meander around, hoping he'd stumble on his partner, but he hadn't yet. He half hoped Liam hadn't scared anyone with his scowls. Stars knew it had taken him a full decade to get used to Liam's lack of happy emotion.

Or any emotion.

Two men dressed as knights needed some assistance with dressing in their armor, so he stopped long enough to help them properly cinch it up so they could wear it better while working. He kept an eye open, just in case any mythicals were about, and though he saw a few werewolves, they were in their own Ren Faire dress, enjoying themselves.

Since the full moon was two weeks away, Adrian didn't pay them much mind.

Meanwhile, Nara babbled around him, spouting off her own personal commentary about people from one end of the fair to the next.

She had a lot to say about the woman pretending to be a psychic medium—and not much of it was pleasant. As people would walk up to her booth, she would shout that they needed to save their money, on the off chance that they might actually hear her.

Not that it worked.

"Really," she said for the third time, her silvery, translucent appearance like smoke on the wind, "I do not comprehend why humans are so gullible."

"Simply because they don't have to listen to you all the time," Adrian replied, his head down and the long blond locks hanging around his face to block his mouth as he spoke to her. He stopped by a booth that sold Egyptian artifacts, or rather Egyptian trinkets; it was doubtful any of them were authentic. Not at those prices, anyway. He picked up a bottle of patchouli oil and sniffed it.

Not bad. Not bad at all.

"Oh my Zeus," Nara muttered.

Adrian rolled his eyes. "There is no need to take Zeus's name in vain. He might send you back to the River Styx if you're not careful."

Nara reached over, her hand gliding right through his chin, a cold chill running through Adrian.

"Nara!" he snapped, bringing his head up. "Do not do that!"

"Look." She pointed out of the booth onto the thoroughfare.

Liam was walking down the path with a child on his back. The little blond girl was giggling and just chatting him up as they walked. She patted him on the top of the head and Liam smiled.

He really smiled.

Adrian about fainted.

## Chapter 2

### *Present Day*

“No, please,” the blond human ground out, blood spitting out of her mouth.

Her face was bloody, black and blue, as was her body. The night that filtered in her window made her look dead.

She almost was.

Not that it stopped him.

He covered her mouth with one hand, not caring that she tried to bite him—it only covered his palm with blood.

*Fragile, nothing, wastes of creation.*

His climax started to rise. Behind his eyes, he could feel it—the fire was coming.

Hands shaking, the orgasm took him—and the fire exploded out of him, engulfing everything around him in a flash.

The sound was deafening.

Windows blasted out, the heat so strong the glass partially melted with the blast.

*Later, when the pathetic humans try to investigate, they’ll determine that it was some form of arson, but they’ll find no evidence of accelerant.*

*And they’ll be lucky if they find the identity of the female.*

*Not that it matters. She’s merely a means to an end.*

He snarled as he walked through the flames, fire shooting out his nose.

It wasn’t enough. It would never be enough.

\* \* \* \*

Nicole Bernard’s light eyes were wide with terror. “But I don’t want—I’m not ready—I don’t want to die.” She stared at the sword the Knight Templar, Sir Liam, held out.

“You asked me to kill you. I am here to fulfill that promise.” He could have jabbed the sword in her heart, not bothering to hesitate, and just done his duty.

But he didn’t.

She shook her head. “I’ve changed my mind...” Her voice faltered.

“Are you sure?”

She looked terrified, but not of him. Something worse had happened. She had babbled when she opened the door about being chased before.

Not a good turn of events.

She motioned for him to follow her into the house she shared with her sire mates, James Henrick and Joseph Oliver. Because of an accident on the men's part, Nicole had been turned into a vampire a few weeks before.

Mythicals getting lost in the throes of passion.

They had no control.

Something Liam never lost.

Nicole walked into the kitchen, each step more solid than the one before. She went straight for the refrigerator and pulled out a bag of blood to make herself a drink. After she'd spent a few days at the Templar compound, she chose to drink bagged blood versus hunting down prey and getting live human blood to feed on.

Liam hoped James and Joseph could keep her newborn vampire instincts under control. He didn't relish the thought of having to ash Nicole; he'd become somewhat fond of her.

Well, as much as Liam could, anyway.

But he had his reasons.

Nicole wasn't terrified of him.

There weren't many people, human or otherwise, who weren't terrified of him. That could have something to do with him being roughly the size of a car.

Or the fact that he was a Knight Templar. The police force of all things mythical on the planet.

Nicole pulled her cup of warmed, bagged blood from the microwave and sat down at the kitchen table. The sleek lines of it clashed with the bouquet of flowers that dominated the center. The flowers were a new addition. In fact, Liam noticed a lot of feminine touches around the once sterile house.

Girly-fied.

Liam smirked on the inside.

"Sit." She met his gaze as she took a sip of her drink.

"I am not here for pleasantries." He didn't bother putting away his sword.

"Fine then. I release you from your debt. I don't want to die."

Liam raised an eyebrow at her, but she wasn't done speaking.

"I want you to find Melios. And I want you to kill him." Her voice didn't falter and her eyes were cold, colder than he'd ever seen them. "That bastard had goons following me in friggin' Wal-Mart."

"Are you certain it was Melios?"

Now she glared at him like he was a moron. "Let's see. Who has a vendetta against James and Joseph? Melios. Who would want to hurt James and Joseph in the most intimate way since they turned in his sister? Melios. Who would think to chase after me, since I'm such a newly turned vampire? It's not like I have any enemies."

Liam was about to tell her that since she was sired by James and Joseph she now inherited their enemies, when the back door came open.

In burst Joseph and James; the blond and brunette vampires flew to Nicole's side. She jumped up, and each man wrapped their arms around each other, making a sort of vampire sandwich. James kissed her on the mouth, Joseph tipping around to kiss her cheek, and they just clung to each other for a moment.

"You're safe," James whispered, stroking her hair.

"We were so worried," Joseph added, kissing her again.

Liam cleared his throat. He really did not want to witness a mating ritual right now.

"Sir Liam." James let go of Nicole, but kept a hand on her shoulder as she sat back down. Joseph stepped behind her chair, his hand on her other shoulder. They both looked ready to defend their mate in a heartbeat.

Truly, after seven hundred years, Liam should be used to the affection and passion so many mythicals displayed, especially for their life mates. Though he wasn't sure who was worse—vampires or wolves. Both were ruled by their passions.

Yet in the last few decades, it had been getting more and more aggravating for Liam to witness emotional attachment. Probably because it seemed useless energy.

And Liam didn't waste his energy.

Though today's visit to Nicole's residence seemed a step in that direction.

"Going somewhere?" He gestured to the suitcases that were piled near the back door.

Joseph followed his gaze, then brought his attention back. "We're taking her somewhere safe."

"Do you think you can hide from Melios and the entire Romanian Clan?"

"We have people we trust."

"Interesting that you run now." Liam put his sword back in its sheath.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Joseph snapped.

Liam shrugged. "Would you have run from Melios a year ago?" Though he knew the answer—James and Joseph would never have run.

Not before their mate.

He didn't get it. What was the importance of the mate?

James took a step forward. "We have to protect Nicole."

"So you run and hide?"

Joseph's fangs came out, and he snarled at Liam.

James's fangs were out as well, though he didn't move a step closer to Liam. "When you have a mate, Sir Liam," James said, "you will understand."

He shook his head. "It will never happen."

"Then you will die a lonely man," Nicole said, punching through the tension in the room.

Liam said nothing as he left, though inside he snorted.

Irony, because he would never die.

\* \* \* \*

“Do not move,” Leeza Hunter’s boss Marge, owner of La Bouteille d’Art, yelled at her. She froze.

Leeza wasn’t the most graceful person in the world, as the two broken hand-blown bowls now in a thousand pieces on the floor now illustrated.

“I’m not moving,” she replied.

This was why she didn’t come down from the upstairs office. She tended to break everything she came in contact with. If Marge had any sense, she would have fired her years ago. It wasn’t the smartest thing in the world to have a klutz working in your hand-blown glass shop.

Marge appeared, broom and dustpan in hand, and started sweeping up the shards that were strewn all over the floor.

“I’ll pay for those,” Leeza said.

“I know,” Marge said. “It would be nice, though, if the money that came out of your check for products were actually for products you were taking home.”

Marge cleared a path, and Leeza retreated to the back of the store, out of the way of as many of the breakables as possible.

“Did you have a reason for coming down here?”

“Actually, I did,” she replied. “We got a call for some custom glass. Are any of the artists able to do that kind of thing?”

“What kind of work?” Marge asked as she dumped the dustpan in the trash, the clatter of the glass falling sending a shiver down Leeza’s back.

“Wedding flutes—customized with the bride and groom’s first initial on them.”

“I’m sure someone could do that.”

While Leeza handled the books, the website and the internet work, she rarely, if ever, had to deal with the artists themselves. Sure, she cataloged their new contributions and set up images for the website, that kind of thing—why she could handle one glass at a time, but not walk through the store without breaking something, she didn’t know—but she didn’t actually know which artists did custom jobs, or bothered to consider such requests.

The store specialized in local artisans and the original work was amazing to see. The store had a small but loyal following in the city. The prices weren’t too high, but high enough that they weren’t ever in the red.

Unless Leeza broke the whole stock.

Most of the time, it was her own clumsiness.

Today, though, she had to blame it on her wandering mind. It had been a couple of weeks since she ran into *him*. He’d been smoking a cigar on the roof where she parked her car.

And he’d sent her heart into palpitations.

Tall. Six-three, six-four maybe? Dark cropped hair and a slight European look to him—exotic, almost. Also, he was huge. Had she gotten right up next to him, he could have probably enveloped her—and she wasn’t any little thing either.

At five-nine, she wasn't exactly tiny.

She'd been thinking about mystery man when she'd come downstairs because she could have sworn she'd seen a glimpse of him last night when she'd been coming out of the grocery store. It was probably the shadows of the night messing with her. At least, that's what she wanted to tell herself.

However, there was more.

It was the smell.

The smell of the damn cigar thing he'd been smoking. Leeza never forgot a smell. It was a weird disease with her.

She could almost taste it now on her lips. Probably why she wasn't able to notice that Marge had rearranged the displays again, and had bounced into one, sending the dishes flying.

Marge stored the broom and glanced back at Leeza. "Are you still brooding over the man from the roof?"

"I'm not brooding," Leeza replied. "I think I saw him last night."

She paused, mid-wipe of the front counter. "Oh, really?"

"I was coming out of the grocery store, and I smelled the cigar." In her mind's eye, she saw the whole thing. Laden down with groceries, she bungled out of the grocery store, heading for her car.

And she got that feeling—the hairs on her neck stood up.

Glancing to the right produced nothing, but when she glanced to the left, she saw the man.

Or so she thought.

It was twilight—the early darkness of spring still seemed to envelop everything around her. The wind had been blowing sharply, coming at her from her left; what direction was that—north? She wasn't sure.

Didn't matter.

A gust of wind brought the smell to her.

And there he was, consumed by shadows and dark clothing. He walked toward her, but not quite—aiming for the doors, like so many other patrons of the store.

Her eyes locked with the shadowed circles where his eyes should have been. Whether he was looking at her or not, she couldn't be certain, only that his head was turned just slightly in her direction, his eyes impossible to read in the dark.

Yet the hairs on her neck wouldn't lie down.

She'd bet anything that he had been staring at her.

"Surely that's not that uncommon." Marge's words jarred her from the memory.

A flash of him filled her mind's eye. "It is when it's attached to a man that size."

## Chapter 3

The bloodlust burned inside the two vampires—they were riddled with it.

Good. They would do their job, then.

“Tell me what it is I want to hear.” Melios glared at them.

So new. They truly had no idea.

“Gone. James and Joseph have disappeared, My Lord.”

“That isn’t what I wanted to know.”

“So sorry, My Lord.” One of the vampires bowed his head.

“And the girl?” Melios didn’t look at them, instead focused on the golden goblet he held, an ancient relic from several hundred years ago, an old family heirloom. The blood in it wasn’t fresh anymore, but the aroma was enough to make the vampires twitch. He purposely let a drop drip out and splash on the floor.

They followed the liquid with their eyes.

Oh yes, the lust was getting more and more powerful.

Neither one responded, their eyes intently focused on the drop of blood.

“Do not make me repeat myself.”

“She left with them. A Templar came to their residence—”

“A Templar.” Melios let out a sigh. “Stupid waste of skin.” The Templars were nothing but a wasted band of men God deemed worthy, for some damnable reason, to try and protect the mythical population from humans.

When it was really the humans who needed protecting.

Unfortunately, the Templar laws kept mythicals from doing what needed to be done—enslaving the humans. Vampires needed blood, wolves needed fresh meat; all mythicals needed a slave race to build whatever needed building.

Humans were perfect for that.

Instead, they were left to their own devices, allowed to roam free, unchecked in the world, too busy focusing on their menial existence, and not realizing that they truly were the sub-species. Soon enough, the mythicals would take their place as the dominant creatures on the planet.

Melios got up out of the chair. “Which Templar was at the house?”

“Sir Liam, My Lord.”

Melios nodded. Of course it was Liam. “Find him. Covertly. Send the two animals...”

“Sir?”

“What are they? The SEALs? Send them. Use that phrasing they like—covert op. Find out what Liam’s weakness is. Then perhaps we can find where Joseph and James have run off to.”

“He is a Templar. He does not have a weakness.”



Melios rocked the glass back and forth, another droplet spilling on the floor. “He breathes. He has a weakness. Find it.”

With that, he set the cup down on the table and headed out of the room.

“My Lord?”

He slowly turned to look at the pleading eyes of his vampire.

“We have not fed...”

Melios began unfastening his red robe. “Why should I let you feed? You did not bring me what I wanted to hear.”

Their hearts hammered, their pulses pounded in the room. The need was getting more and more powerful.

He headed for the door to his side room, dropping his robe to the ground. As he opened the door, he appraised the pets in waiting—several nude humans, just waiting for him, writhing around on the bed with each other.

Just as he liked them.

There was nothing quite like the flavor of blood charged with sexual energy.

“We shall do as you request,” the vampire said, jarring his attention from his pets.

“Good.” He walked into the room, not bothering to shut the door as he climbed on the low burgundy bed, grabbing the first piece of flesh that came near him, a woman’s leg, and bit it, sucking her blood.

She winced and withered in his grip.

He paused long enough to look up at her. “Shush.” With an open palm, he smacked her across her face, and she collapsed back on the bed, blood coming out her mouth. He took another bite—she was almost drained.

He picked her up and walked to the door. “Share this one,” he said, dropping her on the floor, nude and bruised, in front of the vampires.

They didn’t hesitate to bite into her.

\* \* \* \*

Clack.

Clack.

Boom.

Sir Liam was not happy.

Taking down a renegade vampire was usually not this much of a challenge, especially on a Thursday night.

On weeknights, even mythicals tended to relax a bit, not be nearly so powerful. Most were working blokes, just like humans. Of course, most did not raise the Templars’ attention, either.

Tonight, though, this boy, this newly turned mythical, was fighting back harder, more skillfully than a newborn should have been.

Not a good turn of events.

It merely punctuated that they hadn't yet found Melios's nest and where he was hiding all his newly turned vampires.

The young vampire grabbed a pipe out of a trash bin and wielded it like a bo staff, swinging it around to counter Liam's broadsword. The sword was making quick work of the pipe.

Not that the gun that resided in Liam's back wasn't used as well, but this time, the sword had seemed appropriate. Guns were nice, but they didn't have the wonderful ashing effect that the sword did.

Only swords, stabbed through the heart of a vampire, would turn the mythical into dust. Well, swords or any other particularly sharp object.

He was pissed off. A workout was always good at relieving stress. Rape-drain crimes did that to him.

They'd been tracking these crimes since last fall, and while James and Joseph had clued them in to Melios, they still had no solid proof that the old vampire was responsible for the small army of unregistered mythicals. The only way to prove it would be a full-on attack against Melios.

Unfortunately, where Melios was hiding was a problem. They still hadn't figured that out yet.

The number was astounding—if Melios was responsible, he had to be turning humans on almost a daily basis. The number of unregistered never seemed to dwindle, even though Liam probably ashed three or four a week.

And that was just him.

Yet no one would dare come forward, providing anything about Melios. If Joseph and James hadn't even admitted to seeing Melios recently, they wouldn't have known the vampire was still alive. Melios was so old, he didn't have one of the global tracking units imbedded like all other registered mythicals.

And odds were, even if he could be found, he wouldn't allow the procedure.

He was very against anything that gave Templars any sort of advantage.

Liam slashed upward with his sword, coupled with a spin and a kick against the young vampire he fought, knocking him to the side, the boy crashing into the brick wall of the old apartment building.

"It is time for you to share." Liam jerked the boy up and stared into his face. His senses were tingling, and he was ready to pull every bit of information out of this young one he could.

A flash hit him—everything, it was all there. Yet he couldn't decipher any of it. So much vague anger and pompous attitude clouded the memories that might help Liam track him back to his sire.

The same with most of the vampires he'd encountered—even though he could see into their minds, he could never actually read them. It was as though their thoughts were purposely blocked against him.

Which wouldn't surprise Liam in the slightest.

The vampire jerked out of his grip. "I have nothing to say to you." He spun around, the pipe back in his hand.

Clack.

Liam's sword met the pipe, throwing the force of the swing back at the kid.

He surged up in the air, landing with a thump in front of Liam. Even though he'd figured out that he could jump, he hadn't learned how to fight with typical vampire style, using the Y axis in the fight.

Liam's advantage.

They crunched and clanked against one another, the boy lunging at him, throwing the full power of his mythical strength at him.

Good thing Liam was used to mythical strength, and had some of his own. With a twist of his body, he jerked to the side at the last second. Hit the boy in the center of his back. The boy tumbled to the ground, panting for air.

"You are stupid," the vamp spat out between pants.

"How do you figure?" Liam tried to pull more from his mind, get something concrete to anchor the visions he'd pulled already. He held him down, a boot on his chest, sword at the ready to ash him.

"You're as old as most of the elder vampires, if not older. You're human, and you supposedly run the mythicals." He tried to get up. Liam's boot and sword kept him in place. "You could own the world."

"Not our mandate."

"There's a new mandate coming." The boy grabbed Liam's boot and tried to twist his ankle.

Liam stepped on his crotch with his other foot. The vampire cried out in agony. Of course, who wouldn't? Liam weighed somewhere around two-eighty.

"Uh huh." Liam grabbed the boy's hand.

"When we get the Blood Stone, things are going to change." His light, silvery eyes shone with a different kind of clarity than his pompous attitude before. This boy was a believer. He believed every word he spoke—with all his soul and being.

A flash hit Liam—his mind seeing beyond what was in front of him, and showing him far too many details of what this vampire had been privy to. This time, clearer, with certainty, as if he wanted Liam to know exactly what was coming.

The evidence spilled out before him; Melios's plans, the orgies on human flesh, and the goals of this new army Melios was building.

"The Blood Stone?" Liam asked, twisting his foot on the vampire's chest. He was unable to fathom any vampire's belief in a damn rock. A red rock, roughly the size and shape of a human heart, that had no power or charm attached to it, at least none that Liam had ever witnessed.

That didn't stop the legends from arising about the rock's importance. Many believed it wasn't just a rock, but the Stone of Cain, a talisman of Adam's son Cain, forsaken to walk the world in eternal night, The First Vampire.

And supposedly the Stone of Cain could cause a great deal of damage to the mythical as well as the human population. If someone of the pure bloodline of Cain could wield it.

For centuries, vampires had been trying to get their hands on it, with many claiming to be some long lost child of Cain.

Yet no one had been able to find it.

"When we have the stone," the vamp said, "we will change everything."

"There are no direct blood descendents of Cain." He smirked as the vampire winced. Just hearing the name of The First Vampire could throw terror in the heart of most vampires.

The fact that this one wasn't running for the hills just showed how young and foolish he was.

"We have one."

"The bloodlines are dead, boy. I killed the last myself." He shoved his heavy black boot in the boy's throat.

"You...you..." He wheezed.

Liam let up just a bit.

"You...missed one..." the boy managed to get out.

"No, I didn't." Liam plunged his broadsword into the vamp's chest, and in an instant, Liam's foot slammed on the ground. What was once the vampire's body became nothing but soot and ash in the air, swimming around for a brief second before settling on the ground like ugly gray chalk.

Liam pulled out his cellphone, and with a tap, connected to Adrian. He exhaled a few breaths, calming himself before his partner answered. Their exchange was brief, and Adrian was on his way to pick him up.

Liam still considered the vampire's words.

All bloodlines, every last one of them, had been destroyed, as required by the gods. Surely, they hadn't missed a direct descendent of Cain. It couldn't be possible, after all these centuries.

But if it was, they had more problems than just a bunch of unregistered vampires out there, causing a commotion.

A living blood relative of Cain.

Even without some talisman, a vampire with that kind of power could screw up everything.

## Chapter 4

Leeza walked across the street to the parking garage. The night was cold for this time of year, not quite dark yet, and she wished she had bothered to wear a coat with her blouse. Instead, the thin, pretend-silk shirt she wore felt like a sheet of ice dancing across her skin in the wind. And every hair pin in the world wasn't going to hold her baby-fine blond hair up in its twist, not with this wind.

The weather didn't appreciate her need for business casual.

"Leeza!" came a call behind her.

Leeza froze in the middle of downtown, that yell being one that would always make her freeze.

Marge needed something.

Two cars honked at her as she spun around and ran back toward the shop. She waved at the drivers while they cursed her for running back across the busy street. At least she hadn't gotten hit.

Today.

One of these days, she'd learn not to run through downtown streets at quitting time.

Marge stood at the entryway of La Bouteille d'Art. "Girl, you are gonna get squashed like grape," she said, mimicking Mr. Miyagi from *The Karate Kid*.

"Not today. What do you need?" While she'd been busy all day with stock and updates, she wasn't exactly tired yet. Maybe it had something to do with the ticket to the movies in her pocket.

Dinner and a movie alone wasn't the most glamorous thing she could be doing tonight, but heck, it was a chance to get out. And a good action-shoot-'em-up film sounded wonderful.

While she probably could have gone with a girlfriend, more than likely any of her girlfriends would want to see the new romance that had come out the day before. And that did not sound good.

Nope, tonight was a night for explosions, guns, and fight scenes way more interesting than her self-defense classes. She took self-defense classes for protection; they didn't make it look nearly as cool as in the movies.

Most of the time, Leeza still felt like a klutz.

"I have to go, family emergency." Marge danced from one foot to the other. "And I'm expecting a delivery tonight."

"It's Friday night," Leeza countered.

"I know, and I gotta go. It's a big family thing."

"And you think I don't have plans for a Friday night?"

Even Marge wasn't buying that one. She shifted her purse on her shoulder, glancing up at the sky, and started to dart across the street.

"Yeah, okay, I know, that was lame." Leeza's dating life hadn't been very interesting for the last, oh, four years. She dated every so often, but she hadn't been in anything serious for four years.

Getting laid on occasion was a different story.

Okay, well, not really, but there had been a couple of random men in the last few years. And as far as she was concerned, they could stay random in her mind. They were that unimpressive, but they were there when she needed a release.

After the last one, though, she vowed no more “friends with benefits”. It was too confusing.

A thought came to Leeza. “Why are you expecting a delivery? I handle all that stuff,” she hollered toward Marge just as Marge was about to disappear in the garage.

“He’ll be here in an hour, and he’s always prompt.” With that, Marge disappeared into the garage.

“Wait,” Leeza said, cursing to herself. She knew exactly who was coming, and why Marge practically ran across the street to get away, because if she had said who was making the delivery, then Leeza would have never agreed to stay behind and wait for it.

The one and only “Sir” Liam.

As if he really was some kind of royalty.

Whatever.

\* \* \* \*

Leeza seated herself behind the counter of the shop, making a point to stay there and not dare move around the glass. She started by going through and dusting the shelves, but when three bowls almost crashed onto the floor, she stopped herself.

So now all she did was gaze at the pretty glass. The specially-placed light in the store bounced around over the hand-crafted pieces, making them all glimmer and shine.

La Bouteille d’Art was closed for the night, and she considered shutting off some of the light so no wandering passerby would think the place was still open.

The last thing she wanted to do was handle any late-night customers. Being alone in downtown wasn’t the brightest thing she could be doing. She jingled her keys in her pocket.

Maybe she should lock the door. Leeza tried with all her might to think of something positive about this. And ignore the irritation at missing the movie she’d wanted to go see.

“Positive, be positive,” she reminded herself. “At least I’ll get to see this famous ‘Sir’ Liam for once.”

Not that she wanted to. His glass was some of the most popular in the store. Even now, Leeza could glance around and spot his work over the others. There was just something about it—finer details, thinner glass than anyone else made, delicate yet still very strong.

Not once since she’d worked there had she ever shattered one of Sir Liam’s pieces. It was like the pieces had sonar in them, and pushed her away from them before she could break them.

She’d painted a mental picture of him over the few years she’d been at the store. Probably five-six, Albert Einstein gray hair and moustache, and a pot-belly from too much time not moving around.

So when the six-foot-six guy with cropped black hair came in the shop door, she thought for sure she'd gotten an actual customer. Or someone lost.

Maybe she should have locked the door.

"Hi, can I help you?" She forced a smile on her face, and was taken aback by the size of him. My God, were men supposed to be that large? Large as he was, he was familiar to her.

The air around her crackled and she bit her lip.

"Where is Marge?" His gaze narrowed on hers, the slits so small, she could barely tell what color his eyes were. They just resembled angry black voids.

"She's not here. Are you here with the delivery?" Surely this couldn't be the infamous Sir Liam.

Not possible, he was far too...too... A thousand thoughts came to mind, and every one of them sent ripples of desire through her. Desire that moved her focus off of why she was here on a Friday night.

Business. This was business.

He turned toward the door, looking more like a bull in the store than she did when she meandered around in it. "I will come back."

Leeza got a whiff of the air, the smell slamming into her like a semi truck. "You!"

He froze.

"You're the guy who was on the roof that day."

"Pardon?"

She came around the counter, bumping her hip on a table and making the glasses wobble. He jerked fast, catching the tall vase on the end before it tumbled to the ground.

"Thanks," she said, taking the vase back and placing it in its original place. "You are the man who was on the roof a few weeks ago." She may not have recognized him when he came in the door, but she knew the smell—that cigar smell of him haunted her dreams.

"You have me mistaken for someone else."

"No, I don't think so."

"You do."

Evidently, this guy thought she was an idiot, because the finality of the comment was his attempt at intimidation.

Intimidation never made her very happy. "Don't lie to me."

"Where is Marge?" He crossed his arms over his broad chest, his pinched expression looking even more unpleasant. She ran her eyes down his chest, his arms, and his legs.

He was massive! She'd be surprised if she could wrap her arms around him and touch her hands.

The thought of that was enough to send more of those desirous ripples through her body. All her girly parts stood up at attention.

She needed to stop this.

He glared at her like he knew what she was thinking.

Hmm, maybe this wasn't a guy to antagonize. There was something definitely spooky about his glare. She decided that she needed to not be so confrontational. Pissing off someone of his size couldn't be good. Surely he knew what to do with a body...

And he was an artist—his work sold better than most in the store. Marge would have her head if she ran him off.

He was interested in Marge. So she should tell him what he wanted to hear. "She had some family thing to take care of."

"What kind of family problems?" He looked outside, like he was expecting a plane to fall out of the sky or something.

"She didn't say." Odd, that, because usually Marge was very open about her family. And now that Leeza thought about it, it was not good if she wasn't telling her what was going on.

He returned his intense expression back to her, though he didn't look quite so mean, and she could almost see the color of his eyes, sun tea where the sun was beaming through the tea from the other side of the jar: brown, yet golden, but brown still.

"I will get my stuff." He stepped back out the door.

"Good." She forced a smile on her face and waited near the door as he walked to the...wow, pretty plain-Jane sedan he had there. He just screamed enormous SUV.

Or big full-sized diesel truck.

As he bent over the back end of the car to pull out a box, Leeza had to force herself to wipe the drool off her face.

And then she got a full-on view of his ass.

The drool started again.



## Chapter 5

Liam forced himself to squeeze the hand cut-outs on the cardboard box before lifting it out of the trunk.

What in the Heavens was she doing here?

This was bad. This was so very bad.

His heart hammered in his chest. He would take Marge out and beat the ever-loving-werewolf right out of her if he thought he could get away with it. There was an extremely simple reason why he never dealt with Felicia, or Leeza, as she liked to be called, when he brought in his glass.

The woman made him crazy.

And now he had to deal with her. A few weeks before, when he'd been forced to talk to her on the roof, he knew the strange sensations she created in him were getting worse—his whole body felt on edge, and it had taken a week to get over it.

Fortunately, the number of mythicals that needed taken care of had been high enough he could take his frustration out on them.

Liam watched her. He didn't interact with her.

That was the rule. He ordered himself to take the items inside and leave. Speaking wasn't necessary, being nice wasn't necessary, anything that would make him stand out in her mind was unnecessary.

He just needed to get out of here as fast as he could.

He had a dozen things he could go beat up as soon as he left.

Because he damn sure didn't want to deal with the rush of feelings inside when he looked at her. This was worse than when she'd caught him on the roof. If that had been hell on his equilibrium, this was going to be sheer torture, the likes of which he hadn't experienced in seven hundred years.

He inhaled a breath, reminding himself of his promise. In and out. That's all he had to do.

He pulled the box out, careful of everything in it, and headed back to the shop.

Feelings were irrelevant. He had a job to do.

And it wasn't to moon over some human female that would be dead in fifty years.

He reached the door, and just as he was about to balance the box on his hip, the door popped open, Leeza holding it so he could come inside.

Naturally she couldn't hold it open like a normal person and come outside. She had to stand inside the shop, propping it open with her arm, half-standing in the doorway.

Liam scowled.

He barely fit through the door as it was, and now he had to squeeze through with the box, and get by her?

Oh, this just kept getting better and better.

Liam started to force himself through the door, hoping to use his body to push her back into the store and away from him.

Not that it worked.

She stayed there, holding the door open, and Liam, try as he might, couldn't seem to get past her without brushing up against her.

"Oh, sorry," she muttered, but the slight graze was enough for him to know that she wasn't sorry one bit—her emotions and thoughts spread out before him like a picture, and for the first time in his seven-hundred-plus years of life, Liam saw himself through the eyes of a *human* female who was in heat.

*Liam grabbed her, pulling her against his body. His arms wrapped around her, swallowing her frame as their lips crashed together, their heads rocking...*

The vision continued in detail, powerful and complete.

This was bad. This was so very bad.

"Control yourself," he said. He slid past her, heading for the counter. Her hand brushed over his arm as she let go of the door, and a ripple of sensation surged through his body. Though the contact was innocent, the thoughts that he gleaned—which was odd since usually it took more than just a casual touch for him to read anyone's thoughts—were enough to make the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"What are you talking about?" Her voice was slightly lower, and her tone breathy—most certainly a woman needing.

Great.

He had to get out of here.

Liam growled. "Nothing."

"Not my fault you're friggin' hotter than hell." He doubted she intended for him to actually hear the words.

He walked to the counter, setting his box down with care. When he spun around, she stared at him, her eyelids hooded, her chest pushed forward, her lips wet—she was primal, radiating signs of desire.

A surge ran straight down his body, like an electrical stab, from his head, through his chest, down between his legs. His male area pulsed, waking up in a way it hadn't around a female in... in a very, very long time. If ever.

The Templar teachings had taught him that male bodies reacted to stimuli. While it was nothing to be ashamed of, Templar practice was to stay away from external triggers and focus on inner peace and harmony.

Looking at Leeza right now only fanned the flames of the reaction.

He had to get out of here.

He needed to get far away from Leeza and her lustful stares, fairy-delicate curves and wispy hair that he wanted to touch.

These thoughts were not helping him.

Leeza's eyes roamed up and down his body, and she sucked the corner of her lip into her mouth, her teeth just grazing the plump berry-colored flesh.

He stood up straighter, his manly area starting to throb, the ache so strong. He'd never felt this way before—not for any female. Not in seven hundred years.

He would have remembered this kind of sensation.

"You think I'm hot?" he asked before he realized what he was saying. He wanted to hit himself upside the head. Of course she did. Her body language screamed that she found him attractive. He'd seen it many times before. It wasn't the first time he had been called attractive. Most of the time, it was by mythicals who were in heat and attracted to the power of the Templar Knights.

Never by an innocent—by a human.

She tipped her head to the side. "Well, yeah, I do." Her cheeks tinged pink at the admission, and she suddenly became very fascinated with a blue vase on the table near her. "Is that a problem?"

"I'm not used to it," he admitted honestly. At least not from humans.

"Well, don't get any ideas, bub. I can think lots of people are attractive, that doesn't mean I'm going to do anything about it."

His shoulders relaxed at her admission. "Good. Because I would hate to have to disable you." He stepped away from the counter, but unfortunately in the small store, that meant he had to step closer to her.

And he found himself inexplicably drawn to her hair. The soft blond strands hung around her face, fluttering in the air, and he realized the ceiling fan was what made her hair dance like that.

She looked angelic standing there, fair and gentle and delicate.

"Hey, I know karate." She held her hands out in a fighting stance. Albeit an incorrect one.

"Uh huh." He tried to glide past her without any more physical contact.

Not that she'd let him. She made some sort of attempt at a karate swing, accompanied by a grunt.

Liam caught her hand and spun her around, her back to his chest, and yanked her against him. Her fluttering hair tickled his nose and he suddenly felt like his whole body was on fire.

"Hey!" She kicked at him, though it was more like a fly bite than anything.

"Stop squirming." As she wriggled, her bottom brushed against his cock. The sensation from before was nothing like the jolt that hit him now. He let go of her, stepping backward, dropping her like she had the plague.

"Geez." She spun around to face him, and her head tipped to the side, sizing him up. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." He walked around a small display table, making sure to keep the furniture in between him and her.

He had to get out of there.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” She met him at the door, though she was at least astute enough to stay out of his reach. Probably because she didn’t want to wind up restrained again.

Unfortunately, Liam couldn’t be sure he could trust himself not to do it again.

Just because.

“I need to go.” He reached for the door handle.

“Okay then.” She glanced around the shop. “Would you do me one favor though?”

*No, I will not. I need to get out of here.* “What?”

“Let me get my bag, and you can walk out with me?”

No. That’s what he should have said.

No.

Instead he heard himself agreeing to wait on her, and he remained by the door as she took the box he’d brought in to the back. As she did whatever it was she was doing back there, she babbled, telling him the pieces he’d brought in looked very nice, that she’d inventory them next week and have them out for sale soon.

She came back out into the store proper with her purse slung on her shoulder, and stopped behind the counter for a moment.

“Give me just one second,” she said as she pressed a security panel behind the counter. The machine started a slow monotonous beep, signaling they had only a few seconds to get out.

She darted around the counter and was at his side, a key in her hand. He walked out, her right behind him, and she locked the door.

Liam reached up, automatically pulling on it to make sure it was secure before he walked away.

“Thank you for staying,” she said, glancing at the sky. There was no sun left for the day, the sky was inky black—interrupted only by the tall, overly decorative street lamps along the sidewalks on either side of the street. “It’s starting to stay light later and later now, but I still hate walking out by myself.”

“Do you require assistance to your car?”

“Only if you want to.”

He wanted to, he really did. Against every rational and logical thought in his mind, he wanted to.

If only to prolong...

Prolong what? A sensation that he wasn’t supposed to be feeling anyway? More of the burning that still hadn’t left his gut, and probably wouldn’t for days to come?

He was a fool. A seven-hundred-year-old fool who was befuddled by a woman he could break with a flick of his wrist.

Unfortunately, Felicia Zanna Hunter had been doing that to him her entire life. That was the reason he stayed away from her.

It was better to observe rather than be involved. He could be clinical when the need arose.

Yet looking at her face, her delicate features, he wanted to do whatever she asked.

Walk her to her car? Of course.

Liam was about to tell her that he would walk her when his cellphone started to ring.

“Yeah.”

It was Adrian. “We have packs and clans.”

“Who?” He glanced both ways down the street, and saw it was clear, and started to escort Leeza across.

“Three from Drigan, two from Aztec. At the YMCA.”

Liam paused for a moment. “The YMCA?”

“I don’t make this stuff up,” Adrian said.

Liam pinched the bridge of his nose. It was going to be one of those nights, and it wasn’t even a full moon.

Leeza held up her hand, pointing at her car just inside the garage. Liam nodded. She walked into the garage. The man in the booth waved at her as she headed for her car, and she waved back at him.

He wasn’t the usual man on duty in the morning, but Leeza seemed to know him.

Liam watched her press her key fob to get in, climb in and start the car. Backing out of her spot, she headed out of the garage, and right toward Liam. He had to get out of the way before she ran him over. She raised her fingers to wave at him, a smile on her face.

Liam waved back, the tiniest hint of a smile on his face too.

“Liam. Liam?” Adrian jerked him back to the phone call.

“On my way.”

A smile spread over his features, only for a moment, but it had been there.

\* \* \* \*

“I could just kill you,” Leeza said into her cellphone as she drove home. It was too late for the movie anyway—not that she could concentrate on a movie right now if she wanted to.

She mostly wanted to wring Marge’s neck.

Marge laughed. “So it was him, then?”

“It was your buddy, yes.” Leeza corrected her steering as she drove down a curvy road near her house. She lived in a small housing district, one of those sections of town that hid behind strip malls and places the Ladies Who Lunch frequented.

Ironically, the housing addition was older than the strip mall and the homes not nearly as modern as those that the Ladies Who Lunch would spend time in.

“I had a feeling it was him when you mentioned it.”

“And why didn’t you say something from the first instant?”

“What would have been the fun in that?”

Leeza groaned as she pulled into her driveway, taking her time to slide into the car port. The tennis ball that hung from the roof just grazed her windshield, her signal to stop the vehicle so she didn't hit the house.

She scooped up her purse. "You are terrible," she told the woman. Even though her mystery was solved, she still was obsessing. Why, she didn't know. He was even more intriguing than before when she didn't know who he was.

It didn't help that he was even more incredible-looking up close than she remembered—and the smell of him...

A swig of cigar and the aroma of pure man.

Oh, it had been delicious.

But something occurred to her. "Marge, can I ask you a question about him?" She stuck the key in her door and let herself inside.

"Sure."

She started going through the motions of being home—setting down her purse, flipping on lights, turning off her home's alarm system, all that fun stuff.

"Is Liam, well, is he odd or something?" She pulled a glass out of the cupboard and poured herself a glass of wine.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know." Leeza dropped onto her couch and put her feet up on the ottoman. "I..." She paused.

"What?"

"He just... It was like he knew what I was thinking, you know?"

"Oh." Marge paused before saying anything, sounding like she took a drink of something. "Liam is like that. He's very observant."

Leeza shook her head. "This was more, though, I think." How he seemed to respond to her very thoughts—her mind had gone rampant, imagining a kiss from him when he was getting his stuff—it was like he knew.

"Are you asking me if he's psychic?"

"Maybe," she replied, sipping on her glass of wine.

"Trust me when I say Liam isn't psychic. It may seem that way when you're around him, but he's not."

Leeza nodded, more for herself than for Marge. "I just wondered." She decided to not mention the fact that he sent shivers through her whole body when they touched.

"Did he still seem to flip your trigger when you spent time with him?"

Leeza snorted. "Yeah, he did."

"Really?"

“Now, Marge, I know you’re a widow and sworn off men, but surely you can see how hot he is.” In her mind’s eye, images of Liam flashed, and all of a sudden, she felt that rush she’d had before—was it as strong?—she wasn’t sure, but it was powerful.

“I have a hard time seeing him that way.”

“Oh please, you’re not dead.”

“Leeza,” Marge began in that tone Leeza knew as the “Mom tone” or what she would have imagined the tone to be like if she had a mother worth anything. “You know, in a clinical way, I can see other men, but really, no man shines as brightly as my husband did.”

Leeza let out a sigh. “I hope someday I’ll wind up as happy as you and your husband were, Marge. Maybe I’ll get lucky. You think Liam would go out with me?”

“If he didn’t, it would be his loss.”

Leeza smiled at that. “You’re awfully good to me.”

“Someone has to be.” She shifted the phone around, it clattering against whatever earrings she had on. “Look, I don’t know Liam that well, but I do know this about him. He’s not dangerous. He would never harm you.”

“So he’s not a sociopath?”

“Would a sociopath blow glass?”

“I don’t know.” Leeza let herself get drawn into a conversation about work and the latest pieces that Sir Liam had brought in. She told Marge the pieces he brought in were stunning, amazing blue and red pieces that had super delicate detailing in them.

When they got off the phone, she couldn’t help her mind rambling around thoughts of Liam.

It amazed her that his enormous hands could do something so delicate and tiny. Hell, it amazed her that his huge body even fit in the store.

She scolded herself. After all, he was an artist. An artist... She wasn’t going there. She’d known far too many artists that got under her skin, made her burn in ways that were not good.

Picking up the history book that laid on her end table, she opened it to the bookmark inside. History, especially medieval history, was one of her favorite subjects. The Crusades and the knights from that time were fascinating to her.

Probably because her mother dragged her to countless festivals when she was a kid. Mom, while a decent person inside, was a knight groupie. She knew all the men who did the demonstrations at the festivals. And occasionally they knew her, in the most biblical of senses. Not many children grew up surrounded by as much armor as she had always been.

Irony, considering the honor so many knights were supposed to have had in the medieval period.

She couldn’t focus on the words in the book, so she forced herself to start reading aloud.

“The largest mystery that now surrounds the Knights Templar, the one that has carried down through the centuries, was not whether they were guilty of the crimes they were accused of, but what happened to the treasure that King Philip tried to seize on that day in October of 1307.”

She continued reading for a while, the description of what was assumed to be in the Knight Templar treasure troves almost incomprehensible.

“To get hold of just one little item from that collection.” She imagined just an ornate cross, something that might have been a family heirloom from the period, given to the Knights for payment of something...

An image came to mind.

*A huge, meaty hand accepting a golden cross, one encrusted with stones, handed over with painful reluctance. Following the hand up, the face became apparent.*

*Dark hair, close - cropped to the head, a beard, short and meticulously groomed, but the eyes ...*

She knew those eyes.

Her own eyes snapped open.

Whoa.

Sir Liam must have made an impression, his huge hands filling her mind's eye.

An overactive imagination wasn't always a good thing.



## Chapter 6

“Are you sure it was not a trick of the light?” Melios asked. The vampire who knelt before him was one of his new disciples. One of the SEALs. The fear was exuding from his pores, and Melios could feel him questioning himself.

His fear was ironic, considering he was supposedly one of the human military elite. Yet Melios frightened him.

How interesting that was.

“It was a smile,” the SEAL said. “The woman drove by him, waved at him with a smile on her face, and he smiled back.”

Melios paced around his office room, his heavy robe rattling around him as he walked, the only sound in the room.

Until the door slid open.

Then she came in.

He brought his head up to look at her. “Child,” he whispered, “this is not the time.”

The girl of only twelve came over to his desk, her pointy chin raised up, as if to dare him to counter her while in front of a disciple.

“I believe I should be here,” she replied, taking a seat on his desk chair. She flipped her sand-colored hair around so she could stroke the braid that hung over her shoulder.

“Why is that?” he asked, watching the way she stared at her ends.

Her violet eyes met his. “There’s something in the air. It crackles.”

Melios smiled at her. “So there is.” He faced his disciple. “He claims he saw a Templar smile.”

“So?”

“Yet if it is the Templar Liam...” Melios replied.

The girl blinked. “I see.” Even at her young age, she understood that Liam smiling said a great deal.

Sir Liam didn’t smile. His reputation would probably crumble if rumors leaked out that he actually knew how to smile.

Therefore...

He faced his disciple. “Well, now, go and find out everything you can about the woman and...”

“Bring her back?”

“No. Just gather information.” He reached down, grabbing the vampire by the chin and raising him up to meet his eyes. “You are immortal now. It is best you learn that haste is unnecessary. Everything takes time and planning to make sure that all elements play out as they’re supposed to.”

“Yes, master.”

He let go of the vampire’s chin, and he dropped back down on his knee, his head down. But he did not move.

“Go. Be gone with you.”

The vampire scurried out of the room.

Melios laced his fingers together, tapping his chin with his index fingers.

“Sir Liam favors a human?” the girl asked.

He faced her. “Yes, child, he does.”

She shivered. She knew, as well as most, if not more intimately, what that could mean—for Liam and for the human woman. She had seen Melios’s tastes over the years, and knew that when he had a goal, no cost mattered to achieve it. Even when she disagreed with his choices.

More than once, she’d attempted to thwart his plans, bonding with other humans he manipulated in his quests to achieve his goals.

Regardless of what the girl said—she was older now, and claimed that she didn’t care what Melios did with humans anymore—he knew better. She was not a convincing liar. Which was why the child was kept far away from Melios’s more private habits. She was sequestered from the humans he fed upon, as well as the humans he turned.

He never hid his vampire status from her, but he was careful what she learned about mythicals and humans and their places in the world. Or where they should be in the world. He couldn’t risk terrifying her. She was too important to lose. The monks who’d cared for her before were not as dangerous as Melios.

“You understand this course of action?” Melios asked her.

“No, not really.”

He let out a sigh. Perhaps her comprehension of things wasn’t as advanced as he thought. “Sir Liam is a way to finding James and Joseph and their woman.”

She nodded. “And finding them is important.”

“For?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “For avenging the death of your sister.”

He didn’t twitch at the impetuous little girl’s comment. For that he was impressed with himself. Any other person, he would have ripped their throat out for such disrespect.

And the thought had crossed his mind more than once to rip her throat out and be done with her.

Yet she was part of a much larger scheme that was centuries in the making. One moment of temper would destroy what he and the others had been working on for many years.

Yet no one had any idea dealing with a teenage human could be so taxing.

She stood up, apparently unaware she'd irritated him—or perhaps she was aware, Melios couldn't be certain, and straightened her skirt. "I get how it works," she said. "Those vampires deserve to be destroyed. But how long is it going to take? Surely you've given up by now. I would have."

"I am hundreds of years old, child. I do not give up."

She walked out from behind his desk. "Obviously. But you're going to have to hire the animals to do the deed, aren't you?" A shiver ran over her.

"Yes."

"Just keep them away from me." She crossed her arms over her chest, her foot stomping on the floor.

"Oh, dear girl, they will not come near you. I cannot risk that."

She stuck her lip out. "So just turn me, so I can go kill them."

He couldn't help smiling at her. This was what he wanted—even though she drove him to distraction, this attitude, this particular frenzy was what he needed, what he knew she had to have, if she were to succeed in her destiny.

Yet she was far too impatient.

"When the time is right. You are too young now, and while your strength grows every year, you still are too vulnerable. If you were released to the world now, you would be killed by the Templars. You know this."

She stared at the floor for a few minutes, then brought her eyes up to his. "What if you're wrong?"

"Have I ever been wrong?"

She shook her head, saying nothing else as she headed for the door. She knew, as well as Melios, that if the Templars knew exactly who and what she was, they would destroy her—they had to. She was the one who could destroy everything they held dear.

Especially when she became immortal. Normally, Melios didn't hesitate about turning a human, even a young girl, as she was. Yet she wasn't ready. Her strength wasn't fully developed. And while all humans grew stronger as vampires, if Melios was correct—and he almost always was—the girl would be far more powerful than any vampire alive.

Even him.

So he waited—keeping her from turning until she was more mature, and could handle what she would become.

She still wasn't ready yet.

For now, the girl would pout, go to the small gym he'd created for her, and spend the next hour breaking things.

Probably because the sound of glass shattering hurt his ears.

He said nothing as she left the room. When the door closed, he relaxed for a moment.

Just as she said, the air was thick with something—a sensation of anticipation crackled between the molecules.

He could feel it as well.

Finally.

He closed his eyes. “Finally, sister, I will avenge thee.”

\* \* \* \*

Sir Adrian rubbed the back of his head while Sir Liam surveyed the collection of mythicals before them, a haze of ash swimming in the air where the two Aztec vampire clan members had once been.

They’d managed to get the mythicals outside, to a relatively private area away from the prying eyes of humans before ashing the two vampires.

The wolves, members of Drigan pack, irritated Adrian more than the Aztec did. The wolves should know better. The Drigans were some of the better behaved mythicals in the area.

The Aztec vampires were primal in all ways—while North America was in essence neutral territory, the Aztecs were not appreciated there.

Too primitive.

Anything could set off an Aztec. Most of the vampire clans steered clear of the Aztec.

And usually, most wolves did as well.

“And you didn’t provoke anything when they showed up?” Liam asked. The three men were sitting on the ground, one holding a towel to his head.

“We were in the gym. Working out,” Neil Drigan snapped.

Liam crossed his arms over his chest.

“Don’t you have a gym at your compound?” Adrian asked. He’d had to head back there last fall because of some problems they were having with their pins, and he’d seen an impressive gym.

Neil looked at the other two, his brothers Jacob and Noel. Noel bowed his head, his ears turning a bit red. Of course, that might have been from the fact that he’d just got slammed into a wall a few times.

“We do.” Jacob hit his brother Noel in the shoulder. “But lover-wolf here is mad about a gal who works here.”

Liam growled.

Adrian just shook his head. “Is this a mate for you?”

“I don’t know,” Noel said. “I’m still figuring it out.”

Jacob snorted. “Like Neil was last fall.”

Adrian crossed his arms over his chest. “How is Marissa doing, Neil?”

“She’s fine. I’ll tell her you both stopped by.” His voice was riddled with sarcasm. Not surprising, though. The previous fall Neil was almost ashed because he had escaped his pin and roamed the streets. Fortunately though, the time he got out, he managed to save a human and not shred her to pieces.

Now they were married.

“You should know better than to mess with the Aztecs.” Liam was not a happy man. There was a harder, bitterer edge to him tonight than usual. He slayed the two vampires quicker than Adrian had ever seen him move.

Something was bothering his partner.

“He could be having an off day,” came Nara’s sweet voice. Adrian glanced around, but covertly so the others wouldn’t think he was talking to air again.

“Doubtful,” Adrian replied. Whether Nara was just incredibly in tune to his emotions after seven hundred years or if their bond allowed her to read his thoughts, he didn’t know. But she did always seem to know what he was thinking.

Annoying habit of hers, it was.

“The bump on your head is healing itself,” she told him. “You should be fine soon, then your head will stop hurting.”

Adrian growled at her. *My head never stops, since I constantly have to listen to you.*

Liam continued to drill the three wolves about proper behavior in public. It wasn’t so much a lecture as it was him threatening them with their very lives if this happened again.

“Liam,” Adrian said, “we need to hit it.”

Liam nodded, but glanced back at the wolves. “I will not be so forgiving again.”

“We hear you,” Neil said.

They turned to walk away.

“Remind him about registration,” Nara whispered to Adrian.

He paused, spinning around and facing Noel. “Get your registration in now.”

“I don’t even know her name...” Noel said.

“Then find it out.” With that, Adrian turned around and he left. Now he could see Nara, she’d been behind him before, but now was floating in the space just beyond his personal space. They had one rule. No matter what, she wasn’t to enter his personal space. If he could reach his hand out, he didn’t want to be touching her.

It was such an ugly feeling to stick his hand in what might have been her breast or her nose or her butt. She didn’t need to actually touch him to do what she did—when she had messages from the other side, it was a kind of energy transfer for him.

No physical contact.

Not that there could be with a ghost.

## Chapter 7

Dawn broke through the sky when Liam and Adrian returned to the Templar complex. Exhaustion had wiped them both out.

They said very little as they headed through the main hall. Adrian had his iPod on as soon as they entered the house. Two men, one a freed Djinn, the other a dragon, walked past them both, neither one speaking, merely nodding their heads.

They knew that words were unnecessary in the early dawn.

The night staff meandered about the house—they employed several mythicals to work as support staff for the Templars. Every one of the ten bases had a support staff of some kind; this base employed several clan-less vampires, among other species of mythicals, who handled paperwork, calls, and whatever else needed to be done. They were a necessary addition to the Templars' work.

Only fifty-two Templars existed on the planet. That wasn't enough on their own to handle the worldwide mythical population. There was far too much to be done.

"Good evening, Sir Liam," Daniel, a vampire who was about seventy-five years old, greeted them as they walked by.

Liam nodded to him.

"Sir Liam," Daniel began, trying to match Liam's pace as he headed through the house. "A call came in for you earlier, sir."

Liam stopped and faced Daniel. "And why wasn't I contacted?"

"It was of a personal nature." Daniel's voice was almost inaudible in the hall, yet Liam felt like the entire place paused to hear what was being said.

He stared at the boy—albeit Daniel was hardly a boy, his century mark not that far off. Liam did not believe him. He did not receive personal calls.

Unless one considered Nicole, who only wanted him to kill her.

But that hardly counted. That was still Templar work.

"And what was it?" he asked, noticing that, yes, every available pair of eyes were upon him, even Adrian's.

Daniel stared at him for a moment, then cleared his throat. "You are to contact a Lisa Hunter." He held out a piece of paper. "The phone number is there."

He glanced at it, though nothing was there except the number. "Thank you." He wadded the paper up and shoved it in his pocket.

He refused to say anything about what it was, and continued on his way upstairs. Daniel glanced at Adrian, and Adrian didn't say a word, just followed Liam up to his room.

The two Knights shared a room, had for decades. As soon as the door shut, Liam went to his bed. He started stripping off his paraphernalia, including his Kevlar vest and his broadsword.

“So you gonna tell me why Lisa—”

“Leeza,” Liam corrected.

“Leeza Hunter is calling you? And how she got the number here?”

“No.”

Adrian said something under his breath, waving his hand in the air. “I will tell him, Nara.” He pulled off his own Kevlar vest. “Nara seems to think...”

“I know what Nara thinks. And I will not discuss it.” He wasn’t ready to discuss it. And he knew better than to think anything about the call. Leeza was the buyer for the glass store that sold his work. More than likely, she wanted to ask something about pricing or some such thing.

She would not be contacting him for personal reasons.

No matter how much just feeling the paper in his pocket made his heart beat faster and his mind race back to things he had no right to be thinking about.

\* \* \* \*

Leeza stumbled around her house, the coffee not quite waking her up. Late last night, Marge had sent her a text with Sir Liam’s phone number in it, including a note that he was a night person, so she could call him anytime in the evening.

And she’d called. Maybe it was the wine that made her do it. Maybe the romantic movie she watched where the gal called the guy and he actually was interested...

Who knows what made her do it. Except that, even as weird as he had been, he still made her heart strum.

Too bad when she called she got some guy who promised to relay a message to him since he wasn’t around.

Now she was on that crazy girl-thing of waiting, and she just hated it.

Especially since she didn’t know if she could come up with an excuse for her late night call. It was Saturday, she wouldn’t be in the office to do work, so she had nothing there, and he’d left with her, so it’s not like she could pretend she went back to work or something.

“God, I’m pathetic,” she said as she took a whiff of coffee before sipping more of the warm liquid. “If he calls, and I stress if, I’ll just tell him I...I thought he was cute and wondered if he’d want to go to dinner sometime. Or lunch, if he’d prefer something less date-like.”

True enough—she did think he was cute. Though cute seemed, well, not right exactly. He wasn’t cute. He was... He flashed through her mind—dark hair, tight jeans, ass that wouldn’t quit. Yeah. Bad boy to the max.

Probably why he was on her mind—she was a sucker for that sexy bad boy look. And Sir Liam had it in spades.

She walked through her house to the back porch and opened her sliding glass door. Outside, the deck was quiet. The only sounds this early in the morning were the chirping birds and a gentle morning breeze rattling the treetops.

It was chilly. The morning sun hadn't yet warmed everything, and dew glistened on the grass and the budding blooms of flowers.

Everything was so peaceful and quiet. The trees framed out her yard as well as the neighbor's, blocking most of the noise from the street, making her back yard a peaceful getaway. She let her head rest against the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

The rising sun made her eyelids glow and she let the rays that snuck through the trees wake and warm her.

Until everything shadowed.

She flicked her eyes open, expecting to see a cloud had passed over the sun.

There was no cloud.

Leeza screamed.

Sir Liam stood before her, arms crossed over his chest, and he glared down at her. God, did he ever have a look that wasn't a mean-ass glare?

"What in the world are you doing here?"

"You called me."

She blinked. "That didn't mean I wanted you to come over!"

"Then what did you want?"

She jumped up. "And how did you find my house?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. The expression said a mouthful. She wasn't really crazy about that look.

"What did you want?"

"I didn't want you to come to my house!" She reached out, pointing a finger at him. "And this is my backyard. You don't just come walking into someone's backyard. You're lucky I didn't pull out a baseball bat and hit you or something."

"I would have caught it."

"Who are you?" she asked, her chest heaving. His eyes wandered down her body.

She was in her pajamas and robe! The silky pajamas that barely covered anything. She pulled the robe tighter around herself, trying to cover up her body. Hard to do with a robe that was pretty much transparent.

When she met Liam's gaze, his eyes were dark and feral.

Her whole body responded with its own shiver and she looked down him. He wore a black t-shirt, a small red cross on his left pec.

And what a pectoral muscle it was. Not realizing what she was doing, she took a step toward him. Her robe fell open as she stepped into his space, but she didn't care. She reached for him, meeting the fabric, then the hard muscle of his pec.

His face tensed, his eyes pinching shut.

She let the hand run down the broad muscle.

Liam's eyes opened, and his hand snapped up, grabbing her wrist. "Do not touch me."



"I'm sorry," she said, pulling her hand back. It felt charred from the contact. She cradled her wrist in her hand.

"Do you need assistance?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine." She held up her wrist, showing him that it worked just fine.

He crossed his arms again. "You should not call unless you need assistance."

Leeza blinked. "Assistance? What if I just wanted to talk to you? Take you to dinner or something?"

He closed his eyes and opened them, like a forced blink. "I do not date. I do not socialize." He turned to walk away. "Do not contact me again."

She stared as he stepped off her deck and walked down the little path to the gate. "Maybe you should date," she muttered. "Then you wouldn't be such a grump."

He froze, snapping to face her, his dark eyes glaring at her. "I am not a grump."

Leeza's mouth gaped open from shock, partially that he heard her, but mostly that he didn't think he was a grump. "If you're not a grump, then I'm friggin' President of the United States."

## Chapter 8

The remaining sooty mess of the once small ranch house looked like a blackened painting, like a child had thrown a temper tantrum and scribbled over the drawing.

Unfortunately, no child had drawn this house. The smell of charred remains mingled with the smell of the wet burnt soot. Firemen had fought for most of the night to stop the fire, but even then, their job wound up taking far more energy than a normal house fire should have taken.

Sir Liam and Sir Ewan stood off to the side, the Fire Chief standing next to them. The chief's face was covered in grime, his eyes hollow, like he couldn't stand looking at the skeleton of the home and its only occupant, but he couldn't look away either.

He greedily sucked up a cup of coffee, wiping the dribbles off his chin as he stared at the home. A stark sound in the early morning, the slide of a zipper seemed to signify the end of the battle.

And they had lost again.

"And you think it's the same?" Ewan asked, sipping on his own cup of coffee.

The Chief nodded his head. "Though you know I can't say anything on the record."

Ewan arched his eyebrow at the Fire Chief. "Have I ever been on the record?"

Liam stayed back, out of the exchange, merely listening. The Fire Chief was Ewan's domain. He was the liaison for the Templars to governing bodies. Possibly because Ewan wasn't as large and menacing as he was. He'd been barely able to saddle a horse when the change had occurred. After, he'd peaked at six foot, the shortest and leanest of all the Templar Knights. Between his slightly smaller physique and his natural charm, he was able to talk around most any situation. All of which helped him form bonds with public servants like the Fire Chief.

The Fire Chief let out a sigh. "It's not like anything I've ever seen. I can find the point of origin, I can trace back every damn starting flame in the place. But unless this girl's spontaneously combusted, I got nothing on this one."

"Like the other one?" Liam asked.

The Chief walked over to a police cruiser, and motioned the two of them to follow.

Laid on the back end was a set of blueprints, marked up with lines and angles all over it.

"The origin is here, on the bed." The fire chief tapped the plans. "Yet we have small bursts here, here, here, and here." The small bursts were down the hallway toward the door. "We figure maybe they were lit before, but we can't be sure. But there's no propellant, nothing can be found that starts the fire."

"And the woman?" Liam asked.

“She’s going straight to the coroner to see what they can tell us. If it’s like the others, they may be able to tell if she was assaulted before.” The chief took another sip of his coffee, then glanced at Liam. “You don’t think this is arson, do you?”

Ewan shrugged. “Has to be something.”

The man sighed again. “And what do I tell the police on this one? A case of spontaneous combustion?” His words thinly masked his irritation. “She was just a young woman. Mid-twenties. She didn’t deserve this.”

“Neither did the others,” Liam muttered. He and Ewan exchanged glances.

This wasn’t a human problem.

This was a mythical problem. A really, really big one.

Just exactly what they didn’t need to be dealing with right now.

\* \* \* \*

The Bible spoke of Sunday being a day of rest.

The Bible didn’t have the Templar Knights in mind when that idea was formed. While many of the respected customs were followed—two Knights to a room, prayers to and trust in The Divine, certain aspects were lax. Meals were not eaten in silence. Hair was no longer chopped short, and beards were no longer required.

Most of all, though, Sunday wasn’t a day of rest. Mythicals didn’t rest. Neither did the Templar Knights.

As was custom, the Knights met in what would have been a living area in the large house that Grand Master William had converted into a kind of war room for debriefing.

The majority of their staff left at dawn—some because they didn’t agree with sunlight, others because a good portion of the Knights’ business was done at night.

A small support staff worked during the day, mostly doing paperwork. Unfortunately, the life of a Templar wasn’t all fighting the bad guys. Every mythical that was killed had to be recorded—fortunately, that was now a powerful computer database, but for centuries, it was kept in large books.

Even with the assistance of certain magical mythicals, it took almost a decade to transfer everything into the machine. The Knights were busy men. Now, their system was connected through the internet, and the database stored everything, including not just deaths but all recorded living mythicals, their family trees, and so forth.

There wasn’t too much the Knights couldn’t get on a Mythical if they needed it.

Except for the old ones.

Those mythicals who’d been around for near millennia were not quite as nice about giving their information.

Unfortunately, Melios was an old one from the Romanians.

Liam shifted from one foot to the other, waiting for permission to sit. Grand Master William had already led them through morning prayers. Now they all waited to begin the meeting.

William shuffled through a few of the papers on his desk.

Liam had a strong feeling today's meeting would be long and trying.

And it didn't help that Leeza seemed stained in his brain. Try as he might, he couldn't get images of her out of his mind. Her blond hair fluttering like grass in the breeze, the way the sunlight danced over her face as she sat, the morning's dawn caressing her features.

The touch of her hand against his chest, exploratory, sweet and savory all at once.

He gritted his teeth.

This wasn't helping.

What was wrong with him? It wasn't like he'd never been around a female. In seven hundred years, he'd seen women in various states of undress many times before.

None, however, had filled him with such mental images though. The visions tainted his sleep, what little he got.

Even Adrian had complained that he was grunting in his sleep. A glance out of the corner of his eye made him wonder if he'd done more than grunt. Though he didn't do it often, talking in his sleep was usually a sign of distress. And last night had been filled with distress.

He hadn't woken up with a hard-on like that one since he'd become immortal. He'd forgotten the sensation almost completely. Were they supposed to ache like that?

He spent a few hours in prayer, early, hoping to calm his body down and determine what he needed to do—the answer was painfully obvious to him, though. Leeza Hunter no longer required his assistance.

She was a grown woman now—he didn't need to look after her like he had most of her life. She didn't have dishonorable suitors anymore who would mistreat her. She didn't have a mother who would choose sex and drink over caring for her child.

Liam could move on. The Jackstone Foundation was always there if she needed future assistance. He could put her on the private assistance list, the one reserved for human relatives of victims of mythical crime.

Sir William glanced up at the Knights, a tilt of his chin allowing them to all take a seat. Then his gaze settled rather pointedly at Sir Liam.

"I have received word from all the other bases around the world. James Hendrick and Joseph Oliver are nowhere to be found. They have even masked their tracking chips." William didn't like the idea of vampires running for cover. They were in the Americas, after all. It was supposed to be safe here for all mythicals.

Or so the Templars fought hard for. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough. Never enough. Even if their numbers were tripled, it wouldn't be enough. Why just this handful of Templars were turned—when at the time there were literally thousands of Templar Knights in Europe—Liam would never know. That was for The Divine to answer.

"Do you know where they have gone?" William asked Liam.

"No."

William hesitated for a moment, considering his response. He stroked the length of his white beard that hung down to his sternum. He was the only Templar left who actually wore a full beard like the old tradition. It tended to make him look much older than he was. Well, he was over seven hundred years old, but still, he would look younger if he'd shave. "Would you tell me if you did?" William asked.

"No."

William nodded. "Very well. The less that is known about what happened to them, the better. It might cool Melios's attempts at finding them."

"I doubt that," Liam stated. Melios was tenacious, if anything. The mythical spent years planning his revenge, perfecting every possible outcome so that he won, no matter what happened.

"You are probably right. Have we found any trace of Melios yet? He needs to be questioned, spoken to at the very least, to determine if he is the one responsible for the onslaught of newborn vampires."

"He is," Liam replied.

"And you know that for certain because?"

"I saw him turn a newborn I killed three nights ago."

"In his mind?"

"Yes."

William didn't speak for a moment, perhaps giving Liam a moment to elaborate. When he didn't, the Grand Master continued. "Do you know what Melios is up to?"

"He wants the Stone of Cain."

William sighed. "And why would he want it? There's no need for it now."

"He believes he's found a descendant of Cain."

"Not possible. You killed the last ones yourself. Ares led you to that particular one, correct?"

That had been plaguing him. Had he missed someone in the bloodline? He couldn't answer the question, because he just didn't know.

"Yes." Liam's mind flashed back to the last time he'd gone after a rumored bloodline of Cain. It was a family of four. Two parents and two children, a boy and girl. All were killed, as required by The Divine. The parents had been missed in an earlier sweep decades before, because the father, who was the one with the gene, had been adopted out. It wasn't until he was an adult and married that the Templars became aware of his existence.

It was like Cain's gene taunted them—daring them to extinguish it. Every time over the last couple of centuries they thought the line had been squashed, somehow, somewhere, a tiny smattering of the bloodline survived.

And any version, even one that diluted, still proved to be a threat.

"How can there still be an element of Cain out there?" Tomas asked.

Adrian shook his head. "There's more."

"And what would that be?" William asked.

Adrian grimaced. “The prophecy of the one to bring down all mythicals.”

William rolled his eyes. “There is no prophecy. The words in the Balance Mandate are merely a warning. It has been seven hundred years. Surely the prophesized one would have appeared by now.”

Adrian jerked like he’d been hit upside the head, and from the expression on his face, Nara was giving him an earful. “Yes, yes, I know, Nara. I know,” he whispered.

“Your ghost has a contribution to this conversation?” William asked, detest dripping from his voice. While Liam’s mind reading and Ewan’s charm gift seemed to not bother him, Adrian’s connection to the dead troubled him more than any other Knight gift.

Not that he hadn’t benefited from the gift in his long lifetime.

Didn’t mean that William liked it.

“She wishes to remind everyone here that there are no wasted words in the Balance Mandate. The laws are absolute—there is no exception, a gift from The Divine. He specifically created each and every word for the Templar Knights and all mythical creatures. No phrase can be dismissed as improbable.” Adrian let out a long breath, his shoulders tense, like he’d forgotten something and he was getting chewed out for it.

William made a fist at the table. “She wouldn’t want to provide a time table or literal translation of these alleged prophetic words, would she?”

“No.” Adrian replied, his teeth gritted like he was avoiding hitting something. Then he began to speak the prophetic words that his ghost had alluded to:

*Blood flows,*

*Anger surges.*

*Power mixes with passion,*

*Bring the downfall of the Knight.*

*Chaos will raise the future.*

*The light will come from the blood.*

Yeah, they knew those words.

And Liam wasn’t looking forward to them coming true.

## Chapter 9

*He's an utter asshole*, Leeza thought to herself Monday morning as she worked her way through her office, sorting paperwork and boxes of glass that needed to be properly placed and marketed.

She grabbed her digital camera and slapped a memory card in it.

"Stupid asshole," she muttered as she pulled out a set of wine glasses that Sir Liam made. It took every bit of her strength to take the pictures right, light them properly so the glass looked its best for the sales.

It was so tempting to take crappy ones and post those on the web page.

Yet she couldn't bring herself to do it.

It wasn't the glasses' fault.

"Just the guy who made you—he's the asshole." Leeza placed the set of wine glasses back in the box, then carefully pulled out each piece in the collection, setting them out in a nice arrangement on the little table she used to stage the glass pieces.

And it wasn't that she was mad at him for turning her down—that happened enough in life that Leeza was used to that.

It was that he had barged into her backyard while she was having her private moment, her safe time.

That was horrible.

It was rude.

It was scary.

It made her want to call the police and report him.

But of course she didn't.

It was just weird. What kind of guy just shows up in the backyard when you're having your morning cup of coffee? And in her pj's? She wasn't sure which was worse—him barging in or him seeing her in her pajamas.

Not that she was horrible to check out, but still, she wasn't exactly presentable. Her hair hadn't even been combed. And she hadn't brushed her teeth yet.

Her mouth had probably smelled like road kill—that's probably why he ran off.

"Get a grip," she whispered. "He didn't go running off because you had dragon breath first thing in the morning."

A knock sounded on the office door. The upstairs of the store was Leeza's domain. The shop itself rented out the ground floor, with Leeza's office upstairs. Outside Leeza's door was a hall to several other small offices—a couple of attorneys, some accountants, and a computer company. Her door had the name of the store on it, and occasionally people knocked on the door to get directions to one of the other offices.

"It's open," she called back toward the door. It was probably just someone lost.

A man came in. Dressed in a dark gray suit and red tie that bent in the light like it was on fire, shining against the dark colors. His hair, as black as Liam's...

She wasn't thinking about that asshole.

However, this guy's hair was as dark, but soft-looking, brushed back away from his face in soft waves covering his ears. Not like Liam's, all tight and coarse and stuck to his head. This guy looked like a fashion model.

"Can I help you?" Leeza asked, stepping over a few boxes. She subconsciously patted her hair, trying to brush the baby fine blond stuff into some kind of respectable order, and hoped it wasn't covered in dust or packing peanuts or something likewise embarrassing.

"I hope so," he said with a smile that revealed perfect teeth. "I was looking for the Jackstone Foundation?"

She blinked. "Wow, you're off by a few blocks. That place is over on Market Street, I think." She headed over to her desk to pull out a phone book. The Jackstone Foundation was a charity organization that helped out people in need, providing college tuitions, homes for orphaned kids, and other charitable work. Dropping the thick book on her desk with a thump, she couldn't help looking at him again. "You don't look like the type to need the assistance of the Jackstone Foundation."

He smiled that killer grin again. "No, probably not."

Leeza flipped through the book to find the address.

He stepped more into her office, his long legs stretching over piles of boxes. "I'm a lawyer. I'm heading over there for some legal counsel."

"Ahh," she replied. The closer he got to her, the warmer she felt, like he was radiating heat. She thumbed down the listings until she found the building. "It's over on Market Street."

"And how do I get there from here?" he asked.

"Go up to the light, that's Douglas, and make a right. Go down three blocks, then turn left. Shouldn't be far from there."

He nodded. "I see, okay, thank you."

"No problem." She smiled back at him. "Do you want the number?"

"Certainly."

She grabbed one of her business cards and scribbled the number on the back as well as the street address.



Handing him the card, his finger grazed hers, and it was incredibly warm. A blush stained her cheeks and she almost dropped it.

For a second, she swore she saw steam coming off him. "Is there anything else?" she asked.

"No, thanks, this is enough," he replied and started working his way backward out of the office. He read the front of the card. "La Bouteille d'Art." He pronounced it in perfect French. "'The Bottle of Art,' huh?" he asked, his eyebrow raised. "Interesting name for an office."

She grinned. "We sell hand-blown glass pieces. Our store is downstairs." She gestured to the stairs tucked away in the corner of the office.

"I see. And you're Felicia Hunter. Acquisitions Executive?"

She blushed at his tone. "It's a fancy way of saying I handle the new items for sale."

"I was impressed." He stared at her for a moment, the room feeling fiercely hot. "Thank you for your help, Felicia Hunter."

"Leeza," she heard herself say. "Everyone calls me Leeza."

He tipped his head. "Well, Leeza, thank you."

"No problem." She watched the way he moved around with a grace over the boxes of glass, and marveled at someone so tall having such comfortable confidence. He had almost made it back to her door when he stopped and spun back around.

"Have dinner with me."

Leeza blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Have dinner with me. I'm new in town. Show me around. Take me to an expensive restaurant. I'll buy."

"Uh," she stuttered out. Granted he was hot, very hot, but she'd just met him, for goodness' sake. Men didn't just ask women out because they were lost—it sort of killed the manly alpha part of their appearance. "I don't think so," she answered.

Her girly parts didn't like that reply.

"Come on," he said, flashing that grin at her again. "You won't be sorry."

"I'd have to think about it." Okay, at least her girly parts were a little bit less angry at that comment.

"Good. I'll call you in an hour."

With that, he was out the door.

Leeza stared blankly where he'd just exited. "What the hell was that?" She didn't even know the guy's name, for crying out loud! What was she thinking?

She'd just have to tell him she wasn't interested.

And that was that.

So lost in her own thoughts, she barely registered Marge coming in.

"Leeza, what's wrong?" she asked, her voice an octave higher than usual. "What's the matter?"

She blinked, turning her head to Marge. "I think I have a dinner date."

Marge took a sniff of the air. “It’s hot up here.” She walked to the window and opened it up. The cool air flew into the room, vanquishing the heat that had enveloped the room.

It didn’t dawn on Leeza how hot it had gotten in the office until the cool air of spring washed in through the room.

Marge sniffed the air again, this time, a longer breath. “Who was up here?”

Leeza blinked at her. “And I thought I was the one with the sensitive nose thing going on.”

“Can’t you smell that cologne?” Marge looked around.

Leeza shrugged. “I think you’re losing your marbles.”

“I can’t believe you can’t smell that. Did someone come by with a delivery?” She snapped her head from one side to the other, as if expecting the boogie man to jump out at any moment.

Leeza shook her head. She started picking up more of the boxes she had to go through. “No, but a guy stopped by who was lost.”

“Who?” Her posture stiffened, and Leeza swore she grew an inch just standing there.

“Don’t know. Just some lawyer-type, looking for the Jackstone Foundation.”

Marge’s eyes went wide for a second. “And you gave him directions?”

“Sure,” Leeza said. “Why are you acting so weird?” Marge’s behavior didn’t make any sense. It was like she was on guard, nervous or something.

Marge shook her head, and the posturing was gone. “Where’s the new glass from Sir Liam?”

“Over there.” Leeza pointed to a box still on the floor near the door.

Marge walked over and started opening it. “I can’t wait to see it—if it’s as nice as you say, it’ll look great in...the... What the hell is this?” She pulled out one of the goblets.

It was tilted and warped.

“Let me see that,” Leeza said, heading across the room. She twirled the glass on the stem in her hand. The top of it was dented in, like...like it had melted.

“It wasn’t like this earlier,” Leeza said.

Marge looked through the box. All four glasses, which were beautiful jewel-toned wine goblets, now were warped and bent in like they’d been reheated. “Maybe it was hotter in here than you thought.”

“Something,” Leeza muttered, staring at the glasses, unable to fathom what would make them do that. She’d just handled them. They weren’t like that before. “I guess I’ll have to call him and tell him to come back and get them. We sure can’t sell these.”

“No, we can’t.” Marge looked around at the other boxes. “Let’s check the rest of them, make sure nothing else has been damaged.”

Leeza let out a sigh. Yeah, it had been hot, but surely not that hot up here.

Weird.

\* \* \* \*

It was getting close to closing time, and Leeza was beginning to wonder if Sir Liam was going to show up for the damaged pieces. She'd called him earlier in the day, and while he'd been gruff, she remained business-like, and he'd claimed he'd be by before closing time to pick the glasses up.

So far, though, he hadn't shown, and the store would only be open for another half an hour. And Leeza was excited to get out of work.

The lawyer from earlier had called. She'd even managed to get his name—Orlando Horak. Against her better judgment, she'd agreed to have dinner with him. In the back of her mind, something nagged at her about him, but she wasn't sure exactly what it was.

Still, the prospect of going out on a date with someone new had its charms. She hadn't been out in a while. Maybe that's why she'd been so wrapped up in Sir Liam—it had been quite some time since she met someone attractive.

Surely he wouldn't be all that now that she had some distance from him and the prospect of someone else.

A knock resonated on the inner door to her office, the one that came up from the shop.

"Come in," she said. Though she was pretty sure she knew who it was.

Sure enough, Sir Liam walked through the narrow door, tilted slightly to the side to fit through.

She could smell the cigar on him as he invaded her little office. "Hello, Sir Liam," she said, smiling at him with her best professional expression.

"You have something for me?" His face revealed nothing. He looked as big and menacing as he had in her lawn. Maybe more so, since the small office felt much smaller with him in it.

"Yes. I don't know what happened to these glasses," she said, heading to the door near the hallway where the box was still sitting. "They were fine earlier, and then they just got warped."

Liam followed her, and every sense in her body tingled—his presence enough to make her body sensitive.

Trying to ignore the overwhelming sensations, she pulled one of the bent glasses out of the box. "See, they're just...warped."

Liam took the glass, and when he did, his finger grazed hers.

Electricity fired through her. Not like the vibe from the lawyer guy, but something else entirely. It wasn't the same, but more. More powerful, more mystical maybe?

Whatever it was, it was more.

It made her want to touch him everywhere. To grab his hand and start there, working her way up his body, in a slow, methodical pattern, examining every part of his skin. With her fingers, her eyes, her lips...

What was wrong with her?

She glanced up at Liam's face.

His lips were pressed into a tight line, a little crease in his brow, like he was ready to hit something. And he was staring at her.

“Sorry,” she said, though she didn’t really know what she was apologizing for.

He closed his eyes, then opened them again, a slow blink, like he was trying to sort out his thoughts.

“It is fine,” Liam said. “You just... There are things I shouldn’t be thinking about.”

“What things?” Leeza asked.

Again, the little crease revealed itself in his brow. “It is not your concern.” He shifted the box in his arms. “I will bring you new glasses.”

“Liam,” she called out as he turned his back to her.

“Yes?” He didn’t face her.

Like some unknown force propelled her, Leeza closed the gap between them, and put her hand on his back; a feather-light touch, but the muscles seemed to dance beneath her fingers, his body tensing.

Yet she couldn’t stop herself.

Each muscle, she drew a line with the tip of her finger, feeling the curve of them—how strong he was. His body was powerful, massive, a force to be reckoned with; that much was certain. Slowly, she increased her pressure, running her hand down his spine, and touching the indentation of each of his vertebrae.

“Leeza, you shouldn’t,” he said.

But he didn’t move.

She slid her hand down to his jeans, then ran it back up, the tone of the muscles under the shirt sending shivers through her. His body was rigid, hard as marble under her fingers—she wondered if he was even breathing.

She didn’t think she was.

She touched across his shoulder, down his arm. She brought her other hand up to caress him, now both her hands running over the surface. She didn’t want to stop—she couldn’t stop.

“Leeza, please, I beg you.” Liam took a step away from her. The box dropped as he faced her, the shattering of glass a strained accompaniment to their dance.

But she was on a mission. She had to feel him, she had to touch him. The box was kicked out of the way; whether she did it or he did, she didn’t know. She just stepped into his body, her hands running over his chest. Her palms grazed his nipples, and they puckered, Liam inhaling a sharp breath.

She caressed the curve of his biceps, his triceps, his forearms, all of him, even the lines of his fingers.

He squeezed her hands, and she brought her head up to meet his eyes. They were feral, dark, like he didn’t know what he wanted.

“Touch me back,” she whispered.

“I can’t.” He didn’t let go of her.

So Leeza did it for him.

She brought their clenched fingers up to her face and ran his palm down her cheek. He jerked at first, but he didn't stop. His warm hand slid down, his fingers caressing the corner of her mouth. She didn't dare move.

The urge to kiss his fingers almost overwhelmed her, but in her gut, she knew she couldn't respond—she couldn't do anything back, or he'd run away.

He released her hand, letting his fingers graze over her face, delicate, soft touches smoothing over her skin, feeling her. They slid up by her eyes, and she closed them, just as he passed over her lids.

It was like he'd never actually touched a woman before.

He reached into her hair, feeling the strands. "So soft," he whispered as he stroked her locks. "I didn't know..." He continued down the back of her head, stroking her neck, around to the front, his fingers sliding across her shoulders. Down her arm he moved, and every nerve in Leeza was on fire.

She'd never been so turned on in all her life.

His finger skimmed back up her arm, across her shoulder, pausing at the center, just under her neck, where her blouse neckline was open, revealing her skin. His focus was completely on her skin, that tiny flash where her shirt was unbuttoned, and he traced the small half-moon of the bone in the center.

She let out a shuddering breath—his touch was warm, so delicate for someone so massive. Since she'd met him, she'd wondered how someone so large and powerful could blow glass, such a fragile process. Yet feeling how his calloused finger barely touched her, she knew. He touched her with the same care that he used with the glass.

Part of her wanted to yank him to her, to wrap her arms around him and kiss him until their worlds erupted, but she didn't move. She didn't want to break the trance he was in.

His name lingered on her lips, but she didn't expel it. Instead, she rolled her lips into her mouth, wetting them, scraping them with her teeth, something that wouldn't break his concentration.

Yet it did.

His gaze flicked from her neck to her lips.

One of those fingers reached up and caressed her lip, the moisture making it slide a little. He paused, his finger lingering on the center of her mouth.

And she couldn't stop herself. She wrapped her lips around that fingertip and placed a kiss on it.

It was enough to break the spell.

He snapped his hand back, his eyes wide, like he'd been burned. "No."

The force of his words had her stepping backward, and he grabbed the box at their feet and in a flash he was gone.

Tears filled Leeza's eyes, but she had no idea why. They didn't leak out, but it was enough that she knew they were there.

## Chapter 10

Liam half expected to be struck by lightning as he stormed out of La Bouteille d'Art. He wouldn't be surprised if The Divine struck him down, even before he got out of the building.

What had he been thinking?

That was the problem, he hadn't been thinking.

How could he? How could he allow himself to be touched by her? His body screamed in protest. How could he not?

He was over seven hundred years old. Seven hundred and thirty-one years, to be exact. And he'd never been with a woman, never, in all his years, touched a woman intimately.

Because if he did, he would die.

It was written in the Balance Mandate. The Templar Knights were required by Divine law to remain celibate. If not, they would die. He would die.

Yet inside, his heart screamed that this was wrong, that regardless of Divine law, there was something pure and special about Leeza Hunter, and that she was somehow made for him. He'd never felt this way about anyone. Ever.

Certainly, he'd admired women, found them attractive over the centuries—what man wouldn't? But never had anything felt so strong, so powerful as the pull of her.

Now, more than ever, he knew he needed to stay away from her. Now that he'd felt her flesh, touched those fine, silken threads of hair, the smooth roundness of her lips—he had to stay away.

Because he wasn't sure if he could stop himself from wanting more.

Not too long ago he found it sickening how James Henrick and Joseph Oliver were so needy of their trinity mate, Nicole. Now Liam was feeling that kind of pull toward a woman.

He shook his head as he entered the storefront, carrying his box. At least he recognized the temptation for what it was—a test of his faith, his devotion to being a Templar.

Because if he hadn't been...

He grimaced to himself. If he wasn't a Templar, he would have never known Leeza Hunter.

The store had one last customer in it, and Marge was at the desk, finishing up the transaction. He gave a cursory nod to the female as he headed out the door.

"Sir Liam," she called just as he put his hand on the door. "Can you wait just a moment?"

Liam stopped. "What do you want?"

She handed the lady she was helping a bag, and bid her good night. The customer slipped by Liam, giving him a wide berth as she stepped out of the store.

"I need to talk to you," Marge said.

Liam waited. He didn't really want to talk to her, but the laws he lived by mandated that he listen to what a mythical had to say.

She took his silence as a cue to continue. “Leeza has a dinner date tonight.”

Liam blinked, and was rather impressed with himself for not showing that he felt sucker-punched. “With whom?” Even his voice sounded calm.

“That’s just it,” Marge stated, shaking her head. “I don’t know. But I think it’s the same person who melted your glasses.” She reached for the box. “They’re melted. Like from extreme heat...” Somehow, even with him dropping the box upstairs, one of the glasses was still intact so that he could see how the glass had warped and fallen in on itself.

Liam gritted his teeth. “Like from a dragon in heat.”

Marge nodded. “Exactly.”

“I’ll keep an eye,” Liam stated as he walked out the door.

\* \* \* \*

“So are you going to tell me why we’re following around a human tonight?” Adrian asked Liam.

Liam had called as soon as he left La Bouteille d’Art, telling his partner he was off on personal business tonight. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d run off on personal business involving Leeza.

Whether Adrian knew who Leeza was or not, he didn’t know—nor did he care.

Wasn’t his intention to tell him.

And he’d planned on keeping this to himself completely, until he saw Leeza’s dinner date. The man, though he used that term in the loosest of meanings, had met her at the store, followed her home, then taken her to dinner.

Nothing terribly exciting about that.

Except that the man was a dragon. A large one that radiated heat. At least three times, he’d overheard Leeza say something about the heat.

Never a good sign with a dragon.

The hotter they got, the more volatile.

“I think this is our arsonist,” Liam said, a cigar in his hand. The tip glowed red in the dark, and they watched as Leeza and the dragon entered her home.

“You know, William will have your head if he sees that cigar,” Adrian muttered.

“And?” Liam replied.

Adrian didn’t say anything.

The static of Leeza deactivating her alarm, and then their voices as they had after-dinner conversation crackled in their stereo.

What was she thinking? Had she completely lost her mind? Letting a stranger into her home like that? Surely she’d know better. She was grown, she should know how dangerous that was, with men or mythicals.

Adrian shifted in his seat. “New question.”

Liam gave him a sidelong glance.



“There a reason why she’s bugged?”

Liam kept his gaze on the house and didn’t respond. They were listening to bugs placed inside her home—something Liam had done several years before, just to protect Leeza. He had his reasons several years before—one of her boyfriends wasn’t horribly trustworthy. He’d just never bothered removing the bugs.

A good thing.

Laughter and simple conversation came through the house, though it sounded like Leeza was a bit drunk.

He didn’t like that development at all.

“And you’re certain this guy is the arsonist?” Adrian asked.

“No. But he fits the profile—new in the area, an unregistered dragon.”

Liam opened up his cellphone and pulled up a file. “And he fits this as well.” He showed Adrian the file that he’d received from another Templar base.

It was several past cases, from different areas across the country. It seemed that some kind of mythical was working his way across the United States, and women were winding up roasted as he traveled.

Human authorities were baffled.

The Templars were certain it was mythical in origin, but the perpetrator was moving fast enough that they had yet to pin him down. While nothing concrete had emerged, this was the first lead they had. Some of the other bases around had confirmed deaths that were mythical in nature. Still, no one could lock down a pattern to them yet.

The few dragon families still out there were not being helpful with the situation. Like any mythical, they didn’t like the idea of one of their own being blamed for something like this.

“It is so hot in here,” Leeza’s voice echoed through the speakers. “I feel like I’m melting.” Feminine laughter made the audio monitors light up like rainbows.

“What is going on, Liam?” Adrian asked. “And don’t lie to me.”

“I would not lie.”

“You would avoid.”

He didn’t say anything.

Adrian sighed. “You’re doing it now. What is going on with this woman?”

Liam grimaced.

A new peal of laughter came from the house—Leeza was enjoying herself. Pain stabbed in his chest.

“Remember the Renaissance convention we went to?”

Adrian nodded. “I remember.” Understanding filled his face. “The little girl? The one on your shoulders?”

“Yes.”

“Does she remember you?”

“No.”

“Ahh.” Adrian smirked, his gaze scanning outside, around the neighborhood, not really looking at him. “You know, you’re not the first one to watch over someone.”

The words hit him like a punch in the gut. “I’m not?”

“We’ve all done it on occasion.”

His voice had the sound of experience behind the words. Enough to make Liam pause. “When?”

Adrian didn’t say anything for a few minutes, and his eyes stared out into the night, though Liam was pretty sure he didn’t actually see any of the neighborhood. “She was a widow. Husband had died in the American Revolution.”

Liam remembered Adrian being distant for a few decades. He’d been lost in a strange place. Crankier. He’d written that period off as Adrian having a mid-life crisis. Most of the Templars had a period like that—an angry time when it dawned on them exactly what they had lost in their devotion, and how long eternal life really was.

It had never occurred to him that a woman could have been involved.

“What was her name?” Liam asked before he could stop himself.

“Elizabeth,” Adrian replied. A smile slipped across his face.

“Was it love?”

Adrian shrugged. “It was something...” He glanced backward, away from the two of them. “I know,” he snapped at his unseen ghost in the backseat.

“What did Nara say?”

“That she thought I was in love. Madly in love.”

“Were you?”

“I don’t know. We aren’t supposed to love.”

“I know.” It wasn’t right, but Liam had learned to deal with it. Even though with Leeza, there was more. He’d let her touch him. What had he been thinking? He wasn’t supposed to do such things. He wasn’t supposed to allow that kind of...of... He didn’t even know what to call it. Just that it was bad—so very bad. If things progressed with her any further, he could have wound up dead right there in her office.

“Did you ever have to interact with her?”

His partner shrugged. “Sure. Can’t really watch out for someone for twenty-seven years and not interact with them somehow.”

“How did you meet her?”

“I can’t remember,” Adrian said.

Liam nodded, though he was certain Adrian was lying. He remembered every single detail in every instance he’d been around Leeza, from childhood until now.

He didn’t call his partner out. Because calling him out would reveal too much about his own relationship, and what he might have to admit to.

Instead he sat there, in silence.  
Listening.  
Like he did with Leeza.

## Chapter 11

Okay, so Leeza was a little drunk.

Well, maybe a lot drunk.

Two of those fish-bowl margaritas would do that to a person. Why on earth she'd drank that much, she didn't fathom. It was careless.

But Orlando was so handsome.

And charming.

And hot.

And the drinks seemed to cool her off. Temperature-wise, anyway. He just seemed to radiate heat. No matter what she did, she felt like she was in a tanning bed, surrounded by heat. It pulsed off his body, and she wouldn't be surprised if she had some kind of tan tomorrow.

Orlando sat next to her on the couch, smiling brightly, though his eyes were dark, like a depth lingered behind them. Interesting as it was, the drinks from dinner were starting to make her drowsy.

She glanced at the clock.

Almost eleven. She really needed to get to bed. She did have to work in the morning. After all, one didn't go out and party on a Monday night.

"Look, Orlando, we've had a grreat time, but, uh, I gotta get some sleep." Her words weren't totally slurring, but she could feel the buzz of the alcohol behind her tongue. In her mind, she could hear the mistakes, but she couldn't seem to correct them.

"Of course," he said. Though he didn't get up. Instead, he leaned closer, the inferno that was his body making sweat bead up on her brow. He reached up, running a finger across her slick brow. "You don't look so well. Perhaps I should tuck you in?"

She blinked. "I'm fine. Just...just, uh, tired." She wiped away his hand, which felt like she'd just brushed her brow with a hot plate.

"So let me tuck you in." He scooted even closer.

Leeza shook her head. "I don't... Man, it's hot. It's just burning up in here." For a second, she swore she saw heat waves coming off the guy.

Which had to be a result of the alcohol. People didn't radiate heat like that.

Did they?

"I don't feel heat," Orlando said, taking her hand.

She jerked away, her hand hot like it had been burnt. "Stop."

"Perhaps you had too much to drink."

"Maybe," Leeza said. She started fanning herself. "I need...um, I need some rest."

Was she drunk, or did she have some kind of heat stroke? She half felt like it was heat stroke, not drunkenness after all. Her head was swimming, and everything in the room spun a bit.

He grabbed her arm. "Come," he said.

"No," she replied, shaking her head. "You need to leave now."

"I will. In a minute. Let me get you to bed."

Everything was fuzzy. Everything but the knowledge that he needed to leave. "No. You go. I'll sleep later."

He grabbed her arm, and pulled her up with him as he stood. "I'm not leaving yet."

She shoved against him, or she tried to, anyway. But it was like trying to move steel. Molten hot steel. "What is the matter with you? Why won't you go?"

"Because, dumb girl, I'm not finished here." Whatever charm he'd started the evening with was gone, and panic flooded her. He dragged her through the house toward her bedroom, her skin feeling like it was being burned to the bone. Leeza let out a scream as he squeezed her upper arm just before he threw her on her bed.

Lashing out with all she had, Leeza grabbed a vase off her nightstand and hurled it at him.

He didn't seem phased at being hit with a heavy glass object. The water in the bottom sizzled on contact, creating a flash of steam that burned her.

She screamed again.

Orlando punched her in the face, a punch of burning coal. She managed to squint up at him, and flames shot out of his nose, fire like a dragon, searing the tops of the bedding. Smoke started to fill the room, and Leeza tried to cover her mouth to help her breathe, but it wasn't doing any good.

He was practically on fire.

What was this? It couldn't be happening. Not here. Not now. A dream. It had to be a dream. It couldn't be real. Men weren't made of fire like that. The room filled up with smoke as the fire on his body radiated out, licking at her bedding and furniture.

"You're finished, dragon," came a voice that Leeza knew quite well.

In the heat and smoke, she saw Sir Liam, a bright silver sword drawn, yanking the man off her. Sparks flew out of Orlando's nose and mouth, but Liam didn't seem to notice, or even care, that he'd just been shot with fire.

Another man, one Leeza didn't recognize, joined him. Clad in the same black that Liam favored, he held out his own sword. They held their weapons up like shields, and the flames seemed to arc around them, as though they were protected by some kind of force field, like on *Star Trek*.

Orlando screamed, and fire exploded. Liam and the other man flinched at the onslaught, but the battle began.

The fuzz of smoke filled the room. Through the waves of heat, Leeza could make out the three forms, but it was hard to tell who was winning and who wasn't. Orlando flew across the room, slamming into the far wall, and his head—or maybe it was the heat—cracked the window pane. Like flying fire, Orlando charged.

Liam met his attack with a kick, stopping him dead in his tracks. Orlando flashed fire. A blast caught Liam's shirt. One swipe of his hand and the flames were gone. Orlando landed two well-placed punches in Liam's face, sending the huge man backward a few steps.

His partner lunged in, using powerful martial arts moves that could have been in a Jackie Chan movie, fending off Orlando for a moment.

Which was evidently all Liam needed.

Liam charged forward, battle cry erupting from him, sword pointed right at Orlando.

Orlando didn't have time to blink.

The sword impaled him. Orlando incinerated, a blinding red and orange ball of heat, before disappearing in a puff of smoke, gone. Nothing but ash fluttered in the room.

Well, ash and a helluva lot of smoke.

"Window," Liam said, unfazed by the smoke.

The second man darted over to Leeza's bedroom window and threw it open. The cool air of the night swirled in, pulling out all the smoke. The two of them swatted at the smoldering bedding, smothering the flames. In a few moments, the remaining fire was gone, and the smoke started thinning out. It took only a few seconds. Or maybe a few minutes.

Maybe Liam was blowing it out.

Leeza didn't know.

Leeza didn't care.

When she woke up, this would be a helluva dream. She'd have to tell Marge about it in the morning. She'd get a kick out of knowing one of her artisans charged into her house, sword drawn, rescuing her from the dragon man.

Isn't that what Liam had called him? Dragon?

It fit.

Well, better than any logical idea Leeza could come up with as to why he was all fiery.

Liam came over to her. "Are you injured?"

Leeza blinked at him.

Something flashed in her mind—an ancient, repressed memory. This man, this huge man, with the huge head, walking around with her at a fair. She smiled, reaching up to touch his face. "Leeza and Leeham."

"What was that?" the other man asked.

"Shock. She's in some kind of shock. Get a kit," Liam ordered, and the man darted out of the room.

"I'm not in shock," she said. "I'm dreaming."

Liam's hands roamed over her body, and her nipples tightened as he ran his hands down her stomach. "Are you burned? Did he burn you?"

He touched her arm.

Leeza let out a scream. If she were in shock, would it hurt? She didn't think it would.

*This must be a dream.*

“Adrian!” Liam cried out. “Get in here with that kit!”

Leeza turned her head. Her upper arm, where Orlando had grabbed her to drag her into the room was burnt—her shirt fabric gone, the skin looking like it might fall off. Her eyes went wide, and for a second, she could feel her stomach churning and ready to expel.

“Look at me, Leeza. It’s your Leeham. Look at me.” He touched her cheek, turning her face away from the wound. She focused on his face. He was mere inches from her.

“My Leeham,” she whispered, the words coming out almost musical. Like she was a child, not here, not where her arm was burnt so severely that it looked rotted. And she was looking into his eyes—the ones that she needed to see.

He would keep her safe.

Her Leeham. Behind her eyes, the world was huge, she was high in the air, seeing everything like she’d never been able before—the world spread out before her. She was on Leeham’s shoulders.

And he kept her safe there.

“You’re going to be all right. I’m here. Leeham won’t let anything happen to you.” He laced his fingers through hers.

“Leeza and Leeham.”

“That’s right. Leeza and Leeham. I’m going to take care of you, like I always have.”

He leaned forward, his lips mere millimeters from her forehead, and he hesitated, a wisp of breath brushing her brow, but then he moved the extra distance, and pressed his lips to her forehead.

“Liam?”

He froze. His friend had come back, a big black bag in his hand.

Liam didn’t give his friend time to think. “Give me a patch.”

“Liam? Did I just—”

He snapped his head around, moving so fast, Leeza barely registered the movement. One second he was looking at her, the next, he was looking at the other man. “Give me a patch!”

The guy reached into the bag, pulled out a big white thing. Liam snagged it out of his hand and shook it.

“Leeza, this will hurt at first, but soon it’ll feel better. I promise.”

She nodded.

Liam ripped it open, and the strangest aroma hit her nose—something natural, but also pungent, like it was an old fashioned potion that an old witch would use a few hundred years ago.

He wrapped the fabric-like bandage around her arm.

Leeza let out a blood-curdling scream just before passing out on the bed.

\* \* \* \*

“I’ll get it from her before I leave.” Liam’s voice was all echo-y and swirling around the room.

Leeza didn't open her eyes. She knew he was there, and she was safe. Like she'd always been around Liam.

Even though she barely knew him, in her core being she knew she was safe with him. He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

"I am not leaving you alone with her."

"Yes, you are."

"No, really, I'm not. Not until I know your head is on straight."

Leeza's eye finally opened, and she let out a sigh. Mentally, she'd wanted to say Liam's name, but it got stuck, mashed around on her tongue, and it came out a groan.

"I'm here, Leeza, I'm here," Liam said, his hand running down her face.

"Liam!"

He stroked her cheek again, his large calloused hands feeling so soothing against her face. "I will be just outside the door."

Leeza nodded her head, and as he stood, the bed groaned like his weight had been too much for the old box spring mattress. He stepped to the doorway, but he didn't go all the way out.

His friend went outside with him.

Immediately they started talking, but Leeza didn't pay a lot of attention, their voices buzzes in the background, the soundtrack of hysteria. She knew she was very, very near the point of hysteria—who wouldn't be after witnessing a man made of flames getting stabbed by another with a sword?

She risked a peek over the edge of her bed, expecting to see Orlando lying there, a crumpled body on her floor.

Nothing was there, though—just dust on her carpet and singe marks on the floor where Orlando had been standing.

The bedroom window was still open, and the chill of the spring night slipped around her, and she reached for a blanket.

And that's when she felt it.

Soot marks.

Her comforter was singed all over—what was once an old country white and blue quilt-like comforter was now black and rough and burned. Her walls, once baby blue, were now gray and black, like they had been on fire. Her old antique high boy dresser was singed all over the front, black marks like wild waves covering it.

Nothing looked burned through—well, except her comforter, but still, what was once a lovely feminine bedroom looked like someone had played too long with a flame thrower.

She turned her head to her arm.

The thick white patch was wrapped around her. And the skin there felt tingly, like whatever was on the thing was trying to sew her skin back together. She desperately wanted to scratch her arm, the itch so intense.

It wasn't a dream...



She felt sick.

All that she'd seen—the fire man—it wasn't a dream. Liam had saved her from the...the dragon. The man was like a dragon. Or that flame-guy from *Fantastic Four*. He'd practically been a wall of fire in her room.

He'd tried...

Had he tried to rape her? Attack her, yes. If his motive had been rape, well, she thanked her lucky stars that Liam had shown up when he did. If he hadn't have shown up, she would have—well, things would have been really, really bad.

And self-defense classes or no, she wouldn't have been able to fight Orlando off. He had been strong.

So strong...

She shivered. Orlando.

On the floor, just at the edge of her bed, the carpet was black as night, burnt to a crisp and sprinkled with ash. She stuck her toe out, brushing the burnt carpet.

It was then that the smell hit her—like her nose had conveniently shut down for the time being, until that very second, and the smells finally registered.

Burnt carpet, soot and ash permeated the room, even though nothing was actually burning at the moment. Her bedspread felt like a war zone—soft and smooth in one spot, hard and crusty in another.

She needed to get out of this room.

Liam's voice raised in the doorway. "I know the rules."

"Well, you certainly aren't acting like it."

Leeza remained on the bed, unwilling to even try to move with Liam blocking the door, the other guy arguing with him. Not exactly a bright fellow, arguing with someone the size of Liam.

"Get out of here. I'll finish up," Liam said, motioning his friend away.

"You're not staying alone with her."

"You are not my keeper." His voice had gone very low, and he practically growled the words. Liam spun in the doorway and faced her.

His partner grabbed his arm. Leeza jerked at the contact, and realized the friend was as large as Liam was—even a little taller.

*Holy crap. Wherever they're from, they grow them big there.*

"I won't let you destroy yourself," the friend said.

"I am doing my job."

The second man mumbled under his breath, "Nara says to be very wary of the path you travel on."

"I am aware of my path." Liam came back to her bed, and though he spoke to his partner, his dark eyes remained locked with her. "I will perform my duty. She will not remember."

"This is kinda hard to forget," Leeza muttered, glancing around the room at her seared bedroom. How would she replace all this stuff? She doubted that homeowner's insurance covered men incinerating themselves in the bedroom.

"Trust me," Liam said.

The other man let out a sigh. "Don't break the rules."

Liam reached down and stroked Leeza's cheek again. "I am already broken."

Neither of them spoke as the other man left the room. They just sat there looking at each other.

Leeza reached up and stroked her arm. "I'm not going to remember any of this, am I?"

He shook his head.

"Will you tell me what is going on?" She pushed herself up, resting on her good arm.

"Do you really want to know?"

She blinked at him. "You killed a man in my bedroom. Granted, he was attacking me, but you killed him. I think I have a right to know something."

"He was not a man."

"A dragon then." She let out a sigh. Maybe she was in shock, because that was surprisingly believable. "Whatever he was, you killed him."

"I did." He glanced down at the ash on the floor. The smoke had dissipated and the room was starting to smell of the cool night.

Leeza shivered. Liam grabbed the comforter, and started to put it around her. "No." She shoved the blanket away, the singed fabric smelling horrible.

"I will get this replaced," he told her. He glanced around the room. "Is there another blanket somewhere?"

"You mean you don't know?" Now more than ever, she was certain that he had been in her home. But she didn't feel upset about it. Why, she wasn't sure, but it was just... It was what it was.

What it was, though, she wasn't quite sure. There was a strange stalker edge to it, but Liam didn't scare her. Infuriate her? Absolutely. Scare her? Not in the slightest.

He let out a sigh, stroking his hair from the crown to his forehead. "I have been here before. I have not been through your things."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "So why have you been here?"

"To make sure you are safe."

"What, do you come in my house to watch me sleep?"

"No."

She shivered again. "In the closet." He took a couple of steps was in and out of the closet in a moment, a blue quilt in his arms. He wrapped it around her, and she didn't realize how much she was desperate for the smell of something not singed until she smelled the faint scent of the laundry soap from the blanket, and she brought it to her face and inhaled.

She glanced around the room. "I can't sleep in here."

He nodded his head. "Do you require a hotel?"

"No." She stood, the blanket wrapped around her, and headed for the living room. While the smell was still in the house, it wasn't as bad in there. She began throwing the pillows and cushions off the couch to get to the hide-a-bed. It was old and stubborn, and even after she yanked on it a few times, it wouldn't budge.

"Let me," he said, reaching for the handle. He barely moved his arm, and the bed came out, groaning against being disturbed.

Like a precision machine, the two of them unfolded and readied the bed for her, and she couldn't help marveling at the fact that he acted like he could read her thoughts—he knew exactly what she wanted, which blankets, sheets, pillows, all of it, as though she spoke the words aloud.

"This will be better," she said as she sat down and started to crawl under the covers—when she realized she was still wearing her pants. Unfastening them, she pushed the pants down her hips.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Liam jerk and spin around, his back to her.

Any other time she would have probably found his gentlemanly behavior amusing, but not tonight. Tonight, she appreciated it; she appreciated being treated with respect. She shoved the pants off and slid into bed, taking a moment to stare at his back—the muscles tight and tense, like they were in her office this afternoon.

She had touched those muscles, felt them under her fingertips. While the last thing she wanted was sex, she couldn't help recalling their few moments together this afternoon. Touching him, feeling the texture of his body...

Him touching her.

She'd always been a sexual person, loved a good erotic romance and everything, but those moments in her office this afternoon had been so much more...

God, had it just been this afternoon?

That just didn't seem possible.

"I'm sorry."

He turned back around. "No need."

"No, there is." She fluffed the blankets around herself. "I'm sorry for this afternoon." She had pushed, she knew she had. She had seen that in his eyes.

She saw it now as he stood at the foot of the hide-a-bed.

His jaw clenched and his eyes went dark, like he held back his emotions, tied them to the tree outside. Maybe it was just the angles of the light. "It is forgotten."

She almost snorted at that comment. She didn't believe him for a moment. "Are you sure?"

His head jerked in a single nod. "Do you require me to stay here?"

She smirked at his quick subject change. Still, she wasn't sure how to answer that. The fact of the matter was that the danger was gone. It wasn't like Orlando was coming back to get her, waiting in the bushes for Liam to leave.

Yet she still felt scared, like pretty soon, something was going to happen. If he left. Perhaps it was the shock finally settling in—that something was going to come back, to make it worse.

“Would you mind?” she heard herself say before she’d realized she was thinking it.

A tiny hint of a smile graced his mouth. “I would not mind.” He took a seat in the chair cater-cornered from the couch, but he sat down awkwardly in it, like...

“Didn’t you have a sword?” she asked.

“I do,” he replied, and patted his hip. The hard sound of flesh against metal echoed in the room.

She squinted at his hip. Even with the light from the hallway, she couldn’t see even the shadow of the weapon. “How come I can’t see it?”

“It is enchanted.”

She shook her head. Why that particular piece of information made her snap, she didn’t know, but it was like the final element. The last thing to click into place and prove she wasn’t in Kansas anymore.

A hysterical laugh came out of her mouth, followed immediately by tears. In a flash, her laughter had shifted to sobs—the snotty-nose, unattractive sobs that hysterical women made—and they were coming out of her.

She scratched at her arm where the white patch was, but couldn’t get the damn thing off. “I can’t... I can’t...”

\* \* \* \*

Liam jumped up, frozen in space between the need to run over to Leeza and comfort her, and the need to remain strong, and help her find her own strength without touching her.

Yet going even another second without touching her seemed the worst possible kind of torture. Worse than anything done to him in the Spanish Inquisition seven hundred years before.

She dug at the patch on her arm, but it did no good—the patch wouldn’t come off until the wound was healed.

“Leeza, stop,” he said, across the room in a step, one knee on the bed, as he fought with himself to grab her and hold her steady, or to hold her and...

Possibly break the rules.

His heart was torn in a thousand pieces, watching her like this. This was worse than just catching her being hurt—this was a thousand times worse, because *he* had snapped her sanity.

He’d seen it before, of course. Human minds were rather stubborn about accepting new possibilities. Yet never had it ripped him up inside like this did.

She was hurting.

Because of him.

“Leeza,” he whispered, his words clogged with—what was that? He reached up, stroking his face.

His eyes were wet. By all that was holy and pure—was he crying?

Leeza tucked her knees up to herself, rocking back and forth, muttering nonsensical words. Her face was blank, like she was lost in some kind of dark hollow, her whole body shaking as she rocked. More than likely, she didn't even know he was there.

"Leeza," he reached out, touching her arm.

And like a flash, he was slammed with every thought going through her mind.

Her mind flipping from an imagined rape, one that might have happened had the dragon been able to complete his goals, to bursts of fire, Liam charging in, the fight completely from her eyes, her mind unable to make sense of the images, like she watched a fantasy movie.

He closed his own eyes, pushing the images back as he scooted closer on the bed. His sword poked at him as he scooted, and he unhooked it, tossing it on the floor. It landed with a clatter, and Leeza jerked her head toward the noise, squinted at it, then buried her head in her knees again.

Moving completely on instinct, he pulled her into his arms, and she coiled in his embrace. Shifting his legs so she sat in his lap, he tried to envelope her, hoping the contact would take away her fear.

"Not real." She shook her head. "Dream. Can't be real..."

He stroked her soft hair, the strands delicate and tangled, and he moved his fingers to not pull on her hair. Though maybe he should—maybe it would snap her out of it.

He didn't know what to do.

In all his seven hundred years, he'd never had to handle this part. He'd never stayed around long enough to see what became of a human after his interference in their lives.

He came in, did his job, if necessary removed the memories, and went on. Sometimes he didn't have to—the human denied so much of what happened, it didn't matter.

Or they didn't understand what they saw.

He started whispering to her, anything to soothe her.

Her breathing started to slow down a bit, and she grabbed onto him; he leaned backward, resting against the couch, and Leeza laid her head on his chest. She clung to his shirt, her knuckles white with pressure. He half-wondered if she'd rip the fabric.

He continued to stroke her head, but blocked her thoughts from him.

However, it wasn't hard—with her whole body pressed against him, he felt a powerful need building in him, overwhelming his ability to think clearly. Every part of her body that touched his felt too hot, like electricity sparked between every contact point.

Her legs uncoiled, and as they slid down his, the electricity flew through him, up his leg toward his groin, and the heady sensation made him rock his head back and stare at the ceiling...

Not that he could make out anything.

Her hips shifted, putting pressure on his groin, and his whole body tensed, the male parts of him straining against his clothes, and he froze.

It was a horrible sensation.

An amazing sensation.

A desperate war raged in his body, one that screamed for release of some kind—a removal of the pressure, like a pressure cooker about to explode.

Something.

She rooted her head into his chest, sniffing at his shirt. “Smoke,” she mumbled.

He grimaced. He had a job to do, and it wasn’t coddling her. He started stroking her head again. This time, he did tap into her mind.

With everything he had, he made himself focus. He started removing all the memories she had of what had happened, of Orlando, even finding the meeting of the dragon in her mind and pulling it out.

He found the memories of that afternoon in her office. How she had felt when she touched his back, his chest...

The sensations were too powerful. Now, not only did he have his own urges and desires tied to the memories, he had hers as well, seeing how the intimacy had affected her...

And she had been as overwhelmed as he was.

He grimaced. He couldn’t have this. This wasn’t what it was supposed to be. There was but one course of action he had to take. Before he could hesitate, he did it.

He wiped everything clean.

Leeza let out a sigh, and he rolled her off him, tucking her into the bed as he climbed out. Pulling out his cellphone, he made a call.

Adrian answered on the first ring. “I’ve got the cleaning team. We’re on our way.”

“It’s done,” Liam replied. “Binding her now.”

“We’ll be there in fifteen.”

Liam shut the phone and let out a sigh. She was an angel when she slept. He had not lied when he said he didn’t watch her sleep—at least not intentionally. He had been there, though, when she was asleep, and had seen her before, curled up, covers all over her, a jumbled mess of fabric wrapped around her, her eyes shut, her lips barely parted.

This image was nothing he hadn’t seen before. Yet every time, it sent a shiver through him, a tug in his soul that both exhilarated him and pained him.

Something he could never have.

Yet something he wanted so badly.

He shook his head.

*I really am broken.*

## Chapter 12

The basement of the Templar compound wasn't terribly fancy. None of the compound was elegant by any means, but the lower level had an even more utilitarian feel to it. A hall ran the length of the house, one end with a collection of plain rooms, all made with locking mechanisms on both the outside and the inside, all sealed with two small beds—temporary vampire quarters. On the opposite end, a small concrete area was outfitted for werewolves and other more dangerous mythicals—ones that couldn't control themselves. Other rooms lingered in the basement—an interrogation room, the storeroom, one of the Templar safes.

And Liam's glass-blowing studio. The room had been specifically transformed into a studio, ventilation installed, everything that a proficient glassblower would need. Or so Adrian understood. He didn't know anything about blowing glass, other than it was hot, and Liam spent days down there, working on a piece.

The heat from the stoves worked with the heating in the compound as well, fueling the house—probably the only reason Grand Master William had allowed the construction of the room in the first place.

Adrian could hear the clatter of metal against concrete, and if he wasn't mistaken, some of that clattering might have been hot glass too.

Grumbles followed the breaking.

Yep, Liam was not having a good day. But was Adrian really that surprised? Not even a little bit.

"You know, he might very well try to stick you in that oven," Nara said, her ghostly form floating just off Adrian's side.

"He might."

"And then you'd be just as ghostly as I am."

Adrian raised his eyebrow. "And I would be able to avoid you."

"Oh now, Sir Adrian, surely I am not that much of a nuisance."

"Do you truly want me to answer that one?" And he would, but his ghost wouldn't like it one little bit. Because she was a nuisance. Nara was always around, floating about, chatting him up about this thing or that, and only a small percentage of it actually worth listening to.

"Nara, are you lonely?" he heard himself ask.

The ghost stopped short, and Adrian felt suddenly warmer, like he'd stepped out into the sun for a moment.

"Are you?" Nara asked. "Or does this have some strange connection to Sir Liam?"

He hesitated in his thoughts—he hadn't actually been thinking of Liam, or of anyone in particular. Except Nara. She'd been a companion for so long, he could hardly remember the days without her at his side. Even when he didn't want her around. "No. I was asking you."

"Of course not. Why would you think I was?" Nara replied.

He turned to face her. "I would just think you would want to be around other spirits. Be around your own kind more."

She pursed her lips, her ghostly white face getting darker at her mouth. "I can come and go whenever I please."

"Unless I need you."

She let out a sigh. It was a bone of contention—she could come and go as she chose, except when the gods or goddesses needed her to pass on a message. Not that space and time had any meaning to her.

Of course, it rarely had any meaning for him anymore, either.

When she did come through, she came through in a big way, of that there was no doubt. Dealing with Hades and some of the other gods and goddesses on a regular basis would be taxing for anyone.

Yet she didn't need to be around all the time.

Or at least Adrian thought so, anyway.

There was only one time that he could remember when she wasn't around all the time, and that had been when he'd been watching after Elizabeth.

Hmm...

Interesting, that.

Adrian shook his head. As fascinating as that whole train of thought was, he was distracting himself from why he'd ventured down into the basement of the Templar compound anyway.

He didn't particularly like to come down here—the last time had been when they'd fetched James and Joseph.

The basement had a cell-like atmosphere to him. Possibly because so many hundreds of years before, when they'd had to endure the Inquisition, many of their cells were locked below ground, deep hollows in the earth where no light came through.

This basement was not much different—no light permeated the concrete here, either—for practical reasons, granted, but still.

It bothered him.

More metal clanked around.

He didn't knock on the door, which was cracked open. He preferred to surprise Liam—see exactly what the man was up to.

Entering, he stepped to the side. And ducked as a piece of steel came flying at his head, barely missing him.

"At least your aim is still fairly accurate."



“What do you want?” Liam had smudges of, well, of whatever it was he got all over himself when he was down here. The heavy apron he wore to protect himself was old and torn, like it was an old blacksmith’s apron.

It probably was.

Adrian leaned up against a small area of the wall that wasn’t taken up by shelves of materials. Or shelves of finished glass, though the shelves of completed glass projects had dwindled since the last time he’d dared venture into Liam’s space.

“To see how you were.”

Liam growled at him.

Adrian shrugged. “You cannot hide down here forever.”

He raised his hand like he was going to throw something, but his hand was empty. “What am I supposed to do?”

Adrian opened his mouth to speak, but Nara whispered for him to be silent.

Liam continued talking. “Show me a mythical, and I’ll tell you how to kill it. Give me a compound, and I’ll tell you how to take it. But this... What am I supposed to do?”

Adrian shook his head. “After what I saw, I don’t know.”

“And you don’t know everything,” Liam replied.

Adrian froze. “What don’t I know?” He saw him kiss her brow. What else had he done? Liam could have doomed them all. He knew the laws as plainly as any of the other Templars.

No Templar can lie with a mortal woman.

Period.

Or they would die.

Liam turned his back on him. If ever there was a dismissal, Adrian couldn’t imagine a plainer one.

Nara whispered more to Adrian. “Eros. Tell him to contact Eros.”

Adrian shook his head. “That’s the last thing he needs.”

“But it will help,” Nara insisted.

“I can’t imagine that he would do any good to this situation.”

Liam paused, turning his head just a bit to glance back at him. “He who?”

“Forget it.” Adrian waved his hand in the air, trying to push the words out of the air.

“Who?”

“Tell him!” Nara said, almost at the same time Liam had spoken.

Adrian put his hands to his temples. “Fine.” He glanced at Liam. “Nara says to contact Eros.”

Liam snorted.

Adrian glanced at Nara. “I told you.”

Nara brought her ghostly finger to her lips and gestured to Liam. “Wait.”

“Eros... He’s just the love god. How could he—” He froze mid rant. “Maybe...” He started muttering to himself, looking himself over. “Not good to be like this...”

Adrian watched as Liam started straightening everything up in his workroom, lost in a strange daze.

“Liam?”

Liam finally brought his eyes up to Adrian. “He can fix this.”

Adrian took a step toward him. “You are actually going to listen to a minor god about this?”

“He knows what is going on.”

“You are not in love with her, are you?” Adrian asked.

When Liam met his gaze, the answer was written on his face.

He was.

He was madly in love with that woman.

Adrian made a silent prayer.

*Divine, save his broken soul.*

\* \* \* \*

It took Liam very little time to prepare for the summoning of Eros.

After a quick shower, he headed out to the rear of the compound, where a small white chapel had been constructed. The building was simple in shape and design, square and small, something that might have been found on the prairie in the nineteenth century. There was no large steeple, no heavy ornate doors.

Simply a place to worship and contact the gods and goddesses.

Inside, the detailing wasn't much more complex. A few simple pews sat to either side of a center walkway, and in the back was a long marble slab. Liam walked straight to the candles on the far right side and lit them—the flicker the only light in the chapel that wasn't seeping in from the windows. In the center of the marble slab was a large round basin, made of gold, probably as old as Zeus himself.

After he lit the candles, Liam went to the center, staring up at the large iron cross that hung on the wall. Just below it was a copy of the Balance Mandate, opened to a page about coming events.

*Days lost.*

*Days gained.*

*The shine of the sun will guide,*

*The loss of the night will bind.*

Shaking his head at the words, he flipped through the pages to the necessary instructions for contacting residents of Mount Olympus. There was a time, many years before, that he would have considered the words prophetic, the book being open to that very passage a message for him.

Not anymore.

Too many decades trying to make sense of senselessness written in the Balance Mandate had hardened his soul.

There was no coming apocalypse—the world would continue to turn forever more.

And he would be taking care of mythicals for the rest of eternity.

That was what he was supposed to be doing, right? Yet he was here, about to call upon a god, looking for...

Guidance.

He whispered a prayer before heading for the cabinets in the far corner of the chapel, where the necessities were stored. Hopefully something good would come out of this.

An answer of some kind.

Liam pulled out the elements in order to contact the God of Love. Like a phone call, the combination of specific elements, mixed just so, created a beacon through space and time to reach the god and bring him forth.

If the god felt like putting in an appearance, that is.

Eros could decide that Liam was not worth his time. Considering Eros's attitude on occasion, Liam wouldn't put it past him.

Liam paused as he pulled out items, heading back toward the basin, and started double-checking the ingredients again in the Balance Mandate. So far, he had everything—the herbs, the stone, the flint, the oil...

He placed everything in the bowl, laying it in layers, and stared down at it.

It didn't look right.

Or smell right, or something.

He glanced at the Balance Mandate again. What had he forgotten?

"Oh," he whispered, reaching up on his head and snagging a few strands of his own hair and dropping them into the mix of dried herbs.

In his seven hundred years, he'd contacted the minor gods maybe four times—there was rarely a need for it. Adrian's ghost usually kept them in contact with the Divine side without resorting to this archaic method of summoning.

It wasn't terribly different from what the ancient Romans did to bring forth the gods in their time...

Of course, a couple of key elements were not available to them at the time. The main one being the hair of an immortal human.

Drizzling a few drops of the oil over the mixture, he stirred it three times in a counter-clockwise motion, combining all the ingredients.

He grabbed his flint and sparked the herbs.

As the red-orange fire began to burn, he grabbed the last element, a red garnet, and threw it into the flames.

The stone shouldn't have done anything for the fire. If any human would have dropped the red stone into the mix, it would have landed with a thump in the bottom of the bowl and been just a lump taking up space.

However, this wasn't just any garnet, or any human adding it to the mix. When it hit the bowl, the flames exploded, flying out in all directions. Liam jumped back to avoid being singed.

"They don't mention in the Mandate that the fire explodes like that," Eros said, coming up the center isle of the chapel.

Liam spun around, and knelt before Eros. "Eros, God of Love, I request the honor of your presence to guide me in a difficult situation."

Eros's dark hair hung to his shoulders and he brushed it back out of his face. "Sir Liam, get up. I don't hold to formality after all these centuries." Eros took a seat on the front-most pew, throwing his arm over the back, and tipped his head to the side. "I am surprised, though. I would have thought you'd rather deal with my sister than with me."

"Your guidance seemed more prudent." Liam remained kneeling.

Eros shook his head. "Get up before I get irritated."

Liam stood, standing at military rest position, his mind racing, the most prevalent question in his mind if he was in love with Leeza.

"Well, at least you're not bowing." Eros studied him for a moment. "The answer to your question is yes."

Liam blinked. His chest heaved at the simple word. Though some part of him knew that he was in love with her, and had been for a very long time, he could never name it.

And if it wasn't named, then it didn't exist.

Now, however, the emotion existed. And it was tearing him apart. How could this happen? How could something like this happen to him? He was a Templar! Schooled for hundreds of years to control himself, to control his emotions and reign them all back, hold onto himself when others were losing their minds.

How had this happened?

"Is this your doing?" Liam asked, suddenly angry that Eros had caused this. "Then, that day..."

Eros blinked, his eyes going wide. "The little girl from the fair? That is who you're in love with?"

"You did not do this?"

"I would never do something like that. Not to a child—and not to you."

"Why do I not believe you?"

"I may be mischievous, but I'm not mean. You're in love with a mortal female?"

Liam jerked his head once in a curt nod.

"What is her name?"

"Felicia Zanna Hunter."

He raised a brow at him. "Interesting name."

Liam gritted his teeth. "How do I fix this? How do I make it go away?"

Eros shook his head and laughed. "Sir Liam, you are in love. You can't just take a potion and it'll stop. It doesn't just go away."

"I am off-balance. Nothing feels right. Every part of me is sensitive, like I am on fire. It is worse when she is near. How can I live like this?"

"Like every other human out there. You go, one day at a time. Every day, it gets a little better. Distance between you both would be prudent, as well. The less contact you have with her, the less likely you will have more of these feelings."

Liam nodded. "Distance would be good."

"Perhaps you can transfer to another base for a few decades? Give her time to marry, get old, all of that."

"But will I always feel this way?" he asked.

"You will always love her, yes. But distance and time will make it lessen. No one ever gets over their first love, Liam. Not even you."

*I need to.*

## Chapter 13

Like a moth to a flame, Liam couldn't seem to stay away from Leeza. Regardless of Eros's advice.

Which was why, when he rose in the mid-afternoon on Wednesday, he ran through his rituals and prayers, darting out of the compound in record speed.

He arrived at the parking garage about an hour before the store closed, and waited, cigar in his hand, for Leeza to emerge.

Liam had promised himself that he would only be here to make sure she was safe, to watch over her while she crossed the street and came up to her car.

That was his intention.

But when she emerged from the building and she and her coworker entered the parking garage, he couldn't bring himself to move.

Even when she came out of the elevator and started across the concrete, he remained frozen in place.

At first she didn't see him, fiddling with her keys as she headed toward her car. The wind ruffled her feather-light hair and it danced around her face. The evening sun made her features glow, and Liam's heart pounded in his chest, his breath coming in short gasps.

So when she did see him, and smiled, all he could do was stare.

"Hey you," she said as she got closer. "I've been meaning to call you."

"Oh?" He was impressed his tongue was able to formulate that short answer.

"The glasses you brought by the other day? I can't seem to find them. I have them in the computer, pictures and everything, but I can't find the actual glasses. Did you pick them up for some reason?"

He nodded.

She let out a sigh, her shoulders relaxing. "Good, because I thought I was losing my mind. I couldn't find them anywhere. I knew I had them at one point, but I can't put them up for sale if I can't find them to sell."

"I am sorry," he stated. "I will get them back to you soon."

She shrugged. "Bring them back, or give me something else, if you have anything."

"The glass has not been forming well for me as of late."

"That's too bad. Your work is very popular." She walked over to her car door, sticking the key in the lock, then pausing. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I..." He didn't know what he should say. A thousand things ran around in his mind, but nothing seemed to come out. At least not of his own volition. "I... Did you want to go get coffee somewhere?" Inwardly he cringed. Even to him, the words sounded hollow and dead.

Leeza's eyes went wide. "Coffee? Not really."

Liam turned to walk away, the ache in his chest so powerful, he thought he might throw up. Regardless that his invitation had been, well, inappropriate to say the least, it still hurt that she turned him down.

Maybe this was what humans called rejection. It stabbed in his chest. He understood their ache.

Leeza took a couple of steps; her touching his arm sent a shockwave of electricity through him. "But I'd love to grab dinner somewhere. I'm starving."

He froze, pivoting around to look her in the eye. "It would be my honor to escort you to dinner."

She smiled. "I wouldn't consider it an honor, but I'd love to have dinner with you, Liam."

"I would."

\* \* \* \*

They were off rather quickly, each in their own vehicle. While Liam had considered driving her in his car, she would probably see some of his un-enchanted weapons in the back and get the wrong idea.

The battle axe and the mace were pretty menacing. Not to mention the police-like radio set-up in the front seat. Probably would require an explanation.

Leeza led in her car, driving to an out-of-the-way Mexican restaurant not terribly far from her home. Liam parked next to her in the lot, and he managed to get to her car door before she got out, holding it open for her.

She arched her eyebrow at him.

"Are men not supposed to open doors for ladies?" he asked as she climbed out of the car.

"It's not terribly common anymore, no. But while we're on the subject of manners and etiquette, riding in the same car is better manners than taking two vehicles."

"Manners seem to sometimes contradict practicality."

Leeza shrugged as they walked inside. "It's an art to find a balance between the two."

"Are you an artist?"

She shook her head. "You're lucky I don't burp at the table."

Liam grinned as they entered the dark restaurant. From the smell of the food, he knew he'd have to be very careful what he ate. While it all smelled appetizing, being a Templar, he had been blessed, or cursed, depending on point of view, with a super-powerful digestive system.

Which one might think meant he could eat anything.

Not exactly.

He could eat anything. But if it wasn't healthy for him, the substance ran right through him. A fast food cheeseburger would leave him in the bathroom for a good hour. Fries were worse.

Liam and Adrian learned that the hard way—when fast food first came around, they were just as tempted as any human to try it.

They paid for it in the bathroom, flushing all the impure food out of their bodies. In a most unpleasant way.

“What’s wrong?” Leeza asked, interrupting Liam’s thoughts.

“Nothing,” he replied, looking at the worn carpet and well-used booths.

“Do you not like Mexican?” she asked as the hostess took them to a little booth in the middle.

“I do,” he replied, sitting down on the leather seat, the springs in the cushion so used that it felt like he was sliding over a speed bump. He adjusted the sword on his hip—he’d never bothered removing it, the armor like a second skin to him.

Leeza accepted the menu and flipped it open. “While it’s not the prettiest place in town, the food is amazing. And you get a lot for your buck.”

“A good value is always appreciated.” Liam opened his own menu and started to look over the offerings.

There wasn’t a lot that would be low in fat content on this menu. Which could pose a problem.

When the waitress arrived to take their orders, Liam wound up ordering a chicken fajita platter, and Leeza ordered a chimichanga.

“What is a chimichanga?” Liam asked her after the waitress left.

“Basically a deep fried burrito,” Leeza said with a shrug. Liam must have had some strange look on his face, because she immediately continued. “That’s probably not the best way to describe it. They really are good. I’ll give you a bit when mine comes—I never have room for all of it.”

“I shall take your word for it.”

“They really are good.”

Liam nodded. “I have no doubt, but I will not take food from your plate.”

“Why not?”

“Bad manners.”

Leeza grinned.

\* \* \* \*

Liam couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such a nice time. Well, actually, he could, and it was at a Renaissance fair. With her. Though nice seemed hardly the appropriate word for this instance.

They’d talked easily enough through the dinner. Leeza was pretty good about just telling him things, leaving him to say very little about his own life. They did talk about glassblowing and how he liked doing it.

And as she promised, she did give him a part of her chimichanga. And it was very tasty—though he doubted it would stay in his stomach very long.

He probably would have continued having a nice evening if his cellphone hadn’t rang.

He pulled it out of its holster on his hip and glanced at the number. He didn’t recognize it. “Liam,” he said.

Leeza watched him with a strange look on her face.



“It’s Nicole,” came the female voice.

Liam sat up straighter. “Are you all right?”

“We’re fine. I don’t have long.” She inhaled a breath, like she was about to recite something. “We’re under Jobe’s protection, where the trees are like Templars.”

Liam nodded his head, his free hand moving around. In a flash, Leeza had a piece of paper and a pen in front of him, and he started scribbling down her words.

“Sun is rare, though we’re not in shadows,” she continued. “Soon we’ll go where the nightmares began, until the night says we can return.” Then the phone went dead.

Liam finished writing her words down, though he was pretty sure he knew what it all meant anyway.

Leeza watched him. “Work?”

Liam nodded. “A, uh, client was apprising me of her status.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, shifting the leftover food around on her plate. “So now it’s time for me to ask you a personal question.” Leeza wiped her mouth off with her napkin and threw it on the plate, her chimichanga and sides pretty much gone.

Liam was still working on the rice that came with his fajita. “Which is?”

“What is the whole ‘Sir Liam’ thing? Is it a job title or something?”

“I am a knight.”

She raised an eyebrow. “For real or for a job?”

“I was sworn in as a knight by legal means.”

“Huh. Didn’t think there were any out there anymore. Not real ones.” She sipped on her water. “Do you have a sword and chain mail and all that jazz?”

Liam couldn’t help letting the side of his mouth tip up in a smile. “I do. Heavy armor, light armor, chain mail, and several swords among other melee weapons.”

Leeza smirked and shook her head. “Somehow I’m not surprised. So what do you do with it?”

“With what?”

“The armor, the weapons. What do you do with it?”

“Protect the innocent.”

“Of course you do,” Leeza said. “And where does this fantasy play out?”

“Out there, on the city streets.”

“I see.” But it was obvious she didn’t see. She was starting to throw up her defenses, like she thought he was not mentally stable. Maybe she would run from the restaurant screaming.

Probably not a bad thing—if she thought he wasn’t stable, she might not want to be around him. And that could only help him control his emotions properly.

“Aren’t you afraid of the boogie man?” Liam asked.

A bit of a smile quirked up on the corner of her mouth. “The boogie man used to scare me.”

He raised his eyebrow. “And who defends you from the boogie man?”

“Men like you, I guess.” She grinned this time.

And he joined her in the smile, raising his glass of water to her. She clanked her partially filled glass of iced tea against his, the plastic clacking together like a child's toy.

"You are something, Liam."

"And so are you, Leeza."

Leeza laid her hand down on the table, her finger tips precariously close to his. He didn't realize it at first, well, he never actually expected her hand to touch his—it was such a casual gesture, he didn't realize it was more.

At least not until she brushed his fingertip with hers. And in that second, he felt a slamming of her emotions, of her thoughts, and he knew exactly what her intentions were, her desires, her wants.

Which only intensified his.

"Leeza," he whispered, his heart hammering in his chest.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" she asked as she outlined one of his fingers with hers.

He should have moved his hand.

He could just jerk it away.

Yet it was like some unforeseen force was holding his hand in place, keeping it there for her to touch. He glanced around the restaurant, half expecting to find Eros or even Aphrodite around, feeding him with feelings.

Yet the feelings were genuine—both hers and his, wrapping around him, enveloping his mind in an arousing onslaught. All his adrenaline was pumping, as though he'd just been in a fight. He gritted his teeth and finally his hand became unglued from the table.

He pulled his hand away, letting it rest closer to his body.

Leeza pulled her own hand back, a look partially of disappointment, partially of irritation passing over her features.

"You don't like being touched, do you?"

"No."

She nodded her head, as if something was clicking over in her mind. "I'm sorry."

"It is okay."

She ran her fingers through her soft, fluttery hair. "I can't help myself, it's weird. I've never quite felt such a strong pull in my life to anyone. I just wanna jump on you and ride all night..." She slapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh my God, I just said that out loud, didn't I?"

He nodded, his cheeks tinged pink.

How was she able to do that to him? It was terribly... what was the sensation? Embarrassing. Though he didn't know what was worse: knowing that she'd said such erotic things, or the fact that his own face blushed like a silly girl.

\* \* \* \*

When they finished their meal, Leeza and Liam headed for the door, after Leeza offered to pay her portion of the meal. Liam proceeded to remind her that men paid, and while she fluttered a bit over it, she didn't insist again. The sun had gone down and the sky was a soft twinkling of twilight, and he realized they'd been in there much longer than he'd thought.

He had things to do.

He was going to walk her to the car, put her in, and send her home.

That was his plan.

But like so many things in the world, it didn't go according to plan. When he stepped outside, the air was thick with mythical energy.

Not that his gift allowed him to sense the mythicals, by any stretch. That wasn't his particular gift. But after seven hundred years, he could feel them, even if it was just a tingling on the back of his neck.

He smelled the scent of blood in the air. The scent was sharp and crisp—recently fed vampires, he'd bet his sword on it. Yet they were hiding in the shadows...

The restaurant was a solitary structure, and an alley for trash bins left a gap between it and the neighboring building, a hardware store that was already closed for the night.

He put his hand on his sword, ready for battle.

"What, what is it?" Leeza asked, turning her head from one side or the other, looking for whatever had made him tense up.

He didn't see anything, but he couldn't help the gut feeling.

He turned toward the corner, Leeza right behind him.

"What is the matter?" She put her hand on his shoulder, trying to get his attention.

Anger surged—not from the situation, but from her touch. It made his insides light on fire again, and it was distracting. Yet at the same time, it made him want to protect her with an unyielding passion. "Get in your car and go home." He didn't bother looking at her as he spoke.

"Oh sure, send the poor defenseless girl away..." she muttered, staying right behind him.

A stride away from the corner, he stopped, and Leeza ran into the back of him. He turned his head to glance back at her. "I mean it, go now."

But it was too late.

One of the vampires emerged from the side of the building, and Liam jerked out his sword. The vampire was in full regalia, teeth exposed and baring the overly red mouth of the recently fed.

"Oh my God, what the..." Leeza said, trying to get back around him, but he kept her behind him.

"Go home," he said, glaring at the vampire, who was joined by another one.

They were new. Strong, but new. Liam bared his own teeth, and brought his sword up to bear.

"Where did that damn thing come from?" Leeza whispered.

He tipped his head to the side. "When I say, you run."

"What's going on?" She held him like she was trying to scramble up his back.

The vampires slid back into the shadows. Liam took a couple more steps.  
“Run.” With a shove, he pushed Leeza back.  
She didn’t run away.  
It was too late for Liam to stop his attack.

## Chapter 14

She would have expected, when witnessing two men getting stabbed in the heart and turned into ashy messes, to be upset, distraught, or even a bit hysterical.

Leeza was pretty sure someone had given her a lobotomy when she wasn't looking, because she wasn't at all upset by the fight.

Or that Liam had killed those men.

Creatures.

Whatever.

She knew, in some rational part of her brain, that Liam was a protector, and he had been protecting her. She'd considered his whole knighthood gig a bunch of baloney initially. Seeing him in action, though, made her reconsider her thoughts.

She was still up in the air about him.

There was such a strong pull—she hadn't been kidding at the table when she'd said that she'd love to ride him all night. She just hadn't meant to articulate the words.

But there was so much that was just, well, a little crazy. The whole knight thing was generally weird, but understandable. Heck, there were guys who lived out old civil war battles all the time, and they were pretty much normal. Rednecks, but normal.

But those creatures he'd destroyed. And destroy was the optimum word—as soon as he stabbed them in the chests, they disappeared into ash; a sooty mess that danced in the air before settling everywhere.

She could still smell the stuff, and in the back of her mind, she wanted to go wash her hair.

Yet they weren't human.

Human bodies didn't do that. So it didn't count as murder, did it? He was defending her, right?

Everything was so hazy, she didn't quite get it all. There was something missing. And deeper, underneath the haze in her mind, she was pretty sure he'd done this before. The protection thing. While it was obvious from how he fought that he'd been fighting creatures for a very, very long time—the fight wasn't really that much of one—she was more certain that he'd done this before *for her*.

But she couldn't remember.

They arrived back at her house. Liam had a few good gashes in his chest, the shirt stained with blood around the slash marks, yet he still seemed in perfect control of himself. He'd followed in his car and circled the house twice, making sure there was no sign of another one of those creatures...

Vampires.

He'd called them vampires.

She shook her head as she pulled out her first aid kit. How insane had her world gotten that now vampires walked around?

What was next? Werewolves?

Liam sat on her couch, his hand on something that was there, but not there. She imagined it must have been his sword. She'd seen it just before the fight started, but she hadn't seen it on him at dinner.

Or now; she couldn't see it, but the way his hand rested, she could tell he had it across his lap. Would she be able to touch it, she wondered. If she put her hand out where his was, would she feel the cool metal?

She shook off the thoughts and started going through her first aid kit. "Take off your shirt."

Liam jerked his head around and stared at her. "Excuse me?"

"For your wounds."

"I am fine."

Now it was her turn to glare at him. "You're not fine. You have cuts on your chest and left forearm. I'm going to bandage them up. Now take off your shirt."

He let out a sigh-slash-growl as he did as she told him. She grabbed the antiseptic with her back to him, saturated a cloth, and turned back around to face him.

And paused.

She knew he was huge. There was no doubt of that—men didn't fill out clothes like he did without being large. And sitting next to him on the couch, well, she'd seen how much the couch sank in under his weight.

Yet not until she saw his bare chest did she comprehend the massiveness of him. His arms were the size of her thighs—cut with all the lines of a man who spent a *lot* of time in a gym. His pectoral muscles were huge squares of rock; granite or slate, maybe. The only marring of the skin was where he'd been slashed from the fight—several red lines curving downward on his chest. Though not even that seemed to take away from the architecture of his body.

A slight, and oh, it was very slight, dusting of dark hair lingered between his pecs and traveled down toward his belt line. Nestled in the center of it was a chain with a silver cross—not like that in a church, but one that was even in proportion all the way around. It glinted in the light, and she wanted to touch it—to know if it was cool to the touch, or warm like his skin had to be. Her gaze wandered down, her thoughts going rampant of imagining touching that skin, feeling that beautiful perfection...

And it was perfect. There weren't even any scars. The skin was pristine. So pristine, in fact, it didn't seem natural.

Except for one spot, just at his belt line. There, it looked like he'd been stabbed with something large and round.

"Whoa," she whispered, her fingers hovering over the wound, almost impulsively needing to feel the marred flesh, know if it was real. "What happened there?"

He looked down at the spot, like he'd forgotten it was there. "A riding accident."

"What, were you trying to joust?" She reached out to touch the scar, but her fingers stopped just in front of the wound, like a shield blocked her from physical contact.

"Yes." The tone of his voice pretty much ended the conversation.

"Okay then." She started work on the cuts on his chest. "These aren't bleeding very badly."

"They will heal quickly."

"Yeah, but we don't want an infection. What did he cut you with? A knife?"

"Yes."

Leeza gritted her teeth as she started applying the bandages. Liam didn't give her anything to work with either—he stared off into space, refusing to speak, his body rigid and tense, and for a little while, she thought he might have actually been made of stone.

She worked meticulously, applying each bandage over the wounds, the gauze strips like big white-out spots on his chest. True to her initial observation, the wounds weren't bleeding out of the gauze just as she finished his chest.

Liam remained frozen except for his fingers curling around the hilt of the invisible sword on his lap. His knuckles turned white, and it was obvious they were gripping the sword extremely tight.

She got up and walked around him to get to the left side, and as she tried to sit, the sword poked her.

*Ouch!* That answered her question about being able to feel it...

"Move that thing."

Liam didn't move. "There's nothing there."

"Liam, I felt it. Hell, it just poked me in the hip. Move your sword."

He still didn't make eye contact with her. "You are imagining it."

"I'm not imagining the bruise that will be on my hip in the morning from the damn thing's poke. Don't be an ass. Move it."

"There is no sword." His words were automatic. Of course, they had to be. They were arguing about a sword that was invisible.

She dropped her head to her chest for a moment and let out a slow breath. There was a level of crazy beyond her mind that floated around in the moment.

Tequila.

Tequila would be good here.

Maybe then she'd actually be able to see this mystical sword.

She stood back up, stepped directly in front of Liam, straddled his legs, and sat on his lap.

Liam jerked as she landed on his thighs. She ignored the intense desire that swept over her as she shifted her hips to get comfortable. As comfortable as the sword would allow, anyway. Grabbing his chin, she tugged his face to hers. "I can feel the sword across your lap." She jerked her right knee, bumping it. "Move the damn thing, or I will."

Liam blinked, staring at her. His eyes were a mix of astonishment, wonder, and something else.

Something primal.

Leeza reached down and grabbed for the sword.

Liam's hand shot out, stopping her wrist before it made contact. "No," he whispered.

Looking down, Leeza saw his pants—his very tight pants, so tight they looked ready to rip apart if any more pressure came to them.

Her tongue crept out of her mouth, and she licked her lips.

Liam's eyes closed and opened, a very slow, deliberate movement, yet he didn't break his stare at her, nor did he let go of her wrist. His eyes, which had been so astonished before, were now darker, more primal, and very much interested in things other than the cuts on his arm.

Leeza's gaze roamed over his face, across his jawbone, down his neck, back up to his chin, over his lips just as he slipped his tongue out to wet them.

She inhaled. Her free hand started to come up, but before she could bring it up to touch her face, his other hand snagged her wrist, locking both her hands down between their bodies.

"I want you," Liam whispered.

"I want you," she replied.

"I am not supposed to want anyone. And I want you."

She didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry." It seemed the only appropriate answer, yet truth be told, she wasn't sorry. She didn't want him to feel bad for wanting her. She didn't feel bad for wanting him—why should he feel bad about it?

She laced her fingers through his, and surprisingly, he let her, holding her hands as though his life depended on it.

"I want to tell you everything," he whispered, his eyes not leaving hers, the dark pools filled with so much emotion, he looked like he could explode.

She leaned in a little bit closer. "I want you to." And she did. In that second, she knew whatever it was that he was going to tell her would change her entire being.

But she wanted it.

She wanted to know.

He released her hands and put a hand on each one of her cheeks. "If I tell you everything, you will never be the same. You will never see the world around you the same. You will never see me the same again, either."

A tiny smile crept over her lips. "Well, I already think you're a little nuts. What could you possibly say that would make it worse?"

The corner of his mouth turned up. "If you will grant me one thing before, I will tell you everything. Answer any of your questions."

"If I grant you what?"



He leaned a touch closer. “This.” With a slight tug, he pulled her down. Leeza needed no more invitation; she crashed into him, her hands on his bare chest. Their lips hit hard, and for a second he froze, like he was unsure what to do.

It took her a second to realize that he was a novice. He’d never kissed anyone before. And her mind wanted to scream at her. How was it possible that a man who looked like Liam had never kissed anyone? It was absurd.

Yet his tentativeness screamed just that fact.

He was a twist of ironies.

Their lips pressed against each other, slightly frozen, and Leeza parted hers, cradling his upper lip in hers for a second. Liam remained unmoving, his heart hammering under her fingers.

She opened her mouth a second time, and he let go of her face, wrapping his arms around her waist, his hands seeming to swallow the space of her back.

This time, when her lips caressed his bottom lip, he parted his as well, moving in a soft kiss against hers. Her whole body lit on fire at the simple movement. Opening her mouth more, the wet part of her lips brushed his.

Liam followed suit, and she tasted the warmth that was him. Every part of her insides started to melt—this was what kissing was. It wasn’t sloppy, it wasn’t dirty, and it wasn’t forced.

This was what a kiss was supposed to feel like—like her whole world had crumbled to this one moment in time.

Nothing else mattered.

Their lips remained opened, tasting each other, and Leeza slid her tongue in between them, just barely caressing his lower lip.

Liam froze.

Leeza pulled back.

He stared at her, a strange, confused look on his face.

“Is there something wrong?”

“Was that your tongue?” His hands slipped off her back, instead hesitating on her ribs, very, very close to the edge of her breast, and despite his words, she felt a heated response running through her body.

“Uh, yes...” Her words trailed off as she spoke, afraid of his response. Had she offended him somehow? Was he one of those who didn’t believe in tongue kissing? Weren’t there religious factions that were against it?

He closed his eyes for a second, his lips tight in a line, like he was dissecting his thoughts. Was it her he was about to dissect? He panted, his heart humming under her fingers.

When his eyes opened, the dark orbs were even darker, almost feral. “What else do you use it for?”

She blushed at his words—honesty seemed the best reply. “Everything.”

One of his hands slid into her hair. “Show me.”

He pulled her down to him, their lips meeting in a kiss, but not slowly this time. Leeza's mouth met his open one, and when her tongue came out to caress his lip, he met hers with his own, yet he stalled.

Leeza moved her tongue to one side, and he followed her dance. It took Liam only a few moments to learn the steps, then the tempo went from waltz to samba. One of Liam's hands slid around behind her, pulling her against him, the other resting on her hip.

Leeza brought her hands up his body, stroking his arms, his shoulders, eventually wrapping around his neck, and sliding into his hair. It had been years since she'd just sat kissing someone like this. And while she would love to get the rest of him naked, this certainly had its appeal.

But there were other things she could be kissing. She slid off his lips, desperate to taste his skin, and started kissing down his neck.

"Leeza," he whispered. "Is there... Am I..."

She licked over his Adam's apple, and brought her eyes up to his. "Shh." She placed a kiss on his lips.

Slipping back down, she kissed along his throat, and up the side to his ear, and he tipped his head in reply to her touch. His heartbeat hammered even harder, if that was possible, and his short breaths made her hope he didn't start hyper-ventilating.

The taste of him was unlike any man she'd ever known. The skin was, for lack of a better word, pure. Undiluted with colognes or lotions or anything weird to taint it. It just was.

In its pure form, she tasted the adrenalin from his earlier fight, savoring the texture of his smooth skin. Licking a curve around his throat, she let out a sigh of pure ecstasy as she worked her way up to his ear.

Liam shuddered as she sucked his earlobe in her mouth and tasted it. Swirling her tongue around the skin just underneath his ear, he hissed, his grip tighter on her, the hand that rested on her hip coming around to caress her bottom.

Leeza ran her mouth along his shoulders, tasting everything she could, making him jerk and moan under her ministrations. So involved in the savoring of his skin, she didn't realize he'd started to tense underneath her until it was too late.

He jerked her up from his body, panting; heck, they both were. He held her back, his eyes wide. Desperation flew across his face, but he seemed lost at the same time.

"What, what is it?" she whispered, her voice thick and heady.

"More. I need more." He reached in between them, taking the sword that had been a barrier between them and threw it across the room. Where it landed, she wasn't sure; she just heard the clatter.

Not that she had time to think about it, because he grabbed her and pushed her down on the couch, his huge form lying on top of her, their bodies pressed together in all the right places.

Leeza let out a moan of her own just before he covered her mouth with a searing kiss.

He had gotten incredibly comfortable with the kissing.

Not that she was complaining. The weight of him on top of her only drove in more of the desire that threatened to boil over under her own skin. Liam continued to kiss her, his bare chest hot against her, and she ran her hands all over his back, feeling every plane as they kissed.

His hands slid up her sides, then down to her hips, and up again, like he wanted so much to do something, but he wasn't sure exactly what that was.

She'd spread her legs when he laid on top of her, and now she bent one so that it looped around his hip, and he groaned, his hand running down her thigh and back up. He broke their kiss, nuzzling his head in the crook of her neck, and kissing her where her blouse was open at the neckline.

"So soft," he whispered. "Everything is so delicate... I want..."

She stroked his head, letting out soft mews of pleasure as he kissed her. "I know," she managed to say. Reaching between them, she tugged at the edge of the shell she'd been wearing and pushed him up.

Liam watched as she shimmied the blouse up her body, his eyes riveted to the skin as it was revealed. He knelt between her legs, staring down at her.

With one hand, he started making soft circles around her stomach, the pads of his fingers barely grazing her skin. He skirted her belly button, and she squealed, the touch tickling her.

"Am I wrong?" he asked, his hand freezing in the air over her stomach.

"No," she said, reaching up and stroking his cheek. "It just tickles."

"Oh." He continued letting his hands slide around, feeling the edge of her ribs, the way the bones bent under her skin, every dent and angle of her.

Except the part Leeza was desperate for him to touch.

She arched her back into his hands, trying to encourage him to touch her breasts, but he didn't go near them. His hands grazed the underneath, but he wouldn't.

"Touch me..." She put her hand on his, trying to guide him toward her breast.

He wouldn't let her control him. The tip of his finger grazed the bottom of her left breast, barely ruffling the lacy cup of her bra, and she felt such a charge, she might have mistaken it for an orgasm, were she younger.

It wasn't an orgasm, but instead a sensation that made an orgasm much larger.

Reaching up between them, she started to caress his chest, her fingers running over his biceps. He looked down, watching how her fingers ran over the lines, and when her fingertip grazed his nipple, he jerked.

A smile spread across her face, and she pushed herself up, bringing her lips about level with his chest.

He moaned her name as she ran her tongue all over him. When she reached one of his nipples, she licked and played with it, making the giant Sir Liam groan and wiggle under her moves.

He kept shaking his head back and forth. "No. No. No..."

She paused long enough to look up at him. "What is it?"

“I can’t be doing this.” He brought his hand up, partially to separate her from him, partially to cup her cheek. “With every fiber of my being, I want to know every inch of you, to feel every part of you, but I can’t.”

“Why not? What can it hurt?”

“Everything.”

## Chapter 15

It was obvious that Leeza didn't understand what Liam had meant, but he was determined to explain it to her. Properly.

And hopefully without touching her anymore. Because the touching would be his undoing, of that he was certain.

She'd changed, putting on a pair of loose-fitting pants and thin shirt. Not thin enough that he could see through the fabric, but delicate, like her...

And she had taken off the lacy bra, her breasts round and full under the shirt. When she came back out, he had to force himself not to look at her there, because looking led to wanting, and wanting to touching, and touching...

He wasn't going to go there.

"Do you want a drink?" Leeza asked, heading into the kitchen.

"No, thank you," he replied, watching her. Where she'd been burnt was now merely a heavy bruise, though most of it was hidden by the cuff of her t-shirt.

He winced as he saw it, thankful that the skin had grown back but horribly sorry the bruise marred her skin.

She came back with two glasses of wine, and set one down before him. "In case you change your mind." Plopping back on the couch, she turned sideways so she faced him. And she stuck a pillow between them. "I have this feeling you might want a drink before this is all said and done."

"I do not drink."

She stopped, the glass a millimeter from her lips. "Somehow I'm not surprised."

"Why?"

She shook her head, her hand waving in the air, as if to push away the words. "You said you wanted to explain something to me. Well, start talking, buddy."

Where to begin had him stumped, trying to figure out the best way to tell her everything.

And try not to tell her *all* of everything.

"I need you to understand, first and foremost, that you are a beautiful woman, and I am honored you allowed me to..." He stumbled over the words for a moment. "To touch you."

Maybe he should drink some of the wine.

Her eyebrow went up and her lips opened to speak, but he didn't give her time to reply.

"I operate under a different set of laws than you do."

"This has something to do with the whole knight thing, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does."

"So you have a code of ethics. Not a big deal, really."

"The laws I live under are absolute. There is no breaking them."

“Why not?”

“Punishment is swift.”

“What, you get killed if you break a law or something?”

He didn’t say anything.

Leeza blinked. “I was kidding.”

“It is more accurate than you understand.”

“Whoa,” she whispered, and tipped her head to the side. “Really? Like, seriously? You can get killed for breaking the laws?”

“Yes.”

“They don’t play in your world, do they?”

“The Divine does not, no.”

“You mean God?”

“We call Him The Divine. It differentiates Him from the other gods and goddesses.”

“Okay, wait a minute, back this train up just a bit.” She took another sip of her wine, almost emptying the glass. “Start over.”

Liam gritted his teeth. “I am trying to explain.”

“You can’t just jump in and start with gods and goddesses. You need to give more back story. Don’t you read?”

He glared at her.

“Fine, whatever. Just start small. Think of me as a child. Explain to me like you would a child.”

A flash ran through his mind, and he remembered with clarity what she had been like as a child. A smile crept across his face.

He glanced down at his shirt and he could see the edge of the necklace he wore, the one all Templar Knights wore—a small cross on a simple chain. After they’d been turned, a blacksmith who’d been friendly to the Templars in England fabricated them for each knight.

He slipped it out of his shirt and held it up. “What do you think of this?” The necklace, the silver cross—the ends coming to points like a capital ‘T’—glimmered in the faint light of the evening.

“I know that symbol.” She reached up, grazing the cross. “I’ve seen it before.”

“What does it mean to you?”

“Safety.”

“You remember.”

She blinked. “I remember a very large man with dark hair who helped me find my mother at a big, uh...carnival or something, I think. He had that cross on his shoulder. And I think he carried a sword.”

“It was me.”

Leeza shook her head. “No, I was a kid. Five, maybe six. Couldn’t have been you.”

"It was me," he said again.

She jerked back. "How old are you?"

He put his hand on the top of his head and slid it forward, down over his brow. He couldn't believe he was doing this. What was the matter with him? Yet he was determined to tell her the truth about everything. Maybe not all of it, but the truth nonetheless. "I am seven hundred and thirty-one years of age."

\* \* \* \*

Leeza didn't believe a word of it. Yet he did look strikingly like the man from her memory—a memory she'd thought lost.

"On October ninth, 1307, I and fifty-two other Templar Knights became immortal."

She rubbed her head. "1307?" Something nagged the back of her brain about that—something significant. "Weren't the Templar Knights disbanded in the early fourteenth century?"

"Yes. On October thirteenth, 1307, we were accused of many crimes by the Pope and King Philip of France. The Knights all over Europe either were hanged, burned at the stake, tortured until they confessed, or outright killed."

She covered her mouth with her hand. The pain in his voice ripped at her heart. He spoke as though he relived those horrors every day. Hell, he probably did, in a way.

She wanted to slap herself.

She was buying into this? Could it be possibly be true? Could this man, sitting next to her on the couch, be over seven hundred years old? How did this happen? How did he live?

Leeza could buy that he was a knight. Hell, she already was willing to accept that one, but the idea of him being immortal? How in the world could that be true? She had a flash in her mind of *Don Juan*, that movie with Johnny Depp where he was convinced he was Don Juan Demarco, the great lover. And he had been in a mental institution.

*But outside the restaurant*, her mind reminded her. *Those men weren't human*. Humans didn't burst into ash all over the ground. If she was willing to accept that those were real—that vampires could exist—why couldn't she consider the possibility that he was as old as he claimed?

Because they weren't in her living room, that's why. He was here before her. She had been kissing him.

"Please don't be afraid of me," Liam whispered. "Hate me, send me away, consider me unstable, but do not ever be afraid of me." He stared at her table, his eyes glazed over, tears glistening in them, shining from the small amount of light in the living room.

"I don't know how to feel about you." She stood up, just for something to do, and started to pace in front of the coffee table. "One minute I wonder what mental institute you escaped from, the next I'm charged with desire and love and all those wonderful feelings a girl feels toward a boy."

"I am not supposed to love at all," Liam replied. "Yet you're in my brain, you're a part of my thoughts, even when I don't want you there."

"You love me?" She froze in her paces, staring at him, her hands on her hips.

“You have been a part of my thoughts since you were a child.”

“That’s almost freaky.” She rubbed her arms, a chill running over her.

Liam rolled his eyes. “Not that way. The love has only developed recently. I have kept my distance most of your life. Only there when you needed help.”

“Name twice.”

“When you were twelve, you lived in the apartment on Lincoln Street.”

“Yeah,” she replied, sitting back down and grabbing the glass of wine that Liam hadn’t touched. “That scary guy lived there. I hated that guy. Always looked at me funny.”

Liam clenched his fists and rested them on his knees. “I was in the area and I drove by one Saturday night, knowing how your mother would leave you home alone.”

She nodded. Her mother had never been much of a mom. “That could have been any night.”

Liam nodded, and his fists got tighter, his knuckles turning white. “It was a full moon, very bright in the sky, brighter than usual. When I walked through the courtyard, that man was standing in your doorway, trying to pick the lock.”

Leeza froze, wine glass a few inches from her face, and the dinner she’d had threatened to come out of her, all over the couch. “Oh my God.”

“He was a pedophile.” Liam’s voice scraped over the words, as though it was hard for him to even say it, much less think about it. “It was Divine guidance that I picked that particular moment to check on you.”

“What happened to him?”

Liam’s head didn’t turn, but his eyes cut to her, almost like a sword. “He never bothered another child again.”

“Did you kill him?”

“I cannot murder a human.”

“Oh,” Leeza said. “So you turned him in.”

Liam shook his head. “You would be amazed at what a human can live through.”

She shivered. “Do I want to know?”

“No.”

She sipped on the wine, even though her stomach was still bouncing around in knots. But she realized he hadn’t answered her question. “That was one time. Name another.”

He nodded. “The college scholarship program from Jackstone Foundation.”

“You arranged that?”

“I did not arrange for you to win it—I just asked an acquaintance there to send you the information about the programs they had. You won it on your own.”

She smiled. “I always wondered how I’d gotten that information. I had always assumed a teacher recommended me for it.”

A smile crept over his features. “You were quite fetching in your yellow dress at the ceremony. I was proud of you.”



Leeza blinked. “You were there?” A strange shiver ran over her, but it unlocked past feelings of the many assemblies she’d been in, trying to get good grades, do things the best she could, to impress her mother.

To impress someone.

And all that time, Liam had been there, watching her. It filled her with a strange sensation of satisfaction.

“Of course. I wanted to see you succeed.”

She bit her lip. “My mother didn’t come to a lot of that stuff, especially when I got older. I don’t think she even came to my high school graduation. I was eighteen by then. I think she thought her job was done. I used to look out at the crowd, wondering if maybe she had changed her mind, had decided to show up at the last second and surprise me. But she never did.”

“Were you upset by that?”

“No particular reason to be. By eighteen, I had gotten used to her ways. I used to imagine that my father was out there, that he’d known about me all my life and had been watching over me.” She glanced at Liam. “I might have on occasion seen you somewhere lurking in the back and wondered if you were my dad.”

Liam smirked. “I wasn’t trying to be a father to you. Maybe an older brother.”

“Well, you don’t kiss like a brother.”

“I hope that is a good thing.”

“It is.”

It was so strange looking at him, knowing that he’d been in her life for as long as she could remember, that he was always there for her, watching over her, and she never knew it.

“Have you always watched over particular humans?” she heard herself ask.

“No. You are my first.”

Leeza grinned, happy to hear that she wasn’t a regularly scheduled thing with him. “I am flattered.”

“Some knights, so I am learning, have had periods where they have watched over particular humans before, but I have never done it. My partner Adrian did a while ago. He was terribly cranky for a few decades.”

“We women tend to do that to you men.”

“So I am learning. I have been a horrible grouch.”

“You? No, not you.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

He gave her another sideways glance, his lips in a grimace.

Leeza’s gaze wandered around the room, and her eyes rested on her book about the Knights Templar. In a flash, all that she’d been reading about them came back to her, all the information about the Inquisition, the torture that they endured, all of it hit her like a brick.

She reached out and touched his arm. “How did you survive?”

“Survive?”

“The Inquisition? How did you live through that and start this life you have now?”

He let out a sigh. “Part of our gift of immortality is the ability to heal very rapidly.”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

He peeled back the bandage on his chest.

The cut that had been deep enough to possibly warrant stitches just a bit ago now was nothing more than a soft pink line.

Leeza covered her mouth and gasped. “It’s gone. But...” She put her hand against the wound, sliding her finger over the line. “How?”

“The Divine had other plans for us.”

“Which were?”

“To protect humans from the mythical population of the world.”

“How did you know this? I mean, did a bush start burning or singing or something and tell you what was going on? How did it all happen?” Her brain had flipped to the history buff, and she was suddenly fascinated by everything, wanting to know all the details.

“It was difficult. We did not believe what had happened, not at first. Even after we were burned...” He closed his eyes, like he tried to block out the thoughts. “Imagine being left to die, the pain more excruciating than anything you could comprehend, just praying for death that would not come.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Not anymore.”

She shifted, pulling her knees up to her chest, and resting her chin on top. “So what happened? Where did you go? What did you do?”

“At first, not much. You must understand, not only did we become immortal, but our bodies changed. Most of us were suddenly gangly and awkward, in bodies much larger than what we were used to. And there was the Balance Mandate to consider.”

“Balance Mandate?”

“Our book of laws. It contains information about all the mythical beings on the planet, as well as our laws.”

She thought about that for a moment. “I’ve read a few books about the Templar Knights in the past. How different are the rules compared to what was standard then?”

He smiled. “Much more lenient.”

“So you don’t have to be chaste?”

“We still must preserve our chastity.”

She snapped her fingers. “Dang.” Liam didn’t say anything, but there was amusement glinting in his dark eyes. “Surely, after all this time, you all have... You’ve broken laws from time to time.”

Liam shook his head. “We cannot. We will die.”

Her eyes went wide. “You’ll die if you have sex?”

“Yes.”

“Good God,” she said. “Are you sure? Are you really, really sure?”

He raised his eyebrow at her. “You question my laws?”

“I just want to make sure that they’ve been proven.”

His head jerked in a nod. “They have been. One knight tested the theory almost immediately. We found him a few hours too late. The woman was there, still crying over him. His body had turned to stone.”

“Wow. God’s not kidding.”

“Ironically, that was what twisted everything into perspective. What had been fifty-three was now down to fifty-two, and no longer were the words that were scrawled on parchment in a cave to be taken lightly. We took the Balance Mandate as law, every written word absolute in its meaning.”

“What was hardest?”

“For many, it was hardest to watch their families from afar—watch them grow up, grow old and die, while we never changed.”

“And for you?”

He hesitated, then his huge shoulders slumped. “Knowing that I cannot love, even when my heart screams to do so.”

\* \* \* \*

They talked for hours into the night, Liam telling her about different eras of history, correcting the mistakes that historians made, and Leeza inhaled the information like a sponge. He knew she had studied history in college, but he had no idea she had been such a fan of it.

Her questions were educated; she knew what she was talking about. Even though certain things were wrong, it wasn’t her fault. She hadn’t been alive then to know better. He had.

Occasionally, Leeza would touch his arm, slip her fingers around his, and he would reciprocate. When they touched, he could feel her mind buzzing around, but she spoke whatever she thought. However, they didn’t continue kissing.

Oh, what a pleasurable action that had been!

Liam could do it for hours—just feeling her body next to his, kissing, touching her soft skin. Pure heaven.

Nothing could be any more powerful.

All the more reason for him to request a transfer first thing in the morning. He needed to get away from Leeza Hunter as soon as possible.

Already his body craved more of what they had shared—more touching, more kissing, more of everything. And he knew he should not.

Yet he had this night. And he wasn’t about to give it up.

“So tell me,” Leeza said as she twisted the stem of the glass of wine in her hand, a grin on her face, one that he’d seen before. “What’s the story with the Templar treasure? Does it exist? Is it a myth? What’s in it? Is it just a record of Jesus’s bloodline, as some theorists claim, or is it an actual treasure trove of biblical relics?”

“I wondered how long it would take you to ask.” Liam grinned, stretching out with his feet on the coffee table.

Leeza scooted down on the couch, stretching her own legs out, and her feet landed in his lap. He laid his hand on her shin, the most natural feeling in the world to touch her. Like his fingers had been waiting for her.

She nudged him with her foot. “Come on, inquiring minds want to know.”

He smirked. “There is a treasure. It is all those things the theorists claim it is, and more.” His finger grazed the edge of her pants leg, caressing the skin hidden underneath.

“So you have the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant, and the Spear of Destiny?” She pulled one leg away, and Liam thought for a second he’d done something wrong, but she slid it behind him, tucking her toes under his hip.

While it was an odd sensation, it was also terribly comfortable—as though she felt relaxed enough around him to have intimate, but not sexual, contact.

He slid his hand as high as he could up her shin, still savoring the feeling of her. After this night, he would never see her again. All that he would keep were his memories—and if that meant staying up all night tonight talking, then so be it; that was what he’d do.

She bristled with anticipation about his answers about the legendary Templar treasure. “Among our collection, yes.”

“Is it as massive as the one in that Nicholas Cage movie? With stuff from all over the world in it?”

He blinked. “Which one is that?”

“The one where he’s hunting for the treasure hidden in America by the Freemasons.”

Liam shook his head. “Hollywood overdramatizes everything.”

“So it’s not that exciting.”

“It is not that easily found.”

Leeza laughed. “Well, I would imagine not, all things considered. Someone would have found it—humans have a lot of determination when it suits them.”

“Part of our job is to protect humans from mythicals, but also to protect mythicals from humans. And mythical treasure falls in line with that.”

She leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. “Tell me a story.”

“I thought I was.”

“Tell me a story of one of the pieces of Templar treasure, something that’s not in the history books.”

“All right,” he replied, tugging her to him. She came without protest, and after a few moments of shifting and twisting, she was in between his legs, both of them stretched out the length of the couch, her head against his chest, slightly twisted in his arms. She still favored her arm, and he wanted to say something to her about it but he didn’t—he’d erased her memories.

He couldn’t say anything.

And he hated himself for it.

This night, no matter what, he wouldn’t dare erase her memories. He couldn’t do that to her again.

He leaned down just enough to place a kiss on the top of her head.

“What was that for?”

“For a perfect evening,” he replied. Then he began to tell her a story of the dawning of time, the universe, and the ancient gods and goddesses that ruled the days.

## Chapter 16

Leeza yawned as she got ready to go home for the day. The week had been long.

Long because she'd not slept at all Wednesday night. Liam had stayed for the entire evening, and like a gal on a manic high, she'd practically vibrated with energy, hearing about history and stuff from him.

While she tried two or three times that night to say "that's it, I'm tired," she could never seem to stop herself from asking more and more questions.

And Liam had not seemed at all bothered from missing sleep either.

Of course, he did most of his work at night anyway—so for him, being up all night didn't mean anything.

She shook her head at the thought. *Liam, a real live Knight Templar*. As crazy as it sounded, as insane as the whole thing seemed, she believed it.

Of course, seeing a cut that should have had stitches heal up without a trace by dawn, well, that tended to sway a person's ideas.

And she had been dwelling on all the history that he'd told her about—it was amazing.

She had to, though.

Because if she dwelled on the history, she wouldn't think about what an amazing kisser he was. And that was the last thing she needed to be thinking about, even though she couldn't help it.

She wanted to read that Balance Mandate of his. There had to be a loophole of some kind in there. Death if they have sex? Was it actual intercourse, or just ejaculation?

Because if it was actual intercourse, well, she could work around that.

Smiling to herself, she hummed a little bar of music, something old that Liam would probably like. She didn't even know where the little ditty came from, only that it had been in her mind most of her life.

Hey, maybe Liam would know what the deal was with that melody.

She put it on her list of things to ask him this weekend. He said he'd try to get over to see her, but he couldn't make any promises—his work tended to not exactly operate within normal time clock parameters.

Totally understandable.

She couldn't help being excited about the prospect. She shouldered her purse and winced. Her left arm had been hurting right in the middle of her bicep all week.

There was no sign of injury except a bit of a bruise, but for the life of her she couldn't remember what she'd banged her arm into. She saw it Tuesday morning when she got out of the shower, but nothing significant came to mind from Monday night.

For a klutz like her, it was insignificant. Bruises were a part of life.

Leeza tucked a couple of papers in her desk and froze—a shiver ran down her back. Something wasn't right.

She turned to look at her office door, like she expected to see someone standing there.

Of course, no one was.

Yet she couldn't get over the funny feeling of being watched. Maybe her office was drafty. It just didn't feel quite right. The sensation had been following her for the last couple of days, but for the life of her, there was nothing to see.

It was getting on her nerves.

"I'm losing my mind," she whispered to her empty office.

She slipped on her jacket and headed downstairs to see Marge.

Hoping the funny feeling would go away.

Marge stood behind the counter, counting out the register for the end of the day. She brushed a strand of hair out of her face and the shadows in the room hit her just right, making her widow's peak look like it crawled down her face.

"You look rather vampirish today," Leeza said.

Marge's head snapped up, her nostrils flaring. "Excuse me?"

"The way the light's hitting your face—your widow's peak looks darker and longer..." The look on Marge's face was dark, like she'd said the most disgusting of insults. "I didn't mean anything by it."

She relaxed a bit. "I know you didn't. I just... I don't like vampires."

Leeza snorted. "You speak like you know some personally."

"I've had my suspicions in the past."

Leeza laughed off the comment, but she couldn't help wondering if maybe Marge really had known some—after Wednesday night, well, anything was possible. Maybe Marge was sensitive. Then a thought came to her.

"How well do you know Sir Liam?"

Marge shrugged as she went through her motions. "Well enough. I don't have dinner with him or his family, by any means, but we are cordial to each other."

Leeza carefully inched toward her, through the display tables, keeping her purse tucked to her side. She tried to push the nagging feeling that she was being watched away, but it just wouldn't subside.

"Do you know anything about his day job?"

Marge's head snapped up. "A little. What did he tell you?"

Leeza shrugged. "Stuff." What he'd told her had been a secret. Did Marge know anything about him? Did she know what he said he was?

Marge nodded slowly. "I see. His 'stuff' is pretty far out there."

"It is," she replied.

"You okay with that?" Marge asked.

“A history buff like me? Why wouldn’t I be?” And it came to her in that very second, a flash of insight. She was totally okay with who he was—what he was. Because not only would he know everything about history, but because he would always be there.

She would never be alone.

And she’d been alone long enough. But she really wasn’t, was she? Liam had always been with her, in some form or another. And he always would be.

The thought sent such a wonderful joy through her, she couldn’t help smiling.

Marge didn’t look at her as she spoke. “I would think, for that very reason, you would be a little disturbed.”

“I’m fine,” Leeza replied. And she was. Nothing in life was ever simple, and for her to be in love with someone who was walking history...

*Wait a second.*

Was she in love with Sir Liam?

A warm feeling spread through her body at the thought. Could she be in love with him? He was certainly much more important to her now than he ever had been. But was it just the lust talking, or was there some actual emotion involved?

She shook off the thoughts. “You done yet?”

“Just a few more minutes.”

Leeza stayed close to the walls, as far away from the breakables as she could. No need to jeopardize any more of her paycheck than necessary. Her steps were cautious, avoiding the displays, her purse clenched against her body just in case it decided to rebel and swing into a table. Anything to not focus on the thoughts that she might very well be in love with Liam.

There were a thousand different reasons why she logically couldn’t be in love with him—she didn’t even know his full name. Where he’d hailed from before he was a knight. But that didn’t mean she wasn’t.

Marge finished up with a few things. “You never did tell me how your date went.”

“It was wonderful. Liam was a gentleman. Funny, polite...” Her voice trailed off, thinking about how good of a kisser he was, and her cheeks stained pink.

“You had a date with Liam? I thought you were going out with some lawyer guy on Monday.”

Leeza blinked. “What lawyer guy?”

She stared at her for a moment. “Sorry, my mistake. I must be confused. Must have been one of my kids.” Marge waved her hand in the air, trying to push off the thought. “You had a date with Liam?”

“He met me on the roof Wednesday. We had dinner, then went back to my house for a nightcap.”

“Wow, that’s...that’s unexpected.”

“Why?”

“He’s not the dating type.”



“Well, evidently he is with me.” Yet what Marge said about Monday nagged her consciousness, like something was there, but not really. Now that she thought about it, she couldn’t remember anything about Monday at all.

Weird.

She followed Marge out in a daze. It lingered in the back of her mind that she should know it, but it wouldn’t come out—something she’d forgotten, but she couldn’t remember what it was.

They locked up and left, and both of them entered the parking garage together. Leeza was parked on the roof again, and she waved at Marge while heading up the stairs toward her car.

The sun had sunk below the horizon and everything had a heavy orange glow. The strange sensation of being watched came back to her as she walked toward her car. Reaching into her purse, she wrapped her fingers around a can of pepper spray, prepared to yank it out if needed.

“I’m being stupid,” she muttered to herself. There was no one in the roof parking—her car sat there, with one other car a few stalls down. Though she couldn’t help walking over to the edge and looking out, to see if maybe...

No.

No one was out there; at least no one was paying her any mind. Marge’s sedan pulled out of the garage, and she waved at her. Marge stuck her hand out of the window and waved back.

“I must be losing my mind.” Leeza spun around to get back to her car.

“You are not losing your mind,” came a slick male voice.

Leeza jumped about a foot in the air, letting out a slight scream. The man was tall, a little taller than her, sported dark hair, and had a thin, almost gaunt look to his face.

And his eyes were practically white, the irises were so light.

The wind ruffled his clothes, but his hair didn’t dare rebel against him, and a smile oozed across his face, like he was pouring it out of himself rather than smiling sincerely.

And the wind brought a trace of his smell to her.

That metallic smell. Blood.

Leeza’s whole body screamed for her to get the hell away from that guy as soon as possible.

“Are you watching me?” she asked.

“I have been waiting for you, Felicia Zanna Hunter.”

She squeezed the pepper spray in her purse, ready to pull it out. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m outta here.”

“Not so fast.” In a flash, he was next to her, his hand on her arm. She winced, his grip not only aggravating the sore spot, but she couldn’t grip the pepper spray with the way he held her. “I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Questions about what?” She tried to tug her arm away from him, but to no avail. His grip was like iron.

He pulled out a small wallet, showing a gold badge and identification. The cuff of his shirt came up, revealing the edge of a tattoo, but she didn't see much of it, instead focused on the badge. Not that she could see much. He only revealed it for a moment, giving her maybe a half second to see what it said. The most she gathered was the word "detective."

"We believe that a man of your acquaintance was involved in a murder."

"I don't know any murderers."

He smiled, and his teeth were insanely white—almost purple in their brightness. And the canines were sharp. Way too sharp.

Almost like... No, she wasn't going to let her mind wander there. It wasn't quite dark. Surely this wasn't anything strange... Vampires couldn't come out when there was sun out, could they?

Leeza looked around. They were pretty much in shadow in this corner.

Shit.

"Of course you don't. He wouldn't come out and admit he was such. But I do believe you might have witnessed something."

She shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about. I think I would remember if I had seen a murder."

"Maybe, maybe not."

She jerked her arm away from him, and surprisingly he let her go. "Listen, I didn't see anything. I can't even begin to guess who you're talking about."

"Sir Liam."

Leeza froze.

Her stomach dropped—this had the horrible feel of something way deeper than just a routine questioning about a potential murder.

And surely Liam wasn't in the wrong. He was the good guy, right? So that made this guy the bad guy. Had to be. *Had to be*. Which meant she needed to run.

Run.

Like, now.

"What about him?" she asked, plotting a course in her mind, some kind of escape.

"If you would come with me..."

Leeza shook her head. "I don't think so."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Surely you do not want to be brought up on charges for aiding and abetting."

"Why do I have to come anywhere with you? I can stand here and answer questions as easily as I can somewhere else."

He shrugged. "If you prefer. These questions are of a personal nature, however, and I would save your privacy if you came with me."

“What do you want to know? He’s not my boyfriend or anything like that,” Leeza said. She’d taken a step toward her vehicle, but the guy had moved to the side enough to herd her away from it, and now she stood in the space between her vehicle and his.

Not good.

“Are you two close?”

“No.

He took a step toward her.

“Are you two intimate?” he asked, his voice a touch deeper.

“No!” Leeza stepped back, trying to move toward her car.

His eyes ran down her. “Pity. His loss, I suppose.”

Leeza just stared, unsure how to proceed, and moved backward. This one landed her against the half-wall that ran around the edge of the rooftop parking, the hard concrete hitting her in the butt.

The man came toward her. He was getting terribly close to her personal space, and even though Leeza tried to move from side to side, something subtle, just to put more distance, it didn’t seem to work. He calculated every step and countered it like they were life-sized chess pieces.

He reached out, her hair sliding through his fingers. “I can feel it in you, you know.”

“What?”

“The memories. The ones he tried to remove.” He let his hand graze down her shoulder. “Not that it matters.”

He pivoted on his heel, stepped away from her holding his hand up in the air, and snapped his fingers once.

Three men, large, broad-shouldered, and gaunt in the face like him appeared out of the shadows and grabbed her.

That was the last thing Leeza remembered.

## Chapter 17

“I want to request a transfer,” Sir Liam said to Grand Master William Saturday morning. He stood at attention before his boss—his body rigid, his posture perfect. Something he’d mastered over the years.

However, his insides weren’t quite so perfect. Eros’s comments were enough to make him wonder if perhaps the god had been on to something. Getting out of here, heading someplace else, must be a good idea.

He had been at war with himself since dawn on Thursday morning. Had it only been two days ago? It seemed like a lifetime since he spoke to her, saw her, touched her smooth skin.

And everything was dark without her. He couldn’t walk down a street and not think of her. Ready to rip apart anything that breathed ever since he’d been at Leeza’s house.

Liam had slain a lot of mythicals this week.

Vampires were always counted on to be out, doing things they weren’t supposed to do. Adrian occasionally stared at him, a strange look, one combined with pity and worry, especially after Liam would slay a few vampires.

Even his own partner didn’t want anything to do with him right now. Whether he knew what happened Wednesday night or not, he never said, but Adrian tended to know things anyway—his ghost Nara tended to be quite a little gossip ghost. Adrian stayed away—never asking questions, never saying anything, just listening to his damn music like Liam didn’t exist.

And maybe a part of him didn’t exist.

Like the one with common sense.

Grand Master William cleared his throat. “And why do you want a transfer?”

“I am needing time of meditation and focus.”

William eyed him, the older man’s gaze digging into his soul. He didn’t say anything for several minutes, the pieces of paper in his hands fluttering from the breeze that came in through the open window behind him.

Liam tried very hard not to move.

Not to speak.

He knew the rules, as did William.

“You have not seemed yourself the last month,” William replied. “Perhaps a decade in Asia would help you regain your inner balance.”

Liam nodded his head. “Asia would be perfect.”

\* \* \* \*

Adrian had his iPod in his ears, listening to a lot of sixties rock. At the moment, *Don’t Fear The Reaper* blared in his head.

He kept telling himself he was going to take that song out of his iPod. Every time he listened to it, something bad went down. The lines that talked about not being afraid, and committing suicide together, they just gave Adrian a shiver.

Sure he could forward it to another song, but he tended to believe that certain things came his way for a reason.

Even things he didn't like.

He stood in the backyard behind the complex, going through some basic motions with his sword in time with the music, working on his strength.

In a flash, Nara appeared before him, just as he thrust his sword in a forward arc. Were she alive, he would have cut her into shreds.

"Nara!" he snapped, jerking one of the earplugs out.

She didn't speak, instead pointed behind him.

Adrian turned, and from the main house Holden, one of the staff of mythicals, came out. His ears were covered, hiding his dragon heritage. He carried with him a phone and was holding it out toward Adrian.

"Thanks, Holden," Adrian replied. "Who is it?"

Holden shrugged. "Secure line, though."

"Adrian," he said into the phone.

"It's Richard."

Adrian froze. Richard was one of the other Knights Templar. He had been in Asia for the last few years, working with the base in Hong Kong. Adrian hadn't talked to him in probably a decade.

"What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to know what I can do for you."

"How so?" Adrian asked.

"Got a vision from On High. Me, you, Liam, and a couple of other knights were going into battle soon. Confirmed it with Tabor in England. He's already packing his bags to head your way."

Adrian shook his head. "We've been having trouble with a particular vampire, but I can't imagine it being necessary for all of you to be here."

"Well, I am on my way. Should be there in a day. Maybe by then it will be revealed."

Adrian paused. "Richard, really, I don't think we're going to need your help here."

"You do not get it. I have to be there." With that, Richard hung up the phone.

A sick feeling started building in Adrian's stomach. If Richard was getting visions all the way in Asia about the trouble they were having with Melios, well, then it had to be bigger than either he or Liam had any clue to.

But how could it happen so soon—they didn't even know where he was hiding.

\* \* \* \*

Water dripped somewhere in the distance. Or maybe it was near. The echo made it impossible to be certain; all Leeza knew was that it dripped. And each drip sounded louder than the last.

She was bound spread-eagle against a wall down in a dark brick basement.

Focus, she told herself.

She twisted her head from side to side, trying to figure out exactly where she was—chained in a very old basement. On the far wall, she could make out what looked like an old coal chute door and a large relic of a stove. The tiny glimmers of light filtering in from...where was it coming from? She couldn't tell in her current position. It was, however, just enough to paint strange shadows around the room. It was small; there were shelves on one side lining the wall and sticking out in a 'T', making the place look like a maze. And the smell—musty, nasty, dank, mixed with a twinge of something much more menacing, like blood or urine. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

She twisted around and realized that, while she was the only person in the basement, her shackles weren't the only set down here.

*What in God's name was this place?*

A noise echoed from a corner, and Leeza snapped her head over toward it. Rats. Had to be just a rat. This was an old basement. She figured she was somewhere downtown, in one of the older abandoned buildings. Not many houses in the city would have a coal door in them.

Every part of her wanted to scream, wanted to cry out, but terror seized her throat.

What was this? What was going on?

She forced her mind to think logically. She'd been on the roof, to get in her car. That man, the one with the almost white eyes—he was there.

He'd taken her. He'd kidnapped her.

"Oh God," she whispered.

"This has nothing to do with God," the soft voice of someone came from the shadows.

Leeza jumped in the shackles. "Who's there?"

A girl appeared, probably ten or twelve, with long hair in a braid that hung down her shoulder like a rope. "Don't be scared," she whispered.

"Please, you gotta help me. I have to get out of here. Please. Just...just find the key to open the shackles."

She shook her head. "I can't."

"Why not? Let me out of here. I'll get you anything you want."

She came a little closer, though still hidden in the shadows somewhat. "He'll kill me if I do."

Leeza nodded. Though she knew the man, she wanted to know his name. "Who will?" She wanted to know what to call the nightmare man.

"Melios."

Leeza looked at the shackles that held her in place. "Why is he doing this? What does he want with me?"

The girl crossed her arms over her chest. "To rectify a wrong."

Leeza shook her head. "What wrong? What could I possibly have to do with it?"

"You will bring Liam. Liam will bring James and Joseph. And James and Joseph must die."

It was the most insane logic she had ever heard. If this was a method to bring Liam to him, why didn't he just summon him? Liam seemed to come whenever she wanted him to.

And then it dawned on her. She was the bargaining chip. With her here, Liam wouldn't just come in, sword flying, and kill everyone.

Would he?

Leeza shook her head. "I don't know any James or Joseph."

"It is all connected," the girl replied. She jerked her head to the side, her eyes wide, and at that moment, Leeza saw just how bright her eyes were. They were violet. Not blue, not green, but outright violet eyes.

"What are you?" Leeza whispered.

From above, the sound of walking started getting closer.

"I am special." The kid turned into the shadows.

"Wait, wait, come back!"

But it was too late; the girl disappeared as quickly as she had appeared.

Leeza was only alone for a second. Then the man from the roof—Melios—appeared.

He was flanked by two more men, both large and evil-looking, ready to devour her, and Leeza was pretty sure that they literally would devour her if they could. Melios seemed oblivious to them and walked right up to her, stopping only a few inches away from her face.

Leeza tried to press herself backward into the wall, trying to get away. His breath smelled coppery and his tongue was overly red.

"You have had a visitor?"

Leeza didn't say anything.

He glanced at the man on his right. "Find the girl. Lock her up."

"Don't hurt her. She didn't do anything," Leeza whispered. "I think she was just curious."

Melios brought his cold, light eyes back to her. "The girl doesn't need any influence from you."

Leeza shook her head. "I don't know what it is you think you need from me, but I can't figure out how I could help you."

"Why, my dear," he said, baring a set of fangs, "just your presence is enough." With that he grabbed her outstretched right arm.

Leeza screamed as he plunged his fangs in her wrist and started to suck at the blood.

## Chapter 18

Liam pressed the rest of his socks in the suitcase. Grand Master William had informed him that his leave would start immediately, and he needed to get his things packed.

He had more clothing than he thought.

He had been at this base for the last fifty years. One tended to accumulate things.

His glass studio had already been cleaned up as well as possible and would be left for him when he was ready to return. He'd left instructions for William to sell off the remaining pieces down there and use the funds for the organization as he saw fit.

Now all he had to do was pack his personal belongings.

Yet there wasn't anything terribly personal in any of his things. He had lived so long as a Templar he had no idea what it meant to own things.

Did Leeza?

Did she know that she owned his heart? Because it no longer existed within him. Every part of him screamed that he needed to be back with her, go find her, hold her, touch her...

Die if he must, but he needed her.

He hurled a pair of socks across the room. They landed soundlessly on the floor at the foot of Adrian's bed.

This was why he had to go.

He had to get away from her.

She was the reason he was going. He couldn't be around her anymore. No more of her smell, of her soft hair...

This wasn't healthy.

He was broken and he needed to be fixed.

"Asia is the answer." He stepped across the room and picked up the socks, stuffing them back in his suitcase.

Just as he got the case zipped up, Adrian came into the room, looking like he'd been running, his eyes wide, his usually smooth hair wild around his face. "Where are you going?"

"To Asia for a while. I need to clear my head."

"Damn it, Templar, I am old. I'm not that damn fast anymore," came a female's voice behind him.

Liam looked in the doorway. Marge was there, taking a couple of deep breaths as she reached the doorway.

Adrian glanced at her. "You had better be, Margaret Drigan. We have work to do."

Liam felt sick. Something was terribly wrong, he could feel it deep within his gut. And if Marge was there... "What is the matter? What has happened to Leeza?"



“She’s gone,” Marge said. “She’s been taken.”

Liam was in her face in a moment. “What happened?” He grabbed her by her shoulders and lifted her up in the air.

“I don’t know. I got this.” She held up her hand. In it was a simple piece of paper.

Liam took the paper. It was a map of the downtown area, and a single location had a dot on it. Blood.

It was Leeza’s blood. Without a doubt, Liam knew it was. He may not have been a vampire, but he knew.

Melios was that sick. Scrawled in blood on the map were three words.

*I have her.*

Emotions like Liam had never known burst to the surface. Every facet of him screamed in rage, though he physically didn’t move. Vengeance had never been a part of his world; he’d never comprehended the need for it, the desire to kill.

He was a Templar. He didn’t murder. He doled out justice, but never did he take a life in an act of pure, selfish vengeance.

But that was before today.

Liam grabbed his sword. “I will be back.”

\* \* \* \*

“This is a treacherous road we travel,” Nara said in Adrian’s ear.

“I know,” Adrian whispered, running his hand over his face.

It had taken almost an hour to stop Liam. An hour plus every Templar in the compound and several of the support staff holding him back before Adrian could talk any sense into him.

Liam couldn’t just attack Melios’s compound, not without some kind of recon before going.

Liam wanted a full-scale attack on Melios. And there was no doubt in Adrian’s mind that Melios was currently preparing for Liam’s attack.

And he’d go to Hell before he’d let his partner walk into Melios’s lair alone.

At the moment, Liam stared at the floor plans that Daniel had acquired of the building that Melios had marked on the map. The plans were spread over the kitchen table, and Liam and William were looking them over while Daniel stood to the side, ready to get anything else they needed. Marge was sitting at the table as well, a cup of coffee in her hand. The alpha from her pack, her son Dale, had arrived as well. All were milling over the plans.

Trying to figure out a plan of attack.

“The building is pretty straightforward,” William said, pointing at the plans.

“But he would have modified it,” Liam replied. “More than likely, he had the basement converted.”

“Unless he’s installed new windows,” Daniel said.

“What new windows?” Liam asked, staring at the young vampire.

“I was reading about them. They’re supposed to block out all ultraviolet light that can come in. They’re supposed to be incredibly safe for vampires. Some kind of coating on the glass.”

Adrian spoke up. “We’ll know more when Ewan and Tomas get back.”

Liam nodded. “They’ll notice if there’s new windows.” He glanced at William. “If he’s found a way to make the upper stories usable, then we’ll have a lot more area to cover.”

“How many do you think you’ll need?” Dale asked. He was not happy about being there. While relations between the Templars and the Drigan clan were pretty straightforward, the two groups usually stayed out of each other’s way.

And the Templars did not ask for help from wolves.

Of course, this particular case wasn’t about the Templars. This was all Liam. And Marge. If she hadn’t pulled rank in her clan, Dale certainly wouldn’t be here. Adrian knew that. William knew that, though Adrian doubted that William was willing to admit it.

“He doesn’t want to help him, you know,” Nara whispered to Adrian, gesturing at Dale.

Adrian rolled his eyes. Once again, he just wanted to stuff a sock in her mouth. “You think?”

“What was that?” Liam asked Adrian.

“Sorry. Nara.”

Liam nodded, then returned his attention to Dale. “How many are you willing to bring into this? I need your best fighters.”

Dale gritted his teeth. “While any one of the brothers would love to rip the head off a pack of vampires, I cannot promise more than a few. None of my pack do housekeeping.”

“This isn’t housekeeping,” Liam said. “This is a slaughter.”

## Chapter 19

“These numbers are never ending,” Nicole moaned. Surrounded by paperwork, she had taken over the small dinner table in the little basement apartment she, James, and Joseph had moved to. For the time being.

James smirked at her and set a cup of warmed blood seasoned with a cinnamon stick down amongst her chaos of paperwork.

He ran his hand over her shoulder. He couldn’t help himself; he loved touching her. “You don’t have to work out everything this instant.”

“I know.” She leaned back, throwing her pencil on the table. James gave her shoulders a good massage. The numbers had turned her usually soft and supple muscles to rigid rods.

“I bet I can find a way to make all those numbers go away,” he whispered.

Nicole tipped her head back and looked at his face, her eyes stained with a silvery color, the same as his and Joseph’s.

The mark of a vampire.

She reached for his cheek. “I can’t get over how different you look.”

James leaned forward and kissed her brow. “The hair will grow back.” He’d cut his shoulder-length hair off to a cropped affair and shaved off all his facial hair just after they left in order to hide himself more.

“It’s just...” Her voice trailed off and she glanced around the small apartment.

James knew exactly what she was thinking—and it wasn’t because he could read her thoughts, either. While they could afford to stay in the penthouse of the Ritz Carlton for as long as necessary, that would be what Melios expected.

Not this tiny two-bedroom apartment in a rough neighborhood, surrounded by two families of werewolves. So far, the werewolves were keeping their distance, but it was only a matter of time. The wolves had already expressed dislike and general annoyance at having vampire neighbors. James had tried to grease over the tension with cash, but things remained tense.

The door opened and they both jerked, ready for an attack, ready to believe that Melios had found them... Their macabre thoughts fueled their edginess. However, they both relaxed when they realized it was Joseph coming home after a quick feeding.

He glanced between James and Nicole. “What a greeting,” he said as he threw the four locks on the apartment door. His eyes shone from his fresh feeding, his clean-shaven face brighter, more alive. Joseph always looked more human after his feedings, with more color and younger-looking than James.

Joseph swooped in and kissed Nicole, a fast, powerful connection that sent a surge of energy through her and, vicariously, through James.

Just watching Joseph kiss Nicole was enough to start his body humming. His darker thoughts forgotten, James took a step toward them just as Joseph slid his hand under Nicole's blouse.

Then James's cellphone started to ring.

He gritted his teeth. "What?" he snapped into the thing.

"James, it's Liam."

He paused. *Liam? Sir Liam? Was it over? Had he found Melios?*

Joseph and Nicole broke apart, hearing his thoughts.

*It's over?*

*Done?*

James waved a hand at them before speaking. "Is it over?" he asked Liam.

"No."

Whether the others heard the word or if James's disappointment reverberated he didn't know, only that they both slumped, staring at the floor.

"So what do you want?" James asked. "Surely this is not an update."

"I understand now."

James considered his words, but didn't speak. Immediately, his mind flashed to the last time he'd seen Liam—and Liam's questioning of why they didn't stay and fight. Why they were running from Melios.

*Could it be possible? Did Liam finally understand what a mate was?*

*Never... He can't have a mate, can he?*

Maybe he was just not as dense as he'd been a few weeks prior.

The phone rustled with static; Liam must have shifted his cell. "Please. He has my...my mate."

James and Joseph's gazes met.

Thoughts flew rampant between the two of them, and James could feel Nicole trying to understand them. She had not yet mastered the art of mental communication as the two of them had. Of course, they had a century's worth of practice on her.

It was only a moment's hesitation.

"We're coming."

\* \* \* \*

Liam returned to the temple in the back of the compound. The rage he felt was so powerful, so complete, he could barely restrain himself. He was ready to take on Melios himself if he could.

Yet Adrian stopped him.

Thunder from the spring weather crackled outside and lightning filled the sky.

The gods were unhappy with this turn of events. And now he made preparations to call and get some guidance on his latest enterprise.

He had to do something to kill time.

William and Adrian's logic of waiting made too much sense. More Templar Knights were coming. He'd barely been able to sleep, instead spending his night practicing with his weapons—first his sword, then his mace, then the other weapons.

Melios would not survive this engagement.

And if Leeza didn't survive...

He wondered if he would.

The thunder clapped again, and Liam got a shiver. He knew that the cover of the storm would protect them as they approached Melios's building. The rain was a good thing. Maybe, just maybe, Zeus was on their side after all.

The recon had come back—it was pretty obvious that Melios not only used the basement of the old building, but the entire facility. The windows were blacked out, covered in heavy wood on all four stories.

From the plans, the most private entrance would be the old coal chute, but Liam doubted he'd be able to fit through it.

And who knew where Melios was keeping Leeza. A bomb down the chute could kill her if she were down there.

He had to get her out. She was paramount.

Liam put his hand on his heart. He'd never felt such pain and agony before. Why was this happening to him?

He knew it was love. But love was supposed to be happy, joyous—not like this. Not able to control him. And since this had happened he was certain that his feelings for Leeza were controlling his every action right now, not any desire to stop a vampire who was breaking the Balance Mandate.

He was lost, of that he was certain.

The thought was punctuated by a clap of thunder and a gust of wind. Liam jerked his head up just in time to see the main door to the temple blast open.

He might have been scared, had he not seen such dramatics before. After seven hundred years, very little surprised him.

Especially not the arrival of Sir Richard. Even though they were essentially ageless, it was obvious that, in some form or another, Richard had aged.

The short-cropped hair he'd worn for centuries was now long and straggly. His enchanted broadsword was gone, replaced by a samurai sword, and the lines around his eyes had deepened.

"I thought Asia was supposed to help you relax?" Liam asked as Richard came toward him.

"I was until I found out I had to come and save you." Richard's deep baritone voice echoed in the small temple.

The two men smiled at each other, but neither touched—they both had too much respect for each other's gifts. One touch, and Liam would see everything that Richard had gotten in his visions. Also, that same touch would be enough for Richard to see Liam's future in perfect clarity.

Neither of which would be good right now. As much as Liam wanted to know for certain the outcome of what was coming, knowing could also damage the results. In the past, knights who'd been told the future assumed it was a given, thinking things would happen as predicted, and wouldn't put in the effort to make it come to pass. While the future could be predicted, it also had to be worked for.

"I appreciate your coming," Liam said, watching his smoking "call" to the gods.

Evidently, they weren't coming.

"I had to be here. I saw the girl."

Liam nodded his head. "How far ahead are your visions?"

Richard shrugged. "Best guess, she's still alive now. Though I can't be certain if she will live or die."

Liam nodded. "I want to move out in a few hours."

"There's quite a group in there."

"Yes." Not only had the Drigan clan brought six members, but evidently they'd told a few friends and now fifteen werewolves waited in the house, all preparing for attack.

James and Joseph had arrived just before Liam came out to the temple. They'd managed to change their looks significantly enough that Liam almost didn't recognize them. Even Nicole had changed—darkening her hair so she barely looked like herself.

Liam started packing up his things from the call to the gods. He was closing up the Balance Mandate when Richard decided to break the silence.

"You going to tell me who the blonde is?"

He saw no point in lying. More than likely, Adrian had told Richard all about the situation. "Leeza."

Richard shook his head. "I cannot believe it."

Liam paused. "What?"

"That you would fall for a vampire. You, of all people."

Liam blinked. "Leeza is not a mythical."

Richard ran his hands through his hair, rubbing his temples, like he was trying to recall something. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. I am certain. She is not a mythical."

Richard met his gaze. "She might be before this is all said and done."

Liam gritted his teeth.

He vowed—he would kill Melios.

## Chapter 20

Being bitten by a vampire wasn't the most horrible feeling, Leeza thought. The actual piercing of the skin was more like two sharp needles being stabbed into her arm. Not terribly horrific.

Of course, passing out in the midst of it made the horrible go away.

She didn't have to feel the drinking, sucking, or whatever it was that he did. She was light-headed when she woke, unsure of when or where she was.

Though one fact remained.

He wasn't done. Whatever Melios was up to, he wasn't stopping with just one bite.

Leeza knew that after his initial bite. How long she'd slept, she wasn't sure—hell, how long she'd been captive, she didn't know.

When she woke, her wrist had been bandaged and she didn't feel the throbbing of her blood.

Above her, footsteps could be heard, quite a few of them. She couldn't hear any voices, but she certainly could tell something was going on. Perhaps they were getting ready.

Was Liam coming?

Her heart fluttered at the thought.

Liam would come.

He would rescue her.

He had to.

Right? Isn't that what he was supposed to do? Rescue damsels in distress? She looked at her arms. Well, she was a damsel in distress. An overly-dramatic one, to be sure, but one nonetheless.

Maybe he didn't know. Maybe he wasn't aware that anything had happened to her. How long would she have to wait? How long before he'd know something was the matter?

A day?

A week?

A month?

Would she survive that long?

She shivered at the thought. What would Melios do to her? Would he even let her survive that long?

The stairs vibrated as someone came down them, though she didn't bother looking to see who it was. Melios had come back, to do more of whatever his plans were.

Flanked by two of his fellow vampires, he stopped right in front of her, peering into her eyes like he was reading her mind.

She didn't say anything, only tried to draw up enough saliva to spit on him, but it wasn't working so well. Just the thought of him dried her up and made her heart thump in all sorts of unhappy ways.

Melios tipped his head to the side. "Liam has done a lot of work to you."

Leeza shook her head. "No."

He reached up, his finger grazing her cheek. She jerked away from his hand, but it was an empty gesture. There was nowhere she could go.

"But he did. He's manipulated your mind several times."

"He wouldn't."

"On the contrary, he would. To preserve his identity, he would remove all memories of any encounter you had with him." Melios shook his head. "I think you need to know what he's taken from you."

"He never took anything from me."

Melios put his hands on her face. "You will be surprised." He stared into her eyes and she couldn't look away.

It was like he'd tied her eyes to his, connecting them. And he came inside her mind. Like one of those visualizations of the little office workers in the brain with the filing system, he started digging through files that had been locked up behind an old heavy door in her mind.

And suddenly she was flooded with memories of Liam.

Liam at her graduation.

Liam following her in the mall when she was a teenager.

Liam... He'd been everywhere in her life!

And the image of a date, a man... Orlando. He'd been a monster—a dragon, a man of fire. Liam had attacked...

He'd saved her!

Where the bruise on her arm came from came back in perfect clarity and she screamed out, the pain in her mind so fresh it could have just happened.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Why? Why do you do this?" She focused on Melios's face.

"Because you need to know that Liam has manipulated you ever since you were a child."

She tried shaking her head, but he kept a grip on her face. "Please. Stop."

He didn't release his stare for a few more minutes, until so many visions of Liam filled her mind—times when he'd worried her as a kid or a teenager, the weird man from the mall who'd followed her.

Every memory he unlocked shot more emotion through her. Liam had manipulated her for years. She didn't want these memories—she didn't want to know.

Tears flowed freely now. "Please. Just stop this. Whatever you want, just stop."

Melios released her face. "Oh, we are not quite done here, child. But there is more to come." He leaned forward, and without any pretense, bit her throat.



Leeza screamed.

\* \* \* \*

Liam tossed a couple of katanas to Tomas, then an extra pair of nunchucks to Ewan, who tucked them into his belt.

The wolves were getting anxious—Dale and the pack were starting to pace. Only part of the pack was there, though Liam had been surprised at the number of females who had joined. Four, and he knew them well enough to know that they were strong warriors.

He knew how they felt.

Liam had been in a state of flux for hours, planning and preparing the necessary maneuvers required to make this a successful attack. He knew that's where he should be. So as much as he could, he forced himself on the task at hand.

Not on Leeza.

Holden, the only dragon working at the compound, stood in the doorway, watching the knights suit up.

Liam met his gaze as he tightened his vest. "What?"

Holden kept a wide berth around the pacing wolves as he approached. He was young, just a pup, his eyes narrowed, his posture rigid. "I want to help."

Liam's eyes widened. "Why?"

"In my pure form, I can wipe out those vampires. Burn the building to the ground."

Liam shook his head. "Which is why you should stay here. If there's a retaliation attack on the compound, we'll need able fighters here."

Holden grimaced.

Liam took a step toward him, staring into his eyes. "I need you here."

Holden nodded. "As you command."

Liam shook his head. "No, not as I command. As I plead." He glanced at the knights. "You ready?"

"Hoo-ya, Master Chief," Tabor called out, his British accent making the saying sound comical.

Liam glared at him. Adrian and Richard smirked.

Tabor just grinned.

Liam grimaced. His thoughts were flooded—Leeza was back there and she was in pain, and he had to find her. Save her. Jokes were not in his mind at the moment. It was killing him that he wasn't already on his way.

Claiming his mate.

He glanced up, and James and Joseph stood in the doorway, watching. They both had brought weapons of choice themselves, wicked-looking arched blades about as long as their forearms.

Evidently from their housekeeping days.

Richard had his samurai sword out, checking the blade in the light. Approving of it, he slid it into its sheath. Glancing up, he met Liam's gaze.

Neither one had to say anything.

Liam knew that Richard, if anyone, empathized with him more than anyone there. Even more than Adrian. Why, he wasn't sure, but it was there, behind the man's eyes. Richard knew something.

Liam hoped it wasn't bad.

Adrian listened to his iPod and music poured out of one of the buds, a loud rock song, one of those that humans used to motivate themselves before sporting events.

Though one ear bud dangled down, and he nodded his head like he was listening not to the music but to his ghost.

They all were dressed in Kevlar vests and chain mail headgear to protect their necks.

William walked in, looking everyone over as they prepared, though it only took a second for his gaze to hit Liam. He didn't mince any words.

"If anyone dies, you are responsible."

Liam nodded. He was fully aware of what William meant.

William glanced at the other knights, then at the mythicals in the room. "Melios is dangerous. You all know that." He opened his mouth to say something else, but stopped himself. "Report back with status updates."

"Yes sir," came back the unified response from all the knights.

He walked up to each knight, checking their armor, their weapons, making sure each one was ready before battle.

The men held perfectly still while William moved between them.

When he was satisfied, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Save the human. Kill the vampire."

"Yes sir."

"Bow," he stated.

Every knight dropped on one knee, head bowed. Even as old as they all were, they moved with perfect precision into the pose.

They had assumed it many times before.

William began praying.

*"The Divine is our guide.*

*We head into battle*

*For all that is Holy.*

*The Divine, guide our swords.*

*Drive our fight to uphold*

*All that You hold dear and loving.*

*The Divine, bless us in our battle.*

*Amen.”*

A chorus of “amen” echoed around the room. The vampires whimpered at the words. William glanced at the male vampires, but made no apologies. They should have left the room when the prayer started.

Now that everything was done, they could go.

He could go.

Power surged through Liam.

It was finally time.

Time to go get her.

## Chapter 21

The skies rumbled with thunder, the early spring bringing a terribly nasty storm. Dusk had not officially come, but the storm darkened the sky enough that Melios had opened some of the windows.

The rain splattered against the pane in hard little snaps, and lightning lit up the sky.

And he watched.

Liam would come, of that he had no doubt. No self-respecting Templar would allow anything less. A human was in danger.

*Sound the alarm.*

Melios shook his head. Such a waste.

When The Divine decided to grace the world with the Templars, He didn't realize His Divine mistake—assuming that immortal humans would be able to protect the weak against mythicals, the grander species.

Even Melios agreed that while he hated werewolves and all they stood for, they were still better than humans. Humans were nothing.

The Templars, while blessed with mythical strength and psychic powers, were still just humans. They were still manipulated by their human emotions.

Even Liam.

"The air is thick with energy tonight," the child said as she took a few steps into the room. She was silent enough—one wouldn't be able to live among vampires as long as she had without picking up some vampire tendencies.

"They are coming," Melios replied, not looking at her.

"For the woman?"

"Yes, child. You should go, retire to your room for safety. I do not wish to see you damaged."

"I wish to see them, please," she said, the last word a mere whisper on her lips. "I want to see these Templars."

Melios kept his eyes on the outside, though now he scanned for a purpose—his vampire soldiers were in place. Men milled about, staged in strategic attack points up to the building. Liam and whoever he brought with him would come from the north. There was no other way to attack the building.

Situated on a dead end with a train station to the west, the river to the south, and warehouses that remained abandoned most of the time to the east, Liam had no choice but to attack from the front, coming down the main road.

On the tops of the buildings, Melios had stationed several vampires, ready for attack. Just in case Liam had something creative up his sleeve.

Not that he would.

The Templar Knights were horribly predictable. A full frontal assault would be enough. They'd make it to the main entrance of the building, coming in the front door like they owned the place.

Melios took the girl's arm and guided her up to the window. "See, they come. In full frontal assault. Like they always do."

She stepped closer to the window, seeing through the streaming rain three men surrounded on either side by two werewolves.

Their swords glinted in the muted light.

"It is a very small force," she said.

Melios nodded. "They will make it up here. Then I will kill them all."

"They might surprise you."

"Girl, I have been around for hundreds of years. Nothing the Templar Knights do ever surprises me."

"Oh," she said, pressing herself against the glass, watching the men walking toward the building.

\* \* \* \*

"Everyone in place?" Liam whispered in the wireless headset he wore. He was heading forward, the rain pouring down on him, Richard, and Tomas. The four werewolves that flanked them were itching for a fight, their massive wolf bodies flinching and jumping, the scent of vampire powerful in the rain.

"Roger," came Adrian's voice echoing from his surroundings.

"Roger," Tabor said, though he was patchy from the winds of the river.

"Roger," replied Ewan.

"Two minutes," Liam stated. "Spotters on the roofs." He'd seen the vampires milling about before they'd even rounded the corner—and the wolves smelled them. He had to give the wolves credit; they were itching to attack, their hackles up, ready to charge.

Melios's building was up ahead, and the windows which had been covered during the day were now open enough to show light streaming through them, pouring out of the old building like golden flames.

On the top floor, a silhouette could be seen of a person standing very close to the window, watching.

He prayed it wasn't Leeza.

His forces were spread around, surrounding the building. Adrian, James, and Joseph were coming from underground through the sewer lines to cut the security systems and power.

Ewan and a team of nine wolves were spread out through the train depot, while Tabor was moving in from the river—he and two more wolves had jet skis to hit from behind.

Liam could have never done this without everyone.

A battle cry came through both Liam's headset and across the train field.

The enemy had been engaged.

As if it was the cue that everyone was waiting for, all hell broke loose. Vampires poured out of the sky, leaping off the surrounding buildings, attacking.

The wolves snarled, breaking loose, and attacked. Vampires hissed as they met the wolves full force. Both cries echoed off the walls of the abandoned buildings. Liam let out his own battle cry and took off.

Ash floated in the air as he stabbed his first two vampires in rapid succession.

The vampires kept coming.

\* \* \* \*

"We're clear," Adrian said into his headset. He could hear the battle ensuing up on the ground above him, out of the horrible stench of the sewer lines.

How had he gotten sewer duty? He glared back at James and Joseph, who seemed just as annoyed at being down here as he was.

It was making him crazy that he wasn't up above, fighting with the others. However, someone had to be down here, and James and Joseph wouldn't be of any help above anyway.

Vampires could not kill other vampires.

And in a fight like the one above, harsh words weren't going to cut it.

They were just underneath the building and Adrian stopped at a ladder.

"Going now for security." He climbed up, the vampires right behind him, and they reached the edge of the building. Sure enough, just as the recon reports had claimed, an auxiliary entrance to the building was on the side, with electrical meters and security boxes right nearby.

He motioned for James and Joseph. The two vampires headed for the boxes, popping them open and getting to work.

Adrian kept his back to them, holding his sword out, ready for any attack.

So far, though, all the attack seemed to be focused on the front of the building. Liam was doing his part of the job.

A roar filled the air as three jet skis pulled up at the dock. Leaping off, Tabor ran up toward Adrian. The men he'd had with him transformed into wolf form so fast, it was merely a blink as they went from human to animal. With speeds that still astounded Adrian, the animals charged the back of the building, leaping on boxes and bins, climbing toward the roof.

Whatever defense was up there, the wolves would clear it.

Quickly.

"Fantastic," Tabor whispered, watching the wolves disappear on to the roof.

Adrian let out a huff. "Roof occupied."

"Roger," came Liam's voice, though it sounded more like a grunt than anything.

"Aren't you two done back there?" Adrian whispered.

"Almost have it," Joseph replied.

Out of the corner of his eye, Adrian saw a spark flash, heard a couple of obscenities come out of James, and then the lights flickered in the whole building for only a second before shutting off completely.

“Now!” Adrian yelled into the headset.

With that, he, Tabor, and the two vampires went in.

He prayed the others were coming too.

\* \* \* \*

Liam’s mind registered the lights flickering in the building. He heard Adrian’s yell in his headset. And while he was getting closer to the building proper, he couldn’t seem to work his way through the massive wave of vampires that poured out of Melios’s building. They were jumping out the windows of his building and the surrounding places.

He’d probably killed a dozen already, yet it wasn’t nearly enough.

One grabbed him from behind, jerking Liam backward. Liam threw out a couple of punches, but the vampire blocked.

“Templar blood. Always wanted to try—”

The vampire was cut off by a werewolf leaping through the air, hitting him and taking the vamp to the ground. Liam could have mumbled a “thank you” but there wasn’t any time. More vampires were coming.

He managed to sneak a glance to his right—Ewan and the remaining wolves, all nine of them, had come in, funneling the vampires toward Liam and his small line.

Lord, how big was this army?

\* \* \* \*

A scream echoed in the room as the lights went out.

Melios let out a sigh. “Be calm, child.”

Outside was not going as he expected.

They should have captured and brought Liam to him by now. Time to alter his plan.

“Bring that woman up here now,” Melios bellowed. The girl still stood over by the window, a shadow against the light from outside. She didn’t move, stuck in the dark like a stone.

“It is just dark,” he whispered. “We vampires live in the dark.”

“But I am not a vampire,” she replied.

“You will be soon enough.”

It didn’t take them long to bring the woman up. Fear poured off her as though she’d bathed in it. Her whole body trembled and jerked, and while the fear was a good portion of that, sampling her flavor had caused a good deal of it as well.

Melios watched as the vampires brought her in, holding her out by her arms. She jerked and struggled in their grasp, trying to break free. Part of it was the biting—a natural, usually untapped fight mode appeared in all humans after two good drainings.

Part was just the fear.

He stepped into her space, holding her face up. "Your Liam comes."

At first she didn't register the words, her eyes glazed in a frenzy to escape. But after a moment, her eyes snapped wide, like she only just then recognized the words he'd said.

He bit his lip, slashing the skin enough to draw a small amount of blood. He held her face still, her eyes filled with terror, and he leaned forward, pressing his mouth against her, a hard, cruel kiss. His teeth nicked her lip and he sucked it into his mouth, the blood from him and her mixing before he released her.

She jerked out of his hands, licking her lips as if she could erase what he'd done.

He smiled, like one did when talking to a baby. "And when he gets here, I will kill you."



## Chapter 22

Finally, Liam was able to get to the door of the building. Richard was right on his heels, slaying vampires right and left as they reached out for the handle.

And the door flew open in front of them.

Adrian stood there. “About time.”

Liam didn’t say anything as they both ducked inside. Tomas was still fighting off the vampires, surrounded by a pack of really, really pissed off wolves.

“Leeza’s on the fourth floor with Melios. They just took her up there.”

“Building secure?”

“Hoo-ya, Master Chief,” Tabor replied.

“Will you stop saying that? You sound stupid,” Adrian told him.

“Only if you stop talking to your ghost,” Tabor replied.

Liam hissed at the two of them.

Now came the interesting part.

\* \* \* \*

Leeza had quit struggling. Her mind was so blurry. Nothing made any sense. These two men—vampires—held her by the arms, holding her out like she was being crucified, and she waited.

The building was surprisingly quiet.

No one in the room seemed to be able to breathe. Even she could barely drag air into her lungs.

The one, Melios, waited with a stillness that bordered on death, staring at the door.

The darkness surrounded her. A single candle burned on his desk, and it wasn’t for him or the other vampires in the room—it was for the girl. She stayed in the corner, back in the shadows, where she always seemed to be.

She’d been down to see her after every bite, wiping up the wound, trying to clean it up.

Not that it did any good.

He took her essence with every bite.

Her stomach growled, and she needed a very raw, very bloody steak. The more she thought about it, the more steak seemed the most incredible, decadent thing on earth. She struggled against her captors, desperate for something to eat, and her stomach rumbled again.

Melios’s eyes slipped to her for a second, then back on the door. “Silence yourself. Or you shall find your death faster than Sir Liam.”

Outside, she could hear footsteps.

Or at least she thought she could. One glance at the men who held her, and she thought for a second they heard too. She couldn't see their faces very well; they were concealed by hooded robes, making them appear like Grim Reapers.

All they needed was the sickles.

At least she wasn't in the shackles anymore. Not that this was much better.

Melios laced his fingers together and tapped his index fingers on his lip. The tension mounted in the room so much it was bound to pop just any second.

"This waiting is ridiculous," the girl suddenly spat out from across the room. She picked up the candle and walked toward Melios, no fear in her steps.

"We wait," he replied.

"What if you're wrong? What if he decides that this human isn't worth his time? He could be setting bombs to blow the building and you don't have a clue. He's already killed the power."

"He will come," Melios replied, seeming to not care about the girl's sudden flare in temper.

"So if he's coming, why wait for him? There's only one way up here. Go meet him on the stairs—attack while you're on the high ground. Don't wait until there's a level playing field."

This did make Melios take his eyes off the door and look at her. "You do not understand all the rules yet, girl."

"You've been telling me for most of my life that rules don't matter. That we're above the laws laid down by man. Including the laws set by the Templars. So prove it. Use your divine powers and go kill him while he's coming up, instead of waiting." She set her candle down on the large wooden desk behind her.

He grabbed her arm. "You are very, very close to death right now, girl. Daughter of The Bloodline or no, you will respect me."

She shoved his arm off as though he barely touched her. "Spare me." Melios jerked backward, stumbling a few steps. The girl looked at Leeza for a second. "Did you see that? I am getting stronger." She grinned like she'd just aced a test.

Leeza couldn't help smiling back at her.

"Child!" Melios cried out, leaping toward her.

"Harbinger of death," the girl snapped back at him. Her arm shot out as the vampire hurled a punch, but it wasn't enough. The girl went flying across the room, landing with a clatter against the far wall.

"You know not what you speak," he said, his control returning, albeit not completely.

She merely moaned, trying to get up.

The guards that held Leeza struggled, and both of them, as well as Melios, inhaled. It took Leeza a second to realize what they were doing—the girl had been injured. She was bleeding.

"Wounded." Melios glanced at one of the guards holding Leeza. "Hold her," he gestured to the girl.

One let go and walked to the child, yanking her up off the floor. Even Leeza could smell the blood on the child. The cut must have been deep.

The remaining guard pulled Leeza around, and for a second she saw his eyes. There was something different about them, compared to the others. He wasn't... She didn't know what, exactly, but it was different. Yet he seemed to be trying to tell her something, but she couldn't figure it out.

Her head was so fuzzy. He spun her around, her back to him, so she could see the room.

Nothing had changed. She was still there.

The guard hardly budged at the smell. Melios glanced at him, his eyebrow arched. Leeza let out a moan as the guard readjusted his hold on her, and Melios turned his attention to her.

"Smell the blood?"

Leeza wet her lips, not realizing what she was doing, but suddenly the scent of the blood was the most heavenly aroma on earth.

*No. Whatever this is... No!*

She forced herself still.

Melios smiled at her, that evil, wicked grin of his. "Soon, child, you'll be one of us. If you can survive the change, that is." He ran his finger over her cheek. "I doubt it. Too thin, too weak." His fingernail drew blood as he scraped her chin. "Then you'll be a meal for my pets. You'll be lovely with them."

Leeza turned her head as a side door opened. In the room, pillows were scattered about, and three—God, could they be human?—people writhed around, partially lost in throes of sexual passion, yet there was blood everywhere.

What were they eating?

Leeza's stomach revolted, and she threw up.

The guard that held her jerked back, trying to keep his shoes clean.

Melios said nothing, merely smirking at her. "Yes, I think that would be even more interesting. A meal for the pets."

He tipped his head to the side, glancing back at the door. "I think our guests have arrived."

The door burst open.

Liam appeared, his whole being almost shining in the muted light, like his aura was glowing white.

Leeza had never seen anything more beautiful in her life.

He was in the door in a second; behind him, three more men, all huge like he was. Templars all of them, Leeza was willing to bet.

"Welcome," Melios said, positioning himself between Leeza and Liam.

"I have come for what is mine," he stated.

Melios nodded. "Good. And I would be happy to give you what you claim to be yours, but we have business to discuss first."

“No, we do not.” For the briefest second, Liam met Leeza’s gaze, and her whole being lit on fire, like the glow surrounding him was spreading to her.

Whether he really was glowing or it was just a figment of Leeza’s racing mind, she didn’t know. Just that he looked like a beacon, a lighthouse of pure...

Of pure love.

It exuded from him like a beam of power. Regardless of the outcome, Leeza knew she would be safe.

He was here to save her.

Like he had been all her life.

Melios walked over to Leeza, taking her from the guard and putting her in front of him. She whimpered at his rough hold, moaning as he jerked her head to the side, exposing her neck. “You will tell me what I want to know, or I will kill her.”

“You will not,” Liam replied, his hand tightening on the sword.

The sword that was pointed dangerously close to her.

Leeza’s eyes widened, wondering exactly what Liam was going to do. The Templars behind him fanned out. All had their swords up, ready in an instant.

“I wanted to conduct this civilly,” Melios said with a sigh. “But if a fight is what you want...” He snapped his fingers.

Vampires, at least a dozen of them, appeared out of the walls. Or what Leeza thought were the walls. She saw one emerge a second after the rest, and realized that the room was littered with secret doors, one every three feet or so. How they opened she wasn’t sure, but they were almost invisible when they sealed.

Almost. The striped wallpaper disguised them, but not completely.

Melios jerked her backward in a sharp tug, and the swarm of vampires attacked Liam and his Templars.

Even Leeza, who wasn’t terribly smart about battles and fighting, realized it wasn’t much of a fight. Liam jerked his sword in and out of vampires as though they were nothing, ash flying everywhere. His companions did the rest.

Unlike the vampires, Liam and the others were primed for a fight. She would have thought the rested vampires would be better combatants against Liam and the others, who’d been fighting, but evidently the power of their adrenaline and just general skill was enough to dominate.

Metal clashed through the air, slamming against the vampires. Some had fight and combat skills, throwing punches and kicks at the Templars. The blond Templar...

Leeza froze.

The blond one.

He was there.

He was in her house. When... When...

“Oh God,” Leeza cried out.

Liam paused for a second. “Leeza?” A vampire took his momentary pause and attacked, hurling him across the room.

The blond looked at her for a moment, grimaced, and continued fighting. She had been telling herself since Melios revealed all the repressed memories of Liam from her mind that somehow Melios had done it. A magic trick to manipulate her, to scare her, to make her believe that Liam wasn’t what he said he was.

Yet they all were real.

Liam had been in her life from the time she was a child until now.

A vampire got a good hit, cutting Liam on the arm, the blood dripping down. He winced at the pain.

Leeza’s heart pounded.

He was bleeding.

For her.

Liam was fighting, bleeding, in pain...all for her.

There was nothing she could do or say that would make him stop. Even if she told him to leave, he wouldn’t. He would protect her.

Take care of her.

Forever.

A pain swelled in her heart, unlike the ripples in her stomach and the fear in her head. This was different. A kind of clarity that came only in perfect moments. While this moment wasn’t perfect, it was real.

Liam was fighting.

For her.

And with every sword jab, with every thrust, he was getting closer and closer. He would save her. Without a doubt.

And nothing, not the haziness, the fear, or even the doubt could take that clarity away from her in that instant.

She loved him. She loved him for all that he did for her, for every breath that he took, every pain that he felt, she loved him for it. While she’d considered the possibility before, she knew now, without any doubt, that she loved him. And would always love him.

“Liam!” she cried out.

He paused, meeting her gaze.

Neither of them had to say anything in the swirling of the ash, the disappearing of the vampires all around him.

It was understood.

They loved each other.

If it was possible, Liam glowed even brighter, a shining beacon of hope.

One that had always been there, if she had only looked for it.

The fight slowed down. The Templars, still standing, looked fake, unreal, a bad background painting behind Liam, the haze of the ash swirling around like a fog in the room, making Leeza's nose itch.

No more vampires seemed to be coming. All that was left was Liam and the Templars, Melios, and the two guards who'd brought her up—one holding the girl, the other standing at Melios's side.

Outside, the howl of a wolf could be heard through the rain.

Liam took a step forward, less than a foot away from where Leeza was Melios's body shield.

"Your army is destroyed."

"They can be replaced."

"What do you want, Melios?"

He bared his fangs. "I want James and Joseph. And their little trinity mate. They need to know the chaos they caused." Melios shifted his hold, jerking on Leeza's hair. "Tell him. Tell him what's been done."

She cried out. "He bit me," she said. "He bit me twice, on the neck, wrist."

Liam's eyes went wide for a second, but other than that, he didn't move.

"Give me what I want to know," Melios said. He jerked her head back, his fangs out, and bent over to pierce her throat. One fang broke skin, and a dribble of blood came out. Melios licked it off. "You still haven't answered."

Out of the corner of her eye, Leeza saw the guard jerk, and one of the Templars made a subtle motion with his hand, flicking his wrist.

Her pulse throbbed beneath the skin, faster than a metronome; something was going on, she could feel it. The air sparked with it.

"I will not," Liam said.

Melios shrugged. "Then she dies." He arched his head back, ready to bite down on Leeza. Leeza screamed.

The scream was just what was needed, evidently. The guard who held the kid dropped her, and he and the other jerked Leeza out of Melios's grip, while Liam charged forward, sword drawn, to stab him in the heart.

But Melios disappeared in a puff of ash.

Leeza looked from Melios, or where Melios had been, to Liam and his sword. Liam stared at his sword, then at the puff of ash.

As it settled, the answer was revealed.

The girl stood behind Melios's remains. A crude stake was in her hand, still held in position where Melios's heart would have been. Ash fell down over her, making her face alabaster.

"Guess I could kill you, you bastard," she said, after blowing out a puff of air and making the ash fly out of her face.

The Templar with the dark hair, one that Leeza had never seen before, stood frozen for a moment. He tipped his head to the side, looking at the girl. She glanced up at him.

“What?”

“Come on,” he said. “You can leave here now.”

“Thank God,” she muttered.

“Yes,” Liam said, as he pulled Leeza in his arms, staring into her eyes. “Thank God.”

## Chapter 23

They'd barely made it out of the building when the cleanup crew arrived.

Or rather the cleanup man.

Liam arched a brow at Holden as he climbed off the motorcycle he'd driven over. Liam still had Leeza under his arm, and she clung to him like her life depended on it. Ash had gotten in her hair, making it look more gray than blond. He'd tried a couple of times to brush it out, but nothing seemed to get it.

She would just have to shower.

She was probably desperate for a shower.

"You found her," Holden said, his eyes roaming over Leeza.

Liam nodded. "Go do your thing."

Holden grinned. "Really, you have to find a better job for me than this."

Liam didn't say anything. Holden walked into the building, and within moments it was on fire. The dragon crept through the building, careful to ignite at a slow rate so that everything looked fairly explainable.

The Fire Chief appreciated that.

Leeza glanced at the building, the fire sticking its fingers out the windows as it crawled up the building. Then she turned her head to Liam. "I'm hungry."

"We will get you some food soon." He squeezed her against him, her body warm and soft and....

The craving hit him like an anvil.

She was holding on with all her strength, but the bites had started her body's natural response patterns—she was desperate for iron. More specifically, blood. Every part of her screamed for it, well, almost every part. There was one other part that was just as desperate, but not for blood.

Her hormones were in overdrive as well.

"We need to go," she whispered.

Liam nodded. "Yes. Fast."

Looking around, he saw that Richard had the girl, and she stared at everything, her big eyes taking in all the details around her. Richard guided her to a vehicle, though lost in his own thoughts.

Tomas and Ewan were talking with the wolves. Adrian was with Tabor, waiting on Holden to finish.

Liam waved at Adrian. He stared at him for a second, then nodded as Liam jumped into one of the sedans.

"Liam, you came for me. My Leeham," she whispered. He buckled her into the seat, tight enough to make sure she wasn't going to get out. She moaned, holding her stomach. "I need..."



He let out a sigh. "I know, baby," he heard himself say, and before he could stop himself, he put his hand on her knee. "I know what you need." He hit the gas, and they flew through the night toward the Templar compound. Her head flew back against the seat and she grabbed the restraints of the seatbelt.

"Too tight," she whispered.

"It will keep you safe," he replied, not letting her take it off. "Just hold on, Leeza. Hold on."

"Scared." She shook her head. "So scared."

"I know." He patted her leg and she quieted down for a little bit, her head to the side, dozing a bit.

His gut screamed in agony. His Leeza, his ethereal Leeza, being forced to become something so horrible, so vile.

"Did he make me a monster?" Leeza whispered after a few minutes. "It hurts so bad."

"We're going to find out," he replied.

"I don't want to be a monster. Liam, please. Don't let me be a monster."

"As you wish, Leeza."

"Leeza and Leeham. Leeza and Leeham." She yanked at the seatbelt again, trying to pull it free, but he stopped her.

Right now, she needed to stay in her seat. Because when he got her back to the compound, he'd have a lot to explain.

Especially the part about letting her die.

\* \* \* \*

William watched from the door as Liam and the human girl arrived. He carried her inside and she fought against him, her hands clawing at him as he brought her in the house.

This was not going to be pleasant. He glanced over his shoulder. Nicole stood there, wringing her hands and pacing back and forth.

"We may need your assistance," William told her as he opened the front door.

Her eyes went wide.

Liam came in the door, carrying the woman they'd gone after.

"Bring her downstairs," William told him. Liam nodded as he followed. William led the procession, Liam carrying the girl, followed by the djinn Merle, Nicole, and Daniel, a first generation vampire, one who could turn Leeza.

"How much has she been bitten?" William asked.

"Twice, for certain," Liam said.

"Has she ingested any blood?" the vampire Nicole asked.

"Don't know," Liam replied, nuzzling the woman's head and whispering words as she cried out.

"She acts like it," Nicole said.

"I would not put it past Melios to force a turning." The very thought had been plaguing him since they'd left to attack. That Melios would either turn the girl they were rescuing, or put her in a position that she'd have to be turned, by biting her twice, and forcing her to drink vampire blood.

Just a sip, even a drop, would be enough to force a turning. And if Melios was dead, she'd need someone to be sired to. A vampire. "Is Melios dead?"

"Yes," Liam replied. "The others should be back soon."

William led them to Liam's glass studio, as it had the closest long table to put her on, because from the way she struggled against Liam she wasn't going to lie down quietly in a bed. The room had yet to be completely broken down. Some boxes had been brought in, but they'd yet to take the time to really come down here to put everything in storage.

The back corner had a single couch—a futon was the trend's name. A couple of blankets were laid on it; at least someone had folded those.

"Put her there." William motioned to the long table Liam used for rolling out his glass. It was hard, steel, and fairly indestructible.

Liam laid her down and the others fastened shackles to her arms and legs.

The woman screamed, biting and kicking at them as they strapped her down.

"I'd say she's ingested more than just a drop," muttered Nicole.

Unfortunately, William was inclined to agree with her.

She had to be turned now. There was no choice, if she was to live.

Liam stood back, his hands clenched in fists, and a rage so pure, so powerful emanated from him.

"You realize we will have to turn her," William whispered to him.

"No."

"She will die if we do not."

"No."

"Liam," Nicole said, coming up next to him. "I know you don't want to turn her, but it's not that bad. I know I was scared of it before, but it's really not that horrible. And she would be immortal, just like you. You'd be able to be with her for the rest of eternity." She patted his shoulder.

Nicole's words were enough to send Liam into action.

Just not the action everyone expected. "Out. Everyone out."

"You will need help turning her."

"I said out!" The djinn and Daniel and Nicole jumped and ran out the door. William was the only one who bothered to stay.

"You are condemning this girl to death."

"No," he replied. "I'm releasing her to heaven." With that, he shoved the Grand Master out the door and locked it behind him.

Nicole stood on the other side, her eyes wide. "What is he going to do?"

William looked at the door. "Let her die."

## Chapter 24

Liam's entire body screamed. Every pore, every cell, every atom. The sound echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls, the floor, the ceiling, reverberating through the room.

The glass he made shook on the walls. Some of his glass fell, shattering on the concrete floor when it hit. The shards of glass glistened in the light like sparkles of broken diamonds.

His eyes darted to the glass.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid hobby.* If he hadn't had to do this, hadn't had to be a part of this, she would be alive... She would be fine.

He would have never met her. Never known her.

And now she'd never be here, in pain.

This was his fault—a disaster that had started brewing twenty-four years ago.

His gut churned; all his stupid, broken ideas.

Leeza lay on the table, her head twisted to the side, face contorted in pain as she struggled against the restraints.

Liam remained rooted to the spot, unsure what he needed to do, what he had to do. He'd seen a thousand people in her position. Logically, he knew the timeline.

Yet he didn't care. This wasn't about timelines, it wasn't about doing emergency turnings. This was about Leeza. Every part of his soul wanted to scream, to yell at The Divine for allowing this to happen, allowing her to be hurt like this.

Because of him.

Leeza wasn't supposed to be wrapped up in the middle of this world. He'd tried so hard to protect her innocent soul from this...this world he lived in.

The irony of it was tearing him apart. Now she was going to die.

Every part of him ached.

Tears streamed down his face as he tugged at his Kevlar vest. Pulling off the weight only brought more attention to his heart breaking in his chest.

How could he do this to her? How could he let her die? Yet saving her would be condemning her to an immortal death. A trap she would never forgive. He stepped next to the table, caressing her face. She twisted and moaned, calling his name.

"Shh, shh, baby," Liam whispered, caressing her face. In her state, he couldn't feel any coherent thoughts coming from her, just urges, desires. Though he wasn't sure how much of it was her and how much was him. His own mind was tormented by the pain, agony, and love that he felt.

He wanted to save her.

That was his job. To save the innocent.

Yet here she was, boiling over with bloodlust and sexual desires, a torturous gift from that horrible creature Melios.

And there was nothing he could do about it now.

He let the waves of her emotions crash into him, hoping just feeling them would pull some of them out of her mind, give her some peace in her last few minutes.

Every sensation she felt—the desire, the rage, the cravings—washed over him. She snapped her arms toward him, but couldn't move because of the restraints, and would cry out in frustration.

He knew part of the lust was the blood. Yet what did it say about him? Separate from her feelings, he felt his own strange sort of desire. It wasn't like the lust exactly, yet it was—primal. A need to be connected, touching, feeling her. A part of her, for all of time.

It wasn't about mating.

It was more.

Leeza looked around, wildness in her eyes, but as she focused on him, they softened. She recognized him. A smile crept over her face. "Liam," she managed to whisper. Her voice was hoarse and pained.

He smiled back at her. "My love," he replied. He had to be strong for her, to show her there was nothing to be afraid of. No matter how much he ached inside.

"You love me?"

"With everything," he replied. And about choked, saying the words. Yet no truer words could have come out of him.

"I love you too." Her hand fought against the restraint, and Liam reached over to release her. She brought her hand up to cup his cheek. "Are we going to be together?" she asked him, her thumb sliding over his lips.

He kissed the tip of it. "If that is what you wish."

She nodded. "I want to be with you."

Liam's heart shattered into a million pieces. The woman he loved was dying because of him—if he had not befriended her, she would have never been drawn into this ugly, jaded world of mythicals and magic and broken immortal souls.

And he could never be with her. Not in any way she'd deserve.

He loved her so much... His body shook with fear—while he knew what was across the plane of death, he still shook for her.

What if? What if it wasn't what he thought? What if he were wrong?

Liam started undoing the shackles that held her to the table. As he did, her fingers tightened on the edge and her body arched.

She let out a low growl, her knuckles turning white before she slowly released her grip, and tried to get up. Her eyes snapped to his, and they were clear, bright, and piercing in the knowledge hidden there.

“My insides feel like fire—like something’s eating them up, tearing and clawing—small, but getting larger.” She shifted her legs, stretching them out before swinging them over the side of the table. “He tried to turn me, didn’t he? He said I wouldn’t survive.”

“You probably won’t,” Liam replied, the words bringing tears to his eyes.

“If I lived, I would be one of those creatures,” she whispered. “A vampire?”

Liam nodded.

“I don’t want to survive,” she replied, her voice like steel. “I can’t be one.” Her face went ashen as a shock of pain radiated through her. “You should get away from me,” she managed to moan.

“I will not leave you, Leeza,” he replied, getting as close to her as possible with her still sitting on the table.

“No.” She pushed him away, but he held her too tightly. “I want to...to...bite you, Liam. Get away from me.”

He held her close. “You cannot hurt me, Leeza.” She could bite him as much as she wanted, nothing would hurt him more than watching her die. Which he had condemned himself to doing.

She gritted her teeth, letting out another growl. “This is... It’s probably just an ordinary day, right? You deal with this stuff all the time?” Her body shook with intensity against him as the bloodlust worked its way through her.

But the wave started to ebb. At least for the moment. She sagged against him, and when she looked up at him, he leaned down, kissing her forehead. “My brave Leeza,” he said against her skin.

“I’m not brave.”

“You are braver than you know,” Liam replied. “You were brave enough to love me.”

“That didn’t take bravery,” she replied, wrapping her arm around his neck. Her nails dug into him as she tensed in his arms. He slipped an arm under her knees, twisting her so he cradled her against his chest, yet she remained on the table. Tucking her head against his neck, he stroked her back, whispering soft words to her about being strong, about fighting the bloodlust.

He didn’t know what else he could do for her.

“How long?” she asked as the craving ebbed. “How long before this kills me?”

“A few...a few hours. Maybe.” He choked out the words, tears filling his eyes. “I am sorry.” He didn’t look at her, instead staring toward the wall of broken glass.

She wiped her own tear away. “I half expected there to be a cure-all liquid or something I could drink that would make it go away.” She let out a few deep coughs, the kind that held in the chest and pulled a lung out with them. He stroked her back, each rasp eating him alive. “A month ago, I didn’t know any of this existed. Why not magic potions too?” Leeza asked, forcing a smile on her face.

“If there was...”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a hug, her head buried against his throat. Her body was warm, so soft and delicate. He squeezed her against him, savoring the smell of her skin. It didn't matter what she'd been through, she still smelled like...like her.

She turned her head, and before he realized what she did, her lips were on his, and that connection, that need to be a part of her thundered in his ears. Every part of him was desperate for her, needing her in a way he'd never imagined.

The taste of her was so incredible. So powerful.

Instantly Liam was washed away in her flavor, in the feel of her body against his. He wrapped his arms tighter around her, and she twisted, opening her legs and allowing him in the cradle of her. Their lips never parted as her legs wrapped around his hips, locking behind him, and she pressed, pushing him more against her. More touching. More.

He could feel the need within her.

Hell, he felt it for himself. It boiled, it bubbled, it fought against any and all common sense in his mind. He shouldn't be feeling this. He shouldn't be behaving like this.

He knew that.

But it didn't matter.

Leeza was his...and he wasn't about to let her go if he didn't have to. He would spend eternity with her, one way or another.

Liam's hands slid under the back of her shirt, dancing over her soft flesh... *Mine*. Still so soft, so delicate.

*Mine*.

The chant so powerful, so full, he didn't know if it was him or her feeding the instinct. Or maybe both of them, feeding each other.

Not that it mattered.

*Mine...*

Leeza's hand went into his hair, lacing in the short strands, and with a grip he didn't expect, jerked his head, exposing his throat and shoulders. Leeza attacked with a vengeance, a vehemence that overpowered rational thought—the bloodlust.

Liam knew that.

Yet he knew that it was more than that. He could try blaming it for her powerful need, but then what would be his excuse?

He felt it too. Every part of him screamed for release, for the need for this powerful connection to this woman. To give her the gift of him, he would break every rule in the Balance Mandate.

*Mine*. Nothing had ever been so clear, so right in his mind. She was his, for whatever short seconds they had together.

"Leeza," he cried out, his hands sliding over her ribs, up the sides, and he felt the edge of her bra. The thin lace felt amazing under his fingers.

She stopped kissing him just long enough to pull her shirt off and throw it on the floor.

Liam froze for a second, staring at the bruises on her arms where she'd been pulled and jerked like a piece of meat, and a tear came out of his eye.

*Her skin, her beautiful skin, marred by that monster.* The need to attack, to destroy in her honor flooded him. It didn't matter that Melios was gone. He wanted to kill any vampire, anyone who'd put a woman through this.

It made him sick. His entire being vibrated in anger, tears streaming down his face.

Leeza pulled at his shirt, yanking it over his head. Seeing his eyes after she pulled the shirt off, her head tipped to the side.

"What is it?" She stroked his cheek, wiping away the tears on his cheeks.

"He hurt you..."

She looked down, seeing the bruising. "And he is gone. Dead." She put her hands on his bare chest, the feel of her skin like fire against him. "But I'm not. I'm still alive."

*For now...* He didn't say the thought that ran rampant through his mind. He couldn't. And she didn't want to hear it. He put his hand on her shoulder, letting his fingers run down between her breasts, snagging on the center of the bra. "I am sorry. Leeza, I should have gotten there sooner. I'm sorry. This is my fault." He was apologizing, he realized, for more than just Melios. For all of it, for bringing her into this world, for not being able to stay away from her. For following her around "to make sure she was okay," the way he'd justified stalking her practically her whole life.

He hated himself for what he'd done to her. "I am so sorry..."

"Liam," she whispered, reaching behind her body. With a jerk, her bra came undone and she slid it off. "Shut up."

He stared at her, her eyes filled with a kind of understanding that he'd never imagined he would see there. She knew that he was apologizing for everything. She took his hand, kissing his palm.

In that movement, he got a clear image of her mind and nowhere there was any anger, hatred, or even pain about him being in her life.

And she knew...

She knew he'd been a part of her life since she was a child.

And she loved him for it.

The aches in his chest, the pain, started to recede. Leeza pressed herself against him and their lips met in a kiss, one of power, of forgiveness, and of love. With her kiss, with every stroke of her tongue against his, she started sealing the broken cracks in his soul.

She loved him, and she didn't hate him for what he'd brought to her life.

She took one of his hands and placed it over her bare breast. The soft skin in his palm sent wild desires through him and he thought he'd died right there and gone to Heaven. He leaned back a bit, watching his fingers over the flesh. Leeza lay back on the table, bare to him, her hips against his. Heat radiated from her body, mimicked in his. He loomed over her, staring at her bare chest.

“Touch me, Liam. Feel me...”

He put his hands on her breasts, savoring the soft skin.

*Is this Heaven?* he wondered. Surely it had to be. The Divine could never bring him anything more incredible. Her nipple puckered under his palm, snagging on his calluses. She moaned under his touch, and he smiled. How amazing that he could create such noises within her just by...

He slid his palm across one nipple.

She groaned, her eyes locked with his.

He opened his hands, letting her nipples slide between his fingers and she arched into him, pressing them into his hand. He squeezed the soft flesh...his fingers pinching each nipple. She cried out and he jerked back, his hand feeling hot like he'd burned it.

Had he hurt her? That was the last thing he wanted to do...

“Don't stop,” she whispered.

“I thought...”

Leeza sat up, grabbing his head. “If you hurt me, trust me, I will tell you.” She pulled him down into a kiss, her nipples hard and skating across his chest, teasing and tormenting him, a powerful yet almost non-existent touch.

Their tongues danced, a war of movement in his mouth; desperation leaked through every touch, every twist. Lost. He was lost in her, lost within her touch, her taste, her smell.

Leeza arched her back, exposing her throat. “Taste me,” she whispered as she pressed on his head. Liam let his mouth wander down, feeling the skin. With every kiss he placed on her neck, she let out soft mews of desire, driving him forward.

His hands slid up her sides, pausing just at the edge of her breasts, his thumbs caressing the skin, inching closer to her nipples again, and she sighed.

Kissing the bruises on her arms, he tried to will them away with just the press of his lips. Her breasts slid over his chest as he moved, sending shivers of desire through him.

He moaned her name as he came back to her chest, his eyes darting all over her flesh. Desperate for a taste, he leaned closer to feel that soft skin in his mouth, but he found himself frozen.

He wanted to touch her breasts, to love them with kisses, run his tongue over them, but he couldn't seem to move forward. An image of a baby pressed to her breast stopped him cold. Breasts were for mothers, for feeding their young. They weren't for men...

“Liam,” she moaned, palming one breast and holding it up to him. “Explore, my love. Touch me, feel me, taste me.”

He didn't know how to respond. Her whole body was available for him, for touch, for experiencing, and he didn't know what he should do. Where he should go, what he should do. He wanted to damn the Balance Mandate for not allowing him to ever experience this before, to not know what he should be doing. He hated not knowing.

He always knew what to do.

He had, all his life.



Yet now, he was lost, confused, wanting, needing so many things, yet unsure what to do. What was expected, what was appropriate, special.

She stroked his cheek, letting her thumb slide over his lips. “Let me show you,” she whispered.

With deft precision, she got out from underneath him, laid him back on the table, and straddled him. His heart hammered in his chest, feeling like it would burst at any second as she looked him over, one of her hands sliding down his chest.

She kissed him, her hips grinding into his, and he thought he might explode. Sliding down his throat, her kisses sent shivers through him from his head to his toes and back up to his cock, and he fought, at least at first, the urge to press his hips into hers.

Running her tongue over his chest, she nipped and bit at his skin, sending fire through his entire body.

How could anything that felt so amazing be forbidden? Knowing that she loved him, desired him, made him feel so powerful, so amazing, it brought his whole body alive in ways he’d never expected.

He moaned as she kissed her way to his nipple, licking a circle around the left one, then she ran her tongue over it, making him groan. He ground his teeth together just as she bit down on him, and let out a slow breath as she tugged on his nipple with her teeth.

“Oh, Leeza,” he moaned as she slid to the other side and did the same thing.

His body lit on fire, filling with need so strong he clenched the edges of the table, desperate for something...anything. There was more, he knew there was, but he couldn’t begin to fathom anything more wonderful than the feel of her on him, making him feel this incredible power.

She slid her tongue down his body, drawing the lines of his muscles as she worked her way toward his pants.

There was no stopping this, he realized. No matter what happened, he was going to mate with this woman.

And in a blinding moment of clarity, he realized he wouldn’t stop it even if he could. Leeza was dying. There was no stopping what would happen to her in a few precious hours.

And he couldn’t imagine a world without her. He refused to imagine such a thing. This wasn’t just a situation like what Adrian had talked about—watching for a few precious years. This was more.

He knew he would not survive in a world without Leeza. Every part of his heart, the passion he’d always thought fed his power when fighting mythicals, had always been for Leeza. At least for the last two decades. Every fight had been for her, preserving her life, protecting her existence.

And that existence was over.

He would rather die than live the rest of eternity knowing that he had killed her, if not directly, indirectly. He caused this fate.

Because he loved her.

He could not bear living without her. A world without her was not a world he wanted to be in. Leeza, who'd been licking and tasting his stomach, had moved to his pants, her hands jerking at the buttons. He brought his head up, desperate to say something, anything to her...

To tell her...

What exactly? What could he say?

"Leeza?" he whispered. It was all he could manage, her name on his tongue like a drug.

"Shh." As if she knew his thoughts, she reached up, a hand on his cheek. Their eyes locked and maybe she did know exactly what he was thinking, because compassion and love swirled around desire. She had opened his pants and was sliding them down. He raised his hips, making it easier for her, and he could feel her breath against his cock. His whole body lit on fire; he was a powder keg ready to explode.

A flash of cold air met his steaming hot body and he shivered. He looked down himself, realizing he'd never actually looked at himself fully aroused. It had always been something he tried to ignore, really, an irritation of the human condition that wasn't removed when the change happened.

Yet now he saw himself differently. Maybe he was seeing himself through Leeza's eyes, seeing the desire, the longing that was etched on her face, her chest panting, the way she bit her lip in that seductive little way she did as she looked him over.

Leeza looked more beautiful than he'd ever seen her, kneeling between his legs, staring at him. She laid a hand on his stomach and slid it down to his thigh. She ran both her hands down his thighs, her thumbs on the inside of his legs, and he moaned. No woman had ever touched him there, save his mother when he was an infant. He'd no idea the touch was so powerful.

He closed his eyes, his hands trembling as she touched him, making every part of him scream for release.

Leeza's hand slid to the joint where his hip met his leg, then up and down the skin. Her finger trailed up, and barely touched his cock.

He bucked.

She trailed her finger up and down the shaft.

Liam's eyes rolled back in his head.

Her finger circled the top of his shaft. He gripped the edge of the table, holding on for dear life. Electricity streamed through his body, desire and power flooding through him. She encircled him, her fingers sliding up and down in a slow, rhythmic motion.

The need to move overwhelmed him and he bucked into her hand, matching her movements, his whole body responding on impulse. Her tempo increased a tiny bit, and he matched her stroke for stroke. He was getting closer and closer to something... Deep in the back of his mind, he knew it would be ejaculation, but the clinical lessons he'd learned about the human body had nothing on these sensations.

If all the knights knew how pleasurable this was, the entire order would have died centuries ago.

She slowed her movements and took her hand away, and he wanted to cry out in disappointment. He snapped his head up to look in her eyes.

Leeza smiled at him, her eyes dark with wicked intent. Was she not done? What other incredible pleasures did she have in store for him?

He watched with eyes wide, unable to believe what he was seeing, as she leaned over, tasting him. The rough contrast of her tongue against his cock made him cry out. It wasn't pain, it was pleasure...so incredible. Such pleasure.

Then she took the tip in her mouth.

Every part of him arched to her. She had him at her mercy, knowing what he needed more than he did. She fed him, giving him the pleasures he'd been denied all his life. She blessed him with this, this amazing existence. It filled his entire being. No longer was he a Knight Templar.

He was a man.

He moaned her name.

She sat up, running her hand over her chin, but she didn't look at him, instead staring at his cock like she was about to begin another attack.

But she closed her eyes, her body going tense for a moment and she dug her nails into his thigh.

"Leeza." He pulled her up his body, against him, cuddling her, holding her to him if only to soften the pain of the cravings.

"I am okay." She panted as she spoke, though she tried to hide the pain. "Just those cravings."

He kissed the top of her head. "You are very strong. Most would not be able to hold back the cravings as well as you are." He ran his hands over her back, loving the feel of her skin.

She laid her head on his chest. "It's you. I couldn't do it if you weren't here."

He pressed another kiss on her head and she tipped it back, their eyes meeting, and he leaned down, kissing her. She twisted her body, lying on top of him, her hips pressed against his, the only barrier her pants.

They kissed, the fire in their bodies reigniting, and they started rocking their hips into one another. Liam wanted to touch her; he ran his hand down her back and was stopped by her pants. The fabric frustrated him...he needed to feel her flesh.

Touch her curves.

Leeza reached in between their bodies and shimmied herself out of her pants, dropping them on the floor next to the table. Liam rolled onto his side, bringing Leeza with him, and with careful moves, he managed to get her back down on the table.

He was ready to feel her, to explore her body.

“My turn,” he whispered, climbing off the table to look at her nude body. He just stared for a moment. She was so beautiful. Her womanly parts were shadowed because her hips were twisted on the table. Still he couldn’t help wanting to see them.

Leeza seemed to know what he desired even before he did, because she flattened herself on the table so her knees hung off the edge. She spread her legs, opening herself for him, and he stepped into the cradle. While his desire was thrumming and he needed contact with her, he couldn’t help feeling that this was more than just a physical opening of her.

She was opening her soul to him.

A gift he would not take lightly. Leaning down, he pressed a kiss on her knee. She let out a soft coo, and he kissed the inside, just above her knee. God, she was so beautiful, so perfect. Her smooth skin felt like the finest satin under his fingers, even under his lips. He twisted and placed a matching kiss on her other leg.

Leeza moaned his name, encouraging him onward.

He stroked the inside of her thighs, from her knees to her hips and back down. Each time, he got a little closer to her center. The heat from that area was almost searing as he moved up and down.

While what she did to him had brought him great pleasure, it was nothing compared to how this felt—bringing the same to her. That was even more intoxicating, more powerful...

She was his.

There was no denying that.

*Mine.* The word took on new meaning to him, like he could brand it on her skin with each little touch, each little kiss he placed on her.

*Mine.*

He crept closer to her center, teasing her like she’d done to him, a slight stroke here, barely a touch there. She groaned and sighed with every little touch. He took one finger, sliding out to feel her center, touching the folds of skin and the moisture there.

“You are wet,” he whispered. His fingers slid around in the dampness, and she shuddered and moaned as he touched every part of her, feeling how soft and delicate the skin was. His cock got even harder, desperate for release.

His fingers slipped between the folds, shocked at what he felt. Fluid thicker, silkier than water, his fingers glided through it, touching every part of her.

Leeza touched his hand, guiding his fingers inside her folds. She shuddered as he slid his fingers in and out of the slick passage.

His own body was so rigidly hard he could barely stand it. The piston movement his fingers did, he mimicked in the air, and realized he was imitating what his body screamed to be doing.

He wanted to be inside her. He needed it. Every part of him pleaded for the release, for the feel of this.

A tiny part of him screamed that this was his last chance. He could still walk away, to not do this—after all, he hadn't died yet—and still remain a Templar.

And he told that part of himself to shut up. His choice was made—he was going to be with Leeza. If these were her last moments on Earth, then they would be his as well.

He leaned forward, his body covering hers, and he grabbed her hips, pulling them to the edge of the table. He needed to kiss her, he wanted to kiss her. When their mouths met, it was like the beginning of a seal being shut...his lips to hers, his chest to her, his hips to hers...

He was making a promise. This was it, the moment he'd been waiting for all his life. And nothing was going to stop him from completing this mission.

He loved her.

And now he was going to die with her.

"Liam," she whispered, bringing her eyes to his.

"We will be together." He stroked her face. "For all eternity." In his last moments, he would be enveloped in Leeza, feeling her in the deepest, most special way possible, and he was happy.

No, not happy.

Love. He was in love. It wrapped around him like a blanket, holding onto both of them. He looked into her eyes and she could feel it too. He loved her so deeply, so powerfully, that he was giving her his everything. All that he had and more.

With all he had in him, he shoved forward, penetrating her.

She moaned as he entered, adjusting as he pressed forward. Unlike anything he'd ever felt, he let out a deep moan as her body squeezed him tight.

This. This was the connection he'd been missing all his life.

This completed his broken soul.

She sat up, wrapping her arms around him and started kissing him. It was hot, it was powerful, and it fed his desires. More than he'd ever known, more than he'd ever expected, this was the design for him.

He could feel it deep within his gut.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for all his life.

She released his mouth and started kissing his neck and shoulder. Not kissing exactly, but nibbling him. Leeza went rigid in his arms as a wave of bloodlust stronger than any of the others thus far washed over her—it was so powerful, even Liam wanted to bite down on her.

He groaned as the cravings washed through him, feeling a desperate need to give her exactly what she wanted.

She brought her head back and clamped down on his throat, breaking the skin. Blood began to leak out of the wound.

He cried out, the pain of it mingling with the pleasure of being inside her, and his hips began moving of their own accord at a pace he had not set. They were pumping faster, harder than he would have thought to move.

Leeza remained clamped down on him, and he felt her sucking his blood. He began to get dizzy. He pumped harder and faster still, crying out as he slammed into her.

Nothing had ever felt so exquisite.

She held onto him, her body starting to tense, moans coming out of her, and her insides started to squeeze him tight. For a second, he was locked tight inside her, then an orgasm erupted from him. He slammed his hips hard into her as it crested, and it released seven hundred years of pent-up desire.

All space and time stopped. All that was, all that would be, none of it mattered.

It was that moment that mattered. Nothing else.

He looked into Leeza's eyes. She met his stare. "I love you, Liam," she whispered, her lips red from his blood.

"I love you too."

Part of him expected to drop dead right that moment.

But he didn't.

The Divine allowed him a few more minutes of perfect bliss. He scooped her into his arms and walked a few steps to the futon couch and laid her on it. The door was next to the futon, and he flicked the lock open. His brothers would eventually come down and check on him.

Leeza watched him, and he smiled at her. He flicked the lever in the back of the futon and it flattened out. He lay down with her, his body feeling weak, like it was slowly draining away. She grabbed the blanket that had been bundled on the end and tossed it over them both.

She curled into his arms, her finger sliding over his chest in lazy circles.

He closed his eyes.

Happier than he'd ever been in his life.

His final moments were perfect.

## Chapter 25

Grand Master William turned on the web cam, connecting him with the leader of the Romanian Vampire Clan.

He waited with the patience of only an immortal as Dom Romano came to the screen. The vampire was over five hundred years old, though he looked no older than thirty. It was rumored, if one could catch a smile on his face, the vampire could pass for twenty-five.

William made no judgments, though he couldn't help being pleased when he saw Romano—the old man had kept his dark hair short instead of following the current trend of longer hair that so many were wearing.

Old men like the two of them were beyond such trifles.

“Grand Master William,” Dom Romano said, his lip curled back as though he mimicked a smile, but failed miserably. “It is early for a social call from you, is it not?”

William laced his fingers together and stared for a moment at the vampire. Some were able to know when their young were in trouble.

He was interested to see if Romano had that very ability.

“This is not social.”

“Fair enough,” Romano replied. “What can the Romanian Clan do for you, leader of the Templar Knights?”

“I want nothing at this time,” William replied.

Romano stared at him for a few seconds through the monitor, but it was obvious that his patience wasn't as strong as William's. “Are we having a staring contest?”

“No,” William stated. “I am contacting you in an official capacity.”

“So get on with it.”

William cracked his knuckles, first the right, then the left hand.

Romano shifted in his chair, his temper begging to erupt.

“If you do not—”

“Melios is dead,” William stated.

Romano didn't exhibit any sign of recognition, barely even a flicker of response. At least not one that a normal human would detect.

Even through the camera, William saw the fine details if only for a second—Romano's nostrils flaring, his eyes widening, the swallow in his neck. Even his hands clenched.

But it was just enough that William caught it all.

Let it not be said that Grand Master William was not blessed with special abilities as well. He may not be able to hear ghosts or get visions by touching people, but his acute sensitivity to body language was most helpful.

In almost any situation.

Dom Romano nodded at William. "One of your men?"

"No, actually," William replied. "A pet he was keeping killed him."

"A pet killed him? A pet? My son was four hundred years old. How could a pet kill him?"

William didn't respond to his question. He didn't know the answer, in any case. Only that the girl they'd brought back from the attack was his pet, in some capacity, and she had been the one to give the ashing blow.

"What were his plans, Romano? What was Melios up to?"

"I do not know."

William watched him. His body language revealed that the man knew exactly what Melios's plans were. "I think you do know. And you are going to tell me."

"No, I do not know. He did not tell me beyond..."

"Beyond?"

"Avenging his sister."

William arched his eyebrow at him. "Why do I not believe you?"

He leaned forward into the camera, glaring. "Melios had a plan, a grand plan, like children come up with. He thought he had the perfect way to bring order to the world."

"The world is in order, Romano. Did you forget to tell him?"

"Perhaps to you it is."

A knock on the door behind him alerted William. He didn't answer, but heard the squeak of the hinge. "Be careful, Romano. Be very careful. We have his pet." With that, William disconnected the web camera.

Whatever Dom Romano knew of Melios's plans, if the pet was important, he would be attempting to retrieve her. And until William knew exactly why this girl was important, the Romano clan wouldn't be getting near her.

\* \* \* \*

Adrian waited at attention near the door, his body rigid. His mind, however, was running a thousand miles a minute.

And it didn't help that Nara was there.

Her ghostly figure was looming next to him, her usual chattiness gone, replaced with a look of pure remorse.

He'd never seen her features so gaunt and strained.

"Tell me," he whispered to her.

She shook her head.

He pressed his lips in a grim line. Every inch of him had started screaming when Liam locked himself in his workroom with the woman Leeza. He knew it was wrong. He couldn't get anyone else to see it.

He wanted to scream at them all. *Don't you see it? He's in love with her.*



None of them knew how serious Liam's obsession with her was. Adrian did.

And yet he could do nothing about it.

He'd worked with him long enough to know the man. He knew...yet he did nothing.

He should have never left that room.

Leaving Liam alone with her was dangerous. He'd practically sentenced her to death. And Adrian knew how that felt. He'd had to do it once himself. He couldn't stand knowing that his partner was now in there, crying, weeping, mourning the woman.

Well, it was Liam.

He was probably in there breaking, destroying. He might have even stabbed her to ease her pain.

Wouldn't put it past him. He'd need his time in Asia now, time to refocus, to re-center himself again. A pain that would never go away, not really. Adrian knew that too.

He still mourned Elizabeth. Probably would until he died. If he ever died.

William faced Adrian.

"It's time," Adrian said; the time was up. She would have to be dead by now.

William got up from his desk, a slow movement showing his exhaustion even though he hadn't been at the fight. They all were exhausted tonight. Richard, Tabor and the others were on the lower level, recouping from the fight. Some of the wolves had stayed and raucous laughter could be heard from down below, men comparing notes, sharing the fight.

Even that girl they'd found there, she was down there. While she hadn't been speaking much, it was obvious she was taking everything in.

And Richard was keeping an eye on her. He'd volunteered from the moment they'd left the building. Adrian had overheard him telling Tabor that the girl was who was in his visions, not Leeza.

Which was why Richard had been a little confused when they entered Melios's office. Leeza was not who he'd been here to save.

Interesting, that.

William followed Adrian out of the room.

"Is she dead?" William asked.

Adrian jerked his head in a quick nod. William didn't say anything as they proceeded down to the main level.

Nara whispered in his ear. "Just go in," she pleaded.

William pressed his already thin lips in a line that made them disappear. "Liam will have to answer for this."

Adrian knew that. Daniel had offered to turn her. He was full-blood vampire, born from the Russian clan, and had worked with the Templars in Europe before coming over to the Americas.

He'd never sired anyone, but had been willing to turn the woman. At least, if turned, the woman would have been able to live.

Yet Liam forbade it.

“Have Daniel start working up a coronary report and all the other paperwork necessary for the woman. We’ll need to set up a cause of death.” William waved his hand in the air. “You know the drill.”

“Daniel is already working on a basic cause of death,” Adrian said as they walked downstairs.

“Hurry, Adrian,” Nara whispered. “Just go in there.”

He snapped his head to the side. “Be quiet, Nara.” His gut spun inside him; whether he was feeling his own anticipation or Nara was projecting her intensity on him, he didn’t know, but it was making him walk faster.

William took a few wide steps to catch up with him. “What is the rush?”

“I don’t know. I just have this feeling we need to get down there.”

“You do, or your ghost does?”

“I don’t know.” And he didn’t. He didn’t like how Nara was behaving—she floated in front of him, a wisp of silver moving just a bit faster than he was; and whether he meant to or not, he was intent on keeping up with her.

She almost had him to a sprint.

“He put in for a transfer,” William told Adrian as he matched his stride.

Adrian nodded. “I know.” Of course he knew. Though he doubted the Grand Master knew the woman down there was a lot of the reason he’d requested it in the first place.

“He will probably still want to get away,” William muttered, though the words were more for himself than Adrian.

Adrian didn’t bother adding to his thoughts—his own were a chaotic jumble.

Nara was whispering words as she moved, almost too quiet for him to hear; he could only catch the vaguest of hints of them. “Maybe... Hurry...” Whatever she knew, she obviously didn’t know everything about what was going on down there.

Had Liam erected some kind of shield to keep even her out? And if he had, Adrian wanted to know what it was—he’d love to have that little charm in his arsenal. How many times had she walked into the bathroom when he was occupied to prattle on about something?

He shook off the wandering thoughts.

As they rounded a corner, Richard joined their parade. Adrian didn’t look back, but from the sounds of the footsteps, every knight in the house had joined their parade. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Adrian glanced back at the long line of men. All of them wore dark expressions.

They all could feel the tension.

Nara was practically vibrating in front of him, her silvery body shaking in the light.

It was almost palpable when they reached the door to Liam’s studio.

Adrian’s heart hammered in his chest as he reached for the door handle.

“Liam will be devastated,” William whispered.

Adrian nodded his head.

Nara disappeared through the door. His gut clenched, and Nara could be heard whispering inside the room, like she was trying to tell Liam something, though Adrian could hardly make out the words.

He turned the handle.

Unlocked.

Adrian closed his eyes, knowing what he would see—Liam kneeling on the ground, in prayer, possibly in tears, and the woman on the table, lifeless and still. Pain jabbed at his heart. He could imagine what his friend was going through, the heartache and fury that would fill him.

It tore him up.

He hated thinking of his knighthood brother in such pain.

He opened his eyes and pushed the door open.

No body lay on the table. No Liam knelt on the floor. Glass bits broken, shards of color coating the floor. Yet the smell of death was in the air. Death and...sweat?

What had happened? Had Liam moved her? Taken her from the room? And why did it smell so...so...human in there?

He stepped into the room, automatically turning his head to the side, the other place Liam was known to be when in the room.

And froze.

Lying on the futon was Liam, covered with a blanket. The woman wrapped around him, sleeping, her head against his chest. Blood covered his shoulder where his neck connected, right near the artery. The same blood stained her lips and chin.

A wound that hadn't started to close.

A horrible, horrible sick feeling started to build in Adrian. Surely...surely this wasn't...

Liam was so still.

Lifeless.

Adrian wasn't seeing this. He couldn't be. Liam was one of the most dedicated, most devoted members of the order. He was a model knight. Adrian forced himself to close his eyes and open them again.

His vision hadn't been tricking him.

Liam was...

Liam was...

"You." Adrian's voice was a low growl.

Leeza jerked from her position, sleepy and content for a moment. At least until faced with the room.

Adrian registered movement around him, but only in the most basic of senses. His focus had telescoped only to her...

To Liam's murderer.

She may not have stabbed him, but she killed him all the same.

“Murderer.”

Time slowed down. Almost to stillness. Seconds became minutes.

And Adrian’s target was acquired. He lunged forward, sword coming out of its scabbard, flying through the air to pierce that murderer’s heart. He’d never intentionally murdered anyone. But he’d always been a fan of the axiom “an eye for an eye.”

“No, wait, don’t...” The words were distant, too far away for him to make out properly as he surged forward.

The woman screamed.

Nara screamed, her silvery body trying to block him, to no avail.

A pair of large, very strong hands grabbed hold of Adrian, jerking him back, and he flew into the huge worktable.

Adrian’s perception snapped back into focus, William standing in front of him. “Get the girl, get her out of here,” he commanded. Richard and Ewan jerked her off the bed, over Liam.

She was screaming.

Reaching out for Liam. “Liam, Liam? Liam!”

“No!” Adrian yelled, jumping up. “No, you can’t touch him!” He charged at her, but Richard blocked his path, shoving the woman out of the room, Ewan getting her away.

William grabbed hold of Adrian again. “Sir Adrian, you have to calm down. Stop.”

“She killed him! She killed Liam!”

And it hit him, hard, clear, and fast. Sir Liam, Liam McCann of Ireland, a Knight Templar, was now dead. His entire body shook with rage, every pore, every molecule filled with a fury like he’d never known.

It had been seven hundred years since one of his friends fell. Seven hundred years since he’d had to worry that a Templar would die.

The pain was too much for him to bear. Liam had become his family, a brother of immortality. The knowledge that his family of fifty-two would never change, would always be there had been a comfort to him, a way to secure his place in the world even when he wasn’t sure where he belonged. He lived on the fringe of the real world, his understanding stretching to things that included the dead and, at least within his circle, he was secure.

At least until today. Until Liam changed everything.

He dropped to the ground, on his knees, and bowed his head.

*Why Liam, why?* The words were mere whispers in his mind as he started to pray. He prayed for Liam, for a blessed eternal rest. He prayed for Leeza and her immortal soul, and he prayed for himself, for the strength to not go find her and kill her.

Nara knelt next to him, the dress she always wore a gray shadow on the ground, and white-silver streaks ran down her face as she knelt in prayer.

Adrian could hear her prayers.

“Divine, please, I pray, save his soul,” she kept whispering over and over.

William dropped to the ground as well, whispering his own prayers over Liam.

Nara continued to pray, her words a chant in the background as Adrian made his own prayers for Liam. He started nodding his head in rhythm to Nara's words.

They sat there for a very long time, praying.

The words brought Adrian some calmness. Not much. There was still so much anger, so much fury in his gut, but it had turned from the kind that exploded to the kind that simmered, waiting for the perfect chance to escape.

He still wanted to knock Liam upside the head. He wouldn't mind screaming a bit at Leeza. But the fury to attack her and slaughter her, like she'd slaughtered Liam, had gone away.

Eventually, William stood up, muttering something about getting things organized for a proper burial back in Poitiers, France.

Adrian still couldn't bring himself to move. He continued to chant prayers for Liam. The thought of him spending eternity in Hell made him sick to his stomach. He may have hated what Liam did and wanted to strangle him, but he would never want him to face eternal damnation.

And to his surprise, neither did Nara.

She still whispered the same words. "Divine, please, I pray, save his soul."

He felt himself crack a smile. "Liam would appreciate that."

The ghost looked up at him. "I am not praying for Liam. I'm praying for you."

\* \* \* \*

Leeza cried.

She wailed.

She screamed.

She probably would have thrown things, had the room the Templar guys placed her in had any kind of knick-knack to throw.

She'd gone through the entire gamut of loudness.

Now she was on the quiet one. She'd wept while she stood in the shower, washing off all the gore from the last few days. She'd cried while drying off and combing her hair. She'd even cried while she put on the simple clothes someone had brought in, a black t-shirt, a pair of large jeans, and a belt.

She'd cried harder when she put the t-shirt on and realized it had an iron cross on it, right in the center, in bright red.

Now she was on the bed, her head at the edge, and she stared at the generic beige carpet on the floor. One arm dangled down, just brushing the carpet fibers.

She heard her door open again, but she couldn't bring herself to move.

Or even care.

They were probably going to kill her soon anyway.

She'd killed Liam.

Her Leeham...she'd killed him. The memories that the vampire had given back to her had repaired her brain—and somehow the shower had given her a chance to string everything together, to fully understand what all she'd seen.

What she'd always known in her heart.

Liam had always been there for her.

And he was gone. She'd killed him.

It was probably a good thing there wasn't anything sharp in the room.

A soft hand ran down her back, the kind of touch only a mother would give. Of course, that would be if Leeza had a loving mother. "You're gonna be okay, sweetie."

Leeza turned her head. Marge stood there, and Leeza shifted so Marge had room to sit down. She continued to rub her back.

"I killed him, Marge. He's dead because of me."

"Yeah, he's dead..." Marge's voice trailed off. "Never thought he'd go out this way..."

"How could fate be so cruel? He loved me, Marge. I know he did."

"The Divine has His reasons for everything, my dear. We can't begin to understand why God does what He does."

Leeza shifted to the side to look at her, her lip trembling. "What am I going to do, Marge? How can I live without my Leeham?"

Marge tipped her head to the side. "Your Leeham?"

Leeza nodded. And began to tell Marge about all the memories—from the first time she'd ever encountered him at the fair, to talking to him on the roof so many weeks ago.

Marge's eyes got wider and wider. "I had no idea."

And something dawned on Leeza. "Why in the hell are you here? How do you know what Liam is?"

"Oh," Marge said, adjusting her blouse. "I'm a werewolf. Didn't you know? I'm surprised Liam didn't tell you."

Leeza jerked away from her, curling up in a ball in the corner of the bed, her head on her knees. "A werewolf? And all your grandkids and kids?"

"Well, yes, the blood ones are werewolves too. We have a rather large pack. I'm the...the..." She patted her chin. "The best term I can use for it is the Dowager Alpha. My son Dale and his wife are the Alphas. Neil is the Beta."

Leeza shook her head. "And you're just now telling me this why? Especially after I started spending time with Liam, you don't think you could have clued me in to this?"

Marge shrugged. "There was never a quite right time."

Leeza opened her mouth to argue, but the bedroom door came open again, and one of the knights, the one with the longer dark hair, Richard, stuck his head in. "So?" He looked straight at Marge.

"I can't be sure," said Marge, and she returned her gaze on Leeza. "I've known her all her life. If she's turned, I can't tell."

Richard came in the room. "You're a wolf. Vamps are your mortal enemies. You're supposed to have these super-strong, extra-sensitive senses. Use them."

Marge glared at him. "I have known Leeza so long, she still smells the same. I can't smell anything on her. Not vamp, not wolf, not immortal. She just smells... She smells like she always has."

"Hello, in the room," Leeza snapped. "What are you two going on about?"

Marge reached out, taking her hand. "He wants to know if you're a vampire, honey. Evidently, you bit Liam while you were downstairs..."

Leeza nodded. "I know."

"And they're not sure if you are mythical or not."

"Can't you all just look at me and tell?"

"That's the problem. No, they can't. You don't have any telltale signs. Your eyes aren't lighter like a vampire's. And, aside from the grief that's practically radiating off you, you seem exactly the same. At least to me."

"She can't be." Richard came across the room to loom over the bed—a huge shadow that was not happy with the state of events.

Leeza put her hand to her stomach. "The fire inside. It's gone. It's not spreading anymore." She hadn't felt it in a while. She'd been so consumed by her emotions, she hadn't really noticed, but no, the sensations had left her completely. She hadn't felt any since...

Since she'd bit Liam.

"The fire?" Marge asked, staring at her.

"Many have said, during the transformation to vampire, that the change feels like fire inside." He narrowed his eyes on Leeza. "Are you certain you do not feel any different?"

A tear threatened to break free. "Aside from feeling horrible guilt and devastation that the man I love is dead, I feel great."

"Good, come."

He left no room to argue.

A thousand different things went through Leeza's mind. Most of which involved needles and stabbing and poking for medical tests.

Yet Richard didn't lead her to any kind of medical room. He merely led her downstairs to a pair of French doors. The sun gleamed bright through them, and he opened them up.

"Go outside."

Leeza stopped cold. "Uh..."

Footsteps could be heard behind her, and she glanced backward and saw that quite a few people had appeared, all following her.

Including the girl from Melios's place. She stared at her with the strangest look on her face.

Like she was trying to figure something out, but wasn't exactly sure what it was.

"Won't I burn up?" Leeza asked, suddenly terrified of the sunlight. She didn't get any closer to the doors.

"If you are a vampire, yes, your skin will start burning as soon as you get through the doors." Richard grabbed her arm and escorted her to the edge of the sunlight. The bright light on the floor seemed to glow and scream warnings at her.

"Richard, don't do this," Marge said. "Surely one of you knights can tell..."

"No one with that particular sensitivity is here, Marge. This is the easiest test."

"And how long would I be able to stand out there before I start burning?" Leeza asked.

"Only a few moments," Richard replied. "You might not even be able to get out the door."

A small hand slipped into hers. Leeza jerked, and realized that the girl had come up to her. "I'll go with you."

For some reason, the girl's strength was enough for Leeza. She put one foot in front of the other and stepped into the light.

The two of them walked all the way to the doorway and stepped out on the porch. Leeza shielded her eyes from the sun; it was so bright and it had been a while since she'd actually seen it.

The girl did the same and they stepped through the threshold, out onto the concrete patio behind the house.

The sun washed over them both, and it was the most wonderful, warmest, sweetest feeling Leeza had ever felt. It was like God was bathing her in His love. The heat was washing away all the pain, pushing it aside.

She tipped her head to the sun and held out her arms, letting it envelope her. So wonderful, so clean... She felt new again. No longer broken inside.

The girl kicked off her shoes and ran, dashing down into the grass, laughing and giggling. She spun around in circles, and Leeza let out a laugh as the girl slid on the grass, landing on her butt with a thump.

In the doorway stood Richard, though he didn't seem to see Leeza at all, his eyes focused intently on the girl.

Marge pushed her way around him, and when she looked at Leeza, tears started streaming down her face.

Leeza dashed to her. "What, what is it?"

She wiped the tears away. "You're not a vampire, honey. You would have been dead by now."

Another Templar came up to her, one she didn't know, with a British accent. "To confirm, would you spare a touch of blood?"

"Sure," Leeza said.

The girl could be heard still running and giggling outside.

She glanced back at her. "Should she come in?"



Richard shook his head. “Let her play.” He hollered an order at her not to leave the compound grounds. She nodded an affirmative and continued wandering around, picking up strands of grass and running them through her fingers.

Adrian came up to Richard, glaring at Leeza as she stepped by him, but she was able to hear a few of the words he said to Richard.

“It’s not...” Adrian said.

“I know,” Richard replied.

The curious part of Leeza wanted to ask what that was about, but as she glanced at Marge, the older woman just shook her head, as if to say not to bother. Instead Marge wrapped her arms around Leeza, hugging her for all she was worth.

Leeza smiled, though she only partially felt it as she followed the other man inside.

Liam was still gone.

## Chapter 26

In death, there was no pain.

Liam had always thought that was a crock. Really, Heaven may have been perfect, but there was always something not quite right about it. Nothing was ever exactly perfect. He'd known that all his life; it was an axiom that he depended on.

Yet now, in this moment, he felt no pain.

He looked himself over. No scars. Not even the jousting scar on his side remained.

He ran his fingers over the area where the scar had always been, a place he'd grown so accustomed to seeing it he felt strange and awkward without it.

"It can be brought back, if you prefer," came a warm male voice behind him.

Liam spun around.

And immediately dropped to his knees.

The Divine walked before him, in long white robes, looking perfect and angelic, with dark hair and beard, exactly how Liam had always pictured Him to be.

He smiled at Liam. "Please, rise, my warrior. No need for such humility."

Liam didn't move. "I bow before You, Divine, a humble servant, my mission to do only as You request."

"And now I request you to stand."

Liam stood. He was taller than The Divine. That surprised him. Why he didn't know, but it did. He always imagined The Divine to be so large, so much more...yet He seemed so humble.

"Welcome," The Divine said.

Liam looked around. Everything was white and he realized he was surrounded by thick puffy clouds, the air hazy with more clouds, yet he had no trouble breathing. It was like something out of a dream. "I thank You, Divine One, for allowing me to come here."

"And why wouldn't I? You have been a great servant to Me for the last seven hundred years."

"Thank You, sir." Liam bowed his head, then he glanced around. Something didn't feel right; his senses were tingling.

The Divine arched an eyebrow at him. "Is there a problem, Sir Liam?"

It came to him in a flash what was wrong, why it didn't feel right. "Where is Leeza?" he asked. "She should be here."

"Ahh, Felicia Zanna Hunter," The Divine said. "There is an interesting twist on events." He made a motion with His hand and revealed an opening in the clouds. At first it was a loose focus, like being in a plane and looking down at a city. Then the image telescoped and he was at the Templar compound.

*Leeza was dressed, running her hands through her hair as she stared out a window.*

*Tabor appeared at her door. "The results are here." He shook his head. "Never seen anything like it."*

*Leeza's eyes welled in tears. "Then it's true? I'm fine?"*

*Tabor nodded. "It's a bloody miracle. You're fine."*

Liam's gut about dropped out of him. How could this be? She was...she was near death. How could she be alive now? A pain unlike anything he'd ever known surged through him, so hard, so clear, it almost knocked him down. "She was dying. I don't understand."

The Divine looked back at him. "She drank your blood. At the moment you gave your life in sacrifice for her."

Liam shook his head. "But my blood couldn't have cured her." It was one of the first things the Templars did, allowing turning humans to bite them instead of others, if only to see if there were any healing qualities in the blood.

There never were. It might have been able to heal their own personal wounds, but not another human's. It didn't work that way.

The Divine must have heard his thoughts. "It was more than your blood, Liam. It was your heart."

Tears ran down his face. This wasn't what he wanted. It wasn't what he thought would happen. She was supposed to be here. With him. Forever. His gut knotted. "Will she...will she be all right?"

The Divine shrugged. "It is her choice. If she wants to be, she will be."

There was the nagging feeling in his gut again. "I love her." And he did, with every part of himself he was madly and truly in love with Felicia Zanna Hunter. He would have married her on the spot, the first time she kissed him, if there had been a way it could happen.

He'd let himself die, in essence committed suicide, so he could be with her...

And she wasn't here.

His stomach roiled like he'd been kicked.

The Divine put His hand on Liam's shoulder. "I know, Sir Liam. And she loved you. But there are rules to being a Templar. You knew that."

He nodded.

"And now you must pay for your choices."

Liam really didn't like the sound of that.

\* \* \* \*

"And I don't care what your secret society rules are. I'm going," Leeza snapped back at Grand Master William.

William stared at her. "We are not a secret society."

“Oh please,” Leeza fired back. “I know a lot about the Templars, before your turning and after. You’ve hidden yourselves away from the world for all of your existence. I don’t care what you think, I’m going to Liam’s funeral. *I loved him.*” The words came out of her in a rush, yet she knew in that instant, they were true. “I don’t care what you say.”

William stood up to his full height, arms crossed over his chest, his long beard dusting his arms. “And how do you plan on defying me?”

She didn’t back down. “If you think you can keep me away from his funeral, I dare you to stop me. I deserve to be there. I was with him in his last moments.”

“You are the reason he’s dead,” came a voice from the doorway.

Leeza groaned. It was Adrian, Liam’s partner. The last two days had been Hell on earth, between the Templars wanting to make sure, about a dozen times, that she really wasn’t a vampire, and arguing about where the funeral would be held.

And Adrian.

She was very careful not to be alone with him—she still felt like he’d plunge his sword into her without a second thought if given the opportunity.

William had held fast to the decision that Liam was to be put to rest in Poitiers, France, where another Templar lay.

And every time she was about to make any kind of headway, possibly get William to reconsider letting her come, out would pop Adrian, a constant reminder that her actions had killed Liam.

“Don’t start,” Leeza said, her gut roiling. She didn’t need this complication. Not in light of Liam being dead.

Did she believe that she was a murderer? Not in the least. But did she understand that she was responsible for Liam’s death? Absolutely. She’d cried more tears for him than she’d ever cried for anyone in her life. Her eyes were probably permanently swollen from the tears.

If she could take back the moment, she would.

A life with him in it, even if it were a platonic relationship, was better than this.

Liam was gone...

More tears came.

She didn’t bother wiping them away. What was the point? They’d only be replaced by more.

“I think I should start,” Adrian replied, his words cold. “I don’t think anyone who’s responsible for the death of one of my brothers should be allowed to come to his funeral.” He walked over to William’s desk. “You can’t let her come. Never in the history of The Poor-Fellow Soldiers of Jesus Christ and the Temple of Solomon has a woman been allowed in our presence when we lay to rest a member of our brotherhood.”

“And nor will there be now,” William answered him.

Leeza groaned. *Damn him. Damn Adrian and his meddling.*

“Good,” Adrian said. He glanced over his shoulder to nothing behind him. “Shut up, Nara,” he whispered.

Leeza jumped up. She had learned that he talked to a ghost, his constant companion. Something in the way he snapped made her perk up. “What, what did your ghost say?”

“Nothing.” Adrian waved his hand in the air, like he pushed the spirit back.

William raised his eyebrow. “Does Nara have something to contribute to the conversation?”

Adrian shook his head.

\* \* \* \*

“Adrian!” Nara snapped from behind him.

He was ignoring her. He didn’t care what she had to say, it didn’t matter. She was wrong. Plain and simple.

Nara had always advocated for women. Now was no different.

He stood up straight and was about to walk out of the room. She didn’t have anything important to say—she’d only been badgering him for the last two days about letting Leeza come to the funeral.

And no matter what, that wasn’t going to happen.

“Adrian, you have to let her come. She has to be there!” Nara said, pleading.

He glared at her. “No,” was all he said.

“Do you not understand, this doesn’t come from me, this comes from somewhere else. She has to be there.”

“She killed Liam! She doesn’t deserve to be at his funeral!” Adrian’s voice echoed in the room, and Master William and Leeza stared at him.

“Is there something else, Adrian?” William asked.

He turned and looked over his shoulder at his Grand Master. “No, Master. I have spoken my piece.”

“And your spirit has nothing else to say?”

He turned and glared at Nara, who had her hands on her hips, floating in front of him. “No, she does not. The subject is closed.”

“But—” Leeza started to exclaim, but Adrian cut her off with a look.

Nara glared at him.

“I am sorry, Adrian,” Nara whispered. She moved closer, right in front of him, in the space that he’d deemed off limits for her. Adrian looked right in her eyes, ready to ream her for entering his personal space.

Her eyebrows were drawn tight, her lips in a snarl.

She slashed out at him.

Adrian didn’t think anything about the motion, was about to walk right through her.

When pain slapped him in the gut.

“What the...?” he stammered, feeling slashes on his stomach. He jerked his shirt up. Sure enough, across his stomach were four long red gashes. “Nara!”

“You have to tell them, Adrian,” she said, hands on her hips.

“How did you do that?”

She raised her hand. “Tell them. Or I’ll do it again.”

Never once in all the years Nara had been a part of his life had she ever made physical contact with him.

She’d always said it wasn’t possible.

“What is it, Adrian?” William was at his side. Even Leeza came closer, though she stayed a few feet away.

“Nara slashed me.” Adrian ran his fingers over the four red lines. They were already starting to heal up, but the sting was still there, the blood still dripped from the tiny marks.

“Can she do that?”

Adrian glared at William.

“Adrian,” Nara said again, raising her arm.

“Nara, wait, don’t,” Adrian said.

It was too late. This time, though, she slashed through his face.

He jerked backward at the marks, covering his face with his hand. “Nara!”

“I will not stop, Adrian, until you tell them.”

“No!”

“Tell them!” She slashed again. This time on his back.

William jerked Adrian’s shirt off, then glanced up at Leeza. “Go get Sirs Tomas and Tabor.” When she didn’t move right away, William yelled, “Now!”

Leeza darted out the door.

“What is this,” William whispered as he eased Adrian down on the floor. “Why is Nara attacking you? She’s never done anything like this before.”

Adrian shook his head. “She’s wrong. And she knows it.”

Another slash, this one on his thigh. “I am not wrong, Adrian. Not about this.”

His gut quaked—no matter what she said, it didn’t matter. She could torture him to the end of time. He wasn’t backing down. He wasn’t going to let Leeza disgrace Liam’s funeral.

It wasn’t fair.

It wasn’t right.

She killed him...

*She killed him...*

How could they allow her to ruin his funeral by attending? She had no right. It was her fault. This was all her fault.

Liam didn’t know what he was doing.

He was a strong man, but even the strongest can be manipulated. She destroyed him. She destroyed Liam.

“You are wrong,” Adrian said, glaring at Nara. “She doesn’t deserve to be there. She did this to him. That woman doesn’t deserve to be in this compound, much less at Liam’s funeral. We’re treating her like some kind of goddess when she is the one who killed our brother. My brother. She killed Liam!”

Nara slashed at him again, this one at the opposite angle on his stomach. “You are a stubborn, hateful, angry twit, Adrian.” She floated so she was parallel to his face. “Are you mad that he’s gone, or that he was willing to sacrifice himself for the woman he loved?”

“My brother is gone!” Adrian yelled at her. Every piece of anger, hurt, pain, and loss flared to the surface, his voice dripping with agony as he screamed at the ghost that no one else in the room could hear.

William leaned back, letting Adrian lie down on the floor.

“Admit it, Adrian, you’re more angry that Liam made the choice himself. Not because he’s gone. He chose to die. That is what’s bothering you. Not that he’s gone.”

The words stung. As if Nara had reached into his heart, she saw the pain and articulated it. “He didn’t make this choice. She made it for him.”

Vaguely aware that Tomas and Tabor had come in, his stomach knotted as Nara slashed him again.

He curled up, his stomach sporting a new set of slash marks.

“I hate that I’m doing this, but you have to listen. You have to tell them. It is your job.” Nara raised her hand again.

“Stop!” Adrian said, panting. Everything was wrong—Liam was dead. Nara could actually hurt him. Leeza wasn’t dead, like any other human should have been.

It wasn’t the way it was supposed to be.

Tabor and Tomas were kneeling around him. William apprised them of what was going on. Tabor started running his fingers down the slash marks. Tomas put his hands on Adrian’s wounds.

They tingled. He could feel Tomas’s powers pressing over him. The knight reached into his mind, stomping around his emotions, to find what it was that only Tomas could find.

Nara’s vehement demands.

And the fact that Adrian had been refusing to tell them to William since they found Liam.

Nara floated in front of him, her face softening. “I cannot bring him back, Adrian,” she whispered. “He is not anywhere I can go. I only know what has been told to me. That this was his choice. He wanted this. Leeza didn’t kill him.” She hovered closer to his face. “You know that, Adrian.”

Adrian shook his head. Tomas continued to scrape around; he could feel him back there, a spindle in his mind, digging for the fabric of the truth.

Tomas spoke. “The truth shall set you free, Adrian.”

“Adrian,” she said, sounding incredibly like a mother, “Liam’s choice was his to make. He was not forced to be with her. His choice.”

“His choice,” Adrian repeated.

Nara nodded. “Liam’s choice.”

“Liam’s choice,” Adrian whispered, lost in a trance of emotions that threatened to overtake him.

“He wants her at the funeral,” Nara said.

Adrian repeated the words. “He wants her at the funeral.”

Tomas pulled his hands away, and the pressure in his mind was gone. Adrian glanced at the knights. Tears ran down his face. “Nara says that Liam wants her there. It was his choice to die. He loved her with everything in him.”

The words drained him. He’d been ignoring and refusing to hear them for what seemed like an eternity. He’d been fighting them so long, uttering them now took the last of the fight out of him.

He had nothing holding him up anymore.

He covered his face with his hands and cried.



## Chapter 27

“You lose, Sir Liam.” The Divine sat across from him. “That is checkmate.”

Liam shook his head. “I still think you read my mind.”

The Divine raised one shoulder in a shrug. “I work with what I have.”

“Many would consider that cheating.”

The Divine threw back His head and laughed. “I admire your spunk, Sir Liam. Not many would have the gall to say that to My face.”

“Offending You is the least of my concerns.” True enough words. Liam didn’t really care if he offended. He hadn’t worried about it during his life; why should his afterlife be any different?

Whatever it was The Divine had for him to do was what plagued his thoughts. He knew there would be consequences to his actions—though he’d never actually considered the possibility when he made his decision.

Cause and effect.

The Divine reset the chess board. “Shall we play again? Or are you ready for your verdict?”

The Divine had been most kind, giving him time to wait to find out what his punishment would be for what he’d done. They’d played chess, having idle conversation, the kind of thing one would do with a friend.

Like The Divine had nothing better to do with His time.

The shock had finally worn off that Liam’s plan had backfired severely and that Leeza had lived.

Now he had to learn of his punishment for breaking the rules.

“I am ready, Divine God. You have been most kind in offering me time to adjust to this outcome.”

The Divine arched an eyebrow. “Oh, this is not the outcome, My knight. This is the waiting room. The outcome is there.”

Through the white fog that had surrounded them from the time Liam had arrived in this space, a door appeared. Two doors, actually, as the white mist cleared. Simple, both identical in design, the only variation was where each door handle was placed. One the handle was on the right, the other the handle was on the left.

“What must I do?” Liam asked.

“Decide.” The Divine stood up, taking a few steps toward the doors.

“And how do I do that?”

The Divine said nothing.

Liam gritted his teeth. “There’s no difference in either of them. How am I to choose? What awaits me on the other side?”

The Divine merely watched him. “Trust your heart, Sir Liam McCall. There you will find your answer. One way lies Heaven, the other...” He shrugged.

Liam approached the doors. Behind one of these doors was his salvation—was the place he’d always striven for, the elusive Heaven and all of the eternal world.

Yet he was immortal, eternal already. He had walked down that path.

He didn’t want to walk down it again.

The other? Hell and damnation.

He’d been immortal, in a world of mortals, a Hell if he’d ever known one. He’d already walked that path as well.

Neither one seemed the answer to his salvation.

The answer was Leeza.

He knew that. She was the answer to his happiness, to his Heaven.

He held out his hand before each one, to touch them, see how they felt. Very slowly he reached up, half expecting the doors to zap him, but nothing happened when he touched them. They were just doors.

Leading to two worlds, neither of which he wanted to enter. They didn’t have Leeza behind them. No matter where he went, they wouldn’t have Leeza. And Leeza was what he wanted.

He turned to The Divine. “This is a waiting room?”

The Divine nodded.

“Then I choose neither. I will wait here for Leeza.” He walked back to the chair and table where the chess board were.

The Divine sat down across from him. “You will give up your salvation to wait for a woman?”

Liam nodded. “I would rather wait here for her entire lifetime than go to salvation without her. It would not be salvation without Leeza.”

“I see.” The Divine crossed His legs, laced His fingers together and rested them on His knee. “What if she marries? Has a family, a husband that she loves more than you?”

“I would still be here for her,” Liam said, the words choking on his tongue. He didn’t want to think of Leeza finding someone else to love, but he would not hold her back—he wanted her happy and free. If it meant he had to spend eternity watching her, even in Heaven, then so be it.

“And you would allow her to live her life, to be happy and content, and watch from here. And when she died, you would accompany her to Heaven?”

“If she chose.”

The Divine said nothing, vanishing into thin air.

Liam felt a stab of angst in his heart. This wasn’t the life of a warrior.

Yet his life was now over, wasn’t it?

He resigned himself to his fate.

\* \* \* \*

The Knights Templar were not horribly poor when they were disbanded. Scattered across the continent, their organization had thousands of knights along with the necessary support staff to care for each and every one of those knights.

Their finances were considerable—they either owned or leased so much of Europe at the time, their income was astounding. They had temples in every major city from London to Rome, and more scattered around the western parts of Europe.

To say the Knights Templar organization was poor was a gross understatement.

So when Leeza arrived at the small temple outside of Poitiers, France, she felt, well, disappointed.

The stone building looked like a church; it had all the markings of an old medieval building—a lot of stone work, thick heavy walls, some windows, but no elaborate glasswork like in the huge Paris churches.

This was, if anything, overly modest.

She climbed out of the car, a small compact that she'd always associated with European cars, but she'd never understood the need until they drove through some of the older city streets—the roadways were so tight and narrow, she wondered at times if even the little car would fit through.

How they got the larger SUVs through with the casket was a miracle to her.

"I would think we would have been going somewhere more elaborate," Leeza muttered.

Ewan was the driver, and he shrugged. Adrian still wasn't happy she was there, but he'd dropped his insolence. He didn't bother to apologize, but Leeza didn't care.

She'd won the battle anyway. She was here.

"Practicality dictates necessity." Ewan headed up the path toward the building.

Leeza turned at the sound of tires on rock. A few other vehicles had beaten them there, but others were coming up the winding road they'd just gotten off.

"So why bury Liam here? Why not somewhere else? Ireland. England?" She walked toward the old wooden door, carefully stepping on the stones in the walkway, trying to walk around the weeds creeping up in the grass.

"Here is where the first one of us died," Ewan said.

"The first one?"

"There was one other knight who was like us. He died right after we were burned. He's the one who wrote the Balance Mandate. And was the one who tested the laws in it." Ewan's voice was bitter; she noticed he didn't say the man's name, and if he did he might have spat the words out. "The monks who resided here at the time weren't Templars, but they were friendly to us. One of the monks had been a Templar for many years until he was too old to serve anymore."

"And you've kept this place ever since?"

Ewan shrugged. “We’ve made sure no one has bothered it over the years.” He looked at the hillside, his eyes wandering to the top. “I used to sit up there, just about where that tree is.” He pointed to a large tree with widespread branches. “The tree wasn’t there at the time, of course, but I would lie on that hillside and watch the sun pass over.”

“And when did you have time for that? Thought you Templars were busy people.”

“We were. I’m the young one.” He smiled a grin that probably got him out of trouble a lot. “I was barely twenty when we changed. And as you know, youth always finds time to be lazy.”

“Very true.” Her heart thudded. She couldn’t help wondering if Liam had ever had a chance to be youthful. Had he ever lain in the sun, staring at the sky with the wide eyes of youth?

She would never know now.

A tear came out and she wiped it away with her fingertip, trying not to ruin the makeup she’d tried to apply to somewhat hide her swollen eyes.

Not that it worked.

More vehicles arrived and more knights poured out of them. Of them all, Ewan was the smallest. Not that he wasn’t still huge—probably well over six feet and two hundred pounds, but against the others he just wasn’t as big.

And he did have that youthful look to his face.

Well, he did most of the time.

Now his eyes were clouded in darkness.

Leeza supposed everyone’s eyes were. Her eyes certainly were. Crying had been all she’d been able to do for the last few days. And she had to thank the Templars; they’d practically force-fed her orange smoothie things to keep her strength up. The drinks looked lumpy and tasted horrid, but she managed to swallow them. Ever since Adrian’s revelation, they’d been nicer to her.

Sort of.

They were still men and sometimes didn’t know what to do to comfort a woman. Marge had been by, but there was only so much she could do. Before Leeza left for the funeral, Marge had stuffed a couple of kitchen towels into her bag, claiming the way she went through tissues she wouldn’t be able to fit enough in her purse. The way Leeza’d been crying as of late, tissues and hankies just weren’t cutting it.

And she couldn’t tear a dish towel.

Ewan followed a couple of the knights into the little monastery, bringing Leeza with him. Another knight she didn’t know, who had a thick French accent, escorted her through the monastery. Some knights were already there—and all were dressed in their medieval finery—white tunics over chain mail.

A surreal feeling of stepping back in time washed over Leeza. Electricity didn’t run through the monastery, so candles and torches lit their way. Ewan had disappeared when she entered. She followed the French knight through a small back door and down a series of stairs that had more cobwebs and dirt than light. Several other knights who’d been inside followed them down.

She wouldn't have been surprised if the stairs hadn't been used in seven hundred years. The faint smell of old, decay, and mold filled her nostrils, making her sneeze. They traveled down, then along a long, straight, somewhat level corridor. The darkness swam around them. The knight had a candle to light the way, but it threw off very little illumination. They came to another set of stairs that went up. There were several chambers she saw off the main one when they reached the top of the stairs, and from what she could see inside there were notches dug out of the walls and what looked like mummies bundled up in the nooks.

She shivered at the sight.

"Eetz okay, mi'lady," the knight whispered to her. "No boogie man would dare attack zee Templars."

"The fact that you know what a boogie man is scares me."

From behind them someone hissed, and Leeza felt like she was back in school, at the library, where even the slightest whisper would have her waiting in the hall while everyone else got their books.

They reached the end of the passage and Leeza almost stumbled over the threshold of the new room—it was huge.

As she looked at the rock walls, she realized it wasn't just a hollowed out piece of dirt, but an old cave, one that must have existed underneath the small monastery. At the far end of the room, a small door was nestled in shadows, hard to see behind a huge band of sunlight that came down from the roof. The light shone down on a long slab of rock. The rest of the room seemed dark and cold.

Somewhere water dripped, echoing.

The knight who'd escorted her led her to a bench near the slab and seated her, then proceeded to start lighting candles around the room with his. Not that they made much of a difference. They mostly pushed the shadows back into the corners more. But the shadows were still there.

She couldn't help looking around, wondering if in the shadows Liam was watching, wanting to see what his own funeral would be like.

The sunlight gleamed on the long slab of rock and she couldn't help staring at it. She hadn't seen Liam since she'd been pulled out of the room. After she'd awakened.

She shivered.

The last time she'd ever see him would be now.

A new tear rolled out of her eyes.

She was so tired. She wanted to lie down on the bench and take a nap. Looking back, she saw that the room had filled up. She didn't do a head count but was pretty sure that almost every knight in the organization was there. All in their finery—a sea of chain mail and white with big red crosses on their chests.

She shouldn't be here.

This wasn't her place. A wave of nausea overtook her and she covered her mouth with one of her towels, hoping and praying she didn't vomit. Nothing much existed in her stomach to throw up, but it was certainly churning something in there.

The others, the ones that didn't know her or know about her situation, stared at her with looks of either curiosity, irritation or downright outrage. No one offered her a look of pity.

But why would they? They probably saw her as a murderer just like Adrian did.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea. She forced herself to turn around, facing the front, and waited for the ceremony to begin.

It didn't take long.

William came in, carrying a piece of white cloth which he laid over the stone slab.

Leeza cringed as the cloth spread out. *That was where they would lay Liam.*

The procession was a blur. Knights who had been standing in the back before filed in, took seats. William, dressed in formal Grand Master apparel, stood in the front to the side of the stone slab. Her breath hitched as he looked straight at her, even though it was only for a second, then his attention turned to the back of the room.

In unison, all the knights rose. Leeza stood as well, but she couldn't see anything. She was far too short.

At least for the first few moments. Then they got close enough for her to see around the other knights.

Liam was lying on an old-fashioned stretcher, six knights carrying him.

His body, she told herself. That wasn't Liam. Just his body.

The men—Adrian, Ewan, Tomas, Richard, Tabor, and another knight that Leeza didn't know—moved in a slow procession toward the stone.

William watched as they lay Liam down on the large stone slab, and they all let go of the handles at the same moment, resting him on the slab.

Tears sprang up in her eyes. They'd dressed Liam in his Templar finery. The white tunic shone under the sunlight. His chainmail glistened in the light pouring in the opening at the top of the cave.

He was breathtaking.

Beautiful.

Her gut lurched.

It made realizing he was dead that much harder.

\* \* \* \*

Liam watched through the clouds. He didn't look at the doors that loomed off in his peripheral vision. He found it interesting that The Divine had not taken the doors away.

He wondered if he still could change his mind. He shook off the thought. It was his choice, that much he'd understood. Sitting here, waiting. Yet he couldn't imagine trying to find his own salvation without her.

He'd never felt this kind of tearing in his heart.

And now he waited. He'd been so proud of Leeza's determination to go to his funeral. It had taken a bit of help from Nara, but it had been done. Why Nara had helped he didn't know, but the ghost had allowed her that closure.

And he couldn't help the knots of anger that pooled in his gut as he watched Adrian causing Leeza pain. He wanted to reach down through the sky and throttle him.

How could he be so cruel? Didn't he realize that she was hurting as much as he was, if not more?

Adrian, so lost in his own grief, lashed out at her.

Didn't he understand it wasn't Leeza forcing the issue? All Adrian could see was the worst—that Leeza had forced the issue, and he'd buckled. Not at all what it had been.

And Liam could see through Adrian's shields, through his grief—it was more than just grief. It was jealousy. Liam had been willing to sacrifice himself for the woman he'd loved. Adrian hadn't.

And Adrian had always hated himself because of it—he didn't just listen to the music to block out Nara. He listened to it to block his own pain.

Liam knew how he felt.

Still didn't justify how Adrian made Leeza feel. He'd give that knight a piece of his mind if he had the chance.

Liam had a lot he'd say, if he had the chance.

Every time he brought on a new stream of tears out of Leeza, Liam's heart ached. It wasn't supposed to be like this; his death wasn't supposed to tear them both apart like this.

How could he have been so blind to what his death would cause them? His heart ached each time he saw her wipe her eyes. He knew the tears were for him and he felt guilty for it. And every time Adrian glared at Leeza, he wanted to take his partner out and punch him.

Yet he could do nothing. He had dedicated himself to being a permanent watcher.

He'd made the choice for his fate. Now he had to get used to it.

He watched his comrades of the last seven hundred years bring in his body, lay it on the hard stone slab. They were his brothers, and they were grieving his loss. He grieved theirs as well.

He didn't like this passive existence, this place between everything. For a moment, a sheer second, he considered the possibility that he'd chosen the wrong path. Maybe he wasn't supposed to stay here, to wait for Leeza.

Yet his gut had screamed at him that he couldn't be without Leeza. Being without her felt wrong.

"Reconsidering your choice?" came The Divine's voice from behind him.

Liam glanced over his shoulder. Same Divine as before, though His hair was a bit more groomed, and the white robes were gone, replaced with a white polo shirt and khaki slacks.

"Nice outfit," Liam said.

“Yes, I do like to keep up with the trends.” He glanced down. “This is more comfortable than the robes.”

Liam rolled his eyes.

The Divine took a seat across from Liam. The chessboard pieces reset, moving back into their original positions. The Divine waved His hand over the table. Two cups of tea appeared. The Divine twisted the lemon that came with his to release the juice, then dropped the whole chunk into his drink before stirring it. “I have a question for you.”

Liam fiddled with the string of his tea bag. “Yes?”

“You have made sacrifices all of your life.”

“I have.”

“What would you be willing to sacrifice for Leeza?”

Liam thought The Divine had lost His mind. “I have already sacrificed myself for her. You said Yourself that my heart saved her life.”

“Yes, but you only gave your life. What would you sacrifice for her?”

“What else could I give up?” Liam asked, leaning forward. How much more could he give up? He’d already given his life for her. He wasn’t a wealthy man, he didn’t have any possessions. What else could he sacrifice?

The Divine sipped on His tea. “Would you sacrifice who you were?”

Liam shook his head. “I don’t understand. I thought I did.”

“You sacrificed your life, your immortal life. You did not give up who you are.”

“And who am I?”

The Divine raised His eyebrow. “A Knight Templar.”

“I will always be a knight,” Liam replied.

The Divine took another sip of His tea. “Have you ever wondered how this came to pass? How all these events happened? Why you were destined to make this sacrifice?”

“I was destined to do this?” A strange feeling ran over him—one of joy but at the same time dread. He was going to do this? Make this sacrifice for Leeza? How could something like that be predicted—he didn’t even know he would make this decision until it happened.

“Everything is determined. All are cogs in a wheel, a bigger picture than we can ever imagine. Certainly, human choice will dictate variations here and there, but for the most part everything happens as it was determined. So really, is one person’s self-sacrifice really that big of a deal? When you consider the events that come before it and after it to align everything, is it that important?”

“It must be, or it wouldn’t come to pass,” Liam said as he sipped on his own mug.

“That is the interesting part.” The Divine waved a hand in the air and a huge space opened up, showing lives he’d touched over the centuries, how they spidered out, connecting to other lives. Those lives connecting to others, and more, and more still. It was dizzying to see all the connections he alone made.



“Let’s focus just on Melios,” The Divine said. He brought up the events of the last few months.

Everything that had been going on that circled around Melios.

As Liam saw the connections, his eyes got wide, and he glanced back at The Divine. “Really? All that was supposed to come to pass?”

“Keep looking,” The Divine said, pointing to another part. He saw where he’d interacted with Melios, directly and indirectly over the last few decades, how they’d been more intertwined than even Liam knew.

He whispered different things as he pointed at the instances, recognizing this one and that one, how they all were connected.

He stared at one particular thread...the part with Leeza. “And this,” he whispered.

The Divine closed in on that part. “Especially connected,” He replied. “You would not be here if it wasn’t for this.” The display ended at his funeral, sort of fizzling out into nothing. The next scene hadn’t been written yet.

Liam nodded his head. “And now I am here.”

The Divine made the display go away. “So do you stay here, or do you choose a door?”

Liam shook his head. “I wouldn’t know which one to choose.” He finished off his tea and looked back at the plain doors. “Where do they go?”

The Divine leaned back, crossing His legs and resting His hand on His knee. “One goes to Heaven. One goes to a mortal life.”

“Which one? Which one leads to mortal life?”

“If you walk through the door to a mortal life, you must be willing to sacrifice everything you are.”

His heart hammered in his chest. “Will I forget her?” The thought of forgetting Leeza, not knowing her, tore at his heart. Could he be mortal, in hopes that he might find her again, might feel that love again?

He stared at the doors, his hands trembling.

“Are you willing to start over, to be someone completely different?”

The words pounded in his head. Would he be willing to make that choice? Willing to lose everything that he was, in order to be with Leeza? Even willing to sacrifice his own memories, if that’s what it took to be with her?

He closed his eyes.

Leeza swam before him in his mind’s eye. He turned to look at The Divine. “If I can be with Leeza, I will be anyone I have to be.”

The Divine smiled. “The door on the left.”

## Chapter 28

Leeza had a hard time following the service. She kept staring at Liam's body, tears pouring out of her eyes. She wasn't sobbing by any means, but her eyes were filled the entire time.

The Knights who'd placed Liam on the stone had seated themselves on the bench, three on each side of her. She met Adrian's eyes as he took his seat.

His anger, while quelled in the service, still blazed in his eyes.

She shifted to the right a bit, but found herself trapped by Ewan on the other side, and was unable to give Adrian any more space. He didn't bump her, rudely jostle her, anything to even acknowledge her.

She didn't know what was worse—his repeated tongue lashings or this buried rage hiding just below the surface.

Most of the service was spoken in old Latin, and while Leeza recognized some of the word sounds, she really didn't understand what Sir William was saying. And it was obvious she was the only one in the room who didn't get all the words.

Everyone else, in perfect harmony, would reply with the appropriate words as William read from a very old Bible, or at least that's what Leeza assumed it was.

She half hoped William wasn't planning out her execution as he spoke—not that she would know.

Staring at Liam's body seemed the only thing to do. She could see the details of his face—his chiseled features in rest. His hair was covered by his mail, his body thick and menacing. Like he could stand up fighting any second, ready to take down any attacker.

The sunlight poured in on him, making the mail glitter. As she stared, her eyes started getting tired, and as if she'd been staring too long everything started to get blurry. The light around him slowly started to brighten up, like she could see every particle of light surrounding him.

It was beautiful.

It twinkled and glowed. Liam's chest got fuller and shinier in the light.

She let out a sigh. It really was beautiful. It was like God was taking a moment to shine more light on him, bathing him in divine love.

Like he had that day when he'd rescued her—he'd glowed then, too. Why, she didn't know, and frankly she didn't care, but it was true—he'd been a beacon of light in Melios's compound that day.

And now he was a beacon again.

Finally she blinked.

Her eyes focused.

And the light hadn't dissipated. It still swam around him, encircling him in a bath of clean, fresh, golden light.

"Beautiful," she whispered.

Ewan snapped his head to her, a strange look on his face. Then he turned back to William. And he jerked.

On the other side of him, Richard nudged him, gesturing to Liam.

The light around his body continued to glow. So much that William stopped reading and turned.

Liam's body glowed with a bright golden light that was filling up the room. The entire room inhaled a breath.

Leeza was the only one who moved. She stood up from her seat and took a couple of steps toward the dais where he lay. At least until an arm grabbed her and started to pull her back.

She jerked around, seeing Adrian holding her back. "Please," she whispered, meeting his eyes. The pained look in his face was so powerful, so raw.

"No, don't disrespect him," Adrian said, tightening his grip.

"Liam," she cried out. The light around him was fading, dimming. Her heart broke. She'd thought she'd already been broken, that she'd already lost everything inside, but she hadn't—she broke then.

Her soul split in half.

Liam was gone.

He was disappearing, right before her eyes. Maybe somewhere underneath, below her consciousness, she had a thought that he wasn't dead, that maybe he was still awake, still alive somewhere inside the body. It was a foolish thought, a mourning person's dream, of course.

But seeing the light, a visible blessing from God, she knew her Leeham was gone. He'd died for her; saving her life, he'd let his own be taken.

He was honorable like that.

In her mind's eye, she remembered being with him, her Leeham. Dancing, music, she was a little girl... The beat of the belly dancers pounded in her head. The beat throbbed, real, tangible.

It was her first meeting of him.

"Leeham," she whispered, and she crumpled against Adrian. He expelled a breath of air; whether it was shock or surprise, Leeza didn't know, but he caught her.

There was nothing left in her.

The beat kept pounding, kept getting louder and louder. Tears poured out of her as she cried against Adrian.

Opening her eyes, she looked up at Adrian, expecting to see him looking back down at her. But he wasn't.

He was looking away, at where Liam's body lay.

Leeza turned her head.

The light was almost gone, not so bright, not so illuminating.

She wiped away her tears, straining to focus on Liam's body, to see what the others saw.

Liam moved.

Leeza screamed.

\* \* \* \*

Even through his closed eyes, Liam could see the light around him starting to fade. The door had burst with light as soon as he barged through it, and the light had enveloped him.

Like he'd been hit in the chest, Liam opened his mouth and inhaled a huge breath of air—the feel of it filled his lungs, swirled around in his body, his organs suddenly coming to life. His heart began to beat—fast and almost painful in his chest. His chest raised and lowered, the air working through his lungs, refilling the bags and putting them back to work.

His eyes snapped open, but everything was dark and grainy at first. Like they were too dry, too stuck shut. Squeezing them back closed, he inhaled another long breath.

In the distance, he heard voices. Mumbles of conversation, of words around him, hitting him in bursts of sound, his ears not quite functioning right.

Nothing was functioning quite right yet.

Nothing except his brain—stuck in the forefront of his mind, there were things he had to say, words that needed to be uttered before he forgot. Like a dream, he struggled to remember all the words, all the things The Divine had given him to tell the others just before he walked through the door.

He forced himself to keep the words in mind, to keep them in the forefront of his thoughts, so he didn't forget.

Because he had very little time with the words.

Something was in his hands. He squeezed it. A sword. The hilt of a sword was in his hands. He shoved the heavy broadsword off him.

The clatter seemed to bring the room alive. He didn't know where he was, only that he could see a circle above him where daylight streamed down on him—bright, it was so bright.

"Liam?" came a voice. He turned to see Grand Master William at his side.

Liam opened his mouth to speak, but it was too dry and his words were lost.

"Water, we need water, now." In a flash, water was brought to him, and William put his hand under Liam's neck, helping him raise his head enough to drink. He took a few sips, the cold so sweet, so amazing as it flowed down his throat. He swung his arm up, splashing the cup in his face, some of the water getting in his eyes, and he blinked.

He could focus again.

William was there. Richard, Ewan, Tomas and Tabor stood around him, but where...where was... "Leeza," he managed to croak out.

Adrian appeared, Leeza under his arm. Her face was thin, gaunt-looking. Her eyes swollen and tired, tears filling them.

And yet she looked more beautiful than he'd remembered.

She smiled and put her hand on his shoulder. "My Leeham," she whispered.

Liam's hand moved, and he reached up and touched her face. "This is real?"

Leeza stroked his face, color coming into her cheeks. "Liam."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Thank You, Divine. Thank You," he whispered before opening his eyes again.

Liam tried to force himself up, but the others wouldn't let him right away. Between them, he could see the other knights had crowded the...the... What in the world was he lying on anyway? A sarcophagus?

"Liam, you're...you're..." Adrian stammered.

"How is this possible?" Richard whispered.

"Are you complaining? Really?" Tabor muttered to Adrian.

Liam waved his arms in the air. "I don't have a lot of time..." Already the words, the things he needed to say were almost gone. He forced himself to remember exactly what he was supposed to tell them. He forced himself up to a sitting position, hoping it would help the words stay with him longer.

His body ached, but it moved.

"Are you dying? Again?" Ewan whispered.

Liam shook his head, then rubbed his temple. "The Divine... Messages."

Everyone's eyes went wide.

"This is not over. Big changes." He paused long enough to let out a deep cough. "They're coming. You have to be prepared."

William nodded. "We will be ready."

"Be ready to adjust," Liam said. "Everything you think you know about the Order is going to be tested. Flexibility," he said, coughing again. Someone handed him another cup of water.

William gritted his teeth. "I am not fond of change."

Liam gulped down his water. "Get used to it." Liam glanced up, finding Richard. "You. Get back to Asia. Take the kid. She needs to get back there, her destiny begins there."

Richard nodded. "I will watch over her."

Liam rubbed his head. "There's more... I have more..." He ground his wrist into his forehead, the chain mail imprinting on his skin. "I can't remember."

"It's okay," Leeza whispered. "You don't have to say it all now."

Someone appeared with a glass of water and handed it to him. Liam gulped it down in a flash, too. "No, you don't understand. If I don't now...it'll be gone."

"Gone?" William asked.

He met his master's gaze. "I'm losing it. My mind won't hold on, like a fading dream." Leeza took his hand. It seemed to focus him a bit more. "The Divine has a plan, an agenda. You were tested before, but the tests will be more. Harder. Bigger."

William scanned the group. "As if we didn't have enough challenges."

"You don't know the half of it," Liam said. "Everything's shifting." He drank more water, and it filled him, enveloping his insides, making them all work again.

"How many more of my men will I have to bury?" William asked.

"Depends on the path they choose," Liam replied. "You could be coming back here a lot."

"You keep saying 'you,'" Ewan said. "What's the matter? You won't be joining us anymore?" His tone was slightly jovial, but there was just enough worry in it that made everyone pause.

Liam shook his head. "I can't. I'm no longer immortal."

"But half the mythicals that work for us aren't immortal. You can still work with us, fight. We could never replace you, Liam," Adrian said. "You can still be a Templar."

"No, I can't." He squeezed Leeza's hand. "Part of the deal. I cannot be a Templar anymore. I am mortal. I have to be a mortal man." His eyes flickered to Leeza.

And unlike anyone else in the chamber, she was smiling.

## Chapter 29

*I thee wed...*

Liam couldn't believe it. He was married.

A year ago, such a thought would have been so foreign to him, he would have never imagined. Even a few months ago, he would have never considered the possibility.

Yet now, he lay on the couch, Leeza in his arms, watching a movie. The soft smell of her body soap filled his nose as she curled up against his chest, a bowl of popcorn rounding out the aromas in the room.

This had to be Heaven. Pure, true Heaven.

It had come with a price, like anything in the world, and he did miss being a Templar, but he wouldn't trade what he had now for what he lost. And he'd lost more than he ever would have thought.

In the first couple of weeks after returning from France, Liam had been fairly incapacitated. His body had taken quite a while to heal and start functioning properly again. And now it wasn't at the same performance level it had been when he was immortal.

He got tired easily, and he found he had a rather sensitive stomach to food, but he was working on that.

He'd managed to secure a job with the Jackstone Foundation as a security consultant for mythicals and humans alike, setting up security systems and protection for those who needed it.

It wasn't the best job, and Leeza said the pay was good but not great, but it would work for now. Entry level. He found that quite amusing. He had an entry level security position.

He felt so strange getting up and going to a job every day. So unlike his life before. When he left, it was over. It wasn't like missions that took days, months, even years to complete. Missions that would invade his brain all of his waking hours. That was gone.

This was...was...

This just was what it was. A job. A life. Not a particularly exciting one, to most anyway. But it was wonderful for Liam.

Some of the Templars came to visit on occasion—Ewan came by at least once a week, keeping him up to date on the happenings. Ironically, it helped his position at Jackstone, knowing what was going on with the mythical population. Helped him better plan for security systems.

But Adrian never came by.

Not after the first time.

They'd fought. For over an hour when Adrian brought his stuff to Leeza's house right after they'd returned. Leeza had tried twice to break up their fight, but he'd told her to get out.

He'd handle the situation with Adrian.

That went over well. It had now been over two months and he hadn't seen Adrian since.

Once, he'd asked Ewan about Adrian, wanting to know if Adrian was still upset. Ewan only answered with a nod, and changed the subject, instead asking if Liam regretted anything.

And of course he didn't. He didn't like losing Adrian as a friend—they'd been partners for decades—but he wouldn't lose his Leeza.

This was too perfect.

Leeza twisted on his chest and looked up. "Are you enjoying the movie?"

He stroked her cheek. "I am enjoying you, my wife."

She smiled. "You know, someday we won't be doing this every night."

"Why not?"

"Well, we'll have little rug rats running around screaming 'Mommy! Daddy!' until we want to pull our hair out." She made fists with her hands and rested her chin on them.

He laughed. "I hope so." He stroked her nose. Children would only make everything even more real, more...more perfect. "There's one thing I never told anyone, Leeza."

"About what?"

"About when I was with The Divine." The last message he'd had to give, he'd never lost. The others, yes, everything he'd delivered, he lost the words, the meaning behind them not long after they got out of France.

But one thing had remained with him regardless. He'd debated telling anyone, afraid if he did it might slip away like the other things had.

"I thought you couldn't remember anything."

"There is one thing I hesitated telling anyone. But it is not for anyone but you."

"Me?"

"Yes." He stroked her back. "Do you know what your name means?"

Leeza shook her head. "I have no idea."

"Gift from God."

She blinked. "Felicia means that?"

He shook his head. "Zanna does."

"Gift from God, eh? Maybe I am your gift." She leaned forward and kissed him lightly.

"That you are." He grabbed her hips and slid her up his body, kissing her with all the passion and love he could pour out of it. The Divine had told him about her name. And that it had come to pass that she was Liam's own gift from God.

When they finally broke apart, Leeza panted a bit. "Yeah, God's gift. About that," Leeza said. "I haven't had the flu."

"What do you mean, what's wrong?" he asked. "Do we need to go to the doctor? Do you need medical attention?" Panic filled him.

What could be wrong with her? Would she be okay?



“I don’t need a doctor today. But I will need medical attention.” She scooted up his body and put her finger between his brows, pressing on the crease there. “Relax, big boy. It’s not bad.”

“What is it?”

She smiled. “I’m pregnant.”

Liam’s eyes went wide. “Pregnant? Going to have a baby?”

She nodded.

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight, letting out a whoop of joy. Then let go immediately. “I’m sorry. Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

She laughed at him. “I’m fine. Better than fine.” She kissed him, her lips sweet and moist, with a hint of popcorn. “We’re going to be parents.”

Liam kissed her back.

Now this...

This was Heaven.

## Epilogue

### *Nineteen months later*

“I hate the cold,” Adrian said as he pulled up. The house was just like any other little house on the street—Christmas lights adorned it, the trees in the front twinkled in the night as well, and some fake mesh deer, lit up as well, sat between the evergreens.

His tires crunched on the icy, snowy road. The street for the most part looked dead—though lights were on, no cars seemed to be going anywhere this evening. The sun was just going down, and the world looked peaceful for the moment.

He opened the SUV door, but before he climbed out he took a deep breath.

“Oh, just get over it,” Nara said, appearing on the ground outside the car. “Isn’t a knight supposed to be humble?”

“Humble before God...” Adrian muttered as he got out.

His exit was punctuated by three more car door slams, and three more sets of heavy work boots on the crusty, snowy ground.

He couldn’t get out of this now.

Tabor, Ewan, and Tomas marched across the street to the little house, all of them carrying their heavy black bags, the four of them together looking like an invasion party. Ewan went straight for the front door.

They had to do this tonight; they really weren’t going to have another chance.

Hopefully it would all work out well.

Adrian patted the hilt of his sword. He was prepared if it didn’t.

The door opened and the warm light spilled onto the porch. Adrian felt his gut begin to drop. He wasn’t ready. Not in the slightest bit for this. It had been a rough nineteen months.

“Seriously,” Nara whispered to him. “You need to...what do they call it? Grow a pair and get over it.”

Adrian would have punched the ghost if it would have done any good.

Ewan, Tabor, and Tomas filed into the house, Adrian at the rear. When he reached the doorway, he froze.

Leeza stood there staring at him, her eyes wide. “Adrian.”

“I can wait out here,” he said, turning to walk away.

She shook her head. “No, no, no, please, come in.” She stepped out of the way, allowing him room to slide in the door. He twisted to the side so he didn’t hit her. The others were just inside the doorway. He met their curious stares but didn’t back down. He was going to see this through.

He’d waited long enough.

“Where’s he at?” Tomas asked.

“Where else? In the back.” Leeza gestured toward the back of the house. Tomas, Ewan, and Tabor headed through the house. They knew where they were going.

They had been here before.

Adrian hadn’t.

He followed at the last, Leeza just in front of him. Guilt filled him for the last few months. He’d been so...so...angry.

It had taken a long time. But he’d finally learned to get over it. It was all stupid and ridiculous. Adrian was jealous.

One look at Leeza, how happy she was, was enough to prove that—Adrian had been jealous that Liam got the happily-ever-after.

And he hadn’t.

He shook the thoughts away. He knew that Liam was happy, that he was finally having the life of a normal man; and while it pained Adrian to not have him at his side, he’d finally come to terms with it.

It had taken him long enough to figure this out, but Nara assisted with that—reminding him how much of an idiot he was being.

Now whether Liam was over it was a different matter.

The others had already gone into the back room. The noise of a television could be heard, a jumble of music and bells. Probably one of the traditional Christmas movies that were shown over and over during the holidays.

Adrian rolled his eyes.

Ewan and Tomas stopped in the doorway, kind of frozen, and Leeza paused as well. Laughter could be heard coming from the room; as Adrian slipped into the small group, his eyes about fell out of his head.

Rolling around on the floor with a little dark-haired boy was Liam. He held the squealing little baby in the air, feet high over his head.

“Oh no, it’s attack of the baby! Attack of the baby! Ahhh!” Liam laughed as the child cried out and giggled, wiggling in his daddy’s arms.

Liam hugged him to his chest and started rolling from side to side, giving the little baby a ride. He just squealed, kicking his legs in his red pajamas that were covered with little reindeer.

“Oh no! Gonna get me! Gonna get me!” Liam set the baby down and rolled away, his eyes never leaving the boy.

The boy started crawling over to him, a thunder of little legs on the ground as he charged his daddy.

Liam caught him, scooped him up and twisted around, a wide grin on his face.

Then he saw them all standing in the doorway.

“Hi,” he said, grinning as he held the boy. The baby wiggled and twisted against him, wanting down, so he put the kid down but didn’t bother standing up to greet them. “Come in, come in.”

Ewan pulled out a red Santa hat and put it on his head. “Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas!” The little boy giggled and as soon as Ewan got inside the room, the boy charged him. Ewan put down his bag and scooped him up, tossing the little baby in the air.

Adrian finally got a good look and realized the boy was the spitting image of Liam.

Adrian’s heart ached.

He turned to walk back out of the house.

“Oh no you don’t,” Nara snapped at him. “You turn yourself around right now and you go in that room! Adrian, I’m warning you. If you don’t go in there now, you’ll never come back.”

Adrian wasn’t listening.

He couldn’t deal with this, with Liam’s happiness.

It was tearing him apart.

“Adrian?” The voice made Adrian pause more than anything his indentured ghost could say, more than anyone else. He turned.

Liam was staring at him. “Adrian, come in, please.”

Leeza was on the couch, not far from Liam. Liam, however, was standing up and coming toward him. His hair was a touch longer, and if Adrian wasn’t mistaken there was some gray in it, shining in the light.

His face looked older. Not much, but there was enough of a change that Adrian noticed it. He still moved with the same lethal canter he’d always had, but it didn’t feel as...as mean.

Adrian stepped into the room.

A large Christmas tree stood in the corner, and the baby, who’d been charging it, froze and looked at him. Well, the baby looked past him at Nara, who was waving at the baby. The boy started to laugh and fling his arms up and down, like he was trying to mimic her waves.

Liam looked down at the baby. “He’s playing with Nara, isn’t he?”

Adrian nodded.

Liam glanced over his shoulder at Leeza. “I told you.”

Leeza just stuck her tongue out at him. “Well, he doesn’t get the seeing ghosts from my side of the family.”

Liam shook his head and gestured for Adrian to come in. The room wasn’t overly large, but it had been decked out in Christmas finery. On one wall, stockings were hung. Garland and oversized ornaments sat on shelves, and everywhere his eyes looked, Adrian saw not just a place to live, but a home.

“I didn’t think you’d want me here,” Adrian said.

“Why not?” Liam asked.

Adrian shrugged.

“We fought. So what? It happens. I’m glad you came.” He grabbed his arm and did something that Adrian never thought he’d ever get from Liam—Liam pulled him into a bear hug.

He couldn’t help laughing. It was like all the pain in his chest started to melt away—he’d been such an ass.

The baby crawled over to Liam and started to stand up, pulling on his pants. Liam scooped the boy up into his arms, like he’d done it all his life. “And this is my son, Richard Adrian McCall.”

Adrian was stunned. He stared at the boy, and the boy stared back at him. “Adrian?” he whispered. “Like me?”

“No, Leeza has a cousin...” Liam shifted the boy on his hip and Adrian’s face fell. “Of course it’s after you.”

Adrian didn’t know what to say. He looked at his old partner. Nara spoke in his ear, “Go on. It’s okay.”

Adrian nodded.

Because it really was.

It really, really was.

## About Candice Gilmer

[http://www.lyricalpress.com/candice\\_gilmer](http://www.lyricalpress.com/candice_gilmer)

Candice Gilmer didn't know that she would write this particular book. Liam's story had never been a part of the story arc's original inception, it was supposed to stop at A Darker Trinity. However, those wild muses ended A Darker Trinity on a cliff-hanger, and this is her conclusion.

Unless those muses get to talking to her again.

She lives with her husband and children in the Midwest, avoiding tornadoes, writing, and loves to hear from readers.

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