

A romantic scene of a man and a woman embracing. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are both looking at each other. The background is dark, and a large, full moon is visible in the upper right corner. The overall mood is intimate and sensual.

Sig Strang

My Love
ETERNAL

BLOOD, SEX AND ETERNAL LIFE

ERICKA'S PRESS, INC.



My Love Eternal

by Liz Strange

Fantasy/Romance

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Blood, sex and eternal life... What more could a girl ask for?

Tall, dark, and sexy, as well as fabulously wealthy, Giovanni is everything a girl could ask for in a lover. There's only one catch. He's been undead for more than three hundred years. When Rachel is drawn into Giovanni's world, she learns that the rules of human existence mean nothing in the world of vampires. This, however, is a fair price to pay for a love that will last forever.

Hunted by the Desmarais family, who carry a centuries-old vendetta, Rachel and Giovanni travel to the ends of the earth in order to stay one step ahead. Can their love survive, or will their eternity together end?

Content Warning: Violence, sexual encounters with the undead.

Highlight

He looked back to my solemn face. “We shouldn’t feed here.”

“I don’t want to feed yet,” I said. “I want you.”

With smooth, feline grace he came to the bed, his coat dropping to the floor. Slowly he removed his clothing until he was standing completely naked before me. I wrapped my arms around his waist, and licked along his bare stomach. His hands found my arms, and he gently raised me to my feet. Slowly, teasingly he removed my clothing, kissing me deeply between each item. By the time I was undressed I was shaking with need. I throbbed with the desire to have him inside me.

We fell back against the bare mattress, with no need for words. His urgency met mine as he pushed himself inside my body. I cried out. He took his time, savouring each kiss, each thrust. This time there was no violence, no painful memories to flash over my pleasure. We were lost to each other. I drank in ecstasy from his body, and love and desire from his mind. It was a connection so intensely intimate and primal I knew there could only ever be him.

My Love Eternal

By Liz Strange

Lyrical Press, Incorporated

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Dedication

To my mother, Louise, and my brother Bill. Thanks for always standing by me, especially when times were tough.

To Holden, Ezra, Lydia and Iris, my beautiful, wonderful children. You make my life magically hectic and fulfilling, and I wouldn't change one minute of it for anything.

To all the readers; I hope you love this story, and my characters as much as I do. There's a little of my own blood, sweat and tears in each of them.

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* * * *

Of the night I died there are only three things I can clearly recall. I remember the terrible pain, Giovanni's eyes like sapphires in the velvet darkness, and the raw, unbridled lust throbbing throughout my body. My mind swam with memories, some real, some imagined, and some from a past that was not my own. And even though that night was almost twenty-five years ago, the image is as fresh as if it happened only moments ago.

Chapter 1

Fate

The Patient Records department of the hospital where I worked was painfully quiet, as usual for the graveyard shift. Hired to that timeslot initially, as most new employees were, I had chosen to stay even after opportunities for day shifts became available. I had no children, no boyfriend and the night suited me.

Alone in the department one evening, I listened to the rain drumming softly against the windows while entering lab results into the computer, when a figure passed by the open door. Looking up, I wondered who was wandering the halls at that time of night, and quickly dismissed it as a security guard making the rounds. What was out of the ordinary, though, was security passing by again so soon.

Allen, the overweight and over-friendly guard, who had been there longer than I'd been alive, had been by a little less than an hour earlier. Looking in as he usually did, and finding me alone, he had stopped by for a brief exchange— brief on my part, at least. Though he wasn't obviously coming on to me, I always felt slightly unclean after any exchange with him, as though his words and manner held an underlying sexual intent. Other than security, it wasn't often that someone passed by on my shift. Sometimes a patient having trouble sleeping, or other staff on a wayward errand passed my door, but generally it was just me, another employee and piles of paperwork.

I'd glanced up at the clock. Barely three hours of my shift had passed, and I was uncharacteristically impatient for it to be over. Usually I had company here, but one of the girls had recently left— the position yet to be filled. If I wasn't so used to the environment, I supposed the quiet and stillness would have been spooky. The only sound was the soft humming of the overhead lights, or music from the radio— if I remembered to turn it on.

Coffee would jolt me from my funk. I leant to grab my wallet and when I sat up again I was face to face with the most beautiful man I had ever seen. He had been so quiet I hadn't heard him approach, and was now standing just on the other side of my cluttered desk. My breath drew in sharply. He reached out a pale hand, touching my arm so gently I almost wasn't sure he had touched me at all. Time froze in that moment we looked into each other's eyes. I couldn't pull my gaze away, but oddly I wasn't embarrassed or concerned about the way I was acting. That alone should have sent off warning bells.

His eyes were a shade of blue I don't think I'd ever seen before, large and deep-set in his face under dark arched brows. Their colour was luminous against the pale ivory of his skin. Rich ebony hair surrounded his face, shaggy curls hanging almost to his shoulders, and his lips were full and slightly tinged with red. It was those lips that drew my attention most of all. He pulled them back to smile, revealing sharp white teeth. A cold lump of unease formed in my stomach.

The smile lingered, changing his features, making him seem softer, and much younger than I initially thought. My own smile felt tight, my pulse raced, and my heart beat so hard I was sure he could see the throbbing vein in my throat. A hot flush crept up from my collar, my mind curiously blank. I raised a nervous hand to my neck, and his gaze moved from my eyes to my hand.

The strangest feeling I had ever experienced struck me then. An odd panic overcame me, yet I was completely drawn to the man, wanting to run away as much as I wanted to lick every inch of his body. His eyes shimmered as he stared at me with inexplicable hunger. He seemed to be struggling with the same conflicting emotions, appearing as though he wanted to kiss me or hurt me, but fighting against both. His look was so intimate, loving almost, yet so primal. The small hairs on my arms rose. It was as if I wasn't even in control of my own thoughts, let alone my actions or reactions.

When he finally spoke, breaking the spell of our silent exchange, his voice was soft and low. It slipped gently over me with a soft caress. "I'm sorry to interrupt. I walked by and saw that you were all alone here..." He had a slight accent, a different momentum to the way his words were expressed. "I didn't mean to bother you." He smiled again.

It took a tremendous effort on my part for words to come naturally, not too rushed. I didn't want him to see how flustered I was, and how much his presence affected me. "You're not bothering me. I was just about to take a break, actually." I indicated the wallet in my hand. "I don't see many people down here at this time of night." My chitchat sounded nervous, making me self-conscious and anxious.

He broke his gaze and looked about the office. "I don't suppose most people would have reason to come to this part of the hospital." The room where I sat had two workstations with computers. Several doors led into the main hallway and the records storage area. A supervisor's office and a smaller hallway ending at the employees' lunchroom were at the back. "Do you always work alone down here?"

"No, at night there's usually another person here, and during the day there's quite a few staff in and out." I tried to seem nonchalant during this odd exchange, but I was silently wishing for Allen to pass by again.

"And you like working at night?" I thought I detected something odd in his voice, humour perhaps, or maybe concern. His presence made me so flustered, I couldn't think straight.

"I do, actually, it's quiet. I can come in and get my job done."

"The nights are not for everyone." He turned his gaze toward the window. "Or the rain."

Smiling, I also looked outside. "I don't mind the night, or the rain. I find the darkness and the quiet peaceful, and the rain always make me think of cleansing, a way to clear out all the impurities that pop into our lives." Why I was being so open and honest was beyond me. The words were flying out of my mouth of their own accord. There was something so unsettling about him, though he wasn't threatening in any overt way.

"Mother Nature's tonic for the ills of the world." His face held a wistful look.

I sat back in my chair, studying him. "Do you work here? I haven't seen you around before."

"I'm new in town." He smiled again, this time without the sentiment reaching his eyes. His response was an answer without an answer.

My inner alert switched to high, and whatever had passed between us moments before was replaced with good old-fashioned fear. I didn't know this man, I was alone in an isolated part of the building, and the set-up for something bad to happen couldn't be more perfect. He seemed to sense the change in my demeanour, and took a step back from the desk. When he stopped, his body was still in a way I had never seen before in another human being. His gaze pierced me again. Something lurked in those eyes, a darkness that marred their cold beauty.

Then, without realising I had moved, I stood beside him. I was so close, the fabric of his jacket brushed against my bare arm. I tensed, unsure if the sensation was good or bad.

"I like the night too." His voice was soft, and his words seemed comforting, not strange like they should have. The sight of a young man and woman sitting on a large rock under a canopy of ancient trees appeared suddenly in my mind. Then as quickly as it came, it vanished.

I trembled, my throat tight. I tried to speak with a bravado I did not feel. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Of course." He did not move. Instead he placed an ice-cold hand on my arm. I found myself trapped in my odd lust and fear. He smelled so sweet, like the rain. My hand was pulled up between us, and his finger lightly traced the ring I always wore. "I like your ring. Garnet is a nice colour for you, but not your birthstone, I believe." His gaze was hesitant, almost quizzical.

I shook my head. "No, it's not. How could you know that?"

He looked me straight in the eye, and my heart not so much pounded, as clenched in my chest. "I have a way of reading people." Normally an exchange like this would have at least irritated me, if not totally creeped me out, and I would have simply walked out of the room or called the security desk. I did neither, and though the fear was building, I did not want to leave.

I drew even closer, my hand still held lightly in his. "And how do you read me?"

"Strong, smart, a little dark. You are more than people realise."

What a strange and amazing thing for someone to say. "Really?"

The whole situation was absurd. I was hanging onto his every word like a lovesick teenager. I was twenty-six years old, and though he was almost unbelievably beautiful to look at, something about him frightened me. One couldn't be attracted to and fear someone at the same time?

I cursed myself for acting like a complete moron, but he continued to regard me with the most wonderful expression. He smiled again, and my focus was drawn to his soft red lips and white teeth. My hand dropped from his. Then without any noticeable movement he stood in the doorway, looking back at me. "I'm sure we'll see each other again."

He looked me straight in the eye, licking his lips, and the room closed in on me. What was it that felt so off? My arsenal of stinging rebuffs and outright dismissals seemed to have been absorbed into the lump in my throat.

My ears began to ring and I closed my eyes. When I opened them again he was gone. I stood in the room alone, wallet in hand. The building was silent. It was as though he had never been there at all. If it weren't for my pounding heart and my breath held tightly in my chest, I might have believed I had imagined the whole thing.

As I made my way toward the parking lot later that night, I crossed paths with Allen. He hurried from the acute care wing of the hospital, a dark look on his heavy face. Allen was always in a good mood, teasing and flirting relentlessly. He all but ploughed me over before realising I was in his way. "Sorry Rachel, I didn't see you there." No jokes... tense voice.

"That's okay. What's going on? You look upset."

He stopped, but seemed undecided about what he should, or could say to me. "There were four deaths here tonight. All in the same area, all around the same time." I immediately thought about the man who had been in my office earlier.

"And the deaths are questionable I'm assuming."

"Yes and no. Two were cancer patients, very sick, on their last legs so to speak. The other was a lady who's been in a coma for a few years, no chance of regaining consciousness, and a trauma victim from a car crash earlier tonight."

"And?"

"One of the nurses thought she saw someone coming out of one of the cancer patient's room, but when I tried to get details, she couldn't give me any."

"What do you mean, couldn't?"

"It's weird. It's like she blacked out or something. She just can't remember what the person looked like. Can't even tell me if it was a man or a woman."

I saw the stranger's face again. Could he have something to with it? "You know, Allen, there was a guy in my office tonight. I mean, it might be totally unrelated, but he was kinda weird, and when I asked why he was there he didn't really answer."

Allen shifted stiffly, and snapped open his notebook. "Tell me." If the situation weren't so serious, his reaction would have been comical.

"Um, dark hair, kinda long. Blue eyes, fair skin, he was wearing dark clothes and a long jacket." *Incredible gorgeous, creepy but definitely hot. Cool it, Rachel.* "He came in, talked to me briefly and left. Sorry, that's all I got."

"When did this happen?"

“Around two.”

“Just after all this stuff went down. Looks like you mighta seen our guy. If there's anything more of this, I'll come talk to you again.”

“Okay, but what do you mean if there's anything more.”

“Well, there's no visible signs of violence... It's bizarre, actually. Maybe it's nothing, could be just an incredibly unlucky night. It's been known to happen.” He didn't sound any more convinced than I felt.

“Kay, well you know where to find me.”

I walked through the underground parking lot wishing I had eyes in the back of my head. When I reached my car, I jumped in, locking the doors. It was a quiet and uneventful drive home.

“God, Rachel, you're such a dork sometimes. He was hitting on you!” Shannon cut in, wiping away the tingly, sensual, anxious feeling as suddenly as the man had vanished from the office. When I looked at my roommate, she grinned and shook her head.

I tried to laugh it off because there was no way I could make someone else understand something I couldn't understand myself. “Maybe, I guess. More like he was lost, and was being nice?” It sounded lame, even to me.

“Jeez, girl. You are so out of it you don't even know when someone's making a pass at you any more.” She drank the last of her tea, and slammed her cup down with a dramatic bang. “That's it. We are going shopping. We're finding you something sexy, and you're coming to the club tonight. I won't take no for an answer. Maybe we'll even get you laid.”

Inwardly, I groaned. Every time I went to the club with Shannon, I alternated between standing by myself or fighting off her drunken rejects. She was the light all males swarmed to by instinct. Sometimes there were a few other female friends I could latch onto, but I had a feeling that tonight would not be one of those lucky times. I let myself be dragged from store to store, bought an outrageously expensive pair of shoes that killed my feet, and a dress that barely covered me from chest to crotch.

After much primping, flat-ironing, and excessive coats of makeup, Shannon deemed me worthy of breaking hearts. She was gorgeous in leather pants that fit like a second skin and showed off her mile-long legs. Her red halter-top and dark hair complemented her light complexion. I had to admit, she had done an awesome job with my appearance too. My large blue eyes popped against my fair complexion, and my dyed-red hair was smooth and shiny. Even the shade of lipstick she chose was perfect.

We got to the place before it opened, and I was allowed an hour to myself in her office while she went through the opening procedures. For all her faults, Shannon was an excellent manager. She always had hot bands, a full house, and the place made good money. Shannon slipped in a few minutes later, and placed a rye and ginger before me, with strict orders to drink it. What the hell, why not?

When the music thundered on, I wandered out to the main bar, grabbed a stool and ordered another drink. Another perk of Shannon managing the place was that I never had to pay. Shannon flitted back and forth while I chatted with the bartenders— one a life-sized version of Barbie, and one body-builder, who was short but definitely in shape. I couldn't remember his name though he had worked there for quite some time.

I spotted a girl I knew from the hospital, at about the same time I had apparently been spotted myself. The guy heading in my direction had obviously been drinking for quite a while— and hard. He lumbered up to the bar, squeezing between me and the guy on the stool next to me. He had that blurry-eyed look of someone one drink past the point of where he should have stopped, and smelled hot and very male. I tried to make eye contact with the male bartender, but he was busy flirting with a cute brunette at the other end of the bar.

“Hey, wanna dance?” His words were slurred and he leant in way too close for my liking. I was not a touchy person by nature, especially with drunken men who only wanted to get in my pants.

“No, thanks. It's against my religion.”

He took a swig from the beer in his one hand, and made a grab for my arm with the other. “C'mon.” Then he gave me what I guessed he thought was a sexy look.

I pulled my arm back. “I said no thanks,” I returned with the dirtiest look I could muster.

He frowned, looking at me with his bleary eyes. “Whatever.” As he sauntered away, he managed to spill his beer down the front of my new dress.

I jumped up in disgust, but the crowd had already swallowed him. I made my way to the ladies' room, cursing my existence the entire way. As I hastily walked by a set of booths closest to the washroom, my gaze was drawn to a man on his own. He stood casually next to a table full of rowdy girls, barely past the legal drinking age. The four of them were checking him out, all the while hilariously trying to seem as though they weren't. Just as I was about to pass, I realised who the object of their attention was— the stranger from the hospital.

My heart jumped and the alcohol I'd consumed lurched in my stomach. I remembered the conversation I'd had with Allen, and the four deaths, and still found myself walking in his direction. I wanted to confront him, but about what? The words played out in my mind, *Hello weird, gorgeous guy, who may or may not have been hitting on me. Did you come to the hospital last night to kill four seriously sick or injured persons, then casually wander away to chat me up?* What was it I should ask him?

“Hello again.” That curious, and indiscernible accent again. As soon as the words came out of his mouth, my resolve faltered. He looked harmless. Wonderful actually.

“Hello.”

“Having some trouble?” He indicated in the direction of the bar.

I looked down at my dress and shrugged. “About par for course. Are you here alone?”

“I told you I was new in town.”

“That you did.”

“And you? Certainly a girl like you is not alone.” His seemed to be teasing, but I couldn't be certain.

I looked around, but Shannon was nowhere to be seen. “I'm here with my roommate. She's the manager and drags me here sometimes.”

“Not your cup of tea?”

We looked at each other and that strange mixture of feelings tugged at me again— fear, desire and lustful anxiety. God he was lovely, but it was something more than that, something dark.

He leant in close and his lips brushed my ear when he spoke. “Maybe you should head home then.” His presence stirred something warm in the lower regions of my anatomy. He took my arm and we started to walk from the bar. I should have ripped my arm out of his grasp, but again he was not doing anything that could be construed as threatening. How he could be influencing me I was not sure, and at that moment I wasn't sure I cared.

As we neared the door, we passed Shannon, who was talking to one of her employees. Instead of approaching, she gave me the thumbs up, surmising I'd scored. She mouthed “Wow” then we were outside. The night whispered gently, but still had a bite of cool autumn air. We took a few steps from the club, and it was as though I was watching what was happening from outside my body. I wasn't drunk by any stretch, but I felt so out of it. He was just smiling, and holding my arm lightly in a way most men didn't anymore. I wasn't even bothered by the dampness of my dress against my skin.

He turned to face me then, and noticed for the first time that he wasn't very tall, maybe five foot eight or nine, and slim, but in a solid, masculine way. Dressed in jeans, and a dark t-shirt, the whiteness of his arms caught in the moonlight. My breathing was very loud, almost louder than the music from the club. *Tainted Love* was playing inside, and the sound hovered just on the edge of my awareness. I could smell the sweetness of the rain though it wasn't falling, and tasted liquor on my tongue. My body throbbed to the tempo of the music, or my heart, and I couldn't be sure which. I was warm though the air was cool, and more aware of the night than I had ever been before.

Slowly, he moved in toward me, and I was paralysed. He was so close I thought he would kiss me, but instead he spoke with that soft, seductive voice of his. “You are so beautiful. I have thought of no one else since I saw you last night.” His hand slid up my arm, and into my hair. His lips were soft against my throat. I'd never been so aroused in my life. I was trembling and hungry for his body.

He hesitated, then looked me in the eyes once more. “It's like I can feel you in my head. I will see you again. You have touched me... but I'm conflicted. I should just leave you alone, yet I don't seem to want to. I'll be watching.” Then his lips brushed against mine, the night swirled, and there was nothing else but his touch. I swayed and closed my eyes against the dizziness.

When I opened my eyes, he was gone.

Chapter 2

“You are so beautiful. Your vision haunts me, I have thought of no one else since I first saw you last night. I will see you again. You have touched me... and I'll be watching.”

The next few days passed in a haze. Every time I closed my eyes I saw his face, and my mind slipped off to replay his words over and over again.

What the hell were those words supposed to mean? Why did I find them appealing, even flattering, instead of disturbing? I checked in with Allen on a few occasions, but the stranger was never seen around the hospital again.

I couldn't concentrate on anything. I analysed every word, every gesture, which played in my mind in vivid, Technicolor perfection. I was obsessing about the situation, but I couldn't stop myself. The whole exchange probably didn't last more than five minutes, but it was the most intense experience I had ever had. The more I thought about it, the more impossible it seemed, and yet the more certain I was it had happened. I didn't even know his name.

When at work I busied myself at the computer, but often stared off into space, sometimes for as long as fifteen minutes. More than once, when I returned to reality, I found the new girl looking at me with the strangest expression on her face. She must have thought that I was the biggest ditz, or that I'd been smoking something funny before coming to work. I surmised by her demeanour that we wouldn't become chums any time soon.

One night, while logging patient death record statistics, I encountered a statement in one that I had never seen before. It was from the file of a forty-two-year-old male cancer victim, who had passed a few weeks earlier. Near the bottom of the report was this odd statement: *Blood volume less than three litres. No discernible cause of blood loss.* Then, later on, *Cause of Death: advanced pancreatic cancer.*

I wasn't a doctor, but those two statements didn't seem to add up. For some reason that turned a light bulb on, rattling loose some uneasiness inside of me. I quickly flipped back to the front page of the report and looked for the date: October 15. Interesting. That was the night I met my mystery man, and four patients died at the hospital. I would bet money this man was one of the four.

After that first report, I found two more with the same date, and similar notations about inexplicable blood loss. I bet the fourth was in the pile beside my fellow employee, but I couldn't think of a casual way of getting the information from her. She already thought I was strange, and I didn't want to push it. I'd have to sneak a look when she went for her break later.

This new information tickled at a suspicion I was trying to convince myself could not possibly be true. I chewed on it the rest of the night, making little headway with the remaining reports on my desk.

As my mind ran through endless streams of what-ifs, the feeling I had been pushing aside churned up again. I tried to block out his face, his words, but the memories were too intense to ignore.

“I'm taking my break now, Rachel,” Elinor said, making me realise my mind had wandered again. She was standing right beside my desk when I looked up, clearly annoyed, but I couldn't blame her. I was acting like a flake. *Get a grip, Rachel.*

“Right. Guess it's about that time.” I tried to sound cheery, which was difficult to do with my mind racing as it was.

“Uh-huh.” She left me alone. It took everything in me not to stick my tongue out at her receding figure. I waited a few minutes to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything then jumped from my chair. I rifled through the pile of papers on her desk until I found what I was looking for. The fourth report, and unsurprisingly, there was mention of blood loss. I put the paper back where I found it, and sat back at my own desk. It couldn't mean what I thought it did, could it?

On my way out that night, I saw a man with dark hair hurrying to the parking lot ahead of me. My heart skipped a beat. I stormed up to him, intending to demand an explanation for what kind of game he was playing. Instead of the stranger, I found another man before me, and I departed quickly after a mumbled, embarrassed apology. The experience left me shaken, confused and angry.

After that night, it became almost impossible to sleep. Even when the house was quiet, and I was physically exhausted, I would toss and turn with the strangest thoughts churning through my mind. I was restless and uncontrollably anxious. My encounters with this stranger had changed everything. My perception of the world had shifted and, for the first time in my life, the blinders were off and I could see how things really were. Everything I had once held dear now seemed pointless. I knew I was wasting time, wasting myself when fate was calling.

Shannon was somehow being pushed aside in all this. She knew something was going on, and I saw the concern in her face, but I could do or say nothing. I wanted to let her know I was okay, but some part of me knew what I was going through was for me and me alone. I had become detached from everything except uncovering the truth.

On my way home from work one morning, about a week after discovering the reports, another odd experience occurred. I was reliving the look in his eyes that night in front of the club, where the lights were a halo behind his dark mane of hair. Softly, rain started to fall on the windshield, and I smiled as I rolled down the window. I inhaled, feeling the smell of it not only fill my lungs, but triggering a memory.

“I'll be watching...”

I shivered, not from cold, but from the sense of anticipation. I felt his hands like feathers across the skin on my arms, my neck.

Then abruptly the scene changed. One moment it was the dark road in front of me, and the next I was in a completely different place. I stood in a driveway or an alley across the street from a silent house. The morning was still dark, a few hours from sunrise. As the rain touched my skin, I looked up into the sky with eyes that were not my own.

A strange longing and excitement coursed through me, something I couldn't quite understand. My body tensed, my senses sharp and alert. Then someone appeared in my line of sight. A young man was walking home alone. He started up a drive and, for just a moment, he hesitated, as though he understood

what was about to happen. He turned away, reaching into his pocket for his keys. Before he even had a chance to pull his hand free, I was there. The movement was unbelievably quick, like a crack of lightning. One moment I was in the shadows, the next I held the frightened, bewildered man in my hands.

The look on his face was something I could never forget. His eyes revealed his terror, staring wildly. His mouth opened in a wide “O” of surprise. He didn't utter a sound, but his heart pounded like a jackhammer. He didn't struggle, or speak. He just stared in astonishment, body locked in complete and total fear. I moved my face closer, drunk on his terror. When we were close enough to kiss, there was a moment of recognition reflected from his eyes.

It wasn't me looking back, it was *him*. It wasn't the face of the angel I had come to adore looking back out at me. It was the face of a monster. His beautiful features were twisted up with pain and longing. For the briefest moment, I saw the comprehension. I knew he was aware of what I was somehow witnessing. I saw a smile cross his bloody face, and a shiver rode my body from feet to head.

Then as quickly as the vision came, it was gone. I pulled haphazardly off to the side of the road, my hands clenched around the steering wheel. My body ached in a way I could not identify. I wasn't in pain. More like intense hunger. My panties were damp and warm between my legs. What the hell was happening to me? My head ached from trying to understand what was going on.

As I shifted the car into drive I had a chilling thought. Though I was shaken, I was surprisingly not frightened or upset by what I had just seen. What the heck did that mean?

By the time I arrived home, it was almost four-thirty in the morning and the house was full of people. A few lurked on the front step, bottles in hand as I pulled into the driveway. As I entered the house, I spied a pile of coats and shoes in the hallway. People were drinking and smoking everywhere I looked, and music filled the small condo. A scowl pulled at my features as I wound my way through the throng of drunken partiers, angrier with Shannon than I had ever been for this kind of thing.

I found her in the third bedroom of the condo that had been converted into an office guest room. A folding table had been set up, and she was playing cards with a bunch of unfamiliar people. She smiled when she saw me in the doorway, waving me into the already crowded room.

I leant over her and spoke loudly into her ear, to be heard over the music. “What's going on? Why are there so many people here?”

She looked surprised at the sound of anger in my voice. “I thought a little party would cheer you up. You've been such a bitch lately.”

“I'm not being a bitch, Shannon. I've been going through some stuff. I have things to figure out that you wouldn't understand.”

“Relax. What's got your panties in a bunch tonight? You never get mad when I have people over.”

“I'm tired, I have things to think about, and coming home to a hundred obnoxious, drunk assholes doesn't help my mood.”

Shannon rolled her lovely eyes at me, and laid a card on the table. “Have it your way. Be miserable if you want to be, but these people are here now, so you may as well make the best of it. They'll clear out soon, and you can be mad at me tomorrow.”

Jesus, she didn't get anything. Nothing was serious to her. It was all parties, drinking and shopping, like there wasn't a care in the world. It was just more proof that she couldn't understand me. Who could I talk to about this?

I left Shannon to her cards, and wandered from room to room, trying to find a semi-quiet place to sit. There was no chance I was going to fall asleep. I didn't even bother trying to lie down and I couldn't shake the eerie feeling from the vision— or dream— I'd had earlier. I finally wandered out to the front, which was by then thankfully deserted. I sat on the cold step, taking deep breaths of damp air.

Not even five minutes later a police car made its way around the corner of our street, moving slowly until it stopped before our unit. I should have known someone would call the police with the noise and the people coming and going. I was going to kill Shannon for making me deal with this.

I stood as one of the officers emerged from the car and walked to the front door. “Do you live here?”

“Yes, I do. I'm sorry about the noise.”

“Well, it's a bit late. We've already been here once tonight.”

I was definitely going to kick Shannon's butt.

The officer continued. “I suggest you go in there and ask everyone to leave. I'm giving you twenty minutes. If we have to come back, there's going to be some charges laid.”

I opened my mouth to answer, when somewhere off in the distance there was a faint sound. Not just a sound— a voice. The words were so quiet I strained to hear what was being said. The police officer apparently heard it too, because he turned from me, and looked out into the darkness. The other officer stepped out of the car, looking in the same direction as his partner, trying to see what held our attention.

“Who's there?” the second officer shouted into the night.

The response came, soft and calm, whispering over us like the wind through the trees. “Leave the girl alone. Get back in your car and leave. Now.” The sound caressed me, my body responding immediately to its familiarity.

My brain struggled to process what was happening. The officers inexplicably drove off without another word. The sounds of the party seemed oddly distant, filtered through the presence of the night. I strained to see into the darkness beyond the touch of the streetlamp, with a soft tugging in the back of my mind I could not quite understand. I sat on the cold, hard concrete, shaky but not afraid. I forced myself to focus.

A voice. That's what distracted us, a voice out of the darkness.

Gazing out again, I was drawn across the street to the darkened park. I could not look away, even if I wanted to, though I saw nothing but night. Then, slowly, against the chain link fence, a form emerged from the darkness. I rose from the step for a better look, certain it was the figure there, though it was difficult to tell if it was a man or a woman.

Then the person was closer, although neither of us had moved, now on the side of the fence closest to where I stood. The individual was dressed in dark clothing from head to toe, with a long coat that swirled about its legs. The light from the lamp reflected off white hands and face. It was the stranger from the hospital.

Suddenly we were face to face on the damp grass at the edge of the park. His piercing blue eyes held me in their gaze. He spoke my name, though his beautiful red lips never moved. He took me in his arms, a gentle smile playing on his face.

I was shaking, and it wasn't from the cold. He laughed softly, a happy, wonderful sound. His mouth opened, and his teeth were very white against his lips. As my hand touched his silky hair, my mind flashed on the death reports, the vision of the man being attacked, and the night at the club. Sensations rocked my body— fear, cold, lust. Then my mind went blank.

When I came to I was nauseous and confused. I could hear my name being repeated, over and over, but it was no longer his voice speaking. I felt a hand on my shoulder, shaking me urgently, and I forced myself to look up. Shannon stood over me, a frightened look on her face. I blinked, slowly coming to my senses. I was lying in the middle of the street.

She grabbed my hand, and helped me to my feet, holding onto my arm as we made our way back to the front step. My body trembled from a burgeoning panic, and I turned back to the direction of the park, but he was no longer there. Again, it was as if he had never been there at all.

“What happened, Rachel? Someone told me that the police were here, so I came out to see what was going on. Then I see you walking back from the other side of the street and you just collapsed. Did you forget to eat or something?”

I shook my head. “I saw someone at the park. At least I think I did. The police were here, and then he was there, and they left. It doesn't make any sense. I don't remember falling at all.” I couldn't believe how shrill and rushed my voice sounded. It was disturbing, even to me.

Shannon frowned, looking out over the park. “Who did you see? Was it someone you know?” Her voice trailed off as she searched the now-empty street.

It was pointless trying to explain what had happened. She would never understand. I had experienced it, and I was still struggling with what was happening. Standing on the driveway, with the street empty, I had to wonder if I had seen anything at all. I was thinking about him too often, and I was so tired. I wanted to see him, and maybe my desperation had made me hallucinate the whole thing.

Several people watched our exchange from the front step and I suddenly felt foolish. “Forget it. I'm just tired. I guess I didn't really see anything after all.”

“Are you sure you're okay? You've been acting weird lately.”

“I'm fine. I've just been having a lot of trouble sleeping. It's making me kinda crazy. Let's get these people out of here before the cops get back, and I can get to bed.”

She gazed out over the street one last time, before looking me right in the eye. I thought she was going to say something else, but she kept her mouth shut and followed me into the house. The door slammed loudly behind us, and it was all I could do to find the strength to get up the stairs, and into my bed. Shannon cleared the house in short order. The music stopped, and I was finally in the dark warmth and familiarity of my room.

But my mind wasn't ready to shut down. Questions and images ran through my thoughts. Did I really see him there at the fence? If I did, why was he here? How did he know my name? Where I lived? I pictured the way the light shone off his perfect white skin, without a blemish or imperfection.

What had happened earlier, when it was as though I had seen with his eyes? Who was that man and what was he doing with him? It didn't make sense. None of it did. One couldn't see other people's thoughts, or feel their emotions. It was crazy, and I was so, so tired.

I awoke suddenly, without realising I had fallen asleep, and had the strangest urge to look outside. I made my way down the stairs, until I stood in front of the large window in the living room overlooking the park across the street. The night was an odd colour of violet, the shade of a healing bruise. It was very close to dawn. I felt pulled to go outside, and enjoy the night for the last few moments before the new day started, and the darkness was lost.

The air was cold and damp. The sky was changing, and I was suddenly sure that I was too. I was standing there, absorbing the night somehow. It was a strange symbiosis, something I couldn't quite wrap my head around. There was an odd tightness in my chest, and yet a comfort that was indescribable. I was shaky, and wanted something I could not translate into words.

Then a sickness started in the pit of my stomach— hard, angry stabs of pain. I sat, leaning over until my cheek pressed against the cold concrete. What was happening to me?

I was slipping over the boundaries of sleep, when I heard my name being whispered softly against my ear. I struggled to roll over, but there was no strength left in my body. Then I saw his face. He was so angelic, delicate looking, almost child-like. His eyes were even bluer than I remembered, and they burnt with such intensity. He stared down into my face, his features so sharp and clear they strained my eyes. I tried to speak, but he pressed a hand to my lips.

Slowly he lowered his face, and pressed his lips against mine. I had never felt that strange before; so wonderful, so aroused, and yet sick at the same time. I couldn't understand anything but how his touch felt on my body. My heart raced, and I couldn't breathe. I had never experienced anything this intense in my life. The immense pleasure verged on pain, and I couldn't discern where my own feelings ended and his began.

“Rachel.” His lips softly brushed my ear. “I want you to be mine. You stir feelings in me that I didn't think it were possible for my kind to feel. You have opened a part of me I thought died a long time ago. I know this doesn't make sense, but it will in time, I promise you. The more I watch you and learn about you, the more certain I am this is meant to be. You haunt me, with a power and a desire you are not even aware of.” He gently kissed my cheek. “Think of me.”

I ached, and I could not move. I was happy and I was afraid that it wasn't real, scared it was true. Was I dreaming? Was I losing my mind? I was heavy and vulnerable. Softly the fog of sleep rolled in, and I couldn't fight it any longer. His arms slipped under my body, and my face pressed against his chest. The sound of my breathing was loud, then nothing at all.

The next thing I knew I was in darkness. I was alone, warm and safe, in the comfort of my own bed. I couldn't remember returning to the house, if I ever left it at all. It was difficult telling reality from dreams.

My blinds were up, with the soft light entering as the sun began to rise. I waited, hoping to hear his voice or feel his touch, but I was alone. My tears were warm against my cheeks and I suffered weariness to the very core of my being. Soon I was sound asleep, lost in dreams of him.

Chapter 3

Every night for the next two weeks the same dream consumed my sleep. Each time I lay down I would toss fitfully, aching like an addict in need of a fix. As I finally crossed into unconsciousness, I would be pulled into a strange dream, and it was always the same— intense, erotic and very disturbing.

The room would be candlelit, with the shadows dancing like the northern lights across the pale, unadorned walls. The shade on the window would be drawn up, with the windows wide open to the night air, and an unspoken invitation to whomever may be watching from the outside. The darkness beyond the window was its own presence, waiting to spill in.

I walked slowly to the bed and gently folded down the pale yellow cover. The material was heavy, yet as soft as down in my hands. I leant over and blew out all the candles, except for the one on the nightstand, which left barely enough light to see by. As my head touched the pillow, I would appear to fall into an instant and effortless sleep.

As I lay there, I would become aware of a new sound: the gentle rise and fall of music. It was like the sounds of an orchestra, keeping rhythm with my breathing. It gained momentum with each breath, building and filling the room.

The whole thing was something beyond a dream. It was an experience with the sensations of touch, sound and smell. It was as though the scene was staged, each movement manipulated by something beyond my own subconscious. I could feel something there, a presence, an influence just beyond the periphery of my control.

In the next instant, he would be there beside me on the bed, his beauty shining in the hazy light. I would reach out to touch his face, and his silken red lips would pull into a smile. His eyes would be glowing their perfect, piercing blue, with reflections of red dancing across them from the flickering candlelight. He would lean in closely and I could smell him, his scent indistinguishable from the spring rain, and he would rest his head against my shoulder. My body trembled against his touch. Soft kisses fell across my face, and when he looked up again, the smile was still there, but something dark and frightening lurked behind those blue, blue eyes.

As we drew toward each other, his smile would widen, and that's when I would see the change. His teeth became fangs, and his tongue would hungrily trace its way across their surface. His lips were so red and full I thought they would burst and drip with blood, and yet, I didn't pull away.

Fragments of sound from the night of the party would filter in, laughter, music, drunken cheers, and the wailing wind. There were flashes of the moon, and the police, and Shannon's face after she found me in the road. The eerie, undefined music became a more familiar tune, echoing in the room. Whether this song had actually been playing, or if it was something pulled from my memories of another time, I will never be sure. The pounding, throbbing of the drum became the sound of my heart. It filled the room around us.

It was like looking onto a figure carved from white marble, but his tortured eyes held a dark longing in them. The unnatural light fanned out around him, a halo masking the devil inside. Without movement his lips would suddenly be pressed to my throat, cool against the warm rush of blood through my veins. My lips would part, my face a reflection of intense pleasure or pain?

Then I would wake, and find myself in some odd place. I always awoke close to the front door, sometimes even out on the steps or the damp front lawn, as though in my sleep I was trying to get outside. It happened that way without fail, lost in the dream one moment, awake the next. There was never a feeling of transition, or burgeoning awareness, I was just abruptly awake. I would find myself sprawled and drenched with sweat, my body acutely aroused and drained.

I would look about frantically, never frightened, but desperate to find something that was never there. What did I expect, really? I guess I hoped for some concrete proof I wasn't losing my mind. Instead, I would pick myself up, and return to my familiar bed. There I would try to return to sleep. Alone.

Sometimes, lying in the darkness of my room, I would close my eyes and imagine I could hear the music. With effort, I could remember the feeling of his cool touch against my skin.

Yet, some part of me was convinced the dream was real, that it somehow had to be. I felt connected to him, in a way there was no explanation for. The night of the party had been real, at least part of it had, anyway. We had met at the hospital, and again at the club. Shannon had seen us together, however briefly, as we passed her on our way out. These dreams, if they could be called dreams, were so real.

My ties with life as I knew it were becoming shaky, quickly dissolving. The lines between real and not, waking and dreams, blurred, and it troubled me. I went through the motions of eating and going to work, the whole time waiting for answers, sleep and him.

On a night several weeks after the encounter at my home, I had an interesting conversation with Allen. He visited the office to say “hi,” as he almost always did, and I could tell right away something was up. When he didn't spill it willingly, I tried to coax it out of him.

“Whatever happened with those all those deaths? No one ever came to talk to me, so I assumed that nothing suspicious was found?” I decided at that point to not mention what I read in the coroner's reports. I wasn't sure yet what it meant.

“No,” he agreed, but his demeanour instantly changed. He pulled back from leaning over the counter to look down my top. “There was a review and nothing came of it. The bigwigs decided it was all natural causes, but some other stuff has happened since then, so you'll probably be getting a call after all.”

“Okay.” There was clearly more to it than that, but he wasn't sharing. “What about the stranger I told you about? Anything ever turn up there?”

“Funny you should mention that. That's what I'm talking about. I thought I saw him myself the other night. I caught this dark-haired guy coming out of a patient's room real late, you know, way past visiting hours. I called after him, but he didn't stop. I started to follow him, telling him to stop but he just kept walking and never looked back at me. Then he rounded a corner and when I followed, he was gone. Just gone. I looked everywhere, but there was no sign of him. It was the darndest thing.”

I felt a chill as he described the experience. Of our three encounters, every time he had vanished, seemingly in the blink of an eye. “And the patient?”

He hesitated. “Dead.”

A chill ran up my spine. “I’m assuming you reported this.”

“Yep, but just like that nurse, I told you I didn’t see his face. I got nothing. You’re the only one who’s seen what he looks like.”

I didn’t imagine that had been by accident. For some reason he had wanted me to see him, and remember him. This time he seemed to have been caught red-handed in the death of a patient. Did I still want to have him catch up with me again?

Allen was still talking. “... make sure that you’re careful. If you want me to, I can walk you out to your car when you’re done.”

“No, thanks. I think I’m good. The parking lot has cameras, and I’m sure you scared him off.” I gave the most sincere-looking smile I could muster.

The new girl was listening intently, hands stopped over her keyboard. I looked in her direction and she immediately started typing again. *That’s right, honey, keep your nose out of this.*

Allen gave me a last once-over, and with a light pounding of his fist against the counter, turned to leave. “Keep your eyes open, ladies,” he called back over his shoulder.

That certainly put a new twist on things, adding more fuel to the fire of my suspicions.

I had my suspicions, things I assumed were fantasy. I was almost angry at myself for even considering it at first, but the more I learnt, and the more interaction I had, the more I became convinced. I read everything I could get my hands on. I watched movies for any spark of similarity or truth. At last, I concluded that the truth was only going to come from the stranger himself.

As the days stretched into weeks, I was at a standstill. My interview with the hospital administration came and went, the police took my statement, and still there were no more visits. Though I initially thought that crossing paths with this man was the catalyst for taking my life in the direction it was meant to go, I now saw that this turn of events had simply knocked me off course. Even the dreams occurred with less and less frequently. It was about time to shake these feeling off, and take control of my life again. God, if only I could get some answers.

I needed to do something, instead of waiting for something or someone I had absolutely no control over. I approached Shannon on a night neither of us were working, and asked her to do something with me. At first she was reluctant because I had been so distant, and from her point of view, moody and awkward. After talking her out of hitting the clubs— I couldn’t bear the thought of any unwanted attention— we decided to go for a coffee before a movie. I needed to distract myself from the endless, repetitive rounds of thoughts and images burnt in my brain. I just needed to catch my breath, and not think about him for a while.

As we sat in the cafe, I watched the throng of people spilling past, and in some strange way I envied them, the couples smiling and holding hands. I saw people young and old, faces bright or drawn, and envied them living their easy lives. It was difficult to imagine living such a life after all I had experienced in recent months.

“So are you ready to spill what’s been going on with you yet?” Shannon asked over her steaming latte.

That caught my attention. “Going on with me?” I thought playing dumb was the way to go, but she wasn’t buying it.

“Yeah, you’ve been all mopey and weird lately. I mean I know you’re not exactly Miss Social Butterfly, but you usually get out more than this, and I get that you were bummed about breaking up with Sam, but that’s been, like, a year. You did pick up that hottie at the club a few weeks ago. That should have put the wind back in your sails.”

She did remember seeing us together! “Yeah, I don’t know what to say. I’ve been having a lot of trouble sleeping, and just feeling crappy. And that guy, that was just a one-time thing, nothing serious.”

“Too bad. He was cute if you like the European, artsy pretty boy type. You know me, I go more for the big, beefy muscle heads. Oh well, lots more fish in the sea.”

“Yeah, well, find me one you haven’t slept with yet.”

She laughed. “You bitch. It’s not easy being this beautiful, you know.” She tossed her hair and tried to keep a straight face, but didn’t quite pull it off.

“Yeah, you have it sooo rough.”

I paused, the story of bizarre encounters and the deaths at the hospital on the tip of my tongue. What would be the point of dragging Shannon into this? She already thought I was acting oddly, and telling the truth was only going to stress her out. How could I explain that even though I had my suspicions he was not only responsible for five known deaths, but that the reasons for these deaths were supernatural in origin? It sounded crazy just thinking about it, and I could only imagine the reaction if I voiced my conclusions out loud. Best to keep my mouth shut.

Even though the conversation with Shannon distracted me for the moment, the restless anxiety returned as soon as we were on our way to the theatre. I tried to block out everything but the movie, but couldn’t stay focused. As soon as the opening credits rolled I was counting down the seconds until it was finished. I all but leapt from my seat when it finally ended, my skin feeling like a thousand tiny ants scurrying over its surface. I bumped into two people as I made my way toward the door. I needed to get outside. My chest was so tight I couldn’t breathe.

I lunged through the door in my hurry to get outside. The air was frigid, definitely on the far side of fall now, biting into the exposed skin on my face. It wouldn’t be long until the harsh, Canadian winter came upon us. It was still a comfort though, after the theatre’s strangling claustrophobia. Just being outside, with all its possibilities, made the tension subside. I lost Shannon in my rush, so I waited on the street among the people coming and going from

the theatre.

Suddenly, like an electric shock, his face appeared in my mind. I had been doing everything I could to not think about him all evening that this flash caught me off guard. A cold, prickly feeling ran up the back of my neck. A young couple passed me, and for one brief moment, it was our faces I saw, smiling, with the wind whipping through our hair. My heart thundered painfully. Something was about to happen.

I looked down the street, seeing people and movement, but there was a surreal, hazy quality about it. There was only my blood rushing, and the soft tempo of the music playing only in my head. The stores wrapped in darkness looked out onto the street with blind eyes. I could no longer feel the cold. Then I began to move swiftly down the street, pulled like a magnet to some source bigger and stronger than myself. There was a break in the throng of people, and without warning he appeared. He watched me approach with wary eyes.

I stopped, and brought a shaky hand to my lips. I had to be imagining things. It had been a long time since there had been any sign of him, but there he was, alone, waiting for me. He wore the long, dark coat again. The movement of it stirring in the gentle breeze caught my eye momentarily. His face turned away from mine, lost in the shadows.

I thought for one fleeting moment he would leave, but he turned his glorious face in my direction once again. His movements seemed to flow, as if underwater. It was mesmerising to watch, and somehow painful. Then we froze, locked in that perfect and unspoilt moment where there was no sound, no distractions, only the two of us in the night.

I reached a trembling hand toward him, but he only smiled a sad, private smile that made my chest tight. I tried to move forward, but I was locked in place, and the more I tried, the more pained his expression became. I couldn't understand if the moment was actually happening, or if it was some kind of illusion. His silken voice inside my head begged me to come to him. I used my strength to continue, but with each step I progressed, the farther the space between us seemed to become. I willed myself with a ferocity I didn't know I possessed.

Everything about him, except his perfect, pale face blurred into the night. The darkness began to close in about me, shrinking snapshot by snapshot. That wonderful, dangerous, seductive smile played across his lips, and I shivered. The soundtrack playing in my head stopped abruptly, replaced by the unsteady rhythm of my pulse.

He moistened his lips with the tip of his crimson tongue, and I felt it against my skin. I trembled uncontrollably as his full lips opened, exposing his cruelly sharp fangs. My body flashed with heat, and a light perspiration covered my skin. The arousal exploded in my head and between my legs. I saw the approval in his cerulean eyes, and experienced the first step in understanding what a future between us held in store. Perhaps, if I had been terrified or repulsed, things would have turned out very differently for me.

His eyes pierced like daggers, brilliant sapphires in the velvet darkness. His mouth opened again, slowly forming words, though there was no sound. “*I want you.*” I did not hear, so much as feel the words inside my head. At the last moment before he disappeared, the face of a pretty, young woman flashed in my mind. It was a face I was sure I had never seen before.

Then my legs started shaking, and my knees buckled beneath me. My knees made a sharp crack against the sidewalk, and the contact sent spasms of pain up my body. I fell to my side, curling my legs to my chest, and tried to will the pain and disorientation away. Then there was nothing.

Chapter 4

The next thing I was aware of was an assault of frantic voices around me. I was cold, and my faced was pressed against a hard, damp surface. Faces peered down at me, worry stamped across their unfamiliar features. Then I heard a voice I recognised, and was comforted though still shaky. I was too exhausted to move. Each time we crossed paths he seemed to transfer a bit of himself onto me, and also sap some of my physical strength.

The crowd shifted, and Shannon's face appeared above my own. Her expression was rigid, distressed, and I suspected angry. She bent down, and pulled me up against her body. Her arms held me tightly, and my body had no resistance. "What the hell happened, Rachel? You shot out of that theatre like a bat outta hell. I thought you'd gone to the washroom, and when you weren't there I looked outside, but you were gone."

I weakly shook my head.

"How did you get all the way down here?"

I didn't know where "down here" was, but I concluded that I must have wandered quite a distance from the theatre. Even if I could speak, I don't know what I would have said. Whatever happened was within me only as fragments, incoherent jolts of movement and images. There was no explanation for what just happened, or what was happening all together.

She looked at the people surrounding us, but most had already moved away, and the few who remained only shook their heads. The one man who spoke up, said, "She was just standing there on the sidewalk with her arm out like she was reaching for something, and then she crumpled to the ground. She dropped pretty hard, but I don't know if she hit her head or anything."

Shannon's look was incredulous. "Yah, okay. Thanks. Maybe if you could all just back up and give her some space." The remaining gawkers slowly retreated, and eventually continued on their way. She returned her eyes to my face. "Are you okay? Did you faint again?"

I started to cough, and she pushed me away from her, while still hanging onto the back of my coat. "Gross. Are you going to be sick?"

I coughed again, and the words scratched their way out of my throat. "No... I'm okay."

"Jesus, Rachel, you are not okay. You've been acting like a freak for weeks. You never do anything anymore but mope around and you don't talk to anyone. You look like you haven't slept in weeks. And then, well, this is the second time something like this has happened. I don't get what's happening with you and you're starting to seriously piss me off."

His face flashed before my eyes. "I thought I saw someone, and I was following them... and then I don't know what happened."

"What are you talking about? Who did you see?" Her dark eyes flashed with suspicion, and I swallowed a hard ball of pain down my throat. "What is going on with you?"

"Help me up." She pulled me onto my feet with a little more force than was necessary and I almost toppled over again. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to explain this... I just thought I saw a guy I know..." The words sounded lame, even to me. I knew I should just stop talking.

"What guy? Not that one you hooked up with at the club? Is that who you're talking about? 'Cause I haven't seen you with, or heard you talk about any other guys since you and Sam broke up."

"Never mind."

"Don't you tell me to 'never mind,' Rachel. We've been friends way too long for you to blow me off. This is like the first time we've done anything together in two months, and you run out on me, and I find you passed out on the street, in the dark. And this is about some guy? I don't get you, girl..."

"I said let it go. I'm sorry I scared you, or pissed you off or whatever you are. I can handle this on my own."

"You don't seem like you're handling anything, actually."

I bit back my anger, because I could understand her point of view. If the roles had been reversed I would think she was acting like an ass too. Truthfully, I was starting to freak myself out. Did I really run after a possible murderer— or worse— down a darkened street? I stumbled slightly, and she caught me under my elbow, holding on hard.

She turned me toward her, forcing me to look her in the face. "Talk to me right now. We're not going anywhere until you give me something here. This is not like you. I'm worried about you."

It made me uncomfortable to see her face pinched in concern. Usually nothing bothered Shannon— one of her qualities I liked the most. I squirmed under her intense scrutiny. "Yes, it's about that guy from the club." I racked my brain for the right way to word what I would say next. "We've seen each other a few times, and I guess I thought there was something more going on than there is. I didn't want you to know 'cause I was embarrassed."

She stuck her chin out slightly, frowning. "And that's what this is about?" Her tone clearly implied that she didn't believe me.

"Uh-huh. I hadn't heard from him in a few days, and then I thought I saw him, and the streets were really busy, and then I don't know what happened. I guess I fainted or slipped or something."

"Really?" Her words were tight, and it hurt me more than I would ever have imagined to lie to her.

"And I guess I haven't been sleeping that well, and I'm tired, and out of it, and yeah, I'm sorry." The words spilled out, tumbling over themselves. I don't think they helped my credibility.

She held up a hand to stop me before I continued. “Well, it’s not like you to go chasing after a guy like this, so I don’t even know what that is about. But if he’s dodging you, or whatever, then he’s a jerk, and you need to let it go.” She gave me a pointed look, and I cringed at the harshness of her words. “As for all this fainting and stuff, I think you need to see a doctor, maybe get something to help you sleep.”

“I guess you’re right.” I made up my mind, then and there, that there was no way I could share what was going on with anyone. No one could understand. I was alone with this, and that was fine with me.

“I mean it, Rach, ditch this guy. It’s not worth it.”

I smiled like I agreed with her then let it go. There was no need to make her any unhappier.

We wandered back to the car in silence, the darkness comforting me. After the feeling of nausea and the weakness passed, I was nearly humming with excitement. That otherworldly anticipation was building, and my craving for him was like a slow boil waiting to spill over. I had heard the words “I want you” in my head, just before he disappeared. I played them over again in my brain, savouring the lyrical beauty of the way the words sounded. The impact of those three words made my heart swell, feeling as if it was slamming into my ribcage. It was crazy, dangerous, and without a doubt true. Somehow, without knowing anything about him, not even his name, I knew I wanted him in return. I would know who he was, and what brought him into my life.

I was lost in my thoughts, barely feeling the movement of the car, until its motion abruptly stopped. I snapped out of my reverie, realising we were already home. I turned to Shannon, who hadn’t said a word the entire ride, but she was already getting out of the car. I pulled open my door, savouring the slap of cool air against my face. She was on the landing, keys in hand, looking at me with barely concealed annoyance on her face.

“Are you coming?”

I closed the door behind me with a barely audible click. “I just need some air.”

“Whatever,” she snapped, going inside. I turned my gaze out to the park across the street as the door closed behind her. His image flashed in my mind, and that familiar prickle danced across my nape. There was something about him that was so delicate, but also extremely masculine. His features were too lovely to be called handsome, but an undeniable strength emanated from him.

The night became heavy, wrapping itself around me as if to cut me off from any other sensation. Then *snap*, and I wasn’t seeing from my perspective any longer. I was seeing through his eyes again, feeling his hunger and thrill. There was a strange sound around me, something I couldn’t immediately identify until the scene before me came cleanly into focus.

A woman sprawled on the floor, a man on top of her, and the sound was moaning— low and terrible, a sound that scurried up my arms. I thought at first they were sounds of sexual neediness, but as the man rolled to the side with the woman still pinned underneath him I could see that she was covered in blood. The look on her face was pain, not pleasure.

The man’s eyes were wild, his body rigid with excitement. He was swelled with a sense of power. Something flashed in his hand as he pulled it up then struck down with incredible force, and the woman shrieked— a sickening, desperate sound. He was stabbing her, over and over, while she tried, pathetically, to get away. She was no match for him. Not even a surge of adrenaline would save her now. He licked his lips, savouring the moment.

Suddenly the man was knocked from behind, and his body tumbled away from the woman to crash into a nearby table. A vase fell and smashed on the floor, the water and flowers exploding over the narrow room. The woman’s eye became large dark caverns against the pallor of her face and the crimson pool spreading around her body. She was hurt badly, and her heart beat too slowly.

The man struggled to right himself, but his legs were tangled in the table. Then he was suddenly lifted upright and slammed violently against the wall. The table shrieked away, and the knife dropped from his hands to skid across the wood floor. Fear was evident on his face. He was angry at having his game interrupted, and the heated emotion lapped at me. The smell of the other man’s sweat and blood was intensely arousing.

“How do you like it when the tables are turned?” my stranger asked, leaning into the man held against the wall, until their faces were pressed together. “Is it as much fun to be the hunted, as the hunter?”

“Fuck off.” The man hissed the words, spittle flying from his lips.

“Now, now. That’s not very nice language, especially in front of a lady.” My attention returned to the woman, who was painfully pulling herself across the room, away from the men. She stopped, panting from the exertion.

With one hand, the stranger raised the man until his feet dangled several feet from the floor. I experienced the ease with which he supported the man’s body, like some strange astral projection of myself in his body. The would-be killer struggled unsuccessfully, his boots making a hollow, knocking sound against the cream-coloured walls. A vein throbbed in his throat, the skin taut with his anger and fear. There was a small sound from the floor, and he turned to meet the woman’s eyes. A pitiful, hateful look simmered there, as she sat in a pool of her own blood, her life leaking from her body.

“Kill him,” she said softly.

With one hand he reached down and grabbed the knife, and in one swift movement sliced the man’s throat from ear to ear. Even before the blood started to spill, his mouth was pressed to the wound, and I heard him drinking. It was a repulsive and yet wonderful sound. A warmth and satisfaction spread throughout my body. Abruptly he pulled back, allowing a small amount of blood to spill from the wound and down the front of the man’s shirt. The lips of the wound gaped like a second mouth.

He tossed the body to the ground, and came to the woman’s side. He looked into her eyes that were racked with pain. He bent over her, and I thought he would kill her too, but he merely pressed his mouth to the deepest wound, and I heard his soft sigh inside my head. When he pulled back, the bleeding had stopped, but the woman was still close to death.

He walked to the phone, dialled and left it on the table where he found it. When he walked out, he left the door wide open, an undeniable invitation to the

emergency response members who would show up for the call.

The last thing that went through my mind before I was thrust back to my own reality was his voice, “I know you see. I don't understand, but something inside of me is open to you. That's how I know you are the one...”

I came back to reality with an enormous gasp, as though I had been holding my breath under water until my lungs would burst. My body was itchy with longing. I was hot, trembling, and throbbing with lust. I was a bit disgusted with myself that what I witnessed aroused me. Had feelings like this always been inside me somewhere?

I went quietly into the house, past Shannon who was watching TV and didn't acknowledge me, and entered my room.

I would be waiting for him.

For hours I sat in the darkness. The sky was a dark grey, without a hint of moon. Only the twinkling stars afforded some break in the vast expanse of night. The silence was thick and unnerving. Eventually I lay down, exhausted but unable to fall asleep. I tossed restlessly, the anxiety of waiting brewed under my skin, making me twitchy and uncomfortable. I don't know how many times I looked from the clock to window and back again before 4 AM finally crept up. The assault of anticipation on my body was fierce, and every time I closed my eyes he was there.

Just as I was about to go downstairs to get a drink, having long ago given up the thought of getting any sleep that night, a soft scraping sounded against the side of the house. My window slowly opened with a gentle whisper. I waited, breath held tight, and a small bead of cold sweat trickled down my spine.

There was a movement of shadow; almost too quick for my eyes to perceive, then his piercing blue eyes appeared in the darkness. Joy and fear struggled with each other, neither one strong enough to push the other aside.

Softly, the voice spoke again inside my head. The words were alive inside me, sending shivers of sensation through my body. My throat tight and dry, I didn't make a sound. I didn't move.

He stood just inside the window, his outline barely visible by the soft light of the stars. He was as still as I was, and that small distance felt like a giant chasm between us, keeping me from his touch. “May I come to you?”

“Yes.” I sighed.

He hesitated before he moved. “Be sure that this is what you want. I will take your love only because you wish to give it to me. I will not force it or trick it from you.”

“Yes.” The word sounded repeatedly in my brain, and was the only thing I could think or say.

Suddenly, but tenderly, he was upon me. My body screamed at the contact. He stroked my hair with his delicate, white hands, leaning in to kiss my forehead and eyelids. The touch of his warm mouth was like silk. In that moment I felt an inexplicable connection between us. He lay beside me on the bed and took me in his arms. He held me tightly against his body, murmuring in my ear. His hands on my body sent shivers of fire across my skin. I was powerless against the way our bodies craved each other, and I had reached a point that I didn't want to resist, no matter what the consequences might be.

I had never seen anyone in my life more stunning than he was that night. Up close, without distraction, his beauty was even more flawless. His eyes were cut from sapphire, and they looked right into my soul. There were no lines, blemishes, nothing but endless, perfect white skin, except his lips, which blushed with red, and were heaven against my own. Holding me in his arms as still as he was, he could have been a corpse, but for the twinkle in his eyes. The irrepressible power emanating from him could not be ignored.

“You know I can feel your love and desire for me, as I know you feel it from me. I have felt you in my head, seeing from my eyes, thinking my thoughts. I can't understand how this could be, but it's something that simply is. You are a part of me somehow, as I am a part of you.” His words fluttered against my ear, and I knew they were true.

He placed his hands gently on each side of my face and looked me in the eye. I drowned in his longing. “I can see what you are thinking, feel the reactions of your body to mine. I'm drawn to you like I have never been to another in my life.” He rolled onto his back then, face to the ceiling. “I am incapable of resisting.”

I pulled myself closer to him, my head resting on his shoulder. My hands found their way into his soft hair, my fingers thrilling at the texture. Slowly I traced my finger along his strong jaw line, oblivious to anything else. He pressed his cheek into the cup of my hand, his skin cool and dry. We were facing each other then, our eyes locked, and my breath hot between us. His mouth lightly touched the exposed skin on my neck, and I gave a low moan of pleasure. His tongue traced the line of my vein, and I shivered. I grasped his shoulder tightly and he reacted immediately, almost crushing me in his embrace.

At last he leant in and pressed his lips against my own, the kisses urgent and greedy. Phantoms hands shivered along my skin, seducing all my senses. The last vestige of strength coiled within me burst, and I seized him savagely, my hungry mouth moving across his face. A fine mist of perspiration covered my skin, and my clothes were damp against my body. When our passion reached its crescendo and I was almost mad with need, I felt him pull away. He hesitated, his eyes tight with what I felt to be confusion. For one terrible moment I thought he might leave.

His face lowered, hidden against my shoulder, and his tongue snaked furiously across my throat. My heart was in my ears, my blood rushing like a tremendous waterfall. My body was slick, and painfully hot. I was bombarded with emotions— lust, fear, anger, need— a strange intermingling of my thoughts and his.

When he bit me, the pain was unbelievably hot and bright. Streamers of colour shot across my line of vision. My body convulsed with the trauma, and adrenaline thundered through my blood. Then there was only the pressure and the ecstasy of his teeth in my skin.

The brilliance of his skin stung my eyes, and my wound throbbed like a second heartbeat. My body reacted naturally to the pain, my arms pushing against his granite chest. My legs thrashed, and bile crept up the back of my throat. Yet my mind clung there, dancing that fine line between pain and pleasure.

Sound hissed in my ears, my blood rushing.

Then I slipped, falling into the velvet darkness of shock. My body pooled into the bed, and there was no longer any pain. I was only aware of the heat draining from me, and the sound of his mouth against my neck. My hands slipped from their grip on his shoulders, landing lifelessly to the bed. A cool tear slid slowly down my cheek.

He pulled his mouth away from my neck, the suction broken with a soft, sickening plop. My stomach cramped violently. Slowly he raised his head until we were face to face, his wild eyes staring down into mine. His beautiful, angelic features were smeared with blood, and his lips were drawn back to expose his wickedly sharp fangs. His tongue hungrily lapped up the blood remaining on his face, the blood that he had just sucked from my body. Then he roughly pressed his mouth to mine, and I tasted the coppery liquid on my tongue, gagging as it trickled down my throat.

“No tricks,” he projected into my mind, “I want you to feel and be aware of it all.”

My mind reeled, switching channels from the harsh reality to a disconnection from my body. As sick, weak and violated as I felt, I was not afraid. I coughed as he pulled himself away. I felt nothing in my body but coldness.

His face hovered over mine, fangs protruding, distorting the face I loved. His dark curls were damp with either my blood or my tears. I used all my strength to raise my hand to his face, but it was too difficult, and my hand flopped onto the bed again. As I watched, the teeth slowly receded and he brought his sleeve across his face, wiping away the last remnants of his feeding. His face contorted with agony, and anger. His blue eyes were locked with mine, and a silent message passed between us. “*This is what it means to be with me.*”

“I know,” I croaked, and with the silence broken, a painful mosquito-like whine foreshadowed my losing fight against passing out.

He pulled my limp body up in his arms, kissing me with brutal passion. I tasted blood in his kiss, and I couldn't be certain whether it was his or mine. My head lolled against his arm, my vision swirling and darkening around the edges. He pressed me tightly to his chest, his scent sharp in my nostrils and his shirt rough against my cheek. I was terribly cold, and my legs tingled.

After an indeterminate amount of time I felt his warm lips on my ear. “Sleep, my angel. This can go no further tonight.” Gently he lay me down on the bed, and pulled the covers tightly around my body. He kissed my cheek, and brushed the hair lightly away from my face. “I will return tomorrow, and we can talk about what has happened here.”

With a whisper of movement he slipped through the window and disappeared into the night. As I drifted into unconsciousness I heard him say, “My name is Giovanni.”

Chapter 5

I awoke the next morning with a head full of fog. As my eyes opened I was momentarily unsure of where I was. My throat was parched and my tongue glued to the bottom of my mouth. I ached everywhere like bad hangover. The afternoon light streaming in through my uncovered window was warm on my face. It was also stick-pins-in-your-eyes bright, and my pupils contracted painfully in response. I attempted to make my way over to the other side of the room to snatch the blinds shut, but had to abandon my plan about halfway there when I was overcome with nausea. I turned abruptly, and lurched-stumbled my way into the bathroom.

My hasty movement only intensified the sickness, and I collapsed onto the cool tile floor. Violently I relieved myself into the toilet. The dim bathroom was a crazy, lopsided carousel. Every time I thought I was done and stood, I was overcome again. I was sick until there was nothing left, and I sat there retching pitifully, my body weak from the effort.

I silently thanked the powers that be that there was no window in the bathroom because my body was responding harshly to the sunlight. I let the coolness of the toilet seat and the dim atmosphere, calm me. I couldn't remember having ever been so horribly sick before, not even after a particularly hard night of drinking. My body was sore from getting ill.

I concentrated very hard on having clear linear thought processes, evaluating what it was that I needed to make myself feel better. I decided on a glass of water, aspirin and a huge cup of coffee. I leant back against the counter, mentally preparing myself to stand and deal with the unsteadiness that was unquestionably going to accompany that movement.

My mind reeled with strange images— flashes of his smile, my bed, blood and the face of that pretty, young woman I had never met before. I remembered going to the movie with Shannon, but nothing of the actual movie itself. I remembered the crowds, the restless, shifting mass of strangers, and darkness interspersed with yellow light from the tall streetlamps. Something else lingered there in the deepest recesses of my mind, something I couldn't quite pull out of its hiding place.

The memory dancing in the shadows of my brain suddenly grabbed a hold and began to gnaw. More of the dream spilled forth, dominated by his presence. I saw his face, the flash of his eyes, and the way his milky skin glowed in the blanket of darkness covering my room. I saw the open window, and a sharp bolt of adrenaline shot through me, though I couldn't coherently understand what was ominous about it. Why should an open window cause such a jarring sense of panic to snap through my mind? Then there was a flash of movement in the room. I remembered our embrace, his words, and his bite. “Giovanni.”

Instantly, my hand shot to my throat, and a small, strangled mewling escaped my lips. I was shocked when my fingers found a rough patch of skin on the left side of my neck. The skin was angry and tender to the touch. I shook my head. I had been dreaming, hadn't I? My mind ran through the events, a staccato of individual images that somehow would not mesh together. My hand trembled as it hovered over my wound, and the nausea threatened to return.

He followed me home last night? I really saw him outside, on the dark streets? Did he really come into my bedroom, through my window? Our encounter was real? It seemed too bizarre to have actually happened, and much too dangerous.

Shakily, and with a heavy hand on the edge of the toilet for more support, I manoeuvred myself up from the floor. I turned to face my reflection in the mirror. In the dimness I looked much the same as I always did, though my hair was plastered unflatteringly to my head. As I reached over to turn on the light, I could feel the shock of it before it actually happened. The light snapped on, flooding the small room with a harsh, artificial glow. I blinked repeatedly, the soft whine of electricity seeming unnaturally loud.

The light did nothing for my appearance. It wrapped me in a sickly hue, which made my fair complexion sallow, and turned the bags under my eyes into angry, purple bruises. I looked tired, my eyes pulled tightly as I squinted against the assault of light. My cheekbones seemed more pronounced than usual, giving my face a gaunt, almost skeletal appearance. My lips were as white as chalk, as was the skin on my face and neck.

Slowly I turned to the right, pulling away my hair and exposing the source of discomfort on my neck. I regarded the mark I found there with a mixture of revulsion, and irrepressible fascination. He had bitten me. The two tiny, meaty puncture wounds were still fresh and raw-looking. I almost expected them to begin bleeding. I imagined with an inexplicable excitement the sight of fresh blood erupting from the bite, and dripping down my pale neck. I leant closer to the mirror, straining for a better look.

The holes themselves were no bigger than the tip of a ballpoint pen— perfect, angry red indentations in my flesh, with a quarter-sized shadow of blue bruising surrounding them. I poked my finger at the wound hesitantly, my lips held in a grimace of expected pain. It was tender, but not really painful. As I ran my fingers over the area there was a dull throbbing. Squinting against the light, I thought I saw a vague hint of a vein running away from the bite, down the side of my neck. I had never noticed a vein there before, but my skin was much whiter and more fragile-looking than ever before.

Aside from the paleness of my complexion, and the site of the bite, no miraculous transformation had taken place. I stood, transfixed by my reflection, but was somehow disappointed. What I could recall was amazing, but I wanted more. I had it in my mind that somehow our connection, when it finally stepped over the line, would bring with it a power and a resolution as great as the need that had brought us together in the first place. I felt somehow ripped off, and other than a name, I had no satisfying answers.

I forced myself to turn and walk out of the bathroom. As I made my unsteady way down the stairs, a thread of anxiety pulled at the back of my mind. I had almost reached the kitchen when the warm aroma of coffee wafted toward me. It smelled like heaven. I stepped around the corner where the warm sunlight was pouring through the window, and I jerked as it made contact with my eyes.

Peripherally, I was aware of two people sitting at the table, though none of us said a word. Shannon must have gone out after I went to bed, or called someone over. She had been ticked off at me, and maybe she wanted a distraction or someone to talk to.

Trying to hide my unsteadiness, I opened the cupboard and pulled down a cup with slow, deliberate actions. It clinked a little too loudly as it made contact with the counter, and I winced at the sharp assault on my ears. I mixed in copious amounts of cream and sugar with the black liquid, and unseeing, looked out the window. The spoon swirled round and round, in an almost hypnotic motion.

The warm liquid poured over my tongue, filling me with warmth before it disappeared down my throat. There it met my raw stomach, to be captured in a tight knot. The taste felt wonderful, and strange too, drawing a recent experience from my thoughts. I was reminded of the taste of my blood as it spilled from his mouth to mine. I brought a hand to my lips, where a dreamy half-smile lingered. I was instantly aware of an intense hunger, and the stirrings of longing for him.

I was lost in that moment, far away from my house and time. An odd sound played at the edge of my memory, intruding and distracting me from the sensations accompanying it. I shot back to reality. This was the sound of someone clearing their throat. I was suddenly aware that I had been standing in the kitchen, coffee cup in a raised hand, staring off into space. My hand dropped suddenly, spilling the contents out across the tile floor.

I met Shannon's eyes, and found something there that surprised and hurt me. She was looking at me with clear, undeniable pity. As I returned her gaze an intense, unbridled anger sparked inside of me, and my body tensed painfully to contain it. A brief, hot flash of Shannon grasped in my hands and my mouth locked on her throat filled my brain. An angry warmth surged through me at the thought of causing her pain. I smiled.

"Sorry." I placed the cup on the counter. I cleaned up the mess from the floor, and with my coffee refilled joined Shannon at the table. Belatedly, I noticed that the other person present was a woman named Amanda, who had in recent months become friends with Shannon. She happened to be one of my least favourite of Shannon's friends, which she knew, and perhaps that had been the motivation for calling her over for breakfast. I smiled, completely aware of how bizarre my actions must seem to the two of them. She didn't smile in return, just resumed eating her toast.

I sipped my coffee, trying to regain my composure as I racked my brain for a topic to steer us away from my recent behaviour. I was not in the mood to explain or defend myself. I saw the two of them pass a strained look, and I surmised that they had been talking about me before I came down. Shannon didn't speak to me for a long time, not until my cup was empty. She just eyed me wearily, and I silently prepared myself for the lecture that was undoubtedly coming. Running a hand through my matted tangle of hair, I sighed, suddenly remembering how thoroughly awful I appeared.

Finally she put her cup down, and turned to face me. I raised my eyebrows in question as she hesitated. "Have you looked at yourself in the mirror today, Rach?" Her words were harsh. I felt the sting of their meaning. I flashed to the vision of myself that I had experienced right before coming down stairs. If she only knew. "You look like hell. Really, you've been looking not good for a few weeks now... do you even sleep anymore?"

I kept silent for a few moments. When finally I spoke I chose my words carefully, and it was difficult as I fought back the building anger. Her voice had a cool, confrontational tone to it I had never heard before.

"Yes, I sleep, and yes, I know I look like crap. I just didn't sleep well last night."

Her face was tight, like after the movies. I knew then that any chance of salvaging our friendship was dead, but I played the part for her benefit. I cowed under her stare.

"Well, I think this is just more proof that you need some kind of medical help with your sleeping issues. Last night we both heard you thrashing around, and you're getting so thin, and pale looking. I mean the bags under your eyes look like unbelievably terrible..."

Amanda smirked.

I rubbed my thumb along my lips nervously. "I know I've lost some weight, and I haven't been getting out much. I'm assuming this is coming from some kind of concern?" Now my words were sharp.

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "Of course I'm concerned. I mean, I thought we were friends, or at least we used to be." She pushed her chair out, and went to the counter to refill her cup. Without taking a sip, she returned her focus to me, and I could feel the intensity building. Beside me, Amanda shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "I really don't get what's going on with you. I feel like I don't even know you anymore."

She paused, then a strange look passed over her. "This isn't still about that guy is it? Did you sneak out and meet him last night or something?"

"What guy?" Amanda piped up.

I glowered in her direction, but could not stop a flash of his beautiful face from appearing in my mind. "No, it's not about some guy! For God's sake, Shannon... you know I'm not you. I react to things differently!"

She balked. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

I could barely control my anger then. "It means that it's none of your business! I'm just going through some stuff, and it's my stuff, and if you don't like how I'm acting then stay away from me. I'm not asking for your help, and believe me, I'm not holding out for your understanding, because there is no possible way you could understand!" I was on my feet without being aware of standing.

"You are making absolutely no sense. You look like hell, Rachel. You're irritable all the time, you zone out, and you never talk to anyone anymore. If you're in trouble then you'd better speak up, 'cause I'm not going to ask again. Are you on drugs? Are you being abused? What the fuck is going on?"

My body was rigid with anger. On one level I knew Shannon's worry and irritation with me was legitimate—I was acting strangely. Yet a fury was brewing, and even though it was not completely justified, I couldn't stop my reaction to her accusations. A cold stab of realisation went through my heart. This is how it felt to close yourself off from someone you loved. "Nothing is going on, and I'm asking you please to leave me alone. Things will work themselves out."

"You know that's not an answer." Her eyes never wavered from my face.

"It's the best answer you're going to get."

"Fine. If that's the way you want it. You're a big girl, and you have the right to do whatever you want with your life. Just remember I have tried to be a friend."

Unexpectedly, I felt the sting of tears in my eyes. "I know you have, and I appreciate it. More than you know."

The tension in the room was unbearable. I picked up my cup and walked to the counter where Shannon stood. I looked into her eyes— full of worry and disappointment— and attempted to smile. “I’m okay, really.” Was I?

My words fell on deaf ears. “You know I don’t believe you, but there’s nothing I can do if you won’t tell me what’s going on.”

“Then that’s that... ” With those words, I left the room.

I paused at the bottom the stairs, feeling the tension drain out of my body. I heard Shannon return to the table, the scrape of her chair along the floor a chainsaw in my head. I cringed involuntarily. I became aware of a sharp pain in my palm, and looking down I realised my fists were clenched with such force my nails were biting into the skin. Amanda’s voice filtered out, “You’re right, she is being weird, and I haven’t seen her in a while, you know. She looks terrible. What’s with those bags under her eyes?” I silently wished her a painful encounter with a Mack truck.

Shannon was in agreement, her voice now more sad than angry. “She looks pretty rough.”

“Well, there’s nothing you can do if she’s going to be like that.”

“I guess not.”

Then Amanda said something that made my heart thunder into high gear. “Did you see that mark on her neck? I’ve never seen a hickey like that before.”

“I noticed too. Why would she let someone do that to her?”

I couldn’t listen any longer after that. As silently as I could, I made my way back up the stairs to the bathroom. I looked at my reflection once again, seeing the same chalky skin, tired eyes and a new tightness from the effects of the tense conversation. I suspected this appearance was a stage, a prelude to a metamorphosis. I could feel it in my flesh and bones, and the blood rushing through my veins. I had seen it in his eyes, the image flashing in my mind. As sure as I was of this change being inevitable, I was also sure it would mean saying good-bye to everything I had previously been and known.

I let the temperature rise to almost scalding before stepping into the shower, and relished the feeling as the water pounded down on my weary body. I ached terribly. The steam filled the room and my lungs, its presence at once soothing and cleansing. My mind turned this way and that, thoughts shooting off into wild tangents incorporating both fact and fantasy. I saw flashes of events that had already occurred, and of things I surmised were yet to come. It was exhausting trying to sort it all out.

A terrible anguish filled up my chest, pressing outward, needing to find an escape. “Let it go,” my mind pleaded with itself. Then I did. There, under the hot umbrella of water and protected from prying eyes and ears, I released it all. My tears were lost in the water, terrible sobs wracking my body. I sat there until the water turned cold, letting go of all my fear, resentment and insecurity. I let the scars of my soul wash down the drain along with the dirt from my body.

When it was done, I was renewed, empowered and secure in a way that was foreign to all those I would soon leave behind.

I stood there, naked and dripping wet, smiling at my reflection in the mirror. Then, after wrapping myself in a towel, I returned to bed, where I spent the remaining daylight hours tossing in a fitful sleep, dreaming of him.

Chapter 6

That night arrived in a cool, quiet whisper that roused me from my draining sleep. I stretched, my back arched like a cat. I hovered on the edges of wakefulness, enveloped in the comforting vestiges of sleep, when my brain snapped back to reality. In a flash, I was at the window looking out into the waiting darkness. I half expected to find him resting on the window's ledge, a playful and deadly seductive smile on his lips. He wasn't there, though, but I wasn't worried. He would be there soon.

I threw on a comfortable pair of tights, and my favourite black sweater. I caught sight of myself in the mirror on my vanity as I pulled my hair from the neck of my sweater. The bite was barely visible. It had improved drastically during my slumber, no more noticeable than a freckle. In fact, my appearance all around was greatly improved. I was still pale, but I wasn't as unhealthy-looking as before. My skin had a soft sheen, a slight luminescence catching the light. My eyes were alive with vibrant colour, sapphires set against the backdrop of my unblemished skin. The changes had already started.

My attention was drawn away to the framed picture atop the vanity's surface, with my jewellery, perfume and other assorted personal items. It was a picture of my mother and me, taken when I was about eleven years old. We were both caught frolicking on the beach, with the grey-blue Atlantic Ocean filling the background. My mother had her face turned up toward the photographer, her smile wide, and happiness in her eyes. I was just below her, in the process of emptying a bucket of sand to help in the construction of an enormous castle we had been working on. That was one of the last family vacations I can remember taking, with both my parents and my brother in attendance. A lump of remorse formed in my throat. My father had been dead for many years and my brother lived several hours away in another city with his wife and small children. My mother had moved on to a new life of her own. Days like that died a long time ago.

I took one last look at myself then turned the picture down before I left the room. The house was unnaturally quiet. I assumed Shannon had gone out, or left for work early, and I was glad for the chance to get out without a confrontation. I didn't have the patience for questions I could not answer, and I was too keyed up to lie. I had an undeniable urge to get outside. I pulled a pair of boots from the closet and laced them up tightly. I also grabbed my long coat and hat, and headed out into the crisp night air.

The whole neighbourhood seemed to be wrapped in the same unnerving silence as the house. I was all but bursting with anticipation, knowing without question he would keep his promise to return to me.

A slight breeze caused the trees to sway lazily, and I noticed that they gave off a wonderfully sweet smell I had not noticed before. It had snowed, the first snowfall of the year blanketing the ground with a soft covering of whiteness. As I moved down the driveway, the ground crackled under my feet, and filled me with childish delight. My skin was the exact colour of the snow, and both glowed bright and clear. All my senses were alive with anticipation, and it was wonderful.

The feeling of that night was complete and total fascination. My eyes saw farther, and more clearly than ever before. I could hear, and smell and taste things in the night no one else could be aware of. It was as if the night was its own entity, a being capable of communicating with me through every surface of my body. My senses were attuned to its intimate, secretive whisper as it offered up the wisdom hidden in its darkness. It took great effort to keep myself focused.

I walked to the park that wrapped around the back-end of my subdivision. As I made my way by houses I had passed a hundred times before, I looked at them with fresh eyes. All my senses were heightened, to a level that was almost painful.

I pressed on, my footsteps ringing loudly in the empty street. I savoured the coldness of the air as it penetrated my lungs.

Before I knew it, I entered the park, and the tennis courts loomed before me. A slightly off-kilter lamppost over the courts cast sinister, elongated shadows across the asphalt surface. I passed the empty courts, and the illusion of safety and visibility they offered, to head deeper into the heart of the darkness. My body hummed with excitement, muscles tensed under my pale, taught skin.

A sharp, but almost undetectable buzzing sounded in my ears. The cold air prickled softly at my exposed skin, but the sensation warmed me with its friction.

My throat narrowed tightly. I couldn't have made a sound if I'd wanted to. Silently, a sprinkle of wet flakes landed on my face. I did not need sound to announce my presence. What was waiting for me in the darkness was linked to me in a way that transcended human senses and emotions. My brain filled with a flash of the park as seen out of his eyes, his line of sight angled toward me from the far end of the field where the public school was situated. Brilliant sparks burst in my stomach. A whisper of wind lifted my hair.

Then the air changed. It was very subtle, but I was so attuned to the feeling of it around me I noticed the change immediately. It grew darker, the air denser. The night circled in around me like a spotlight. What lay beyond a five-foot radius was lost as if behind a closed door. I waited precariously, wavering between the sureties that he was close, and the uncertainty of what our meeting would bring. Then I heard his voice, soft and silvery inside my brain.

"Come to me," he said.

I was so ebullient, that at the sound of his voice my body was shocked into immobility. I closed my eyes, images of him swimming across the inside of my lids. A warm flush crept up my neck, and onto my face. Moving deeper into the park, my feet carried me along swiftly and surely, though I was walking blind. I felt a gentle pull, reminiscent of the touch of his hands on my body. I was not afraid, or even uncertain. I knew without doubt I should be there.

Then, without sound or movement, his hands were in my hair. I shuddered, my need of him shooting painfully to the surface of my consciousness. He hungrily moved his mouth to my bare neck, his soft lips hovering on the wound he had inflicted the night before. His tongue probed its rough surface, eliciting both pleasure and pain. I was drawn against his body, my shivering convulsions against his firm chest. It was suddenly damp and warm between my legs, my entire being consumed with greedy, selfish desire.

Aggressively, I was thrust back from his embrace. I snapped my eyes open, and his face swam hazily into focus. The snow fell softly upon his ebony hair, leaving streaks of wetness, like tears on his beautiful face. His eyes were brilliant jewels. I reached my hand out tentatively to touch his face, and he

smiled. There was something sweet and innocent about his smile, a hint of the boy he must have been, hiding behind the man.

I wanted to speak, but my mind was locked, and my throat as dry as sand. In all honesty, I don't know what words would have been worthy of breaking that moment between us. I couldn't take my stare away from his face, and his eyes never wavered from mine. The wind swirled around us, blowing delicate snowflakes onto our hair and clothes.

I received an unexpected flash of his face, bloody and savage, as it was in my bed the night before. With my free hand I reached to my neck and stroked the bite mark. Then his other hand closed over mine, pulling it away. His fingers lightly brushed the tender flesh, causing a terrible throbbing as the blood rushed through the vein. I tried to resist, but couldn't stop my eyes from slipping shut.

The only thing I was aware of was my blood and the wind. "Open your eyes and look at me. Please." His voice was gentle and light.

I opened my eyes, pushing away the agony of need contorting my body, and forced myself to concentrate on his face. His eyes burnt like demon fire, turning the blue to violet, and as I looked into them my body relaxed. I stumbled, limbs heavy and my senses dulled. The tips of his elongated teeth were in his smile.

Then in a glitch of space and time, his face was less than an inch from my own. My body shuddered. He leant over my upturned face, and gently pressed his lips against mine. I pressed back, unable to get close enough, crushing my mouth into his. I was beyond reasoning, humility or the capacity to care for anything other than my immediate physical desires. I wanted nothing more than to lie down with him on the soft blanket of snow, and have him ravage me in any way he wanted. I knew with unshakable conviction that I would follow him to the ends of the earth if he wanted me to.

"I know, Rachel. I feel the same way." His velvet voice responded to my unspoken words. "I feel the need to be with you, every bit as much as you feel the need to be with me. I have never met another woman who has affected me like you have. I guess I didn't think that it was even possible to have these types of feelings anymore." He paused, his eyes drifting up to the sweeping of stars against the grey sky, then back to my eyes that were brimming with tears. "Each moment that I am not with you, I hunger. Not just a physical craving but also an emotional one. I also feel your sickness at our separations and your longing for me. If you give your heart to me here tonight, I promise I will love you for all eternity. I know I have no right to ask this of you, or any woman for that matter, because of what I am." His eyes lowered from mine, and when he spoke again his voice was tight with pain. "I am a monster."

"You're not a monster," I replied.

He looked me straight in the face then, eyes blazing. "Yes, I am a monster, but I have discovered that I am still capable of love."

Those words stood between us, the meaning both powerful and ominous. "I need to hear the words, Rachel. Your thoughts are jumbled. I can't take the risk of misunderstanding. This is too important."

A collage of emotions filled me at his words, and fear seemed to be the overwhelming leader of all the feelings rushing through me. I thought of the hospital deaths, the two attacks I witnessed psychically, and the pain I experienced from his bite. I lingered in that murky space between fear and lust.

He stared at me, with eyes full of longing. A sharp bolt of pain shot into me. With our connection open like it was in that moment, his inner turmoil was savagely projected into me. Still I could not speak. I trembled as I thought of all the things I would have to leave behind, and of all the things I did not understand. A petulant cloud of uncertainty washed through me, and I was caught off guard by my faltering resolve.

He traced his cold hand along the edge of my jaw, and down my neck. Flakes of wet snow fell on my cheeks. There was a flash in my mind of the two of us locked in our deadly embrace, and my body rocked with the force of the memory. Then, in a whirl of darkness and snow, my love was gone.

Instantly, I crumpled to the cold, wet ground, a puppet whose strings had suddenly been cut. My tears burst forth with fury, and gigantic, heaving sobs escaped from my lips. I pounded my fists against the frozen ground.

"Come back to me," I wailed into the wind. "Please, Giovanni, come back to me. I'm sorry... I love you." I raised myself into a seated position, the dampness soaking into my leggings, making icy contact with my skin.

I waited for what seemed like an eternity, my dreadful howls dying into the silence of the night. My tears froze against my stinging cheeks. My heart felt shrivelled and black, a tiny raisin in my chest. An anguished breath rattled my chest. Seeing and hearing nothing, I pushed myself to my feet to begin the walk home.

With a whisper of sound he returned. He stopped about ten feet away, the swirling snow a shimmering curtain to his dark clothes and hair. His expression was solemn and still. As I closed the distance between us, I discerned tears mingled with the wetness of the snow on his cheeks, streaks slightly tinged with red.

Stopping just short of touching him, I was afraid to move in case he was a figment of my imagination. I was petrified he wasn't real, or that any mistake on my part would dissolve him from my life completely. Then he reached for my hand and pulled me into his embrace. I pressed my ear against his chest, which was as silent as the night around us.

Eventually he stepped back, still holding me, and looked into my face with a troubled expression. "Did you mean it?"

I nodded.

He made a sad, whistling sound, suddenly unable to meet my eyes then hugged me tightly and pressed his lips to the top of my head. "I don't want this to be a mistake for you. I didn't have a choice about it myself, and though I have come to terms with who I— What I am, I need this to be something that you choose. There is more to my story than what you have deduced so far. There is much more."

"I'm willing to accept whatever the truth is."

"I don't know that you can. I know you see the things I see, and sometimes are able to absorb my feelings, but you don't really know what's at stake. You don't know about my past... or how I came to be like I am now." As the words left his lips, I saw a hazy memory of my love, and a tall, blond man in a

shabby, dim room. Just as I was about to see the other man's face, his image was ripped from my mind. The memory of the man invoked fury and bitterness.

"It doesn't matter where you've come from, or what you are. You know I've seen the dark things you do, and still I'm here."

"Yes, that's true. You should be afraid to be alone with me, yet here you are. Sometime I would like to share my past with you. It's been a long time since I have had anyone to talk to, since I've been close to someone I would want to share my stories with."

"We have years to share ourselves with each other."

"I just don't want you to have any regrets."

His mouth was against my face, and I smiled at the euphoria that his touch brought to me. As I lingered in that warm cocoon I saw the face of the strange girl again, her blond hair splayed around her, her mouth open in a soundless scream. I clutched myself tighter to his chest, squeezing my eyes shut against the image. When it cleared I looked back up into his face, and was pleased to find his smile had returned. "I want to go with you. I want to know."

"If you come with me I will always protect you, I will never hurt you."

"I believe you."

Then as the wind kicked up around us in the empty field, and the snowflakes danced through the air, I was pulled more tightly into his embrace. His movements were too fast to make sense of the space around me. There was only the rushing darkness and the snow. When we finally stopped, my chest ached and my head spun. I didn't have any sense of how far we'd gone, or how much time had passed.

We stopped outside a vaguely familiar building, in an area with no outside light. The ground under our feet felt like concrete. I was led, my hand in his, to a door all but hidden in the building's exterior, barely tall enough to allow him to enter without ducking his head. A strange sense of déjà vu overcame me. It was a place I knew, yet didn't. A narrow flight of stairs led directly down from the doorway into a long, damp hallway. The end curved sharply, making it impossible to see where the passage ended.

We made our way along, past the curve to the last door in the hallway. The walls were limestone— a common construction element in many of the old buildings in town. I ran my hand along the cold, rough surface as we walked, tingles of anticipation caressing my skin.

He pulled a key from his pocket with an easy grace, opened the door, and whisked us inside. The room was small, dimly lit by a single lamp on a table across from the door. A bed held a tangle of sheets, and shelves upon shelves of books lined the walls. The floor was stone, like the walls. The only small window had been boarded up.

Many pieces of art were displayed about the room, some framed, others loose, both large and small. Some of the pictures had been painted, other sketched in pencil or charcoal, and most were portraits. I move closer to examine a series of paintings lined up against the wall under the window. These depicted many faces I didn't know, both men and women, of all ages. Here I found the face of the girl I kept seeing flashes of in my mind. Her image, as captured on the paper, showed her youthful beauty and her joy. It was a far cry from the face of terror I had been having a recurring glimpse of.

Last in the series, this one executed without colour, was a perfect representation of me. I turned to him in surprise, finding his posture stiff and his expression unreadable. I covered my face with my hands, feeling both in awe and somewhat embarrassed. Then I leant down and traced my fingers along the lines of my face in the portrait. "You did these?"

"Yes. I was an artist once. A long time ago."

"They're beautiful."

"Thank you." He settled himself on the edge of the bed. "I started that one of you right after I saw you at the hospital. One of the benefits of being such as I am is having a photographic memory, but even if that were not true I would never have been able to forget your face."

I turned, so swelled with pride and desire I thought I would burst. I brought myself into his arms and crushed my lips down onto his. He kissed me back greedily, his tongue probing my mouth. His teeth pressed against my lip, making my desire even more urgent. When he pulled back, a dark, predatory look on his face was quickly replaced with a smile. "This is where I live."

"Alone?" It seemed there was much more to the building than this hallway, and single room, and there was a definite weird smell.

A peculiar, almost amused looked flickered across his face. "Not exactly." A soft echoing quality to our conversation made the building seem enormous and hollow.

Roughly, I was pulled onto the bed. His eyes were wild, displaying a fierceness I had never experienced before. His silken lips drew back in a snarl, exposing his fangs. His tongue snaked out, yet it was an intimidating gesture instead of a seductive one. He rolled us over, pinning me under his body, holding my shoulders in a vice-like grip. In that instant his beauty was gone, and he unmasked the beast living beneath his exquisite facade. I saw then what the terrified people in my visions saw. I understood that nameless girl's terror, and couldn't help but feel a twinge of my own.

My shoulders screaming with pain, I thought for sure his grip would pulverise them. An awful whimpering sounded in my ears, and belatedly I realised the sound was mine. He must have seen something in my face that affected him, because just a suddenly as he gripped me, he released me. Giovanni rolled over onto his back beside me on the bed, and took my hand. His touch was cool and firm. My heart was racing, and I felt dizzy. My shoulders throbbed like a second heartbeat.

Interspersed with my own thoughts were memories of another time, and people I didn't know. A young, dark-haired boy ran and laughed with a group of other dark-haired children. Then I saw a church and an expanse of crystal-blue water. Then, this same group of people appeared again, matured to adults. Then her face, again and again, as the terror ravaged her features. Each time it came, it rocked through my senses then was quickly overshadowed by other, more pleasant scenes.

Finally I dared to turn my head to face him. He lay completely still. I tried to reach out with my mind, but something blocked our connection. It was like fighting against granite. I squeezed his hand that still gripped mine, and waited for a response. His chest was still, without the rise and fall of human breathing, just like I knew there was no heartbeat. I lay my head against the side of his body and waited.

When he spoke, his voice was heavy with emotion. “I told you I would explain who I am, and where I came from. My full name is Giovanni Alejandro Ruiz y Castillo, though I have not used that identity in many years.” He paused. “I have been alone for so very long. After I was changed I thought any chance for love and companionship had died with my humanity. I never imagined experiencing what I am right now could ever happen. Early on I entertained the thought of having someone to exist with, and I have even tried to make myself a companion, with disastrous results. I never imagined I would have the chance to love again.” I experienced a flash of a small boy, a huge grin on his golden-skinned face.

I took a deep breath, and gathered my last vestige of courage. It was my chance to speak, and I could not screw it up like I did in the park. I chose my words carefully. “I am glad to finally have a name for you. It's one of the most beautiful names I have ever heard.” The words tumbled out of my mouth too quickly, and I took a breath to slow myself. He turned his face to mine, so the tips of our noses brushed. *Keep it cool, Rachel*. I belatedly realised he might have caught that. Great. “I too had lost my belief in finding someone who could touch that part of myself I keep hidden from the world. I've only had one real relationship in my life, and it ended badly. I've just never found any one who clicked with me, accepted me for who I am. I've been dreaming of you since the first night we met, and existing only 'til the next time we were together. The brief moments we have been together have been the most exciting of my life. There is an undeniable connection between us. Whoever you are, or whatever you are doesn't matter, because something bigger than both of us has brought us together.” I hoped that came out the way I meant it to.

When I finished he didn't speak. We were silent, bodies touching, feeling the enormity of that moment. The minutes ticked by agonisingly. The wall to his thoughts was still up, and it was unbearable not to know what he thinking or feeling. His face was stone. What did I do wrong this time?

Then the statue came to life. The blank expression broke and a timid smile slid across his lips. The memories long locked away within his mind burst forth, and I was assaulted with images. I felt flushed with his love, a physiological reaction to an emotional release. “I am a vampire,” he said simply.

When those words were finally said aloud, words to something I already knew in my heart, I felt such a wave of relief. I rolled away as a hysterical, maniacal laughter erupted from my body. I laughed like I never had in my life, until tears were streaming down my face. He watched me, never trying to stop me or touch me in any way. His secret was finally affirmed, and I had never been happier or surer of anything in my life.

When my laughing finally turned to real tears I threw myself into his waiting arms, and kissed him all over his face and neck. His skin was cool and unnaturally firm under the heat of my lips. “I know, I know.”

Chapter 7

Transformation

Somewhere in an unseen area of the building a clock ticked. My oddly sensitive ears could hear it above the whisper of my breathing. It was the only sound in the otherwise tomb-like quiet. Where was the clock? What people would be looking onto its face for the time? Were there other people in the building, and did they know we were there?

How could Giovanni have a set-up like this without anyone being the wiser? Someone must know he was there, and better still must be aware of what he was. There had to be someone offering him protection, or anonymity, but in exchange for what?

The cold night passed quietly, turning into a day withheld from our sight. I gained an odd comfort in that. I imagined it was the absorption of Giovanni's feelings, but they felt as comforting as my own. I drifted off into an easy and heavy sleep in his bed, and I knew I was safe with him, tucked away from the rest of the world. Everything for me changed in the blink of an eye, and for the first time in my life I felt sure about what I was doing. I found myself standing at the threshold of eternity, and knew with unshakable faith I could make the leap.

I told Giovanni I loved him, and with every fibre of my being I meant it. I knew that to keep that love I would kill, and I also knew that killing was a certainty in choosing that life. I understood giving myself to him meant the loss of everything else. I knew we would be feared, and it would mean a lifetime of secrecy. I don't think I ever gave much thought to spiritual matters up until that point, but if I did have a soul, I was most certainly about to forsake it for a lifetime with him. And, somehow, that was okay with me. I was firm in my belief that everything in my life led me to that point, and to Giovanni. That was the only path for me.

Giovanni hadn't said a word in hours, even since I opened my eyes. There were so many things I wanted to ask, but I was unnerved by his silence. I thought it best to wait until he spoke first. I tensed at the thought of his voice, the sound of which elicited such a powerful and intimate reaction from me. His voice scurried through my mind, and whispered over my skin. Would I still feel the same way after I changed? Would he affect me as he did now?

I turned my attention to my surroundings. The room was certainly nothing to write home about, and it held the quietness of death. To my human body the air was uncomfortably cold and damp, the air slightly bitter and acrid. The depth of the stillness was unsettling. The faces appearing around the room, drawn with Giovanni's talented hand, didn't seem to take away from the emptiness. They appeared to be witnessing us, waiting for blood to be shed.

I turned to look at Giovanni's profile in the dimness, finding his eyes closed, but knowing he was awake, if that was the word for it. His ancestry was almost undetectable, though his slight accent hinted at European origins. His face was neither young nor old. Only his eyes could betray the truth. Once past their beauty and intensity, one could find the ghosts of too many years of pain and loneliness.

His eyes opened suddenly, as if he felt me watching him. More likely he was overwhelmed by the feelings and questions throwing themselves about in my mind. He turned slightly, tendrils of electricity snaking up my arm where it brushed his. He smiled, and my worries drained away. It was enough that we were together, and that made me the luckiest woman in the world.

My gaze roamed around the room once more, tracing the blocks making up the walls until my curiosity got the better of me. "Where are we?"

His smile grew even wider, and a small laugh escaped his lips. "Do you really want to know?"

I nodded. "Yes."

He paused, obviously enjoying keeping me in suspense. "We are in the basement of a funeral home."

It was an ideal place to hide. It wasn't the sort of building anyone would enter accidentally, or would even have business with except on a rare occasion. I had only ever been to one funeral in my life. "That's very clever, actually."

"It does make a lot of sense, considering."

"I would never have known, and I've been wracking my brain trying to figure it out."

"I don't think anyone would have guessed it unless they'd been here before. It's not too often that the average person would find themselves in similar surroundings."

"Well, you keep telling me I'm not your average person."

"And you are not, but I do not think it's been your habit to crawl around funeral homes at night, has it?"

I wrinkled my nose.

"Does it bother you?"

"No," I said quickly. "Does it bother you?"

He barked out a laugh. "Not at all."

I raised myself up on my elbow. "It's an okay room, I guess. Just not a lot of amenities."

"Sometimes I prefer to live a Spartan-type life, other times I live like a king. It depends on the circumstances and how long I plan on staying. I can never stay in one place for too long, not more than five or ten years anyway." He paused, lost in thought. "I'm safe here, and that's what's important."

"So how does this work? I mean, someone must know that you're here, right? You couldn't run the risk of being discovered accidentally."

"I have an arrangement here. The director looks out for me, since his family has owned this place for many generations, right back to Kingston's origins. In return, the family is rewarded quite handsomely. It's an arrangement that works for both sides."

"Have you been here long?"

"Not long this time, though I have been to this city before. I have known a member of this family from various generations. The ones I don't meet are at least privy to my existence. Whether I use the space or not, I always accommodate the family. That way I always have a safe place to go when I'm at this end of the country."

His words intrigued me. I had grown up in Kingston, and had the usual history lessons, trips to city hall, and more, but I had never imagined I could meet someone who had actually experienced the town in another time. "What brought you here in the first place?"

"I had been in the United States for some time, having come over from Europe during one of the many mass exiles to the 'new colonies.' I was quite tired of the endless wars, and clashing ideals, and Canada was then a very powerful territory. This city was the primary community of South-eastern Upper Canada, as it was called in that time. Before it became the first capital of Canada there was a real bustle of activity. I slipped in, and made a business deal with a young man to build the city a funeral home. Since then I have had a permanent retreat."

I sighed, trying to imagine the city back then. It was true that Fort Henry, and many of the fortified towers still stood. Even many of the homes, and buildings in the downtown core were original to the early mid-1800s. It was something I had never given much thought to before, having lived here my whole life. Those realisations took me into entirely uncharted territory, imagining all the sights Giovanni must have seen. I felt so close to him, and yet so entirely removed from whom he was.

I nuzzled myself closer, bringing my arm over to embrace him, when he held up his hand to stop me. His expression was so pained hot tears sprung to my eyes. His emotions were a knife to my heart. The room rippled with waves of sorrow, a drowning effect in the silence. I hoped he hadn't taken my silence for hesitation, because there was none now.

There was darkness in his eyes when he spoke. "I know that this must be overwhelming. I have been catching glimpses of your thoughts, and have been flooded by your feelings, but the things in your head are moving so fast even I am having trouble keeping up. I have to ask you, Rachel, are you having doubts about being with me?" His voice was so low I held my breath to hear him. "Do you really want to commit yourself to this kind of existence?"

I tried to knock down the barrier in my brain to flood him with reassurance. It was frustrating how clear our connection was sometimes, and how clouded it could be at others. "The only place that I belong is with you."

When he turned back to me his smile became a savage slash of red in his alabaster skin. His movements were so fast they blurred, producing no sound. He gripped my arms with his powerful hands, his long fingers biting into my flesh. He snatched me in closer to his body, our noses pressed together, forcing me to look into eyes now glowing like cigarette embers. Instantly terrified and completely aroused, I trembled with a need to be ravaged. He pulled back his silky red lips in a snarl, exposing the white fangs I so feared and desired.

"You think you know what I am?" he snarled. The hair on my arms stood at the sound of his voice. "You can never understand what I am or what I am capable of, until you have become like me! Do you comprehend what your life will consist of? I can give you love like no other, I can give you unbelievable strength, but I will also make you a killer. Can you really accept that fate?"

"Yes." I whimpered, ashamed of my own weakness.

"Yes," he replied, almost despondently. "You can love a man who not only is a killer, but who enjoys what he is?"

"Yes." My voice gained strength. I was stunned by my reaction to his outburst. I did not want to fear him. I didn't want to have doubts. He may be a monster, a killer, but he was also the other half of my heart. Still my body quivered, my skin slick with cold sweat.

His smile returned, the one that soothed me while erasing all doubts. As I looked into those eyes, I could hardly remember the feelings of fear and panic I had just experienced. Then he lowered his lips to mine, their touch much cooler than before. The feeling was the same: euphoric and mind-numbing. Any tendrils of misgiving were eliminated instantly.

I was lost to everything but my love for him and the touch of his body against mine. He showered me with kisses, each one sweeter and more urgent than the one before. The loving half, and the dangerous half needed to mesh for the sake of our relationship's success, and my sanity.

Slowly, he pulled himself away from our embrace. He broke away from my stare and threw himself back on the bed, his back to me. To my horror, he began to shake with silent sobbing. I laid my body across his, my face pressed into his ebony curls. In an almost child-like way he turned himself toward me, pressing his head tightly against my chest.

When his crying ended, he looked at me with despairing eyes. The whites had turned red and bloody trails stained his cheeks. That pain touched me through his tears, liquid anguish on my skin. My heart ached. His voice was weak, trembling when he finally spoke, but even that was better than silent tears. "Rachel, there is so much I want to tell you, and many things you need to know before anything else can happen. I want you to listen carefully to each word and know it is the truth. I would never lie to you. I could never deliberately mislead you, or deceive you."

I nodded, not only persuaded by his words, but by the sincerity with which he spoke.

"I have searched through centuries for a companion. A few times I thought I found one. I have made two others like myself. One had to be destroyed almost immediately, as he was savage and irresponsible. The other, he stayed with me for some time, but eventually decided to make his way on his own. When I made these attempts it never once crossed my mind to look for someone to love. It was merely to not always be alone, to find someone to exist with, hunt or possibly have some enjoyment with, but never love."

"What about the one who made you?" I asked.

Anger turned his eyes black and there was a brief flash of the nameless girl before he resumed control of himself. “That is a story for another time. Like you said before, we have a lot of years to share the stories of our pasts.”

I nodded.

“You see, even as vampires we still have needs. Certainly they are not as great as a human's, as our bodies and minds are not as fragile, but we still have needs. We must feed, of course, though over the years the amount we need to subsist greatly diminishes. And, though for the most part, our ‘lives’ are spent on the run, and we are always hidden with secrets and deception, we still crave some type of social interaction, no matter how shallow. I have had the occasion to have lovers over the years, but I have never been attracted to someone's spirit or personality, or whatever you may like to call it, as I have with you. They were all people to whom I had a superficial physical attraction, yet this only drew me to them as much as the ease with which I could control their minds. I wanted someone I could take satisfaction from for a time, but whom I could also manipulate without effort. Then when I tired of them, I could slip away without them remembering too much of our time together. They would be none the wiser as to what they had actually allowed into their lives.”

I stiffened as he talked of his lovers, jealousy sparking its fire in me. It was silly, of course, to be envious of people he had been with before he knew I existed, or before I was even born, but I could not help myself. He was only trying to be honest, but the pain bit deeply. The only comfort was the knowledge that after me, there would be no others.

His eyes were sad as he took in my reaction, and he kissed me deeply before proceeding. “I don't know how I can ask you to commit yourself to an existence like mine. I am afraid to let you go, and I am just as afraid to keep you with me. When I first saw you that night at the hospital, I knew in an instant you were the one. I was certain, then and there, that you were my soul mate, if it's possible for a vampire to have a soul mate. Even before I saw your face, I was drawn to your presence.”

I touched a blood-tinged tear as it slipped down his face.

“I know you feel the same attraction, and not just physically, but that you are attuned to my heart and mind. Our connection is powerful. I have never encountered another person who could see my thoughts or feel my emotions. I cannot deny my feelings for you. I can't fight my need to be with you.”

“There is nothing I could want more than to be with you. I understand what's at stake here.”

“I know that you feel that way, but please listen to me. I cannot make our lives perfect, no matter my strength, experience or wealth, but I can give you opportunities like no other can. I will give you a love that will never die, and can never be shaken. You have to weigh the odds carefully, because this is not a decision you can go back on. Once you change, you will be a vampire for all your existence. Do you really know what this means?”

I started to speak, but he cut off my words. “I am offering you immortality certainly, in the literal sense of the word. We can, without incident, exist as I am until the end of time, whenever that may be. But understand, we can be killed. Not easily, mind you, but it can be done. Fire can destroy us, dismemberment, and of course starvation, where your body decays as your mind it still aware. Be aware of those out there who know we exist, and want nothing more than to destroy us.”

“What about the sun?”

Giovanni showed no surprise at my question. “Ah, the sun. Yes, it can hurt us, even kill us with a prolonged exposure. I have found through my own experiences, and from speaking with others like me, that the effects of the sun lessen with time. We are able to build up some resistance to it, so we may go out during the day for short periods of time. We simply use this time when we are more vulnerable to rest, since we need time to restore our energy, much like humans do. I guess I should dispel some other myths you might have heard of. We cannot fly, though we can move faster than the average human eye is able to process. We can't control animals, or shape-shift. We do have incredible strength, photographic memories and the ability to read or control minds to varying degrees. We will never get sick or age, and we remain physically as we were when we were changed.”

The heavy stares of the people in the portraits penetrated me, and I bristled at the overload of information. I could feel the desperation in his words, realising he had as much to lose as I did. It was a strange comprehension that a vampire could hurt or could be lonely.

“My attraction to you has also to do with something I am sure you are not even aware of. There are dark desires in you— a hunger to dominate, manipulate and hurt coiled deep in your psyche, waiting for its chance to escape. That is a quality unique to few, and the ability to appreciate and control it is something that almost none possess.”

Instead of being offended, or angered by his words, I was pleased. Those words threw open a door that, until then, was tightly shut against the outside world. I had long been hiding behind my own insecurities, and what society deemed acceptable. The truth was we all hurt others with lies, infidelities, theft, abandonment, or through physical violence. There was not one life that had walked the face of the earth that had not been touched by hurt of one kind or another. It was all in the way it was viewed, processed and accepted.

“You're very quiet, and I'm having trouble seeing your thoughts.”

“I'm just working through everything that you've said, but just because I'm quiet, don't think I'm having any doubts. The more I know, the more certain I am this is the right thing for me, that this is the only choice for me.”

His love called to me like the blood rushing through my veins. I held my gaze steady with his, letting their calmness wash over me. Nothing could or would shake me from what we had started. There was only one way it could go. “I want to be with you, and only you. I don't care what I have to give up, or can never have. If we have to run, I will run with you to the ends of the earth. I would hide, fight and kill— whatever I need to do. No sacrifice is too great for us to be together.” I meant those words unconditionally as I spoke them.

“I hear you, but you must come to this willingly. There are many things I can endure in this life, but your hatred is not one of them.”

I was tired of hesitation. It was time. “If you want me, then take me. Now, and don't ever look back.”

That's the moment everything changed. His reaction was instantaneous, moving toward me in a blur of black and white. I was taken into his iron grasp

without even the chance to struggle. I was burning with need as his lips pressed against my own. I felt the pressure of his fangs and cried out.

He tore at his clothes, until the perfect white skin was exposed. His naked body was hard and lean, his eyes red and wild with desire, matching my feverish need. My own clothing was pulled from my body, and I was dimly aware of a stinging sensation as seams burst and shreds of material were yanked away with savage force.

In the blink of an eye we were naked, writhing against each other's bodies. Giovanni's excitement was obvious, his hardness pressing into my naked thigh, and his fangs scraping my lower lip. My mouth filled with the taste of blood, as my body sang with pleasure. I was flying high on adrenaline, and my heart thundered— *Bang! Bang!*— in accompaniment to the frenzy in my brain.

His skin was like ice as it pressed against me, yet I exploded into heat when he entered my body. Our bodies rocked to the tempo of my escalating pulse, taking me to levels of pleasure I would never have imagined existing. His mouth was all over my face, my neck and shoulder, and there were hot shrieks of pain as his teeth pierced my flesh. I clung to him with weakening hands, lost to the assault of sensations.

A kaleidoscope of images— faces of my past and his— intermingled with a view of our encounter as though I were seeing it from somewhere above where we tangled on the bed. The images and sounds moved in a psychotic frenzy. His voice suddenly thundered into my ear, but I did not have the strength to pull away.

“I have always loved to kill, and now I will kill to love. The blood I take will keep me going to be with you.”

My breathing quickened to the point of hyperventilation, with the room and Giovanni swimming in and out of focus. As I neared my climax, the space around me filled with strange, jumbled voices, laughter, cries and the music from my dreams. *Her* face flashed repeatedly, sometimes superimposing itself over my own until I could not separate her image from mine. Tears streamed down my face, and a sickness in my stomach fought to keep up with the pleasure gripping the rest of my body. I was silent, trapped in a pantomime of pleasure and pain.

As an orgasm seized me to spill me over into an ecstasy beyond reason, his fangs plunged into my neck. The waves of pleasure rolled, and I was aware of unnaturally loud sucking in my ear, and the noise was both repulsive and comforting. My hands slipped from their grip as more and more of my blood drained from my body into Giovanni's greedy mouth. The pleasure faded, replaced with pain that burnt with savage intensity. As my eyes began to close, his face appeared above my own, the last vestiges of my human life dripping from his mouth. He pressed his now scorching lips to my own, but I felt nothing.

As I slipped into the greyness, Giovanni's arm was pressed to my open mouth. A hot, salty liquid poured down my throat. I gagged then something in my brain was triggered, and the sickness and pain was replaced with acceptance. With that last glimpse of my love, bloody and wild with lust, I slipped over the edge of darkness.

“It's done,” my savage, beautiful angel whispered.

Then I died.

Chapter 8

When I woke the next night I was reborn. If I'd thought my senses were heightened before then, it was nothing compared to what I experienced when I regained consciousness. I emerged from that slumber, for lack of a better word, with a burgeoning attunement to the world around me.

Sound was the first thing I was aware of. It crept into my brain and began to burrow its way through. I tuned into many voices, some quite clear and painfully loud, others like a radio station almost out of range. There were many layers to the sound around me— music, laughter, dogs barking, car engines and others I could not immediately identify. The bombardment was terrifyingly chaotic, and each time my mind singled out a voice or sound, I was knocked off course again by something else. The more I tried to concentrate, the more maddening and overwhelming the noise became.

The next thing I became aware of was the touch of Giovanni's hand over my own. Without realising it, I had raised my hands to my ears in a failed attempt to block the barrage of voices. Giovanni's cool touch gave me some comfort from the building distress. His touch was a distraction from the sounds, something outside of that chaos to concentrate on.

He gently pulled my hands away, and whispered in my ear. His caressing voice drowned out all the others sounds. "I know it's overwhelming. We all go through this at first, until we gain control over our new senses. I will help you."

As his lips pressed against my cheek, I dared to slowly open my eyes. He pulled back, and I was then looking into those eyes, sparkling like jewels. I was completely dazzled by their colour and brightness, their beauty even more stunning because of the change. His dark hair softly brushed my face, and its touch was wonderfully perfect against my skin. I wound my hands into his hair, revelling in its texture, and I pressed it to my face to drink in the delicious aroma.

Gently, his silken lips touched mine, and I was completely consumed by the contact. Where our lips met it was a sensation like no other. It was electric and sweet, and I was all but lost to that feeling. There was nothing else in the world then, just our kiss. As cornball and unbelievable as it may sound, it was true. Nothing else mattered.

If I kept my eyes closed and concentrated on the sensation of touch, I found my other senses dimmed slightly. The sounds became hazier and more distant, and my closed eyes protected me in the blanket of darkness. My skin was on fire where our bodies pressed together, and his hair the whisper of heavenly softness where it touched my face. His hands were supple, yet strong as they traced their way along my face and body. His lips were feathers dancing across my face and neck. The sheet underneath me felt strange, as if I was aware of each individual strand in its makeup rubbing against my back and legs. It wasn't uncomfortable exactly. It was just that my body was intensely aware of its presence.

Giovanni's kiss deepened, pulling me into the intense waves of pleasure our contact gave. I tasted blood in our kiss. Whether it was from the night before, or from the force with which our mouths were pressed together, I was not sure. My being surged to the point of explosion at the recognition. I was then instantly aware of the thirst, which blocked out sound, touch and smell. There was then only one need.

Giovanni must have sensed the change, because the hands that caressed me lovingly, suddenly gripped my upper arms with an iron force. The thirst burnt inside me, forcing its madness into my brain. I could not reason. There were no coherent thoughts at all, only an urgent, demanding need. My throat was parched, as dry as sand. It squeezed painfully, rubbing like sandpaper when I tried to swallow. The need crawled along my skin, burning like the bites of a thousand red ants. I began to thrash underneath my love, but his grip was unbreakable. He mentally called out to me, like pinpricks in my brain, but I could not be reached then.

A hot pain in my mouth revealed my fangs enlarging in response to my need. My lips drew back, an involuntary physical reaction. I was no longer in control at all. There was only a blinding, all-consuming call for blood screaming through every fibre of my being. In one swift movement, Giovanni released his grip and pulled us into a sitting position on the bed.

He straddled my body, effectively pinning my lower half underneath him. He pressed my face against his chest, forcing my teeth to pierce his tough flesh. Hot, thick blood poured into my mouth, a taste sweeter than honey. My brain sang with joy as the blood was absorbed. The physical need subsided quickly, but without dissipating completely. Giovanni pushed me harshly away from his body, stopping my feeding with painful abruptness. I looked up into his eyes and understood immediately that this was only a temporary solution.

Together we fell back to the bed. My body was still thrumming with need, but I regained some control over myself. I didn't feel like my body was on fire any longer, and I was aware again of Giovanni's touch, and the sounds of the outside world.

"I'm sorry," I said in a strange and wondrous voice.

"Don't be sorry, love. We are all like this at the beginning. The need for blood is terrible and consuming in the first few years, until you gain better control. That is why some of us don't make it. Our need sometimes overcomes everything else, and we make ourselves vulnerable to exposure and, ultimately, destruction. Don't worry, I will help you."

"Tell me everything."

His laughter was soft against my ear. "I cannot tell you everything tonight, but I will tell you what you need to know. At first you will need to feed almost every night. The thirst will be so intense you will be without reason until you satisfy it, but your need cannot bypass keeping our true nature a secret. Our survival depends on that. Too many deaths will draw attention. You need to know who to take, when, where and how to dispose of the bodies."

The bodies. "Tell me."

"We don't always need to kill to feed, because we can often cloud our victims' minds, or their own fright does it for them, but until you have more control, that is most likely not a possibility. Sometimes I dispose of a body where it will not be found, or disguise a killing to make it look like an accident or natural causes. That was what I was doing in the hospital that night. Sometimes I take patients who are near death and I speed the process along."

"So that's what you were doing. You were feeding. I suspected as much."

“Yes, I found a comatose young man, who would never have regained consciousness, an automobile accident victim and two long-time cancer patients. In fact, the one cancer patient was so close to death, she thought I was an angel. In situations like that what I do is mutually beneficial. Sometimes I even take inmates from their prison cells, choosing the lowest of the low. I get the blood I need, and I relieve the taxpayers of the burden of supporting the dregs of society. Feeding doesn't have to always be cruel, or senseless, though I have to admit that sometimes I take people simply because they attract or irritate me. Sometimes I need the fear, and the act of the hunt as much as I need the blood.” He spoke without malice or hesitation, a simple statement of the truth. His voice was wine for my ears, soothing my pain and distraction.

“Let's get cleaned up. Then you can experience the night with me as it is meant to be for creatures such as us.” In one effortless movement he was up and across the room.

With one hand on the doorknob he looked back at me and smiled. I sat up, and just as the thought of going to the door crossed my mind I was there, colliding into Giovanni's back. I felt like a gangly, young colt not quite in control of its limbs. He caught me as I stumbled, and pulled me toward him. Where his chest had been as hard as stone before, it was now simply firm, but like velvet under my fingertips. Just as I was enjoying the feeling of my fingers running across his bare skin, a sharp sound from outside intruded, and the moment was lost. I couldn't seem to hear, and feel and think all at the same time. It was confusing and frustrating.

“It will come in time,” he whispered.

We made our way along the dark hallway, the stone damp to my bare feet. Though there was no source of light, I could see perfectly fine, discerning the many layers of grim, and the difference in shades of the stonewalls. I could smell the age of the building, and the death that resided there.

After a quick shower, the water cascading over my body like liquid silk, we returned to his room to get ready. Giovanni enjoyed my reactions, though his words were always kind and reassuring. I still found the increased awareness of my senses distracting, but with Giovanni's touch I could function more clearly. We quickly dressed, me in borrowed clothes— as mine had been reduced to shreds the night before— then slipped out into the waiting darkness.

The night offered a spectacle of movements, colours, aromas and sounds to my new, preternatural senses. The cars on the nearby road thundered, vibrating the ground beneath my feet. Hundreds of heartbeats took up a chorus of tiny jackhammers, poking away at my awareness. The softly falling snow was as loud as a rushing waterfall, fighting for its place over the incessant pounding of the heartbeats.

I stumbled down from the step, my coordination thrown off by the assault of sound. He reached back to take my hand, and I was immediately comforted, but my thirst had returned with a vengeance. The need clawed the inside of my brain, and my throat constricted painfully. I squeezed Giovanni's hand in desperation, and I heard his voice inside my head. *“We will feed, and then I will showyou the night as I have known it for almost three centuries.”*

We sped off through the darkness, with me clinging onto his hand tightly for fear of being left behind. He moved too quickly. Even with my new strength and awareness, it was difficult processing the surroundings as we moved through the night. Individual items fleetingly caught my eye, landmarks I recognised, only to be lost to a new sight or sound. It all mashed together incoherently in my head, and I reeled from the inability to absorb it all quickly enough.

I knew the night was cold because snow fell yet I seemed completely indifferent to the exterior temperature. I was not cold, though I could recognise the dampness and the movement of the wind. I marvelled at beauty of the individual flakes as they tumbled by, momentarily blocking the rush of noise and my desperate thirst.

We stopped abruptly, with my body pressed against his back. I buried my face in his hair, forcing the smell into my body in a pathetic attempt to ward off the building rage. Giovanni tensed, and I became acutely aware of a sound above all the others swirling about me. It was breathing, and from the sound of it, the person was very close.

Looking out from the shield of Giovanni's body, I realised we stood in an alleyway. From the smell I surmised we were behind a restaurant or place where food was prepared. I detected garbage, grease, sweat and an underlying stench of urine. Yet the scent that made me swoon with need was blood.

The man sat, half hidden in the shadows of a large dumpster near the dead-end of the alleyway. He rested on the ground, knees drawn up against the cold. As we moved closer, I noted his eyes were closed, and his chest moved in shaky breaths. His clothing was ragged and ill fitting, his face and hair so filthy it was impossible to guess his age. His blood rushed through his veins, his heartbeat a beacon to which I was impulsively drawn. A strangled sound escaped my lips.

In the blink of an eye, and without a whisper of sound, Giovanni caught the man in his arms. The man's eyes fluttered open in surprise. They were bloodshot and bleary from alcohol consumption. My love forced the man's head back at a terrible angle, and clamped down on his throat. I trembled as I heard the sounds of the blood being sucked from his neck. I approached them like a zombie, and the man was thrust into my waiting hands. My fangs were already out and I sunk them into the wound with enough force something in the man's neck snapped.

I drank and drank, the hot liquid pouring into me, and I was pulled into a euphoric state more intensely pleasurable than drugs or sex. My body thrilled as thousands of synapses fired at once— bright points of desire quenched with a man's blood. He struggled, but he was no match for my strength. His attempts to fight somehow heightened the experience, awaking an unknown perverse gratification at another's fear. I was drunk with power and blood. The night raged around us in our deadly act, and Giovanni's scent danced on the air.

All too soon the man's body became a lifeless husk, and Giovanni pulled it from my grasp. My mouth broke away with a sickening slurp, but I was unfazed. I had enjoyed every second of the man's terror, and every drop of his blood I had consumed. The wasted body was slack, held awkwardly in Giovanni's arms. The man's head pulled over his right shoulder and slightly to the back, the ragged wound on his neck exposed to my sensitive eyes. It looked like a wild animal had been at him, not a human. My killing was not neat, but my need dominated my discretion. I had been lost to the call of his blood and the thirst threatening to drive me mad.

Giovanni tucked the corpse under his arm, indicating with a tip of his head that I should follow. We silently walked to the end of the alley to look out onto the connecting street. The time of night and the bitter cold kept the streets nearly empty, and we were free to make our way down to the nearby waterfront.

Giovanni stopped me at the end of the pier, before he dropped to the ice-covered water below. I watched as he made his way out across the lake to

where the ice grew much thinner. There he forced the body through a small opening, leaving it to the harsh elements and the whimsy of the lake's movement. His movements were quick and light, barely making contact with the cold surface, and leaving him in no peril himself.

In a few minutes he was at my side again. "How do you feel?"

I felt strong, aroused, satisfied— things that I could not put into words. I nodded then was pulled back into the night.

So we walked back into the streets, hand in hand like innocent young lovers, and I experienced the night like never before. I savoured its dark beauty. I saw things in ways that I would never have without Giovanni's dark kiss. I was able to perceive the many layers to the darkness, the sprinkling of stars like spotlights beating down on us. I marvelled at the way the shadows danced across the ground, melting into the night air. I never knew so many shades of grey and black existed. It was amazing to behold. It was no wonder then that I had been disoriented and overwhelmed in the light of Giovanni's room, where there was so much colour and detail to process.

As we made it to the heart of the downtown district, the number of people on the streets picked up significantly. Each person we passed gave off a unique aroma. Some people smelled clean and fresh, others musky, and on some I could even detect illness or death. I often felt myself drawn to a particular scent, and if I had not fed to my full capacity, I don't think I would have been able to resist the temptation. My body responded to the sounds of their heartbeats, each tempo its own, yet all calling to me.

The flashes of thoughts I was exposed to were incredible: worry, pride and anger. I saw daydreams and memories, snippets of media people had seen, and thoughts people were most likely not even aware they were having. Several times I laughed out loud, Giovanni amused with my obvious delight. This phenomenon was not like "reading" minds— it was more a transfer of random thoughts and feelings. Each person left a psychic footprint of some kind, some intense, some fleeting.

A few times a dark or hateful thought passed through a person's mind, and I was instantly drawn to it, like a moth to a flame. Each time it happened I realised Giovanni felt it as well, and I understood then how the choice of victim could sometimes be made for you.

As we passed a large storefront window, I caught a glimpse of myself, and I hesitated. It was me— yet it wasn't. My skin, which had always been fair, was now a luminescent white. My eyes were almost as bright and blue as Giovanni's. I smiled, and was reassured by the matching smile on his reflection. How beautiful and perfect we looked together, two halves of one whole. It was the first time I had ever felt I was exactly where I belonged.

The streets teemed with life and people excited about the upcoming holidays. I always enjoyed this time of year, and the same feelings were reflected on the faces we passed. Though I had lived in Kingston my entire life, I felt like I was seeing the city for the first time.

I hadn't realised before just how many young adults there were in our population. With the number of post-secondary institutions within the city limits, young people passed in droves. In the near future others would replace them, as the students returned home, got jobs or went on to other educational endeavours. It was a strange metaphor for the way our existence would also be— passing through towns as the students passed through their programmes, moving to other places to escape the notice of our never-aging bodies, as the graduates escaped to whatever life held for them after they completed their education.

As we continued our walk I asked Giovanni many questions about his past, suddenly as hungry for knowledge as I was earlier for blood. "Where were you born? What year? What happened to your family?" A series of rambling questions spilled out before he had the chance to answer any.

He chuckled softly. "Whoa. If you want to know where I came from, I will be happy to tell you. It's been a very long time since I even thought of my origins, much less spoke to someone about them. I don't know where to begin." A wistful, almost pained expression crossed his face as he spoke.

"Start with where you were born, and your family."

"All right. I was born in Catalonia, Spain, in 1712. I lived in a moderately sized town by the ocean. I was the middle child of six boys, two of whom died in childhood. I had one sister who was several years younger than me. Her name was Teresa, and my surviving brothers were Raphael, Fernando and Xavier. Our family was wealthy, because my mother came from a family of landholders and merchants. My father's family was less successful, made up of skilled labourers, artisans and clergy. Both of my parents were supremely devoted Roman Catholics, and their families knew each other through church. We had a good upbringing, we all went to school and church, and were encouraged to develop artistic skills." He paused, seemingly lost to those ancient memories. As he took my hand I was flooded with images of unknown people. I surmised that I was seeing his brothers and sister as children, then young adults, because the faces shared his characteristics, and all had the same ebony hair.

"Is Giovanni a Spanish name?"

As he locked eyes with me, the images disappeared, and it was just the two of us on the dark, snowy street. I hadn't noticed that we had wandered away from the crowds, as I was lost in his memories. "No, it's not actually. I was named after my mother's favourite uncle, an Italian merchant who married my grandmother's sister. My mother was the youngest of nine in her family, and she told me many stories of this man. He travelled extensively, and always regaled them with tales of far-off lands, bringing the children exotic gifts from the places he visited. When he died, he left my mother a large sum of money."

I smiled, but didn't speak, as I wanted him to continue. His voice was wonderful to hear, and it blocked out many other distractions. The memories danced through my mind, filling me with warmth and wonder, the most intimate of connections with my love.

"Now where was I? Oh yes, my mother was very involved with the church, as most women of that time were, and she was completely devoted to her children. She had the most wonderful singing voice, and she often sang to us as children, before bed. My father had dreams of being an artist as a young man, but discovered that he did not have the skill to be successful, and instead trained as a calligrapher for the church. After he and my mother married, he was pulled into her family business. After that he had little time for artistic pursuits."

"What was it like then? How you lived, the country?"

Before he spoke again I experienced views of gorgeous blue waters, huge expanses of countryside, stretches of mountains and clusters of citrus groves.

The colours of the fruit were psychotically vibrant, the image so real I saw the wind ruffling the trees. I could smell the tangy aroma of fresh oranges and lemons.

“It was a beautiful place to grow up, and it still is a beautiful place today. I try to return every few decades to see how things are. Then, it was also a time of great change and development. I was born just before the end of the War of Spanish Succession, which had caused much upheaval in our area. After the new king established himself, Spain tried to crush the Catalan region's sense of identity. It was also the time of discovery, with many countries sending out ships to the New World, and Spain was a leader in these expeditions.

“As I entered my early teens, I discovered that I had a real talent for drawing. My father seized on this immediately, vicariously living his own dream through my talent. He found me a private tutor then sent me off to study in both France and Italy. At that time, there was not an established art training school in Spain. The Academy of San Fernando would not yet come for many years. So I went to school, and I spent time with my siblings swimming, riding and attending local social functions. I was even betrothed to the daughter of a family friend.”

His smile spread across his face in response to my scowl. “There is nothing to be jealous of. I was never in love with the girl. She was always like a sister to me. We grew up together, spent holidays together, but that's what happened back then. Children were matched with suitable partners to maintain alliances, wealth, satisfy the church and culture.”

I clenched my lips together tightly, the remnants of the green-eyed monster still tugging at my heart. “What happened to her?”

“She died a little over a month after her fifteenth birthday. Smallpox.”

“Oh, how awful.”

“Yes. She was a very sweet girl. It was a sad time. Many died of smallpox, including relatives and close friends. The rest of us made it through. I would have been eighteen the year that she died. God, its so long ago, it doesn't seem like it could be real. I spent that summer at home then I was off to the Academy de San Luca in Rome, where I spent two years training. My father hoped for me to become an artist for the church, but I was undecided as to what I wanted to do with my craft. Rococo style was all the rage then, but I felt drawn to express myself in other ways and other styles. I was searching, for what I don't know... Eventually I made my way to France to try new things... ” His voice trailed off as bitterness crept into his eyes. We walked for a way in silence, the night a vast carpet of protection and acceptance to two of the world's most dangerous inhabitants.

“Then, what happened? What happened to your siblings and your parents?”

His voice was tight and angry when he spoke next. “And then I was changed.”

“I see,” I said, though I did not. His experience had obviously not been the magical one mine was. Without warning, a bright stabbing pain shot through my head, darkness that exploded into a million white-hot stars. My hands clenched against my temples, uselessly trying to block the pain. Images tumbled one after another in my head, a sequence of events that made no sense. I saw a room filled with faces laughing, smiling... an empty art studio... Giovanni's face much as it was as I knew him, but with his skin like burnt sienna. These were then replaced with the girl who was haunting my dreams and thoughts. I saw her in life, smiling shyly, walking along a wooded path with the sunlight dancing off her mass of butter-coloured hair... then in death, lying in a pool of blood, her throat torn to shreds and her clouded eyes staring accusingly. I stumbled from the intensity of the memory, and the anger accompanying it. Giovanni caught my arm, and pulled me with such force into his embrace that my feet left the ground. “I'm sorry.”

“Who is she?” I whispered against his chest.

“I can't talk about that here. That is a discussion for later, in private, where there will be no distractions and we will not be interrupted.”

I tensed at the misery in his voice, but said no more.

Soon back at the funeral home, we entered the building like silent apparitions. The place was still unnaturally quiet. There were no indications that anyone alive was in attendance.

In his room our clothes were quickly discarded and we tumbled together onto the bed, our bodies entwined. Soon our passion overtook us, and we made love. Our bodies were still warm from the stolen blood, and where our flesh made contact there was fire. Our rhythm grew more intense and frantic, and I was drawn back to the night before. As Giovanni pulled me to an orgasm, I relived the moment he had taken my life. It seemed that both our lusts— for blood and for each other— were inexplicably tied to one another. It was similar to the way the he could appear as both devil and angel, and I could love both parts of his being equally.

As I lay with him, safe in the darkness, my thoughts ran wild. I went over the things he had shared about his life before becoming a vampire, experiencing the memories so intensely I could smell the salt air, and feel the texture of the paper and paint as he created. I remembered his family's faces lovingly, as if they were somehow my own. Then, as I tried to remember exactly what had happened to make me change, I found only a black, empty hole where that experience should have been. “Giovanni, how did you change me?”

He shifted slightly. “Do you not remember?”

I closed my eyes and I could see our bodies locked in passion, the room, the pain then nothing until I opened my eyes that evening. “No. It's very jumbled, and it's like trying to remember after drinking too much. It simply isn't there.”

I pulled myself up onto my elbow, looking down onto his face. The wry smile on his lips both irritated and intrigued me. We were terrible, murderous creatures, yet we could love one another with a force greater than anything the world had known before. He kissed his way up my arm and shoulder until we were face to face. “You remember nothing at all?”

I shook my head.

He took my hand and pressed into the tiniest of marks on his wrist. “After I drank you dry, past the point that you could have lived, I opened a wound on my

wrist and forced your mouth to it. My blood spilled down your throat, and turned you into a vampire.” As the words were spoken, there was a tingling on the back of my neck, but still the memory did not come.

“Just like that?” I asked, incredulous.

“No, it takes a few hours for the change to be complete. As the vampiric blood fills your veins, your human body slowly dies, cell by cell. You linger between death, and the undead as we are, easy to be lost. Then your body begins to convert into its preternatural beauty, and there is no stopping the transformation.”

“But how does it work?”

“I honestly don't know, my love. The few other vampires I have encountered over the years know only as much as I do. I can only offer you the simple mechanics of it. I cannot explain the science or biology of it, or comment on the possible spiritual connection. It is something that appears in defiance to both God and nature, and simply should not be, yet here we both are. You were beautiful, like an angel. In those few hours I experienced a lifetime of fear that you would not make it.” Sweetly, he met my lips with his.

“And now we will be together forever.”

“Yes.”

“Where will we go?”

“Where do you want to go is the question, love? We are free to do, and be anything we want. I have money and homes, and contacts from one side of the world to the other.”

“There is one place that I have always dreamt of going.” I said. As the image entered my head, he nodded his understanding.

“I would like to get a few things from my house before we go.”

“Of course. Whatever you need.” His mind felt my hesitation, and I was incapable of stopping the rush of emotions parading through me as I thought of my home, and the friends and family I would be leaving behind. “I know it's hard to separate yourself from your human existence. It's to be expected, and it will get easier leaving others behind as the years pass. You have to trust me that it's much better for your loved ones if you simply disappear. There will be no explanation you can offer that will satisfy, and it will only cause you to leave with your last memories being ones of anger and frustration.”

I knew these words were true. What could I say that would be an acceptable explanation for my departure? My mother knew of my dreams of returning to school, and I had shared my hope of travelling with Shannon and other friends. Even the people I worked with, I was sure, would not understand why I would leave a job where I was paid and treated well, and had a secure future. What did all of that mean, in comparison to all that was at my fingertips? I was going to live forever, and everyone I had ever known would grow old, or become sick or hurt, and ultimately die. I had already given that all up, the moment I gave him my heart. Crossing over into his existence was simply an exercise, when the truth was there had been no turning back since the first time our eyes had met on that quiet rainy night at the hospital.

There were a few hours remaining before the sun would rise, so we made our way out into the night once again. I felt a sharp pang as we stood on the street outside the front door. Giovanni pulled me along and, making an effortless leap, we landed on the roof outside my second-storey window. Not a sound was made, nothing disturbed. It was eerily silent and still, and I felt like a thief breaking into my own home.

He opened the window and slid it wide enough for us to enter. The room was dark, but I could see it was exactly as I left it. I listened to the silence, able to discern two heartbeats from the room across the hall. Shannon must have brought someone home with her, and Giovanni's voice responded in my head. “*Yes. I hear them too.*”

I went swiftly across the hall, and without a sound opened her bedroom door. She lay tangled in her sheet, her dark hair spilling across the pillow. Beside her lay a man whom I did not recognise, his face turned away from my position in the doorway. I felt a twinge of sadness for having to leave things that way with Shannon, but like Giovanni had said, it would be easier for everyone to just slip away. I gently closed the door and walked away.

Back in my room, Giovanni had taken down a suitcase from my closet and was filling it with my clothes. He turned when I entered the room, offering the tiniest of smiles. I went through the door to the adjoining bathroom then stopped in bewilderment. What exactly did I need to take? I grabbed my hairbrush, toothbrush and makeup. Looking at myself in the dark mirror I wondered whether vampires even wore makeup.

From my dresser I took my perfume, my diary and the photo of my mother and me. Hastily I grabbed a few CDs, and some pieces of jewellery. Everything else would have to be left behind. After placing the last few things in the suitcase and closing it, I leant into Giovanni's body and sighed. He kissed the top of my head and waited for my reaction. “Let's go.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. The last time I talked to my mother we had a nice conversation, and I know she is happy with her husband and that he'll look after her. She will still have my brother and his children.”

“Okay, then.”

With that we returned to the night that would forever be our companion. In his dingy room I curled up in his arms, with my head on his chest and his sweet scent in my lungs. My last conscious thought was: *This is really happening! I'm a vampire.*

Chapter 9

The next night arrived smoothly, embracing us, its dark Romeo and Juliet, as we lay in our slumber. Before my eyes opened, but as I was well on the way to consciousness, the miscellany of a dream played about my brain. I drew a strange comfort from knowing I was still capable of dreaming. It was a small part of my humanity I had carried into my new existence.

I opened my eyes on the second night of my life with Giovanni to feel the crushing hand of love on my heart upon seeing his face. He looked peaceful and innocent with his dark hair spilling across the pillow and a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. I traced a delicate line down his strong jaw before placing a kiss on his cheek. The smile widened and I knew he was aware.

He scooped me into his arms, our still-naked bodies pressed together. I giggled, and playfully tried to pull away. From somewhere overhead footsteps pounded, and a door opened with force. I looked at Giovanni, surprised to see worry on his face. Soon the footsteps approached down the hallway toward our room. A loud, single knock sounded at the door.

I hastily pulled the covers up against my body as Giovanni called out, "Come in."

A middle-aged man with a wild thatch of grey hair appeared in the doorway, stopping to make eye contact with Giovanni before entering. A silent communication was exchanged between the two men that caused the hair on my arms to rise. He stopped just before the edge of the bed, finally acknowledging me with a quick nod of his head. Instinctively I took Giovanni's hand in my own.

"They're here."

Giovanni tensed. "You're sure."

"Yes."

I didn't know who "they" were, but I immediately knew the situation was serious. In explaining his arrangement with Gerald Mead, whom I guessed was the man standing before us— he had described his appearance— he had also told me it was very rare for them to be in each other's presence. In fact, they made every effort to never be together, in case others might see them.

The man's eyes were wild behind his wire-framed glasses, his hands visibly shaking. He ran his fingers roughly through his hair. His scent was heavily masked by the odour of death— a consequence of his line of work. He caught me eyeing him, and I detected a hint of fear overtop his obvious agitation. "Who's this?" he asked in a too loud-voice.

Giovanni frowned. "Rachel." Just my name, no explanation. Gerald nodded stiffly then abruptly turned to leave the room.

Giovanni called out to him as he marched through the open door. "If he shows up say nothing. Pack up the art until you are told where to send it. Anything else I leave behind you destroy. You know the arrangement."

"Yes." He left, closing the door behind him.

Giovanni immediately jumped from the bed, grabbing his clothes from the pile where they had fallen the night before. He paced, the eyes of his past watching solemnly from their canvases. I sat frozen, and waited for his instruction. Incoherent thoughts and images floundered from his mind to my own, but I could not make sense of any of it. Yet again, though, her face was among the things that moved through his thoughts. Something dark and ultimately threatening to us was tied to that girl.

Suddenly he turned and came back to the bed. He sat beside me, his profile turned toward where I sat, and slowly lowered his head. Then his thoughts were blocked, though I could feel he was working though something very painful. He was so still it was alarming. I was just reaching out to touch his shoulder when he unexpectedly slammed his fist down on the palm of his other hand. Both hands were clenched when he finally spoke. "I hoped to be able to tell you things slowly, try to ease you into this, but now it has been made impossible. There are things you must know now. Our very existence may depend on it."

A spasm of terror shot through me. "What are you talking about?"

He shook his still lowered head, unable to meet my eyes. "There is a family, named Desmarais, whom have been tracking me for the past three hundred years. Currently the leader is a man named Bertrande. This family is on a mission to destroy me for something that happened a very long time ago. They are relentless. When one dies, or gets too old to continue, another family member takes over. They have even managed to destroy several other vampires they have become aware of. Sometimes I am able to evade them for decades, sometime only for a few years. They have as many contacts about the world as I do. The last time the Desmarais caught up with me was over seven years ago."

Someone wanted to harm my Giovanni. At that moment that was all I needed to know. I dressed quickly and grabbed my suitcase, which had remained packed. Giovanni looked wistfully at his paintings and books, but grabbed only a few pieces of clothing, which he threw into a small duffle bag. He then moved aside one of the portraits, revealing a small safe embedded in the stone wall. He quickly unlocked it, and removed several bundles of cash and some papers. These he stuffed into the bag. Then we left as if the building was on fire.

No snow fell, like the previous evening, but the wind was sharp and laced with cold. "I have a truck," Giovanni said. He pulled me along to a dark corner, where an older, non-descript pickup stood. It was the type of vehicle you would pass on the streets every day, without noticing. The money and the truck were signs that he was ready for whatever might happen. Though I was alarmed at the thought of someone bent on our destruction, I drew comfort from Giovanni's obvious preparation.

As the truck pulled away from the lot I caught a glimpse of Gerald in an upstairs window. He waved once then disappeared from sight. I would never see the man again, but I would always be thankful for his allegiance.

Soon enough we were on the 401, headed west into the darkness. The shadowy landscape whisked by, yet I was oblivious. My mind raced with questions. What could have happened to make a family pursue Giovanni for centuries? It must be tied to the girl who kept returning to his thoughts, but how? Would we ever know peace, if we were always on the run from people who were dedicated to our demise?

I looked to Giovanni's strong profile for comfort. If we needed to run to stay safe, then we would run. It was as Giovanni said, we were things that should not exist, and as an extension of this our love was something that should never have been.

I had no idea where we were headed, as we made our way down that highway that stretched for thousands of kilometers, and I didn't care. As long as we were together, it didn't matter what physical place we found ourselves in. Our love would be the guiding constant, and that was more than enough.

After driving for hours in silence, I felt Giovanni's cool fingers touch my face. I turned, and briefly met his eyes, before he turned his attention back to the road. "What are you thinking? Your mind is clouded."

"Just that I love you."

"That's all? After what's happened tonight you don't have a thousand questions swirling around in that lovely brain of yours?"

I smiled. "I suppose that you'll tell me when you're ready."

His lips pursed, and his brow wrinkled. Then *she* became another presence in the car with us, and I knew he was ready to share the story. "The girl you keep seeing in your mind— she's the reason for this. Though I don't mean to place blame on her, for if anyone was ever innocent, she was. I apologise, I'm not explaining this very well, but this is something I have been forcing myself to not think about for too long now."

He paused, eyes straight ahead. The grey, indistinct landscape continued to roll by. "Her name was Seraphine. She worked for the family I stayed with while attending school in France. I would see her almost daily, and she would always smile at me in her shy way. I don't think we ever exchanged more than handful of words with each other, yet I thought that I was in love with her." He reached a hand out and gently squeezed mine, knowing those words stung.

"I had some romantic idea in my head that I would sweep her off her feet and we would be married. It was ridiculous, of course. My family would never have allowed it, not even for love. She was a servant girl, someone my mother would have deemed too common for me, and she was very young and innocent, about sixteen years old. Though, at that time, it was an age when many girls married and started their families.

"I started following her home from work. She would leave once the kitchen was cleaned after the evening meal, and would walk the several miles to her family home. After the first few times I think she knew I was there, but she never acknowledged me. She only took longer routes to get home, and paused more frequently. Sometimes she stopped at the same spot where there was a large flat rock, and she would take out some scraps of paper from her pocket and she would write. I was a bit surprised. Many of the working class, and especially women, did not even know how to read back then, much less write. She looked angelic sitting there, with the sunlight shining on her blond hair. I would often find myself holding my breath as I enjoyed her beauty from my hiding place. It was perfectly ridiculous for someone of my age and status to have been acting that way, but love can make one do foolish things.

"One evening after she had finished writing, she left a piece of paper on the rock. As she made her way from the rock, she briefly looked back toward the spot where I was hiding, and let out a small giggle. I waited a few moments then I went to see what it was that she left behind. I found a single sheet of paper, addressed to me, and on it was poem that she had written. I stood there, reading it over and over again, then I just sat on the rock and held the paper in my hands."

He stopped speaking for a few moments and then began again in a pained voice. "This is the poem she wrote:

The clock chimes echo

through the empty corridor.

The young girl sits alone.

She shivers from the dampness,

and the feelings of a lost time

envelop her in their memories.

She is both the times past,

and the times yet to come.

Within the world she is no one,

within herself she is everything.

"At the bottom she asked me to meet her at that spot the next night, and signed her name."

"That's a very sad poem." I was unsure of where this was all going.

"Yes, it was, and I'll always regret that I never had the chance to ask her what it meant. I have always wondered what influenced her, what things she might have read. She was such a pivotal factor of my life, a presence in it still, and yet I didn't really know her at all. It took everything in me to bury her image in my mind, and block out the pain I associate with her memory. There is no way now to separate my adoration from her death. She has become this thing where no good can exist without the bad, and it is not something that I can reconcile within myself.

"Anyway, when I passed her the next morning she smiled shyly, and I had a rush of excitement and nervousness. All throughout the day I was a wreck. I accomplished nothing at school. All I could think of was our meeting that night, but there was no way of knowing what lay in store for the two of us.

"I couldn't eat a bite of dinner, and ended up excusing myself from the table early. The others thought I had gone up to bed, but I slipped out the back door, and waited for her to leave. An hour passed by like an eternity before she appeared. She started on her way home, and I followed along behind her. As we approached the spot where she had left the poem, she looked behind her and called out my name. I stepped out from the foliage where I had been hiding, and we stood on the path just looking at each other. The sun was just starting to set, and the light set her hair afire with colour. She walked to the large rock and sat, waiting for me to join her. I took a seat beside her, our arms just touching.

"The towering trees canopied our spot, and a soft wind rattled through the leaves. I was trembling, and I didn't want her to know I was nervous. I turned to her, and met her eyes. They were the clearest, lightest colour of hazel I had ever seen. Her skin was an unspoiled, creamy white, with a gentle blush spreading across both cheeks. I raised my hand, and hesitantly ran it down the length of her wheat-coloured hair. It felt like silk. I knew then as I stared into her eyes that the best thing that I could do would be to leave, and never speak to her again. There was no way it could ever amount to anything, but I could not pull myself away. I felt bewitched by her beauty and innocence. So there on that rock, as the day gently slipped into night, we kissed. It was a brief, innocent kiss, so sweet by its very nature and intent. As soon as our lips parted, she jumped up and disappeared down the path toward her home. I sat there for a long time, barely aware of how dark the woods around me were becoming. All too soon I found myself in total darkness. I cursed myself for being ridiculous."

I flinched as the steering wheel made a crunching noise under his hands. "Giovanni."

He continued as though I hadn't spoken. "I was concentrating so hard on trying to find my way back through the darkness that I didn't hear him approach. Though knowing what I do now, I realise I would have only heard him approach if he wanted me to. He seemed to just appear out of nowhere.

"He was very tall and thin, with a commanding presence. He appeared to be in his late thirties or early forties, though his hair was not the slightest bit grey. It was a very unusual shade of blond, a colour reminding me of lemons. It was very fine and straight, and it fell just below his shoulders. He regarded me with bright green eyes, as steady and dangerous as a fox. I was paralysed under his gaze.

"He was dressed from head to toe in black, which was very striking against the chalk-like colour of his skin. My first thought was that he was ill, and I silently prayed he would not infect me with something terrible, an ironic thought considering what was about to happen. He held back his black cloak with his hands, and it struck me as peculiar that his gloves were made of red velvet. They were the only hint of colour to him, aside from his eyes. He came to me without a word, and brushed those gloves along my face. They were so soft! My thought process completely shut down, so it did not seem strange.

"His hands wound into my hair, and he pulled my head back, forcing me to look up into his eyes. He was quite a bit taller than I am, and it strained my neck to look at him like that. We stayed that way for a few moments, and as my heart pounded wildly in my chest he started to lean into me. He moved as though he was about to kiss me, but at the last moment turned away. He licked his lips, and then pressed his cheek against my own, situating his mouth right against my ear. He was whispering, but I didn't understand. Later I would come to know that he was speaking English, but at that time I only spoke Spanish and a bit of French. I felt myself melt into his embrace, and even though he was a man I was not alarmed or embarrassed. It felt strangely good.

"Then, without warning, I felt a terrible pain in the side of my neck. My knees buckled, but the stranger held me in our awkward embrace with his mouth clamped onto my flesh. The sounds of his feeding were painfully loud in my ear, and I was helpless to protect myself. The world swam in and out of focus, my body growing weaker and weaker from the blood loss. Then I blacked out.

"The next thing I was aware of was finding myself in a strange house. It was dark and I was lying on a pile of straw on the floor, a rough blanket over top of my body. I tried to move, but I was weak, and the attempt just caused my head to swim. I was terribly nauseated and cold. A fire burnt in a hearth not far from where I lay, but I did not feel its warmth. My throat was dry, and the wound on my neck throbbed terribly.

"Suddenly he was there at my side, his monstrous green eyes glaring down on me. I closed my eyes, praying for death, but I knew I was in the hands of something worse than death. Again, I felt his mouth on my body, this time on my inner arm, and then all too soon the familiar sting of his bite. He drank briefly then I passed out again. This went on for several days, I can't be sure of how long it was until one night things changed.

"He started to feed, and I could feel my life force draining out of me with every mouthful of blood he swallowed. I saw visions of my mother, and my siblings, and I felt hot tears on my cheeks. Then, just as I felt that I was about to slip over into waiting death he pulled a sharp piece of glass across his wrist. Bright red drops of blood sprang to the surface before he placed the wound to my dry lips. He squeezed, and I felt the liquid spill into my mouth and down my parched throat. There was a terrible buzzing in my ears, and his cold smile loomed over my face. Before I knew what was happening, I felt my mouth press more firmly against his wrist, and I began to drink. Before I was ready he pulled his arm away, and I gave way to the greyness pulling at my consciousness.

"The next evening when I awoke, I was alone. The room was full of the overpowering smell of the wood burning in the fire, and the snapping of the logs that sounded like thunder claps to my sensitive ears. Even though the fire provided the only light in the whole space, I was able to discern every detail of the dingy and sparsely furnished room. I realised I was naked, yet I was not cold. My throat stung with dryness, and I was wild with thirst. Yet I didn't know then what it was that I was thirsting for.

"I looked about the tiny house for clothing, eventually finding a pair of trousers that were much too long and a worn overcoat. As I was dressing, footsteps sounded outside the house. The door creaked open and the man appeared out of the darkness. We stood looking at each other, and he had the most curious expression on his face, part surprise and part suspicion. I noticed then that he was dragging something along behind him. A strange pounding filled the room, the sound stabbing agonisingly inside my head. He smiled then pulled his bundle up into his arms.

"I realised then that it was a person he held, a small figure who was dirty, and covered with leaves and twigs as though they had been dragged through the forest. It appeared to be a woman, though she wore a large hooded cape that covered her slight frame. He had obviously incapacitated her somehow, as her body hung limply from his grasp.

"He lowered his mouth to the body's throat, the face pressed against his chest, masking the features from my view. His green eyes were wary as he watched me from his position over her. Suddenly an aroma made my thirst flare unbearably. My body tensed with need. He came to me so quickly that even my vampire eyes could not discern his movement. The body was thrust into my arms, and my hungry lips found my way to her throat. The blood provoked me and I could not resist. I drank, unable to control the mad frenzy accompanying my thirst, and tore her throat viciously. I drank until the body

became a brittle, empty husk in my arms, and yet I needed more. I tossed the body aside, unaware of the level of my new strength. The body flew from my hands to the other side of the room, skidding to a stop at the edge of the fire. Long strands of blond hair spilled out from the hood, the colours of the flames reflected on their pale surface. I looked from the body back to his face and saw that he was laughing. There was no sound, but his body shook visibly. I was disoriented, frightened and repulsed at my own actions. I begged him for answers, but he said nothing.

"I flew across the room in a rage, still violent with thirst. I kicked at the body in disgust, the force of the contact throwing it up into the air. It landed back on the wooden floor with a sickening sound, like the snapping of dry kindling. The hood fell back, revealing for the first time the face of the person whose life I took. For a few seconds my brain refused to comprehend what I was seeing.

"The face that I had looked at a hundred times, a face I dreamt about and lusted after, lay battered and drained of life at my feet. It was Seraphine.

"What have I done?" I screamed in horror, and still the man said nothing. He just eyed me and smiled that terrible smile of his. I fell to my knees and pulled her wasted body into my arms. Her skin was dry and brittle, stretched taut across her small form. Her face, once so beautiful, was now withered and sickly grey. Her head flopped back over my arm, and the dancing firelight exposed the mess I made of her throat while feeding. The meat of her neck was grotesquely colourless, and the damage I had inflicted exposed tendons, and even a flash of her spine. But it was the sight of her lifeless eyes that bothered me the most. Their glorious, sparkling colour that had reminded me of Heaven had gone. I pulled her tightly to my body, so I would not have to look at her eyes, and felt more helpless than I had ever felt in my life."

As he spoke, I saw the entire encounter play out in my mind. I could feel his hunger, hear the pounding of her heart and smell the blood in the air. Having just experienced my own first awakening, and knowing the overwhelming and uncontrollable thirst accompanying it, I had nothing but empathy for what he had gone through. The situation had obviously been set up to transpire as it did, for what purpose I could not comprehend. Perhaps the stranger enjoyed inflicting torment not only on his human victims, but on other vampires as well. Just seeing that man's cold eyes in Giovanni's memories was enough to fill me with dread and revulsion. Having him come upon Giovanni without warning like he had, only made the situation worse. There was no choice, and no chance to adjust to what he had become. Giovanni would have had no way to understand what happened to him, let alone have been able to control his actions without guidance.

"Can you even comprehend the tragedy of it? It was just a silly crush. Selfish, immature lust and it cost her her life! It was bad enough that I would have eventually broken her heart when the relationship ended, if it ever had the chance to begin at all, but in my thoughtlessness I led him directly to her."

"Giovanni, it's not your fault. There is no way you could have known that something like that would have happened. How could anyone have known?"

My love's grief was too real, and his guilt would not be erased. Something about that girl's death had burnt itself into his very being, and he would carry it with him to the end of his existence.

Somehow the silence that followed was even more terrible than the story he had shared. I was bombarded with nightmarish images, and Giovanni's anger and guilt washed over me. I felt a touch of my own shame as the image of the girl's death triggered my own insistent thirst. I squirmed in my seat, teeth clenched, knowing I would not be able to contain myself for too long.

"You need to feed," he said without looking at me.

"Yes."

Without another word he took the next off-ramp, bringing us to a small town, the streets all but deserted at this late hour. We drove until we were on the farthest edges of town, where the streets turned to narrow roads, and dirt laneways. Giovanni pulled the car to the side of the road near a farmhouse set about an acre back from the property's edge. We both exited the car silently.

"Can you hear them?" he asked as we moved up the driveway with blinding speed.

"No, I can only hear the wind... and no wait. I hear a heartbeat. Two heartbeats." The sound was faint, but my body reacted instantly to the possibility of blood. In a violent burst I reached for the door, but Giovanni's hand caught mine in his iron grip. His eyes burnt into mine. "Careful. Keep the element of surprise."

With the merest whisper of sound, Giovanni snapped off the handle from the door, and pulled the lock open. The door opened inward with a soft groan. Swiftly we made our way through into a long hallway. The walls were lined with family pictures, of several children in various stages of growth, as well as group and wedding photos, and several shots of family members with a number of different horses. Their eyes watched in judgment as we made our way into the home to steal their loved ones from them. Giovanni took my hand and yanked me around a corner to the staircase.

On the second floor we found several closed doors, but our heightened senses told us there was life only behind one of them. Two heartbeats in that room sounded in the gentle rhythms of sleep. Giovanni placed a chaste kiss on my cheek, but there was no enjoyment in his face. The memories he had unleashed earlier were still holding him in their cocoon of anguish.

In the room, we found an older couple asleep on a large bed, tucked under a large window overlooking the back pasture on their property. The curtains were open slightly, and the soft glow of moonlight washed over their unsuspecting forms. The man was turned away from his wife, an arm dangling over the edge of the bed. The night was chillingly quiet.

Suddenly, Giovanni was on the woman, his body pressed tightly to hers—a lover's embrace. His hand snaked behind her head and thrust her up toward him, and her eyes flew open in fear. Her mouth opened in an almost comical "O" of surprise, but she did not scream. I heard his guttural snarl as he bit into her flesh. The smell of her blood immediately spurred me on.

I seized her husband in my hands and clamped my mouth onto his throat. Hot, gorgeous, delicious blood filled my waiting mouth. I drank greedily, and his body rocked with death throes in my arms. He did not have the time to utter a single word, and barely struggled against my assault. I closed my eyes as I drank, and all I could see was Seraphine's face. His heart slowed, as did the blood, then both stopped. When I was done, I laid the man back down onto the bed. His eyes remained closed, and he looked almost peaceful. If not for the gaping wound on his neck he would have appeared to be asleep. I turned his head the other way, effectively hiding the damage and the blood staining the collar of his faded flannel pyjamas.

Giovanni was gone when I became aware of the surroundings and myself. While caught up in the frenzy of feeding, I discovered I was essentially cut off from my other senses. I didn't hear anything but the victim's heart, and I could smell nothing but their blood. I understood how easy it might be for a person to gain an advantage for the few minutes when a new vampire was lost to his feeding. It might be enough time to strike an attack, and ultimately destroy one of us.

I used my mind to try feel out where Giovanni had gone, but encountered only a blank wall. I felt a deep terror at being blocked from our connection. Was his anger masking him me? It seemed as if the joyous things, and the arousals and excitement came more clearly to me than did fear and anger. The dark thoughts punctured my brain, sometimes too quickly or too violently to make sense. They did little but rattle and unnerve me.

I looked back at the bed, and realised Giovanni had left the woman's body hanging haphazardly over the side. I pushed her onto her back and pulled the covers into place. The spot where Giovanni had fed was discernable only by two tiny marks on the side of her neck. In the darkness there was no redness, and like her husband she seemed merely asleep. I left them in the bed, side by side, given over to their final slumber.

As I rose to leave, I caught a glimpse of the woman's face out of the corner of my eye, and immediately turned back. As I stood there her features began to shift and the grey hair became darker and longer. The skin filled out and took on a more youthful appearance. The stranger's face was replaced by one I knew all too well. I gasped, and leapt to the bedside. I took the lifeless hand in my own, staring down into the face of my mother. I was frozen with horror, sick desperate guilt burning inside me.

"Rachel, what's going on?" Giovanni called to me over my wails.

I lifted my head from where I laid it against my mother's chest, and looked into his eyes, which were wide with alarm. "It's my mother... my mother..." I sobbed.

His gaze left my face and travelled to the body on the bed. He frowned, dark brows knitting together before he spoke. "No, it's not. Your mother is fine. This is a stranger."

I looked back at the bed. He was right, it was still the body of an old woman, and not my mother. I felt silly, and yet still deeply disturbed. The hand I held was not one of a fifty-six-year-old woman, but the gnarled hand of a woman well into her seventies or more. Giovanni pulled my hand away from the body and all but dragged me out of the room. I took one last furtive glance, relieved to see the bodies of two dead strangers lying in the silent room.

All the way down the hall I felt eyes burning into my back. I was afraid to look back and find someone else I cared about lurking there. We stopped in the large family room, downstairs, where Giovanni led me to the couch. It was a large, overly embellished flowered number, sagging from years of use. When we sat I smelled a strange scent that reminded me of the hospital.

"Are you all right now?" His voice was bright with concern.

"Yes. I don't know what happened. I was just pushing her back onto the bed and then her face... changed. It was horrible."

"I don't know how to explain this, but I think that the stress of changing, and the story of Seraphine and her family has put too much pressure on you. It's bringing out your own fears and guilt about leaving your family behind." His look was still grim, and made my heart ache.

I wrapped my arms around him, and squeezed him as if I would never let go. We held each other in that dark and silent farmhouse, taking the reassurance only we could give each other.

Slowly he pulled out of my grasp and kissed me quickly on the mouth. "Just stay here. There are a few things I need to do."

I nodded, happy to have a moment to myself. I was still unnerved by my experience. I guess I hadn't even considered that vampires could be afraid, or have remorse. I didn't realise that even in my undead state that I could become stressed and unnerved. There were many things I would need to learn and experience before I could be completely sure of myself. I didn't want to be a hindrance. It was a powerful and humbling feeling to know that insecurities and faults belonged to those such as we are.

A large display cabinet stood across from the couch where I sat, and something on it caught my eye. I went over and picked up the object, turning it over delicately in my hand. It was a snow globe, with a tiny, cherubic figure dancing across a snowy landscape. I shook it and smiled as the fake snow swirled about. I had loved snow globes as a child, and remembered the fear of being caught after I accidentally broke one as a young girl.

The top of a piano was filled with cards. I picked them up, reading the sentiments of people I would never know and feeling oddly envious. Would we ever be able to settle somewhere and enjoy holidays like this, even if only the two of us? What, if anything, did vampires celebrate?

Then I picked up a homemade card with a peculiarly drawn Santa on the front, and eight brown objects with spider-like legs that could only be reindeer. Inside, written in large childish scrawl, was *To Granny and Grandpa. Merry Christmas. I love you. Janice.* I dropped the card as if it was on fire, and scrambled across the room.

What was wrong with me? One minute I didn't care who I killed, the next I was crippled with guilt over the loss of a child's grandparent. I needed to get it together.

Overhead, came the sounds of drawers being opened and closed. Items were shuffled about and doors slammed. The tiny nativity figures displayed on the scarred coffee table shook with the vehemence of the slamming, and the figure of Mary toppled over. I guiltily replaced her to her proper position. What would these people have thought about the existence of creatures such as us, against their Christian beliefs?

Soon Giovanni's footsteps came down the staircase. He appeared in the doorway, and eyed me strangely in my position by the tiny nativity figures. Anger was tight in my chest as I stood there, looking at those people's decorations, knowing that their molested bodies lay upstairs. An overwhelming impulse to flee, to run into the night until the sun started its ascent filled me. I felt shame at still being there in their home, while he rummaged through their personal belongings.

Giovanni must have sensed my discomfort. He cast a worried look in my direction. “I was just looking around to decide on the best way to dispose of the bodies.”

“Haven't we done enough to these poor people?”

“We can't leave their bodies like that. There will be too many questions, and if it gets into the news it could help direct Bertrande onto our trail.”

“Of course.” I sighed.

“Rachel, this is the way it must be. We need blood to survive, and sometimes that means people will die. You said you understood that before I brought you over. These people were old. Look around you— they obviously had a good life, had children and grandchildren.”

“Okay,” I agreed angrily. “So what were you doing up there? Why were you looking through their stuff?”

He held a package of paper out. “I was looking to see if this place was insured. I thought that the best way to deal with this would be to start a fire. It would cover all the evidence, but I wanted to make sure that these people's family members would receive some benefit from it. Not everything I do is selfish.”

His words stung. It could have been merely a statement about his actions that night, or he could have been referring to Seraphine. “I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm acting this way.”

“Forget about it. We need to get this done and get back on the road.”

He disappeared again, this time to the house's basement. I heard the creaking of the wooden steps, and snap of the electrical panel being opened. Almost immediately there was the distinct smell of something burning. He raced back to me, and we made our hasty retreat to the car.

We found our way back to the highway, and continued our westward escape until there was only about an hour's worth of night left. Giovanni pulled off at a seedy-looking motel with half of the lights in its roadside sign burnt out. It was the type of place where rooms could be rented by the hour, and the man at the counter had no trouble with the odd hours for which we would need the room. Giovanni paid the man in cash, slipping him a little extra to make sure we were not disturbed, and got our key. The greasy, ferret-faced man watched as Giovanni returned to the truck, and he followed our movement around the back of the building. I'm sure he assumed I was a paid companion, or that we were cheating spouses of some kind.

The room was just as one would expect it to be, but even more disgusting with our heightened eyesight to pick out the incriminating layer of filth covering everything. An orange shag carpet had a style that had been popular several decades ago, and looked as if it hadn't been vacuumed since it had been installed. A double bed boasted a cheap polyester cover and flat pillows. The TV was bolted to the table where it sat. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a bedside table, which held the phone and the remote. It was depressing to say the least.

Giovanni quickly latched the door and pulled the curtains closed. He then pushed the bed up against the door to add more reinforcement than the cheap chain lock would afford. Then he snatched the covers and pillows from the bed and took them into the tiny bathroom. The small space had no window, and the bare bulb cast a sickly yellow glow about the space. The sink was chipped and a wide ring of grime stained the tub's perimeter. He placed a blanket on the tub's bottom then laid the pillows and cover on top. He shut the door behind me.

Together we lay in the filthy tub wrapped with musty-smelling covers. The narrow space forced our bodies tightly together, with my head cradled in the crook of his shoulder and chest. He played with my hair, and fluttered soft kisses across my forehead. I forced myself to concentrate on the comfort of being in his arms, pushing aside all thoughts of our pursuit and my strange reactions.

“You never explained what happened to the one who changed you, or how the Desmarais family figured out it was you who killed the girl.”

“Tomorrow, my love. I have talked enough of this for one night,” he murmured.

“I'm sorry for your pain, Giovanni. I'm glad that you shared your story with me, and that you felt that you were able to trust me with this. The past is the past, and whoever we may have been before now is gone. We're together now, and we can deal with whatever happens.”

“Sometimes the past has a way of stealing your future,” he said sadly. I trailed off into sleep with those words replaying in my mind. I dreamt of blood and lust, and the loss of something that was never mine to begin with.

Chapter 10

I awoke with a sharp jolt of panic. I shook my head and pulled my knees up to my chest for comfort. The porcelain was cold against my back, but did not chill me. My body temperature was not much warmer than the tub, and temperature in general did not seem to register easily with my vampire physiology. I leant back and closed my eyes.

In an instant they were open again. I was alone in the tub and I sat bolt upright, looking for Giovanni.

I came from the bathroom into the larger room, which had definitely not become more appealing or cleaner during our slumber. The bed had been returned to its original position, but the curtains were still drawn, and after I tested the door I discovered the lock was still engaged. As I lifted my hand from the knob, I heard someone's fast approach toward the door. From the lightness of his steps and the lack of heartbeat, I quickly determined it was Giovanni. In another room a television blared, and to my distaste I overheard the couple occupying the room engaging in sloppy, enthusiastic sex.

The door opened inward. Giovanni smiled as he found me sitting on the edge of the bed. "I took a quick look around, and I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary." His attention flickered, and I surmised that he had become aware of the couple in the other room. He looked back to my solemn face. "We shouldn't feed here."

"I don't want to feed yet," I said. "I want you."

With smooth, feline grace he came to the bed, his coat dropping to the floor. Slowly he removed his clothing until he was standing completely naked before me. I wrapped my arms around his waist, and licked along his bare stomach. His hands found my arms, and he gently raised me to my feet. Slowly, teasingly he removed my clothing, kissing me deeply between each item. By the time I was undressed I was shaking with need. I throbbed with the desire to have him inside me.

We fell back against the bare mattress, with no need for words. His urgency met mine as he pushed himself inside my body. I cried out. He took his time, savouring each kiss, each thrust. This time there was no violence, no painful memories to flash over my pleasure. We were lost to each other. I drank in ecstasy from his body, and love and desire from his mind. It was a connection so intensely intimate and primal I knew there could only ever be him.

We lay naked in the dark. The sounds of passing cars from the highway spilled in occasionally, reminding us that we were not entirely alone in the world.

"We should go." Giovanni's tone did not support the statement.

I physically forced myself to move from his arms. Once dressed, we went to the car then he drove us around to the front office. After checking out, we returned to the road, putting several hours' distance between the motel and us. The sex had calmed me somewhat, but the thirst was building. I held my hands together in my lap, clenching my teeth painfully. My fangs erupted and I rubbed them feverishly over my bottom lip. Occasionally Giovanni glanced in my direction. I saw the movement from my peripheral vision but I did not meet his gaze.

When I thought I could stand it no more, he pulled off at a small gas station rest stop that had seen better days. It had two pumps and the windows advertised cigarettes and cola. He pulled some money from his pocket and told me to go inside to pay the clerk. I looked at him warily, my body tensed with unrelenting need. Giovanni looked very nonchalant as he unscrewed the cap from the gas tank, and began to refuel the car. He leant back against the side of the truck and looked off across the shadowy horizon.

The gravel crunched loudly under my shoes as I made my way to the front door. A cowbell jangled overhead as I entered, the sound grating and excruciating to my sensitive ears. I knew my need to feed was exaggerating my response to external stimuli, but I did not have enough control to apply that knowledge practically. The overhead light was too bright.

From the counter, the man watched my approach. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously as I neared. I knew my appearance must have been alarming to him. He probably thought I was junkie, and was worried that he might be about to be robbed. "You all right there?" he asked in a deep, raspy voice.

I didn't answer, but watched as he stubbed out his cigarette into an already overflowing ashtray. A radio played a news report, the volume turned down low, yet to me it was still blatantly loud. I silently took in the old-fashioned cash register, the half-eaten bag of pretzels and the sprinkling of dandruff on the man's shoulders. His face was unshaven, his grey-brown hair thinning. Bruise-like bags discoloured the skin under his hazel eyes and his fingers were heavily stained with nicotine.

I placed some money on the counter and he looked at it as if I had offered him something offensive. "He's not done pumping." He looked out the window to where Giovanni stood.

The room became suffocatingly tight. I knew what was about to happen and I was powerless to stop it. A part of me— the dominant part— didn't want to stop it. The man returned his attention to me, the first inkling of real fear in his eyes. His body emitted an odour of anxiety, and it only pushed me further over the edge. "Hey now, little lady," he started in a shaky voice. He took a tentative step backward, connecting with the shelves of tobacco products lined behind him. Several packages fell to the floor but he didn't dare take his eyes away from me.

I caught him in my stare, just like the stereotypical deer in the headlights. His tongue twitched and saliva beaded up in the corners of his mouth. The pulsing vein in his neck excited my already combustible state. I leapt over the counter with one fluid movement, landing mere inches from where he stood. He moaned as I touched his cheek with my cold hand. His eyes filled with tears.

I snatched his arm with my small hand, twisting it until something snapped. As I forced him to his knees, I became intoxicated by his fear. Distantly the meter made a soft ping, indicating that Giovanni had finished fuelling the truck. I wanted him so badly I was trembling.

I could hold back no longer. I clamped my mouth onto his neck, and my fangs ripped through his malleable flesh. I drank, the maddening need easing with every second. His blood filled my stomach, and warmed my body as my venous system spread the nourishment to all areas of my body. My mind rolled with pleasure, and I was able to think coherently again. In minutes his body sagged in my grip. As the last drop was drawn I became aware again of the scent of sweat and tobacco.

I knew Giovanni was there before I saw him. I felt his approval and saw his smile flash in my mind. I dropped the body among the spilled cigarette butts and packages that had tumbled from the shelves during my attack. I stood savouring the moment, empowered with the man's blood. When my eyes opened I looked down on his wasted body sprawled on top of the mess and smiled. I felt nothing but satisfaction. There was no remorse, or shame.

That was the moment I truly became a creature of the night. That was the moment I knew that not only could I kill impartially, but that I enjoyed it.

I jumped back over the counter to Giovanni's waiting arms. Without words he understood that my transformation was complete. As the door of the building closed behind us, all the ghosts of my former self remained trapped behind.

The snow was falling again, and like a child I stuck out my tongue to catch the icy flakes. I learnt many things in those brief moments inside. I discovered the true meaning of the lifestyle to which I had willingly handed myself over to. I understood the allure of power and dominance, and I learnt that my love was patient and understanding, that he would not force me, or manipulate my feeling for him. He would let me come to things on my own terms. Yet, above all else, I was able to see the fierceness and strength in myself Giovanni recognised and encouraged.

"I had a look around while you were inside. There is an apartment in the back. It's empty. The man must have lived here alone. Why don't we go back there and get cleaned up?"

"Okay."

He pulled some clothing from our bags in the car, which he then handed to me. He walked back into the building, leaving me outside in the dancing snow. The outside lights began to turn off, one by one, until the building was dark. It would have been unnoticeable from the highway at night.

He joined me shortly and we stole around the side of the building, to a rickety-looking staircase. A battered wooden door stood at the top. Giovanni pushed it open, exerting little force to break the lock free.

Inside was a single room with a living room-bedroom area sectioned off from the kitchen by a narrow counter. To the right of the doorway, was another smaller door leading to the unit's bathroom. The space was as filthy as the motel room. Dirty dishes were stacked everywhere, among empty fast food containers and multiple ashtrays. The air was damp and smelled like week-old garbage. There was absolutely nothing in that place I would want to touch any part of my body. I looked to Giovanni but he only shrugged, an amused expression on his face.

Viewed under the harsh light of the bathroom fixture, I looked like something out of a horror movie. The bottom half of my face was covered with drying blood, starting to turn from red to brown. The rest of my face was a smooth, ivory canvas, with ice-blue eyes shining back at me. My hair was a mess, matted and flat from sleeping in the cramped bathtub. Yet I was still beautiful.

I removed my clothes and handed them to Giovanni. He was standing in the small room, obviously as disturbed by the thought of touching anything as I was. I stepped into the shower stall where the tiles were outlined with black mildew and turned on the water. I used the small lump of congealed soap to wash my face, and managed to squeeze enough shampoo from the bottle to lather my hair. I stepped, somewhat refreshed and definitely cleaner, but couldn't find anything to dry myself on. I walked out into the main room, and Giovanni handed me a small dishtowel that looked clean and I used that to pat myself dry.

As I was dressing in clean clothes Giovanni spoke. "I don't think the world will be at a loss with this guy. The only things he seemed to have of interest are junk food, crack and pornography."

"I didn't get the impression that he was contributing much."

"I just thought you might want to know, after what happened last night."

I was dressed and running a comb through my long, wet hair. "I'm okay, Giovanni. Really. Something happened tonight when I was with him. Everything seemed to click, and I made complete peace with who I have become."

"And what you have become?"

"Yes, and what," I answered honestly. "Now, let's get out of this hole. It's disgusting in here."

Giovanni laughed and took my hand. "It's too bad it's not like the movies, where the vampires flounce around in expensive clothes and never get blood on themselves, except when their supposed to look scary or sexy."

I kissed him deeply then pulled slightly back. "This is better."

We drove away into the swirling snow, leaving behind the clerk's now-battered body. Giovanni made it look like a hold-up gone horribly wrong. He even dropped some of the man's stash, implicating drugs as the reason for the overkill.

There were few cars on the highway, and we kept a steady pace as we continued westward. I was lulled into an almost hypnotic state by the car's movement, and the endlessly monotonous landscape. My mind wandered back to the night before and Giovanni's story of the girl.

"Why did you tell me about Seraphine?" I asked after hours of silence.

"You needed to know what we are up against."

"No, I mean, why did you tell me about her? You could have just said that someone was killed which led to a vendetta, or simply that someone discovered what you were. You didn't have to tell me about her."

"Wouldn't you have wondered why you kept seeing her face?"

"I see lots of things from you in my mind, lots of faces. You could have told me anything."

He stole a quick look at me and his expression was solemn. "I will never lie to you, Rachel, and I needed to share this with you as much as you needed to know the truth. It might save our lives one day. I have been carrying this around with me for many years and I have never shared it with anyone. You are the only one I have ever wanted to tell. Do you understand?"

An unsettling sensation emanated from Giovanni. It crept over my skin. It was part hurt, part grief and part relief. "Yes. I'm glad that you feel that you can be completely honest with me. There should be no secrets between us, but you still haven't explained how they figured out it was you. Can you tell me?"

"I suppose it's best to get this out in the open. You have to understand that this is like picking a very painful scab, and letting the pain leak out. I have held it off for so long... well, after that night I stayed in that house. I wrapped the girl's corpse up in a blanket and placed it in an empty room. I didn't know what to do, I was wild with grief and I was afraid. The one who changed me didn't even try to speak to me after that. For two nights he brought people back to me to feed on, but I wouldn't. On the third night, when I awoke, he was gone. The few items of clothing and his bag of money, even his horse was gone. I was alone. I found a note from him on the table, which he had managed to write in rudimentary Spanish.

"It said, Giovanni. This has been a mistake for the both of us. It does neither one of us any good for me to stay. Perhaps our paths will cross again one day. Good luck and Farewell.

"And that was it. I was alone.

"I looked in nightly on her corpse, all the more sickened as it began to decompose. By the fifth night, the bloodlust was too great to ignore any longer. I was crazy. I had absolutely no control over myself. I stumbled out into the night, running through the forest until at last I found myself in a familiar area. Then I encountered a clearing, realising too late exactly where I was.

"There on the rock where our only kiss had occurred, was a shrine of sorts, with candles and food, flowers, ribbons and rosary beads. There was also a small picture of Seraphine that someone had drawn. Sitting there, quietly in the dark, was a young man. He was slightly built, with thick blond hair. As he heard me approach, he looked up. I wanted to take him to feed, but when I saw his face I was shocked.

"He looked so much like her it was uncanny. He had the same fine features, and eyes the same colour as hers. It was like looking upon her face again. He rose to his feet, dusting the loose dirt from his pants. He couldn't have been much older than she had been, maybe eighteen. He indicated in the direction of the rock when he spoke. 'Did you know her?'

"I ignored his words and walked over to the small picture. I touched it gently and stared down at the image captured on the page. It was a very good likeness of her, highlighting her innocent beauty. I felt a terrible sickness in my heart, but I could not even grieve because his blood was torturing me with its nearness. I could smell him, and hear his strong heart beating. As I turned back to him and he saw me clearly in the candlelight, he gasped. He took a shaky footstep backward, making the form of the cross over his chest. The picture dropped from my hands. The unconcealed terror in his icy eyes taunted me, and I could not resist. I grabbed him, all but crushing his spine with my bare hands. He struggled wildly and screamed out for help, but there was no escape for him.

"I had never tasted anything as wonderful as that young man's blood. I felt a satisfaction and fulfilment so complete it was almost perfect. Soon his struggling stopped and his heart slowed. When I was finished, I placed the body behind the stone and sat. I was sick with shame, and yet I felt powerful, strong. I didn't understand how something like what I was could exist. I had never heard of anything like it.

"I was still sitting there, alone in my shame, when a group of men approached. I heard the sound of pounding hooves, but I was too sick at heart to care who it might be. Soon I could make out a group of men, almost a mob. Some carried swords and canes, and others simply had offerings for the shrine. When they saw me there, the leader dismounted and strode up to me. I could see a family resemblance in this man also, but his hair was darker, and he was more solidly built. 'Who are you?' he demanded.

"A friend. I am just paying my respects.'

"His eyes narrowed suspiciously. 'Do you know what happened to her?'

"No,' I whispered.

"She has disappeared. It's been many days and we fear the worst has happened.'

"The worst?' I knew he could have no idea what the worst really was.

"Yes. Some lunatic must have gotten hold of her on her way home.'

"I was silent after that. The men all gathered around, effectively circling me. The body of the young man was close, but could not be seen from their position. The smell of their blood was maddening and I had to fight to keep control. 'Did you see a young man here?' another one of the men asked.

"I shook my head. The leader came even closer to me. 'Come here where we can see you,' he ordered.

"I had no choice. Slowly I stood and walked into the center of the group. I was still wearing only the trousers and the coat, and the man's blood was visible on my bare chest. I looked into his eyes, and saw understanding there. He knew instantly that I was not human, then one of the others began to yell, 'He's here! He's here! Charles is dead!'

"I fled up the path in a blur of speed, knocking the man to the ground. Without thinking, I headed back toward the house where I had come from, having no other place to go. Behind me I heard the pounding of the horses and the screams of the men. They followed but I was too fast. I eventually lost them and found my way back to the little house. I stayed there for the rest of the night, unbelievably frightened at the thought of being discovered. Soon the sun came and I fell asleep in the room that had been my home for so many nights.

"The next night when I awoke I instantly remembered what had happened, and knew I could not stay at that house any longer. I needed a plan, and some

money to get myself far away. There was some back at my room in town, and it was my plan to go there for it, change and leave town. Where I was going to go after that I didn't know. I couldn't return to my family. The thought of losing control and hurting one of them was too horrible to imagine. I just had to get away then try to figure out what I was, and how I would live.

"Then I heard them. A large crowd was approaching the house. They were a way off still, but close enough that it would have been tricky to slip away unnoticed. I wasn't aware of my abilities then, the strength, the speed, or the influence I could have over another's mind. I panicked. I grabbed her corpse, thinking I would bury it somewhere, and I slipped out of the house. I could physically hear the voices and the movements, and mentally hear the thoughts, but I wasn't able to differentiate between the two. It was all garbled and confusing, and distracted me from thinking clearly. I made it about a mile from the house before I crossed paths with two men on horseback. I knew instantly that one of them was the man who had challenged me the previous night, one of Seraphine's relatives. I saw a light bobbing to the rhythm of the horse's movement. I was frightened, and I was thirsty. I had only fed once in six days, and the effects were ravaging my body and my mind.

"I jumped out from the tree line, startling the horses. One whinnied and reared on its back legs. The man dropped to the ground with a heavy thud, while the other managed to get his mount under control. He locked eyes with me, angry hate-filled eyes that burnt right into me. He jumped down and when he was close enough to see what was in my hands, his rage flared. 'Monster!' he screamed and he had no idea how right he was.

"'I didn't mean to kill her,' I said.

"He snatched her body from my arms, and seeing the state of decay he retched, dropping her to the path. His partner joined him, but underneath his anger there was fear. I snaked out and snatched the smaller man from where he stood. I leapt from where the three of us had been standing, and landed effortlessly several yards away. I stuck my fangs into the man's neck and drained his life away in minutes. The other man looked about in bewilderment, unable to track my preternatural speed. Finally he spotted us and ran to where I was feeding from his friend. He stopped just short of me, his bravado fading. 'What are you?'

"'Something to be feared.' I tossed the now-dead body of his friend at his feet.

"'I know you. I know who you are! My sister told me of you! Giovanni, that's your name!' He pointed a shaky finger in my direction, his eyes wide with fear.

"I was just about to take him as well, when I heard the distinct sound of horses, and the voices of many men yelling to one another in the darkness. I had to get away if I was to save myself. I turned to run and I heard him screaming after me, declaring his revenge for his sister's death. 'I will find you, and I will find a way to kill you, whatever you are. The Desmarais family will not rest until you have been destroyed!' His words howled in my ears as I ran away. I snuck back to my previous residence, climbed in a window, and got my things. I left that town, and travelled as far as I could for many nights. When I was satisfied that I was somewhat safe, I did everything I could to figure out what had happened to me. Eventually I discovered the truth. I read and I listened to folklore from all the places I visited. I learnt about the pain from the sun. I gained control over my strength and learnt how to move so fast I could not be detected. I learnt how to read and sometimes influence others' minds, though that was a lot of hit and miss for many years. Occasionally I even met others like us."

"What about the one who made you? You don't even know his name?"

"No name. Nothing. In all the years that I have existed I have never seen or heard from him again."

"I'm sorry for you. What a terrible way for that to have happened. I don't know what I would do if I didn't have you to guide me, and protect me."

"I've survived."

"Yes, but what a way for it to have happened."

"Things happen for a reason, I firmly believe that. Perhaps I needed to go through what I did, to find my way to you."

I couldn't help but smile. "Maybe. So now the fight will be both of ours. I think that together we can get through anything."

"I do too. So have I answered all of your questions?"

"Well, what happened to your family? I mean what did they do when you disappeared?"

"My mother came to France to search for me when the family I was staying with informed her of my disappearance. She did her best to look into it. I know that there was some speculation that Seraphine and I ran off together, but that was quickly kyboshed. My mother spoke with the brother, Henri, and he told her that his sister's body had been found and buried, and that he had no idea what had happened to me. Eventually she gave up and returned home. She dedicated herself to my siblings and her many grandchildren, and life went on without me."

"Hopefully life will go on without me."

"It will, my love, I promise. Time does heal all wounds. I think that maybe now, after all these hundreds of years even my pain will heal."

"I hope I can be a part of that."

"You already are. I would never have talked about this again if I hadn't met you. I had almost reached the point where I didn't care if I existed any longer. I had been without reason to exist for so long, destruction seemed almost to be a blessing. You see, as long as I have been running, the Desmarais have been chasing. They have grown in number and resources, becoming powerful and wealthy. Without a reason to want to carry on, I have toyed with the idea of letting them catch me."

My voice was heavy with emotion when I spoke. "Don't ever say anything like that again."

"I won't. For the first time in a long time I feel happy, and I feel a reason for my existence. You."

“Then together we will do whatever it takes to make sure that the Desmarais never find us, and that we never forget how miraculous it was that we found each other.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

We continued on to Winnipeg then flew out of the country. It was easy to slip away. When we reached Europe, Giovanni arranged for one of his contacts to prepare new identification documents for us, and then it was as if we had disappeared from the face of the earth. In a way this was true, because the girl I once was no longer existed.

Together, with no fear and no regrets, we left my old life behind. The future was wide open and ours for the taking.

Chapter 11

Ten Years Later

The night sky was a vast expanse of twinkling stars. The air tasted of salt from the sea. The wind sweeping off the waters was warm, and it was warmer still in the arms of my love as we lay on the sand. Though the temperature neither helped nor hindered us, I still found its sensation comforted me. We lay together on the shores of a great body of water, secure in the relative safety we found there.

After many years of moving from one place to another, never staying longer than a year and sometimes only a few weeks, we finally settled in a medium-sized Greek town nestled along the Mediterranean Sea. I was introduced to several of Giovanni's contacts throughout our travels, and learnt the locations of several of his real estate holdings.

I also gained control of my thirst and my powers. With Giovanni's guidance I adapted quickly to my new existence, and no longer considered myself a hindrance. I knew how to play the part to pass as human, how to cover the trail of my kills, and to assume new identities as needed. Being a vampire was even better than I could have imagined.

I was also given access to several accounts that he held throughout the world, being conveniently listed as his "wife." It was a strange arrangement, with several accounts being left in trust to his "son," and now wife or "daughter" in the event of his death. It was a simple way to pass on his wealth from one era to the next without raising any alarms. Gaining fake documents was never a difficult task, considering some of the parties he aligned himself with. Still it amazed me, the ease with which he sailed through one identity to the next, and one country to another. After all the time he had spent roaming the earth, he had perfected the art of assuming new identities.

We settled in our new home after a decade of a gypsy-like lifestyle, when Giovanni was finally sure the Desmarais family had been shaken from our trail. Of course it was always a matter of time before either our not aging would force us to move on, or our pursuers would catch up with us again. They were a dedicated and crafty bunch, fully committed to the destruction of what they believed to be an abomination, namely vampires, and specifically Giovanni.

For now we were settled. The town was lovely, and our home offered us the privacy we needed. We kept a small yacht, available for a hasty retreat if needed, and many sailors in the vicinity were ready to captain her for the right price. Above all else, we had each other.

The world was right then, beautiful and uncomplicated. Our love was strong. We had escaped destruction before, and we could do it again. Giovanni was the best instructor and a fierce protector. He made me feel strong and adored. There was never a second thought about the life I had left behind. I fully embraced who and what I had become.

The land was strange and exciting to me, and somewhere even Giovanni had not been in a long time. It was a place with a long history and a proud heritage, with many large cities to hunt in, as well as remote mountains and forests. We also had quick and easy access to several other countries bordering our adopted home, and we knew that spreading out our feeding ground meant less chance of detection. Even in that day and age, different countries did not easily share information about crimes committed within their borders with others.

I was so happy there. Greece was somewhere I had long dreamt of visiting, even as a very young girl. I never thought that I would make it there even for a holiday, much less have the chance to make it my home, however briefly. I was enchanted with its history and the culture. The landscapes and the architecture were breathtaking, even in the dark of night. The people were beautiful and exotic to my inexperienced eye, and I interacted with them as much as I could without drawing suspicion.

I read everything I could get my hands on, and visited every museum, historical site, theatre and event available. Sometimes it meant sneaking in after regular hours, and sometimes Giovanni managed to bribe someone to allow us private access. His connections allowed me to see and touch things no regular patron would ever be able to. The only thanks he ever needed were my obvious delight and awe.

My favourite times were when we simply wandered the streets long after the inhabitants retired for the night. The few souls we did encounter were most often up to no good—thieves, prostitutes and drunks. Their disappearances never caused any concern. I often imagined that the towns were ours, and we were their immortal caretakers. I held such respect for a civilisation that had survived for millennia, always leading the way in art, science and technological advancement.

In all the previous places we had stayed I never had the chance to truly enjoy myself. Everywhere else had been temporary, as though we were just biding our time. It seemed pointless to seek out any kind of connection to a place we might flee from at any given moment. Here, was more permanence, and from that the luxury of connection. Though we would always be somewhat on the outside, I felt some semblance of belonging and acceptance. We were generous patrons, and supporters of local people and events, and for that we were given respect for our private way of life.

Through our travels, I learnt that Giovanni was fluent in many languages. He was respectful and knowledgeable about many native customs and beliefs, all throughout Asia, Europe and South America. We hadn't yet made it to Africa, though I hoped that one day we would. The more I learnt about his nature and views, the more deeply I loved him.

The house we now called our home had once been a magnificent villa overlooking the blue-green sea. Its history traced its way beyond the country's official independence, but the years had been kind to it. The building was situated on a small mountainside, with a gentle rise offering protection from the wear of water and salt. Town was accessible by a private road that cut through the white rock. Small, scrubby trees shot up here and there, though for the most part there was not enough soil to support foliage. The house itself was of moderate size, having evolved to its present state from various additions over the years. The outside was stucco, as were most residential structures in the area, with a tiled roof. An enormous brick wall had been erected about the property, offering both protection and privacy.

Inside its gates the previous owners put in tremendous effort and expense to construct elaborate gardens and outside living areas. The inner walls of the fence were snaked with native vines, flowers, plants and fruit-bearing trees that filled the landscape. One high terrace provided a beautiful view of the sea below. It was a magical place.

On this night, like many others before it, we were lying on our backs on the gentle slope of sand, which even in the darkness was clean and white. The sky was brilliant with stars. Giovanni gently held my hand in his, his touch as comforting as always. The moon was bright and filled the area with a shimmering illumination, making the stretch of beach dance with shadows. My mind was open to the possibilities that the night held for the two of us.

Giovanni's thoughts were fuzzy and far away. It seemed the longer I was a vampire, and the stronger I became, the more strain it put on my ability to see his thoughts. I wasn't completely out of the loop, but the images in his mind didn't simply jump from him to me as they seemed to have before the change, and soon after. It was more of me being empathetic to his feelings and his moods, than anything else. If I concentrated, I could break in, and when there was a situation with heightened emotion, either good or bad, it was easier to slip inside. With humans it was much easier to peek inside their minds. With vampires it could be a struggle.

Off in the distance I could hear the ships in the small harbour not ten miles from our home. Even in the night there always seemed to be activity in that part of town. I rolled over onto my stomach, our house barely visible from our position on the beach. The trail down from the house twisted like a snake, and wouldn't be easy to follow even in the light of day. I rested my chin on his shoulder, and the corner of his lips turned up in a smile. "What are you thinking about?"

He turned his head slightly. "That I love you, and that this is one of those perfect moments, where we can just be happy. These are the times I want to hang onto, to have to remember when things are tough." Though the words were positive and his tone soft, I knew there was a dark undercurrent to their meaning. There would always be dark times for us, a bruise that never healed in the flesh of our love for one another. It was a constant threat that pulled at the back of my mind, and forced me to cherish the time we had together.

I planted a soft kiss on his chin. "I love you too, I love this place and the bit of peace we've found here."

"You told me once that you have always wanted to come here, that you even dreamt about it as a child. Is it everything that you hoped it would be?"

"Yes," I answered honestly, and it was much more than I could have ever imagined, vibrant with history and beauty. "It's even better to be here with you, and know that you can appreciate this place as much as I can."

We settled back into a comfortable moment, without the need for words. The sound of the waters lapping at the shore was soothing. I played with his hair and let my mind wander. When times were still like that, and we were locked in our intimate connections, my brain swam with questions of the past and dreams for the future. I would go over all that Giovanni shared about himself and his life before we met. Although we had talked for hours about his past, and he never held back from me anything that I asked, I knew there was still so much more to discover. Without his past we would not have our present, and there would never be a future.

A thought suddenly popped into my mind. "How old were you when you changed?"

"Have I never told you? That seems strange."

I pulled myself up slightly and shook my head.

"I was twenty-two years old when he found me, just months short of completing my training. In the fall of that year I would have been off to apprentice with a painter in Rome."

"You have one of those faces that's very hard to judge for age. I guess that through the years you've had to appear both younger and older than you are, if that makes sense, because how can someone appear their age when they're actually hundreds of years old?"

"Just numbers. Humans place so much significance on numbers and how they gauge time, as though that has a direct effect on the outcome of any specific stage of their life, or dictates the extent to which they can enjoy it."

"This coming from a man who could for all intensive purposes live forever." I kept a trace of teasing in my voice.

"Touche." Then he jumped to his feet, snatching me up to his side in one fluid movement. "Enough about this. Let's hunt."

Then we raced off into the darkness, the unsuspecting world at our mercy. I experienced a deep, unparalleled moment of insight into my lover's mind from that conversation on the beach, more so from the things remaining unsaid. I saw the true nature of his being that night. He was man who not only accepted who he was, but one who embraced his place in the world. Human being are constantly looking back, doubting, regretting and wanting what they don't have. As vampires we had much simpler needs and views. From me, Giovanni gained insight into his own psyche. He was not simply a vampire, but still a man. He was not solely defined by what he needed to continue his existence, but by what he gave to his life. By allowing himself to receive my love, he became a fuller, more complete version of himself.

We raced up the hillside, past the villa and the town that had become our home. The lights from the houses where our neighbours rested in blissful ignorance twinkled in silent repose. We would not feed on the people who accepted us, albeit without knowing our secret. It would not only be cruel to take from people who had been nothing but amenable to us, it would be too dangerous. This was not a large town, and too many unexplained deaths or disappearances would ultimately attract attention. From attention came the need for answers and eventually justice.

From the window of the library in our home, we had a hazy view of the mountains edging our adopted country's border with its northern neighbours. It was effortless for us to climb the steep range, and cover the vast distance no human could have managed without the benefit of our unnatural speed. We tried to branch out, never going to the same place twice within a space of several months. Not only was it logical to our safety, but also in a strange way it offered us the chance to see many different places and people. Sometimes we went on foot, other times by car, depending on the destination. Often, after feeding, we would explore the nearest town, specifically any historical sites, museums, or other places of interest.

I was on a personal quest for knowledge of all kinds. I was exploring all aspects of humanity and its progressive development. In most historical records, artistic works and religious movements a common theme occurred, and one not dissimilar to our current condition. There was a persistent and unwavering need to understand our origins, and the purpose for our existence. Humanity, like the creatures of the night, wanted answers, and were constantly looking and evaluating all information they gathered.

Right then and there was only one quest: blood. That particular night we happened upon a group of very intoxicated men coming home through a dark forested trail. From what I could discern from the jumbled, drunken thoughts stumbling through their minds, they were headed home from a night of drinking after work. A group of factory workers, they worked hard, twelve-hour shifts, and needed some way to unwind before they returned to their girlfriends, wives and families. I fleetingly thought of those waiting at home for their men who would not return to them. I quickly pushed that thought aside, concentrating on the events about to unfold.

Silently we swooped in on the unsuspecting men. To them it must have seemed as if the darkness itself came alive, surrounding them like cornered animals. I snatched the first one I encountered by the hair, snapping his spine with one quick, lethal thrust of my hand. His face had barely enough time to register his unquestionable shock, before fear immobilised his body, and my mouth was at his naked throat. I drained him quickly, as did Giovanni with the one he caught.

Around us the previously quiet night was frantic with the shouts of anger and surprise, and screams of terror. Two men instinctively bolted in a vain attempt to save their lives, while one stayed behind to attempt to fend off the monsters attacking his friends. I felt the man at my back, heavy hands pawing at the fabric of my dress. His movements annoyed me more than troubled me. I knew, as he did not, that his death was certain.

The first man's body dropped from my grip and landed with an almost inaudible thud to the damp ground. I whirled around, my face smeared with his friend's blood. He froze, eyes locked with mine, making a choked mewling sound, though I doubted he was aware of it. A thick man, arms heavily muscled from years of manual labour, his eyes were dark. Were he not so completely terrified of what stood before him, I imagined his eyes would have a hard, mean look to them. In my mind I heard his jumbled argument with himself that he could not be seeing what he was. I smiled, which only frightened him more.

I took my time with that one, playing my sick game of cat and mouse. This one I wanted to dominate and torture. I wanted to hear his heart thundering in fear, hear his blood blasting through his veins. I wanted to smell his perspiration as his body reacted to the surge of adrenaline that his petrified brain released. I wanted to chase him, and challenge myself in his taking.

"Run," I snarled.

As the man took off into the night, I saw that Giovanni had already ravaged two of the remaining three men. The last, like my fleeing prey, had taken flight. Giovanni kissed me hard on the mouth, the blood of our kills mingling in our mouths. Then, as if he had never been there at all, he was gone. My sensitive ears heard the sounds of the man he was pursuing crashing through the trees. I turned my attention to my own chase, concentrating until I caught the sound of a heartbeat pounding like thunder, and distantly the hysterical voice of a man calling for help. We were still a few miles from the edge of the nearest town. I did not worry about him being heard.

My legs moved so quickly it was like flying. The wind whipped through my hair, and I easily ducked and jumped through the brush. I heard a crash and the snapping of branches to the left of my current course. I veered off, making a wide arc, eventually ending up in front of where the man was entangled in a mass of thorny underbrush. While trying to untangle himself, he thrashed wildly, doing himself more harm than good. I was still quite a distance away, but my preternatural sight allowed me to see the spectacle quite clearly. When he finally freed himself, and began to run again, I made my move.

I let him come right to me, oblivious of my presence. He took brief, furtive glances over his shoulder, trying to catch sight of me. Then he stopped, not three feet from where I stood, his breath heaving. Silently, I stepped in behind him. I gently tapped his shoulder, and the man whirled around in shock. The look on his face couldn't have been more comical or petrified. Tears were streaming down his cheeks, and I knew that this was the type of man who hadn't cried since he was a young boy. He raised his hands as if to ward me off. "No, no, no, please... no, don't..."

I took him into my deadly embrace, my teeth deep into his flesh as the words continued to sputter out then abruptly stop. His heart pumped the warm liquid into my mouth, and even though I had already fed, I drank greedily. It was almost a sexual release, one I felt with both my libido and my psyche. His last thoughts were of a woman, pretty in a tired, washed-out way, and of being sorry for treating her the way that he had. Soon the force of the blood flow slowed then trickled to nothing. I released the man and his body fell to a seated position, his back pressed up against a narrow tree. His hands rested limply at his side, but his sightless eyes were still wide.

I felt Giovanni's approach in my mind before I heard him. Softly he took my hand, and pulled me into his arms. We were both warm with our stolen blood, a powerful heat where our skin touched. He kissed my mouth, my throat, and I wrapped my powerful arms around him, feeling his maleness press into my body. I was just about to give in, and let him take me there on the forest floor when a whispery sensation came over me. His head snapped back, his body tight with tension. "One's not dead."

We raced back through the forest, to the initial site of our encounter. "He's one of yours," I said, and Giovanni just nodded. He was watching the man with an intense fascination. His heartbeat was sluggish. He lay on the cold earth, his body half underneath his dead companion. His face was even whiter than ours, visible as a sickly glow in the blackness of the night. He twitched, with eyes rolled back in his head. The man's mind was strangely blank, as though his pain and fear wiped it clear. He must have known, on some level at least though, that he was dying. Whether it was right then, or an hour later, he had simply lost too much blood to survive.

Giovanni leant down and snatched him up by the collar of his shirt. In one swift movement he twisted the man's head backward, breaking his neck. "He's dead now."

"I'll get the other three and meet you back here." I returned to the site of my last kill and retrieved the man's body. Not too far away I found the ravaged corpses of Giovanni's attack, and without effort hefted the two men over my shoulder. The third I tucked under my arm. Then I returned to where Giovanni waited.

We transported the bodies deeper into the forest, far from any trail or evidence of use. We quickly made a shallow grave and dumped all five into the hole. We covered them with dirt and over that some leaves and other debris. By the time anyone found them, if they were found at all, they would be so decomposed it would be difficult to determine how they had died. Since the skin was the first to go as the body rotted, the bite marks would be indistinguishable, and since I had better control of myself when feeding, the damage I left was minimal, almost unnoticeable.

We travelled back to the outskirts of our town, our unnatural speed propelling us ahead faster than would have been visible to any person whose path we

may have crossed. When the first houses came into view, Giovanni slowed, taking my hand in his. His dark hair was tangled and gorgeous. I put my other hand to it, its texture soft under my small hand. We took our time heading back to the beach, strolling leisurely through the town. We passed a few others, though the streets were all but deserted at that late hour. I could smell the salt, and hear the call of the waters lapping on the shore. We smiled at those we passed. I'm sure we appeared as the image we wanted to project— as a young couple in love simply enjoying each other's company.

Soon we found ourselves at the beach. I tugged at his hand and took off running. He laughed, the soft peals of sound trailing behind me as I ran. The air was much heavier as we approached the water's edge. The sea appeared as a shimmering black pool, not the blue-green of the sea during daylight. For us the sea was always black, the only way to see it otherwise was to enjoy its representation in art or in movies. I didn't mind the blackness because the water always felt the same. It was cool and refreshing, a way to wash away all of our sins, of which there were many.

Just before I touched the water I stopped and took off my heavy boots. I dropped them carelessly to the ground, and scrunched my toes in the wet sand. The feeling of the sand against my skin never failed to please me. I felt an unexplainable connection to the water, and to the rain. It gave me clarity, and some feeling of redemption, as though stepping into its depths could cleanse me like nothing else could.

Giovanni was at my side, his shoes also removed. He wrapped his arms around me and pressed his body tightly against my own. "You are such a curious woman, you know that? You're a child, a vixen and huntress all wrapped in one delicious package." His mouth was hot against my ear, a state that would pass as the blood was absorbed. I felt his hands travel up my back and begin to tug at the zipper of my dress. All too easily the garment fell in a pile at my feet, and I stood in the sand naked except for a pair of red panties.

"What about you?" I asked playfully.

In a blur Giovanni's clothes joined mine on the beach, and his hard, lean body was exposed to the soft moonlight. "Better?"

"Much." I took his hand again and led him into the water. When we were about thigh deep I stopped. Off in the distance I heard the low moaning of a ship's horn. The water was cold, too cold for a human to enjoy, but it didn't bother us a bit. Then, without any warning, Giovanni grabbed me and threw me far out into the water. I had barely broken the surface again, when he was already at my side. His speed alarmed me, sometimes. No matter how quickly I moved, he was always quicker. Sometimes it was as if he hadn't moved at all. He was simply in one place one moment then the next instant in another.

Together we swam far out into the ocean. We could go for miles without being fatigued in any way. It was powerful to be out in the dark water, the only two creatures for miles. Those were some of my favourite times, coming back from the kill and diving into the cold, dark water.

Back at the beach, we tumbled into each other's arms. Our bodies rolled across the wet beach, the grit digging into my skin. The discomfort of the sand was lost to the burning of Giovanni's skin touching mine. His need was urgent, his mouth and hands greedy for my body. He pushed himself inside of me, though my body was still tight. I reacted with a violent rush of excitement. He pounded into me, over and over, as the gentle sounds of the water meeting the shore mingled with my whimpers of ecstasy. I wrapped my legs around his, forcing him deeper into my body.

"God, you feel wonderful," he whispered in my ear.

After we were done, we lay on the cold sand cradled in each other's arms. The stars above us twinkled, our silent witnesses.

"What are thinking about?" I asked.

"Lots of things."

"Like what?"

He turned his position until he was looking directly into my eyes. His face was so intense, yet hard to read. "Rachel, you worry too much. Every time that you can't see my thoughts, or experience my feelings, you panic. Just because my mind might be closed it doesn't mean that there is anything wrong. If there were something to worry about I would tell you." His words held a harsh tone that he had never used with me before.

"I'm sorry."

A look like shame flashed quickly over his face. "I didn't mean for it to sound like that. I just want you to be happy, and enjoy the gift of us being together that we have been given."

"All right, let's change the subject. Tell me more about your family, about your brothers and sister."

He groaned softly. "That was, long ago. Why do you want to know these things so badly?"

"My life is an open book to you, but there are so many holes in what I know about your life. I want to know. Isn't that enough to try to remember and to share with me?"

"All right, I give in. What can I tell you?" He paused briefly as he thought back to a time so long ago. "My sister became a nun, and she lived in a convent not too far away from the town where we were born and raised. As far as I know, she had a good life, and of course my mother was very proud to have one of her children who dedicated their life to the church. She lived to a nice old age, and I was fortunate enough to see her just before she died.

"As for my brothers, Raphael, who was the oldest, married a nice girl we had known growing up, sired eight children and joined my father in the family business. After my father passed on he took over and made it even more successful, and some of the original land from my home is still owned by his descendents. He was always very strong and serious, not like me at all, and he made an excellent businessman.

"Fernando also married, but his young wife died in childbirth, and my mother ended up helping him raise the child. He eventually remarried, but not for many years, and never produced another child of his own. He also helped out in the family business.

"Xavier, who was only two years older than me, had somewhat of wanderlust. He accompanied the uncle I was named after on several purchasing expeditions, and followed other business opportunities. He even came over to America looking to establish himself in a large country looking for

adventurous men. Unfortunately he caught some type of infection on the voyage over, and died a few weeks after he arrived. He never married, and never had kids. I too was in America at the same time, and was informed by one of my contacts that he was coming over, so I went to see him. He was in a hospital, and was very sick. I doubt he knew I was there. Of all my brothers, he was probably the most like me, and the one I have missed the most. There are relatives alive today whom I can trace back to my brothers and cousins. I have kept close tabs on my family and later descendants, from shortly after my change. If I couldn't be a part of their life, I at least wanted to know that they were well."

I closed my eyes as he talked, trying to imagine what it would have been like to live during those times. I was familiar with their faces, as they often flashed through Giovanni's mind, especially when we lay down to slumber for the day. All the brothers had some variation of his features, all nice-looking men in their own right. What would it be like to meet a relative born hundreds of years after when you should have died?

"There's a boat coming." His voice was soft.

I decided to change the topic, as he obviously had trouble reliving his human past. "What are we, Giovanni? I mean we're not exactly dead, and yet we're not really alive either. We have feelings and thoughts, but we have to kill to survive. Do you have any ideas? Don't you want to find out more about where we came from?"

"Rachel, you think too much about things you have no control over. I have survived for almost three hundred years now, and I know little more than I did when I was first changed. All I can tell you is that creatures like ourselves have existed for a very long time. How long I can't be sure, but I have travelled the world many times over, and in almost every culture there is some type of legend or myth concerning creatures who do not die, and who drink the blood of other living creatures. There are variations, but the stories essentially carry the same information. Why can't you just be content that we are what we are, and even more so that we have each other?" His voice was hard, and I knew he was restraining his anger.

I turned away from his words. I let myself focus on the soft whisper of the water on the shore, and the distant moaning of the boats on the sea. I wound my fingers through the cold, damp sand. Giovanni's mood was dark, I could feel it washing over me, but I was still blocked from his thoughts. "I just want to know more about how vampires came to be. Is that so terrible?"

His strong arm was wrapped around me, and I allowed myself to be pulled in tightly to his body. I felt his darkness draining away, and as he seemed to relax my body responded in kind. "If it's this important to you then I will try to help. I just can't promise you that you will find the answers that you're searching for..."

"I know. I just think that if anyone can do it, that together we can."

He didn't answer, just pulled me tighter still. I manoeuvred myself so that I was looking up into his beautiful face, and I couldn't stop myself from smiling. His eyes were so blue in the darkness. "How did you know that I was the one? I mean after all those years, and all the people you have met, how did you know?"

His exquisite face was soft with emotion. "How could I know? It's simple. You are the only woman who has ever made me feel the way I do when we're together. It's as if I have found my other half, a part of me I didn't even know was missing until we met. We are meant to be together."

"I feel the same way, and just as easily and completely as I can believe that, I know the answers I'm seeking are out there somewhere. They have to be. Some day I'll find those answers, but with your help and support it will be much easier."

"There are others like us out there. There are some who are much older and stronger than me, and even older than the one who made me, but if they have answers they have not shared them. Some encounters I had were simply too brief to get into topics such as this, and others have made it clear they do not want contact with others of their kind. For the most part, the vampires I have met are solitary creatures, and prefer to remain in the shadows. Their interactions with humans are superficial, and their interaction with other vampires almost non-existent. I can't tell you why, simply that it is so. If they are lonely, or want some type of companionship or identity, I don't know. If they are also looking for answers as to the origins of our kind, again I don't know. Maybe there is some truth in the various legends, it might be a place to start?"

"Sure, that's a good idea. Maybe we can get to the library at the university soon? I can do some research online."

"Of course, my love. Whatever you need I will do my best to get for you." With that we settled back into a comfortable silence. My reeling mind drew comfort from his words. I could understand why Giovanni settled into his way of thinking, and his acceptance of his life over the course of hundreds of years. Anything that might break that way of being would be difficult for him. The fact that he would try and that he would support my efforts touched me deeply.

Together we stood and dressed, our clothing now gritty with sand. He followed me silently up the narrow, rocky path to our home. The windows were ablaze with light, though we could see perfectly fine in the darkness. It was more for outward appearances, because our house was visible to the village from its position on the mountainside. The people were aware, to some extent, of the hours we kept. I entered the front door, and moved through the sparsely furnished interior. Every surface gleamed, all areas impeccably clean. The whole house was like a dream to me, but the one room I cared for the most was the library. It was situated at the farthest end from the front door.

When I entered the space I was immediately at ease. Giovanni had had it decorated exactly as I'd wanted it. It was a massive room, with floor-to-ceiling bookcases on three of its four main walls. The wood was dark and old. The floor was made of massive stone squares, light brown in colour. If you looked closely enough you could see the remnants of shells and other aquatic life captured in the stone. An enormous desk and a top-of-the line computer occupied one corner. A comfortable sofa sat directly beneath a skylight, where I could sit and read for hours.

And read I did, because the shelves were filled with all types of written material, everything from best sellers, to reference books, medical journals and non-fiction. I learnt to read several languages over the years, a necessity since the books he brought to me were often out of print and written in a native language. Some I had to have translated for me, sometimes at a huge expense and headache in trying to locate the required linguist. Giovanni knew the one thing I desired above all else was knowledge. While I could appreciate expensive clothes and fast cars, and other types of luxuries, I could never stop wanting to know more. It seemed that my thirst for knowledge only intensified with the change, as though becoming a vampire had made me more of who I'd originally been. Being in that room, with all that knowledge and information at hand, made me positively giddy.

We parted for a brief amount of time, me to my research and Giovanni to his painting. We both worked until the dawn began to creep in, forcing us to our daytime retreat.

We had a “bedroom,” where we dressed, spent time, made love, but did not rest. The room showed all the appearances of a normal space, and we kept up the pretences for our cleaning staff. They knew that when the door was unlocked they were to clean and change the sheets. What they didn't know was that there was a hidden entrance in the back of our walk-in closet leading to a secure place that kept us safe from the sunlight, and from those who would do us harm.

As we lay down that morning, in each other's arms as we always slept, my thoughts were only of him.

Chapter 12

Unfortunately the intimacy we experienced that night began to feel strained. In a very subtle way I felt Giovanni distancing himself from me. He was never a man to express himself easily, but there was something he was holding back. His moments of sharing his feeling were often more like outbursts, a flow of sentiment coming after long stretches of time where he held his emotions in check. I had never felt he was keeping anything from me before.

Yet, as the days turned to weeks, he became quieter than ever. He was withdrawn, almost sullen, as though some terrible secret poisoned him like a cancerous mass growing unchecked. His moods were often dark, and he met all my offers to talk with refusal, insisting that nothing going on. The more he tried to reassure me, the more I worried. His brooding left me raw and feeling rebuffed.

I longed to see his face light up again, and know that I was the cause of that smile. I made every effort to communicate my support, with and without words. He was slowly turning into someone I didn't know or understand, and it frightened me. Something was eating him up inside, and distracting him from our life.

I played many scenarios through my head, some infinitely worse than others, but none seemed to ring true. If someone had become suspicious of us, I would have thought that Giovanni would have simply shared the information with me. It had happened before and we dealt with the situation quickly. More importantly, and the thing that set off alarms for me, was that he seemed uncertain and afraid. Even in the times when we had to flee at a moment's notice I had never seen him afraid. He didn't get nervous, or rattled. He dealt with things head on. I knew instinctively that whatever was disturbing him that way, had to be something very bad.

One evening after Giovanni informed me that he once again had something “to take care of” I decided that I had to find out what was going on. I would follow him, even if it meant betraying his trust. He indicated that he was going to town, but not where, so I made an effort to trail him at a distance. Either he sensed my presence, or bad luck intervened, and I lost him in a busy throng of people.

I wandered about the crowds, keeping my senses alert. I watched the couples and families gathered at the restaurants and cafes, snippets of conversations sailing through my mind. The warm air was alive with aromas of food, flowers, people and the sea. It felt as if an electric current was running through the air, charged by the life force of all the people around me. It was pleasant to be around others like that again. Giovanni and I had fed earlier, so the temptation of blood did not distract me. I looked onto faces full of happiness and satisfaction. There was relief from a day's hard work completed and for reunions with loved ones. These were as people normally were, not employee-employer type interactions, or people deformed by fear. I saw the people as they were— fathers, mothers, children, storekeepers and waitresses. The music from the taverns spilled out over the layers of laughter and conversations. I had a sudden resolve for Giovanni and me to try to mingle with others more regularly.

After an hour of fruitless searching, I found myself on the path leading down to the town's main port. I passed the docks where the men were busy unloading, and preparing for the next day's work. I was still a bit flustered, and must have been acting strangely, as I caught the attention of two men on a boat nearest to where I stopped. I heard their hurried whispers, but was not familiar with the language. It was not unusual to have crews made up of many different nationalities, and these men looked more northern European than Mediterranean. I was familiar with the tone however— fear. I tried to smile reassuringly, but the men remained stock still, one with a coil of rope clutched tightly in his leathery hands. I raised a hand in a friendly wave, but this only brought on another rush of flustered words. I turned away quickly, making my way back to town.

The streets had thinned out considerably, making it more difficult to blend in as I continued to search. With fewer people around me, it was easier to concentrate, and perhaps attune myself to Giovanni's thoughts. Fuzzily, I caught a sense of Giovanni's mind, but it was as if he was deliberately trying to keep his mind closed from my intrusion. Then, as quickly as it had slipped in, it was lost. I turned in the direction I had sensed it from, when I was overcome with a compulsion to head off in a completely different direction.

I felt drawn along the unfamiliar streets, as if an unseen hand tugged at my arm. I was apprehensive, but seemed to have no will to stop myself. Soon, I was far from any other places I knew, away from the main streets where the restaurants, shops and other businesses resided. The farther from the heart of the city I went, the more intense the feeling became, to follow this unknown and urgent call. Perhaps the answer to Giovanni's withdrawal lay at the end of this.

I came to a stop outside of a small building that looked like it might have been a restaurant in another life. Now it displayed a large sign advertising “Rooms for Rent,” with a large arrow pointing to a staircase winding up the side of the stone structure to the second floor. The large front window on the main floor was hazy with grime. A dim light shone from inside, and the front door was slightly ajar. The urgency struck me again, like a slap to the face. There was definitely something waiting in there for me, yet I sensed no sign of life.

My feet propelled me forward, and I found myself standing in a small, dingy room. A few tables lay scattered about, with several mismatched chairs, and other assorted cast-offs from the building's previous existence. I stopped when I noticed the man sitting at a table farthest from the door, all but invisible in the shadows.

The power radiating from him was so grotesquely evident I feared it might overtake me, and leave me defenceless to an attack. The waves of power rode through my body, a tingling and uncomfortable pressure starting in my brain. He lifted his thin hand and indicated the chair opposite him at the table.

“Sit down,” he said, though his lips never moved.

The next thing I knew I was seated across from him, and my fear intensified, blocking my ability to think clearly. Up close the power was even stronger, its immensity pressing against my body. It slithered over my skin like snails, my revulsion now as great as my fear, but I did not leave. In fact, I forced myself to make eye contact with the man, and when I did, the shock of recognition almost knocked me to the floor.

He regarded me with luminescent green eyes. They looked out from a face so pale and gaunt it reminded me of photos I had seen of concentration camp victims. His features were unremarkable— long thin nose, high forehead and pointed chin. His corn-yellow hair fell limply to his shoulders. His face was plain, and so completely devoid of expression it was terrifying. Anything could be going on in the mind behind that blank stare. His eyes were dead holes, sucking you in with their emptiness. His long, thin body was splayed casually over the hard, wooden chair, hands like dead fish atop of the table.

Those skeletal fingers began reaching for me, and inside I cringed at the thought of them touching any part of my body. I could not move. Then, as they slid over my hands, his touch dry and cold, I was shocked with an image so powerful I almost blacked out. There was no transition, and no subtlety to my absorption of his thoughts. It was a blunt, aggressive seizure of my mind, where I was forced to view something with no way of protecting myself.

I saw a group of men, including the one I was now seated before, gathered around a large rectangular table. All of the men were older and obviously wealthy, judging by the manner in which they were dressed. The table was piled high with food and bottles of wine. I had no frame of reference, but it reminded me of something I had seen in a movie once, about the life of Henry the VIII. It was the same style of dress, and style for the men's facial hair, as well as the wigs they wore. The room was dark. Only candles and a crackling fire offered any source of light. The faces around me were paunchy and overweight, and in many glimmered the demon of intoxication. Raucous laughter broke out, and goblets were slammed together in merriment, yet the one whose memory I was experiencing did not smile. The others' laughter rose in a crescendo, the room began to spin... laughter, laughter, footsteps.

When I became aware once again, I was back in the dingy room and there was only silence. I felt weak, drained. Then, there was a familiar touch to my arm, and I turned my head feebly to find Giovanni at my side. His presence was calming and seemed to be at least partially shielding me from the effects of the other man's power. His eyes were worried and angry.

"She's all right, don't be melodramatic." The man had a deep, upper-class English accent. "I was only playing with her."

I turned toward the sound of the man's voice, and found a humourless smile on his thin lips.

Giovanni's face was tight with anger when he spoke. "I know about your games all too well."

"Oh, Giovanni, why can't you just let the past be the past? I did not come to argue you with you. In fact, I thought you might have found some peace in your life at last, since you met this enchanting young lady."

Giovanni was crazy with anger—the strange man's words were only egging him on. I had never seen him so furious, so on the verge of losing control. His face was taut. "She is not yours to play with! Do you understand me? Anything that may exist between us is exactly that— between us! And I will not allow any harm to come to her, especially from you! I am not that desperate, frightened fledgling you left all those years ago!" His anger thundered out through his words, attacking the waves of power still stemming from the stranger. I raised my hands to my face, shielding myself from his outburst.

The man simply stared, his face returning to its previous neutral expression. Then Giovanni's mask of anger slipped a little, and I witnessed some of the sadness and uncertainty that had been in his eyes for weeks. "And why now? After all this time, why at all? What could you possibly want from me after all these years?"

The stranger smiled coldly, a look that would have turned a human's blood to ice. He looked at me pointedly before he answered. "What does it matter now? I think that you have made it very clear you have no interest in discussing anything with me." His tone was mocking.

"And what is that you would have us discuss? How you took my human life away from me? How you caused me to kill an innocent girl, a girl who I thought myself to be in love with at the time? How you left me without explaining anything about what we are, the dangers, our needs, powers? Did you really think you owed me nothing after forcing this existence on me?"

"I gave you the gift of eternal life, my dear boy. What more could I possibly owe you?" His voice dripped with condescendence, and a nasty sneer spread across his face.

Giovanni didn't answer and his silence was even more unnerving than his outburst. The man stood, and I couldn't believe how tall he was. His pronounced thinness only added to his height, his arms long and gangly, but I knew his appearance was deceptive. His mild, even sickly facade belied the strength I knew he possessed. "The facts are simple, Giovanni. I am here and I am your maker. I would have thought that you would have many things to discuss with me. Haven't you always wanted to confront me and get your feelings about this out in the open?" His eyes were cold, not a spark of sympathy or sincerity visible in their emerald depths.

A strange and horrible look passed between the two men, a look that made my body stiffen with fear. Then, before I could even attempt to shield myself, a wave of power struck me with tremendous force. The room went black.

There was the sensation of falling, though I knew my feet were planted firmly on the ground. I caught a glimpse of myself, corpse-like and dying in the moments before Giovanni brought me over. Then I raced back further still in the trail of memories, flying past unfamiliar people and places, until arriving again at that fateful night. I saw her sweet face and the waves of blond hair. I saw her as clearly as if she were standing before me, exactly as she had been in life.

I saw her with him in the moment when he had appeared out of the darkness like a phantom, and snatched the unsuspecting girl. I saw the house through his eyes, as he approached. Then as he stepped inside, with the girl limp in his arms from faint, the intensity of the vision doubled in strength. I could feel the power of the memory from both men, the picture of it clear and painfully real in my mind. It clawed its way into my own brain, forever etching every second of that horrible moment in time into my memories. I saw, heard and felt every terrible step in that young girl's death, from the first touch of his fangs, to her lifeless body dropping to the floor.

Then, as suddenly as the spell had come, it was gone. I was rocked back to the present, my consciousness slamming back into my weakened body. The men were shouting angrily at each other, their voices shaking the dirty glass in the window with their vehemence. Outside a group of people passed, and I could hear their comments about the intensity of the fight going on inside the building.

I was shaky, but I forced myself to pull it together. "We need to leave here," I said. "This may be a quiet part of town, but there are still a few people around, and we don't need any negative attention. Especially not from anyone who might think to call the police. If this is going to continue, we should head back to the house. We've caused enough of a disturbance here tonight."

The stranger broke off eye contact with Giovanni at the sound of my voice. He looked at me with hostility and gave me another one of his soulless smiles. I was terribly afraid, and smart enough to know that I should be. He was very powerful and very old. The thoughts that he projected at me were so intense, nothing like what I experienced with Giovanni. I silently wondered if it were because of the nature of the thoughts intensifying their experience. The

stranger's were powerfully angry and vile, but Giovanni more often than not slipped into my mind with feeling of love, and pleasant memories of his past.

"See now, Giovanni, your lady here knows how to behave reasonably. Why don't we go to your home, where you can have a nice chat with one of your oldest friends?"

Giovanni's face remained impassive, but his eyes revealed the depth of his hatred for the man before him. "You are no friend of mine." I could feel how desperately he was fighting within himself not to lose control.

The man sighed. "Giovanni, be sensible. There may never be another opportunity."

Giovanni said nothing. He simply stared at the man with bitter contempt. I had never seen him so angry, or so unnerved before. That single night had scarred him so deeply he believed himself incapable of anything good for every night he had existed until we met. He had lived for all that time not only in physical darkness, but also with a darkness within his mind he could never escape. We stood there in silence, the three of us, in our forced and tragic clique. Without those two men's past, Giovanni and I would never have had our present.

Then, as though he read my mind, he turned on his heel and with a savage tug of my arm, pulled me along behind him. I was a silent, but not unwilling witness to what was to come. I simply had no say in what was about to unfold.

The three of us hurtled with lightning speed through the near-empty streets, and across the stretch of hilly countryside separating our home from the main town. Our figures would have been nothing more than blurred shadows across an otherwise unblemished evening sky. Throughout the few minutes it took us to reach the gates, I imagined I could feel the stranger's spidery fingertips brushing across my bare neck. I suspected if anything other than my own imagination was happening, that he was most likely giving me the illusion of his touch.

Soon enough, the distance was crossed, and our home stood before us. Something in its presence gave me a new resolve, and some peace of mind.

Once inside, I stood on surer ground, and some of Giovanni's tension had also subsided. He was angry, there was no doubt, but a few steps back from the edge of explosion. This was more of the man I knew and loved, a man who was capable of anything. I tried to give him my silent empathy to know that our front was unified, but the negative feelings churning about inside my love clouded our connection. Instead I took his hand, and Giovanni immediately squeezed it without looking my way.

We entered the sitting room through a door to the immediate right of the front entrance. It was a space that was rarely used, except on the very few occasions we entertained. Even then, it was always about business. For Giovanni it was about making money and securing assets. For me it was about the acquisition of information.

Right then my only thought was that I didn't want that man to be in any of the rooms where we spent most of our time. It was as if his very presence would sour the comfort and joy we found there. Giovanni and I sat together on a loveseat, while the stranger took a chair opposite us. He gazed about the room silently, a disapproving expression pinching his corpse-like face.

The blond man held his skeletal hands in his lap, his posture prim. On his thin slash of a mouth, that icy smile had returned and settled, disturbing me more than I could ever possibly describe. When he turned it toward me, its invisible tentacles reached out, crawling under my skin. It was a terrible thing to experience, and it stayed sealed on his hollow face, all the more awful because I was aware of what kind of person existed behind that smile. Distantly, twelve peals of the bell from the town's main church rang out.

The tension in the room was stifling. I didn't dare say a word. It felt as if the slightest misstep would cause all hell to break loose. At last Giovanni broke the unbearable silence, his voice cold and quiet. "Why have you come here? I will not tolerate anything that could hurt her, or bring suspicion on our life here."

The smile did not waiver. "I thought you brought me here to talk, Giovanni, not to give me more of your arrogance and threats."

"Threats are the least of what you deserve after what you did to me, and the danger you left me in. This is where we live, and you are intruding here. There is nothing that I could hear from you that would make any difference to me now."

"Oh, Giovanni. Still the emotional, little fool, aren't you? I can't be bothered with theatrics, my dear boy, so don't waste them on me. Perhaps they work with your lady friend here, but I really don't appreciate them at all. Something in that may have once attracted me to you, but not any longer. This is not some kind of pissing contest either! Could you not look a bit past your anger and humility, and consider the possibility that what I have to discuss with you is something worthwhile, necessary to your survival even?" His voice held the tiniest edge of anger.

The silence was agonising. There was much to talk about, but too much history standing in the way of progress. When at last Giovanni spoke, I lurched forward in my seat, his grip on my leg the only thing stopping me from tumbling to the floor.

His words slashed into the room with bitter vehemence. "What is that you want? It's you who made contact with me, and yet you are saying nothing. Why are you here? If you have something to tell me then out with it, otherwise get out of my home."

Again the man said nothing, which only infuriated Giovanni more. "How did you find me? How do you know about my life?" he demanded.

"It wasn't very difficult, believe me, Giovanni. I had existed for a very long time before I crossed your path, and I developed many contacts and resources, not to mention acquiring considerable skills of my own. In my own opinion, you are a somewhat predictable man. There were very few times when I lost all knowledge of your whereabouts, and it never took me long to pick up your trail again. You should be glad your relentless pursuers are not the trackers I am, or you would have perished long ago. Though you may not have known it, I have never been far from you and your escapades. I especially enjoyed the incident in India. What was that... seventy, eighty years ago now? I don't remember."

He then turned abruptly and cast a sharp look at me. "Now you, you were a surprise. I thought he lost all that romantic nonsense long ago, and then he met you. I was shocked that he chose any kind of companion, especially after the first two attempts, but to think that he had fallen in love, I just couldn't believe it." He returned the conversation to Giovanni. "You still have a thing for silly, pretty young women." With those last words a vivid image of Seraphine's dead body was thrust into my mind.

The force of the image was a path of agony through my brain. I knew Giovanni received the image as well, because he shifted slightly, but he was much stronger than I, and therefore better able to ward off the psychic attack. Panic took hold of me like hands around my throat. I could barely see and my brain throbbed terribly. Yet when I looked to my side, Giovanni was calm and composed. All the rage vanished from his demeanour, and my weary mind reeled as it tried to understand his reaction. It was confusing, and the stranger's power was breaking me down.

Giovanni sat there smug and silent, and the stranger continued his cold, but empty stare. The clock ticked off the minutes like years. The tension in the room itched at my skin. I looked back and forth between the men's faces, but neither was giving in. When I could stand it no longer I jumped to my feet and let out a savage howl. The sound of my scream filled the room, releasing me slightly from the unbearable pressure and uncertainty.

The man also stood. He drew his tall, lanky body up until he towered over me, and my screams died in my throat. He pointed his long bony finger at me, outstretched from the hand of Death itself. I felt the full force of his powers unleashed upon me, and I crumpled. I found myself looking up into his face, his thin lips now pulled back in a wicked snarl.

His teeth were very white and sharp, his fangs fully exposed, and the sight drove terror straight into my heart. "You shut up, you insolent child. I have had just about enough from the both of you. I have been more than patient with Giovanni's anger, and your inexperience, but enough is enough!"

I was stunned into silence. Instantly, Giovanni was on his feet, his body angled slightly in front of mine in a protective stance. "No, I think it's you who doesn't know whom you're dealing with. I may not be as old as you are, but you delude yourself about my strength, and you are in our home, and it's my patience you are trying, not the other way around." I felt the reassuring touch of Giovanni's hand against my stomach as I stood up behind him. I pressed into his body as he continued. "If there was actually something to share, you would have revealed it by now. I think you're on a fishing expedition of some kind. For what purpose, I can only imagine, and the fact that you been following me around for all these years is not intimidating, it's pathetic. Now get out of here."

In a flash the stranger was in Giovanni's space, but he did not so much as flinch. "I will leave when I am good and ready to leave. I see that you have grown overconfident over the years, in addition to your ridiculous attachment to this girl. You really think that you are any match to my power. If I wanted you— or that girl— destroyed you couldn't stop me. I can crush everything you have here in the blink of an eye. Why I felt the need to share anything with you is beyond me. I knew it was a mistake to change you the minute it happened. You are too sensitive, too needy to be vampire. Look at this ridiculous arrangement you have here— playing house as if you were human. It's nauseating and absurd. You are a monster, a killer and nothing else, and making yourself believe anything other than that doesn't make it real. Dragging another into your mess and denials doesn't make it real either."

"That's enough."

"Enough is it? You think that you impress anyone here? You think you're so gallant standing up for your woman, is that it? Don't bother. It's not me you need to fear. There are far worse things conspiring against the two of you than little old me. It was as a courtesy that I came here, and look how I'm treated? Threatened and insulted! Please. Save your bravado, it's embarrassing. No woman is worth this much trouble."

"Watch your mouth. This is my woman you are talking about, and the one tossing about threats is you." "*Be strong. This is almost over,*" I heard in my head.

"You need to stop, Giovanni. You want you to hear what I came to tell you."

"All I've heard is insults and comments meant to intimidate."

The stranger sighed. "You're infuriating. Maybe you deserve to be destroyed."

"More threats?"

He paced across the room, keeping his thin back to where we stood. Giovanni took a step forward, just out of my reach. The man's arrogance was evident in the way he held his body. Fascinated and terrified, I trembled like a scolded child.

"You have nothing to tell us. You're wasting my time," said Giovanni.

"This," the stranger said, turning and waving his hands about the room, "is not worth a few moments of your time. Keeping you and your lady from being destroyed is a waste of time?"

"And now who's being dramatic? If this were a simple exchange of information you would already be gone by now, but here you are still. You obviously want something from me as well as whatever information you think I need to have. Much has changed since that night, and you don't know me at all. Rachel is my partner, and she is to be treated as my equal. I will not settle for less than that, not from you, not from anyone." Giovanni's voice was low, but filled with conviction.

"Your equal? Rubbish!" he snorted. "Don't patronise me, I'm doing you a favour by coming to you like this and you think that you'll talk down to me? Enough with your talk about love and relationships, I don't buy a word of it. And, even more, it bores me silly."

Giovanni returned the man's cold smile, a look I had never seen before. It was terrible and somehow beautiful on his face. "No more. It is your own misfortune that you are incapable of love, and despite you, I survived. In some strange way I have you to thank for finding Rachel. If you hadn't taken me like you did, then we would never have met."

"It's a very big mistake to talk to me this way, my dear boy. I was serious when I said what I have to tell you is very important." As he talked, his cruel eyes looked past Giovanni, directly at me. I looked away, but willed myself to remain where I was.

Giovanni closed the small distance between himself and the other man, the soles of his shoes whispering across the wood floor. The man regarded him with distaste and barely concealed fury. Giovanni acted as though he didn't notice, and didn't stop until he was as close as he could get to the man without touching him.

Then, he did something that unleashed the conflict that had been threatening to escape throughout our entire encounter. It was an insignificant move, so

slight as to be almost unnoticeable, but the man reacted violently. It was the touch of Giovanni's hand on the stranger's arm that released the torrent of emotions that brought the possibility of a civil exchange between the two to an end.

The man drew back with a sharp intake, and eyes that had previously burnt a fiery green, were now as black as coal. He snatched his arm away as though it was on fire, and his mouth became a cruel slash across his face. "Don't you ever touch me!"

"You have to calm down, or nothing is going to come of this! These outbursts of yours are getting us nowhere. All this hedging, and the intimidations need to stop. Stop the insults, and just get on with what you have to say."

"I want to speak with you alone." His eyes remained on me, though his words were directed at Giovanni.

"Anything that you say to me can be said to her. You will show her the respect she deserves or you can leave. This is not negotiable."

For a brief moment I thought he was going to relent. His eyes lost some of their darkness, and the sneer receded until his face was a mask of blankness. He stared at the pair of us, long arms dangling loosely at his sides. The unusually long fingers twitched ever so slightly. Then that icy smile returned.

The shift in the feeling of the room was very subtle, but the hair on my arms still rose in alarm. My gaze flickered nervously in Giovanni's direction, hoping to gauge his reaction, but he did not move. My attention returned to the man, who was now slowly moving in my direction, and my body thrummed with fear. I didn't want to meet those monstrous green eyes of his, but my body was betraying me. It was like it had been earlier on the streets when I had responded to his psychic call. I could not stop myself, and as soon as our eyes met I was trapped. I drowned in his hypnotic gaze, but I could not pull myself away. I was peripherally aware of Giovanni standing slightly to the front and to the right of me. He seemed too still.

Slowly he leant into my face, which made him bend at an awkward angle because of his height, and I whimpered in revulsion at his closeness. His lips were mere inches from my own, and I thought with growing horror that he might actually kiss me. I felt a tightness about my body, as though the air had become denser. One skeletal hand reached out and I was powerless to stop it from touching my body.

Then, as quick as lightning, he pulled his hand back and slapped me across the face. My head rocked from the force, and the strength of the contact picked my feet up off the floor to knock me back against the loveseat. I stumbled, but the shock and pain of the attack broke his mental control of me. My fear was instantly replaced by a burning anger. I brought my hand to my cheek, which still stung from the slap, and silently seethed from the indignation of what he had done.

Giovanni turned in our direction, but did not move forward. His face was worryingly devoid of emotion, and his body did not display the reaction that I felt the incident warranted. I looked back up into the man's face, but this time the eyes did not mesmerise me. I was disgusted to see that the icy smile had been replaced by a genuine one. He was apparently pleased with himself, and that only angered me more.

"Giovanni," I said urgently.

His attempt at a frown didn't quite succeed. His eyes moved from my face to the stranger's, but he was oddly silent. I couldn't understand why he wasn't trying to help me, or defend me in some way. I took my chance in that moment the man turned away from me and toward Giovanni.

I jumped to my feet and launched myself into the man's body. I connected solidly with his side, and to my surprise he stumbled a few steps backward. I think the movement was more from surprise, than any real force of my strike. I slipped around his side, stopping as I reached Giovanni. I heard the man fall into the coffee table as I grabbed Giovanni's arms with my small hands and shook him with all my strength. I could hear the man cursing, and knew I had but seconds before he was on his feet again. If he got a hold of me it would be all over. "Giovanni, please."

"Go!" he growled through gritted teeth. I shook my head in disbelief. "Get out of here!" he screamed.

Burning with humiliation and anger I had no choice but to run. I didn't wait to see what would happen next. I simply fled. As I raced out the room, I heard the sounds of a struggle, and two male voices raised in anger. I knocked the door clear out of its frame, not even attempting to open it in my haste to get away. I felt a moment of guilt then the sour taste of cowardice, but I knew I was no match for the stranger. He was too strong, and had too much control over my mind, to the point where he could turn my own body against itself. And, God damn it, I was angry!

I ran out to the driveway and jumped into one of the cars. I pulled the shade down and the keys dropped into my waiting hand. After slamming the car into drive I pulled away from the house, driving recklessly until the familiar village lay far behind me. I was too angry and scared to care who might see me.

What had happened back there? It had been chaos, and the man was so weirdly evasive and yet aggressive. It made no sense. One minute Giovanni had been angry, the next passive. Had he also been affected by the man's mental control? Why did he tell me to leave?

When I finally came to my senses enough to realise that I had no idea where I was, I stopped. It was dangerous to find myself in unfamiliar territory with only a few hours of night left. I pulled over to the side of the road to get my bearings and ascertained that I was on a highway I had travelled on before. I remembered it leading to several small towns and villages. The road cut a swath through a dense forest, and I took shelter there in a small clearing. My face still held a phantom stinging from the man's slap, and I burnt with humiliation. I let out a stream of expletives, but it did nothing to reduce the level of my anger. I needed to calm down, and think things through clearly. I stepped from the car and let the silent darkness calm me.

A moment of doubt had never touched me since joining Giovanni as a vampire. He had always been loyal and supportive, guiding and protecting me every step of the way. He was so incredibly strong. I couldn't believe what had happened. He must have been affected by the stranger's mind-games. There was no other logical explanation. His outburst must have stemmed from desperation. He knew his behaviour would have shocked and hurt me. It was a way to get me far away from the danger in our midst.

I was mulling this over and over again when I became aware of the presence of something alive. I shut my thoughts off immediately and concentrated on the area around me, aware of a small sound of movement, a whisper of brush being gently pushed aside. There was no way a human's ears would have been able to pick it up, but I could hear things clearly for miles. When I wanted to concentrate on a particular area, I could discern the most brief or quiet of sounds. Then I picked up a heartbeat. The creature moved closer still, and I caught a scent. Human.

Chapter 13

I followed a small, very overgrown path from the highway's edge, deeper into the forest's depths. After I gained my bearings, allowing myself to be aware of my surroundings and not just my simmering anger, I was able to tentatively establish where I was situated. I was just over the border from my adopted country, and I was almost positive I was close to a small, farming community Giovanni and I had hunted in several years before. If it was the place I was thinking of, I remembered quaint farmhouses filled with sleeping families and barns full of resting animals. It gave me a twinge of sadness when I thought about the kind of lives those sleeping men and women were going to wake to.

The small clearing where had I stopped consisted of just a large rock with a fallen tree resting on its wide base. An area no more than ten feet square existed where the ground was relatively free of plant growth and other obstacles. I had just perched myself on the rock's upper plateau, when I caught the first signs that I was not alone. My first thought was to scare the person off. I had had too much drama that night already, and I had already fed. The movements stopped and I knew by my heightened senses that the human was still a way off from being any kind of threat, or witness. I closed my eyes, forcing myself to calm down. Slowly the tension began to drain from my body, but I was far from being relaxed. There were many things out there in the night that were potentially as dangerous as I was.

As pointedly as I tried to make myself think through the facts, my emotions kept creeping in. A venomous fury coursed through my veins. Terrible images of Seraphine's death, and Giovanni's anger and fear filtered through my brain, twisting and souring my thoughts. Remembering that stranger's horribly cold smile and green eyes chilled me to the core.

Had I somehow unconsciously sabotaged our safety, influencing Giovanni to make decisions outside of what his experience would normally tell him to do? Had I let this man come into our life through my own ignorance, and possibly something worse, considering the danger that he alluded to? Was I somehow at fault for what had happened this night?

A strange and sudden thought jumped into my brain, one completely divorced from the matter at hand. Today was the birthday of my niece, Danica, who had only been eleven years old when I left. She would now be in her early twenties. Where had she ended up? Was she married? Had she gone on to university? She would now be almost the same age as I was when I changed. For some reason that thought unsettled me terribly.

Then, as quickly as the thought came, my mind raced back to the present. No matter what may have happened, or could still be happening, I would have to return to the house. I could conceivably find another place to go, but no matter what my life was with Giovanni, I needed to be where he was. I needed to give him the benefit of the doubt and clear up what had transpired. He had never failed or wronged me before.

I thought it best to wait until quite close to sunrise to return. The encounter would have to be over by then, as the stranger would have to return to his daytime resting place for his own safety. I closed my eyes and tried to open my mind to Giovanni's thoughts, but there was nothing. I tried to believe that that was a good omen, because when he was high with emotion, his link with me was usually wide open. If he was in pain, or fearful I should have been feeling something. At least that's what I wanted to believe.

I was debating about going ahead into the nearest town when I became aware again of the presence in the dark woods. My stalker wandered a bit closer as I sat thinking, but was still not close enough to be any kind of threat. The unseen person's movements were very stealthy and oddly light. They pricked at my attention.

I leant down and snapped off a large branch from the fallen tree, which rested at my feet. I paused, listening to the night, but the movements had stopped. I tossed the branch off in the direction the last sounds had come from, and waited for a reaction. I expected a scream, or some kind of abrupt movement, but there was none. I was curious, and a frankly a little annoyed. A few minutes passed in complete silence. Then, so softly even I strained to hear, there was a rustling. The person made slow, careful movements, but it was obvious they were coming in my direction. I sat as still as stone, waiting for them to get closer.

It was puzzling that the person was approaching from deep within the forest. Why would someone be out there alone at night? As they came closer, I picked up on some fleeting images and the unmistakable feelings of fear and curiosity. Within a few minutes they would be close enough for me to see them, but not close enough to allow them the same luxury. A slight breeze rustled by, bringing with it the aromas of dirt, sweat and blood.

I didn't need to feed, but I was churning with anger and aggression. The chance to release my inner turmoil was too intoxicating to dismiss. I could just have easily departed— a ghost to my would-be voyeur— but I stayed where I was. It was somewhat exhilarating to not know whom I would come face to face with in that shadowy encounter.

My stalker was not only exceptionally careful, he or she was bold. The almost inaudible footsteps stopped not ten feet from where I sat, on the very edges of the clearing. Though I pretended to be oblivious of their approach, I could clearly discern a small figure beneath the overhanging branches of a nearby tree. From where I sat, I did not have a completely unobstructed view of their position, but I was left with the impression of a small man or woman, medium-length dark hair and large eyes. The eyes beamed out from the obscured face, shining in the pale stream of moonlight. The body remained incredibly still, but the eyes flicked about the open space with cautious interest. Again, I caught a whiff of their scent and something about it disturbed me. It was not like any other scent I had experienced before when hunting.

The alluring aroma in such proximity led me away from those troubling thoughts. My body began to betray me, trembling lightly with desire. I let myself go to the feeling, pushing aside everything else. I lunged at my prey, my movements too quick for eyes to register before I caught the person in my grasp. The body felt frail and thin in my arms. There was no struggle or outcry at my sudden attack. The passivity was decidedly unsettling. I cupped the individual's small chin with my hand, and lifted the lowered face toward my own. I had to see the face of this daring creature, and know the look of fear before I took a life.

When those gloriously innocent and calm eyes met my own, I was so surprised I immediately dropped my hold. For the first time in many years, I was hesitant about taking a life. I felt my doubt as physically as I had felt my fear and anger from earlier in the evening. I was even more troubled that once my grip was released the person still made no attempt to escape. That haunting gaze remained on my face, and I felt a strange sense of peace. An unmistakable bonding happened between the two of us in that moment. I could not kill this pitiful creature. It was only a child.

The boy was young, maybe nine or ten years old, though he was so thin he might have been as old as twelve. Bearing the obvious signs of malnourishment and neglect, he was also incredibly dirty, with tangled, matted hair, but was not matured enough to be releasing the telltale body odour of adolescence. His outfit was several sizes too large, all but swallowing up his tiny frame. The clothing was also not adequate to prevent the ill effects of exposure to the cold, damp nights common in that area. Yet, underneath the ill-fitting clothes and the filth, lay an unquestionable beauty.

His eyes were large soulful pools shining up from a face that even the gauntness could not detract from exquisite features. It was a face that through his youth would seem too “pretty,” but as a man would be undeniably masculine and attractive. It was a face that would one day make woman silly with desire. The boy's eyes were bluer than the clearest of skies, a blue reminding me too much of the eyes of the man I loved.

Those terrible and innocent blue eyes held me in their unflinching gaze, and touched me in a deeply intimate way. Much pain lurked there, too much pain for someone so young, inexplicably drawing me. I was compelled to understand what could deliver a child to such a place, both emotionally and physically. What terrible things could have happened to have fate bring him to me in such a way? Were the events that transpired earlier only a circumstance that needed to occur to allow me to meet this child?

I reached out my hand, gently brushing my fingertips over the boy's cheek. “Are you lost? Why are you out all alone in the woods in the dark?” My voice was a gentle whisper, as I didn't want to frighten him. I waited patiently, but he had no obvious reaction and he did not answer my questions.

We both stood silently, each eyeing the other. Then the boy took a step forward, still displaying no discernable expression. I opened my arms hesitantly, and somewhat nervous and unsure of what was expected of me. He moved into my embrace, melting into my body as though he was always meant to be there. He wrapped his frail arms around my body, and I could feel his ribs through the thin fabric of his shirt. His body was warm, and I felt a completion to something I was not aware was missing. It was a perfect symbiosis, stirring a powerful reaction in myself. It was a feeling so pure and perfect, derived without lust, fear or anger. It was acceptance of comfort and an exchange of affection without ulterior motivation. I smiled in the darkness.

After a few minutes, the tension drained from his body, and the front of my shirt became damp with the boy's silent tears. These were not tears of fear or even sadness. It was a release from deep inside him, which in turned triggered a reaction from myself I was not prepared for. I felt a need to give of myself purely, to see to another's needs without motivation or expectation of anything in return. His tiny hands found their way into the long waves of my hair, and I felt a sharp twinge of emotion, like nothing I had felt since the first time I held my newborn niece in my arms. I rested my chin on the top of his head and sighed. Unbelievably I began to relax and I returned his affection with a gentle squeeze.

Dimly I was aware that this was a country that had seen much recent upheaval and destruction. Political and cultural turmoil had split the nation, turning neighbour against neighbour. In the aftermath of the internal conflicts, harsh and dangerous living conditions remained for many— hunger, unemployment, sickness, anger and hostility. From those conditions grew substance abuse, violence, criminality and desperation, conditions that allowed many terrible things to happen without recourse or retribution.

From this uncertain and potentially perilous environment came a memory a young woman with a small child in tow. It was night and the two moved along the edge of a road that had seen better days, the road I had just come from. Their pace was painfully slow, exposing their exhaustion. The woman held the child's hand tightly, her dark eyes darting furtively about the shadowy landscape. At that moment, things were quiet and seemingly safe. Both bore the signs of a hard life— unhealthy thinness, worn clothing and the air of defeat. If not for the child, I gained the impression that the woman would have simply given up long before that night. At her side the child stumbled, and she did not have the strength to help him along any farther.

She looked off to the side of the road, obviously trying to discern a suitable place for them to rest for few hours. She carried a worn military-style bag over one shoulder, which she removed for the boy to use as a makeshift pillow. He was asleep as soon as his head touched the bag. Though tired herself, she stayed awake, her body fitting snugly alongside her child. After an indeterminate amount of time she closed her eyes.

Two rough, belligerent men, brought to the same road on the same night by hard times of their own appeared out of the night. Unlike the mother and child, the men had been warped by the harshness of their life and had given in to the defeat, allowing it to twist them into things without conscience. They saw the mother and child, and viewed them as simply a means to an end. One of them men roughly shook the woman awake, and demanded money and food. She immediately flooded with terror. She insisted that she did not have either, but the men were long past the ability to care or empathise with others in a similar situation to their own.

The man with his hands still clamped on the woman's upper arm turned a sneering look in the direction of his companion. “This little bitch here says she don't have any money, or any food. What are we gonna do about that?”

The woman was crying by then. Hot, desperate tears spilled out of eyes wide with fear and anticipation. She pleaded pathetically with them to leave her and her son alone, but the men were too angry and too intoxicated to be swayed by her words. I felt the painful dread, much as she must have also felt, as the events about to unfold became clear. Her words simply spurred the men on, pushing them over the edge into behaviour that, under any other circumstances would never have happened. Roughly, the woman was yanked to her feet. She kicked out at the boy still slumbering on the ground, and his eyes opened, wide with shock. He registered his understanding of the danger they were in.

Like a shot in the dark the memory continued, escaping from his young mind to burrow into mine. The images were horrible and so vivid, they cut a swath through my brain like razor blades. I clenched my teeth from the ferocity of their impact. The boy trembled then went slack in my arms. He had not fainted, but was having an obvious physical reaction from reliving the awful events now playing out in my brain. I was no longer a witness. The experience had become my own. My body was tight was fear, my brain churning with terror.

As the second man leant down to grab a hold of my arm, I jumped up and hid behind my mother. Her body was hot and she smelled bad. She shook her arm at me, and started yelling at me to run. I was so scared, I didn't want to leave her, but I was so small there was nothing I could do.

“Now! Get as far away as you can!” she screamed. I'd never heard her sound like that before. It scared me.

I turned away, crying like a baby. My heart was pounding so hard in my chest it hurt. My tummy felt weird, like when it's hard to go to the bathroom. It felt like fireworks were going off inside me, and I couldn't think straight. The tears burnt on my cheeks, running into my mouth and making the top of my shirt wet. As I ran into the forest, I heard the men laughing behind me, but it sounded mean. I thought I might pee my pants.

I ran and ran as fast as I could. The trees kept snapping against me and catching on my clothes. One scratched my eye and made everything blurry. My

skin was stinging and bleeding, but I was too scared to slow down. What was happening to my mother?

I tripped on a large root and fell down really hard. My head banged against something, a rock maybe, and it made me feel like I was going to throw up. When I stood again I was dizzy and my brain hurt. I took off again, running so fast until I couldn't breathe anymore. Something was pounding in my ears.

Unable to move anymore, I fell down. It was so dark I couldn't see anything. I was crying so hard I was choking on my snot. My chest felt like it would explode. Everything hurt and I didn't know what to do.

I had to calm down, or the men might hear me. I bit my lip, which I do sometimes when I'm upset, and I tasted blood. It hurt, but it helped me to stop crying. When I could breathe all right again I stood. Sweat was pouring down my sides, and my shirt was stuck to me. It was cold. I didn't want to go back, but I had to.

It was so quiet and dark. I turned around and started walking back, trying to be careful so I wouldn't hurt myself anymore, but I wasn't sure I was going in the right direction. Then I heard my mother screaming.

I ran toward the sound, and slowed down just at the edge of the trees.

I dropped onto my knees, which were sore and bleeding. The men and my mother were so close I could smell them. They had that funny smell adults have when they drink wine.

My mother was on the ground, and she was naked. The smaller of the two men was on top of her, moving around and making noises like a pig. The other man was holding my mother's arms above her head, and she was crying and begging them to stop.

The man on top of my mother keep telling her to shut up, and yelled all kinds of terrible things at her, but she didn't stop crying. Please stop, Mom, please. His dark coat was shaking as he wiggled around on top of her. Then he started hitting her, over and over again. The sound of him hitting her scared me, and I wanted to help. I wanted to kill the men for hurting her. My tummy hurt and my throat was burning. I thought I might throw up.

The man in the black coat stood, spitting onto the ground beside my mother. I heard the sound of a zipper as he did his pants back up. His friend was laughing like a madman. I started shaking and I wanted to cry, but I couldn't.

My mother coughed, and she made a horrible gurgling sound as she turned herself onto her stomach. She was trying to crawl away from the men. I'd never seen a woman naked before, and I hope I don't again. Her back and legs were so white. She looked like a ghost, except for the blood and dirt all over her.

"Where th' hell she think she'd going?" the one man said and made a gross snorting sound. He reached down and grabbed my mother by the hair. He pulled her head backward, twisting her around. The other man pulled a knife from his pocket, and cut her in the throat.

She fell to the ground, and a big pool of blood poured out. The men looked through her clothes and our bags. When they realised there was nothing to steal, they kicked at my mother's body a few times then walked away.

My ears started to whine, and I was shaking so hard my teeth were chattering. I wanted my mother so bad, but I was afraid to go out onto the road in case the men came back. My brain was shrinking and I couldn't feel my body anymore. I looked out at my mother again. She wasn't moving. She must have been so cold without her clothes on. She needed a doctor.

I vomited and I fell on the muddy ground. Blackness.

I slammed back into my own consciousness with such force that I stumbled, and had to grab a nearby branch so as not to land on my ass. The boy was still against me, but had slipped, and his arms were now clutched about my legs. I pulled him back to standing. I was shaking with fury. Those were the type of people that deserved to cross my path. The rest of the boy's experiences stumbled out of his mind in a series of disjointed images and a muddle of disassociated emotion. It was impossible to gauge the amount of time that had passed.

In the daylight the woman's body lay at the side of the road, eyes clouded in death. The boy gathered up the remains of his mother's clothes and did his best to cover her nakedness. He sat there until the night came again. Nights of scavenging for food and shaking in the cold followed. Days passed hidden in the forest.

I hadn't seen a body, and I certainly would have smelled the scent of decaying flesh, so I could only assume she'd been discovered and removed. If that had brought him relief or further damage, I couldn't tell.

Sickness and anger rocked me as I stood there, holding him in my arms. I'd seen death many times, been the cause of much myself, but I had never been affected in the way his mother's murder caused me to feel. I pressed my lips to the top of his head, the hair coarse and gritty.

I considered my options: leave him there to fend for himself, take him to a nearby hospital or church, or take him with me. It was not much of a consideration. My anger with Giovanni seemed a pale concern compared to what that boy had been through. I took his hand and led him back through the forest toward the road. As we stepped out from the trees I had a sudden thought. "What about your father?"

He made the tiniest movement of his head, but still did not speak. From his mind I received only blankness, as if no memory of any father existed. Perhaps he never knew the man, or had been separated from him too long to remember his face. He did not smile, frown or show any indication of resistance to my touch.

It was as if time had been divided into before I met the boy and after. The encounter with Giovanni's maker falling clearly into before, therefore became less important. As I stood holding the boy's hand, I closed my eyes and tried to find my connection with Giovanni. I felt a brief flicker, a response to my own openness. "*Rachel*," the voice I loved whispered in my head. "*Come back... he has gone. I have things to explain.*"

When I opened my eyes, the boy was watching me solemnly. He moved back into my arms, and further into my heart. We stood in that embrace for a long time, the vampire and orphan, enjoying the other in ways completely unnatural to both. I was a surrogate mother and a saviour from a cruel world. I had

found a way to use my heart purely, and be close to a human without having to kill, trick or deceive. It was a powerful moment for both of us.

Nothing could ever be the same for either of us. Together we had been thrust down a new and uncharted path. The future was a blank canvas, full of possibilities, both good and bad. We would each play a part in the way things would turn out.

Chapter 14

Carrying the boy without effort in my arms, I returned to the car. I slowed on the road leading up to the main gate, driving with care through the open gates. I was full of apprehension, and all my senses were on high alert as I made my way cautiously to the front door. The quiet made me uneasy, the young boys' delicate heartbeat the only sound I was aware of.

The boy kept silent the entire trip, pressed tightly to my side. As I carried him from the car to the front door, his warm mouth was pressed into the flesh at the base of my neck, and it felt strange and wonderful. His hand in mine felt so natural, it was as though we had done it a thousand times. His mind played the scene of his last night with his mother, and her subsequent death over and over again. The horrible images ran as though on some kind of cognitive loop, interspersed with brief snapshots of happier times, and an odd blank nothingness that was almost more terrible than his mother's murder.

As soon as I opened the front door, the gentle creaking unnaturally loud to my ears, I knew Giovanni was not there. The door I had knocked from its frame earlier had been hastily repaired, but the house was empty. I stepped in, hesitating, my new companion trailing behind me. Our footsteps shuffled softly across the cold stone floor. I immediately looked into the sitting room, where just a few hours earlier Giovanni and I had experienced our tumultuous encounter with the spectre of his past. The room was in shambles— chairs overturned and the beautiful wooden table had been smashed to pieces. The boy and I both took in the obvious signs of violence with silent apprehension. Where had he gone?

“Come on. Let's get you cleaned up and find you somewhere to sleep.” My voice sounded confident, and the boy seemed too oblivious to the discomfort behind those words.

We returned to the hallway, and I led us in the direction of the grandiose staircase at the farthest end of the house. The boy's enormous yet solemn eyes took in everything, but his face did not respond in anyway to what he saw. Even his mind stayed curiously blank, and his demeanour was outwardly even. The fact that he was that calm, and seemingly compliant to my lead, indicated to me just how traumatised he really was. He was burying his pain somewhere deep inside his immature and unprepared mind. Those were the events in life that could utterly destroy a person's capacity to love and trust, bringing darkness to every experience to follow. They could turn people into monsters all too willing to inflict the same type of torment on others, or they could ignite the pursuit of all that was good in humanity.

We turned right at the top of the stairs, down a short and little-used hallway. I opened the second door onto a beautiful bedroom suite with an adjoining bathroom. Going directly to the tub, I turned on the faucet to fill it with clean, warm water. I found shampoo, soap and towels, placing them all within easy reach of the tub's edge. The boy followed me into the room, stopping short of entering the bathroom.

I smiled at him, standing so still in the doorway. “It's all right. Come in, you don't need to be afraid.”

He continued to stand there, that blank expression on his face. I approached him, taking him gently by the arm, and led him to the tub. “I'm going to go and find you some clean clothes. I want you to get in, and clean yourself up, okay? Do you understand what I'm saying to you?”

He turned his face toward mine, nodding once quickly. I smiled. It was progress. I closed the door behind me to allow him some privacy. Speeding to my room, I searched for anything that would fit his slight frame. I grabbed a t-shirt of my own, a pair of running shorts and some socks. I would have to go into town the next evening and get him some proper clothing, but that would do to sleep in. I returned to the room and placed the clothing on the large four-poster bed. Pausing outside the bathroom door, I was pleased to hear the sounds of the boy bathing. The next thing I needed to worry about was food.

Down in the kitchen that was never cooked in, I pulled open the doors on the massive restaurant-style refrigerator. We kept a certain amount of food on the premises, mostly to maintain appearances for our cleaning staff, and for the few visitors we received. It had been so long since I thought about consuming food myself, and it felt unnatural to be pulling together a meal for someone else. I found some fresh bread, cheese and fruit, which I piled on a serving tray, then added a bottle of water and some milk. I would have to make sure the kitchen was better stocked in the future, because I hoped the boy would be staying for a while.

As I was putting together the last touches on the tray, I heard a door open upstairs. Light, quick footsteps moved across the floor from the bathroom. I carried the tray up with me, pausing outside the seven-foot door, feeling a surprising tingle of anticipation. It was unnerving how much I wanted to please the child and to give him comfort. I tapped lightly on the wood, waiting a minute before I pushed the door inward.

I smelled clean skin and soap as I entered the space. He had dressed in the clothing I had left, the shorts and shirt a bit too big, but a definite improvement on the rags I'd found him in. His damp, shaggy hair left a circle of wetness about the shirt's shoulders and back. With the dirt scrubbed clean from his face I could see more clearly the series of scratches about his face and arms, and the bruise-like bags under his ever-watchful eyes. His legs were terribly thin and coltishly long where they protruded from the borrowed shorts. He was so pitiful and angelic my heart swelled.

I brought the food to the bed, where he obligingly hopped up, but waited for me to give him permission to eat. When I did, he ate with unashamed determination, not leaving a single crumb, or drop of milk behind. Almost instantly his eyes began to droop, and I imagined he had not slept well in a very long time. I pulled back the expensive and heavy duvet, and moved it aside to allow the boy to settle into a comfortable position. His eyes were closed as soon as his head touched the pillow. I pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, drinking in the aroma of the shampoo. He twitched slightly then was still. I waited a few minutes until he fell into a deep sleep then slipped noiselessly from the room.

“Good night,” I whispered as the door closed.

We had been back at the house for about forty-five minutes without any sign of Giovanni. I had been so wrapped up in caring for the boy, that I had been blocking out all other stimuli around me. I made a concerted effort to drop my guard, but did not immediately pick up on any sign of my love.

I raced outside, but I was conflicted as to whether I should wait at the house or head out in search of him. If he returned to the house before I was back, and found the boy asleep, what would his reaction be? I needed to be able to explain what he was doing there. Yet he could be out there looking for me, and worrying that I was hurt or worse. “*Giovanni,*” I thought with as much power behind it as I could muster. “*Where are you?*”

I made one last, frantic sweep through the house, looking for any sign that might indicate where Giovanni had gone, but found nothing. Apart from the

destruction in the sitting room, nothing appeared to be out of place. I made sure to lock the door behind me and engage the alarm system to ensure that the boy remained safe while I ventured out to find my love, hoping he would be happy to see me when I found him.

My best bet would be the village, the long stretch of beach or the docks. Beyond that, there were simply too many places he could have gone. Wherever I looked, though, I needed to do it quickly since there was only about an hour left until sunrise. While Giovanni might be able to survive for a short while in the light, I did not have the longevity behind me yet to support the attempt. I raced down the dark and rocky hillside to the beach where we had spent many wonderful hours together. The space was deserted, as it always was at this hour, for as far as I could see. My ears strained to pick up any sound that might indicate the way I should go, but there was only the sound of the water slapping the shore. I hurtled forward along the beach, abuzz with overwhelming concern.

I made my way toward the docks, only to find them as deserted as the beach had been. Inside many of the boats I detected life, heartbeats and breathing slowed with sleep. There was nothing amiss, no hint that Giovanni had been there recently. “Jesus, Giovanni,” I cursed. “Where are you?”

My feet barely touched the ground as I ran through the empty streets. All was dark and quiet. I even passed the building where we had encountered the stranger earlier, but it, too, was deserted. There was no evidence that anyone had been there at all that night. I shrieked in frustration, and pounded my fist against the wall with such force as to leave a neat, but distinct hole in the exterior wall.

There was no choice but to head back home. The night would be over soon. I returned the way I had come, along the deserted beach. My anxiety rose with each step. Then, just as the house came into view, I felt a familiar tug at my mind. I turned, peering up into the rocky cliffs running parallel to the beach in the same direction as the house. A soft whoosh of wind picked up then a figure appeared out of the softening darkness. At the sight of his face, I was choked with emotion— relief, confusion and anger.

I jumped into his arms and he reacted equally at the sight of me.

He squeezed me ferociously, raining kisses down on the top of my head, on my neck and face. “I love you. I'm so sorry...” His voice was deep with emotion, sounding alien to my ear.

“I love you too. I was so worried. I didn't understand what happened earlier, why you told me to leave, and then when I came back and I couldn't find you...” My words tumbled out roughly, as if my body couldn't expel them fast enough.

“I don't know where to start. I have much to tell you. I'm sorry if I hurt you, I was trying to save you. He is very powerful and old, and I was afraid he would hurt you... and I couldn't bear the thought of not be able to protect you.”

“Is he gone?”

“For now.” He looked at me, his blue eyes heavy with worry. “I can't say if or when he will come back.”

I grabbed his hand, feeling the first tingling warning that the sun would rise soon. “We need to get home.”

“Yes.” He pressed his lips against mine, filling me with powerful, familiar reassurance. “We can talk tomorrow.”

All I wanted then was to lie in our bed, and lose myself to the touch that I loved and undeniably relied on. I needed to be close to his scent, know the feeling of his body intertwined with mine. I was giddy with the relief knowing he was safe. I wanted his voice to be the last thing I heard before I drifted off into our daylight slumber.

We made it back to the house just as the first shimmers of sunlight began to appear on the horizon. I felt the immediate, sickening panic I always did when we stayed out this close to sunrise. Giovanni gave me a puzzled look when we arrived at the door and found the full security system had been engaged. Normally I would have simply locked the door, relying on the outside cameras, which were always monitoring the perimeter of the house. We stepped in quickly, re-engaging the system before the window coverings even had a chance to lift. It was an intricate system that not only locked the door and windows. It had solid metal coverings for the windows that were lowered into place when the system was activated. When the staff came to the house to work, they could stop the full system, which opened those coverings and allowed light into the house. By that time we were safely locked away in our soundproof, fireproof lair where we passed the daylight hours. Giovanni had taken but a few steps past the doorway when his body tensed and he grabbed my arm. “We're not alone,” he whispered in my ear.

I took him by the hand and led him up the stairs to the second floor. His look was questioning, as I opened the door to the guest bedroom. When he saw the sleeping boy he frowned, and a heavy lump appeared in my throat. He pulled me from the room, closing the door silently behind us. “It appears that we have many things to discuss tomorrow.” His voice was tired and strained.

We fell naked into each other's arms that morning, too disturbed for anything other than the comfort of each other's presence. It took a long time for my mind to settle enough for me to drift off. Giovanni was also troubled. He was still tossing and turning when I finally fell asleep.

When I awoke the house was ablaze with light. Every lamp, chandelier and fixture had been turned on. Even candles, which had been placed decoratively about various locations in the house, were lit. There was so much light it was a solid entity fighting off the possibility of shadows, or even worse, the unseen things lurking in the shadows. I was puzzled then panicked. The boy!

Especially disturbing was Giovanni's absence when I awoke. Though it was not unusual for him to wake before I did, or even leave our resting area, it was troubling because of the boy's presence in our home. We had left many things unsaid, and equally unexplained. I did not imagine he would cause the boy any harm, but I wondered how the boy would feel to see Giovanni without my presence. He had no warning that there was someone else in the house, and after what he had experienced, I worried what his reaction might be.

I immediately raced from our room down the hall to the bedroom where I left the boy sleeping the morning before. The bed was empty, rumpled from sleep. His scent was still in the air, giving a poignant reminder of the extent to which the boy affected me. A brief check in the bathroom proved it to be empty as well. Then, just as I crossed from the room into the hallway, I heard a startling yet wondrous sound.

It was laughter— the high, sweet and infectious laughter of a child. The sound came from the direction of the library, so I turned and flew down the immense staircase to the lower level. The doors were wide open. The room was as lit up as the rest of the house. Something caught in my throat, though the thoughts of Giovanni's that I was picking up on were soft and happy. I stopped in the doorway, seeing but not comprehending the sight before my eyes. I filled with that warm prickling feeling one experiences when seeing kittens and newborn babies.

Giovanni sat on the floor with the boy. To one side of them sat a huge pile of books, with several opened atop the gorgeous and incredibly valuable Persian carpet they were seated on. The boy was looking through the pages of one tome, almost the same size as he was, with obvious delight. Giovanni looked up and caught my eye, his smile easy and natural. The boy soon looked in my direction also, his own smile growing even wider. He pushed aside the book, which fell to the carpet with a muted thud, to launch himself at me, and I eagerly wrapped my arms around his warm body.

Giovanni motioned for me to sit with them, so I did. We looked through several of the books, and Giovanni and I talked casually about everything and nothing. Though the boy seemed engrossed in the pages of the books he was looking at, I often felt his world-weary eyes following our actions. I could also see snippets of his thoughts, and what I was privy to was enough for me to know he was absorbing every word of our conversation. While there may have been psychological damage in the young, fragile mind, there certainly was no lack of intelligence. Perhaps in time, those wounds would heal and emotional progress would be made.

After about an hour, Giovanni caught my attention and I felt the subtle force of his thoughts into my mind. “*We should feed.*”

Nodding my understanding, I smiled reassuringly at the boy. He picked up immediately on the change in the atmosphere. “Maybe we could wait until later?” I suggested, and Giovanni raised an eyebrow questioningly. “I think we need to take the boy into town and get him some proper-fitting clothes and some more food. Maybe some books and toys more for his age?” I looked at the boy when I said this last part, and though he did not speak, he smiled his agreement.

“Of course. As you wish, my love. Just as long as we have a chance to speak about some important things.” His voice was soft, but his expression was serious.

“Yes, I understand.”

We took the car into town— something we did not do very often— but we wanted to keep up appearances for both the boy and the residents. As we moved from store to store to make our purchases, we passed off an easy explanation of the boy being a relative whose parents were recently killed in an accident, a misrepresentation obviously, but a story not too far from the truth. The boy was sweet and compliant everywhere we went. His demeanour and the sympathetic response evoked by the cover story won him indulgences everywhere we went. He received extra toys and books, sweets from the bakery, and new shoes of his choosing. We lavished him effortlessly and gained as much pleasure from the experience as the boy.

With the car loaded with our abundant purchases, we headed back to the house. I got the boy settled with a meal, and found a twenty-four hour children's channel for him to watch while Giovanni brought the parcels in from the car.

“We just need to go out for a bit, okay? I will make sure the house is locked up tight, and you will be safe,” I said to the boy.

He nodded his comprehension and I felt a wave of his fear.

I touched his shoulder gently. “I promise I'll be right back.”

Giovanni was waiting for me by the front door, his beauty almost painful to my eyes, filling my chest with a tight aching. Even after all those years, his beauty could still catch me by surprise. We stepped outside, the alarm system engaged as promised. Giovanni raised his head slightly, looking out in the direction of the beach. “There's someone there. Two someones, actually.”

I nodded, also picking up on the movement.

We fled down the rocky trail toward the beach. From an overhanging ledge we dropped silently, an approximate two-storey height. It was easy to take our power for granted, but there were moments when it was incredible.

We landed on the firmly packed sand, cloaked in the shadows of the mountain's edge. About a hundred yards from our position sat two men sharing a bottle of cheap liquor. Standing there with our prey in view made me realise that it had been some time since we had taken a feeding from the power of suggestion or seduction, and left any of our unknowing or unwilling donors alive.

One of the two men had fallen back against the damp sand and from the blurry and incoherent thoughts I was absorbing I gathered he was near the point of passing out. His partner in crime, as it were, did not seem to be as bad off. He was thinking about a fight he had earlier in the evening with a woman over his being out of work. I perceived that he was persona non grata unless he could find a stable source of income. Running into the other man was a simple happenstance. It was funny how the simplest, and seemingly unimportant of decisions could lead you to the biggest events of your life. Agreeing to a night of drinking with a buddy had led him into the hands of monsters.

I felt a violent rush of hunger and though I could control it somewhat after many years as a creature of the night, I didn't want to. I didn't have time for any emotional satisfaction I might have gained from his fear. There were too many things that still needed to be settled. The only satisfaction I would gain that night was from the taking of his blood. There was only the time to drink.

In a blur of movement we left our position in the shadows. I went to the man nearing unconsciousness, kneeling over him and feeling the dampness spread through the fabric of my pants where I touched the sand. I cupped his face in my hands, looking down into his haggard face. His breath reeked of alcohol. The urge built, the sound of his heart drawing me deeper with every beat. Even his hideous smell and the obvious signs of abuse on his body did not deter me from my need. The vein in his neck throbbed, his blood singing with warmth and life.

I lowered myself to him in a parody of a sexual embrace. My mouth found his neck and the soft pulsing of the blood through his vein. His body was limp, not reacting to my presence at all until my fangs made contact with his flesh. I tore into him, and he began to thrash madly underneath my body. His hands gripped my arms, but he was no match for the strength I possessed. His shock coaxed the blood quickly into my eager mouth. The liquid gushed violently,

small excesses bubbling over my lips and down to my chin. His blood was sweet, and soon his thrashing stopped and the surge of blood slowed.

When he was still, I rolled off him onto my back. I was physically satisfied, but somehow vaguely unsettled. Giovanni plopped down beside me on the sand. He had placed the other man's body beside his friend's. He also seemed ill at ease, and certainly not as satiated as he would normally appear after feeding. I pressed my face to his bent leg, and felt his hands move softly over my back. A cool wind coming off the ocean intermittently lifted his dark hair.

"We should get back to the boy. We have a lot to discuss and some important decisions to make." His voice was a silken whisper and he did not look at me when he spoke.

Without other words, we got up together to remove the two bodies from the beach. We carried them down to the water's edge, to a private dock where Giovanni and I kept a small, motorised boat. Once the two bodies were laid on the boat's floor, Giovanni took off over the still, black waters. He would drop the bodies far enough out that they would be so damaged by the water and sea life, the mode of death would be difficult to determine.

As the boat moved farther out across the ocean, I made my way back to the house, and the boy I had brought unexpectedly into our lives. The house was still securely locked and ablaze with light. The boy was in much the same position as I had left him, though I could see that the plate of food had been reduced to crumbs. His face lit up with a smile as soon as I walked into the room. I sat at his side on the coach, and allowed myself to enjoy the silly cartoon characters parading across the TV screen.

Within thirty minutes I heard the sound of the front door opening, and the security system being re-engaged. I felt Giovanni's presence even before he entered the room where we sat, and the cool hands that touched my shoulders smelled of the sea. He came around the side of the couch, leaning up against the arm.

"What are we watching?" Amusement danced in his blue eyes.

I looked to the boy who shook his head. I shrugged and offered a smile. Many years had passed since I'd last watched cartoons, or any kind of television show for that matter. Sometimes Giovanni and I went to the movies, or watched them from home, but we rarely watched TV. Since we were able to travel great distances on any given night, without being bothered by adverse weather of any kind, we spent many of our evenings on the move: visiting, studying and discovering. Giovanni moved from his perch on the sofa's arm to the large coffee table. He was seated in front of the boy and me, easily able to make eye contact with us. The boy looked at him nervously, like a child who knew he was about to get punished.

Giovanni kept his voice soft and neutral when he spoke. "Well, you know that we are Rachel and Giovanni." He paused, looking at the boy who remained silent. "I was wondering if you could tell us your name?"

The boy quickly looked to me, eyes wide with fright. He squirmed then reluctantly shook his head.

"No you can't tell us, or no you don't know what your name is?"

The boy simply shook his head again, which didn't clarify which situation it was. Several minutes ticked by while no one spoke. Giovanni's lips were pursed, his expression difficult to read, so I thought I would try a different tactic. "Would you like us to give you a name?"

The boy could not have reacted more violently if I had stuck him with a hot poker. He pressed himself into the corner of the couch and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Giovanni gave me a pained look. I touched my hand to the boy's arm, and he reversed himself to press into my body. "It's okay," I cooed. "Why don't we just call you Sonny until you're ready to tell us your name."

The tension immediately dropped from his thin frame, and he nodded slowly. He looked first to Giovanni then to me. His mind was curiously blank as I tried to pick out the name from his subconscious. All I received was confusing flashes of anger and relief. There was definitely a part of his mind he kept tightly locked down.

"All right then, Sonny, how about you come outside with us to the yard? You can play while Rachel and I talk about some adult things? Is that okay with you?"

He nodded, and as we stood up he slipped his small hand into mine. We led him to the solarium, where an additional door existed. The air in our yard was warm and heavy with the perfume of many different plants. From the terrace a curved staircase spiralled down to the manicured lawn below. I led him down and showed him the many gardens, statues and fountains. I left him there with a reassuring gesture to where Giovanni sat on the terrace in clear view of the lawns where we stood. Returning to my love, we took a seat on one of the stone benches.

"Well, this is quite a predicament that we have found ourselves in."

"Yes. I hope, well, that you're not too angry about the boy. I can't explain it, but I just couldn't leave him there in the woods."

"I do understand, Rachel. Part of the reason I was drawn to you is because you have as much kindness in you as you do vengeance. It's just the timing of it all. On the very night my maker chooses to appear after nearly three centuries of silence this boy is thrust into our lives. It's a strange coincidence."

"Well, maybe he had to come back into your life to put the events into motion that needed to happen so I could meet this boy. Maybe, for some reason, I'm supposed to be this boy's saviour, or he ours."

I watched his face as he pondered my words, and I was struck very powerfully by just how beautiful Giovanni really was. He seemed to weigh my words very seriously before he spoke again. "Maybe it's a bit of both."

"You're probably right. I think that we all have much to give to each other. We all come from places of darkness, but perhaps we could bring some light into each other's lives."

"Figuratively speaking of course," he teased, making me laugh. "Well, the most pressing issue is then my maker's reappearance and what exactly it means."

“What happened after I left?”

Shame flickered across his face. “After you fled, I was able to break free from his hold. I can't tell you how frightened I was. He is very powerful, and his grip on my mind was like a steel trap. The thought of you being harmed forced more power out of me than I was aware I was capable of. He seemed surprised that I managed to shake him off, and I used that opportunity to attack. I lunged at him and he struggled for a few moments before he finally pulled away. We stopped at a tentative truce while I agreed to hear him speak.”

“What did he have to say?”

“It's more what he did not say that was telling. He told me that the Desmarais were close to catching up with us, and that when they finally did, he didn't think I would be able to survive. He said that in addition to tracking me for the past three hundred years, the family has been conducting research into the best way to destroy vampires. Apparently they have caught a few newly made vampires and have tested various methods to control and kill them. If he knew more than that, if he had any specifics, he was not sharing. I don't know what to make of it. If he has been watching me, and us, all this time as he said he has, why warn me now? If something really has changed, if the Desmarais have discovered some powerful tool to destroy us, then why not tell me about it so we could be prepared? It just seems like more games, and yet if I don't take him seriously, it might be to our detriment.”

“So he seems to be helping, but only until a certain point?”

“Exactly, and for what purpose? I don't see him doing anything unless he is somehow going to benefit from it, and how does this help him?”

“I don't know. Maybe he fears them going after him eventually, you know, because he made you a vampire, which in their eyes led directly to Seraphine's death.”

“Perhaps. I do not think we will ever be sure of his true motives, but perhaps this does indicate it is now time to move on.”

I felt an immense sadness at his words, even though I knew he was right. Still, this house was the only real home we had known since the start of our journey together. If the Desmarais were near, then we were all in danger. The safest course of action was to be proactive, putting distance between us and our pursuers.

“I'm going to make some calls and get some things going.” He stood, but stopped at the threshold to the house. “Don't worry, though, we can come back here again in another life.”

I smiled sadly. I remained to watch Sonny frolic about the yard. He seemed normal then, moving from section to section to smell flowers or climb on one of the many statues dotting the yard. I watched with amusement as he dipped his hand into the fishpond then snatched it back when a giant goldfish rose looking for food. His delight when he realised one of the fountains was filled by a cherubic-looking boy “peeing” into the basin was beyond hilarious.

Looking out at the boy as he wandered about, I suddenly knew with absolute certainty he was a part of our life forever. Wherever our adventures might take us, he would be there, but what would happen when he was no longer a boy? Would we have to part ways, keeping watch over him from afar? Or would his existence have to join ours in every sense of the word? Looking at his sweet face and the innocence he still clung to, I couldn't bear the thought of him becoming one of us. That was something that would be dealt with if and when the situation presented itself.

About an hour later, Giovanni returned. He brought with him his sketchbook, and I saw with relief that he was smiling. I could only assume his plans had gone smoothly and he had found somewhere for us to relocate to.

“Feel like joining Sonny in the garden?” He indicated the book he held.

“Sure.” It had been some time since I had posed for him.

“I thought I could make a sketch of the two of you in the garden for a keepsake?”

“That's a wonderful idea.”

We sat on a bench, surrounded by nature's beauty, while Giovanni captured that moment in time with his talented hands. Even in the rough stages, the picture showed the two of us and the garden backdrop as a perfect likeness. It was sad that a talent as great as Giovanni's should be kept hidden. I would have liked to find a way to share his art with the rest of the world, without drawing too much unwanted attention in our direction. He had vast inventories of works stored at various homes, and other facilities about the world, which showcased the many people whose lives he had crossed, and the many eras he had lived through. His works displayed his love for the art and his interest in his various subjects.

We passed the rest of the night reading with the boy and watching movies. With each hour, our comfort with each other grew. My heart opened even wider, accepting an odd contentment that came with that growing love.

After the boy was tucked away safely in his bed, we too settled down to slumber. With Giovanni's arm tight and comfortingly around my body, I let my mind wander. He spoke to me briefly about where we were headed, saying only that “eventually” we would end up in England. I was pleasantly surprised, since I had always wanted to see Great Britain, the home of my family's ancestors. I had high hopes for the start of a new life there.

“What are you thinking?” Giovanni's voice was a caress, and I couldn't help but smile.

“I was thinking about what it will be like in a new country, a new home and with a new member to our family.”

“Family? Is that what we are now?”

“I think so... that's what it feels like anyway. This all may have started from something traumatic and difficult, but now all the pieces are falling into place, and it feels as if this is how it's meant to be.”

“I hope this boy won't change things between us, and I don't mean that to sound like some petty jealousy, but change is change. No matter how subtle or

positive it may seem, the consequences down the road could be immense.”

“If anything, this boy is going to bring us closer together. We have a unifying cause to fight for, something outside of our love for each other. I think it's going to be awesome.”

“Awesome?” he said in an amused tone. “Sometimes the way you express yourself, Rachel, is interesting to say the least, but I have to agree.”

A sudden troubling thought gripped me. “Do you think Sonny will be safe with us? With the Desmarais out there?”

“They are after me and, to a lesser extent, the general vampire population. I don't think these are the type of people to kill a child in cold blood. If anything, I imagine that they would try to rescue him.”

I didn't say anything to that, because, really, what was there to say? Yes we were monsters, and yes we caused death and suffering, but was what they were doing any different? Were they not also destroying lives? Perhaps we were not “alive” in the traditional sense, but we moved, had feelings and thoughts, dreams and desires. Did they really think there would be no consequence to their actions or their beliefs? Giovanni was right about one thing. He was a boy, just an innocent little boy.

Chapter 15

The next few days passed in a blur of activity. We packed up the house, sending various items on to other properties or into storage in England, for when we eventually arrived there. We talked with our staff about keeping the property clean and grounds manicured. We made arrangements with a local property management company to rent the house— for a generous commission I might add— and to keep it under close surveillance when it was empty. All money generated from rent would be passed on to one of Giovanni's various money managers in another part of Europe.

We also contacted one of Giovanni's less-than-legal business associates to secure passports for the three of us. We had put the deed off for a few days, hoping that the boy might start to speak, and give us his real name, but pressed for time we were forced to have him identified as Sonny. Soon enough these identities would be discarded and, I hoped, by then we would have made some progress with the boy.

Both of us kept a wary and watchful eye out for Giovanni's maker and the Desmarais family. We were able to secure some recent photos of the family members as well as known associates, so at least we could be fairly certain as to whom we were watching for. Sonny simply took it all in his stride. When I explained that we needed to leave, he nodded his understanding, but did not indicate that he was upset in any way. In fact, he seemed quite excited to pack up his own trunks and luggage with new clothing, toys and books. He was delighted when he accompanied Giovanni and me to make arrangements for a crew to manage our yacht.

The night we left, we stood on the deck as the soft spray of water from the sea danced across our skin. We watched until the coast was far out of sight, and the only thing visible was dark water and a smoky sky filled with stars. It would take us about two days to reach the western coast of Turkey, to the small province of Canakkale, where Giovanni had a safe house for us to rest and access funds for the next leg of our adventure.

I was sorry that our stay there would be brief, as everything I had read and seen of the area described a land with a rich history and heritage. Perhaps another time we might have more leisure to explore that intriguing part of the world. Due to its strategic location astride two continents, Turkey's culture was a unique blend of Eastern and Western traditions. The Anatolian peninsula— also called Asia Minor— comprising most of modern Turkey, was one of the oldest continually inhabited regions in the world due to its location at the intersection of Asia and Europe. I itched to explore its many historical sites and speak with people, but knew that it was not to be.

We ended up staying but one night, in a small home Giovanni owned under another name. It was kept by an associate of his who was paid handsomely to make sure it was available and secure at a moment's notice. From there we took an overnight train to the northern side of the country, to the edge of the Black Sea, which seemed aptly named considering the type of visitors we were. After that it was a series of trains and airplanes, with intermittent, brief stops along the way until we found ourselves in western Asia. We passed through Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, finally arriving in India.

We stayed there for a few weeks, allowing me to indulge in my obsession with experiencing history and culture in an intimate way. As we meandered through the various states, I was able to see the paintings at the Ajanta Caves in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, the beautiful and indescribably affecting Taj Mahal, the Kalikmata Temple on top of the Pavagadh Hill in Champaner-Pavagadh Archaeological Park, the Majestic Kandariya Mahadev Temple at the Khajuraho group of temples. We took in the Bhimbetka rock shelters located in the Raisen district, in the state of Madhya Pradesh, which exhibited the earliest traces of human life in India. Its Stone Age rock paintings were approximately nine thousand years old. And, of course we visited Bollywood, enjoying the movies and the beautiful people involved in their creation. There were too many festivals, celebrations and visits to live theatre to mention by name, and all the while that we were taking in the sights and enjoying the culture, Sonny said not one word.

While on our travels through India, I had many occasions to read about the culture, and to even speak directly with people who had knowledge of the country's long history. There were many ancient beliefs about creatures that returned from the dead to drink the blood of the living. I was introduced to the story of the Bhuta, who is the soul of a man who died an untimely death. It wandered around animating dead bodies at night and attacked the living like a ghoul. In northern India I was told of the brahmapparusha, a vampire-like creature with a head encircled by intestines and a skull from which it drank blood.

Yet the most famous Indian vampire was Kali, who had fangs and four arms, and who wore a garland of corpses or skulls. Her temples were near the cremation grounds. She and the goddess Durga battled the demon Raktabija, who could reproduce himself from each drop of blood spilled. Kali drank all his blood so none was spilled, thereby winning the battle and killing Raktabija. Of all I heard there were many intriguing and fantastical stories, but no verifiable information or concrete proof of our origins.

One evening, as I was out alone hunting, a cold, unnatural feeling whispered at my back, warning me of another immortal in the vicinity. It had been quite some time since we'd crossed paths with any others of our kind, and I was taken by surprise. I hurried along the crowded streets, moving toward a less populated area of the city. I ducked inside an empty alley and waited.

Someone stopped at the mouth of the dark alley, and I could tell by their energy that they were not human. He was a tall man, and the moon was bright behind his lanky frame. He caught sight of me, and as he moved closer I realised this was someone I'd met before. I remembered the breed of fear he invoked all too well.

This time, Giovanni's maker was dressed rather sharply, in a tailored suit and expensive shoes. He smelled of lemons and blood. He had brushed his thin blond hair back, accentuating the sharp lines of his face. His smile was still Death personified.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"The same as you. Hunting." His voice was surprisingly soft.

"You just happen to be in the exact same city as us. I find that hard to believe."

He looked ready to say something nasty then seemed to bite it back at the last second. "Think what you will. I'm not here to bother you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, but he was already back at the end of the alley.

And like that, he was gone.

I told Giovanni about the encounter as soon as I returned. He was understandably upset, and set about moving us to a new location as quickly as possible. *More games?* Yet something about this meeting seemed different. He hadn't been aggressive, or even hostile. If I hadn't known any better, I might have thought he seemed a little bit concerned.

From India we crossed into southern China, making sure to stop at one of the sections of the Great Wall. One cannot help but feel in awe, while standing on the immense structure and looking out over the landscape. I was moved by the genius and incredible amount of hard work it must have taken to see the project through to fruition.

On to the east we travelled, until we entered Japan, which would become our home of sorts for several months. Giovanni owned a beautiful home in the country, and had many investments and business partners working in that corner of the world. It was a culture shock for sure, as many of the countries we visited had been, but one that I fondly adapted to. Life was frenetic there, the streets swarming with humanity.

One particular evening, Sonny and I were walking along the streets, as the throngs rushed by us. Sonny stopped in front of a large display window of a popular bookstore, eyeing the many children's books with interest. We entered, immediately zeroing in on the sparsely filled children's area. It was close to the time that the store would close. Sonny wandered around, returning again and again to a book with a scene of fishermen on the front.

"Did you want this one, Sonny, with the fishermen on the front?"

"They're not fishermen. They're sailors."

"Oh, I see. They're sail—" I looked from the book to Sonny, and my body tightened with shock. Did I just hear what I thought I heard? The book fell from my fingers as I realised the truth. I reached down and picked it up, trying to be nonchalant. I hoped I didn't spook him back into silence.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"See how they're dressed? They have uniforms on."

"You're absolutely right. They are sailors. How silly of me." I tried to keep too much emotion from creeping into my voice, and I deliberately did not comment that he had uttered his first words in months. I didn't want to do anything that might make him retreat into the perceived safety of his silence again.

We paid for the book then rushed home as quickly as possible without appearing frantic. Giovanni had been out earlier to meet with a business associate who was in town from Hong Kong, but I thought he should have been finished. We found him in our home's office, going over sheets of financial information.

He looked up as we entered, and frowned when he saw the strange expression on my face. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all. Quite the opposite, actually. Why don't you show Giovanni the book that we got tonight?"

Sonny walked up to the desk with its sleek ebony finish and placed the book on top of the papers. He smiled shyly then pointed at the cover and said, "It's a book about sailors."

Giovanni immediately turned in my direction and I thought as hard as I could, "*Don't spook him.*"

He must have understood, because he simply turned back to the boy and nodded in agreement. "I see that. Is this something that interests you?"

"I like the water. I liked when we went on the big boat."

After that initial, inconsequential exchange we all sat to read the book that was the breakthrough. When it was done, he had many questions about the sea, boats, fisherman and sailors. We answered them all as best we could, promising to find the information we did not have.

After a few hours, he grew tired and said that he wanted to go to bed. As he made his way out of the room, the new book in hand, he turned back and looked at the two of us with a powerfully serious face. "My name is Eli." With that he left for his room.

I threw my arms around Giovanni, plastering his face with kisses. I felt this tremendous gratitude and relief, finally reassured that taking the boy into our lives was the right thing to do. I believed he was finally allowing himself to be loved, and to love us in return. Any feelings of guilt or betrayal over letting others into his heart after the death of his mother were finally beginning to dim. I was certain then, that he would be all right.

"What happened tonight?" Giovanni asked, incredulous.

"Nothing. That's what makes it all the more magical. We were looking at books, and for the first time he simply answered one of my questions. And a name! Finally, after all this time— Eli."

"Eli," Giovanni repeated.

"We should feed."

"Yes. Just let me check on Eli." I gave a silly giggle at the sound of his name, but it was such a triumph after all those months of silence. I raced up the stairs soundlessly, and found the boy sound asleep with the book clutched tightly in his arms. I retreated and shut the door.

We ventured by car down to the seedier part of town where we were able to secure a transaction with a few prostitutes. We drove them out to the city's outskirts where we overpowered them and drank greedily from their fragile bodies. The young woman whom I took blood from couldn't have been more than twenty years old, yet her body showed signs of years of abuse and neglect. She was unhealthily thin and a series of bruises covered her scantily clad body. The saddest part of it all was that she didn't even seem surprised upon the realisation that she was about to die. We left the one girl at the side of the road, with a heroin-filled syringe in her arm, and the other we drove to a remote park area to be left to the elements. We were always careful and there

were never any witnesses, nor evidence to tie the kills to us.

On the drive home, Giovanni informed me that he had a surprise at the house. No amount of pleading would persuade him to give me any details, and he obviously enjoyed my frustration.

He led me straight to his office and pulled out a small wrapped package from one of the desk drawers. He handed it over silently. I took it and sat in a chair opposite where he usually sat at the desk and ripped it open with delight. Inside was a small, very old volume of Japanese folklore.

“Now it's in Japanese, but I've had it translated, and the notes are inside. There're some interesting stories, but I don't know if they are going to be of any help to you. At any rate I know how much you like books.”

“You never know. Thank you, it's a beautiful book, and very thoughtful,” I said as I began to carefully turn the fragile pages. Inside were intricate, hand-drawn pictures, and stories in beautiful script. I looked to the notes for explanations of what I was seeing and I was regaled with tales of spirits, ghouls and monsters. There were several stories about vampire-like creatures, including the Gaki, a wailing corpse who thirsted for blood. They had the traditional pale skin, hollow features and lack of body temperature. Spectacular shape-shifting abilities allowed them to change into not only animals, but also look like other humans. They could even impersonate a living person.

A story of the Hannya— usually female— spoke of a creature that had once been a truly beautiful woman who had become insane and possessed by a demon. She was transformed into a hideous creature that drank blood and ate children. I was intrigued by the many similarities I kept uncovering from culture to culture, but I was still no closer to understanding what we were or where we had come from. Perhaps I would never know. It was strange and frustrating to encounter these legends, which seemed so incredibly similar from culture to culture. Their origins must all have stemmed from some type of common truth.

I made an internal decision that night to put my quest on the back burner. I had been blessed with many gifts and that seemed to be what I should be concentrating on. I would continue to evaluate information that came my way, and keep my eyes open, but I wouldn't pursue answers with as much vigour as I had been.

Shortly after that night, we began our trek back through Europe and onward to England. Along the way, we stopped in many of the northern European countries, both to visit, and to also acquire new identities and access funds for our new life. I kept my mind solely concentrated on my family, and the plans for starting afresh in England. I allowed myself the chance to see a few places of interest along the way, but nothing more.

The final leg of our voyage was to cross the English Channel by way of the Portsmouth-Cherbourg ferry. We picked up a new car in France and we used this to make the last leg of our journey. Our furniture had been ordered ahead months ago, and had been recently delivered to the new home. Even the majority of our personal belongings and luggage were sent ahead, and we carried with us just a few changes of clothing.

On the ferry over, we stood on the deck to watch the dark sea, something Eli always enjoyed. As the three of us stood there, I began to experience the uncomfortable feeling of someone watching us, and for a moment panic overtook me. Then I turned my head slightly, to see that our watchers were an elderly couple standing not too far away. The woman looked at me strangely and pulled herself in more tightly to her husband's side. While he seemed oblivious, she was obviously picking up on something from Giovanni and me. Some people were very sensitive— psychic if one must call it something— but they noticed differences about other people. It was similar to the sensation of getting the “creeps” There was usually a very valid reason for this reaction. I smiled, but she wasn't buying it. Then Eli turned his head, and pressed himself into my side. He gave her one of his wonderful, innocent looks and she seemed to relax a bit. After a few minutes, she even smiled back. There was something about a mother and her child that was universally appealing and reassuring.

After the crossing, we spent the night in the town of Portsmouth, as not enough darkness remained to make it to our new house. Giovanni made arrangements through one of his contacts for our room to be made acceptable to us for the daytime hours. He also made sure there was a meal for Eli.

We dropped off our belongings and settled Eli before heading out to feed. We made our way to a smaller town a few miles away and easily found two men passed out in an alleyway. The one man was elderly and, by appearances, had spent most of his life on the streets and in the bottle. The other man was much younger, but equally as addicted. He didn't even flinch when I sank my fangs into him, and looked much the same in death as he had while sleeping.

Tomorrow would be the start of a whole new way of “living,” in a new country, a new home and a new family dynamic. Eli had finally begun to talk, and it was the perfect opportunity to set him up with the best tutors money could buy. There was not even a hint of the Desmarais on our trail since we had left our home by the sea almost a year previously.

I woke in a strange bed, alone and worried. I could see where Giovanni's body had rumpled the sheets, but he had gone. I leapt from the bed, and went out into the main sitting room, off which our bedroom and Eli's came from. I found them sitting at the dining table, engaged in a game of poker. Several dirty, but empty plates were piled on the nearby bar, and a half-filled glass of pop stood by Eli's hand. They both smiled when I entered the room, and I gave them both a kiss in turn. Eli's cheek was sticky with something he had eaten, and he was still in a pair of pyjamas.

“Hello, boys. Having fun, are we?”

“Yes, Giovanni's teaching me to play poker.”

“A valuable skill for all young men,” I teased.

Giovanni placed his cards on the table. “I guess it's time to take a break. You need to go have bath and get dressed so we can get going to the new house.”

Eli left the room agreeably, and soon we could hear the sound of the bathtub being filled. Giovanni grabbed me by the arm and pulled me onto his lap. We kissed deeply and when we broke apart, he brushed my tangled hair from my eyes. “He's quite a smart little guy you know.” I saw genuine pride in his eyes.

“Of course I know. He’s our son isn’t he?”

“I guess that he is. I have to tell you that I really wondered if we were doing the right thing by taking him with us when he didn’t speak for all those months. Ever since Japan, things have just gotten better and better, and here we are now, on our way to a new home and a fresh start. This is a wonderful time for us.”

“I’m glad you’re looking at it that way and I’ve wrestled with this decision too. I’ve worried that being with us is not the best thing for Eli.”

“Well, he seems very happy, and he’s recovering from the trauma he went through. I have the firmest belief he’s going to be fine— even better than fine. He’s very quick and I think there’s a bright future for him.”

When we were all cleaned up, and had removed our few belongings from the room, we returned to the car for the end of the journey. The night was cool, with the bitterness of approaching winter nipping at its heels. As we pulled away from town, heading northwest toward our new home, the traffic thinned considerably. Soon it was at least thirty minutes before we passed another car. Eli sat quietly in the back, reading from a stack of comic books Giovanni had indulged him with before leaving town.

Up ahead, much farther than the naked human eye would have been able to see, a bright light flashed. The closer we came to it, the more obvious it was that there had been some type of accident. We slowed as the rear end of an expensive sedan-type car became visible off to the side of the road. Streaks from the car’s tires ran across the narrow road, where the driver obviously attempted to avoid running into something. Giovanni pulled slightly ahead, and parked.

I looked into the back seat where Eli turned to get a glimpse out of the back window. “Stay in the car,” I ordered before joining Giovanni outside.

The car had smashed into an enormous tree that had most likely been standing since before the reign of Elizabeth I. The front end was demolished, crumpled to the edge of the front tires. Inside the driver was pinned between his seat and the steering wheel, though from the look of him, he was unconscious. Giovanni pulled at the door, easily prying it completely free of its frame. He peered at the man closely, and shook his head. The man’s face had been crushed beyond recognition, his clothing soaked with blood. His heartbeat was too slow— he was near death.

“It looks like his passenger was ejected from the car.” He pointed to the shattered windshield. “Go take a look in the edge of the woods. They can’t be that far.”

Not ten feet into the forest’s edge I found the first piece of the passenger— a woman’s lower leg, complete with a silver, lace-up stiletto lay in the low brush. A few feet farther, I found the rest of her. She had been badly injured, both from the shards of glass that had ripped at her body and from the impact of being thrown from the vehicle. Incredibly she was still conscious. She was blinking rapidly and was emitting a horrible, ragged panting.

“Found her,” I called out.

She looked toward the sound of my voice.

“And?” Giovanni asked.

“Same.”

“Do it.” He didn’t need to explain. I knelt and suddenly the woman grabbed my arm. The movement caused blood to slosh from the tear across her throat.

“John, John,” she said in a thick, wet-sounding voice. “I think I forgot to lock the back door.”

She was beyond help. Her mind was already drifting away. I lowered my mouth to the wound on her neck and drank the last of the blood remaining in her body. There was just enough to satisfy my thirst.

When I emerged, Giovanni was already standing by the back of our car. He replaced his cellphone in his pocket, and looked to me. “I called in the accident to the authorities. We’ll be long gone by the time they arrive.”

“How can you tell where we are? It’s looked the same for miles.”

“You forget that I’ve been to England many times. In fact, I once owned another property not too far from here. These woods are very old.”

I was about to speak again when I realised Eli’s face was pressed against the back window, peering out at us. He had a strange expression on his features.

“You don’t think he saw anything, do you?”

“It’s too dark.” Giovanni frowned slightly. “We should go.”

As soon as the doors closed shut Eli spoke. “Are they dead?”

I gave Giovanni a pointed look. “It’s nothing for you to worry about, honey. Giovanni has called the authorities and they’re on their way now.”

Eli’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What took you so long?”

“We were just looking around. Making sure that there wasn’t anything that we could do.”

“So they are dead.”

Giovanni cut me off just as I was about to speak. “Yes, they’re dead. It was a bad accident and sometimes these things happen.”

“Okay,” he answered and settled back to resume reading his comic books.

Giovanni squeezed my hand, but I wasn't certain that that was all there was to it. I tried to get something from Eli, but his mind was shut tight. Sometimes he did that. I don't know if he was aware of what he was doing, but it was often impossible to get any sense of his thoughts or feelings. It was as if he had a way of locking away things he didn't want to deal with or acknowledge.

About forty minutes later, a small town appeared, and we stopped to get Eli something to eat. He chose an inexpensive restaurant then gorged himself on burgers and fries. He never commented on the fact that Giovanni and I never ate with him. I imagined there was a lot of information stored in that bright, young mind of his. Sooner or later there were bound to be questions.

Giovanni made a call to his contact and was assured that the house was ready. The cleaning staff had been through that day, and the landscaping crew had been by earlier in the week. I gained the impression that no one had lived at the property for quite some time, and Giovanni had spared no expense or effort for it to suit our needs. A new, top-of-the-line security system had been installed and tested. The kitchen was stocked with all of Eli's favourites and a cook would be available to prepare dinner six nights a week. The only thing missing was a family.

I glanced up as he snapped his phone shut. The grim look from earlier had been replaced by his irresistible smile, and inwardly I felt relief. He returned to the table where Eli and I sat, and smoothly slid into the booth beside me. He planted a soft kiss on my cheek, and Eli grinned with a mouth full of French fries.

“Everything is set.”

“Is it a big house?” Eli asked with unconcealed glee.

“It's not just a house, it's an estate. There are over forty rooms, stables, garages, a pool and tennis court— everything you could ever imagine.”

“Wow! Seriously? Are there going to be horses?”

“I'm sure we could arrange for that, and lessons too, if that's something that interests you?”

“Yes. I've never ridden a horse before.”

“Well, there are many new things that are going to happen once we get settled in. Whatever interests you, you can try. We want you to be happy.”

“I am happy,” he said shyly. I reached across the table to take his hand in my own.

“We're all going to be very happy here,” I agreed.

About an hour later, we pulled up the half-mile long drive. The house loomed over the car, the lower floor alive with light. God, it was enormous.

As we stepped through the front doors together, I knew Giovanni's words were true. We were going to be happy there.

Chapter 16

Consequence

Eli ran about from room to room in ecstasy for twenty minutes upon entering our new home, before calming enough that we could regroup in the kitchen. A note had been left with all the “need to know” information about the house. Eli pulled open cupboard after cupboard, while we reviewed the instructions for the security system, and the schedules for the cleaners, cook, driver and others.

From there we took a tour of the interior of the house where I counted a total of ten bedrooms, and twelve baths. There were grandfather clocks, paintings that appeared to be hundreds of years old and chandeliers made of gold. Words such as opulent, grandiose and elaborate sprang to mind. My mind was spinning with thoughts of what the upkeep of a house such as that would take.

Beautiful fresh vases of flowers were strewn about the house, and I was just lowering my face to one to take in the glorious aroma when Eli appeared and began to tug anxiously at my sleeve. “There’s a dumb waiter! Did you see? Did you see? Can we look outside now, please?” I laughed. His enthusiasm was infectious, and I could not refuse.

Outside, the moon was large and silver. I noticed details I had missed on our approach earlier. Several large, fearsome gargoyles kept watch over the property from their perch along the house’s roof. Impeccably kept gardens wrapped around the structure from the front yard to the back. I touched my hand to the cold grey stone making up the exterior of the house, brushing climbing vines that all but covered the back walls. It was imposing and exquisite. I loved it immediately. I had to admit— however cliché it might be for a vampire— that I had a little bit of the Gothic, Addams Family-type style in me.

Eli ran ahead toward the stables and called out to me. I rushed down the staggered series of stone staircases to the backyard, the night as quiet as I had ever known it to be. I joined him at the open door of the stables, where he was peering in with awe. It was a beautiful space and obviously recently renovated. It was large enough to hold fifteen horses from the look of it, and I knew that if Eli wished it, Giovanni would fill every stall. He grabbed my hand suddenly and pulled me off in another direction.

We discovered a pool with cabana, a tennis court, a hedge maze dotted with exquisite and ancient statues, a large pond, woods and fields for days. With a tingle at my back, Giovanni appeared, wrapping his strong arms around my waist.

“This is amazing,” I said.

“Nearly three hundred acres, much like any of the nearby properties... Private enough to keep away prying eyes, yet only a twenty-minute drive from the nearest town. It’s the best of both worlds here.”

We both watched as Eli ran, and twirled about the wide-open lawns. Our last home had been wonderful, and would always hold a special place in my heart, but the house in England was perfect for us. “Eli is obviously happy here.”

“I knew from the first photographs the realtor sent me this was the place. It has everything we need, and I must confess that I’ve missed England.”

“This is the perfect place to raise a child.”

“And the Desmarais will not be looking for a family, so that works to our advantage.”

I wished he hadn’t brought them up in such a perfect moment, but he was right. “Yes. It’s going to wonderful here.”

“Maybe you could go back to school here. I have done some research and there are excellent evening courses available at the nearby university. Maybe I can start to paint again, or be involved in the arts somehow.”

I turned to him. “That sounds wonderful!”

His lips just touched mine when Eli raced up. “When are we getting a horse? When? Soon?”

Giovanni scooped the boy into his arms and twirled him around. They both laughed, so easy and natural with one another. He gently dropped him back to his feet, and Eli threw his arms about his waist. “We can start looking tomorrow, but remember that it’s very serious business purchasing a horse. There has to be a good fit between the animal and owner. I’ll make arrangements to take you out to view some for sale and we’ll go from there, all right?”

“Okay,” he chirped.

We wandered about the property then inside the house again for many hours until Eli finally showed signs of sleepiness. We let him choose the room he wanted, which turned out to be the one looking directly onto the stables, before tucking him into bed. I read him a chapter of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. It was our habit to read each night before Eli went to sleep, and I tried to expose him to the classics. When finished, I placed the book on the bedside table and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. He responded by throwing his arms around my neck.

“I love you,” he whispered fiercely in my ear.

“Right back at you.” I waited until he lay his head down again and closed his eyes. Then I was out of the room, with the door closed, in the blink of an eye.

As I made my way down the hall, I heard someone playing the piano. I vaguely remembered seeing one in the corner of one of the main floor rooms. I followed the sound of the music to a medium-sized, wood-panelled sitting room. Giovanni sat at the piano playing a light, easy number from at least a century before I was born. He smiled as I entered, but continued playing. I lowered myself onto an antique loveseat, which was covered with an overpowering floral pattern. I closed my eyes, allowing the music to relax me. Then, in almost the same instant the music stopped, Giovanni was at my side.

“I didn't know you could play the piano.”

“I haven't played in a hundred years, and we've never lived somewhere that had a piano until now.”

He smiled devilishly, and I couldn't help but laugh. “I guess you're right.”

“I'm always keeping you on your toes.” Then with elaborate flourish, he extended his hand to me, which I obligingly took. He pulled me up into his arms, and whirled me out into the hallways, where we danced and laughed. It was the perfect beginning.

Our time in England began as a clean slate, and we easily settled into a quiet yet fulfilling existence. We were all able to find happiness there, in our own individual ways. Giovanni returned to his art, Eli was given the means and the support to pursue whatever interested him, gathering an enviable education in the process, and I started to write in earnest. More importantly, we became a real family.

We were, of course, isolated from many of the “normal” aspects of life because of our daytime restrictions and our need for secrecy, but we found a way to make it all work. Eli's schedule was adjusted as he got older, so he began his day at noon and ended around midnight, or in the early morning hours. That way he had a chance to participate in some activities that only took place during the daylight hours, and had the opportunity for regular socialisation and interaction with children of the same age.

We hired a man named Jacob McManus to be the general household manager, and a part of his duties was to chauffeur Eli to his activities when we “were not available.” A retired military man, he had never married and had no children, and he fit into our structured and covert lifestyle perfectly. He never asked questions, followed instructions to the tee and was what some would refer to as a straight arrow. I never worried for Eli's safety, and knew I didn't need to worry about the details because they would always be taken care of.

Because of our strange lifestyle and the hours we kept, I believe the three of us developed relationships with each other that were more dependent and intimate than what would have been under other circumstances. This was especially true of Eli and me. We spent almost every evening together, reading, researching, or watching movies and documentaries. Eli, I discovered, shared my passion for knowledge. We both read voraciously and there wasn't a subject we hadn't at least superficially touched on in our studies.

During those hours we spent together Giovanni often went to the guest house that had been converted into an art studio to paint, or he conducted business. No matter how wonderful and safe our life seemed there, Giovanni was always conscious of making sure we had opportunities for a quick escape, and that generous finances were available.

In addition to the studies Eli and I undertook together, we hired him the best tutors money could buy. In the afternoons he studied mathematics, sciences, social sciences, politics, and learnt several languages, becoming fluent in French, Spanish, German, Mandarin and Japanese, as well as private piano and equestrian training. We also made sure to enrol him in activities where he would interact with the children of England's elite. He played football in a prestigious league and had both weapons and defensive training, as well as etiquette. He was invited to many parties and events, accompanied by his “assistant” Jacob during the day, and either Giovanni or I in the evening.

We integrated ourselves into society by the subtle hint that Giovanni was some type of European royalty, I, his bride and Eli, our charge. We became involved in the local arts, making extremely generous donations to one of the largest galleries in the country. Giovanni even donated some artwork of a “distant relative,” which was enthusiastically received by both critics and the public alike. We attended just enough events to be accepted, but not enough to allow anyone to get too close. It seemed that the wealthy were allowed a certain amount of eccentricity.

So the days and nights passed. I spent my early evening with Eli, learning and enjoying my part of helping him develop into an incredibly intelligent, kind and capable young man, and the remainder of the dark hours as Giovanni's muse, lover and companion. I could not imagine anything more perfect than what we established during that time.

Before I knew it I was no longer spending my evening with a gangly, eager boy, but a young man. Seemingly overnight, Eli aged from eleven to seventeen years old. He grew to a lean six foot one. He was handsome, with a wonderful smile and shaggy dark hair not unlike another man I was close to.

I was aware of the appreciative glances he received from the opposite sex, yet he never had more than a casual friendship with any young woman. I suspected we spent too much time alone together, and that he was unnaturally close to me. I feared he no longer looked at me as a child to a mother, but as something else entirely. I tried in vain to encourage his affections in other directions, but he could not be influenced. I shared my worries with Giovanni, but he did not seem as concerned, and brushed the matter aside.

I found myself in an odd situation with two men: one with whom my soul was inextricably combined, and another who was just finding his footing in an increasingly complicated adult world. The one recourse I had, something that had not been available to me since before I left my human life, was that I had found a friend. For certain, most of our social interactions were scant and superficial, but with her things were decidedly different. She was a kindred soul in many ways, and someone I came to care about deeply.

Her name was Charlotte. She must have been in her late sixties, though she was very coy about her true age. She too lived in quiet seclusion, much enjoying her own company to that of others. If I thought our home was grand, hers put ours to shame. She was a thin, strong and opinionated woman, who cared little about appropriateness or making nice. She spoke her mind, to the fury and embarrassment of many, and lived her life on her own terms. Once upon a time she had been married to royalty, and should have been more accurately referred to as Lady Charlotte, but she was above pretences. She had been a widow for more than twenty years and her only son had married into a wealthy and influential Italian family. He lived on the continent now, visiting only a few times a year.

As I more and more felt the need to distance myself from the closeness I had unwittingly developed with Eli, I often found myself in Charlotte's company. She never thought of my late visits as strange, and I was one of very few people she allowed access to her home. Most times we simply talked, about everything and anything.

The few times Eli accompanied me to see if there might be something in Charlotte's library he hadn't read yet, I noticed that she eyed our interactions warily, yet the subject remained untouched.

Some of the most entertaining times I spent in England were when I accompanied Charlotte to some kind of elite function. She was frightfully straightforward, leaving many a young lady in tears, or members of “proper” society blusteringly mad. And the gossip she knew! There was not an affair, nervous breakdown, bankruptcy, or other faux pas she didn't know about. Most, I'm sure, didn't like her, but they were smart enough to placate her.

It finally came to a point where Eli had learnt all that the private tutors we hired could teach him. He excelled at all he turned his mind to, but still craved more. He was then eighteen years old, and it was time that he progressed to formal university training. When I approached him about it, his reaction couldn't have astounded me more.

“Why do you want me to go away?” He was obviously hurt by my suggestion.

“Eli, that's not what I meant. I just want to make sure you get the best education possible, and I think you've exhausted what can be accomplished at home. This has nothing to do with wanting to separate myself from you.” Though I silently thought it wouldn't hurt for him to develop new relationships.

“I'm happy here,” he stated.

“Don't you want to try new things, make new friends... maybe find a girlfriend?”

With these last words he launched himself into my arms, and I was painfully aware that he was no longer a boy. I pulled away slightly, uncomfortable with the intimate touch. He looked down into my eyes, his face tense and full of hurt. “I have friends, but the only people who really matter to me are you and Giovanni, and to a lesser extent Jacob and Charlotte. I want to stay here.”

I took his hand and led him to a small sofa where we both sat. “I think you can have both. There is an excellent school nearby where you could study, and still live at home. Jacob can take you, or you can drive yourself and we can still spend time together. I just don't want you to miss out on anything...”

He brushed his hand across my cheek. “I have everything I want right here.”

“Why so serious?” Giovanni's voice sounded in the room, and Eli quickly withdrew his hand from my face. Giovanni seemed oblivious to the tension between Eli and me.

“We're discussing Eli going to university, and he has some reservations.”

Giovanni dropped onto a chair opposite us. “That sounds like a wonderful idea. A boy as smart as you should go to university.”

Eli's voice was quiet and tight when he spoke. “I just don't want to move away.”

Giovanni nodded, and looked to me for input. I must have had a strange expression on my face, for his eyes narrowed slightly. A soft touch tingled in my brain, as Giovanni tried to read my thoughts.

I forced a smile, and it felt wrong on my face. “I suggested the school nearby, where he could commute to from home.”

“Sounds reasonable. What do you think, Eli?”

He stood, looking pointedly at me when he answered. “Sounds great. I think I need to go study if I'm going to be writing entrance exams.” With that he left the room.

I crossed the room, and lowered myself into Giovanni's lap. I drank in his scent, eager for his touch. I was inexplicably disturbed by what had transpired. Had I read too much into it? Hadn't I been looking for inappropriate behaviour? And hadn't I played my part in what happened?

Giovanni's lips tickled my ear, and I turned to meet him in a kiss. I poured myself into the embrace.

“Come out to the studio with me,” he whispered.

For the past few weeks Giovanni had been working on a semi-nude portrait of me, reclining on a plum-coloured settee. I removed my clothing and settled back into the now familiar pose, with the silky fabric draped across lower body. My hair was down, spilling across my pale shoulders and breasts. After about an hour, Giovanni came around the side of his easel, wiping his hands. His long, paint-covered fingers found the fabric about my body, pulling it away to spill onto the floor.

Then his hands traced their way up the outer edge of my leg, over my hip and across my bare stomach. He cupped my breast gently and as he lowered his mouth, my nipple became hard with anticipation. His tongue snaked out and as it touched my bare skin, I shuddered with pleasure. His tongue traced its way over my breast, up my throat, his mouth finally finding my own.

As he raised himself up to his knees to be able to reach my mouth, my hands moved to the front of his pants. I lowered the zipper, and even before my hands slipped inside I could feel his arousal. He growled softly in his throat. I urgently pulled the pants down until he was exposed. I shifted my position until I was seated, wrapping my legs tightly around his body. With one, quick thrust he entered me then there was nothing else but the pleasure of his body.

My fangs enlarged, as often happens when being sexually aroused, and it was compounded by us not having fed that night. I ran my tongue along my teeth, eyes half-closed in ecstasy. I was dimly aware of the prickly sensation of being watched, but we were both too close to stop. Moments later, Giovanni climaxed and collapsed forward against my body. “I think there's someone outside,” I whispered into his ear.

His body instantly became rigid. He zipped up his pants and stood, all in one incredibly fast and fluid movement. That left me displayed in all my nakedness, so I scooped up my clothing from the floor and retreated to one of the smaller rooms to dress. I heard the door open, and when I returned Giovanni was gone, obviously looking for our voyeur. I walked around to the front of the portrait, momentarily stunned by the beautiful woman who looked back at me. It wasn't finished, with much of the detail still lacking, but the vision was clear. Was this how I was or how Giovanni saw me?

An almost undetectable sound from the doorway startled me, and I whirled about in surprise with fangs ready. Eli stood just inside the doorway, pale and

startled at my reaction. I quickly closed my mouth. There was a poignant and terrible silent exchange between the two of us, where there was no doubt as to who was watching. Eli lowered his eyes then retreated into the night. A few minutes later, Giovanni returned, finding me waiting on the same settee where we had just made love.

He came immediately to my side. “Eli is the only one out there. I crossed paths with him about halfway from here to the stables. You don't think it was him?”

I shook my head, but could not bring myself to smile. I felt a tight pain in my heart I knew I could not share with him. It was something I would need to deal with myself. “No, I don't think he was spying. Maybe it was simply his presence I was picking up on?” The suggestion sounded thin, even to my own ears.

Giovanni placed a kiss on my cheek. “Even vampires can lose themselves to the throes of passion, my love.”

“Yes, I'm sure I was crossing my signals. Let's not worry about it anymore, okay?” I looked pleadingly into his concerned face, and he smiled. “The portrait looks wonderful.”

He cocked his head, and I could see the pride in his eyes. “Yes, definitely one of my best works. Could be because I have the perfect subject?”

“I don't know about that, but one that obviously pleases you,” I teased back, though my true thoughts were not so light-hearted.

“Would I be a real bastard if I asked if we could wait a few hours to feed? I feel inspired after that delicious interruption, and I'd like to work some more.”

Secretly I was pleased for the time to myself. There was an issue I had no choice but to face, and it couldn't wait any longer. “That's fine. It's only a little after one, we have hours still. I'll come back around four, okay?”

He pulled me up to standing, and pressed his lips to my forehead. “Perfect.”

I almost made it out the door, when I felt compelled to turn back. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he responded, and with that I left.

I found Eli in the library, the place where I knew he would be. His head was down and his shoulders slumped when I entered, and it pained me to see him so defeated. I hesitated, but knew it was not doing either one of us any favours by letting things go on as they had been. There was too much at stake to let emotions derail a near-perfect existence. I sat beside him at the desk, something I had done many nights before, but for the first time I felt reluctance rather than contentment. “I know you were watching.”

“Yes. I was.” His voice held a hint of hostility.

I brought my hand to his face and forced him to look at me. “Why? You knew it was wrong, and that you were violating our trust.”

“I think you know why.” His voice was husky, and its effect was irrefutable.

“Eli, you know how I feel about Giovanni. I love him, we belong to each other and nothing can change that. There is too much history between you and me. We have been as mother and child for too long for it to be anything else. I understand that you are no longer a child, but you will always be my child. You can't look at me like that, or think of me in that way! Do you understand what I'm saying?”

“Yes, but I can't help what I feel. Don't you think it hurts, don't you understand my guilt and my conflict? The two of you have never been anything but good to me, and I love you both, but with you...”

“Don't.” I was unable or unwilling to deal with what I knew he would say next. “This has to stop.” I walked to the huge picture window looking out onto the back garden. The night was uniformly black— barely a star visible to the naked eye. I felt that blackness in my heart, as I was forced to have a conversation I had been dreading since the first night I had laid eyes on Eli. “You know there's more to this situation than just what you feel about me?” I kept my back to him, but felt the shift in the tension in the room.

“Yes.”

His chair scraped across the wood floor as he stood. A moment later he was at my side, the warmth from his body so inviting, but I did not move. I was terrified of what I was about to say, and its possibly devastating effects. I took his hand, which seemed large and foreign in my own. “Part of this situation is in no way your fault. We have been forced into a situation that keeps us unnaturally close, and that was bound to have an effect on your feelings toward me.” I struggled with what to say next. There was no way to clearly address the situation without revealing the complete truth. I saw no way around divulging the secret that was kept from him for many years. “I have been afraid of this moment for many years now, but I can't put this off any longer. You are old enough for the truth, and old enough to make your own decisions about what you will do with this truth. Like I just said, you're not a little boy anymore.” I turned my head to find his serious blue eyes looking down on me. I felt as if I was choking, but I had to go on. “But before I say any more, I want you to know that I love you, that I've always loved you and that I would never do anything to purposely hurt you.”

He nodded. “I know that.”

“Good.” I sighed, thinking back to a time so long ago. “Well, can you remember back to that first night, when I found you in the woods?”

He smiled faintly “Yes, I remember. You looked just like an angel, sitting on that rock under the moonlight.”

I forced back tears from the shock of his words, and the tenderness with which they were spoken. “I'm not an angel, Eli, I'm a monster. I'm a— ”

“Vampire,” he finished when I could not. I was stunned speechless. He looked down with love onto my shocked face, which troubled me even more. “When I saw you that night, I knew no one was supposed to be that beautiful. The moon shimmered on your porcelain skin, and your eyes were as brilliant as diamonds. I was a child then, and didn't have the capacity to understand exactly what you were, especially after all that I had been through. Even so, on

some level, I knew. I knew you were sent there to rescue me.”

“Eli, I only wanted to help you, and love you... ”

“I know and you have. You have given me the most amazing life, and opportunities I would never have gotten otherwise. You and Giovanni both have been exceptionally careful not to expose me to anything... violent or hurtful. It's simply that we live too closely not to notice how fast you can be, and how strong. I am more than aware that I have never seen you in the daylight hours and that I have never seen you eat, but these are things I have simply accepted, and they don't have any bearing on how I feel about you.”

“I have always worried I was hurting you somehow, robbing you of a normal life.”

His face suddenly tightened with anger. “Don't you ever say that! I was living a so-called normal life before you met me and look what happened there. My father ran off before I was born. We never had enough to eat no matter how hard my mother worked, and then those men... those men...” His voice cracked with emotion, and I could not resist taking him into my arms. “You saved me, and I will always be grateful for that. I will always love you. Nothing can change that.” His hot tears dampened the shoulder of my shirt.

I was crying then too. “And I will always love you, even more than if you were my own flesh and blood. I got to choose you, and I think that you also got to choose me. We were meant to be in each other's lives, I'm certain of that.” I pulled back, and cupped his beautiful, tear-stained face with my hands. “But know what I mean when I say that I love you. You are my child, my friend, a most precious part of my life, but Giovanni will always have my heart. You have to know this.”

“Yes, I do, but I can't promise not to feel the way I do.”

“As long as you know that it can't be reciprocated and that you can't act on these feelings. You need to look elsewhere for that kind of love, and relationship. I will always love you and treasure you... just maybe not the way you want me to.”

“I understand.”

“Good, then let this be the one and only time we talk about this. This is between you and I. Giovanni will, of course, have to be told that you are aware of our little secret, but not of this. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“I will always be here for you. Nothing will change that.”

We stood in that embrace for a long time, knowing things would never be the same, but that we would be all right. Our bond was too strong for even the darkest of secrets to break it.

Chapter 17

As the years passed, Charlotte became a very important part of my life. She was a passage to the human world around us, though in truth she lived almost as solitary an existence as we did. In every sense, however, she was a friend. She was someone I could trust, someone I could laugh with and look up to. I hoped she might be someone I could one day share my secret with— as a human ally— much like Giovanni had at various times over the course of his existence, yet I don't think Giovanni ever looked upon his associations as friendships. They were necessary partnerships and business arrangements, and he always had some type of leverage over those who were privy to what he really was. I also hoped that should the need arise to flee, that I would be able to say a proper good-bye to her, and all things ending well, that we would somehow be able to stay in touch.

There were times when I thought she already knew our secret, or that she suspected something she could not quite believe. Sometimes I caught her watching me with a strange look in her eye, not fear exactly, but perhaps suspicion or concern. There was no doubt that she was aware we were hiding something, as she herself had many secrets I did not dare pry into. There was more to her than the front she offered to the outside world. She was a deep and intelligent woman, someone I was proud to call my friend. We continued in that silent agreement not to push or expect more than the other was willing to give.

Often when she stopped by our home she would find Eli and I holed up in the library, poring over one book or another, or discussing some piece of information we had picked up in an article or from another media outlet. She tended not to interrupt, but to either watch our interaction, or bring in her own views and knowledge of the subject at hand. The times she remained silent, watching the way that Eli and I interacted, I would sometimes see a strange, clouded expression cross her face. I knew we did not act like a normal mother and son, but our relationship was not like others of its kind. We were closer than any other could be, held together by secrecy and the threat of danger. In many ways we were the only real things the other had. Giovanni, Eli and I were a unique and unbreakable unit. We all knew how quickly things could change, and how easy it was to lose all that you held dear.

On one evening, after Eli went down to the stables to check on the horses, Charlotte finally broached the subject. True to herself, she was completely direct. She was not one to mince words, or keep her feelings and opinions to herself. It was the only time that she had ever stepped over that invisible boundary we had established early in our relationship.

“What exactly is going on with the two of you?” Her voice was neutral but firm.

I was taken slightly aback, and I hesitated. “What do you mean?”

“He's no more your son than I am the Virgin Mary!” She snorted, sort of half-amused, half-exasperated.

“Well, of course he's not my biological son. You know that. I have always been honest about his being adopted.”

“Of course he's not your biological son. I look at the two of you, and there is no resemblance to speak of, and you are hardly old enough to be his mother anyway. You look barely five years his senior now. In fact, the older he gets, the more obvious it is that you have not aged at all in the almost ten years I've known you.”

“Well, he's the son of one of Giovanni's relatives, so that would explain why we don't look alike. As for my appearance I guess it's a combination of luck, good genes and looking after myself.”

She pursed her thin lips, turning my comments over in her mind. I truly felt terrible about lying to someone I considered a friend, but I didn't know if that was the best time to reveal my secret. My explanation was lame, but what could I say that wouldn't alarm her? Something like that could shatter what we had, and might force us to flee if she reacted negatively. I didn't have a strong enough ability to cloud minds, to cover my tracks against a negative reaction. I wasn't even sure if Giovanni had the strength to control a situation like that. The thought of her hating, or even worse, fearing me, formed a stone of dread in my stomach.

She did not speak again for so long I began to fear the worse. I called out to Jacob to bring us some tea, hoping that any type of distraction might ease the tension and steer the conversation in a safer direction.

It seemed to work, at least for the moment. The tea arrived and Charlotte started speaking again, as though her earlier comments were not hanging like red flags between us. We talked about an upcoming event, and her total dislike for the family hosting it. Though the dialogue was innocent enough, the words felt forced, and I could not remember a time when I had ever felt uncomfortable in her company before.

After about an hour of the mindless chatter, Charlotte abruptly put her cup down. The saucer made a sharp sound, as it was placed none too gently on the table to the side of where she sat. I began to shift about in my chair, prickling under her scrutiny. Something was brewing in her mind, and I didn't think I was going to like what she would say next. I hoped this wasn't the end of our friendship.

“There is more going on here than your relationship with Eli, or how the boy came to be in your lives. There are bigger things at work here. I want to know your secret.”

I shook my head, inwardly cringing. “I don't know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do. The way you live, the way you all but hide from the world. Your relationship with the boy, though I can't rightly call him a boy any longer. There is a secret here, and a terrible one I think.”

“And you hide no secrets from me? Are there not things from your own past that you would rather remain buried?”

“Of course I have secrets, but I think if they came to light they would be petty when compared to whatever it is that you're hiding. I can respect your privacy, but if there is something here that could in some way cause me harm then I think that I have a right to know.”

“I would never hurt you,” I said. “You are one of the few friends I have, and I would always do my best to keep you from harm's way.”

“That’s not an answer.” She sighed, then leant forward with hands pressed together as though in prayer. “We’ll let that drop for now. What about you? How can you explain your appearance, truthfully? You look exactly the same as the first night I opened my door to find you on my step, flowers in hand. I remember that night as though it were yesterday, and looking at you now it literally could have been yesterday.” Her eyes were serious, the strain in them paining me.

I forced out a small laugh, which sounded hollow. “Charlotte, you flatter me too much.”

She wasn’t smiling when she spoke next, and her words sent off warning bells. “I’m not joking, my friend. You need to tell me what’s really going in here.”

“Do you want to me to tell you my secret, even if it means that you will hate me? Even if it means the end of our friendship?”

“I want to know the truth.”

What was there to say to that? How could I explain why I never aged, never changed a bit, while in the same amount of time Eli had grown from a boy to a man? Could she ever look at me as the same young woman she saw me as then, when she knew of the monster lurking beneath the innocent facade? Could she lie down to sleep each night untroubled with the knowledge that two blood drinkers were her closest neighbours? The possibility of her rejection stung, but the actuality of it was more than I could bear. Perhaps this is why Giovanni did not ever let his relationships progress further than the superficial, or the necessary. Even the most casual of attachments could hurt when they were gone.

She was staring at me intently, waiting for some kind of answer. A hundred lies raced through my mind, each one more unbelievable than the next. The bottom line was that I really didn’t want to lie to Charlotte. I had too much respect for her and our friendship. I sat there with no answer to give her, the silence becoming more painful with each passing minute. What words could be said to make her understand? There was no bond to hold her to me as there was with Eli. There were no guarantees that truth would or could be accepted. In fact, the most plausible scenario was that it would send her away in terror.

I was just finding my voice when Giovanni and another man burst into the room. His eyes were wild, and his clothing slicked to his body from the rain that had been pouring all night. The hair on my arms rose. I knew instantly that something was terribly wrong. That whole night was wrong, from Charlotte’s probing questions to Giovanni’s obvious distress. I jumped to my feet, peripherally aware of Charlotte taking in the speed with which I rose and moved to Giovanni’s side.

His hand was like iron as it grasped my lower arm. “They’re here. They’ve been spotted in England. You understand what I’m saying?”

I nodded sadly, that phantom hand squeezing at my already troubled heart. “I understand. I’ll go and get Eli. He’s gone down to the stables.” I looked to the man who stood just behind Giovanni, recognising him as Jimmy. He had been introduced to both Eli and I some months before as someone to contact if an emergency arose. I knew he was a thug, but he was paid handsomely for his services. He could get us out of the country quickly, if needed.

“Wait,” Giovanni said, holding on tightly to my arm. This time he directed his words in Charlotte’s direction. “I’m sorry for this kind of behaviour, Charlotte, but I think you can gather that something serious has happened. I have a car waiting downstairs to take you home.”

She rose to her feet, solid with determination. “I’m not going anywhere until I know exactly what is going on here.”

“We don’t have time for this.”

“Charlotte, please...” I pleaded, feeling Giovanni’s anger washing over me.

“Don’t ‘please me’, young lady. I’ve seen my share of unsavoury things over the years, and it takes a lot to rattle these old bones. I can’t help you, or cover for you if you continue to keep me in the dark.” Her eyes flicked back and forth between the two of us, tiny beads of sweat appearing along her hairline.

Giovanni took a step forward and she tensed slightly. “I think you know exactly what’s going on. Not much gets by your watchful eye. You’re just afraid to accept what you have already deduced.”

“Giovanni, stop. You’re frightening her.” I came around from behind him to Charlotte’s side. I touched her free arm lightly, but she did not react. Her eyes were firmly glued to Giovanni’s advance.

“She wants the truth, Rachel. Isn’t that what she said?”

“That’s what she said, boss,” said Jimmy, from his position of leaning against the doorway. He couldn’t have looked more bored if he tried.

“Jimmy, go down to the stable and bring Eli back to the house,” he said to the man before turning his attention back to Charlotte.

The man shrugged, and left the room to do as he was requested.

“Now do I have to say it, or is the truth already clear?”

Charlotte shook her head, the first real signs of fear appearing on her face. She turned to me, as though she just became aware of my presence at her side. “It can’t be.” Her voice was shaky. She quickly looked back to Giovanni, whose anger was making him less and less human in appearance. Then her eyes found mine once again, and I will never forget the look on her face as long I as exist. “It can’t be.”

“Yes, it’s true. I could never find a way to tell you... I didn’t want to lose your friendship.”

“Vampires? This is absurd! I don’t believe it.”

I pulled back my lips slightly, exposing my partially elongated fangs. She brought a trembling hand to her mouth, and her throat worked as if she was having trouble swallowing. God, it was the worst possible way for her to have found out. Her fear permeated the room like sour milk, and I felt a crash of self-loathing as her reaction began to arouse me. Something in human fear satisfied a dark and hardened part of my heart. Usually it did not bother me to

know this about myself, but in that instance I was keenly aware of how monstrous it made me.

We all remained in our tense standoff, with the rain pounding against the windows, until a swath of light cutting across the room from outside broke the moment. Giovanni raced to the window, slamming his hand against the wall after a brief peek outside. “They’re here! We don’t have time. We have to go!”

Charlotte turned her wild eyes on me. “Who’s here? What the hell is going on? I knew that there was something bad happening here... What have you gotten me involved in?”

A sound like gunshots rang outside. I grabbed Charlotte by her arm and began to steer out of the room, when she screamed.

“Please, Charlotte, I’m sorry. I don’t have time to explain, but no matter what I may by I will always be your friend.”

“My friend! You’ve done nothing but lie to me since the moment we met. Why should I trust you now?”

Giovanni looked at me, eyes pleading. “Rachel, we have to get out of here.”

Just then Eli burst through the doorway bloody, and soaked from the rain. “There are men here. They have guns, and, and... Jimmy’s men are holding them off outside, but I don’t know for how long. There are a lot of them.”

The air was pungent with the smell of blood. I took a step in Eli’s direction, and he sensed my concern before I could speak. “I’m fine, just a little scuffle. We have to get out of here.”

“Rachel, take Eli and Charlotte down the back stairs and through the servants’ wing. Go out the door by the stables, and cut across the field to Blake Road. Go to the house near there that I showed you. I’ve got to help Jimmy’s men if I can, and take out a few of these bastards! We need to get them off our tail once and for all!”

My body felt electrocuted with fear at his words. “Please, Giovanni, don’t do this. Come with us, we need to get away!”

“Go now!” he bellowed so loudly Charlotte cringed. He raced out the door before I could say another word.

Eli took my hand in his firm grip, and I reached out for Charlotte to do the same, but she recoiled from my advance.

“Don’t touch me. I’m more than capable of moving myself. I don’t want your help.”

There was no time to argue, though I was sick at the loss of her affection. Yet I was even more afraid of what could happen to Giovanni. “Okay. I’m sorry, I just want all of us to get out of here without getting hurt.”

We made our way along the hallway to stairs, concealed by a narrow door that, at first glance, appeared to be a linen closet. These led directly into the kitchen via the dry goods storage room. The kitchen contained the only interior access to the servants’ wing, which was the second storey to the eight-car garage. Here existed a series of small bedrooms and two baths, and at the farthest end of the hallway an exit to the back of the house. The stairs wound down the back of the house to a small walkway joining the garage to the guest house, most recently used as Giovanni’s art studio.

Eli slowly opened the door from the storage room into the main kitchen area. He peeked into the space then ushered us forward with a movement of his hand. The room, which until then had always seemed warm and comforting, now seemed desolate. The sound of an altercation reached us from the main hallway, followed by a loud crash.

“Stay here,” I said through clenched teeth. I shot forward to the kitchen’s opening into the hallway, where a man was being brutally beaten by two others.

Even though his face was a bloody mess, I recognised Jimmy as the one being attacked, and rushed to his aid. I grabbed the man who was holding him down, wrenching his head about until the spine snapped. His body immediately went limp, and I tossed it to the floor, where it slid sickeningly in the water that had dripped from the men’s wet clothing. My movements were so quick, Jimmy’s other assailant had barely enough time to register that his partner had been killed before his own lifeless body joined him. I knelt to Jimmy’s side, glad to see that his eyes were open and alert.

“Are you all right?”

“Takes more than that to keep me down,” he said before spitting out a mouthful of blood. I turned back as I heard movement, angry to find both Eli and Charlotte watching my actions from the kitchen doorway. I pointed behind them, and they both retreated into the relative safety of the kitchen.

“Where’s Giovanni?” I tried to keep the desperation out of my voice.

“Outside. He managed to kill a few, and my boys have some down as well, but then two armoured cars pulled up and all Hell broke loose. I lost sight of him, and the next thing I know I’m being dragged in here by these two.” His eyes drooped, and I knew he was hurt badly. I raced up the hallway to the front door, which stood open, allowing rain to pour in to pool on the wooden floor. I peered out, but saw only the angry faces of strangers, and several unfamiliar vehicles, including the armoured cars Jimmy had mentioned.

“Fuck!” I screamed and raced back to the kitchen.

Inside I found Eli trying to calm a near hysterical Charlotte. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of me, and she skidded backward until she collided with the wall.

“She saw what you did to those men,” Eli said.

“You are a monster, a vampire or whatever you are! Stay away from me!” she shrieked.

I approached her slowly. “Charlotte, I’m not going to hurt you. Those men might have killed us. It was their life or ours, and I’m not sorry for choosing us.”

She shook her head as I continued to approach. As I reached Eli's side, he took my hand, an innocent action that seemed to excite her fear even more. "What are you doing to him? He's not one of you, that I know."

"No, he's not."

She turned her tormented eyes in his direction and I felt a tug on my hand. "You don't have to go with them, with her. You can stay, I'll help you." Her words tumbled out in a strange, high-pitched voice. She fought to control the fear threatening to overtake her, the strength that she had possessed her whole life keeping her one step ahead of falling apart.

"This is my family, Charlotte. Where they go, I go."

She was about to speak again when a chorus of hostile, panicky voices streaming in from the hallway interrupted us. The strangers' nearness pushed home the need to leave immediately. "We have to go now."

"I'm not going with you." Her words were as firm as she could make them.

Eli yanked my arm, and he pulled open the door to the servants' quarters' hallway with his free hand. "Let's go. If she wants to stay, let her."

"We can't leave her to these men. Who knows what will happen."

"They're not after her. They want Giovanni."

"I'm not going with you." She spoke with less conviction than before. Her gaze darted to the hallway at the sound of a man's voice raised in anger. A flurry of heavy footsteps ricocheted down the hallway in our direction. She turned back to us, as one wayward tear spilled down her pale face. "Go, and if Eli is going with you, I won't be an accomplice to his death. I'll do my best to send them in another direction."

We leapt through the doorway. "I'm sorry," I called back over my shoulder, just as the door was shut firmly behind us. I heard the scraping sound of something being dragged in front of it. We raced up the narrow flight of stairs as the sounds of several men's voices were heard, entering the kitchen. We couldn't wait for Charlotte's reaction. We were running for our lives.

The rain was a wall of wetness against the second floor windows. I heard the rumblings of car engines, gunshots and screams from the courtyard below. As we reached the end of the hallway and the exit to the back of the house, I dared a look down onto the activity below. The events that I witnessed that night were forever burnt into my mind.

Several men were down, some obviously dead, and others still attempting to move about. With the darkness and the rain it was difficult to be sure which men were whose. One of the armoured trucks had been brought around, and its massive doors stood wide open. On the ground near the truck a mass of men writhed about as if involved in some contorted, violent orgy.

One man pulled back from the group, yelling, "Nous l'avons recu. Nous l'avons recu." *We got him. We got him.* At the sound of his words, several more men retreated from the pile, and for the first time I had a clear view of what was taking place.

They had Giovanni pinned to the ground under some kind of heavy, chain net. Even under its weight and confinement he managed to throw off several of his attackers, one smashing violently into the rear of the armoured truck. The man's head exploded in a shower of blood and brains, and he fell to the ground dead. The man who had yelled suddenly waved his hand to someone out of my line of sight then another man rushed to Giovanni's side.

Several others replaced the men who were thrown off. The man now at his side pulled out a syringe, plunging it deeply into Giovanni's neck. His body convulsed, bucking the administrator off to the side. I pounded my fists against the window, the glass shattering. The rain spilled in through the jagged hole, drenching the front of my shirt.

"Giovanni, no!" I screamed, but the words were lost to the sounds of the rain, engines and yelling.

Then another vehicle pulled around the side of the building into the courtyard, spilling a whole new batch of men out into the hostile crowd. They held what resembled cattle prods, with which they began to poke at Giovanni's body. The devices emitted bright jolts of light, which snaked out and into Giovanni's body.

"*Rachel!*" He uttered my name with such force I thought my brain might explode.

His head turned in my direction, and for one fleeting moment I thought our eyes connected. Then came another jolt, and a scramble of men blocked my view. His body spasmed and jerked about horrifically under the net, while several of the men broke out in riotous laughter. His body lay still. The rain soaked his clothing, and his dark hair was plastered to his face and neck.

"Rachel, we have to go. We can't help him now." Eli's words sounded tinny and far away, like the soft whine of a mosquito in my ear. He pulled at my arm, but he couldn't budge me from my spot in front of the window. The world around me died. I watched in horror as Giovanni's body was casually tossed inside the back of the open truck. The leader, and the man who had injected him, looked about quickly before piling in themselves. The door was pulled shut behind them with an audible thud.

As the truck began its return to the front of the house, a group of Jimmy's men burst out of the rear doors and sprayed gunfire into the remaining crowd. A few made it back to the second truck and it peeled away with a violent shriek of rubber against concrete. Of the remaining attackers, any who held guns returned fire while running for the safety of the nearby woods. More bodies joined those already splayed about the now bloody courtyard.

I moved away from the window toward the waiting escape route to the outside, but I was not aware of any conscious decision to flee. Our footsteps thundered like mortar fire in the narrow space. Bright spots of light swam before my eyes, and Eli's mouth moved, but I could not hear what he was saying. He thrust the door open onto the night with the butt of his hand, and I stumbled out behind him.

As we passed through the darkened walkway from the garage to the guest house, I caught glimpses of Jimmy and his men taking care of the few

remaining Desmarais members. They did not stop for pleas of mercy, and I silently thanked them for their ruthlessness.

Eli pulled me inside the guest house, where he went immediately to the safe hidden in the floor. He pulled out several packages of money and documents to help us get out of the country quickly. He had been made aware of all aspects of our secret life after the night of my revelation, and had access to all types of funds, documents and allies. Thankfully, he was still able to think coherently.

I stood, transfixed by the sight of Giovanni's art supplies, and my still unfinished portrait resting in the easel. I felt myself being drawn into Eli's warm embrace and when he finally pulled away I noticed for the first time that his eyes were streaming with tears. I could not cry. I felt decidedly numb.

Then the most amazing and unbelievable thing happened. As we turned to leave, a blur of movement appeared in the doorway. I reacted instantly, my fangs thrust outward, and I pushed Eli behind me as I leapt toward the intruder. A cold, solid hand caught the front of my shirt, impossibly stopping my attack. As our two bodies made contact I looked up into a face I had hoped to never see again.

The green eyes I remembered all too well met my gaze, but I didn't find the fury that had been there during our first encounter.

"I'm here to help."

Chapter 18

“Rachel, who is this?” Eli’s voice was strained with fear.

I looked to him then back again to the face of Giovanni’s maker. “I don’t know his name.”

“Charles. Now let’s go, there’s a second wave of men on their way here. We have but minutes.” There was no hesitation to his words, and I felt oddly certain that he could be trusted. “Charles, this is Eli. He’s to be protected at all costs.”

“Of course.”

Together, the three of us took off in the direction of the forest, not stopping until we were safely under its camouflage. In the woods we encountered several of the Desmarais men, who fled when they came under fire. We destroyed them all in turn, though their deaths did not bring me any satisfaction. A thousand lives taken in retribution could never make up for Giovanni’s loss. At least they would no longer be able to hunt down others of our kind. We left their lifeless bodies where they fell, continuing to our destination on Blake Road.

Within a mile of the house to which we were fleeing, we caught the sight of dancing licks of orange flame. We stopped just within the range that our vampire eyes could discern the house, where it stood engulfed in flames.

“They have really prepared this time. I think it’s safe to assume all your contacts in England have been compromised, and even if your man back there manages to get out with his life, he will be followed.”

I had to agree. We headed up the road, farther away from both our home and the now destroyed safe house. We had gone about two or three miles, all the way discussing our options, when we heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. We retreated into the shadows, watching in silence as a car with its headlights off slowly made its way up the road. I recognised the car as soon as it was near, though I don’t think that I had ever seen the person at the wheel driving before. Charles looked at me questioningly.

“Isn’t that Charlotte’s car?” Eli whispered in my ear.

“Yes.” I jumped from my hiding spot, racing up the road until I was alongside the vehicle.

When Charlotte caught sight of me she slammed on the brakes. Eli and Charles emerged from the darkness and joined me at the vehicle.

The window lowered and Charlotte was clearly startled when she spoke. “Jesus, you seemed to appear out of nowhere.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, now that I’m over my initial shock, I’m here to help.” She pressed the unlock button for the vehicle’s doors. “I saw what they did to Giovanni, and to the other men who were trying to protect you... and I don’t know exactly how I feel yet, but you are my friend, and you need somewhere to go.”

That I could not deny. I opened the driver’s door. “Move over. I know you don’t like to drive and I can see better in the dark than you can.”

The men climbed into the backseat without a word.

“Where are we going?”

“Go in the back way to my place. You know where the old house is that has the private road.”

I nodded and continued to drive.

She turned to explain to the men in the back. “In the old days it was a meeting house of sorts, and there’s an underground space, with a tunnel connecting it to the main house. Nobody knows about it except for family, who are now all dead. It should be safe, and there will be at least two ways to escape, if need be.”

“They might search your house,” Charles offered from the backseat.

“I don’t know about that. I was quite hysterical when the men found me, and they got me out of there quickly and all but dumped me at the bottom of the road leading up to my estate. I think they believe I was quite traumatised, and just a silly old lady to boot.”

“It’s the best chance we have right now. You and I have to find somewhere to rest for the day, and I don’t want to take any chances that these men might try to rescue Eli.” My voice sounded strange to my own ears. The full force of what had happened had certainly not hit me. I was oddly calm and focused.

“Very well. Perhaps you’re right, and I think this group will need some time to regroup also. They lost quite a few of their ranks during the battles. Giovanni chose his men well. They were quite lethal.”

I felt a quick stab of pain at the sound of Giovanni’s name, but I pressed on. I was able to make quick time of getting to Charlotte’s, even with the lights off, since I could see upward of a mile in the distance. Soon I heard the biting sound of the tires against gravel, as we pulled off the road onto the narrow drive to the house. It was little more than a rut zigzagging through the forest, with nothing to indicate any kind of entrance. In some spots, the vegetation was so thickly overgrown Charles and I had to get out and remove what was blocking the path. We replaced the debris across the breadth of the path, making it all the more difficult for any type of vehicle to follow.

The house appeared— a quiet and forlorn projection in a small clearing otherwise surrounded by acres of wilderness. We drove the car into the nearly dilapidated barn, hiding it from view. Charlotte motioned us toward the rear entrance, and as we passed around the side of the building I noticed that the front doors were carefully boarded across, most likely to prevent vandalism and squatters.

She unlocked a narrow door, which led us directly into the home's kitchen. From there we followed her into what must have been a pantry in another time. The room was barren except for a few crates, and floor-to-ceiling shelving that ran the entire perimeter of the room. She reached a hand into the space where one of the shelves met the stone wall, pressing until a section released and moved slightly forward. She tried to give the now revealed door a yank to pull it wider, but it was stubborn. I took over and pulled the opening wide enough for us to pass. Just inside the opening a flight of stairs had been cut from the naturally occurring rock. They ended in a well of blackness that even my vampiric eyes had trouble seeing into. Charlotte fumbled around behind us until a narrow beam of light appeared. She held a small flashlight in her hands, which projected a weak shaft of light. She pulled the door closed behind her, locking it with an enormous length of wood.

“Let's go.”

Down the flight of stairs we went, until our feet made contact with the floor of a well-concealed passageway. The air was damp and stale.

“Up ahead there a several rooms, and also several barriers which can be locked. Eventually this passage leads to the main house where it comes out into the wine cellar.”

We moved on ahead through the first archway, where a solid wood barrier existed that could be lowered into place from the ceiling then secured with another immense beam of wood. From there she led us for several hundred yards until she stopped outside a doorway that was almost indistinguishable from the rock walls in which it stood.

“Here.” She pushed the door inward.

Inside, the room was quite large with a low ceiling. A long table stood with several heavy chairs about it, and two doors led off into other areas. Everything was covered with a thorough layer of dust.

“I wasn't thinking too clearly when I set off to find you, and I didn't bring supplies of any kind. I believe there's a trunk in one of the other rooms with blankets and a lantern, matches, that kind of thing. I'm sorry, I didn't think too far ahead...” She seemed nervous now that she was alone in the isolated space with us.

I placed a hand on her arm, and thankfully she did not pull it away. “This is wonderful Charlotte, thank you.”

She held the light up between us and looked me directly in the eye. She did not smile, but I sensed acceptance on her part. “I'm going to continue and after I go, someone should lock the next set of doors to stop entrance from the other side.”

She turned quickly to leave, and with a shaky hand on the door looked at the three of us. “Eli, do you want to come with me?”

He didn't hesitate. “No. I need to be here.”

She nodded and left us in the darkness. Both Charles and I went to one of the smaller adjoining rooms where we found the trunk Charlotte had spoken of. Inside were several changes of clothing, blankets, two lanterns and a box of waterproof matches. I lit a lantern and placed it on the table. I offered Eli a dry pair of pants and a sweater, which both smelled slightly of mildew, but were still better than the soaked clothing we were all wearing. I retreated to the other room to change, discovering only men's clothing in the trunk. I dressed in a pair of too-large pants and a sweater that fell to my knees. Back in the main room, the two men were similarly dressed. I joined them at the table.

Charles caught my eye, his expression grim. “I want to say that I'm sincerely sorry about what happened tonight. I know this may be hard to believe after our last encounter, but I did not wish any harm to Giovanni, or yourself.”

Eli reached across the table to take my hand, and his flesh was unbelievably warm against my own.

“Thank you for saying that. I can't really wrap my head around what happened. And why you showed up? Can you explain to me what those men were doing to Giovanni?” I asked.

“It's like I tried to tell him all those years ago. The Desmarais have been researching ways to efficiently control and kill vampires, and from the events tonight, it looks as though they have succeeded.”

“What were those things they were using on Giovanni? And what was he injected with?” I tried to keep my voice even, but I could hear the quiver creeping in to betray me.

“It's quite ingenious if I might say so. It's the same technology used by marine biologists to control sharks, only intensified. The netting was made of the same material shark cages are constructed of, making it all but indestructible, even for a vampire. The injection was a relaxant tested on other vampires they have managed to capture over the years, which basically paralyses the victim. It was developed from many years of study of vampire blood chemistry, a serum unique to us. And the prods again were based on shark control, tasers that have been amped up enough to affect even the strongest of our kind. Against one of these things we might have been able to fight, but not against all three. They were very prepared this time.”

“Sharks?” I asked.

“Yes, and it makes sense, I guess. They are formidable creatures, designed to kill others, but extremely hard to kill themselves. Much like a vampire.”

“How do you know this?” Eli asked.

“I've been watching them for a while now. They are very well protected, but I've managed to get some information. Not enough, though.”

“He had no chance. Not alone, anyway.”

“No.”

"Rachel, there was nothing you could have done." Eli's words were soft, and truthful I knew, but words could not have comforted me then.

I was too close to losing control, so I switched gears in the conversation. I was on the threshold of the full force of Giovanni's loss. I knew that once that gate opened, it would not be closed again for a long time, if ever.

"What about you? How do you fit into all of this?"

"What I told you many years ago was true. I have been watching Giovanni, and as a consequence have been aware of the Desmarais and their research. I learnt of the attack, and came to warn you, but obviously I was too late." He paused, a conflicted look on his face. "I guess even one as old as I can be caught unaware."

His words triggered a memory from that night so many years before. I let my mind follow that thread, as the sound of his voice distracted me from the flood of torment whispering in my mind.

"How old are you exactly?"

"I was born in the year 1327, in an area not too far from here. My family was quite well to do, my mother's side able to trace her lineage back to Richard the First. Our family had certainly fallen below that once greatly exalted status, but we were wealthy and influential nonetheless. I was a spoilt, aimless man, living off the wealth of my family, with no real ambition or responsibilities of my own. I wandered from place to place, soaking up the lavish lifestyle wherever I could. I never married, to the annoyance of my mother, though I might have sired a few illegitimate children along the way. Then fate caught up with my one night. I was forty years old. My mother had passed on a few years earlier, leaving her vast fortune to my brother and me. My home was frequently open to the wealthy and the privileged for one type of gathering or another, and on one such night she came along at the invitation of an acquaintance of mine."

He stopped, realising that neither Eli nor I had made a sound since he began speaking. "I'm sorry, it's been a long time since I have even thought about this."

"Go on." I was grateful for the distraction from the emotions I was barely able to hold at bay.

"It was quite late, most of the guests already having left for home, and I was quite drunk. I was quite drunk most of the time back then, to be entirely honest. She came to me, and lured me away to my bedroom with promises of sexual indulgence. Certainly nothing to be turned down by a man such as I was then, and she was incredibly beautiful, too beautiful I now know. After she had her way with me, she bit me and drained me to the point that I could never have survived. She looked down on me, smiling, and asked me whether I wanted to live or die. Of course I said I wanted to live, and then she made me a vampire."

"But you didn't really know what it was that she was asking you?" I asked quietly.

"No, but I don't suppose that it would have mattered if I did. I was a shallow man, still am really, and I'm sure I would still have accepted if I had known the truth."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't rightly know. I stayed with her briefly, but one night she simply left. I have only seen her but twice in all the years since."

Charles's words stirred up mixed feeling. Even his very presence was confusing, and it was compounded by the trauma of the loss of Giovanni. His face returned to that cold, blank expression I remembered all too well, but I understood that it was an expression that simply came easily after too many years of wearing it. His presence reminded me too much of what happened that night.

"I don't think I can hear any more tonight. Charles can you lock the other barrier before retiring?"

He nodded, and with a look slightly softened from his usual expression, he stood from the table. He leant in, and in a voice too quiet for Eli to have heard, said, "Giovanni was right. Being alone for all this time is a terrible way to exist."

Then he left to do as I had asked.

I entered the smaller room, feeling wearier than I could ever remember being. I lay on the narrow cot, smelling the years of disuse, and was suddenly overcome with panic at the thought of sleeping alone for the first time in more than two decades. A cold spasm of anxiety travelled up my body's entirety.

I drew my knees up to my chest, and I tightly wrapped my arms around them in a sorry attempt to console myself. Flashes of his face, his scent and taste assaulted my senses, yet the tears still would not come.

In the other room I heard Charles return with a swift closure of the door and a solid latching of the lock. How could this have happened? Everything had been perfect. Giovanni, Eli and I had settled into such a wonderful life, and we were so full of love for one another. Now Giovanni was dead, and the rest of us hiding in an underground tomb. Even Charlotte, whose only crime had been befriending me, was now facing the possibility of harm.

A chair scraped across the rough stone floor as one of the men settled at the table. A few silent moments passed before I heard Charles speak. "So, I am aware that you have been with Rachel and Giovanni for several years now, but what exactly is your connection to them?"

"They are parents to me. I never had a father, and my mother was killed when I was a boy. Rachel saved me from a terrible existence, and I owe her for everything that I am and everything that I have."

"I see, and that's the extent of your, how shall I say this, attachment?"

There was a pause before Eli spoke again. "I don't know what you mean."

"All right then. I won't give you the disrespect of trying to read your mind, though to be honest, even in the proximity we have been in with each other tonight I have received very little from you."

"Rachel says I have a hard mind to read."

"That may be true. There are some humans who are almost impossible to read, and others who are like an open book."

"What about you? What is your connection to Rachel and Giovanni?"

"I am Giovanni's maker."

"Why have I never heard about your before?"

"Let's just say that in the past, I was not open to contact, but even a dog as old as me, I have found, can change his ways."

"And you came back for friendship?"

"Something like that, and what about you? You are a grown man now, and still you reside with your parents, as you call them. Why are you still here?"

"Because this is where I belong." His voice was soft, but full of conviction.

"Then what do you say we both stop grandstanding, and just accept the fact that this is where we both need to be right now?"

"All right. I need to go check on Rachel." I heard his quiet footsteps as he closed the distance from the table to the cot where I lay. Once inside the room, he gently wrapped his lanky frame alongside my body and pulled me in tightly to himself.

He didn't need to say a word. I felt his love, and knew in his own way he shared my grief over Giovanni's loss. The tears burst forth with vehemence then, and I sobbed in his arms until it was impossible to cry any longer. Then I closed my eyes and drifted into an unsettled sleep.

I awoke the next evening to the sound of unfamiliar voices, rushed and agitated. I was momentarily disorientated, and I reached out my arms for Giovanni as I normally would, instead finding the edge of the narrow cot. The realisation that he was not there, and in fact gone from me forever sent a cold shock through my aching body.

I shuffled into the next room, where I found Charles and Charlotte in deep conversation. They abruptly stopped as I emerged, inadvertently twisting the knife I already felt in my heart. I didn't think I could survive their pity.

"I didn't mean to interrupt. Where's Eli?"

"He's at the house." A horrible expression must have crossed my face because she immediately launched into an explanation. "It's okay, really. Please sit and let me explain what's happened."

We all took a seat at the grimy table, the darkness broken by the unsteady waves of light from the lantern. The effect cast harsh shadows across their faces, making them seem ethereal one minute and sinister the next.

"After I got back home, I called the security force I use to monitor the house. I have used them in the past for coverage when I've had large event of some kind. Anyway, they came out under the pretence of an attempted home invasion, and have been patrolling the house and grounds ever since. Everything has been quiet. There has been no contact whatsoever. Then Eli came by early this afternoon, and I accompanied him, with two guards following, of course, back to your place. When we got there it was deserted. There was obvious damage and signs that something had happened, but it was clear someone did a good job of sweeping up the evidence. All the bodies were gone. Every shell casing was removed and all the blood had been wiped clean. There were simply tires tracks and broken windows. I called a company out to board everything up, and Eli removed the items he felt were important. We've brought it all to the main house. I'm sure there are things there that should be stored or moved, but that's not imperative right now. Eli's up at my house right now, making a few calls."

"And no police involvement?"

"Nothing. I put out quiet feelers to the authorities and the hospitals, but there are no signs that anyone other than the people involved know what happened last night. Your men must have treated their own wounds, and as for the others, I can't honestly say."

I turned to Charles. "What do you think of this?"

"I'd like to look into it myself. I think I'll go by the house then check with my sources. I can be back in a few hours."

"That sounds like a good idea."

Charles left swiftly and without another word. I still wasn't sure if I trusted him completely, but he was the best chance we had at that point. After he was gone I turned my full attention to Charlotte, and I could see that the circumstances were taking their toll on her. For the first time since I had known her, she looked old. Her clothing was rumpled, and her hair in disarray. Her skin looked sallow and dark bags were evident under her tired eyes. Timidly she came to me, and gave me a quick hug. "I don't know how we're supposed to act with each other."

"Like friends, and you have been an amazing one to us."

"I've done the best that I can, but I realise that the safest option for you right now is to disappear."

"Yes. We need to get out of England quickly."

She handed me a folded piece of paper. "This is the name and phone number of a friend of mine in Switzerland. You can send a communication through

her whenever you need. She can be trusted.”

“Thank you. There will be things here to tie up, and I may need your help.”

“I should get back to the house. I need to get some sleep. I'm too old to keep up with these kind of wild shenanigans.” She gave a small laugh, but I could see she was struggling with the intensity of the situation. Fortunately, Eli's return interrupted the uncomfortable moment.

He slipped through the door quietly, obviously sensing the awkwardness between Charlotte and me. He gave me a sad smile and she left the room.

Eli closed the door behind her and came immediately to where I stood. I threw myself into his arms, so full of hurt and anger I thought I would suffocate from the burden of it. He wrapped one strong arm around my waist and smoothed his hand along my hair with the other. “It's going to be all right,” he murmured, “I will never leave you.”

“I can't lose you too.” The thought of it was more than I could bear.

“You know I love you, Rachel, and I would do anything to be with you.”

He pulled me even closer, and a knot of dread began to mingle with the sadness and confusion already overtaking my mind.

“Eli, please, I can't do this, especially not now... ” I pulled away from him and returned to the room where I had slept. *Giovanni, how can I go on without you?*

I stood there with tears stinging my eyes like acid, and sobs wracking my body. Though I had seen the events, my brain could not comprehend that he was actually gone. Gone! No more forever, no more love to last until the end of time. How could this have happened? Part of me had died with him.

“Rachel?”

I turned, startled at the sound of Eli's voice, thinking for one desperate second that it was Giovanni.

I looked to the floor, away from where Eli stood in the doorway, pale and shaken. “Eli, I... ”

He came to my side and wrapped his long arms around me. Before that night it had been a long time since he had touched me that way, and I was surprised at how much he'd changed. He was no longer the little boy I found those many years ago in the woods. It was strange being touched by another man. He was too tall, softer than Giovanni had been. I pulled him closer, my grief threatening to eat me from the inside out. With my face pressed into the scratchy fabric of his sweater, I was filled with a scent that was all wrong.

Gently, he led me to the edge of the bed. We lowered ourselves to it, careful to keep ourselves wrapped in each other's arms. He was silent, letting me expel my hurt without comment or interruption. Softly he stroked my hair, and wiped away the blood-tinged tears as I sobbed for what seemed like hours. I cried until it was impossible to cry anymore, though the pain was still raw and terrible.

“Rachel, I'm sorry. I know there are no words that could ever help with this pain, but I am here and I will do whatever I can.”

I nodded my head against his chest, still not ready to speak. “I loved him too, you know. He was the only father I have ever known.” He paused and pulled me more tightly into his arms. “And I love you, Rachel, with all my heart. There is no one more important to me than you, and if you are in pain then I'm in pain.”

I pulled away slightly, and looked up into his clear blue eyes. His brow was ridged with worry. I touched his cheek and did my best to smile. “I know you love me, and that's probably the only thing keeping me from not completely falling apart. If you weren't here I would have done something really dangerous and reckless by now, and who knows who else may have gotten hurt.”

“You did the right thing by coming with me. Charles is okay, and so is Charlotte, and we're safe here for tonight, at least. Tomorrow we will get far away from here and then we can decide what to do next.”

“Okay, though right now, I don't know what the point of tomorrow would be.”

Eli grabbed my shoulders and shook me with force. “Don't ever speak like that, don't even think like that! I still need you. I'll always need you.”

The intensity of his words surprised me, and I realised there was no trace left of the boy I raised. A strange man looked back at me with such passion and need in his eyes I was both horrified and touched. How could I have ever thought his feelings for me had gone away? We sat in the painful silence, both unable to look away from each other. I needed comfort and closeness to help soothe my pain, and Eli needed to have his lust and adoration of me fulfilled, even if only under contrived circumstances.

He was trembling when he finally moved again, slowly reaching out to touch my face. His hand slipped into my hair, his fingers whispering along the skin on my neck. He brought himself forward, burying his face in my hair, and I melted into that embrace. As I wrapped my arms back around his body he released a sound full of need and gratitude.

His hot breath was on my neck, a strange, intimate sensation I had not felt in more than two decades. He touched his forehead to my own, and spoke in rushed words. “I know that you don't, and that you can't love me the way that you love Giovanni, and that's all right with me. I can love you enough for the two of us. I have always loved you, from that first moment as a child when I saw you sitting on the rock under the moonlight. You looked like something that came from Heaven, and my feelings for you have only grown stronger in the years we've spent together.”

“Eli don't,” I tried to interrupt, but he was not to be ignored.

“You need to hear this, especially right now. You need to know that you are loved and needed, and that you always will be. You are my everything. I need to be close to you. I need to love you for the world to make sense.”

“Eli, I love you too, but not like this. This is wrong, I can't...”

“*Shhh*. I know what I'm saying, and I know what I'm doing. I'm not a child anymore. Just be with me, and let yourself forget about all that happened in the past twenty-four hours, at least for a short time. Let me love you, and help ease your pain.” Then he pressed his lips softly against my own. I tasted my tears on his mouth. Salt and blood mingled and his skin was so warm. My resolve cracked and I desperately wanted to forget! I didn't want to be aware that my love was gone. I wanted to remove myself from the reality where Giovanni no longer existed. I needed the comfort and distraction Eli was offering.

We fell back onto the bed and without another word shed our clothes. I lost myself to the feeling of Eli's hands on my body, and his warm lips on my face. I pushed away all my anguish, and any thoughts of the guilt and shame I knew I would have when that night was over.

Eli's passion fuelled me, but could not bring me to the same level of desire he experienced for me. I could not break past the knowledge that my heart would always belong to another, whether he was with me in the flesh, or not. My body responded unwittingly, its arousal momentarily greater than my spirit's grief. We made love fiercely, the act more savage than tender, pushing us both to an all-consuming crescendo. His heart thundered and my nails bit into his back. The smell of blood enveloped me, drawing out the darker side of my need.

Eli's sounds became more guttural and I knew he was near his limit. My own response was amplified by his satisfaction, and I let myself go completely to the pleasure. Then he pressed his mouth tightly to my ear, his hot breath overwhelmingly strange and wonderful to my senses, and said the words that I hoped would never come since he learnt the truth. “Take me. I want to be with you forever.”

“No!” But the pleasure was too intense, and my hurt too raw. He did not relent. With his arm that was under my body, he pulled me in tightly against his body. His hand slid up my back to the base of my neck. He forced my face against his warm throat, where my mouth found his throbbing vein. I tried to pull away, but his hand was firm. If I had truly wanted to break away, my strength would have been no match for him, but truthfully in that moment I wanted the taste of his blood. I wanted to know if his blood could be sweeter than his kiss. I was weak and confused. My fangs enlarged and the blood lust grew.

As he reached his climax, I used my strength to turn us until I was on top. His eyes were bright with passion and he did not resist. As his body was overflowed with the pleasure of our sexual encounter, I clamped my mouth onto his neck to realise a gratification of my own. My teeth pierced his flesh and my mouth was immediately filled with his warm, rich blood. It was sweet! I drank and drank as powerful memories assaulted my fragile mind, but I did not stop. I could smell Eli's scent, sex and blood. Then as the flow began to ebb, my mind cleared enough to understand the implications of what I had just done.

I looked down onto Eli's pale face, seeing a corpse and not the face of someone I had loved for all those years. I knew that if I did not share my dark gift with him that he would be lost forever. Giovanni's face flashed before my eyes and I was bitterly aware that I could not endure the loss of another person whom I loved. I bit into the flesh of my wrist then pressed the open wound to Eli's white lips. I squeezed and watched as my blood flowed into his mouth.

His face was slack and some of the liquid ran from the corner of his mouth to stain the pillow beneath his head. For a minute like eternity I thought he might not make it. Then he coughed and struggled weakly beneath me. I squeezed harder, forcing more of my blood into his mouth until I felt his lips press against my flesh. Trembling hands grasped my arm, and he began to eagerly suck at the wound. I let him drink until I was overcome with dizziness, and I had to force him from my wrist.

His head fell back to the bed, and he murmured softly. Blue eyes fluttered open briefly, making contact with my own, though I do not think he was at that point aware of my presence. Within minutes his pale skin became smoother and less ghastly. He was still very pale, but in a soft, milky way that had become so normal for my own reflection. His lips tinged with red. I gently pressed my fingertips against them, sighing when I felt their softness under my touch. Belatedly I was aware of the tears streaming down my face.

I rose from the bed to leave him to the deepest slumber he would ever know. When he awoke the next night, there would be a whole new world waiting for both of us.

Epilogue

It was a long time after the night of Eli's change before I was able to bring myself to write again. I lived those terrible days that followed full of shame, hurt and anger. Each night when I woke and looked into the face of the man I had condemned to eternal darkness and bloodlust, it was all that I could do to make myself continue. Though I knew Eli had gotten what he wanted, and that he has never had a moment of anger toward me, I still felt as if I had made a dreadful mistake.

Charles took the events in stride, though perhaps because he really had no choice but to go along with it if he chose to remain in our company. There had been no time then to explore the motivations or implications of my actions. We needed to leave England quickly, and even now, we speak of those events very little.

The next night we made our way to the mainland of Europe, and began our meandering way back to North America. Charlotte took care of all the arrangements to close the house, and to make sure all the servants were rewarded for their good work. I suspected none of them would ever need to work again. The house itself I left to Jacob for his loyalty.

Charles moved us through a series of countries with the help of his contacts, until we were sure we had lost all signs of the Desmarais and their followers. I accessed the resources Giovanni had secured for me, and together we established a network of allies to keep an eye on the Desmarais and whatever activities they might be involved in. We wanted to be deadly certain they would never get the jump on us again.

Eventually we found ourselves in San Francisco. There was so much activity, and so many different kinds of lifestyles there, that it was easy for us to blend in. I was surprised at the numbers of people we encountered that for whatever personal reason or circumstance, were also active only in the night.

After all the months since tragedy struck, my first waking thought was always of Giovanni, and my days were filled with his presence in my dreams. The pain was still very raw, and at times I wondered if it would ever go away.

I recently heard, through one of our confidants, that Charlotte had passed away. I have to wonder if the stress that we put her through contributed to her demise. Before she learnt of our secret, she had been a vibrant and formidable woman, and I thought of her as close to indestructible as a human could get. Though I had not seen her since that last night in her home, I felt a tremendous loss at her passing. She was a real friend, and I would miss her terribly.

Just last week I began to write again. I struggled at first, spending hours to produce a single line, but now that I have persevered, my thoughts are rushing out. It has made a powerful difference in my ability to cope without Giovanni's presence. Sometimes I am even able to lose myself to my writing, and forget for brief periods of time that he is gone. I have been thinking of even trying to publish some of my work, and I know that would have made him proud.

Some nights though, the pain is just too great, and I can do nothing but sit alone and cry. More often than not in those moments, I find myself on a secluded bluff overlooking the sea. I can close my eyes and smell the ocean, and imagine that we are back in the Mediterranean. On those nights Charles and Eli both know it is best to leave me alone, and I'm thankful for that.

Despite our differences Charles has remained with us. We have established a tenuous truce, an acceptance if you will. I don't know that I would call us friends, but we definitely have a connection none can deny. I know we can count on him, and I imagine that after all the hundreds of years spent alone, this is not easy for him, and that he is doing the best he can. For now we just go on. We both have our guilt over Giovanni's death, and I think his watchful eye over Eli and me helps to alleviate that for him.

And of Eli, what can I say? He's as wonderful as he always was, ever loyal and kind. He loves me still in his desperate, obsessive way, but has managed to keep it in check. Though we both know we can never be as he dreams, we are also aware that we are powerfully bound to one another for eternity. I give to him of myself what I can, and he never pushes for more. Some nights I share my bed with him, and others I spend alone, though on our nights apart Eli is never want for company. He has established himself at both a local campus, and in the city's thriving club scene. I don't blame any woman for wanting him, how could I? I must confess that it gives me a sad sense of comfort to know he would drop any and all other woman at the snap of my fingers.

So, in the evenings I dedicate myself to my writing and the care of a small establishment that I have recently purchased. Together Charles and I keep a vigilant eye on our finances, and the activities of the Desmarais. Charles does whatever it is he does on his own time. Eli takes classes at the local university, where he, of course, is always at the top of the class. When classes are over he spends his time in one club after another unconsciously pursuing, I believe, a replacement for me. I hope for the both of us he finds one.

It seems sometimes that the only thing we all have in common is our need for blood. Sometimes we hunt together, other times we go it alone. Charles and I are at a point where we don't need to hunt each night, and the thrill I used to experience in my pursuits of humans has paled. Eli, who had a powerful mind even before the change, has an incredible control over his victims, to the point where he can drink from two or three a night, and have them all none the wiser. More often than not, he does not kill his victims, and I find that fact very telling.

Tonight as I walked the streets I thought I caught a glimpse of my love's face among the crowd. This has happened before, more often than I care to admit, but it is always a cruel trick of my mind. The first few times it happened I found myself chasing after a stranger with only a passing resemblance to the man I love, and in my anguish I confess I took their lives. Now I simply turn away.

I miss you Giovanni. I always will.

Forever in darkness, forever my love.

About Liz Strange

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Liz has always had a fascination with the dark side— vampires in particular. She attributes this to her first vampire novel, *Salem's Lot*, which she found at the ripe old age of 12. Since then there's been no stopping her. In addition to anything written about her beloved bloodsuckers, Liz enjoys fantasy, horror and crime novels.

In addition to writing and reading, Liz enjoys scary movies, soccer, history documentaries, live music, exercising and spending time with her four children. Someday, when not working, raising kids or writing, she hopes to travel the world. She has her sights set on Greece, Mexico and Easter Island.

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