



SAMHAIN

IN THE
BLOOD

ABIGAIL BARNETTE

Her blood is his lifeline. His love could be her salvation...

Call girl Cassandra Connely drifts through life in a haze of guilt and sedatives, burdened by a deadly mistake from her past and plagued by nightmares of horrific, clawed creatures. Her newest client is a mouth-watering distraction, and she finds herself intrigued by Viktor Novotny's eccentric...tastes. Until he touches her, and her nightmares become real.

One look at the woman in the hot red dress, and Viktor rests assured he will hang onto his humanity at least one more night. In the century since an attack turned him into a vampire and killed his wife, regular sexual encounters are his only defense against becoming a mindless Minion. Yet when Cassie agrees to be his companion—and meal—for the evening, she stirs his soul in a way he hasn't felt since his lost lover.

Viktor's haunted eyes pull at her heart, but Cassie cannot bear to feel anything, ever again. When she flees his apartment, though, she is in more peril than she knows. Tasting her blood without completing their union has left Viktor hungry for no other but her. And vulnerable to the very Minions that wait to drag him into the void. Worse, Cassie is their next target...

Warning: Contains explicit love scenes that will make your blood boil over, including a brief m/m encounter, ill-advised (but oh-so-sexy) use of sharp objects, and hypnotic kisses that could—just for a moment—make you imagine you are Viktor's lady of the night.

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In the Blood

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my awesome editor, Linda, who puts up with a lot of dodging of responsibilities on my part. Sorry about that!

Chapter One

They waited for her below. Claws extended, gleaming in the moonlight. Flashing teeth dripping in anticipation. She searched the darkness, looking for help, for a savior she could not name, though she called out to him. One quick shove sent her over the ledge, into the pit, and their greedy claws scored her arms, tangled in her hair. Faceless, rubbery white skin parted in a sick imitation of a smile, revealing long, serrated jaws. It sprang.

Cassandra Connely woke to the angry beeping of the alarm clock. Out of habit and reflex, knowing it was a silly thing to do, she thrashed the blankets off her legs and tousled her hair to get rid of the feeling of the dream creatures' hands on her.

Another night, another nightmare.

She reached for the bottle of pills on her nightstand. They were supposed to stop the dreams and make her normal. She popped the top off the prescription bottle and dry-swallowed two of the tablets. So what if they didn't do exactly what they promised? They kept her from feeling, most days.

For a split second she considered calling someone. But who? A friend? Those had dropped off one by one after Cassie's accident, when she'd lost interest in frat parties and reading *Cosmo*. Dr. Holden, her psychiatrist, was on vacation, and even he seemed tired of hearing the same old complaints. No one could help her. And maybe she didn't deserve help.

Dr. Holden always stressed that it had been an accident, and to think of it that way, but Cassie couldn't brush it aside that easily, even to restore her sanity. She could remember the moment so clearly: stumbling out the door with Emily, clinging to each other to stay on their feet, laughing at their drunken clumsiness. And Brad standing on the lawn, offering them a ride again and again, following them to the car helplessly. Still trying to stop it all from happening, even as Cassie climbed into the driver's seat.

Six years. Six long years of meeting with probation officers and showing up for court dates. Shaking off her self-pity—pity she did not deserve—Cassie reached for the phone. She did have a call to make, but not to drone on about her problems. Julie had left her about a million messages during her shift the night before, and all of them were "Oh my God, urgent, call me back!" She punched in the number and waited while it rang.

"Hey, girl, what's up?" Julie was always perky, always glad to hear from her coworkers. Even more so when she wanted something from one of them, and Cassie noticed she'd really ramped up the chummy factor when she'd answered.

She slipped on some fake cheerfulness of her own. “Not much. Grant said you needed some help covering clients.”

Grant was the “appointment manager” at 4-1-2, the gentlemen’s club Julie and Cassie both worked for. “Appointment manager” was really just a nice way of saying “pimp”, but 4-1-2 wasn’t your average brothel. Clients pulled down a minimum seven-figure salary annually, were required to follow strict dress and conduct codes, and the wealthiest men in New York were wait-listed for years before being granted membership.

The girls were held to higher standards than most clubs too. No illegal drugs, monthly blood work and nothing fake. No implants, extensions, or peroxided blondes. 4-1-2 was supposed to be classy, the highest quality girls in the city, and they made enough dough to buy themselves a cloak of invisibility.

The sweetly wheedling tone in Julie’s voice jumped up three notches on the sugary scale. “Well, the guy is really, really great.”

Of course he was. All of their clients were standup guys, CEOs, men with wives and children they never saw, who spent all their free time with hookers. And if Julie couldn’t get rid of this one, well... “If he’s such a gem, how come no one will take him?”

“There’s nothing wrong with him. He just has preferences.” Julie and Cassie were the only redheads currently employed by 4-1-2, and there were plenty of men with that particular fetish. Cassie had wondered if her bookings would go up in the wake of Julie’s leaving, but something about this assignment put her on her guard. She always trusted her instincts now, even if they automatically jumped to suspicion.

“Is it a red hair thing?” She examined a lock, frowning at a split end. “Because if that’s the case, give it to Violet. She’s strawberry blonde. She could use the extra income.”

“It’s not something Violet can handle,” Julie hedged and, as if she’d realized she wasn’t getting anywhere with said hedging, came right out with it. “He’s got a very specific kink.”

“And now I’m the go-to girl for kinky?” Cassie raised an eyebrow. “What’s his deal?”

Encouraged to continue, Julie spilled all. “First of all, he’s a real gentleman. He doesn’t come down here to hang out, he’s not married, he’s not in the mob or anything like that. He just gets off on...um...he drinks blood.”

The thought of drinking blood brought a strange, coppery taste to the back of Cassie’s tongue. Probably a memory from the weeks she’d spent in the hospital. “Why are you asking me? I mean, it’s your last night, so obviously I wasn’t your first pick. Are you really that desperate to unload him on someone? Why not let him worry about who’s going to replace you in his Dracula act?”

Julie dropped her forced enthusiasm. “I like the guy. Listen, don’t make that into more than it is, okay? I just feel bad for him. He’s sweet, and I thought you’d like him. I haven’t asked anyone else, either.”

“Blood drinking, huh?” That was certainly a new one. Cassie didn’t usually take “special” clients. It was too much work to tie someone up or dress all in rubber, and there were plenty of other girls willing to take those jobs. But Julie very rarely discussed her clients as if they were human beings she could muster empathy toward. That spoke well of the guy, blood drinker or not. “I’m not making any promises, but I’ll meet him. You swear to God that he’s not a total psycho?”

“He’s not a psycho. He’s just...turned on by different things, you know? He’ll treat you really nice. And he pays well. It’s an easy thousand bucks per visit. And he’s really, really good.”

A thousand dollars per visit wasn’t exactly prime money with their clients, but it was more money than none. “I’ll give him a shot. But I’m not kidding, if I wind up dead, I’m going to haunt you forever.”

“Thank you *so* much!” Julie slipped right back into her false enthusiasm. “If you ever need anything—and I mean anything—you just let me know. Carla in HR told me there are some openings in the billing department.”

Cassie shook her head. Julie, like all the other girls who’d gotten out of the life since Cassie had gotten into it, meant well. “I like my job. I don’t need a new one.”

Julie sighed over the line. “Some people like being call girls. But you don’t.”

That was true, Cassie had to admit. But she wasn’t working her way through college, the way Julie had, and she wouldn’t fool herself into thinking she’d find a place at Miller, Miller, and Firth, the most prestigious law firm in Manhattan. “I’m not cut out for law school like you were.”

“I know,” Julie conceded, sounding disappointed. “I just don’t like to think about you wasting your life.” She didn’t know the real reason Cassie had dropped out of college. No one did, and that was the nice thing about working at 4-1-2. Everyone stayed out of each other’s business.

But Cassie didn’t argue. She found a pen and dutifully took down the client’s address.

“As if I had a life to waste,” she muttered as she hung up the phone.

Winter in New York was miserable, wet and cold, even after the snow had melted. The buildings pushed and jostled the wind into the narrow spaces between them, the freezing currents dipping to sting the city’s inhabitants as they bustled along busy sidewalks trying to get to places they didn’t really want to go.

In the twenty-five year history of 4-1-2, only one girl had ever been hurt by a client. That client died a week later in a robbery where nothing was stolen. It had been widely rumored that 4-1-2 had mob money tied up in it, and the incident with the client sort of proved that. But that didn’t make Cassie feel any safer. Dead was dead, even if someone got their throat slit for doing it. Death was permanent. She knew that all too well.

Still, she forced herself into the building, gave the doorman her name, let him lead her to the elevator. As it ascended, she shook off the feeling of apprehension that had dogged her all day, forced herself into the role of professional seductress that seemed at once a welcome escape and a ridiculous joke.

The elevator came to a smooth stop and the doors opened onto the austere blackness of marble covered walls, floor, and ceiling. Cassie stepped into the foyer where inset lights created small, illuminated circles in the blackness. A wide, descending staircase flanked by two tall, white vases stood before her. The sound of footsteps climbing up preceded the arrival of a short, barrel-chested man in a gray suit. His black hair was slicked back from his face, revealing how thin it had become in middle age, and he smoothed down his goatee with his fingers as he crossed the wide floor.

“Are you...” Cassie squinted at the business card in her hand. “Vik...Viktor? Am I saying that right?”

The man smiled and extended his hand. “I’m Anthony. I’m Mr. Novotny’s personal assistant. You must be from the club.”

The formal way he referred to the client set Cassie back a little. Using first names was a trick she used to put herself on equal footing, helpful when the men she dealt with were used to being worshipped on a daily basis. She’d never had to discuss them with their personal assistants. It took her half a second to recover her crafted attitude. “Is Mr. Novotny available? I know I’m a bit early—”

“Let me take your coat,” Anthony interrupted.

The girls of 4-1-2 were instructed to look sexy but not trashy when they went out to work. Cassie shrugged out of her white peacoat and smoothed the skirt of her red, long-sleeved wrap dress, adjusting the neckline so a bit less cleavage showed. She tucked her hair, which hung loose and straight down her back, behind her ears and followed Anthony down the stairs.

The apartment was nicer than anything Cassie had ever seen, in real life or the movies. The stairs were clear, tempered glass, anchored by a single steel spine down the center. The rails were slick black enamel, so shiny that she almost didn’t want to put her hands on them for fear of leaving fingerprints. As they walked down, a large living room unfolded into view. Stiff, black sofas and chairs were arranged on the black marble floor around a plush white rug. Abstract sculptures in silver and tarnished bronze dotted the shelves and mantle, and a cubist painting in shades of gray hung over a sleek marble fireplace. Dark tinted windows stretched from floor to ceiling, and the view from the thirtieth story made Cassie’s knees a bit weak.

“Watch your step, miss,” Anthony said, steadying her with a firm grip on her elbow.

“Sorry. I’m afraid of heights.” She took a deep breath to make the room stop spinning. *You’re not going to fall out of the windows. You don’t even have to go near them. Just keep walking.*

A dark voice, startling in its nearness, cut through the relative silence of the room. “The view can be...intimidating.”

Cassie stopped, her feet seemingly fused to the stairs. Julie had said the guy was rich. She'd said he was nice. She hadn't mentioned that he was totally hot, or that his deep, gentle voice would turn her knees to water faster than any tall building ever could.

Dressed in a black suit that probably cost more than any car Cassie would ever own, the man blended perfectly with his monochromatic surroundings. His hair, cut short and neat, was stark white, but not from age. He wasn't old. He wasn't young, either. His age was impossible to place on first glance. Everything, from his long, pale fingers buttoning his jacket to the carefully composed expression on his face suggested an elegant timelessness that intrigued Cassie more than she cared to admit.

Realizing she stared, she tried to open her mouth to introduce herself, but he spoke first, a faint accent coloring his words. "I am Viktor Novotny. And you are?"

"Cassandra," she whispered, then cleared her throat to speak up. "Cassandra. From 4-1-2."

"Yes, Julie recommended you. Please, come in." He gestured to the room around him, and Cassie walked the rest of the way down the stairs on shaking legs.

"Mr. Novotny, will you be needing anything else tonight?" Anthony asked.

"No, thank you, Anthony, I believe I have all I need." He answered without taking his eyes off Cassie. The corner of his mouth ticked in a smile that should have put her at ease, but it unnerved her even more than his stark formality. "Please, sit down, Cassandra."

Settling into a practiced pose on the couch, she managed to regain some of her self-assurance. "You have a beautiful accent. Where are you from, Mr. Novotny?" She wondered if that was a part of the Dracula act, as well.

"Please, call me Viktor. Would you like some wine?" He stepped away before she could recite her strict rule about not drinking on the job. "I am originally from Czechoslovakia. But I have lived in New York City for a long time." He did not speak as he poured the wine. When he returned, he pressed a glass into her hand before settling into one of the arm chairs. "And you? Have you always lived in New York?"

"No." Her automatic response was more curt than she would have liked. "I moved here about three years ago."

She dropped her gaze to her wineglass. White. She didn't know whether to be surprised it wasn't red because of his strange fetish or unsurprised that it matched the decor. "So, Viktor, my friend Julie tells me that drinking blood really turns you on?"

He nodded and sipped his wine, unembarrassed by his peculiar tastes. "I paid Julie a thousand dollars a visit. In return, I drank her blood. Does that make you uncomfortable?"

"Do you want it to?" It was always best to know what got the client off at the start. "Is that part of the thrill?"

“No, of course not.” He set his glass down. It was still full. “I would not wish for you to do something...distasteful. If you are truly comfortable with the idea, then the job is yours. I would need an assurance that I could see you every week.”

Every week? Even if the guy was a little freaky, she could get past it for four thousand extra dollars a month. “I don’t think that will be a problem. So, what happens, do you...bite me? And then we do it? Or we do it and then...”

“No. I do not like to bite. It is not in causing pain that I find enjoyment.” He reached into his jacket and produced a single, gleaming razor blade. “Julie preferred to cut herself, but I can do it, if you find it difficult. Some do.”

So, she wasn’t his only supplier. She wondered how many girls he had lined up for this job and thought she should point out how vastly unsafe such practices were. She held her tongue. A man like this, with his expensive suits and palatial apartment, could afford clean tricks. “I think I’d rather do it. Don’t take it personally, it’s just that I don’t know you well enough yet to trust you with a sharp implement.”

He laughed softly, and her stomach jumped in response. She could feel his gaze on her like a wave of heat searing to her bones. A client had never affected her this way before. She gulped down half her glass of wine, personal rules be damned, and tried to get her head on straight. A flush crept up her skin like a fever, burned through her like fire.

“Come here.” His softly spoken command sent electric shocks of arousal through her veins, and she rose on trembling legs. She stood before him, looking down as he studied her face, time swelling around them until she was sure she would scream just to break the tension. He gestured and said, simply, “Sit,” and she found herself in his lap, the taut muscles of his thighs pressing into the backs of her legs as he pulled her to lie against his chest.

“The razor,” she had the presence of mind to say and, before she could panic at the potential danger of the situation, he pressed the flat of the blade into the palm of her hand.

“Don’t cut yourself,” he warned, his lips moving like a phantom chill over the skin of her throat. “Not yet.”

It shouldn’t be like this, she warned herself. It was her job to remain in control, to give a man his fantasy. It was her job. And still, as he tipped her head back to rest on his shoulder, stroking her throat with his long, gentle fingers, she wanted to surrender that control, more than she’d ever wanted anything.

His hand dropped to her thigh, where the red fabric of her skirt rode up and he helped its ascent. His mouth fastened at her neck, teeth grazed her skin. His hands bunched on her skirt, raising it higher, fingers sliding over the red silk of her panties, now soaked to her skin. She moaned and writhed against him, pressing back against the unmistakable hard ridge of him beneath his trousers, and he whispered against her ear, “Now. Do it.”

The words shocked some sense into her, and with numb fingers she brought the blade to her neck. His hand caught her wrist. “Not unless you want to kill yourself,” his dark voice scolded, and he brought the hand gripping the blade to her wrist. “Here. Not deep.”

She shook so badly he had to help her. The sting of the cut pulled a surprised cry from her, but the pain disappeared under the shocking cold of his mouth as he fastened it to the cut.

The room darkened before her eyes. Had she cut too deep? Would he notice before it was too late? She tried to speak, but the darkness came over her too quickly, far too quickly to be bleeding to death. She knew what that was like, to be on the edge of death. This was not the same, though it was just as terrifying. She was falling, farther than the floor, and the monsters were on her.

Only this time, they were real. Their teeth, their claws.

Her screams.

“Cassandra?” Viktor shook her shoulders gently. “Cassandra!”

His voice pulled her violently back to reality even as it echoed through her nightmares. Had she heard a voice in them before? It took her a moment to realize that she still sat in his lap, his arms strong around her as he looked down at her with eyes wide in concern. Red stained his lower lip, and he hurried to wrap a handkerchief around her wrist. She smoothed her hair back with one hand, her head pounding like she’d just woken up with the worst hangover of her life. She pushed herself away and stood, trembling for a different reason now. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“You were screaming.” He followed her—he probably would never want her in his home again, and she didn’t blame him—up the stairs to the foyer. “Are you all right?”

Screaming? That was a new symptom she’d have to tell Dr. Holden. “I’m fine! I just...I want to go.”

“You should wait,” he said, though he helped her into her coat with trembling hands. “I am afraid Anthony has gone for the night, so there is no car to take you home—”

“I’ll get a cab.” She searched for an elevator button on the sleek black walls. “Let me out of here!”

“Cassandra,” he began, but he did not finish. Instead he opened a panel on the wall and called the elevator. “I sent Julie’s payment to the club. Shall I do the same for you?”

Her money. Damn it. She hadn’t done the job, not to her satisfaction, certainly not to his. “No, I couldn’t accept it. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“It would not be fair to send you away without payment,” he countered.

“Fine,” she whispered. Anything to get her out of here, away from this guy who seemed stranger every second. Anything to get home to the pills that wouldn’t help her and the nightmares that at least kept their hands to themselves.

Before she could stop herself, tears slid down her face and it was too late to hide them.

“Cassandra, don’t go.” His haunted eyes pulled at something in her heart, but the monsters flashed through her mind again. The elevator doors opened and she raced inside. She did not want to look back, but

something pulled her gaze to the doors. Viktor stood, the shadows on his face deepened by the light overhead, making no move to follow her. He did not look away, even as the doors slid closed.

A tremor went through Cassie, one that did not stop shaking her limb from limb, even after she'd run from the building and into the cold New York winter.

Chapter Two

Viktor stood at the living room windows, watching the sun rise over the skyline. From his vantage point he could look over the row of buildings surrounding the park and view the way the sunlight unfolded like a golden blanket over the hidden green jewel of the city. He usually enjoyed this morning ritual, but today he hated it. He hated knowing that she was out there somewhere, alone and afraid, and he had not done what he'd needed to do to reassure her.

He had seen her sorrow the moment he'd tasted her blood. Horrific visions of blood and twisted metal, memories of unimaginable pain. And Minions. She knew of them, their blank faces devoid of humanity, their spirits fueled by violence. If she hadn't left, he was not sure he could have made love to her anyway. Knowing the pain she was in, tasting her fear, it would have damaged his humanity, not restored it.

He tightened his grip on the crystal glass in his hand and it shattered, raining droplets of unfinished blood to the floor.

"Shall I clean that up for you, Mr. Novotny?" Anthony already moved to wipe the blood off the black marble before waiting for a reply.

"You're such a considerate jailer." He chuckled. For the past thirty years, Anthony had shadowed Viktor's every step in the guise of being an incredibly solicitous personal assistant. Most of the time, he fulfilled his role very well, but Viktor knew the man gauged his every step, determining if today would be the day he had to sink a stake in his back.

Viktor let the man believe that he would be physically able to accomplish such a feat. "And how are my friends at the Conclave?"

"Dedicated to wiping out your entire species. I sent them a glowing report regarding your...longevity. You may wish to step back from the window, sir. The light is getting very close."

Repressing a heavy sigh, Viktor flipped the switch on the wall that would lower the blinds. Anthony followed him to the bar, where Viktor wiped his bloodied hand on one of the pristine white bar towels. He tossed it into the sink, knowing Anthony would come back for it later and fret over it the entire time it sat untended. "Do not mention Cassandra to the Conclave. She has nothing to do with them."

"Doesn't she?" Anthony shrugged. "If you insist. I find what you've told me of her visions rather suspect."

"She is not one of us, nor will she be." An almost painful determination tightened his muscles at the words, as though he were tensed to take action. He should not have told Anthony about her vision. Viktor cursed himself for his stupidity. "I do not know how she knows of Minions, but I will find out. Perhaps a simple hypnosis will cure her of her memories."

"You may try. I will act according to my vow to the Conclave, Viktor."

Viktor nodded, not wishing to rehash old enmity. "See to the deal with Whitehall and Barnes. They insisted on a lunch meeting at their downtown offices."

"They think they'll put the crazy shut-in at a disadvantage." Anthony shook his head and chuckled. "Will there be anything else before you retire?"

"No, thank you." Though he should have seen to his other hunger, he needed to be left alone with his thoughts. He could not examine them freely while Anthony was there, reading every emotion that crossed his face. While the Conclave monitored his every move, waiting for the day he would lose his humanity and become a Minion, he walked a fine line.

When Anthony had gone, Viktor crossed the living room to sit in the chair he'd occupied the night before. Closing his eyes, he felt Cassandra's firm body beneath his hands, heard her soft moans as she had given herself over to him completely. The memories enflamed him, but he could not concern himself with carnal desires now, even at the cost of the sliver of humanity such an indulgence would have brought him. Not with so many unanswered questions, and an innocent human life hanging in the balance.

How had Cassandra known of Minions? No human who encountered them should have survived. He knew that well enough...

Brushing aside memories best left unvisited, he concentrated on the woman who needed his help. The woman he could not get out of his mind, who seemed inextricably connected with the ghosts of his past. He cursed his stupidity aloud and stood, reaching into his collar for the ring he wore suspended by a chain around his neck. The moment his fingers closed on the slender band, his mind calmed. He credited Melina's spirit with the transformation. Momentary though it might be, it provided a welcome respite from the darkness that pulled his humanity away by shreds.

A shock ripped his tranquility from him. The gentle aura that Melina's memory brought to him was so familiar, he hadn't questioned its presence the night before. But it had been there when he'd fed from Cassandra.

His heart seized, and he flattened the ring to his flesh. It was not possible. He probed his memory for any thought he might have had that would have conjured such a feeling, but his mind had been fixed on Cassandra, on her body and her blood and the lust that had raged through his veins as he'd held her. Shamefully, Melina had been the furthest thing from his mind.

In the back of his mind, he still felt Cassandra. The act of feeding forged a connection, one she would be wholly oblivious to, but too keen on his end to ignore. Her confusion and despair were palpable, and he blamed himself. If he had only known—

There had been no way to know, he reasoned, shutting down the guilt that would do him no good now. Usually once he'd fed from a human and made love to them, the rush of humanity he'd acquired blocked that predator instinct to sense his prey. But since she'd run off without completing the feeding, all he could do was wait until she came seeking answers, and make sure she didn't do anything foolish in the meantime.

Cassie called in sick to work. In the past, she hadn't been able to shake the dreams made up of teeth and fangs and scenes from the accident. Now, the monsters and memories stalked her in the daylight, joined by the burning imprint of Viktor's hands she could still feel on her body.

She'd tried calling Dr. Holden, but ultimately hadn't been able to tell him the whole story. How would it have sounded? "I met a man who makes my nightmares worse. He makes them real. And yes, I am ready to go to the asylum now."

But there was no other explanation for what had happened. Touching him had made her nightmares materialize out of thin air. No, not touching him...being touched by him.

No other client had ever brought her to her knees the way he had. Maybe that was scarier than her nightmares.

Sitting up in her bed, she reached for her bottle of pills and swallowed two, then screwed on the cap and set them in their place on her nightstand. She got to her feet and hurried across the cold, wooden floor to the bathroom. The studio apartment was small and usually drafty, but it had become the only place in the world where Cassie felt safe. Her twin bed just fit in the bay window, and she woke most mornings to multi-colored light streaming from the suncatchers and prisms she'd hung. Her small television perched on the ledge of a bookshelf, and a second-hand desk served as a dresser and vanity. The rest of her clothes stuffed the little closet and one cupboard in the tiny kitchen. It was small, but it was her sanctuary. Now, she didn't feel safe.

She leaned against the sink and splashed cold water on her face, her eyes fixed miserably on her own reflection. What was she doing, letting a client get to her this way? Monsters didn't exist. She was sick, and it had nothing to do with the man she'd met the night before. She needed to take her pills and go back to bed for a long, long time. She could make a new plan tomorrow.

With a full glass of water from the sink in the bathroom, Cassandra returned to her bed. She climbed in, popped the top off her pill bottle, took out two and gulped them down.

A growing sense of unease dogged Viktor until nightfall. Two hours past sunset, he caught himself pacing in front of the windows.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Novotny, but there was no answer." Anthony descended the stairs, sliding a cell phone into his jacket pocket.

Viktor frowned at the cars gliding soundlessly below. He did not know where Cassandra was, but he knew she was in the city. He felt it in the lingering bond between them. That it had lasted this long was uncommon enough. That he could sense she was in danger was unthinkable.

"Have you tried the club?" It was a grasp at straws, he knew.

Anthony raised an eyebrow. "Is there a reason it has to be this particular girl?"

"Just try them, please," Viktor implored. He turned back to the city beyond the windows, not bothering to listen to the conversation. His hand slipped into the collar of his shirt for the steadying weight of the ring.

"All they can tell me is that Cassandra is not working tonight," Anthony said after he'd hung up. "If that's even her real name."

"Thank you, Anthony." Perhaps Viktor had imagined it all. Was this the beginning of the madness that would transform him from vampire to Minion? He swallowed a lump of sorrow and closed his eyes.

"You know you get like this if you don't finish your feeding." Anthony unfastened and refastened the cuffs of his jacket. "All paranoid and shaky. If you need me to bring you another girl—"

Viktor waved his hand. "It does not work that way."

"I could send the car for Elliot," Anthony suggested. Viktor shook his head. He didn't want to feed. That wasn't what drove him to seek out Cassandra. He wanted to be sure she was safe, and at the moment he couldn't convince himself that she was.

"You're tired," he said quietly to his jailer/assistant. "Go home."

The human wasn't a fool. He didn't move from his spot.

"I swear to you, I do not wish to harm anyone tonight. Myself included. Your services will not be required before sunup, at least." Without waiting for a reply, Viktor headed to his office. Sleek and black as the rest of the apartment, the office was dominated by a large desk with a top-of-the-line computer. Technology never ceased to amaze Viktor as he'd watched it change over the years. He typed up an email to his company's most successful skip-tracer and, within an hour, had Cassandra's home address in his inbox. The man would be rewarded handsomely.

He'd dismissed Anthony. Damn! Conclave spy though he was, Anthony was his driver. Viktor had never bothered to learn. He squared his shoulders. It couldn't be that difficult if so many people had mastered it. He went to the closet-sized office Anthony kept on the second floor near the elevator, took the keys to his least-extravagant car and rode down to the garage. After some minor difficulty shifting gears

with the two paddles attached to the steering wheel, the Aston-Martin Vantage—and its clumsy driver—lurched from the garage.

The GPS and a healthy dose of luck helped him arrive safely in Queens, where he pulled to a stop in front of a storefront deli that had closed for the night. Above that, Viktor realized, was Cassie's apartment.

She didn't answer the buzzer and her windows were dark. Though common sense told him that she simply wasn't home, his uncanny sense argued otherwise. Checking the street to be certain he would not be seen, he leapt to the second story, perching on the ledge outside her window. His heart jumped into his throat at what he saw inside. Cassandra, lying face down on the floor, her legs tangled in bedclothes that had tripped her when she'd risen from her bed. A cordless phone lay in pieces beside her, broken in the fall, and a bottle of pills sat open on the nightstand.

Without thinking, he punched his fist through the glass and unlocked the window. He opened it and crawled inside and over the bed to kneel beside her on the floor. He called her name and shook her shoulder, but she did not rouse. Vomit caked her hair and pooled on the floor beneath her. Pressing his fingers to her neck, he felt for a pulse. It was there, weak, but she lived.

Had she done this intentionally? The thought was like a physical blow. Though he did not know her well, he knew the terror lurking inside of her and the desperation it brought. The thought of another suffering as he had for so many years...

The moment he lifted her in his arms, his despair fled. As quickly and easily as if he held Melina in his arms again, he felt human. He slid Cassandra onto the bed and went to the small washroom to find something to clean her up. A small hand towel hung beside the sink, and he wetted it before returning to bathe her face and neck. The T-shirt she wore was sodden with vomit. He tore it down the front and slid her arms from it, mentally scolding himself for the reaction the sight of her naked body caused in him.

Even in her unconscious and seriously ill state, she was beautiful. Her eyelashes, uncoated in mascara, lay soft and red as her hair against her freckled cheeks. Though her head lolled unsupported, the angle only accentuated her graceful neck. He could have admired her all night, until he noticed that her full, natural breasts and firm, toned stomach were covered in gooseflesh, her nipples puckered against the cold. He covered her with the thin quilt folded over the end of the bed, then picked up the prescription bottle. He didn't recognize the name of the drug.

"Anthony," he barked into his cell phone the moment the man answered. "Find out what you can about a drug called—" He sounded the word out, then spelled it, hoping that would be sufficient for his assistant.

"Do you need me?" Anthony asked. "If the girl is in some kind of trouble, you need to call 911."

"I don't know if she's in trouble. Please, just get me the information." He would do whatever it took to see that she survived. Something about her was linked to him, and he could not see her die before he found out what it was.

In her dreams, Cassandra was no longer fighting monsters. Instead, she fought the temptation to let her heart stop beating, her lungs to cease filling with breath. It was as if she were drowning, over and over, and each time she began to pull herself above water, she would slip.

His voice was there, most disturbing of all. Telling her to calm herself, that she was safe. She did not doubt that she was safe from the moment she heard his voice, but even on the edge of death she had enough sense to know that something about him was strange, too strange to be trusted. All through the night, she fought her body's wish to die and her brain's insistence to wake, suspended in an in-between world with a man she did not know and who couldn't be there.

With a strangled cry, she sat up, suddenly loosed from the medicated grasp of sleep. She felt her face, her hair, then felt for the phone. She'd had it in her hand just a moment ago, to call for help. She patted the bed, her hand coming to rest on another hand, a cold hand, lying atop the bedclothes. With a scream, she lurched away from the figure who straightened himself, casting bleary eyes around the room.

"Cassandra," Viktor breathed. "Thank God."

He sat beside the bed on the stool that usually stood before her vanity. His shirt, blindingly white in the dark, was rumpled and the sleeves rolled back. His pale forearms had pillowed his head on the edge of the bed. He looked as though he'd been there all night.

"What are you doing here?" she shrieked, reaching for something, anything, to throw at him. It was a gross invasion of privacy for him to walk into her home and sit beside her as she slept and—

Her hand closed on the bottle of pills, and she remembered.

"I almost didn't get here in time," he said, his voice hoarse. "I'm glad you called me."

"I didn't call you," she snapped, but she couldn't remember. She'd had the phone in her hand, hadn't she? Where was it now?

"You must have broken it when you fell, because the line went dead," he explained patiently, scooping up broken plastic pieces off her vanity. "I don't think you'll be able to fix it."

"But why would I have called you?" she asked, not that he would know the answer. Her mortification grew by the second. She'd called him, despite barely knowing him, which showed she was, like, obsessed with him or something. And he was a client. Unprofessional on so many levels. "I'm so sorry, I would never—"

He waved a hand. "Nonsense. I could tell from your voice that something was wrong and came straight over. What on earth were you doing, Cassandra?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know. It was an accident."

It *had* been an accident, hadn't it? She scrolled through the events of the night in her mind. She'd taken too many pills, she knew that well enough. When she'd realized her mistake, she'd tried to call for

help...but had it really been a mistake? Why hadn't she called 911? Why hadn't she gotten real help, instead of calling a client who might not have bothered to come to her aid at all? Had she really wanted to die?

"I am glad to hear that," he said, his soft accent making the words sound more intimate than they really were. He ran his fingers through his mussed white hair, a gesture he must have performed countless times while she'd slept. The top buttons of his shirt were open, revealing the pale flesh beneath, and the sight held Cassie's gaze for longer than she meant it to.

"Why did you come?" She squeezed her eyes shut in embarrassment. "I meant, why would you bother? I called you, so I obviously wanted you to come here. But you don't know me. Why would you take the time?"

He shifted on the stool, stretching one long leg out, then the other. "I don't know. I think if I were in need of help, I would want someone to come to my aid."

A rich, powerful man like Viktor Novotny coming down from his ivory tower to help her? She hated herself for being so jaded, but she couldn't help but feel there would be some kind of ulterior motive woven in to this act of kindness. With his type, there always was. "Well, thank you. I think I'll be okay now."

"You wish for me to go?" he asked uncertainly, as though he wanted to stay here in her apartment that smelled like puke and was probably smaller than his guest bathroom at home. There definitely was something weird about this guy.

She smiled weakly and nodded. "Don't worry, I won't call you again."

"If you need anything," he said, reaching to put one hand on her arm. The shrieks of the monsters filled her ears, and she flinched from him. His eyes clouded with hurt.

"I'm sorry, I'm just...jumpy. Probably the drugs wearing off." She shrugged, knowing she was a good liar who had just had a rare slip up.

He swallowed, the sound audible, the way his throat moved looking almost painful. "I know that you are troubled—"

"It was an accident," she snapped.

"And I believe you." He hesitated. "I know you have...nightmares. Episodes, perhaps? During your waking hours, as you did at my apartment?"

Her cheeks burned, and she knew he could see the embarrassment written on her face. "No. That never happened before. I was kind of thinking you had something to do with it."

"Me?"

God, how could she do this when the guy had just saved her life? *Self-preservation, that's how.* "Yeah. How do I know that wine you gave me wasn't drugged?"

He leaned forward. "You think I would have to drug you?"

His entire being, from the looming expanse of his broad shoulders to the dark promise of seduction in his deep voice, caused sparks of awareness to race through her, but she wouldn't show it. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and shot back, "What, because I'm a prostitute? You don't need to drug me, you can just throw a wad of cash at me and my panties will fall off?"

"No." He leaned closer. Their noses almost touched. If she had wanted to, she could have brushed her lips against his. He continued, in a voice every bit as deep and dark as her most erotic daydreams. "I would not have to drug you because if I wished to seduce you, I would. I could do things to you that would make you beg for it, Cassandra. I could give you pleasure like you've never felt in your life, and by the time I was finished, you would be screaming my name."

She cleared her throat to hide the huge gulp of air she took. She'd had a taste of him already, and knew with aching certainty that he could make good on his threat. As much as she hated herself for admitting it, a part of her wanted him to. "Well, I'm glad you think so. But I'm not interested. Don't call me, don't contact me through the club, don't ever come here again. Do you understand?"

He straightened, looking as though he'd suddenly remembered his surroundings. He fastened the top two buttons of his shirt, his face so devoid of emotion that he appeared almost alien. "Yes, of course. I understand perfectly. Good night, then."

Only after he'd collected his jacket and left did Cassie notice the broken window pane.

Chapter Three

For three nights, Cassandra didn't sleep. She didn't take her pills. She sat up in bed, staring at the cardboard she'd taped over the hole in the window. Rationally, she knew that if a window hadn't kept him out in the first place, a broken window wouldn't make much difference in him getting in, but cold logic wouldn't set her at ease. Constant surveillance at least gave her some charade of control.

How had he found her? She was certain she hadn't called him, after she saw the broken window. Had he intended to, what, attack her? Kill her? But then he'd stayed and nursed her through an overdose. Those didn't seem like the actions of a cold-hearted murderer. Every time she tried to convince herself otherwise, she remembered the way he'd fallen asleep at her bedside, waiting for a sign that she was all right. Of course, she would have been better off in a hospital, but they might have locked her up for attempting suicide. A rich, smart guy like Viktor would have known that. Maybe he hadn't called for help because he wanted to protect her.

She forced that notion from her mind. It bordered on something almost romantic, and she definitely didn't need to be mooning away her life in day dreams about a client, even if that client set her blood on fire just from being near her. She shivered at the memory of the sensual threat he'd delivered before storming out of her apartment. There was no doubt in her mind that he could really do those things, make her scream with pleasure and beg for more. Chills raced over her skin at the thought of those elegant hands stroking her, her skin flushed and perspiring.

She had to stop this. It was one thing to fantasize about a client, another to fantasize about the guy who'd broken into her place. How on earth had he gotten up to her second-floor window? Someone would have noticed a guy with a ladder on the street in the middle of the night, right? Briefly, she'd considered reporting the incident to 4-1-2. They'd make sure he stayed far, far away from her. She'd changed her mind when she thought about what might happen to him. Even if he had broken into her apartment, she couldn't deal with any more blood on her hands.

She couldn't stay in her apartment forever, and she couldn't call in to work forever. She made an appointment with one of her easiest-to-please clients, a nebbishy thirty-five-year-old who was set for life owing to the sale of the Internet search engine he'd created at twenty-four. He worked late—whatever someone worked on once they were independently wealthy—and wanted to meet after dinner. Fine by Cassie. The longer she stayed awake, the better.

As if her retreat from life had provided respite for the weather, as well, Cassie stepped out onto a sidewalk wet with melting snow. The smell of spring rain in the city played tricks on her. Had she been cooped up for five days or five months? It should have been pleasant on the street, but her gaze was drawn away from the last, retreating dregs of winter to the sleek black car parked on the opposite curb. A Maybach 62 S. Cassandra was no stranger to expensive cars; this one didn't belong in her neighborhood.

She started to walk slowly, checking over her shoulder only once to see if the car moved. It did, a slow, menacing crawl. The glare from the street lights created an impenetrable reflection on the windshield. She could not see who drove, but she knew who would be in the back, watching her. Viktor.

A thousand women's self-defense classes came through her mind, but she couldn't remember any tips for hiding from a vehicle that was clearly following you. Her first instinct was to duck into the narrow alley up ahead, and she followed that instinct.

The moment she veered off the sidewalk, into the space between the two buildings like the walls of a coffin, she knew she had made the wrong choice. A shock of fear stiffened her spine, the kind that gripped her in her nightmares. Something moved in the darkness at the back of the alley. *Nothing. It's nothing.* She rolled her neck, staring up at the patch of sky, tinged orange with light pollution, that she could see between the rooftops.

A hiss, a flash of fangs, and the creatures from her nightmares were falling, teeth bared, to the pavement all around her.

"I'm dreaming! I'm dreaming!" she shrieked over and over, sinking to her knees as the ring of them closed around her, their freakishly long arms and blank, white faces closing her in. She couldn't watch, squeezed her eyes shut tight and covered her ears to block out the sound of their harsh, drooling respirations in her ears.

It seemed years until one of them touched her, its talons scraping her wrist. She tried to scream, but the terror froze her lungs. This was how she would die, then: on her knees in an alley, out of her mind, killed by a hallucination that seemed so real it stopped her heart.

Something growled beside her ear, but instinct told her it was not one of the creatures. It was an oddly familiar sound, and she stopped cowering long enough to catch sight of its source.

Viktor, his white hair and skin glowing in the darkness, stood beside her, his hand at one of the creatures' throats. It thrashed its arms and legs, snapped its strange, wide jaws. The other creatures stood back, defensive, their mouths stretched into eerie grimaces over their long, pointed teeth.

With a jerking motion, Viktor lifted the creature he held and smashed it straight down, into the pavement. The ground seemed to part like water around the body, and a shockwave rumbled beneath them as Viktor turned for the next one.

One of the creatures darted out of its protective stance and grabbed Cassie. She found her lungs this time, and Viktor whirled at her scream. He quickly dispatched the monster in his hands by breaking it over his knee like sticks for a fire and lunged for the one that held Cassie.

In her life, she'd seen plenty of angry people. Her parents, the judge, Emily's parents. Herself, as she'd screamed obscenities at her own reflection.

She'd never seen anyone as angry as Viktor when the creature laid its hands on her.

Grasping each of the monster's arms, he twisted the limbs in opposite directions until bone snapped and broke through the rubbery skin of the thing's shoulders. It howled, and its cry sounded like wind blasting through the cracks in an abandoned house. Bringing up his leg, Viktor put one foot on the creature's chest and kicked. The beast flew into the building across the alley, connecting in a shower of brick shrapnel. Viktor still held its arms, now detached from the body, which wriggled and went still, a bloody pulp on the ground.

He shouted something at the remaining creatures in a harsh, foreign language, and they cowered, hissing in one last display of bravado before receding into the darkness.

Viktor watched them for a moment, his chest heaving, then turned to Cassie. "Cassandra, get in the car."

Only then did she notice Anthony standing patiently beside the Maybach at the end of the alley. She was too numb, too frightened to argue, but she couldn't quite move. Viktor pulled her to her feet, looped one arm around her and tucked her close to his chest as he helped her stumble toward the car.

"Drive us home," he ordered Anthony in a low voice, then slid into the car beside her. He laid a hand on her knee, and it was cold through her jeans. "Are you all right?"

She nodded stupidly. Of course she wasn't all right. Nothing was all right. Either the monsters of her dreams were real or Viktor was part of her hallucination. In either case, she was crazy, and she had no clue how long she'd been that way.

For a long time, she said nothing, and he did not try to engage her. She stared out the window, imagining that all of the people on the sidewalks would turn to her with blank faces and yellow teeth. A woman juggled a paper bag of groceries on her arm, and Cassie watched with terrorized fascination, waiting for her to expose her startling lack of features. When she did turn her head, she was only another human being, but Cassie still startled.

Finally, she had the courage to ask Viktor. "What were those things?"

"Vampires." The word was hard and unapologetic.

She nodded again, content to withdraw and continue staring out the dark-tinted glass as she slowly lost her mind.

Viktor was not as content to let her. "It was my fault. My mark is on you now, from feeding. They can track you, as they can track me."

“Your mark?” Cassandra shook her head. “Did you know that would happen to me? That monsters would try to attack me? And you drank my blood anyway?”

Jesus, what was she saying? She couldn’t possibly believe a word he had to say.

“Usually, it does not happen this way. If we had—”

“Why would they be tracking you? They’re my nightmares. I’ve been dreaming about them my whole life.” Well, not her whole life. Ever since the accident. But she didn’t feel like rehashing those details with a stranger.

“They’re tracking me because they wish to make me one of them.” He cleared his throat and looked away, out the window, as though he were ashamed to meet her eyes. “I have taken a life before, out of hunger. It fractured my soul, as such an act always does, and they are...attracted to that kind of despair. I carry a scent that is irresistible to Minions. When I fed off you, it mingled our essences. If we had...finished our business together, the humanity restored to me through the act would have lessened my connection to you. But I let you leave my apartment. Then, stupidly, I led them to your home.” He looked out his own window, hopelessness lining his face. “I should have known better.”

An angry laugh burst from her throat. “About what? About vampires?”

“Yes, about vampires.”

The authority with which he spoke was dangerous, pulled Cassie in, made her want to believe every word he said. Yet her brain refused to adapt to this new and absurd reality. “You can’t just say that to me. My life can’t be part of your sick fantasies. There isn’t enough money in the world to—”

“What do you think they were, then?” he asked calmly, cutting her off as though he were a patient father dealing with a toddler’s screaming tantrum.

The monsters from her nightmares were vampires. Or Minions or whatever. They existed, like humans and dogs and cats and trees. And not just tonight. Probably forever. And she’d never had a clue, besides her dreams.

Though she wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer, she asked him anyway. “What are you? Why could you fight those things the way you did?”

He let go of her hand then, as if suddenly uncomfortable with their closeness. “I am a vampire.”

Confusion spurred her curiosity on. “But those things were vampires. If you’re the same...species—”

“We are not the same!” His voice was too loud, even in the spacious interior of the car. He took a deep breath and continued, more gently, “A new vampire possesses all the instincts of an animal. If he suppresses those instincts—to hunt and kill—then he will retain his humanity. For a little while, anyway. Those that seek only to satisfy their hunger do not. They become Minions. The ones that attacked you are little more than animals, and they would have killed you had I not intervened.”

“How did you know they would come for me?” If it was him, if something in him had tainted her, was she...oh, God, she couldn’t be—

"You are not one of us. I swear to you, I would never...not without some...assurance..." He shook his head, as if to clear it. "They enjoy the despair. The smell, the taste. And you have a limitless well of that inside of you. Only the blind and mortal would not see that. The look in your eyes." He touched her face, his fingers curving over her jaw. "You do not look like yourself this way."

"How do you know what I'm supposed to look like?" She pushed his hand away. "You don't know me."

He closed his eyes briefly, sorrow crimping the space between his eyebrows. When he returned to the moment, the sadness in his expression was all for her. "They could not resist. I should have known better than to leave you."

They pulled up outside of Viktor's building. "Mr. Novotny, you're all clear," Anthony said over the intercom.

"We should walk quickly. Do not run. If any are near, running will attract their attention." Viktor reached for the door.

"Wait, just wait." She dropped her head to her hands. "I'm sorry, I can't... Drive me home. I can't get wrapped up in whatever weird game it is you're playing."

"It is not a game." Something in his voice had changed. It was still deep and gentle, but command warped the edges. "You will not be safe on your own. Come upstairs, where I can protect you."

She wanted to argue, but she couldn't find the words. Even if she could have, she couldn't have said them. Despite her fear—of him, of the creatures he was sure had followed them—she slid from the car, let him put his arm around her shoulders and guide her into the building, into the elevator, straight to his penthouse tomb. She had no choice. It was as if her body had decided, independently of her mind, to obey him.

Once they were out of the elevator and standing in the marble foyer, the mental paralysis lost its hold, and rage seized her.

Before she could utter a word, he held up a hand. "I am sorry. I promise I will not use such a cheap trick again."

"Trick?" She turned to the elevator, pressed the button furiously. "That wasn't a trick! That was a violation! People don't just do that, they don't just get to—"

"You are right," he said, loud enough to break through her angry tirade. Then, softer, "*People* do not do that."

The cold shock was like ice water pumping through her veins. She turned to face him. She'd never seen eyes so sad, an expression so despondent.

Yes, she had.

She turned to her reflection in the polished black marble wall. The image was distorted, twisting her face into a pale skull with sunken eyes. She saw it again, in the floor.

And in the black marble world at her feet, her reflection was alone.

She walked to him, looking at the walls, the floor, the gleaming brushed-metal of the elevator doors. No hint that he stood there except his actual, physical presence. She came close enough to touch him, and did, pressing her palm to the side of his cold face. “You don’t have a reflection.”

“It makes it easier to stalk prey.” He gave her a grim smile. “I have lost too much humanity to have retained something so unnecessary as my reflection.”

Though his statement thoroughly creeped her out, she couldn’t move her hand from him. Maybe there really was some kind of connection between them, like he said. She couldn’t stop staring into his eyes, despite the limitless well of pain she saw there. “You really are...what you say you are.”

He leaned into her touch, took a breath that sounded like a sob. When he spoke, though, his words were controlled, almost polite. “Yes. A vampire.”

His hand captured hers and pulled it to his lips. For a weird, frightening moment she thought he would bite her. Instead, he kissed her palm on the fleshy pad below her thumb. Before she could react, his other arm snaked around her waist, pulled her tight to him, and he covered her mouth with his. He was hungry, desperate, his hands sliding to her shoulders, then down, capturing her arms to her sides, releasing her the next moment.

It had been years since Cassie had been kissed like this, like a woman and not an employee. The carefully drawn lines she’d put down for herself in black and white faded to gray and disappeared altogether. It was dangerous, angering, even, that he could do such a thing.

But this was not another of his hypnotic tricks. Maddening though it was, she could not resist. She opened her mouth under his, found herself just as wild and desperate as him. She wound her arms around his neck and rose on the tips of her toes, not close enough and too close at the same time. His hands smoothed her shirt tight against her back, then bunched the fabric in his fingers, slid under to suddenly hot skin beneath, tracing down her spine, fingertips dipping into the waistband of her jeans.

Someone cleared their throat, and Viktor’s hands immediately moved to smooth his jacket as he stepped back from her. Anthony stood in the foyer, a respectful distance from them. “I’m sorry for my interruption, Mr. Novotny. Is there anything else you’ll need tonight?”

“No, thank you, Anthony. Good night.”

He nodded toward Cassie. “Will the lady be needing a ride home?”

“Good night, Anthony.” Viktor’s voice was firmer, and he waited until the man entered the elevator and the doors had closed behind him before he spoke again.

“I apologize for my behavior.” He unbuttoned and re-buttoned his jacket as he spoke, though it hadn’t been rumpled. “It was not... I did not mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she said quickly. “I don’t usually do...that. Either.”

They stood in silence, looking anywhere but at each other, though Cassie stole a glance or two to try and discern what he was thinking. Had that been another mind trick? The sensible thing would have been to blame it on that, but the truth was, she'd lost control, just as he had.

"I have questions," she asked after what seemed like a long time, hoping to return the moment to neutral ground.

"All right." He rubbed his hands together as though he anticipated her questions happily. His sudden shift in mood only highlighted the awkwardness of their situation, an oddly endearing reaction in Cassie's mind. He placed a hand on her elbow to steer her from the foyer to the staircase, and his touch sent a shock of awareness through her. Strangely, the crazy glass stairs and dizzying height displayed by the windows ahead didn't seem as terrifying with him at her side.

He led her to the couch and waited until she had sat before seating himself in the armchair adjacent. "Would you like to go first, or shall I?"

"I will," she said quickly. She hadn't thought he would want to know anything about her. No one usually did. "How old are you?"

"Forty-two," he answered automatically, then corrected himself. "No, no, you wish to know about—"

"Total," she prompted. "The total number of years."

"Yes." He tapped his finger against his lips, his brow creased in a frown. "I was born in 1881. That would make me...one hundred and twenty-nine years old."

She tried not to choke on her own spit. She'd expected him to be old. Maybe even ancient. She'd been fully prepared to learn he was five hundred. Hearing it out loud was a lot different than imagining it in your head, though. "Maybe I should have started with 'where are you from?'"

He shook his head, making a clucking noise with his tongue. "No, no. It's my turn now. Where are you from?"

She took a deep breath and tried to remember her therapist's words. *You do not need to disclose what happened to anyone. You have a new life now, and you've paid your debt to society. You won't hurt anyone by omitting the truth.* Easy enough to say when you're being paid to, she guessed. Now was not the time to tell him, if she ever told him at all. "I'm from Arizona."

His eyebrows shot up at that. "Arizona, and you moved all the way to New York? I'm impressed."

She shrugged. "Don't be, it was just a plane ride. Now, my turn. Where are *you* from?"

"The Austro-Hungarian Empire," he said, then he cursed under his breath. "No, I'm sorry. Czechoslovakia."

"The Czech Republic," she corrected him quietly. "Since the end of the cold war."

"Ah, yes. I have not been back since I left there, and I must confess I have not always cared for politics." He shrugged. "I must now, for the sake of the company. But it bores me. I let Anthony handle the details."

“And you don’t miss your home?” If a news story came on related to her home state, Cassie’s ears always perked up, even though she didn’t want them to.

“There is nothing there for me,” he said, with a harshness that shocked Cassie. Recovering his cool demeanor, he continued, “But you spoke out of turn. I have the same question for you.”

Cassie felt her heartbeat in her throat. “Do I miss my home? No. Not at all.”

He smiled, slow and genuine. “I think we must be very alike.”

“You mean besides the whole you’re-a-vampire thing?” She snickered. “Yeah, I guess we’re a lot alike.”

In more ways than you know.

Suddenly, it wasn’t funny anymore. Not even in a grim, darkly humorous way. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. “Oh man, I am...so exhausted.”

“It is the adrenaline wearing off. It is safer for you to stay here,” he said, letting out a long breath, as if bracing for an argument. “I do not expect you to...fulfill our previous agreement while you are here tonight. But if you wish to be compensated—”

“No.” She cleared her throat. “You saved my life.”

“Twice,” he reminded her with a gentle smile. “It is late. Let me take you to the guest room.”

Guest room? They hadn’t been able to control themselves in the foyer, what would happen when they were in a room with a bed? Nothing, she resolved as she followed Viktor to a door that blended seamlessly into the marble wall.

“My idea,” he said with an embarrassed smile. “I greatly admire the secret passages of Bond villain hideouts.”

Was that a joke? Had he just made a joke? “I didn’t realize vampires had a sense of humor.”

“Don’t tell anyone, it would ruin our collective reputation.” He held open the door for her, and she took a deep breath as she stepped past him. Into a secret passageway, with a vampire. It was official. She had lost her mind.

The corridor they’d entered was as dark and mausoleum-like as the rest of the house. Sconces on the wall reflected shallow light off the black marble walls, but at least the floor here was carpeted, a thick white plush that would feel heavenly barefoot. Thankfully the carpet continued into the guest room Viktor opened for her.

“Your entire apartment makes me crave Oreos,” she said, wandering to the king-sized bed in the center of the room, a mountain of black pillows piled high upon the pristine white duvet cover.

He followed her only a few steps, as though an invisible tether held him back. “I could call Anthony back to bring you some, if you wish. I can make him get you almost anything. He’s very handy to keep around.”

She smiled at his joke and shook her head, wondering what it would be like to just order someone to get you cookies. Did people really do that kind of thing? Was Anthony an assistant, or was he a slave under hypnotic mind control? “No, I’m not hungry, actually.”

“Well, if you are, or if you need anything else, don’t hesitate to ask. I owe you your comfort, since I have caused you all this trouble.” He motioned to the dresser. “There are a few things in there you might find useful. Nightclothes, underthings.”

“Underthings?” She raised an eyebrow at him.

“I am a vampire, not a monk.” His easy shrug told her that jealousy was not required. Not that she had a reason to be jealous. It wasn’t like he hadn’t slept with Julie, and probably with lots of other women in his long, long life.

Something was definitely wrong with her brain if she was worried about what other women this vampire guy was sleeping with, even if he had kissed her and saved her life. The kiss had been nothing but a natural expression of relief after danger. And he may have saved her life, but he even admitted it was his fault she had gotten into trouble in the first place.

Although, the first time, she’d gotten herself into trouble. But it had been because of the nightmares, and those had gotten worse when she’d met him.

Had gotten worse, but hadn’t simply appeared overnight. Since the moment she’d met him, he’d dominated her thoughts. Being apart hadn’t made things any better, and now, being near him, her confusion had been turned all the way up to eleven.

“Viktor, may I ask you something?” He nodded, and she continued. “You told me the Minions were after me were because of you. But I’ve had nightmares about them ever since—for my whole life. My whole life, I’ve had them. Not just after I met you.”

Her words had visibly shaken him. She had thought it would be impossible, but he went paler, the deep, sorrowful hollows beneath his eyes darkening. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, no,” he assured her, composing his shocked expression but not truly hiding it. “It is rare, but not unheard of, for people to know of the existence of Minions without truly knowing what they are. Perhaps you saw them once and only mistook it for a dream.”

“I think I would remember those things pretty clearly.” She didn’t mean to argue with him, but something nagged at her, some component of the situation that did not rest easy in the back of her mind. “They’re not normal. It’s not like you see scary, blank vampires all over New York. I’ve never even seen a bat since I moved here.”

He shrugged, his pretended indifference beginning to resemble actual indifference. It made it seem more like an act. “Perhaps they are a part of the collective primal memory. Perhaps something happened once, something that brought you close to death.”

Her heart went icy cold. “No, nothing like that has ever happened to me. You’re right, maybe they’re just a part of everyone’s nightmares. They’re certainly nightmarish enough.”

“Well, if you will be comfortable for now, I will excuse myself.” He hesitated only a moment, to give her a chance to ask for anything else, to see if she truly was comfortable. She smiled, trying to look more at ease than he did, so he would go. If he didn’t, the temptation to jump into his arms and beg him to make good on his threats to give her pleasure unlike any she had felt before might just overwhelm her. It was a far more attractive prospect than going to bed and giving herself up to the nightmares. She watched him go, waiting to hear the soft click of a door before she let out the breath she held.

Once inside his office, Viktor closed the door and took a moment to still his racing mind. He reached into his collar and gripped Melina’s ring. It burned white hot against his palm, and he dropped it with a curse. It bounced like a hot coal off his skin, and he ripped the chain from his neck with a growl. The ring rolled across the carpet to settle innocently a few feet from him. The Eastern cross etched into the band mocked him with a glint of light, and Viktor could not force his gaze to settle upon it.

Aversion to holy objects, he thought. One step closer to the end. He forced his limbs to stop trembling as he wiped his burned hand over his face. He would have to feed now, to heal his wounds, and feed that other hunger in him, as well. Though the kiss he’d shared with Cassandra had soothed the ragged edges of his humanity, a simple kiss could not stem the tide that flowed away from him. He’d needed to be with her that first night, to have taken someone else in the days since. His self-enforced chastity of the past week had been a substantial blow to his humanity, and it could not have come at a worse time. He could not worry about himself when he was so worried about Cassandra. But why was he so worried? He had not caused her troubles. The sadness he had tasted in her had been aging for some time.

It is because she reminds you so much of someone you can never have again. His chest tightened as though the missing weight of the ring were enough to crush him. Cassandra was nothing like Melina. But she had seen the Minions, she’d remembered them when other humans would not have. Other humans would have been dead if they had encountered them. Even those who had been slain by the creatures had likely not known what had caused their death.

Perhaps she had died, his traitorous mind insisted. Perhaps she died long ago, when there was no one to save her.

He shook his head, desperate to clear those dangerous longings from his mind. He would not let Cassandra meet the same fate Melina had, and he would not entertain any notion that they were connected. His imagination would happily run away with him to let him feel a fraction of what he’d felt with Melina. What he’d felt when he’d kissed Cassandra.

Carefully, he lifted the precious ring with his handkerchief. Through the silk, the metal band burned as though it had been removed from an oven, but when he set it onto the gleaming enamel of his desk, it

left no mark. The handkerchief came away without a scorch on it, and he used it to mop his sweating brow. With trembling hands, he reached for his phone and dialed Anthony's number.

"Get me someone. I don't care who," he ordered as soon as the man answered. He could not keep up the pretext of Anthony's false employment now. The man acted in his capacity as a protector of humanity tonight. Viktor looked away from the ring and fixed his gaze on the clock. After he fed, his mind would be clearer. After he fed from a human and took his pleasure from a human body, he would have the strength to banish these confusing thoughts and to concentrate on what should be his true concern.

His loss of humanity that drove him ever closer to losing his soul completely.

Chapter Four

In her completely dark, completely silent room, in a bed ten times more comfortable than her bed at home, Cassandra couldn't sleep. Sleeping in strange places had always been a problem for her. She punched her pillow with a frustrated sigh and threw her legs out of the bed. A soft silk robe hung from the bedpost and she pulled it down. The nightgown she'd found in the drawer—with the price tags still on—was long, made of the same deliciously soft black silk as the robe, but a bit too tight and not something she wanted to parade around a stranger's house in. Shrugging into the sleeves of the robe, she padded to the door and opened it, turning the knob slowly so as not to make a noise.

While she was pretty sure Viktor would still be up—vampires slept during the day, didn't they?—she didn't want his solicitous manservant popping up with a glass of warm milk. What kind of a person just hung around waiting for someone else's orders all day and all night? Viktor must pay him a fortune. Or maybe he had some really horrible dirt on him. While she supposed it might be convenient to be waited on hand and foot, she just needed to be alone with her thoughts. Or alone with Viktor, since her thoughts all concerned him.

The living room was empty, the large windows uncovered. The traffic outside had slowed. While New York might be the city that never sleeps, it certainly looked as if everyone was taking a nap. Probably one of the benefits of living in a wealthy neighborhood. When the banks closed, so did everything else.

Not able to bring herself closer to the windows and their dizzying view, she wandered past the fireplace and ran her fingers along the mantel. In the dark, the marble walls and black furniture made the room a void. It unnerved Cassie and forced her to retreat to the hallway she'd come from. Far at the end, at the double doors leading to Viktor's bedroom, faint light glowed.

Would it be intrusive to knock and speak to him, if just to pass the time? She wondered if he was just as lonely as she was, sitting up all night alone. She stopped outside the door and knocked softly. When he didn't answer, she knocked again, then pushed on the open door to widen the opening just slightly.

"Viktor?" Her softly spoken question ended on a gasp. Viktor was not lonely. At least, he wasn't alone. And he didn't look lonely at the moment.

Her heart pounding, Cassie took a step back. Otherwise occupied, Viktor and his companion hadn't noticed her. That left her with the awkward decision of whether or not she should leave, or stay to watch and assuage her curiosity.

It wasn't as though she hadn't seen people having sex before. One of her easiest clients had been a very successful real estate developer who often just wanted her to watch him with one of his mistresses. She'd never seen a vampire have sex before and, while it didn't seem all that different from a human having sex, she'd never seen a man fuck another man. Which was exactly what was happening in Viktor's room.

She pressed her face to the crack between the doors, chastising herself for spying but unable to resist her curiosity. A fire burned in the sleek marble fireplace, and Viktor knelt, naked, on the plush white rug in front of it, his head thrown back, mouth open and groaning with pleasure. His hands twisted in the shoulder-length dark hair of a young man lying in front of him. The light of the fire cast the men's bodies in a golden glow, gilding the droplets of sweat on the young man's tight muscles.

"Enough," Viktor warned, and the man pulled back. Viktor climbed to his feet, and Cassandra's view was blocked by the angle of the room, but the brief glimpse she'd caught revealed the deception of Viktor's finely tailored clothes. Those expensive suits hid the body of a man more accustomed to the weight room than the boardroom.

The young man waited patiently, a slow smile curving his lips as he watched what Cassie couldn't see. When Viktor stepped into view, she saw what had made the guy on the floor so happy. Viktor moved toward him, stroking his hand up and down the length of the longest, thickest cock Cassie had ever seen. She covered her mouth to stifle her cry of surprise, her cunt growing wet as she watched Viktor's hand gripping his massive shaft.

The guy on the floor whistled and laughed. Viktor smiled graciously, as if he'd just been complimented on having a lovely home or good skin. Cassie almost laughed herself. When Viktor dropped to his knees again, the man's bravado faded a bit. "Go slow, okay?"

"I will," Viktor reassured him. "And if you find me...too difficult to take, let me know. It will not affect your payment."

It sounded like Viktor made a routine of this. Something akin to jealousy flared in Cassie's mind, but she dismissed it. Viktor had been honest with her when she'd first come here. He'd told her that he had other sources of...well, whatever it was he liked to do with male prostitutes. And she couldn't exactly judge him for being a john, when they'd met on the job. He hadn't declared true love, and she had to admit she wouldn't have been brave enough to let him in through the backdoor, so to speak. There was no reason to be jealous.

There was no reason to peep, either, but she couldn't look away as Viktor positioned himself behind the man, who supported himself on his hands and knees. Cassie had been so intent on staring at Viktor's cock that she hadn't seen the condom in his other hand. He unrolled it down his length and reached for something out of her line of sight, coming back with a bottle of lube. He pumped a generous amount into his hands and smeared it over his penis, then dispensed more and slid his fingers into the cleft of the man's ass.

“Your hands are cold,” the man purred, reaching down to grip his own cock.

Cassandra reached down too, her fingers bunching the material of her nightgown, lifting it higher. Actually having sex with someone didn’t get her as hot as just watching Viktor. She practically ached with emptiness, and she pressed her thighs together, her channel spasming, begging to be filled.

What was she thinking? She should be insulted that Viktor, who had seemed pretty darn attracted to her earlier that evening, had apparently been hiding a gay streak a mile long. Why had he pretended? Why had he kissed her?

Those concerns fled as she watched Viktor lean over the man, easing the wide head of his erection against the man’s body. The man hissed and buried his face against his arm as Viktor pressed forward, then halted. “Are you all right?”

That was far gentler treatment than Cassandra would have expected from a client, even the ones at 4-1-2. No one had ever hurt her outright, but none had been anything close to considerate without her prompting. The man made a strangled noise but nodded, so Viktor pressed forward, so slowly as to make Cassie aware of the breath she held.

“God,” the man on the floor groaned, rolling his head back. The tension in his face changed to joyous relief and back again as if someone had flipped a light switch. Viktor laughed softly, but his concentration never wavered. The hard ridges of muscle across his stomach contracted and he shuddered as his control slipped and he drove the rest of himself into his partner’s body. The man gasped loud enough to cover Cassie’s own startled noise.

“I’m sorry,” Viktor panted, his head and shoulders slumping like a runner recovering from a losing race.

The guy grimaced, but shook his head. “Nothing to be sorry about. Let’s go.”

It didn’t take any more encouraging. Viktor growled, and the feral sound shot straight to Cassie’s dripping core. Almost without realizing what she intended, she slipped two fingers between her folds and over her clit. Her teeth sank into her lip, a dam holding back the sea of moans and gasps that she feared would overwhelm her. The threat of being discovered and the mortification that would follow seemed such a small thing to risk. Her eyes closed as she swirled her fingertips over her swollen flesh, and she forced them to open to take in more of the scene before her.

Viktor grasped the man on the floor by one shoulder, forcing him back as he drove forward. Violent exhalations burst from the man’s throat and his hand worked furiously on his cock while his hips bucked in time to Viktor’s punishing thrusts. “So fucking good,” the man babbled senselessly.

It certainly looked fucking good from where Cassie stood. A sheen of sweat stood out on Viktor’s pale body. Ropes of muscle strained against skin as he slammed his hips against the man’s ass. The man shouted, his cock spurting thick white fluid over his hand and onto the rug.

Cassie's orgasm caught her quickly, and she gripped the door for support as her knees buckled. She prayed silently that she wouldn't make a sound or, worse, topple through the door entirely.

While the man still trembled from his release, Viktor grabbed a handful of dark hair and pulled the man's head back, exposing his throat. He opened his mouth to reveal needle-sharp fangs that gleamed in the firelight like something out of a horror movie. Paralyzed with pleasure and fear, Cassandra could not look away in the brief second it took for Viktor to bite into the man's corded neck.

Her heart pounding, Cassandra could not believe what she saw. She'd thought she'd understood what Viktor was. Hadn't he drunk her blood? Fought off the monsters that had attacked her? She'd seen his missing reflection too, but none of those things had truly gotten across the reality of what Viktor was. Not like this.

The man screamed and struggled. Viktor broke his mouth, smeared horrific red, away from the man's throat and hissed strange words into his ear. Immediately, the man's struggles ceased, and Viktor pressed his lips over the wound, sucking noisily against it. The man moaned and arched his back, grinding against Viktor's pumping hips. Viktor tore his mouth from the bite in the man's neck and, to Cassandra's astonishment, the wound closed before her eyes. With a low groan, Viktor shuddered against the man, ramming his hips forward one last time.

Cassandra backed away, terrified that when Viktor's head cleared he would look up and finally notice her. She could not turn away from the door, paralyzed by the fear that if she did, he would see her fleeing and know that she saw. Somehow, staring at the door and creeping slowly backward was the only way she could imagine keeping it from happening. The tension was too great to bear after only a few steps, and she turned and ran with the lightest steps possible back to her room. She leapt into bed and burrowed as far under the covers as she could stand, certain that any moment he would poke his head in to check and see if she were awake. Pretending sleep soon threatened to give way to actual sleep, and she succumbed, one hand protectively clenched around her throat.

Viktor rolled away from Christopher's prone form. He didn't bother to look back. There had been nothing wrong with the young man's performance. In fact, the only thing he seemed to be lacking was the fact that he was not Cassandra.

Pushing the guilt from his mind, he got to his feet. He'd needed to feed. There was nothing wrong in that. Blood to keep his heart pumping, intimacy to halt his inevitable slide into the abyss.

Why did he feel as though he'd betrayed her? He reached for his robe, then tossed it aside. He needed fresh air, before the sun came up. He pulled a pair of jeans from his dresser and put them on, then shoved his arms into the black button-down shirt he'd left balled up on the floor.

Halfway through the living room, he felt her presence like the prick of a needle all over his skin. He waited a few more strides to see if she would speak. When she did not, he said, "Join me, if you like."

He didn't wait to see if she followed. He knew that she did. Pushing open the door to the terrace, he stepped out into the night air. She paused at the door, a little gasp escaping her throat. She held one pale hand to the bare skin over her collarbones. The light night breeze stirred her silk nightgown and flattened the fabric against her body, accentuating the line that bisected her toned stomach, the soft mound at the juncture of her thighs. Despite his encounter with Christopher, his body longed for her. Not solely sexually, though he did grow hard at the sight of her hard nipples straining against her nightgown. No, he wanted her, but he wanted to hold her, to feel her safe in his arms, real and alive.

Do you long for her, or do you long for Melina?

"There is no need to fear. I would not let you fall." He leaned against the sleek railing, arms braced wide, letting the cool night wind push through his open shirt.

"I know I won't fall." She sounded almost ashamed of her fear. "You've been so good to me."

He turned and held out his hand to her, and she took it, stepping easily into his embrace. Her skin was remarkably warm and alive against his. Soft in a way that Christopher had not been. And familiar. Her body was so familiar. He held her close, burying his face in her hair.

"Miluji tě, Viktor. Neopouštěj mě znovu."

I love you, Viktor. Do not leave me again.

Every synapse in his brain beat to desperate alert. He lifted his head, not daring to look at her face, not willing to believe that this might be a dream. But he had to look, and when she lifted her head, her face creased in concern, Melina's face had replaced Cassandra's.

"What's wrong?" she asked, this apparition with Melina's face and Cassandra's voice. He backed away, felt the hard iron rail at his back and, in a horrifying moment, felt it disintegrate. Tumbling back, he opened his mouth to scream, only to see Melina change shape, twisting into the grotesque form of a Minion.

Dripping with sweat and gasping for breath, Viktor sat up. The air in his darkened room prickled with the daylight that loomed behind the window shades. Christopher was long gone, as was the money Viktor had left for him. Cassandra remained, a rosy glow that lay gently at the edges of his mind. Just her presence helped calm him.

As he dressed for the day, Viktor tried to shake the terror of the dream. Though it was tempting to ruminate on the possible meanings behind it, he knew better than to expect any good to come from dwelling on nightmares. Some might have the gift for divining from dreams, but he had never found a useful message in them. He expended unusual concentration on tasks that were usually automated: fastening cufflinks, buttoning his shirt, tying his tie. Any small task that would distance him from the lingering shadow of his dream.

When he passed the room Cassandra had slept in, he noticed that the bed was empty and unmade. He continued to the living room, mentally bracing himself for her presence.

Seated in a leather armchair, wrapped in the silk robe he had left out for her, Cassandra leaned over a coffee table covered with takeout boxes. The smell of the food assaulted him, and Viktor took a step back. Usually, his apartment smelled like...nothing. It had been a very long time since he'd seen human food in his home, and this smelled strongly of cotton oil and broccoli.

Though he hadn't made a sound, Cassandra straightened, her head whipping around out of reflex. Gone was the temptress from his dream, replaced with an almost wholesome side of Cassandra that he had not thought to see before. Dressed in a silk camisole and her jeans from the night before, she couldn't have been more sexy, but it was the way she looked, the way her pulse was visible in her throat and her eyes went wide, searching for some threat, that captured him. That this beautiful creature lived in such fear that it had become reflex broke his heart. The night before she'd warmed to him, or at least it had seemed as though she had. Perhaps it had just been the shock of the attack, of all she had learned, that had left her vulnerable to him. That bothered him more than it ought.

"I hope you don't mind. Your assistant brought this all for me." She motioned at the coffee table turned buffet. "There's plenty here if—"

His stomach turned at the thought. "No, I do not—"

"Of course." She blushed, closed her eyes and shook her head. "I'm sorry, I'm getting used to this whole..."

"Vampire thing?" He forced himself to relax. The food would not attack him. He took a seat on the sofa, warily eyeing the bounty on the table. "I must remember to thank Anthony for his thoughtfulness."

After a long, uncomfortable silence, during which Cassandra sipped from a soft drink and Viktor furiously tried to think of a way to reenter the easy conversation they'd had the night before, she suddenly spoke. "Your friend left early this morning."

If it had not already been so, Viktor's blood would have run cold.

"It's fine, I'm not...weird about stuff like that." Cassandra picked up a box of noodles and stabbed at the contents with a pair of chopsticks, not willing to meet his eyes. "I guess it would be pretty hypocritical of me, in my business."

"I fear you might misunderstand. He is merely someone I feed from."

"I saw you together." She blushed again, her pale skin glowing with proof of her embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to spy on you. I woke up in the night and I thought maybe you would be awake too. I honestly would never—"

He lifted his hand to stop her. "It was wrong of me to entertain guests while you stay in my home. Think nothing of it."

“Well, I do think something of it.” She frowned and dropped her chopsticks into the box. “I have to know, are you... I thought when you kissed me...”

“I have lived a long time, Cassandra.” He groaned inwardly at the poor excuse that was. “That is no excuse for my rudeness toward you. I merely wish for you to understand, once a person lives as I have and has seen all I have, certain distinctions no longer matter as they apply to companionship and feeding.”

“So, you’re not gay? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?” It made sense for her to be so incredulous, but it would have been much easier if she would simply believe him.

Another tortured silence fell between them. Viktor wanted to rush to reassure her that what she’d seen meant nothing, but the sentiment would seem cheap. “There are not so many open-minded persons in this city as you might think. If I cannot find someone to feed from, I am not above bringing them here under false pretenses.”

“You mean, he didn’t want you to feed from him?” She looked truly horrified by what she heard.

“As I am sure the chicken in that carton would rather you not feed from it.” He smiled to soften the harsh truth of his reply. “I did not hurt him, and he will not remember what happened to him but that he visited a client and enjoyed the service he provided. I doubt you can say as much for the chicken.”

She pursed her lips. “It’s not the same thing.”

“No, it is not.” He studied her face. There was something of Melina there, in her defiance, her gentle, willful way of speaking that warned him not to dismiss her. “Tell me, when you do your work, do you enjoy it?”

“No, no,” she answered without hesitation, waving her arms in front of her and laughing without humor. “No, it’s a job. That’s all it is.”

“You find nothing about being with another human sexually a connection to what you are? Your humanity?” The expression on her face told him he might as well be speaking Greek.

Cassandra laughed. “No. In fact, I would say it’s just the opposite. Every time I sleep with a guy for money, I’m less human than I was that morning.”

“It is different for vampires.” It should be different for humans, as well, but Viktor did not wish to insult her. Another time, perhaps, when he could show her what he meant, take her into his arms and give her pleasure, show her it did not have to wound her soul to surrender her body. “If you had not left the night of our first meeting, I would have not only fed on your blood, but I would have enjoyed your body. In making that connection with a human, we are able to retain some of our own humanity.”

“For last night, I can only apologize. My hunger drove me to behave in a way that was upsetting to you, and I will endeavor not to do so in the future.”

“Apology accepted. And appreciated,” she added with a timid smile. Timid—there was a word he would not have applied to her before. Every moment he spent with her, she fascinated him more.

As if his thought of the time had alerted her, she glanced up to the clock on the mantel. "I'm sorry, it's almost noon and I'm still hanging out in your house. I can get a cab and head home—"

"No, I wish for you to stay." He hated the desperation he felt at the thought of her leaving, but knew she would not stay forever and he should not wish her to. But there was a real danger waiting for her, and he would not let her go where he could not follow. "It is not safe for you to leave without me to accompany you, and I cannot do so before sunset. Truthfully, I feel you are much safer here, with me."

"Truthfully? So do I." She blushed and looked down at her hands. "I just don't want you to think you have to let me stay here. I don't want to put a crimp in your lifestyle."

So, she still concerned herself with that. It should not make him pleased that she was troubled to see him with someone else, but it did. "You are inordinately concerned with what you saw last night."

"Well, it's kind of hard to get out of my mind." She flushed. "I don't mean it like—"

Desire lanced, unexpectedly, through him. "Exactly how much did you see?"

She picked up a take-out carton and stabbed at the contents with no clear intention of eating. "I saw enough."

"Enough." He chuckled to himself. Though he'd never considered it before, he had to admit there was something arousing in the thought of being watched.

She snorted and made a gestural threat with her fork. "Yes, I saw it. I'm sure you're very proud."

"And I'm sure you're a little curious."

"Don't do that," she warned gently. "Don't try to tease me to change the subject. I'm not a child. You kissed me yesterday. You've gone out of your way to protect me. I think I have a right to know what's going on in your head."

"I cannot argue with you. You do have a right to know." He stood and walked away, not from the conversation, but from the distraction of her sitting there, looking so beautiful and tousled from bed. If he looked at her, he would not be able to form a coherent explanation of his feelings. He stood at the window, though the shades hid the view.

"I didn't call you," she said softly. "When I was overdosing. I didn't call you for help, but somehow, you showed up. What were you doing at my apartment?"

So, she knew the truth. "I am sorry. I did not mean to deceive you. But I felt that you were in danger."

After a long pause, she asked, "You *felt* me?"

"After I fed on you, I could feel your presence in my blood. It does not always happen, but it is not uncommon. Something in your blood bound you to me, and that bond would have been broken if we had made love. Perhaps it was your sadness. I knew you were in danger and I came to your aid. I had hoped that would be the end of it, and you would never have cause to question my story."

"You didn't hypnotize me then, did you?" A steely anger underscored her words. She was as strong-willed as Melina had been, and did not like to have it altered.

He did not have to lie to put her fears to rest. “No. You were unconscious when I found you, and I knew you would not remember all the details of that night. I did not like lying to you, but I could not explain—”

“Without telling me what you were. I understand.” She paused, her breath hitching audibly. “Is that why you kissed me? Because of my blood?”

“I kissed you because I wanted to.” He turned and found her standing behind him. It was unusual for anyone to be able to sneak up on him, and she had done it without trying. It did not bode well for him that his concentration was so broken. “Cassandra, I must confess that I would be attracted to you even if we were not in the situation in which we find ourselves.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” She blushed again. The woman who had been so cool and professional toward him when she had thought to be servicing a sexual fetish blushed at the mention of her feelings. “And then last night—”

“Forget last night,” he bade her softly. He did not need to use a trick of the mind on her now, and wouldn’t. He hoped his words would be enough to reassure her. “Cassandra, you are beholden to me for nothing. I will not ask you to stay here if you do not wish to, or spend time with me if you do not wish to.” Though he spoke those words, he silently prayed she would not leave. If she did, he would hire someone to guard her every moment of every day, but it would kill him to see the task fall into another’s hands. It would kill him to have her far from him, to miss the sight of her when he had just begun to appreciate it.

She took a deep breath. “I’ll stay. It’s just that I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You will not be. It would bother me far more to think of you out there, alone and unprotected.” He glanced at his watch. “I have a teleconference with shareholders in ten minutes. You’ll have to excuse me. I keep rather odd work hours.”

“You would have to. You’re a vampire.” She looked around his spartan apartment and said with a sigh, “I guess I’ll find some way to keep myself entertained.”

Chapter Five

There was absolutely nothing fun in Viktor's apartment. Cassandra didn't know if it was because he was a vampire or because he was a workaholic, but there weren't any books in the living room, no television, not even a spare piece of junk mail lying around. It was like no one lived there. Was Viktor living? She would have to ask him the next time they spoke. Which could be any time in the next ten years. There wasn't a clock to keep track of the time she'd spent while bored.

The huge windows were shaded, but that didn't make them any less terrifying. Boredom could drive Cassie to do any number of stupid things, so for a while she made a game of inching her way, step by step, toward the glass. Not being able to see the height at which she stood should have made it easier, but knowing what was behind the dark shades didn't help at all.

This is so like you, she scolded herself. You're afraid of something, but you don't want to conquer your fear. You just want to torture yourself with it.

Cassandra went to the couch, flopped down and stared up into the dark void of the ceiling. It felt like hours since Viktor had excused himself to go to his office, and it would probably feel like more before he emerged again. Any other normal person would have been glad to be as far away from a vampire as possible. Nope, not her. She wanted to get closer. A lot closer.

She groaned at her own stupidity and pulled one of the throw pillows over her face. She mumbled into it, "I would kill somebody for a magazine right now."

"Excuse me?"

Fumbling to get the pillow off her face, she looked up at Anthony, who peered down at her with concern. "I said I would kill somebody for a magazine right now."

"Did Viktor leave you here without anything to do?" Anthony chuckled. "Forgive him, he doesn't realize that his eternal martyrdom isn't as fascinating to everyone as it is to him."

She sat up and smoothed her hair. "I assume he works a lot?"

"Twenty-six hours a day, if I let him. Something to drink?" He already made his way to the bar, and Cassandra got up to follow him.

"Any soda in there?" She nodded toward the minifridge below the bar.

Anthony shook his head. "Orange juice, though."

"I'll take it." She slid onto a bar stool while Anthony poured her a glass of juice. "So, I bet you work twice as hard as he does."

“Three times.” He passed the glass to her. “But I still find time to read.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen a book in this house,” she said with a smile, then added, “Thank you,” as she lifted the glass for a drink.

“Yeah, Viktor doesn’t read much. Now me, on the other hand, I read a lot of stuff.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a manila envelope, dropping it onto the bar with more force than necessary.

Cassandra swallowed. Was this a blackmail attempt? She’d seen more than one girl at the club go out with the wrong client and end up signing off on “confidentiality agreements” that amounted to little more than veiled legal threats should they ever tell what they knew. “What do you, uh, what do you read?”

He raised an eyebrow. “All sorts of things. True crime, lately. You should take a look.”

With shaking hands, Cassie set aside her juice glass and reached for the envelope. Almost before she opened it she knew what would be inside, but she still gasped when the photocopied newspaper stories slid into her hand. The grainy, black-and-white matrix of the photos took her back with sharp clarity to that night. From an entirely different angle, lying on the broken glass strewn on the pavement, she saw the car on its side in the median. Saw them pull Emily’s ragdoll body from the hole they’d cut in the roof, saw them lay her on the grass and cover her with a sheet so the passing cars wouldn’t gawk at her.

“I was wondering how long you were going to wait until you told Viktor. How many times you were going to let him feed off you again.” Anthony smiled an unfriendly smile. “You know, he’s hanging on by a thread. He might lose his humanity in days. He might go a couple years. I don’t know. But I think that whoever hired you isn’t planning on me killing him when the time comes. Why don’t you get out and go tell your boss that he’s not going to take down Viktor Novotny on my watch.”

Cassie shook her head, her heart still pounding wildly from the shock in the envelope. “I don’t understand a word you just said.”

“You expect me to believe that you just showing up with your poisoned blood is a coincidence? When Viktor’s condition has taken a turn for the worse and Minions are swarming the city?” Anthony laughed. “You must think I was born yesterday.”

“I think you’re really overestimating what I know about your situation here.” Trying to regain her calm, Cassandra pushed the photocopied pages back into the envelope. “Yes, I had an accident in college. But that has nothing to do with Viktor.”

Anthony said nothing, but regarded her skeptically.

“Besides, I don’t know what you mean about his condition. He’s a vampire. How does that get worse? He said he could lose his humanity, that he might be one of those...things, one day. But I don’t understand what would make that happen, or where I come in.” That sounded like something a spy would ask. A very inept spy, which was apparently what Anthony thought she was. “Look, I’m nobody. Honestly, I had no idea that vampires existed until I met Viktor. But if there’s something wrong with him, like he’s going to die or something, I have a right to know.”

“No, actually, you don’t have a right to know.” Anthony sighed in frustration. “Look, I’m going to be watching you. If you don’t have a reason to hide this, you should tell Viktor about the accident. That way, I know you’re not up to anything and Viktor can make up his own mind on whether or not he wants to feed from you.”

“What, because I had a car accident my blood is damaged somehow?” She frowned. “Viktor would have been able to tell, right? He would have tasted it.”

Anthony shook his head and took the envelope back, tucking it into his jacket. “Not because of your accident. Look, I can’t tell if you’re playing dumb or not, but you killed somebody. That stays in your blood. Viktor has been losing his humanity at an even faster rate than usual lately, and drinking the blood of a killer is only going to speed up the process.”

The blood of a killer. The cold way he’d stated it left her no room for argument. She *had* killed someone. Maybe not as directly as pulling a trigger, but her actions had led to someone losing their life. “You said he’s losing his humanity. What happens then? When it’s all gone, what happens to him?”

It was clear that Anthony still didn’t believe her, from the way he paused before answering. “You know what happens. You met it in the alley last night.”

Cassie shivered at the memory of the creatures that had surrounded her. She couldn’t imagine Viktor being one of them. They’d been faceless, void of personality or compassion or fear. They’d been...inhuman. “I don’t want to hurt Viktor. I just met him, and he’s been nothing but kind to me.”

“Neither do I. But I’ll have to, if he becomes one of them. You need to make your choice.” He poured himself a splash of whiskey in a highball glass. “Or I’ll make it for you.”

After he downed his drink, the entire conversation seemed to have never taken place, as though the whiskey had washed it away. “What do you like to read? I’ll swing by the bookstore before I bring your dinner.”

“Um, anything, really. Just magazines would be fine, I guess.” Anthony might have been able to flip his switch from threatening to solicitous in a heartbeat, but Cassandra was less able to switch from threatened to not-threatened while he stood there, cold expectation still glinting in his eyes. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem,” he said with a friendly wink before setting his glass aside and moving toward the stairs.

Cassandra sat at the bar for a long time after he’d gone. So, Anthony wasn’t just a personal assistant, then, that much was clear. And if he thought she had been sent to harm Viktor, that would be the story he told him. Not the story of how she’d paid her debt to society through hours of community service and probation check-ups. Not how despite all that, she still felt like a murderer. Still *was* a murderer. She had to tell Viktor before Anthony did.

Then she thought of the way people had looked at her after the accident. Mixtures of hatred and pity and relief that it hadn't been them. She'd become a walking cautionary tale. She couldn't stand it if Viktor looked at her that way.

And what if he decided he didn't want her around, if she had killed someone? What if he thought, as Anthony did, that she was working for someone, trying to ruin Viktor's humanity? If he sent her away, who would protect her from those awful creatures? On the other hand, she'd been living with them stalking her dreams for a long time now. Maybe she would be fine on her own. She couldn't rely on Viktor to save her from everything. She'd never relied on anyone before.

Then there was Viktor himself. His loneliness must be unbearable, living in his mausoleum of an apartment with only Anthony and some regular tricks for company. If her presence somehow tainted him, though, and made him more like those rubbery monsters who'd attacked her in the alley, she definitely didn't need to stick around.

Not that she should want to, anyway. She'd met lots of lonely guys. It was an occupational hazard. She'd never really cared about that before. Maybe this was a sign that it was time to get out of the life altogether. But something about Viktor called to her, the way no other person had before. She wanted his protection, but she wanted his attention too. She wanted him to feel the same, unexplainable draw that she felt, the unsettling lift she got just from being in the same room with him.

Her head throbbed, and she looked around helplessly. That was as close to admitting having real feelings about anything, let alone a guy, in a very long time. Now, more than ever, she wished she had something to distract herself.

"Your afternoon snack, Viktor."

He looked up and took the warm mug of blood from Anthony's hand. "Thank you. I will need some for supper, as well."

"Not feeding off your guest?" Anthony set a saucer down where Viktor would place the mug and laid a napkin beside it.

"Not that it's any of your business," Viktor scolded. "I have suspended our arrangement while she stays here. And I will not be feeding from anyone else, so I will need more blood for dinner."

Anthony raised an eyebrow. "Taking my advice?"

"Not entirely." He sipped from the mug, hating the feel of the glazed ceramic surface under his lips. The soft, warm skin of a willing human was much preferred. Perhaps Anthony was correct, though; perhaps distancing himself from the act of feeding was good for his soul, as well as for his dealings with Cassandra. "What do you think of her?"

The silence that met his question served as a sharp enough impression of what Anthony thought of her. He spoke slowly and carefully. "I think she's a very attractive, very intelligent girl."

"You say intelligent as though it were an accusation," Viktor mused. It mattered little to him what the Conclave's lackey thought of Cassandra.

"I don't trust her," the human stated simply.

Viktor nodded as though he understood the man's concern. "Has she given you any reason for suspicion?"

Anthony spread his hands. "Her timing. Forgive me, Viktor, I'm sure you've already thought of this, but it seems strange that she comes into contact with you when the city is overrun with Minions."

"Anything else?" Viktor kept his tone even, as though he were considering the information he'd been given. In reality, it was absurd. If Anthony had the power to taste Cassandra's blood, he would have known immediately nothing that dark lurked in her soul. The darkness inside of her had nothing to do with the Minions she'd seen in her dreams. She suffered because a part of her was missing, an important part she would not be able to deny forever.

"I want you to be very careful," Anthony warned. "I'm warning you, as a member of the Conclave, but also as someone who knows you well. I don't think you've got your head on right where this woman is concerned."

"Perhaps not." Tonight was not the night to ask for Anthony's help in the matter. He had already soured himself against Cassandra. "Thank you, I will think about what you have told me."

He waited until Anthony excused himself, then turned back to his computer screen. The spreadsheet that had been open when the human had entered had merely been a cover. When he minimized the window, the screen filled with website after website, all detailing some manner of reincarnation belief. Just seeing the words on the screen was enough to draw a cold sweat onto his brow. Could he truly be considering it?

Though he made a good effort at reading the words, their meanings evaporated the instant he read them, replaced by the memory of Melina's smile, her kind eyes, her soft body beneath his hands. Did he want Cassandra, or did he want Cassandra to be Melina? If the two of them stood before him to choose, he did not know which choice he would make, and that troubled him.

If Melina had been there, she would know the answer. She had always been able to say the right thing, to reassure him of his choices. She'd had total confidence in him, even when he'd had none. That had been her downfall.

Perhaps it will be Cassandra's, as well.

No, he would not let that happen. This time, he knew what he faced. He knew how to protect her. Not against himself, but when the time came, Anthony would do his duty. Perhaps it wasn't fair to want Cassandra when his time was so short. If she fell in love with him only to have to release him, what would that do to her?

That was too presumptuous. Cassandra was with him because she was in danger, not because of some romantic entanglement.

Impulsively, he picked up his phone and hit number one on his speed dial. “Anthony, I wish to have dinner with Cassandra. A proper dinner. Set it up.” He disconnected the call before the man could argue with him. He didn’t need anyone else trying to convince him that further exploring the feelings he’d already grown for Cassandra was a terrible idea.

He was already trying hard enough to convince himself.

Chapter Six

Cassandra had received her invitation to dinner rather informally. Anthony had mumbled something about it when he'd come by her room with an overnight bag. Her overnight bag. Packed full of her clothes.

"How did you get these?" she had asked, holding up a pair of jeans.

Anthony had straightened his tie and told her, "I took the liberty of entering your home and taking a look through your wardrobe."

Hours later, Cassandra was still bristling over the invasion to her privacy. She was used to rich, powerful men doing whatever they wanted, but she hadn't pegged Viktor for one of those types. She went to the dining room at seven with every intention to tell him exactly where he could stick his home-invading little messenger boy.

When she entered the room, Viktor wasn't there. The table had been set with immaculate white china and gleaming silver. Cassandra wondered what a vampire needed dishes for, and if he'd had them before he'd decided to have dinner with her. His place was set only with a glass and a black linen napkin, and the stark reminder of what Viktor was disturbed her. She had to tell him the truth tonight, no matter what occurred. If he rejected her, then what had she lost? A vampire who had messed up her life.

On the other hand, she would also lose a vampire who had saved her life, who had vowed to protect her no matter what the cost. A man who was attracted to her, not to some façade she'd created to impress him. Somehow, he'd seen that she was damaged and, unbelievably, that seemed to make him like her more. At best, losing Viktor's trust would mean losing the only person who seemed to know what was happening to her, and the only person who could save her. At worst, it would mean turning her back on the only person who'd made her believe she had a chance at happiness.

"You look sad." Viktor had entered the room so quietly she hadn't known he was there. He pulled out her chair and motioned for her to sit. "I apologize for my lateness. I lost track of the time."

"That's a pretty lame excuse in your own house."

"Anthony tried to hire someone to cook for you, but no one was available at this late notice. I hope take-out will suffice." Viktor took his seat and unfolded his napkin, while Anthony appeared, as if summoned by the mention of his name, with a plastic grocery bag filled with Styrofoam containers.

"Maybe Anthony could have just picked up some pots and pans from my kitchen. You know, while he was rummaging through my stuff." She scooted her own chair in. "Unless he can't cook. He could have at

least brought the paper plates and saved himself the dishwashing. They were on top of the microwave, didn't you see them?"

"Mr. Novotny doesn't entertain dinner guests that often. He wanted a chance to use his wedding china." Anthony dropped this bombshell smoothly while he unpacked the cartons. "I hope you like Indian food."

"I love it. Did you get the menu off my fucking refrigerator?" she snapped in reply at the same time that Viktor said, "Thank you, Anthony, we can manage from here."

Waiting in silence for the assistant to leave, Cassie fumed. Viktor was married? Of course he was. 4-1-2 had plenty of married clients who didn't want to risk an indiscreet mistress. And who was she to get her nose out of joint? She'd come here on assignment, not as a date, and his marital status hadn't exactly mattered when she'd been cowering from monsters in an alley. Still, she couldn't keep the hurt out of her tone when she asked, "So, let me guess. You stay here while she gets the mansion in Connecticut, right? Only get together for important functions? Is she a vampire too?"

"No, not at all." He looked down as he smoothed his napkin over his lap. "She's dead. For quite a long time now."

If Cassie had needed any more convincing that she was a horrible person, this would have done the trick. "I'm sorry. I can't believe I said that, I'm so stupid. Of course, she might have been...deceased or divorced or..."

Viktor shook his head and didn't look at her. "It is fine. Anyone would have inferred the same from Anthony's statement. I think, perhaps, that is why he made it."

"Still, I'm sorry." The chair beneath her seemed suddenly uncomfortable, and the scents from the cooling take-out containers seemed much less appetizing.

"It was a long time ago." He glanced up at her, a hard, indecipherable set to his eyes. "Please, eat. You must be hungry. I know that my home is not set up for a human's comfort. I will try to have that corrected."

The subject of his wife was closed, apparently. Cassandra couldn't think of the last time she'd put her foot in her mouth so badly. She did as he asked and scooped portions of saffron rice and something delicious with lamb and curry onto her plate. "I wonder why Anthony brought this, if the smell of food bothers you so much. Maybe he should have brought a baloney sandwich."

"I think he did it to show he is not pleased with me." Viktor chuckled. "I would fire him, if he was not such a good assistant."

"He's not just an assistant, though, is he?" She took a bite and pretended not to be concerned with his answer. "Assistants don't just break into someone's house and go through their shit."

"He didn't break in." Viktor looked up. "He used your key. And I did not send him. He went of his own accord. He seems to think you have...sinister motives, where I am concerned."

"You're a vampire, but he thinks I'm sinister." She narrowed her eyes. "I'm sure that's exactly what happened. You didn't send him to spy on me."

Viktor's look of confusion seemed genuine. She had to give him credit for his acting skills, but at the end of the day, he was just like every other rich asshole in New York.

"You didn't send him to look into my private life? To dig up stuff from my past?" She pushed her chair back and stood. "I appreciate you saving my life, but I can't deal with this. I have to go."

Something brushed her shoulder, and Viktor stood before her. She shrieked and took a step back.

"I will not harm you!" he said quickly, his face a mask of despair. "Please, I would never hurt you."

She swallowed her fear, but her ears still roared with the terror coursing through her veins. "You'll just break into my house, hypnotize me, send someone to spy on me? How is that not hurting me?"

"I did not ask Anthony to do that. I knew he had suspicions about you, but I never expected him to do something so drastic," Viktor stated firmly. "I have already promised not to use tricks of the mind to control you. I do not wish for anything between us to be forced."

"You might say that now, but I know your type." A note of hysteria crept into her voice. "You have all the money in the world, so you think you can make everyone put up with your bullshit. You can't buy me. I don't care if I am a prostitute, you can't buy me."

"I do not wish to buy you." He stepped forward and reached a hand toward her. "Cassandra, there is a deep wound inside of you. Right now, my only wish is to know why."

"You want to know why?" He'd probably already seen the contents of his lackey's manila folder. This was just the test, to see if she would be honest with him. If she failed, maybe she could go home, back to real life. But that wasn't what she wanted. No matter how she might try to convince Viktor that she didn't want him, no matter how she might try to convince herself, she didn't want him to think she was a liar or a spy or whatever his assistant alleged. Viktor was the only person she had trusted in a long time, and she wanted to have his trust in return. "I killed my best friend."

The silence while she waited for him to reject her...it was the most terrible silence she'd ever felt.

His whole being seemed to slump. The light of concern in his eyes dimmed, his shoulders slouched. This was it. This was when he realized what a monster she was.

"It was in college." She hurried to fill the time until he ordered her out of his house. "I was at a party, drinking too much, doing drugs. Emily had been drinking too, but she didn't touch any of that other stuff. She didn't even know. I thought I was okay to drive."

"You drove, with your friend in the car?" Viktor asked slowly.

"I knew it was wrong." She took a shuddering breath. "I knew it was dangerous, and I did it anyway. The next thing I knew, I was on the side of the road and they were...they had to cut her body out of the car."

He opened his mouth to speak, and suddenly Cassie didn't want to hear him lecture her or yell at her. Usually, she thought there was nothing a person could say to make her feel worse about what had happened than she already did. But hearing him denounce her was, for reasons she couldn't discern, unthinkable. "I know what I did then was wrong. But that doesn't mean I'm trying to...I thought you had a fetish, and Julie needed someone to cover you. No matter what Anthony says, I'm not here to hurt you."

"I never thought you were." Viktor's voice was practically a whisper. "What has happened to you...it is a wound to the soul, and it will scar, but it can heal."

She shook her head. "Really? Because it doesn't feel like it ever will. And when Anthony accused me of trying to steal your humanity or turn you into a Minion or whatever it was he thought I was doing, it actually took me a minute to realize that he was wrong. Every day, I live with the consequences of being a monster."

He touched her face, his fingers feather light as they brushed her skin. "I have killed. In my first days as a vampire, the thirst overwhelmed me, and I could not help myself. Do you see a monster when you look at me?"

A shiver ran down her spine. Vampires were monsters. Every Halloween, all those scary movies. There was no way to get around the fact that he was a monster. But from where she stood, he looked like a man. A man who was lonely, in pain. A man who thought more of her than she did herself.

"You don't understand. It's not the same as it is for you. You're a vampire. You're supposed to be a monster. I'm not. I was just supposed to be a regular person."

"I had no aspiration to be a monster. I was supposed to be a regular person too and die a regular death." He dropped his hand, clasping both in front of his body in a silent plea. Finally, he spoke again. "There is nothing you can say that will make me think any less of you, Cassandra. I have lived too long not to have learned that the past shapes a person, but it does not mar them forever."

She closed her eyes, ashamed to feel a hot tear escape and roll down her cheek. "Don't do this."

"Do what?" His voice held all the helplessness of a man who saw pain and didn't know how to fix it.

"Don't try to make me feel better when I don't deserve to." She shook her head, dislodging more tears, but she wouldn't open her eyes. "Don't try to save me."

She felt his nearness as he closed the gap between them. "You are worth saving."

His fingers lifted her chin, and she opened her eyes to stare into his. The molten gray pools burned with a new intensity, and she couldn't pull her gaze away. But this was no hypnotic trick. What passed between them was pure need.

She didn't plead for him to make her pain go, or to help her forget the horrible memories, the nightmares, the blood and the pain. His arms strong around her, he leaned his head down and captured her lips.

The kiss should have brought the monsters to her, but their claws and shrieks receded under the cold touch of his mouth. She parted her lips, welcoming him to stroke her tongue with his. His arms tightened around her, then he released her abruptly.

“No,” he said, all but wiping his mouth in his disgust. “I cannot treat you this way.”

“How?” she demanded angrily. “I don’t understand what any of this has to do with me. I don’t know why, but the only person I feel safe with on this entire planet is you.”

“Then it is not right to take advantage of you in this position.” He turned as if to go, and she stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“I don’t care. It’s not taking advantage. I want this.” She couldn’t find the words for further pleas, so she rose on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his cold cheek. He turned to face her, a thousand conflicting emotions etched into his expression, a thousand denials poised to burst from him. None of them could overcome the one urge Cassandra knew he felt, because she felt it too, and it was too powerful to deny.

With an almost inhuman growl, he lifted her into his arms, kissing her with a passion she hadn’t thought someone so controlled would have been capable of feeling. He carried her to his bedroom and kicked the door shut with a reverberating slam. The moment he set her on her feet, her hands smoothed over his chest, into his jacket. He shrugged it off, his hands returning to dive greedily into her hair. Their lips met again as she divested him of his tie and went to work on the buttons of his shirt. He pushed her hands away and gripped the front of his shirt, pulling it open, sending buttons flying. Cassandra gasped against his mouth, then broke their contact to let him pull her shirt over her head. He ran his hands down her back, deftly popping the clasp of her bra before he grabbed her butt and pulled her hips flush against him.

Through her jeans, Cassandra felt the substantial hardness of him and gooseflesh peppered her skin in anticipation. The memory of what she had seen the night before sent new awareness flooding through her veins. She let her mind linger on the image of Viktor’s body, the crisp lines of his muscled abdomen flexing as he had pounded into a man. All that tight skin and hard body belonged to her tonight, and she shivered, remembering how powerfully aroused she had been just looking at him. Now, she didn’t have to just look. She ran her greedy fingers over his chest inside his open shirt. His skin was cold and smooth, slightly warm over the place where his heart would be. She looked up, questioning, and he closed his hand over hers, pressing her palm flat as he kissed her again. The gesture, so unexpectedly tender in the moment, took her breath away. When he looked at her, she realized with a shock he saw her and not some fantasy woman. He saw her, yet his eyes lingered on her in adoration.

She stepped back and let the black lace of her bra fall forward, the straps sliding down her arms. His breathing audibly quickened at the sight of her exposed flesh, and he leaned down to take one hard nipple into his mouth. Cassandra’s head fell back and his hand immediately caught her at the small of her back, supporting her as his mouth teased her sensitive breast mercilessly.

He jerked the duvet from the bed and pushed her gently back, and she landed with a bounce on the soft mattress. She laughed, and in the next second she stopped laughing, because his hands were on her thighs, urging them apart. He knelt on the carpet and lowered his face to the bend of her knee, looking up at her with a hot, hungry gaze. Would he bite her? Did she want him to?

No, of course she didn't. Though sharing blood with him had been a powerfully erotic experience, it had also been terrifying. With her tainted blood, the consequences were too dire.

As if sensing her fear—and how could he have missed it? Her whole body had tensed up like a line about to break—he said, “I have other plans for my mouth that do not include biting you.”

“I'm sorry, I'm just being stupid. I—” Her apology was cut off by a gasp as his cold mouth descended on the bend of her knee, and a flood of wetness rushed to her core. When was the last time anyone had ever made her feel like this?

Never, she realized as his mouth moved up her thigh, closer and closer to the lacy edge of her panties. None of the men she'd dated in college, none of the clients she'd serviced through the club. They'd wanted her to be overcome with passion, to scream their names and rake her nails down their backs. They hadn't cared if she'd truly felt anything, just that their egos were stroked by their encounter. A tear slid from the corner of her eye, wetting the hair at her temple.

Immediately, Viktor lifted his head and came to lie beside her. “Have I done something to upset you?”

“No.” She swiped at her eyes, hating her stupid emotions for ruining everything. They'd never interfered like this before. “No, it's just me. I'm screwed up.”

He didn't respond right away, and that made her feel more vulnerable and exposed than when his head had been between her legs. She crossed her arms over her bare breasts and moved to sit up.

“No, please.” Viktor urged her to stay with a hand resting lightly on the tight skin of her stomach. “Tell me, what has upset you?”

“It's just...” Why was she talking? She'd been with enough men to know that talking didn't solve anything. “I haven't been with anyone. I mean, when it wasn't a part of my job. You didn't do anything wrong, you just...surprised me.”

He leaned down and touched his lips to hers. Not a full kiss, just the lightest brush of his mouth against hers. “Allow me to continue to surprise you.”

She nodded and held her breath while he moved to kneel between her legs again. One finger slipped beneath the lace at her hip, dragging the scrap of fabric down. She exhaled shakily, lifting her hips so he could pull the panties off the rest of the way. He stroked the length of one leg, the lace trapped under his hand, and she was completely bare before him.

Reverently, he placed his hands at the junctures of her inner thigh and mound and traced the sculpted line of hair there. All her earlier tension left her, replaced by a completely different kind. She let her legs fall wider apart and watched, teeth sunken into her bottom lip, as he leaned forward and parted her folds

with his fingers. The first shock of his cold tongue on her hot flesh bucked her hips and pulled an audible gasp from her lungs. She plunged her fingers into his pale hair, holding him there, wanting to pull him away, too weak to decide on either course of action and content to let him continue. No, desperate for him to. His tongue pulled in lazy circles around her clit, up and over and then down to taste the wetness at her entrance.

The sensations coursed through her body like electricity, jolting her every nerve with alternating currents of “too much” and “not enough”. She rolled her hips beneath his mouth, trying to bring him closer to where she desperately needed him to be, and he complied readily, fastening his lips to her clit with gentle suction as his tongue flicked over the hard nub.

Cassandra exploded, her hips bucking, a long, strangled sigh of disbelief pulling from her throat like a razor blade. She fell back and only then was she aware she’d arched up, straining toward his mouth, so hard she could feel the stretch of it in her muscles.

In a moment he was on her, covering her with his body while her cunt still spasmed from her release. The wide tip of his cock rubbed against her opening, and her hands flew to his shoulders to stop him. “Look, I know I’m not some delicate virgin, but...”

“But you’re asking me to be gentle?” He laughed, soft and low. “I will be.”

She couldn’t think of a good reason not to trust him, or to stop him. For the first time in years, she wanted someone and trusted him enough to let him into her body, not for money, but because she wanted to.

He pressed forward, her juices and the wetness left from his mouth aiding his entry. She gratefully accepted his weight atop her, and at that moment it felt like she’d been missing it her entire life. He parted her folds with his fingers and the head of his cock slid into her aching cunt, stretching her and filling her with delicious pressure. He pushed in farther and she moaned, bringing her knees up to bracket his waist. More and more he filled her, every cold inch of him warming from the heat of her body as he sank deeper and deeper.

“Oh God,” she whimpered as his pelvis came flush to hers, his massive cock buried inside her tight channel. “Don’t stop.”

When he moved, she cried out, the muscles in her calves trembling. She clutched at him with her hands and her cunt as he withdrew, the length of him slipping from her at what seemed like never-ending increments. He pulled free and plunged forward again, filling her, torturing her with his slowness. She whimpered and rocked her hips, begging him silently to end her frustration.

He gave just what she asked, pistoning inside of her with growing speed until she scored his back with her nails, sobbing aloud with the building pressure. Her greedy channel clung to him, and she arched her back beneath him. He panted, pumping his hips harder and harder against her, wringing every last sensation of exquisite torture from the movement. Her cunt had never felt so hot and wet and open, her body had

never been strung so incredibly tightly with building pleasure. She wanted to scream and thrash, to push him off and to pull him closer, and finally she did scream, loud and long, her legs crushing him to her as she spasmed around his cock.

He rocked back onto his knees, pulling her with him. Her body boneless and heavy, she clung to him as he ground his cock deep inside her, slipping his hand between them to stroke her. She moaned his name, shivering under the sweat that bathed her body. How could he feel so cold when she was so hot? The contrast set her every nerve ending on fire. His fingers made her clit pulse with another orgasm and then another, until she couldn't hang on to him anymore and he needed his hands to support her. He laid her back and grasped her hips, pumping into her furiously while he pulled her against him, impaling her on his hard length. He came inside her with a feral growl that might have frightened her if she'd had more energy to be frightened. As it was, she could only lie back and gasp for breath, her lungs aching with the effort.

Viktor collapsed beside her, though he didn't appear to be half as worn out as she felt. Cassie swallowed, her throat raw from exertion and excessive vocalization. Nothing she'd ever done on the job could have prepared her for what it would feel like when she finally slept with a guy and had it mean something. The physical side had been good—no, phenomenally good—but she'd never given another person such complete control over her. Never left herself vulnerable the way she had with him. He was probably a thousand times more dangerous than any client she'd ever been with, but she'd given herself over so completely to the sensations he'd aroused in her.

With a shock, she realized she trusted him. Worse, she'd never realized before now she hadn't been trusting anyone for a long time.

"Say something," Viktor begged quietly.

He thought she was upset with him. Maybe he was afraid she regretted having sex with him. "Something."

He chuckled. "I will assume from your literal interpretation of my question that you are not angry with me."

"Why would I be angry?" She struggled to push herself up onto her elbow so she could see his face. "You fucked me like you just got out of prison this morning. That was unbelievable."

"Crude," he admonished, but he grinned with caveman pride.

She settled into the crook of his arm and laid her head on his shoulder. "So, even vampires like to have their egos stroked."

"Among other things."

She smiled. "At the end of the day, you're not all that different from human men."

"Oh? You've been with human men who've been 'unbelievable'?"

She snorted at that. "No, definitely not. In fact..."

"I see," he said, saving her from finishing the sentence. A silence fell between them that was not comfortable, but something very close, until he said, "You deserve so much more than the life you've been given, Cassandra."

She closed her eyes, relishing the unfamiliar feeling of snuggling beside someone. Even if it were just for a night, she would enjoy the false safe feeling. "I'm sorry I accused you of spying on me. And of being an adulterer."

He groaned. "Oh, Anthony. How I look forward to the end of his mortal life."

"So, what does he actually do? He said he would kill you if you turned into a Minion." She shivered despite the warmth of the blankets tucked around her. "Unless you pay him for that service, but I don't see why you would."

"You saw those creatures. I assure you, I do not pay him to babysit me. There is an entire organization, the Conclave, that has pledged itself to destroying Minions." He seemed uncomfortable as he acknowledged, "Anthony belongs to that organization, and he is stationed with me for the service that he will eventually do for them."

She sat up, holding the sheets to her chest. "You mean, when you eventually lose your humanity and become a Minion, then Anthony will kill you?"

Idly stroking her back, he answered in an almost bored tone of voice. "That's the plan."

Turning toward him, she shrugged off his hand. "How can you live like that? Being polite to a guy who's going to kill you?"

"How else should I treat him? He's a free assistant, the Conclave pays his salary. Do you know how much I would have to pay someone to do his job?" Viktor shuddered dramatically. "It's worth it just to let him kill me."

"This isn't funny." Cassie took a deep breath. "He tried to blackmail me. He had newspaper clippings about the accident and warned me...he thought I was trying to trick you into feeding off of me."

"He shouldn't have done," Viktor said, and though his tone was soft, his expression was frighteningly hard.

So frightening that she couldn't help but ask, "You're not going to..."

"No, of course not!" Made suddenly aware of his reaction, he tried to disguise it from her. "I'll talk to him, and reiterate that you are not Conclave business."

"Thank you." She settled beside him again, her mind racing. Had she overstepped her bounds? Had she made a mistake? To have a powerful man like Viktor champion her cause against an employee... Surely she would owe him something in return.

So much for thinking she'd finally begun to trust someone.

Chapter Seven

Cassandra woke in the dark, alone. A second's confusion was alleviated when she saw the soft light in the hallway. She slid from the bed and picked up the shirt Viktor had discarded, pulling it on and buttoning a few buttons. Keeping her eyes peeled in case Anthony lurked in the hallway, she tiptoed from the master bedroom to the open door to Viktor's office.

She raised her hand to knock, but halted. Viktor sat behind his desk, eyes trained on the computer in front of him as he worked. Shirtless, the overhead lights made his pale skin almost glow and accentuated the deep lines carved around the thick slabs of muscle in his back and arms. Arms she had clung to hours before, a back she had raked her nails down as she'd arched under him, mindless with passion.

"I didn't think office stuff could be sexy," she said in lieu of knocking.

He jumped. She'd actually startled him.

"Aren't vampires supposed to have super reflexes or something?" she asked in response to the shocked look on his face.

He quickly composed himself. "We are supposed to. Apparently mine do not work when you're around."

She couldn't help but smile at him. There was something oddly distracting, seeing all that pale skin stretched over his powerful body, oddly incongruous with the spreadsheet he labored over. "If I'm bothering you, I'll go back to bed. I just woke up and wondered where you were."

"Comparing quarterly reports," he said, flicking a key and minimizing the windows on the screen. "I have people who could do it for me, but that's another secret about our kind: we love statistics. But no, you aren't bothering me."

She stepped into the office, her natural curiosity drawing her to the sleek black shelves behind his desk. "So, this is where you keep the books."

"Nothing interesting. They're just there to make it look like I can read." He slid his chair back and patted his lap. "Come on, do you want to see something really interesting?"

She sat obediently, the black silk of the pajama pants he wore tickling her thighs deliciously. He turned them to face the computer screen again and, with a flick of his fingertip on the touch screen of the monitor, a map of New York City, Manhattan and the outer boroughs filled the screen.

"This is where we are," he said, indicating a rough area on the map. The picture zoomed in to a perfect aerial view of the building they sat in. He zoomed out once more and tapped a key. Thousands of red dots obscured the picture. "And these are Minions."

Cassie's stomach dropped. Everywhere she looked, red flowed like a menacing wave over the city. "That's insane...oh my God, look how many are in the park. That's right outside your window!"

"If I tried to cross the street, I would be set upon in moments."

"God, what are my chances?" she whispered, tracing the path of one of the dots with her eyes.

"Better." He pushed her hair over her shoulder, smoothing it down her back. "Now that we've made love, the connection between us should be lessened. They likely would not pay attention to you. Why, do you wish to go home?"

Swallowing thickly, she shook her head. She couldn't tear her gaze from the screen. The thought of going out there, unprotected, while her nightmare creatures swarmed the city... "Is it always like this?"

"No. This is an unusual number, even for New York."

"How is it that this isn't all over the news?" Cassie turned to look at Viktor's face, but his attention stayed riveted to the screen. "People must be seeing them."

"No. Minions are adept at hiding their numbers. Even if they killed someone, it would be highly unlikely that their victim would catch a glimpse of them. It was unusual that they showed themselves to you." He tapped a key and the map closed.

"So, why have I seen them in my dreams?" She'd asked him before, and he hadn't known the answer. She didn't think he would have one now, but some silly part of her hoped that if she asked enough, the answer would present itself.

"I don't know. If I had the answer, I could protect you better than I can now." He pulled her against him and tucked her head against his shoulder.

"You don't have to worry about me. I've been dreaming about those things since the accident." She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against his cool skin. Sleepily, she added, "I know it must be hard for you, because of your wife."

"How so?" he asked, stroking her hair from her face.

"Because the Minions got her."

Viktor's hand stilled and his posture stiffened.

Cassie sat up, immediately afraid she'd said something wrong. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend—"

"Who told you that my wife was killed by Minions?" His wide eyes drilled holes into her.

"You did," Cassie answered automatically. Then, almost as automatically, "No. You didn't."

"I didn't." Viktor's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Perhaps Anthony—"

"No." Her heart began to do a strange, disordered beat. "Are you sure you didn't—"

"No." He pushed the chair back, almost dumping her from his lap. When she sprang to her feet, he said, "I'm sorry. This has just..."

"There's a logical explanation," Cassie insisted. Even if she couldn't think of one.

"The dream," Viktor said, to no one in particular. He stood and paced the room, muttering to himself as though she wasn't there. "It couldn't be."

"I-I just assumed," she stammered. But she hadn't. She'd known.

"You just assumed a monster that has been tormenting you in nightmares and that recently attacked you in the waking world killed my wife, who you never heard of before dinner tonight?" He shook his head. "This is not coincidental."

"What do you mean?" A strange, nervous flutter began at the base of her throat and traveled up with her words. She had heard of past lives, of people having memories of things that had happened years before their births. A part of her wanted him to suggest exactly that, the same reckless part of her that had latched so hopelessly on to Viktor in the first place. But the rest of her knew that this was too crazy, too far-out to be believed.

But you're in a room with a vampire. You let him drink your blood. You let him fuck you. You didn't believe he could exist, and he does. Is anything left that's unbelievable now?

"I think...if nothing else..." He cleared his throat, and his eyes shone with a pink veneer that he blinked away. "I think you know something of her, at least."

"You don't think that's...coincidental? That I would be the girl Julie called to replace her?"

He pointed toward the desk. "Her ring is there. Put it on. Maybe...maybe it will prove something."

She shrank from the desk, as though it could somehow force her to pick up the ring.

A look of hopelessness settled on Viktor's face. Did he think he had lost her? She didn't want to pick up the dead woman's ring. Maybe nothing would happen, but something might. She didn't want to take that chance.

She got to her feet and went to him, let him pull her into his arms. He tucked her head beneath his chin and stroked her hair against her back.

"I wore that ring for decades. Because it was Melina's."

She closed her eyes, let him accept her weight. "Pretty name."

He made an affirmative noise and continued, "In times it seemed I would lose myself, I would hold this ring and I would feel her presence with me. Until the night we met."

He released her and stepped back. "I cannot believe there isn't some connection. We are of different times, Cassandra. I am a superstitious man. I believe in fate."

Her throat went dry. It took all her composure to rasp out, "You think I...was fated to meet you?"

Usually, it annoyed Cassie when people dodged her questions, but when Viktor did it by hauling her up against his chest, her toes barely touching the floor, and kissed her until she couldn't breathe, she didn't

complain. He said more with one kiss than he could have with a hundred words, and she opened her heart without caution.

His hands slid down her back, over the curve of her ass, then under the tails of the shirt as he let her back down. Closing her eyes, she tilted her head back, raising her arms to let him pull the shirt over her head. When she opened them again, he caught her gaze, held it as he cupped her chin in his hand and traced her lower lip with his thumb. Need turned his eyes into fathomless pools, and he lowered his lips to hers once more, settling them there for only a moment before moving on to her ear, her throat.

She wondered, just for a moment, if the passion that gripped him was really for her, or for the woman he suspected she had been. As his mouth descended on the hollow between her collar bones, she dismissed those concerns for a later time. Now, she needed his hands on her, his mouth. Needed to lose herself in his touch to feel real.

He gripped her thighs and boosted her up, urging her to wind her legs around his waist. He held her effortlessly, and she marveled at his strength. He buried his face against her breasts, nibbling and sucking a path between the two. His hard body was cold against her, but warming from the heat trapped between them. Trusting in his strength, she leaned back, arching into his kisses. He sucked one hard nipple into his mouth, his eyes closed as if he savored the most delicious morsel he'd ever tasted.

Sensation ricocheted off every nerve ending. She pulled herself up, curving over him as she delved her fingers into his hair. His cock prodded against her ass and she shivered in anticipation of him filling her.

It was so different this time. Though he'd lost none of the tenderness he'd shown her before, there was a new desperation to his desire. He devoured her, consumed her with his passion and intensity. When he looked into her eyes, his gaze could have burned her; when he touched her, he did.

"Fuck me," she begged, gripping his shoulders. "Just fuck me."

He carried her the few steps to the office chair and dropped into it, and she rose on her knees, straddling his lap. One cold finger slid down, parting her and circling her clit, wringing a shudder from her.

"Do you know what it does to me, to hear how much you want me?" He pushed a finger into her clutching channel, stroked her rippling walls. "To feel it?"

She moaned, undulating her hips against his hand.

"Tell me," he prompted, another finger opening her, stretching her. "Tell me what you want."

She wanted him. So much more than just the physical need that pulsed through her entire being. She wanted all of him. "Love me," she begged, knowing that if he wished, he would hear her true meaning.

He froze beneath her for a split second, and her stomach dropped. She'd gone too far. Now he would reject her.

But he didn't. Instead, he gripped her ass, lifted her so the broad head of him rested at her opening. All he had to do was ease her down and her swollen flesh would part to welcome him inside.

Instead, she wriggled from his grasp, dropping to her knees in front of him. His expression of momentary confusion evaporated into a smile that she returned as she gripped his cock. Slowly, she stroked her hand up his shaft, then leaned forward and curled her tongue around the tip. The sound he made, a strangled inhalation of surprise, sent darts of arousal straight to her clit. She marveled at that. She'd never felt anything close to pleasure from going down on a guy, but she wanted to make Viktor feel as incredible as he made her feel.

She worked her tongue from the very base of him to the head in fluttering strokes, dropping to repeat the action over and over, until his hips rose off the chair. Only then did she open her mouth wide and draw him in, rubbing the roof of her mouth in circles over the tip of his cock. His size made the job a bit tricky, but when she looked up at his face and saw his head thrown back, eyes closed, she figured he wasn't complaining. She took her time, sucking and swirling her tongue around him, pumping him in her fist as she swallowed him deep, until finally he buried a hand in her hair with a groan and urged her to stop.

"Do you want to fuck me?" she asked, sliding her mouth up his shaft one last time.

With a growl that was almost frightening, he lifted her to her feet and laid her back on the desk. Briefly, she worried about the things she had seen on the desk: the ring, the computer, all his papers and work. He swept them all aside and, as he didn't seem to care about them, she couldn't bring herself to, either. Especially not when he drove into her, over and over, his hands on her shoulders to stop her sliding off the desk with the force of his thrusts. He filled her so completely, but still she gasped for breath and ground against him, seeking more. She needed all of him, all of his cock, all of his body, all of his soul.

His mouth tight with determination, he pounded into her in long strokes, blood-tinged sweat standing out on his forehead. She panted beneath him, helpless to do anything but hold on and surrender to the force of his long-controlled passions. She gripped him tighter with her legs, her cunt, strained up to meet his punishing thrusts. The hot, tight spiral in her pelvis expanded, contracted, and she came, screaming his name.

He groaned and buried his face against her neck. Through the trembling aftermath of her orgasm, she felt his teeth graze her skin, then tighten. With a roar of denial, he pulled back, thrusting against her harder, just once, and she couldn't hold back her whimper as he pulsed inside of her.

"Cassandra," he rasped, breathing heavily as he supported his weight on his arms above her. "I am sorry. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm perfect." She leaned up, and he met her lips with his, the hungry, desperate need between them abated, if just for now.

He withdrew from her body and lifted her to carry her to his bedroom. As they walked, she felt the silky wetness against her thighs and gasped. "Oh my God. We didn't use a condom."

"No, we did not." His expression was tight. "I apologize. It is unforgivable that I would put you at such risk. I do not carry disease, if that alleviates your worry. My body cannot sustain a virus."

“What about emergency contraception?” she asked. “Can vampires, you know...get someone knocked up?”

“That is a good question. I don’t know.” Viktor balanced her on one arm and pulled the bedding back with the other, lowering her gently to the crisp sheets. “I will have Anthony procure something for you in the morning.”

She settled against him when he joined her in the bed. “Did you have any children? When you were human?”

“No,” he answered quickly. “No, Melina could not... We conceived twice, but the babies were stillborn.”

“I’m so sorry.” Her heart ached at the thought. Had that truly happened to her? “Isn’t that the sort of thing I should remember? If, you know...”

He traced a line down her bare arm with one fingertip. “Maybe it is something you don’t wish to remember.”

Snuggling closer, she asked, “Tell me about her. If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” He lazily stroked her back in wide circles. “I so rarely have a chance to revisit her memory with another person. It reminds me that she was real. After almost a century, the past begins to seem like a dream, or a fairytale.”

“It doesn’t take that long,” she corrected him. Her own past seemed like an entirely different lifetime. “What was she like?”

“She was short,” he said simply, indicating a spot on his chest. “She only came to here.”

“I was thinking more, what did she act like? What did you love about her?” If anyone had told Cassie a week ago that she would be grilling a client for personal information, she would have turned in her resignation right then. But Viktor wasn’t just a client. Not anymore.

He sighed. “Ah. Well, she was very stubborn. She argued with me often.”

“And you loved her in spite of it,” she finished for him.

“No.” He kissed her forehead, letting his lips linger there. “I loved her *because* of it.”

“I can’t imagine that. Someone loving you because of your bad qualities.” She yawned, almost unable to fight the pull of sleep any longer.

“Try,” he whispered against her hair. “You may find you don’t need to imagine.”

That was a step she couldn’t let herself take. Not yet. Instead, she let his gentle hands at her back and his soft breath against her hair lull her into sleep.

Long after Cassandra had drifted off in his arms, sleeplessness forced Viktor from his bed. He went to his office and set to right everything he had swept from his desk. He hoped the computer still worked. If

not, he would send Anthony out for a new one later. When he came to the ring, shining placidly against the carpet, he hesitated.

His hunger for blood had lessened. His soul had certainly benefited from Cassandra's presence. Would the ring still burn his skin? Did he dare try? With trembling fingers, he lifted it from the carpet, waiting for the invisible flames to lick him, the excruciating pain to reverberate up his arm. But there was nothing. No burning, but no gentle presence, either. He ground the cross engraved on the band into his palm over and over, anticipating the sting, but none came.

"Mr. Novotny?" Anthony, reporting for his morning duties, stepped through the door. "Anything I can do for you before I check in with the Conclave this morning?"

Viktor rose and straightened. It wasn't the first time Anthony had found him morosely contemplating Melina's ring in the middle of the night, but it was the first time he'd seen him crouched on the floor amongst hastily strewn papers, clad only in pajama pants. He did not relish the human seeing him so undignified. "Yes, there is."

As Anthony came closer, Viktor sprang at him, gripping his arm and twisting it behind his back as he slammed the human's head into the desktop. Pinning the man, Viktor leaned over his back, fangs extended. "If you ever intrude upon Cassandra's privacy again, for any reason, I will kill you. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

To his credit, the human did not scream in terror or weep for forgiveness. "I did what was in the best interest of the Conclave. I had to know."

With a flick of his wrist, Viktor tossed Anthony from the desk. He landed across the room, near the door.

Though he struggled to appear unaffected, Anthony's hands shook as he straightened his jacket and tie. "You're right. I overstepped my bounds. I'll leave her alone from here on out."

Viktor nodded, feeling no need to further explain himself. "See that you do. You're dismissed."

When Anthony had gone, Viktor picked up the ring again. He expected that it would scorch him, that precious increment of humanity snuffed out from his rough treatment of the human. Instead, it rested cool against his palm, and that confused him further.

He left the ring on the desk and returned to his bedroom, locking the door from the inside. There was no need to allow Anthony the luxury of intrusion. When he reached the bedside, Viktor stopped to gaze down at Cassandra. She did not sleep, though she pretended to. The commotion from the office had likely woken her. He indulged her ruse, content to watch her breasts rise and fall beneath the sheet with her carefully measured breaths. Even in the darkness of the room, she glowed. Maybe it was a light only he could see.

It did not make sense when he applied the cold logic that ruled every other part of his life. He did not need to question his feelings, as sudden and ill-planned as they were. He was drawn to her with his heart and not solely his mind. At least he knew he was still human enough to feel that reckless impulse.

Sliding into the bed beside her, he kissed her, slowly, gently. Let me love you, he urged her silently. Let me love *you*, not some façade you've constructed to hide from the world.

As if in answer, her arms encircled his neck, her fingers delved into his hair, drawing him closer. There was none of the desperation he'd felt in her kiss before, none of the pain or longing to forget where she was. She wanted him, with all of her soul. Whether or not that soul also belonged to Melina didn't matter.

Viktor rose to an empty bed. How had he not heard her leave? He did not look through the apartment for her. He knew he wouldn't find her.

He dressed himself in a T-shirt and a pair of jeans. He felt no need to go through the motions of putting on a suit, tying a tie, fastening cufflinks. It would not make him feel any more human. Only one thing would, and she had left.

Anthony waited for him in his office. "She left this."

Viktor took the folded note from his assistant's hand. "Thank you. Will you excuse me a moment?"

Once Anthony had gone, Viktor unfolded the paper. The sight of her cramped handwriting wrung a sad smile from him.

Viktor,

I didn't want to leave like this, but if I had waited for you to wake up, I might not have left at all. We both know what we were thinking last night. I need to find out for sure.

I'll be in touch.

He refolded the paper and tucked it into the pocket of his shirt. Then he reached for Melina's ring.

The intercom buzzed. Could the man not give him a moment to mourn? He hit the button and gave a terse, "Yes?"

"Mr. Novotny, there's something you need to see on channel six."

Of all the things Anthony would interrupt him for! Cursing, he reached for the remote to the sleek black television hung in place of a picture on the wall. The video that appeared stunned him.

"Here in Brooklyn, some questions remain unanswered," the reporter finished up, her image superimposed beside a sketch of what was unmistakably a Minion. A label across the bottom of the screen declared, "City Reeling After Violent Animal Attack".

With a shock of dread, Viktor realized where the reporter stood. On the street, in front of Cassandra's building.

Chapter Eight

Even the biting cold couldn't persuade Cassie to push the buzzer at the address she'd hastily scrawled down. The woman inside expected her, but that didn't quell Cassie's desire to run home to her apartment and climb under the blankets and never emerge.

What had happened to her life? One day, she was a call girl. The next, she was unemployed, standing on the street in front of a psychic's apartment building, ready to go in and see if she was the reincarnation of a vampire's dead wife.

God, had she lost her mind? From the moment she'd looked up "psychic" on Viktor's computer—she was surprised it had actually worked, after the way he'd pushed it off the desk the night before—she'd felt like she must be going crazy. First, she'd ventured into the city, alone, not knowing if those Minion things would still be after her. Then, she'd come to a stranger's apartment after one phone consultation and quit her job at 4-1-2.

There was still time to call the club and act like it had all been a joke. Ha ha, I was just pretending to quit! Fooled you! Please take me back, I don't know how I'm going to pay rent. But she couldn't do that. 4-1-2 was a good job for a lot of women, but not for her. Not anymore. She'd spent too much time pretending to be someone else in order to please her clients. She hadn't had time to figure out who she was.

And now she might be someone else. She blinked back sudden tears. Had Viktor known? Had that been what he'd wanted from the beginning? Was that why he'd come to her rescue?

This is so stupid. She should swear him off completely. No, she should go back to him. Let him protect her from monsters she'd thought had been all in her head. She could pretend to be Melina. She could pretend to be anyone. She'd certainly had enough practice to pull it off. But no, she couldn't do that. It was crazy, but she wanted him to know her, possibly to even love her. She had braved a city swarming with Minions to get her answers. To chicken out now would be to abandon her progress entirely and go back to the Cassie who spent her days in the grip of anti-psychotics and sedatives. She couldn't be that person again. Not if she wanted to be with Viktor, and she did. God help her, she did.

The only way she could do that was to find out who she was, really, and the gnawing feeling in her stomach seemed to suggest that the answer to that was very complicated. Maybe the woman inside would be able to help her. She just had to get the courage to push the buzzer.

The door opened before she had a chance to make that decision. A young woman with a chic haircut leaned out into the freezing cold. "Are you Cassie?"

The woman in the doorway didn't look anything like what Cassie had expected. When they'd spoken on the phone, she'd imagined an older woman with frizzy hair, wearing some throwback to Flower Power. To be confronted with a perfectly pulled-together and fashionable New Yorker threw her off substantially. "I am. Are you Maya?"

The woman nodded and motioned her inside. "Come on in."

Cassie followed her into the small, modern lobby. "I'm on eight," Maya said as she pushed the button to call the elevator. "You were having second thoughts about coming, weren't you?"

It probably wouldn't do any good to lie to a psychic, so Cassie said, "Yeah. I'm just not sure about all of this."

"All of what? What's going on?" The elevator door slid open and Maya stood aside so that Cassie could enter first.

Her first instinct was to snap, "Shouldn't you know that already?" but Cassie controlled herself. "I just have some questions, is all."

"Questions that can only be answered by past life regression therapy?" Maya hit the button for the eighth floor. "You've come to the right place."

They reached Maya's floor and finally the door to her apartment. The place was small, but impeccably decorated and welcoming. Maya took her coat. "Have a seat on the couch."

"Honestly, I don't know what I'm doing here," Cassie began, her fear taking her over once more. "I think I've officially lost my mind."

"I hear that a lot." Maya seated herself in a chair beside the couch and settled in as though she spent many hours in that pose.

"Maybe I'm just wasting my time." Cassie waited for the woman to agree with her, or disagree, or say something that would make her decision for her.

"You owe it to him to find out." Maya's words stopped Cassie's desire to flee in its tracks. Calmly, she continued. "I don't know the entire situation, but I feel that you are very strongly conflicted. Wouldn't it be better to have a clear picture of things before you closed the door on him forever?"

Cassie's hands shook. "I guess I didn't really buy that you were...psychic."

"It doesn't take a psychic to recognize a woman who's having a hard time deciding what to do about a guy." Maya snorted. "I see one in the mirror almost every day. You came here because you thought this might actually help you. I think you owe it to both of you to see if it does."

She made a lot of sense, and Cassie couldn't argue with her reasoning. "What do I do?"

"Well, you close your eyes, and I put you into a light hypnotic state." Maya gestured to the sofa. "You might want to lie down, unless you feel you're going to fall asleep."

There was no way Cassie would fall asleep. Not when she was as keyed up as she was. Without giving doubt any more time, Cassie arranged herself on the couch and willed her body to relax according to

Maya's softly spoken instructions. The woman was truly talented. She painted a picture with words, of a room in Cassie's mind. "In this room, there is a door..."

Closing her eyes, she let Maya's calm, sure voice weave a spell around her mind. Weave a spell? She'd started taking this stuff way too seriously. She'd met one vampire, and now she was believing all sorts of stuff she would have laughed at last week. Part of her really wanted to stand and run out again, but some indefinable urge kept her rooted to her couch.

"Continue taking slow, deep breaths," Maya instructed. "As you walk through the door, concentrate on your breathing. I'm going to begin to count backwards from ten. Let yourself go, deeper and deeper, as I count. Ten..."

This isn't going to work.

"Nine..."

You're crazy, Cassie. You should be in your therapist's office, not some psychic's apartment.

"Eight...going deeper and deeper..."

You should have just put up with your crazy rich vampire delusions. At least you'd have a place to live.

"Seven...six...deeper and deeper, into a state of total relaxation..."

You might have just quit your job over some crazy thing you made up. You might be certifiable. She opened her mouth to speak, to tell Maya that, nice as she was, all of this was hocus pocus and she wasn't going to waste any more of either of their time when a cold draft hit her.

"Your veil! It'll get caught in the door!" The voice that spoke wasn't hers. It wasn't Maya's either. When had the woman stopped counting?

"Don't just stand there, watch out for your veil!" Furthermore, why could Cassie understand the words in her ears? They weren't in any language she'd ever heard.

Maya's voice broke through the fog of confusion. "I want you to go now to the happiest day of this lifetime. See the people around you. Do you recognize them?"

At the word "see", Cassie's vision cleared, though she hadn't realized she'd been staring into total blackness. If she had, maybe she would have been afraid. She didn't feel afraid. She felt excited, happy, and...perhaps just a bit afraid. She looked around her. The woman who fussed with the lace hanging past Cassie's shoulder didn't look like anyone she knew, but something about her was so familiar...

"Look at what you're wearing," Maya's voice urged.

"This is a mistake," the woman, middle-aged and wearing a shabby but clean black wool dress and a heavy gold cross on a chain around her neck, frowned at her. "You couldn't wait until after Lent? Give it some more time?"

“No, Mama,” she said, the words coming to her effortlessly, as though she read words from a script. She looked down at her dress. A wedding dress. It didn’t look like a wedding dress she would expect to see in the twenty-first century, but something inside of her knew what it was.

“People will think you’re in a bad way,” the woman warned her.

“I don’t care!” Never in her life had she raised her voice to her mother, and her own action shocked her so thoroughly that she immediately shut her mouth. It took only a moment of courage to open it again. “Viktor loves me, and I love him. We need to arrive in Prague before the spring, if he is to take the job his cousin has offered him.”

“Let him go! He chases a fantasy, Melina! The city is no place for you,” Mama admonished, crossing herself dramatically.

Just the thought of Viktor leaving without her brought tears to her eyes and an aching loneliness to her heart. They could not be separated. They would wilt in their despair like flowers in a drought.

“I must go with him,” she said, steel behind her words. “Everyone waits at the church. Will you make this day a sorrowful one? This is my wedding, not a funeral.”

The scene jumped ahead in a dizzying rush. Perhaps it was not the mental journey, but the oppressive heat that suddenly surrounded her skin and invaded her lungs with every breath. Though it was winter outside, the atmosphere in the church was stifling, with the candles and incense and the crush of bodies pressed around them. She told herself it was a mark of Viktor’s popularity that the entire village had turned out to see them married, and not because they had all come for the gossip.

She looked at the man standing beside her. Though his hair was dark and he wore a suit much less refined than the ones he wore now, she would recognize Viktor anywhere. His posture was a bit stiffer than usual, his expression serious above the starched collar of his best shirt. Church-serious, she had called it, ever since she had noticed the somber cast to his features one Sunday during services. He’d cut his hair for the wedding; it no longer brushed his shoulders in a stick-straight curtain of chestnut brown. She had always thought him handsome, but today, on their wedding day, she felt he must be the most handsome man in the entire world.

As if he could feel her gaze upon him, he lifted one eyebrow, almost imperceptibly, and looked at her from the corner of his eye. He winked and turned his attention back to the priest before them, and she could not contain her giggles. *Let them think what they will think. I love him, and he loves me. Soon, we will be away from here forever, and free.*

The oppressive heat in the air encouraged her to give in to the sleepy sway of her knees, and it took her a moment to realize she had closed her eyes. Why did everyone gasp? Had something terrible happened? Something closed around her, hard and reassuringly stable. Viktor’s arms, supporting her as she swooned.

“Open the doors, she needs air,” he barked, and her heart swelled at the concern he showed for her. She did not recover as quickly as she could have, too delighted in the feeling of Viktor holding her close and the tender words he whispered in her ear.

The dizzying rush overcame her again, for a wholly different reason. The church was long gone now, the traditional and lengthy ceremony completed. Now, she stood alone with Viktor—her husband!—her body thrumming with the excitement of discovery, her cheeks flushed. They stood in a small attic room with a sloped ceiling and a chimney that provided little warmth. A lamp banished the dark to the corners, but still she shivered. All the long hours they’d spent together, walking by the lake or talking by the fire, keeping their voices low so that her family wouldn’t overhear, those held little indication of what he would be like now that they were together, alone, on their wedding night.

It was not that she feared him. Rather, she feared she would disappoint him. Nothing Mama had told her had adequately prepared her for what her part would be. Oh, she knew the mechanics, but not how to act, other than to “endure” as her mother had instructed. Endure, and Viktor would be happy. Endure, and she would have many children. But this did not feel like something that was to be endured, standing so close to Viktor that the crisp hair on his chest brushed her bare breasts.

Viktor’s fingers, long and elegant, rough from the hard work he did for his family’s farm, came to rest beneath her chin. The light in his eyes had not changed when he looked at her now. She was his wife, yes, but still his *ptáček*, his “little bird”, and he looked at her with the same tenderness as he had the day he had asked her to marry him. Looking into his eyes, she saw he did not share her worries that something had changed between them. He kissed her, as gently and slowly as he had the very first time.

He looped one arm under her knees and lifted her effortlessly to carry her to the bed.

“Do not be afraid,” he pleaded in that strange language Cassie could somehow understand. His voice was beautiful and dark with desire for her, and she reached for him as he leaned back to look at her. “You are perfect.”

“I am skinny,” she said, covering her small breasts and sunken stomach with her hands.

“You are perfect,” he repeated, brushing her hand aside, and leaned down to take her nipple into his mouth. The room was cold, but his mouth was hot and wet, and she squeezed her thighs together, the place between them becoming hot and wet, as well. He moved to the other breast, and for the moment she did not feel they were so insignificant as she had before. She placed her hands on his shoulders, marveling at why they never seemed so broad before. She tentatively ran her fingers down his back, feeling her way along the ridges of hard muscle, free to explore him in a way she had not been just hours before. How strange, that they loved each other so completely without truly knowing each other this way.

“You’re holding your breath,” he whispered, raising his head to look up at her, and he smiled that same, teasing smile she had seen so many times before.

She gulped in breath, self-conscious at the sound, and he laughed before returning to place kisses on her ribs, her stomach, lower, until she stopped him. He met her pleading look with a kiss to reassure her and parted her thighs with his hand. One finger stroked her soft petals, and she cried out in shock, then bit back her voice at the fear someone would hear her.

“No, please,” he murmured against her lips. “I want to hear you. I want to know all the sounds you make. I want to know if you like to be touched like this...” He slipped that questing finger over the hot, hard little bud she’d stroked beneath the blankets while her sisters all slept, and she sat up in surprise.

“And like this,” he continued, rolling his fingertip over and over it, in tight circles that brought another moan to her throat.

“Yes,” she managed with a shaking voice. “Yes, I like that.”

He bent his head to her breast again, all the while worrying the little nub with his finger. Her body arched and tensed. She panted, her fingers clutching at the bedding, his arms, anything she could reach. His mouth moved, lower and lower, until it rested where his finger had been, and she screamed, clamping her knees to his head as her body spasmed in joy.

Her legs fell open, and Viktor pulled himself up to lie between them. He fumbled with his trousers, cursing, then settled his weight against her. Her breath caught, he pushed forward, and her body opened around him with a stinging burst. He groaned, buried his head against her neck, then mumbled, “Forgive me.”

She shuddered, gritting her teeth against the intrusion of his body. She took a deep breath and willed her body to relax, and it helped some, but it felt so strange. He moved inside of her, only for a moment, and then it was over, so quickly she could barely put her thoughts and feelings together. He withdrew from her body on another tide of wetness, slippery and silky between her thighs, and fell to the bed beside her.

“I am sorry,” he rasped, swallowing hard against his rapid breaths. “I wanted to...ah, I’m a fool.”

She leaned up on one elbow and stared down at him. “You are not a fool.”

“I have never...” His flush was visible even in the dim lamplight. “I didn’t realize how it would feel.”

“How did it feel?” she asked, amazed that he had been as inexperienced as she. A smile slowly widened the corners of his mouth, and she leaned down, tentatively brushing her mouth across his. Then, she laughed. “You’re mine now.”

“As you are mine,” he agreed, reaching up to pull her lips to his once more.

“Go forward now, to the moment of your death,” Maya’s voice intruded. Cassie startled at the realization that she was not Melina in the attic room Viktor’s parents had allowed them to move into. She was Cassandra, on the couch in a psychic’s studio apartment, and she was about to see herself die.

Panic clawed at her, and those metaphorical claws turned into real ones, gripping her skin, clutching at her hair. She tried to brush them away, but they were so real, so painful.

“Viktor!” she screamed for him, saw him, fallen under the hands of those creatures, and thought, *This is my fault.*

If she hadn’t been so angry, if she hadn’t stormed out of the café...if she hadn’t insisted they leave the flat and venture into the forbidding winter night...if they had never come to Prague at all, but stayed in the safety of their little village...

He stretched out his hand, seeking her touch even as another of the creatures landed on his back and tore long gouges across his coat. The snow beneath Viktor’s body turned pink, then scarlet.

She could not reach his hand. She wanted to. She prayed to, but no strength came to her. Her vision darkened. Oh God! Not like this! There was so much they had not done. She cried out for him with the last of her ability, but it made no difference, and the darkness sealed her in, though she could still hear his screams.

Covering her ears, Cassie abruptly sat up. The screaming was long gone, she knew the moment she saw Maya’s surprised face and the interior of the small apartment, but she didn’t trust herself enough to take her hands away. He’d been in so much pain. How had he survived? Not just the attack, but the years, the decades that had followed.

They had loved each other. She had loved him. Their long separation pierced her heart now, a curious echo of a loneliness she’d always felt but never questioned.

“May I get you some water?” Maya asked, reaching a solicitous hand to Cassie’s knee.

Feeling like a fool, Cassie lowered her hands. She swiped at her eyes and scrambled for her purse. “I have to go. You have my credit card information, right? From over the phone?”

“Please don’t leave. You’re very upset. There has to be someone I can call for you.” Maya reached for her phone.

Cassie shook her head. “I just have to get out of here.”

“Wait, please,” Maya called behind her, but Cassie didn’t stop to explain. She wouldn’t have been able to. No words would have adequately described her experience. She pushed her lungs to keep up with her as she burst from the door and onto the street. She’d forgotten her coat. There wasn’t any time or a good enough reason to go back for it. She had to find Viktor.

That alone shook her to the very core of her being. The old Cassie would have turned back, used any excuse to keep from confronting the possibility before her. That wasn’t an option anymore, not after what she had seen. When Viktor had looked at Melina, it had been with the same tenderness as Cassie had seen in his face as he’d held her. He loved her then. He could love her now. Maybe he already did.

As she ran, she ignored the feeling she was being watched, and wrote off the shapes in the corners of her vision as figments of her imagination.

Chapter Nine

“When did they say they would call?” Viktor tilted his head to try to catch a glimpse of the rooftops as they passed, but the windows of the car limited his vision.

“When they had more information on the movement patterns of the Minions.” Anthony swerved, deftly avoiding a car parallel parking on the street. “I shouldn’t be doing this for you, you know that, right?”

“I know.” Viktor knew all too well that Anthony should be hunting and destroying Minions with the other Conclave members who had descended upon New York. The highest concentration of Minions in an urban area in almost a hundred years was considered a full-blown emergency by Conclave standards. Though Viktor didn’t care for the Conclave on most days, he didn’t mind them wiping the scum from the city. He shrank from the sunlight that pierced the clouds and grazed his skin. “You should have warned me. At the first sign that things were getting out of hand, you should have let me know. I could have helped you.”

“Helped me how?” Anthony blared the horn and zoomed through a red light. “Every time you kill, you get worse. Your days are numbered, buddy. Look in a mirror.”

Viktor didn’t need the reminder. “How far are we?”

“About five minutes.” Anthony steered the car down a narrow alley. “No matter what we find, you need to stay in control. Don’t make yourself a part of the problem.”

“Just make sure Cassandra is safe.” If there was a fight, Viktor wouldn’t walk away and leave her vulnerable. He wouldn’t be able to. Even if he lost the battle for his humanity in the process, he would not abandon Cassandra to the same fate Melina had suffered.

When they pulled up in front of the building, something seemed...odd. Viktor had expected to see signs of Minions everywhere, but there were none.

“We’re too late.” He turned to Anthony, whose face twisted in disbelief. “We’re too late.”

“Maybe not.” Anthony pulled his phone from his pocket and punched a few keys. “I’ve got some on the map. They seem to be congregating around midtown.”

Covering his head with his jacket to protect himself from any sunlight that might break the cloud cover, Viktor exited the car and leapt to the second-story ledge, only belatedly considering the consequences if someone had seen him. Damn the Conclave’s protocol. His only concern was for Cassandra.

"I had a key," Anthony called from the street. "Shall I join you?"

Peering through the dark glass, Viktor shook his head. "No. She's not here. We have to find her."

He pushed off from the building and connected with something in midair. The impact shot him back, through the windows, spraying glass over the small apartment. He hit the bed and tumbled to the floor, locked in the rubbery grip of a Minion. The horrible thing dug its claws into his shoulders and its jaws snapped mere inches from his face. He pushed with all of his might and dislodged it, springing to his feet only to be struck down again. A second Minion perched on his back and bit into his neck. He roared in pain and shoved himself backward, smashing the creature into the wall hard enough to crumble plaster around them.

They fought hard, hungry. Viktor knew they must have been waiting a long time for Cassandra. They wouldn't have her. Let them tear him apart. They wouldn't have her.

Cassie turned the corner, not running, but walking fast enough that she had to dodge the quick-moving crowd. The doorman at Viktor's building admitted her without question and indicated that instructions had been left to let her into the apartment. But when the elevator doors opened and she was confronted with the sleek black foyer, no one was there to meet her.

"Viktor?" She hurried down the terrifying staircase, ignoring the windows that seemed poised to swallow her whole. The horrible feeling of falling, falling endlessly, gripped her, and she clung to the railing for support, breaking from the stairs and hurrying to the well-disguised door by the fireplace. She opened it to find the hallway dark, no sign of any occupants.

She called Viktor's name as she looked into the rooms she passed. The sound of a television, muffled by a closed door, drew her to Viktor's office. The flat-screen television on the wall broadcasted a local channel, and the computer on the desk glowed with a map of Manhattan and the outlying boroughs. Red dots flashed and swarmed over the streets, moving like a sinister pox over the city.

Leaning in closer, she scanned the map. There was her street. Four red dots seemed concentrated on her block.

That was where Viktor was. She knew it without any doubt. He'd gone to rescue her. Just like before, her impulsive behavior had led him into danger. Just like before, it would be her fault if he were attacked. This time, though, he had so much more to lose.

Her gaze fell on the little gold circle that lay on the desk. Her wedding ring. No, Melina's wedding ring. She slipped it onto her finger and fled the apartment, then the building, out into streets swarming with monsters. She only prayed she wasn't too late.

Another Minion came at him, fangs bared. Viktor lifted himself as best he could and struck out at the creature. In the corner, Anthony's body lay limp and skewed like a child's toy thrown during a temper tantrum. He had done his best to fight off the Minions, using the skills and weapons the Conclave had provided him. It had been an impressive but ultimately futile display. When the Conclave members Anthony had called for help arrived, they would find their comrade dead, his charge the same. Viktor cried out pathetically as a Minion gripped his arm and pulled, hard enough that bone and sinew separated. He would be torn apart. Such an undignified end.

But an end at last. The pieces of his kills—and the pieces of Cassandra's destroyed apartment—lay in piles around him. His own skin resembled the chunks of flesh lying on the floor, rubbery and white. His memory slipped away from him like water through a sieve, and the hunger...he nearly sobbed with the force of it. He reached out for the Minion who'd caught him. He would pull the creature apart, feast on its blood. He would drink until his thirst was quenched, drink until the dead heart that beat within him burst from the pressure. He was a creature driven totally by hunger.

A familiar scent wafted to him above the smell of his own blood. Ah, desperation. Guilt. He knew her, but all that registered now was the hunger. He needed to consume her.

The door opened, and she stopped in her tracks. Her gaze remained fixed on the ruin and death around her.

It was time to strike.

One of the creatures stood over what Cassie thought was Viktor. But it couldn't be. Though the monster wore the tatters of Viktor's clothing, it seemed shapeless and unformed. The suggestion of a human body with the rubbery skin and shapeless features of a Minion.

The creature that held down not-Viktor sprang toward her, and she rushed forward, purely on instinct, driving her shoulder into the creature hard, setting it off balance. In that moment, she grabbed the object nearest to her—an umbrella leaning behind the door—lifted it over her head and pummeled the creature again, screaming with every smack of the weapon. Blood, thick and black, sprayed over her, but she didn't stop, squeezing her eyes shut tight to protect them from the spray. Only when a hand caught her ankle did she open her eyes again. The thing that should have been Viktor held her in his grasp.

She couldn't harm him. Tears spilled from her eyes as she stared down into the formless face. "Viktor, it's me. Please!"

He pulled her down, mouth unusually wide, teeth at strange angles in his horrible mouth.

"It's Cassandra. Melina. I love you. Please don't do this!" She didn't fight him. He covered her body, his rubbery white limbs so different from the sturdy arms that had held her the night before. She closed her eyes and sobbed. If this was how she would die, she would. She only hoped that Viktor's soul, or whatever

part of him could be called a soul, had moved on before he became this monstrosity. They had found each other in this lifetime. She wouldn't rest until she found him in the next.

His fangs sank into her neck, and she screamed, but she didn't push him away. She didn't want to struggle, didn't want him to hurt her more than he had to. There was no chance of escape now, anyway. She clung to his shoulders, wiry and round now from his transformation into Minion, and whispered that she loved him over and over while her blood flowed from the wound in her neck. What he did not drink puddled beneath her head, wetting her hair. Tears rolled from her eyes to join the sticky wetness on the floor. It hadn't been long ago that she'd collapsed on this floor and Viktor had come to her aid. She forced herself to focus on the short time they'd spent together. When she died, which wouldn't be long now, she wanted to die remembering what he had been, not fearing the monster he had become.

Her thoughts became muddled, and she struggled to hold her memories close. The pain faded. She couldn't feel her body anymore. Her mind wandered, all the way to the little attic room where she'd spent her wedding night as Melina. Lying beside Viktor in the dark, she had listened to the sound of his breathing, her heart nearly bursting with the love she'd felt for him in that lifetime.

"*Miluji tê,*" she whispered to Viktor, lying sleeping beside her, and to Viktor, transformed into a monster from her nightmares. "*Miluji tê, Viktor.*"

Then she died.

Her blood washed through him like a tidal wave, blasting away years of pain, decades of dying. He had the presence of mind to release her, to roll away from her body so that as he collapsed, he did not crush her. Melina. No, *Cassandra*. That was her name now. Her soul was nameless, though it was familiar, and it poured into him as a healing balm. How had he forgotten her?

It took him a moment to become aware of what he'd done. It took him another moment to stop. He drew away, his broken arm still cradling her. She'd spoken to him, in words that had penetrated his consciousness, in a language he had not spoken for decades but still remembered with piercing clarity. She had told him she loved him.

"*Miluji tê,*" he repeated to her still form. He wanted to weep, but he could not allow it. He had done this. He had murdered his beautiful Cassandra. His Melina. For the second time, he had failed her.

No, it could not be this way! With a roar of frustration, he slashed his own wrist and let the blood well up. He had condemned her to death before by being too weak to protect her. This time there was something he could do about it. He pressed his wrist to her slack mouth and prayed that some spark of life remained within her. Prayed that she could forgive him for what he had done, what he did to her now. The act of changing her might make him into a monster once more. He had balanced so precariously on the limit of his humanity for so long, he no longer knew what might tip the scales. He silently urged her to wake, to drink the blood that flowed into her mouth.

She stirred in his arms, pushing him away, gagging. She spit the blood from her mouth, scrubbed her hand across her face as she did so. Her hair, matted with her blood, stuck to her cheek, and she pushed it away with a grimace of disgust.

She should have been unable to move, seized by agony as the change had taken her. It had taken him days to recover from his transformation. Days of fever and uncertainty, days of praying for a death that would never arrive. He didn't wish that horror on anyone, especially not Cassandra. The thought of her hurting, the thought of the pain he had already caused, drove a spike of helpless rage into him.

Cassandra rolled away from him, choking, and he didn't dare to touch her. Finally, her coughing subsided, and she asked in a strangled whisper, "What happened?"

Viktor squeezed his eyes shut. "Anthony and I saw on the news that Minions had attacked near here. We came to protect you. He did not survive."

A sob escaped her, and it surprised him. She had never seemed to care for Anthony, and Anthony certainly had never cared for her. She'd consumed vampire blood. At this moment, she should care only for blood, for feeding, if she had truly transformed. He reached for her. Her skin did not burn the way a new vampire's feverish flesh should feel. She was human still, warm and alive. He had not killed her. He had not turned her.

"This is all my fault. If I had never left—"

"No." He tried to pull her into his arms, but she resisted him. Why shouldn't she? He'd nearly killed her, and he had certainly destroyed her life. "You are not responsible for what happened here. There are Minions all over the city. Right now, many Conclave members are losing their lives. You are responsible for none of them."

"No." She turned wide, tear-filled eyes to his. "I meant before. In Prague. I should have never left by myself that night. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have died, and you wouldn't be—"

"Dear God." He pulled away from her, then cursed his reaction. What reaction did he expect to have, faced with a living ghost?

"You should have let me die." She sounded tired and defeated. "This time. You should have let me die."

His hands trembled as he reached for her. On her left ring finger, she wore Melina's wedding band. He covered her hand with his own, and the skin-warmed gold did not burn him. "Melina?"

She looked up at him and gasped. What must he look like now, half-transformed, halted in his transition to Minion?

"Viktor," she sputtered. "Your hair."

In the fight, her little vanity table had been destroyed, and pieces of mirror lay all around them. Cassandra reached for one with trembling hands and held it out so he could see. In the fragile shard, a face from long ago stared back at him.

He touched his hair, no longer the colorless white from before, but the dull brown it had been in his youth. His face, too, did not appear so pale or grim. He looked...almost human.

"Does this mean..." She paused and licked her lips. "Does this mean that you're not a..."

"No." The hunger remained, taunting him. "No, I am still a vampire."

"Oh."

The soft noise of disappointment pierced his heart. She would have liked it better if he had not been a vampire anymore. The sound of sirens pricked his ears. "We have to go."

With his help, Cassandra rose on shaky legs. "You can't go out like that, you're practically naked," she said, indicating his torn clothes. "And the sunlight!"

A crack of thunder split the air, and raindrops pelted the window. The sunlight would not be a problem, but everything else...

With a growl of frustration, Viktor grabbed the sheet from the bed and shook glass off it. He tied it around his waist and helped Cassandra downstairs, to the waiting car. The sun stung his eyes, but his skin didn't ignite. Anthony had left the keys in the car—a final favor. Viktor peeled away from the curb without a look back. When he finally relaxed enough to check on Cassandra, she was asleep, slumped against the window in the passenger seat.

Safe. Covered in gore, almost dead at his hands, but safe. He trembled and turned his attention back to the road and the unfamiliar mechanics of driving. Anthony was gone. The Conclave wouldn't be happy. Minions still swarmed the city.

He had failed her.

It wasn't just that he hadn't been able to stop himself from draining her dry. It wasn't that he'd failed to transform her. He rejoiced in that. No, the thing that bothered him most was that he had even considered condemning her to this life. In his desperation to keep her, he'd been willing to sacrifice her soul.

For years, he had mourned Melina, prayed to have her back. The impossible had happened. And now, he had to let her go. To protect Cassandra, he had to let her go.

Chapter Ten

Cassandra woke to an empty room. She lay in Viktor's bed, and the shades were open to the city lights stretching beyond the darkened rectangle of the park. Standing gingerly, she winced at the soreness in her limbs. She'd never have thought that beating something to death with a weapon would take so much physical effort. She'd always assumed the weapon did most of the work.

Her neck stung too, and she reached up to touch the wound from Viktor's bite. A shiver ran through her, all the way to her toes, and not the good kind. Viktor had been one of those creatures, or nearly one of them. A monster from her nightmares.

She paused. Something was wrong. She hadn't woken screaming or sweating. She hadn't been tormented by hellish visions. She'd just...slept.

Frowning, she slid from the bed. When Viktor had carried her into the apartment, he'd taken her straight to the master bathroom and helped her to undress. She'd stayed awake just long enough to shower away the blood before crawling under the covers. At the foot of the bed, a black silk nightgown waited for her, and she pulled it on, grateful for the comforting softness. Her neck ached where he'd bitten her, and she touched the edges of the wound gingerly.

Padding down the hall, she found the door to the living room open and warm firelight in a flickering reflection against the marble. Her muscles tensed and she shot into motion, running toward the flames and shouting, "Viktor!"

When she burst into the living room, she realized her foolishness. The apartment was not engulfed in flames. A cheerful fire crackled in the fireplace, and Viktor sat on the couch, holding a glass of something that was not red, but a warm amber. He looked at her with concern written across every feature. "Is everything all right?"

Her chest almost caved in under the weight of her relief. "Yeah. Everything is fine. I thought the apartment was burning down."

He chuckled. "You're still in shock. You're waiting for monsters to jump out at you from every corner."

"Can you really blame me?" She sat beside him, wanting to touch him, to melt against his sturdiness and stillness, but she kept her arms tucked around her waist, pulling her body into a shell. He didn't seem like the same Viktor. Though he hadn't looked old before, he seemed younger to Cassandra now. He was the man she'd seen during her past life exploration, but she was not that woman. "What do we do now?"

He lifted his glass to her. "Since my transformation has been somewhat...reversed in its progress, I thought I would see if it is possible to get drunk. And watch the sunrise, if I am able."

"The sunrise?" It hadn't been the answer she'd been looking for, and she couldn't ask him again. Despite all they'd been through, he seemed unapproachable now. "Isn't that a little dangerous?"

"Only as we lose our humanity. At first, we can do nearly all of the things we were able to do while alive." He smiled sadly, but Cassie couldn't fathom why he'd be sad to regain his humanity. Not when she'd seen what he was about to become.

"Well, I meant...what now? The cops would have found my apartment full of dead monsters. They've got to be looking for me." She wished he would take her into his arms and tell her that it would be okay. He would have, a day ago.

He shook his head. "No, they will not look for you. The Conclave has an infinite reach. They'll have that apartment completely made over by now. It will look like you never lived there at all."

"But the cops will know I lived there. They'll want to question me and—"

"The Conclave will take care of the details. And if they do not...my wealth will take care of what they miss." The silence stretched between them for some time, until he continued. "I am sorry to have complicated your life so. I fully intend to help you with whatever you need to rebuild. A job, a new identity, an apartment. Say the word, and it is yours."

A cold knot formed in the pit of her stomach. "Um...I don't know what I would need."

"You need something better than a vampire, Cassandra." He looked back to the flames.

Now that it was out in the open, the knot turned into lead and hardened everything inside of her. "What did you do to me? After you bit me."

He didn't answer her.

"Tell me!" She had remembered choking on blood, spitting the foul, coppery taste from her mouth. Had it been hers? "Why didn't I die after you drank my blood?"

"Vampire blood is very powerful." He looked up at her now, and in his gaze she felt the import of his words. "I gave you mine."

She struggled to keep the fear from her voice. "Why would you do that?"

"You had died. I fed you my blood, in the hopes that—"

A prickle of understanding crept up her spine. "You were going to turn me into a vampire?"

"I thought it was the only way. I could not lose you again." He closed his eyes and turned back to the fire.

"You didn't want to lose me, but you're sending me away now?" She shook her head. He had to realize how ridiculous that sounded. Please, God, let him realize how ridiculous it sounded.

"I was willing to condemn you to this life, Cassandra. I do not know why the Minions did not also turn you when we were attacked in Prague. For many years, I wished that they had. But time...it does not

heal, but it gave me a new perspective. How could I have lived with myself if you, Melina, had lost your humanity and become a monster? Wasn't it better that we were separated, if only to protect you from what I am?

"Now that I have you again, the temptation to hold on to you forever is far too great. I was willing to give you my blood and snatch you back from Death himself. I was willing to sacrifice your soul just to keep you. By the grace of God, you received only enough to restore you, but not enough to turn you. Knowing that I am capable of doing that to you... I would rather be apart, than risk giving in to the temptation to make you what I am."

Tears coated her eyes, and she blinked them back. Fine, if that was how it would be, that was how it would be. She could live with disappointment. She had before. Even as she thought it, she knew it was a lie. After everything that had happened between them, he would just throw her away? He'd had decades to get used to his broken heart, but she hadn't. She couldn't adapt to the pain that froze her lungs. But she couldn't make him love her, either. Desperately clutching the last shred of cold detachment that lingered in her soul, she strove to connect with the old Cassandra, the one who didn't need anyone but herself. The persona didn't fit as well now, but she forced her voice to sound bored and unaffected. "I'll need an apartment."

"You have your pick of any in Manhattan."

She wetted her lips. "And I'll need a job. A legit one. I'm not going back to the club."

He nodded, still gazing into the fire. "There are openings in my company. Or, if you prefer—"

"I don't want to work for you." She'd declared that a little too stridently. Now was the time to get a bit of the old Cassie back, to use her pretend strength to get through the next few minutes, possibly the next few hours and days. "If it's all the same to you, I think we should make this a clean break."

"Of course."

"And until I have a place to stay, I should stay in a hotel or something."

"I've already had my new assistant make arrangements. You'll be staying at the Waldorf-Astoria. From what I understand, the suites there are very tasteful, nothing like being in a hotel room." He swallowed the rest of the liquid in his glass. "I'll send someone over to show you apartments."

They said nothing for a long time. Cassie had never felt quite so numb before, at least not without sedatives and pain killers. She stared into the flames right along with him, wishing she were anywhere else but stupidly, hopelessly unable to leave his side.

"You deserve better than a vampire," he said quietly. "Someday, I will lose my humanity. Something happened, I don't know how or why, to give me a second chance. But I won't put you in danger again."

He had a point. When he'd been that monster, he hadn't recognized her. He'd been willing to kill her, to slowly bleed her dry. If it happened again, what would stop him? Whatever miracle had happened this time? She didn't really feel like testing it out.

"I went to a psychic," she said, not knowing why she felt she should share the information. "I guess I thought, since vampires are real, you know...anyway, I found out some interesting stuff."

"I'm sure you did." He looked at her finally, sorrow etched into every line on his face. "You're wearing your wedding ring."

"You noticed." She looked down, suddenly embarrassed, and twisted the gold band off her finger. "I don't know what any of this means—"

"It means nothing." He shook his head and stood, going to the bar for another drink. "I have cost you your life once, almost twice. I will not be the cause of your death again."

"I'm not asking you to! I just..." She exhaled angrily. "You're so ready to tell me what I deserve. You haven't bothered to ask me what I want."

"Because I cannot give it to you."

She searched her mind for something else to say, some magic word that would convince him of the mistake he made, that they both made, if she walked out of this apartment and never came back. But she knew it didn't exist, and she had no choice but to nod silently and hold out the ring.

"Keep it, please." He stepped closer, setting his drink aside, and slid the ring back on her finger. His skin seemed warmer now, and that small touch of humanity mocked her. "I gave it to you as a symbol of the love between us then. I would not wish for you to forget that."

And the love I have for you now? she silently seethed. A tear finally escaped, and a soft sob. As though they were as repellent to him as sunlight, he stepped back.

"I'll call you a car." He took his drink with him as he headed to the hallway.

On legs that felt like lead, she went to the guest room, where the clothes that Anthony had stolen from her apartment waited for her. She supposed she should be happy she didn't have to replace absolutely everything. *Just your whole life.*

After she dressed and packed the rest of her clothes, she returned to the living room, but Viktor had not come back. The door to his office was closed and within moments the elevator opened and a smartly dressed driver appeared at the top of the stairs. "Mr. Novotny called for a car?"

"Yeah, that's for me." She wondered if she should tell Viktor she was leaving. Then, anger and hurt pride won out over the stupid, tender feelings she'd developed for him. Anger had more practice, anyway.

She pulled her bag over her shoulder and headed up the stairs.

Chapter Eleven

Without Cassandra, the apartment was a tomb.

Viktor stood at the windows, watching the sun unroll its deadly blanket over the park. One morning. He'd had one morning after Cassandra had left. The sun had touched his skin, and he'd looked on it in wonder. He'd gone onto the terrace and felt the rays soak the early morning cold with warmth. Tears of joy had leaked, crimson, from his eyes, but there had been no one to share the experience with.

The next morning, the sun had burned him.

He held out his hand, longing to feel the touch of the light through the window for just a moment. His skin blistered and cracked, smoke wafting from the fissure that widened under the golden light. His reflection, pale white hair and skin, squinted back at him like a sickly ghost. He hit the button to close the shades and turned.

Stephanie, his new assistant, stood silently at the bottom of the stairs. Waiting, like a work-hungry vulture. "Is there anything I can assist you with, Mr. Novotny? Do you need your infusion?"

Without Anthony, Viktor had been forced to make some difficult changes. Namely, faking a disease that required him to ingest mysterious "infusions" and avoid sunlight. The Conclave had yet to send him word of another watcher's arrival, and he did not wish to call their attention to his continued existence. They would find him, eventually, but in the meantime, he had to pretend for the benefit of his mousy new assistant.

Worse, he couldn't feed from anyone, and that was what he blamed for the rapid loss of his humanity. He could drink all the blood he wanted, but he would not touch another human. He couldn't stomach the thought of being with anyone but Cassandra. "Did the realtor have any luck finding an apartment for my friend?"

Frowning, Stephanie consulted her smart phone. "Mmm...looks like no luck yet. Another week at the Waldorf?"

He made a noise to confirm, and she sighed loudly.

"It is not your money I am spending, Stephanie," he snapped. Then, walking to his office, he called over his shoulder, "See that I am not disturbed this morning."

"In just a moment, sir," his assistant called, her heels clacking on the marble as she hurried to catch up with him.

He didn't slow his steps and slumped in the chair behind his desk to wait for her to catch up. When she came through the door, she smirked and said, "Catch," before throwing something in his direction.

Without thinking, he caught the object. When he opened his hand, the ring, Melina's ring, sparkled in his palm.

"She sent it back with me when I dropped off the credit card you gave her." Stephanie nodded toward the ring. "She said she didn't want it anymore."

"Thank you." He waved a hand to dismiss the woman and waited until he was alone to look at the ring again. By all accounts, it should have burned the flesh from his hands. As he turned it from palm to palm, it remained cool, but he found himself imagining a bit of heat there. Not the scourging fire that should have assailed him from the holy object, but the gentle warmth of Cassandra's skin.

Christ have mercy, what was he doing? For so many years, he'd prayed to have Melina back. He'd avoided any real entanglements with humans and isolated himself because he could not have her. Now she had returned to him, and he rejected her?

But it wasn't Melina. Cassandra was more outspoken, harder and less approachable. Wasn't she? He scoured his short memory of Cassandra, and all he found was a woman who had trusted him when she shouldn't have, who had struggled under the weight of enormous pain, alone, but who had risked her life in the hope of saving him. He crushed the ring in his palm, willing it to mark his flesh, but it remained as harmless as it ever had been. Harmless, but not powerless. It was the symbol that had bound their souls together that day in the small village church. Their souls, and not their bodies.

He reached for the intercom and pressed the button, but Stephanie didn't answer. Damn the woman, he would fire her and replace her as soon as the downtown office opened.

He strode to his bedroom and hit the button that controlled the shades. The moment the sunlight had filtered a hazy line through the air, he thrust his hand into it. His sleeve ignited almost immediately and, with a shout of despair, he closed the blinds.

He couldn't leave yet. But when he could, he would go to Cassandra. He'd made a terrible mistake. He could only hope she felt the same way.

The knock at the door startled Cassie. The realtor wasn't stopping by today, and she'd already politely declined maid service. She pushed back the room service tray on the ottoman she'd rested it on and hopped to her feet, hitting the button on the remote. She didn't need whoever it was on the other side of the door judging her trashy daytime TV picks.

"Ugh," she intoned under her breath as she checked the peephole. Viktor's new assistant—his latest, female assistant—stood on the other side of the door, preoccupied with the phone in her hand. Cassie flipped the lock and opened the door. "Come in."

“This won’t take long,” Stephanie said, stepping smoothly into the room as though she’d been born in four-inch heels. She pressed a hand to her hair to pat it into place and holstered her phone. “Mr. Novotny wishes to know if the credit card he sent over works.”

Cassie’s cheeks flamed. “I haven’t used it.”

Stephanie arched an eyebrow. “It’s been two days.”

As if Cassie couldn’t control her gold-digging ways for two whole days! “I guess I haven’t been in a rip-off-a-rich-guy mood.”

The fake laugh that issued from Stephanie could have sliced bread. “You don’t have to prove anything to me. It’s just that if I were you, I’d take the money and run.”

Cassie tilted her head. “What are you talking about?”

Stephanie sat in one of the delicate Queen Anne chairs in the suite’s living area. “I do not doubt that you are acquainted with Mr. Novotny’s...affliction?”

If she’d had anything in her mouth, Cassie would have choked. “Excuse me?”

“His vampirism.” Stephanie reached into her jacket and pulled out a card. “I’m an agent of the Conclave. Has Mr. Novotny told you about that?”

“Yes, he has.” Was that the wrong answer? The last thing she wanted to do was get Viktor in trouble. She had no idea what those Conclave people would do to him if they were angry. Her stomach dropped. “Oh God, he’s not—”

“Rapidly losing his humanity once again?” Stephanie withdrew her phone and pursed her lips as she browsed the screen. “At an alarming rate, I’m afraid.”

In her anger, Cassie had assumed that Viktor had gone back to life as normal for him, without any thought of her. “Is he feeding?”

“Blood, yes. But I’m sure you’re aware that he has other...needs. A connection with a human can sustain a vampire’s humanity for decades. Now that your relationship with Mr. Novotny has ended, it seems he will not seek other human companionship.”

“That’s not what you are?” Cassie couldn’t help her jealous sniff.

Stephanie looked a bit taken aback by her answer. Good. “As a Conclave member, it is my duty to monitor Mr. Novotny’s decline. Nothing more.”

“That’s very comforting.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.” Stephanie trained her ice blue eyes on Cassie, making her feel the distinct need to squirm. “The Conclave has a particular interest in Mr. Novotny. He’s the most prominent vampire figure in human society. If he were to become a Minion, it would raise public suspicion. We’ve monitored him closely in the years following his considerable financial and business success and, until he met you, his humanity had been in precipitous decline.”

"But he's not now," she corrected the woman. "After what happened at my apartment. He's back to almost human."

Stephanie shook her head. "He *was* back to almost human. Unfortunately, his progress has reversed. The Conclave feels it was something to do with you."

"I would never hurt Viktor!" The nerve of this woman! It was one thing to imply Cassie was a gold-digger, another altogether to suggest she would want Viktor to turn into one of *those*.

"We believe he got better because of you, not worse," Stephanie clarified calmly. "He met you and made an almost total reversal. Now that you've parted, his condition has worsened."

"Worsened?" Worse than he had been when they'd first met? When he'd been just days away from turning into a Minion?

"He has a day, two, at best." Stephanie didn't attempt to sugarcoat it. Cassie doubted that Conclave types ever did. The way both Stephanie and Anthony had talked about Viktor had been as though they'd described some kind of dangerous animal instead of a man. "We plan to neutralize him in forty-eight hours, to prevent any messy public spectacle."

In two days, Viktor would die? Cassie clenched her fists. She wanted to lunge at this woman and rip her hair out, more than she had just minutes before. "You're going to murder him. Don't use a fancy word to cover it up."

A flicker of warning passed over Stephanie's face. She stood, smoothing her skirt back into place. "I realize this must be difficult for you, but I urge you to accept whatever financial help Mr. Novotny has offered in the timeframe I've given you. The Conclave will not offer any support to you once he's dead." At the door, Stephanie paused. "Have a nice day, Ms. Connely."

Her heart pounding, Cassandra stared at the closed door. What could she do? Viktor had made it clear he didn't want her in his life, but he wouldn't want to die, either. And if there was some way to stop the Conclave, he would be a Minion in just a few days.

He'd been willing to buy her out of his life and never see her again, but this wasn't right. She couldn't let him do this, no matter what his wishes were where she was concerned. Hands trembling, she lifted the phone receiver from its cradle and punched the number for the front desk. "I need a car!"

"Stephanie, call me a damned car!" Viktor released the button on the intercom so his assistant could reply, but no reply was forthcoming. He wasn't surprised, but he was angry. The woman had been out almost all day. Now it was finally safe to leave, he couldn't get a car. He supposed he could use the subway. Or just walk. He didn't imagine the Waldorf-Astoria was terribly far away. They were on an island, after all.

He closed his eyes. He needed to calm himself. When he opened his eyes, he looked at his reflection in the mirror over his dresser. It was missing. Wonderful. Back to asking his assistant to straighten his tie

and hoping all his buttons were done up correctly before strolling into public. What he wouldn't give for Melina's calming influence, the gentle energy he'd relied upon year after year as he'd pressed her ring against his skin and let his memories soothe him. Now that he'd found her again, her essence deserted him.

Or had it? Like a wave, her soul seemed to crash over him, and the feeling was so achingly familiar he pressed a hand to his chest to cover the ring he had returned to the chain around his neck.

From the foyer, he heard the click of the elevator doors, and then Cassandra's voice, loaded with panic as she shouted his name.

He hurried from his room, worries about his appearance forgotten. When he reached the living room, she stood at the top of the stairs, her eyes wide and red from crying, her hair tousled over the shoulders of her leather jacket. Torn between wanting to run to her and wariness that she might flee him, he chose to stand where he was, the space between them like miles. "I thought you did not wish to see me again."

"I wasn't given much of a choice." She hurried down the stairs, looking around as though something evil might spring out at her. "Your new assistant. She's a member of the Conclave."

The strange feeling that perhaps he'd missed a page or two in the story crept up on him. "Pardon me?"

"Look, I know you don't want me here. But she came to see me. She told me to spend whatever money you were willing to give me, because they were going to kill you in two days. 'Neutralize' was the word she used. Because she said you were going to become a Minion, because I left, and I...I couldn't do that to you!" A sob racked her entire body, and she looked like she would crumple in on herself with her tears. "Tell me to go, send me away, I don't care, I'm not going anywhere! I can't let that happen to you!"

He did go to her then, and she fell into his arms as easily as though they had never been apart. Not for a week, not for a lifetime. "I sent you away because I saw the look on your face when you realized I was still a vampire. I could not be so selfish as to keep you when I was not what you wanted."

Her arms tightened around him, and it killed him to pry her away, but he had to. "My death is inevitable, as anyone's is. If my choice is to die or become a Minion, I choose death."

She took a deep breath. "Please, don't think I'm crazy. Because it's going to sound crazy. Very, very crazy."

He took her hands. They seemed almost as cold as his. "Cassandra, you believed I was a vampire. You believed about Minions, and you sought out a psychic to find out about your past life. I owe it to you to take what you tell me at face value."

"I'm the reason you changed back." She went on in a rush, explaining the Conclave believed she had prevented his transformation into Minion. "I thought that if I came here, if I got you to listen to me... We don't have to be what we were before. Maybe if I just stayed close. I don't want to lose you, Viktor. I know you've made your decision, but you said before that Melina was stubborn. She argued. Well, not a lot has changed. I'm stubborn, and I'm not going to leave here if I know you're going to die."

"I knew it was you," he said, squeezing her hands. "For decades, it was your memory. And then when I met you...*this* you, I must have somehow overlooked your effect on me. But I saw your disappointment, Cassandra, when you asked if I was still a vampire. You owe me nothing. You do not have to stay here."

"Of course I have to stay. I couldn't save you before. And I can't go back in time and save Emily." She stopped, squeezing her eyes shut in frustration. "That makes it sound like I'm using you to atone for something."

"A penance no one deserves," he said with a humorless laugh.

She looked up with tears in her eyes. "I deserve you."

The earnestness in her words drove away the final resistance in him. He'd fought for her—no, they had fought for each other—but there was no reason to continue fighting, especially not such a powerful foe as his love for her. He withdrew the wedding ring from the collar of his shirt. With a tug, he snapped the chain. "Cassandra, be my wife, for the second time."

She laughed. "We've known each other for a few days."

"A few days and the nine years we were married," he pointed out, his hope turning to dread in his chest. Was this too much, too soon?

Chewing her lip, she kept her gaze fixed on the ring between his thumb and forefinger. "You're going to live for hundreds of years. I'm not."

He reached out with his other hand and lifted her chin so that she faced him. "Do you love me?"

Her lips compressed as though she tried to hold back tears. Nodding first, she followed it with a whispered, "Yes. I do love you."

"And I love you." He took her hand, and she didn't resist him as he slipped the ring onto her finger. "The rest we will work on."

She laughed at that and let him help her to her feet. Once they stood, he swept her up in his arms and kissed her, the way he'd ached to kiss her all the interminable days they'd been apart.

She leaned back and gasped, and he looked to the mirror, where his reflection once again appeared. His skin was less pale, his hair the familiar chestnut brown of his youth.

"That's going to take some getting used to," she breathed, reaching up to touch it. "So, now what?"

"Now," a voice said behind them, making Cassandra jump in his arms, "I report back to the Conclave and inform them our efforts are better spent elsewhere."

Despite the words Stephanie had spoken, Cassandra whirled to face her and shielded Viktor with her body. "Get out!"

"I will." Stephanie lifted her chin. "I see that Mr. Novotny's humanity is no longer in danger, and therefore I'm no longer needed. For now."

"For now?" he repeated, wrapping his arms around Cassandra's shoulders.

Stephanie's smile was a warning. "We'll monitor your situation. If things change in the future—"

“Get out,” Cassandra whispered, and the woman nodded, heading to the stairs.

They watched her go. Viktor considered going to the security cameras in Anthony’s office to make sure she really had exited the building. Cassandra was shaken, though, and needed his attention. “Are you all right?”

“They’re going to monitor us? Does that mean they can just come back and kill you, whenever they want?”

He pressed his lips to her temple. “They won’t need to. I love you. I’m not going to let you go again. Even if my humanity didn’t depend on you, I would want you here, with me.”

“If you trust the Conclave, I guess I have to too.” She turned in his arms, still uncertain, it seemed, from the way she chewed her lip. “But you didn’t answer my question from before.”

He frowned, searching his memory for some unresolved trouble between them. “What question?”

“What now?”

“Now?” He pretended to consider. It gave him a moment to enjoy the sight of her, his Cassandra, his Melina, finally able to smile up at him, free from the horrors of the past for the first time in nearly a century. “I think now we should spend the whole night making love. And in the morning, I would like to watch the sunrise with you. On the terrace.”

“I haven’t been cured of my fear of heights, you know,” she reminded him.

He kissed her cheek, then her jaw, then nibbled her ear until she laughed and playfully pushed him back. “I know you haven’t. But I’ll be there. If you fall, I’ll catch you.”

“Do you promise?” She looked into his eyes, searching for something in his words that was far more than reassurance about physical height.

“*Navždy*, Melina,” he whispered, claiming her lips once more. “Forever, Cassandra.”

About the Author

The alter-ego of USA Today Bestselling Author [Jennifer Armintrout](#), Abigail Barnette was born during a conversation with author [Bronwyn Green](#), who encouraged Jennifer to develop an elaborate fantasy persona—complete with nom de plume—under which to pen erotic romance. Abigail enjoys long naps in fairy-filled glades, running through corridors in tragically romantic haunted castles, and drinking goblet after goblet of spiced wine.

To learn more about Abigail Barnette, please visit www.abigailbarnette.com, or visit her blog at www.abigailbarnette.blogspot.com.

Look for these titles by Abigail Barnette

Now Available:

Ravenous

One man claims her by day, another by night. Together they lay claim to her heart.

Ravenous

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Annabelle Whittington sails toward Jamaica, and marriage to a wealthy plantation owner, on winds of hope. Hope that she hasn't saved her virginity only to be doomed to proper English wifehood, never to fully satisfy her sexual curiosity. Then the sails of the pirate ship *Howling Hades* appear on the horizon.

Captain Galerius' demands are simple: in exchange for her blood to slake his eternal thirst, and her body to quell his voracious lust, he will guarantee safe passage. Except his motives are less than pure. In his hold is another prisoner, Ian Drummond, who must soon be replaced...with Annabelle.

But Ian has plans of his own, and they don't include giving up his lover so easily. And, once he gets a taste of Annabelle's sweet blend of innocence and boldness, he can't imagine living without either one of them.

Annabelle, sensing the tortured soul beneath the monster, refuses to let Galerius intimidate her—and finds an unexpected ally in the infuriating, maddening Ian. As danger threatens the *Hades*, she is faced with a choice. Return to her life of duty, or embrace her spirit of adventure...and sail the high seas with the men who have captured her heart.

Warning: Avast! Here be hot vampire pirate lovin' that won't be coming to a theater near you any time soon; a comely wench who be givin' "boring" the old heave-ho. Cool rum drink recommended.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Ravenous:

Annabelle gasped as Galerius's mouth covered hers. She pressed her fists against his chest, determined to push him away, willing herself to with every second that passed, but the will of her morals lost out to the will of her body.

His lips were shockingly cold, and his tongue tasted of wine. Her hands moved from fists to claws as she gripped his shoulders. For a moment, she thought of the fiancé she had not met, the only man who had a right to do this to her, and she felt a stab of guilt. But she did not know him, and she did not know if she was safe at the hands of this pirate, and—

Yes, that was it! Surely it was not her sinful curiosity that drove her to press harder against Galerius, not the feverish fantasies she indulged in night after night. She did this to protect herself, and to save her life!

She couldn't really believe that, could she?

No.

She pushed back, caught him unawares so that he released her. "No, I'm sorry, I can't—"

"I saw into your mind, Annabelle." He stalked forward, pulling the robe from his shoulders. "I know what you dream of doing with a man."

He could not possibly... She shook her head. "I think of no such thing."

"Oh, but you do." He took her hand and lifted her wrist to his mouth, flicking his tongue over the pulse that leaped there. "And I promise you, there is so much more than what you've imagined."

When she opened her mouth to protest, all that came out was a whimper.

Galerius released her arm and stepped back, finger to his lips as though having an epiphany. "Perhaps I am driving too hard a bargain. How about this, then? The next time we are to sail across the sea, I will make it my personal mission to find your betrothed and deliver you safely to him. Do you find that fair?"

It was too easy, and very suspicious. "Do you often travel across the sea?"

"Of course. We are pirates, after all."

"Fine, then." Her answer was too easy, and very suspicious as well, but she refused to dwell on it. Still, he had not made a move toward her. "I agree. Proceed."

He chuckled, and a hot blush crept up her face. "It would be easier if you took off your gown."

"Oh." She felt foolish and suddenly not as eager to continue with what they had begun. She had supposed she would be naked, but she had imagined it would happen in the heat of passion, as if by magic, so she would not have time to think about it. To remove her clothing now, while he watched her, would be embarrassing and...

Impossible, she realized. On the boat, Mrs. Grimble had helped her with her stays when she dressed and undressed, and the woman tied such ridiculous little knots. "I can't," she said quietly, relief and disappointment mixing in her voice. "I suppose that's—"

Before she could finish, he dropped to his knees in front of her and pulled her gown open, flinging pins across the room and ripping her stomacher. Annabelle gasped. She would not deny she had imagined having her clothes torn off in a moment of passion, but in practice it was a bit unnerving. More so when he reached for a knife on the table and pointed it to her midsection. She yelped and jumped back, and he growled, "Be quiet, I won't hurt you." A horrible tearing sound alerted her to the demise of the ribbons cinching her corset, and at once she stood in the short shift and drawers beneath. The gasp she uttered then was one of relief, not anticipation.

A smile curved his mouth, and he tossed the blade aside. "In my day, women did not wear such ridiculous undergarments."

"And I shan't, now," Annabelle said, but she could not inject appropriate dismay knowing the vile garment was destroyed. "I suppose I will have to make do until we reach Jamaica."

"If we reach Jamaica," he corrected her. "And I don't want to hear any more talk of it. While you are in my company, you are to think of me, not some far-off man whom you have never met." He advanced on

her, backed her up to the edge of the bunk. “And when you return to him, I guarantee you will still be thinking of me.”

Her knees turned to water and she collapsed, chest constricting with a mixture of fear and excitement. Her nipples grew tight beneath her shift, the dark pink of them showing prominently against the sheer muslin of the garment. With one hand at the small of her back, he stroked the side of one breast. Her breath hitched, and she knew then why he supported her so. Without his arm strong around her back, she would collapse from sheer delight. His smile was almost a smirk as he lowered his mouth, maddeningly slowly. “My, but you are innocent.”

“I’m not—” she began to protest, but his lips closed over the peak of one breast through the fabric, and her back arched like a drawn bow. Never had she felt such intense sensation. She had not been able to imagine what this would be like, not properly; she understood that now. The shivers of apprehension and arousal raced toward her most secret place, the part of her she had stroked beneath the covers while indulging in her most naughty fantasies. All from the touch of his mouth. What would happen when— No, she would not think of that. Her skin grew hot just imagining it.

“It has been a very long time since I’ve had a virgin,” he murmured against her flesh. “The blood is too sweet for my tastes. But I forgot how much fun this is.” His palm snaked beneath her shift, gliding across her belly and up to cup her breast.

She shuddered as a rush of heat flooded her core, swelling her untouched flesh and setting a nearly unbearable tension there. She pressed her thighs together and arched her back, moaning. Galerius slid up her body to cover her mouth with his again, his hands bunching the shift and raising it. He broke their kiss only long enough to pull the garment over her head and discard it, then pressed her to him again. When her exposed skin met his, she moaned and opened her legs, raising one to hook around his waist.

He laughed low in his throat and eased her leg back down. “Do not rush me.” His cold, wet mouth moved from hers to kiss her chin, her jaw, suck her earlobe. Annabelle was powerless to do anything but clutch at his shoulders and gasp. He laved a trail down her neck, bit her shoulder gently. He smoothed his hands down her arms, raising gooseflesh there. Every movement he made brought him in contact with a new part of her body, a new part to be set alight with sensation. When his mouth closed over her breast again, she shrieked and writhed beneath him. When he stroked her other breast, rolled the nipple between his fingers, she could not breathe.

All the while, she burned, ached, rubbed against him and bit her lip to stop the senseless pleas that would escape if she tried to speak.

His body was cold and hard, as if it were carved out of stone, yet somehow he felt alive. His breath chilled the places on her skin where moisture still lingered from his kisses. He moved his attention from one breast to the other. The sensation lost nothing to repetition, and she writhed beneath him.

Never in her life had Annabelle felt so out of control, so reckless, so...free. All thoughts of being a proper lady fled, though she had not truly cared to act the part of a proper lady to begin with. Still, being loosed from the restraints of what was and wasn't allowed sent a delicious thrill through her.

Galerius slid down her body, though she gripped his arms and whimpered for him to stay where he was. He trailed his fingers down her stomach, and the flesh there trembled under his touch. He moved ever closer to the part of her that demanded his attention, sliding the muslin drawers over her hips. She held her breath as the cool air touched her enflamed flesh. She was too exposed, too open to his gaze and touch, in a way no one had seen her before. A pang of anxiety forced her legs together, but his body between them impeded her, and he dropped to his knees in front of the bunk and forced her legs wide apart with a hand on each thigh. The breath she had held rushed out of her in a shuddering moan she could not restrain. Certainly he did not intend to put his mouth on her there...certainly he would not...

Magick made him human. Only love can keep him that way.

Uncross My Heart

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After a century of living *la vida muerta*, Julian Devlin's closest ally casts a de-vamping spell that leaves him defanged and demoted from his hard-won place in Baltimore's vampire hierarchy. Disoriented by his transformation, he can't even find his way home.

The indignities don't end there. Before he can explain to the quirky consignment shop owner why he's hiding in her basement, she's punched the newly re-acquired breath out of him and smacked him upside the head with her knock-off purse.

Zoe Boyd's scream could have peeled paint from the walls—if she could get her heart out of her throat. Common thugs aren't supposed to have a smile so panty-melting that she finds herself apologizing for scaring *him*.

She's also too busy managing her friends' love lives to take on an ex-vampire with revamping and revenge on his mind. Until she guides him home and ends up neck deep in his world of trouble.

As Zoe risks her life to give him back his death, she warms the soul Julian never thought he'd own again. And when he tracks down a devilish witch who can reverse the spell, immortality without Zoe suddenly seems like cold comfort...

Warning: This novel contains sensual love scenes between a fashion-forward hero and a fashion-unconscious heroine, abuse of Italian loafers, and a few love bites. Don't worry, freshly sharpened fangs don't hurt. Much...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Uncross My Heart:

He even haunted her dreams.

Zoe walked through a dark place where cold water dripped and unseen creatures scuttled around her feet. She didn't scream in response to the brush of wiry fur against her bare ankles only because *he* was beside her, his hand on her shoulder, guiding her toward a safe refuge.

"Where are we?" she asked, and her voice echoed.

"We're almost there. You have to hurry."

She obeyed him, picking up the pace through the grimy water that swirled around her feet, but the very atmosphere of the place seemed to hold her back. Each step sapped her strength and brought her no closer to her goal.

"Don't let them catch you," Devlin told her. "Keep running."

She tried, but the harder she pumped her legs, the slower her progress became until she was certain she was moving backward. His warm hand slipped from her shoulder, and when she turned to look for him, he was gone, replaced by a looming, shapeless shadow that wrapped cable-like arms around her.

A hand clamped across her lips, cutting off her air supply. Her lungs protested. She kicked and struggled and finally opened her eyes to find Julian Devlin hovering above her.

“Don’t scream. I won’t hurt you.” Julian dropped his hand from Zoe’s lips and backed away from her bed, hands up, his movements deliberately slow and non-threatening.

In the blue neon glow of her bedside alarm clock, her pale skin looked like alabaster, and her eyes were huge and terrified. Clutching a thin blanket to her chest, she scrambled to a sitting position amid the tumble of pillows that populated her bed. “How did you get in here? Are you insane? What if I kept a knife under my pillow or something?”

“You don’t. I checked.”

She squeaked in indignation. “You broke into my house.”

“No. I let myself in with your spare key, which you obviously put back right where you got it from after we came in before. You know, you’re asking to be murdered in your sleep, or worse. It amazes me that a girl as trusting as you is still alive.”

“You weren’t supposed to look.”

“I looked. Sue me.” He shrugged. This had all been too easy. He’d probably be doing her a favor by draining her dry as soon as he transformed back. This blonde gypsy belonged in another era, a simpler time when people left their doors unlocked and everyone knew their neighbors. Either that or she needed a body guard twenty-four/seven.

“What are you doing back here? Didn’t you find someone to help you?”

He sighed. A lie would be easy, even if it did little to preserve the mere shred of dignity he had left. “It’s almost dawn. I needed someplace to go before sunrise, and I was kicked out of the bus station. They don’t allow people to sleep there anymore, I discovered.” Truth was, she was the only trustworthy soul he could find at this hour.

She blinked at him. “Sunrise? Um...humans can go out in the daylight. Or have you been revamped already?” One delicate hand slid toward her slender throat. Julian watched the subtle movement with a mixture of amusement and—dear God—arousal.

She’d traded her peasant blouse for a thin-strapped tank top. Clingy and white, it contrasted with her honeyed skin and did little to hide the sumptuous curves of her breasts, now peaked with taut nipples. Gooseflesh stood out on her bare arms. He wondered if she might be considering the possibility that he would lower his lips to her neck and drink...

He blinked away the traitorous thoughts. “No. I’m still human.” He laughed. “I guess I’m so conditioned to avoid sunlight that it never occurred to me. Nevertheless, I need a place to sleep for a little while. I don’t have enough cash to go to a hotel, and if I use my credit cards, I could be leading Lambert right to me.”

“Vampires have credit cards?”

“We’re undead, not Amish. How else would one purchase Gucci loafers?”

Warm yellow light illuminated her skeptical gaze when she switched on the bedside lamp. “Okay, silly question. I admit it, but give me a break. It’s four fifty-nine A.M., and I just woke up with a man’s hand over my mouth. You’re lucky I didn’t bite you.”

He let his gaze roam her half-hidden curves again. She’d be lucky if he didn’t bite *her* one way or another. “I apologize for sneaking in...something I would *not* have been able to do if you had an ounce of common sense.” He tossed the spare key to her and, just as he’d hoped, she let go of her death grip on the blanket to catch it.

Delicious. He’d have climbed into the bed with her if he hadn’t been so desperate to keep her trust for just a little longer. He needed this girl. And he hated needing her. “Do yourself a favor and hide that somewhere else. Better yet, give it to your boyfriend for safe keeping.”

“I told you, he’s *not* my boyfriend.”

Good. The thought crossed his mind unbidden, and he squashed it. “Can I borrow your couch? Just for a few hours?”

Her lips quivered a bit before she responded. “Sure. I’ll get you a pillow and a blanket.”

“No need to treat me like a guest.”

“But you are one.” She rose, and Julian’s gaze traveled up and down her bare legs, pausing only briefly at the still-red scrapes on her knees. She’d hurt herself running from him and, for some inexplicable reason, he regretted that. He shook off the unproductive thought and took inventory of the rest of her outfit.

Tiny panties rode low on her hips, leaving a band of naked skin beneath the hem of her skimpy top. Ah. The twenty-first century had so many advantages over the nineteenth. Each decade, it seemed women became less inhibited about their bodies. It made being immortal so much fun.

She moved unselfconsciously now, and Julian followed her into the living room. When she bent over to retrieve a blanket and pillow from within the square hassock, he stifled an appreciative sigh.

She tossed the items at him while he debated sinking his very human teeth into one creamy inner thigh. “Put your eyes back in your head, Romeo. I already told you, I’m nobody’s entrée. Now, go. Sleep. I’m going back to bed in my room behind a door that locks, and there’s no spare key above the frame, so don’t get any ideas. If you’re still here in the morning—the *actual* morning—I’ll think about cooking you breakfast, and we’ll talk about getting you a decent place to stay until your house is fixed, okay?”

He stared for a full second, dumbfounded by her. One bite. Just one bite was all he wanted. “Okay.”

She disappeared into the bedroom then, shutting the door firmly on any further comment or fantasy on his part.

Disappointed but still oddly amused, Julian made himself comfortable on her couch.

Zoe's heart thundered in her shamelessly exposed chest. She'd just been parading around in her underwear in front of a lunatic—a drop dead gorgeous lunatic—who'd stolen into her bedroom in the middle of the night.

Her face burned with shame and something else. He'd been looking, and she'd enjoyed letting him look.



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