



SHIELA STEWART

Tempting
THE
DARKNESS

BOOK 5 IN THE DARKNESS SERIES

Tempting the Darkness

by Shiela Stewart

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Tempting the Darkness
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For my mother.

*You are the most amazing woman I have ever known.
You have dealt with so much in your life and you have
always stood strong. When you said you were a pillar,
you were so right.*

Your strength astounds me.

You astound me

PROLOGUE

Jacob's Cove, 2006

Spring. What a glorious season. It was a time of fresh beginnings, of birth, of progress. Trees broke free of their wintery slumber to produce buds of soon to be stark green leaves and brilliantly colored blossoms. Flowers pushed through the ground in search of warmer surroundings. The grass that had been hidden for months beneath a blanket of white was perking up and reaching for the sky. Though the sun would not be at its warmest for months, today it put on a good show.

It was a time of beginnings, but today would be a prelude to the end.

Gabriella Hawthorn sat on the veranda with rose bushes on every side, which soon would begin to bud, the roof overhead shielding her delicate porcelain skin from the damaging rays. The filmy sundress fit a little more loosely than it had the summer before when she had cut it from the pattern and stitched it herself.

A vision of loveliness captured in a decaying body.

His mind drifted to a time when he'd first laid eyes on his beauty.

He'd entered the flower shop with one plan in mind. To find shade plants for Basil's mansion so he and Basil could sit outside during the day and not have the sun's rays fry them. He'd been at a loss and had no idea what he was doing when she'd stepped into his view.

"May I help you, sir?"

Her voice was like a song that lingered gently in his mind. Turning to greet the woman who had so kindly offered her help, he was awestruck by her beauty. She had a face that reminded him of a nineteen forties movie actress. Flawless porcelain skin, dark, dreamy eyes fanned by thick lashes. Her beauty took his breath away.

"Sir?" She tilted her head to the side.

Helpless, he couldn't stop gazing upon her. When she smiled at him, his heart skipped a beat.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Cooper," he blurted out, then cleared his throat. "Sorry, yes, I'm fine. My name is Cooper. Cooper Hawthorn. Perfect, now I'm babbling." He gave his head a shake, once again clearing his throat. "I'm in need of some sort of plant that will tolerate the sun as well as vine along a trellis to provide shade to a deck. I would prefer a flowering vine, not too pungent yet giving off a fragrant scent."

Her lips curved up in a glorious smile that nearly knocked him off his feet. "You certainly are specific in your needs. Well, let's see what we can find for you. My name is Gabriella."

Gabriella. It suited her perfectly.

He followed her as she made her way through the aisles of the garden shop, transfixed by the gentle sway of her body as she moved. She had a grace that very few women came by naturally. The long, white skirt she wore hid what he was most certain would be a killer set of legs.

"Are you a gardener, Cooper?"

She should bottle that voice. It could calm the most savage of beasts. "I dabble, but I'm finding a strong likeness for the act."

"Are you now?" She smiled back at him. "Well then, you came to the right place. I absolutely love trumpet vines." His gaze shifted to the vibrant red horn-shaped flowers stabbing out from dark green leaves she pointed out. "They are hardy and will give you the shade you desire."

"They're perfect. I would like to purchase enough to cover a fifteen foot radius."

Her mouth dropped open, then closed before she responded. "That's quite the order. We may have to special order some in from our other stores to accommodate."

"How long would that take?"

She shifted her stance, her eyes taking on a look that told him she was thinking. "I could put a rush on it and have them to you by the end of the week."

"That would be perfect!"

"Wonderful. Is there anything else I can help you with or will this be all?"

She was such a proper lady, a rare find these days. "I could use some lilies and daises as well."

"All right, let me show you what we have."

They had spent an hour together, picking out flowers, talking about planting them in just the right spot to keep them looking lush for years. He regretted leaving her, even more so after not having asked her for a date. But he made up for it the following week when she appeared at his door with the shipment of flowers he'd ordered.

"I wasn't expecting you to deliver them," he said with a great deal of surprise in his voice.

She smiled at him, the warmth it caused him like a gentle ray of sunshine on a dark soul. "I couldn't resist. The instant you gave me the address I was curious. I've always been curious about this place. There aren't many castles in Jacob's Cove."

She was right about that. As a matter of fact, there was only one. "Would you care for a tour?"

She waved a delicate hand. "Oh, I don't want to be a bother."

"You could never be a bother," he said sincerely. When she tilted her head at his comment, he cleared his throat. "I could show you around while the men unload the flowers."

The smile lit her eyes. "Well then, that would work out perfectly."

It took him nearly half an hour to show her the upper and main floors. He decided it was best not to show her the dungeon, for obvious reasons. By the time they were through with the tour, the flowers had been unloaded from the truck, ready to be planted.

"It is a perfect day for planting."

She stepped out into the sun, tipping her face up to it. Cooper was struck by the beauty of the sunlight dabbing her face with a radiant glow and spoke without thinking. "Will you have dinner with me?"

She turned to him, her face solemn. "Why, Cooper, how bold of you."

"I...uh..." He should have known better.

"I thought you would never ask."

He choked out his response. "Oh, dear. I have never done anything as bold as that before."

He knew at that very moment she touched a hand to his cheek that he was in love. "I'm honored to have been the first. Now, would you like help in planting these gorgeous blooms?"

"I would love that."

He'd had to lie to her then about not being able to stand the sunlight, telling her he suffered a rare form of skin condition that worsened in direct sunlight. He hated lying to her at the time but knew he had no other choice.

So in his big, floppy straw hat, coveralls that covered every inch of his skin, the gloves that came to his elbows, they sat together in the afternoon on that day he'd first tested his boldness and planted flowers.



"There's plenty of shade here for the both of us. You need not worry. Care to join me, Cooper?"

He came out of his thoughts to give her a bright smile. The ice in the glasses of chilled tea he held crackled as he shifted his stance to start towards her. "I was admiring the beauty before me. I thought you might like a cool glass of tea."

"It would go down smoothly right about now." Lifting her left hand, she caressed his cheek as he set the glasses on the wicker folding table beside her chair.

That simple touch did so much to him. "The tulips are beginning to show their heads." He took the chair opposite the tiny table between them, raising his glass. "I predict a stellar year for them this summer."

"You say that every summer." When she smiled at him he felt his heart skip a beat "When do you have to return to Basil?"

He swirled the glass in his hand as he looked out over the stretch of land before him that he called home. "As usual, six tomorrow morning." He wished the time until then would drag on for an eternity.

She reached across the table to touch his hand. "It would be so much easier if you would tell him about me."

He set his glass down, shifting in his seat to take both her hands in his. "We've discussed this many times, Gabriella. You are safer if no one knows about you."

She sighed, as she always did, and nodded. "I just think it would be easier for you to not have to live two separate lives. I worry for you, my darling."

With a smile on his lips, he brought her hands to his mouth, brushing a whisper of a kiss to her joined knuckles. "You need not worry for me, sweetheart. I've the resilience of a dozen men."

"You need not remind me of your resilience." Her eyes grew dreamy as she spoke. "You showed me quite well last night."

Hearing the hint of seduction in her voice stirred his most primal needs. She'd been so giving the night before, and he had been so utterly eager to have her. Thinking about the way her body had felt against his, the way she'd murmured her pleasure against his ear only increased his need for her now. He considered carrying her off to their bedroom just to feel her delicate skin and taste her luscious lips again...but now was not the time. "How are you feeling? You didn't rest well."

She slipped her hands from his to lift her glass to her lips for a sip. "The nights seem to be the worst. If I lie for more than an hour, my body begins to ache something fierce."

He knew the reason why.

How did you tell the woman you loved more than life itself that she was going to die? "Dr. Stanton called me this morning."

Her eyes perked up as she looked at him from beneath the brim of her hat. "Philip called you? What did he want?"

Cooper stood, gazing out at the land before him. The sky bloomed a serene brilliant blue, yet his heart ached. "They call for rain later today. I was hoping to take you for a picnic later this evening but I might have to alter those plans." He flinched when her hand touched his shoulder.

"Cooper, I know you well enough to know when you are stalling. If it rains, then the tulips will be happy. Our picnic can always wait until next weekend." She turned him to face her. "What did Philip want?"

Oh, she was such a vision, his Gabriella. Her long, brown hair flowed like blankets of silk over her frail shoulders. Those big, brown eyes of hers would haunt him for years to come. "Your test results are in."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh. Well, don't keep a girl waiting. What did they have to say?"

Taking both of her hands in his, Cooper drew in a calming breath. "Your cancer has returned."

She looked down, taking in a deep breath. "As I suspected."

He touched her face, drawing her attention back to him. "I don't want to lose you, my precious love."

"I'm not ready to leave you just yet either."

"It's worse this time."

"I know."

"I would do anything to keep you here with me."

She took a step back. "Not that."

"No! Oh no, that wasn't what I meant. I gave you my word that I would not turn you. There's a way..." He took her hands in his once more. "An experimental procedure that would allow you to sleep in stasis until a cure can be found."

She cocked her head to the side. "How do you mean?"

"Cryogenics. What happens is you are put into a coma, then frozen in sleep while I, along with Philip, look for a cure."

"What if one isn't found?"

"I will never stop until there is."

"But I will be without you. You without me."

He caressed her face with his hand, her skin as soft as silk. "You will be asleep. You won't know you're without me. My time will be spent finding a cure. I won't sleep until I do."

She leaned in to brush her lips over his. "Darling, you're a vampire, not a robot. You need sleep as well as I do."

He closed his eyes to capture the moment. "You know what I meant."

"I do. I love you with all my heart, Cooper. I know you will do everything in your power to cure me of this retched disease."

Yes, he would. "Then I have your consent?"

She smiled. It was a picture he would carry with him forever. "You have my consent."

CHAPTER ONE

Jacob's Cove, 2026
Six months of darkness

Cooper heard the commotion coming from the dungeon below the instant he stepped into the kitchen to start lunch. Though he didn't know why he bothered when neither Basil or Trinity had much of an appetite lately. Still, the others in the group could pop in—and usually did—at any time.

Although the dungeon was fairly soundproof, Cooper's keen hearing picked up the screams. Racing down to the dungeon, Cooper threw the door open to find Basil standing over a young man, both of them bloody.

"I have all sorts of ideas when it comes to torture. I can go on for hours. Can you?"

The screams split through the air, sending a chill down Cooper's spine. The young man's hand that had been fastened to a cinder block was coated in sickly, gray blood.

"Now, I ask you again. Where is Chaos?"

"I...don't...know," the young man wheezed, kneeling on the floor, his head down, brown hair matted over his face.

"Then you shall lose another."

Cooper turned away just as Basil sliced off one of the boy's fingers. The cries from the young man sunk right to Cooper's gut, drawing a vile sickness up to his throat. "Basil."

"Not now, Cooper. I'm busy."

Apparently he was enjoying what he was doing. The look on Basil's face reminded Cooper far too much of Basil's father. "The lad will keep. I must speak with you now."

Basil angled a steely look Cooper's way. Then he stepped away from the bloody vampire boy, wiping his brow with his forearm as he walked to the cell doors. "What is so important that you needed to interrupt me while I'm interrogating a suspect, Cooper?"

Cooper opened the cell door, saying nothing, held a hand out as an indication of wanting Basil to follow him. With a snarled response, Basil exited the cell. Cooper stepped up to the sink near the back of the room that was used—in its day of torture—to wash the blood from the assailant's hands. Lifting the glass mirror from its place on the wall, he held it up in front of Basil. "Who do you see?"

Basil growled, baring sharp, white fangs. "This is what you pulled me away from my task for?"

"Who do you see?"

Basil's icy blue eyes narrowed. When he spoke it was through gritted teeth. "Myself. May I return now?"

"Look closer."

"Damn it, Cooper—"

"Look closer!" Cooper insisted sternly. This time, Basil's eyes began to glow, but he looked back into the mirror.

"I see myself."

"Then your eyes are as clouded as your judgment. Do you know who I see, Basil?"

"I don't give a rat's ass—"

"Avadur," Cooper cut him off, the name alone had Basil pausing. "There is pleasure in your eyes, the same pleasure I would see come into your father's eyes when he was torturing you. I feel the coldness emanating from your heart that was so chilling in your father."

Basil stepped back as if he finally saw what Cooper did. He turned away from the mirror, looking down at his hands, coated in sickly, gray vampire blood.

"We both know that boy has no information for you. We both know he is not an appropriate means for you to vent your frustrations and pain on." Cooper placed his hands on Basil's shoulders, turning him. "Your anger is not with that boy."

"I can't take my anger out on the one who deserves it."

Cooper ran his hand over Basil's long, dark hair, much like he had when Basil had been a boy, in dire need of affection. "Taking it out on

the innocent only turns you into a monster. I won't stand by and allow that. Go, be with Trinity. Console each other."

"I can't make her come out of Felicity's room."

The tears in Basil's eyes made Cooper's heart ache. "Then go there to be with her. You need each other." Grabbing the towel hanging by the sink, Cooper laid it over Basil's bloody hands. "I'll take care of the boy."

Basil nodded. Walking to the dungeon's exit, he paused. "What would I ever do without you, Cooper?"

The instant Basil was gone, Cooper turned to the boy. He was curled up on the floor, clutching what remained of his hand. Cooper knelt down, taking the mangled hand in his. Basil had done a number on the boy. He'd severed all but two of the young man's fingers. Though he wouldn't die from blood loss, he would suffer the pain.

"Shh now, all will be well in no time." Laying his hand on the boy's head, Cooper soothed him with his touch, then sent his mind to sleep. While the boy slept, Cooper carried him to the underground exit. Once at the surface, Cooper laid the boy on the ground, knowing that either someone would find him and take him to safety, or he would wake and run for his life. Either way, he was better off than where he'd been.

Back inside, Cooper washed up in the main floor washroom, wiping the blood from his hands, then splashing some cold water on his face. He hated senseless violence. Grabbing the towel, Cooper glanced at the mirror and noticed one of his tinted lenses had shifted slightly. Drying off his hands, he readjusted it, covering up the blue that would identify him as having been sired by the king. He wore the yellow contacts for a reason.

Giving his suit jacket a stiff tug, Cooper left the horror behind him.



The scent of daffodils and tulips filled the air. Bright yellow heads stood regally atop of their stalks of green. Drawing in the fragrant aroma, Cooper engaged the alarm before turning to the room. The artificial sunlight shone down on the blooms and, in a show of appreciation, each flower tipped their head up in reverence.

Tucking the keycard into the breast pocket of his tailored, navy pin-stripped suit, he walked casually to the center of the room. Placed on a pedestal was a long glass container, tipped up at enough of an angle to allow the viewer access to what it held inside.

Giving his suit jacket, then his tie, a slight adjustment, Cooper walked up to the container, placing one hand on top of the glass. He

desperately needed this peace after the horror he'd been witness to earlier with Basil.

"Good morning, my sweet Gabriella." He plucked one brilliant yellow tulip from its stalk to lay it gently on the glass right where her hands crossed on her lap. "You're looking as lovely as ever."

He checked the electronic read-outs, nodded at the findings, then checked every connection as he habitually did each time he visited. When he was satisfied everything was working properly, he pulled up his stool and took a seat.

"The darkness still remains and I don't mind telling you I find it extremely difficult to leave you and this sunny room to return to such cold darkness." He lifted the tulip to his nose to inhale the soft aroma. "So much has happened since I last saw you. First, I must apologize for not coming to you sooner but I was otherwise indisposed."

He stood to face the garden of roses in brilliant red and white. "The child Basil and Trinity had has been taken by the queen. I do not understand why Rajana would do such a thing." He broke off a red rosebud to carry back to the glass case. "She of all people should know what it feels like to lose her only child." He sat on the stool once more, laying the blossom on the glass by Gabriella's face. Her skin was as creamy white as it had been on the last day she had smiled at him before the sleep took her over.

"Though Basil was already well into his childhood when Avadur took him away from her, Trinity had only just given birth to their daughter, the pain is still as great. I know what it's like to love and lose." He pressed his hand to the glass over Gabriella's face.

"Trinity has been distraught, to say the least, and Basil has been frantically calling out to his mother. It took quite a bit of my power to convince him not to call upon the Dark Mystics to help him. He and I both know that would only lead to disaster. I refuse to let him give up his soul even if it is for his child."

Cooper plucked the petals from the rosebud, scattering them over the glass. Gabriella had always loved the feel of the silky petals on her skin. "Chaos is still in hiding. Even with the aid of Danny's lover, Starla, no one can locate him. Wherever Chaos is hiding, he's more than likely shielding himself from magics. Will this madness ever end?"

He stood again, feeling restless. The cot he often slept on when he came for extended visits was still as it was the last time he'd slept here. Perfectly made up and unused.

"Avadur has done nothing but cause pain all his unnatural life. Even now, in his absence, he still inflicts it through his minion, Chaos.

I should have taken him out right at the start." He waved a hand in the air. "Oh, I know, that would have revealed my true self, still..."

He smoothed a hand across the cotton blanket over the bed, taking out the individual crease that had somehow occurred in his absence. "If anything good has come from this horrid darkness, it's the love that's been blossoming all around me." Giving his suit jacket a tug, he made his way back to the glass case. "It warms my heart that in the depths of darkness love can find a way to light up an aching heart." He laid his palm right over her heart. "My heart longs for the light you once brought to my life. I have not found a cure and it only frustrates me more. I've been without you for twenty years, my sweet love. I never thought it would be this long." Resting his head on the glass, he let out a long, exasperating sigh. "Had I known..." He sighed again, then lifted his head. "It saddens me that the retched disease that robbed you of your life, robbed you from me has yet to be cured. Even with the technologies we have now, no cure has been found. I begin to wonder if one will ever be found."

Feeling that all too familiar ache in his heart, Cooper cleared his throat as he stood. He knew perfectly well if he stayed here much longer he would do something that he had promised he would never do. So, with a heavy heart, he pressed a kiss to the glass and left his precious wife to sleep.

Checking to make sure all the alarms were in proper working order, he exited the room. "I leave her once again in your trust, Thaddeus."

The tall, thin gentleman nodded from where he sat in his chair by the door. Cooper had known him for more than thirty years and trusted him implicitly to watch over his most cherished possession.

With only a thought to where he wanted to be, Cooper vanished.

He set himself down in the gardens as he usually did and continued on his way to the house. It was the only one of its kind in Jacob's Cove. Avadur had wanted a home that boasted his title as king, so he had a castle built on top of the hill where everyone would see it. Cooper had been a servant of that castle for more years than he cared to remember. It had never felt like a home to him. Though he'd never told Basil otherwise, he chose to make his home in the servants' quarters, which was just off from the grand castle in a small cabin-like house. While there he was free to be himself, to do as he pleased. After he'd met Gabriella, he had considered bringing her to his home but had decided against it, feeling she would be safer if no one—even his clos-

est friend, Basil—knew about her. So he'd kept two places: the false one in the cabin, and the other one in Gabriella's quaint bungalow in Jacob's Cove suburban area. Though it had been hard for him to lead the double life, he'd known it was for the best.

Everyone was better off not knowing the truth.



Basil found Trinity where she was most days, sitting in the wooden rocking chair he'd bought for her to use when she nursed the baby. She held onto a tiny pink rabbit, a stuffed toy that used to be hers in her youth. She'd wanted their daughter to have it.

She was never able to give it to Felicity.

In the week since Basil's mother had shown up to steal their daughter away, Trinity had closed herself off. It scared him. Most of the time she sat in the nursery, clinging to that stuffed rabbit. When she finally managed to pull herself out of the room, she curled herself up in bed and slept. He knew the nightmares she had that woke her so often were about their daughter and the horrible way she had been stolen from them. Though Trinity allowed him to comfort her after the dreams, he felt a distance in her that worried him.

Closing the nursery door, Basil walked towards her and, kneeling on the floor at her feet, placed his hand on hers. Her eyes shifted to meet his, but Trinity wasn't in them. "Hi," he said simply, hoping to draw out at least a glimmer of a smile.

He failed.

"Hi."

He didn't move but stayed where he was, touching her skin, wanting to feel close to her in any way possible. "Have you eaten today?"

She shook her head, then looked down at the rabbit.

"You need to keep up your strength."

Trinity shook her head again, sighing. "Her hair was dark and her face was pale. She had your eyes."

Basil knew the reason Trinity continually mentioned what their daughter had looked like. She was afraid of forgetting. "She was lovely." But neither of them would ever forget. "I could bring you something here, some blood at least."

Drawing the rabbit closer to her breast, Trinity sighed. "I didn't even get to nurse her once. My breasts ache with milk and I'll never know what it feels like to have her suckle on me."

He took her chin in his hand and moved into her view. "I will find her and then she will suckle from you. I promise you, my love."

She closed her eyes. "I'm tired. I think I'll go to bed."

He didn't stop her; he knew there was no point. Before he had a chance to say anything else, she vanished. Getting to his feet, Basil looked around the room at everything he had done to ready it for their daughter's arrival. The crib sat near the back of the room, the furthest area from the window, which was covered in black. There were no toys, there were no cute balloons or alphabets or animals on the walls that he and Trinity had planned on painting. They'd been so preoccupied in finding Chaos that they hadn't had time to decorate the room as they'd wished. The room was empty and not just from the void of their daughter's presence, but of life itself. Was it a blessing? He didn't think so.

"I will find you and my daughter, Mother," he vowed in a deep growl. "And when I do, you will pay."

He left the room, his heart aching.

CHAPTER TWO

Cooper heard Trinity weeping in her bedroom, her heart aching for the daughter she'd barely had. Basil's anger and frustration at not being able to bring their daughter back reverberated back at him.

He understood and felt much of the same.

Cooper missed his wife dearly, missed the way she would look lovingly at him when he would enter the room. He missed the way she would touch his face or the way she felt in his arms, her heart beating against his. There were so many things he missed about his beautiful Gabriella. Like Basil and Trinity, the one thing he loved more than air itself had been taken away from him.

Oh, he could go visit Gabriella anytime he wanted, but she wasn't really there. Her body was, but she was in a comatose state and had no idea he was even there.

"I'm going out, Cooper."

He came abruptly back to the present with a great deal of regret. There was no sunshine now, only bitter darkness that swallowed up everything beautiful. "May I inquire as to where you will be going, sir?"

Basil gave him that ever-popular dark scowl that did little to faze Cooper. "Just out."

"Might I add something before you disappear?" Cooper began and gave Basil no time to argue. "If something were to happen to you, what do you think that will do to Trinity? Especially now, during her...grief."

Basil let out a long breath, then rubbed a hand across his face. "I can't just sit here, watching her wither away. I have to do something."

"She needs you here."

"What she needs is our daughter home, safe, and in her arms. I'm determined to give her that."

Before Cooper could say another word, Basil vanished. Letting out a deep breath, Cooper decided it was time he did more. Taking the chance that he might be caught, he sent himself to the alley at the back of the Digital Domain. Though the city was deserted, Jonah still kept his office open. They might not always see eye to eye, but Cooper liked Jonah Moore well enough and respected his love for Trinity. Cooper was going to play on that love now.

Stepping through the back entrance, the alarm rang out and he nearly jumped out of his skin. That was nothing compared to the scare he got when before him, a wall of metal bars fell from the ceiling to land nearly on his feet. If he hadn't jumped back, they would have.

"What the devil—"

"YES! It worked. Didn't I tell you it would work?" a male voice, which he figured was Jonah's, cried out.

"Yes you did. You constantly amaze me with your intelligence."

"It turns you on, I know. Kinda makes me hot knowing it turns you on."

Cooper cleared his throat. Both Jonah and his love interest, Raven, faced him. "I would like to be let out of here now," he said in a perfectly calm manner that was nothing like the rage that was boiling inside of him.

"Coop? What the hell are you doing here?"

With a click on some sort of hand held remote, Jonah had the bars rising back up to the ceiling.

"I came to speak to you. Had I known it would almost cost me my life, I would have reconsidered." Cooper gave his stiff black jacket a yank in his annoyance.

"It wouldn't have cost you your life, Cooper. Just lock you in place until I could deal with you. I don't move so fast, as you know."

Cooper knew perfectly well. Jonah had been involved in a car accident caused by Chaos' men that had taken his wife's life along

with that of their unborn child, and had rendered Jonah temporarily paralyzed. He might have remained that way if Chaos hadn't become enraged and turned him into a vampire to spite Trinity.

Though he could walk now, Jonah still needed the aid of a cane.

"Perhaps next time I'll ring before entering. Hello, Raven, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"Ringing would be advisable," Jonah piped in. "So, what brings you to my humble establishment? I would think you'd had enough of this place."

Jonah was right. Cooper wasn't overly fond of the computer shop because it had been a cramped home for eight people during the time it took for Basil to repair the damage Chaos' men had caused when they'd bombed the castle. He had felt claustrophobic in the shop and had had absolutely no privacy for months. He was glad to be out of there.

"Trinity needs you."

Just the mention of her changed Jonah's demeanor. "What's wrong?"

"She won't eat. All she does is sleep when she isn't locked away in the baby's room. Not even Basil can get through to her. Besides, he's dealing with his own emotions right now. I thought maybe you could come by the castle to visit her."

Jonah hesitated and Cooper knew perfectly well why. Jonah felt uneasy seeing Trinity since she'd lost her daughter to the queen. Given his own loss.

"You're the perfect person to talk to her, Jonah. I plead with you. She needs to know life will go on."

"You think I can convince her of that?"

Cooper nodded. "You lost more than anyone should and handled it remarkably. She needs to see that even in such heart wrenching tragedy, there is still light."

"Cooper—"

"I think he's right," Raven interrupted, taking Jonah's hands in hers. "And if you don't see how you can help her given the similarities in your situations, then think of this. Who did she turn to when Basil cheated on her? You. Who did she confide in? You. Who does she think of as a brother—"

"I get it. Sheesh, gang up on a guy, why don't you. Okay. I'll go see her now."

"Thank you." Cooper felt at least marginally better.

"You're a good friend to her, Cooper."

With a nod, Cooper left the building.
He wished he could do more.

CHAPTER THREE

Basil was in the mood for a fight and hoped someone gave him enough reason to start one. The streets had been eerily calm the past few days. He doubted very much that every inhuman creature had packed up and moved on, though he was sure some had. Still, where was everyone?

When he spotted the fang brothers—or so he liked to call Dante and Danny Vega—heading towards him, he contemplated picking a fight with them, then decided otherwise. He liked Dante well enough not to beat on him. Danny, on the other hand...well, he was still getting used to the boy. “Well, if it isn’t Twiddle Dee and Twiddle Dum.”

“Has he ever told us who is who?” Danny inquired of his twin brother, Dante.

Dante sized Basil up, narrowing his freshly yellow vampire eyes as he spoke. “I’m not sure he even knows. You look...pissed.”

He’d known Dante nearly a year. Up until a few days ago, Dante had been human. But when Chaos’ men had roughed him up enough to put him at death’s door, his once distant twin brother had stepped in to rescue Dante by making him a vampire. It surprised Basil how calmly Dante was taking it.

“I am. And unless you want to feel how pissed I am, you would do better to move on.”

"See, I know him well enough to know when a statement like that means trouble," Dante informed Danny.

When Basil walked away, both Dante and Danny followed him.

"Where you going, Basil?"

"Fuck off," he barked loudly, but it didn't deter the fang brothers.

"Look, I care enough for Trinity to—" Basil whirled on Dante, his fangs at the ready, his temper boiling. "Want to make sure you stay safe," Dante finished undaunted. "She's suffered enough already. You both have. All I want to do is help you."

Basil calmed his temper, taking a deep breath. It wasn't Dante he was angry with. "You up for a fight?"

Dante's face lit with excitement. "With you?"

"It's tempting, but no. Someone else."

"I'm game for whatever you have in mind."

"What about you, Danny?" Basil turned his attention to the younger twin.

"I haven't gotten enough fighting time in lately. Count me in."

"Then come with me." He turned without another word and marched down the street. What he needed was a car. He could send himself anywhere he wanted but the fang brothers couldn't. He wasn't so stupid as to go into a house full of animals alone.

"Where are we going?" Danny asked, in his hurry to catch up.

"Chaos' compound." Seeing a car parked on the side of the road looking a little worse for wear, Basil decided it would do. Yanking open the driver's door, he climbed behind the wheel and pressed his hand to the ignition, sending enough electrical charge into it to start it running.

"Shit, why couldn't I have that ability? Would come in handy," Danny remarked.

"You're on the good side of the law now, remember?" Dante reminded him and climbed into the passenger's side while Danny took the back seat. "What are you planning?"

Basil set them rolling, squealing the tires as he sped off. "To tear the compound apart until I find Chaos."

"Okay..." Dante shifted in his seat, gripping the dashboard to hold himself in place as Basil raced through the city. "Might I point out—at the risk of losing my life—that there are probably near to a hundred creatures of various races at the compound, and only three of us."

"Three kick-ass vampires, one of which has phenomenal powers," Danny pointed out, leaning forward between the two front seats.

"I'm just saying," Dante began after giving his brother a sideways glance, "the last time we went in half cocked...I...uh...ended up with my guts on the floor."

Basil remembered it quite well. But Dante had been human when they had gone to the police station in search of Chaos. It had been the turning point to Dante becoming one of them. "I'll get us out of there before anything bad can happen. Look, I was distracted then with Trinity being close to delivery. When she called me, well, I let my guard down. That won't happen this time."

"Okay, so tell me the plan."

Basil took the corner in a sharp, tire screeching turn and headed out of the city, towards the compound. "I'm going to use mind control to make them believe there's more than just three of us."

"You can do that?" Danny inquired.

Basil nodded. "If you want out, now is the time to voice your opinion."

"Like I said. I care enough for Trinity to make sure you're okay. I'm in," Dante said.

"Me too," Danny piped up, giving the seats a pounding with his fists. "I am so psyched."

"Just keep your head," Basil warned him as much as he warned himself. He pulled into the compound, coming to an abrupt stop several feet away from the building. He angled in his seat as he spoke. "I need the both of you to believe there are more of us. I need you to concentrate your minds. Think gang, think crowds, just don't think about being only three of us. Got it?"

Both Danny and Dante nodded.

"Good. Let's go." He rushed from the car, his head held high and his mind clear. The instant he saw the door to the compound open, he began to control the minds within. "We've come for Chaos," he chanted in a strong, deep voice.

"Look, we don't want any trouble from you, Basil. So just take your gang and head back the way you came."

Good, it was working. "All we want is Chaos. Give him to us and no one will be harmed."

The vamp leaned against the doorjamb as he spoke. "Chaos isn't here and, no, I don't know where he is."

Basil stepped closer, scanning the vamp's mind to find he was telling the truth. "Then tell Fritz I wish to speak with him."

"He's not here either. He left a few days ago, right before Chaos came back. I don't know where either of them are. Look, we don't

want trouble. All we want is to be left alone to do as we please. If you have a beef with Chaos or Fritz, take it up with them." He stepped back through the door and shut it.

Danny rubbed his hands together. "I guess we break in and have a look see for ourselves."

Basil turned, walking past Dante and Danny. "No."

"What?" Danny ran up beside him. "I thought we came here for a fight?"

"They're not here. There's no point to the fight." Basil thrust the car door open, then decided he wasn't in the mood for company. "Take the car." He vanished before either twin could speak.



Cooper waited in the living room with Raven while Jonah went up to talk to Trinity. He hoped Jonah could give her some comfort, or at least talk her into coming out of her room for a while. Cooper could understand her grief, but he also knew locking herself away did no one any good.

"They're very close."

Cooper glanced over at Raven who sat opposite him in the Colonial chair beside the fireplace. "That was my reason for asking him to speak with her."

"He'll be able to help her. Jonah has a way of making a person feel comfortable. He's easy to talk to."

Cooper was counting on that. He dusted his pants with a brush of his hand, feeling a tad bit awkward just sitting here with nothing to say.

"We all thought you were a doctor."

Raven's sudden blurted declaration startled him. They'd been silent for several minutes. "I beg your pardon?"

"Jonah and I, as well as Dante and Gypsy. We all thought you were a doctor."

"I'm in the medical field." Or at least he had been some time ago.

"True, but a medical examiner is a little different than a physician."

"Only in the fact that I dealt more in the investigation aspect of death. I still hold a medical license." Or had at one time in his life.

"Okay, let me put it this way. We all thought you were one of those...you know, county doctors with a private practice."

"I did work for the county but not privately."

Raven leaned forward, obviously interested. "Yeah? How long ago?"

"It was in the early nineteen forties. I should go up, see how Jonah is making out."

"He's fine. You must have been very young?"

"My father began training me as a physician when I was fifteen. I was a gifted child and he saw to it that my mind was not wasted." It had been years since he'd thought about his father, or any member of his family for that matter.

"Sounds like you had a wonderful father. Did you work with him then?"

"For a time, until..." He broke off and stood, giving his jacket a tug. "I should prepare some soup for Trinity. She may feel up to eating after Jonah is through with her."

"Until what?" Raven prodded.

Cooper let out a long breath and decided there was no harm in telling her. "Until I was turned and taken into Avadur's control. I'll brew some tea as well. Call me when Jonah comes down." He hurried to the kitchen, relieved to be on his own again. It was so hard to keep up the pretense of being an ordinary vampire when he was questioned. It was the sole reason he'd wanted to be back in the castle, away from the confines of the Digital Domain. He just wasn't comfortable being around people.

They asked too many questions.

He busied himself making soup he was sure no one would eat, but the tea wouldn't go to waste. He loved his afternoon tea.

"She won't talk to me."

He turned to see Jonah and Raven standing in the doorway. "What do you mean, she won't talk to you?"

"She clammed up. I tried, God knows I tried, but she just stayed quiet. Has she been like this since...Felicity was taken?"

"Yes. I was sure she would open up to you." Cooper was dumfounded.

"Well, she didn't. It pisses me off to see her like this. If I had a way of finding that woman, I would ring her neck for what she did to Trin and Basil." Raven laid a hand on his shoulder and leaned her head against his.

There was so much love there and such a delight to see, especially now with so much grief filling the house.

It only made him long for his own love.

"We all wish we could get our hands on Rajana. Would the two of you care for some soup or tea?"

"No thank you, Cooper." Raven smiled warmly.

"I have some work to do. Listen, if she doesn't change in a few days, call me, okay? I'll keep nagging at her until she breaks."

With a nod, Cooper watched as Jonah linked his hand with Raven's and left the room.

He missed that connection.

CHAPTER FOUR

With tray in hand, Cooper stopped in front of Trinity's bedroom door. He knew it was probably useless to attempt to get her to eat something, but he had to try. Settling the tray on one hip, he rapped on the door. When there was no response, he entered.

She was stretched out on her bed, lying on her side, facing the window.

He could feel her pain as if it were his own.

"I've brought you some soup and tea." He set it on the foot of the huge four-poster bed, then decided to tidy the room a bit while he was there. She remained as she was and when he moved around the bed, he saw that her eyes were open. She had a blank stare that worried him. "It's French onion. I know how much you care for it." When she still didn't respond, he sighed and continued to busy himself.

After several minutes, he just couldn't contain himself any longer.

He sat down beside her on the bed, staring straight ahead in the same manner she was. "What has happened to you and Basil is tragic; there is no other word for it."

"I don't want to talk about it, Cooper."

"So you would much rather lie on your bed and stare at the darkened window. What will that accomplish?"

"Leave me alone, Cooper."

He could feel her temper starting to rise. "I remember when Basil first came to me to tell me he had found his perfect mate. He was filled with excitement and could barely contain himself." He laughed with the memory. "I cautioned him to not jump into anything too hastily, but he was determined he knew what he was doing. He was so happy and, because of that, I was happy for him."

He angled his head to look at her and caressed her long, red hair, brushing it along the stark white pillow. She was such a beauty, was it any wonder his Basil loved her? "I was concerned when he told me he was going to talk to you about being a vampire, about wanting to turn you. He'd never done such a thing before. Oh, he had sired his share of vampires in his earlier years, but this was different. He wanted to make you his."

When she still didn't respond, Cooper continued to stroke her hair and talk. "He spent hours, preparing this room for you, for your surrender. Everything had to be perfect, right down to the rose petals on the bed. If there was one that had even the smallest amount of wilting to it, he discarded it immediately. The candles had to be set out perfectly."

"Why are you telling me this, Cooper? I was there. I know how perfect it was."

He twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. He thought of Basil as his son, and Trinity as his daughter. His heart ached for the both of them. "You've both have been through a horrible ordeal and lost something precious to you. You have the strongest love I have ever known. Don't let Rajana take that from you as well."

Her eyes met his, gleaming with tears.

He stroked his fingers softly along her face. She looked so young, so torn up.

"It's my fault," she said in a voice that mirrored a mouse. "I'm the reason my daughter is gone."

He could see and feel her attempt to fight off the tears. "You are not to blame for what happened to you."

"Yes, I am, Cooper. I signed my daughter away. I deserve this pain now. I don't deserve to be happy or feel love. Don't you see? How can I even look Basil in the eyes when we both know I'm the reason our daughter was taken."

"You didn't know what you were signing."

Both Cooper and Trinity turned to the doorway where Basil stood. Cooper rose off the bed, knowing it was his time to exit. He walked

to Basil and laid a hand on his shoulder before leaving. They needed this time alone.

It was the perfect time for him to sneak off to see his love.



Trinity sat up, her back against the headboard, and wiped the tears from her face. She hated Cooper for prying that out of her. "Basil—"

"Don't shut down on me now." He walked to her, his steps as firm as his face. "And don't get huffy on me for overhearing your conversation. I was merely coming up to our bedroom to check on you. Damn it, Trinity. You are not to blame."

She tugged her hand away when he sat beside her on the bed and reached out for her. "Yes, I am and we both know it. If I hadn't signed that paper, we would still have our daughter."

"My mother tricked you. She knew how vulnerable you were, how much you wanted to find Jonah. If there is blame to be cast, it is to be on her." He cupped her face in his palm, held tight when she tried to pull away. "What she did was underhanded. She used you to get what she wanted. She knew you were pregnant when you came to her and she saw the perfect way to take what she wanted. Rajana used you. She is the one to blame. Not you."

"But—"

He sealed her lips tight with a hard kiss. "There are no buts. I knew she would pull something but I had no idea she would go to such lengths. A part of me wonders if she wasn't planning this even when you were killed by Avadur."

Trinity sniffled back her tears. "What do you mean?"

"I often wondered what her motive was in giving you these powers. Sure, she may have wanted you to have the upper hand against Chaos and Avadur, but I always felt like there was something more."

"How could she have known?"

"She knew how deep our love was. She knew that by losing you, I would be devastated, as she knew giving you back to me would make me eternally happy. I also believe she knew that the instant you returned to me, I would—we would engage in several days of intercourse. Sex is the greatest form of endearment, the truest way to show your mate just how deeply you feel for them. We didn't use protection. It was bound to happen. When it did, she was going to be right there to find a way to take our child."

"But I get the birth control injections."

"You did, yes, before you died." He stroked the tears from her face and she felt the love he felt for her wash over her. "You were recreated, essentially, reborn when Rajana gave you back your life. She had to have known the consequences would result in a pregnancy."

She sat a little straighter, the tears replaced with anger now. "She planned it all?"

"I believe so, yes."

She took a deep breath, though it did little to calm her. "That bitch."

Basil smiled, stroking his hand along her face. "Welcome back, my love."

"I'm going to kill her." Her eyes met Basil. "I'm sorry if that hurts you—"

"You'll need to stand in line," he advised her sternly.

Trinity took another long breath, then closed her eyes. "I thought you blamed me, so I figured it was best to pull away rather than have you push me away." She opened her eyes to see the love that filled his.

"Oh, Trinity." He closed his mouth over hers, lingering for several seconds before pulling back. "I would never push you away. You are my soul mate. I'm lost without you."

That was all she needed to let the dam open up and flow freely. "I am so sorry. I love you so much, Basil. I don't want to lose you too."

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly to him. "You will never lose me, my love. Never."



Cooper stood outside the bedroom door and felt the love pouring out from the room. It warmed his heart to know the two people he thought of as his family were finally getting back to where they were meant to be.

It made him long for what he had lost so long ago.

Making sure no one was around to see him, he sent himself away, setting down just outside the secured door to his wife's room. "You may take a break," he instructed the guard. Keying in the code, he entered the room. When the door closed, he walked to the glass case that held his love.

She looked as pure and beautiful as she had the day he had sent her to sleep. The day he promised her he would not wake her until a cure was found. Twenty years had passed and he was no closer to a cure today than he had been on that fateful day he said goodbye to his one true love.

Yet he longed for her as much now as he did then.

"I've lived without you for so long. I cannot bear another moment. I miss your gentle touch. I miss your sweet voice. I miss the conversations we would have. I miss you, my love. I need you. I cannot live without you any longer."

His eyes flicked to the control panel that kept her in her stasis. All it would take would be to key in the code—which he alone had—and press one button to wake his sleeping beauty. He paused, his mind working feverishly.

Should he wake her?

What then? Spend a few months with her, at best. Watch her wither away as the cancer robbed her body of life? He couldn't do that to her, to himself. But he needed her so desperately. He was tired of being alone.

The love between Basil and Trinity reminded him of his own desires and love. Once, he'd had what they have now. Like Basil, his love was human. Though Basil made Trinity his by siring her, Cooper had promised Gabriella he never would.

Yet...

What kind of life was this? She was frozen, asleep, and wasn't truly living anyway. Sure, he could see her any time he liked, but it wasn't the same as having her. He missed having her.

And what if something was to happen to him? There had been some close calls over the past twenty years, especially these last few months Jacob's Cove had been engulfed in darkness. What would happen to Gabriella then? Who would take care of her? How would she feel if she woke up to find that he was no longer with this world? He didn't want her to have to feel the pain he had felt for the past twenty years.

There was one way he could cure her. One way he could have her for his from now on. Though he promised her he would never turn her, he saw no other way to curing her.

Without wasting any time, he hurried to enter the code. He took a deep breath, then pressed the red button that would shut off the liquid nitrogen that had cooled her body to preserve her DNA. He watched as her life support continued to breath for her, continued to cause her heart to beat, knowing that the instant he shut them off, he would have to revive her himself. It would take several minutes for the cryogenic freezing to shut down. While he waited, Cooper prepared the medications and tools he would need to bring her back to life. Setting the syringe filled with adrenaline to start her heart on the table

beside her, Cooper watched the seconds tick away, waiting for the green light to indicate it was time to shut off the life support. When it beeped and turned green, he flicked the switch to stop the machines. Pressing the button to open the chamber, he anxiously waited for it to open. The instant it did, he was there with the syringe.

Pressing the needle over her heart, he injected the adrenaline, then set it back on the tray and prepared for other methods of CPR.

When her body jolted, so did his. When she gasped for the air that hadn't been natural to her for over twenty years, he was right there, prepared to give her his.

Her eyes flew open and she gasped several times before finally relaxing.

"That's it, my sweet, come back to me now." He stroked her face, watching the machines emitting her pulse and heart rate. They were erratic, but that was to be expected.

She coughed, she gagged, then drew in one long breath before settling.

"There you go, that's my girl."

Her eyes drooped and she blinked them several times. Her mouth worked as she tried to swallow and attempted to speak.

"Just relax, my sweet. Take your time. I'm here. I'm here for you."

She turned her head to him and her eyes lit up. Then she smiled and said, "Cooper."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Yes, oh yes, I am here, Gabriella. I am here." It had been so long since he'd tasted her lips, since he'd felt the warmth of her skin. He wasted no time now, lingering for several moments as he kissed her face. He knew he was grinning like a fool when he lifted up, but he didn't care. "I am so glad to see your eyes. I have missed your eyes." The need to taste her lips was so great he just couldn't resist kissing them as well. He wanted to kiss every inch of her.

"Am—" She coughed, swallowed. "Am I...alive?"

"You are alive, my precious dear. You are definitely alive." He couldn't stop himself from touching her, from stroking her delicate skin. It was as soft now as it had been on that last day they'd spent together, making love for hours.

"How...how long...have I been...gone?"

"Far too long. Twenty years," he supplied, kissing her forehead.

"Twenty...oh my." Then she smiled as she looked up at him. "You look as handsome now as you did when I fell asleep."

Taking the hand she held out to him he pressed his lips to her palm. "And you are as radiant as the day I first laid eyes on you. Let's get you out of this contraption." He couldn't wait to release her, but he knew she would need to take it slowly. Though her body had been

fed and kept healthy in her stasis, the machines working her muscles so they didn't atrophy, he knew she would be extremely weak.

He didn't mind one bit having to lift her and carry her to the bed.

Scooping his arms under her body, he lifted her up then just held her to him as he wept.

"Oh, sweetheart. No tears. I'm here now." Though her arm was wobbly, she stroked her hand across his face, wiping away the tears. "This has been hard on you. I knew it would be."

Laying her on the bed, shaking his head, he gathering himself. "I have you now and that is all that matters. You're shivering."

"I feel chilled to the bone."

Her body was still trying to regenerate and become accustom to life. "A hot bath will do wonders. I'll run one. You stay here." He left her with a long kiss on her lips.

As quick as he could, he filled the tub with warm water, adding her favorite bath bubbles to the flow. When it was filled he shut off the water and hurried back to her. Fear clamped around his heart at seeing her eyes closed. "Gabriella? Gabriella?" He raced to her, praying she wasn't gone. As her eyes fluttered open, he breathed in a sigh of relief. He couldn't lose her now. "Oh, thank the stars."

"I've slept for so long. One would think I'd had enough rest, yet I can't seem to stay awake."

He stroked her face with a gentle hand and smiled down at her. "Your body needs time to recuperate. You'll feel tired for several days yet. The water is ready for you, if you still wish to bathe."

She nodded, her eyes drooping. But when she tried to unbutton her blouse, her hands just fell to her sides.

"Allow me." With shaky hands, he began to unfasten each pearl button that ran along the front of her white silk blouse.

"I feel so useless, yet at the same time...energized. It's been some time since you undressed me. For you that is."

He caught the twinkle in her eyes and smiled in return. "Indeed it has." Like so many times before, Cooper enjoyed every minute of it. Folding her blouse perfectly, he set it at the foot of the bed then drew the zipper at the side of her skirt down. Though he knew he shouldn't feel aroused by it, there was definitely an erotic feel to what he was doing.

It had been so long since he'd seen his wife naked, was it any wonder he longed for her?

"Did you miss me, my dear Cooper?" she asked teasingly.

The grin slipped out as he slid her skirt away, folding it as perfectly as he had her shirt. "Immensely." As he stripped her of her undergarments, the longing grew.

Getting a hold of himself, he hooked his arms beneath her—God, her skin felt so soft—and carried her to the tub. When her hand came up to caress his face, he was actually startled by it.

"How difficult this must be for you. Unless, of course, you've found someone else to satisfy you since I've been gone?"

"Never! I have been true and faithful to you in your absence."

Her hand still on his face, she smiled softly. "As I suspected. I give you, now as I gave before, my body to you to do with as you wish."

"When you're stronger." Placing her in the water, he watched as the frothy white bubbles swallowed up her nudity.

"Oh, this is heavenly," she sighed, lying back in the warm water.

"It's not too hot, is it?"

"No." She opened her eyes and smiled at him. "It is perfect. You are perfect. It's as if no time has passed for me. Twenty years?"

He nodded. Taking the sponge at the edge of the tub, he dampened it and began to wash her arms. "I've visited you every day. Kept the flowers watered and fresh. Would you like me to bring some to you now?"

"I would, yes, thank you."

With a kiss to her head he hurried to the stasis room to gather as many flowers as he could. Then he paused as he caught sight of the bed. He remembered the flowers Basil had laid out for Trinity the night he made her his. It was the perfect touch to give the woman you loved. So, before rushing back to Gabriella, he scattered some of the tulip petals on the bed. Hurrying back to the washroom, he was delighted to see her eyes wide open when he entered the room. "For you, my lady."

She giggled, as she did so many times before when he would bring her flowers. "How lucky I am to have found the most perfect man. I think I would like to get out of the tub now."

"Of course." Grabbing a towel, he laid it out on the floor, then pulled the plug on the tub. Her skin was warm, slick, and pink as he lifted her out of the bubbles. He placed her on the towel, wrapping it around her before gathering her up in his arms. "I'll have the heat up in a moment."

"I love you."

He paused, his heart skipping a beat. It had been far too long since he'd heard her utter those three words. "Oh, my sweet, I love you so

dearly." He kissed her now, not quickly, not gently, but with an urgency to feel. Then he realized what he was doing and pulled himself back.

"Don't stop. I want to feel you. Taste you."

He set her on the bed with many regrets. He knew it would take all of his strength to dry her off without touching her. "In time." He melted when her palm rested on his cheek.

"No, now. Touch me, Cooper. Make me feel alive."

His eyes met hers and it was as if no time had passed for them. Cupping her chin in his hand, he lowered his mouth to hers, drinking her in. When her arms wrapped around his neck, he took the kiss deeper.

Her lips were like the tulip petals, silky and warm. Her mouth was hot, needy, so he gave as he took. Their tongues tangled in their dance of lips, and his hands found their way to her body. At first, he only stroked her arms, her shoulders but with each stroke, he moved them lower until he separated the towel to expose her nudity.

"Touch me. Taste me," she pleaded against his lips, breathlessly. "Bring me back to life."

Cupping her face in his palms, he kissed her mouth once, then slowly worked his lips along her chin, her neck, savoring the delicate skin under her ears.

She moaned.

Her skin was as pale as the moonlight and as soft as silk warmed in the sun. She tasted like heaven.

He sought her breasts and suckled on one, then the other, drawing out the moment.

She arched into him.

Taking one tulip stem, he slid the bright yellow head over her face, along her neck, then over her chest. Her belly quivered as the silk petals glided over her skin.

She spread her legs for him.

Taking his time, Cooper slid the flower over her hips, down her thighs, knees, and to her feet. He kissed each pink toe before moving to the next. He repeated the motion, slowly sliding the flower along her leg, up her thigh, to the pink silk glistening between her legs before teasingly running the flower over the other leg.

She welcomed him.

He wanted nothing more than to take her in one quick motion, but he knew they both needed time. It had been too long since he'd

felt the silky warmth inside a woman and he knew it would take one stroke for him to spill deep inside of her.

Gabriella was too weak in any case to have him bury himself with haste.

So he took his time.

His lips caressed, his tongue sampled, his fingers sought.

"I must have you, Cooper. Before I go insane."

With a sly smile, he lifted himself up. "I wish you no discomfort."

"Then finish me already," she panted, smiling up at him.

"My sweet goddess, Gabriella. We will never be finished." He disrobed, taking as much care with his clothing as he had hers and when he was standing in front of her, completely naked, he saw the look of anticipation in her eyes.

"You are still so damn beautiful."

She reached out to him, looking like a woman in love. "And you still take my breath away. Come to me, my lover, and give to me."

He positioned himself between her legs, but before he took what he so desperately needed, he plucked the petals from the flower, laying them on her chest and abdomen. Then, with the last one, he eased it over her lips. "No truer beauty have I ever seen than that of my true love, Gabriella."

Her eyes glistened.

He spread her, then gently slipped inside.

She cried out.

He took her lips, soothed with gentle kisses as his body slid inside her silky treasure. Her legs spread for him as he moved in and out, as the moisture stroked over him. Her hands stroked his back, her nails scraping along sensitive skin. Her mouth was hot and hungry. With each stroke, she began to come more alive.

She moved for him.

Cooper felt his body ready, felt the surge that was building. As he pulled his lips free, looking deep into her eyes, he knew just what he had to do.

"I love you with all my heart, Gabriella. Today, we will be one forever."

Her body pulsed with the orgasm that rippled through. As she arched her back, crying out with her release, he lowered his mouth to her neck. When his own release burst free, he penetrated her neck with his teeth.

"Cooper...no!"

"It's the only way," he said, then sunk his teeth back into her neck. He drank in her blood, sating not only his thirst for her, but his need to have her as well. He felt her struggling beneath him and knew he needed to calm her before the final release. Rising up, he cupped her face in his hand, steadying her as he looked into her eyes.

"There is no cure, my sweet, and I could not live without you in my life any longer. This is the only way. I love you," he proclaimed and took her neck once more. As he drank her life into his, he felt something damp slide over his fingers. Glancing up, he saw that they were her tears. It would all be better in no time and then they could be as happy as they had been so long ago.

When he felt her heartbeat slow and her pulse weaken, he pulled away and bit into his wrist. "Drink from me, my sweet. Drink and live."

Her eyes drooping, she opened her mouth—she knew to protest—but he placed his bloody wrist over her mouth instead. "Drink, Gabriella. It's the only way to save you." She hesitated but when the blood coated the back of her throat she gagged. To ward off choking, she began to swallow. She drank and drank and drank until Cooper felt his own pulse slow. He pulled his wrist away and took her lips. She tasted of his blood mixed with the sweetness that was his Gabriella.

He could feel her body as it began to regenerate, as it began to meld with his blood. When her mouth grew more eager, he pumped himself into her until they both screamed with their release.

"Why?" she whimpered, her arms falling to her sides.

Pulling free, he laid at her side, stroking her face. "It was the only way for you to have a life. Shh now, you need to sleep. Your body needs to reform." He kissed her once more and sent her to a sleepy slumber.

Cooper dressed, feeling more alive than he had in more years than he could count. Mostly it was from the fresh human blood which he hadn't had in many years, but he also knew it was because he had his love back.

Looking down at Gabriella as she slept, her body pink from their lovemaking, he felt the love wash over him.

Finally, he had her back.

Now all he needed was to bring her home.

CHAPTER SIX

Trinity lay in Basil's arms, feeling the afterglow of their lovemaking and the comfort of being in the arms of the man she loved. Once again.

But her mind was not as still as her body.

"What do we do now?"

Basil stroked a hand along her arm, sending chills into her body. "Catch our breath."

She sat up, her hair falling over her shoulder. "You know what I mean."

He sighed. "Yes, I do, but I was also hoping for a few more minutes to bask in the afterglow." He let out another breath before he spoke. "I've attempted several times to call out to my mother. I can't even open the door to the Realm of Mystics with my mind. Rajana has it securely sealed."

"Maybe if I try. I should have tried before now. Damn it!" He stilled her with a kiss and it was just what she needed to calm herself.

"You needed time."

"I took too much time."

He kissed her lips shut. "There is no going back. Only forward. We need to end this darkness once and for all."

"I know." She settled into his arms, calmed by his heartbeat. "We need to find out where Chaos is."

"He isn't at his compound. I checked," he informed her when she lifted her head. "The fang brothers and I went to the compound to find him."

She tilted her head. "The fang brothers?"

"The Vega boys," he supplied, running his hand along her hair.

"Oh...I get it. That's funny. Okay, so you went in with Dante and Danny—wait, how is Dante doing? How is he handling being a vampire?" She hadn't spoken with anyone, really, since her daughter had been...snatched away.

Basil continued to stroke her hair calmly. "He seems to be handling it fine. I've seen him and Danny out on quite a few occasions, patrolling. They seem close."

"I'm glad. I was worried he would hate Danny for doing that to him. So you went to the compound." She lifted her head when it occurred to her. "Just the three of you? Are you insa—"

He kissed her mouth shut again. "I used mind control to make the others believe there were more. Come back here."

She went willingly into his arms. "You're sure he isn't there?" She yawned.

He kissed her head. "Positive. Sleep now. We'll get to it after you've rested."

Snuggling into his arms, she muttered softly, "I want my baby back." Before falling asleep.



Cooper laid Gabriella on his bed, spreading her hair out onto the pillow and covering her up with the blanket before taking a step back. She would sleep for a bit more, her body would need the rest. She'd been through a lot in the past hour.

She looked so perfect on his bed.

Leaving her to sleep, he began to tidy up for her awakening. Though he was diligent with keeping his home clean, he hadn't been here in days and the dust had accumulated. He wished he had thought to bring some flowers back with him.

Why couldn't he get them now? It would only take him a few moments. He'd be back before she'd awaken. Decided to do just that, Cooper sent himself to the facility where Gabriella had slept for the past twenty years.

He couldn't wait for her to wake and begin their life.



Gabriella fought to open her eyes and couldn't understand why they felt as if they were laden with lead. Struggling, she pushed them open and blearily tried to look around. It was all so fuzzy, as if something were coating her eyes, blurring them. She scrubbed her fists over them and blinked away the fog.

Where was she?

Her body felt...odd. Heavy, different. Energized.

She took a good look around. It was a bedroom. She was in a bedroom.

Cooper's bedroom.

How had she gotten here? Her mind seemed as foggy as her eyes. Her mouth was as dry as the desert. She pushed the blankets aside, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. They were bare. *Well, of course they are, you were in bed.* She caught sight of the rest of her body and gasped. She was completely naked.

Then it all came barreling back into her mind.

Cooper had woken her. He'd bathed her. He'd made love to her.

He'd made her a vampire.

Her hand flew up to her neck and she felt the distinct impression of two marks just below her ear. He'd bitten her. While he'd poured himself into her, he had bitten her, drank in her blood, and made her like him.

"It's the only way."

She bolted out of the bed and her legs gave way, nearly sending her tumbling to the floor. Plopping back down onto the bed, she took a few deep breaths, then slowly got to her feet. Though they wobbled, her legs managed to carry her as she walked to the mirror over the dresser. The room was utterly dark yet she saw with perfect clarity. Her eyes were a translucent blue green with a tint of yellow. Opening her mouth, she saw the fangs penetrating from her gums

She gasped, backing up, and bumped into the bed.

Whirling around, her heart racing, she felt panicked.

She needed to get out of here.

In a desperate search, she ran about the room looking for her clothing. It was nowhere to be found. How was that possible? Spotting a robe hanging on the back of the door, she yanked it down and quickly slipped into it. It hung off her like a droopy sack of silk but she did her best to belt it up to cover her nudity.

He'd made love to her, then made her a vampire.

Why would he do that?

Carefully, she opened the bedroom door, peering through the crack. She saw no one and heard nothing. Throwing the door open, she bolted. She didn't know where she was going, or what she was going to do, she just knew she had to run.

"Gabriella."

She screamed and spun around to see Cooper standing before her. Her heart raced with both fear and love, and in the conflict of emotions, she was momentarily frozen.

"Are you all right, my sweet?"

"Don't touch me," she blurted out in a voice much too frail to be hers. Spinning around, she searched for an exit.

"You should be resting."

"Leave me alone." Seeing an escape, she bolted for the door, throwing it open as she ran. Her bare feet slapped on the paved steps leading down to a small cobblestone path. Everything was so dark. It felt so...unnatural.

"Gabriella, please, come back inside."

His voice startled her and she ran a little faster. "No, leave me alone. Leave me alone," she screamed as she ran.

"Gabriella, stop."

She jumped when he appeared in front of her, and screamed even louder.

"My stars, love. What has gotten into you?"

"Don't touch me. You turned me into a vampire. Just leave me alone." Spinning around, she darted off, not knowing where she was or where she was headed.

"Gabriella. Please."

Her blood curdling scream echoed in the still air as he grabbed her arm and stopped her. "Leave me alone. Please, please, just let me be."

"What is going on?"

Her head twisted to the male voice behind her and she saw a man with dark hair and beautiful, glowing blue eyes. "Help me. Please, help me. Save me." Jerking her arm free, she raced to the gentleman. She didn't know who he was, but she hoped he would help her. "Please, don't let him near me."

"Gabriella. What has happened to you? It's me, Cooper."

"I don't know what's going on but I know this woman is terrified. Did you just turn her, Cooper?"

"Yes, yes, he did. You know him?" If he knew Cooper, then odds were he was...like him. She pulled away in fear, then saw the woman running towards her with hair as red as fire flying out as she ran. "Help me, please." She ran right into the woman's arms.

"You turned her?" the man gasped.

"I had no choice. Gabriella, please, just calm down and let me explain."

She clung to the woman, shaking her head rapidly. "Please, don't let him touch me. Won't you help me, please?"

"I don't know what's going on but I know when someone is afraid. I'll take her up to the house while you figure out what's happening. Come on now."

Feeling comforted by the woman, Gabriella went with her willingly.

"What the hell is going on, Cooper?" she heard the blue-eyed man bellow.

"That is my wife."

Gabriella felt her legs weaken and the air around her stir. The world began to spin. She went down and everything went black.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"She's your what?"

Cooper didn't have time to explain and moved past Basil in a rush to get to his wife.

"You're not going anywhere until you explain." When Basil grabbed his arm, Cooper rounded on him, snarling.

"She's just confused and scared. Once I hold her, explain this to her, she'll feel better. But you need to let me go in order for me to do so." He tugged his arm but Basil held it firmly. "Please, don't make me do something I will regret."

"What has gotten into you, Cooper? I demand an explanation."

"I have no time for one now. She needs me, needs my blood."

"Trinity will make sure she's taken care of."

Cooper's temper was steadily rising. "She needs mine. I must feed her so our bond is secured. Release me, Basil. Now!"

"What the hell is wrong with you? This isn't like you to take an innocent and make her yours."

"She isn't an innocent. She's my wife." Knowing what he was about to do would start an avalanche of questions, he chose his fate and did so anyway. He sent himself into the house to his wife's side.

Trinity gasped when he appeared before her in the guest room, her eyes wide as she stared at him. "How the hell—"

"I must feed her. Leave us be." Sitting down beside Gabriella on the bed, he stroking her face. Cooper wasn't surprised when Basil appeared in the room.

"How the hell were you able to transport yourself, Cooper?"

"Leave me be. I must tend to my wife." Gently he stroked her face, confused as to why she'd reacted in the manner she had.

"Your wife? What the hell is going on, Cooper?"

When Basil's hand clamped on his shoulder, Cooper growled, making Basil take a step back. Lifting his wrist, he bit into the flesh, drawing his own blood, then, turning to Gabriella, he pressed it to her mouth. "Drink from me, my sweet. Drink."

Her lips latched on like a baby to its mother's breast and she suckled. With each intake of his blood, he felt her body strengthen.

"This is crazy. For fuck's sake, Cooper, what is going on?"

"Leave us," he bellowed, startling Gabriella.

Her eyes shot wide open and she bolted back, pulling her mouth from his wrist. "No!"

"It's all right, my love. Everything is fine now. Just relax."

"No, no, stay away from me. Please, Cooper. Just leave me be."

"Can't you see how terrified she is, Cooper?" But when Basil touched his shoulder, Cooper rounded on him. "What the hell?"

Cooper blinked several times and knew his contact lenses had shifted. His secret had been discovered. "Just leave me with her for a moment and then I will explain myself."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

"I will not harm her." He focused his attention on Trinity. "I love her. I would never harm her. Please, trust me." He knew it was wrong but he did it anyway. Using his mind, he soothed Trinity and convinced her to take Basil from the room.

"They need time, Basil." She took his arm in her hand and looked into Cooper's eyes. "We'll be right outside the door in any case. Just give him time."

Cooper saw Basil's skepticism and wished he didn't have to do what he was about to do. He controlled the mind of the man he thought of as his son.

"We'll be right outside," Basil stated to Gabriella with comfort in his voice.

They left together and Cooper instantly locked the door. When he turned back to Gabriella, his heart ached at the fear he saw in her eyes. She sat on the bed, her legs curled up to her chest, her hands clutching his robe. She wore his robe.

"I love you," he said simply as me moved closer.

"How could you? If you truly loved me, you would never have done this." She bore her fangs, her eyes shimmering with tears.

"It was all I knew to do. There is no cure, my sweet. I could not bear to be without you any longer. I saw no other way —"

"Than to kill me?"

Those words were like a dagger to his heart. "You aren't dead, only reinvented."

"Into something you promised to never do."

He let out a long breath, knowing it was best to remain where he was rather than try to get closer to her. "That was a different time."

"But you promised."

"What else was I supposed to do? Let you die?"

"Find a cure."

"I tried. There isn't one. Cancer is as deadly today as it was the day I put you to sleep in your glass case."

"Then you should have waited until there was one."

"I was tired of waiting." He blew out a long breath. "I missed you. I longed to have you in my arms, to taste your lips, to hear you call my name. I needed you."

"So you broke your promise and made me a vampire."

"I had no other choice. Please, Gabriella, can't you understand that?" He jumped when the door burst open. Turning, he saw the fury in Basil's eyes. In the flash of a second, Basil was before him, his fist raised. Cooper's vision blurred when Basil slammed his fist into Cooper's jaw.

"Cooper!"

"Basil!"

"I'm fine," Cooper reassured Gabriella, minimally relieved when she dashed to his side. Then she pulled away again. "I had that coming."

"You definitely did. You bastard!" Basil rounded on Cooper. "How dare you use mind control on me."

"It was for everyone's benefit." Cooper wiped the sickly gray blood from his throbbing nose.

"Now you sound like my father. You're part of him. Aren't you?" Basil demanded firmly, his blue eyes glowing.

Cooper nodded, drawing in a deep breath. "Yes," he said quietly.

"You've lied to me. All these years you kept this from me. Why? No, I don't want to know why. I just want you to leave."

"Basil!"

He shook Trinity off with a flick of his hand. "I mean it, Cooper. I want you gone."

"As you wish. Gabriella and I will leave momentarily."

"I'm not leaving."

His heart, already breaking, chipped even more with her words. "Darling—"

"I can't. Please don't make me, Cooper. I need some time. Please."

Her plea sunk right to his heart. With a nod, he vanished.

What had he just done?



She was in a room in a home she was unfamiliar with, having two strangers stare at her. To say she was uncomfortable was an understatement. She knew who Basil was, Cooper had spoken of him enough times, but she had to admit she had no idea he was so gorgeous. The woman, Trinity, she was unfamiliar with. However, she seemed nice enough.

Still...they were strangers.

"Can I get you anything?"

Gabriella smiled politely at Trinity. "I'm fine, thank you." The awkward silence continued.

Until Basil piped up.

"I need some answers."

"Don't push it, Basil."

He narrowed a look at Trinity, then turned to Gabriella. "Are you Cooper's wife?"

"Yes."

She could see the pressure in the veins on the side of his forehead when he clenched his jaw. "When?"

She had to think about it. Her mind was still a little fuzzy and she had no idea what year it was. "What is the year?"

"Two thousand, twenty-six," Trinity supplied.

Gabriella gasped. "Really? Wow." Then she remembered Cooper telling her she'd been asleep for twenty years. "We were married in the year two thousand and two." Basil's jaw dropped in his shock. "But I've been in a cryogenic sleep for the past twenty years," she explained, lowering her legs, smoothing out her robe. She really wished she had something else to wear.

"Trinity, see if you can find her some clothes. I picked up your thoughts," he explained when she tilted her head in confusion. Trinity

left the room as he continued. "I don't read minds but sometimes others' thoughts just jump out at me...well, it's got a lot to do with body language too but that's not a topic for now. Explain this cryogenic thing."

Trinity reentered the room with what looked like a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Not exactly Gabriella's style but beggars couldn't be choosy. "I was diagnosed with breast cancer shortly before our marriage. After the removal of the lump and months of chemo I was told it was in remission. It only lasted three years when it was discovered I had ovarian cancer. It had progressed to the point that there was no hope to ending it. Cooper came to me with an experimental procedure that would freeze my body until a cure could be found. It was risky. We both knew the outcome could be bad, but I was willing to give it a try. I was going to die within months in any case. What did I have to lose? He woke me earlier today...I think it was today, and told me there still was no cure." She swallowed, her hand coming up to the side of her neck to where the bite marks had been. She was surprised that there was no evidence of them now. "That was when he turned me."

"You've been human all this time?"

She nodded at Basil, then let out a long breath. "He promised me, when I first discovered what he was, that he would never do this to me. I don't..." The tears clogged her throat, preventing her from going on.

"I think she's had enough for now, Basil." Trinity sat down on the bed beside Gabriella, wrapping her arm around Gabriella's shoulders. "Go talk to Cooper."

With a deep growl, Basil vanished.

"Not all vampires can do that. Am I correct?" she asked Trinity, sniffing back her tears.

"Only those created by the two original vampires." She handed Gabriella a tissue. "Which means...Cooper was sired by Avadur."

"I don't know who that is. I'm very tired. Would it be all right if I took a nap here before finding a place to stay?"

Trinity stood, nodded. "You can stay here as long as you like. You rest. If you need anything...just call me."

Gabriella settled down on the bed, drawing the covers to her chin. She closed her eyes, letting the tears flow after Trinity left the room.

She wept herself to sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Everything had just gone so horribly wrong. All he'd wanted was to bring his beautiful Gabriella to life and cure her of that retched illness that had robbed so much of her life already. He had no idea doing so would create such a stir.

Why had she been so terrified of him?

He had never harmed her, not even so much as raised his voice to her, yet she had looked at him like he was a...monster. She hadn't even looked at him in that way when he'd told her what he was. He thought back to that day when his true self had been revealed.



"Oh, Cooper, it is such a lovely evening. Look at that full moon, and the stars. It's like the sky is excited and wants to share its joy with the world."

The way she looked at him now took his breath away. She was such a beauty. He wanted her in his life for more than just the occasional evening or night that they managed to share together. But to have her in his life on a permanent basis meant revealing what he truly was.

Could he risk telling her and possibly losing her?

"What is it? You look troubled."

"I am troubled. Come, sit with me." Taking her hand in his, her fingers delicately resting against his palm, he led her to the lounge chairs on the back deck. He sat with her, still holding her hand in his, just gazing at her. His love for her was like nothing he'd ever felt before and what he was about to say may very well have her running from him in fear.

If that were the case, he could always strip her mind of what he'd told her. He didn't like to have to do that, but he didn't want to lose her either.

"You're worrying me, Cooper."

Her voice was like a birdsong whispering in his ear.. "Have I told you recently how much I love you?"

Her smile was as bright as the full moon above. "I believe it's been at least an hour since the last time you recited those words to me."

"My heart is filled with the love I have for you. I cannot breathe but to breathe for you. When I am with you I feel alive and whole."

She tilted her head ever so slightly. "I feel the same. What is this all about, Cooper?"

He drew in a long breath just to steady himself before he spoke again. "There is something I have not told you about myself. Something, I fear, you may not be ready to hear."

"You're a vampire."

His jaw dropped as he stared into her knowing eyes.

"I've known for some time now. And here I thought you were about to propose to me." Her laughter was like a delicate song drifting in the wind. "You're a vampire, Cooper, and I love you still, so wipe that worry from your mind."

"How did you find out? How could you know?"

"How could I not? I have seen your teeth when we make love and the way your eyes begin to take on a different shade of blue when you're excited. Also, your inability to be in the sunlight, always preferring the night for our rendezvous. But really it was the blood I caught you sipping one night when you thought I was fast asleep in your bed." Her smile widened as she delicately stroked his face. "It surprises you that I'm so nonchalant about it."

"Of course. How could it not. How long?"

She tapped her head in thought. "How long have we been seeing each other now?"

His jaw dropped once more. "That long?"

She laughed boldly. "Well, not from the first moment, but within a few days. Remember that day you serenaded me on my doorstep. I

was so overwhelmed that you would sing to me that I threw my arms around you, kissing you boldly on the lips."

"Our first kiss. How could I forget?" His heart warmed with the memory.

"I felt your teeth elongate then. At the time I thought you'd pulled away because I had been too bold, but later, when you kissed me goodnight, your teeth were normal. I've known your kind existed for some time. How could I not when they've begun to appear more often?"

"I didn't frighten you?"

"Oh, Cooper." She kissed his lips softly, lingering for several moments before pulling away to look him directly in the eyes. "You don't have a harmful bone in your body. I could never be afraid of you."



She had definitely been afraid of him today.

The knock on his door startled him. As he dashed to answer it, he fully expected Gabriella to be on the other side.

He was both shocked and disappointed it was Basil.

"I've come for answers and you had better damn well give them to me."

Cooper stepped aside to let Basil inside. "I've nothing left to hide." He shut the door, turning to Basil. The anger he saw in Basil's eyes struck him deep. "You have every right to be angry."

"Damn right I do. I don't know where to begin. I want to rip your head off is what I want to do. I feel betrayed," he said lastly, expelling it on a long breath.

"I never meant to betray you."

Basil's snort of laughter struck another deep wound. "You told me one of Avadur's minions sired you before he brought you to my father."

"No, that is not entirely true. You only assumed it. I...chose not to set you straight on who actually sired me."

Basil's jaw tightened. He shoved his hands in his pants pockets. "Why? Why lie to me about it?"

"I didn't so much lie as omit the truth."

Again the snort from Basil. "One and the same," he growled, his eyes narrowing.

Cooper closed his eyes, drawing in a deep breath before continuing. "In the beginning," he opened his eyes to look directly at Basil, "I thought you were like him. That you would use me, control me,

torture me. So I kept silent. I only spoke to you when spoken to. I took care of you as I was instructed, took care of Avadur but I remained distant for my own benefit. But the longer I was with you both, the more I saw that you were not like your father. As we started to grow closer, you began to confide in me. I felt that if I told you he had sired me, you would think I was on his side and you would separate yourself from me. I didn't want that."

"It still doesn't make it better."

"Would you have trusted me if I had told you I was his? That he had me under his control? We both know the answer to that. What would have happened to you, boy, if I hadn't been on your side?"

"We do not need to go there," Basil warned with his index finger raised.

"Avadur brutalized you," Cooper began despite Basil's warning. "He humiliated you, used you as entertainment for his repulsive gang. He did the same to me in the beginning, to break me down and I knew if he continued to do so with you, that someday you would become just like him."

"I would never be like him," Basil insisted firmly.

"Left to his devices, you would have, to survive. I had to protect you, save you before it was too late. If you had known I was under his control, you never would have trusted me."

"Then why the hell didn't you tell me after we left? You had plenty of time then."

Cooper shoved his restless hands in the pockets of his trim black suit jacket. "I couldn't chance losing you. I had to protect you from him. I knew he would come after us. I was connected to him through his blood as were you. Why do you think I insisted we move from place to place as often as we did?"

"I thought it was because of me." Basil ran a hand through his dark hair. "You should have told me. You've done nothing but lie to me all these years we've been together. I find out you've had a wife since two thousand. Can you explain to me why you thought it was best to keep her a secret from me as well?"

"For her protection." When Basil's eyes widened, Cooper knew he'd said it completely wrong. "What I meant was I couldn't take the chance that some vampire bent on revenge against you wouldn't come after her. I couldn't chance that someday Avadur would find his way to freedom and come looking for you."

"You're connected to him through blood as well, remember?" Basil stated snidely.

"That is why I kept her away from the castle, why I only saw her on the weekends and only at her house, why no one knew about us. Even if Avadur came after me, he would find me at the castle. She was safe where she was."

"You still could have told me. I would have helped protect her."

"She was mine to protect."

Basil's jaw worked. "I thought we were family."

"We are."

"Family doesn't lie to each other, or keep secrets. I trusted you, Cooper. You broke that trust."

"I did it to protect what was mine. I never wanted to hurt you."

Basil spoke now in a voice that was as distant as the space between them. "Yet it was exactly what you did. I don't want you back at the house."

Before Cooper could say a word, Basil vanished.

This was exactly what he had been trying to avoid.



Her body ached with such intensity she thought it would break open. Drenched in sweat, Gabriella lay on an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar house, weeping from her pain and heartache. Her beloved Cooper had betrayed her in the worst way and now she was left to deal with the consequences. How could he have done this to her? How could he have made her into one of his kind without giving her the choice?

In a sense, he had raped her body of her life.

Curling into a ball, she cradled her aching bones and the burning muscles against the pain that streamed through her veins like fire ants eating away at her flesh. It hurt so bad. She just didn't know what to do to make it stop.

"You must drink from me."

His voice, though it had been soft, startled her. Shifting her head, she saw Cooper standing at the foot of the bed. "I...asked...please...don't..." Her teeth chattered when she spoke.

He moved towards her, pulling up the sleeve of his white shirt to expose his arm. "The pain will subside after you've fed. Drink from me, my love. Just drink."

"I...can't." She didn't want to but his veins were calling to her, begging her to take.

He knelt down at her side, laying his bare arm on the bed by her mouth. "You need not suffer this way. Take me, darling. Drink."

Unable to resist, she grabbed hold of his wrist...and bit down. The instant the blood touched her tongue she felt a jolt. It was like the most potent wine she had ever sampled and the urge to have more grew with each pull. She drank him down as if he was water and with each swallow she felt the pain slip away. When the exhaustion took hold of her, she released his arm to look up into his eyes.

“Now you will rest.”

His lips brush her forehead right before he disappeared.

CHAPTER NINE

The darkness surrounded her. Awakening, Gabriella sat up in the bed she'd slept in and took in her surroundings. Though there were no lights on, yet she could see with perfect clarity. Not only could she see perfectly, but everything seemed to be more defined, clearer, brighter.

Pushing the covers aside, the rustling sound echoed loudly inside her head. She flinched. The noises around her seemed to echo in her head.. Creaking noises, like wood on wood grinding together. There were echoes of other sounds that she couldn't define.

It was rather maddening.

Slipping out of the bed, her feet touched the soft, fuzzy rug, tickling a smile from her lips. Her skin seemed over sensitive as well. She spotted the clothing Trinity had given her the night... how long had she been sleeping? If it was still dark, was it still night? It had been dark when she'd run from Cooper. Her heart ached thinking of him, thinking of what had happened since she'd awoken.

Shaking it off, she grabbed the jeans and T-shirt, though it was unlike her to ever wear either. She had no choice but to wear them now. She had no other clothes to choose from.

There were three doors in the room. She figured one was a closet and the other an exit, so she hoped the third would lead her to a wash-room.

"Let's see what's behind door number one." Opening the first door, she gasped at the enormity of the closet. "Wow. A girl's dream closet for sure." With a giggle, she closed that one, moving on to the next and, to her delight, she found the washroom. How perfect was it that the room she stayed in had an adjoining washroom? Scouting around inside, she found some towels, bath soaps as well as shampoo. She set her clothing and towel on the vanity. Peering into the mirror, she gaped at the reflection before her.

Her eyes were yellow. Yellow.

Lifting her upper lip, her eyes widened when she saw a set of fangs protruding from her teeth. She touched them and found them needle sharp. She supposed they would have to be—and she so didn't want to go there.

She was a vampire.

Touching a hand to her chest, right over her heart, Gabriella was delighted to feel it beating beneath her ribcage. Thank God for small miracles.

Stripping out of the robe, the scent caught her attention and she knew instantly it was Cooper's. It smelled distinctly of his favorite cologne. Her heart ached as she drew in the scent.

How could he have done this to her?

Shaking off her tears, she stepped into the shower and started the water. The instant it touched her skin she jumped. It felt like needles against her flesh. Without haste, she adjusted the showerhead until she found a more pleasing spray of water. Then she simply stood beneath the water and let it wash over her.

She remembered how Cooper had washed her, how his hands had glided over her slick, warm flesh. How he had held her after drawing her from the tub.

He'd come to her and she had drank from him.

Her eyes shot open with the memory.

She could taste him on her lips, in her mouth...her body felt him. How odd was that? And it ached to have more of him.

Grabbing the soap, Gabriella washed her body clean, realizing just how sensitive her flesh truly was when she skimmed over her breasts.

There was no lump now.

She'd refused to allow the doctors to remove her breast, opting instead for endless hours of chemo, which had made her violently ill as well as stripping the hair from her head. But she'd kept her breasts. Maybe if she had allowed them to take her breast she might never have developed cancer in other parts of her body.

She shook that thought away, knowing it did her no good to dwell on what couldn't be changed.

Was she cancer free now that she was a vampire?

She washed her hair, rinsed, then shut the water off before stepping out of the shower. She towed dry, realizing, quite disturbingly, that she had no undergarments. How could a person wear clothing without undergarments? It was unfathomable.

Given no other choice, she changed into the jeans and T-shirt, absolutely hating the feel of the denim against her bare flesh. What other choice did she have?

Her first endeavor would be to see if her house was still her home. If so, she hoped her clothing was still there. She brushed her hair, noticing how vibrant it looked. *Must be the shampoo.*

She was startled to see Cooper sitting on her bed as she exited the washroom.

His smile nearly melted her. "You look radiant."

The words clogged her throat. She was seeing him in a new light now. A mix of the man she loved and the man who had raped her of her life.

"I figured you would need your belongings." He held his hand out to the large suitcase that lay open on her bed, filled with her clothing. "Though it was nice of Trinity to supply you with the jeans and T-shirt, they really don't suit you."

"You kept them?" she found herself finally saying.

"Of course. I always knew you would come back to me. That someday I would awaken you." When he stood up, she backed away noticing the hurt in his eyes. He was so handsome with his dark brown hair so perfectly styled around a warm gentle face and his tailored suits that fit him so well. "Did you sleep well?"

Yet she saw him differently now. "I don't know what to say to you, Cooper."

He let out a long breath. "I only meant well."

"I'm not ready for this just yet." She wasn't sure when she would be ready, if ever.

"You never feared me before. Why do you now?"

"I can't do this now, Cooper." Her voice wavered with tears that threatened to break free.

"I still love you more than the air I breathe."

"Please..." The tears slipped from her eyes down her cheeks. The knock on her door startled her. Taking a deep breath, she called out, "Enter." When she turned back to Cooper she saw that he was gone.

She blinked away the sting of the brightness when the lights came on.

"I just thought I would come in and check on you. I wasn't sure if you'd be awake yet, but it looks like you have been for a while. What's this?" Trinity turned her attention to the suitcase on the bed.

"My belongings." Gabriella cleared her throat as she moved towards the bed. "Cooper brought them for me."

"He was here?"

Gabriella nodded as she began pulling items from the case. "He left when you entered."

"I'm having trouble getting used to him like that."

Gabriella turned her head to Trinity. "Like what?"

"Vanishing at will."

"You didn't know he could do that?"

Trinity shook her head as she walked to the dresser across the room. "We thought he'd been sired by one of Avadur's men. Not the king himself." She paused while opening the first drawer. "You knew what he was all along?"

"I did." Gabriella handed Trinity the items of clothing that would go in the drawer.

"This is all so weird to me...but I imagine it's even weirder for you. How are you doing? Really?"

Gabriella sighed. "Confused. Hurt. Sad. There are too many emotions for me to describe them all but, mostly, I guess I feel betrayed."

"Because he turned you?"

"Because he promised me he never would." She handed Trinity her undergarments. "We always knew he would outlive me and we were fine with that. At least I assumed he was fine with it. I knew my leaving would be hard on him, but I had no idea..." She closed her eyes, letting out a long breath. "He came to me in my sleep and fed me."

"When? Today?"

"I have no idea what day it is, but it was dark so I assume it was the night before. Or it could have been only hours ago. What time is it?"

Trinity lifted her wrist. "Three fifteen."

"In the morning?" If that were the case, why wasn't the sun rising?

"In the afternoon," Trinity supplied, heading to the closet.

"How is that possible when it's clearly dark outside?"

"Right. You don't know what's happened. Where do I begin?"

She took the first dress Gabriella handed her to slip it on a hanger before speaking. "A spell has been cast over Jacob's Cove to encase it in darkness."

"Pardon me? How can that be?"

"I kid you not. Okay, here it goes. I'll do my best to give you the condensed version. Just over six months ago, Chaos, one of Avadur's creations, used a ritual to break Avadur from his seclusion. He made some sort of deal with the Dark Mystics that allowed the city to be cast in darkness. Chaos' plan was that he and Avadur would take over the city and, eventually, the world. I foiled that plan when I was killed then brought back to life by the queen and given her powers to take them both out. I managed to send Avadur back, but Chaos hasn't been so easy to catch."

She drew in a deep breath and Gabriella noticed an uneasiness in her as she continued.

"In order to end the darkness, Chaos has to be killed. The only problem is...we can't find him anywhere. So until then, no sun."

"Seriously?" She had to see this for herself. Drawing the dark blinds open, Gabriella looked out over the vast property below her to see nothing but darkness.

In the distance a light shone in a window of Cooper's home.

She closed the blinds, preferring not to think about Cooper just yet. "How weird."

"Yeah, and then some. Do you own any pants?"

Gabriella turned to Trinity, baffled. "Beg pardon?"

"All I see are skirts and dresses. No pants."

"I dislike pants."

"Seriously?"

Gabriella shrugged. "Are you Basil's wife?"

Trinity closed the closet door. "Not really. We're a couple but we've never tied the knot."

"How come?" Gabriella busied herself by making the bed. She felt energized, as if she was fuelled up.

"Well...it's never really come up."

"How long have you two been together?"

Trinity pulled her braid of red hair over her shoulder to stroke it as she spoke. "A little over eight years."

"That's a long time. Any children?"

"No," she said abruptly, then walked to the door. "Well, it looks like you're settling in nicely. Make yourself at home. The kitchen is downstairs, through the living room, dining hall, and through a hallway. If you get hungry...well, Cooper usually took care of the food. If you get hungry, just help yourself." She left the room in a hurry.

Gabriella wondered what it was she had just said to make Trinity run off.

CHAPTER TEN

It pained him not to be with her, even though he'd spent the last twenty years without her, Cooper longed for his Gabriella now like never before. Perhaps it was because he had drank from her and she from him and in doing so had linked them forever as one.

At least until she drank from someone else.

That thought scared him more than death itself. He couldn't allow her to drink from anyone but himself. They were soul mates, he'd known that from the very first moment he'd set his eyes on her beautiful face. Even though she may not allow him to feed off of her for now, he could still ensure that she would drink from his vein. Just as he had hours before when he'd appeared in her bedroom, his vein ready.

He could understand Basil's anger towards him, but he just couldn't fathom why his precious Gabriella would not want to welcome him into her warm and loving arms. All he'd done was give her life. He would give her the time she needed, for now. Perhaps distance and time away would draw her to him. And if that didn't work, he was sure the pull of his blood inside of her would.

In the meantime, he was going to go stark raving mad sitting about doing absolutely nothing. It reminded him of his time at the Digital Domain. He hadn't felt that closed since his days with Avadur when he would be chained down on the cot in the dungeon, a victim to

Avadur's abuse. Though the external scars had long since healed, the inner ones were still so often raw. He had endured days of torture at Avadur's hands only to secure that Cooper would succumb to whatever Avadur wanted. He'd been beaten down and if it hadn't been for the sad eyes of a boy too frightened to protect himself against an evil father, Cooper might have succumbed to Avadur's abuse.

But Basil had needed him, and so Cooper had fought for him.

That was just what Cooper was going to do now.

Fight for Basil.

Chaos needed to be found. This endless darkness had to be stopped. The city needed the crowds of people, the humans that so often took advantage of their great city. Chaos needed to pay for taking the lives of five innocent young girls once and for all. Maybe, just maybe, if he were to take Chaos out, Basil would give him a second chance and welcome him back into his home, and into his heart.

It would also give Cooper something to do to keep his mind occupied with something other than Gabriella's unwillingness to see him.

He sent himself to the compound that Chaos had called home for several decades now. He knew perfectly well that if he had appeared by the front door, not a soul inside would allow him in. So he set himself down inside the facility.

And was appalled at the disgusting mess he found.

How could people live this way? Filth was everywhere. On the walls. The floor looked as if it hadn't been swept in ages. Furniture was broken down, looking as if it had been through a war. As for the stench, well, it was enough to make anyone gag.

The sooner he was out of this wretched squalor the better.

"Well, looky here. We got us a visitor."

Calmly, Cooper turned to the scruffy looking—he wasn't sure what race the creature was but if he were to take a guess, he would say a cross between a werewolf and a monkey. He wasn't entirely sure that was possible, but it was his best guess. The smell emanating off of the man made his eyes water.

A good hour in a blistering bleach bath might do the trick.

"I've come in search of Chaos."

"You and every goddamn other person. He ain't here." He shoved his hands in his filthy jean pockets and sucked in a wad of snot. "You smell fresh."

"It's called hygiene. You ought to try it sometime."

The creature smiled, showing of his lack of hygiene in the decay of his teeth. "Sophitamacated too, aren't you? Maybe I *ought* to bring you down a few notches."

Cooper vanished as the brute barreled towards him. He was sure in his haste to leave that the grimy slug fell right on that scarred, dirty face of his. Served him right. Deciding not to take the word of a man that smelled worse than rotting flesh, Cooper went on a tour of the facility.

Oh, the things he could do here. It surely would give him hours of work just cleaning it. He grimaced as he sidestepped to avoid a pile of dung. It most certainly wasn't from an animal, which told him again just how hygienic the lot were. The sooner he was free of this place the better.

The sound of moaning coming down the hall took him closer to a door, securely locked. Undaunted, Cooper transported himself inside the room and saw a frail young man lying on a filthy cot. He looked gaunt, as if he hadn't seen food or freedom in some time.

"Not to worry, son. I'll rescue you from this dung hole and those vicious creatures that have you locked in here." But as he approached the cot, he smelt the distinct scent of vampire. He turned the boy's head and saw the bite marks on his neck.

When the boy opened his eyes, they were yellow.

"They've already gotten to you. No matter. It's not too late. What is your name, son?" Cooper asked mostly to keep the boy conscious. It would be easier if the boy could walk without Cooper's help rather than if Cooper were to try to carry him from the facility.

"Dusty...Dusty Ryder," the boy choked out.

"Well, Mr. Ryder, I am about to rescue you."

"The hell you are."

Cooper spun around just in time to be pummeled by rather large fists. He flew backwards, landing with a hard thump on the cold cement floor. His bones jarred, his tailbone cracked and he knew he would be in for a world of hurt if he didn't retreat now. "I'll return for you," he promised, then vanished. Without hesitation, he sent himself to Basil. Since he'd let Basil feed off of him in the early days and still, on occasion in the past few years, they were minimally linked. He set himself down in the Digital Domain to a round of gasps from everyone inside.

"What the hell?"

He dismissed Jonah's gasp to turn to Basil. "There is a young man inside Chaos' compound that needs rescuing. I imagine he isn't the only one. We need to go in and rescue him before it is too late."

"Cooper, did you just...appear out of nowhere?"

He waved Dante's question away with a flutter of his hand. "We all need to go in and rescue him."

"We don't need to do anything," Basil growled at him in a fierce tone that even startled Cooper.

"Will you allow your anger at me cloud your judgment and let an innocent young man suffer the consequences?"

"I'll do what I want to do when I see fit. I don't need you anymore, Cooper."

Those words struck a mighty blow to his heart. Cooper stood his ground. "Fine, you need me no longer, but someone else does. I attempted to rescue him but I was attacked. I alone am no threat. If you don't want my help, so be it, but I refuse to sit back while you do nothing."

"What will you do? Go back in there alone?" Basil laughed boldly.

"Okay, I don't know what's going on here starting with Cooper appearing out of nowhere and why the two of you are sniping at each other, but if someone is in danger, we should help."

Cooper turned to Dante with an appreciative nod. "Thank you. At least someone is using their head." The low, feral growl Basil emitted warned Cooper he was walking on a thin line. He decided it was best to turn his attention to someone who didn't want to rip his throat out. "The boy is in the north end of the compound in the third room from the end of the hall. Hurry. Who knows what they will do to him since I've been there. His name is Dusty Ryder." He vanished, hoping they would do as he asked and rescue the young man.



"I am so lost."

Basil turned to Jonah. Feeling his rage boiling to the surface, he took a slow breath. "Is there anything you can do, electronically, to shut that place down, lock it up so no one can leave?"

"Um...I'm not sure. Can we discuss what just happened here?"

"No!" Basil turned to Dante. "Get your brother and anyone else willing to help. We go in an hour. Jonah, find a way to lock everyone inside."

"Sure. But first, what the fuck is going on?"

"I don't want to get into it now. Get to work."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It seemed silly to seclude herself in her room simply because she was afraid she might run into Cooper. Gabriella supposed she would have to face him sooner or later. She had never been the type of woman to put anything off, she didn't know why she was procrastinating now.

Yet stepping from her room was proving to be very difficult.

She thrust the door open, taking in a deep breath. She was being silly and laughed at herself for it. Leaving the room, she walked down the long corridor. She'd admired the place long before she had ever met Cooper. Who wouldn't admire a castle in a city where it was rare to see such a thing? Sure, it wasn't actually in the city, rather on the outer limits. Still, it belonged to Jacob's Cove.

Cooper had given her a tour once, much to her delight. She had hoped he would when she'd shown up at his door with the delivery of flowers he'd ordered. From the looks of it now, nothing much had changed. She wondered if the flowers they had planted then were still in bloom today.

One of the bedroom doors was ajar, drawing her attention. She stopped, unable to resist, and peered inside, surprised to see a baby's crib.

"It was to be my daughter's room."

She jumped at least a foot, her heart thumping in her chest. Whirling around, she saw Basil standing soberly behind her. She placed a hand to her heart, drawing in a deep breath. "Was?"

He nodded, walking past her into the room, stopping beside the crib. "She was taken from us only moments after her birth."

"Oh dear, I am so sorry. How awful for you." Then Gabriella remembered Trinity saying she had no children. Was this what she meant? Was it any wonder she'd fled the room as quickly as she had?

"She would be a week old today." He turned back to her, clearing his throat. The obvious sounds of emotion rang in his voice as he spoke. "Have you seen Trinity?"

The poor man. Poor Trinity. She could only imagine the pain they must be feeling. "Earlier. But not since. I'm sorry."

"I'll find her." He walked past her again, stopping but not looking at her. "Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

"I'm taken care of, thank you. May I ask you something?" He looked up at her, nodded. "Will you ever be able to forgive Cooper?"

"Will you?"

She wasn't sure she could answer that. "*Touché*. Have you spoken to him since...well...I showed up?"

"I have. Have you?"

"He came to me, twice. Once to feed me and the other time he brought me my clothing. He attempted to speak to me but I wasn't ready. I know how much he loves you, how much you rely on him. I would hate to think I would come between the two of you."

Basil turned to her fully now and she saw sincerity in his eyes when he spoke. "You aren't coming between us. His lies are. I need to find Trinity. I have a task I think she will enjoy doing."

Gabriella nodded as he left the room. She stood there a moment, thinking about what Basil had said. They both had been betrayed by the one they loved. Would either of them ever be able to forgive Cooper?



Trinity stood at Basil's side by the compound gates as a car came to a stop at the curb. Jonah, Dante, Gypsy, and Danny stepped out of the car. Behind them another car pulled up and three of Basil's men exited. It wasn't a strong number, but it was better than none.

"This is strictly a search and rescue mission," Basil told everyone. "But if you have to take someone out to get to them, so be it."

"Now we're talking," Danny said, eagerly rubbing his hands together.

"This is not personal. So if you have a bone to pick with anyone inside, Danny, leave it out here. Got it?" Basil warned.

"I know what I'm doing and if by any chance as I'm trying to rescue someone I happen to gouge the eyes out of the creeps in my way—oops—and if it's someone who happened to piss me off in the past, then so be it."

"Just remember why we're here," Basil reminded him.

"Trin." Jonah walked up to her, a faint grin on his face.

She hadn't been too kind to him when he'd come to see her and she regretted that. "Look, Jonah—"

"Grief does weird things to a person. They're not always themselves. What they say and do is a reflection of the pain they're feeling." He took her chin in the palm of his hand. "I know this first hand."

Yes, he did, given the fact he had lost his wife and unborn child, then been turned into a vampire all within days of each other.

"But you ever threaten to turn my dick into a shriveled raisin again and I may not be as kind."

She bit her lip, trying not to smirk. "I believe I said that if you didn't leave the room I would make it so that a certain part of your anatomy would shrivel up to the point where the only box it would be useful in would be a box of bran flakes."

"I condensed it." He smiled. "Good to see you out and about."

"Good to be about. Now, let's go kick some ass."

"Rescue," Basil reminded her.

"That's what I meant." Grinning, she along with her few warriors headed to the compound. When the door flew open and a dozen angry men came rushing out, she felt the adrenaline kick in.

Swords were drawn behind her but as she headed forward, Trinity knew her friends could take care of themselves. She was going to enjoy taking out a few slimy bastards on her quest. It had been a long time since she'd been able to fight.

Metal rang out as it was used on its victims. She went in bare handed, relishing the hand-to-hand combat. Fists raised, she took out the first jerk who dared to come at her. Damn, it felt good.

Blood flew both in red and sickly gray. Vampires bore their fangs, werewolves raised long claws. She felt the sting of nails along her back. Swinging her leg out, she caught the bastard right in the throat. He went down on a choked scream, clutching his torn jugular.

Served him right.

"I'm going in to do a search," Basil informed her then change into a bat.

In her glory, Trinity took out her first victim with a snap of his neck. The were wasn't dead, but he sure as hell wouldn't be moving any longer. She turned back to the fight.

"Get the cripple," someone called out.

As she turned to Jonah, she saw him pull out some sort of flat box-like device that looked a great deal like a calculator. He pressed something on it and she was shocked when a wire shot out in the form of a net to catch two vamps. Then things got interesting.

The two vamps went down, convulsing as if they'd bitten into a live wire.

"Hot damn, it works," Jonah whooped, throwing one hand in the air. "Call me a cripple, will you?"

Laughing, Trinity continued taking anyone out that dared come near her. When they began to retreat, she was highly disappointed but let the few scurry off to lick their wounds.

"Damn, that was a riot," Danny shouted, throwing his hands in the air.

"Jesus, Jonah. That is a nasty device." Dante laughed as he looked down at the unconscious vamps still twitching on the ground.

"And now I know it works." Jonah tucked the device in his shirt pocket, grinning.

Dante's jaw dropped open. "You never tested it before now?"

"No better trial than in combat."

"Fuck!"

"Damn, it is good to be back." Trinity laughed.

"They cleared house."

She turned as Basil set down beside her, a smile still filling her face. "I haven't felt this juiced in...a long fucking time."

Basil gave her a hard, brain numbing kiss. "I knew it was just what you needed."

"You always know what's best for me. Now, what did you say about cleaning house?"

"No one's inside. They must have gotten everyone out after Cooper left."

"You saw Cooper?" she asked, surprised.

"Long story. I'll tell you later."

Jonah disengaged the instrument in his hand. "Maybe you can fill us in at the same time, like telling us why the hell the guy can vanish at will."

Tempting the Darkness

With a tip of his head, Basil hooked his arm over Trinity's shoulder. "I can give you a rundown but not here and not at the house."

"We're closest to Vega Investigations. We can discuss it there," Dante added while eyeballing Jonah's little device.

"We'll meet you there." Trinity linked her hand with Basil's and together, they vanished.



Cooper stood back as everyone gathered in their cars and drove away. He was disappointed that they hadn't been able to save anyone, especially the boy.

He should have done more to save him in the first place.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gabriella had been somewhat skeptical of Trinity when she'd explained about the darkness, but seeing it now, with her own eyes, she was bewildered. How could it be possible to have complete darkness? There weren't even any stars, or a moon. It was as though a blanket covered the sky. It was sad.

Then she noticed the trees, flowers and the grass that had all withered and died. It actually made her sick. Such beauty was marred now by one man's selfishness. It just wasn't right. She knelt down near the wilted flowers that she and Cooper had once planted together, her throat clogging with tears.

It wasn't just due to the death of the blooms either.

It had been a happy time in her life. A new beginning. Just like the flowers they planted, their love began to root that day and every day after.

Now, just like the plants lying wilted on the ground, the root of their love was dying.

She didn't want to feel this pain. She had hoped their reunion would be a glorious one filled with endless days of love and joy. Yet... now they were apart and she was hurting like she'd never hurt before.

"I've considered starting an artificial garden. I've even drawn up plans for a greenhouse."

She didn't move from her spot when Cooper spoke, though he had startled her. Once, she had been able to speak freely to him. Now, she hesitated.

"It worked well in your room at the facility. The flowers there bloomed hardily and reproduced often. Can't you even look at me now?" Cooper sighed.

She stood, dusting the dry dirt from her hands and knees before turning to him. Yet she still said nothing.

"Your silence is like a dagger to my heart."

"Much like your betrayal has done to my heart."

"I did the only thing I knew to do to save you."

"Without giving me the choice. Once, you asked my approval for everything that pertained to us. Yet at that crucial moment you chose to ignore my rights and do as you pleased."

Cooper swallowed hard before replying. "Then you would have rather I left you in your tomb to linger in neither death nor life?"

"Isn't that what I am doing now?"

"You are not dead, Gabriella. You have been infected, yes, but your heart still beats, your blood still flows, and you still breathe. All of those are critical to life. What I did for you was give you life."

"I feel as if you stripped me of it," her voice quivered.

"I cured you of that retched disease. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Not in this manner." Turing to leave, he grabbed her arm to stop her. "Please, release me."

"I love you, Gabriella, and I know you love me as well."

"I do love you, and that is what hurts the most." It shocked her when he pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her body. In a flash, his lips were on hers and the emotions swirled like a nasty caldron inside of her. She wanted to give in, to let him have her, to give everything she was to him. Instead, she pulled away. "Don't."

"You told me to take you, to have your body, to touch you, and I did. Do you remember my hands on your warm flesh?" He skimmed one hand down her back, making her moan. "Do you remember the feel of my lips on yours, the caress of my fingers?" Leaning in closer, he whispered against her mouth, "Do you remember telling me your body was mine as ever before?"

"Yes..." she murmured breathlessly.

"That is just what I did."

Realizing she was perilously close to giving into him. Planting her palms on his chest, she gave him a good, hard shove. It shocked her how much strength she had. "I gave you my body, yes, but I did not

agree to let you rape me of my humanity. Do not push me again, Cooper." Spinning on her heels, she left him standing in the garden they had once created, alone.



"Okay, let me get this straight," Jonah began, beside him sat Raven, her fingers linked with his. "Cooper was turned into a vampire by Avadur, which gives him the power of mind control as well as the ability to poof anywhere he wants. And he never told you who really sired him or that he had a wife hidden away for years."

"In a nutshell." Basil slipped a cigarette between his lips, flicking the flame on his lighter to the tip. He'd made a promise to quit smoking for Trinity while she was pregnant and after the baby came. He didn't see a reason to stop now, given the circumstances.

"I can see why you're pissed at him," Dante added. He sat behind his desk while Gypsy rested on his lap. "I also understand why his wife would be upset with him for turning her into a vampire without her consent."

Danny angled in his chair to meet his twin's eyes. Next to him, his girlfriend, Starla, stroked his arm. "Because I did the same thing to you. I wondered when you would say something."

Dante shifted Gypsy to get a better look at his brother. "My circumstance was a little different. I was on death's door. No, I'm not angry at you for turning me. I rather like my life and I'm glad to still have it. Even if it means I have to suck blood for the rest of it."

"What's she like?" Gypsy inquired.

"Nice," Trinity supplied. "Sophisticated. Perfectly suited for Cooper."

"Here we thought he might be gay. Explains a lot, now that I think about it." Everyone looked at Gypsy. "What? We did, you all did... well, maybe not Basil...but I know Raven did and so did Jonah—"

"I said the guy was queer. Didn't mean I thought he was gay. Men shouldn't be neat freaks." Jonah shook his head, which made Trinity laugh.

"I just thought he didn't date because of what Avadur had done to him when he first came to stay with us," Basil stated rather quietly. He remembered quite sickeningly hearing Cooper scream for help, begging not to be hurt and seeing the women crawling all over him, using their teeth on him in the worst way.

"That does not sound good." Jonah shuddered.

When Trinity put her hand on his shoulder, Basil looked up, realized what he'd said then quickly changed the subject. "Now you have the whole story. We need to focus on the tasks at hand. We need to find Chaos." Giving Trinity's hand a squeeze, Basil moved about restlessly.

Starla lifted her hand. "I tried another locator spell and it took me to the city limits but stopped at the barrier of darkness. I don't think he's in the city."

Basil smoked as he paced, feeling restless, feeling...hurt on so many levels. His best friend, the man who had saved him from the cruelty of his father had lied to him his entire life. His heart ached for the daughter he'd only briefly seen before his mother so cruelly stole her from Trinity's arms. And if he didn't calm himself soon, he was going to cause an unnatural disaster. "Can you set up outside the barrier and see if you can locate him?"

"Not alone she won't be." Danny put a protective arm around Starla.

"You can't come along, Danny. Remember the last time you stepped out of the darkness barrier. You fried yourself to a pulp," she reminded him.

"I can wear protective gear. You are not doing it alone," he demanded, pulling her a little closer to his side.

"I'm a witch, remember? I can take care of myself."

"Danny can go along. Two heads are better than one," Basil interjected to end the impending argument. "But before you do that, I need a favor from you, Starla."

Her big eyes perked up. "Sure, what do you need?"

"Is there a spell, an incantation, anything that could be used to call my mother to me? I need something that will bring her out of hiding, even if it means ripping her out of her realm. Can you come up with something that could do that?"

Starla tapped a finger to her lips in thought. "I could contact my mother and High Priestess Essema to see if they know of something. It might take a few hours to a day to come up with something."

"Then get on it. Danny can drive while you research." The loud crash from outside startled them all.

"Looks like we've got trouble," Trinity said, peering out the front window of Vega Investigations.

Coming up beside Trinity, Basil snarled as he looked outside. "And then some."

Outside, a group of hoodlums were standing before a burning building, their torches lit, ready to cause more damage.

"Shit." Dante exclaimed.

"Yeah. Looks like the rest of us have work to do. Danny and Starla, get going. Let's roll people." Basil took Trinity's hand in his.

"Just stay behind me, sweetie," Jonah advised Raven.

"Can I use your electronet?"

He kissed her head, smiling. "That's my girl."

"Better yet, why don't you and Gypsy go get a fire truck?"

Both women scowled at Basil's instructions. "Buzzkill," Gypsy spouted. "Come on, Raven, let's go get a fire truck."

"Let's roll." Charging out the door, Basil went straight for the crowd with Trinity at his side.

"Can I use the electronet?" Dante asked as they ran from Jonah's office and into the fight.

"Dream on, D."

"Buzzkill," Dante mimicked Gypsy's early statement. "To your left," he called out and Jonah spun, fists ready.

Now this was just what he needed to rid himself of his fury, Basil decided as he pummeled fists into flesh. When the werewolf came at him, he simply kicked it in the teeth. He changed into a Rottweiler and ran full steam at the whimpering wolf. "Bring it on, pooch."

"It's just weird when he talks in his animal form," Jonah said while whipping out his electronet. He pressed the button which had the net shooting out, only a mere two inches from where Basil was fighting off the werewolf.

"Watch it!" Basil sunk his teeth into the wolf's neck. The beast/man cried out, the blood spurted, and Basil shook him until he quit moving. He returned to his human form as the animal beneath him transformed into a human.

He was merely a boy.

Turning, he saw Trinity taking out two vamps at once. His heart swelled with pride. "That's my girl," Basil chanted, then went back into the fight.

"Shit! My net is jammed," Jonah proclaimed in a very high pitched, panicked voice.

"I got your back." Lifting his hand, Dante took out the vamp that was running straight for Jonah.

He took out one more before Basil noticed they had managed to win the battle. Those that didn't die ran off like scared girls. He drew in a long breath. "Now that was just what I needed."

Tempting the Darkness

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Trinity slid into his arms, kissing him hard on the mouth.

In the distance they heard the siren and as the truck came to a stop only feet away from them, Gypsy climbed out of the driver's side.

"Anyone know how to work this thing?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cooper was absolutely lost without his usual household duties. Sure, Basil was an easy person to take care of, but the house always needed some sort of cleaning. And cooking, he missed cooking for the group. Then there were the errands he'd had to run, shopping to do.

The research that had taken up most of his waking free time. There wasn't much use to him researching cures for cancer now, was there? Gabriella was alive and no longer battling the horrid disease. Why couldn't she just see that what he did to her had been for her own good?

He hadn't raped her of her humanity. He'd cured her, made her better.

Her reaction to him now completely baffled him. He had thought their love was eternal and could weather anything that was thrown at them. They'd clung to each other during her chemo, during all the days she'd begged for the pain and sickness to stop. Well, he had ended it for her, and now she was angry at him for it.

He also hated being apart from her. He feared above anything else that the longer they were apart, the less likely it would be that she would return to him. Oh, he knew she loved him, but the worry was still there. Sometimes, distance did not make the heart grow fonder, especially when one heart was hurting. What he needed was to be

present in her life on a daily basis. The only way to do that was to convince Basil to let him back into his home.

That was not going to be an easy task, but he had to try.

Since it had been his home for over eighty years, Cooper felt secure enough to simply enter without knocking. The house was so quiet, much like it had been before the dreaded darkness began. Entering through the back way, Cooper checked the coatroom, noticing it was in need of a cleaning. The floor was soiled and could use a thorough wash. As he walked through the corridor that led to the kitchen and the rest of the property, he noticed various spots here and there that needed wiping. He hoped to be able to get to them after his discussion with Basil.

He had to make Basil understand what he'd done was for the best for everyone concerned.

As he entered the kitchen, he found Basil rummaging through the fridge. It reminded him of a time when Basil had been younger, when his father still ruled the house. It had surprised him to find Basil up and about in the middle of the day, considering his father had had the poor lad tied up in the dungeon for two days beating him for not obeying his command to imprison several females for sexual and blood pleasure.

"I could make you something if you like."

Basil pulled himself from the fridge, narrowing his eyes at Cooper. "I don't believe I invited you inside my home."

"It is my home as well."

Basil slammed the fridge door hard enough to rattle the contents. "You ended any rights you had to this place, and me for that fact, with your lies."

"I never lied. Why is it you cannot see that? Yes, I withheld information from you, but I saw no need to tell you otherwise."

"Saw no need?" Basil snorted. "What about the fact that we're family? Or at least I thought we were. Family doesn't lie to one another."

"You lied to Trinity. You decided to cheat on her rather than tell her the truth that your father was attempting to break free of his seclusion. Is she not your family?"

"That was a different set of circumstances. I did it for her own safety," Basil spoke in a low growl.

"And I refrained from telling you who my true sire was for your benefit. I knew if you found out you would treat me differently, always worrying I might be working for Avadur and misleading you

into thinking I was your friend. You wouldn't be able to trust me and, if that were the case, who would be there to protect you from the torturous abuse your father bestowed upon you?"

"Well, I guess we'll never know what I would have done now, will we."

"Don't you see how much better your life is after I rescued you from his clutches? If you had found out I was sired by Avadur, you would not have trusted me and your father would have continued his abuse. Where would you be today if he had continued? Would you be the man you are now if I hadn't rescued you? If I hadn't lied to you?"

Basil pointed a finger at him, narrowing his eyes even more. "Do not turn this on me."

Cooper stepped back in shock. "That was not what I meant. I only meant that my lies were necessary in order to save you. I never wanted to be a part of Avadur. Having some of his abilities was a constant reminder that I was."

"Then being around me on a daily basis must have been a killer for you, since I'm his son."

"No. No, never. Oh, this has all blown so out of proportion. I never wanted to hurt you. I have thought of you as my own son."

"Yet you never felt the need to tell me you had a wife." Basil crooked his head to the side.

"I wanted to keep her safe."

"From me?" Basil choked out.

"No, from our kind, from your father, from Chaos. I never wanted her to have to fear for her life."

"You think that if I had known about her I would have put her in jeopardy? Yeah, not feeling any better here, Cooper."

In a restless move so uncharacteristic of Cooper it even shocked him, he ran a hand through his hair in frustration. He quickly smoothed it back into place and shoved his hands into his trouser pockets instead. "I made a mistake—"

"Just one," Basil quipped.

"I've made mistakes, yes, as have you, as have the majority of today's population—"

"Lies are a little harder to forgive than a mistake. I'm not ready for you to be here yet, Cooper. So I'm asking you politely to leave. Don't make me erect a barrier against you," Basil warned calmly.

Disappointed, Cooper nodded and, saying nothing, left. He would just have to come up with another way to win Basil back.



The instant the door closed Basil picked up the closest thing to him—a glass bowl on the table—and threw it against the wall. It shattered into a dozen little pieces and did nothing to relieve his pain.

“That was a nice bowl.”

Spinning around, Basil saw Trinity standing in the doorway. “I have dozens more of equal beauty.” He supposed since he was the one who made the mess, he should be the one to clean it up. “Were you eavesdropping?” he asked as he scouted for the broom and dustpan.

“I came in around the time Cooper was explaining how much better your life is that he lied.” She took the dustpan from him. “He’s right.”

Basil was more than shocked by her comment. “Come again?”

“Well, not in the lying part but that you wouldn’t have trusted him, trusted that he wanted to help you. Tell me honestly, if you had known from the start who sired him, would you have trusted him?”

He swept the shards into a pile, grinding his teeth as he worked. “Like I told him, neither of us will ever know that because he never gave me the choice.”

“I’m not condoning his actions, but I am saying that I can see his reasoning for not telling you the truth.” She held up a finger to stop him. “In the beginning. But after the two of you left Avadur and were on the run, he should have told you then.”

“Exactly. But he doesn’t see it that way. It’s not just his choice to hide his true sire from me that hurts.”

“It’s the fact that he had a whole other life that you didn’t know about.” She stood after he’d brushed the glass into the pan and met his eyes.

She knew him so well. “Yes. He has told me so often since rescuing me from my father that he thought of himself as my father. If that were true, wouldn’t he have wanted to share the most exciting part of his life with me? Fuck, Trin, he had a wife and never saw fit to introduce us. How am I not supposed to be hurt by that?”

“I know.” She dumped the glass into the garbage, dropping the pan beside it, then turned to Basil. “Do you want me to go beat him up for you?”

He laughed and went willingly into her arms. “I love you.”

"Feeling's mutual." She ran a hand over his hair, looking at him with such love it made his legs weak. "It's been a crazy few weeks for us, hasn't it?"

"And then some. How are you holding up?" He traced his index finger along her cheek.

She shrugged and bit her lip. "I want to scream most of the time, and the other times I want to crawl in a hole and cry myself to sleep." She shrugged again. "I keep thinking she needs me and I'm not there for her. I hate your mother for robbing us of our daughter." She let out a long breath. "How are you holding up?"

"You saw the glass on the floor. I pretty much tore up the Realm trying to get my mother's attention, so I would have to say I'm not doing so great." He leaned his forehead on hers. "What are we going to do, Trinity? What if we never get her back?"

She firmly took his chin in her hand. "We will. I am determined to find our daughter even if I have to rip a hole in the dimensions to get to the Realm of Mystics."

"Let's hope Starla can do just that."



Gabriella's room was dark. Entering, Cooper saw that she was asleep in her bed. She looked like a goddess asleep on a cloud of white. He stripped off his jacket, slipped his feet out of his shoes, then tiptoed to her bed. He had to feel her, be near her. He longed to hold her in his arms, to have her curl to him in her sleep and cuddle against him. For twenty years he'd slept alone, without her near him and now that she was back, he wanted to have what they'd once had.

The togetherness.

Thinking it would be best to stay clothed, Cooper slipped under the covers beside her. Her back was to him and he pressed his face into her hair, drawing in the fragrant scent of her hair. He'd always loved her hair, the length, the silkiness of it, and couldn't resist touching it now.

She moaned in response.

He longed to touch more of her but knew it was a risk to do so. He didn't want her waking up and asking him to leave. So he laid beside her, stroking her hair softly, listening to her sleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In her sleep, Gabriella dreamt of her husband's loving arms holding her to his chest, his fingers gently playing with the ends of her hair as he kissed her softly on the mouth. They lay naked, savoring the taste and touch of each other's bodies. His hands were so gentle as they skimmed along her skin, stopping at the small dip in her back. He pulled her closer and she felt the press of his hardness against her aching flesh.

She moved for him in a seductive dance that stroked flesh against flesh. Her body heated, his body responded. When he rolled on top of her, she parted her legs to allow him inside. Their eyes met and she felt so much love in that simple glance that it rippled like warm water throughout her body. He took her lips and pressed inside.

She woke with a start, sitting straight up in her bed, looking around, bewildered. Her loins ached with a need she knew would not be sated without the one she loved. Curling her legs to her chest, she wept.

She wanted Cooper so badly it hurt.

The knock on her door startled her from her tears and, sniffing, responded. "Yes?"

"It's Trinity. Are you decent? Can I come in?"

Gabriella dashed her tears away and dried her face on the sleeve of her nightshirt. "Yes, of course. Please, come in." She dropped her legs and smoothed out the covers as Trinity entered her room.

"Oh, you're in bed. I didn't wake you I hope?"

"No, I was already awake." Leaning over the bed, Gabriella turned the bedside lamp on. "I seem to sleep in spurts these days."

"It's common for vampires." Trinity sat on the edge of the bed. "You were crying?"

Gabriella tipped her head down, ashamed. "I had a dream."

"About Cooper." Utterly surprised, Gabriella looked up. "It's understandable. You miss him."

"I do, terribly. Yet I feel so betrayed by him. Oh, my emotions are like a rollercoaster, up and down." She sniffled, the tears stinging her eyes. "I just don't know what to do."

"Basil's pretty upset with him too."

Gabriella sniffled again. "What about you? What are your feelings about Cooper? Or about me, for that matter? I've invaded your home at a time when you have other things to deal with. Basil told me about your daughter." She laid her hand over Trinity's. "I am so sorry."

"You haven't invaded anything. Having you here is a nice distraction." Trinity patted her hand softly. "What do I feel about Cooper and his lies? Hm...I don't like what he did, that he's lied to Basil for all these years. But, honestly, I'm not surprised. Cooper is a secretive sort, never really talking about himself much. He's always baffled me." Trinity shrugged.

"That sounds nothing like the Cooper I know. He has always been full of stories, of his youth, of his father's encouragements to have him practice medicine, of his intelligence. He has such an inquisitive mind. His father so hoped he would follow in his footsteps, become a practitioner, but Cooper preferred the investigative aspect of medicine, particularly after death. He and Philip, my physician, worked tirelessly to find a cure for my cancer. Unfortunately, they never found one."

"Which brings us to what he did to you. Do you hate him for turning you?"

Gabriella twisted the blanket in her hands nervously. "I could never hate him. I feel betrayed by him, hurt definitely, but I don't hate him. He promised me he would never turn me. When he woke me, I was sure he had done so because a cure had been found. When he made love to me so sweetly, complete with flower petals on the bed, I thought our life would finally be what it was meant to be."

She took a long breath, her voice breaking when she spoke. "Then he bit me."

"Without telling you what he was doing?"

She sniffled the tears away, refusing to give in to them. "He told me it was the only way, that there was no cure. How could he have done that to me?"

"Have you asked him?" Trinity handed her a tissue.

It was useless to try to fight the tears off and, taking the tissue, Gabriella wiped them away. "I have and he's repeatedly told me he did it for my benefit, that no cure could be found, that he couldn't leave me in my stasis forever."

"Would you have preferred he leave you...the way you were? Frozen? That just sounds so weird."

Gabriella laughed. The sound was so foreign to her now. "It was more of a comatose sedation. I had machines keeping my heart and brain functioning and other devices that kept my body from deteriorating. For me, it was no more than he put me to sleep and woke me hours later. I had no idea I was asleep for twenty years."

"But for him it was twenty years."

She hung her head, picking the tissue apart. "I realize that."

"I can't imagine what it must have been like for him, all these years, without you. I can tell how much he loves you." Trinity chuckled lightly, catching Gabriella's attention. "Sorry, it's just weird to see him like that. I've known him for eight years and rarely ever saw him smile. Oh, he doted on Basil, and I could tell how much he cares for him, but with you...it's different."

The Cooper Gabriella knew and loved had been full of life, full of smiles and laughter. Before she'd gone to sleep. "I don't doubt his love for me, and that is what is so hard to deal with. If he loves me as I know he does, how could he have done this to me without discussing it with me first?"

"If he had, if he had said to you, 'Gabriella, I can't cure you but I can turn you into a vampire and you'll never have to worry about being sick again' would you have said yes?"

She pushed up from the bed, too restless to sit. "I would have wanted to look at other options."

"Like what? Chemo? Medication? I don't know what stage your cancer was in when you were put to sleep—and that just sounds fucked up—sorry." Trinity caught herself.

"I've heard the word a time or two." Gabriella reassured her with a wave of her hand and a smile. "Before I was placed into the coma I was given three months, at best, to live."

"Yikes! So waking you now, you would have had the same amount of time, maybe less, right?"

Gabriella nodded, and knew where the conversation was going. "Okay, yes, there wouldn't have been much time to look for alternative methods to healing me. Still, I would have liked the choice."

"Do you hate what you are now?"

"I really don't feel that much different than I did before...well, before the cancer. I have all this energy I didn't have before, and my senses are keener, but aside from that, I feel no different."

"So being a vampire really isn't all that bad? Considering the alternative?"

Her lips curved up in a wry smile. She knew where Trinity had been going and had fallen right into it. "It is better than being dead, yes. But it's the choice. I wasn't given one. He never told me what he was planning. That is what hurts."

"I get that, and I can't imagine what that must be like for you."

Gabriella turned to Trinity, curious. "How were you turned? I assume it was Basil who turned you?"

She nodded, pulling her long red ponytail over her shoulder to play with the end. She really had lovely hair, Gabriella thought, even if it was blood red. "It was Basil, and we'd discussed his life as a vampire, what it was like and I had expressed an interest. But he asked me, not out right. He didn't come out and say, 'Can I turn you into a vampire?', but it was implied. I gave myself to him willingly, my virginity and my life, at the same time."

"He sired you when he made love to you?"

Trinity nodded, a sly smile lifting her lips and Gabriella could see the love she held for her man in the glitter in her eyes. "It really was a beautiful moment."

Cooper had turned her while making love as well. Only she didn't look back at it fondly. Would she ever? "But he gave you the choice. You knew what was coming and you knew you could say no. I wasn't given that decision."

"I know." Trinity stood, shoving her hands in her pockets. "And it doesn't matter what anyone says to you, it's you who has to come to terms with it and decide what to do about it."

"Precisely."

"I don't envy you your dilemma."

"Betrayal isn't easy to overcome."

Trinity nodded her head reverently. "I know that all too well."

Gabriella cocked her head to the side. "Oh?"

"Basil cheated on me."

"Oh my."

"But he did it for my benefit. Yeah, I know how that sounds."

Trinity sighed heavily. "He knew it was the only way that I would leave him. Long story short, his father threatened his life and anyone he held dear. Basil knew if I was in his life, I wouldn't be safe. So he did the one thing that he knew would tear us apart."

"Taking another woman to bed?"

Trinity nodded soberly. "I was devastated. I wanted to kill him. I swore I would never fall in love again."

"What changed?"

"I found out the truth."

"You forgave him?"

Trinity chuckled. "Not easily, but yeah. Don't get me wrong, it still stung, what he did...but I love him more than anything—well, almost anything." She sighed deeply.

Gabriella suspected that *anything* was her child.

"Well, I just thought I would pop in to see how you were holding up. If you need anything..."

"You've been so generous to me thus far. I don't know how to repay you, or Basil."

Trinity shrugged. "We don't need repayment. It's a huge house and there's plenty of room. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"May I ask you something?"

Trinity stopped before opening the door to leave. "Sure."

"What is your daughter's name?"

"Felicity Rose."

"What a beautiful name." Trinity nodded, then left. Gabriella could only imagine what she must be going through. Nothing was worse than losing a child.

To busy herself, Gabriella tidied up the bed, smoothing the covers until there wasn't a single crease to be seen. Would she be able to forgive Cooper as easily as Trinity had forgiven Basil?

She wished she had the answer to that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cooper was at a loss. He had no one to go home to, no duties to carry out, no research left to go over. In all the years he had been alive—and he'd truly lost track how many they were—he had never been so bored before. There had always been something for him to do. In his youth it had been helping his father run his private medical practice in their home, tending to the household duties that his father often had little time for, and studying his schooling. He'd always kept active, even in his early adult life, studying every moment he'd had free and tending to his father's patients when he was unavailable or out on a house call. Even after Cooper had been taken by Avadur he'd kept busy. Sure, he'd done so to keep his sanity for the most part, the beatings and humiliating sexual acts alone had threatened to drive him over the edge, not to mention the threat to his father's life if he ever left. But he had never been the type to simply sit around doing nothing.

That was why he was now walking the city streets. He was restless, bored, and yes, frustrated. The two people he loved more than air itself wanted nothing to do with him.

He saw two familiar faces in the distance and decided that it might be nice to have some friendly banter.

Though Dante and Danny were born identical twins, looking at them together, one would never know it. Sure, they resembled each

other with the dark hair and bronze Hispanic skin. Even their eyes and mouth were the same. But Danny was years younger than his brother due to the fact that he'd been turned into a vampire at the tender age of thirteen, just over twenty years earlier. Since vampires didn't age as quickly as humans, he was now a cocky seventeen year old, where his brother was a mature thirty-something.

From what Cooper could tell, the brothers were roughhousing. Since he had no brothers of his own, Cooper found it fascinating to watch the two interact. Cooper cringed when Danny threw a right cross which caught his brother right in the chin.

"Shit, bro, you were supposed to deflect it. What were you day-dreaming about? Like I can't guess," Danny snorted, then spinning, sent out a roundhouse kick Dante's way.

"Starla's been teaching you her moves I see." Dante grabbed the leg, flipped his brother over and dropped him on his back. Dust plumed up as Danny went down.

"And thinking about your sweetie makes you soft." In a scissor move, Danny scooped Dante's legs out from under him, bringing him down hard onto the ground.

Both brothers sat panting, staring at each other for a few moments before Dante finally spoke. "You don't need me to teach you to fight."

"Oh...this was about you teaching me? I thought this was me teaching you." Laughing, Danny dodged the clump of dirt Dante threw at him.

"Hello gentlemen."

Both men turned as Cooper came up behind them.

"Fancy meeting you out here, Cooper." Dante hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. "Never would have pictured you as the slumming type."

Slumming? Then Cooper saw the area he was walking in and shrugged. It was known as Jacob's Cove's red light district.

"Then again, I guess we really don't know you like we thought."

Apparently, they had been filled in. "I am still the same man I was before."

"Well, sure, except for the fact that you were sired by the king and had a wife hidden away for years. A wife? You really had a wife?" Dante asked with astonishment.

Cooper didn't much care for the attitude. "Have. I have a wife. I suppose it's too much to ask that at least one person wouldn't judge me."

"I don't judge you," Danny piped up, his hand in the air. "I don't really know you so it's kinda stupid for me to judge you, plus...I let my family believe I was dead for twenty years so..." He shrugged.

The loud crash in the distance startled them all. When Dante and Danny headed in the direction it came from, Cooper decided he had nothing better to do and followed them. They came upon a gang of rebels who apparently had some dispute with the vehicles on the road because they were currently smashing them to pieces. Dante and Danny got right into the mayhem.

Cooper watched them fight off the rebels, not sure what the point was. He was sure when they were finished the angry men would only go find something else to destroy.

"Well, look at you, all dressed up like you got somewhere to be."

Cooper turned his attention to the gravelly voice to his left and saw the greasy-haired vamp eyeballing him from head to toe. Cooper said nothing but slowly made his way towards where Danny and Dante were fighting. He wasn't ashamed to ask for help.

He'd never raised a hand in battle in his life, he wasn't about to start now.

"I'm thinking you and me are about the same size." The vamp inched closer. "And I might just look good in those tailored duds."

"Boys, I could use some assistance."

"Busy," Dante hollered as he pummeled his fists into one of the beasts' faces.

The vamp inched closer, his yellow, decayed teeth bared as he smiled with obvious deviousness. "I'm thinking this is going to be one easy grab."

With a girlish yelp that he was not too proud of, Cooper cringed as the beast came at him. He felt the first sickening blow to his gut that sent him pitching over at the waist. The air rushed from his lungs and refused to reenter. The next blow came to his face.

He literally saw stars.

"Use your fists, Coop!"

He wasn't sure which Vega brother had just yelled out to him, it all sounded muffled in his throbbing head, but he knew what they asked of him was not something he'd even so much as contemplated before.

When the vamp grabbed hold of his head and yanked it back, he actually felt the bile rising in his throat.

"Maybe I ought to make you my bitch when I'm done taking your clothes. Ever had a man inside you, pretty boy?"

A memory speared into him as brightly as if someone had flicked a light in his mind. They crawled over him, hands groping, mouths hungry, both men and women assaulting him. His hands were chained above him, attached to a hook in the ceiling, leaving him helpless to their abuse. When Avadur came up behind him, and grabbed a hold of his member, Cooper suspected he might break it off. Avadur's pleasure for pain was that sick. What happened next he had not expected.

He had been penetrated in a hard thrust that tore everything inside of him and nearly broke the man he had been.

He would not allow that to happen again.

Curling his hand into a fist, Cooper bared his fangs, opened his eyes wide, and slammed his fist right into the beast's nose. He heard the crunch of bone, knew he'd broken it, but felt little remorse. When he was released, Cooper seized the opportunity to have a little revenge. Even if it wasn't the true being he wished he was pummeling.

Then he was yanked up by the back of his jacket and tossed onto the ground. His vision cleared just enough to see the animal coming at him with bared fangs, and the one coming at him with fists. The next thing he knew he was being bombarded by fists and teeth.

The rage inside of him blew wide open.

He vanished and set himself down directly behind the men who had fallen flat on their faces when he'd disappeared. "Looking for me, boys?"

They spun to face him, eyes wide.

"You picked on the wrong man." Baring his fangs, he went at them, fists ready, teeth aimed to tear into flesh. In the distance he heard the Vega boys bantering while battling.

"Way to go, bro!"

"Same goes."

"I'm out of here," one of the vamps shouted as he darted off.

"Chickens!"

"You handled yourself pretty decently, Danny."

"Told you I can take care of myself, Bro. Been doing it for twenty years. That was righteously fun."

"Now aren't you glad I convinced you to go out?"

"Hell yeah!"

While the Vega boys conversed, Cooper fought for his life and endured a fair amount of blows. He felt sick to his stomach and gloriously high at the same time.

"Oh shit, Coop!"

When the beasts were ripped off of him and taken care of, the act left him with a great deal of frustration.

He glared up at the Vega brothers, spitting his fury. "Why the devil did you do that? I was managing just fine on my own," he belted out, getting to his feet. Then the air around him began to swirl. "Damn it," he managed before it all went blank.



Feeling sick to her stomach with worry, Gabriella watched helplessly as Cooper was laid on the bed. The instant he was settled, she ran to his side, taking his face in her hands. "Dear Lord, he's been beaten to a pulp. Get me some water and cloths to tend his wounds. Cooper, can you hear me?" Worried to death, Gabriella stroked his bloody face.

"What the hell happened?" Basil demanded, standing over the bed, scowling.

"We met up with him on the street, not sure why he was there. We saw some vamps destroying some cars and so we went in to stop them. The next thing I know, Cooper's screaming. I look over and a vamp was attacking him."

Gabriella looked up abruptly, glaring at the older dark-haired man. "You did nothing to help him?"

"Um...we kinda had our hands full," a younger version of the dark-haired man spoke up.

"He managed fine on his own. Man...I've never seen Cooper like that. It was like he got this blast of adrenaline and started beating on the vamp. I was trying to prevent my face from being used as a battering ram and when I turned back to Cooper, he was going at a crowd of vamps like he was superman or something. He was an animal." The older of the two men chuckled.

"I do not find this funny in the least." Angry at the men, Gabriella decided to turn her attention to her husband. "He's unconscious and Lord knows what kind of internal injuries he's sustained. And you all think it's funny. I'm appalled."

"Guess you had to be there," one of the men said softly.

"Here you go, Gabriella."

She took the bowl of water and a cloth from Trinity and immediately began wiping the blood from Cooper's face. To see such beauty marred by bruises and blood was a shame. "We should have a doctor examine him."

"Cooper was our doctor."

She looked up at the older dark-haired man, confused. "You have no one else?"

"The city's abandoned, Gabriella," Trinity supplied, laying her hand on Cooper's belly. Her face grew very concentrated, then suddenly, her hand began to glow.

"What in the world..."

"She does that from time to time," Basil explained. "Trinity?"

"He's healing. Nothing serious but, man, does it look weird inside..." She looked up at everyone's gasp. "Oh no, I just meant seeing inside of a person is weird. His insides are fine. Nothing some rest won't help."

"Then we'll help him to his house. Dante, Danny..." Basil nudged his head to Cooper then the door.

"Um...yeah, sure."

"You can't move him." Gabriella hovered over Cooper protectively. "I'm as hurt by his actions as you are, Basil, but I'm not a cruel person. From what Cooper's told me, the same applies to you. Will you kick him out now in his time of need?"

Basil's jaw tightened in his response. "Until he's able to move on his own." He stormed out of the room.

"He's really pissed at the guy," Dante added quietly.

"He thinks...thought...hell, I don't know which one applies but he has always considered Cooper his father," Trinity said. "He's not pissed, he's hurt." She turned to the door and left.

"Well...uh...I guess we should go too."

Gabriella barely spared the dark-haired men a look and was quite pleased when both left the room.

"Oh, darling. What did you get yourself into?" She washed the blood from his face with gentle strokes, rinsing the cloth out each time. When she was finished, she undressed him, gasping at the colorful array of bruises marring his gentle pale chest.

She hung his clothing over the chair, then drew the blankets up to his chin. She stood a moment just looking down at him. He was so handsome and she felt a flutter in her belly as she watched him sleep. The wrinkles at the sides of his eyes made him look even more distinguished and she remembered vividly how they wrinkled more when he smiled.

With a quick caress to his face, she stepped away from the bed and left him to rest.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The chains cut into his wrists as Cooper tried to break free. The voices around him echoed against the cold cement walls to taunt him.

"Av-a-dur. Av-a-dur."

Through the crowd of men Avadur stepped forth. His broad shoulders were held squarely below the gnarled face of the giant man. Cooper fought harder as the giant came towards him. Fought for his life.

"It's time I made you mine."

The chains were ripped from the wall and he was dragged to the floor. As the men around him chanted and cheered, the giant pinned him to the floor. Teeth clamped onto his neck and he tried to scream. The pressure of the brute pressing on top of him became easier to bear as his body became weightless. When the giant of a man lifted his head, blood coating his mouth, and spoke, everything went still.

"Now, you are mine."

Cooper stirred and with the movement his face scrunched up as the pain from the action registered even in his sleep. He opened his eyes and even that was a task. Looking at his surroundings, he recognized one of the guest bedrooms in the castle. Why he was here was a mystery to him.

He pushed himself to a sitting position and winced at the sharp jab to his belly. Glancing down, he saw that not only was he mostly nude, but his skin had taken on a rainbow pattern of bruises.

The dream swirled in his mind and, for a moment, Cooper was back in Avadur's clutches. He hadn't dreamt of his creation since Avadur first returned. Cooper wasn't too thrilled with reliving that part of his past again, but if it had only been a dream, why was he injured?

Then he remembered the fight.

Letting out a sigh of relief, he examined his wounds. Apparently he'd gotten as good as he'd given.

Swiveling his waist, stretching his back, he tried to work the kinks out. Nothing felt broken, which was a good sign, but he was definitely bruised. Over to his left he saw his clothing lying over the back of a chair and wondered who it was who had undressed him. The last thing he remembered was seeing Dante come up to him.

He desperately hoped it hadn't been Dante who had undressed him.

"Ah, you're awake."

Angling his head to the door, every pain in his body gave way to the pleasure of seeing his beautiful Gabriella stroll into the room. She wore the sea foam blue skirt he had bought her just after they'd married, and a white lacy blouse. Her brown hair was drawn up in a twist at the top of her head, casually flowing over the back to touch the nape of her neck.

His heart swam with love.

"I thought you would sleep longer. How do you feel?"

"Better, now that you've arrived. Did you take care of me?"

She placed a tray on the foot of the bed that she'd been carrying but didn't sit. "I did. You're looking better now than you did two hours earlier."

"You always had that way with me."

She turned away and his heart sank.

"I brought you some liquids including blood. Basil has a cellar filled with different types of blood. It was rather a shock to see, but I suppose it will become easier for me in time. Do you need to feed?"

"Only from you."

Her eyes shifted to meet his and he saw only a flicker of emotion in them. "I'm told his blood is of the highest quality."

Disappointed, he shifted in the bed to move closer to her. "I can still taste you on my tongue."

"That is not something I care to discuss at this time. Here." She thrust a cup at him and when he glanced inside, saw it was filled with blood.

"I would much rather have yours. I'm told that drinking from each other can be a very erotic sensation. I'm interested to give it a try."

"Basil wishes you out of his home when you're able."

"Gabriella." He reached out to take her hand only to have her pull it away. A stab to the heart couldn't have hurt worse.

"Don't..."

The hell he wouldn't. Pushing himself from the bed and ignoring the pull in his muscles, he walked to her clad only in his black briefs. "I've been without you for much too long."

"Cooper, please..."

Taking her into his arms, she didn't fight him and it pleased him to no end. "Don't push me away, Gabriella, not when I need you so much."



She melted against him and when he tilted his head to kiss her, she reciprocated. His mouth was as giving as always, taking only what she gave. His lips were soft, pressing to hers so gently while his tongue slowly slid over her teeth. The instant it touched her incisors she felt her body ignite.

Flames of scorching heat penetrated her body, an ache so intense it nearly had her knees buckling. His body pressing to hers caused an avalanche of need inside of her.

She had to have him.

He walked her backwards until her legs bumped into the bed. She went down willingly with him. His mouth devoured hers with a passion she had never felt from him before, and she wanted more. Using her nails, she scraped the flesh on his back while her body clung to his.

He slid his hand under her skirt, and the touch of his fingers on her bare skin was like an electrical charge that went straight to her center. She parted for him, wanting nothing more than to be given the pleasure that seemed to invade her body.

When his mouth left hers to nibble on her chin, she turned her head to expose her neck. His fingers grazed the moisture building between her legs and she moaned her approval.

Then his teeth scraped her neck and the realization of what she was doing shot into her like a blow to the belly.

"No!" She threw him off of her, panting, and stood up, smoothing her skirt out. She could not believe what she had been about to allow him to do to her.

"Darling—"

"Don't." She held her hand up, trying to catch her breath. "That was not fair."

"You want me, there is no denying that."

She backed away when he stood up, trying desperately not to notice the huge bulge in his briefs or the fine line of muscles on his abdomen. "I'm strong enough not to give in to my wants. I need to go."

He grabbed her arm as she spun to leave. Turning to him, she bore her fangs.

"You are so beautiful like this. It takes my breath away." Lifting his index finger, he grazed her fangs and she gasped. "I want you to drink from me."

"Stop it!" She ran from the room. She jumped at the sight of Basil in the hallway near Cooper's room.

"Are you all right?"

She took a deep, steadying breath and nodded. "I need to go."

He took her arm, much like Cooper had but not with the heated desire she had felt from her husband.

"Did he hurt you?"

It shocked her that he would ask her that. Shocked that he would think such a thing. "No, heavens no. He would never hurt me. I just need..." Oh, did she ever need. "Fresh air. He's awake." Leaving Basil in the hall, she dashed away.



Basil didn't bother to knock, it was his home after all, and thrust his way into Cooper's room. He was surprised to see him standing by the window, looking out and wearing only a pair of black briefs.

The bruises on his back were very prominent.

"What did you just do to her?"

Cooper turned, a shocked expression on his face, then he scurried to the chair where his clothing lay. "I didn't hear you enter."

"Answer my question," Basil demanded.

"I assume you speak of Gabriella, and I did nothing to her."

"Well, she left this room like a woman who had either been attacked or had the life scared out of her." Though he truly couldn't see Cooper doing either, he still doubted. After all, did he really know the man in front of him as he thought he did?

Cooper drew the zipper up on his trousers as he spoke. "Or running from desire."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Cooper looked up. He no longer wore the yellow contacts and Basil wondered if he would ever get used to seeing him with blue eyes.

"What happens between a husband and wife is of no one's concern but their own." He sat on the bed, cradling his ribs.

"It is when the woman is terrified."

"She wasn't terrified, Basil, and to think you would even venture a thought that I might have harmed her hurts me deeply."

"Well," Basil said slowly, "it's hard to believe a man who has spent the better part of my life lying to me."

Cooper stood, sliding his hands into his pants pockets. "Will you never forgive me?"

Basil shrugged. "Have I ever forgiven my father for what he did to me?"

Cooper's face fell. "It isn't fair to compare me to him."

Basil kept his face blank. "No. From where I stand I see a great deal of similarities."

"I never harmed you."

"Define harm," Basil countered evenly.

Cooper said nothing for a moment. "Perhaps you ought to look at your not so stellar past to see if you have a right to judge me. I'll be out of your hair now." Grabbing the remainder of his clothing, Cooper vanished.

That was another thing Basil wasn't used to.

Grinding his teeth, he turned and jumped at finding Trinity's there. The look on her face said it all. "Do not side with him."

"I'm not. But I have to say that I am a bit baffled as to why you're so angry at him. Okay, I know he lied to you all these years. Still..."

"That's not enough of a reason?"

"Not for you. There's more." She walked to him, sliding her fingers along his face. "Talk to me."

He took her hand in his, pulled it from his face, then kissed her palm. "How much did you overhear?"

"Enough."

"If I were a paranoid person, I might think you're spying on me." He smiled halfheartedly. "He was surprised that I compared him to my father. Yet, from where I stand, they are the same."

"How?"

He closed his eyes, drew in a long breath before he spoke. "When I didn't behave as they wanted, they both resorted to taking over my mind, and it makes me wonder, how many times in the past has he done that to me?"

"Oh, Basil."

He released her and took a step back. "I need some time alone." He disappeared, leaving Trinity standing alone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

What had their life become? In the span of a year she had lost the man she loved due to infidelity, tried to stop innocent girls from losing their lives, reunited with her love, fought to stop the sun from being stamped out, had her best friend captured and turned into a vampire, lost a friend and gained several more...

Gave birth to a daughter she only had but a moment to get to know before that daughter had been stripped from her arms.

And here she was now, standing all alone in the kitchen, wondering what she wanted to fill her empty belly with and knowing it wasn't hunger that made it ache but loss. She felt the walls that had threatened to crash down on her when she'd lost her family begin to crumble once more. She was so damn tired of trying to hold them up.

"There you are. Where is Basil?"

She turned to see Danny and Starla entering the room. They were a cute couple. "Out. What's up?"

"We did the locators spell again, like Basil asked. He should be here for this. Can you get him?" Danny inquired as he headed for the fridge.

"Make yourself at home," Trinity muttered and mentally called out to Basil. She hoped he'd had enough alone time. She was very

worried about him. This situation with Cooper was just enough of a catalyst for him to go off and do something stupid.

"It was my home for a while. Remember?" He waved the chicken leg in his hand before he finished. "Incarcerated in the dungeon."

"This isn't the time, Danny," Starla stepped in.

"You called?"

Starla jumped when Basil appeared beside her. "Sweet goddess!"

"Sorry. Didn't know we had company," Basil apologized.

"Starla and Danny have some news for us," Trinity informed him, laying her hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

He waved it off. "Fine. What sort of news?"

"I tried the locators spell again on the outer limits of Jacob's Cove and got the same message. His trail ends at the barrier of the darkness."

"So what does that mean?" Trinity wanted to know.

"Let her finish," Danny quipped, then dug into the chicken.

Trinity narrowed her eyes at him but let Starla continue.

"I was frustrated so I contacted my mother and High Priestess Essema—I also talked to them about your mother," she said to Basil. "But I'll get to that in a minute. Chaos was in contact with the Dark Mystics again. My auntie said they were very cryptic, which isn't anything new, but all they really told her was that he is under their care."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Basil grumbled.

Starla shrugged. "That was all they would give her without her having to give them something in return. She wasn't willing to sell her soul. Sorry."

"We know more now than we did a day ago, so thanks." Trinity nodded to Starla. "Now, what about Basil's mother?"

"We have a spell," Danny mumbled, his mouth full.

"What Danny means is my mother and High Priestess Essema were able to give me a spell I can use to contact your mother. Um...it has some risks, but nothing that can't be remedied."

"Starla could end up a brain dead, babbling beauty," Danny stated, setting the remainder of his chicken leg on the table to walk to her. "Which is why I don't want her to do it."

"It's a small risk, as I reassured you, sweetie. I'll be fine."

"A small risk is still too much of a risk, sweetie. I'm not willing to lose you."

"You won't lose me."

"I hate to break up this lovely moment, but..." Trinity glared at them. "How small of a risk?"

Starla held up her index finger and thumb, a thin space apart. "About this much."

"It's too big of a risk," Danny insisted.

"Which is my decision to make," she emphasized.

"Explain the spell to me. We'll decide what to do from there," Basil added firmly.

Starla let out a long breath, placed a finger to Danny's lips to stop him from speaking, then began. "It's a complicated spell which involves me putting myself in a trance in order to call out to the Realm of Mystics."

Trinity cocked her head to the side. "How do you mean 'call'?"

"Essentially, I give my being to the mystic realm, which enables me to appear in the Realm to speak to your mother."

"Now tell them what you need to do in order to bring her down in order for Basil to speak to her."

Starla speared Danny a nasty look. "I need to hold onto her and keep a firm hold while I will my body back to this realm."

"In doing so, your mother could fry her circuits. We'll come up with another plan."

"I want to do this." Starla gritted her teeth.

"It's too dangerous," Danny snarled.

"I agree."

All heads turned to Trinity. "It is too dangerous for you. But not for me. Tell me how to do this spell and I'll grab her."

"No." Basil stepped into her view. "I'll do it."

He was sweet for trying to protect her. "I have powers you don't, Basil. I can do this."

"I don't want you to do this."

"Even if it means finding out where she has our daughter?"

"You're asking me to choose and that's not fair."

She kissed his mouth. "Then let me decide." She turned back to Starla. "How soon can you start teaching me how to do the spell?"

"Trinity —"

She held her hand up to stop Basil.

"As soon as you like," Starla added cautiously.

"Perfect. Then let's get rolling." Trinity turned to Basil and, taking his face in her hands, kissed the angry lips snarling at her. "I love you. Trust me to do this."

"Oh, I trust you. I just don't trust my mother."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gabriella just couldn't get over the never-ending darkness. It was eerie, to say the least, but she also felt a void, as if nothing else existed. And that scared her.

Once upon a time she had thrived on the business of strangers. It was rare that she didn't strike up a conversation with a customer at the flower garden shop she had worked at. She loved to interact with the people, loved hearing their stories.

She missed that.

She missed having anyone to talk to.

Oh sure, Trinity was being very kind to her, but it wasn't the same. One person was nice, but more was better.

"Well, well, well."

She spun around, her heart pounding in her chest as she gazed into the yellow eyes of a monster.

Along with the ten others surrounding her.

She hadn't even heard them approach. Cooper had always told her how keen his senses were. Shouldn't hers be the same?

"Ain't she a pretty one?"

"Ripe."

"New."

"Please...just let me be," her voice quivered.

"Oh sure, no problem, darling." The monster jumped at her so fast she screamed. "Right after we're through with you."

His breath was rancid and made her gag. His hands on her made her stomach roll. She knew perfectly well what they had in mind to do to her.

She wasn't going to get away.

"I wanna taste her. Give her to me."

She was tossed across the circle of men and grabbed by another monster with hair as long as hers and lips painted as black as his hair. When he pulled her against his chest, she felt his erection press into her back.

He ran his tongue over her neck to her cheek and she thought she might vomit.

"Tasty."

"Let me try her out."

Once again, she was tossed across the circle and, this time, grabbed by a brute of a man with a beard coated in what appeared to be blood. His eyes were a deeper yellow and looked more animal than vampire. When his hand came up to clasp her face, his long nails scraped her chin.

"Smells real pretty. I love the smell of fear."

"Please, don't hurt me," she begged in a voice that seemed much too weak for her liking.

"Well, sweet cakes, I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to do that," the bearded man growled against her ear. "I get off on hearing my victims scream. If you know what I mean."

He laughed and her entire body tightened up.

"Leave her be."

He swiveled only his head, his nails biting into her chin as he tightened his grip. "Fuck off, buddy."

"I think not."

"Cooper?" She recognized his voice, that strong, sophisticated voice of his and had never been happier to hear it.

"Let the lady go and no one has to get hurt."

She cringed as the ring of men laughed in a loud, bellowing song.

"She's our treat but whatever is left of her when we're done you are more than welcome to have. Right, boys?"

"Definitely."

"Oh sure."

"Now, fuck off."

Suddenly, the beast's hand slid from her face and the arm around her waist loosened. Baffled by it, she jerked away but realized she had nowhere to go.

Then one by one, the animals backed off, turned, and walked away. Stunned, she watched them slowly saunter off.

Cooper grabbed her arms and spun her to face him. "Are you all right?"

She was shaking like a leaf. "I...think so." What had just happened?

"Did they harm you?" He touched her face, examining her.

"No, well...nothing extreme. I was so scared." Her legs wobbled and he was right there holding her up. "What happened?"

He sat with her on the cold grass, rubbing his hands over her arms. "You were attacked by a gang of animals."

She looked up into Cooper's blue eyes, saw the sincerity in them. "No, not that, I know what happened to me. What happened to them?"

"I convinced them to move on. Your cheek is bleeding."

Her hand lifted to the sting, carelessly. "How exactly did you convince them?"

"With my mind." He pulled a handkerchief from his jacket pocket to dab at her wound.

"You used mind control on them?"

"Yes. This should heal up nicely in no time."

She shook his hand away, realizing what he'd said. "But you told me you never used that ability."

"Normally, I don't." He dabbed at the wound again.

"But you did just now, and the other day on Basil." She pushed him away and stood. "When else have you used it?"

He stood with her, handing her the cloth. "Never."

She waved the cloth away. "Have you ever used it on me?" She had to know.

"Never! Oh, Gabriella, how could you think such a thing of me?"

The hurt in his voice was genuine. "How can I be sure that you've never used it before now?"

"Trust in me that I tell the truth." He took her hand in his, pressed it to his heart. "I vowed to you that I would never use my powers of persuasion on you, or anyone else I love, and I never have."

"Until now."

"Yes. What I did just now was to save your life. We were no match for the ten of them. What else was I supposed to do?"

She gave it some thought. "Once again it comes down to you thinking what you do is best for me."

He blinked at her a few times before responding. "Would you have rather I left them to have their way with you?"

"No!" That was not what she meant.

"Then what would you have had me do?"

"Call someone to help us."

His brow lifted, making his face look even more distinguished. "And in the time it would take for them to show up both of us could have been killed."

"Maybe not."

"Gabriella."

She waved a hand in his direction, then began to walk. "My brain is so...cloudy. My thoughts are so erratic at times and my heart...oh Lord, my heart is so utterly torn." She turned back to him, saw he still stood in the very spot she'd left him at. "My heart tells me to go to you, to take you back, but my head says otherwise. I question everything you do now. This was never what I wanted for us. I never once questioned you in all the time we were together."

"You need not question me now, my darling."

She snorted. "No? Yet I do. I trusted you to care for me, to see to me, to protect me, and what do you do? You turned me into your kind."

"And gave you life."

She nodded, chewing on her lip. "True, but what sort of life is it when I'm without the one I love. When I have no one to be with, no friends, no work, nothing. I live in darkness now and each and every day I feel it creeping into my heart."

He walked to her so casually that she could have easily brushed him aside. Yet she didn't. She let him take her hands in his. "When I thought I could never love, there was you. When I thought no woman could possibly love me, you proved me wrong. When I feared I would be swallowed by my trauma, you showed me the way. You shone light into a dark heart and now I will do the same."

He kissed her softly and she melted into him. She wanted nothing more than to let him sweep her off her feet, but her head told her otherwise. She pulled away and drew in a deep breath. "Please, Cooper. Don't push me."

Turing away, she ran to the house.



"I still don't like this."

Trinity heard Basil's proclamation but let it wash over her like a cool breeze. She'd heard it at least a dozen times already. He had yet to change her mind.

"Okay, so now what do I do?"

"Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing," Starla instructed softly.

Sitting on the living room floor, legs crossed in front of her, Trinity did as Starla asked. She always thought it was foolish when people said they meditated. What was the purpose to sit absolutely still and listen to your breath whoosh in and out trying for some calm that—

"Stop thinking or this won't work."

Trinity opened her eyes and frowned at Starla. "How did you know I was thinking?"

"One, your brow was curling and two, your jaw was tensing up. If you want this to work, you have to do as I say."

She heard Basil's snort and ignored him. No one told her what to do. But in this case, Trinity supposed she could put it aside.

For her daughter.

Closing her eyes once more, she took a deep breath, then another, and willed her body to relax.

"Good. Now listen to your breath. Take a deep breath in, then slowly let it out. Good. Now focus on each breath."

It was silly, but Trinity did it. *Breathe in, slowly let it out. In...out... in...out...* Okay, that wasn't going to work. It was just making her horny. *Count the breaths. One...two...three...four...five...* She jumped when someone touched her hand. "What?"

"You did an excellent job."

She blinked sleepy eyes at Starla, confused. "What? I just got started. How can you know I did a good job?"

Basil sat down beside her, taking her hands in his, looking her right in the eyes. "You've been at it for half an hour, love."

"What?" She checked her watch, and was shocked. "Holy shit!"

Basil kissed her mouth and laughed. "Time flies when you're having fun."

"I tried concentrating on each breath whooshing in and out but that just made me think of sex. So I counted each breath instead."

"It worked. Good job!" Starla stood up, giving her back a stretch. "Now you'll know what to do when we start the spell."

"Why aren't we doing it now?" Trinity didn't want to wait. She wanted her daughter back as soon as possible.

"I don't have everything I need to perform the spell and you need to take a break."

"Why do I need a break? I feel great, better than I have in a long time. I'm totally relaxed." She couldn't remember a time when she'd felt so relaxed.

"Too relaxed. If we were to start now, you would be too vulnerable to the dark magics and anything that could go wrong."

"But I thought the whole deal was for me to relax." She was confused.

Starla shook her head. "The whole point is to have you in a state of inner peace so you can move your mind to the Realm of Mystics and be strong enough to grab Rajana out of it to bring her down here. If we were to try that now, she could control you and keep you locked in her realm. Tomorrow is a better time. I'll get my stuff and be here at five."

"I lost track of time months ago. When you get here you get here. I'll be ready." Trinity stood and gave her own back a stretch. Her guard instantly came up when the front door opened. She relaxed when she saw Raven and Gypsy enter. "What's up?"

"We have come for a girls' night—or day—whichever it is right now," Gypsy chirped in her usual spunky attitude.

"A what?" Maybe her brain was so relaxed that she was hallucinating.

"Girls' time. Raven, Starla, and I thought it was time we met the new girl and welcomed her to the fold. And you so could use some R and R. We brought booze." Gypsy held up a bag, which Trinity could only assume held the booze.

"We don't have time for this now."

"It's the perfect time," Basil intercepted, kissing her on the cheek. "You deserve some fun. We all do. Go for it."

Pursing her lips, Trinity gave in. "Fine, but we are not doing each other's hair and makeup."

"Party pooper."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The surprise at finding four women at her door—three of whom she didn't even know—was slowly wearing off. Gabriella's confusion, however, had not. She wasn't sure what to make of it. They'd come to her room, spouting about having some girl fun and waving a bottle of wine in her face and, honestly, if Trinity hadn't been in the bunch, Gabriella might very well have shut the door in their faces, thinking they were lunatics.

And here they were now, making themselves at home in her room, some stretched out on her bed, others in the chairs by the little table near the window. She sat on the sofa, feeling utterly uncomfortable. She looked from woman to woman, each one as different as the next. Gypsy was an odd one. She had short, spiked, green hair and loved plying the eye shadow on apparently. She had several piercings in her ears and bottom lip and when she spoke, Gabriella had noticed one in her tongue. Then there was Raven. She seemed the quieter one of the bunch. Her hair was a jet black cut in a bob that flipped up at her chin. She had a pale complexion and beautiful blue eyes. Starla was one of those classic beauties with dark red, curly hair and alabaster skin and gave the air of a woman who knew what she wanted and just how to get it. Trinity, well, Gabriella liked her the most and

probably because she'd welcomed her and had been so kind. Her blood red hair came down to her waist, which was curvy and she wore skintight jeans.

Each woman had their own style and, right now, they were all staring at her as if she were some sort of alien.

"So, Gabby—do you mind if I call you Gabby?" Gabriella opened her mouth to protest but Gypsy kept blabbing. "Tell us about yourself."

Her hands twisted nervously on her lap. "All right. I'm forty-two...wait...make that sixty-two—oh Lord, am I really in my sixties?" She just couldn't grasp that. Though she'd been asleep for twenty years she hadn't aged more than a year in her looks, which was a miracle. She wasn't sure how Cooper had done it, but here she was, sixty-two and looking no older than forty-three.

"Vampires don't age like humans, so that would explain the youthfulness."

"But I wasn't a vampire while I was asleep. I was only turned a week ago." Had it already been a week?

Gypsy pursed her lips. "Right. You got me then. So what else can you tell us?"

She seemed to be the nosiest one of the bunch. "My parents are gone, passed away when I was only sixteen. They were quite old when they had me. I went to live with friends until I was eighteen, then struck out on my own."

"When did you meet Cooper?"

Gabriella looked up at Gypsy and could see that was all she was really interested in. "When I was thirty-seven."

"How did you meet?"

"Give the girl a break, Gypsy." Trinity shot her a narrow look.

"It's all right. She's curious and one should never dispel a curious mind."

"Right. What she said." Gypsy waved her on.

Smiling, Gabriella continued. "I once worked at a floral garden shop here in Jacob's Cove. Cooper came in one day and asked my help in regards to planting shade plants. I helped him pick them out, then helped him plant them."

"Which ones?" Trinity asked curiously.

"The trumpet lilies, at the back of the house. We also planted rose bushes, calla lilies, and azaleas, which I've noticed have all died." That saddened her a great deal.

"The darkness pretty much took care of all the plant life," Raven informed her, refilling everyone's glasses. "How long were the two of you married?"

"Nearly four years. Thank you." Though she really didn't want more wine, she took it politely. "Now it's your turn. Tell me about yourselves. Why don't we start with you, Gypsy." Since she was the one who was questioning her, Gabriella figured it was only fair she was the next one to be grilled.

"Well, I used to be human but I was turned by my sweetie's twin brother the day of the darkness. I managed to escape and ran into Dante, who took me in and kept me safe. We're not married but hope to tie the knot someday, if this crappy darkness ever ends. A few weeks ago he was attacked by some vampires while he and Basil were trying to capture Chaos and my sweetie was stabbed brutally, which nearly killed him. He would have died if Danny, his twin, hadn't thought fast and made him a vampire. So now he's one of us." She beamed, then gulped down her glass of wine. "Oh, and we love having sex."

More info than Gabriella needed to know. "I see. Interesting. Next." She turned to Raven.

"I'm not a vampire but my guy, Jonah, is. I lost my son a while back and had given up on life. I was captured by some of Chaos' men and used as Chaos' blood slave and housekeeper until they captured Jonah and turned him into a vampire. I rescued him, helped him heal. He was involved in an accident that killed his wife and their unborn child and rendered him paralyzed from waist down. I helped him get his legs back, so to speak, and we've been together ever since. Oh, and I'm a nurse. Or I was, before the darkness came. Your turn, Starla."

"I'm a witch, not a vampire. I came to Jacob's Cove to find out where Chaos was and to find out everything I could about the ritual that was used to cast the city in darkness. I met Danny by crashing into him, literally. We found Chaos through a locators spell and locked him up. But some of his men found out where he was and let him loose. I'm with Danny, her sweetie's twin brother." Starla thumbed at Gypsy.

"The two dark-haired men who brought Cooper home last night are twins?"

"Yep." Gypsy beamed, holding her glass out to Raven for a refill.

"How can that be?"

"Danny was turned when he was thirteen. Like Gypsy stated, vampires don't age like humans. We age one year for every human

five, so in reality, Danny is only seventeen where Dante is in his thirties," Trinity explained, swirling her glass of wine.

"I knew how vampires aged. Cooper filled me in when he revealed who he was. I was just baffled how they could be twins, but now it makes sense."

"So you knew Cooper was a vamp?"

Gabriella nodded to Gypsy. "I suspected something was different about him from the beginning."

"Were you shocked when he told you?"

She shook her head at Starla's question. "Not at all. As I said, I suspected something was different about him."

"So you knew about vampires?" Raven asked.

Gabriella swallowed her sip of wine before responding. "I'd seen a few rambling about at night, and there were times some would venture into the shop in the evening."

"Did you freak out when you first saw one?"

Gabriella was amused by the excitement in Gypsy's tone. "I was startled, but one would have to be pretty close-minded not to realize these creatures exist, which I suppose I am one now." She was still getting used to it. Drinking blood was the hardest part, but having it placed in various drinks helped. Her mind wandered to taking Cooper's vein the first night after she'd run away from him. She could still taste him on her pallet, felt him inside of her.

"I was shocked when I saw my first one," Raven admitted freely.

Gabriella shook out of her thoughts and turned back to the ladies. They discussed their first encounters with vampires like a person would discuss their first encounter with any other life form. Casually. Gypsy and Starla spoke quite a bit about their men, Raven would pipe in with a few quips about her guy, and occasionally Trinity would say something about Basil. Gabriella felt a little odd, hearing them discuss their relationships so nonchalantly.

"Are you going to forgive Cooper?" Gypsy asked bluntly.

Gabriella was startled, but before she could respond, Trinity broke in.

"That is no one's business but hers and Cooper's."

"I was just curious. He's such a sweetie. I hate to see him so down."

"You feel sorry for him?" Starla snorted at Gypsy.

"Well, yeah."

"He turned her into a vampire without her consent," Starla added gruffly.

"To save her life," Gypsy pointed out.

Apparently they knew the whole story.

Trinity blew out a high, ear-piercing whistle through her fingers, catching everyone's attention. "Drop the subject."

"No, it's all right," Gabriella found herself saying. "I'm interested in everyone's viewpoint." She turned to Gypsy. "You said you were abducted and turned into a vampire. Didn't that anger you in the slightest?"

"No...not really."

"Why not? Something precious was taken from you, raped from you without your consent."

"Yeah, but being a vampire isn't that bad. I never get sick. I can keep this kick ass body for lifetimes, which is a major upside. And the sex is ten times better now that I'm a vampire."

"It always comes back to the sex." Raven snickered into her glass.

"Well, it's good. You can't tell me Jonah hasn't had some rocking hot orgasms since being turned."

"I didn't know him before he was a vampire—well, not long at least—but he has mentioned how much stronger they are. Still..."

"Okay, so you don't mind being a vampire or that you were turned without your consent—"

"Which most people are," Gypsy interrupted Gabriella. "You think a vamp asks his victims before he chomps on them? Not a chance." She wiggled her head back and forth, snapping her fingers.

"I can so totally understand why you're upset with Cooper," Starla pointed out, sliding onto the sofa beside Gabriella. "I would be so pissed at Danny if he turned me without my consent. You trust someone with all your heart and they turn around and bite you and make you a vampire. Well, that's just not right."

"Exactly!" Finally, someone saw her point.

"Sure, you were dying, and there was no hope of finding a cure, but still... He could have asked you first."

"Would you have said yes?"

Gabriella turned to Raven. She took a deep breath before replying. "I don't know."

"You would have rather died?" Gypsy gasped.

"Well—"

"If I was given the option of life or death, a damn good life at that, I would jump at it."

"But that's the thing," Gabriella acknowledged Gypsy's remark, "I wasn't given the choice."

"That's what hurts," Starla added.

"Yes."

"Do you hate being a vampire?"

Gabriella looked at Raven as she responded. "No, I can't say I hate it. There really isn't much of a difference. Well, except the strength, the heightened senses—"

"And the sex. Have you had sex since becoming a vampire?"

"Jesus, Gypsy." Trinity scowled at her.

"What?" Gypsy lifted her hands, palms up.

"That's none of your business."

"I was just asking."

"We haven't." Gabriella stepped in, deciding there was no point ignoring the question. "But I've wanted to." She was sure she was blushing. Her face certainly felt hot.

"So what's stopping you?"

Gypsy was definitely the bold one of the bunch. "He betrayed me."

"Give her a break now, Gypsy," Trinity insisted, shooting Gypsy a warning glare.

Not wanting to be the cause of a fight, Gabriella decided to move on. "May I ask a question?"

"By all means." Raven nodded.

Gabriella drew in a deep breath, twisting her hands nervously on her lap. She never spoke about her sex life; it was a little odd that she wanted to now. "Actually, I think this is something the lady vampires could answer better." She shifted her attention to Trinity simply because she felt more comfortable with her. "When Basil touches your teeth, your fangs—is that the right term for them?"

"Yep."

Gabriella continued. "Do you...feel odd?" It was proving more difficult to talk about her sex life than she'd thought.

"Define *odd*."

"She means horny. Isn't that what you mean, Gabby?" Gypsy piped in boldly.

"Actually, I prefer Gabriella, but you are right." Even if it had been stated crudely. She turned back to Trinity, waiting for an answer.

"Yes. Our fangs are an erogenous zone, especially if you're with the person who sired you."

"That explains quite a bit then." Her reaction when Cooper had touched her fangs for one.

"Then the two of you have gotten it on?" Gypsy bounced on the bed with excitement.

"Gypsy. Enough," Trinity warned her.

Lying back against the headboard, Gypsy sulked.

"Cooper has made it blatantly clear that he wants me back, but we haven't engaged in intercourse since he woke me from my coma. Before he turned me."

"He turned you after having sex with you? Cool!"

"Okay Gypsy, I think it's time we left Gabriella alone." Getting up from her chair, Raven took hold of Gypsy's arm and pulled her off the bed.

"But we didn't finish the wine." She sulked.

"We can finish it the next time we get together," Starla informed her as she stopped by Gabriella. "It was nice to get to know you. If you ever need someone to talk to, just give me a call." She handed Gabriella her number on a piece of paper.

"Thank you, Starla. I will do that."

"It was a pleasure." Raven nodded as she pulled Gypsy from the room.

"Bye," Gypsy managed before being rushed out.

Trinity lingered after the others had left and Gabriella was rather pleased she did. "How are you holding up?"

Trinity looked at her with a shocked expression. "Pardon?"

"It's a tough time for you right now. I can't imagine how you must be feeling after the loss of your daughter, but I wanted to return your kindness and tell you that if you ever need a shoulder," she patted hers, "mine are always free."

Trinity smiled genuinely. "Thanks. Same goes for you."

"I appreciate it."

"Can I ask you something?"

"By all means." Gabriella leaned back in her seat and waited.

"Has Cooper ever done anything to harm you? Ever?"

"No, never. As a matter of fact, he has always doted on me."

"Did he keep his promise to you to find a cure?"

"Yes, but—"

"I know you feel betrayed because he didn't ask you if you would want him to turn you into a vampire. Would you have been this upset if he had cured you by other means while you were still in the coma?"

"No, but this is different."

"Is it?" Trinity stood. "Think about it. He kept his end of the bar-

gain, he cured you. At least he woke you before turning you. Get some rest. You look tired."

Gabriella sat where she was long after Trinity left the room, thinking.

CHAPTER TWENTY

His bruises were healing up nicely, thanks to his regenerative abilities. His ribs were still a little tender but Cooper knew in a matter of a day that mild discomfort would be gone.

He wished he could say the same for his heart.

If there was a cure for a broken heart, he would love to know of it. Gabriella didn't want him. The man he thought of as a son refused to see him. What else did he have? Nothing. So here he sat alone in his cabin home with nothing to do but ache from loneliness.

He was at a loss for what to do next. He longed to have his wife back. He'd waited long enough already to have her back and now that she was alive and well, he was still without her. It wasn't fair.

Life was not fair.

He'd had an ordinary life, a good life, until Avadur had captured him and turned him. He had been thriving in his practice, gaining recognition for his tireless efforts to get to the truth behind death. He had even been planning on starting a compilation of bizarre deaths, including the ones he had so often been in charge of determining. Victims with their body drained of blood was not an ordinary death for humans, and Cooper had been determined to find out the cause.

Well, he had, hadn't he? The hard way.

Working late one night on his research, a gang of hoodlums led by Chaos had invaded the hospital where he'd worked, and he'd been taken hostage and brought to Avadur. His life had taken on a drastic change that very day.

"Make him better."

Cooper had been shoved hard into a room that smelled of fresh blood and festering flesh. As the light came on, he saw the man on the bed. Having seen plenty of injuries in his day should have prepared him for what he saw then, yet it hadn't. On a bed covered in some sort of gray fluid was a huge man, moaning in pain, his body riddled with wounds like nothing Cooper had seen before.

He had turned to the men who had captured him and held up his hands. "I'm not sure I'll be able to help him."

"Well you'd better figure out a way if you want to keep breathing."

He'd been forced to tend to Avadur's wounds, which he'd sustained in a battle that nearly took his life. He'd had gouges taken from his body, huge gaping wounds and several internal injuries. He'd had no idea how to heal a vampire but did his best to tend to Avadur.

Cooper's mistake had been to save him.

Another mistake had been to believe him.

Avadur had promised that if Cooper remained at his side, as his physician, he would leave Cooper's father unharmed. Not that he'd had much of a choice staying as he'd been locked up most of the time.

It wasn't until months later during a horrendous bout of humiliating torture that Cooper learned the truth.

"Your father served me well in both nourishment and in sex, but his sweetness is nothing compared to yours." He'd penetrated Cooper, tearing him up not only physically, but emotionally as well.

If it hadn't been for his need to protect Basil, Cooper might have very well succumbed to the horror. Basil was his saving grace, his light at the end of a very tempting dark tunnel. He made it his life's work to protect Basil from that day on, and he had.

But the darkness had always been inside of him, threatening to creep in.

Until he'd met Gabriella.

She loved him for who he was, cared for him as only a lover could. He'd worried that he may not be able to satisfy her sexually, hadn't even had any sexual encounter since leaving Avadur, but she had been so kind to him, so gentle, and had shown him a world filled with beauty.

He wished now that she was with him to soothe him once more.

Maybe there was a way she could be with him, that all of this pain could be forgotten. Though he had vowed never to use his powers of mind control on her, perhaps this time it would be all right. She was in pain without him; he was in pain without her. He could very easily use his mind control to convince her that she had asked him to turn her. It wouldn't take much, a simple persuasive thought to penetrate the negative and erase the pain that separated them.

He could just as easily do the same for Basil.

All he would have to do is put them both into a sedative sleep, then slip into their minds and rework their memories. Everything would then be as it was supposed to be.

The knock on his door startled him and he was curious who it would be paying him a visit. His hopes rose as he ran to the door, but were dashed when he saw it was Trinity and not Gabriella.

"Hey. You busy?"

"Never for you. Please, come in." He stepped aside to allow her in, then closed the door. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine...well, as fine as it can be. How are you doing?"

He held the chair for her and they both sat at the kitchen table. "I'm holding up as well as expected. Any word on finding Felicity?"

She toyed with the lace place mat on the table. "Starla has a spell that we're going to try. It's complicated but, to put it plainly, I'm going to try to grab Rajana and convince her to tell me where she's keeping Felicity."

"Sounds dangerous."

Her eyes met his and he saw the sadness deep inside the pool of blue green. "It has some negative points and that's kinda why I'm here."

"Oh?"

"I want you there when I do the spell, and before you say anything, I know Basil doesn't want you around him right now. But if something goes wrong, he is going to need you to ground him."

"He doesn't need me for anything any longer." It saddened him to say so but it was the truth.

"He does need you and that is why what you did to him hurts so much. He'll probably kill me for telling you this but...well, I can take him on." She smiled lightly, then continued. "I don't believe it's the lies as much as what you did to him by using mind control on him

that hurts. When you controlled his mind, he felt like he was back with his father and we both know how much he hates his father for what he did to him."

Cooper did and simply nodded, letting Trinity continue.

"When you controlled his mind...he told me that it was exactly what his father once did to control him. He felt safe with you, Cooper, but when you did that, you broke his trust. He's having a hard time getting past that."

Cooper lowered his head, his earlier thoughts shaming him. He hadn't thought about what controlling Basil's mind would do to him and he knew that if he followed through with his plan to wipe his memories clean, it would only break that trust even more. Severing it forever, if Basil ever found out the truth.

He couldn't risk losing him forever.

"Thank you for telling me that."

"I like you, Cooper. Since I met Basil, you have been nothing but kind to me. I've come to think of you as family. I hate seeing you hurt like this, and I especially hate seeing Basil hurting. You need to work this out with him. He needs you in his life. Especially if I don't come back."

"What do you mean by that?" She worried him now.

She plucked at the placemat, her nervousness was very evident. "One of the risks in performing this spell is that Rajana could control my mind and pull me back into her realm. I'm damn determined to fight her, but there still is a chance I may lose. If I do, I need to know you will help Basil move on, protect him and save him from anything stupid he might try."

"Like getting you back?"

She shrugged. "I know he'll try. I expect him to try, but it's the means he goes to in order to get me back that worry me."

"The Dark Mystics."

She nodded. "I do not want him going to them and giving himself to them in order to save me. I trust you, Cooper, to stop him if he tries."

"With my life," he vowed.

"That's what I figured. Thank you."

"I care for you as well, Trinity. I never wanted anyone hurt. I know the pain I feel without my love, without Basil, but it must be miniscule compared to the pain you are feeling at the loss of your precious daughter. Anything I can do to help you get her back, I will. You have just to ask."

Her smile warmed her sad face and gave him a glimpse of the woman he once knew. Before tragedy befell her. "Thanks. And since you brought that up, Gabriella needs you."

His entire face must have lit up because she held up one finger and stopped him before he could respond.

"She needs the man she thought she married. The man she trusted, who loved her beyond life. She needs to be reminded that he is still there, inside of you."

"I would give my life for her."

"I have no doubt. Show her that, show her how much you love her. Don't demand she return, don't force her. Convince her you are still the same man she fell in love with." Trinity pushed up from her seat. "If that doesn't work, whisk her off her feet and take her away someplace warm and away from this cold darkness."

He sat at his table, alone, after she left and knew exactly what had to be done.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gabriella was feeling a little hungry and decided to sneak down into the kitchen to look for something to eat. When she found Basil sitting at the tiny table, in the dark, she instantly turned around, not wanting to disturb his obvious need for alone time.

"Was there something you needed?"

She paused and cautiously turned around to speak to him. "Nothing that can't wait."

"There's no need for you to wait. I was only...well...moping I guess." He stood up and flicked the overhead light on. "Were you hungry? Do you need some blood?"

"I didn't want to disturb you."

He shrugged, then pulled out a chair for her. "It was a good thing you did or I might have given in to my thought to drown my sorrows in a bottle of scotch. I'm afraid there isn't much left in the refrigerator. I've sent some of my men to the nearest city to grab some groceries. I think there might still be some apple pie leftover."

"There's no need to bother. I wasn't that hungry anyway."

"It's not a bother and I could use a thick slice of pie myself."

The charm he emitted when he smiled at her was enough to make her heart speed up. "Then I would love some."

"Perfect. How are you doing?" he asked as he removed the tin of pie from the fridge and placed it on the table.

"I'm managing quite well. You are so kind to me, allowing me to stay with you here. I absolutely love your home. Nothing has really changed since I was here last."

He dished out two slices of pie and handed one to her. "You've been to my home before?"

"Thank you. I was, several times, in the past. I helped Cooper plant flowers in your garden and terrace area."

Basil sat across from her, tilting his head as he spoke. "Yet I never remember seeing you."

"Cooper made sure you were away when I came by. That hurts you and for that I'm sorry. He was only trying to protect me."

"From me, apparently." He dug into his pie with a great deal of anger.

"Not from you, but your kind. He feared that if anyone ever wanted to destroy you, they would look to those closest to you first. He didn't want anyone to know about me, especially Chaos and his men."

"I could have helped him protect you."

"I know you can't see beyond your hurt, but he really was just trying to protect us both."

"Hard to see that from my angle." He broke off another piece and shoved it in his mouth.

"I can understand that, believe me I can. What I tell you now was told to me in confidence and if Cooper knew I was telling you, he would have my head." She pursed her lips and continued. "He never wanted you to know who sired him because he felt if you knew, you would always look at him differently. It was hard enough for him knowing you knew the humiliations he endured, but to have you know that your father was the one who turned him was too much for him to bear."

"I've never thought badly of him for what he endured."

"But the way you reacted to finding out the truth now is exactly what he was trying to avoid."

"He should have trusted me."

She could see the hurt in his beautiful blue eyes and wished she could soothe him somehow. "You were all he had. His father was killed by Avadur's men and he had no other family. He couldn't risk losing you, so he lied. Yes, we may feel that was wrong, but we didn't go through what he did."

"He's told you everything, then?"

She nodded, picking at her dish of apple pie. "It hurts me deeply to know of the horrors he experienced."

"I used to hear him, in the early days, begging for help, begging to be released, begging for the agony to stop. My father tortured numerous people in my time with him, but none affected me as deeply as what he did to Cooper. I felt so helpless not being able to help him."

Reaching across the table, Gabriella laid her hand over his. "You were the only thing that kept him going. He loves you beyond reason. He would give his life for you. What he did by not telling you the truth was save you both from any more agony. Whether you can forgive him is up to you."

"I won't lie by saying the deception doesn't hurt, but I can look past that. What I'm having trouble with is that he controlled my mind, making me do what he wanted me to do and disregarding my feelings. He knew how much I resented my father for controlling my mind and that is what hurts the most."

"I can understand that. I guess it is something the two of you need to work out." She took a bite from her pie and smiled. She chewed it, swallowed, then spoke. "This is one of Cooper's."

Basil cocked his head to the side. "Yes, how did you know that?"

"I know my darling's work. The faint tang of lemon is a calling card. Cooper loves his sweets tangy."

"Yes, he does." Basil laughed and stuffed more pie in his mouth.

"I guess we both have a lot to think about in regards to Cooper," she said after a while.

"I guess so." He looked up at her, pursing his lips. "I never really envisioned a woman that would be perfect for Cooper, but if I had, she would be you."

"Why thank you." Her heart longed for the man she had first fallen in love with oh so long ago.



Both Trinity and Basil had given her plenty to think about. With her belly full of delicious pie, Gabriella decided to relax with a book before retiring for the night—or day—whichever the case was. She couldn't see how anyone could thrive off of a life in total darkness. The short time she'd been in it was more than enough for her to wish to never see darkness again.

It pleased her that Basil kept a large library in his home. Perusing the rows full of books that lined the shelves, she had a hard time

deciding what to read. She wondered if Cooper had saved any of her novels. She'd had a shelf of books in her home but nothing that came close to the stacks she saw now.

Her mind wandered to the many times she'd lain in Cooper's arms while they both read a novel together. He had always read faster than her, but he always found something to occupy his time while she finished the page. The memory brought a smile to her lips and a warmth to her heart. He loved to play with her hair while they read. She missed that.

She missed a great deal.

What Trinity had said to her gave her thought. Gabriella had trusted Cooper to find a cure for her while she was asleep. She had even signed a document, encouraged by Cooper and her doctor, that they could try any cure needed without waking her for consent.

"At least he woke you before turning you."

Trinity was right. Cooper could have just as easily turned her while she was in her comatose state. Or could he have? She really didn't know how it worked. But she did know that she had trusted Cooper to find a cure...and he had. Though she had made him promise her early on when she'd learned what he was not to ever turn her, she was beginning to see the reasoning behind his choice.

For her it had been no more than falling asleep and waking. No time had passed for her. Yet for Cooper, twenty years had gone by. Twenty years to sit by and watch his love lying asleep in a glass case, not able to touch her, kiss her, or hear her speak to him. How difficult that must have been for him. Why had she never given that any thought before now?

Because she had felt betrayed.

She'd needed Trinity to refocus her mind and the next time she saw her, Gabriella was going to make sure and thank her.

Oh, what a fool she had been.

Cooper had done exactly what she had asked him to do, in a roundabout way, and she had pushed him away as if he was nothing more than some monster that had taken her life. It was amazing that he didn't hate her for what she had done. What she was doing.

Deciding there was no book here that would take her mind off of her love and what she had done to him, Gabriella decided to go to her room, change, and go see Cooper instead. She needed to apologize to him.

Racing up the stairs, she hurried to her room and throwing her door open, came to an abrupt halt. There, before her, was a plethora

of posies in every shade possible. Yellow daffodils, white daises, red roses, bluebells, bright orange lilies, and so many more. She was awe-struck and could only stand there, staring.

"I grew these in your room while you slept."

His voice startled her and as he stepped out of the shadows, her heart sped with love.

"I worried that when the darkness came, I would not be able to tend to them regularly, but they managed quite well. I thought you should have some beauty in your life."

Her eyes welled up as she stepped towards the man she loved. "I have plenty of beauty in my life." She touched a hand to his cheek as the first tears spilled from her eyes. "I have you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The touch of her fingers along his cheek was a sensation he had loved and had done without for so long. To be this close to the woman he adored and know he'd been destined for was unimaginable. Seeing the way she looked at him now, with so much love, was something he'd feared he would never see again.

Was he dreaming?

"I've been such a fool. Can you ever forgive me, darling?"

Maybe he was dreaming.

"Cooper?"

"Hm?" He had to be dreaming.

"Oh dear...I should have thought of this." She pulled away and he stood there, staring. "I hurt you deeply by pushing you away, by rejecting you. Of course you would have difficulty forgiving me. How stupid of me to think you could forgive me so easily."

He wasn't dreaming. "Gabriella—"

"I was cruel to you, telling you to leave me alone, pushing you away, running from you when you have never done a single thing to ever harm me." She turned back to him with pleading in her eyes. "I don't deserve to have you back but I ask you now to please reconsider."

He was most definitely not dreaming. "Gabriella—" He was shocked when she took his hand in hers and babbled on.

"I will do anything to gain your trust in me again, anything you ask, just please, please forgive me."

"Gabriella." Raising her hands to his lips, he kissed her knuckles. "You have nothing to be forgiven for. I, on the other hand, should be on my knees. If I didn't want to be with you any longer, would I be constantly appearing before you, asking you to take me back? Would I have fed you that first night? Would I have filled your room with the one thing in life that lights your eyes?"

"You light my eyes, Cooper." She touched his face again, her soft lips curving up in a sliver of a smile. "It is this exactly that makes me realize what a wonderful man you are. No other man would bring a garden of posies to a woman's room just to please her. I love you." She closed her mouth over his and he drank in her warmth.

His hand found that comfortable spot on her waist and as she deepened the kiss, he drew her closer to him. No dream had ever been as pleasant as this, and he would know given the fact that for twenty years he had dreamt of his love in his arms, tasting the flavor that was only hers, feeling her soft silky lips caressing his.

"Make me feel alive, Cooper," she whispered against his mouth, and the sensation sent shivers cascading over his entire body.

Without hesitation, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to her bed. Setting her down, he left her sitting on the edge while he grabbed several roses.

"What are you doing?"

"Giving you romance." He drew the bed covers away, causing her to get up, then quickly scattered the rose petals over the sheets. He tossed the stems away and turned to her. His breath escaped him when he saw the huge smile on her face.

"You are incredible."

"Tell me that after." His lips curved up in a sly grin. Holding his hand out to her, she walked to him and he drew her to his chest. "Music." He pulled away and she yanked him back.

"I don't need music, Cooper. All I need is you."

"But I want this to be perfect."

She cupped his face in her hands and smiled. "As long as I have you, I have perfection."

She'd always known just the right things to say to him to make his knees weak. "I love you with all my heart. I never meant to hurt you."

"I know—well, I know now. I love you just as much, Cooper. Now make love to me."

Laughing, he wrapped his arms around her and simply held her for several minutes.

"Cooper?"

"I'm just reassuring myself that you are indeed real and not a dream."

She tilted her head back. "Of course I'm real."

He shook it off. "Never mind me. Let me look at you." He held her out at arms' length and drank in the beauty that was his wife. "You are as lovely now as the day I first laid eyes on you. I truly am a lucky man." Drawing her closer, he took her lips and began the slow dance to seduction.

Her body fit against his so perfectly. The way her arms wound around his neck felt as if they'd been created to do so. Her lips fitted perfectly to his. She had been made for him, that we would stake his life on.

One by one he slowly released the buttons on the trim, silky white shirt she wore. When the fabric parted, he slipped it from her shoulders and touched his lips to the bare skin.

She moaned.

Slowly, as he lowered the fabric, he kissed his way down her arm. When it slipped from her fingers, he lifted her hand and drew each one into his mouth in turn. Then he proceeded to do the same with the other arm and hand. He let the shirt drop to the floor and when he met her eyes, he saw they swam with desire.

He kept his gaze on hers as he lowered the zipper at the side of her skirt. As it pooled to the floor, he took a step back to admire the beauty before him.

"I have missed seeing you like this." Clad in only a white bra and panties and her high heels, she was the epitome of gorgeous. And she was all his.

"I wouldn't mind seeing more myself." Stepping up to him, she began the busy work of removing his jacket and unbuttoning his shirt. When she opened his shirt, she sighed and slid her nails along his chest.

He moaned.

Stripping his shirt away, she clucked her tongue at the faint bruising still coloring his skin. "I've never known you to be a foolish man. Promise me you will never fight again?"

"I can promise you to try, but should I be attacked I will most definitely protect myself or what is mine." He tilted her chin up with one finger. "I would fight to the death for you."

"My warrior." She laughed and kissed his lips. Then she fell to her knees and kissed each and every bruise on his abdomen before standing to rest her lips on his once more. With her eyes on his, she undid the snap on his trousers, lowered the zipper, and let his pants fall to the floor. "Now, that's much better."

Laughing, he pulled her into his arms and slowly lowered her to the bed. He kissed her face, taking time to enjoy the subtle curve of her chin before savoring her neck. He heard her quick intake of breath and it pained him that she worried that he might bite her.

But he wouldn't unless she asked.

Gently, he pressed warm lips to tip of her collarbone before moving to her shoulder. He slipped the bra strap away and worked his lips down the swell of her breast. Trailing kisses across the swell and over her cleavage, he made his way to the other. When he lowered that strap, her back arched. Slipping his hand behind her, he unfastened the clasp that held her bra in place. Slowly, he slipped the bra away.

She was full, ripe, and pink and waiting for him to sample her.

So he did.

A man should never tire of pleasuring a woman. Their satisfaction was euphoric, and gift enough for any man to feel fulfilled. Pleasuring his Gabriella fulfilled him completely. So he took his time lingering on first one breast, then the next, arousing her.

He eased the simple cotton underwear down her hips while he suckled on the ripeness on her chest. She wiggled out of underwear. He enjoyed the length of her body, examining every section available. She was soft and warm and oh so giving. When she spread her legs for him, he knew it would take no more than a touch to send her over. So he took his time.

He touched. He caressed. He teased.

His mouth found hers and as her lips parted, her tongue slid between swollen lips. He touched the tip with his own and as she pulled hers back, he followed. While their lips caressed, their tongues danced, and all the while his fingers aroused her. She was putty in his hands, as she always had been, but the instant his tongue scraped over her incisors; she became electric.

She pulled him tight against her, her nails digging into his back while her body wiggled against his. He felt the heat pouring off of her in waves and the scent she gave off aroused him to the point of no

return. Then her fingers clawed at his briefs, until frustration grew to be too much and she tore them away.

"Oh my," she giggled.

"Indeed." With a smile on his lips, he stroked a hand along her cheek. "Does my darling want something?"

"You."

"Is that so?"

"Cooper, stop being coy."

He laughed when she yanked him on top of her body.

"Take me!"

"As you wish." But he was not going to make it fast, though he sensed it was just what she wanted. He was not a man to rush, especially when something mattered. Gabriella definitely mattered.

Taking her hands in his, he laced fingers and slowly lifted her hands above her head. All the while, his eyes never left hers. She parted her legs, the moisture tempting him to her opening. Still holding her eyes captive, he slowly slipped inside.

She moaned.

He sighed.

This too would be taken slowly. Each stroke was given with precision, like a slow intake of breath. They moved together in perfect unison, their eyes never leaving each other's. He felt her fingers tense and clasp onto him a little tighter. Her breathing became more intense with each stroke. He moved in, out, in, out until he felt her body begin to react.

"I wish to have all of you, Gabriella, and I wish you to have all of me." He kissed her mouth before asking. "Will you take my blood?" She didn't hesitate as he'd expected and as he turned his neck, she clamped on. He jerked, the sudden penetration a shocking intrusion, then he felt the first pull of blood from his veins and his body came alive.

Angling his head, he bit into the fleshy part just above her shoulder. She gasped and halted sucking for only a brief second before drawing on him with a greater force. He felt the muscles in her body contract around him, pulling him and, with each pull of his blood, she sucked him in. His body grew hot, like nothing he'd ever felt before and when she gushed around him, releasing his neck to cry out, his body spilled deep inside of her.

He took her mouth in a warm kiss as they both finished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It had been too long since he'd held his wife in his arms. He would never tell her, but he had feared he never would. As the day's fell into months and the months into years with still no hope in sight to finding a cure for her cancer, Cooper had doubted he ever would have her again. Now, as she lay content in his arms, it felt as though no time had passed.

"Will it always be that intense?"

He toyed with the nails at the ends of her fingers, sliding his thumb over each one, testing their strength. From everything he'd observed in Gabriella, she'd suffered no lasting effects from her twenty-year coma. That too had been something he'd worried about. "I have no idea. That was my first time."

She sat up and her hair fell over her shoulder like a silk wave. "You've never bitten one of your sexual conquests before?"

He ran his fingers over it. "I've had no sexual conquest aside from you."

"Well, I know, not before me. But since I've been asleep?"

His eyes met hers as he ran his finger along her jaw line. "None." Her eyes went wide. "Seriously?"

"Why do you find that hard to believe?"

"I just assumed...I guess I should have known better."

He tipped her chin up as he spoke. "Yes, you should have. I hold my vows true to my heart and even if you had lain in slumber another twenty years or more I would not have taken another woman to my bed."

Her face lit up with a smile. "Oh, my darling Cooper. What a miserable twenty years it must have been for you." With that smile still in place, she nipped his lips with her own.

"I have you now. That is all that matters."

She came to rest on his shoulder, one hand delicately placed on his chest right over his heart. "What made you decide to wake me now and not sooner?"

"I couldn't live without you in my life any longer. When Chaos performed the ritual to darken the city I saw horror and death and pain all around me. Trinity died and was resurrected, but Basil suffered in that short time she was gone. I truly knew what his heart felt, as mine felt the same being away from you. Then Jonah's wife and unborn child were killed and Jonah was turned into a vampire. Dante was nearly killed by Chaos' men and I saw the lengths a brother would go to in order to save his kin. Throughout all the death and destruction one thing stood out tall and bright. Love."

He kissed her head, drawing her closer, needing to reassure himself she was indeed real and not a dream. "Basil and Trinity came back together and in their reunion created a child. Dante found his love. Jonah, despite the loss of his wife, found love. Finally, young Danny and Starla so much in love. It reminded me of what I once had, what I could still have."

He gazed down at her. "I could not bear being without you for much longer. I'd worked tirelessly to find a cure but with each year passing, found nothing. I knew that you hadn't wanted me to ever turn you, but I saw no other way."

"I know," she said, cupping his face in her palm.

"With this darkness and the destruction I worried about two things. One, someone would find you and take you for themselves. Two, I would die and you would not be looked after and slowly your meds and life support would deplete and no one would be there to save you. I wanted neither for you. So I chose the cure. I never meant to do you harm."

"I know," she reiterated a little firmer. "I came to realize that... or rather, Trinity helped me understand that. I asked you to cure me,

trusted you to cure me, and that was exactly what you did. It was fear that had me begging you to promise never to turn me, but truly, this life isn't so bad after all." She pulled him closer and kissed him gently. "A lifetime with you seems pretty damn good right now."

He wanted more than that tiny sample of delight and took her lips and lingered in a long, patient kiss. If he knew they could live joined as they were forever, he might never have released her. "Indeed."

The knock on the door startled them both out of their loving embrace and when the door opened they both scrambled to make sure they were covered. As if they were teenagers catching an afternoon romp and mother had entered to find them.

"Oh...um...sorry." Turning her back, Trinity cleared her throat. "Sorry. Guess I should have waited for an answer."

"Was there something you needed from me?" Gabriella asked with a bit of a squeak in her voice.

"Um...I was just going to tell you that we'll be doing the ritual soon and wondered if you would want to watch. But I see you're busy. Nice to see you again, Cooper," she snickered.

"And you, Trinity."

"I'll just leave the two of you to...um...see you later."

They both burst into laughter after Trinity hustled from the room.



Surrounded by her friends, Trinity tried not to show her nervousness. Her insides were doing flip flops like a skydiver without a parachute. She really worried she was going to toss her cookies all over the nicely vacuumed living room rug. Everything had to be perfect for the ritual, including ridding the carpet of any unknown fibers that might screw up the process.

It all sounded bizarre to her, but what did she know about magic? Really?

"Was Gabriella going to come down to watch?"

Turning to Gypsy, Trinity shook her head. "Um...I don't think so." Thank God for small favors that the two had been covered when she'd entered the room. A naked Cooper she did not want to see. It would be the equivalent of seeing her father naked.

"Maybe I should go up and convince her to come down."

"No!" Trinity blurted out, having everyone turn to her in surprise. "She was sleeping. Let her sleep." She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She could feel the bile floating up to the surface.

"Okay...that was weird." With a shrug, Gypsy let it go.

"Let's go over this again, Trinity."

She turned to Starla, her impatience showing in the brusque tone in her voice. "We've gone over it so many times that I'll be reciting it in my sleep for weeks. I'm ready."

"Still—"

"Relax my breathing, when I do, I'm supposed to focus on counting each breath until I feel weightless. When I see the bright white light I'm supposed to go to it and no jokes again about that Jonah." She pointed a finger at him, silencing him. He sulked and she continued. "When I reach the Realm of Mystics I am to find Rajana who will most likely be waiting for me. I need to grab her arm, hold onto her tight while you pull us both back." She knew exactly what to do and didn't need to go over it again.

"How will I know you've got her?"

Trinity rolled her eyes and Basil stroked a hand along her back. "I give you a mental tap and recite the code word, *Presto*. I got it. Let's just get to it already."

"Darling," Basil took her hands in his, drawing her attention to him, "Starla is just being cautious."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry for being so jumpy," she apologized to Starla.

"I know you're nervous and I can't blame you. But you need to relax if this is going to work. You have to release the tension."

"I told you we should have had sex before starting this," Basil said with a humorous tone in his voice.

"Oh, like any of us needed to hear that," Jonah quipped.

"There's still time," Gypsy piped up. "I think the two of you should have sex first."

"You think everything revolves around sex," Raven added with a roll of her eyes.

"It's a good stress reducer," Gypsy informed her.

"You just want to watch," Dante added, pulling her onto his lap.

"Oh...yuck." Trinity shuddered.

"You really need to work on that voyeuristic obsession of yours, my dear," Dante stated with a smirk.

"Enough," Basil shouted, catching everyone's attention. "There are other methods of relaxation. Please tell me you have never spied on us, Gypsy."

"No, but—" Dante clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Thank you. As I was saying..." He walked to Trinity, sitting behind her on the sofa, and began to massage her neck and shoulders. "See."

"Sex is better," Gypsy sulked.

"I'm with her," Danny added and received a scowl from Starla. "In thinking sex is better. With you, sweet cheeks, only you," he reaffirmed.

The sound on the stairs had all eyes drifting to the foyer as both Cooper and Gabriella entered. A hush filled the room.

"What are you doing here?" Basil snarled.

"I asked him to join us. I thought the more the merrier." Trinity soothed Basil with a hand over the one he held on her shoulder.

"Hey, you're holding hands," Gypsy chirped, bouncing up from her spot on Dante's lap. "Does that mean the two of you are back together—Oh, Trinity said you were sleeping, Gabriella. You weren't sleeping were you? Ha! At least someone's relaxed." She laughed and Dante pulled her back down onto his lap.

"Remember how I told you there are times when you should think long and hard before speaking your mind?"

Gypsy nodded.

"Now is one of those times. Nice to see you both again." Dante acknowledged Cooper and Gabriella.

"We should get this ball rolling," Basil growled, his eyes shifting away from Cooper.

"That's what I was saying before." Standing, Trinity rolled her shoulders and admitted, at least to herself, that she felt a little better.

"I'll get it started." Grabbing a bottle, Starla began sprinkling white powder on the floor.

"What's that?" Raven asked.

"Healing salt. It acts as a protective barrier to the person inside the circle. In this case, Trinity. I need you to step inside now, Trinity."

Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the circle.

"Give your arms a shake and take several deep breaths."

Feeling a little awkward having all eyes on her, Trinity did her best to relax. She took several deep breaths, giving her arms a shake.

"Now, sit down in the circle, cross your legs, and place your hands on your knees, wrists up."

She did as she was instructed.

"Good. Now everyone sit around the outside of the circle and join hands." When they all had, Starla took a deep breath and began. "To

the Goddess I beg a safe journey for your daughter, Trinity. In trust I lay my soul, and ask the Realm to open a hole. Guide her to the one she seeks, protect her as she leaps. So mote it be." She took a deep breath before speaking to Trinity. "You may begin."

"What was that about a soul?" Danny whispered to her only to receive a "shh" from Basil.

Trying to forget she was surrounded by people all staring at her, Trinity began her deep breathing. She counted out each breath until her body began to feel very light. Then she felt herself float. Up, up, up she went and the light began to shine. Squeezing her eyes shut to protect them from the bright light, she felt herself being pulled into the mystical realm. She'd been here before. Only that time she'd been dead.

This time she was very much alive.

She stopped when she arrived and looked around. When Rajana stepped in front of her, Trinity didn't flinch.

"Hello, my child."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Holding Gabriella's hand, Cooper watched as one by one, the people in the circle began to look impatient. He was betting Gypsy would be the first to speak.

"How long do we wait?"

He was wrong.

"No more than fifteen minutes," Starla informed Danny.

"Then what?"

"If she doesn't give me the signal, I pull her back."

"I don't feel right about this," Basil added, wiping his hands on his jeans. "Something doesn't feel right."

"You're just nervous," Jonah reassured him.

"And you wouldn't be if it were Raven doing this?"

Jonah nodded, linked his fingers a little tighter with Raven's. "Of course I would be. I'm just saying your nerves are on high alert right now, that's all."

"I never should have let her do this." Basil shook his head.

"She would have done it without your approval."

Basil turned to Starla with a tip of his head. "Why do you say that?"

"She told me either way she was doing it. Even if it meant doing it alone."

"Damn her." He started to stand and Starla pulled him back down.

"You stand up now and you break her security. I know this is tough for you—"

"You have no idea," he snarled.

"Fine, I can understand how difficult this must be for you, but it's something she needed to do."

"I should have done it instead of her."

"This is something she needs to do," Starla reaffirmed.

"Only because she has some self-delusion that losing our daughter was her fault even though I've reassured her she had no idea what my mother was up to when Mother made Trinity sign that agreement. Damn both of them."

"It's been fifteen minutes."

"What?" Starla turned to Cooper.

"The time, it's been fifteen minutes and she hasn't given us the signal."

Starla checked her watch and frowned. "You're right. Okay, get ready to pull her back down."

"About damn time," Basil quipped.

"In this land and no other, bring us Trinity from the other." They all jerked once and fell backwards as they were blown over.

"What the hell was that?" Basil barked out.

"We were blocked," Starla said. "Goddess of light, I ask you now, bring Trinity back from her flight."

Again they were knocked back, only this time, breaking them apart and separating the circle.

"No!" Starla yelled.

"Shit! We broke the circle," Basil hollered.

"Give me your hands. Everyone. Hands." She held hers out and waited until everyone's had been joined before beginning. "We call out to you Goddess to bring us Trinity safe and sound." They were separated as if a blast had speared into the room.

"Fuck!"

"That is not good. She doesn't swear unless it's bad," Danny informed everyone.

Basil wasn't the only one worrying now, and Cooper was right there next to him. "What is happening, Starla?"

"She's blocking us?"

"Who?"

"Rajana."



"Long time no see." Staring at the beauty before her, Trinity didn't hide her disdain for the entity. "Where the hell is my daughter, you bitch." She ran at the floating vision in white only to stumble forward when Rajana vanished.

"Is that any way to treat the giver of your life?"

Spinning around, Trinity glared at Rajana. "I want my daughter."

"She is safe."

"I want her back, now," Trinity shouted, and with it came a violent wind that did no more than blow Rajana's long, golden hair.

"You signed an agreement, in your blood. She is rightfully mine."

"I didn't know what I was signing away. I thought I was giving you permission to take my powers back."

"A costly mistake on your part, then, wasn't it?"

"You bitch!" Again, her charge at Rajana did nothing more than cause her to stumble. She was getting tired of the disappearing act. Her breath rushed out of her lungs when Rajana clutched her neck and lifted her a foot off the ground. Trinity struggled, fighting at the hand that strangled the air from her lungs. But the more she fought, the tighter the fingers became.

"I think it is time you paid for your disrespect to your queen."

Trinity looked into the cold blue eyes of death and screamed.



Cooper watched as arguments began to heat up and he could see Basil was growing steadily unstable. If he didn't calm down soon, he would surely...

"I think she knew." Cooper noticed that no one had heard him. "I believe Trinity knew this might happen," he said a little louder.

"I don't believe they're listening to you, darling."

He gave a nod to Gabriella, then tried another tactic. Sticking his fingers between his lips, he whistled at a high enough pitch to make everyone stop bickering and cringe.

"What the hell?" Basil wiggled a finger in his ears.

"Thank you." He cleared his throat, doing his best to ignore the nasty glares he received and continued. "I believe Trinity knew, or suspected this might happen."

"What the hell are you talking about, Cooper?"

He walked right up to Basil as he responded. "She came to me earlier, at my home, and asked me to be here to help you should anything go wrong."

"That doesn't mean she knew something like this would happen. We don't have time for this. I need to get to her, get her back."

"Where are you going?" Cooper asked when Basil turned to leave.

"To get some help."

Cooper hurried up beside Basil, stepping directly in front of him, stopping Basil mid stride. "Where exactly are you planning to go for this help?"

"This is none of your concern now, Cooper, and I would prefer it if you weren't here when I got back."

"Basil—"

Cooper lifted his hand to stop Gabriella. "I was asked to take care of you should anything happen to Trinity and I certainly have no plans to let her down. I ask again, where are you planning on getting this help?"

Basil gave Cooper a not so gentle shove. "None of your damn business."

"Okay, I think we all just need to calm down here."

"I don't need your input right now, Jonah," Basil snapped.

"I'll give you that one because I know you're worried about Trin. So am I. But, as I recall, the last time you lost her you kind of went berserk. I think you should tell all of us what you plan to do."

Basil rounded on him, eyes blazing. "I have never had to answer to you, Jonah, and I don't plan to start now, so back the hell off."

"We can help." Dante stepped up, calmly. "When this all began we all agreed to do whatever it took to stop Chaos and end the darkness. As a group. We are not dividing now."

"When that's your woman in trouble, then you can make the rules," Basil hissed out in a vicious snarl. Then turning, started off towards the door.

Cooper knew he had to do something now before Basil did something he would live to regret. The only thing he could think to do was control his mind.

"You will sleep now," he stated, entering into Basil's mind. He was right there when Basil's legs gave out and caught him in his arms.

"What the hell?" Jonah exclaimed.

Cooper lifted Basil into his arms, shifting him into a more comfortable position as he replied to the crowd of onlookers. "I put him to sleep."

"You what?" Jonah asked sharply.

"I went into his mind and knocked him out. I need to get him to his room." He knew very well as he carried Basil up the stairs that everyone would follow him. They didn't disappoint.

He laid Basil on his bed, adjusting him so he lay perfectly flat before turning to the people behind him. "It was for his own good. He was about to go to the Dark Mystics to ask for help in getting Trinity back. I couldn't allow him to do that."

"Oh, he is going to be mighty pissed at you when he wakes up," Jonah stated with a shake of his head.

"That may very well be, but it is for his own good and I am only keeping my promise to Trinity not to let him do anything stupid. Now, I need to speak with you, Starla."

"Me? Why?"

"In the other room. Please." When she nodded, he turned to Gabriella, taking her arms in his hands. "I need you to sit with him and if he should wake, call to me."

"I will. I hope you know what you're doing, Cooper."

So did he. "I'm doing what needs to be done." He kissed her quickly, then escorted Starla from the room. He led her down the hall and away from eavesdroppers. "This spell you preformed, can it be modified?"

She tilted her head in confusion. "How so?"

"Can two people enter instead of just one?"

Again, her brow drew together in confusion. "Um...I don't know. I would have to look into it but I know it would be risky."

"What is life without risks? Another question. If you were to link with two powerful entities, would you be able to feed off their power to punch a hole into the Realm that would allow said entities to travel into it?"

"Okay, that just sounds weird. Again, I don't know. I suppose it would be possible. I am assuming we're talking about other witches?"

"No. You would use mine and Basil's powers. I may not be as powerful as Basil but I do have strength that would be beneficial to you to aid in your attempt."

"Okay, sure, but I can tell you doing something like that could have devastating consequences."

He didn't care. "I'm willing to risk it."

"You could die."

He wasn't prepared for that one. His pause was enough to indicate to Starla that he was concerned.

"Yeah, so, it was a nice thought."

"It's the only way." He couldn't keep Basil sedated forever and he knew the instant he released him Basil would head straight for the Dark Mystics. But not before showing Cooper how unimpressed he was at being controlled. "We need to do this as soon as possible."

Starla let out a long sigh before responding. "Okay, but I will not do this without Basil's consent."

"You'll get it." He gave her shoulder a light squeeze before returning to Basil's room. As it was before he'd left, the room was still full with worried bodies. He took a moment to glance at Basil, still asleep on the bed, then turned to the crowd. "You had all better fuel up and get some rest. We're about to do some strong magics and I am going to need all of you in prime form."

"Cooper—"

He lifted only a hand to silence Jonah. "I have asked Starla to look into what it will take to punch a hole in the Realm to allow both Basil and I inside to retrieve Trinity. It is a powerful spell and it will require everyone at their best. Basil and I will need to draw positive energy from each and every one of you. It will drain you but you will bounce back. If anyone isn't up for this, speak now."

"I'll let you know after I speak with Starla." Saying his piece, Danny left the room.

"Anyone else?"

"I hope you know what you're doing, Cooper. I'm in," Dante informed him.

"Me too," Gypsy followed.

"I have to do this," Jonah stated to Raven.

"Then we'll do this together."

"Great! Now go get some rest. Pick a room and I will come get you when we're ready." Cooper waited until everyone had left the room before turning his attention to Gabriella. "What I have planned could have dire repercussions."

"How dire?"

He stroked his hands along her arms in a soothing manner. "Starla will need to draw on my energy, using my special abilities in order for me to be able to go into the Realm with Basil. It could weaken me to the point where I may not be able to return."

"Well, you had better damn well return or I will come and kick your ass back here." She took his hands in hers, gripping them tightly. "I am not losing you now."

"I will fight to return to you. I just need to prepare you in case something does happen."

"I won't lie and tell you I wish you wouldn't do this."

Raising her hands, he brushed his lips gently over her knuckles. "I love you beyond life itself. But he is like a son to me." His eyes drifted to Basil. "If he loses Trinity now, he will become his father. I didn't risk my life to rescue him all those years ago from that madman only to have him turn into that monster now. I need to do this."

"I know. And I love you for it." She tugged him towards the door. "Now take your own advice and go get some rest."

"But I—"

She closed her mouth over his, ending his protest. "Rest," she insisted.

"Yes, ma'am." Smiling, he left the room. He truly was a lucky man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Realm of Mystics had always been described as a heaven for vampires and demons, yet being here now, Trinity wondered if it really was. Her idea of heaven was not being locked in a cell with no window other than a tiny slit on the door only wide enough for eyes to peer in or out. She felt claustrophobic, like the walls were closing in on her and if she didn't get out soon, she would go insane.

"Let me out of here, damn it!" She pounded her fists on the metal door and the echoing sound terrified her. Where exactly was she? Were there no other people around? Why did it sound so empty?

Why wasn't anyone coming to get her? She'd thought that by now Starla would have figured out a different way to break into the Realm to rescue her. It had been days, to her calculations, and still she was locked in the hellish cell of glowing white. She hated white. If she never saw white again she would be so damn happy. It was like walking in a fog, mist surrounded her, scattered when she moved, and it was damn annoying. It looked as if there was no floor beneath her even though she felt it. It was all freaking her out.

"I want some answers, Rajana. That's the least you can give me." She jumped when Rajana appeared through the door. "Shit! That is freaky."

"You bellowed?"

Trinity was getting tired of Rajana's smarmy attitude. "Where are you keeping my daughter?"

"She is safe and happy where she is."

Trinity gritted her teeth. "Answer the damn question."

"I need not answer anything. I rule here and no one..." Rajana leaned in close and Trinity could feel the iciness of the queen's presence waver over her. "No one questions me."

"Bravo for you. Must be hard holding that swelled head up all day long. Where is my daughter?"

Rajana flicked her wrist and sent Trinity flying across the tiny cell. She fell with a hard thump and decided the floor beneath her not only existed but was damn solid. Standing, she rubbed her sore butt and pushed a little harder. "You may rule here, but you do not own me and you do not control me. I will find a way out of here and to my daughter if it is the last thing I do."

"That can be arranged," Rajana stated boldly. "And I do control you. I control all those that have come from me, which is every creature slithering through its miserable existence here and on earth."

"Again, that swelled head must be hard to hold up. Whoa!" Her body lurched to the side and landed against the wall. She really wasn't into kissing pavement.

"I control you without so much as an effort and there is nothing you can do about it."

Trinity's hands came up over her head and her legs spread. She didn't much like the lack of control. When she was spun around, it actually took her breath away. Then she slid up the wall, hitting her head on the ceiling before sliding along it. Looking down, Trinity felt the panic grip her.

She was pretty damn sure she knew what was about to happen.

"Nothing," Rajana emphasized firmly, then stepped through the door and vanished.

Trinity looked down at the floor and before she could think, "Shit!" she fell face first onto the floor beneath her. The stars exploded before her eyes and then she saw nothing at all.



Cooper stretched his arms out, yawned, rolled over, and gazed into the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen.

"Morning, sleepy head."

There was no better way to wake up than next to the woman you loved, especially when she was smiling at you with a bounty of love. "Good morning to you too. Have I been asleep long?"

"Two hours." She stroked his tussled hair from his face. "Did you sleep well?"

He captured her hand and brought it to his lips. "It would have been better with you beside me."

"Yes, but someone wanted me to watch over Basil...wait...that was you." Smirking, she leaned down and kissed his lips softly. "We'll have plenty of time to sleep together after Trinity is brought back home. Now, the rest of the gang is already awake and pacing in Basil's room." She slipped from the bed.

"You seem very confident that everything will go as planned."

"I have all the confidence in the world in you, my dear. I'll meet you in Basil's room."

He was damn glad Gabriella was confident because he was having his doubts. It was a lot to ask of one person. He hoped Starla was strong enough to pull this off.

He hoped he was.

The nap had helped as he felt stronger now than he had two hours earlier. Or maybe it was due to the fact that he'd been woken by an angel. He had her back, he finally had his Gabriella back.

But would he end up losing her in the end?

He was going to make damn sure he didn't. He was going to come back from the Realm, even if it meant fighting Rajana.

After dressing, Cooper slicked his hair back before leaving the room. The instant he entered Basil's room all eyes were on him.

Including Basil's.

Cooper's blood went cold. "Oh, hell!"

Basil charged at him like a bull tempted by a red cape. He pinned him to the wall with little effort and left Cooper gasping.

"Cooper!" Gabriella ran to him instantly.

All hell broke loose as the men charged Basil.

"Calm down!" Dante shouted.

"Basil, don't be stupid." Jonah tried to step in.

But even with all the men yanking at him, Basil kept Cooper pinned to the wall.

"You bastard!" Basil growled.

"I did what I had to in order to save you," Cooper croaked out.

"I didn't need fucking saving and even if I did I would never want it from you."

That hurt, deeply. "Fine, you wish to have retribution, you wish to make me pay for the lies, do so after we bring Trinity back."

"How the hell do you suppose we're going to do that?" Basil snapped, pressing Cooper harder against the wall.

"Just calm down now, Basil." Jonah tried to calm the situation.

Cooper tried to swallow but it wasn't an easy task with a hand clamped around your throat. "By teaming our powers together and allowing Starla to use us to break a hole in the Realm which will allow us to go in and bring her back."

Basil's fingers flexed. "It could work."

"I know it will work. But we need to act now. Time in the Realm is different than our time. Trinity has most likely been there for days already."

"I know that and we wasted precious time while I was knocked out," Basil stated harshly.

"If I hadn't knocked you out, you would have gone to the Dark Mystics for help. I couldn't allow that. I promised Trinity I wouldn't allow that and I meant to keep my promise to her. She knew it would be the first place you would go for help if she didn't come back."

"Damn, she knows me well." His lips curved up in a sly smile. Then he released Cooper and stepped back. "When this is over we will talk."

"If talk is all you wish, then so be it. I'm all right, darling," he reassured Gabriella as she fussed after him. "We need to get everything set up."



What the hell was taking Basil so long rescuing her? It was beginning to really worry Trinity. Had something happened to him, to Starla during the spell? She hoped desperately that everyone was all right. But if they were all right, why hadn't they come for her yet?

Damn it! She was getting tired of waiting.

She kicked the door in her frustration and swore at the stabbing pain that shot into her foot.

"Hello."

Pausing at the tiny voice outside the door, Trinity responded softly. "Hi."

"Are you scared inside of there?"

Trinity hobbled to the door and she wished she could open the tiny slit of a hole in the door to see who she was speaking to. "I'm more pissed than scared."

"That's a bad word."

Okay, so she was speaking with a kid. Watch the tongue. "Sorry. I'm just a little upset at being locked in here. What's your name?"

"I not supposed to talk to strangers."

"That's smart. Do you live here?" Why else would the kid be here?

"I shouldn't be talking to you. Mother will be upset with me."

"Who is your mother?" Trinity asked as she slid down the wall to come to a rest on her butt. She placed her ear to the door to be closer to the child. It wasn't that she couldn't hear her just fine through the metal, but it had been so long since she'd been close to anyone besides Rajana.

"I should go. You sound nice, though."

Trinity smiled. "Thank you. You sound nice too."

"What is your name?"

"Trinity."

"That's a pretty name. Oh—I need to go."

"Wait, don't go." When she got no response, Trinity stayed where she was, holding the tiny voice inside her head. If someone as sweet as that child could survive here, so could she.

So she waited.



With the circle created once more, everyone prepared to give the spell another try. Tension was high in the air and Cooper knew if it continued, neither he nor Basil would be able to feed off of the group's energy without damaging all of them. He needed to break the tension.

"Two guys were in a bar, and they were both watching the television when the news came on."

"What?" Basil's brow curled with curiosity.

"Just let me finish. Two guys were in a bar, and they were both watching the television when the news came on. It showed a guy on a bridge who was about to jump, obviously suicidal."

"What the hell are you doing, Cooper?" Basil snarled.

"Telling a joke but it won't be funny if you continue to interrupt me."

"Perhaps now isn't the right time for a joke, dear." Gabriella patted Cooper on the back lightly.

"Now is the perfect time," he continued. "'I'll bet you ten dollars he'll jump,' said the first guy. 'Bet you ten dollars he won't,' said the second guy. Then the man on the television closed his eyes and threw himself off the bridge. The second guy hands the first guy the money."

'I can't take your money,' said the first guy. 'I cheated you. The same story was on the five o'clock news.' 'No, no. Take it,' said the second guy. 'I saw the five o'clock news too. I just didn't think the guy was dumb enough to jump again.'"

He heard the first snicker, followed by another, then another before everyone burst into laughter.

"That was a good one," Danny chuckled.

"Damn, why can't I ever meet the stupid ones?" Jonah added, taking a deep breath to calm himself.

"You are the stupid one," Dante teased with a shove.

"Har har," Jonah replied sarcastically.

"Are we through?"

Everyone turned to Basil who was obviously annoyed.

"It was a funny joke," Gypsy piped up.

"We don't have time for jokes."

"It was needed to relieve the tension in the room." Cooper gave his jacket a tug. "We can proceed."

"Didn't think the guy was dumb enough to jump a second time," Danny snickered as he sat on the floor outside the circle. When Basil glared at him, Danny lifted his hands. "Well, it was funny."

"You did well, dear," Gabriella reassured him with a gentle hand to his shoulder. She took her seat beside Danny and smiled at him. "It was good."

"Now it's over. Concentrate people," Basil demanded.

"Okay, everyone take your place around the circle and hold hands. Basil, Cooper, in the middle." Starla waited while they stepped inside, then took her place between them.

"Kinky." Everyone glared at Gypsy. "Sorry."

They formed a triangle, taking each other's hands before sitting down inside the circle. "Now, I need everyone to take five deep, cleansing breaths," Starla instructed.

As told, everyone took their deep breaths, including Basil and Cooper.

"Are you two ready?" Starla tipped her head to both men.

"I've been ready for hours," Basil grumbled.

"You may proceed." Cooper gave her a nod.

"Close your eyes, take in a long deep breath, exhale and focus on the energy around you. Feed off of it."

Cooper focused his mind on those around him, drawing on their energy. He felt their energy permeate him, seeping into him like sharp

pin pricks to his mind. It did no more than irritate him and didn't cause him to break his concentration. The goal before him was much more important.

"Good, now give it to me."

Linking with Starla's mind, Cooper gave her everything he had. He felt Basil's presence as he released his energy to her as well. It was like being one within one body, all three connected. Then he felt Starla jerk. He clutched tighter to her hand, as did Basil as they fed her the energy. Cooper hoped she could handle it. When he'd released it all, he opened his eyes and saw hers were wide open and white.

She was absorbing their energy.

He sensed Danny's concern and turning his mind to him, reassured him that Starla would be fine. Then Cooper waited while she began to pant. Her body began to sway side to side, back and forward. Almost hypnotically.

Her head tilted back and when she screamed everyone jumped.

"Remain as you are. She is—" Coopers words were cut short when the electricity shot into him. Like he'd bitten into a live wire, his body began to convulse. Then he saw it. Light, so bright it nearly blinded him. He felt the air around him shake, if that was possible, then crack with an earsplitting sound. Starla's screams stopped and he saw her as clear as day in his mind.

"Go, now. I don't know how long I can hold it."

Grabbing onto Basil, Cooper pulled him into the rift.

They stood, staring at the vision before them and knew they were not welcomed by the heated glare in Rajana's ice blue eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Cooper felt the anger spill off of Rajana like hot lava. It scorched him, inside and out. But he held his ground.

"You think breaking through my barrier will award you my approval?"

"Hardly. I haven't sought your approval in years. We both know why I'm here," Basil stated calmly even though Cooper knew he felt the burn too. "Where are they?"

"I have no idea who you are referring to."

It shocked Cooper when Rajana flew backwards several feet to land on her rear end. Basil was there, standing over top of her in the blink of an eye. "Where are Trinity and Felicity?"

Basil was sent flying backwards several feet. Now it was Rajana's turn to hover over him. "Never raise your hand to me again," she belted loud enough to ripple the air.

"Go look for them," Cooper heard inside his mind and without response, went in search of the two they had come for. He could hear the fight between mother and son and prayed Basil came out of it alive. He was torn between doing as Basil asked, and doing what he had promised Trinity. To keep Basil safe.

"GO!"

Cooper jumped at the roar in his mind and did as was demanded of him, hurrying off to find Trinity first. How the devil was he supposed to find anyone in all this cloudy whiteness? It was like walking into the washroom after someone had had a steam bath or shower. It felt dewy and cool as he waded through the mist. If he was going to accomplish anything, he would have to do it using his powers.

Closing his eyes, he focused his mind on Trinity.

"Ah, finally, you have come to your senses and came to rescue me."

Cooper's heart sped up and he felt a sickness in his belly he hadn't felt in a long time. "Avadur."

"One and the same. I've been waiting for you."

"I am not here for you," he spoke using only his mind. He didn't know where Avadur was and he didn't care. The demon could rot here for all he cared.

"But you will save me. Won't you, Cooper."

He felt the fingers dig into his mind, slimy fingers that did more than search. They probed, as they attempted to control. "Never!" He shook his mind clear, or attempted to at least.

"You are mine now as you ever have been. Come to me, my son."

He felt his feet moving, felt his body slide through the misty dew and everything began to blur.

"Your mind is so clear now, so serene—ah, there is love inside of you now. How interesting."

Cooper's inner senses clicked in and he tried to push the probing fingers away.

"Oh no, no no no, not now that I have you. Come to me, my son."

"I—am—not—your son." But it didn't matter how much he tried, his mind was not his own.

"Your blood is my blood as surely as if I had birthed you. Release me, now."

"Cooper. Fight him!" Basil's voice inside his mind was loud enough to shatter glass and it was enough to break Avadur's control for a moment.

Because he didn't feel safe opening his mind again, Cooper did the next best thing. "Trinity! Where are you?" He yelled out to her as he walked blindly through the white mist.

"Cooper?"

"Yes, it's me. Where are you?"

"I don't know. I'll keep talking, just follow my voice."

He turned in the direction her voice came from.

"Where is Basil?"

Left, he decided, and kept pushing through the fog. It was so quiet, other than Trinity's voice. It was like nothing else existed but the two of them.

But he knew better.

"He's occupying his mother while I search for you." "What do you mean by occupying?"

The skepticism and worry in her voice came through loud and clear and as he approached a lone door in the midst of nothing, he knew he'd found her. "They're having tea. Keep talking." Her voice was growing stronger, which told him he was on the right track.

"Ha ha, Coop. Now tell me the truth."

Through the mist he saw a door. "Occupying, talking to her, distracting her. Say something."

"Jesus, he better not be doing something stupid."

She was definitely behind that door. "You've met Basil, haven't you? Now step away from the doorway. I'm going to attempt to kick it down."

"Right. Like you would—"

He booted the door and it flew open.

"Holy shit!"

"We must hurry." Taking her hand, he raced off into the fog and towards the sounds of fighting.

"That was some kick, Cooper. Who would have thought you had it in you. Oh, shit."

They came to an abrupt halt. Before them both Rajana and Basil hovered in mid air, unconscious, while Avadur stood before them.

Cooper knew now what had to be done. He grabbed Trinity by the arms and jerked her to face him. "Tell Gabriella that I love her eternally and that I will do my best to make it back to her."

"What the hell are you talking about, Cooper?"

"Just do it." Dragging her towards Basil, he kept his eyes away from Avadur long enough to grab hold of Basil's arm. He saw the rift and pushed them both through.

He turned around as the rift closed and lost his breath when Avadur clutched hold of his neck.

"You will pay for that."



Gabriella gasped when Trinity and Basil fell from the ceiling to drop down directly in the center of the circle. Everyone jumped and scrambled to their feet.

"Oh man, am I glad to see you."

Gabriella watched as Jonah ran to Trinity, throwing his arms around her. She looked up at the ceiling, fully expecting Cooper to drop down at any minute. She heard the voices around her, cheering at their success, welcoming both Trinity and Basil back. Still no Cooper.

She was growing very worried.

"Where is Cooper?"

"Oh, um..." Trinity stammered.

"What? Where is he?" she demanded more sternly. When Trinity walked up to her and took hold of her by the arms, she knew it wasn't good. "No. No, you will not tell me he is gone."

"He told me to tell you—"

"No!"



Cooper looked into the eyes of evil and it took him back to a time in his life he was not proud of. He had always valued his independence, his tenacity, his ability to see the light at the end of the darkness, but after Avadur beat him down, he'd lost all of that. Held by the man who had tried to strip everything that was good inside of him away, Cooper knew that if he didn't fight now, he would never get it back.

He had someone precious to return to and no one was going to stop him.

"You controlled me once. But I am no man's puppet." He clutched onto the hand that clasped around his neck with one hand and reached out to grab Rajana with his other. Then, using everything he had inside of him, Cooper sent her his power. He hoped it would be enough to give her strength to break free of Avadur's hypnotic hold.

When she gasped, he knew it had worked.

"Release him!"

The hand that held onto his throat released and Cooper fell with a thud to the ground beneath him. Then she turned on Cooper.

"You are too dangerous."

Cooper screamed when she clasped onto his head.



Trinity took Gabriella's hands in hers and spoke solemnly. "He loves you very much, Gabriella. He wanted me to tell you that."

"No." She held firm, refusing to believe Cooper was gone. "He will return to me."

"Gabriella," Basil stepped up now to speak to her, "my father was free. He and Cooper are linked by blood. My father can control him; he did while we were up there. Avadur will not release him."

"I refuse to believe it. My Cooper is stronger than that. He will fight to be free, to come back to me." She knew that in her heart.

"Gabriella—"

"Stop trying to convince me. I am not in denial. I just know the man I love and I know he will not rest until he is back here with me. With all of us."

"Gabriella."

They all jumped when Cooper fell from the ceiling to land at their feet with a thud.

"See. I told you he would return to me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

If this was what it felt like to be born, Cooper completely understood why babies thrust from the comfort of their mother's womb wailed as loudly as they did. It was not a smooth transition.

"Oh, darling, are you all right?"

Right there at his side was the woman he had fought to return to. She knelt down beside him, taking him in her arms and soothing him with kisses to his face.

What could he do but laugh.

"The joke, right?" Gypsy asked.

"Let the joke go, honey," Dante advised.

"I knew you would come back to me. They didn't believe me but I knew."

All he wanted was those lips on his, and taking Gabriella's face in his hands, yanked her to him. He didn't give a damn about the people surrounding them. He was just glad to be home and in the arms of the woman he loved.

"Aw, how romantic," Gypsy sighed.

"How did you manage to get away?"

He pulled his lips away from his wife with a heavy sigh and leaned his head on hers. He supposed that would have to last him until

they were alone. "I allowed your mother to draw on my power and it was enough for her to break his control."

"She just let you go?" Basil asked.

"She pushed me out. I am apparently too dangerous to be near Avadur, given he can control me, so she released me."

"Just like that?" Basil sounded very skeptical.

"Yes and no. She did something to my head. I'm not entirely sure what but it gave me a nasty headache." Cooper turned now, to look at the people around him. Everyone looked...odd...a little distorted.

"Your eyes!"

Cooper turned his attention to Trinity. "What about them?"

"They're yellow!" Basil exclaimed.

Gabriella turned him to face her and by her reaction Cooper gathered it was not good. "Are you wearing your contacts?"

He touched his fingers to his eyelids. "No."

"How is it possible that his eyes are yellow?" Trinity asked Basil.

"What did you say my mother did to you?"

Cooper looked back up at Basil. "She clasped a hold of my head and I felt a sharp pain that started in my head and speared into my body."

"Try transporting yourself somewhere."

He tilted his head at Basil. "May I inquire why?"

"Just give it a try."

With an inward shrug, Cooper did as Basil asked. And found himself still sitting in the very same spot he'd fallen to. "What on earth?"

"Read my mind."

Cooper looked up at him, quizzically. "I can't. What did she do to me?"

"She took away the part of you that was a part of him."

"Anyone else as lost as I am?" Dante asked and received a nod from most everyone in the room.

"When she took hold of your head, she stripped away your abilities, the very thing that would allow my father to control you. She's worried he will break out of there," Basil explained.

"So are you." Basil had every reason to worry, and even if what he said was true about Rajana stripping him of his abilities, Cooper worried as well.

"I think we all should be worried. If Avadur got out of whatever my mother put him in once, he can do it again."

"I guess it is our job then to make sure he doesn't have access to leave the Realm."

"How exactly do we do that?" Jonah asked Cooper.

"We seal up the rift we made and put a block on the Realm so no one else can enter or leave. Could such a thing be done, Starla?"

She shrugged "I have no idea. I guess I need to ask my mother and the high priestess. I'm sure it would take a lot—"

"No."

All eyes turned to Trinity.

"If we seal it up, I'll never get my daughter. I'm sorry if leaving it open may help Avadur break free, but it's a risk I'm willing to take," Trinity explained, then turned to Basil. "We can handle anything Avadur throws at us. We have before, and we will again. I want our daughter home where she belongs."

Nodding, he stroked a hand along her cheek. "Then it is what we will do. We won't stop until we have her back."

She nodded, her eyes glistening with tears.

Basil turned to Cooper and as Cooper got to his feet, Basil held out his hand. "You were willing to sacrifice yourself for me, for us. Thank you."

Cooper took Basil's hand in his, the grip firm, and when Cooper looked into Basil's eyes, he saw the warmth that had once been held for him glittering in the eyes of the man he thought of as his son. "I told you once I would give my life for you. I realize what I did hurt you, and for that I am sorry. But it was never done to slight you or hurt you in any way. I thought it was best to keep the secret to save us all."

"I think I understand that now."

"Now it is I who must thank you."

Basil's brow curled in confusion. "Me? For what?"

"If you had not called out to me, if you had not given me the opportunity to break Avadur's hold, I might very well be in his control right now."

"I may have given you the opportunity but it wasn't me that helped you break his control." Basil's eyes drifted to Gabriella.

Cooper linked his fingers with Gabriella and brought them to his lips. "It is true. I would have fought to the death to return to my love." Then he looked back at Basil, to everyone in the room. "I was not gifted with a family before I was taken by Avadur it was always just my father and me. But I like to think that I have a family now. In all of you."

"Aw, you're going to make me cry." Gypsy sniffled.

"Stand in line," Raven added with a bright smile.

"Will we be able to move on from this?" Cooper asked Basil.

"I think we still have some work ahead of us...but yeah, I think we can move on." He held his hand out to Cooper once more.

Taking it, Cooper didn't just shake it this time but pulled Basil towards him and embraced him in a strong, fatherly hug. It felt good to have Basil back in his life and he was going to make damn sure nothing came between them again.

"This really is a mushy moment." Starla sniffled, then leaned against Danny's shoulder.

He released Basil and turned his attention to Trinity. "Whatever you need to find your daughter, you have only to ask."

"I know. Thanks, Cooper."

"But for now, I would like some time with my wife." Taking Gabriella's hand in his, he led her out the door and away from the castle.

"Where are we going?"

"My house."

"Cooper."

He stopped, turned to her, and silenced her with a kiss. "In a moment. When we get home." She remained silent the rest of the way to his house and the instant they were inside, he spun her around, pushed her up against the wall and took her mouth in a fevered kiss that he was sure would leave her breathless.

He was not disappointed.

"When I decided to help Basil get Trinity back, I knew there was a chance I might not come back. I also knew I would fight to the death to come back. But when I saw Avadur controlling both Basil and Rajana, I feared none of us would ever return. I vowed to Basil long ago that I would protect him from his evil father at any cost. I kept that promise. I knew if he were to remain in the Realm, Avadur would torture him mercilessly and I knew Avadur would take over the Realm and then we would all suffer. So I acted quickly and pushed both he and Trinity through the rift."

He twirled a lock of Gabriella's hair around his index finger as he spoke. "I know to you it was no more than minutes that I was gone, but for me it was hours. Time moves quickly in the Realm. Those hours I was without you were the hardest of my life and the frown tells me I've confused you."

She chuckled lightly. "Just a little."

"Come, sit." He led her to the sofa in his living room and once they'd both taken a seat, he took her hands in his while he spoke. "These past twenty years without you were very hard for me."

"I understand that."

He nodded and continued. "But I always knew I could come to you and sit with you, be with you, even if you didn't know I was there. While I was in the Realm, I was completely without you. I never want to be without you ever again."

She lifted his hands to her chest. "I feel the same way, Cooper."

"I do not regret turning you. My only regret is waiting so long to do so. I was tempted often, but I waited, hoping to find a cure. You may not understand, or may be angry at what I have to say now, and for that I am sorry. But I am glad I did not find a cure and I am glad I turned you because, now, I won't fear that you will die before me and I will have to live out the rest of my existence alone, without you."

"I understand and I'm not angry." She placed her hand on his cheek and he leaned into it. "I love you, Cooper, with every ounce of my being. I am glad you turned me as well and, to be honest, I wish you had done it long ago. I think that now, but I know if you had turned me sooner, before I became ill, I might not have been as accepting of my new life. Now was the right time to bring me to life." She kissed him slowly, once, twice and on the third kiss she left her lips on his a few moments longer. "Thank you."

His heart nearly burst with love. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her tight to his chest. He was never letting her go ever again.

"No, my darling Gabriella, thank you."

EPILOGUE

Felicity sat in her room, admiring the dolls that lined the shelf on her wall and felt a certain kinship with them. She often felt like a doll whose only purpose was to be on display. There was life beyond the purity of her sanctuary and she so longed to find it. If only she could.

When her mother walked into her room, Felicity turned, her long black hair fell over her shoulder and she brushed it back. She often wished she could be rid of the length of her hair as well.

"Have you come to give me the answers I seek?"

Her mother, Rajana, walked to her, running her hand along the length of her hair as she spoke. "There are always a plethora of questions with you."

"I have a curious mind."

"That you do, my sweet." Rajana leaned down to kiss the top of her head. "What would you like to know first?"

"Who was that lady in that cell?"

Rajana floated along as she spoke, straightening bedding, aligning ornaments. "That...was your birth mother." She turned now, and her face became very stern. "You remember what I told you about her?"

Felicity nodded, her head bobbing. "That she is the essence of evil, wants only to ruin you and take over your place as reigning queen. But she seemed so nice."

"You are young still, my sweet girl, and impressionable." Rajana walked back to her now and ran her fingers through her long hair. "Evil wears the face of kindness to lure in its victims. She would care for you as delicately as she would a used rag. If I hadn't taken you from her, she would have led you down that evil path as well. I could not have that."

"What about those men? The two with blue eyes. Who were they?"

"Her consorts. There now, I've answered your questions. Would you like to take a walk?"

Felicity brushed her hand along the ivory skin of the porcelain doll on her dresser and shook her head. "I've seen all there is to see here." She looked up at her mother. "I wish to see earth now."

"You are not ready," Rajana snapped, then taking the doll from her, set it on the top shelf on the wall. "Now do as your mother asks."

"Why can't I go down for even a moment? I've heard stories about the beauty of the world. I only want to see for myself."

Rajana clasped her hands on Felicity's chin and knelt down to eye level. "You will do as your mother asks and nothing more. Is that understood?"

She glared at her mother and refused to respond. When the fingers tightened, she held her ground.

"Is that understood, Felicity?"

Holding her eyes as narrow as possible, she snapped back and the electricity danced in the room. "Yes, Mother."

"Good. Now, let's enjoy a walk together while I still have time."

She took her mother's hand as they walked from the room. Deep inside her mind, she thought of ways to break free.

She didn't just want to see the world. She wanted to see her parents.

Even if they were evil.

Because deep inside she wondered if they were so evil, did that mean she would become evil as well?

Biography

Raised on a rural farm in Saskatchewan, Shiela Stewart relied on her vivid imagination to fill her days. Never did she realize that her need to tell a story would someday lead to becoming a published romance author. In the fall of two thousand and six, Shiela published her very first book and hasn't stopped since.

When not writing, Shiela spends time with the love of her life, William and their three children. She has a strong affection for animals which is evident in the five cats, one dog, three turtles and ten fish she owns. Some of her passions aside from writing are drawing and painting and proudly displays her artwork in murals in her home.

Her favorite time of day is sunset and loves to stargaze.

Other Books by Shiela Stewart

Discovery in Passion: Passion Series Book 1

Escape in Passion: Passion Series Book 2

Mercy in Passion: Passion Series Book 3

Seducing the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 1

Desiring the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 2

Embracing the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 3

Charming the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 4

Tempting the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 5

Penetrating the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 6

Consuming the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 7

Surviving the Darkness: Darkness Series Book 8