

Vlad's Story

by Carolyn Faulkner

Prologue

Another New Years. A millenium, come and gone. Where would it end for him . . . he had given up wondering centuries ago. Vlad snorted derisively. He'd probably still be around to hear people bitch about Y3K, unfortunately. At least the world had improved in the way of creature comforts, and the technology! He didn't eat that night – like a lot of nights lately - spending it instead in front of a television that was practically as big as the bed he was born in, watching the world celebrate having made it through two thousand years. There was nothing to celebrate about it. It was just a year, like any other year, melding into so many damned years. "Damned" being the operative word.

What was the line from that song? "Alone again, naturally." Vlad had been reveling in a deep blue funk for the past forty years, ever since - . He viciously clamped down on the painful memory, but not quickly enough to prevent the tears from pooling in his eyes. He was the oldest of his kind, but all that meant was that he had lost the most – friends, families, wives, lovers, the list was never ending, and the idea of adding another name to that list was utterly abhorrent.

"Do something! Go out there and get involved," his vampire friend Alexander had encouraged, to no avail. Finally, even he went his own way, saying, "Fine. Sit there and rot, reliving old memories. But why choose such a slow death?" He flipped Vlad a wooden stake. "Use it. Better to die quickly than waste away to nothingness. But before you do, you should write it all down. What a story it would make, huh, old man?" Though they looked the same age, Alexander was only about two hundred years old, to Vlad's five hundred plus, and he had taken on the annoying habit of referring to Vlad as if he were the equivalent of a vampire senior citizen. Perhaps because that was how he was acting.

He hadn't taken care with his appearance in decades, slipping back into the old ways before Isabella, although not quite all the way. Blood was much more available nowadays; there was no need to hunt, not that he had slipped quite that far regardless. No reason to undo the good behavior of the past three hundred years just for the taste of some wretched yuppie.

Although he was hardly stupid and had learned the lessons the Jesuits had beaten into him – sums, languages, history, Vlad had never considered himself much of a man of letters, fighting had always been his forte. At heart, he would always be a warrior, and

damned proud of it. He'd defeated the Turks against impossible odds, driven off various "friendly" invasions . . . he had envisioned dying with his sword in his hand, not in the cross of Christ. But here he was, almost frail. Shrinking. Weak. Weaker than he'd been since the moment he learned Elizabeta's cruel fate.

For the first time in a long time, he felt hungry. He had something to do – a reason to live. Well, exist, anyway. Alexander's idea had merit. Vlad had a half a millenium's worth of experiences in his old journals. With a new sense of purpose, he collected them, reminiscing through tears sometimes, and made some notes. But he realized that the scope of his mission was too much to accomplish alone. He needed an assistant. A Renfield, if you will.

A woman, of course.

Chapter 1

Vampires Rule

Victoria hurried into Cam's office, her hands full of junk, as usual. Finally, annoyed and frustrated well beyond endurance, she threw her briefcase, her pocketbook, her laptop, and the can of soda she'd just wrestled from an ungrateful machine onto the burgundy leather couch, and groaned.

"Arrrrrrrgggghhhhhh!" For added emphasis, she stomped her feet, then, feeling much better for the tantrum, she told herself quietly. "Deep, cleansing breaths. In through my nose, out through my mouth."

"Why are you doing Lamaze breathing, are you pregnant?" Cam asked quietly from right next to her. She screamed and jumped, hitting her ankle on the coffee table. Cripes, the man was moved as silently as a cat!

"Oh, sonofa –" she wailed, noticing the huge run in her brand new nylons that went all the way up the back of her leg, like a seam should have.

Her boss wagged a finger at her. "Uh-uh-uh, you don't want to finish that, now do you?"

Vicky grimaced. No, she didn't. He'd been threatening to do something atrocious about her gutter mouth, and she had no doubt he'd carry out his threat to take her over his knee if he heard one more vulgarity on company time. She pouted exaggeratedly. "I was going to say 'son of a gun'. Is that better, Boss?"

"Marginally," he commented laconically from behind his desk while Vicky flopped down on the couch bonelessly. "I have a new assignment for you, about which I also have considerable reservations."

Exhausted, but intrigued, she leaned forward. "How dangerous can being a temp secretary be? Where are you sending me to North Korea? Iraq? Rwanda?"

"To 1473 Mulholland Lane, tonight, in about – " he checked his watch – "half an hour."

Victoria considered this for a moment. The only house she knew on Mulholland Lane was the old mansion, which hadn't been inhabited in years. "To do what, exactly?"

Cameron threw a paper onto his desk and eyed her carefully. "To speak to a Mr. Sepesh regarding some word processing he needs done. To hear him tell it, he's virtually housebound, and has no clerical skills of his own. It's going to be quite involved, and as it will probably be mostly night work, he's going to pay you time and a half even for your regular hours."

"Cha-ching!" Dollar signs danced in her eyes.

He was wearing a less mercenary, more concerned expression. "I don't think I like this, not one bit."

She sensed – correctly – that he was one step away from vetoing this assignment. Cameron Deverell ran a chain of temp agencies across Massachusetts, and as he lived near Boston, he still kept his hand intimately involved in the running of this one, although, with his money, he could easily have left the day to day indignities to a flunky. Cam treated his employees like family, most especially the women. While conscious of current sexual harassment law, he still managed to see to the safety of his female employees while they were out on assignments, whether they liked it or not. Vic didn't, particularly, but she put up with it since they'd known each other for quite a while, well before she came to work for him. They were very good friends, and it made him extra protective of her. Try as he might, and as chauvinistic as it probably sounded, he made no apologies for the fact that sending a woman out to a man's house at night made something twist in his stomach.

"It just doesn't feel right to me, Vic," he admitted.

She sighed heavily. "It never does."

"He asked for a woman."

"What's he going to have me doing?"

"Word processing. He mentioned something about his memoirs."

Vicky stood up, trying to get out the door before he had a chance to tell her she couldn't go.

"Just a minute there, Victoria Regina." The sound of her full name made her eyes roll dramatically. Cam grabbed her shoulders and Vicky looked up at him, noting that his eyes were a deep brown, with gold flecks. He wore his black hair closely trimmed – a remnant of too many years in the military – and occasionally sported a mustache. The breadth of his shoulders at this close range prevented her from seeing around him, but his size had nothing to do with fat. She doubted there was a spare ounce of anything but muscle on him, which he had loads of. The routine was so familiar she began to recite it brattily with him. "You will wear your beeper. You will carry your cell phone and your pepper spray. You will only stay an hour this evening, and he knows that. You will use the limo to and from and if you don't stop parroting everything I'm saying I am going to take you over my knee!"

The list was recited back to him sarcastically. "Beeper. On. Cell phone. Charged, and on. Pepper spray, full and peppery." After showing him everything she dumped it into her purse, then saluted him smartly and turned to go, but not before he laid a smart swat to her butt.

"You are too cheeky for your own good, little girl. That's going to get you into trouble one day," he growled, walking her to the door.

"I'm shaking in my boots."

"You're wearing sandals."

"Exactly."

"Call me the minute you get home, and it better not be any later than eight o'clock, if you know what's good for you," he called after her, realizing as he watched her get into the white stretch limo how much he really detested sending her to this guy, but he had no choice. Even the men he employed preferred to be home, eating dinner with the family at this hour. Vic was always available for any sort of last minute assignment. As she often said with a wistful grin, sometimes it paid to have no life.

Vicky walked up to the large French doors and rang the bell. The door was opened instantly, and she gave the thumbs up sign to Harry, the limo driver, so that he could feel free to leave. The man who extended his hand to her once she was inside looked like a well-dressed rock star. His long red hair hung in loose curls onto his shoulders, and he had the most startling blue eyes she'd ever seen. Few rock stars, however, would ever be caught dead in a three-piece suit. This guy filled his like it was made for him – if he could afford to occupy the Mulholland mausoleum then he very well may have had it hand made to his measurements, which were impressive. Up until now, Cam was the biggest man she'd ever seen. He made Cam seem smaller, although they were probably of much the same proportions – impressively broad shouldered, Y-shaped, muscle-on-muscle. Hmmmm. Maybe he was a retired body builder, or pro wrestler . . .

"I am Vlad Tsepes."

What was it about that name that sounded terribly familiar to her?

When she realized she had been staring agog at the man for several minutes, she blushed fire engine red and laughed nervously, putting her small hand in his. Vicky had a good, firm handshake. She detested women – and men – who shook hands like an arthritic grandparent well before they were one. To her surprise, this gentleman turned her hand within his, and bent over and kissed the back of it gently in a very old world gesture.

When he straightened, meeting her eyes again, Vicky barely articulated, "Vicky. Vicky Robinson."

"Victoria?" he questioned, turning to walk into what she thought must be the front study.

"Uh, yes." She was right about the room; it was wall to wall books, with a partners' desk in front of the bay window. It appeared to be where he had chosen to start what would probably end up being extensive renovations.

"You must call me Vlad."

"Thank you." It took her a long moment to realize that he was standing until she chose to sit down. Good God, who had that kind of manners any more? She shifted her position in the comfortable leather chair, then cleared her throat nervously. What was with her tonight? She was never nervous on a job, in fact, she was the only one who was usually setting the client at ease. "Well, tonight I'm only here to get the gist of the job, and set up what hours and for how long you'll need me."

He had seated himself on the end of a tapestried sofa, looking very out of place on the delicate Victorian settee, as if it would give way under his muscular bulk. "Full time and then some, for the foreseeable future."

"What hours?"

"Well, as I prefer to work in the afternoons and evening, I would say three to eleven. And Mr. Deverell mentioned that you were likely to be interested in over-time."

Dracula.

Cripes. She was sitting not three feet away from a man who wore the name of the most infamous vampire of them all. What had he ever done to his mother to deserve that nasty bit of karma? That was why that name rang a bell.

"Victoria?" He intensely disliked having to repeat himself, and he could tell she wasn't paying any attention to him. There was a small, secret smile on her face.

"I'm sorry . . . Your accent. You must be of Eastern European descent."

Vlad looked surprised. "Yes, I am from Romania."

The smile became a broad grin. "Is Vlad Tsepes –" she pronounced the name correctly – with a "ts" sound at the beginning and a "sh" sound at the end - whereas Cam hadn't and that impressed him " – a family name?"

His smile was much less bright, as he looked at her consideringly. "Yes, you might say that."

"You must get teased about it all the time."

Few people would ever live through the experience of teasing him. "What do you mean?"

Vicky chuckled, and he liked its carefree sound. "Well, I'd hazard a guess that in the U.S., naming your child after Dracula would result in child abuse charges. Maybe kids in Romania are more forgiving, but if you'd grown up here you'd've changed your name by now."

"Actually, you're the first person who has noticed its origin, and the first person in years who's pronounced it correctly." God knows, the English mangled their own language badly enough; they should never be allowed to attempt a foreign one.

Somehow, he noticed, discussing "Dracula" put her at ease. How strange. She was much less tense right now than she had been just a few minutes before. Vlad took a moment to consider her. Generally, he disliked modern women, not because of any one particular trait but rather because the whole gender seemed to have lost its identity. Society seemed to tell women nowadays that they needed to be more like men, at a time when it was never more important that they be totally different. He had no complaints with independent females; in fact he supported the idea. But independence and strength did not preclude femininity. Vlad had been amazed when he opened the door to see a woman in hose, a moderate length skirt and a pretty but businesslike shirt. And she even had long hair! Most of the people he'd seen when he ventured out – which, granted, was a rare occasion lately – were wearing denim trousers and cotton t-shirts that had seen much better days. Apparently during his self-inflicted isolation it had become fashionable to dress like a beggar regardless of one's means.

Victoria was not a gorgeous woman, but rather a pleasant looking one who became much better looking when she was laughing or smiling, which she seemed to do a lot, in a manner that invited her companion to join in the joke, even if it was at her expense. She had long blonde hair that was full and thick but not well styled, expressive gray-green eyes that shone with intelligence and humor, and pale, full red lips. There were small diamonds in her ears, and she wore a light, enticing scent that piqued his senses. Hmmmmmm.

"I guess sometimes it's an advantage to be a vampire nut."

His eyebrow went up questioningly, and she frowned.

"You can't have been here long and not know that the vampires rule nowadays."

Startled did not adequately describe how he was feeling. "What do you mean?"

Warming to her subject, she leaned a little toward him, giving him another nice whiff of the perfume and her own enticing scent. "Well, the popularity of Anne Rice, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, if you go to a search engine on the Web and search 'vampire' you're going to get tens of thousands of hits . . ." Boy, had she ever lost him. He was looking at her like she was speaking Esperanto. "Never mind." With a playful grin, Vicky sat back in her chair. "But if your name is no lie, and you are a vampire, Mister, you've got it made in the shade."

"Why?" he was extremely intrigued by what she was saying.

"Blood banks, eternal life, money galore, and women that would line up as far as the eye could see to be bitten."

Vlad smiled at her enthusiasm. He would have to have her expound on this theory some time soon. "Well, I must admit that with my little venture here I thought the name might add something . . ."

"What am I going to be helping you with?"

He explained what he would need from her, and she was very eager to assist him. In the middle of their conversation, her cell phone rang. Vicky checked her watch. It was 8:05. She answered mechanically, knowing whom it was. "Yes, Cam, I'm fine. I'll be home in a half an hour and I'll call you then."

"You'd better," he shot back in a raspy voice. "I'm sending Harry now."

"Fine." She snapped the phone closed and tucked it back into her purse. "Over-protective boss," she said by way of explanation.

Vlad rose when she did. "As well he should be. I won't keep you any longer, then. Tomorrow is soon enough to get started."

Vicky led the way to the front door. "It was very nice to meet you. I'm sure I can be a big help in getting this together for you."

Vlad bowed and kissed her hand again. She was definitely going to get spoiled by that in no time flat. "I would be very grateful for any help you can give me. I am somewhat out of my element here." In more than just the writing, he thought wryly.

Harry honked the horn when he pulled up, and Vicky walked out to the car. Vlad shut the door then leaned against it for a moment, wondering for the first time in a very long time if he would be adding more chapters to his journal.

Chapter 2

Elizabeta

7 March, In the Year of Our Lord 1453

It was almost too much for Elizabeta. Although she and Vlad had known that they were destined to marry, all of a sudden it was coming up too quickly on her. Within two

weeks, she would be his bride. As they had been formally betrothed at seven, and he was six years her senior, her parents had allowed them quite a lot of time together, and both parents thoroughly approved of the marriage. They were very well matched temperamentally – Vlad was a dashing no-nonsense straight forward man prone to the occasional bad mood, and Elizabeth was an intelligent, spirited if somewhat headstrong consort who was the only person who could cajole the giant of a redhead out of his doldrums and into a presentable mood that didn't send everyone but her running. He was her rock, and she was his sunshine, and it had been that way as long as anyone in either family could remember.

It was truly a love match, and everyone in the kingdom knew it. Practically the entire population of the country turned out for the nuptial celebration, and as they left on their way to their own lodgings, crowds of people lined the narrow streets to throw flowers at them. Vlad and Elizabetha, in turn, distributed coins to the greedy well wishers.

When they were finally alone, for the first time in years, it seemed, although it had really only been a couple weeks, she fell into his arms with a giggle.

"I think someone has had a little too much celebration," Vlad caught her tightly to him, lifting her off her feet with little effort. She probably didn't weigh as much as the heavy broadsword he'd lifted every day of his life since he was thirteen.

Serious, suddenly, she pulled a little away from him, contented and trusting in his powerful arms. "We'll never be alone again," she whispered, and he tightened his grip just a little in reply.

"Never, my love."

He loved her slowly and sweetly all night long, bringing her to pleasure despite the pain of his first invasion. Elizabetha reveled in his attentions, exploring him shyly then more boldly at his suggestion. Vlad, who had been held captive in the Sultan's palace for several years, had used the time wisely to learn many tricks from his own harem regarding a woman's pleasure and how to encourage and ensure it. He had become quite expert at it, as well as the punishing aspects of arousal without completion.

Bet was just the slightest bit spoiled – not nasty or vicious, just headstrong and stubborn. She was the only child of doting parents, and was quite used to getting her own way. As he was to be her husband, he invited the family to live with him, and her parents gave him their permission to correct certain aspects of Elizabetha's behavior. They allowed him to reward or punish her behavior, as he saw fit, from the time he was eighteen and she was twelve. Bet had not bent easily to his will, possessing a strong one of her own. It

took all of his considerable concentration to follow the advice his father had given him regarding women – to break a female to his hand as carefully as he would a young mare, with strength, consistency, and patience. Vlad knew that if he became overbearingly dominant with Bet, he might damage her spirit, make her afraid of him, and this was not at all what he wanted. But with constant, consistent discipline, fair but strict punishments, and a clear understanding of exactly what he expected of her helped to mold her to him, rather than away from him.

At first, the spankings had been frightening in their frequency. He had had to tan her hide three or four times a day for the first month, until she learned what he would and would not tolerate, and precisely where the line was drawn. Bet's mother, Elysia, even came to him during that first month – entirely on her own as Elizabeta was much, much too proud to have asked her to intercede – to ask him to be more lenient on her pride and joy.

It was probably the fact that this was the forth night in a row that he had had to send Bet packing off to bed very early in the evening with a blistered bottom and no supper. If Vlad knew mothers, Elysia was more concerned about her daughter's lack of food than the fact that Elizabeta's bottom now throbbed from a painful taste of his leather belt.

He understood her concerns, and would hope for nothing less than such a loving mother for his wife-to-be. But he would not be deterred, either. No one would rule in his house but him. It would be a benevolent dictatorship, yes, but a dictatorship nonetheless. Vlad calmed Elysia's fears as best he could, betting her a new diamond broach that within the next two weeks, the punishments would lessen naturally, through Elizabeta's own behavior, and not any relaxation of expectations on his part.

And, of course, he was right. As she learned what he wanted from her, gained confidence in his respect for her abilities, and her place in his life, Bet's spankings became less and less frequent. As Elizabeth grew and changed, so did the nature of their relationship. He had always been and would always be her lord and master, but as she grew into adulthood Vlad began to treat her as an adult with adult responsibilities and expectations of behavior. He monitored her schooling, as well, knowing that in order to keep their chaotic nation together, he would need more than a vacuous decoration on his arm. Vlad would need to rely on Elizabeta's intellect as heavily as his own. Dismal performances in the schoolroom were not tolerated any more readily than bad behavior.

Now, here she lay in his arms, still breathing heavily from her first few orgasms. Although Elizabeta, the minx, had done her best for the two months prior to their marriage to seduce him into her bed, Vlad would not allow them to anticipate their vows.

In fact, it had been less than a week ago that she had been teasing him mercilessly,

pressing her body against him, brushing her breasts against his back, leaning over him unnecessarily just for an excuse to touch him. He was sitting at the desk he used while working, and she was supposed to be looking over some correspondence they had just received, to give him her opinion. But she just couldn't seem to leave him alone for ten seconds, and Vlad wasn't getting anything done.

Bet leaned past him again on some pretext, pressing her ample breasts into the side of his face. That was it. He pushed the chair back away from the desk and she lost her balance, falling naturally over his lap in a position she had assumed more times than she would like to remember. Bet tried to get up, but a heavy arm prevented that. Uh-oh. She hadn't meant to anger him, merely tease him a little, hopefully into bed. There went her skirts, though, right over her back and head. Now she couldn't even see what he was going to do, beyond the obvious. "Vlad, no, I'm sorry – "

"It's a little too late for 'sorry', sweet," he growled, making fast work of pulling her hose and pantalets down to the backs of her knees.

She didn't want to go to bed early without supper, or be put in the corner for what would seem like a year. "Please don't spank me –"

As he had said, too late. His callused paw landed on her bottom with a resounding SMACK. Vlad's hand spankings were just as bad as almost any of the other implements he used. The strength contained in those heavy, muscular arms and his huge palm and fingers could run an enemy through with a broadsword that stood as tall as some men. And although Elizabeta knew he loved her too much to ever do her any permanent damage or commit any truly violent act towards her, Vlad could certainly put that strength to work on her bottom, especially when one stroke covered nearly the whole of her cheeks.

"Yeowwww! Oww! Please I won't tease you anymooooooooorrreowwww!" Nothing she'd ever screamed had ever done her any good, probably because he was too busy lecturing her.

SMACK!WHAP!SPANK! "You're damned right you won't be teasing me any more, because once I get through setting fire to your butt –" WHACK!WHACK!SLAP

"- you're going to spend some time in your favorite part of this room." SPANK!SLAP! WHAP! "You're not a little girl any more –" SMACK!SLAP!SLAP!SLAP! " – but as long as you act like one –" SPANK!WHACK!SMACK! " – I'm going to keep tanning your hide until my rules sink in!" SWAT!SWAT!SLAP!WHAP!CRACK!

He was utterly relentless, punishing her until he thought she had learned her lesson. By that time, Elizabeta was moaning and sobbing pitifully. It was not mercy that made him stop, however, it was the fact that his arm was getting tired, and her bottom was beginning to look like someone had branded her with the imprint of a very large palm. Vlad kept her over his knees for a few moments, but offered her no comfort for her misbehavior. Then he helped her up, keeping her hose where they had ended up around her ankles, and held her hand while she hobbled shamefully across the room to the corner he always put her in.

"Nose," he reminded, and she touched her nose to the spot he had marked years and years before. "Hands." Bet laced her fingers on the top of her head. Bending forward to meet that marker made her bottom jut out embarrassingly, and Vlad compounded her embarrassment by lifting her skirts up and over her head again, so that if someone had come into the room – which they weren't likely to do – all they would have seen was a very sorry young lady's extremely well beaten bottom, but they probably could not have discerned its owner.

Vlad reclaimed his seat behind the desk, hoping that having dealt harshly with her he could finally accomplish something. He became absorbed in his work for a long while, but kept a constant ear out for any real distress she might be feeling, sniffles and hiccoughing sobs notwithstanding. Occasionally, he would lift his head and take the time to survey his proud little wife-to-be as she suffered in such a humiliating state, desperate to move but too stubborn to fidget. She might be headstrong and a bit too proud of herself, but he was proud of her, too. No one in the world could hold a candle to his Elizabeta, and though he was hard on her, he knew that she understood he would gladly give his life for her. She was his world, in one small, feisty little package. Or should that be 'baggage'? he thought with a grin.

It had been almost an hour, which was a very long time for one little girl to spend in the corner. Vlad rose and went to her, first taking her arms down from her head and kneading them along with her shoulders, knowing her muscles would be exhausted and painful. Then he put her skirts down as carefully as if he were dressing a queen. Such powerful feelings of love overwhelmed him that he gathered her up into his arms to sit the both of them down in the big overstuffed chair he favored. Bet tucked her forehead into the side of his neck while one small hand clenched his shoulder. Vlad could feel the wetness of her tears on his skin, and his only thought was to comfort her, letting her cry it out and wet his favorite tunic as he took the pins out of her long black hair, stroking it away from her face lovingly.

"I do so hate to punish you, my bratty little one," he whispered, pressing a very gentle kiss to her forehead.

Bet sniffed unbecomingly, and Vlad smiled. "Then why do you?" she returned pertly, searching his eyes for the truth.

His lips claimed hers in a passionate kiss that made her arch her back over the steel band of his arm, crushing her breasts to his hard chest, causing a delicious ache. "I love you too much to let you misbehave, my darling. You are the best thing in my life, Elizabeta. The best thing in my world." Vlad could no more keep his hand from stealing its way to her full breast than he could stop night from coming. His touch was that of a butterfly wing, light and reverent, teasing her as she had teased him. A pebble of a nipple peaked under the velvet of her bodice, and he concentrated his attention on it, enjoying the gasps of pleasure flying uncontrollably from her mouth when he plucked at it delicately. They would be absolutely explosive together. Elizabeta responded to his touch with complete abandon, trusting herself to him implicitly. It was the best compliment he had ever had in his life.

"What are you thinking of?" she whispered in the present, nibbling at his neck with just the edges of her teeth to bring him back to their marriage bed.

"You," he responded, pulling her beneath him again. "You fill me up."

Her grin was wicked. "I thought it was the other way around. Am I missing something?"

"Minx." Vlad knew it was too soon for her to accept him into her body again, so he contented himself with leisurely exploration of every inch of her, during which he tickled and teased, complimented and caressed her into another explosion of pleasure.

Tears had leaked out of her clenched eyelids and into the hair at her temples; he could see the dark wetness of them in her hair. "Are you alright, my love?" Vlad positioned himself carefully at on his side next to her, leaning his cheek on his palm.

Bet laced her smaller fingers with his big ones. "Yes. But –"

"But what?" bringing her hand to his lips.

The uncharacteristic hesitancy in her tone made his head come up and he caught her eyes. She looked entirely too serious. "Should I – when you – is it right that –"

Vlad gathered her slight frame against his bulky one, wrapping himself around her as if to protect her from the world. "Were you going to ask if your responsiveness to me in our bed was right?" Bet nodded while showing intense interest in the construction of his

index finger. "Yes, it is, and we will have no more discussion about its rightness. I don't ever want to feel that you're holding back a moan or a caress from me because you think that Father Alexi wouldn't approve of it." He pulled her even closer against him, his forearm crossing between her breasts protectively. "This is our world. Where, how, when, and why we choose to love each other is no one else's concern but ours."

Her soft little voice wafted to his ears, "Are you going to have rules for me in bed, too?"

Vlad put his lips to her ear, whispering, "The only pertinent rule is love each other."

Chapter 3

Getting to Know You

When Victoria arrived for her first day of work, Vlad opened the door for her, solicitously seated her at the desk and made sure she was extremely comfortable. Then he piled five two hundred paged journals next to her - old journals, mahogany leather bound with intricate gold leaf patterns on the front, and spidery, delicate writing on the impossibly thin pages. "Wow!" The amateur historian in her was immediately intrigued.

"I have to go out for a few hours," he said, noticing that she could barely lift her head from what she was reading.

But that got Victoria's attention. "Uh, you're going to leave me here? Alone?"

A thick red eyebrow lifted. "Are you afraid to be alone in my house?"

She looked amazed. "Hell, no. But aren't you worried I'll steal the silver?"

Vlad smiled beatifically. "Are you going to steal my silver?" Not that he would have any, but that was neither here nor there.

"No, but – "

"Then that's good enough for me," he stated firmly, and turned to go out the door.

Despite the fact that she thought he was crazy to leave a virtual stranger alone in his house, Victoria was happy to see him go, although she knew she wasn't going to get much accomplished while he was gone. The journal entries were fabulous! Oh, how she hated to read and type at the same time!

When he returned, she was curled up like a contented cat on his settee, head bowed toward the diary she was devouring. Shrugging out of his coat, he wandered into the library, commenting, "I didn't realize I'd hired a reader as well as a typist."

"Oh, shit – " Oops, what if he had the same problem with tiny little profanities on his time that Cam did? "You scared me!"

Occupational hazard, he commented to himself. "Sorry."

Victoria got up, her nose back in the book, and walked confidently to the desk. Without looking up, she shoved a sheaf of typed pages into his chest. "I've typed for four hours straight. I get a two fifteen minute breaks and a half hour lunch, and I intend to spend them reading."

Vlad leaned against the desk with an amused expression on his face as he watched her make her way back to resume her previous position without moving her eyes from the book or bumping into anything. "Are they that interesting?"

Her reply did not encourage conversation. "They are to me."

Vlad looked over what she had typed, and found a lot of the editing he had been anticipating had been done for him already. Before he could thank her for it, he heard a bell go off. Victoria got up immediately to claim her place across from him at the desk in front of her small laptop computer, and began typing.

"Stop," he commanded, offering her his hand from where he stood next to the desk. Vicky looked up at him and stood, refusing his hand. "I'd like your opinions of what you've read." Vlad gestured to the settee, and Victoria sat. Vlad sat on the coffee table in front of her. The casualness of his chosen seat was at odds with his usual formality, but he was too eager for a second opinion. "By the way, I appreciate all the editing you've been doing, too."

"If there's anything I change that you didn't want changed, just let me know."

He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I will. What were your impressions?"

Vicky smiled broadly as if they shared some secret that Vlad had no inkling of. "Doing a little advanced marketing study, huh? Well, I guess I'd definitely qualify as the average consumer of vampire fiction. I've read a lot of it, except Anne Rice."

It did not set well with him that she seemed to be delaying her response. He was not used

to being thwarted, or to caring one whit about the opinion of someone he barely knew. Despite the fact that Victoria probably had no idea what she was doing to him, if he had known her better, he would have growled a warning that meant if she didn't answer him within the next few seconds, she was going to find herself bottom up over his lap getting the spanking of her life. That in itself would delay her response further, but it would have made him feel a whole lot better.

"It's fantastic," her voice was soft and dreamy, as if she were recalling the story in her mind. "Very believable, detailed, like Dracula's autobiography."

"Exactly." He knew they were on the same wavelength. It had been decades since he'd tried, or even wanted to, but for some reason he decided to reach out to her with his mind. She looked very receptive and relaxed, and that was how he found her mind. Contrary to his prejudiced opinion of modern women, his probe of Vicky's mind revealed that she was what she appeared to be – happy, loving, warm, and funny, with a general confidence about herself and her abilities. Vlad liked what he glimpsed in the few seconds their minds touched, and then he drew away, but not before he got a disturbing impression.

"Whoa!" Vicky leaned over, clutching her head. "Gosh, I'm so dizzy all of a sudden."

"Are you okay? Would you like some water?" No one had ever reacted to him this way.

"Yes, please." Vlad appeared at her elbow in seconds with a glass of ice water, which she sipped slowly. "Wow, I've never had anything like that happen."

"How long since you've eaten?" For some strange reason, it was fashionable in the twenty-first century to be as skinny as a peasant. Vlad did not hold with that. He preferred his women nicely rounded in all the pertinent areas, not bony and hollowed out like skeletons.

"Before I came here." Vlad had nothing fit for human consumption in the house, but he couldn't let her know that. Vicky stood up, shakily for a moment, but then more steadily. "It's passed. I'm fine."

Vlad stood, blocking her passage back to the desk. "Are you sure you're okay, Victoria? Would you like to go home?"

Vicky shook her head slowly, not wanting to encourage the return of another spell. Awareness shivered along her nerve endings as she stood in front of him, raising goose bumps along her arms and making her nipples ache painfully. God, but he was big! And

in another impressively fitting suit. Didn't the man own a pair of jeans and a t-shirt? His tall, military bearing made her feel extremely small next to him, and the broad expanse of gray fabric seemed to eclipse her entire field of vision. Big curls of red hair covered his shoulders, and on another man it might have seemed feminine, but there was nothing remotely soft or girlish about this man. He was armed and dangerous, a fact she recognized on a deep emotional and physical level.

Until now, she had compared every man she'd met unfavorably to her boss. Vlad had just raised the bar.

Within the first months she worked for him, they settled into a very comfortable routine. As Vlad definitely wanted input regarding where the "story" was going, Vicky only typed for part of the time she was there, the rest of the time was spent talking with Vlad about her thoughts on what she was reading and typing, and just talking in general. He seemed to like to listen to her voice, so she expounded on a lot of different things, from Star Trek to romance novels. Vlad listened quietly as the feelings in her voice washed over him. Here was a passionate woman, and he wanted her. Now. But he'd given up raping and pillaging, dammit, so he'd have to go for the slow approach to maneuver her into bed.

He made some lifestyle adjustments to accommodate her – there was always Diet Coke in the fridge, Ben and Jerry's in the freezer, and some sort of snack on the counter, although Vlad swore he was going to wean her off junk food as much as possible. He could barely tolerate the smell of Cheetohs, to say nothing of the atrocious artificial color and residue on the fingertips. Slowly, he had fewer and fewer snack foods available, and more and more fruits and veggies. Next on his agenda was to have the Diet Coke can surgically removed from her hand, if necessary, or perhaps introduce the self-confessed brat to some gentle discipline.

Vlad was in the office one day just after she'd arrived, a little early as usual, when he heard an angry crunch from the doorway and looked up to see her biting viciously into a carrot stick. "What did that carrot ever do to you?" he asked with a smile.

"It's healthy, and that's enough," she chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "And it's not a Cheetoh. In fact," Vicky sauntered over to the desk, "I've been noticing a definite dearth of good old fashioned junk food here recently. I guess I'm going to have to go back to bringing my own."

"No."

She was startled. "No what?"

Vlad met her wide eyes. "No, I don't want you to bring any more junk food into the house. We don't need it. I just want you to eat healthily, that's all."

Vicky blinked quickly, and recovered a small smile. "Jeez, you sound like Cam. Now I've got two of you nagging at me mercilessly."

The smile was wiped from Vlad's face as if it had never been and would never be again at the mention of her boss's name, but Victoria didn't notice. When they talked later that night, she felt his gaze resting on her heavily.

"Did I say something wrong? Does the fact that I'm seeing such a great romantic element to the story upset you? Is that not what you wanted?"

He didn't answer for a moment, just stared at her almost insolently, then abruptly threw the pages he'd been going over with her on the coffee table. "No. You've done nothing, Victoria. It's me, I'm out of sorts, I guess. You've been working very hard. Why don't you go home early tonight?"

She hesitated, wondering the real reason why he was rushing her out the door. "Do you still want me to come tomorrow?" He'd asked her if she minded coming in on a Saturday, and she'd said it was fine with her, but he'd have to put up with casual dress.

Almost absently, he answered while staring into the fire. "Yes, come at three, like usual. If I'm not here, use your key."

Vicky left, feeling there was a lot of things unsaid between them.

She was right. Vlad spent the night brooding unhappily, perseverating over what he had discovered when his mind touched hers – she was in love with her boss, whether she knew it or not.

How, then, was he going to get her to fall in love with him?

Chapter 4

Desolation

In the Year of Our Lord, 1784

Vlad and Elizabeta had nine wonderful years together during which, when he was not on campaign, they rarely left each other's sight. It was not unusual for them to scandalize

their guest and family by staying abed for an entire weekend, during which time no one but the servants saw or heard anything from them. Oh, he was still the master and she his occasionally disobedient lady, and it was always disappointing for him when he found he must punish her, but in general, she blossomed under his firm, loving hand, and he basked in the fragrance of her love.

Of her death and his resurrection to the Undead, he remembered little beyond pure pain – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. His newfound powers held little interest; the only remaining thought in his mind was revenge. The acts he committed in the first three hundred years after he turned away from the light were truly heinous, and those that history attributed to his name were but a drop of water in the sewery ocean of his inhumanity. He felt nothing but pain, why should he be the only one hurting in the world? Vlad the Impaler had made sure he had plenty of company in the hell of his own making - guilty or innocent of real or imagined crimes, no one brought before the great warlord ever sought or found mercy.

Eventually, even he tired of the bloodbath and ventured into Western Europe, meeting up with several of his own kind in Paris. That was where he had met Alex, one night while they were both hunting for dinner amongst the thronging crowds of itinerants and beggars, prostitutes and gentlemen. Vlad recognized a brother immediately, and brought him back to one of the houses he had secured around the city. They talked until sunrise, then met at sundown and talked all night again. Alexi had been a Russian peasant, and now he lived like a veritable prince. The change had been nothing but good for him, and he felt no particular compunction towards hurting or killing. Alex left scarcely a body to be found – in fact, he had kept a veritable harem of willing females, some of the uppermost crust of French society. He winked at Vlad, saying, "I'd much rather leave a well-satisfied woman behind than a bloodied corpse."

Despite the fact that Vlad was the older of the two, Alexi knew more about their abilities than he did, having been in contact with several other vampires at different times in his life. Alex told him how to take blood without killing his victim, how to heal as well as hurt with the power of his hands and his mind. But the most important thing Vlad learned in those first few nights after meeting this strange young Russian, was that Alex was in love. And his woman loved him back. They were planning a marriage, after a fashion, and would move to another country to live as man and wife. Few would be the wiser.

"Why would you want to put yourself through that, man? You will lose her in thirty years; she will grow old and die!"

Alex sat down in front of Vlad. "I have already given her the first mark. She has some of my strength in her veins. She will age much more slowly. And when she dies, it will be

within the circle of my arms."

Vlad admired the strength of his conviction, of his love for this woman, but shook his head sadly. "I do not think I could bear loving and losing another woman. I did not even think such a thing was possible for us, but now that I know, I don't think I want to regardless. It is too painful."

Alex patted him on the shoulder. "I understand. Existing is painful. But it's more painful alone."

They spent a lot of time together from then on, and Alexi drew Vlad into his circle of friends, which contained a lot of beautiful, eligible interested women, some of whom knew what he was and some who didn't. More did than didn't, which amazed Vlad. Sometimes, he felt positively hunted when he walked into a drawing room of the exclusive club Alex frequented, and all female eyes turned to him. They knew, and yet they chose not to look away. Interesting.

Although he could have had female companionship from any number of these women on any number of occasions, Vlad held himself aloof from them. He was severely polite and courteous if approached, but squelched any further advances quickly for several months, until few women would approach him. It was a warm summer night when he had tired of the poker game he had come for and decided to explore the wonderful gardens that surrounded the house. Roses of various shapes and sizes fairly surrounded him as he walked down the circular path that ended at a pink Italian marble bench built for two. A young woman who was reading most industriously through delicately framed spectacles already occupied one of the chairs. She hadn't even noticed his presence yet; she was so absorbed in her book.

Vlad was intrigued – most of the women he had met recently wouldn't read a book for pleasure on a bet. He sat down, not really trying to be unobtrusive, and still her nose remained glued to the pages. Must be some book.

"What are you reading?" he asked quietly, only to have the poor woman so startled at his interruption that she shrieked and threw the book into a nearby hedge.

The poor girl clutched at her chest, breathing heavily, like he had come at her fangs bared. "My word, you scared me to death!"

"Not quite," he replied drolly, gamely hunting for her volume. When he found it, he looked at the spine. "Ahhh. The Oddeasy."

Isabella Conti held out a slim, elegant hand. "I was just getting to the part with the Cyclops when your voice – " She shuddered, and he couldn't tell if it was at him or the one-eyed monster. "Your voice rang inside my head."

His eyebrow rose. "I'm sorry. I do tend to have a rather loud voice."

"That's all right." She fidgeted nervously. What was wrong with her? Here was the most gorgeously handsome gentleman sitting next to her and all she wanted was to get back to her book.

Vlad stood, bowing in front of her. "I am Prince Vlad. And you are?"

"Isabella. Isabella Conti." His hand was dry but cool, but the lips pressed to the back of her hand were hot as a brand. Bella snatched her hand back from his possession, and Vlad smiled and sat down again.

The glasses came off almost furtively and were deposited into a reticule. Vlad knew she was preparing to leave, but didn't want to let her go.

"I don't believe I've seen you here before."

Her smile was more of a grimace. "I came with my sister Rose."

"Rose Conti is your sister?" The two could hardly be more different in looks and behavior. Rose was a loud, gregarious person of small education but large bosoms who enjoyed nothing more than dominating every conversation regardless of whether she knew anything about the subject at hand. Despite this, she was considered to be the life of the party. The sister before him was pleasant looking, had keen green eyes and blonde hair, and it was painfully obvious that she would much rather be reading her book than conversing with him.

Bella flushed a little with embarrassment. She was the shy one in the family. Both her mother and her sister could steamroll right over her with their loud voices and flashy looks. No one had ever noticed her, till now. And now that she'd been noticed, she was beginning to wish she hadn't. "Yes, she's my sister."

"And all the men prefer her." It was not a question, it was a statement. A fairly personal one at that.

"Well," he could see what little self-confidence she had draining away at his boldness as Isabella twisted the ribbons on her purse compulsively, looking everywhere but at him.

"She is prettier – "

"Nonsense. Don't you believe that, ever."

He said it with such raw conviction that she turned and met his eyes, but continued her sad little litany, learned early at her mother's knee. "Rose is vivacious and happy and funny – "

"And empty-headed and loud and boorish and stupid," he finished in a comical, but most ungallant manner.

Isabella had to clamp her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. She supposed she should jump to her sister's defense, but those were exactly the words she used to describe Rose every night, when she begged God to strike her sister with permanent laryngitis. She'd probably be going straight to hell for that, but it would be worth it to have a moment's peace in this lifetime. "She's a very nice person, really."

"I'm sure she is," he replied sarcastically, "but does she have to remind everyone about it every ten minutes?"

Bella bit her lip to keep from laughing. It would have been very discourteous indeed. But he was sooooo right.

"IS- AAAA – BEEEELLLLLLL – AAAAAA!"

She stood suddenly. "Oh, there's Mother. She'll be furious that I'm not right there at her beck and call."

Vlad caught her hand before she could run away. "May I call on you some time? I'd like to discuss the book with you."

"Ugly-bella" with a gentleman caller? Rose and her mother would faint dead away. "Uh, yes, I guess it would be all right." She flew toward the sound of her distant foghorn of a mother. Vlad planned to call soon. He'd bring ear plugs.

Chapter 5

Chivalry

Two days later, he left his card with the butler, and it naturally got put into the burgeoning pile with Rose's notes. Bella sat in the uncomfortable straight backed chair

that had always been hers while her sister and Mother went through their numerous invitations, using her as a social secretary who entered the times and places of each event for each woman. She, of course, never had any events of her own, as all of her Mother's attention had focused on her precious Rose years ago.

"Who is this? I don't remember him," Rose leaned over and handed a gilt edged card to her mother.

"Prince Vlad," Eugenia murmured, flipping the card over and reading aloud the inscription on the back. "Isabella – hope you enjoyed the book. Will drop by Thursday AM. V."

"Isabella?" they both exclaimed in astonishment, then collapsed in giggles. "What is this, a joke?" her sister asked. "Are you so desperate for attention that you had your own cards made up, big sister?"

Eugenia's eyebrows rose as she pinned Isabella with an angry stare. "And whose money did you use to get them printed, my girl?"

That tone did not bode well for her. Not well at all.

To Isabella's complete surprise, Vlad did appear Thursday morning at their front door. Both Eugenia and Rose's jaws were on the floor when he was announced into the drawing room by their butler.

"Prince Vlad of Szeklys to see Miss Isabella," Samuels intoned gravely. Vlad strode into the room as if he owned it, which he well could have. His finances had taken a definite upturn since he'd met Alex. He bowed formally over Isabella's hand, but noticed that she did not meet his eyes. She seemed shier than ever in his presence, while he set about charming her bovine mother and loud-mouthed sister.

Eugenia Conti could not understand why this gorgeous Prince chose mousy little Bella over her beautiful Rose. My, but he was a fine specimen of a man – tall, broad and muscular, with an air of confident masculinity . . . mmmm—mmmmm. If she were a few years younger . . . she'd've given Rose a run for her money.

After engaging in polite small talk, though, it was obvious that Isabella was his main interest. Although he knew that no proper mother would allow it, he asked anyway. "Mrs. Conti, would it be alright for Isabella to accompany me on a turn around the Park?"

She amazed him by saying yes, but that Bella would have to take a chaperone – Mitzy,

her maid. Mitzy blended in with the woodwork well, and Vlad ignored her entirely as they made a slow circuit around the park.

"I'm surprised your mother let you come."

For the first time that day, she met his eyes. Hers were full of humor. She seemed to blossom away from her family. "She's probably hoping you'll compromise me and then we'll have to marry and I'll be out of her hair forever."

Despite her light tone, Vlad recognized the pain beneath that quip. Not wanting her to dwell on it, he asked, "So, did you enjoy the book?"

They talked and laughed and argued for the next several hours, until Mitzy finally complained that it was probably getting on toward dinnertime, and she was right. Vlad deposited them safely at the door and pressed a chaste, quick kiss on her cheek, promising to come back and take her to dinner.

He was as good as his word, and to her family's growing amazement, this strapping European Prince fairly danced attendance on Isabella. Vlad took to dropping by now and then, and when he couldn't come, he would send a gift. Sometimes a single flower, sometimes a novel or book of poetry, or a silk ribbon for her hair.

Vlad found her to be an intelligent, quick-witted girl with a facility for languages that matched his. Shy but pert, she blossomed under his attentive gaze and away from the ugliness of her only parent's unfeeling treatment. It was the first time in a very long time for Vlad that he spent time talking with a woman. With his checkered past – to put it politely – he more or less used women to his own bloody ends. But Isabella knew what he was and yet still seemed to like him as a person. Of course, she didn't know everything.

He tried to hint at his former deeds by confessing to her one afternoon in the privacy of a dining room at Whites, but she stopped him by covering his hand with hers where they lay on the table and saying with quiet conviction, "God doesn't care about the mistakes you've made in the past, as long as you're sorry for them and try not to repeat them in the future." Vlad was shocked into silence, merely staring at her dumfounded. "I don't care, either, Vlad. You have consciously made a new start. Only you can decide how you'll behave." She smiled and his heart clenched. "I know you'll do the right thing."

Rose was green with jealousy, which made her nasty. But Eugenia bided her time. Somewhere, somehow the girl would slip up, and then she'd get her comeuppance.

As it turned out, it was Eugenia who got it in the end. Vlad had watched Bella interact with her mother, and had a sneaking suspicion that her abuse of Isabella was more than just verbal, although he had seen no proof. He consciously took to stopping by unannounced, very sure that Eugenia was not about to turn away a Prince from her door, even if he did have designs on the wrong daughter, in her opinion.

It was one such Sunday that he called and asked to take Bella out shopping, but Rose stalled him at the door to the drawing room, saying that her sister was "under the weather." He knew she was lying without exerting any mystical powers.

"Out of my way, baggage," he pushed the disgruntled girl to one side and threw open the double doors. Isabella was sitting at the small secretary, her head bent over a book of some sort.

Eugenia rose and accosted him on the way to her. "I'll thank you to leave, Sir. My daughter is not up to company tonight."

Vlad passed her by as if she wasn't there. Bella stopped writing and sat back in the chair, but wouldn't look up at him. He reached out strong fingers to lift her chin and turn her head toward him. His jaw clenched in fury as he saw the raw, swollen lip and almost shut black eye. Without a second thought, he picked her up in his arms, inadvertently making her scream in pain and faint dead away.

He strode out of the room as quickly as possible, jostling her as little as he could. "Where are you taking her?" Eugenia demanded.

"Away from you, Madam," Vlad stated, stopping at the door just long enough to snarl back at the two pieces of garbage that stared at him with mouths agape. "And if either one of you ever comes near her again, I'll kill you."

When he got her across town to his home, Vlad deposited her with exquisite care on the bed in the master bedroom. Alexi was there, peering curiously over his shoulder at her. "What are you going to do with her now? She'll be ruined if she spends the night here."

"Then we'll get married," the thought was out of his mouth before he knew it, but it seemed somehow right.

Alex took care of the legalities of the arrangement, and it was decided that they would tell Isabella that she was married by proxy to save her reputation. Where things went from there was up to Vlad.

He would never forget undressing her that night and discovering that her whole right side was one massive bruise. She probably had bruised or broken ribs, which would have been the reason she cried out when he lifted her. The sight of it made him sick at heart that she had had to endure years of abuse at her mother's hands. Vlad tucked her into one of his voluminous robes, then into the bed. She looked so lost and broken, lying unprotected on the big bed. "I don't want to leave her," he said the thought aloud, and Alexi went into action again, planting a packet of Vlad's soil into the cushion of the chair he would occupy all night.

"You'll be fine if you want to go to sleep." Alexi watched Vlad carefully – when his friend finally fell in love, he fell hard!

Exhausted, Vlad collapsed into the chair. "I just don't want her to wake up in a strange place and be scared."

Alexi patted Vlad's shoulder – he looked as if he needed comforting as much as Bella did. "She'll be fine."

His friend left, and Vlad concentrated his newfound mental powers on connecting himself with the small woman on the bed. His success was born out in the fact that he knew the exact moment she regained consciousness, although she had not moved a muscle. Vlad could feel her overwhelming fear and sorrow so deeply that he had to climb onto the bed and take her in his arms. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse with emotion. "You're safe with me. No one will ever hurt you again."

And he meant it. Isabella could hear the truth in his tone. "But – I – we – I shouldn't be here with you!"

In answer, Vlad showed her the smaller dragon insignia ring he'd had specially made for her but had not had occasion to give to her yet. It had served as her wedding ring, and even now resided on the third finger of her left hand. He kissed it and her as if she were the most precious thing in his life. And she was.

"We're married?" she breathed, unable to comprehend.

He sensed her confusion. "I would not let you out of my sight. Alexi thought it would be best rather than compromising your reputation. There was a proxy to stand in for you. We are well and truly married."

She didn't know what to do or say. It seemed it had all been done for her. Instead, she avoided the whole situation by falling deeply asleep in his arms. Vlad eased his arm out

from under her head, laying her gently back against the pillows, and busied himself making arrangements for their future.

Although they were married, Vlad did not claim his true rights as a husband immediately. He did take over her life to a large extent, though, making sure she was seen by the best doctors to be certain that there was not any lasting damage to her eye, her jaw, or side. Then, since he had taken her away from everything she'd owned, he sent lackeys to her mother's house to retrieve some small things she wanted, but he personally replaced everything else she needed from the skin out – all clothing, jewelry, perfumes, everything – and everything he provided for her was of superb quality, not second hand castoffs from her sister. Bella had never owned such beautiful things in her life. Vlad showered her with more than possessions, though. He showered her with compliments and encouragement, until her strength of personality returned. They discoursed on a wide range of topics, and as they both loved and spoke several languages, they had devised a game of switching tongues mid-sentence. He might start out in French, switch to English, then Latin and Italian. She would respond in Italian, then switch to Greek and German, ending up in English.

The couple was the hit of every party they attended, and he carefully kept them from going to places where she might run into her mother or sister. It seemed that everyone around her could see how he looked at her with loving indulgence when they dined out or strolled along the street looking into shop windows. Though she was not blind, Bella refused to deal with it just yet, knowing in the back of her mind that there was more to marriage than this did not necessarily make her eager to indulge in it.

Isabella knew what Vlad was, although that was another area they had yet to truly confront, and as he tended to rise late she had taken to riding in the early afternoon, alone, before he woke. When he first noticed this habit, he called her to him to stroke her hair and looking deeply into her eyes with an intensity that almost embarrassed her. "I am glad that you are feeling well enough to venture out some on your own. Just promise me that you'll always take a groom with you – there have been reports of attacks on young women in the park." Vlad bent her toward him and kissed the top of her head chastely then rested his cheek lightly there. "I couldn't bear it if you were hurt, my beautiful."

The low, sensual tone of his voice made her body ripple with reaction. It had always been like that for her – just the sound of his voice raised goosebumps on her arms – not from fear, but from pure sexual reaction. Her heartbeat quickened, and she drew a deep breath, trying to control the uncontrollable.

"Yes, Vlad, I will."

It happened, one afternoon, when she'd long since recovered from her mother's assault, that there were no grooms available to ride with, so she set off on her own. When she returned to the house she entered through the back door, her riding boots clunking clumsily on the shiny hardwood floors until she reached the banister of the grand staircase in the foyer. He was waiting for her, standing by the front door with his hands clasped behind his back, just above his butt. His eyes met hers and pierced through to her vulnerable heart. She'd never seen him look so disheveled, so unkempt. Vlad always looked perfect, as if he were a wax mannequin in a museum somewhere.

Not today. His shirt was only half buttoned, his tie was nowhere to be found, and his hair looked like he'd run his hands through it more than once compulsively. Which he had when he found his wife had deliberately disobeyed him and gone riding alone. The papers had been full of lurid tales of what had happened to unsuspecting women who were riding or walking in the park unaccompanied in broad daylight. They'd discussed the topic just yesterday, and he had reminded her that – as he wouldn't be there to go with her - she wasn't to go alone. Vlad had trusted her to obey him. But he'd awakened about forty-five minutes ago to wander down to the stables, hoping to ask a hand when the mistress had left. The groom had earned a job for life by ratting out his naughty wife, and he'd sweated out the moments until now, practically tearing his hair out by the roots worrying about her.

Now here she was, in front of him, biting her lip apprehensively. Vlad stalked toward her and watched her take a reflexive step backward, but there would be no escaping her first punishment. And damned well deserved it was, too!

Since she was in front of the staircase, he simply reached out in passing and latched on to her upper arm, bringing her with him as he stomped up the stairs. "Vlad, I – "

"Don't even try, Isabella," he scolded through clenched teeth. Vlad pushed her ahead of him into her big bedroom, shrugging out of his flax colored linen coat to unbutton his cufflinks and roll the sleeves of his cream lawn shirt up to the elbows, revealing thick, muscular forearms. As he was paying attention to what he was doing in regards to his own preparations for her first spanking at his hands, he wasn't alert to Isabella's reactions.

When he turned around to look at her, he was dumbstruck. She had backed herself into the furthest corner of the room - eyes wide but dry and unblinking, face bleached an unhealthy white. She looked as if he had confronted her full fanged and bloodthirsty. Vlad's heart clenched painfully at that utterly devastated look. Every instinct in his body made him want to wipe that look of her face and never see it again. But when he walked toward Bella, arms out in front of him to pull her into a comforting embrace, she shrank

down next to the wall and covered her head with her hands protectively.

Christ, she thought he was going to beat her with his fists! In his mind, he rapidly went through an impressive list of profanities, but outwardly he crouched a respectable distance from her, forearms draped over powerful thighs. Vlad had never really pushed for a mental connection with Isabella, not wanting to frighten her. But his overwhelming compulsion was reassurance, and he used his mind, his voice, and his body to broadcast it to her.

"Listen to me, little one," he swallowed hard, watching closely for any sign of acceptance from her. "I will never raise my fist to you. Ever. Do you hear me? I will spank you and paddle you like the naughty little girl you are when you drive me out of my mind with worry like you did. But I will never beat you like your mother did."

The first gentle but firm tendril of mental projection flowed into Isabella's frightened mind, and, bathed in its steady, warm glow she had no choice but to recognize the utterly uncomplicated truth of his words.

Slowly, like a small animal coming out of hibernation, she peeked out from under her hands at him. Vlad crouched not three feet from her, still talking in a warm, soothing tone into both her ears and her mind, that, once she forgot to be afraid, had the usual affect on her.

If he had chosen to use his fists, she would have been worse than dead, for having now found a new life with him, and given him her tentative trust, she would never have recovered physically or mentally from his beating. Vlad remained entirely motionless, unbreathing, waiting for her to decide if he was truly worthy of that trust.

In one fluid motion, she launched herself at him bodily with such force it was only his vampiric strength that kept her from bowling him over entirely. Her arms clutched him so tightly that if he had been a creature that breathed, he would not have been able to do so easily. Bella's now wet face was buried in his hair, plastered to the side of his neck. His arms held her tightly, carefully, like the treasure she was.

He held and rocked her in his lap, there on the floor of her bedroom, combing his big fingers through her hair and murmuring soothing nothings as she cried.

"I'm s-so s-sorry!" she sobbed.

"About what, my sweet?" Vlad loved the way she was curled against his chest, head tucked just beneath his jaw as she leaned against him bonelessly. It had been too long . . .

much too long since he had felt such tenderness toward a woman.

He heard her swallow, and take a deep breath. When she spoke again, her tone was much more collected, soft and sure. "I should never have thought you would hurt me. You took me away from my mother because of that. You would never do that to me."

It was Vlad's turn to draw an unneeded breath, then rise with her in his arms to carry her to the big canopied bed. As he began to help her out of her riding habit, he again used that low, soothing tone. "No, I would never beat you, my darling. You much too precious to me." When she was down to her shift, her cheeks grew red and warm as she stood in front of him, just as her other cheeks would soon be doing, he thought to himself. "Although you will never feel my fist on your body, Isabella, there is still the matter of your disobedience from this afternoon. Did I or did I not tell you expressly not to go riding without taking a groom?"

He seemed angry all over again, Bella mused, but she trusted what he said. She had the grace to look down. "You did, but – "

"No buts." Vlad sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her over his lap in one graceful movement. Before Isabella had a chance to react one way or the other, her drawers were around her ankles, and his hand had slapped her naked bottom with a solid SMACK.

She was so surprised by her position and his actions that she forgot entirely to be afraid. Embarrassment was the uppermost feeling in her mind, to be followed very shortly by stinging pain in her posterior. Why, he was treating her like a naughty little girl, and she wasn't going to stand for it!

Bella wasn't aware that she had spoken her last thought aloud, and whether she did or not, Vlad answered it while he slapped away at her butt, "No, you're not going to stand for it this time. You're going to lie over my lap and get a good thorough spanking, then I'm going to put you into the corner with your reddened cheeks exposed for a while to let you consider the consequences of disobeying me." SWATSLAPWHACK He seemed to go on forever and Isabella was sure at several points that she simply couldn't take any more, but of course she had no choice but to endure it. Vlad held her truly immobile, one leg over hers because she had been kicking vigorously and he wouldn't tolerate that. "When I've decided that you're sufficiently repentant, you will be tucked into bed for a long nap like the naughty little girl you are."

His words fuelled her anger. She was not a child! Bella renewed her struggles despite the growing pain in her bottom and the backs of her legs, fairly screaming through her sobs,

"I AM NOT A LITTLE GIRL!!!!"

Vlad redoubled his efforts to tame her, starting to smack the same exact spot twice in a row, further inflaming an already blistered bottom and eliciting screams of torment from his disobedient wife. "You're willful and disobedient, you do things that put yourself in imminent danger, and you have a defiant attitude. You're over my lap with your panties around your ankles getting the good hard spanking that you deserve. If you weren't a naughty little girl, then none of this would be happening, now would it?"

He had continued to spank her deliberately twice over in the same spot, all up and down her bottom cheeks to the area just above the dimples of her knees. When he finally let her up, she was one sorry little wife with big raised hand prints on her bum that were put on display when he guided her to a bare corner of her room and pinned her skirt up to increase her embarrassment.

Isabella's hands went immediately to her bottom to try to rub some of the sting away, but Vlad caught that movement and, putting his foot up on the nearby dressing stool, he flipped her quickly over his raised knee, delivering twenty-five more stinging swats while lecturing her on proper disciplinary behavior. "You are never to rub your bottom no matter how much it hurts. When you stand in the corner, unless I tell you differently, your hands are to stay laced on top of your head."

He let Bella slip off his knee and find her own way to the corner, then, just before he would have reached for her to administer another set of swats, she remembered and laced her fingers over her glorious hair. Vlad sat on her bed and checked his watch, figuring ten minutes ought to be long enough for her first time in the corner. He would expect much more of her later, but it would be better to be a little lenient on his darling this first time. She'd never know that eventually what she'd just received from him just now would be categorized as a light punishment spanking.

Her sobs were catching in her throat terribly as she sniffed and cried. Why, her bottom almost hurt worse now than when he was blistering it – it was like a burn that continued to sear even afterwards. Bella was deeply mortified at his method of keeping her in line, and she vowed to be the best behaved wife in the realm if only so that there would be no repeat performance of this terribly humiliating and embarrassing type of punishment.

When her time was up, Vlad called her to him. Bella turned to see him on her bed with his arms opened wide in invitation, but did not run to him immediately, concerned that he would still be angry with her.

Vlad watched her cautious approach, but kept his arms open to her, cajoling, "Come here,

Babygirl."

When she finally reached the edge of the bed, he reached out and pulled her over him, to lay her gently on her side as she hissed when her tender buttcheeks hit the coverlet. This position practically forced her into his arms, where she belonged after a spanking. Vlad kissed her face gently all over, brushing the damp hair out of her eyes while holding her tightly and murmuring comfortingly. "There's my girl. I'm sorry I had to spank you, but there was no other way for you to know how serious I am about you doing as I tell you. I couldn't bear to lose you, my darling. You're too precious to me." A broad, soothing hand rubbed up and down her slender back.

Bella settled her cheek against his chest, her breathing ragged at first from the heavy sobs, then quickly becoming more even as he comforted her into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 6

Epiphany

Vicky arrived at the old mansion well before three, a little uneasy about the way she and her employer had parted the night before. She wondered if he was truly all right.

The man was an odd bird. Definitely a spanko, which Victoria considered a plus, particularly while she was reading the story. Many a night she went home with very wet panties due to the exquisite detail with which he described his personal brand of loving discipline. Ahhhhhhh.

She even went so far as to fantasize about him when she was alone in her bed at night . . . about how he'd catch her sitting on the couch with a big bag of Cheetohs in one hand, and a chocolate bar in the other, just daring him to do something about it. So he would, of course.

"Vicky," he'd say, looking at her sternly, which he almost always did naturally, anyway. Must be his dominance factor, which was very high. He was definitely an Alpha Male. "I thought I told you there would be no more junk food in this house!"

"But – " would be all she'd be able to get out before he strode purposefully across the room to her to drop down on the couch next to her and pull her over his lap.

"I'm sorry I have to do this, Victoria, but you need to learn that I mean what I say, and this lesson's going to hurt me more than it hurts you." Her heroes always say that to her heroines in all the spanking stories she makes up in her mind.

"Pleeeeeeeaaaaaaase don't spank me, Vlad, NO!!!"

Of course, none of her pleas or cries ever deter him from delivering a blistering spanking to her quickly bared bottom, reddening it painfully while he lectured between every blow. "You've been very naughty to disobey me SMACKSMACKSMACK, little girl, and now you're going to get the spanking you deserve!"

It was one of her favorite fantasies, and she was remembering it again in her mind as she let herself in with the key that Vlad had given her months ago. Vicky had become quite comfortable in this house. And it certainly fit Vlad to a "T". Dumping her pocketbook off on a corner of the desk, she went in search of a Diet Coke to begin her workday - or rather "work-afternoon".

Her forehead wrinkled at the hours this assignment was making her keep. She was practically adopting the hours of the vampire she was helping Vlad write about. Ice cubes clinked into a big water tumbler glass. She'd never thought of it before, but wasn't he taking that "Vlad Tsepes" thing a bit far? Mentally, Vicky enumerated all of the reasons why she should consider that Vlad's name was no lie: 1): He rarely went out in the sun – definitely never uncovered that she'd seen. It was a small town, and everyone was very curious about the foreign man who'd bought the decrepit old mansion. If he'd been seen somewhere about town, she'd've gotten the lowdown on where and when long ago. 2): His name. 3): She never saw him eat anything. He hated everything she ate, and the only thing she'd seen him ingest in the past four months was water. 4): He'd bought a huge old mansion and had done nothing toward fixing it up, a la Barnabas Collins and the "old house" in "Dark Shadows". Just like one would expect a man who had lived in centuries past without modern conveniences to act. Hmmmmmmmm.

She gave herself a mental shrug as she rummaged through the cupboards for anything to eat besides – ugh! – vegetables. Nothing. Lots of "no fat" treats – for "no fat" read "no discernable taste". Yuck.

Even the fridge didn't hold anything of value. Not even in the crisper –

Blood.

"Eek!" she couldn't contain the small cry as she automatically jumped back, then clamped her hand firmly over her mouth.

There was blood in the crisper.

Nice, neatly packaged McBlood.

No celery. No carrots. Not even something as innocuous as broccoli.

Oh, why couldn't it have been a nice rotting head of iceberg lettuce, like everyone else in America has in his vegetable crisper?

Blood.

Unable to stop herself from the morbid curiosity of it all, she reached in and pulled the other crisper drawer out, then stepped back quickly, as if it would bite her.

More blood.

In convenient snack-packs, like pudding.

Just rip open the top and guzzle it down – no need for a straw.

That's what fangs are for.

Leaving everything open, she took several steps back while continuing to stare at the sterile red evidence before her. Shuddering, she hopped back another few feet, only to feel something terribly warm and solid against her back bringing her up short. The strong, familiar scent of his aftershave snaked into her nostrils as she went rigid with fear.

His voice came to her from a place alarmingly close to her jugular. "I wondered how long it would take you to find that."

Never one for dancing, she nevertheless executed a perfect pirouette away from him, as if her life depended on it. With the relative safety of a room between them, she turned, chuckling a little. "This –" her throat was so dry she couldn't continue. Swallow. Breathe. Good. "This is just a prop, right?" Please, please, please let it be a prop, she prayed fervently.

Vlad was in front of her, and she hadn't seen him move. "What good would a prop be without an audience?"

Vicky had been annoyed at the heroines in enough horror/slasher movies to know that this was a good time to depart. All she had to do was get out of here alive. Anything else was gravy; there was nothing in her purse that was worth her life. Nor was dignity a concern as she simply turned tail and ran toward the heavy oak door. When she got to it,

she couldn't open it, although she knew she hadn't locked it when she came in. Pulling on the doorknob was useless. He wasn't going to let her go. Shit, shit, shit. Breathing heavily, she leaned her forehead against the door for a moment, unwilling to give up so soon.

So she turned, and he was leaning casually against the kitchen doorframe, watching her, one foot crossed over the other. "Open the fucking door."

He tsked. "Such language."

Well, if she was going to die, she was going to die. What the hell. "Open the fucking door, please," she said with as much attitude as her shaking voice and jelly legs would allow.

Vlad didn't want to play with her, but he also didn't want to lose her. He'd taken a chance and put the blood there, waiting for her to find it and come to a correct conclusion. It was an interesting test of modern attitudes – hers in particular. He'd wondered if she'd shrug it off as another "lifestyle choice". Apparently not. Even after working with him for the past several months, she was still in fear for her life. Some superstitions run deep. "I would like you to stay and talk to me for a few minutes, then you'll be free to go." If she pressed her back any closer against the door she was going to have splinters. "I won't hurt you."

Her eyebrow rose. "Not 'I can't' but 'I won't'."

"Even vampires have free will."

Somehow, that thought did not relax her.

"Why would I kill you when you're only half-finished typing?" Humor was such a large part of her personality, he was hoping that it would put her at ease. No such luck.

He inclined his head. "Would my word mean anything to you?"

"Does it mean anything to you?" she countered.

"You've read my story. You tell me."

She relaxed somewhat. Of course, it was the story of his own life that she'd been slaving over with him! "There's not much about your early time as a vampire to recommend you."

He nodded slowly. "But I've made changes, haven't I? For the good?" Her answer seemed very important to him as he pinned her with that pointed, intense gaze.

"It would seem," she answered hesitantly, still very wary.

"Then talk to me for a moment. I don't want to lose you. You're the first modern woman I've met, really, and I like you. I value your opinions about my writing, but more than that, I like you."

Victoria was still wild eyed, and didn't look very likely to comply with his request.

Though it galled him to have to beg, he made a small bow. "Please. I guarantee I won't harm a hair on your head. You've seen my stores of blood. I'm not a ravening beast."

Curiosity was going to kill more than the cat. Vicky inclined her head and waited for him to move. "You first."

He walked into the office ahead of her, taking the chair that he always used. She remained standing near the door, as if that position granted her the illusion of safety. Vlad wasn't about to remind her that if he truly wanted to, he could kill her before she even had a chance to turn around and start for the door, but bringing that up wasn't going to help him any.

"Now that you know my secret, I don't want anything to change about our relationship."

She snorted derisively.

"Why should it? I've been a vampire since long before you began working for me. The only difference is that now you know my name is no lie."

"But I'm food to you. I'm in danger; I can feel it."

Vlad considered this. "No, Victoria, danger is driving without a seatbelt, which I know you do frequently. Danger is running a red light, which I also know you do occasionally, or speeding." She'd done all of those things in the months she'd been with him. "You're not in danger with me, you're vulnerable. I could have killed you at any time in the past few months, yet here you are."

"Must you keep harping on the fact that I'm a complete idiot not to have put two and two together before this?"

Now he was angry. "Don't you ever let me hear you say that about yourself again, or you will end up over my lap, young lady!" Vicky's eyes bulged, and for a moment, she forgot to be scared about anything besides the idea of ending up bare-bottomed over this dangerous giant of a man's lap, made ready by him to receive his own brand of thorough, caring discipline.

Refusing to allow him to see how scared she was, she raised her chin and swallowed hard, staring at him with eyes that practically screamed, "Do your worst," despite the fact that she was shaking like a leaf.

Vlad took a deep breath and smiled. For a man who had forsaken God five centuries before, the Almighty had certainly seen fit to throw some magnificent women in his path. As unholy and unclean a creature as he was, he felt he had truly been blessed by his encounters with the fairer sex during his life and subsequent life-after-life. Perhaps it was a sign that he was not as forsaken as he thought.

He walked around the desk as casually as possible, trying not to stare too intently at her. It made humans nervous. Finally, he leaned his butt against the edge of the desk and folded his hands on his lap. "Have I ever threatened you?" he asked, head tilted invitingly, but Victoria felt the weight of his concentration on her.

She shook her head slowly back and forth, while the rest of her trembled uncontrollably.

"Sit before you fall down," he said with not a little command in his voice.

Her eyebrow rose, and she held her ground.

A small smile at her defiance. "Please sit. You look like you expect me to descend on you like the hounds of hell."

Slowly, Victoria relaxed enough to realize that every muscle in her body ached from having been tense for so long. Sitting sound like a wonderful relief, and it wasn't like she hadn't sat alone in this room with him every night for the past four months . . . Against her better judgement, she positioned herself gingerly on the cushions at far end of the couch. So much had changed in the blink of an eye. Had she not made that little discovery, she would have been sitting as close to him as possible.

Whether it was a vampiric talent or his own natural magnetism, Vlad attracted her. He exuded confidence and masculinity, intelligence and humor, appearing in one statement or action to present the epitome of arrogance, yet never failing to use an opportunity for

self-deprecating humor or puns, or plays on words. Nothing seemed to dull the sharp edge of his personality, as if civilization didn't quite set well with him. He wore the mantle of polite society well but uneasily.

It was this blatant, raw force of personality that made Victoria most wary. She was halfway in love with him – all the way physically – and if he had simply been what he'd presented himself as she would have suggested a more rewarding personal relationship once she'd finished her job with him. His dominant stance, take-charge attitude made the gooseflesh rise on her arms as she'd pictured herself submitting to him in a variety of ways.

Now, though, with the imminent possibility of her death at his hands – er, mouth – uppermost in her mind, Vicky had to make a conscious effort not to hug herself in cold comfort.

"Is there anything I can say to help you relax?" He didn't want to resort to invading her mind, knowing that she would consider it the worst kind of violation. Vlad wanted her to want to stay on, but it was hard to remember that he shouldn't compulse her to do that.

Her voice was husky, but not shaky. "I don't know that there is anything. It's kind of like being in the same cage with a tiger. It's beautiful and wondrous but dangerous and you shouldn't get too close."

Vlad almost preened at her descriptive words. "I know how much you like big cats. Thank you for not comparing me to a waterbuffalo."

She snorted. "Too close to being a domesticated animal. You've never been domesticated, even when you were alive."

"No," he agreed. "I was a warrior, and now I'm an old warrior with no battles left to fight."

He sounded almost depressed. Could vampires suffer from depression? It was his vulnerability that caught at her heart. "Poor, immortal, strong as fifty elephants, able-to-control-the-weather-and-turn-into-other-animals you. What a tough life you've had!"

Her sarcastic tone made Vlad chuckle. "Yes, I guess I'm not as bad off as I could be."

"Yeah, you could be dead, like you were supposed to be five hundred years ago."

Levering himself away from the desk, Vlad commented, "I almost was a couple of

months ago, and by my own hand." He stared pensively out the window, his back to her.

A suicidal vampire? Suddenly, unbidden, his feelings flooded into her mind. Pain. Desolation. Loneliness. Lost love. Grief. Fear. "Stop that!" the force of his own thoughts were crowding hers out of her head painfully.

Vlad turned and saw her clutching her head. "Sorry." He consciously clamped down on his leaking emotions. "That's never happened before. You must be empathic to draw me out like that."

"Whatever I am," Vicky replied, visibly shaken again. "I'm harmless."

He nodded sadly. "And I'm not, is that it?" She nodded back. "Is that what it comes down to? You'll never get over the fact of what I am, despite all of your bluster and bluff when we first met about how 'vampires rule' and women would line up to get to me."

Vicky cleared her throat. "I never said I'd be among those women, Vlad. I've never much liked being one of a crowd." Bravely, she got up and crossed to the door into the foyer, expecting him to stop her at any step. But he didn't. She couldn't resist a glance back at him. Vlad stood at the corner of the desk watching her leave. Vicky drew a sharp breath at the blatant pain and longing that was written all over his expressive face. A muscle twitched in the side of his jaw where his teeth clenched together, but he didn't make a move against her, merely let her walk out the door as she ripped the unbeating heart out of his chest and blithely took it with her.

Chapter 7

Reckoning

It was stupid, and childish, but when she achieved the relative safety of her house, Victoria locked every lock and pulled every shade, then turned on every light she owned, as if that would keep her safe from Vlad the Bogeyman. Did she really want to be safe? she asked herself, then refused to dwell on the truthful answer. Instead, she busied herself with mundane chores she detested but kept her occupied – running the dishwasher, wiping down the counters, making dinner –

Blood

But she couldn't quite force herself to open her own refrigerator, and that left precious little to eat. So she ordered a pizza, which was not her favorite food but it would suffice for the night until she put it on the coffee table in front of the couch and folded back the

top of the box. Cheese and pepperoni swam up to her eyes in a red, red pool of –

Blood.

- sauce that looked just a bit too much like –

Blood.

Damn him!! Angry, she tossed her dinner untouched into the trash and stood there for a moment, consciously clamping down on the rampant paranoia flooding through her veins. Like a mantra, she kept repeating the fact that he'd repeated to her: If he'd wanted her dead, she'd already be dead. He'd given her his word – such as it was – that'd he wouldn't hurt her. And a very large part of her wanted to believe in him. But it was the smaller, annoying, whiny, scared part that was screaming the loudest at this point – GET THE HELL OUT OF THE HOUSE!!! GO STAY WITH A FRIEND!!!

But what was she going to say? "Duh, can I come over to your house? I've just found out that Bram Stoker was right?" Her friends – Cam most especially - would be rolling on the floor while dialing the nearest hospital with the men in white coats and butterfly nets. No, that was not an option.

She could go to a motel. Vicky snapped her fingers. That's the ticket. She raced upstairs and collected a couple of outfits as well as the necessities of life, hastily changing her plain gold ball earrings for crosses at the last minute, just in case. Twenty minutes later, she was comfortably ensconced in an inexpensive motel room watching a recent movie on a pay cable channel she couldn't afford at home. Still hungry, she'd stopped by an all night market and picked up some Cheetohs and the ever present Diet Coke, as well as a large chocolate bar. If ever an event fairly screamed for chocolate, this was it.

Vicky made herself comfortable on the bed in her night attire – a too small t-shirt and panties, leaning back against the headboard with her long legs stretched out in front of her and her bare feet crossed. The salty tang of the cheese twists combined perfectly in her mouth as she took a small bite of smooth chocolate. Almost enough to make her forget the events of the day. She smiled, leaning her head back as the candy melted down her throat. Heaven.

"I doubt they have Cheetohs in heaven," the low male growl made her jump up, but in the small motel room, there really wasn't anywhere to go but the bathroom.

Vlad stood nonchalantly in front of her, not a hair out of place, although she knew – she knew – she had locked every lock on the door, then checked them. Twice.

"H-h-how?"

He removed his long coat and advanced into the room as if he owned it, sitting on the edge of the other bed. "You would have been safer in your own house, which you've never invited me into. This is a hotel. No invitation is necessary for me to cross the threshold of any room except the owners'." Vlad thought he heard a small whimper, but her lips never moved.

Vicky was still standing as far away from him as she could, feeling terribly exposed in a thin t-shirt that barely reached her thighs and a practically non-existent pair of filmy pink panties. She was completely trapped, literally backed against the wall. The ambrosia of melted chocolate had turned to ashes in her mouth, but she swallowed convulsively anyway.

"Wh-" she began, dry mouthed, then cleared her throat and started again. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to make sure you were all right," he lied glibly, watching her carefully.

Vicky was biting her lower lip hard enough to draw blood, which she realized with a terrified start was exactly what she didn't want to do in front of him. "How did you know I was here?" she asked shrewdly.

He tilted his head back, as if considering his answer. It might behoove him to lie, but he didn't want to get into that mess again. "Remember how I said you were empathic?"

She nodded, still wary.

"You are. And I can read you very easily. We have a connection, a mental connection."

Doubt filled her face. "Let me guess, Vampire Psychic Friends Network?"

Vlad grinned. "For real. I know what you've done since you left my house. I was worried about you. I didn't want you to do anything stupid."

"Which I proceeded to do by running to a motel when I was perfectly safe in my own blasted house."

He shrugged. "How would you know all of the ins and outs of vampire etiquette?"

As close to relaxed as she'd gotten since she discovered the truth, Vicky nodded wisely. "Yeah, there's the problem of 'whose rules do you believe?'"

His smile broadened, and she would have sworn he winked rakishly. "Believe mine."

She almost snorted, then covered her mouth. No one would ever believe she was joking in a cheap motel room with a vampire.

"No one needs to believe it. You needn't tell anyone."

"Stop that!" Vicky detested the idea that he could read her mind.

Vlad inclined his head gracefully. "As you wish."

Victoria felt a slight . . . tickle in her head, as if his fingertips had run carressingly over her brain, then she was alone in her own head, and it was such an unfamiliar feeling that she knew he'd been "reading" her for quite a while. Suddenly, it was all just too much for her. Tears began to well in her eyes, and instinctively, she rubbed her hands over her face, hiding the weakness from him and trying to pull herself together. Vicky hated to cry in front of anyone, but most of all this man-who-was-not-a-man who had become so important to her in such a short time.

Less than two seconds later, when she looked up, it was to stare directly into his startling blue eyes. And there was no where for her to go if he decided to attack her.

His voice was softly husky, "I will never hurt you purposely, Victoria Regina." To her intense discomfort, he took a step closer, close enough that they were almost touching, and slowly raised a hand near her face. She felt a slight pinch at her ears, then nothing but weightlessness. Vlad had captured her up in his arms, and deposited her down on the big bed. Vicky scrambled to the opposite side immediately, but he remained seated on the other edge of the bed, watching her intently. Vlad began to speak to her, in a low, hypnotic voice, watching her respond, relaxing almost against her will.

"You remind me very much of Isabella, you know. Intelligent, funny, quick witted, beautiful." She blushed uneasily at the last. "I wasn't lying when I said you are the first modern woman I've gotten close to – or even cared to get close to." His husky voice became even softer. "After my Elizabeth died, I withdrew from the living and the dead. I wondered if my time had passed and it might be just as well if I faded from being."

He knew his words had caught her as surely as his arms would in a few minutes. Every thought was the truth, and it was that truth that shone through to her, piquing her

curiosity. Vicky truly almost relaxed enough to lean forward, drawn to him by a strange need to offer comfort to a creature that could snap her neck like a twig after draining her of blood.

"Alexander suggested I write my life's story. At least it gave me something to do. A reason to get up in the afternoon." Vlad drew a deep breath. He was a man of action, and all of this mollycoddling and apologizing that he hadn't killed her by now was wearing on him. He wanted her, he knew she had come to want him before learning what he was, despite her feelings for her boss.

Before she realized what had happened, Vlad was lying at her side, and had caught her wrists in one of his hands, pulling them gently but inexorably above her head, laying her out before him like a virgin sacrifice. Although Victoria struggled, she could not prevent him from opening her legs gently and settling himself intimately in the cradle of her hips, his rampant desire asserting itself blatantly against the mound of her lovenest.

Vlad let her hands go since there was nothing she could do to move him from the spot he had laid claim to, although she continued to struggle until he commanded sharply, "Stop!" The eyes that met his were wild with apprehension but also heavily laced with defiance. Vlad almost smiled. It was almost as if she was thinking that if he was going to kill her, she was going to go down fighting. How like his Vicky!

He sighed, hating that she was so afraid of him that her breath was coming in short pants and her hands were ice-cold to touch. The only thing he could think of to do to calm her fears was to show her that although his attentions were supremely lustful, it was not a bloodlust. Vlad kept his voice low and soft, as if he were calming a fractious horse, while his hands played neutrally with a lock of hair, but moved on to stroke up and down her arms, touching her gently but possessively everywhere he could reach while he murmured a phrase repeatedly in Romanian, hoping to soothe her with the sound of his voice.

Almost imperceptibly at first, her muscles loosened, and eventually, she began to writhe slowly beneath him as his touch took on a more sensual nature. Vicky's breath became short, but it was not out of fear.

Trying to resist him was a losing battle, she was discovering, but she made one valiant attempt, mainly because her curiosity was killing her.

"Wh-" she licked her parched lips and tried again. "What are you saying?"

Vlad's big long-fingered hand stopped just before it claimed her left breast, and he

grinned mischievously. "Nothing in particular."

That nonchalant air let her know it was something particular. "Tell me!" she ordered, and he threw back his head and laughed outright.

"You are in no position to issue orders, my sweet." He rocked his hips against her to remind her of her vulnerability.

Her pouty lower lip protruded brattily. "I want to know."

"But I don't want to tell you."

Vlad couldn't help the stupid grin on his face. If they'd've been standing, she would have been all but stamping her cute little foot. If she was arguing with him, then she couldn't be that afraid of him. And despite her little tantrum, he was glad of it.

The determined glint in her eye did not bode well. "If you don't tell me what you were saying, I'll – "

"Oh, how quickly we fall! First you're scared to death of me, and now you're threatening me!" He hadn't pulled in the reins on her brattiness yet, because he so enjoyed the lack of fear in her eyes and demeanor. Truthfully, he didn't think there was much she could do, but Vicky could be very inventive. Almost taunting her, he challenged, "So whattaya gonna do? Make me?"

He was so damned smug, this vampire/warrior/sex-god who had laid claim to her bodily and driven away most of her entirely reasonable fears . . . Vicky felt he needed to be taken down a peg or two, and her response was swift and vengeful. With lightening speed attained through too many wrestling matches at movie theatres during her youth, she grabbed his package in her small hand, giving it a no-nonsense squeeze.

Vicky's triumphant glow at his unabashed squeal of surprise and discomfort was short lived, however. Before she knew what was happening she was staring at the unbecoming carpeting while he efficiently divested her of her panties so that he could whack mercilessly away at her bottom.

"Nonononononono!" she railed, trying fruitlessly to get away from that awful spanking hand, but nothing helped. Vicky writhed and kicked her legs, screamed and moaned – it had absolutely no effect on him. He punished her relentlessly, broad palm smacking smartly down on her vulnerably bouncing bottom rhythmically over and over, until it seemed he would never stop.

Only when she began to cry helplessly, sobbing brokenly over his lap did he let her up to be cuddled closely in his arms. Because he remembered her mentioning that her mother had always rocked her when she didn't feel well, he moved them both gently back and forth, stroking her hair away from her face while she tried to choke back sobs.

"Shhhhhh, sweet." Oh, God, it had been a lifetime since he'd held a well-spanked woman in his arms, comforting her for the punishment he had meted out on her naughty bottom cheeks. She was so beautiful to him, he had to kiss her.

Vlad's lips covered hers in a careful but insistent kiss, his tongue boldly parting her lips to explore her mouth while holding her immobile in his arms, subject to his every caress. He knew when Vicky had finally surrendered completely to him, ending the futile struggles that only tired her out and joining the kiss a little tentatively at first, then more aggressively until he pressed warm, wet lips to her forehead. "We have to stop now, sweetheart," his voice was husky with need. "You're not ready to make love with me, yet."

It was like having a bucket of cold blood thrown over her. Vicky sat up with no hindrance from him, shooting halfway across the room towards the door a little too late to save her dignity. Christ, she'd practically thrown herself at him!!!

Vlad saw a couple of gleaming spots on the carpet and bent to retrieve them, pressing them into her hand as he shrugged into his coat and walked to the door, saying, "Sorry about these. They're really not my style." He stole a quick peck, then sauntered out the door, closing it carefully behind him. "Lock this right now if you're going to stay here."

In a daze, Vicky did as she was told, then heard his footsteps walking away. Suddenly weak and dizzy, she sagged against the door, staring unseeingly down at the little unrecognizable gold lumps in her palm.

Sharp realization slapped her in the face.

Until he had zapped them off her ears, they had been tiny gold crosses.

If Victoria had thought that that would be the end of him, she was distinctly mistaken. If anything she saw more of him than she had when she was working for him. Vlad sent her things by special delivery – cards, a kitten, balloons, stock in Coca-Cola, Godiva chocolates – in a never ending parade of presents, all of which she returned, except the kitten, whom she couldn't bear to part with. He'd made sure she'd keep that at least by including in its note that it had been found abandoned by a busy highway and had been

brought it into the humane society. Today was its last day before being euthanized.

Finally, late one Sunday afternoon, several weeks after she had discovered the truth, he appeared on her doorstep. Despite the fact that Vicky knew he expected her invite him in, issuing an invitation she had no idea how to revoke should it become necessary, she pushed past him instead and sat on a patio chair. The look in his eye at what he took as an insult was indescribable. That determined, predatory gleam made her wonder if she'd gone too far, but then she saw him ruthlessly regain control of his inner beast. When they first met, she had been the one to talk, and he had absorbed her words, her thoughts, her moods, and her dreams like a sponge. Vlad seemed remote, almost untouchable as he began to talk about his life and his loves, and how there had been no one since Elizabeth died in his arms in 1955.

He had to clear his throat of the constriction that always tightened it when he spoke of Elizabeth. But as he gazed down into Victoria's clear green eyes, he knew that sitting pertly before him – resisting him at every turn, just like all the other women in his life – was another chance at happiness. And despite the pain and the longing and the loneliness of always being the one left behind to soldier on, he wouldn't trade one second of time he'd had with the extraordinary women he'd been blessed with.

Now, if he could just get this minx to cooperate . . .

Talking about Elizabeth always made him feel better, as if saying her name conjured her soothing spirit to his side. A wolfish smile stole across his face, setting Vicky's nerves on edge as he stalked toward her. There was no way she was going to be able to make it into the house before he caught her, so she might as well surrender to the inevitable, if not gracefully.

Vlad pulled her up into his arms and took her mouth passionately, not holding back an iota of the passion he felt for her. If it bowled her over, so much the better. Maybe he'd been pussyfooting around her too much. It was time to show her who was boss in more rooms than his library!

He drew back a little, leaving his arms solidly around her tiny waist, to consider her closely: creamy cheeks were flushed a pretty pink, her breath was coming rapidly, and her nipples were peaked tightly against her t-shirt. And none of this was inspired by fear of him. Vlad grinned, knowing he had won and it was just a matter of time and a little finessing on his part before he had someone warm and wonderful by his side again to explore life with and to take care of. At least he knew with Victoria, he'd never be bored!

Suddenly, he grinned and leaned down to her ear to whisper the same phrase that he had

chanted in the hotel room, then he deposited her in the patio chair and began walking toward the waiting limo.

Vicky's dulcet tones screeched from behind him with all the delicacy of a fishwife, "Some day you'll have to tell me what that means!!"

Vlad turned unexpectedly at her words, projecting himself toward her so that he appeared closer to her without having to move.

With a truly rakish smile, he winked slowly and informed her, "Resistance is futile, my dear. Resistance is futile."

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