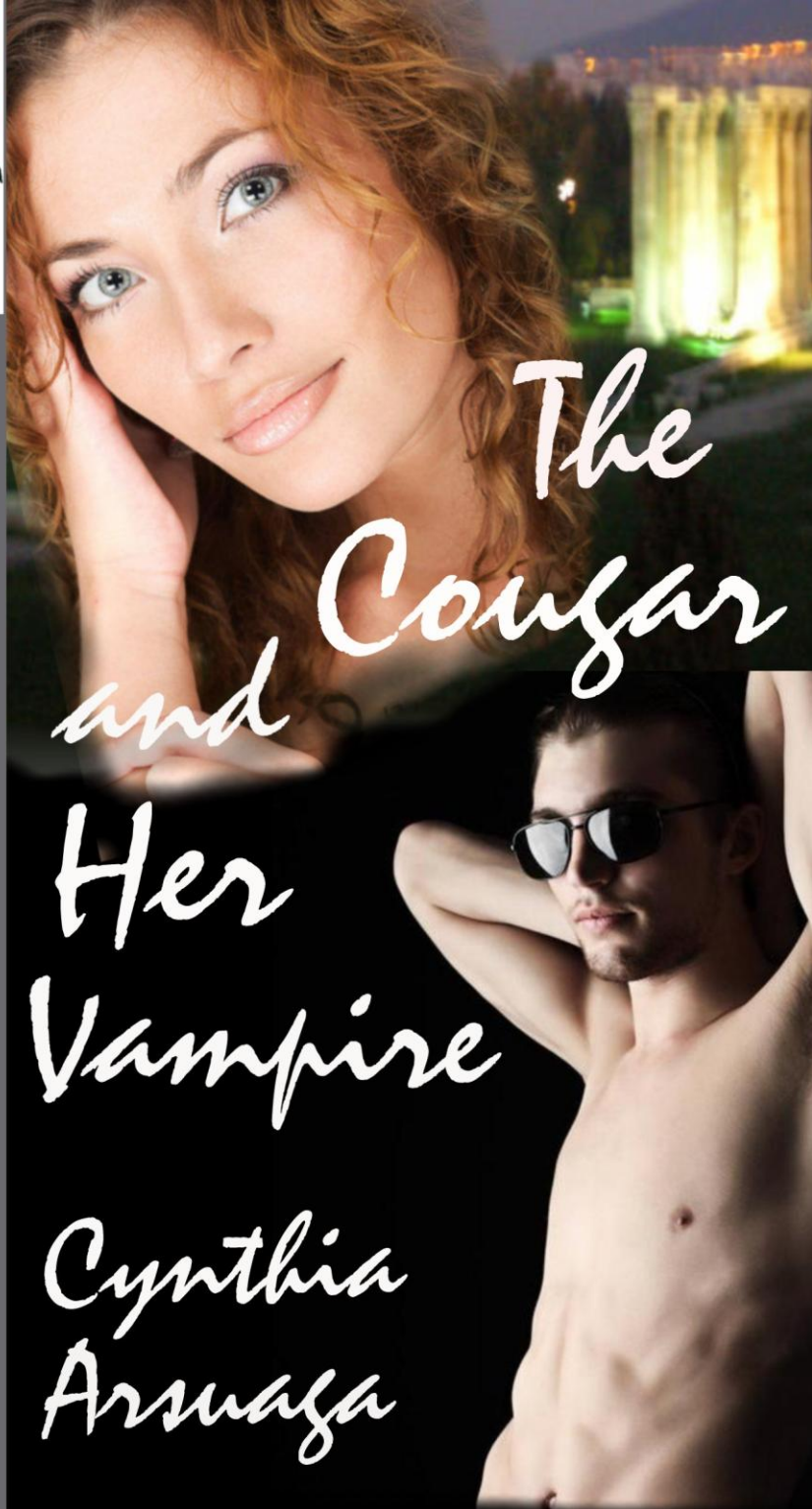




Secret Cravings Publishing



The Cougar and Her Vampire

*Cynthia
Aruaga*

The Cougar and Her Vampire

Cynthia Arsuaga

EROTIC ROMANCE

Secret Cravings Publishing
www.secretcravingspublishing.com

A Secret Cravings Publishing Book

Erotic Romance

THE COUGAR AND HER VAMPIRE

Copyright © 2011 by Cynthia Arsuaga

E-book ISBN: 978-1-936653-45-4

First E-book Publication: April 2011

Cover design by Beth Walker

Edited by Larriane Barnard

Proofread by Belinda Barton

All cover art and logo copyright © 2011 by Secret Cravings Publishing

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Secret Cravings Publishing

www.secretcravingspublishing.com

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this novel to Mike, my partner for life and loving husband who helped me through the toughest job of editing. I would like to thank my Editor, Larriane Barnard, proofreader Belinda Barton, Editor Ariana Gaynor for giving me encouragement when I got frustrated, and last to my publisher, having confidence in my vision for this story, Beth Walker.

The Cougar and Her Vampire

Cynthia Arsuaga

Copyright © 2011

Chapter One

Las Vegas, Nevada

Christian J. MacKenzie, known as C.J. to his closest friends, owner of Nocturnal Entertainment and Hospitality Corporation, or NEHC, walked into the dimly lit bar of *The Purple Tulip*. From the outside the nightclub appeared like any other Las Vegas style establishment—glitzy and glamorous. Inside, another entire world flourished. Veiled in black gossamer, fabrics draped throughout with accents of various shades of purple. The décor of the large expanse reflected the tone of a macabre sanctuary, the newest creation of Black Heart Entertainment and Ian McAlester, Christian's former friend and latest business rival.

Ian catered to the young, up-and-coming Hollywood types such as actors, musicians, models, producers, and general human vampire wannabes. Not interested in the luxury Christian gave his clientele, Ian's craved the dark and Gothic. Getting them addicted to the lifestyle, as well as the benefits of a vampire's blood, became Ian's sole purpose. The power he had over the rich and famous humans fed his hunger just as much as their blood.

Christian made his way to the bar, a round, black, polished granite and brass area at the center of the club. He sat and surveyed the establishment. Several dimly lit VIP niches in the upper level offered anonymity for the celebrities. The dance floor was small but adequate. However, probably not much dancing took place. No doubt, it was a gratuitous item Ian added

for the aesthetics. The eerie music played loud and reverberated through the state of the art sound system.

After gaining the attention of the bartender, Christian ordered the house special, a concoction of whiskey and synthetic blood, called Vegas Spitfire.

“Hey, old man, checking yer competition out?” Ian asked as he came up behind Christian and slapped him on the back.

Christian spun around on the barstool and gave Ian a glare, showing his fangs. “Nice place, but it willna last,” he said in a deep, throaty tone.

“Ye think? I hate to disappoint ye, C.J., but my clubs are hot. Ye may have succeeded in running all the other vamps out of business, but ye haven’t got me yet.”

“Ye’r right, I’m no’ finished with ye. I’ve been easy on ye because of our past, but ye’r going too far, Ian, and endangering us all.”

“I use and exploit humans for what they are. If they want what I have to offer, they’re taking the risk, not me. If more find out about us, I say bring it on. I’ll be a rich man. I doona like ye, and ye doona like me. I’ll have no regrets when I take ye down.”

“I see that’s the way ye want to play it. This venue of yers will burn out its appeal eventually, but not before it does severe damage. The mortals want the glamour and privacy I provide them, not this dark, morose style. Ye’r endangering the safety of us all with what ye’r doing.” He swallowed the last of his drink and slammed the glass down on the bar.

“Yer clubs have lost their edge. You’ve lost yer edge. My clubs are the hottest and latest thing. The young mortals love them, and they drive this industry. Ye’r catering to the old rich bastards, and they’ll be leavin’ their money to their young. They doona want what ye offer, they want what I have. Ye’r dead and doona know it.”

Christian didn’t continue arguing. He stood and glared, the blood burning in his veins, and knew his emerald eyes were greener than usual. It always happened with the onset of anger, right before they turned brilliant red.

Christian turned to leave, not saying a word.

“Go ahead, walk away. Ye know I’m right, yer nights are numbered. When I take ye down, it will be too late for ye to do anythin’ about it.”

Ian’s laughter followed him out. As of tonight, they were enemies in more than the entertainment world. Ian’s policy of open membership at his clubs threatened possible exposure of vampires to the human world, tipping the balance beyond their past friendship. Christian vowed to take Ian down at any cost.

* * * *

The limousine ride back to the Nocturnal Desert Rose, his latest resort in the United States, offered Christian the opportunity to think hard. What happened between them that led to this showdown? Christian missed his friend, but Ian changed after he lost his mate, Cassandra. She betrayed him with another vampire. After killing both of them savagely, he was never the same, becoming a bitter and dark vampire bent on destroying anything that crossed him. Christian could no longer be around him. Their paths went in separate directions, and he didn’t hear from Ian until about twenty-five years ago when the Vampire Rage came into fashion. They were rivals in the entertainment business of vampire sex and blood exchanges, and quite possibly the delicate balance of humans and vampires co-existing.

Had Ian spoke some truth? *Am I losing my edge?* His vampire resorts were world renowned among the famous and infamous celebrities who loved to hobnob with vampires. Cavorting with vamps became the chic thing to do, drink vampire blood for the healing benefits and have hot sex. Blood, the new drug of choice, like cocaine in the 1980’s, led to his business success. With a couple of his human and vampire friends, he formed a joint venture and developed private resorts around the globe catering to the rich and famous and their ‘thirst’ for vampires. After a few successful years, he bought out the partners and became sole owner of one of the most successful vampire entertainment businesses. Other groups of vampire entrepreneurs had tried to muscle in on Christian’s territory by bringing in a more unsavory, darker side of the business with Goth-style clubs and resorts, but they didn’t survive. He put them out of business, except for one—Ian.

The patrons of Christian's clubs had at least a net worth of tens of millions. Many of those in the local governments, where the resorts were located, played in the inner circle of the Vampire Rage with financial benefits. For the general populace, vampires were nothing more than a legend, a myth for the macabre-minded people who fantasized about them. The elite circle of select humans liked it that way, and Christian eagerly accommodated their desires. He and his vampire friends and colleagues didn't want their existence to be known to the general population for fear of being hunted down to be used for medical experimentation and eventual extermination. They, the vampires, had survived for centuries and intended to continue for centuries more. Ian changed the rules by making his clubs available to a younger, less affluent crowd. A move, which could lead to exposure of their kind with an outcome Christian didn't want to contemplate.

Some carefully selected young mortals patronized Christian's establishments in addition to the older ones. Revenues were up, and he thought about opening a new club in the future. They were less expensive to develop than large resorts and his board of directors was more likely to approve a smaller venture. The only decision he had to make was the location. Viable locations were Berlin, Hong Kong, Ibiza, and even Buenos Aires, or maybe another location in the States, but none of the locations he'd considered seemed right. This time, he wanted a location in a warm climate. The resort theme in Vegas had a small club on-site, but nothing on The Strip. To put one there to compete with Ian, didn't make sense. Another location, perhaps in the south would be more viable, maybe even on a Caribbean Island. Was Ian correct? Was he losing his edge and couldn't make a simple decision like choosing a new club location?

Christian needed to clear his head. He wanted to be the best at what he did, always had been, and always would be. Ian wasn't getting away with filling his head with bullshit.

The Nocturnal Desert Rose came into view, and Christian made a decision. He required rest and relaxation, time to collect his thoughts, and choose his next plan of action. His favorite resort rested in Crete, Greece. To him, the Elounda Resort remained the most peaceful place on earth. There, he could find himself and regain self-confidence. A visit during the peak season of July

with the international crowd would make for vibrant conversation and pique his creative juices. He'd spend a couple months relaxing and getting his edge back before thinking about his next project. After finishing his business in Vegas, he would leave for Elounda.

"Sir, we are here," the driver announced.

As the limousine came to a halt at the front entrance, Christian spied a pair of unaccompanied tall and lanky women, one blonde and the other a brunette. The doorman opened the limo door and Christian stepped out, immediately making his way to the women. He needed companionship and a blood-fix tonight—no synthetic blood. The real thing remained the only cure to sate the bloodlust.

"Ladies, are you here unaccompanied?" he asked as he put his arms around their waists.

"Not anymore," one of them said, giggling.

"My name is C.J., the owner of this establishment. What do you ladies say we have a party in my suite?"

The two women smiled as their eyebrows arched and pupils widened with excitement. They made their way to his penthouse suite where he had his way with them, sexually and by taking their blood. He sent them on their way before dawn.

Closing his eyes, he felt the weight of three hundred lonely years. As the sun began to rise over the desert sands, Elounda called to him.

Two more weeks.

Chapter Two

Miami, Florida

Just another day at the office in sunny South Beach, Florida and Payton completed the closings for her latest sales, with prosperity to be celebrated along with the winding down of the summer season. After the recent event of her divorce from her cheating husband finalized two months before, she felt a little down in the dumps. She looked forward to today's closings to boost her morale *and* bank account.

Since the divorce from Demetrius Vasiliou, she relished the idea he would finally be out of her life, financially speaking, and she didn't want to think of him ever again. The closings made her fiscally comfortable, for the next couple of months without tapping into her generous settlement that Demetrius fought tooth and nail. She received the penthouse condominium and a large cash payout, both of which he expressed she didn't deserve. Payton didn't give an inch in what she asked for. She deserved it after the private investigator caught the indiscretion with Demetrius' twenty-four year old assistant on camera. He buckled, but made a veiled threat she'd fail on her own and never get another penny from him. Eleven years, six months, twenty-seven days entitled her to more, but she finally settled to move on with her life. Focusing on her next transaction, a listing at the Lago Del Mar Condominiums would be a distraction from the lingering doldrums, since her life had taken so many ups and downs over the past twenty plus years. She took care of herself, but why couldn't she find love, one that could last? Everything else in her life appeared good. Tears burned her eyes, until they finally rolled down her cheeks.

With three failed marriages behind her, she was done with men. Her real estate career would be her new love. She made the decision as she pulled up to her office building. Work would be the driving passion in her life. Attention returned to the listing of the condominium, offered at a sale price of over a million dollars; a nice commission if she marketed the property right and lucked out with a quick sale. As she worked on the sales comparisons and presentation in the early afternoon, the office receptionist came running into her private office.

“Did you hear about the agent murdered last night?” Maritsa said excitedly.

“No. Who? Where did it happen?” she asked.

“I don’t remember the name, but it happened at a listing on Bay Street. The owners came home and found the agent with her throat cut and no blood anywhere. Isn’t that weird?”

“Yeah, it sounds like the other two from last month. A serial killer appears to be targeting real estate agents. Creepy. No blood? I’ll have to call Janice and find out if she knows more details. She deals in those luxury homes a lot and may even know the person.”

“Aren’t you glad you don’t have houses for listings, only condos? There haven’t been any killings in them, only the private beach homes.”

“Who’s to say they won’t move to condos next? Although with the security in the buildings, the cameras and all, I doubt they would get away with it. I guess that’s why they’re targeting the houses.”

“Hey, that’s pretty good. You’re right. You ought to be a cop.”

“Please, cops don’t make enough to keep me in Prada and Chanel.”

They both laughed but in the back of Payton’s mind, she began to worry about her friend no matter how many times she told herself the murder victim couldn’t possibly be Janice. If anything had happened, she was certain Jason, her husband would have called.

“If you want to read more about the killings, a bulletin is posted on the Realtor Board website. I need to let the other agents know. See ya later.”

Payton tolerated Maritsa, front desk receptionist and office gossip, because of her youth and enthusiasm and in spite of her ditsy nature. At twenty-one, fresh out of community college, she

told everyone who would listen she didn't know what to do with her life. Living life as it came to her kept her content for the present. Payton felt that way once, a long time and three husbands ago, but she wised up. Hopefully, Maritsa would one day, but not through the husband route.

The website bulletin about the murders revealed sketchy details but had enough to warrant concern. The killings occurred at night in private beach homes and involved female real estate agents. Nothing new there. She scrolled down the page to find more specifics about the most recent one. Her stomach did a flip when she discovered the victim was a SoBe Properties agent with the Miami Beach office. Upon seeing the victim was a forty-three year old woman, her breath caught. Then a name flashed on the screen.

"Oh, my God, not Janice!" Payton stared in shock at the computer. Tears welled up in her eyes to trickle down her cheek in a black streak of mascara.

Without hesitation, she picked up her cell phone and called Jason. Payton had known Janice since moving to South Beach. They met in real estate school and became instant friends. Payton had not spoken with Janice in about a week but had plans to meet for drinks this coming Friday. *Why didn't Jason call me?*

The phone rang, and Jason answered. She understood the instant she heard the grief in his voice.

"Jason, it's Payton."

"Payton. Oh, my God, Payton. She's gone." Jason sobbed.

Mentally exhausted after an hour on the phone with him, she still promised Jason she'd stop by to visit him on her way home. For the remainder of the day concentrating on work was impossible. Thoughts of Janice dying in such a horrific manner unnerved her. *Who could have done such a thing and why? The women murdered were innocent, defenseless, and did not deserve to die. They were doing a job they enjoyed, and their lives were cut short by a sadistic, murdering creep.*

Never experiencing the loss of a friend before, she didn't know how she'd manage getting through the evening, but had to bear up for Jason's sake.

* * * *

Janice Worth's funeral consisted of a quiet ceremony with close friends and relatives. Several real estate colleagues stopped by the house she'd shared with Jason and her seventeen-year-old son, Patrick. Payton volunteered to help prepare food and kept a steady flow of various dishes on a buffet table for the people that came and went all afternoon. By seven o'clock that evening, exhaustion overwhelmed her after being on her feet all day in two-inch heels. After the last of the guests departed and the kitchen cleanup completed, she wandered out to the back terrace.

The balmy late July night featured a slight warm breeze blowing off the water. A partial moon hung in the clear sky reflecting onto the Intracoastal Waterway. Private yachts and small sailboats glided by the house with their floating parties on board. The scent of the jasmine and tropical plants wafted through the air. The rustling Queen Palms kept time to the breeze in a melodic rhythm. Payton loved South Beach. Janice had loved it, too. *I'm going to miss you, girl!* A tear rolled down her cheek, the first one shed since the funeral earlier in the day.

An arm reached around her shoulder; she jerked and spun. Jason stood within inches gazing into her eyes.

"Hey, didn't mean to startle you. I wanted to say thanks. You were a great support to me and Patrick today. I don't think I could have gotten through everything without you. Thanks," he told her, his voice unsteady, fighting back tears.

"You're welcome. Janice would have wanted me here, I know."

"Yeah, she would have."

"How's Patrick doing?"

"He went to a friend's house because he couldn't hang around. I told him to go, but be careful. He's almost eighteen, a young man and has to grieve in his own way. I can only be here for him. You know?"

"That's all you can do." She paused and then continued, "How are you doing?"

“Okay, but I’m still in shock. I begged her not to show the property at night because of the location being isolated. I’d heard about the murders last month, but she insisted the client checked out, and she’d be okay. The house wasn’t vacant, and she had mace. Damn, why did she have to go? I should have gone with her!” He slammed his hand on the concrete balustrade and started to curse. “I need to know Janice didn’t die in vain. I want to find the bastard who did this to her and rip his heart out!”

Payton put her arm around Jason’s shoulder and her other hand over his where it rested on the balustrade.

“Jason, you’re bleeding. Let’s go inside and take care of this.”

“No, it’s okay. I need to feel the pain right now. It proves I’m alive.”

“I know it hurts. My heart is breaking too. The police will find who did this. The sadistic pig is going to slip up and get caught. I promise you, he will.”

She tightened her embrace. He turned to her. For a few moments, they stood face-to-face, staring into one another’s eyes. Tears streamed down both their faces as they shared the loss. They also shared the hatred of the unknown murderer. Jason leaned down, his lips within inches of Payton’s. For a split second, she became lost in the moment.

“Jason, no. It’s not right. We’re both hurting. Falling into each other’s arms to make the pain go away won’t bring Janice back. We’ll only regret it in the morning.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking.” He stepped back, seemingly embarrassed.

“Hey, it’s okay. We’re still friends. Now please, let’s go take care of that hand,” she insisted. She grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the house.

* * * *

The next several weeks, Payton stayed busy working long hours. She obtained the Lago Del Mar Condominium listing and had a duty call that resulted in a sale of a small house in Miami Shores. Also, she received a referral lead for a beach home from a past client of Janice’s that she

ran into at the funeral. The client had been a social acquaintance of Janice's for years, and Payton met her a few times. After the funeral, she called the owners. Guilt dogged her at first, but business was business, and unfortunately, Janice was no longer available to help the client. If the lead panned out, she made a promise to herself that part of the commission would go to Patrick, Janice's son, as a gift. Helping him was the right thing to do.

An appointment to see the beach home the next afternoon at two o'clock left plenty of time to do her sales comparison and work on the presentation. Although her expertise fell within the condominium market, she had worked single-family homes before. With the saturation of condominiums in the area, sales on them were slim. To have a single family listing would be refreshing and could bring in more business for her, something always appreciated in the current depressed real estate market.

* * * *

She arrived at the beach home through an ornate scrolled wrought-iron gate. The palm tree lined cobblestone driveway lead to the two-story mansion, with its white stucco and red tiled roof. After parking her black Mercedes under the porte cochere, she retrieved the digital camera to take exterior photographs of the fountain and front entrance for her marketing package. Over the past five years, Payton prided herself at becoming quite adept at taking near professional-quality photos of her listings. Friends and colleagues asked her to be the designated photographer at most social functions, and she always jumped at the opportunity to hone her skills. Finished taking the outside shots, she grabbed the laptop and purse, and proceeded to the entrance. The massive carved mahogany double front door, stood twelve feet tall, adorned a large doorknocker in the shape of the letter "M." After trying to use the knocker, she pressed the doorbell. The "M" proved too heavy to move.

After an hour and a half, Payton walked away with a twelve and a half million dollar listing, pleased with herself. The exquisite home presented luxury features: marble floors, granite countertops, top of the line appliances, swimming pool, five bedrooms, study, wine cellar, media

room, a master suite wing, and views to die for. Ecstatic with the listing, she could not wait to get back to the office to start preparing her plan of action. International clients were going to be the best bet, and the Internet would be the best course of action. Her connections in New York and Los Angeles didn't hurt either. Her mind raced with all the possibilities for the advertising.

Chapter Three

While working after-hours on a marketing plan several days later, Payton's cell phone rang. The caller ID indicated Jason Worth. *Oh shit! Should I answer?*

"Jason? How are you?"

"Hey, Payton. Have you heard about the new victim? When the police called to give me an update on Janice's murder, they mentioned the latest one as well."

"Oh, my, no, I haven't heard. I've been busy with work. Where did this one happen? Did the cops tell you?"

"No, nothing specific. I'm sure the details will come out on the evening news though. This crazy bastard has to be stopped."

"I know. It's scary to be in this business right now. I guess we'll have to start a buddy system or something."

"Try not showing homes after dark. That and vacant homes on the beach."

"I can't help it sometimes. I have to arrange showings when the customers or clients are available—morning, noon, or night."

"Promise me you won't show any properties after dark, Payton. This is obviously the pervert's favorite time to strike. Defenseless women showing property at night, what a perfect setup for a whacko. Promise me?"

"I promise I won't do anything stupid. No commission is worth my life. Trust me."

"Listen, if you aren't busy Friday, would you like to go for drinks? As friends. Nothing more. I'd like some company. The four walls are closing in on me. What do ya say?"

With hesitation, she stumbled for words to say. "Um, let me check my calendar." She thought of Jason as a nice guy and knew he was lonely, but the night of Janice's funeral they had

almost made a mistake. Time had passed, and the likelihood of faltering and almost kissing again may not happen. “Okay, I’m free, sure why not. Where would you like to go?”

“Hmm, let me think about it and let you know when I pick you up. I’ll see you around eight?”

“Sure, I’ll see you then.”

After disconnecting, she worried if she’d made a mistake in agreeing. An attractive man, in his forties, a corporate attorney by profession, and he had a nice body. She liked Jason and certainly would look twice if she met him as a stranger, but he was the husband of her friend. Granted, her dead friend, but the entire situation made her feel strange. He said they would only talk and have drinks as friends, so what harm could come from that? The walls were closing in on her too, and going out Friday would be a nice change of pace.

* * * *

On Friday morning, the buzz in the office concerned the latest murder. The office broker put out warnings—no female agents were to show properties without a male agent or companion with them. Night showings were strongly discouraged. All new buyers were subject to a thorough screening prior to meeting with an agent. Being geographically random according to the police reports, the broker could provide no more advice. Rumors spread that the murders resembled a form of initiation among local gangs.

Payton’s anxiety over the case mounted as the day passed. The morning sped by, sending out a blanket email to contacts about the new beachfront listing. Hoping for a quick turnaround, she planned a marketing campaign with contacts made in London a couple years back. Tapping into the European market for this listing would be a good source of future business as well.

Meeting Jason for drinks worried the bejezuss out of her. All morning and afternoon her mind wandered away from business, and she fretted more about how to dress for Jason than the preparations for a listing appointment. Why was she so concerned with what to wear? Only

drinks with a friend, not a date and nothing special. Why make a big deal out of it? *The date? Oh, no, not a date! I can't think like that.*

Feeling lonely, no matter how hard she tried, she considered this a date and made going out with Jason a big deal. Since the divorce, she had thrown every waking hour into work, sometimes putting in twelve to fourteen hour days. The death of Janice hadn't helped either, dearly missing her company. Payton's control over everything in her life had slipped tacitly through her fingers. Three failed marriages, another birthday around the corner, no children, no love in her life, except work. Work, this is all she had to show for forty-four and a half years? This represented the net worth of her life? *Payton, stop feeling sorry for yourself and be happy with what you have! You said this would be your new love.*

A knock came to her office door snapping her back from the deep thoughts.

"Do you want to go get a bite to eat?" Maritsa asked. "A group of us are going to *Tisdale's* for lunch if you want to tag along."

"Sure, it'll take my mind off work for a while." A welcomed reprieve.

* * * *

The doorbell rang. *Nothing like being prompt, Jason.* Eight o'clock exactly, punctuality seemed his forte. *Has to be the attorney in him.* As usual, being on-time and ready to go brought out the procrastinator in her. Selecting clothes to purchase or wear, or making last minute decisions definitely became the bane of her existence. The doorbell rang again, as she ran to answer, her hair still half done and rollers flopping, her bare feet squeaked across the hardwood floors. Wearing only a pink silk robe, which hung loosely over her body, she wrapped and tied it before opening the door.

Jason smiled as she greeted him, the handsome, non-date man standing before her. "I thought you were going to stand me up."

“I’m sorry, Jason. As you can see, I’m running late. I had last minute phone calls to make to the West Coast and didn’t get here until thirty minutes ago. Do you mind fixing yourself a drink and waiting a little longer?”

He gave a little chuckle and smiled. “Not a problem. Where’s your liquor cabinet?”

“To the right of the kitchen sink.”

She ran into the bedroom to finish dressing.

“I like what you’ve done to the place. It looks different from when Demetrius lived here. You’ve changed out the furniture. Very you. A little New York, a little L.A., a little Miami Beach.”

“Thanks. I like it.” She stumbled over piles of rejected clothes on the floor. She finally settled on a sequin T-shirt and skinny jeans. Slipping on strappy hi-heel sandals, she made a few last minute adjustments, and joined Jason in the living area.

Jason sat on the sofa with a glass of red wine in hand and an extra glass sitting on the coffee table.

“Wow, you look great!” He stood, admiring her head to toe. “Demetrius was a fool.”

She blushed. “Thanks, but I think I’m better off without him. Is that wine for me?”

“Yes, I didn’t want to drink alone.”

She took the glass from his hand and sat in the chair. He followed suit taking a seat across from her.

“So, where are we going? Nothing swanky, I hope, I’m not dressed for anything fancy.”

“You’re fine. It’s South Beach. You like jazz, right?”

“Yes, I do. Janice told you?”

“She did. I thought we could check out *The Sapphire Lounge*. I heard the club is a nice place with a small, older crowd, not the usual young summer tourist types. More locals should make for a nice evening.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I’ve been working long hours, so this is a nice break. So, tell me, how have you been? How’s Patrick?”

“I’ve been good. Working long hours like you. Patrick has been off with friends more than spending time at home. I’ve been giving him space and time to grieve. He and Janice were close.”

“I know. She always talked about how proud she was of him. She said she couldn’t wait until his graduation and going away to college and gushed about him all the time.” Payton’s voice softened and tears began to well.

“Okay, I think we need to go before we both turn this night into a downer.”

“Sounds great, why waste any more time. Let’s go.” She put her glass down. He did the same, waiting while she quickly stepped into the guest bath near the front door, grabbed a tissue and patted her eyes. *Ohmigod, this is going to be a mistake, I know it.*

The typical Friday night crowds packed the South Beach corridor. At the height of the summer season, people walked six deep on the sidewalks, and the streets were a sea of cars, all shapes, sizes, and price tags. This was the place to be seen, no doubt about it.

They decided to walk the three blocks to the lounge, and Jason parked the car in a municipal parking garage. A warm, light August breeze off the ocean caressed her cheek. When they arrived at the lounge, a long line snaked around the corner of the building with eager customers waiting to get in to the establishment. Fortunately, Jason had made reservations so they were able to bypass the line.

Jason and Payton were greeted by an enthusiastic young waitress who escorted them to a booth at the back of the lounge, far from the stage. Plush navy blue Naugahyde adorned the booths and a low round table made of granite in a lapis blue set between the benches. They ordered a bottle of house wine and sat back to enjoy the jazz quartet. Listening to the music, they made small talk, avoiding any topic pertaining to Janice.

Watching the scantily-clad bodies writhing on the dance floor Payton realized her attire definitely didn’t fit in with the younger crowd. However, she loved the pulsing rhythm and moved with the beat in the booth. When a slow piece came on, Jason tapped her on her shoulder and asked her to dance. She smiled and accepted without a word. Rising, she followed him to the

dance floor. He pulled her close, holding one hand and his other arm around her waist. Couples swayed to the slow beat on the crowded floor. As she brushed against other dancers, pushing her closer to him, her senses heightened. After a long stretch with little to no physical contact, she needed to touch. She shouldn't be feeling this way toward her best friend's husband but damn she needed comfort, she wanted control over her life and feel alive again. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. A flash of perception answered in his dark brown eyes. Payton fancied he felt the same desire. He slowly pulled her into a tighter embrace.

He stood tall at six feet five, towering above her five feet eight. Those shoulders were impossibly wide, accentuating a trim waist. Resting her head on his chest, she heard his rapid heartbeat, and felt his erection against her belly with his body betraying his arousal. Dark intent etched intently in his expression.

Jason's features were classic outdoorsman—a rugged, sun-kissed face showcased a heavy brow and square jaw with intense blue eyes against his tan skin. Athletic, he enjoyed water sports, tennis, and driving fast cars. Payton could never understand how Janice and he made a match. Her friend was the total opposite.

Closing her eyes, she blocked out the thoughts of her friend. The music slowed to a throbbing primal beat.

Jason's hands warmed her body, the feeling sorely missed and needed. Leaning into him, she reached around the nape of his neck and tightly wrapped her fingers at the base. A big hand clasped her swaying hip. His other hand slid under her T-shirt, his smooth fingers running along the flesh of her stomach. She undulated against him, shamelessly brushing her thighs against his crotch. He moved with her, pressing her into him, as if they were alone on the dance floor.

Lifting her chin, she breathed in deeply. He smelled of expensive cologne, a scent that filled her senses and thrilled her. They danced, lost in each other. He kissed and licked behind her earlobe; gooseflesh tingled on her skin. His fingers stroked the length of her spine, his touch making her pussy throb to the rhythm, begging for release.

As if reading her thoughts, he held her tighter. The throbbing intensified the damp, moist needy place between her legs.

With another tug on her to come closer, she found her legs straddling his thigh, her skinny jeans so tight they were like a second skin. As she ground against him, she could only imagine how so damn good his body pressed against hers would be. His left hand settled on her ass, his fingers cupping and squeezing. His right hand fondled her breasts through the sequined fabric. Her breasts and legs quivered. The rising warmth in her body signaled an impending climax, right in the middle of the dance floor. *What the hell? Oh, sweet Mother of God, what am I doing?*

“Jason,” she cried out, her voice muffled by the music. She clutched at his shoulders, desperate with need. The tightness of the embrace caused friction against his chest, hardening her nipples. What was he doing to her? Immersed in the warmth of his body against hers, she knew he expected more than friendly talk tonight. Should she give in to the desire overwhelming her or turn him away?

He leaned down close to her ear. “I want you, Payton. Do you want to go?” he murmured.

With hesitation, she answered, “Yes,” and gave into the desire.

* * * *

Payton awoke at daybreak, rolled over, and her heart dropped seeing Jason sound asleep beside her. Her first thoughts were of Janice. What had she done? Sleeping with her best friend’s husband did not sit high on her bucket list. *Damn! What kind of person am I?* Janice had been dead less than thirty days. In her opinion, what she did last night bordered on morally wrong and disgusting. She eased out of bed so as not to wake Jason and headed to the bathroom to shower. Her thoughts wandered to the night before. Both of them were two lonely hearts consoling one another, trying to make the pain go away, but that’s a lousy excuse for having mindless sex with a friend’s husband. It never works, never does. *What a helluva mess you’ve got yourself into, Payton.*

Scrubbing her body hard, washing away all the lovemaking from the night before, she thought of the man lying in her bed. The sweet man, the gentle man, but not the man she wanted. He could be someone to bridge the gap between Demetrius and...and what? An unknown future man of her dreams? Someone who would love her forever without question, with all her faults and at her age? Not likely. The only love she could count on centered on buying and selling real estate, not a man. Men always let her down. Work she could count on, and for the time being, served as her real true love. She'd used Jason, she felt bad about it, and determined to let him down easy without hurting him. He could only be a friend, and she wanted to keep him as such.

Finished with her shower, she toweled off and put on her robe. When she went back into the bedroom, Jason had departed, leaving a note on the bed pillow. Sitting down, she unfolded the paper to read the contents.

Payton,

Thanks for last night. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. I'll call you later.

Jason

Discussing their relationship wouldn't be easy after all. *Damn!*

While the coffeemaker brewed her 'Morning Joe' caffeine fix, she booted up the laptop on the breakfast bar to check her email for responses to the marketing blitz for the new listing. Some junk mail, agent messages, and a buyer message awaited her. *Hmm. A new contact?*

Friday, August 29, 7:33 p.m.

From: Ian McAlester

To: Payton Fleming

Payton Fleming,

My name is Ian McAlester. I saw your sign on the Ocean Boulevard beachfront property. I am interested in taking a look at this property. I am an entertainment entrepreneur opening a nightclub on Lincoln Street this fall. I have looked at several other properties but have not found the right one for my needs. I am available after eight pm any night this week. Please email and let me know if you can meet at the property.

Thank you.

Ian McAlester

Black Heart Entertainment Industries

The message sparked interest. A buyer who didn't ask the price or other information about the property, and he wanted to make an appointment at night. This sounded suspicious. With the serial killer still on the loose, she decided not to take any risks and sent back:

Saturday, 10:30 am

From: Payton Fleming

To: Ian McAlester

Mr. McAlester,

Thank you for your interest in Ocean Boulevard. The list price is \$12.5 million.

There are five bedrooms and five full baths. If this is something that still interest you, I will be more than happy to show you the property tomorrow afternoon at three pm. The owners have allowed the showing of the property at that time.

Please let me know if that time works for you. Thank you again for your interest.

Payton Fleming

Luxury Properties

After clicking the “Send” button, she crossed her fingers and hoped for an immediate response. If Mr. McAlester was a legitimate buyer, he would see her at three. If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t respond.

Opening the other messages, she replied to other agents, deleted the junk mail, except for one. The subject caught her attention, concerning a spa resort on the Island of Crete, Greece. She had never been to any part of the country and always thought about going because of Demetrius’ Greek heritage. In all the years of modeling and traveling with her first husband as close as she got was Italy, and Demetrius never took her, either. A vacation far away from the craziness of the divorce, Janice’s death, Jason, and the serial killer would be a welcome relief and maybe just what she needed. She could clear her head and get her bearings. *A week or two away wouldn’t hurt. I could keep in touch via Internet and have another agent handle my business for showings. Yeah, this could work.*

With a bit of excitement, she opened the resort’s home page. Promises of an idyllic location and luxury amenities were sometimes overrated on websites with pretty pictures under ideal situations. She hoped this wasn’t really a dog disguised with retouched photos. The location of the hotel was on the western part of the island in a village called Elounda, an exclusive area featuring a five-star luxury spa. Each suite had a private balcony and its own swimming pool, all overlooking the Aegean Sea. The place sounded perfect.

* * * *

Ian McAlester never responded to her email. Just as she suspected, not legitimate, a nosy neighbor, or the price exceeded his limit.

The next day, she decided to book a ten-day stay at what promised to be a heavenly retreat. The sooner she left town, the better. She reserved her flight to Athens, a connecting flight to Crete, and transportation from the airport to the resort. Excited, she couldn’t wait to go.

Another murder occurred two days after she booked the trip. The body count totaled five. Payton was relieved to be leaving town for a while.

The last contact with Jason was the message she left on his answering machine telling him she needed space and time to think about what happened. She left out mentioning how guilty she felt or that she would be leaving town.

Chapter Four

End of August, Village of Elounda, Island of Crete

Christian wanted nothing more than to relax tonight. After a couple of days, he would refocus on business. Making his way to the outdoor bar, he greeted several customers seated in lounge chairs beachside. The three bartenders dressed in black muscle T-shirts and tight black leather pants at the bar served thirsty patrons. Waitresses, dressed in black tank tops and black leather mini-skirts, waited on guests lounging on chaises and chairs seated on the sandy beach.

Spying an empty seat at the bar, Christian made his way toward the center of the terrace, sat down, and ordered the evening's special cocktail. Nearing the end of the season, the bartenders liked to experiment with different concoctions, fancy cocktails laced with synthetic blood. Sipping the newest mixture, he surveyed the active scene, checking out which rich and famous humans were visiting the resort at the end of the season. The clientele dwindled that time of year, which he preferred, but the book revenue didn't like the results. He would like to find a way to bring in more profits without exposing the few vamps that still frequented the resort that time of year, but how?

Christian took another sip of his cocktail. He didn't particularly like it, a Bloody Cosmopolitan, red and frothy, but didn't have the sweet taste of the pure stuff, real blood. He hungered for the real thing, not the synthetic watered-down crap they served human guests. Spotting the hotel manager walking in his direction with a ledger under his arm, he muttered under his breath, "So much for rest and relaxation tonight." He put on a false smile for his human employee.

“Mr. MacKenzie, I hope you rested well, sir. I have the books for you to review at your leisure,” Spiros Manolis said. A short, balding man in his early forties and a good employee, he’d worked for Christian and the Elounda property since the opening of the resort fifteen years ago. Christian trusted him implicitly, even though his sense of timing left much to be desired.

“I rested very well, Spiros, thank you. As usual, I’m sure I will find the books are in good order?” Christian asked.

“Of course, sir. This season has been better than last year this time, and I am projecting that this month will exceed last month’s revenue. We don’t have any bookings for next month, but that could change over the course of the next few weeks. To bridge the gap, I would like permission to put an Internet marketing plan into effect. I believe we might get more reservations.”

“What kind of marketing? To unqualified humans? If you do, make sure it is after October first so we don’t run the danger of them finding out about us. No vamps show up after that time so we should be fine. I will take a look at this and get it back to you tomorrow night.”

“Yes, Mr. MacKenzie.” Spiros nodded his head and left Christian, returning to the main resort building.

* * * *

At nine o’clock in the evening, the live band set up to play several sets until early morning. The surrounding non-vampire resorts complained over the years about the loud music playing into the early morning hours, so the band ceased playing at three o’clock. The private parties traditionally broke up before then and went to the suites, continuing behind closed doors.

Christian usually took a jog along the waterfront at that time of morning, ideal for finding unsuspecting tourists returning to their hotels from parties or village bars. He could quench his thirst, and his victims wouldn’t remember what happened the next morning. No harm, no foul, he told himself. He never took more than he needed to survive and didn’t kill those that did him no harm. He only killed out of self-defense or self-preservation. Once a warrior, he changed over

the past several hundred years, becoming more a man of peace, using the art of negotiation rather than war.

Jogging alone on nights like this, under a starlit sky, listening to the surf kissing the shore, he felt the most alone and sad for what he had become. As a mortal, living on a small farm in Scotland with a wife and young son, he was happy and in love. Then war broke out, and he enlisted. When mortally injured on the battlefield, he and Ian lay dying when a stranger came upon them and asked if they wanted to live and fight another day. What man wouldn't answer yes, if for no other reason than to see his wife and child one more time? He had no idea the pact he made with the devil on that day would change his life forever. When he made his way back to his family months later, his wife had taken up with an Englishman, and she'd told his son he died in battle. The woman he loved had betrayed him and their love. He *was* dead in a sense. How could he blame her? Though he still felt betrayed, he knew she would never have accepted what he became. He left Scotland and never saw them again.

Christian had many women in his bed over the course of the next several hundred years, but none could satisfy his deepest desires. The human women wanted him for his money and the power he could give them. If they were transformed to vampire, they cared nothing for him and left to fulfill their own desires. He resigned himself to being alone forever with his work the only mistress he could depend on for comfort and joy.

The scent of two young women farther down the beach caught his keen senses. They were staggering, obviously drunk. As he jogged closer, he could hear their hearts beating, and his hunger grew. The prospect of a double treat tonight delighted him, and he smiled inwardly.

Before he reached them, he sensed another presence. Another vampire prowled the night on the hunt. *Who the fuck is breaking the agreement?* One of the stipulations under the contract covenants between NEHC and visiting vampires required them to stay on the resort and not interact with the locals. As the owner, he tended to bend the rules for himself and discreetly partake of the local flavors. The local authorities turned a blind-eye to the practice in exchange for certain financial considerations. No one was hurt and all participants came away with the

memory of a pleasurable experience. This other vampire either was not at the resort or in direct violation of the contract. Either way, they were about to run head on into Christian's ire.

Within a few minutes, a familiar face appeared.

"Ramsey, what are you doing here, man?" Christian called out.

"C.J.? Bro, I didn't know you were here in Greece." Ramsey Weiss moved closer to Christian and gave him a hug.

Ramsey, a vampire extraordinaire presented the image of a Dapper Dan in the yesteryear's terminology. Today, he would be considered a hip, urban player, the kind of man *or* vamp who loved women and had a woman on his arm every night of the week. Ramsey came from an Austrian aristocratic family and had been transformed in the early 1800's. To hear him talk, one would think him the oldest. Christian never let Ramsey get away with it in his presence, but knew when with other people he referred to Christian as 'the kid.'

"When did you get here?" Christian asked.

"Tonight. Thought I'd get me a snack before I check in."

"Are you staying at the resort?"

"Yeah, man. I only stay at your fine establishments when I travel."

"Then you know the rules. No off resort feeding."

"I know but I wanted something fresh, not that uptight rich bitch crap. I wanted something strange and sweet. Ya know what I mean? Besides, what are you doing here? Owner privileges?"

"I was out jogging, not feeding."

"Yeah, right. You're going to tell me you would let those fine ladies go without one small taste? I won't tell if you don't. I'm tight with the owner, and I think he'll be cool with it. What do ya say? I have dibs on the cute blonde. You can have the red head." He playfully nudged Christian with his shoulder.

"Okay, fine, but don't drain them. I have an arrangement with the local officials not to harm anyone here, so take enough and let her go unharmed. Got it?"

"You got it, bro." Ramsey and Christian walked up to the young ladies and smiled.

“Good evening, ladies,” they said in unison in a routine done many times before.

* * * *

The next night, Christian met up with Ramsey, who flirted with a pretty human woman at the bar, a willowy blonde in her mid-twenties. The Austrian vampire liked the blondes.

“Good evening, Ramsey, who’s your friend?” Christian asked, sitting down on the empty barstool next to Ramsey.

“C.J., this pretty young thing is Miss Nicole DuPont from Gay Paree.”

Christian extended his hand. “*Enchanté*, Mademoiselle.”

“*Enchanté*,” she said demurely and gave him a wink.

Christian turned to one of the bartenders and asked for the daily house special, this time a Scotch Whiskey laced with the usual synthetic blood, the bartender coined Hot Scotch. He hated the new concoction as much as the Cosmopolitan from the night before, but it took the edge off until something more to his liking came along.

Ramsey taunted Christian to join them. “Hey, man, Nicole and I are going back to my suite. You want to join us? She’s up for a little ménage, right, baby?”

“I’m not interested, but you kids go on. I have some work to do.”

“Are you sure, C.J.? I’ll make it worth your while,” Nicole said, running her hand across Christian’s chest. He grabbed her wrist, roughly at first. Aggressive women put him off, but then took her hand raised it to his lips and kissed the back.

“Mademoiselle, Ramsey is all the man you need. Another night, perhaps.”

“Ramsey, take me to your suite,” Nicole demanded, insulted, it seemed, by Christian’s rebuff.

Christian wasn’t in the mood to have sex with human groupies tonight or any night for that matter. He catered to them because his business demanded such features, but he didn’t make a habit of getting involved with his guests. On rare occasions he would consider the indulgence, but normally he abstained. Besides, Ramsey was right, most of the humans at his resorts were

rich, bitchy, and demanding. They were only interested in using the vampires for their own thrills. He hated the mindless and boring sex that went along with his existence, but running the resorts provided a lucrative living.

The tedium of the routine duties wearied him. He walked around the resort smiling and making small talk with his guests. The chore convinced him to kick working on the new project into high gear. He needed something more than sleeping, eating, and smiling at guests to keep him occupied and out of trouble. He had been putting off making a few changes in his routine long enough. A decision on a new location for his next club topped his goals on the business part of the trip. A new resort, a new location, would be the best medicine for him. The words Ian said to him in Las Vegas haunted his thoughts. “You’ve lost your edge, man.” As much as he didn’t want to think about what Ian said, he knew he had to get started immediately on a prototype model.

In his quest, he surveyed guests at Elounda and canvassed the company board of directors. The consensus suggested the United States; specifically, South Beach, Florida as a good place. The area boasted a warm climate, affluent business-oriented citizenry, and most of all Black Heart Entertainment Industries would be opening a club in the fall presenting a perfect opportunity to move in and upstage Ian. He could wipe out Ian once and for all.

Over the following week, Christian set the wheels in motion for his new project. Near the end of August, time was running out. He had to move fast to get ahead of Ian. Christian made up his mind to bring class and legitimacy to the Vampire Entertainment industry. Once humans came to understand their existence and vampires meant no harm, just the occasional bite, then society’s position would change. Synthetic blood certainly helped promote the abstinence from human consumption, which in turn would help acclamation and acknowledgement. Christian’s business savvy could see the day clearly, and he worked hard to keep his clubs upscale and safe for humans. One day, he hoped, elevating vampires into the mainstream from being a group forced into hiding and taking them out into the “light” would become his number one priority. With a total of thirty-two to date, resorts and clubs in New York, London, Dubai, Bali, Elounda,

Saint Lucia, Cancun, Seychelles, Estonia, Croatia, and Nashville, as well as countless others, adding the club in South Beach would be a fine gem in his crown of glamorous vampire venues for the famous and elite.

Christian promoted class and glamour with eroticism, not the dark, sinister, and perverse. Ian and Black Heart Entertainment produced dangerous, kinky, and deadly venues, playing to the darkest side of their kind. As long as Ian continued to open his type of club, the Vampires as a whole, would never be accepted into normal society. Ian had to go.

The venue for South Beach would be a new business model for NEHC. The real estate available in the Miami Beach, South Beach vicinity commanded a premium price with limited availability. As a designated historical area, Christian would have to comply with other government agencies. More red tape, but nothing he couldn't handle. His organization possessed many skills in maneuvering through the paperwork required. The ultimate goal of running Ian out of business could be accomplished with a little extra work. The next step would be to make arrangements to find the best location for the new club and a safe place to lay his head during the day; a lair to call home, not a makeshift place like a hotel. He needed security and privacy.

* * * *

After awakening at sunset, Christian had his usual blood drink from the personal stock in his suite. The housekeeping staff refilled his refrigerator while he slept. One of the perks of being the owner. Convenient, but not the way he liked to quench his hunger. Having it on hand however, kept him off the streets every night, and kept him mixing with his human guests to a minimum. He didn't like to mix business with pleasure too frequently. Humans tended to get attached, and a vampire in his position had to be careful. The pre-dawn jogs were warm and always brought him that extra boost to his diet, and the anonymity suited his lifestyle. A little sex and a drink of blood in the moonlight held great appeal. The night called for a jog if all went right.

The usual jeans and T-shirt wouldn't do for evening, and he dressed up, khaki linen slacks and silk shirt fit his mood. The stay at Elounda would end soon. Two or three more weeks and the season would definitely be over for vampires frequenting the resort. He authorized Spiros to advertise for additional reservations, humans only, to bring in more revenue starting in October. A little revenue would be better than nothing, and there would be no risk of any vamps running into unsuspecting humans. The crowds were thinner than they were six weeks ago when he arrived. Over the next several months, the resort would barely make enough income to turn a profit. Any other business would close during the lull, but he couldn't do it. He loved Elounda and would never close completely down.

Launching another club made for excitement. He accomplished a few things he'd wanted to do in the past couple of weeks. If nothing else, keeping the resort open allowed him to formulate how to open a new club in South Beach and that alone got his blood stirring again.

His suite faced the Mirabello Bay, and as he stepped outside and walked down the stone path toward the beach area, the air had a chill that tickled his flesh. The weather soon would change on a more permanent term, and the time would come to leave this beautiful place. Elounda remained his favorite resort. Isolated from the fast-paced world of London where he normally lived, it offered a quiet and peaceful place to relax. He would sorely miss it.

Turning the corner of the villa units, he found Ramsey leaning against the bar, talking and flirting with a guest, a tall young blonde with a body of a supermodel, skinny, of course. Ramsey wouldn't have a woman any other way.

"Ramsey, my man, who's this lovely lass?" Christian asked, patting Ramsey on the back.

"C.J., this fair one is Giselle. I saw her at the spa getting a full body massage and couldn't resist. I invited her to join us for a drink. Hope it's okay with you?"

"Sure, why not? I feel like celebrating tonight." Christian looked Giselle over. About twenty-five, and the daughter of a millionaire, as all of their guests were, she prowled establishments like Christian's looking for a thrill. Her blood smelled sweet and full of vitality.

She lacked the taint many of the other guests had, probably new to the game. Ramsey must have sensed her purity too.

After ordering drinks, they moved to a table at the beach, talking and flirting for about an hour. Ramsey touched and caressed Giselle and she didn't resist his advances. He took little nibbles on her neck, and she giggled at first, the amount of drinks she'd had beginning to show. As he got more aggressive with his kisses and touching, her responses became more guttural, and she lowered her eyelids with a flutter of lashes. As he ran his fingers over her flesh, goose bumps prickled across her skin. Ramsey suggested they move to a suite for more privacy.

As they walked to Ramsey's suite in the main resort building, Christian had second thoughts. He pulled Ramsey aside and said, "Man, ye know I've changed my mind. Giselle is all yours."

"You sure, bro?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'll catch ye later."

When he left her for Ramsey's pleasure and decided to go for a jog. The bars were still open, and people would be out, a perfect opportunity to run into some unfortunate party-goers to complete his nightly blood craving. He changed into shorts and a T-shirt, then slipped on his running shoes and headed down to the beach. The jog tonight would be an easy one.

Chapter Five

First weekend of September, Elounda

Payton's trip from Miami to Heraklion, Crete, made for a long day. She flew to Athens, where she had a short layover before making the next connection to Crete, landing in Heraklion less than an hour after leaving Athens. After retrieving her luggage, she made her way through the small airport toward the exit. A robust man dressed smartly in a dark suit held a placard with her name on it near the doors. What a relief that she'd had the forethought to arrange with the resort to have a driver pick her up at the air terminal. The long day of travel exhausted her, but a two-hour drive to the resort in Elounda still lay ahead. The drive might have been a scenic one to enjoy if she hadn't fallen asleep in the backseat. She arrived at the resort mid-afternoon, checked in, and settled into her room before three o'clock in the afternoon, Crete time.

The accommodations exceeded her expectations, a luxurious suite consisting of two rooms, a living area with sofa, chair, dining table, desk, and a bedroom with a private bath. Sliding doors in the living room opened onto a ceramic tile floored terrace. A second set of sliding doors from the bedroom led out to another terrace and a private swimming pool overlooking Mirabello Bay. The sun shone across the sparkling turquoise water. At that moment, she knew she made the right decision to come. She noticed a few people wandering around at what appeared to be a bar area, but only a handful. When she checked in, two couples were in the lobby lounge having drinks, listening to the piano player. The resort appeared quiet so far, perfect for her to relax and get her head clear. When she booked the reservation, the website stated this was the off-season, an ideal situation for her purposes with no crowds and low rates.

Unpacking only the essentials, toiletries, and a nightgown, she stepped onto the terrace to take in the view. September held a hint of fall in the late afternoon air. She knelt to test the temperature of the heated pool. The thought of a swim to relax before taking a nap tempted, but she decided sleep and the comfortable bed called to her more. Stepping back inside, she closed the draperies, crawled lazily onto the king-sized bed, and tucked the down pillows up under her head. Just a short nap, she told herself, to catch up with the time change. Eight hours later she awoke in total darkness.

“Oh, my God! What time is it?” she said aloud. In the pitch-black, she felt for the lamp and found the switch, flicked it on, but found no clock.

Rolling out of the bed, she pulled back the draperies. Definitely night with a bright moon shining down over the bay. *This is gorgeous. I definitely could live here forever.* She could have that swim, under the moonlight, and stepped onto the terrace. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the fresh air. Yes, she made the right decision getting away from the chaos back in Miami. *This is where I need to be right now.* Looking around, she studied the configuration of the terracing and walls between the rooms that prevented one guest from seeing into the next unit. Also, because of the dark, no one would see her. *Hmm, maybe...*

Payton shut the lights off in her suite except for the light in the bathroom. She left the door to the bathroom ajar, letting a sliver of light leak through, allowing her to see and undress. Grabbing the white, terrycloth robe the hotel furnished, she covered her nakedness before stepping onto the pool terrace. She glanced around again to make sure no one could see, untied the sash, slipped the robe from around her shoulders and let it fall to the tile deck.

Easing into the heated pool one foot at a time she tested the temperature. Satisfied, Payton submerged all at once into the relaxing, warm waters. Her body tingled as it grew accustomed to the heat. Taking languid strokes, leisurely treading, she rolled to her back to float with her arms outstretched to the side. Her long blonde hair undulated in the water like creamy melted butter. With her ears submerged below the water, the outside world shut off, no sound except that of her

own breathing. Totally relaxed, she inhaled a deep breath and exhaled. She opened her eyes and gazed at the starlit sky. Clear, with a thousand stars winking at her, she smiled.

Payton rose up out of the pool and looked out over the edge toward the open darkness of the bay. The moon shone brightly and reflected its beams upon the black water with thousands of twinkling diamonds upon the surface. As she scanned the night-time landscape, she spotted a man jogging along the beachfront. Although considerable distance away, she could make out his silhouette from the bright moonlight shining down on him.

Curiously watching him jog for a few seconds more, she made out a few of his features as he moved closer to the security lights. His raven black hair fell softly to his broad shoulders. The sweat from his run caused his T-shirt to cling tightly to his upper body and show the outline of his physique. *Damn, he has a nice profile and muscles.*

“I thought *I* was compulsive about jogging early in the morning,” she said quietly. “If he looks as good up close as he does from here, *man*, it sure is worth jogging this early.”

Startled by his abrupt stop, twist, and looking in her direction, she stood up without thinking. Did he see her? Did he hear her? *No way, the lights in the room are off, and the night is too dark. He can't see or hear me. Or can he?*

The sudden realization that she stood naked before him—and anyone else for that matter—hit her. She dropped back into the pool. She swam to the opposite side, snatched up the terry robe, and pulled herself out. Keeping below the balcony wall so as not to be seen, she sat on the edge of the pool, put on the robe, and stood up. Scanning out over the dark landscape, she searched for the man. No sign of him but she couldn't see where he could have disappeared to so quickly. Maybe she imagined a handsome jogger, a wishful figment of jet lag. *Whatever, skinny-dipping on a moonlit night was a stupid idea.*

* * * *

Christian ran into Ramsey at the Beachfront Bar on his way back from his jog. “Ramsey, my man, I thought you would still be with Giselle. You bored with her already?” he asked.

“No man, she’s passed out cold. Thought I’d get some fresh air. What’s up with you? You’re acting like you’ve seen a ghost, and you know they don’t exist, only the undead like us,” he said with a snort.

“I think I beheld a goddess tonight. I swear she looked like the real Aphrodite.”

“What! You’ve been sucking too many Greek women. We need to get you off this island.”

“No, I’m fine.” He motioned to the barkeeper to get him a drink. “I swear. I was jogging back from my usual run. I heard a woman’s voice, stopped, glanced up, and there she stood, naked, like Aphrodite rising out of the sea foam.” He pointed in the direction of the suites in the main resort building on the hill. “Then she disappeared. She was beautiful, with long blonde hair, green eyes, voluptuous body, tan skin, and I cannot say more, or I’ll get an embarrassing erection here and now.”

“Yep, sounds like Aphrodite to me, but I’d say it’s more like a guest at the resort knows you jog in the morning and wanted to get your attention.”

“No, I don’t think so. Those rooms are pretty much closed for the season and I was surprised anyone was there at all. There weren’t any other lights on in that section. I’ll have to check it out.”

“You do that, boss man. I still think we need to get you off this island and back to work. As things stand I’m leaving tomorrow. Finish your drink, I’ll check on Giselle and then meet you back here, and we’ll talk.”

“Let me clean up first and meet you in thirty minutes.” Gulping down the drink, he shook his head in disbelief.

* * * *

The day began for Payton with a knock on her suite door. Not quite awake yet, she lay in bed thinking about what had happened hours before in the pool. Was it a coincidence the jogger looked at her as she looked at him? How could he have seen her in the dark? Jumping out of bed,

she put on her robe and shuffled off to open the door a few inches and peek out. “Can I help you?”

The hotel manager greeted her with a smile. “Yes, ma’am. I was asked to personally deliver these to you.” He pulled a bouquet of a dozen deep-red roses from behind him and presented them to her.

“Who are these from?” she asked in amazement. The only people who knew she was in Elounda were Maritsa and her broker. They wouldn’t have sent her roses.

“A card is in the bouquet ma’am. If you have nothing else...?”

“Um, wait let me get my purse.”

“Not necessary, Miss Fleming. It is taken care of.”

Gripping the vase, she said, “Okay then. I guess that will be all. Thank you.” She placed flowers down on the table and took the card from the holder to read who sent them. The card read:

To My Aphrodite—

These roses cannot compare to your beauty.

I hope to see you again tonight.

Your Immortal Slave

“Oh, my God, he did see me! He thinks I’m a beautiful goddess. Great, I’m here to relax and I might have a night jogger stalking me.”

He did have a fantastic muscular physique though. A superb athlete’s body with rock hard abs under that T-shirt for sure. I guess I shouldn’t complain.

One thing she decided—no more late night skinny-dipping in the pool. She couldn’t take another chance of being seen by the jogger—or anyone else—while swimming in the nude.

Wide-awake with no chance of going back to sleep, she decided to check out the resort and make an appointment for a spa treatment or two.

All of the resort took her breath away, just as the small portion she observed when she arrived. She sauntered down to the dining area to get a quick bite for breakfast and took a seat on the open terrace overlooking the beachfront area. The azure blue waters of the Aegean Sea wrapping into the Mirabello Bay were what legends were written about. Admiring the sight, she understood why ancient Greek and Roman mariners wrote about the Sea in all her majesty and beauty. Payton fell instantly in love, mesmerized by the sun shining on the blue-green waters, just as beautiful in the daylight as in the night. When she finally pulled herself away to place a breakfast order, she noticed that she was the only patron seated in the area. At first she thought she arrived late, but looking at her watch, she wasn't.

Glancing up at the waiter, she asked, "Where is everyone else for breakfast?"

"This is a transition time of year, and the few guests usually sleep in late or take breakfast in their rooms. Nice to have someone in the dining room this morning."

Payton hoped to pry some information out of the young waiter about the other guests, specifically a jogger with raven black hair. She struck up a conversation when he brought her order of assorted fruits and cheeses, starting with how he came to be working at the resort. As the only one in the restaurant, taking him from his assigned task wasn't an issue.

Apparently eager to please, he answered all her questions. He came from Croatia on an exchange student visa, arriving at the resort a week before. A student of hotel management, he was learning his trade through the programs established and supported by the owner of the resort. The Nocturnal Foundation offered scholarships and internships to low-income and underprivileged individuals in third world countries. The owner of the resort impressed Payton with his innovative and generous programs.

"I notice not many guests are here at the resort. Do you know how many there are by any chance?"

"Mmm, I think maybe twenty or so. Some guests are checking out today, so I don't know for sure. At night there are more people out and about to see," he said.

“I’m here strictly for relaxation. No work, just play. Do you know if there are any guests who are, well, shall we say, single men? Other than yourself, of course?” she asked coyly.

“Ah, yes, there are a few men, single, yes. They are usually here at night. I don’t see them during day.”

“Do any of them like to jog, go running at night, late, along the beach?”

“Ah, I’m not sure, but yes, I think, maybe yes. I don’t know for sure. I don’t work in the evenings.”

“Well, thanks, Josef, I guess I’ll just have to check the beachfront bar area out this evening. Thanks for the breakfast. You were very helpful.”

Another couple came into the restaurant, and Josef left to attend to them. She gazed out over the panoramic view of the bay. *What a glorious day! Why am I obsessing over this man? I’m here to relax. I don’t need a man.*

She finished breakfast and left the restaurant, smiling at Josef before departing in search of the spa. Passing the fitness center and indoor swimming pool along the way, she arrived at the spa. The inviting entrance consisted of double wooden doors opening onto a bridge crossing a stream that flowed through a channel cut into the tile floor feed from a fountain along one wall. The path led to the reception area where an attendant awaited. The friendly Greek woman dressed in a uniform jacket of a soft light blue with her name embroidered on.

“Good morning, madam, may I help you?” Elise asked with a smile.

“Yes, I’m a guest here and would like to find out what services you have available.”

The attendant showed Payton the list and accompanied her on a tour of the facilities. Impressed with the quality of offerings and since there were appointments available for later in the day, she booked a massage and a facial in the afternoon. Afterward, she took a walk around the outside of the complex.

The resort sat within a private enclave surrounded by a high stone wall with bougainvillea shrubs growing atop. The winding path led her around the golf course, past a small chapel, a few

boutique shops, and then down to the Beachfront Bar. After the invigorating walk of about two hours, she had enough time to return to her suite to change for the spa treatments.

As Payton waited for her massage, two young women came in. The tall blonde commented to the petite red head about her recent sexual encounter with a man named Ramsey. With a definite French accent, she described—in great detail—their sexual escapade from the night before. Payton thought, as a woman married three times, that she would have experienced sex with a man in every possible way, but the exploits of this young woman made her blush. “Ramsey, unfortunately, is leaving today. I guess that’s why he treated me so well yesterday, and we made love all night. I swear, Shannon, at one point, I think I passed out from sheer exhaustion. The sex was the best ever. I could go again tonight, but he won’t be here,” the woman remarked, pouting.

“What about his friend C.J.?” Shannon asked.

“I don’t know. On our way to Ramsey’s suite C.J. turned around. Ramsey said he had business to take care of.”

“Giselle, do you think this C.J. is still available?” Shannon asked.

“I think so. I’ll try and hook you up.”

“Miss Fleming, we’re ready for your treatment,” the attendant said at Payton’s side.

Payton was more than ready to leave the area. The talk about Ramsey and Giselle and their evening of lovemaking made her wet between her thighs. She wondered briefly if Ramsey may have been the hot jogger she spied last night, but decided he couldn’t have been. Giselle said Ramsey spent all night with her. Payton’s jogger still hovered out there somewhere.

The treatment consumed the entire afternoon. Because the experience was so enjoyable and relaxing, she booked another treatment for the next day to take advantage of the steam bath and sauna privileges.

Returning to her suite, she felt totally content. With time to spare before planning for dinner, she took the time to check for email messages. Not expecting anything more than junk mail or the daily updates from Maritsa, she quickly opened the laptop. To her surprise, a message from

Ian McAlester appeared. She didn't think he was interested in the Ocean Boulevard property. Opening the message, it read:

Friday, September 9, 7:33 p.m.

From: Ian McAlester

To: Payton Fleming

Payton Fleming,

Sorry for the delay in reply. I couldn't make the three pm you suggested.

How about seven-thirty tomorrow night? Can't wait to meet you.

Thank you.

Ian McAlester

Black Heart Entertainment Industries

"Oh, great. Now he replies," she said and prepared a response, stating she would return to Miami next week and would contact him at that time to set a time to meet.

After showering and dressing, she took a nap. Her body still hadn't caught up with the time change. Frustration with not being home to take care of business made for a fitful sleep. Before nodding off, she told herself to relax and enjoy because nothing could be done thousands of miles away. Awaking from a sound sleep around seven, she groggily dressed for dinner in a solid blue jersey maxi-dress. The dress was a present to herself, splurged on for the trip, because the color resembled that of the Aegean Sea. Besides the sales clerk said the outfit complemented her emerald green eyes. Funny thing, the green eyes were fake; she wore colored contacts. She thought about not wearing the contacts, but her natural hazel green eyes didn't look as good with her blonde hair, also fake. *At least my boobs are real.* Sometimes, she hated the extensive time and effort needed to look good. One day she'd love to find someone who loved her for her true unvarnished self.

She enjoyed being blonde, wearing colored contacts, and dressing sexy and frilly, but while the fake-isms made her feel young and appealing to men, they represented a shell, a protective cover if truth be known, against encroaching reality. Approaching forty-five, she couldn't compete with the young girls anymore. Three husbands proved that point. Hell, the first one did. All of them left her for younger women. She never understood why. What earthshaking resolution needed to take place for her to find the right man? Someone to keep her company in her elder years? A body to cuddle and someone to talk would be good enough at this time of her life.

I guess that's why I'm here, to figure this out. There I go again, worrying about a man. Stop Payton! I'm here to relax and clear my head.

After putting on her makeup, coifing her hair, spraying her favorite perfume, *Mandarin*, she took one more glance in the mirror. Sighing, she said aloud, "Well, lady, I guess this is as good as it gets. Not bad for an old lady." Slipping on gold metallic sandals and grabbing her clutch, she left the suite and walked down the stairs for dinner.

Two other couples were in the restaurant when she arrived. To the best of her knowledge, Europeans ate dinner later than in the States, but the time, last she checked it, was nine-thirty, and she expected more diners. The hostess seated her next to the window overlooking the pool and the bay. The moon shone brightly, enough to reflect upon the water in a thousand twinkling faux stars and light up the evening sky. At the Beachfront Bar area, there was some activity, and the band played a lively tune, although the music could faintly be heard. After dinner, she planned to go down and mingle with the other guests, and with luck, run into her mystery night jogger with raven black hair.

Chapter Six

Christian awakened from a dead sleep. His first thoughts were of his goddess from the night before. He sent her roses with a note and hoped she wouldn't be offended or frightened by his brash advance. After all, she stood naked before him, in the moonlight, but if she had intended for him to see, she would not have disappeared so quickly. Checking the guest registry, he learned her name, Payton Fleming, and she came from Miami Beach, Florida. After crossing paths with Ian in Las Vegas, Christian checked around. His sources within Global Security and Investigative Services discovered Ian's interest in the Miami area for the location of a new club. Ian could well have done the same and know of Christian's plan to open a club there as well. A coincidence, he thought, but suspicion crept in. Ian had said he would take Christian down, and the take-down would happen when he least expected. Did the process begin with Payton Fleming? No, not her, not his goddess. This had to a coincidence.

The action at the bar didn't start until around ten, so he hung out in his suite working at his computer. At first, he resisted searching for information on Payton Fleming. He typed her name in the search engine and stared at the name for a long time without pressing the "Enter" key. His index finger hovered over the button for what seemed like an eternity before he finally pressed down.

The name Payton Fleming came up with several entries. An uncommon name, the number of pages that popped up surprised him. Several minutes passed before he found what he thought to be the correct Payton, his goddess. In her youth, she modeled swimsuits. He perused the information about her first two marriages, both occurred in California, one to a photographer and the other an actor. The second marriage had more information; the typical young actor marries an unknown female and ends it with divorce six months later. His goddess was either unlucky in

love or liked to get married for the thrill. Another entry stated she was a real estate agent in Miami Beach, Florida, specializing in high-end condominiums and married to Demetrius Vasiliou, a developer/agent of condominiums in the Miami Beach area. The posts made no mention of a divorce. A website pertaining to real estate was listed, but he had read enough and shut the computer off. *Was she still married?*

Why had she vacationed here alone? If married, where was this Demetrius? Could the entry even be the same Payton Fleming? There were others listed, but not in Miami Beach. *Dammit!*

Once again, his expectations of a romance with a mortal were dashed by reality. He knew the impossible situation, but he kept falling for the same kind of woman. As a vampire, he should stay with his own kind. Mortals were a means to an end, vessels for food and money with sex on the side. No romance, no love eternal. He needed to concentrate on his business and swear off women, mortal women, forever!

Dammit! There she sat at the bar as he entered the beach area, a vision so lovely the mere sight of her took his breath away. Her long, softly curled hair fell loosely over bare shoulders. A Mediterranean Sea blue dress covered her legs, but he could make out her womanly curves under the clinging fabric, hugging her body in all the right places. She sipped on her wine, and when she turned her head, their eyes locked. Her eyes were green, like his. This mortal woman could be the exception to his rule. *Dammit! What am I doing?*

He walked up to her as they continued gazing into each other's eyes. He smiled and extended his hand to introduce himself. Say something clever, he thought, but all that came out was, "Did you get my roses?"

"So, you're my early morning jogger," she said, her lips twitching as if she fought back a smile.

"Aye, I guess I am. You are more beautiful up close than afar. I'm so glad you decided to come tonight," he said softly, with a hint of his Scottish accent. Years of living in London and around the world dissolved the strong brogue of his ancestral home, but bits of it popped out now

and then. He took her hand kissing the palm. The delicate, long, slender fingers with a perfect manicure were warm against his cool lips.

She blushed. "My name is Payton Fleming, and you are?" she asked.

"Your immortal slave, my Aphrodite," he answered.

She chuckled. "No, seriously. You do have a name, don't you?"

He began to reply, "Aye. My name is..." but Ramsey stepping between them interrupted him.

"C.J., bro, this must be the goddess you were talking about last night. Am I right?" he asked.

"Aye, this is Payton Fleming," Christian introduced.

"A pleasure to meet you Payton. You *are* just as beautiful as C.J. described."

"He told you what exactly?"

"Only that I saw a goddess from the balcony while jogging," Christian interjected quickly.

"Yeah, that's all he told me. He said you looked like Aphrodite. I can see that," Ramsey said winking.

"Ramsey, I thought you were leaving for Hong Kong," Christian said, a bit annoyed.

"Headquarters postponed my departure for a day or two, so I thought I'd hang out with you since last night was a bit of a bust."

"I think Giselle would object to that comment. Why don't you go find her? I think she's still here."

Payton straightened in her seat. "If this is the same Giselle I think you're talking about, I saw her up at the main lounge about thirty minutes ago. She was having drinks with another woman."

Ramsey motioned for Christian to follow him to talk privately.

"Excuse us for a moment, Payton," Christian said.

When they were alone, Ramsey said, "Hey, C.J., I see you're occupied here with your goddess. I sense she's into you, hot and ready. She's a little too past prime for my taste, but she's

not bad.” Then, glancing at Payton over his shoulder, he asked, “You don’t mind if I leave you again, do you?”

“She’s not old, and no, I don’t mind. I really like her. Any suggestions on how I can win her heart. I’m a little out of practice.”

“You? You want to win a human female’s heart? God Save the Queen, I never thought I’d see the night.”

“That’s enough out of you kid. I really need some pointers.”

“Okay, okay. Mortal women are conquered by way of their heads. Win her mind, and her body and heart will follow. Me, I just go for the body. I don’t need all the other stuff.” He ended with a snort.

“You old dog,” Christian said, patting Ramsey on the shoulder.

“Naw, that’s Jean-Pierre,” Ramsey retorted.

“Go play with Giselle. She’ll be happy to see you, I’m sure.”

“Thanks, you have fun too. Catch you later.”

Christian returned to Payton. She smiled as he walked up to her. He liked her friendly smile, a face with character. Ramsey was right; Christian sensed her arousal also.

“He really likes Giselle, doesn’t he?” she asked.

“Aye, how can you tell from just meeting him?”

“The love goddess knows all.”

He smirked. “Aye, she does.” He sat down on the barstool next to her. “What are you drinking?” He motioned for the bartender. “Phillip, please give the lady what she wants,” Christian said.

“White wine,” Payton said.

The bartender looked to Christian. “Yes, sir, Mr. Mac—” he began to say, but Christian cut him off.

“The last name is Mack,” Christian said as he nodded his head. “I would like my usual, Phillip.”

“What is your usual?” Payton asked.

“I don’t think you’d like the cocktail. I don’t really like it myself, but keeps me from drinking too much before I take my run.”

“Strategic drinking. Interesting concept. That’s why I run in the morning before work, so I have an energetic day.”

“Are you working here or strictly pleasure?”

“I’m here strictly for rest and relaxation. I’m trying to clear my head and sort things out before going back to work.”

“So, are you having love problems, my love goddess?”

“Does my body language speak louder than my words?”

“Maybe, a little.”

“I don’t know why I’m even talking about this. I don’t know you well enough to tell you my problems.”

Christian leaned in. “A love goddess needs to talk to someone every now and then. Consider me your love therapist. Isn’t that what slaves to your beauty do? Listen to your stories of love?”

She chuckled. “You know you are young enough to be my son. This flirting isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

Little did she know he had her by approximately three hundred years. He chuckled inwardly over the irony.

“Well, didn’t Aphrodite’s son, Eros, control the love destinies of men? He listened to her stories of love, I’m sure. Why not let me listen to yours?”

He liked the way she volleyed his mischievous banter right back at him. “You think you are little Eros, and you’re going to shoot your arrows and make me fall in love and make me feel better?”

“If that’s what I have to do. Of course, I’ll make you fall in love with me.”

“Oh, is that right? You’re a bold young thing, aren’t you?”

He leaned in even closer and almost at a whisper said, "In all seriousness, if you need to talk, I'll listen and make no judgment. I might take a nibble of your neck if you get too close." He gave her what he knew was a devilish grin.

He knew what she was thinking without even reading her thoughts. The body language told him all he needed to know. She thought him too young for her, but sweet, none-the-less. He didn't want to be sweet, and she obviously didn't know he was a vampire. Her hang-up with their age difference could be a problem but not as big a problem as him being a vampire. How the hell did she get a reservation here at the resort before the season ended? He'd have to talk with Spiros.

"Tell me C.J., why are you here? Rest and relaxation as well?" she asked.

Shit, she's asking mundane human flirting questions, and I suck at it. Taking a sip of his drink, he finally answered. "Work and play. I work for the resort owner based out of London. I'm here checking the resort out, with some playtime thrown in."

"You're from London then? I can't quite place your accent. I suspect a little Scottish, a little refined British, but not exactly. Where are you from originally?"

Aye, she did notice. I can't say too much since she doesn't know about who and what I am. "Scotland. I've traveled the world since boyhood, so the accent comes and goes."

"Ah, I knew there was something different about you. I mean your accent. You live in London. I live in Miami Beach. You're not only young enough to be my son, but we live an ocean apart."

"I'm not asking for a commitment from you, Payton. I'm looking for some fun. Why are you fightin' the attraction?"

"We're talking attraction between us? Boy, you're a bold young man, I'll give you that," she said.

He laughed. "Aye, I believe in cutting through the bullshit. When I see something I want, I go for it. Do you want to play?"

She shifted her position on the barstool. "You want to play with me?"

“Aye.” He grinned as his nostrils flared taking in her sexual arousal.

Sensing her confusion based on three centuries practice, he watched her struggle with what to say next. She took a sip of her wine then spoke.

“What do you do, exactly, for the resort owner? Do you *entertain* single older women?” she asked.

“Hmm, entertain? Not really. You’re going to avoid your feelings, okay.” He took a sip of his drink. “I guess you can say I handle new club and resort acquisitions.”

“You mean like the purchase of the properties?”

“Aye, I guess you could say that. Property *not* women.”

“Oh cute,” she said with a smile. “Are you opening anything soon?”

“We’re lookin’ at a club in your area. South Beach, to be exact.”

“You’re kidding? Have you found the property yet? I’m only asking because I’m a real estate agent, and if you need an agent, I would welcome the opportunity to assist you.”

“We haven’t selected anyone yet. Why don’t you give me your card, and I’ll pass it along to the owner. If he’s interested, he’ll let you know.” He played with her to see the reaction. If she worked for Ian, she would know he owned the place. If not, he’d eventually tell her the truth. Until then he would have some fun.

She picked up her clutch. “I think I do have a business card,” she said, reaching inside. “Let me see. Yes, here it is. All my numbers, office and cell, are listed as well as my email address. Have the owner contact me anytime. I have my laptop with me and can respond quickly.” She handed the card to Christian and for a split second their fingers made contact. He’d swear he felt electric shocks arc through his nerve endings.

“I’ll do that.” He smiled at her while gazing into her eyes. He could hear her heart beating faster and the scent of her blood pulsing through her veins made him lust for her more. What was it about this mortal woman?

“Thank you.” She took a sip of her wine, looking away from him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You’re still attracted to me no matter how hard you try to fight the enticement, my sweet goddess.”

She closed her eyes. “No, I can’t. I’m on vacation, from work, from men, from love. Please, I don’t need any complications in my life right now.”

“He must have really hurt you.”

Eyes popped open, and she stared quizzically at him. “Who?”

“The man you’re running away from.”

“I’m not running away from anyone. I told you, I have a complicated life and needed a break. I’m here to relax, and you would only keep me from that.”

“Making love with me would be relaxing and help you forget your troubles. That’s just what yer love therapist would order.”

“No, I don’t think so. I can’t do this.” She rose from the barstool.

He grabbed her arm to stop her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I was playing with you, and I took my teasing too far. Please, forgive me. I couldn’t sleep tonight knowing I upset you.”

“It’s me, not you. I’m not ready for anyone new in my life. I’ve made such a mess of things. I have to get myself together before I can even think of bringing someone else into my complicated world. I hope you understand. You’re a sweet man. There must be a younger woman here at the hotel you’d rather make love to than me. I’m too old for you and have too much baggage. I’m sorry. Playing the cougar to a cub like you isn’t possible.” She kissed him on his cheek and ran off, holding her dress up to keep from tripping.

Her comments stunned him. A younger woman was not what he wanted. As his goddess, he wanted her. Her age meant nothing. At that moment, he felt her irresistible allure drawing him into love with her.

Dammit! What am I doing?

* * * *

Payton awoke the next morning, and the first thoughts were of the young man she knew as C.J. The attraction between them seemed strong, but she knew he could be trouble. His youth would cause her heartache. The trip to Elounda meant rest and relaxation, and a means to forget and leave the problems of home behind for ten days. Bringing more complications into her life didn't follow the game plan. Having fun was one thing, but to have sex with a man young enough to be her son scared her. Bad enough when Demetrius left her for the little bimbo. She certainly couldn't follow his example, turning herself into a pathetic and desperate woman. An older woman with a young man, that type of relationship couldn't last. Could she take a risk? *I'm not a cougar. It sounds so predatory.* No way in Hell. C.J. said he wasn't looking for a commitment, but she had a bad habit of falling for the wrong guy and had three marriages to prove that fact. Getting involved with this charismatic young man would spell trouble with a capital "T."

No, this just won't work, no matter how good the sex would be. I can't do this.

A knock came to her door. Rising from the bed, she put on a robe, and answered the door. Spiros stood on the other side, holding a vase of red roses. *Oh, not again!*

"Good morning, Miss Fleming. I have a delivery for you. This time, would you like me to place them in the room?"

"Ah, how about on the desk for right now."

"Very good."

Finding the clutch containing her wallet, she pulled out five Euros for a tip, but he stopped her. "No need. Have a good day, Miss Fleming," he said and departed her suite.

Payton knew C.J. sent the flowers without looking at the card. She shook her head, but a little smile came to her face.

"You got to give him an A for effort." She leaned over the vase and inhaled the fragrant aroma of the roses. The card peeked from the center of the bouquet.

Payton,

I'm sorry for last night.

Let me make my inconsiderate behavior up to you. Turn on your computer at eight-thirty pm. Have your IM and webcam on.

CJ

“What is he up to? I knew he was going to be trouble,” she questioned, but smiled in anticipation of the evening approaching.

After scheduling a three-hour session at the spa, she dressed in casual sweats to go to the fitness center for a short warm-up, then to the spa. Her appointment included a body massage, pedicure, manicure, seaweed wrap, and use of the steam bath and sauna, filling the afternoon and taking her mind off C.J., so she could concentrate on herself.

Returning from the spa, Payton felt completely relaxed and ten years younger, partly from the treatments, partly from the lusty thoughts about what C.J. had planned for the evening. She thought about the other men in her life as well and how to reconcile her feelings for them. The anguish over her one-night stand with Jason no longer clawed at her conscience. Dealing with her feelings for Demetrius posed a more complicated situation. Despite how he hurt her, she still had some love for him. They were married for nearly twelve years, and they'd been happy. At least, she had.

Time would have to heal the pain.

Blossoming feelings for C.J. made her tingle warm inside. The feelings were wrong. A generation separated them, and they lived an ocean apart, in two different worlds. A relationship just wouldn't work.

He's heartache waiting to happen.

Chapter Seven

Damn! What should I do, it's nearly eight-thirty. Payton paced the floor, staring at the laptop on the coffee table, poised and ready to be turned on. She debated back and forth, on or off. In a week, she'd never see him again. She'd return to Miami, and he'd be in London. Why go through the heartache? *I'm not a player, but he is. I've seen his type before, charming and easy on the eyes. No, I can't do this.*

When she awakened this morning, she made the decision not to see him again, but then the roses came. All bets were off, and she couldn't stop thinking about him the remainder of the day. They could have some fun for a couple of days and no harm done. Closing her eyes, she imagined his face, green eyes, thick brows, long black raven hair, strong, square jaw, luscious kissable lips.

Oh, God Payton, get a grip!

This young pup named C.J. persisted in her head, and she couldn't shake his image. Here she sat at a luxury setting on a beautiful Mediterranean island with an attractive, tall, and clever young man pursuing her. If she were only twenty years younger, hell she'd settle for ten years younger, she'd be all over him. Not an option. Or was it?

Nervously, she glanced at her watch. Eight twenty-seven.

"Okay, I'll see what he wants. Nothing wrong with that." She turned on the computer and waited impatiently while it booted up. Sitting on the sofa, laptop on the coffee table, she adjusted her shirt and hair in front of the webcam. Nervous energy manifested in the form of a tapping foot on the wood floor and twirling her hair around an index finger.

The screen changed and a familiar voice came through the speakers. "Hey, beautiful. Since you're online, I'm assuming you have accepted my apology for last night?" he asked. Any of the

nervousness he seemed to display when with her at times had faded, and the confidence he exhibited most of last night returned.

Dammit! I'm so in trouble. She gave him a little smile. He looked so adorable with his hair pulled back off his face and those green eyes. So intense, they looked like emerald green marbles with tiny flecks of gold on the grainy computer screen. He returned her smile. A slight delay in the responses between the two computers made their motions and voices slightly out of synchronization.

"Yes, I guess I have. The roses are beautiful, thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Why did you want to contact me this way? Have you left the resort?" she asked.

"No, I wanted to show you we could have fun with a long-distance relationship by way of our computers, in between actual visits. You can't beat modern technology. We could talk and see each other every day. The only difference would be we wouldn't be able to touch each other."

"True, but touching is something I like to do. I don't know about you, but you're going to have to do more convincing to win me over with this concept."

"Fair enough. Where are you now?" he asked.

"I'm in my room, in the living room on the sofa to be exact. Why?"

"Go to the bedroom and lay on the bed. Take your laptop."

Perplexed, she asked, "Okay, what are you up to?"

"Just go. I want to try a little experiment."

Wild thoughts of what he'd do next raced in her mind. Could a variation of phone sex be what he planned? The very thought made her squirm with delight and warm in anticipation, although the real thing would be more enjoyable. Still, open to his experiment, she went to the bedroom, laptop in hand and crawled into bed. *Dammit, I'm acting like a school girl.*

"Okay, I'm here. What do you have planned?" she asked, demurely.

“Lie back on the bed and close your eyes. You can turn the camera away if you don’t want me to see you, if that makes you more comfortable. We can still hear each other.”

“I know where you’re going with this, and this isn’t the same as you being here in person, you know.”

“We’ll see. I’m really very good at verbal communication.”

The monitor flickered with his image as she stared into his mesmerizing eyes for a few seconds, debating whether to go along.

If he is still at the resort, and he wants to have fun as he claims, why didn’t he just come to my room? Although I did tell him I wasn’t interested. Maybe this is his way of worming his way in.

Playing along, she knew he wasn’t ever going to see her again after they left Elounda, so why not? Why would he go through the pretense of saying they were going to continue a relationship? His actions were confusing.

“Payton? Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m just not sure I want to do this. Call me old-fashioned, but I’ve never done anything like this before, and I feel a little weird.”

“I promise to be gentle. Lie back, relax, and close your eyes.”

Turning the laptop so the webcam faced away from her, Payton closed her eyes and lay back upon the bed pillows, awaiting his next instructions. She took in several deep breaths, and her heart began to race. *Damn! What am I doing?*

* * * *

Christian couldn’t be sure if the computer connection would work, but knew he could always move quickly to outside her suite, if necessary. For the moment, he’d be satisfied with watching her via computer. Obviously, she didn’t realize she turned the laptop to face the dresser mirror, which reflected back onto the bed. He could still see Payton as her eyes closed and she lay back upon the bed pillows. He grinned as he watched her prepare for his directions. Never

trying remote seduction before, or encountered another vampire who had, the challenge would be to keep the mental connection. Trying for the first time with Payton made the experience all the more special. A fascinating and mysterious woman, she made him want to know her completely, body and soul.

Closing his eyes, he tapped into her mind, so he could control her and to ensure the experiment a success. Manipulating her to his will would be easy at this point, and he took over.

Payton, I'm here with you, and I'm brushing a tendril of your hair away from your face. Do you feel me doing that?

"Yes, I do." She reached up and pulled her hair back off her face.

I'm now unbuttoning your shirt and unzipping your pants. Your shirt is coming off and your pants are off too.

Sending a thought to command her to do as he suggested, she obeyed, unbuttoned her shirt, unzipped her pants and removed them.

I'm straddling your hips looking down on your beautiful face. Open your eyes and look into mine.

She opened her eyes, her heart raced, and her breathing accelerated to deep and fast. A warm flush covered her body, and her eyes fluttered until they closed again.

My lips are hovering close to yours. Can you feel my breath against your lips? Answer me.

"Yes."

I am going to kiss you hard and passionately. Our tongues are going to meet, and I will outline your mouth with my tongue, exploring every part of yours. Let yourself go, Payton, and eagerly take me in your mouth.

"How are you doing this? Hypnosis?"

Payton, concentrate, I'm here with you. I'm kissing the hollow of your neck, and with my hand I am removing the strap of your bra, and then I'm kissing the other side of your neck. Remove your bra, Payton.

Reaching behind her back, she unfastened the hooks and removed the undergarment without hesitation.

I'm running my hands across your breasts, gently massaging them. Your nipples are hard and erect. I am moving down your body, kissing the cleft between your breasts to your belly.

She played with her nipples, tugging and pulling them between her thumb and forefinger until they hardened into red, little, erect buds. She moaned, and he watched her reach for him, but finding only empty air. His own arousal grew.

I'm moving my hand down your taut belly to your panties. Slip your panties off, Payton.

She lifted her buttocks and slipped them off. She reached for him again, but again embraced only emptiness. "I want to touch you, C.J. I want to hold you."

He experienced the need to touch her as well as he continued. *My hand is moving down your thigh and spreading your legs. I am resting my hand at the mound of your femininity so I can use my fingers to gently massage your sweet bud. You are warm and wet and want more.*

"Oh, C.J., what are you doing to me? You're going to make me scream." To muffle her cries, she grabbed a pillow, burying her head.

I'm going to make you cry out in pleasure.

Her cries of passion were muffled under the pillow.

You are so wet, Payton. Do you want more?

She pulled the pillow down from her face and breathlessly answered, "Yes, I want more, don't stop."

His mental fingers explored the depths of her moist pussy, and then gently parted the swollen folds. He inserted a finger inside and stroked the inner walls, then pulled out and inserted two fingers. He circled her nub then plunged in again, and again, faster and faster. *Do you like that, love?*

She cried out. *Oh, God, do I ever!* She gripped the sheets and twisted them in her hands. Her hips began to move in a rhythmic motion to accommodate the motion of his fingers stroking her. She moaned as she arched her back with release that sent spasms throughout her body.

Christian couldn't take mind touching only anymore. He had to feel Payton in person. *Fuck this!* He left his suite for hers.

* * * *

"C.J., how are you doing this? I want you inside me. I can't take this anymore. I need you now. C. J.? Where are you?" Her voice sounded frantic.

She opened her eyes and sat up in the bed. As she reached for the laptop, a knock came to her door. She glanced at the monitor screen—blank, silent.

"C.J.?" After placing the laptop on the dresser, she grabbed her robe, fighting to get it on as she ran to the door.

Payton opened the door, and he stood before her, leaning against the door jam with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I promised I'd be gentle," he said with a mischievous grin.

Grabbing him by his arm, she pulled him into the room. "I don't know how you did that, but you're damned sure going to finish what you started," she said in a throaty, passionate voice.

"Gladly," he replied, scooping her up in his arms and kissing her hard.

Christian carried her to the bedroom and placed her on the bed. He untied the sash and peeled the garment back, exposing her nakedness. While he stood at the edge of the bed, looking down at her, warmth rushed through her body. At that very moment, she believed she was indeed his love goddess, more beautiful than any woman in the world. Bending one leg at the knee and spreading her legs slightly, she invited him to take her.

"What's taking you so long? Undress and finish what you started," she demanded.

"Patience, my goddess." He ripped off his shirt, buttons flying, unzipped his pants, and dropped them to his ankles. His boxer shorts followed until he stood naked, and his desire showed prominently.

A little smile of approval spread across her face when with a single tug of his arm, she drew C.J. onto the bed. He lowered himself, straddling her hips. His skin smelled fresh and cool. His

manly scent seemed to overtake her senses as she inhaled deeply. The coolness of his flesh shocked her and made her shudder. Gradually, the contrast in their body temperatures seemed to lessen, as if he were drawing heat from her flushed body.

Emotion tugged at her heart as he captured her mouth in a gentle move. Exploring the shape, the taste, he coaxed her lips open with his tongue. Not too wet, not too dry, his lips tasted like citrus, like her *Mandarin* perfume. She moaned and arched toward him, wanting more.

Answering her request, he dipped his tongue deep between her lips. The ritual dance as ancient as time, he showed her with his tongue what his cock would do to her pussy. He plunged, circled, licked, and retracted. Her eyes closed and eagerly met his tongue with wanton eagerness.

“You’re beautiful and delicate,” he whispered, bending his head and rubbing along the column of her neck. “So warm and alive. Your blood is sweet and filled with life.”

“Ah, yeah, we’re both hot and alive,” she murmuring. “Now shut up and show me how alive that cock is of yours.”

“Your wish is my command m’lady,” he said, his voice dropping to a near growl.

His hands moved lower. One cupped her buttocks while the other reached between her legs. Parting her cleft with his thumb, he slid his index finger over her sensitive clit. He smiled against her nipple when her hips bucked and her moist folds convulsed around his fingertip.

Taking the same care he had administered during their computer sex, he repeated every touch, caress, and stroke. She loved the brush of his hot skin against hers, his lips branded every inch of her body, and his tongue sent warming pulses to every fiber of her being. With one swift motion, he wedged between her legs and thrust his passion-filled shaft deep into her hot wetness. She moaned at its deep and probing entry and wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck. He moved slowly at first, then gradually rode her hard and fast until they moved as one. The room resounded with the wet slapping sound of their bodies meeting as they proceeded toward a mutual climax, ending with exploding cries of pleasure. Collapsed from exhaustion, they lay together, entwined in each other’s arms. Payton drifted off to sleep.

The sound of her heartbeat sang to him. The sweet smell of blood pulsing through her veins intoxicated him. Controlling the hunger took every ounce of his strength to restrain from taking a bite of her during their sex play. What bothered him the most was worry over her true intentions. Did she know Ian? Was it a coincidence she was from Miami Beach, and Ian lived there? One thing became clear; she knew nothing of the vampire lifestyle. That information alone made her more intriguing and a challenge. Spiros confirmed she booked through the Internet, and there may be an error, but he still checked.

Christian didn't know how she would react to his being a vampire, an undead creature of the night, if she turned out innocent. His experience showed mortals not into bloodsucking rituals normally found the whole lifestyle repugnant. The last thing he wanted was for Payton to be repulsed by him. He planned to win her over and ease her into his way of life. Until then, he would have to control his urge to bite and drink her blood.

As she slept, he watched her steady breathing and in some strange way felt comforted. The experiment with the computer had worked, and the results pleased him. Gently gliding his fingers up and down the length of her arm and her thigh, he relished her soft, curving flesh, soft as silk. So vulnerable and innocent of the danger she stepped into. He could devour her completely without any resistance, making her his alone.

A familiar sound came from the laptop sitting on the dresser. In all the excitement, Payton didn't disconnect the link. He got up and retrieved the computer to shut it down. At a quick glance, he saw her message box was open, with correspondence from Black Heart Entertainment. At first he didn't believe he read the name right, but the sender line clearly did say Black Heart. He looked over at Payton. *How does she know Ian? Real estate? Or something else?* The temptation to open the message tugged at him, especially seeing who wrote it. Were the situation between Ian and him not so serious with so many other lives involved, he never would have invaded her privacy. Circumstances urged him to do otherwise, and he opened the message.

Fuck! They made arrangements to meet when Payton returned. The message was short, but to the point. Knowing Ian, either he planned to use Payton for his purposes or do her harm.

Either way, the situation appeared bad, and the message told him little more than she had missed one meeting with Ian, but would meet when she returned. Could he be interested in property, or something else? Maybe the messages contained some manner of code. He knew the important thing; a connection existed between Ian and Payton.

His blood boiled. The woman he had fallen for, his beautiful goddess knew his rival, his enemy and possibly conspired to take him down. He should have known not to trust a mortal woman. Pacing the floor in the living room away from her, he needed several minutes to calm his anger and decide what his next step would be. He went back into the bedroom. His eyes were still red with anger, and his breathing labored. A sheet partially covered Payton's naked body, outlining her slender form. The angelic face stopped him cold. Ready to attack her and drink her dry for her betrayal, he realized he loved her. Loving a woman he knew nothing about could have an explosive outcome if her innocence were found to be guilty in the end.

Innocent? Could she be a pawn in Ian's plan and truly unaware of what she did? Ian could be controlling her. He scanned her body and found no marks, and when he had controlled her mind, he sensed no traces of infiltration from Ian. Seeing her lying there on the bed where they'd made love, made him wonder how she could betray him. Wasn't she married? Maybe that defined the connection. Could Ian be blackmailing her through her husband? Whatever it was, he had to know. More answers to questions he had would become clearer if he played Payton right.

Christian dressed quickly. He carefully put Payton's clothes back on her and placed her in the bed, propped up on the bed pillows with the computer on her lap. He used mind control and planted a thought, and then left her suite, quickly returning to his own.

Sitting in front of his computer monitor back in his suite, he pulled himself together and said, "Payton, how do you feel?" He paused. "Payton, are you there?" he repeated, louder.

Awakening groggy and confused, she slowly opened emerald eyes.

"C.J., what are you doing there?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"What do you mean? I've been right here all night, in my suite. Are you all right?" he asked.

“What, no, you were here, with me, we made love. I know we did!” she cried, excited and agitated, her hands tugging at her clothes as if they were foreign to her.

“Love, calm down. We did make love, sort of. We had virtual sex, don’t you remember?”

“I remember you telling me to close my eyes and talking to me over the computer, but everything’s kind of blurry after that.”

“Well, from what I gather, you were really into the sex talk and enjoyed my little experiment. You fell asleep for a little while. I told you I’d be gentle. Was I?”

“Yes, I think so. I just wish I could remember more. I swear you were here, though. The touching and...and sex felt so real.”

“Well, I think I just proved my point.”

“What point is that?”

“We can have a long-distance relationship and not suffer any physical withdrawal. Having computer time in between seeing each other in person could get us through the transition times. What do you think?”

“Okay. I guess.”

“Just okay? A little more enthusiasm would be appreciated. I gave you my best without being there. Some encouragement my way would be nice.”

“I’m sorry. This is still all confusing. I only met you two days ago, and you’re talking about having a relationship. I don’t know you, and I’m having sex with you, computer sex! This is all too strange and wild for me. I don’t do this kind of thing, especially at my age.”

“Having virtual sex is strange and wild at my age too. We’ll find our way together.”

Chapter Eight

Christian put his plan into motion. No one, mortal or immortal, would make a fool of him, especially a woman. *After three hundred years, Ian should know that I'm not going to back down.* As for Payton Fleming, even if she played a part in Ian's treachery, as a human she represented no threat.

He awoke at twilight famished. His late night jogging routine had been disrupted because of his seduction of Payton. The supply of synthetic blood furnished by the resort partially quenched the hunger, but the sanguine supplement paled compared to the real thing. He couldn't take the urge much longer. Tonight he would go out hunting or take one of the few remaining guests at the resort. If he didn't, Payton was sure to fall prey to his hunger.

After showering and dressing, he sat at his computer to compose an email to Payton. He wasn't C.J. the loyal employee, but Christian MacKenzie, CEO of Nocturnal Entertainment and Hospitality Corporation, looking for an agent in South Beach, Florida. He logged into the company website to use his official email address to send the message and wrote:

From: Christian MacKenzie, CEO

To: Payton Fleming, Luxury Properties

Date: Sunday, 7:04 pm

Dear Miss Fleming,

A trusted employee, C.J. Mack gave me your name. I normally do not make direct contact with real estate agents for company business, leaving those matters to be handled by our Acquisition Department. However, since I will be acquiring a personal residence as well, I will be handling both purchases

personally. Would you be qualified and interested in a commercial property as well as residential? If so, please respond and I will send you details.

Regards,

Christian MacKenzie

CEO

Nocturnal Entertainment and Hospitality Corporation

For a few brief moments he hesitated, but finally hit the “Send” button. Afterward, he’d have to wait for Payton to respond. He knew she would. If that was the role she played and if she was working with Ian, reel him in and play him, and then Ian would finish him off? *Let’s play Payton. Come to me, sweetheart.*

* * * *

Sitting around the resort during the day, boredom set in. The spa offered nothing new, so Payton rented a car and took off exploring. She decided to visit the *Palace of Knossos* in Heraklion, two hours from the resort.

Starting out early in the morning, the drive turned out to be pleasurable and fairly easy. With only one main road, driving on unfamiliar roadways posed no navigational challenges. She made several stops along the way to take photos of the beautiful scenery, mountains, beaches, and rustic stone houses set against the Mediterranean Sea. After the tour of the ruins and visiting the museum in the city, she did some shopping, picking out some souvenirs for friends and a pretty scarf for Maritsa.

Payton arrived back at the resort later than she expected.

She had plans to meet C.J. around nine for drinks at the Beachfront Bar. The nightstand clock indicated eight o’clock. Starving, she needed to shower and dress quickly to make her way downstairs to be at the bar by nine. Rushing to get ready for a date invariably presented difficulties, especially when choosing what to wear. Finally, she settled for a simple pair of

skinny jeans and a T-shirt and sandals, pulled her hair back in a ponytail and applied minimal makeup. Racing out the door, slipping her room key card in her pocket, she knew she forgot something, but it was already after nine, she didn't want to keep C.J. waiting.

Hell, I don't want to miss being with him every minute I can. Damn, why am I acting like a young school girl? He's a baby boy! Ugh!

The night before, she had made that decision. The virtual world of computer sex Christian invited her into had been one of the most sensual and sexually stimulating encounters with a man she'd ever experienced. Although disappointed that the sex hadn't been real, she wanted more with this man no matter how young he seemed. If he made her feel this alive again, she would give the whole cougar scenario a try. What little time she had with him, she would make the most of the little cub, and she had not been disappointed so far.

Rushing down the narrow path toward the Beachfront Bar, she came around the last bend and there he sat at the bar, looking handsome in a roguish kind of way. His shoulder-length hair pulled back behind his ears, accented how casually he dressed in dark trousers with a linen shirt worn loose, untucked, and the top buttons unfastened. A familiar warm tingle rushed over Payton's body. She was in for more devilish trouble with this young stud tonight. He had a look about him that said he wanted to play. She was ready to misbehave. This trip had turned out to be the best idea she had made in years.

"Hey, you. Sorry I'm late. The drive back from sightseeing in Heraklion took longer than I expected," she said, as she took a seat next to him.

"No problem, ye'r worth the wait, love." He leaned close and took a deep breath as if drawing in her very scent. "Did you enjoy the sightseeing?"

"Yes, I enjoyed the excursion, but I would have had more fun if you joined me."

"I wish I could've, but I had business."

"I know. Duty calls." She understood and couldn't fault him. "I'm starving. I didn't have time to do dinner tonight. Do they serve food here at the bar? Do you know? I didn't even have

time to eat. Have you eaten?" The words spewed forth nervously. Acting like a frightened young girl again, she didn't pause long enough for him to get a word in to answer.

With fingers pressed against his lips, he spread them enough for a smile to peek through. "I've already eaten, but if you want something, I can have whatever you like from the kitchen brought to my suite," he suggested.

"Your suite? Are you inviting me to your suite for business or pleasure, Mr. Mack?"

"A little of both. Maybe discuss real estate acquisitions, in private this time, and I think we need to continue our talk from last night, getting to know one another."

"I think I could be talked into that," she said casually while her body hummed in anticipation. "So, what's good on the menu?"

"Whatever your heart's desire. The chef is quite talented."

"Okay, but let me warn you. I'm particular about what I eat, so don't have them bring me anything with meat."

"What are you a vegetarian? No meat, nothing with blood, eh?"

"Oh, God, no. The thought of eating the flesh of another living thing, ugh, it's repulsive. I'm not a vegetarian per se, just eat healthy and avoid as much red meat as possible. If I could get a nice salad and grilled vegetables, like peppers, zucchini, and broccoli, what do you think? Can they do that?"

"Well, I'll make sure," he said, sounding a bit strange, almost as if something disappointed or worried him. "Let's go. I'll call on the way."

* * * *

"This isn't a suite, it's a grand villa," Payton remarked with astonishment as she walked through the entrance. "Compared to my suite, this is the Taj Mahal." She spun around the living room. "I've been in luxury real estate for many years, and I recognize quality. This room is *par excellence*. High, vaulted ceilings, fine furnishings, top of the line everything, and the

views...the magnificent views from every window. Your boss sure knows how to take care of his employees.”

“Where would you like to sit, the terrace or here in the living area?” he asked.

“How about the terrace? Tonight is beautiful. A clear sky, no clouds, with a bright moon and a million stars to shine down on us. Let’s sit out there.”

“Whatever my goddess wants.”

Payton snickered as she walked onto the tile covered terrace. “This goddess thing is getting a little old,” she said pleasantly.

Christian watched her walk to the balcony overlooking the bay. The waning moon cast a uniform reflection on the water, and the surf splashed against the rocks below. Joining her at the overlook, they peered down into the darkness, and saw no beach, only a sharp drop-off from the property. A soft, gentle breeze, kissed their skin.

“This is absolutely beautiful. The peace and quiet is seductive. I think I could live here forever,” she said, adding with a snicker, “I’m sure the owner would have something to say about that, right?”

“Hmm, he probably would.”

“So, now that you’ve lured me into your lair, what more do you want to know about me that I didn’t tell you the first night we talked?”

Lair? The interesting choice of words took him aback. Was she baiting him? The place represented the permanent location for the sleeping of the undead while in Elounda. The suite served only as his temporary lair. How had she known? Or was the turn of phrase only a coincidence?

“I faxed your business card to Mr. MacKenzie. Have you heard from him?” he asked, fishing for an answer about the email he’d sent her earlier in the evening.

“That’s what I forgot,” she said with a snap of her fingers. “I ran so late I didn’t check my messages today. I’ll do it tomorrow. Thank you for recommending me, though. I promise to take care of him if he hires me and find the right properties that meet the company’s needs.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“You said you work in Acquisitions. Would I be working with you on any of these possible transactions?”

“Maybe. We’ll see what Mr. MacKenzie has to say about my involvement.”

After taking a small sip of wine, she looked up to the starlit, clear night sky. “Do you think you’ll get to Miami anytime soon? I’d love to show you around.”

“Maybe,” he said, wondering over the nervousness he sensed in her. “Why don’t you tell me more about yourself? I want to know the real Payton. What makes you laugh? What makes you cry? What makes you happy?”

“You know I’d have to think about that for a bit. No one has ever asked me in quite that way before.”

“Really? Are you happy being with me right now?” he asked.

She looked up at him. “You sly devil. You made me fall right into your little trap. Yes, I am actually. This is a happy moment, while it lasts anyway.”

“You don’t think you can be happy with me forever?”

“C.J., you know I have reservations about us because of our age difference. You’ve shown me how the geographical distances could be overcome.” She smiled coyly at him, and then continued, “The age difference is still a problem.”

“Not for me, Payton.”

“Of course, you can say that. Except for me, age *is* a problem. I have to live with the difference staring back at me every day from the mirror.” She paused, took a deep breath, and continued. “I’ve been married three times, and all three of them left me for younger women. The most recent divorce is still raw, which is one of the reasons I’m here in Elounda. He left me for a twenty-something bimbo. I can’t compete with younger women anymore. They left me! How am I supposed to recover from that?”

Her revelation dumbfounded him. For a moment his lips moved but no words came out. She didn't wait for him to answer as tears welled up. Turning away, she ran into the villa, the tears flowing freely.

Following her, he grabbed her by the upper arm.

"Payton, stop. I'm sorry. I didn't know. I'm sorry." He embraced her tightly, his arms around her shoulders and waist. Could he be wrong about doubting her intentions? Reading her mind came more difficult the more emotionally attached he became. He sensed her sincerity, which confused him more. "C'mon back and let's talk." He ushered her back to the chaise lounges situated around the pool. They sat down and silence weighed heavy in the air for a few moments.

"I'm here to listen, if you want to talk. No judgments. I told you the first day I met you, I would listen, and I sincerely meant what I said."

A few more silent moments passed.

"I'm sorry. I'm such an emotional wreck lately. I came to this resort to clear my head about my recent divorce and other things going on in my life. Then, I met you and got sidetracked. Everything has happened so fast, I'm having a little trouble processing what's happening between us right now. I told you I have baggage, and you didn't need to get involved with me."

"You don't have more baggage than I do. Trust me, I think we all have problems, but in different degrees. So what if you were married to three idiots masquerading as decent men. I'd be willing to bet that each one of your ex-husbands were narcissistic pretty boys—they were into themselves and what they wanted and didn't give a rat's arse what you wanted in life. They didn't care what made you happy. I bet they didn't want children, either, did they?"

Payton's head snapped back slightly from his question. "How'd you know? No, they didn't. They all said we had to enjoy each other before we could bring another life into the world. Except I did want a child. By the time I married Demetrius, he decided he was too old to have children and had a vasectomy before we got married. I should have known something wasn't

right when he had the procedure done without discussing anything with me. By doing that, I see now I couldn't trust him, but I was in denial, I suppose."

"Payton, I would never treat you like that. I find you to be a smart, beautiful, intriguing woman, and no younger woman could come close to comparing to you. Yer life experience alone is sexy as hell to me. You've seen all the young women here at the resort. I'm attracted to you, no one else, now or ever."

"How can you make a statement like that? You are so young, and you have your whole life ahead of you. When I'm old and gray, you'll still be an attractive, handsome, virile man wanting to have sex, and *not* with a wrinkly, dried-up cranky old woman. How are you going to feel then?"

"Payton, if I love you, nothing else matters. We will find a way to make this work. I can guarantee you, I won't be boring, and I promise I'll be gentle." He gave her a smile and moved closer to her.

"Gentle, like last night, right?"

"Aye, you caught me humor?"

"Yes, are you trying to tell me to stop being so serious about this?"

He brushed back a few tendrils of her hair that had fallen out of her ponytail while he told her, "Aye, my beautiful goddess, life is too short to fret over this age difference between us. Be honest with me, Payton, be honest with yourself. If you want our relationship to work, you have to let go of the hurts from yer past. They're holding you back."

"You're right, I do have to let go. I can't let the men of my past ruin the men of my future." She lifted her chin and made a gesture toward him.

"What do you mean by men? I hope to be the only man in your future." He dropped his voice to a low, rich pitch, filled with a seductive promise for more than casual talk.

"How can you talk about loving me after only knowing me a couple of days? I'm nothing special, especially for someone like you."

"Do you believe in love at first sight?"

“No, not anymore. I told you three marriages kind of ruined that ‘let’s live happily ever after’ fairy tale for me.”

“I do believe. I knew the moment I saw you.”

An index finger ran across her lips, outlining them. She closed her eyes. Payton licked his finger as it passed over her lips and then slipped the digit inside her mouth. She sucked slightly as he pulled out. He leaned over and covered her mouth with his. Her lips were firm and moist, and his tongue delved into her mouth with determination.

As he lifted her to carry inside the villa, she wrapped her arms around his neck. Not breaking the kiss, he maneuvered his way through the living area and into his bedroom.

Placing her on the bed, he followed by straddling her hips and reached behind her to pull the T-shirt up over her head. Slowly, he eased her down to unzip the jeans, lifted her hips, and wiggled them down her legs, along with her panties, then tossed them aside. Reaching for the elastic holding her hair, he pulled the band out and let the hair fall down around her shoulders in a glorious bounce of platinum curled locks. He slipped one bra strap off her shoulder, then the other. Reaching around the back, he unfastened the hooks, and the bra he tossed to the floor, exposing her total nakedness.

Quickly shedding his own clothing, he lowered himself upon her, kissing and running his tongue across her warm flesh. The touch of her bare skin against his own intoxicated him. She returned his touch, his kisses with the same hunger and passion. The heat of her kisses, stroked like little butterflies fluttering all over his skin, tingling everywhere they landed.

His hands drifted over every inch of her shoulders, her breasts, and her thighs. He teased her with every slow, sensual stroke he made. His hands knew when and where to softly caress or stroke with more determination, until she writhed and moaned beneath him.

Wrapping her arms tightly around his neck, so tight he thought she did so out of fear that if she let go, he might disappear like last night. He had to find a way to gain her trust. What magic did this woman have over him? Her life’s essence made him feel young and vital again. How would he survive if she rejected him like the other women in his long existence?

When Christian rose over her, she lifted her hips to receive him and moaned as their bodies became one. He moved inside her, with each stroke of his long and thick cock. He could feel the tension building within her toward release. She arched her back and grabbed the sheets as his deep thrusts brought her to fulfillment. His release came quickly, filling him with warm sensations and a sense of pride unlike anything he had ever known. He could make this gorgeous woman writhe with pleasure, the same as she did for him. The feeling profoundly swept through him.

Christian kissed her rosy red lips as he rolled onto his side, carrying her with him. They lay facing each other, their bodies still entwined and staring into each other's eyes. His gaze moved over her face, noting the faint glisten of perspiration on her brow and the iris of her eyes moved. *That's strange.* He never noticed her iris move before. Another color peeked out. *Contacts?*

Her body felt like the softest cashmere against his, cuddly and warm. *Damn the plan.*

Gazing into her eyes, he gave a gentle kiss across her cheek. Still holding her in his embrace, he brushed the hair from her neck. *A small taste, that's all I need.* By controlling her thoughts, she wouldn't remember his bite. He wanted to carry the memory of the night and the sweet taste of Payton's blood with him always.

As Payton slept, Christian went for a much-needed jog. Payton's blood had whetted his appetite. He dared not take more from her. His jog would be quick; it was after two o'clock. For sure he would find someone out and about to partake from to pacify his need, but not answer any of the many questions roiling through his mind.

Did he dare reveal his true identity to her and mark her as his? He resisted with the first taste, but the hunger tonight begged for more than a small bite; he wanted more. Would she accept him knowing the truth? He decided to tell her. He couldn't let her go, but if he was wrong in trusting her, his plan could be compromised.

Thinking about Payton's eyes, he remembered the way the iris moved. He had to ask her about them. Contacts were the only explanation. Her eyes were not as green, and as he thought more about them, figured maybe not green at all. They were enhanced, no doubt, the same as her

hair, that much he already figured out. She probably made changes to make herself more appealing, like most women tended to do. He smiled, because he really didn't care. To him she represented a summit of beauty, and he yearned for her without the accoutrements of make-up and beauty aids. He jogged fast and made quick work of satisfying his hunger, returning to shower and towel off.

Returning to the bed as Payton stirred from sleep, he crawled under the sheets beside her and held her in his arms. She would have to return to her suite before he had to sleep.

Grinning, he knew enough time remained for one more lovemaking session before dawn and began to caress and kiss her awake.

Chapter Nine

Payton stretched and yawned, raising her hands up and under her hair, wrapping the tresses through her fingers and down onto the pillow. The glorious night with her young lover left her tingly all over thinking about him. C.J.'s gentleness made her feel safe and protected in his arms. She broke down last night and told him about her insecurities with men, the betrayals of her ex-husbands, and he had comforted her.

Could a relationship with this young cub really work? He had all the qualities she desired—smart, sensitive, tall, dark, and handsome. What complicated this picture though? *He's too perfect.* There had to be a catch. Was she over-thinking things again? Could he simply be a man of many talents who wanted her?

Sitting up, she pulled her knees to her chest and saw her reflection in the dresser mirror. Her disheveled hair looked a sight. She almost hated the idea of a shower to wash her hair and body. The aroma of C.J. still blanketed her clothes and skin. She liked how he smelled, a mix of sandalwood and vanilla, very erotic and sensual. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine him kissing and caressing her and the sensations he sent throughout her body. The familiar warmth inside her core began to build to a roaring fire.

Damn, how did he do that? This is crazy, I have to stop this.

Having no specific plans for the day, just doing nothing would be fine with her. Only a few more days left of her vacation and she would be back in Miami Beach. Elounda would be a distant memory. Maybe she would surprise C.J. and show up at his suite—no, his villa—and have a late picnic lunch. Sunshine washed brightly over the day—a perfect day for sitting out on the lawn, on a blanket, eating tasty morsels, and sipping wine. Yes, she would call the concierge and see if she could arrange for a picnic lunch.

After showering, she dressed in a black one-piece maillot bathing suit and covered up in a pair of white linen wrap pants and tunic top. She blow-dried her hair straight, no curls. Slipped on metallic sandals, she grabbed her room key and set off for the restaurant to pick up the picnic basket. She had butterflies in her stomach in anticipation of seeing C.J. again and hoped he would like her surprise. One thing for sure, having a young man for a boyfriend did make her feel like a young woman again. *A nice side effect, for sure. Better than Botox. Must be the sex.* She snickered.

“Josef, how nice to see you today. I’m picking up a picnic basket. Is my lunch order ready?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am, I think so. I’ll check to see if the chef is finished. Do you want a cloth to sit on too? I can pack one for you.”

“Yes, that would be great. I totally forgot about that. Thanks.”

After a few minutes wait, she was on her way with almost a skip in her step. The long winding path down and around to the villas along the peninsula overlooking the bay took fifteen to twenty minutes. The basket became very heavy by the time she reached his door.

Knocking at first, she waited a few seconds with no response and then located the doorbell and rang the buzzer. Still no answer. Where could he be? As she turned to leave, the door opened and a housekeeper stood before her.

“*Kalimera*.” Payton said good morning in Greek.

“*Kalimera*,” the woman replied.

“Yes, I was looking for C.J., Mr. C.J. Mack, is he in?” Payton asked.

“No Mr. Mack here,” the housekeeper said. The woman was Greek and did not speak English very well.

“Do you know where he is?”

“No Mr. Mack here.”

“This isn’t getting me anywhere,” Payton mumbled. She smiled at the housekeeper and said, “*Efhharisto*,” which meant thank you, and left discouraged. *So much for the surprise.*

Walking away disappointed, with the heavy basket in both hands, she felt sad and totally alone. Where could he be? She never saw him during the day. Why should she be upset? It wasn't as if he stood her up. He didn't know about the picnic. She didn't call him up to let him know she was stopping by. They weren't in a real relationship, anyway, where she would know his whereabouts. He did say business brought him to Elounda. Maybe he went out for the day to take care of some project his boss asked to be done. There could be a hundred explanations. Sighing from disappointment, she decided to wander down to the beach area.

She found her way to the sandy waterfront near the Beachfront Bar. Several guests sunbathed close to the water's edge. She threaded her way through the half-naked bodies to find an available lounge chair and recognized a familiar face. The young woman from the spa, Giselle, who talked about Ramsey. Payton sat in the chaise beside her, placing the picnic basket on the ground between them.

"I hope this chair wasn't taken?" Payton asked.

"*Non, Madame,*" Giselle said, peeking her face out from under the wide-brimmed straw hat.

Payton smiled, and then removed her wrap pants and tunic, settling into the lounge chair. Since the surprise picnic with C.J. fell apart, she may as well catch some rays and work on her tan. Short of going back to her room or making an appointment at the spa, she had nothing better to do. She reached into the basket and discovered the chef cooked up an impressive array of roasted and grilled vegetables with a loaf of bread, assorted cheeses, and fresh seasonal fruits. A nice bottle of wine with two glasses lay in the bottom of the basket.

"Would you like to join me?" she asked Giselle.

Giselle looked at her as if the offer puzzled her.

"I was kind of stood up. My surprise went bust."

"Oh, I see. *Merci*, everything smells delicious," Giselle answered.

"I'm Payton, Payton Fleming, by the way."

"*Enchanté*, I'm Giselle Reynaud."

"*Enchanté*. Are you from Paris?"

“Yes, how could you tell?”

“I did modeling there in my younger days.”

“Ah, I can see that. You are a beautiful woman still.”

“Thank you.” She paused, taking a bite of a strawberry. “You’re the young girl Ramsey talked about the other night, right?”

“*Oui*, you know my Ramsey?” She turned toward Payton as if by getting closer to her she would get closer to Ramsey.

“A little. I’ve been seeing C.J., and they’re friends. I recognized the name from overhearing you talking about Ramsey in the spa one day. Actually, C.J. is who this surprise basket was for, but he wasn’t in his suite when I went there to surprise him.”

A little girl’s giggle came in response. “Well, of course not, not at this hour.”

Payton stared at the young woman. “Is there something I’m missing here? Why do you think it’s funny?”

“He’s sleeping now because he’s up all night. Weren’t you with him?” She gave Payton a sly look and winked at her.

“Um, yes, but I’m up and awake. What’s his problem? He’s a sweet young thing and needs his beauty rest, I guess? I’m an old broad who doesn’t need much sleep.”

“You, absolutely not. You aren’t old. Don’t you know what he is and does here?”

“He works for the company that owns the resort. I don’t know much more than that. He doesn’t talk about what he does with any details, only that he is in Acquisitions.”

“Oh, well, get him to tell you.”

“I think I will.” Payton leaned back on the chaise, letting the sun’s rays warm her face. A few minutes later, she couldn’t resist asking, “How old do I look to you, Giselle?”

“Who cares? You’re a beautiful woman with many, many years ahead. I can see the life in your eyes, and if C.J. likes you, then you’re lucky. I know he’s very good to his women, but my Ramsey is better for me. He told me his work plans finally came together. He left this morning, and I miss him already.”

“I heard him talking to C.J. and I think he really likes you. I bet he’s missing you right now too. If he had a choice, he would be here with you, I’m sure.”

“You think so? I’m afraid I’ll never see him again. I’ll be in Paris, and he’ll be in Hong Kong or London or wherever his job takes him,” she pouted.

“If you really like him, and he likes you, you’ll find a way to each other.” She should take her own advice. Wasn’t that what C.J. had been telling her the past couple of days? The words sounded different coming out of her mouth. His influence started rubbing off on her. She grinned.

“Yes, you’re right. We’ll find a way. He has marked me, and I know I can find him. No more playing hard to get. I want him, and I am going to have him, if he likes it or not. My mind is made up,” she said with confidence and sheer determination.

“You go, girl.”

They laughed.

“What about you, Payton? Do you like C.J.?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been married and divorced three times. I don’t think I have the energy to go through another relationship that’s probably doomed from the beginning.”

“Three times! You must be a true romantic. You haven’t found the right man yet. Maybe C.J. is the one. He has marked you, has he not?”

Payton thought about Giselle’s strange choice of words. “Marked me? I guess so. Like an invisible tattoo. He’s left a lasting impression on me; that’s for sure. He insisted that we can have a relationship regardless of our age difference and distance apart, but I really don’t know. I’m not completely convinced.”

“Age doesn’t mean anything between two people in love, and the long distance is nothing, either. Where do you live?”

“I live in Miami Beach, and he tells me he lives in London. Big difference.”

“That’s nothing. A snap of the fingers for a man like C.J.”

Payton snickered. She understood why Ramsey liked Giselle. Quirky, she spoke her mind and said the strangest things. From Payton's own appreciation of the female form, Giselle also had a perfect, slender, well-proportioned body any healthy man would lust after.

"A snap of the fingers, huh? Plus an eight-hour flight with jet lag for a day or two. Sure, it's a great way to have a relationship," Payton said sarcastically.

"Payton, you told me to go after Ramsey. You should do the same with C.J. If he makes you feel like a woman, who cares what you have to go through to be with him, yes? Isn't that what you told me? You'll find a way to be together and work your differences out, no?"

"Yes, I did say that, didn't I?"

"You did." She drank some of her wine and ate a few pieces fruit from the platter.

"Well, long distance relationships are difficult. The age difference only compounds the problem. I still don't understand what you meant about him sleeping so late. I went to his villa, and the housekeeper said he wasn't there. Where could he be if not in his room?"

Giselle giggled again. "Hmm, probably the housekeeper is told not to allow anyone in during the day."

"You're probably right, I guess." She paused, then added, "You don't think he's seeing another woman? You said he takes care of his women. You've seen him with other women other than me, right?"

The young woman stared at Payton. "Oh, *mon Dieu*, C.J. has had other women, but if he has been with you, I doubt he has been with other women since. He always goes to his own suite. This I do know. I'm sure he gave instructions not to be disturbed."

The two women spent the next couple of hours chatting about their two men, love, and work, and not necessarily in that order. They drank the entire bottle of wine from the picnic basket plus another bottle they ordered from the bar. By the time they walked back to their respective suites, they were best of friends, laughing and sharing their experiences about their two young "horny little boys with devilish smiles," as they nicknamed them. They agreed to meet later for early drinks before dinner.

* * * *

Payton checked her email messages. A message of interest from Maritsa told her about another murder in Miami, bringing the serial killer's death count to six. The police had no leads and absolute panic ran rampant in the real estate community, making her glad thousands of miles separated her from the craziness for at least the next couple of days.

Hesitation to open the message from Jason caused a momentary feeling of guilt. He probably wondered where she was because she hadn't answered her phone or returned messages, although she thought she made herself clear, she didn't want to talk to him.

Payton,

Got your message. You're right. The night we spent together was a mistake. I shouldn't have taken advantage of you that way. You are a good friend, and I'd like to remain your friend and be there for you if you need one. Please forgive me.

Call me when you're up to talking.

Jason

Leaving a message on the answering machine before departing for Greece made her feel like a coward, but she didn't have the guts to tell him in person. She should have told him when she left town; that would have been the right thing to do. After a few minutes of thinking about what to say, she typed out a brief message thanking him and letting him know she'd call him when she arrived back home.

Continuing to scroll down through pages of junk mail, she came to an unfamiliar addressee. The message came from [mailto: CEO@NEHC.COM](mailto:CEO@NEHC.COM). *Could this be from the owner?* She quickly opened the message and read it. The date time-stamped from the day before. *He must think I'm not interested by not getting back to him until now. I hope it's not too late!* She thought briefly about how to compose a reply, and then wrote:

From: Payton Fleming, Luxury Properties

To: Christian MacKenzie, CEO, Nocturnal Entertainment and Hospitality Corporation

Date: Monday, 5:33 pm

Mr. MacKenzie,

I received your message and thank you for contacting me.

I would be very interested in assisting you in finding properties for both your business and personal use in South Beach/Miami Beach, Florida. I have over ten years of experience in the area of luxury real estate in South Beach and have ranked in the top 1% of all agents in sales.

Please feel free to visit my website and review some of my listings and biography. I will be back in town the end of the week and be available to show you properties at that time. Until then, if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me anytime via email.

Kindest Regards,

Payton Fleming

The message sounded professional, sincere, and to the point. Hopefully, her delay in responding didn't offend him, and he would get back to her. C.J. had been kind in giving the owner her business card, the least she could do was follow-up promptly, and she almost blew the opportunity! She hit the Send button and hoped for the best.

The sun would be setting soon. She stepped out onto the terrace to watch the evening sky turn from amber to red to violet to black. She liked the moment right before twilight changed to night. The transition happened so quickly, like in a movie when the scene would fade to black. Brilliant colors all around and then pitch-black. The time invoked such strong feelings inside her,

and the beauty could bring tears to her eyes at times. Tonight, there were no tears, only a smile. She hoped to see C.J. again.

Giselle was right, a snap of her fingers and C.J. could be hers. If their relationship was meant to be, they would find a way to make things work. Age and geographic distance between them should not matter. She was a woman, and he was a man. That was all that was important. Any time spent with C.J, however long or short, she decided was worth every minute. He touched her in ways she'd never been aware of before. That said a lot. She thought herself an experienced woman, but he sparked feelings she didn't know existed, mentally and physically. He was magic, but was he for real?

The return for home approached, and in a couple of days the enchantment of Elounda would be behind her, only a memory. Would C.J. be part of her future or be left at Elounda? Did he say all the right things only to get her into his bed? Maybe he only perceived her as a lonely, middle-aged, rich, American woman on vacation, looking for a cheap thrill. He was a young, handsome man ready to deliver the goods.

Why did she keep second-guessing herself and him? Just when she reconciled her feelings and the situation about him seemed right, she went and messed things up again. She'd gone over this so many times before. He didn't seem to be a gigolo. For one thing, he had a legitimate job with the resort, and he even referred her to the owner for future business. He didn't have to do that. Why did he want her? With all the other pretty young women at the resort to choose from, what made her stand out?

Payton, you need to chill. He likes you. Be honest with him and tell him tonight how you feel. You want him. Yes, you want him. Courage, you can do this. You've had too much wine and sun, that's it.

Undressing in front of the mirror, she looked at her reflection. Totally naked, she stared at her body. Not bad for her age—tight abdomen, nice, round, high breasts, slim, taut ass, long, slender legs, and hardly a wrinkle on her face. Yes, she looked good for an almost forty-five year

old woman. Her birthday technically lay several weeks away, so she could still state her age as forty-four.

Putting her hands on her hips, she thought about what C.J. told her about being honest with herself. *Okay, I will. When I get back home, I'm going to change my hair back to the natural color and get rid of the colored contacts. I'm going to take care of myself and shed all the negative thoughts. I will be your woman, C.J., a completely new woman. Honest, freed from my past, and ready to move forward.*

Showering hurt. She stayed in the sun too long without sunscreen, and her skin stung. *How stupid, Payton!* She didn't mean to sunbathe unprotected, but she also expected to be with C.J. all afternoon, in his villa, making love, not with Giselle imbibing in too much wine and exposing her half-naked body to the harsh sun. She knew better; now she paid dearly for such stupidity.

The more difficult task of dressing came next. Luckily, she had a loose-fitting maxi-dress to wear. The chemise fell softly over her body and didn't cling to her skin, which burned intensely. Tonight would be miserable. *Dammit, dammit, dammit!*

Giselle sat at the bar, conversing and flirting with the bartender as Payton moved slowly toward the bar to sit down gingerly on the barstool next to her.

"Oh *mon Dieu*, you look like you're in agony," Giselle said.

"I am. I need a stiff drink and a bottle of aspirin to mask this horrible pain."

Motioning to the bartender, she ordered a double house special, a Bloody Martini, no olive. She didn't know the blend and didn't particularly care. She only wanted something strong to help deaden the sunburn pain and knew wine wasn't strong enough. Giselle gave her a funny look when she ordered.

"What? You think it's too much?" Payton asked, looking back at Giselle. "I need something strong."

"Okay, but I hope you're prepared. I hear the specials are very potent and usually don't taste that great. Ramsey said they taste like *merde!*"

“Right now I don’t care. I don’t think I can meet C.J. tonight looking like this. That’s what hurts the most. I only have a couple more days here, and I go and do something stupid by basting in the sun like a lobster. I can’t have him touch me, my skin hurts so bad. I don’t want to touch me.”

“Oh, Payton, he’ll understand. He can probably make you feel better too.”

The drink came, and she took a gulp to get started. “Oh...my...God. You’re right. This does taste like crap. How do they get away with selling this to the guests?”

“I told you. Drink more and you won’t notice how bad you feel.”

Payton took another gulp and grimaced. “Aw, this is nasty. I must admit I am feeling the effects already. Maybe I better eat something so this doesn’t go to my head.”

“We can order here or go to the restaurant. What do you prefer?”

“We can stay here. I don’t want to move any more than I have to.”

Giselle laughed.

“Don’t laugh, it’s not funny,” Payton told her. She took another gulp of her cocktail. The sunburn pain eased, but the taste did not. *What’s in this concoction?*

They ordered a platter of fresh fruits and vegetables. Giselle wanted some meats and cheeses, but Payton talked her out of the meat portion. Giselle pouted as they ordered more drinks.

* * * *

Christian awoke, anxious to meet up with Payton. His previous night with her made him feel alive again. His doubts still persisted, but diminished as he learned more about her. While suspicions lingered that she worked for Ian in some way, until he knew it for a fact, he would enjoy every moment he could with her. He tasted her, an act he hoped wouldn’t come back to haunt him. He wasn’t prepared to reveal his real identity to her just yet. Timing became everything.

His hunger for her last night overwhelmed him. She tasted so sweet. He wanted more of her blood and her body, but still worried over how he would tell her without frightening her? Would she reject him? When he told other mortal women, they freaked out and he never saw them again, or they thought him crazy, or wanted him to turn them. As the Vampire Rage grew in popularity, the tables had turned somewhat. A small portion of the mortals wanted him, but for different reasons. He didn't trust any of them. They wanted him only for what his blood could do for them and not as a person. If mortals wanted to use him for blood and sex, then they would have to pay for his services, and they did, handsomely. He became a millionaire almost overnight with his resorts and clubs.

After showering and dressing, he had his usual evening blood energy drink, only enough to satisfy his immediate hunger. Other satisfaction tonight would come to him in the form of live specimens. At this time of year, the supply became limited, an indication of time to leave Elounda and head back to London, and then to Miami Beach in search of his new club site. Sitting down to drink, he checked his email to see if Payton responded to his message. Sure enough, she had. *Good girl, yer playing nicely, lass!* He wrote back that he'd be in Miami Beach in a week and would contact her to set an appointment. *That should get her excited and hook Ian if she was working for him. Either way, I'll be prepared for him by then.*

The Beachfront Bar had very few guests. He glanced around and saw Payton sitting with Giselle, the cute blonde Ramsey had his eye on. He did too, until Payton came into his life. Before joining the women, he ordered a house special.

"Ladies, may I join you?"

"C.J.! Of course," Payton said with a smile and excitement in her voice. Appreciating her enthusiastic mood, he wondered if the change had to do with the drink sitting on the table in front of her.

Upon sitting, he leaned in and kissed Payton on the cheek. "Good evening, love. Good evening, Giselle." Then turning to Payton, he asked, "What are you drinking?"

“The house special. It’s pretty for a martini, but really tastes nasty. You kind of get used to the bitter taste.”

“I told you they were not the best, and I can’t believe you’re drinking it. I thought you only drank wine?”

“She needed something stronger,” Giselle interjected, snickering.

“Yes, I did, and it’s your entire fault,” Payton told him, patting him on his arm.

“My fault? What did I do?”

“I wanted to surprise you today with a lunch picnic. I went to your room, and you weren’t there. I ended up at the beach, ran into Giselle, and we spent the entire afternoon eating, drinking, and getting sunburned. I forgot to put on sunscreen, and I look like this.” She delicately lifted her dress up to reveal her very red skin. “I needed to deaden the pain, so I asked for doubles. This is my first, a double, and it’s helping.”

Chuckling at the way she accused him for the sunburn pain, he asked, “So ye’r blaming me because you forgot to put on sunscreen?”

“No, I’m blaming you because if you had been in your room, I wouldn’t have been in the sun, I would have been with you in your bed.” Her hand flew up over her mouth. “Oops, I didn’t mean to say that.”

He laughed hard, as did Giselle.

With a tone of voice making it clear she had been offended by their laughter, she stood to leave, and said, “Okay, if you guys are going to laugh at me, I’m going back to my room.”

“Nay, wait love. I’m not laughing at you, just the circumstances. I’m sorry, please sit back down,” he said, trying not to grab a part of her body that would hurt.

“I guess I’m being silly blaming you. Must be the drink making me think crazy things, but this is kind of funny, don’t you think?” She sat down, shaking her head, and gulped down the last of the drink.

He sensed her pain. “You need to slow down on those drinks, love. They’re more for sipping than gulping.”

“Not when you’re in pain and they taste like...what was the word you said, Giselle?”

“*Merde?*”

“Yea, they taste like *merde*, so you have to gulp it down fast or the nasty shit comes back up.”

“Okay. Do you want another? How about you, Giselle?” he asked.

“Please and make it a double, barkeep,” Payton said, the words slurring together.

“I’m good, thank you,” Giselle said.

An idea struck him, and he excused himself as he left for the bar. Synthetic blood composed the main ingredient of the drink, but he would substitute some of his own in the fresh cocktail. The healing power of his fluids would help with the sunburn, not enough to immediately make the pain go away, but heal her by morning. In her current state of intoxication, she would think the alcohol did the work and not know the difference in the additives. He hated to see her in such misery. In a way, she was right; he was to blame. Fortunately, she didn’t discover him sleeping in the middle of the day. That discovery would have ruined everything.

Returning from the bar, he handed the new drink to her. Once she drank his special mixed cocktail, she would feel better.

“Here you go, my love, try this.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking a sip. “This tastes a little different. What did you do?”

“The bartender opened a new bottle of whiskey,” he lied.

“Oh, that makes sense, I guess. This one actually tastes sweeter.”

Smiling, he realized no one had ever told him his blood tasted sweet. “What are you ladies up for tonight? Dancing maybe?”

“I wish Ramsey were still here. I know what I would want to do if he were,” Giselle lamented. “The extra day we had wasn’t enough.”

Turning to C.J., Payton said, “You’re good friends with Ramsey. Do you know how to contact him? Giselle is lovesick. You could help her out, couldn’t you?” She snuggled up to him, putting a hand on his chest.

“I probably could,” he said, gazing into her eyes. She already felt no pain, he guessed. He grinned.

“You are the sweetest man.” She gave him a kiss on his cheek.

“I think you are too. When can you contact him?” Giselle asked.

“Ladies, I believe it’s early in the morning in Hong Kong.”

“He’s awake, C.J. You know he is. Can you call him?” Giselle asked.

“Okay, I’ll be back.” He stepped away from the bar to call Ramsey, but still within earshot of the women.

“Do you think he’ll contact him, Payton?”

“C.J. can do anything. He’s magic. Just like this drink. What is in this? I don’t feel anything, and look, my sunburn is disappearing, or am I seeing things?” Payton stretched out her arms to show Giselle.

“You’re right, look at that,” she said in amazement as she grabbed her arm to look closer.

Christian returned, knowing he’d make Giselle a happy woman. Ramsey missed her too and made his way back to Elounda as they spoke. The men worked out a cover story for Payton’s benefit. Giselle knew of a vampire’s superhuman abilities of strength, hearing, and such, and he assumed Giselle thought Payton knew. He didn’t want Giselle to innocently say anything to Payton about them being vampires. Ramsey would fill her in later.

“Giselle, good news, sweetheart. Ramsey finished his job, and he was already on his way here as we spoke. He should be here shortly and asked that you meet him in your suite.”

“Really? Payton, you’re right. He *is* magic. Thank you, C.J. I love you. I’ll see you later. *Bonsoir mes amis*,” she said, running off quickly.

Returning his attention to Payton, he sat down close to her. “So you think I’m magic, do you?”

“Among other things. This nasty drink is curing me, see? It doesn’t taste like *merde* now.” She started to pull her dress up to show him her legs. “I don’t know if it’s me or what, but I don’t

feel anything, and the pain is fading. You fix a great drink Mr. Mack. See what it did to my burn. You need to tell your boss to package this sweet *merde*.”

Shaking his head in amusement, he pulled her dress down. “Payton, I think you’ve had enough. Why don’t we go to my place and continue this conversation. Come on, love, let me help you up.” He stood up and took her hand.

“Yes, let’s go to your suite, or should I say your villa. I have a room. You have a mansion by comparison.” She stood up and collapsed. “Whoa. I think I’ve had too much.”

“Aye, I told you. Let me carry you. Put yer arms around my neck, love.” He put his arms around her shoulders and under her legs, picking her up. She sighed and rested her head on his shoulder.

“My hero,” she said softly.

He contemplated moving at vampire speed to the villa, but she was still conscious, and he didn’t want to deal with the questions. He could have used mind control as well, but again he resisted. Taking the long way turned out to be a pleasant journey. Holding her in his arms, feeling her warmth against him, hearing her heartbeat, and smelling her mandarin orange scented skin aroused all his senses even more than they did last night.

By the time they arrived at his villa, she was unconscious. He went straight to the bedroom and placed her on the bed, propped her up on the bed pillows, removed her sandals, and covered her with a coverlet.

Gazing upon his beautiful goddess, warmth filled his cold body. She took his breath away every time he saw her. He wanted her. Badly. He wasn’t the type to take advantage of a woman when she wasn’t in a position to consent. Unconscious certainly took the fun out of making love as well. Hearing the moaning and whispers of her love inspired him, the writhing of her body arching up to meet his, yes, waiting for her to wake up was his only option. For how long, he didn’t know. He crawled in bed and lay down beside her. Being with her was enough, for now.

Chapter Ten

Leaving Elounda, Crete for London, UK, and Miami Beach

Christian returned to Payton's suite before dawn and laid her in the bed, kissing her lips as he departed. Payton lying in his arms in bed was almost too much for him to bear. He was conflicted—he loved her, but didn't trust her. How would he resolve this dilemma? His plan was already in play and would finish where the pieces landed. He played to win, and Ian would lose. He prayed Payton would be innocent of betrayal and would not get caught in the crossfire.

He left for London to prepare the final details. The next time he saw Payton, he would reveal his real identity, would see her reaction, and know if she worked for Ian or not. Either way, he would get his new club and a residence, while putting Ian and his Black Heart Entertainment finally out of business for good.

War amongst the vampires was not a pleasant undertaking, bloody by all accounts, and there would be resistance. He needed help to do battle. Several factions spread over the globe, some who lived by the old ways—like Ian—hunting humans for pure sport and feeding on them and others like himself who used mainly synthetic blood and only fed on humans through controlled circumstances. Vampires like Ian were the ones Christian hated.

If Ian had any forewarning of Christian coming to Miami, he would be prepared. Christian had to be as well. Sunrise would arrive soon; he would start tomorrow, but now he had to rest. His last thoughts before falling into deep sleep were of Payton and how beautiful she looked as he kissed her goodbye.

* * * *

On her last day in Elounda, Payton awoke late in the morning. Her head pounded, and she didn't want to get up. She blinked several times, focusing on the vaguely familiar surroundings.

"How did I get here? This is my room." She jolted up, grabbing her head with both her hands. "Oh, God, I'm getting too old for this shit."

After sitting still for a few moments, Payton slowly moved her legs to the side of the bed and stood up, wobbly at first, but got her bearings and shuffled to the bathroom. She turned on the shower and then searched for the aspirin in her overnight case. The meds were desperately needed to relieve the pounding, skull piercing pain. Staring at the reflection in the mirror glaring back at her, she wondered what had happened the night before. Her memory was fuzzy. How did she get to her room? The last she remembered, she was talking to C.J. in the bar. Giselle left. Then nothing.

Dammit, what's wrong with me? I don't get drunk.

Finally finding the aspirin in the bottom of the make-up bag, she took two with water. Four might have been better, but not on an empty stomach. Stepping into the shower, she closed her eyes, let the hot, steamy water run down her aching body and over her hair. The aqueous liquid helped her relax and ease the headache. Then the realization dawned on her.

"My sunburn! I have no sunburn." She looked over her body. The redness from the sunburn completely disappeared.

How is this possible? A burn that bad doesn't disappear overnight.

She shouldn't complain. One thing she did recall was the pain, and that was blessedly gone. Reaching for the loofah and soap, she lathered the natural sponge and washed her body, followed by shampooing her hair. The headache had faded away by the time she stepped out of the shower.

After dressing in sweats and a plain T-shirt, she decided to partial pack for the return back to Miami Beach. From the moment she set foot on the resort, everything had exceeded her expectations, all Elounda and the Island of Crete—the accommodations, the food, the people, the sightseeing, and especially one particular man. She smiled and wondered if that particular man

was awake. He must have brought her back to her room last night and tucked her into bed. She just wished she could remember what happened.

That's the last time I order the house special!

After packing as much as she could, she curled up on the bed with her laptop to check her email messages. The back-logged file consisted of the usual junk mail, a few messages from agents giving feedback on showings of her listings, and a new one from Christian MacKenzie. He would arrive in Miami next week and wanted to see properties as soon as possible. Delighted, she closed the messages and researched properties to show him, just to be prepared. Finding the right commercial property was the tricky part; the residential was a piece of cake. She spent several hours on the computer organizing the showings, lining them up to call once she got back stateside.

Outside was cold and rainy, the first day of bad weather since she arrived. She didn't feel like dressing to go to the restaurant. Preferring lazy and casual in her suite, she ordered room service. As she ate the salad, grilled vegetables, and fruit bowl, she wondered what C.J. did on this gloomy day. *Why hasn't he called me?* Surely he was awake and up and about by now. Maybe he worked again and wasn't able to break away. Or, was he sleeping? Hopefully, she would see him tonight and would tell him how she felt before leaving in the morning. She should have told him last night, but that damn sunburn and drinking too much got in the way!

"I wish I could remember what happened last night. Crazy." She shook her head.

One thing she hated most was being out of control, and she fought hard all her life to stay on top of things. The only failures she had were the bad choices in husbands, and that insanity wouldn't be repeated any time soon. Losing control with alcohol wasn't something she normally did, and that bothered her. C.J. got the last drink for her, and the concoction tasted different. Did he put something in it? After drinking the entirety, that's when things got fuzzy. What motive would he have for spiking her drink? She would have gladly gone with him; there would have been no reason to coerce her into having sex. Good grief, how many times had they already had sex? Unless another reason existed. Very puzzling.

So bizarre, she couldn't shake the thought that C.J. kept a secret from her. The more she thought about what happened between them, the more the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. He was trouble from the beginning. Calling her a goddess and telling her how beautiful she was all the time was over-the-top. No handsome, sexy, young man like C.J. would be seriously interested in an older woman like her. She had nothing of importance to offer him that she could think of. Doubts and insecurities crept back into her thoughts.

Thinking back to the first time she met him, what he was doing, saying, wearing, and what she did in response brought the headache to the forefront again. Pushing through the growing pain, she asked herself what did she do that would make him want to hurt her in any way? Nothing came to mind.

Pacing the floor, she began to piece the events of the past week together. *Think Payton. He saw me the first night I was here, out on the balcony, in the pool. He sent flowers the next morning. I met him at the bar in the evening. He wanted my business card to give to the owner. He came on to me, and I left him at the bar. Then, the second day, I received more roses and a note. She walked to the vase of roses on the desk and leaned down to smell them. Hmm, they still smell good. Okay, keep focused. Next, what happened next? Oh, yeah, how could I forget, the incredible virtual sex! He was here. No, he wasn't here. I couldn't remember then, either.*

"He told me we had computer sex only, nothing more. I swear what happened was real. He was here." Walking back to the bedroom, she ran every step through her mind, trying to recreate the event. She lay on the bed as she did that night. "He was talking to me through the computer, and then he wasn't answering me. Next, a knock came to the suite door, and I got up." She rose from the bed and went to the door, pretending to answer, and then walked back into the bedroom, acting out what she thought happened.

Stopping and staring at the bed, she talked aloud through the events as they occurred. "I took him to the bedroom, I was on the bed, and he stood at the foot staring at me. He ripped off his shirt, dropped his pants, and proceeded to make love to me. I felt him, I touched him, and he was real, not imagined."

“I’m not crazy. He was here.” She strained her memory, determined to remember. Closing her eyes, picturing every detail. Then the recollection became clear. “He ripped off his shirt and buttons popped off.”

Dropping to her hands and knees, she scoured under the bed and behind the drapes and nightstand to see if there might be a loose button. She pulled the drapes back from the corner against the wall, stopped, and smiled, seeing a button. “He *was* here, and he lied to me. I knew it!” *But why?*

“Why did I forget?” *What’s happening to me? Is he drugging me?* She sat down on the side of the bed, staring at the button, and wondering why he needed to lie about being in her room. What difference did it make? They made love in person instead of having computer sex, big deal. What else did he cover up? *The next night we went to his villa, I told him about my ex-husbands, and we made love. What did he have to gain by lying? I don’t get it unless someone wanted him...*

“Oh, my God! Demetrius! Oh, I bet he’s behind this. That royal Greek bastard. He hired C.J. to seduce me to get back at me for the divorce. I know he had something to do with this charade.” Taking the thought further, she gasped. *He’s been spying on me! Why else would a young punk like C.J. have anything to do with me? Demetrius certainly has the money and influence to pay someone to do this. Wait until I get back home.*

“What if he took pictures? He could try to blackmail me, divorce decree or not. He’s vindictive enough and hates to lose as much as I do and did this to humiliate me. If he thinks he’s going to get away with this, he has another thing coming.” She paced the floor, scowling, and her hands in tight fists.

No, this is all silly. I’m letting paranoia take over logical thought. Stop it Payton! Calm down and think this through.

Demetrius has connections and could have hired someone, although they would have had to get here to the resort with very short notice. Or maybe he knew C.J. was already here. No, that doesn’t make sense, does it? What other explanation is there? I’m not a goddess like C.J. says,

and I'm certainly not a cougar. Why else would he make a move on me? Payton, how could you be so stupid? Computer sex and drugged by a young, good-looking guy. I'm worse off than before I came here. I swear, I can't trust any man ever, ever again!

Tonight, she would handle C.J. her way. Yes, she'd take care of him all right. No man would make a fool of her and get away with it again. If he had taken pictures, she would find out and secure them the best way she could. Whatever guile or manipulation she could muster, she'd do.

After freshening up, she dressed in the sexiest dress, a clingy, turquoise mini-dress with a low-cut back and a pair of three-inch matching stilettos. The high heels elongated her long, slender legs to their best advantage. The dress enhanced the green contacts, but she decided this would be the last day she wore them. Tomorrow would bring a new day and changes in her life starting with being her real self. No more hiding behind false images.

Because of the continuing rain, the Beachfront Bar closed down. She went to the main lounge after dinner where she found Giselle cuddling on a banquette with Ramsey. They didn't see her as she approached, but she overheard their conversation.

"C.J. isn't going to join us tonight?" Giselle asked Ramsey.

"No, he left for London. Don't expect him back here until next season. I'll probably see him at Christmas in London."

"Payton will be disappointed, I'm sure."

"Maybe. I don't know what he saw in her anyway. She's a little old for my taste, and I told him that. I like them young like you, sweetheart." He gave her a kiss and a hug.

As he did, Giselle tilted her head up and caught enough of a glimpse of Payton as she stood in shock. Payton knew the expression of hurt and anger had to show clearly by the gaped mouth of Giselle staring back.

Giselle pulled back from Ramsey. "Payton!"

Ramsey turned and stared at her. "Hey, Payton. I didn't see you standing there."

"Obviously, Ramsey. Your cohort took off to London, eh?" Payton asked.

“Uh, business he said. He didn’t tell you?” He acted nervous and tried to slump down into the couch. She didn’t buy his cover-up. “Do I act like I knew? Would I be asking you if he went to London if he told me? *Men*, you’re all alike. What did Giselle say? Oh yeah, *merde!*” She turned and walked back toward the elevator.

“Uh, nice dress, Payton,” he said.

Giselle punched him in the arm, stood up, and said, “She’s right, men are all alike, Ramsey. Men are *merde* and pigs!”

* * * *

“Payton, wait. I need to talk to you,” Giselle called, running down the hallway.

Payton turned. “We have nothing to talk about, Giselle. Ramsey is right; I’m too old for C.J., and I think it’s a good thing he left, otherwise he’d be missing a pair of balls right about now.”

“*Mon Dieu!* No, Payton. Ramsey is wrong. You and C.J. are good together. He left for business, and he’ll be back.” Giselle tried to sound reassuring.

“It’s too late. I’ll be gone tomorrow.” She unlocked her door and stepped through. “Do you want to come in?” she asked.

“Yes, please.”

Payton kicked off her high heels and sat down on the sofa. Giselle sat in the overstuffed chair across from her.

“I’m not mad at Ramsey about the age thing. Well, maybe a little, but I’m more upset with C.J. for taking off to London and not giving me the opportunity to confront him about lying to me,” Payton said.

“Ah, you wanted to take his balls. What did he lie to you about?”

“Everything.” She rose from the sofa and paced the floor.

“I don’t understand,” Giselle said, with puzzlement on her face.

“No, you wouldn’t. The situation is complicated. Let’s just say, Christian has another side. He hasn’t been honest with me. I should have known something wasn’t right from the beginning. He tried too hard to be with me, telling me how beautiful I was, and all that goddess talk, and how he didn’t care how old I am. Everything out of his mouth was a lie.” She continued pacing, her hands clenched in fists resting on her hips. “His motivation could only be money. What else could a young man want from an older woman except money? I certainly don’t have a lot of it, but my ex-husband sure as hell does! He must have paid well to have him seduce me.”

“Your ex-husband? You think your ex-husband paid C.J. to have sex with you?” Giselle started to chuckle. “No, Payton, I don’t think so. C.J. has a secret to tell, but I assure you it has nothing to do with your ex-husband paying him to be with you.”

“What do you know about this, Giselle?”

“You have to ask C.J. It isn’t my place to say.”

“I would, but I don’t have an address or phone number to contact him. Hell, London’s a big town. I don’t even know what part of London his office is located in.”

“Why don’t I ask Ramsey how to reach him? They’re friends, and he might tell me, and I can let you know.”

“That might work. Do you think he would tell you without getting suspicious?”

“I think so. I can get the address and phone number from him tonight.”

“Good.” She looked for her clutch, pulled out a business card, and continued. “If you can’t let me know by the time I leave in the morning, here’s my business card. Email me with the information.” She handed the card to Giselle.

“Okay. Consider the job done. I’ll go right now. I hope he’s still downstairs. I left him saying he was a pig.”

“I heard,” Payton said and laughed.

Giselle laughed too. “Yes, I did. He’s probably still sitting there like a big baby.” She left Payton’s room, heading to the lounge.

Giselle left C.J.'s email address and cell phone number on Ramsey's business card and left it at the front desk for Payton. When she checked out the next morning, Spiros handed her the card. She asked if there were any other messages, but he told her no. C.J. hadn't left her a message, nothing.

* * * *

Taking the corporate jet, Christian arrived in London before the sun faded. A couple of the staff also returned with him. Sleeping on the jet did not provide optimum rest for his kind, but he had it retrofitted to accommodate his needs for long journeys and remained asleep on the tarmac until sunset. After going through the usual government checkpoints, he went straight to his office to finalize plans for the South Beach club.

The vampire contingent he needed would be a minimum of ten of his best and most loyal warriors. No doubt, Ian already had a formidable and established coven in Miami Beach, and his club would open any day according to his sources. Christian needed to act fast to force Ian out of business before he got a foothold in the area.

The light from his desk lamp provided the only illumination in the office. He leaned back in his chair, propped his legs up on his desk, and rested his arms behind his head. Closing his eyes, his thoughts drifted to Payton and their time together in Elounda. He missed her already and hated leaving the way he did, but he had to get out before losing control. Until he knew he could trust her, disclosing his vampire nature remained a non-option, and he couldn't trust her until events played out in Miami Beach.

"Why did I have to find that email?" Grabbing his head with his hands, he leaned forward, swinging his legs down from the desk. "Things would be so different now."

Concentrating on work was difficult with the image of Payton etched on his brain, her scent burned in his nostrils. Her blood imprinted and flowed through his veins, and he tasted her lips on his. Nothing would sate him until he had her in his arms again.

Turning to the computer, he emailed Payton as Christian, telling her of his arrival date. He pulled out her business card and keyed in her website address. On the home page was a picture of her and for a few moments he became fixated on her photograph. She presented a professional, prim, and proper image in a business suit, airbrushed makeup, and perfectly coifed hair. His goddess was divine, indeed. He should have pulled the website up in Elounda when he searched for her information before. The site had a lot of interesting details he could have used. Right now he'd focus on his real estate needs and how she'd help him.

A number of residential properties looked appropriate for his needs, and he made note of them. A home located at Ocean Boulevard stood out from the others. He definitely wanted her to show the property to him if still available. However, the most important priority would be the site for the club. That would be the challenge; she had to find a suitable building for him. He could deal with a lair later, if need be.

After a long night, he was hungry. He wanted more than synthetic blood; he needed the real thing. He decided to close up shop and head out to his London club, *The Chelsea Rose*. He could quench his hunger, check in with his club manager, drown his thoughts of Payton with a Scotch laced synthetic blood mixture, and maybe find a groupie to succumb to his charms.

Located in a Victorian-style townhome, the decoration scheme of *The Chelsea Rose* featured period pieces, a time Christian loved. London captured the epitome of the period, and living in the city during that time beat living in the Scottish countryside. Moving to London marked a turning point in his existence as a vampire. He leaned back in the chair, raked fingers through his hair and closed his eyes, remembering the epiphany he had when everything changed for him. After that night he embarked on his present path. Enough about the past, he was thirsty.

The night turned out to be quiet at *The Rose*, his nickname for the London club. Just as well, he didn't want to socialize, only find an unattached female to feed on to satisfy his desire for fresh blood. He circulated around the room, smiling at the couples gathered in the booths and tables, sipping on their cocktails and kissing. The more intimate action happened on the second

floor of the establishment in private rooms. Christian made his way to the bar and ordered Scotch. The bartender welcomed him back home and made his drink quickly.

“Thanks, Cyrus, how are things tonight?”

“Not bad, sir. Downstairs has been slow, but I think the upstairs has been good. Movie types came to town for a premier and booked the second floor for the weekend. Things have slowed down during the week. Check with Thomas, he’ll know more details.”

“Where is Thomas? I haven’t seen him since I arrived.”

“He’s probably in the back. You want me to call him up?”

“No, I’ll check on him later, thanks.” He took a sip of his drink and turned in his seat to see who walked through the front door. A smile crossed his face, and he rose to greet an old friend.

“Jean-Pierre, ye old dog. Where have ye been, man?” he asked, grabbing the man’s hand to shake and putting the other arm around his shoulder.

“C.J., I didn’t think I would see you tonight. I heard you were in Greece. What happened? Did you miss our cold, rainy weather?” Jean-Pierre jested.

“No, I had business to finish before leaving for the States. I have a new club to open in Miami Beach.”

“Sunny Florida, better than rainy London, yes?”

“Aye, I agree, but London is home, and it’s always good coming here no matter how bad the weather.”

“*C’est vrai*,” Jean-Pierre said.

“Let’s get you a drink, my man.”

“Not any of that synthetic blood *merde* you vamps like. I want something strong with some hair on it.” He grinned.

“I think Cyrus can fix you up.” They walked to the bar and ordered drinks. C.J. forgot about his desire for a female for the time being in exchange for the company of an old friend.

Jean-Pierre Lafitte was a shape-shifter, a werewolf from the French Pyrénées, Basque Country. He came from a long family lineage of shape-shifters originally protecting royalty in

the early millennia of civilization, evolving to modern time protectors for hire as their existence went the way of legend, like vampires. Most of the jobs Jean-Pierre took lately were for mortals, wealthy humans in need of special-skilled protection. The job paid well, and he traveled the world, two pleasures he said he loved.

Christian and Jean-Pierre met during a World War II London air raid in a West End underground train station. The raid came at night, and they found themselves in the tube by themselves, talking, laughing, and becoming friends for life. Jean-Pierre protected Christian while he slept until the next sunset, their loyalty bonded. Through the years, their lives crossed many times, in projects of mutual assistance. Tonight Christian sought Jean-Pierre's help.

"Are you up for a job?" he asked Jean-Pierre. "I'll pay you well."

"What do you have in mind, *mon ami*?"

"I'm in need of a security detail for my Miami project. Ian McAlester is there with a new club, and I want to take him down before he gets a stronghold. He's going to put up a fight. I could use a man with your talents. Are you interested?"

"McAlester, that bloodsucking demon! If I could help you take him down, I'd do the job for nothing. When are you planning on going?"

"In two days. Can you transport your entourage by then?"

"I have a few loose ends I need to tie up, but I think I can manage. Who else is part of your group? To defeat McAlester, you better have tough warriors. He's ruthless, and I can assure you, he has surrounded himself with real bad asses. Russians most likely."

"I know. I ran into him in Vegas a couple of months ago, and he laughed at me with such arrogance and self-assurance, I wanted to run him through. I kept my composure. After that encounter, I'd like nothing better than to wipe that arrogant Scottish rogue off the face of the Earth."

"You have to be careful; he's an evil one. With that evil comes power and corruption. He knows very influential people."

“I know very influential people as well. We’ll see who has more power when all is said and done. He needs to be nothing but ashes. You know it, and I know it.”

“I am with you, always. I have some ideas of others to bring on board. Let me make a few calls. I’ll have them here in three days.”

“Three days then.”

They sealed the plan by clinking their drink glasses together and gulping down the remainder of their drinks.

Christian needed to find some fresh blood to top off his evening. He looked around the room and spied a tall blonde in a corner booth.

Chapter Eleven

Miami Beach

Payton whirled into the office two days after arriving back from Elounda like a cat on a mission to trap a mouse. She spent the first day unpacking and sleeping. The jet lag was a bitch. Getting back to work was her salvation to what happened in Elounda. She had business to take care of and nothing would stop her from accomplishing that goal, even the tension that saturated the office. Another murder had been discovered the night before. The police gained no strong leads and still encouraged real estate agents not to show property after dark.

Maritsa's gleeful greeting reminded Payton of the familiarity she missed over the past week and a half. The time away restored the zest for work and a return to comfortable, familiar surroundings. Anything to take her mind off the young man she was still furious with.

"Good morning, Payton. It's good to have you back. How was Greece?" Maritsa asked, as she handed Payton a stack of messages.

"Thanks, Greece was wonderful. I even picked up a new client. Can you believe that? Go to Greece and find a client for Miami Beach, go figure. I need to get to my computer and start researching properties and making calls. So, are any of these critical that I need to take care of now?" She waved the message notes in her hand.

"No, they were all from agents for showings and giving feedback. I turned most of them over to the agent on call to answer or emailed you already."

"Then I'll be in my office. Can you hold any calls until I can get this research done?"

"Sure thing." The phone rang, and Maritsa left to answer it.

Payton padded down the hallway to her office. She put her laptop case on her desk, stored her purse in the desk drawer, sat down in her chair, and leaned back. Being back home in Miami Beach felt great. Her office occupied the southwest corner of the building, surrounded on two sides with floor to ceiling windows. Nice and sunny. Modern, sleek furniture, a desk and credenza in lacquered dark wood and steel, and two upholstered chairs in a contemporary blue and brown print furnished the room. Eclectic mingled with modern wall art. While no expert, most of it appeared collectable. She loved the feel and smell of her office.

Opening her laptop, she meticulously searched for properties for Christian MacKenzie. She received an email from him saying he would be in town in a couple of days. Her search turned up several residential properties as well. She already planned on showing him her Ocean Boulevard listing, despite it being outside the price range he indicated. If he didn't go for that, with all that was available, she wasn't concerned about making a sale on a home. The commercial properties posed a problem. Space available for what he stated he wanted was limited.

After making calls to the other agents for possible listings, Payton made one more—her hair stylist. She needed to change her hair back to its natural color. After Elounda she vowed to remove the mask she hid behind, be herself again, and make positive changes in her life. She had already stopped wearing the green contacts and switched to clear ones. Unable to see without glasses, she didn't have the nerve to have laser surgery to correct her vision. Maybe one day she'd have the guts for the procedure.

* * * *

Christian arrived with his contingent of vampire warriors three days later. The first order of business—procuring a residence for his lair and his entourage was a critical requisite accomplished by establishing temporary quarters at the Fontainebleau Hotel penthouse suite. A hotel did not offer the most private and secure setting for a vampire's needs. Fortunately, he had Jean-Pierre to provide security. Contacting Payton was of the utmost importance and a call to her office, once they settled into the suite, became his next priority.

Early morning hours approached and dawn would show her face within the hour. Christian tasked Albert, his personal assistant, to contact Payton to schedule an appointment for the next evening to meet at the Ocean Boulevard property. Based on the Internet information, the residence would meet his needs.

Albert Morrison, a mortal, had been in his employ for thirty years knowing him longer though, since taking Albert in as a ward at the age of six. Christian trusted him implicitly. He had many useful talents—spoke six languages, had a black belt in Tai Kwan Do, knew his way around proper protocol, and made a mean Dirty Martini. Christian often sparred with him, using broadswords or claymores. Using swords and daggers during battle for territorial rights wasn't uncommon for the Scottish vampires. They considered fighting with them an honorable way to die. Over the past hundred plus years, Christian had to do battle a handful of times, nothing extremely serious, but enough to keep his swordsmanship skills sharp and keen. He carried his Scottish Dirk with him at all times, except when he resided in the safe compound of his resorts like Elounda or Las Vegas. There he felt no need to have a weapon strapped on, just nearby in case of emergency. Carrying the broadsword strapped on his back always presented a problem. He had to put up an illusion veil when in the presence of humans to conceal the weapon's presence. In the far past, carrying a broadsword openly never presented a problem. In modern times, the practice would draw too much unwanted attention.

* * * *

When Payton received a call from Mr. MacKenzie's personal assistant, Albert, to set an appointment she expressed hesitation to meeting at an evening hour. Despite her apprehension, in light of the serial murders, they compromised with seven-thirty. The sun would be down this time of year, barely. Feeling more comfortable with the earlier time, Payton asked, "Will Mr. MacKenzie come alone or will there be others in attendance for the viewing?"

"I will be present, Miss Fleming, and perhaps his bodyguards. Why do you ask?"

"I was curious if there would be another decision-maker present."

“No other decision-maker, ma’am. Only Mr. MacKenzie. He makes all final decisions.”

“Okay, I’ll see him tomorrow evening at seven-thirty at the Ocean Boulevard property. Please let him know that I look forward to meeting him.”

“I will Miss Fleming.”

Finishing the call with MacKenzie’s man, Payton felt exhilarated. This would be a winning sale. The mysterious Christian MacKenzie would fall in love with the property, and Ocean Boulevard would be the first of two properties she would sell him.

What a great way to end the year and make my birthday a glorious one!

The next day, she prepared for the showing, shuffling paperwork and making return phone calls to other agents. Two days before, she emailed C.J. at the address Giselle had obtained from Ramsey in Elounda. He hadn’t responded to her first message, and she decided to try again, this time more demanding.

As she gazed out the window, resting back in her chair, she contemplated her life with Demetrius. How could he do this to her? How, after over fifteen years, could he dishonor their life together by hiring someone to seduce her and possibly discredit and humiliate her? That about summed up how she felt upon leaving Elounda. Humiliated. Deceived. Heartbroken.

Demetrius had her unconditional love and the mere thought of him used to bring a smile to her face, but not anymore. They were divorced, freeing her to have a relationship with whomever she wanted. What reason would Demetrius have to do this? Except for spite and to humiliate her. Closing her eyes and biting her bottom lip, she reached back into her memories to recall their life together.

Their story began after divorcing her second husband Derek Conklin, when she left Los Angeles for South Beach, Florida. Payton needed a major makeover to transition into the new lifestyle of sunny South Florida. She made physical changes like, extensions, colored contacts in emerald green, and purchased a new, more chic wardrobe. She made all those changes thinking it was a way to attract a man who would prefer a woman with a Florida look and a younger, more

hip style. Two failed marriages could hurt a woman's self-esteem, and boosting one's appearance never hurt.

Getting a job became her next objective. With plenty of experience on her resume from working in Los Angeles between her first and second marriages, she answered an ad for an administrative assistant to one of the top real estate agents in the South Beach area. She got the position, not just because of her qualifications, but because an immediate physical attraction developed with the agent—she got the man too, Demetrius Vasiliou.

The marriage lasted almost twelve years, until he found other interests in a twenty-four year old personal assistant. Remembering that fateful afternoon so clearly still brought anger and tears. She came home early to surprise him. The surprise fell on her. Demetrius and the bimbo were in bed, naked and doing things she didn't even want to think about. Storming out and never looking back, she filed for divorce the next day. More hurt came when she discovered the affair wasn't the first. A private detective she hired at her attorney's insistence uncovered not only evidence of the current affair, but past relationships with other women as well. After the evidence came to light, a lot of the fight went out of Demetrius.

Demetrius didn't like backing down from a fight, and he didn't like to lose, but confronted with irrefutable evidence of his infidelities, he had to grit his teeth and make concessions. She had loved him and thought she probably always would, in some small way. If he orchestrated the entire C.J. in Crete scenario, that small sliver of love would quickly turn to hate.

Her cell phone rang, startling her out of her thoughts. Caller ID showed Jason's number. She hadn't talked to him since returning from Elounda and didn't think she wanted to. After five rings, the call went to voicemail.

How ironic, the one man she wanted to talk to was probably doing the same thing she just did to Jason—letting the call go to voicemail.

Payton lost herself in thought again. C.J. remained foremost on her mind. He got under her skin in the worst way. She missed him—his touch, his smile, his voice. Reconciling her feelings for him, knowing there were too many unknowns, too many unanswered questions, became more

difficult with each passing minute. Why didn't he return her calls or emails? Tears welled up in her eyes. The answers weren't forthcoming, and she desperately wanted to believe he wasn't involved with Demetrius.

Perhaps he would be with Mr. MacKenzie. The possibility existed, didn't it? C.J. said he worked in acquisitions for the company, and this qualified as a company acquisition, didn't it? Looking at her watch, she knew in a couple of hours she would have her answer.

Maritsa poked her head through Payton's door, tapping on the doorframe at the same time.

"Hey, you okay?"

Payton quickly wiped the tears from her face and answered, "Yes, I was thinking about my friend who was murdered," she lied.

"I'm sorry," Maritsa replied, then continued. "Are you up to going to *Tisdale's* for lunch? A few of us are going. You want to join us? A welcome back home celebration and fill us in on all the fun you had."

"Sure, I need to get out of this office for a couple of hours."

"Great, I'll meet you up front in five." Maritsa turned to leave.

"Maritsa, wait," Payton said. Maritsa stopped and turned back. "Did Demetrius call before I went on vacation and not leave a message?"

"I think he did. I remember he did call maybe a couple of days or so before you left. He said it wasn't important, and he'd call you on your cell. Why?"

"Did you tell him anything about my trip?"

"I don't think so, but I guess I could have. Demetrius has always been nice to me and talks to me when he calls. I guess I wasn't thinking when I told him. I was so excited for you I forgot that you said you didn't want anyone to know. Did I do something wrong or cause some kind of trouble? I'm so sorry if it did."

"Maritsa, it's okay. I'm trying to piece together a puzzle. I believe you filled in a missing piece. I know you didn't mean to tell Demetrius and how very charming he can be. Don't worry about it. Let's go have lunch. I'll see you in a few minutes."

Demetrius would not get away with humiliating her, and she would let him know that after returning from lunch. And C.J.? Well, he could go to hell.

* * * *

“What do you mean, Demetrius? I know you. You hired that young man C.J. to spy on me while I was on vacation in Greece. Don’t deny it,” Payton demanded, her hand aching from her grip on the phone, wishing it was his neck.

“Payton, you’re crazy. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I haven’t hired any man to spy on you. We’re divorced, and you got a nice settlement from me. What are you doing, trying to get more from me by making false allegations?” His voice raised more with each word. He sounded genuinely insulted by her accusation.

“You swear to me, on your dead mother’s grave, you didn’t have anything to do with C.J. Mack in Elounda?”

“Payton, I swear. I don’t know a C.J. Mack. What did he do to you? I’ve never heard you so upset that you would accuse me of harming you. You got the penthouse, cash, the car, jewelry, what else, my blood too? You know me, why would you think I would hurt you like that?”

“No, you just hurt me by screwing every young woman who worked for you.”

“That’s not fair. If you weren’t so damn frigid, I wouldn’t have looked elsewhere. I didn’t have anything to do with this C.J. guy, and whatever he did to you, well, you probably deserved it.”

“You bastard! If I find out you had anything to do with this, you’re going to regret crossing me.” Her voice quavered with a mixture of rage and doubt.

“Payton, you’re crazy! Get a life! Don’t contact me again.” He hung up, slamming the phone down in her ear.

“Ohhh!” she screamed. *That man is infuriating! To think I loved him. Not anymore!*

His words cut her deeply, and the last sliver of love slipped into a forgotten memory.

In all their years of marriage, Demetrius never showed such animosity toward her. Never called her frigid and she never refused his sexual advances. Quite the contrary, he seemed to refuse her. If Demetrius didn't hire C.J., then who did? If anyone? Could it be possible C.J. acted on his own? Payton became more confused than ever. Now what? *Work, my true love.*

With only a few hours to spare, she threw herself back to the business of preparing for Mr. MacKenzie's arrival. She confirmed with the owners of Ocean Boulevard for the seven-thirty showing and would go early to make sure lights were on and everything properly placed. She couldn't eat even though hunger tugged at her insides. Before big showings, she always got nervous and eating made her sick. She'd get a late bite to eat after the showing.

Chapter Twelve

Payton left the office around six o'clock for the showing. The drive along Ocean Boulevard was a pleasant one for an early fall night, not too cool or rainy. The moon roof slid back to full open letting in fresh air, and the canopy of a perfect South Florida pre-twilight time of night. The last of rush hour traffic still congested the beachfront road, but nothing to prevent her from arriving on time to meet her new client, Christian MacKenzie. The sun hovered at the horizon, with all the glorious colors of amber, burnt orange, and violet reflected upon the waters of the Intracoastal Waterway. Payton loved the beauty of this moment, no matter where in the world her feet landed. Thoughts of Elounda swept over her. The sunsets there were breathtaking and mesmerizing. She loved the island especially the resort, but the magic had evaporated, perhaps forever.

Pulling her Mercedes up to the security box in front of the wrought-iron entrance gate to the property, Payton entered the special code the owners gave her to leave the gate open for customers and drove through. The owners told her they would be out of town for a couple of days and made the house available to show anytime.

"Sell it quickly," they commented when she called to make the appointment. She'd do her best as always.

Showing property at night still made her uncomfortable, but this was a referral that checked out. Besides, Mr. MacKenzie would bring others so she wouldn't be alone in the house. Placing her laptop, property file, and handbag on the kitchen counter, she glanced over at the clock on the microwave, which read six-forty. Scurrying around the house, she turned on lights, straightened up pillows on beds, chairs, and couches, and turned on the outdoor spa and terrace lights. Barely a minute to spare, she ran to the front of the house when the entrance gate intercom

sounded. She had to give Christian MacKenzie an A-plus for promptness; the time showed seven-thirty exactly. He would be at the front door within a couple of minutes. A man with a British accent announced himself as the driver for Mr. MacKenzie. *He has a driver? Impressive.*

Payton could not understand her anxiety at meeting Christian MacKenzie. She pictured a man in his late thirties, maybe early forties, six foot, dark hair with a little gray at the temples, well-dressed in a business suit. Of course, he spoke with a British accent, all supposition of course. She hoped not to be disappointed.

The doorbell rang. A gentleman fitting the image of Christian MacKenzie she created in her mind stood before her. Smiling and extending her hand she greeted the stranger she assumed was her new client.

“Mr. MacKenzie, a pleasure to meet you. I’m Payton Fleming. Please, come in.”

“Good evening, Miss Fleming. I’m Albert Morrison, Mr. MacKenzie’s personal assistant. You can call me Albert if you wish. We spoke yesterday and set this appointment,” Albert said with his distinguished, proper British accent and demeanor.

Her face warmed with a blush. “Oh, yes. I’m sorry, *Albert*. I forgot you would be here as well. Come in.” She ushered him into the foyer entrance, then continued to speak. “Is Mr. MacKenzie going to be here?” she asked, and looked out into the driveway to see if anyone else would be entering. *Be cool Payton, he doesn’t look like a serial killer.*

“Mr. MacKenzie will be here shortly. I will inspect the property prior to his arrival. Would you like to begin?”

“Uh, sure. He *will* be here eventually, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. He is speaking with the security detail outside and will be in for the tour when he is finished.”

“Security detail? Is he expecting an attempt on his life?” she said, jokingly.

Albert gazed at her seriously. “You never know with a man in his position.”

“Ooohhh,” she said with animation, spinning on her heels and turning her back on Albert.

Proceeding to guide Albert around the property, she started the tour with the living room and then on to the dining room. Stopping in the kitchen, he commented, "Very nice, this will do nicely."

"This leads out to the covered terrace and the pool area," she stated, stepping across the threshold of the double French doors onto the cobblestone terrace.

"Very nice, this will do nicely," was his only repeated comment.

That was all he seemed to know how to say. No expression, just the same words over and over, almost robotic. Her cell phone vibrated in her hip pocket, and she debated answering or not. After it vibrated three times, she decided to respond.

"Excuse me, Albert, I have a call. Please continue to look around."

She flipped the phone open.

"Hello, this is Payton Fleming."

"Payton, this is Maritsa."

"Yes, Maritsa. What are you still doing there at this hour?"

"I had a chance to pick up a little overtime."

"I'm with a client, what do you need?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I think I messed up again. I'm sorry."

Suppressing a huff, she asked, "Okay, get to the point Maritsa, what did you do?"

"I just got a call from a man who said he wanted to see Ocean Boulevard and claimed he owned an entertainment company. I thought he was the appointment you said you had already with the entertainment guy, and I told him you were already at the property, and after I hung up with him, I realized the name was different. I really screwed up, didn't I? I'm so sorry, Payton. He's on his way there to see you, and what if he's the serial killer, you could be in danger." Maritsa rambled breathlessly.

"Maritsa, don't be silly. I'm fine and here with several people. Did you catch the name of this caller?"

“He said his name was Ian McAlester with Black Heart Entertainment, and he said he made an appointment with you before. Did he?”

“Ian McAlester? Oh yes, I remember. He tried to a couple of weeks ago. I thought he lost interest, because he never confirmed the appointment. Hmm. Well, interesting. Don’t worry, Maritsa, he’s okay, I’m sure. Don’t worry, I’ll call you later. Now go home and stop worrying.”

“All right, if you’re sure. You call when you finish. I don’t care what time you get in. You promise?”

“I promise.”

After hanging up, she rejoined Albert who had walked to the edge of the pool area toward the beachfront.

“Sorry for the interruption.”

“Not a problem,” Albert said.

“So what do you think of the property so far, or should I say, what do you think Mr. MacKenzie will think?” she asked, continuing with her soft sell of the property.

“Satisfactory. I think this is a very nice view. Mr. MacKenzie will enjoy this.”

“Yes, the views are magnificent.”

“Not as enchanting as those of the Aegean Sea in the moonlight,” said a soft voice behind her.

Startled, Payton twisted to find her young man from Elounda, grinning at her. Her knees almost buckled.

“C.J.? What are you doing here?”

Before he could answer, Albert interjected. “Mr. MacKenzie, if you have no further need of my services, I’ll take my leave. The house is exceptional and will meet your needs. I approve.”

“Very good, Albert. Thank you,” Christian said.

Payton stared, dumbfounded by Albert’s remark. Mr. MacKenzie? “You? *You’re* Christian MacKenzie?”

“Aye. You were expecting someone else, love?” he asked, walking toward her.

His pupils dilated in surprise to see her hair a different color. His eyes roamed over every contour of her body and she instantly felt self-conscious.

Staring at him, mixed emotions darted through her brain and body, causing her heart to race and her skin to tingle. C.J. stood before her as Christian MacKenzie. Another ruse?

“You know what I mean! You’ve been lying to me since the day we met. What kind of game are you playing?”

“No game, Payton. A man in my position has to be careful of the women he brings into his life. I’m a cautious person. You can understand can’t you? You have secrets you haven’t told me about yourself. Correct?”

His confidence was evident in his speech and his Scottish brogue had all but disappeared to irritate her further. “Small ones. Insignificant ones. I didn’t lie about my name, or what I did for a living, or sleeping with you, and then denying anything happened. You tried to convince me I imagined the whole thing. To add insult to injury, you spiked my drink the last night I saw you.” She walked away, but turned back, continuing to talk, “No, I never deceived you. Maybe I didn’t tell you my real hair color is this, not blonde, or that I’ll be forty-five next month, or that I’ve occasionally eaten chicken when I told you I don’t eat meat, but other than that, I’ve told you the truth about everything.”

“Ah, I knew you liked meat,” he said, chuckling.

“Ooh, you, you can’t take anything seriously. See, you *are* too young for me. A child. Everything is a game to you. You’re not even interested in this house, are you?”

“Quite the contrary. You heard Albert. The property is exceptional and will meet my needs. I am ready to make the purchase. I would like to move in as soon as possible. What do we have to do to make this happen?”

“You’re serious? You want to buy this house and move in right away? You haven’t even seen the entire property yet.”

“I trust Albert. He knows me. Besides, you have to get busy looking for a place for my new club. Are you up for the job, Payton, or should I look for another agent?” he asked, grinning.

“No, you don’t have to do that.” She didn’t know whether to punch him or kiss him. He infuriated her, standing there, grinning, so sure of himself, so arrogant. No way she’d let him get the upper hand. “So, Christian, should I call you Christian, or do you prefer something else?”

“Christian. I like the way you say my name.” He smiled as her blush warmed her face.

“Okay, I’m up for the challenge. Try and keep up if you can,” she said and turned to leave, but he stopped her, grabbing her arm.

“Wait.”

“Now what?”

“Were you expecting someone else here tonight?” he asked, sounding concerned.

At first, she hesitated, and then said, “Someone else? Oh, yes, I forgot. I received a call from our receptionist before you arrived. An Ian McAlester called in and said he wanted to see this property tonight, and thinking he was the party I was waiting for, she told him I was already here. A big mix-up, but I said it was okay, because I wasn’t alone. Why did you ask?”

“I heard a car door. This Ian McAlester, do you know him, Payton?”

The way Christian’s tone and body tensed, she thought maybe he was the jealous type.

“No, he emailed me several weeks ago wanting to see this property, but he never confirmed the appointment. I thought he was just another nosy neighbor or a buyer who couldn’t afford the price. I never heard anything back from my last email to him until tonight.”

* * * *

Smiling inwardly, he knew by her explosive reaction to learning his true identity, she did not work for Ian. No amount of brainwashing could have concealed her emotions. She told the truth, which pleased him immensely. Now he had to protect her from Ian.

“Payton, I really want this house. I have to go check on my security team. Would you mind talking with Albert about the details for preparing the paperwork while I take care of business inside? Albert is quite familiar with my affairs and can do the mundane work until I get back.”

“That’s fine, but if the gentleman I told you my office sent over is here, I need to go and speak with him. The car door you heard could be him.”

“Not necessary. If he’s arrived, I’ll let him know I’m purchasing and tell him you’ll call him later.”

“You can’t do that. This is my listing, and I have to keep the sellers’ interests in mind.”

“I know Mr. McAlester. We’re business colleagues. Don’t worry about this, Payton.”

“Christian, I can’t let you do this.”

With gentle hands, he cupped her face, kissed her hard, then whispered, “Love, please stay here. I’ll explain later. Speak to Albert and take care of the paperwork for me. Please?”

“Christian, how can I resist you? Your offer better be a good one. Like full price?”

He laughed. “There’s no room to negotiate with you, is there?”

“No.”

“You drive a hard bargain, love. I’m going inside. You stay here on the terrace, enjoy the beautiful night, and I’ll send Albert out.”

“Uh, okay, but my files are in the drawer by the sink in the kitchen.”

“Perfect. I’ll be right back.” Christian turned and walked toward the house.

“Oh, and have him bring my laptop too,” she called out.

With a look over his shoulder, he grinned and said, “Aye, love.”

Christian didn’t have to use mind control on Payton, only his persuasive rhetoric. While he dealt with Ian, she would be safe with Albert. He left the terrace and headed toward the entrance, where he found Jean-Pierre and two of his warriors facing off with Ian and five of his bodyguards, all with broadswords drawn. Christian drew his sword from a specially designed lined compartment in his coat and joined his men.

“Christian sent a message to Albert through a mind connection. *Join Payton and keep her there until Ian departs the property. Albert, there’s a laptop and file folder in the kitchen, could you take them out to the terrace. I’ll join you when I’ve finished my business with our guest.*

Christian turned attention to his enemy. "Ian, this is not the place or time for this. I have no quarrel with you here. Stand down your men, and I'll do the same."

"Why are ye here?" Ian demanded.

"I am procuring this house for my use."

"I was interested in the house as well, but it appears ye have beaten me to it. Where's the agent? A Payton Fleming, I think is her name. Did ye take care of her already?"

"You don't need to concern yerself with her. I suggest you and yer entourage leave now before I begin to lose my patience."

Ian motioned for his men to leave, "Klaus, Ruben, round everyone up and let's go. I'm done here."

Christian did the same with his men.

Jean-Pierre hesitated, "*Mon ami*, I don't want to leave you here with this scoundrel. I don't trust him."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. Stay outside the front door and I'll call you if I need you," Christian said.

As Jean-Pierre walked to the exit, Ian pronounced loudly, "So ye have dirty, flea-bitten dogs working for ye now I see. Ye canna get true warriors to do yer security work for ye, C.J.?"

Jean-Pierre gave Ian a growl and continued out the door. Ian laughed and taunted Christian, dancing slowly around him with his sword still drawn.

"I may have dogs working for me, but at least they chose the better vampire," Christian quipped.

The eyes of both men glowed red as they slowly circled each other. Ian acted first with a flash of metal as his blade moved in a blurred arc.

Christian barely had time to parry the blow. Swords clashed with hits and misses as the two vamps moved around the interior of the house. A lamp crashed to the floor, knick-knacks flew off display shelves, and the room filled with the shouts of expletives.

“What the hell is going on here?” Payton demanded as she came upon the two men squared off in the living room with swords raised in the air, ready to strike another blow. “Fighting with broadswords? What do you think this is some kind of medieval Highlander battlefield? Is someone going to answer me?”

The two men slowly stood down. The only sound in the room was their heavy breathing. They sheathed their swords and hid them from her view.

“*Ohmigod*, what have you done to this room?” With a determined stride toward the two men, she stopped and picked up the lamp, placing it back on the side table. First a steely eye captured Christian’s gaze, and then shifted the attention to the other man. “Who the hell are you?”

With a roguish grin and taking her hand Ian replied, “Please call me Ian, Ian McAlester. Ye must be the agent Payton Fleming. Ye are a spirited woman, I must say.”

“Ian McAlester? Yes, my office receptionist said you were on your way. Wait, where did your sword go?” She glanced over at Christian. “Where’s yours? I saw both of you with swords.”

Christian forced a laugh. “We were arguing and fighting with fists, not swords, love?”

“Aye, we were only sparring. We’re old friends,” Ian said.

“Old friends? No, no I saw broadswords...in your hands...held above your heads. What’s really going on here?”

Albert ran into the room calling, “Miss Fleming, please come with me. This is between them. Please come outside.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “What? No, I’m not leaving here until someone tells me what’s going on, or I’m calling the police. You know what? Maybe I’ll call them anyway.” With a quick reach of her hand into her pocket, she pulled out the cell phone.

The two men turned their attention to Payton, taking a position on either side of her. Christian was upset with her for leaving Albert’s protection, and he had to rein in the situation, which threatened to spiral out of control.

“I don’t think that’s a wise move Miss Fleming, but I do like the way ye negotiate, lass. I could use someone like ye working for me,” Ian said, drawing nearer to her.

“Ian, back away from her, she knows nothing about us and what we do. She’s innocent and needs to stay that way.”

“*Really*,” Ian said with amazement. With a step closer to Payton, he captured her attention and gazed into her eyes. “Let me have that phone. Ye don’t need to invite the police to our party. Be a good girl and hand it to me.” With a blank expression, she obeyed.

Christian moved closer to Payton. He knew Ian was tapping into her mind just from the expression on Ian’s face, and Payton’s.

“Yes, she is innocent. How sweet C.J. You’ve had her, and she doesn’t even know the truth.”

Payton stood motionless, lost in Ian’s spell.

“Let her go Ian, or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll what? She means something to ye, doesn’t she? Why else would ye mask yer identity? Unless, ye fear she’d reject ye, and ye couldn’t live with that, could ye?”

Payton blinked and teetered on her feet.

“Ye’r a fool falling for a mortal, especially one who is obviously past her prime, and ye can’t even control her. If ye were going to play, why not with a fresh young virgin ye could mold into what ye want. Instead, look at her. She’s what, in her thirties, speaks her mind too easily, and would fight ye at every turn. Too exhausting for me.”

“That’s what you’ll never understand about a woman like Payton. I’ve had the young, fresh virgins, and they are not easy to mold. Remember Cassandra, Ian. You tried to create the perfect woman with her and look what happened.”

Christian knew he would strike a nerve with the mention of Cassandra. Ian glared back, releasing the hold on Payton. “Have yer house and this impudent woman, for now. This isn’t over between us.” A sudden chill in the air blew through the room as he rushed out of the house in a blur, slamming the front door.

Payton collapsed to the floor. Christian ran to her as Jean-Pierre and two other vampire warriors rushed through the front door.

“Is everything okay in here, boss man?” Jean-Pierre asked.

“Yes, fine. Secure the outside and make sure Ian and his flunkies have left the grounds.”

“Yes, sir. My pleasure.”

Christian turned his attention to Payton. “Love, are you all right?” he asked.

“Yeah, what happened? I feel funny. Did I faint?” she asked, dazed.

“You did faint, but only a few minutes.”

“Okay, that’s strange. Maybe I should have eaten. Where’s Mr. McAlester? I remember he was here.”

“Don’t worry about him, he left. Why did you leave Albert? I told you to stay outside with him.”

“I heard noises inside and came in to see what was going on,” she said in confusion. “I—I saw you and Mr. McAlester...fighting...with swords. I-I know I did.” With squinted eyes and holding her head, she peered around the room. “Then they disappeared.”

“You scared me, love. You almost got yerself killed.”

“*What?* How? I don’t understand.”

“I’ll tell you later. Let’s just say Ian McAlester is someone you shouldn’t be around. He’s dangerous in more ways than one. Trust me, love. You need to stay away from him.”

“How do you know him?”

“That’s very complicated?”

“I’m finding you have more secrets than I could imagine.”

“Aye, I do.” He grinned, leaned forward, and brushed his lips over hers.

“Okay, but you still haven’t answered me about those broadswords you guys were brandishing.”

“Fists, love, remember it as fists.”

“I need to think.” She seemed to shake herself, no doubt telling herself she couldn’t have seen what she thought.

Relieved, he turned his attention to Albert, who had remained in the shadows of the room.

“Albert, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” he said. “If you have nothing else for me, sir, I think I will retire to the limo.”

“That’s fine, Albert.”

Albert turned to her. “Miss Fleming, thank you and a pleasure meeting you.”

Payton stood and found her way to the terrace, still dazed. Christian followed.

“What are you doing out here, love?”

“I’m getting your paperwork I started with Albert.”

She seemed to find her balance, which Christian was grateful for. Although the use of mind control would solve the immediate problem, he preferred not to. She was confused enough, and he’d found in the past, those he was emotionally involved with by some strange twist, he had less control of.

“You said you wanted to buy this house, right? Well, I’m holding you to it, unless that was another lie. After all you and Mr. McAlester did trash the living room.”

“Nay, not a lie. I want this house.”

“Is this really what you want?” she asked, her voice gaining strength.

“Aye, as long as you promise not to have any dealings with Ian MacKenzie. He’s a dangerous man, and I won’t risk having you harmed.”

“Sure, if you sign here after I write your offer up and tell me what happened tonight, I’ll do whatever you say.” She smiled, humoring him.

“Then let’s buy me a house. I’ll let you know everything very soon. How about dinner after we finish?”

“Okay, Christian, I’m not going to ask what just happened here, for now. What I do want from you is to tell me why you left Elounda without a word. I need to reconcile that first, before I can move forward with you. Can you do that for me?”

“I can and I will, but not here and not now. This is not the right time, but I promise, soon.”

An hour later, after sitting down at the kitchen table and writing the details of the purchase offer, he signed the paperwork for presentation to the sellers. Payton tried to contact them via cell phone, only to get their voicemail. Though Christian voiced his impatience with the delay, she assured him she would get a response as soon as possible. He would have to wait until tomorrow for an acceptance.

Dammit, another night in the hotel with no privacy. I need to tell Payton my story now.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning started off as usual for Payton—up at five-thirty, jog on the beach, home by seven, shower, dress, and get out the door by eight. With a stop for coffee at Starbucks for a second caffeine fix, she'd be to work before nine. She arrived at the office with an extra bounce already in her step. As she entered the building, she received a call from the sellers of the Ocean Boulevard property. They accepted Christian's offer, including taking possession early, a concession, in her experience, she thought they shouldn't make, but full price offers open many doors. Offering as well to pay for the damage hadn't hurt. They agreed he could have the house in three days, promising to be in the office the next day to sign off on the contract.

Without stopping at the front desk, Payton went straight to her private office. She called Christian's hotel suite to inform him of the good news.

Albert answered. "Mr. MacKenzie's suite."

"Albert, this is Payton, is he available?"

"No, Miss Fleming. He will not be available until this evening. Do you wish to call back or leave a message?"

"I can leave a message. Have him call me, but please let him know his offer was accepted with no changes. He will be able to take early occupancy. I will have the papers signed by the owners this afternoon and can deliver them to the hotel afterward."

"Very good. He will be very pleased. I will have him call you, but it will not be necessary to deliver the documents. Mr. MacKenzie will make those arrangements with you directly."

"Oh, okay. Thank you, Albert."

"You're welcome."

After hanging up with Albert, she glanced up to find Maritsa pacing nervously outside the office door.

“Maritsa, do you need to speak to me?”

“Payton, you promised me you were going to call last night. You never did. I’ve been a nervous wreck and haven’t slept all night worrying about you!” she exclaimed loudly. “You came in here this morning and didn’t even say hello to me. Is everything okay? What happened to you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I did promise, didn’t I? I wrote an offer on Ocean Boulevard and time slipped by. The hour was very late when I got in last night. I was tired and forgot about calling. I’m sorry if I worried you. As you can see, I’m perfectly fine.”

“I’m glad you’re okay. You had me really worried. I almost called the police. So, who bought the house?”

“Christian MacKenzie,” she said with a smile.

“Isn’t he the client you picked up during your vacation?”

The office gossip trolled for fodder, Payton knew, but didn’t bite. “Yes, he’s the one. I see the look in your eye, Maritsa. Nothing is going on between us other than business. Go back to work.”

“Congratulations and I’m glad you’re alive and well. I need to get back to my desk, *now*. I’ll talk to ya later.” She giggled as she sauntered off.

Payton’s cell phone rang. Answering without checking the number, Jason greeted her on the other end. He asked her to lunch to discuss Janice’s murder investigation. With concerted effort, she tried to back out, saying she had an appointment, but he insisted and wouldn’t take no for an answer. Acquiescing, she agreed to meet for a late lunch.

After hanging up, she thought about why Jason clung to her. He’d called almost every day since her return from Elounda, leaving messages with updates on Janice’s murder investigation. Why did he need to provide the information and in such detail? She never asked him to keep her informed. Maybe he needs to talk to someone, or maybe he was obsessed with her.

The subject of Christian, not C.J. but Christian, presented another problem. He told her he would tell her what happened in Elounda. In no way would she continue their relationship without knowing the truth of what really went on there. She understood his not trusting her initially because of his position, but he should know her well enough now. *What about last night with Ian McAlester? What was that all about? Swords? I think they both made me do things I didn't want to do. How did they do that? Hypnosis or something? Christian told Ian I was innocent and didn't know what they did. I wonder what he meant by that? They knew each other before last night. Competitors? Enemies? Fighting with broadswords? They're both from Scotland. Highlanders? Why did I feel so strange? Did I imagine swords? They both said fists. I do remember that; I'm sure. So strange. I've never fainted before. Too many unanswered questions. I feel a headache coming on, thinking about this. Stop, Payton. It couldn't have been real. I need a distraction, something more pleasant to think about or do.*

Maritsa appeared at her door with a large vase full of flowers. Poking her head from around the bouquet, she said, "Payton, these just arrived for you. Aren't they gorgeous?"

Payton stood, cracked a smile, thinking they had to be from Christian. "Oh, they're beautiful. Lavender roses, so unusual and exquisite."

"This card also came with them." Maritsa handed her an envelope.

"You can put the roses on the credenza. Thanks, Maritsa," she said and immediately opened the envelope.

"I'll be back. I have more," Maritsa said, giggling.

Payton looked up from opening the envelope, asking, "What do you mean you have more?"

"You'll see. You must have been really good last night."

"What?" Payton asked quizzically, shaking her head. She pulled out the note and what appeared to be an invitation. The note read:

Payton,

A pleasure meeting you last night. Sorry for the unpleasantness. I would like to invite you to my club's grand opening tonight. Will you come so I can make a more formal apology? I would like to discuss your assistance in finding me a place to call home.

Please say yes.

Ian McAlester

Payton's mouth gaped open. What could Ian McAlester be up to? Didn't Christian say he was dangerous? He made a sweet gesture and apology, and he wanted to hire her for real estate. Maybe Christian overstated the poor man's evil. "Why not?"

"Why not, what?" Maritsa asked as she appeared at Payton's office doorway again, this time carrying a vase of red roses.

"More roses?"

"Yes, I told you there was more. So what did that note say?"

"It's an invitation to a club grand opening."

"What club?"

Looking at the invitation, Payton read, "To the *Black Reverie*. That sounds a bit sinister and creepy, doesn't it?"

"No, I heard about the new Goth-style private club through some of my friends. The club is supposed to be a really hip place. Only wealthy and famous people are invited to join. To even get the chance to go would be so cool. You ought to go Payton, and then you could tell me all about it."

"I'm not into Goth stuff like you. It's kind of weird, and I'm not going by myself." After taking the red roses from Maritsa, she placed them on the credenza next to the lavender ones. The card from the red roses read:

Payton,

Thanks for your help on getting my new house and sorry about last night. Let me make up my bad manners to you.

I'll call you later tonight.

Christian

“Does the invitation say you can bring a guest?”

“What?” Payton murmured, smiling over her red roses. A promise of a call later tonight from him left her with a warm tingle all over, and she couldn't wait.

“Payton, can you take a guest to the club opening?”

“Yes, I guess I can.” She could tell by the look in Maritsa's eyes and the tone of her voice that she wanted to be the guest. “You want to go with me?”

“I would love to go! I'll pick you up so you don't have to drive. I love you, Payton. My other friends are going to die when I tell them. Thank you, thank you so much. This is going to be great.” Maritsa gushed with accompanying hugs.

“You're welcome. Why don't you pick me up about eight-thirty? That should give us enough time to get there by nine, don't you think? You know where this place is, I assume?”

“Yeah, and that should be enough time if traffic isn't bad. Maybe I'll show up a little earlier.”

The owners of the Ocean Boulevard property showed up two hours later, signing off on the contract with Christian. They were leaving for South America in a couple of days, so letting Christian move in early became a blessing for them. They would not have to worry about leaving the property vacant while for sale. With the house under contract, they were even more ecstatic. Christian would pay cash, and the closing would also be quick, less than thirty days. The attorneys could handle all the paperwork from there on out. Everything came together beautifully. Just the way Payton liked transactions to go down.

After they left she met Jason at *Posh* for lunch, on the dining patio overlooking the water. The views couldn't be beat for relaxing and dining. After ordering, Jason began to talk.

“I’ve decided to hire a private investigator to help with Janice’s murder. The police aren’t getting anywhere with leads. She’s just another statistic to them. I’m not going to let her memory be besmirched like that.”

“I’m sure they’re just as baffled and dismayed as you are. This pervert has murdered how many now six, seven, innocent women?”

“Seven and no signs that he’s going to stop. That’s why I’ve hired this Ramsey guy. He’s supposed to be one of the best and came highly recommended by Mr. LaMont, one of the firm’s partners. I told him I needed help with Janice’s murder and with one phone call this Ramsey is on a plane from London to help.”

Coincidence? Could this be the same Ramsey I know?

“Ramsey?” she asked.

“Ramsey Weiss, with Global Security and Investigative Services out of London. Mr. LaMont said the firm does business with them all the time. He seemed very interested in helping me, so I have an appointment with Ramsey Weiss tomorrow night.”

“I can’t believe this,” she said, shaking her head. Ramsey and Christian were friends, and Ramsey would help Jason investigate Janice’s murder? What were the odds of this happening?

“What can’t you believe? That I would hire someone to help find Janice’s murderer?”

“No, not that. Ramsey Weiss.” She reached into her handbag to search for the business card Giselle had given her in Elounda. Finding the card, she placed it on the table, showing Jason. “Look, Ramsey Weiss, Global Security and Investigative Services. The same Ramsey. I know him. A real bastard.”

Jason snorted. “A bastard you say? He insulted you, didn’t he?”

“Of course. I don’t know about his investigative skills though. Maybe he’s good at what he does, but he’s lousy at social skills.”

“How do you know him?”

“I met him in Elounda. He’s a friend of Christian.”

“Christian?”

“Yes,” she hesitated to say. “I met Christian MacKenzie in Elounda and sold him a house last night. He’s the owner of Nocturnal Entertainment and Hospitality Corporation and will be opening a club in South Beach.”

“Oh, I see. I suppose this Christian guy is single?”

“Jason, please.”

“Payton, as your friend, I’m only concerned about your welfare. What do you know about him? You met him on vacation and then sold him a house a week later, half-way around the world. Sounds a little strange to me. Then it turns out he’s friends with the same investigator I’ve hired. I’m missing a piece of the puzzle here. All this sounds a little too coincidental to me.”

“Yes, I agree. Now that you lay it out. I’ve had some apprehensions about Christian since first meeting him. He has said and done things that are strange and questionable, and he hasn’t given me a straight answer yet. I want to believe him. Now this with Ramsey being hired by you and he’s friends with Christian seems too coincidental. I’m so confused.”

“I have an idea. I told you my firm uses Ramsey’s company. Maybe our computer files have information referencing this Christian MacKenzie. It’s certainly worth a try to find out. Want to come to my office for some of our own investigating?”

“Sure, I’d love to get to the bottom of this mystery.”

* * * *

An hour later, Payton and Jason got off the elevator on the eleventh floor of the office building that housed the law firm where Jason held a junior partner position. Minardi, Beall, and Lamont occupied the entire floor, along with the remaining two upper floors of the high-rise. The law firm ranked as one of the most prestigious in Miami, along with their offices in New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Berlin, and London.

They stopped at the receptionist desk to sign in and obtain a guest badge for Payton.

Jason’s good-sized corner office overlooked the Intracoastal Waterway. From the eleventh floor, the views were incredible. The sunsets had to be breathtaking, she thought. His furnishings

were typical lawyer issue—heavy, dark wood and leather chairs with studded upholstery tacks along the edges. The room, however, was a mess with a lot of papers and files spread everywhere, most of them files about the local murders.

“So this is what a busy corporate attorney’s office looks like. I thought you more the neat freak type. This is really a surprise.”

Jason cleared the files from one of the oversized guest chairs and placed them on the floor behind his desk. He offered the chair to her. “Sorry. I’ve been so preoccupied with these murders I haven’t cared about the tidiness of my office.”

“I understand. It’s okay. I’m only teasing you. So, let’s get to those computer files you talked about.”

Jason sat down at his desk and booted up the computer. After a few minutes and a few password entries, he entered the company file library. Searching first for information regarding Ramsey Weiss and the GSIS company, Jason read what he found aloud. “The company’s file indicates Ramsey is an experienced investigator, employed with the company for twenty years. He’s an expert marksman, black belt in martial arts, fluent in German, Mandarin, Spanish, and French.”

“I know he can speak French. What else does the file say?”

“Not much more. The profile indicates Nocturnal Entertainment and Hospitality Corporation is one of their clients. Isn’t that the name of your friend’s company?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Here’s a link. Let me see where that takes me.” He clicked the link which led him back to NEHC’s personal company files. “The owner is Christian MacKenzie. I find no picture of him, but we do have a profile. He was born in Melrose, Scotland. No date though. He has owned the company for twenty-three years. Education, no mention of any here. No, take that back. An MBA from London Business School. That’s impressive. Let’s see what else.”

“Go back. You said he’s owned the company twenty-three years?”

“Yes, the profile clearly indicates twenty-three years. Why?”

“How’s that possible? He can’t be more than twenty-seven, twenty-eight years old. Not unless he’s discovered the Fountain of Youth because no way he has owned the business for twenty-three years.”

“Are you sure he’s only twenty-seven?”

“He’s a baby. Ramsey, too, now that I think about it. Something is strange about this, Jason.”

“Maybe they’ve padded their resumes. Doing that isn’t out of the realm of possibility, you know. Some young punks do that to get ahead. Especially when they first start out.”

“Perhaps. Check your company files and see how long they have represented Ramsey’s company. You know just on a hunch, check and see if your company represents Nocturnal. I have a suspicion they do.”

“Good guess, Payton. We do. Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“My computer crashed. What the hell?”

Payton jumped out of her seat and sidled up beside Jason. “It’s a total blue screen. What happened, a power failure? Try turning the hard drive off and rebooting.”

The rebooting didn’t work; the computer totally crashed.

“Mr. Worth?” Sandy, his secretary, called over his phone intercom.

“Yes, Sandy?”

“Mr. LaMont’s office called and wants to see you immediately.”

“Okay, thanks Sandy.” He turned to Payton. “I need to get you out of here. Something is wrong. I don’t get called to a senior partner’s office with no advance notice. I think this is why my computer went down. Someone was monitoring my system.”

“Who would be monitoring you? That sounds so Big Brother.”

“I know. This is their company. Come on. Go, before someone comes for you too.”

He took Payton out through the back hallway toward the elevator, by-passing the front receptionist. As the doors closed, he told her he’d call her.

Chapter Fourteen

Payton's cell phone rang with Jason's number showing on the caller ID.

"Jason, are you okay? What did your boss want?" she asked frantically.

"First, are you safe? No one followed you from the firm, did they?"

"No, not that I could tell, but I wasn't looking either. I got out as quickly as I could. I'm at my office now."

"Good, stay there, I'm on my way."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'll see you in a few."

As Payton hung up her phone, Maritsa piped in over her intercom.

"Yes, Maritsa?"

"Payton, there are some gentlemen here to see you. You need to come to the lobby."

"Who are they?"

"A Detective Gutierrez and Detective Ochoa with the Miami Beach Police Department."

"I'll be right there," she said, wondering what two of Miami's finest wanted with her. She didn't have so much as a traffic violation. *A break-in at one of my listings, maybe?* She'd find out soon enough. Straightening her hair and skirt, she strode down the hallway toward the front lobby.

Turning the corner to the lobby, she saw two men, one dressed in a style reminiscent of the old TV show *Miami Vice*. Why a man today thought that was attractive escaped her comprehension. A dark, chocolate brown, he wore his hair slicked back with some hair product, making it shine unnaturally under the office overhead lights. Along with the plastered down hair and the five o'clock shadow on his face, he looked more like he belonged to a Columbian drug cartel than Miami's finest. Maybe he wanted to look tough. The other man looked more like the

stereotypical detective—short and stocky, dressed in a cheap, dark-colored suit slightly wrinkled, white shirt, and navy blue tie with an obvious food stain. Clean shaven, and more conservatively dressed in comparison to the TV actor wannabe, he didn't put on pretenses like the other man.

As she walked up to them smiling, she extended a hand. Her grip grasped the detectives' firmly to show they didn't intimidate her. *Okay fellas what the hell do you want?*

"Hello, detectives, I'm Payton Fleming. How may I help you?" Butterflies flitted in her stomach. She sucked in a deep breath to calm jittery nerves.

"Miss Fleming, I'm Detective Gutierrez and this is my partner, Detective Ochoa," the man in the bad fashion statement said. "Is there someplace we can talk in private?"

Turning to Maritsa, she asked, "Is the conference room available?"

"Yes, I believe it is. No one has checked the room out through me this afternoon."

Turning to the detectives, she said, "Follow me."

Payton walked ahead of the detectives, conscious of their eyes watching her every move. Why were they here? *They're watching my ass. Of all days for me to wear a tight-fitting skirt. Sometimes men are such....such men! Shit! Shit! Shit!*

"Here we are, Detectives," she said, continuing to smile. Motioning for them to enter the conference room, she followed in behind them and sat in one of the high-back chairs. "So, what's this all about, how can I help you?"

Detective Ochoa pulled out a notebook and pen from his inside jacket pocket and flipped a few pages. He placed the small pad on the table and made a few more scribble entries on the tattered pages. Detective Gutierrez began to speak.

"Do you know a Mr. Ian McAlester? Have you had contact with him?"

"Ian McAlester? Is this what this is about?"

"Please, just answer the question, Miss Fleming," he said curtly.

"Y-Yes, I know Mr. McAlester. He wants me to find him a house. How did you make a connection between him and me? I just met him last night, as a matter of fact, at one of my listings. On Ocean Boulevard. What's this all about? Is he okay? Something happen to him?"

“You’ve met with him? How did he seem to you?”

“Seem? He was fine. As I said, we met at one of my listings last night. The house didn’t meet his needs, so we’re going to work together to find another property. He was charming, well-spoken, polite, and I guess, maybe a little strange, but nothing out of the ordinary.”

Of course, there were some extraordinary things about Ian. Hell, with Christian too. She didn’t think Ian was interested in buying a house. *Who nearly comes to blows with another buyer for a property and then the next day send roses and a club invite?* Nothing about that confrontation made sense, and something told her she should say as little as possible until she knew why they were there.

“Strange how?”

“I don’t know. Not in any way I’d say. Preoccupied, maybe.”

“Hmm. Do you know how we can find him?”

“No, I don’t, except by email.”

“Has he contacted you today?”

With hesitation, she said, “No, but I suspect he will. He wants me to find him a house. That’s what I do for people, Detective. I take it you want me to tell you when he does, am I right?” She thought about telling them about the flowers, what harm would that have done? The invitation to the club? She wished Jason were there. Even Christian would be a help right about now. Although, he seemed part of this problem she found herself in the middle of. Someone owed her some answers to some very serious questions and not the ones the detectives were asking.

“That would be greatly appreciated.”

“What has he done?”

“He’s wanted for questioning in a police matter.”

“Ah, you can’t say. Well, whatever he’s done, I’m sure it isn’t all that bad. He seems like a very nice person.”

“They all seem that way at first, ma’am. I think we’re finished here. If you think of anything else or you hear from Mr. McAlester, here’s my card, call me or Detective Ochoa here.”

Taking the card from him, she said, “I’ll do that.” Pushing back from the table, she rose from the chair, letting the detectives leave the room ahead of her. No more looking at her ass for them.

“Oh, by the way, Miss Fleming, I suggest you don’t show property after dark. The Police Department has issued a warning to the real estate community to refrain from doing so, for their own protection, until this perp is caught.”

“Are you saying you think Ian McAlester might be a suspect?”

“I didn’t say that, ma’am. I picked up on what you said earlier. You were out showing property last night. That is highly dangerous in today’s climate. Just be careful.”

“Oh, I see. Okay, I will. Thank you for your concern.”

“Doing my job, ma’am.”

“You know Detective, you never answered my earlier question.”

“What question was that, Miss Fleming?” Detective Gutierrez asked.

“About how you connected me to Ian McAlester? I didn’t put a billboard out advertising that fact.”

“We found your name on an email message from him.”

Her brow crinkled, “Oh,” was all that she could get out. *The email message he sent me?* “I still don’t know how you got his email, but he probably has contacted several agents.”

“He did, and you were one of them, Miss Fleming. We’re checking out all leads.”

“I see. If Mr. McAlester contacts me, I’ll let you know.”

Walking toward the front entrance in shock and silence, she saw Jason sitting on the lobby sofa and made a motion to him to make no acknowledgement of her. He lowered his head, pretending to read the magazine he had in his hands. After the men departed, he jumped up and ran over to her.

“Those guys are detectives. The ones who interviewed me about Janice’s murder. What are they doing here?”

Grabbing his elbow, she quickly ushered him down the hallway toward her office, whispering, “You’re right they are. They asked me questions about Ian McAlester. I think they suspect him in these murders.”

“Who’s this Ian McAlester?”

“Someone I’ve met at one of my listings last night. I wonder what connection he has with Janice. Do you still have access to her email?”

“I think so. I haven’t looked at them since the police took her computer as evidence. I didn’t think about it. They haven’t returned the computer yet. Let me use your laptop.” He paused before going back in the conversation. “What do you mean you met him last night? By yourself?”

Payton ignored the question and motioned for Jason to sit at her desk to use the laptop. She sat in the occasional chair in front of her desk. That had to be the connection; Janice met Ian McAlester too.

Moments later, Jason became still. “Are you going to tell me how this McAlester is involved and why you met him alone?”

“I didn’t meet him alone. Have you found anything yet?”

“Who is he?” he asked, looking at her sternly.

“He’s looking for a house and contacted me by email several weeks ago. He showed up while I showed the house to Christian. You found something, didn’t you?”

“Nothing. I just saw the last message I sent Janice the day she was...” He couldn’t finish.

“Jason, are you all right?”

“She never opened the message I sent her. She always opened her messages in the evening, and evening never came.”

“Jason?”

“Yeah, I’m all right. I found nothing on her personal account. I’m going to try the business account.”

A few minutes passed.

“I’ll be damned,” he said.

“What?”

“Ian McAlester. He emailed Janice to see a listing. Two days before she was murdered. I have a hunch he killed her.” He looked up at her and continued. “I *know* he did it. That’s why the police are asking about him. They’ve tied him to it through Janice’s computer and emails.”

“Maybe. We don’t know that yet. Let me see the message.”

Reading the email, she noticed the similarities to the message Ian sent to her. Maybe he *was* involved. Her heart raced. Christian warned her about him last night. Did he know something?

“Oh, this isn’t good, Jason.”

“I know.”

“No, you really have no idea. The detective said he tracked me down through an email message. My message reads similar to Janice’s, and I’m going to the grand opening of Ian’s club tonight with Maritsa. He invited me. Ian could be setting me up as his next target.”

“Don’t go. Did you tell the detectives?”

“No.”

“Why the hell not? This is important information.”

“I didn’t want to say anything until I talked to you, as my attorney.”

“Jesus, Payton. Don’t you realize this Ian person could be the killer? You’re not going tonight. It could be dangerous.”

“I’m fine and I think I should go, and you should too. Aren’t you supposed to meet Ramsey tonight? Why not meet him at the club and have Ramsey check Ian out. I’ll be safe knowing you and Ramsey are there. I don’t particularly care for Ramsey, but he’s in security, right? Ian wouldn’t try anything if he is the killer and I’m not alone.”

“The plan sounds good, but...”

“But what Jason? The police? If they were doing such a good job, why did you hire Ramsey? No, this is a good plan for now. We still don’t know if Ian McAlester is a killer. All we know is the email he sent me was worded very similar to the one Janice received. We could be so wrong about him. If we get more evidence, we’ll turn everything we discover over to Detectives Gutierrez and Ochoa. I promise. C’mon. I know this will work. Maritsa is picking me up at eight, eight-thirty, and we should be at the club about nine. You can meet Ramsey about the same time. He’ll probably have a cow when he sees me there, but oh well, he’ll get over it.”

“Boy, he must have really pissed you off,” he said with a snicker.

“He did, and payback is hell. He’s going to be working for us.”

“Remind me never to cross you.”

They laughed.

“Do you think we should question him about his weird resume?” she asked. “You know the time he’s been with the company? I still think that’s strange. I’m certainly going to ask Christian when I see him. What do you think?”

“I still think the man is padding his resume. Mr. LaMont indicated a computer glitch, and I got the distinct impression I should leave the whole matter alone. I think we found something we shouldn’t have.”

“How’d that meeting go anyway? You sounded anxious when you called, but we got side-tracked with the detectives showing up.”

“The ass chewing from Edward LaMont wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. He explained the importance of maintaining Nocturnal Entertainment and Hospitality Corporation’s privacy and how I shouldn’t have accessed the company files to obtain information on the owners. The link was an error on the system and would be taken care of immediately. Mr. LaMont actually thanked me for finding the flaw in the system.”

“Really? Your boss sounds a little too forgiving considering your computer crashed coincidentally.”

“I know. He told me he understood my grief over the loss of Janice, accessing the information happened due to a computer glitch, and don’t open unauthorized files again.”

“Did you tell him the glitch wasn’t your fault? The computer let you access the files. You’re a partner, aren’t you? Are some files off-limits?”

“Yes, I explained everything to him. I told him I hired Ramsey Weiss on his recommendation and had a meeting set up. Before I met with Mr. Weiss, I wanted to research his background and searched the company files to get more information on him and there was a link icon I pressed taking me to another file. I explained to Mr. LaMont I had no idea the files were confidential. Seems like there might be a few files that are for senior partners’ eyes only. After I explained the reason, I told him I would let the professionals handle Janice’s case.”

“Did he believe you?”

“I don’t know but I think there is more involved. Don’t ask me how I know. Just call it a gut feeling. When I got up to leave he said something that gave me an uncomfortable feeling. He said he was glad we had the talk and that I had a bright future with the firm, keep doing what I’m doing, and we’d talk again soon.”

“What’s strange about that? You are good Jason, and maybe he sees the potential in you.”

“Maybe, but his tone of voice, the way he said it, didn’t sit right with me. I had this strange feeling like a thousand eyes bored through my back as I left his office. The eerie sensation made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I feel like I faced a dragon today.”

“Do you think those files are related to the murders?”

“How could they?” he answered, shaking his head. “What we’re doing is a separate issue. Let’s concentrate on Ian McAlester and worry about Ramsey and Christian later. Those two are the least of our worries.”

“Okay, for right now.”

* * * *

Christian nervously paced the hotel suite.

“Why hasn’t she returned my messages, Albert? I’ve left three already.”

“Perhaps she’s in meetings or showing properties and can’t be disturbed.”

“You sent the flowers, right? With a note saying I’d call tonight?”

“Yes, sir, as you instructed. If I may ask, how did you know the sellers were going to accept your offer?”

“I didn’t, I just hoped they would. No vampire magic this time. Payton’s excellent negotiating skills must have been the impetus.”

“You like her, but you haven’t told her about yourself yet, have you?”

“Nay. I think I’m falling in love with her, and I don’t know how to tell her who I really am. If I do, I’m afraid she’ll reject me.”

“Then again, she could accept you. I’ve seen the way she looks at you. I don’t have to be a vampire to sense an attraction between a man and a woman, and I see one between the two of you.”

“She doesn’t trust me. I can’t blame her. I didn’t trust her at first, either. I’ve played her from the beginning, lying to her. Finding out I withheld that I’m vampire would only give her more reason to distrust me, and if she learns the truth, there’s no guarantee she won’t be repulsed by the disclosure.”

“So, you would rather continue to hide the truth and live in turmoil of being caught one day? Give her the choice, just like everything else. Have faith in your love for her that she will make the right choice.”

“You’re right, Albert. I know your counsel has always been sagacious. I should listen to you more.”

“Yes, Mr. Sir, you should.”

“Albert, stop calling me Mr. Sir when we’re alone. It’s too formal.”

“Yes, Mr. Sir.”

Christian shook his head and grinned.

“Habits are hard to break...sir,” Albert said.

He'd been calling Christian, Mister Sir, since coming to live in the vampire's household at the age of six, after his mother died. His mother taught him as a young boy to always respect his elders by addressing them prefaced with Mister, Mistress, or Miss. The salutation evolved to Mister Sir.

Christian knew Albert was right. He had to trust his feelings and trust Payton. After seeing her again, he realized how much he missed her. All the curves he remembered running his hands across were still as alluring, the fresh scent of the mandarin orange still wafted in the air around her, and the gentleness of her voice as she spoke soothed his ears. He wanted to touch her, take her in his arms, and kiss her luscious lips.

Christian tried to call Payton again. The phone rang several times. She finally answered on the fifth ring.

"Hello," she said, sounding out of breath.

"Payton, it's Christian. Where have you been? I've called several times, and you haven't returned my calls. I was worried."

"Settle down, I've been busy working. Thank you for the roses. They're beautiful."

"You're welcome. Are you busy with work tonight, or can we meet and talk? I promised I would tell you everything. Maybe tonight should be that time."

"I have a prior commitment."

"Will you be out all night? We could meet after your commitment."

"I don't know how long my appointment will take."

"Payton, I need to see you tonight. You have to get me my paperwork for my house if nothing else."

"Okay, I'm going to be at Ian McAlester's club opening tonight."

"Nay, you can't. I told you Ian is dangerous. Why can't you understand I don't want you near him?"

"I'm going with a friend to help him. If you don't let me get off the phone, I'm going to be late. If you want to talk, I'll be there around nine. You can't stop me, Christian. I'll be there with several people, one of which is Ramsey Weiss."

"Ramsey? What are you doing with Ramsey?"

"He's been hired by my friend to help us. I told you I'm doing this for a friend. Now let me go. I'll see you at the club."

Even though the phone clicked in his ear, he shouted, "Payton, Payton, don't hang up on me."

"She hung up on you?"

"Aye! That woman is so infuriating. She has such a mind of her own and never listens to me. I know what's good for her, and she ignores me."

"Modern, liberated women. Not like the women from three hundred years ago, is she?"

"Nay, thank goodness. I like a strong woman who speaks her mind. I guess I should be careful what I ask for, eh?"

"Yes, Mr. Sir."

"Well, Albert, I guess I'm going to a club opening tonight. Unfortunately, not mine."

* * * *

Payton knew Christian wanted to talk, and sensing his urgency, she didn't want to turn him away, but she was in a hurry. Time to explain what happened in Elounda was what she'd wanted to hear for days, and she turned his invitation down. Find Janice's killer or find out about Christian? *Dammit! Never enough time.*

As usual, Payton ran late and couldn't decide what to wear for a Goth club. Piles of rejects lay on the floor. *Black, maybe?* Maritsa would arrive at any time, and all she'd finished was her shower, hair, and makeup, and she didn't know if her hair and makeup were even appropriate.

The doorbell rang.

Payton pulled on her pink chenille robe and padded to the door. Peering through the peephole, she glimpsed Maritsa's face, nothing like the face at the office. "Ohmigod." Opening the door, she took a step back upon seeing Maritsa in full Goth attire.

"What are you wearing? If that's Goth, I have nothing to wear. Absolutely nothing comes close," Payton said.

"What? You don't like my hair, my skirt, makeup, or what?" Maritsa twirled around.

"Oh, your whole look is kind of cute, if you like skulls, combat boots with fishnets, and heavy black makeup. I will look out of place next to you."

"I'm glad I came early. Let's see what you've got." She led the way to the bedroom and exclaimed, "My Gawd, Payton, I'd say you couldn't make up your mind." She stepped over the piles of clothes on the floor.

"Oh, stop. I'm not young like you. I can't wear cute miniskirts anymore. I'd look silly. Black is okay, but not skulls and vinyl like I see on the young girls these days."

"Yes, you can. You've got a killer body. Do you have anything leather, preferably in black?"

"I have black leather pants."

"Okay, that might work. Let me see."

Rummaging through the back end of the closet to find them, Payton struggled to put them on. They fit snug, like ten pounds lighter and ten years ago tight. The zipper barely managed to lock in place. "This is the best I've got. What do you think?" she asked, walking out to model them for Maritsa.

"Wow, you look great! Now for a top. Do you have any sexy bustiers? Lingerie is fine. You can wear lingerie as outerwear if it's not too revealing."

"I have a red and black corset somewhere in this drawer." Pulling everything out, not caring where the clothes fell on the floor, she finally found the right corset. Holding the undergarment up for approval, Maritsa gave her the thumbs up.

The corset fit like a glove, cinching her in tightly at the waist and pushing her already ample breasts up. She had bought the corset for a Valentine's Day gift for Demetrius several years ago, along with a matching G-string and stockings. He enjoyed the gift, and the ensemble resulted in a sensational night of lovemaking. *He thought I was frigid? Bastard!*

"Will this work?" she asked, stepping out of the bathroom.

"Oh, yeah. All you need are some stilettos, jewelry, and a little more makeup. I'll take care of the makeup for you."

After another twenty minutes of tweaking, Maritsa finished Payton's look. Standing back, admiring her work, she said, "Damn, Payton, you're going to turn heads tonight. I'm jealous. I hope I look as good as you when I'm your age."

Payton smiled and turned to look in her full-length mirror. Her eyes about popped out. "Oh my, I look so different. I like the look though. The metal chain belt is a nice touch. I need my leather jacket. It's chilly out. I'll freeze my ass off only wearing this. Let's go, we're late. I told Jason we would be there at nine."

They arrived at their destination at nine-thirty, showed the VIP pass Ian sent, and stepped inside the *Black Reverie*. The club turned out not to be what Payton expected.

Chapter Fifteen

“Payton, is that you?” Jason remarked. Something resembling shock wavered in his voice.

Turning on her heels, she found Jason standing with his mouth open and staring at her in disbelief.

“Close your mouth, Jason, you’re embarrassing me,” she said, self-consciously. “You remember Maritsa from my office?”

“Yes, how are you?” he asked, turning quickly back to Payton, not waiting for an answer from Maritsa. “Ramsey is here. Do you want to join us? While on my way to the bar, I saw you walk in. Would you like something? White wine?”

“Nothing right now. Where are you seated?”

With a hand gesture, he indicated a table with a very familiar man with dirty blond hair already seated.

“Maritsa, you want to join us?”

“No, I think I’m going to check the place out if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, no problem.”

Maritsa left to find action with a younger group. It appeared an interesting looking man sitting at the bar captured her interest. Payton headed to the table where Ramsey sat. The décor of the club drew her attention with the garish display of Victorian bad taste bordello, the best way she could describe the interior designer’s handiwork. Black, damask-patterned cloth covered the walls with red accents throughout, crystals dangling from the ceiling, chandeliers hanging over the red velvet upholstered booths and chairs. The entire place seemed out of place for South Beach; either that or she really was getting old. This seemed more like a scene from a bad movie during her early days in Los Angeles, and that dated her.

Before she reached the table, a hand tapped on her shoulder. She turned, and Ian stood within inches of her. Her heart skipped a beat, and her breathing increased. Pulling herself together, she gave him a smile and said, "Hey, nice place. Little vulgar for my taste, but I guess you know what's hot with the young crowd. Thanks for inviting me."

"Ye'r welcome. Ye look absolutely stunning and *tall*. I almost didn't recognize ye," Ian remarked.

"I think the three inch heels make me almost six feet tall. I feel like an Amazon."

"More like a Greek goddess," Christian interjected, putting his arm around her waist.

Payton turned her head, brushing her lips across Christian's cheek. Even with her stilettos, he had her by a couple inches. She somehow felt safe again and smiled, looking into his eyes, those beautiful green eyes. Despite all her apprehensions about him, he still made her feel all warm and tingly inside. Instant wetness developed between her legs. *What the hell?*

"She's with me tonight, Ian. We don't want any trouble. We're here to enjoy your establishment, nothing more."

Payton jumped in to extinguish the tension that sprang up between the two men. "I insisted we come tonight. I wanted to come and thank you for inviting me and sending the beautiful roses. Christian didn't want to come, but I insisted. Play nice for me." With a wink and a crinkle of her mouth, she hoped to convince him no ulterior motive existed.

"We'll talk business another time. Enjoy yer evening." Ian said with an angry tone before he walked off in the direction of the bar.

As soon as Ian disappeared from sight, she turned to Christian, "I hope you don't mind me telling a little lie about you not wanting to come tonight. Can you tell if he believed my story?" she asked.

"Nay, he seems skeptical by his body language. Besides, who says I didn't want to come and be with you, love?" Christian slid his arm from around her waist and up to her shoulders. They walked toward the two men seated at the nearby table.

Ramsey saw them approach and stood up, knocking his chair over and gasping at the sight of Payton. The tight, black leather pants fit her long legs like a second skin. They curved around her soft, rounded hips up to her cinched waist. The black corset had red lace accents, and the cups were cut in such a way to make her more voluptuous.

“Good evening, Ramsey, nice to see you,” she said demurely.

“Payton, nice to see you again,” Ramsey said.

Jason walked up as she prepared to sit, and quickly pulled a chair out for her. Ramsey up-righted his overturned chair. Christian took the last seat.

“Thanks, Jason,” Payton said, noticing Christian cast a hostile glance at Jason, probably for assisting her with her chair.

“Payton, you look *nice*. I didn’t know you’d be here tonight or you, bro. Now ain’t this a real small world. What’s this all about?”

“I’ve hired you,” Jason said. “Payton is my friend, and she’s involved with the investigation. She helped piece together that Ian McAlester may have a part in a series of murders, including my wife’s. That’s why she’s here.”

Ramsey turned to Christian apparently in shock, saying, “Bro, did you know Ian might be up to these kinds of misdeeds?”

With a comparable reaction to Ramsey’s, Christian shook his head and answered, “Nay, I didn’t.”

Jason turned to Christian, and asked, “I take it you must be the new man causing trouble in Payton’s life?”

“Jason, be nice. Christian is a friend. He also knows McAlester and might be able to help us get evidence.”

“You can call me C.J. if you like. Payton likes to call me Christian. What evidence are you looking for?”

“Anything. That’s where you come in, Ramsey,” Jason said, looking at him directly. “You need to help us find evidence linking McAlester to the series of murders that have occurred, but

specifically to my wife's. We, Payton and I, have found emails from him to my wife similar to the ones he sent to Payton. We need to find out if Ian sent emails to the other victims. If so, there might be a pattern developing."

"Interesting theory," Ramsey said, shaking his head.

"What made you put this together?" Christian asked.

"Two of Miami's finest detectives paid me a visit today. They asked if I knew Ian and if I had any contact with him. Jason, while waiting for me in the lobby, recognized them. Oh, whatever. The details are complicated. Suffice it to say, we just put two and two together. We're asking for your help and are convinced Ian has something to do with the murders. We need evidence, though, to take to the police. Can you help us or not?" she asked.

"Why not tell the detectives what you already suspect and let them investigate?" Ramsey asked.

"They don't get it. I've been asking questions of them for months, and nothing, absolutely nothing is happening, until now," Jason explained. "More innocent people have died, and they keep telling me they have no leads. Today they came to Payton asking about this McAlester—no, if we get something concrete, we'll turn the evidence over. We need this taken care of now not later. Before more people die."

"Why did we meet here tonight, of all places?" Ramsey asked.

"Payton came up with the suggestion."

"Ian invited me. I thought the club would be a perfect opportunity to see if we could get information. I don't know. I'm not good at this investigation stuff. Ramsey, what do you think, can you help us?" she pleaded.

Ramsey glanced over at Christian before he answered. "Look, this is an interesting case, I'll admit. I know Ian, and he is one evil son of a bitch, strong, powerful, and influential. I don't know. Let me talk to Christian alone for a few before I make a decision."

"Certainly, I understand. We'll wait here," Jason replied.

The two men rose to leave. Payton stood as well and whispered in Christian's ear. "Jason and I are pursuing this, regardless of Ramsey's decision. I'd rather have his help. Convince him for me."

Christian stared at her as she eased herself back down into her chair.

Jason waited until the two men stepped outside the club. He leaned into Payton and spoke softly. "I'm not sure if we can trust them, but they're all we've got right now. What do you think? You know them better than I do. Do you think they'll help us get this guy?"

"Yes. Have you noticed Ian's watching us? He's creeping me out. Don't look. I think he's coming over here. Ignore him, maybe he'll go away."

"I think it's too late."

"Oh, shit. Be nice, Jason." She turned to Ian as he approached. "Hello again," she said, forcing a smile.

"Are ye enjoying yerselves?"

"Yes, we are. Thank you," Jason replied.

"Where are yer other gentlemen?"

"They needed fresh air. They said they'd be right back," she said.

"Hmmm. I see ye'r not drinking. Let me send over some of our house specials."

"That would be gracious of you, thank you. What is your house special though?" she asked.

"A special blend I named Sweet Reverie, after the club. Scotch Whiskey with a sweet flavor added."

"Interesting. I guess we'll try your special then. Okay with you, Jason?"

"Sure."

The drinks came, but they didn't touch them. Red scotch whiskey appeared strange, especially to Payton. The drink looked too familiar to what she drank in Elounda, the one that made her memory fuzzy.

* * * *

Christian couldn't deny the woman bewitched him. He couldn't resist her. Convincing Ramsey to help Payton would take some doing, though. Once they stepped out of the club, outside the walls of any listening ears, he could discuss those options. Christian regarded the plan as an opportunity to take Ian down once and for all, but Ramsey worried about the exposure to the mortal world. If word got out to the general population about their vampire existence, beyond the small circle of rich and influential, their financial and physical survival would be at stake.

"We have to try. Sounds to me like the cops are halfway to solving the case and nailing Ian. We just have to push them a little more in his direction, before *we* make him go away. We could stage a scene to look like they caught and killed him. You'll have solved another case, I'll have the exclusive right to the clubs and resorts, and all will be right in the world again."

"I'm still not convinced, bro. Those two humans in there don't know we're vampires. Hell, they don't know Ian is one. We take care of our own, bro. Humans don't get involved in our shit. If Ian's the one the cops are looking for, we know why. He or his warriors have been feeding off the locals. If we help prove Ian committed these murders, we run the risk of exposing all our kind, not just Ian alone. I don't know. I don't like this."

"The plan will work. I have some of my best warriors here already. We can move anytime to set this up. It's all good."

"What about them?" Ramsey asked, gesturing to the building with a nod of his head.

"I'm telling Payton everything tonight. That's why we met. I'm coming clean about myself and hoping she doesn't reject me. Her reaction could affect this whole operation. We'll see. I can't wait any longer. I have to trust she'll be okay with my revelation."

"If not, are you prepared for her rejection?"

"Nay, but I love her, and I feel in my heart she loves me. I don't think I can give her up. My heart will break if she rejects me, but I know that's what happens with mortal women. They have a hard time accepting us for what we are, dead creatures who could kill and take their blood at any time."

“Stop sounding so down. There are some up sides to our existence. Concentrate on the positives. Remember, I told you with a woman like Payton you have to win her mind. If you’ve done that, you’ll win her heart.”

“You’re right. Now let’s go give them our decision.”

“We made one?”

“Yes, we’re going to help take down Ian.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I made the decision.”

They laughed and walked back into the club.

* * * *

Payton didn’t have a chance to admire Christian from afar when he’d walked into the club, but when he returned, she had the opportunity to take in his full masculine presence. So young and fresh and dammit, easy on any female eye. Wearing black jeans, a T-shirt, and leather jacket, he looked like an Easy Rider from the seventies. His hair, slicked back earlier, had several strands falling forward as he walked. She never thought a man with long hair would be attractive, but after running her hands through his, that opinion changed. Like silk, the tendrils felt sensuous brushing against her skin as they made love. The young lover she met in Elounda seemed different somehow. Sexier, if that was possible. Too much time had passed since they were together, and she wanted that feeling again. Biting her bottom lip as their eyes met, she smiled, and he returned a similar sentiment with a twinkle in his eye. What was she doing getting involved with him? Questioning her decision, she quickly shoved the thought out of her mind. She already *was* involved, deeply, up to her eyeballs.

“What have you decided? Are you going to help us?” Jason asked, as the two men reached the table.

“We’re in. Let’s just find somewhere more private to strategize. This place gives me the creeps on top of everything else,” Ramsey said.

“You can use my penthouse, which is secure. Payton and I will meet you there.” Christian turned to Payton and said, “Let’s go.”

Payton smiled. The excitement of him taking charge thrilled her. Warmth surged through her body, her heart raced, and her breathing quickened. At the last minute, she remembered Maritsa and took a quick look around the club, but didn’t see her. Leaving the club with Christian, she made a mental note to call Maritsa later to make sure she got home all right.

Payton and Christian stepped outside the club. He said, “Stay here, I’ll be right back. I have to get the small car I picked up to scoot around town.”

Scoot around town? Who talks like that? What did he lease—a motor scooter, a Toyota Prius? Neither of those seemed his style. He had a driver the other night. Ah, here comes a Black Lexus. Now that’s more his style. The car’s stopping. No, a red-haired man is getting out.

“Dammit, where is he, it’s freakin’ cold out here,” she muttered, shivering and folding her arms across her chest.

A sleek, blood red Ferrari drove up and stopped in front of her. Her jaw dropped. The passenger door opened, and Christian called her. “Payton, are you going to get in or are you going to stand there all night?”

Leather pants sliding against leather upholstered seats didn’t work so well. After managing, to get situated, she closed the door. “A Ferrari? Just a small car to scoot around town in, huh? This isn’t leased, is it?”

Grinning and preening, he said, “Nay, love. You like my new car? I think red suits me.”

“I think it’s a little ostentatious for my taste and maybe yours too.”

“Of course, it is. That’s why you have to do something wild and crazy every now and then. Don’t you ever step outside your comfort zone and do something a little reckless?”

“I did. I have three failed marriages to show for my reckless behavior.”

With a snicker, he said, “Nay, love. I mean experience life in different ways. Not the way yer parents said you had to live or what society dictates. Can you step out of the mold you made for yerself and try new things?”

“Are you suggesting we try something kinky in the sex department? Did that Goth club turn you on? If black and creepy arouse you, I’m telling you, I’m not into that sort of thing. I’m dressed like this only because Maritsa did this to me. I think this outfit looks okay, but this really isn’t something I would wear out on an on-going basis.” She gave him a little nudge in his side. “You like me in this, don’t you?”

“Why shouldn’t I? I think you’re hot. They make me a breast and leg man tonight.”

She blushed. “You are such a naughty boy. What bad things do you have in mind?”

“Who said I had bad things in mind? I’m suggesting you try doing things outside yer norm. Buying this Ferrari for me is stepping outside my norm.”

“Okay. I’ll bite. What do you think I should do? Any suggestions?”

“Hmm. I don’t know but I promise I’ll be gentle, whatever you decide.” He taunted with his grin. He reached for her hand and laughed. “Hold on, ye’r in for the ride of yer life, love.” He sped off, testing the capabilities of the Ferrari.

* * * *

Christian raced down Ocean Drive, turning onto Lincoln Avenue with Payton screaming for him to slow down with her hands gripping the seat. After a few minutes, the screaming subsided, and her grip relaxed.

“Are you enjoying the ride?” he asked coming to a stop at a traffic light. “You all right, love?”

“I’m fine. You didn’t have to scare the hell out of me like that though.” A rock solid mass of muscle met the little jab she gave his bicep.

“Ow.”

The light turned green, and he sped off again, this time maintaining the speed limit. They had traveled a couple of blocks when he said, “Hold on,” and made a U-turn in the middle of the road, crossing traffic in the opposite direction and barely missing an oncoming car.

“What are you doing, trying to kill us!”

“Nay, I see something. Hold on again, love.” He made another U-turn, going back in the original direction.

“What are you doing? Have you totally lost your mind? Is this one of those out of the box moments you were talking about earlier?”

“I told you, when I see something I like, I have to take what I want right then. I can’t wait to drive around the block. Besides, no cars were coming.” He pulled up in front of a vacant Art Deco style commercial building and cut the engine.

Payton jumped out of the car. Christian followed. With arms flailing, she turned to him. “Are you trying to kill us? Answer me! Christian, what was that all about? You could have taken a few extra minutes and drove around the block instead of giving me a heart attack. I’m not as young as you are. Do you have a death wish?” She watched his gaze focus on something behind her. “It’s an empty building, so what?”

“I know.” Walking closer toward the building, he continued. “Isn’t she beautiful? I love the architecture. This is perfect for the club. What do you think?” He stepped closer to the building and began to rub his hands over the stucco façade walls.

First, she looked at him, then the building. “I love it too. One of the reasons I moved to South Beach years ago. I love Art Deco architecture. What are you doing?”

“Feeling the spirit of the building. I like the way it speaks to me.”

Okay.

The building stood four stories high with possible views of the ocean, although without being inside, that fact could only be an assumption. Her experienced real estate agent’s eye discerned, even in the current rough shape, the structure had potential.

Maybe it is speaking to him in a Zen kind of way.

With boarded up windows, graffiti walls, and a faded and worn sign posted on the sidewalk with an agent name and phone number, she determined the building had definitely been vacant for some time. Based on Christian’s enthusiasm, she reached into her purse and found a piece of paper and pen to write down the information. The call would be made first thing tomorrow.

"I love this. I want to get inside," he said, stepping back and admiring the building.

"Christian, the place is vacant and locked up tight. I'm sure I can't get the agent to come out this time of night to show us the inside. I wrote down the number. I'll get us in tomorrow."

"Not soon enough. Don't you have a magic agent key to get me in now?"

"No."

"Maybe I can find an open window. I'm going to look." He took off to the side of the building, leaving Payton at the front.

"Christian, come back. Don't leave me here. This isn't a great neighborhood to be standing by myself dressed like this. Christian, you can't do this!" She ran after him, stumbling along the uneven pavement in stilettos. After gaining composure, she realized he had disappeared around the back of the building leaving her in the dark alley, alone.

No answer and no Christian materialized. Uneasy standing there in the alley, she started to walk back to the front of the building. Something wasn't right; she thought someone followed her, and it was not Christian returning. Coming to an abrupt stop, she turned and called out, "Christian, is that you?" No answer. Picking up the pace again, her heart began to pound. *Where did he go? This isn't funny.*

As she broke from the mouth of the alley and emerged on the sidewalk, a young man stood in her path.

"Hey, *chica*, what are you doin' out here all alone? Lookin' for some action?" he asked and made gestures with his hands between his legs, grabbing his jeans.

Although in her heels she easily towered over the young man, with no self-defense skills, getting out of the situation by fighting wouldn't work. Besides, he could have a weapon. *Where is Christian? Keep cool Payton. He has to come back anytime and save me.* Swallowing hard, she sucked in a deep breath. "I'm not alone. My boyfriend is going to be here any minute." Her voice cracked trying to sound convincing to the man.

"Sure, *chica*, your boyfriend is going to be here any minute. Dressed like that, I'd say you have many boyfriends," the young Latino said.

“Look, young man, I’m not interested in carrying on a conversation with you. My boyfriend will be here any minute. So leave me alone,” she said, mustering courage.

“Yo, Tito, this hot *chica* thinks she can wander into the *Panteros Blanco* territory and work it without us. What do you think we should do?”

“We can do whatever we want. When we’re done with you, you’ll beg for more.” Tito drew closer, pulling a few strands of Payton’s hair through his fingers. “Mmm, Dragones, she smells good and feels nice. We’ll have some fun tonight with this one.” Tito put his hands on her back. She jerked around, and as she did, Dragones came closer and grabbed her.

She screamed for Christian, and fought back.

“Don’t fight, *chica*. Your fate is sealed with us tonight. Give it up to us.” They pulled her toward the alley. She kicked them with her stiletto heels, making some contact, but not enough to stop their assault. As Christian appeared from around the corner of the building, the man named Dragones jerked the handbag from around her shoulder and pushed her down on the sidewalk. He took off running down the street. Tito saw Christian and ran the opposite direction. Christian turned his attention to Payton.

“Are you all right?” he asked, helping her stand.

“Yes, I’m okay. That kid took off with my bag.”

“I know. I’ll be right back. Stay here.”

“Where are you going? You’re not leaving me here alone again, are you?”

“I’ll get your bag back. Stay here.” From a standing start, he sprinted off in a blur and disappeared around the corner so fast she couldn’t believe her eyes.

Kicking off her heels, she ran after him but couldn’t catch up. *Damn, he’s fast.* After running for a city block, she lost sight of him and again stood alone on an unknown dark street. Resting a few minutes to catch her breath and calm her nerves, she decided to walk back toward the car.

Footsteps came up behind her at a trot. Someone else ready to attack me? *No, this can’t happen again. Keep walking Payton, I see the Ferrari. Just get to the Ferrari.*

“Payton, wait up.” Christian spoke softly.

Turning on her heels, her heart skipped a beat in relief at seeing Christian following close behind. She reached out to hug him, but stepped back. Her handbag hung from one hand but the other pressed his blood stained his shirt. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing, just a cut. I’ll be okay. Here’s your handbag.”

“You’re not okay. We need to get you to a hospital.” She supported him around the waist and held his arm in her grip.

“I’m fine, love, really. Let’s go.”

“You’re not fine. We can go to my place. I have a first-aid kit there. We can clean and bandage you up.”

“If you insist.”

“Are you okay to drive? If not, I’ll call for a taxi.”

“I’m okay. Let’s get out of here.”

* * * *

“Take your jacket off and have a seat while I get the first-aid kit,” Payton told Christian as they entered her condominium.

“Aye, love. I told you I’m really going to be okay. The cut doesn’t hurt.”

“You let me be the judge of that. You were really bleeding bad back there,” she called out from the hall bathroom.

As she walked back into the living room area, she found he hadn’t just removed his leather jacket. He had removed his T-shirt too and sat on her sofa with his chest bared.

“See, the gash isn’t bleeding and only a scratch,” he said, pointing to what she was sure had been a deep gash etched across his stomach, now healed to a thin red scar that faded as she watched.

Kneeling beside him, she examined the wound in disbelief. With shaking hands, she opened the kit, took out alcohol pads, tore open the packages, and swabbed his stomach, removing the

dried blood from the wound area. A slight pink line remained. Stunned, she looked up at him. “What is this? You were cut pretty bad. Now it’s like...like nothing happened.” She stood up and backed away as she continued. “What’s going on Christian? This isn’t normal.”

Lunging up from the sofa, he walked toward her. “Aye, love. I need to explain. I told you I needed to talk to you about who I am since we first met. I promised, so now is the time. Do you want to sit?” he quietly requested.

“Do you have some kind of special healing powers, a rare blood disorder, or something?” she asked.

“Aye, I guess you could say that. I *really* think you need to sit down while I tell my story.” He gently guided her to the sofa. She willingly let him and sat down to listen.

With heavy feet, he continued to pace back and forth for a few minutes before he spoke. “I want to start by saying I love you. I haven’t loved another woman in a very long, long time. You’re the first woman who has come into my life and touched me in ways that I thought had died long ago. I want to say that upfront.”

Smiling, she said, “Thank you. You’ve touched me as well. I will admit I’ve had doubts from the beginning, but you’ve done something to me I can’t describe. The feelings happened like magic, came out of nowhere, and I haven’t been the same since Elounda.”

“What you experienced in Crete was not magic, Payton. You felt the love between us. Remember that as I tell my story. Promise me you’ll remember?”

“You’re scaring me, but I promise.”

“Don’t be afraid.” He took a deep breath and continued. “Did you wonder, the first night I saw you, how I could see from so far away at just the right moment, or why we only met after sunset and never during the day? Or why you never saw me eat any food, only drink the occasional bar drinks?”

“I did wonder, but didn’t put too much thought into any of the oddities except the day routine thing. Go on.”

Pulling in a deep lungful of air, he then spoke softly. “I was born in 1719 in a small countryside glen in Scotland and reborn a vampire at the Battle of Culloden in 1746. I was married to a young girl named Laurel. We had a son named Jacob. I tried to return to them after my rebirth, but the dear lass, sure I had died, had taken up with an Englishman and remarried.”

Payton interrupted him at this point, almost laughing. “You’re kidding, right? You’re a vampire? You seriously think you’re a vampire? Believing in them, just like the tooth fairy or Santa Claus, will land you in the psych ward. Why are you making up such a ridiculous story? What’s the real story, Christian?”

“Love, I’m telling the real story. I am a vampire. Do you want me to prove it to you?”

“Christian, you’ll be okay. You don’t need to prove anything to me. Why don’t you have a seat, and I’ll call Ramsey, and we’ll go to the hospital and have a doctor take a look at you to make sure you’re okay.”

“Payton, you don’t believe me, do you? Here I thought you would reject me and instead you’re mocking me.”

“I’m not mocking you. I’m sure you think you’re a vampire, but a doctor should check you out after that attack. You might have been hit on the head, not just cut.” She reached for his head, running her fingers through his hair.

He grabbed her wrists and said, “Payton, I’m not crazy; I didn’t get hit on the head. I don’t want to do this, but you leave me no choice.” He morphed into his extreme vampire state—fangs came down, eyes turned red, and his skin became a light white pallor. He levitated off the floor about three feet.

Payton sat paralyzed as he changed. Watching him levitate, she keeled over, fainting, out cold. Christian morphed back, scooped Payton up into his arms and placed her on the sofa.

“Payton, wake up, love. Payton,” he urged.

“What happened?” She was startled to see Christian hovering over her and lunged up, pulling away from him into the corner of the sofa. “What are you, what...what the hell was that?”

“I told you, I’m a vampire. Now do you believe me?”

“Are you going to eat me or whatever y-you do?”

“Nay, I love you. I’d never hurt you and you have to believe me about that.”

“Then what are you going to do with me?” She scooted further away from him, her knees up to her chest.

“I’m not going to do anything with you. I told you, I won’t hurt you.”

“Well, don’t vampires suck all the blood out of people and kill them?”

“Some do, but I use synthetic blood and occasionally bite humans to supplement my diet, but never kill them. Those days are in my past.”

“Occasionally bite, like, like at the resort? Did you try to bite me?”

He hesitated, but told her the truth. “I did bite you.”

“Oh, my God. You didn’t. I don’t remember you doing it.”

“I know. I removed the memory after we made love. I couldn’t control the hunger. I’m sorry. I wasn’t ready to tell you about me, so I covered the memory when you slept.”

“How could you? You violated me, not only by taking my blood but also by stealing my memory! You’re evil! I hate you!” She jumped off the sofa and ran to the other side of the room, crying. Stopping, crossing her arms across her chest, she turned. “I understand what Giselle meant when she asked if you had marked me. She was asking if you had bit me and drank my blood. How did you remove my memory, with some kind of...of weird mind control, or something? No, you drugged me. That’s what was in that drink!” She flailed her hands in the air and shook her head.

“Nay, love. You were hurting, and my blood—”

“I drank your blood! Oh, God, I think I’m going to be sick. I’m going to die. You’re going to turn me into a...a vampire! Oh, God!” She ran into the bathroom, holding her hand over her mouth.

“Payton, you’re not going to die, and you’re not turning into a vampire. Please, come out and talk to me.”

Payton expelled her stomach contents into the toilet. Christian waited for the sounds of heaving to stop before he knocked gently on the door. She didn't answer his first knock. He knocked again.

"Payton, are you okay?"

"Go away," she sobbed.

"Payton, I'm sorry, love. I know I've hurt you. I need to tell more of the story so you understand why I did what I did. You can stay in there, if you like. I'll stay here. If you will listen please, I need you to understand. You promised to remember I love you no matter what I said. Please."

After a momentary silence, she spoke. "I did promise. Shit! A vampire? Really? I never saw that one coming," she said from beyond the door.

A mere two inches of wood separated them, so close to touch, but they might as well be miles. The sound of her steady soft breathing echoed in his head.

"Go ahead, I'm listening," she said after a few seconds.

He continued in a soft, low voice. "Where was I?"

"I don't know something about a wife marrying an Englishman."

"Thank you. She thought I'd died. I've had three wives, all human, and when I told them my secret, only one accepted me, and she agreed to be turned. Soon after turning, she ran off with another vampire. I gave up on ever finding love and threw myself into work. When I heard the story of your failed marriages, I understood you. I felt we were kindred souls, knowing what you want and need because I want the same things. Payton, you complete me. I believe fate stepped in to create the computer glitch we had with yer reservation. I would never have met you otherwise."

"What computer glitch?"

"The resort had orders not to take reservations for non-members until October, I would have been gone by the time you arrived and wouldn't have met you. I may have eventually come to Miami, but who's to say if I would have met you?"

“We wouldn’t have had Elounda?”

“Nay, we wouldn’t. Don’t you see, Payton, this is fate? We are destined to be together. I believe with all my heart and soul, we are meant to be together.”

“I wish I could believe like you, Christian. I need time to take all this in.” He heard her shift position followed by quiet crying.

“I understand.” He turned to his side, placed a hand flat on the opposite side of the door, and rested his head. After a few moments, he departed.

Chapter Sixteen

Ian watched Christian and the other three talking quietly. He strained to make out what they were saying, but the band played too loud and drowned out any conversation. He thought about positioning himself closer, but he would have been noticed by Christian or Ramsey, so he kept his distance.

At one point, Ramsey and Christian went outside the club to talk. Ian saw this as the perfect opportunity to eavesdrop on Payton and the other human. Unfortunately, he became cornered by a local rich patron who went on and on about his new yacht acquisition and into great detail about how his wife decorated the vessel. She had no experience as an interior designer, but that made no difference. Blah, blah, blah. The human droned on. If Ian could have gotten away with ripping the man's throat out, draining him dry right in front of everyone, he would have and enjoyed every minute. Of course, he couldn't.

By the time the bragging mortal finished, Ramsey and Christian were sitting back at the table with Payton and the unknown man. They spoke for a few minutes before leaving. Payton and Christian left together, as did Ramsey and the unknown man.

Ian motioned over one of his henchman, Klaus.

"I want you to follow C.J. and that woman. I want to know where they go and everything they do. Report back to me before the sun rises. Do not fail."

* * * *

Later that night Ian sat at the bar, scanning the room. The club filled to the capacity meant good revenues. The success of the *Black Reverie* grand opening pleased him, but anger raged over Payton showing up with C.J., and he took the move as an insult. She received his flowers

and invitation and showed up with him. *Fuck ye C.J. MacKenzie! I told ye I'd get to ye and I know ye'r weakness. Miss Payton Fleming.*

The hatred for C.J. compounded with the way he treated the mortal at the house the night before, made Ian want her blood, to claim her for his own. Maybe the challenge of C.J.'s interest in the human female was what piqued his desire. Although he had to admit, while not exactly his type, when he saw Payton walk into the club dressed in the black leather pants and corset, he thought his heart would stop. Then C.J. appeared.

"Boss, we have a problem in one of the VIP rooms," Rico, one of the club vampire bodyguards said, interrupting Ian's train of thought.

"What now?" Ian muttered. He sucked down the last of the whiskey and followed Rico to the backroom area.

Entering the VIP room, the smell of blood and chaos emanated strongly. A young vampire stood shaking in one corner, half-naked, muttering something incoherent in Russian.

"Dammit, what the hell! Didn't I say no killing tonight? I wanted no attention from the cops. Who did this?" Ian blasted.

"Luka," Rico stated.

Ian walked over to the young vampire cowering in the corner. Clawing his hand on his shoulder, he raised him off the floor with one swift movement. Luka's expression said he feared his coven master would end his vampire life.

"I hope she was pleasurable," Ian said and dropped the poor soul to the floor.

"What do we do with the girl, boss? Luka drained her dry. She's still in a coma and we can change her or kill her at this point," Rico said.

"She looks familiar. Do we know who she is?" Ian queried.

"She came in with that woman you told Klaus to follow. Do you think she'll come looking for her?" Rico asked.

"Yes, she will. Let me think."

Klaus walked in. "Boss, what happened here? A little too much sex and rock-n-roll?"

“Luka got a little carried away with his bloodsucking skills,” Rico said.

Klaus slapped the young man upside his head, knocking him to the floor. “Boss told you no killing tonight. Didn’t you listen?”

Luka muttered a curse in Russian.

“Leave him, Klaus. He’s still young and learning. I can’t fault him,” Ian said. “This one looks like she enjoyed the pleasures he offered. Look at the expression on her face.” He gave an impatient flick of his hand. “We have to figure out what to do with her. I don’t want the cops coming around here and messing in my business. I like Miami in the winter and plan on staying here through the first of the year. I’m bored with playing cat and mouse with the detectives on the murder cases and tired of staying one-step ahead of them. What did you find out with your task Klaus?”

“I had some trouble keeping up with him. Fortunately, you can’t miss a bright red Ferrari racing down Ocean Drive dodging cars and traffic lights. The crazy vamp turned on Lincoln, and I spotted them in front of an old building. I have these.” He pulled out his cell phone and showed Ian pictures he’d taken of C.J. striking a young Hispanic man.

“Interesting. C.J. in a hot sports car, racing on public streets endangering humans, not like him. What happened to this young man?” Ian asked.

“I took care of him. I craved a midnight snack.” He licked his lips and made a smacking sound.

“C.J. didn’t finish him? He is such a Boy Scout these days. Is the young man still where you left him?”

“Should be. I doubt he’s been found yet.”

“Good. I have an idea how we can dispose of this one and take care of C.J. in the process. Rico, clean her up. Luka, get dressed and pull your sorry ass together. Klaus, come with me, we have work to do.”

* * * *

Christian arrived at his penthouse suite and quietly stepped through the entrance door.

Jason, seated on the sofa, jumped up. “What the hell! Blood? Where have you been? Where’s Payton? We’ve been waiting for hours.”

“I thought you would’ve been gone by now,” Christian remarked, surprised by Jason’s presence.

“I asked you a question, where’s Payton?”

Jean-Pierre, Ramsey, Albert, and several others, came running from the kitchen area.

“You okay? You look like shit, bro.” Ramsey asked.

“Nay, I’m not okay. I need to be alone,” Christian said and headed for the bedroom.

“You all right, Mr. Sir?” Albert asked.

“I’ll be fine, Albert.”

No, he wouldn’t be fine. He told Payton he was a vampire. His disclosure as well as the idea she’d kissed and made love to him, repulsed her, just like he knew it would. She locked herself in the bathroom, listened, but she gave no encouraging response. Obviously, she needed time to think, to let everything he told her sink in, to get used to the idea, and then he could approach her again. They could talk and see if they could work things out. Although he expected her rejection, he hadn’t the hysteria and misconceptions about vampirism. He never considered what he did to survive as evil. After almost three hundred years, his blood needs became an ordinary necessity of life, like breathing air. By her way of thinking, he was damned, but he hoped she had come to love him as a man and not see him as a repulsive creature.

Everything about Payton seemed so right for him—smart, witty, fun, and so sexy. Still his goddess and he was her slave. Since his humble beginnings as a farmer to the present-day as a successful businessman, his fondest desire had never changed, someone to love and to love him in return. With Payton, he knew he could have that life.

A knock sounded at the door.

“May I come in, Mr. Sir?” Albert asked, quietly.

Christian didn't respond. He lay on the bed, in the dark, looking up at the ceiling. Albert entered anyway.

"You told her, didn't you?" Albert asked.

"Aye, the truth repulsed her so she became sick. I left."

"What happened to your shirt and jacket?"

"I was in a fight and got cut. I took them off at her place. I guess I left them there."

"I see. I guess she saw you heal and that started the process. Am I right?"

"Aye. Not quite the way I imagined I'd reveal my true self."

"I like her. She'll come around. Give her time. I think her friend, Jason, will not be a problem, either. From what I can hear so far, he'll be an ally. He might be able to bring her around too."

Christian sat up. "You think he could help convince her?"

"He might, if we can show him we're the good guys and make him believe that we'll do them no harm. Look at me. I've been with you for over forty years. Working for you has been a rewarding time and no harm has come to me."

"You're a good man, Albert. I appreciate yer loyalty and counsel. Thanks. I'm going to shower and join everyone shortly. Don't let Jason leave before then."

"Yes, Mr. Sir."

* * * *

"Yeah, this better be good. It's four-thirty in the freakin' morning."

"Detective Gutierrez. This is Officer Thompson. Sorry to call you so early, but I think you might want to get down and see what just arrived."

"Yeah, what is it?"

"An envelope was dropped off anonymously addressed, 'To Whom It May Concern Regarding the Serial Murders.' It contained pictures of what appears to be an attack of one man against another man. An address where we'll supposedly find two bodies was included. We

dispatched a couple unmarkeds out to the site a few minutes ago. I tried calling Detective Ochoa but got his answering machine. You may want to head on over to the crime scene. The ME is on their way as well.”

“Thanks, Thompson. What’s the address? Yeah, okay. Lincoln. Yeah. Okay. Thanks. I’ll keep calling Ochoa. You keep calling him too.”

“You’ve got it.”

Miguel Gutierrez leaped out of bed, quickly dressed, pausing only to pick up his cell phone from the charging cradle. He skipped brushing his teeth and hair. “Only time to take a leak,” he told himself and headed out the door.

On the way to the crime scene he reached Daniel Ochoa, and they arrived at the same time.

“Dude, you got a mint?” Gutierrez asked Ochoa. “I didn’t have time to brush my teeth. Feels like a dragon died in my mouth.”

Ochoa checked his pocket. “Will spearmint gum do?”

“Sure, anything to slay the dragon.”

Ochoa tossed the gum to him.

Yellow tape circled the crime scene where two bodies were still in view. Blue flashing lights swirled frantically, reflecting like strobes off the whitewashed Art Deco buildings. Two ambulances were poised near the alley where a group of twenty uniformed police officers were standing. The Coroner’s Office representatives were present, taking their samples. Gutierrez and Ochoa flashed their badges as they approached the barrier of yellow tape. An officer inspected them and let them through.

“What do we have here, Doc?” Gutierrez asked the assistant coroner, Dr. Michelle Bromberg—cute brunette, petite, little round derriere. He had worked some cases with her. She had been on the force about two years. Single, from what he’d heard around the rumor mill. He’d tried to get up the nerve to ask her out, but she always seemed stuck in the graveyard shift when he worked the days. Tonight was the first time he’d seen her in months. She looked fine, tight blue jeans, white cotton shirt, latex gloves, goggles, and a coffee colored ponytail.

Dr. Bromberg pulled back the goggles onto the top of her head, revealing her pale blue eyes. “Two dead, one male, Hispanic, the other female, also Hispanic. Both look like they were completely drained of their blood. The male had his neck broken. The female only her blood drained.”

“No throats cut?” Ochoa asked.

“No, doesn’t appear so,” she said.

“Well, that’s different,” Ochoa said, scribbling in his notebook.

“What’s different?” she asked.

“The other murders, the victims had their throats cut along with their blood drained,” Gutierrez said.

“Oh, yes, you’re right,” she said. “Well, I’ll know more when I examine them further in the lab.”

“This looks more gang related than the serial murders. What do you think, Doc?” Gutierrez asked.

“Again, boys, I’ll have to let you know when I examine them and compare them with the others. My gut feeling is that they’re related. Look here...” She wore latex gloves and pointed to an area on the female victim’s neck. “See these puncture wounds? They are the same as the ones on the other murder victims. Their throats may not have been cut, but the puncture wounds look the same.”

“Must be part of the gang member initiation ritual,” Ochoa said.

“Perhaps, but again boys, we don’t know until—”

“I know I know until you examine them and compare to the others,” Gutierrez said, finishing her sentence. “We’ll let you get back to what you were doing.”

“Thanks, I’ll let you know what I find.”

Gutierrez and Ochoa walked over to an officer bagging and marking evidence. The officer conscientiously made sure the technicians marked every plastic bag correctly and placed them in the evidence box.

“Anything of interest, officer?” Gutierrez asked.

“The female’s handbag, a knife from the male, and a business card. That’s it so far,” the officer reported.

“Were pictures taken before you removed the articles?” Ochoa asked.

“Yes, sir, the photographer took his shots before I removed anything. He’s over there taking more.”

“Thanks. Let me know when you’re finished,” Gutierrez said.

The two detectives made their way to the photographer.

“Hey, how’s it goin’? How soon will you have the photos?” Gutierrez asked.

“You’ll have them by noon today, Detective.”

“How about ten?”

“I’ll try, but you can’t rush perfection.”

“I’ll settle for semi-perfection. I need to see them as soon as possible.”

Ochoa scribbled in his notebook as they walked about. He didn’t talk much. Miguel “Mike” Gutierrez usually did all the talking. They made a good partnership, working together for six years. Daniel Ochoa made detective a year after Gutierrez. Although Ochoa had more time on the force, promotion to detective took him longer, but Gutierrez still respected Ochoa. When Ochoa did speak, Gutierrez listened.

“Mike, did you notice the female’s clothes? A little dressed up, like she had been to a party. Unlike the male victim. I don’t think they were together.”

“Hmm. I think you’re right. She’s dressed like, what do they call them—the punk style, right? Don’t you have a kid sister who’s into that stuff?”

“She’s dressed Goth. Yes, my sister and her friends are into the lifestyle, over my screaming objections. She talked about a new club opening on Ocean Drive. Maybe that’s where this girl went last night. We need to check the club out.”

“Let’s head back to the station and check the pictures they received. Maybe forensics has been able to lift some prints to find out who sent them,” Gutierrez said.

* * * *

Payton felt extremely alone. She called out Christian's name several times with no response. After a few minutes, she left the bathroom and went out into the living room. He was nowhere in the apartment. His jacket and T-shirt were folded neatly on the coffee table. She curled up on the sofa with the jacket wrapped in her arms and fell into a deep sleep.

Payton, run. He's getting closer. Run faster. Don't let him catch you. Pick up your feet and run. He can't touch you, or you'll die. Don't let him bite you. No! Christian, don't take me.

She jerked through the twilight sleep and sat straight, his leather jacket still clutched in her arms with his scent, the smell of death or a vampire. She threw the vile garment across the floor and cursed it.

"Thank God, I was dreaming." Except the dream really did happen. *Christian is a vampire! This is a nightmare.* Nothing made sense, but then again everything did. Thinking back on everything over the past weeks—Elounda in particular—all the questions she'd asked had answers. She never saw him during the day, and he didn't eat or drink, except for those house specials, which tasted like shit. Because they had blood in them!

Oh, my God, I drank his blood! When I had my sunburn and it went away, like his cut from last night! Healing blood? No wonder only the rich can afford to go to their resorts. They're like the Fountain of Youth to humans.

Thinking about last night made her sick. Hoping to clear her head, she decided to take a morning run. Dressing in sweats, a hoodie, and running shoes, she grabbed her keys and set off for the beach to jog. The sun had just reached peeked above the horizon as she hit the sands. She pictured him racing for his coffin, steps ahead of the killing sunlight.

Ugh! No, vampires don't exist. They're fiction, a made up story from someone's imagination. Folklore, from people who couldn't explain what happened to them. Modern science could explain things. Medical science could explain things. Christian had a medical condition that could be explained. He could get help.

Picking up her pace, the blood raced through her veins, and her heart rate increased. All the lies he told her in Elounda were to protect her. Or were they to protect him? She'd fallen in love with the handsome young man, and she had wanted him despite his lies. The only thing she thought she wanted were answers and expected them last night, just not the ones he gave. Did a blood-sucking monster come to her wrapped in the trappings of a beautiful young man?

Three times before he'd married, all human women. Was she just his newest conquest? How could she know his true intentions? Did he intend to turn her into a vampire as he had one wife?

No, stop thinking that! There are no such things as vampires! I must have dreamt this whole thing. Right? I'll wake up, and I'll laugh about this over a glass of wine with friends.

Anger welled up in her. He had stolen a part of her life. Fate, he said, brought them together, because of a computer glitch. She ran faster. He'd owned his company for twenty-three years. No computer glitch changed that fact. Was Ramsey in on this ruse too? Jason's boss said a computer glitch in the company files caused the unauthorized access. Were they all involved in a complicated cover-up? She had to find Jason and tell him. *I'm going crazy thinking about this.*

Slowing her pace, she turned back toward home. Where did Ian McAlester fit into this story? Was he a vampire too? Christian said he was dangerous, as a vampire too? He probably bore at least partial responsibility for Janice's death. Could good vampires and bad vampires exist? That is, if there were such a thing?

"Aagh! This is going to drive me insane!" *Maybe I'm already insane to believe this whole story.* She closed her eyes and could see Christian's face, his green eyes enflamed with passion, his hands tracing his fingers over her body, making a tangible memory of love on her skin. Damn that man! He still worked his vampire voodoo on her.

Before Payton showered and after she dressed, she tried several times to contact Maritsa. She left her alone at the club last night and in light of Christian's revelation, her friend could have run into trouble with Ian or another vampire. With no answer at Maritsa's, coupled with the fact the office hadn't seen her either; Payton's chest began to tighten. Something bad happened, she knew it. Before going to the office, she stopped to pick up coffee, needing that caffeine fix to

carry her through the morning. Drinking coffee remained one of her few deviations of a healthy living regimen. She turned into the parking lot of her office building and sat in the car. Working used to be her salvation, her lifeline, her only love. A few weeks ago, Christian came into her life, and she thought to love a man again possible. A real man, a handsome, luscious man, who made her feel young and vibrant, alive. Now he might be dead, or undead, or...What should she call him? A three-hundred year old vampire who feeds on humans? How could she love a man like that?

“God help me, I think I do love you, Christian. What am I going to do?” She rested her head on the steering wheel and cried.

Time seemed to come to a standstill as she ran the events of the past several days through her head. A tap on the window startled her. A bad *Miami Vice* fashion statement stood on the other side of the glass. *Detective Gutierrez?* Wiping the tears from her face, she pressed the power switch for the window.

“Good morning, Detective. What can I do for you?” she asked.

“Good morning, Miss Fleming. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Hmm. I’d like to discuss some details with you. New information has come to light in the Nocturnal Murders Case, and I think you can fill in some gaps for me.”

“Nocturnal Murders? Is that what you’re calling them now? An interesting name.”

“Not my choice. The damn media likes giving sensational names to these high profile cases.”

“Let me get my things and we can go inside.”

“Actually, I hoped you would follow me to the station.”

“The station? Am I being asked to come in for formal questioning? Do I need my attorney present?”

“Do you think you need an attorney?”

“No, I’ve done nothing wrong. I’ll follow you.”

No, she had done nothing wrong, except believe a vampire ran loose on the shores of Miami Beach. She kissed him, and bedded him, and drank his blood. *Ugh!* The blood part she still couldn't get out of her mind. Maybe she knew two or three other vampires living in a hotel room, and a bad one who opened a nightclub last night, as well. No, she had done nothing wrong, but she was hiding information. Just in case, she called Jason to have him meet her at the station.

Detective Ochoa escorted her to a room with an obvious two-way mirror. The room contained a wooden table, four chairs, and nothing else. The walls were painted a dull gray. Not a pleasant décor. Taxpayer's money at work, they must have gotten a good deal on cheap paint when they remodeled the rooms. Erring on the side of wise instead of stupid seemed the better course of action in this circumstance. She watched enough television crime shows suggesting silence until representation was present. The smart thing to do was to wait for an attorney before talking, innocent or not. Payton refused to speak to the Detectives until Jason arrived.

While she waited for Jason to come to her rescue, she checked her messages on her cell phone. No calls. She accessed her email messages. Nothing from Christian, but of course, he slept at this hour, or whatever he did in the daytime. That nuance seemed to escape his explanation about himself last night. The hardest information to process concerned him biting her and erasing her memory, and drinking his blood. She shook her head to get the thought out of her mind. Shaking really didn't work, nothing would.

Jason arrived thirty minutes later. The detectives entered the interrogation room a few seconds behind him.

"Gentlemen, this is Jason Worth, my attorney. I'll answer any of your questions now," Payton said.

"This really wasn't necessary, you know," Detective Gutierrez said.

"I wanted to be sure," she said.

"Attorney Jason Worth, you're Janice Worth's husband?" Detective Ochoa asked. "I thought the name sounded familiar. Interesting coincidence."

"Yes, it is," Jason replied.

Detective Gutierrez pulled out a plastic bag and placed it on the interrogation room table. “Is this your business card, Miss Fleming?”

Picking the bag up, she examined the contents closely and said, “Yes, the card has my name on the face and certainly looks like mine, so I assume this is my business card. I have thousands made up a year. Where did you get this one?”

“We found it on a murder victim last night,” Gutierrez said.

“Murder victim? Who?” she asked, stunned.

“A young man by the name of José Rivera. He runs with a local gang called the *Panteros Blanco*. Can’t miss them, they have panther tattoos across their backs with the paws visible on their arms. Been showing houses to gang members lately, Miss Fleming?” Gutierrez questioned.

“I don’t think I like your sarcastic tone, Detective,” Jason interjected.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound that way. The case took an unusual turn last night. You don’t seem the type of real estate agent that would have clients like José Riviera.”

“It’s okay, Jason. No, Detective Gutierrez, I haven’t shown Mr. Riviera property. He could have picked my card up from anywhere. I have promotional materials all around town.”

“Hmm, I guess that’s possible,” Gutierrez said and pulled out another photo, placing it in front of her. “Tell me, do you know him?”

A young man sprawled out on the ground with his eyes open, head twisted at an awkward angle, and the rest of his body contorted in an unnatural position. The gruesome photograph caused her to wince. The sight made her sick in the stomach, and she turned her head. Of course, she recognized him as the punk who had attacked her last night. The same young man Christian chased to retrieve her handbag. Maybe that was how one of her business cards ended up beside him. Did Christian kill this young man? He’d come back with a knife wound. Christian had defended himself and killed this man, but why hadn’t Christian told her he’d killed him? What should she tell the detectives?

“Miss Fleming? Does this man look familiar?” Gutierrez asked.

“No, I’ve never seen him before. Please take that away, it’s gruesome.”

"I need to ask you another question. Were you with Maritsa Delgado last night, specifically at a night club called...?" Pausing, he glanced over at Ochoa.

"*Black Reverie*?" Ochoa supplied.

Payton looked at Jason. Should she answer? His facial expression didn't give her an answer. Where were these questions going? What did Maritsa have to do with this? "I went to the club with her. She picked me up, but once we got there she went on her own. I met with Jason and didn't see her the rest of the evening. I left about an hour after arriving."

"When was that?" Gutierrez asked.

"When I left or arrived?"

"Left."

"I'd say around ten-thirty, ten forty-five. Wouldn't you say, Jason? We left at the same time," she said.

"Yes, I'd say just before eleven." Jason confirmed, pointedly directing his answer to the detectives. "We were at the same function, and I can corroborate the time she left."

"I see. Interesting. Where did you go after you left the club?"

"I went home."

"You went home alone and didn't stop anywhere along the way?"

"I didn't go alone, Detective. What does this have to do with Maritsa? You never said. I've tried to call her several times this morning, and she wasn't at the office. No one there has seen her."

Detective Gutierrez seemed to debate with himself for a moment. Ochoa kept his head buried in his notebook, scribbling notes. Gutierrez flipped through the photographs and pulled one of them out. Holding onto the edges, he stared down at the photo for a few seconds before he placed it down in front of her.

"Is this Maritsa Delgado?"

Tears slowly built up, clouding her vision. The photograph was of her friend in a contorted position. “Oh, my God, that’s Maritsa! What happened to her? Who did this? Oh, Jason, who could have done this to her? Ian?” She fell into his arms sobbing.

Detective Gutierrez looked at Jason who stared back at him. Ochoa raised his head from his notebook. Gutierrez asked, “Ian, Ian McAlester? You think he is responsible?”

“We do,” Jason told them. “That’s why we were meeting at the club. We have reason to believe he was involved in my wife’s murder. I don’t know about these recent murders, though,”

“I shouldn’t have left her there by herself. This is entirely my fault,” she cried.

“Payton, it’s not your fault. Maritsa was old enough to stay at the club and take care of herself. You can’t blame yourself,” Jason said.

“Can we get back to our questions? You said you didn’t go home alone. We need to know, who did you go home with?” Gutierrez asked.

With hesitation, she wiped her face and took a deep breath. “Christian, Christian MacKenzie. He’s a client and a close friend.”

Gutierrez flipped through the photographs again. He showed her a photo of Christian standing over the gang member. “Can you identify this man, Miss Fleming?”

Staring at the photograph, she picked it up, and looked closer. While blown up and a little blurry, the handsome young man in the photo could be no one but Christian. She held a duplicate of the image in her mind of him from that night, the intensity of his green eyes, his shoulder length dark hair, and the gash in his T-shirt where the gang member cut him.

Oh, God, he killed the man! Did he kill Maritsa too? No, she was still at the club. This doesn’t make sense. What do I say? Does Jason know about Christian? Oh, God, this isn’t happening.

Taking in a deep breath to compose and calm down, she answered, “It’s hard to tell, but I guess this could be...ah...yes, I’d say this is Christian MacKenzie.”

“Now that’s very interesting, Miss Fleming. You said he went home with you. If you’re indentifying this man in the picture as Mr. MacKenzie, where were you?”

"I...I was at home. He didn't stay the night, and I don't remember when he left." She lowered her head to finish. "We had a disagreement, and he left while I was in the bathroom."

"Hmm. What time was it? Approximately?"

"I don't know. After midnight maybe. I really don't remember."

"So you can't give Mr. MacKenzie an alibi?"

"Payton don't answer that. Detective, I represent Mr. MacKenzie and his company, Nocturnal Entertainment and Hospitality Corporation. Is he a person of interest in this case?" Jason asked.

"As a matter of fact he is, as a witness. Interesting that you're Mr. MacKenzie's attorney as well."

"Yes, interesting, isn't it? Are you going to want to see him for questioning?"

"Yes, the sooner the better. Save us from issuing a warrant based on these photos and Miss Fleming's identifying him. If you can get him to come in of his own free will, sure would save us the trouble and all the unnecessary formalities."

"Detective, you and I both know these photos are flimsy and circumstantial at best, and I see nothing here to substantiate issuing a warrant for my client's arrest. I will have Mr. MacKenzie here tonight. He left on a business trip early this morning and will not return until this evening. I'll call you when we can be here."

"How convenient your client left for a business trip this morning."

"My client is a very busy and successful businessman with interests around the world. You'll see he had nothing to do with this young man's murder, or any murder, for that matter. This is just a case of mistaken identity. We'll straighten this out tonight. Are you finished with Miss Fleming?"

"For now but if anything else comes to mind, Miss Fleming, please let us know."

"I will." She rose slowly from her chair, Jason holding her arm to steady her. Turning to Detective Gutierrez as she reached the door, she asked, "How did Maritsa die? Do you know that yet?"

“Like the others, the killer drained all the blood from her body, and now the coroner believes she might have been sexually assaulted as well. If true, DNA results will nail the freak. Hope it’s nobody you know.”

Gutierrez looked at her as if he thought the results would put the blame on Christian. He seemed to take pleasure at her discomfort.

“C’mon Payton. Don’t say anything. Let’s go,” Jason said, ushering Payton out the door.

“We need a place to talk, a safe, out-of-the-way location where there’s no possibility of someone overhearing or the premises being bugged,” Jason told her once they were outside.

“Bugged? You really think the cops would bug our places?”

“Yes, I do. If not them, my firm could even be involved. Something sinister and weird is going on, and I trust no one right now except you, of course. I don’t want to use our phones except as an emergency. We’ll get disposables later. Be careful talking in our cars too.”

“This is crazy, Jason. What have we gotten ourselves messed up in? Vampires, murder, what else are there—little green men from Mars named Yoda?” she asked, half-jokingly. *Does Jason know about Christian and the other vampires?* “Uh, forget I said that about vampires and mythical creatures.”

“I don’t think Yoda was from Mars,” he said, obviously trying to keep the subject light-hearted.

“You’re trying to be funny?” She cut him a serious look. *Maybe he doesn’t know.*

“I know. Be nice, Jason,” he said, in a pretty decent impression of Payton’s voice. He smiled. “Right now let’s think. There has to be somewhere we can go and talk in private to figure this out. What about one of your listings? They wouldn’t think to bug one of them. Do you have a vacant listing we can go to?”

“Yes, the Ocean Boulevard property. Christian is supposed to move in tomorrow, but the sellers have already moved out. I think they left for South America today. The house is furnished, so we’ll have chairs and sofas to sit on. The place is private and secure. We can go there.”

“Perfect. Let’s go. Remember, do not talk on your phone, unless it’s superfluous information, nothing about the murders, vampires, or where we are, got it? They can triangulate our location through our phones, so be careful. I’ll follow you there.”

“Jason. One more thing.”

“Yeah?”

She hesitated to ask, but then forced herself. “So you *do* know about Christian and...his other friends? How is it possible? What is your take on all this?”

“What do you think?” He grinned.

She smirked. *I guess he does know.*

Payton drove to Ocean Boulevard in a daze. In the past twenty-four hours, her life had been turned upside down. The man she thought she loved disclosed his true nature, a creature of unspeakable horror. She couldn’t wrap her mind around the whole concept. Was she insane to think that she could have a relationship with a man who needed to drink blood in order to survive? For him, the choice boiled down to choosing between life and death. He told her he didn’t want to hurt her, but what did he do to that young man last night? He took his life. Granted, he attacked her and Christian was cut by the man, but Christian could have rendered him harmless and left him unconscious, not dead. That didn’t explain what happened to Maritsa.

The questions were giving her a headache.

* * * *

As Payton unlocked the front door, Jason remarked, “How appropriate, the door has knockers with the letter ‘M’ already. Let me guess, he bought the house because of the ‘M’?”

Chuckling as she grabbed the knob and turned it. “No, I don’t think so. Just a coincidence, I’m sure.” She pushed open the door. “Come on in. Let me get the alarm.” She stepped to the alarm pad. “That’s funny, the alarm is off. I know it was set the last time I was here. Maybe the owners forgot to reset the code when they left.”

“Nice place. How much did this baby go for?” Jason asked as he sat down on the living room sofa.

“Twelve and a half.”

“*Really!* C.J. must be doing well for himself as a vampire.” He snorted. “I guess I’m in the wrong business.”

“That’s not funny, Jason,” she retorted as she joined him, falling into the overstuffed occasional chair across from the sofa. “So he told you he’s a vampire, and you believe him?”

“Of course, I believe. They all are, except for Albert and Jean-Pierre. What I said wasn’t meant to be funny. I’m really serious. If I could live like this forever, I’d be a happy man. Yep, women lined up outside my door, wanting to taste my blood, and the sex, well, yep, I’d be a happy man.” He stretched out his arms across the back of the sofa and looked up to the ceiling with a grin on his face, then back at her.

“Jason, you’re kidding, right? My God, Janice has only been dead for a couple of months, and you’re talking like this.” She picked up a pillow and threw it at him. “Oh, men, you are such...such men!” She stormed out of the room toward the kitchen.

He laughed. “Exactly. I tried to lighten things up, Payton. You were so down. C’mon. A little humor never hurt anyone. I miss Janice and that’s my point. I’m lonely sometimes.” He followed her into the kitchen.

What an interesting remark she thought. Jason was lonely and living forever without someone to share his life. It would have to be unbearable. *Like Christian.*

“You want something to drink?” she asked.

“Sure. Diet Coke?”

“Let me see if the previous owners left anything behind. They said they would leave the unopened products available to use if the buyer wanted them. No, looks like only regular Coke. Is that okay?”

“Guess it’ll have to do.”

They both turned when they heard the sound of metal scraping. A man of six feet plus a few inches stood before them, with a sword in one hand and a snarl on his face.

“Jean-Pierre, what are you doing here?” Jason asked.

“Jason, *mon ami*, I could ask you the same thing. Miss Fleming, you don’t remember me do you? We saw each other briefly the other day when you showed C.J. this property. Well, anyway, I saw you.” He moved closer, sheathed his sword, and extended his hand. “I’m Jean-Pierre, C.J.’s head of security. I’m here checking the place out before he moves in. I wasn’t expecting anyone today. Why are you here?”

“We needed a place to talk in private. We’ve run into trouble, and I think we might need your help,” Jason said.

“Trouble? Well now that’s my middle name.”

“What is up with these swords? Can’t you use something smaller? They’re a little archaic, aren’t they? What’s wrong with a gun?” Payton asked.

“They get the job done, and they’re quieter than guns. Besides, they’re sexy, don’t you think?” Jean-Pierre asked.

She rolled her eyes. Men and sex. That’s all they think about. *Ugh!* “And how did you get in here? This place is supposed to be secure and has an alarm system.”

“I’m in security. I know how to get around those toys.”

Rolling her eyes again, she left the kitchen to sit in the living room with her drink. The men followed, watching her walk in front of them. She should have known better. Men and sex.

“Jean-Pierre, Christian’s in trouble. Someone is trying to set him up. I think the instigator is Ian McAlester,” Payton said.

“That evil scoundrel. What has he done?”

“Payton and I just came from the Police Department. The police brought her in for questioning. Two murders occurred last night close to Ian’s club, and the police have pictures with C.J. standing over one of the bodies, the young man’s,” Jason said.

Jean-Pierre looked at Payton. “I thought he stayed with you last night.”

“He was with me. After we left Ian’s club, we stopped at a vacant building and were attacked by a couple of gang members. Christian chased one of them because they stole my handbag. Christian ran off so fast, I didn’t see what he did, and I didn’t see anyone else, either. I don’t know who could have taken pictures. He returned a few minutes later with my handbag, then we left for my place because he was cut and bleeding. I lied about being there. I couldn’t think. I didn’t know what to say. What am I going to do when they find out?”

“We’ll straighten it out,” Jason assured her and told Jean-Pierre, “The detectives want to question C.J., I told them I’m his attorney, and I’ll take him in tonight. We have to come up with a story and a plan before then. Any ideas?”

“We have to move everyone in here. I’ve scanned the property, and the place is clean. Then we need to infiltrate Ian’s lair. We have to find the hiding place first, though. I doubt it’s his club, too high profile. I suspect it has to be something more private and secure. From there we might be able to find evidence that will incriminate him in these murders. If we do that, we’ll be able to get the heat off C.J.”

“Sounds like a plan, but the hard part is going to be finding the lair and evidence. I have no ideas on how to do that. Hopefully the DNA the cops come up with will prove C.J.’s innocence. That should help. Beyond that I have no clue,” Jason commented.

“Leave the task to Ramsey. He’s the pro, and he’ll figure out that end of the plan. You worry about making sure C.J. doesn’t end up in jail. That’s not a good place for a vampire to spend time. His special abilities get a bit messy to explain.”

“You’re human, right?” Payton asked Jean-Pierre.

“What’s your point?” he fired back.

“I’m curious. You’re awake during the day, unlike Christian. You’re not a, you know a...”

“No way, I’m not a vampire, *ma chéri*. I’m a—”

Jason cut him off. “He’s a hired sword fighter and security, right?”

“*Mais oui*, that is what I am,” Jean-Pierre said, glancing at Jason.

Payton didn't miss the silent interchange between the two men, but didn't pursue whatever they were hiding or that she felt like they were hiding. She didn't think she could stand any more secrets and strived for some sense of normalcy. "How long have you known Christian?"

"I've known him a long time. He is a good and honorable man, Payton. He cares about and respects people, especially you. I see how he feels about you in his eyes when he looks at you. C.J. would not hurt you, or anyone, unless they hurt him. Trust me. I've known him a long, long time. You have to have faith and believe in him."

"I'm having a hard time believing that. He hasn't trusted me enough to tell me the truth since I met him. Now when he's in trouble, he wants me to trust him. Not an easy thing to do considering how he lied to me before."

"Trust is a complicated and difficult issue for those in our line of work. Let's concentrate on getting out of this mess for now. I need to get back to the hotel and make sure everything is covered there. Albert is alone and may need help. I'd suggest you get some sleep today so you're fresh. I have a feeling this will be a long night."

Chapter Seventeen

Sensing Albert was more sympathetic to her situation, she stayed with him in the kitchen where he worked preparing a tray of sandwiches. Jean-Pierre was there also.

“How do you do all this, Albert?”

“Do what, Miss Fleming?”

“Please, call me Payton. I think we’re beyond the formal stage.”

“Beg your pardon, but old habits are hard to break Miss...Payton.”

“So how do you not freak out around all them? I’d walk in and feel like they want to eat me for dinner.”

“Probably more like dessert, *ma chéri*,” Jean-Pierre said sweetly.

Payton startled at his remark.

“Jean-Pierre, don’t tease her like that,” Albert chided. He turned to her and continued. “He is teasing. They only looked because you are a rarity, and Mr. Sir hasn’t had a woman, ah, shall we say, in his bed in a long time.”

She scoffed. “Oh, I can’t believe that. A handsome, powerful man like Christian has probably had a woman in his bed every night. You just don’t know it.”

“Oh, no, *ma chéri*, not like that. Yes, he has women, but for feeding. Sex makes the process more enjoyable for the woman to tolerate the taking of blood. You’re the only one he has kept more than one night that I’m aware of,” Jean-Pierre said. “I have known him a long time. You’re special, Payton. It is *l’amour*.” He grabbed a sandwich from the tray Albert fixed for the human bodyguards standing watch outside.

Albert smacked his hand.

“Ah, what was that for *mon ami*? I’m hungry. Oh, look, *mademoiselle*, she’s blushing.” Jean-Pierre kissed Payton on the cheek and joined the others in the living room.

“He is a real romantic that one, but he’s telling the truth. Mr. Sir has not had anyone with him since I’ve known him. Would you like something to drink with your sandwich?” Albert asked.

“Water is fine. With ice. How long have you known Christian?” she asked as she lifted a roast beef sandwich from the tray and took a small bite.

“Since I was six. I’ve been working for him since shortly after my twenty-first birthday after graduating university. I’m fifty-two.”

“How did you know him at age six? That’s very young. What did he do, find you on the street as a young waif?” she asked, half-jokingly.

“Actually, that’s not too far from the truth. My mother worked as a waitress at an all-night diner in the district of Redbridge in London. She used to leave me with a sitter not far from where she worked. One night, after picking me up, we were attacked by a group of vampires, though I didn’t know that’s what they were at the time. I hid in the alley behind a trash bin, scared witless, as you could imagine. My mum tried to protect me the best she could and fought hard. All I remember is hiding and trying to be quiet so they wouldn’t find me. Then silence. Mr. Sir, found me cowered down and whimpering. He rescued us. My mother barely survived and only lasted two days after the attack. He gave her the choice to change, but she declined. I cried for three days. Mr. Sir took me in and sent me to the best schools. I traveled with him, and he showed me the best the world had to offer, never once threatening to harm me. Once, I offered to give my blood for him after a serious injury from fighting, and he refused. He is an honorable man, Payton. You can trust him. You need to free your mind and open your heart. Then you’ll see the real man.”

Tears welled in her eyes from the touching story. She imagined more stories were left to be told about Christian. Deep down, he had to be a good person and only indentured into a life of drinking human blood for his own survival, not because he wanted to, but because he had to.

Twilight's cast of vivid colors shone across the waters of the Intracoastal, and Payton knew Christian would soon arrive. So would ten other vampires and the few humans who took care of them, like Albert and Jean-Pierre, and Jason and her. Could Jean-Pierre be something else? Indications earlier in the day suggested he had another side to him, but he wasn't saying much. Why did she get mixed up with them? She now accepted vampires existed. They were real. Could she love one?

Free your mind and open your heart. The words Albert said to her repeated over and over inside her head. Christian deserved her love, and she wanted to give her heart freely and willingly. She just didn't know how.

During the talk with Jean-Pierre, he told her Christian possessed honor as well as a caring nature. She had thought about their conversation all day, also remembering what Josef, the young intern waiter, had told her in Elounda. He'd been sponsored by Christian's company. Maybe, just maybe, Christian wasn't a monster, but a good person. Had he embarked on a quest to make amends for the bad he'd done in the past?

Whether he chose to become a vampire or not, he still had to drink human blood to survive all those years. Almost three hundred? The necessity to kill people during the span of time had to occur. While she could feel a small amount of sympathy for him, the victims were the ones she felt sorry for.

The sun set as she stood out by the dark water staring across the serene calm. The moon shone only as a haloed sliver in a partly cloudy sky. A possible rainstorm brewed over the Atlantic Ocean, unusual this time of year, but she could smell the makings congealing in the air, along with a fall chill. Earlier, in the afternoon, she packed a few clothes and brought them to the house. The shawl she included came in handy.

A chill swept across her back, and she knew the sudden change in temperature had nothing to do with the wind. *Christian?* Strangely, she sensed his presence. Did he use vampire voodoo on her? She couldn't turn and face him and closed her eyes. Her heart began to beat faster, and then a warm feeling enveloped her, and the chill from moments before faded.

“Payton,” he said softly, “ye’r here. Does this mean you’ve forgiven me?”

“No. Only that I believe you are...” The word stuck on the tip of her tongue because her brain balked at saying it.

“Say it, Payton, say what I am.”

Turning to face him, she kept her eyes closed, arms wrapped around her chest, and the shawl clenched in closed hands. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and said, “I believe you are a vampire, but nothing changes. I don’t necessarily forgive and accept you.” She whirled back around. She loved him but her mind clung to the revulsion of a relationship with a vampire. Gradually her heart gained ground.

“I understand. Ye’r still upset with me for lying to you.”

No, he didn’t understand. What tormented her went beyond the lying. He betrayed her, stole her memory, and killed people, possibly her friend. “I have to ask you a question.”

“Anything.”

Her desire to know the truth overcame her fear. “Did you kill that man?” She closed her eyes. *Please let the answer be no.*

“No, I left him unconscious. Jason told me your friend was murdered last night as well. I’m sorry for yer loss, but I had nothing to do with either death. I suspect Ian is guilty of those crimes. He has a vendetta against me, the same as I have for him.”

“This is a war between the two of you. Any human killed in the process is just collateral damage to you vampires. Sorry is all you can say?” She turned to face him. “We’re only food to you!”

“Payton, don’t say that. With all the time you have spent with me, showing how much I love you, how could you think that is how I think? Ian believes that, but not me and not my friends inside. We are fighting against Ian and those like him. I’m going to stop him this time, I promise. He won’t hurt you or anyone else again when I’m finished.”

“You bit me, drank my blood, and erased my memory so you wouldn’t be caught. What kind of love is that, Christian?”

“I regret I erased yer memory, but not takin’ yer blood. I love you and tasted yer blood because I couldn’t bear leaving without having a part of you with me forever. I feared you would reject me like the other women in my life. I know now how wrong I was to do it.”

“Yes, what you did was wrong. With all the time we spent together, with me showing you how much I love you, trusting me should have been high on your priority list.”

His eyes brightened with excitement with angry words she couldn’t take back. “You love me?”

Despite all the lies, she did love him. Right or wrong, she committed to this strange relationship for the long haul. “Yes, God help me, I do.” She paused, gave him a little grin, staring up at him. “I guess I’m not old enough to be your mother after all.”

He pulled her into his arms. “Payton, my love,” he said softly, shifting to cup his hands on her cheeks to kiss her. She resisted at first, briefly, before she opened to him.

“Ahem,” Jason said, clearing his throat as Payton and Christian pulled apart. “Excuse me, guys, I hate to interrupt. C.J., we have to get going. Detective Gutierrez is waiting for us. Let’s go and get this over with.”

“I’ll be right in. Give me a few minutes,” he said and turned to Payton. “I won’t be long, love. We’ll talk when I return. You’ll be here when I get back?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Watching him walk to the house, his receding figure dwindling to nothing but a shadow, the warm cocoon she felt in his presence departed. The chill of the evening returned. Time came to seek the warmth and shelter of his new lair, and she walked back to join the others inside.

* * * *

Jason paced the floor nervously. Detectives Gutierrez and Ochoa kept him and Christian waiting for over an hour in Interrogation Room Four. Christian, calm and relaxed, sat in one of the chairs the entire time.

“This is getting ridiculous. I told Gutierrez we would be here at seven-thirty. The time is now eight forty-five. I see no excuse for them making you wait like this,” Jason declared, with the agitation in his voice quite noticeable.

“Jason, calm down. I’m innocent of any wrongdoing and don’t mind waiting for the detectives. I’ll tell them what they want to hear, and we’ll be out of here. Sit down and relax.”

“You’re a lot more confident than I am right now.”

Not having the emotional attachment to Jason that he shared with Payton, Christian could read the attorney’s mind. Jason’s anxiety was confused by his new client’s calm rationality. Jason’s mind zigzagged from one thought to another to figure out how to get his client out of the situation cleanly.

Ten minutes more passed before Detectives Gutierrez and Ochoa finally entered and sat down in the two remaining chairs. After the necessary introductions, Detective Gutierrez began his questioning, with Ochoa making scribbles in his notebook.

“Mr. MacKenzie, where were you last night between nine o’clock and one in the morning?” Gutierrez began.

“Detective, why don’t I tell you everything I know.”

“Mr. MacKenzie, just answer the question the detective asked. Don’t offer anything more,” Jason directed sternly.

“I have nothing to hide. I’ve done nothing wrong and can account for my time last night.”

“Go ahead, Mr. MacKenzie, tell us everything you know,” Gutierrez said, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed against his chest.

Christian could play the interrogation straight or use a little vampire mind control. Detective Gutierrez thought he had his man, but Christian would prove him wrong. He would convince Gutierrez the murders were a simple gang war and let the vampires take care of the vampires. The less the humans knew the better off everyone would be. Detective Ochoa, however, was harder to read. Was he one of those rare humans that could block a vampire’s mind probe, or worse, could he probe a vampire’s mind? Something about him seemed unusual. As if to avoid

direct eye contact, he kept his head buried in a notebook. He didn't speak much, either, and had a funky scent. Actually when he thought about it, he realized the odor was similar to Jean-Pierre's, but not as toned down. Was it bad after-shave or could he be a werewolf?

"I met up with my friends at the *Black Reverie*, a new club, around nine fifteen, nine-thirty, and stayed for a while. I left with my female friend, and we went to her home," Christian said, deciding to tell the truth up to a point for the time being.

"About what time did you leave the club?" Gutierrez asked him.

"Right before eleven. I remember looking at the clock on the dash of the car when Payton got in."

"Did you go straight to her place, or did you stop off someplace first?"

Christian debated how to answer. "We stopped at a vacant building," he said, truth still seeming to be the best course of action. "I'm looking for a property to open a nightclub, and Payton is helping me. An interesting building caught my eye as we were driving on Lincoln, so we stopped and took a look. We were there about fifteen or twenty minutes looking around the outside. Payton took the number from the For Sale sign, and we left for her place."

"She didn't mention you stopping."

"No doubt she didn't think it important."

He scoffed at that, asking, "How long were you with Payton, excuse me, Miss Fleming?"

"Detective, I don't know how long I stayed at Miss Fleming's. We talked for a couple of hours, I guess. I left and drove back to my hotel. My friends were there and can vouch for the time, I'm sure."

"I was there when he arrived, around one, I remember because I turned on the television, but nothing decent came on that early in the morning," Jason offered.

"You were at his hotel room?" Gutierrez asked, puzzled by Jason's response.

"Yes, I met with Ramsey Weiss, a private investigator. He's also a friend of Mr. MacKenzie. He offered his hotel suite to us instead of the club where we originally met. The suite provided more privacy. Do you have a problem with that, Detective?"

“No, I find your coincidental involvement interesting. The world isn’t that small, and I have to wonder what you have in common,” Gutierrez said.

“I think that would be my wife, Janice. If you *people* would do your job, you would see that my client is innocent and that the real killer is still out there. Stop harassing Mr. MacKenzie. An evil killer is on the loose. Do your job!” Jason lost his composure, rose from his chair, and nearly lunged across the table at the detectives.

Christian jumped from his chair. He used his vampire speed to stop Jason from jumping on the detectives. The situation exploded out of hand and he had to take charge. No more playing the interrogation straight. A little vampire mind control would finish the tedious meeting.

“Jason, enough, let me take care of this,” Christian said and unleashed a wave of psychic energy toward the two detectives. A rush of chilled air swept into the room. *Both of you are under my control. Do you hear me?*

Both Detectives fell back in their chairs, arms limp at their sides and blank looks across their faces. Ochoa’s notebook fell to the floor. In unison, they responded to his voice. “Yes, I hear you.”

Stunned by Christian’s *tour de force*, Jason asked, “Man, what are you doing? Hypnosis?”

“Something like that. Now be quiet, I need to concentrate.”

You will not investigate me or Payton Fleming. We are innocent. The murders are gang related, and you will pursue only gang members. You will not remember interrogating Christian MacKenzie or Payton Fleming. You won’t remember knowing them. Do you understand?

“Yes, they are innocent. The murders are gang related,” they said simultaneously.

Christian released his psychic connection.

“If you need nothing else from me, gentlemen, may I leave?” Christian asked, acting as if nothing had happened.

“Uh, yes, I think we’re done here, but don’t leave town in case we have any other questions,” Gutierrez said. “Do you have anything else, Ochoa?”

“No.” He reached down to pick up his notepad from the floor.

“Good evening, Detectives.”

Christian and Jason hurried their exit of the interrogation room without saying a word to each other. Once outside, Jason could not contain his excitement any longer.

“What happened in there?” Jason asked as they continued walking to Christian’s Ferrari.

“Vampire mind control.”

“You guys are too cool. Those detectives didn’t know you messed with them. They think you’re innocent and gangs are responsible for the murders. What about Ian?”

“We’ll take care of Ian. We don’t want the authorities involved. As you know, the general population can’t know about vampires, only a select few. We have to keep the police out of our business for our protection. I know what you wanted, but we can’t do it that way. I appreciate your assistance, but from here on out, let me handle the authorities. LaMont should know better than to send in a rookie like you.”

“Oh, I see. You think I can’t handle your case. That’s why our firm has your files encrypted. To keep you’re existence under wraps?”

“My files?”

“Our firm represents your company, right?”

“Yes. I assumed LaMont sent you to represent me.”

“No, I took you as a client because of Payton.”

Christian shook his head, “Dammit, I never made the connection. When you said you worked for LaMont, I assumed you knew and were friends only by coincidence. No wonder you were shocked to see me in my state last night when I returned to the hotel. Ye’r taking the truth about us pretty well for just finding out.”

“I’ve seen a lot the past couple of days. Nothing surprises me.”

“I miss a lot with what goes on during the daytime”

Jason laughed. “Yeah, you do, but you have other benefits.”

“I wish Payton understood them better. I thought you had talked to her and smoothed things over. She appears better tonight.”

They reached the car, slid in, and Christian started the engine.

“Yeah, I might have had something to do with that,” Jason said, “but I think it’s probably more because she’s in love with you.”

* * * *

When she first walked back in the house, all eyes went to her, making her uneasy, like dinner had been served and she might be the main course despite what Jean-Pierre told her. Ramsey was there, conversing with the other vampires in the living room. Though she slowly put the names of the vampire warriors with faces, she still didn’t quite recognize all the players in this new world she stepped into. Feeling little more comfortable after talking with Albert and Jean-Pierre, she sat down on the sofa next to Ramsey.

“Boys, we have to figure this out. Any ideas how to start to find his lair?” Ramsey asked. He turned to a curly-haired red head with blue eyes named Russ and asked, “You were hanging out with some of Ian’s men. Did you pick up on anything from them at all?”

“Nothing. Where they’re lying during the day is kept totally secret. No hints at all. I followed one for as long as I could before I had to get back before sunrise. Sorry. I’ll try again tonight and hope he doesn’t get suspicious.”

“Same here,” said a short, spiky blond, punk-style man named Kendrix.

“What are you looking for, if you don’t mind me asking?” Her voice trailed off as all eyes again looked at her like dessert was now served.

“Sweetheart, this is men’s talk. I appreciate you asking, but I don’t think you can help. You aren’t the pro here; we are,” Ramsey said in a condescending tone.

Jaw clenched, eyes narrowed, Payton’s whole body tensed. “You mean vampire talk. I beg to differ with you, almighty Ramsey, but I might know how to find Ian, but since you don’t think human women are competent enough, I’ll leave you to figure out where he is all on your own.” She stood and walked off in a huff.

Albert, who stood by the fireplace, smirked, covering his grin with his hand. The other vampires stared at Ramsey waiting for him to retort.

“*Ma chéri*, I’d like to hear what you have to say,” Jean-Pierre called. “Please come back and tell me. I’m not a vampire, and I trust your instincts. I can smell them. My senses are keen and sharp.” He glared at Ramsey and without words urged him to speak, motioning with his head.

“Payton, let’s hear your thoughts on finding Ian. If C.J. trusts you, I trust you. Come back and sit with us,” Ramsey said, though she suspected it was done under silent protest.

Fastening her eyes intently on Ramsey, she slowly walked back to the sofa and sat down next to him. Quietly she said, “You know, I really don’t know what Giselle sees in you. You’re such a macho, male chauvinist, but she thinks love conquers all.”

“Giselle said that?”

“Yep, the last night in Elounda. You don’t deserve her, you know. Just as well, you’ll never see her again.” She turned to the group and asked, “Where does a vampire usually have a lair?”

“Not that different from where we are now. Secure, private, and large enough to house guards during the day,” Jean-Pierre said.

Ramsey seemed perplexed and at a loss for words by what Payton had told him about Giselle. She privately gloated a brief moment before she concentrated on the problem.

“A place like this house. Hmm. When did Ian arrive in Miami, does anyone know?” she asked.

“Mr. Sir said Mr. McAlester started coming here sometime in late June, early July to scope out places for his new club. That’s what our sources indicated and I want to say right before we left Las Vegas,” Albert said.

“Excuse me, gentlemen, while I get my laptop.” She rose from the sofa.

Ramsey finally spoke. “Wait, you can use mine, if you like.”

“No, I need mine. I have specific software for what I need to do. I’ll be back.”

Moments later, she returned with her laptop and quickly booted up. After a few minutes pecking away at the keyboard, she pulled up a list and began to read, stopping at one that caught her attention. “No, tell me it isn’t so?”

“What is it, *ma chéri*?” Jean-Pierre asked, concerned.

“I think I know where Ian is hiding out. In the house where my friend Janice died. She was Jason’s wife.”

“Are you sure? How do you know?” Ramsey asked.

Turning the laptop, she pointed to the list. “Ramsey, look at this list of properties. They are all the properties where the Nocturnal Murders occurred. That’s what the cops are calling them. After visiting that garish place he calls a nightclub, I got a pretty good idea what he likes. I know most of these properties because I toured them for comparison when I worked to get this property. The listing Janice had was right up Ian’s alley. The owner, a Saudi Arabian sheik, favored naked Greek and Roman god and goddess statues, hideous flock wallpaper, gilt everything inside, and marble in every color everywhere. Believe me, the house is an abomination. This has to be the one. I can picture Ian there, grooving on the eccentricity. What better way to take a place? Commit a murder there, and it becomes a distressed property for someone to swoop in and take over for pennies on the dollar. He’s evil in every way, isn’t he?”

Ramsey jotted down the address and handed the paper to Kendrix, sending him and three others to check the house out.

“Sweetheart, if this checks out, I’ll owe you a big apology, and I think you’re in the wrong line of business. Ever thought about being a private investigator? You’re good, damn good.” Ramsey smirked.

She grinned. “No, I think I’ll stick with my day job, but thanks for the compliment.”

“You did good, *ma chéri*. Christian will be proud of you,” Jean-Pierre said.

“Yes, he will,” Albert agreed.

“Well, I don’t know about that.” She paused before asking, “Does anyone know what time it is? Shouldn’t Christian and Jason be back by now? They’ve been gone a long time.”

“It’s nine-thirty,” Albert said.

“Don’t worry. If trouble arises, Christian will make the problem go away. Handling the police is easy for him. He doesn’t like to deal with them, but if he must, he’ll do what is necessary. They should be here shortly,” Ramsey said with conviction.

“I hope you’re right,” she said. “Albert is there a printer I can connect to. I want to print this list just in case that address doesn’t pan out?”

“Yes, in the office. Follow me.”

* * * *

Albert retired to his bedroom. His days started before sunrise, so he went to bed early. Jean-Pierre left to make his perimeter security check of the property, leaving Payton to feel uncomfortable being the only human in a house full of vampires, awake and eyeing her again as dinner and dessert. She tried to ignore them by reading her email messages.

Fifteen minutes later, her cell phone rang. Caller ID showed Jason’s number.

“Jason, is everything okay?” she asked.

“Yes, we’ll tell you about it when we get back. We’re on our way,” Jason replied.

Thirty minutes after the phone call, the vampire reconnaissance team returned.

“So, boys, what did you find?” Ramsey asked.

“We saw activity at the property. I’d say someone is camping out there. Two guards at the front and two out back along the water. We saw three vamps leave in a black SUV as we arrived. The house is a lair for sure, we sensed vampires inside, but we can’t confirm if Ian is one of them,” Kendrix conveyed.

“Good job. Now we can put a plan together.” Ramsey turned to Payton and said, “And you, sweetheart, my humble apologies.”

Seeing a way to play with his head, she said coyly, “That’s not a big enough apology, Ramsey. I think you’re going to have to do something special to make it up to me.” Her heartbeat picked up. She wanted to get back at him for being so rude to her in Elounda, and an opportunity

presented itself to mess with him. She wanted to see how far she could go. Moving closer to him, she put her hand on his thigh and started rubbing softly, back and forth.

Ramsey began to squirm in his seat. "I don't think C.J. would appreciate me doing anything special for you, Payton."

"Oh, I don't think he'd mind."

The other vampires casually stood around, listening to the conversation.

"I think I misjudged you," Ramsey said.

"How's that?"

"I thought you were too old for my taste, a mature cougar, shall we say, but turns out you're a sly young minx. I hope C.J. knows what he has in you."

"I know perfectly well what I have in Payton. What's going on here?" Christian asked.

The other vampires scattered, some vanishing to other parts of the house, still others to outside. Ramsey sat straight up on the sofa, throwing a pillow over his lap to conceal his reaction to Payton's attention.

"I was teasing Ramsey. He owed me a big apology, and he wouldn't give me one. So I thought I'd work it out of him. I almost had him begging until you walked in and spoiled the fun," Payton said with a smirk on her face.

"Looks like she got her big apology. Did you enjoy it as much as she apparently did?"

Ramsey threw the pillow at Christian and cursed him under his breath. Christian dodged the missile and started laughing along with Payton.

"You evil wench. You were playing me, weren't you?" Ramsey asked, shaking his head.

"Of course. Paybacks are hell. That was for Elounda. Now we're even." She stretched out her hand to shake. "Friends?"

He embraced her instead. "Friends. Forever as One, Protector of All."

"What is that, a secret vampire pledge?" she asked.

"The oath of our coven. We fight as one to protect all that is good. We live by the solemn affirmation," Christian explained.

“I like it. You make me feel like I’m part of your family.”

“You are,” Christian said.

Glancing around behind him, she asked, “Where’s Jason? Didn’t he come back with you?”

“He saw Jean-Pierre when we pulled up and wanted to talk with him. He’ll be in shortly.”

“So everything went okay with the detectives questioning you? They seemed so sure you murdered that gang member. What did you say?” she asked.

“The truth. I didn’t murder anyone,” Christian said.

“You used your mind control, didn’t you?”

“You have to leave this alone, Payton. We’re going to take care of this our way now. The police don’t need to be involved. They think the murders were gang related, and they need to keep thinking that way for our protection.”

“But the killings weren’t gang related. You know the murders had to be Ian and his vampires. This isn’t what we agreed to do. If we found evidence, we would turn all of it over to the police to investigate. I thought you wanted to get Ian? I know where they’re hanging out.” She turned to Ramsey, saying, “Tell him Ramsey, and tell him how I figured it out.”

“Figured out what? What is she talking about?” Christian asked.

“She found Ian’s lair tonight. A vampire lair, anyway, don’t know if Ian is there. I had a couple of the boys check the place out. There are vampires inside with human and vampire guards floating around. We’ll get a firm confirmation tomorrow when Jean-Pierre checks the house out,” Ramsey explained.

Christian looked at Payton asking, “How?”

“Simple deduction.”

“She’s not only beautiful, she’s smart. You’ve got a gem, C.J., I’m jealous,” Ramsey declared.

Christian moved closer, pulled her up into his arms and gazed into her eyes. “I know. My decision is still made. Ian is mine.”

“Okay, for right now.”

“Hmm, you need to let this go, Payton.”

“Christian, your eyes are so intense.”

“Aye, they are going to turn red any second if ye’r not careful. Changing the subject won’t change my mind.”

“I’m not. Does the red mean you’re about to turn into your other side like the other night?” she asked grinning.

“Nay love, my eyes turn when I’m very aroused too.”

“Ah, why don’t you two get a room? I’m going to go find Jean-Pierre,” Ramsey said and left.

“Why don’t we go see about turning those eyes of yours scarlet?” she teased.

Chapter Eighteen

Christian led Payton to his bedroom, closed the door, and turned the lock. The bed had been turned down, and candles were strategically placed throughout. The amber flicker of the flames danced upon the walls.

“No way could you have known I would come to you tonight. How’d you do all this?” she asked, certain the answer would be based in vampire voodoo, the new term she liked to call his “special talents.” He had used a lot of his voodoo on her lately, and she thought it another of his courting techniques. The efforts to impress her didn’t go unnoticed.

“I didn’t know you would come to me. I thought maybe you did this.”

They looked at each other and then broke out in a simultaneous laugh. “Albert!” The staging of the bedroom employed no vampire voodoo, but the caring efforts of a loyal friend and employee.

“My fault, I’m afraid. Albert and I talked tonight, and I think he figured out I was probably going to forgive you for all your dastardly vampire doings,” Payton said.

“He is a hopeless romantic and believes in true love. Do you believe in me, my love?”

“I don’t think of you as a monster anymore, but the erasing of my memories is still disconcerting. I want to trust you not to do that to me again unless I say okay.”

“I can promise you.” He ran his fingers down her cheek and outlined her lips.

Closing her eyes, she swallowed hard. “I want to love you, Christian. With all my heart I do, but I...I’m afraid.” Damned afraid, as she noticed his eyes cast a deep red hue, glowing in the candlelight. How could he touch and kiss her without wanting to devour her?

“You can love me and not be afraid. I won’t hurt you.”

Christian covered her face with feathery kisses, and she reciprocated until their mouths met in a hot, wet, mutual confrontation. Their lips parted and tongues intertwined, exploring each other with strong, powerful strokes. Christian ripped off his shirt, buttons flying and fabric tearing, and he turned his attention to Payton, pausing, with his hands wrapped in her shirt.

“It’s only a T-shirt. I’ll buy another one,” she hissed.

Smiling, he tore the T-shirt from her chest into a mangled mass of stretched cotton falling to the floor. Next, he unclasped and removed her bra.

Scooping her into his arms, he carried her to the bed, laying her down gently. He gazed into her eyes a moment before he bent his head and kissed her aching, flushed breasts, cupping them in the palms of his hands, and titillating her hard nipples with his fingers. He flicked his wet tongue down her belly and circled the navel several times.

Payton moaned.

Straddling her hips, he unzipped her jeans, and lifted her buttocks to pull them down. He slipped off her panties, and she lay naked before him, ready when he lowered between her legs, kissing her gently on her moist, hard clit. She moaned from the skilled application of his tongue, shuddering in release.

Slowing his pace, he cleverly used his fingers slipping in and out between the slippery softness of her folds, only to prolong the pleasure, until she panted from the excitement of another climax. He inserted a finger then two; stroking her and stretching her with determination until he sensed that strong, lovely sensation begin to claim her again. She gasped as he plunged deep with such swiftness between her clitoris and the depths of her pulsating core. Arching her back, she moved her hips to keep rhythm with his movements. Her body quaked from the third release, and she let out a low squeal. He slowed his touch again.

“Do you want more, my goddess? Tell me you want me. Tell me.”

She locked her arms around his neck. “Oh, Christian,” she said breathlessly, “I need you now please take me.”

Christian shed his jeans and joined her on the bed. Gripping one leg then the other, he placed them over his shoulders, lifting her hips for the perfect angle to enter her fully. With one deep thrust, he filled her with one swift motion. Leaning forward, he kissed her hard and passionately. Moving slowly at first, he gradually rode her hard and fast. She slid her legs down, bending at the knees to accommodate him, and wrapped her ankles around his back. He delved deeper into her with each rhythmic push. She let out a scream of hot, wet abandonment with the fourth climax, which crested more intensely than the first three. He let out his own deep groan as his passion crested, and his fangs came down, his eyes blood red.

Payton sucked in a deep breath at seeing him in vampire form.

He grimaced, pulled out and fell down beside her. His fangs receded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

Immediately, she sat up and scooted back on the bed away from him. "Are you okay? You look...a little hungry?"

He shook his head. "I'm fine. I...I got a little carried away with yer sexy, responsive body. It's so sensual. I'm sorry I scared you, love. I won't hurt you."

"That's okay. I've never seen you as a vampire before, except for the night you told me. You know how to put on quite a show, mister." She decided not to let his display of his true self, the fangs and glowing, blood red eyes, bother her. He was who and what he was and couldn't change if he wanted too. She had to accept him because the alternative, living without him, would be unbearable. He actually hadn't lost control and bitten her, which made for a good thing. He'd shown restraint. She could trust him.

Moving closer, she took in the magnificent sight of him. Her young man from Elounda made her quiver, and she yearned for his body like no other man before. Her hand glided over his strong chest and down his taut, well-defined abdomen. She stopped at the area where he had been cut by the gang member.

"Did this hurt? Where that kid cut you the other night?"

“Nay, not really. After three hundred years, you become desensitized to the pain we go through as vampires. I’ve been cut, sliced, hung, burned, but the worst is going without blood for too long.”

“It’s that painful?”

“Like dying all over again. You’re enraged and would do anything, and I’m ashamed to say I have. When I first turned, I didn’t know how to hunt properly without being caught. I lived in fear and didn’t manage my prey very well. I went days, sometimes weeks, without feeding properly. Deprivation of blood is an excruciating hell to live in, one I never wish to repeat. Ian didn’t fare much better to our circumstances, since we were turned at the same time. We learned to hunt together, and we survived for many years hunting prey in tandem. That’s why our on-going conflict is hard for me. Why doing what I have to do is difficult for me.”

“You mean kill him? How do you kill a vampire, anyway?” Her hands continued to aimlessly wander over his body as he spoke.

“Aye. The most efficient way is to cut off their head or run them through the heart.” Then he added with a tone of regret, “Ian used to be my friend.”

She ran her fingers down a trail leading to the V of fine curly raven black hair above his groin. “Now I see why you carry swords instead of guns.”

Chuckling, he said, “A clean cut is surer than putting random holes in an enemy.”

She paused, and changing the subject, asking, “Do you become desensitized to the joys of pleasure over the years, as well?” She stroked his cock the full length, and even semi-flaccid, he was thick and long. She grinned as he flexed muscles causing a twitch.

“Nay, the joys of pleasure, especially by you, could never desensitize any man.” He groaned as he closed his eyes.

“My, God, you take my breath away.” She continued stroking him, tracing the pronounced vein pulsing on the surface. “How did it happen?”

“What? This? I was born with a big cock, lass. Made to please the women in my life.” He fell back on the bed pillow. “Don’t stop what you’re doing, love.”

She snorted. “Oh, you think you’re clever.” She squeezed him gently. “I meant what happened to ruin your friendship.”

“Do not toy with a man like that if all you want to do is talk instead of indulging in carnal pleasures.”

“I just want to get to know more about you. What carnal pleasures would you like to indulge in, Mr. MacKenzie?” She tickled him along his inner thighs and up under his balls, and then stretched out beside him, cradling her head on his shoulder.

“Love, I’ll give you all night to stop torturing me like that.”

“As long as you give me what I want in return.” She went back to stroking his growing erection. *He may be over three hundred years old, but he can perform and recover like no normal twenty-seven year old I ever knew.*

“I have to admit Ian was right about one thing. Ye’r a tough negotiator, Miss Fleming. Anything, anything you want is yers.” He turned to the side, propping up on his elbow.

“I told you what I want. Talk to me. Tell me about Ian.”

“He’s evil. Bad news. You need to stay away from him. End of story. Now let’s get back to the carnal pleasures.” He ran his fingers through her hair, pulling her close enough to kiss. “By the way, I haven’t told you yet. I like yer hair this way. It definitely suits you.”

“Thanks, but no changing the subject. Why aren’t you friends anymore? He couldn’t have been evil when you were friends, unless you were evil too?” She hesitated with the last part of her question. Maybe evil ruled him when he first transformed. He’d hinted as much earlier. He may have changed for the better while Ian never changed.

“Ye’r not going to let this go are you?”

“No and just to let you know I’m a woman used to getting what she wants once I set my mind to it.”

“I think I’ve figured that out. Okay. Ian and I were transformed the same day, and we were mercenaries for about fifty years. We parted ways, but I continued my fighting ways, and then I met Ramsey years later. He saved me. I had embarked on a path of self-destruction, and he

helped me find a way out. I owe him. He had recently been turned when I first met him. Like I said, he saved me.” He paused, and she could see the anguish on his face and in his eyes.

“You were very close for fifty years. I see why this conflict is troubling you. What happened to change your friendship?” she asked, brushing her fingers through his hair and snuggling her head on his shoulder. Telling his story caused him obvious pain. She could feel the tension in his body as she continued lightly stroking his body.

“He fell in love with Cassandra, Cassandra Saint Cevigny. A beautiful, sweet, young thing. Fresh, and wild-spirited, and a virgin. He became totally smitten by the raven-haired beauty. He eventually transformed her, and she changed in ways other than vampire. The wildness he loved, the wildness that had attracted him, intensified when she turned, and she took up with another vampire. Edward, I think was his name. He found them together, and he ripped them both to shreds, literally. He was never the same after that. I couldn’t be around him. His mood swings were unbearable. We eventually went our separate ways. Over the years, we would run into each other, and when we did, I noticed how his behavior became even more disturbing. He became a very dangerous vampire, bent on the old, traditional ways of hunting prey and killing for pleasure instead of only as needed for survival. Since the Vampire Blood Rage amongst the wealthy of the world has taken off in the past twenty-five years, he has become worse. That’s why vampires like myself banded together to bring vampires like Ian down. He can destroy all of us if the existence of our kind is made public. We will be hunted down and killed or experimented on in labs because of the healing powers in our blood. Now do you see why I want you to stay away from him?”

“I do understand and now I understand also, why you spiked my drink in Elounda. I blamed you for my sunburn, and you were trying to help. I’m sorry. You were doing something so sweet, and I thought you were being sinister. Can you ever forgive me?” She leaned over him within inches of his lips and reached a hand down to his groin, again touching his erection, stroking gently. She whispered, “What can I do to make this up to you, since you already gave me what I wanted?”

“You’ve already given me what I most want, yer love and acceptance for what I am. I want nothing more.” He paused and engaged her eyes with his. “We have all night to explore our wants and desires.”

He took her into his arms as he rolled to cover her with his body. Starting on her brow, he kissed down to her cheek, then to her ear, and sucked on her lobe. She ran her fingernails up and down his spine as he came to her neck, kissing gently and then taking small nibbles against her skin.

She got caught up in the moment, mesmerized by his gentle nibbling and quickly moving hands, massaging and titillating her skin from her breasts to thighs. She spread her legs in anticipation of him delivering the promised carnal pleasure.

Payton, I love you. I am with you now. She heard him whispering in her head. The unexpected voice jolted her. What vampire voodoo did he use on her this time? Similar to Elounda, yet different.

“Christian, what are you doing to me? I feel strange. I feel like I’m on fire, burning inside for you.” Her heart beat fast, and she could barely breathe. She wanted him to be inside her and to take her blood. *Oh, my God, I want him to bite me, now!*

“It’s okay, love, I won’t take yer blood if you do not want me to.” He nuzzled her cheek. “The urge will pass if you want it to.”

“No, I’m fine with this. I want you completely, and I want to remember everything. Take me, now.” She clenched her fists in the sheets beneath her, closed her eyes, and remembered what Albert had told her earlier—*free your mind and open your heart*. Payton decided to take his advice to the maximum. With a quickening of her breathing, calmness settled over her entire body.

“If you’re sure, then I will be gentle and make our blood exchange as pleasurable as possible.”

Placing hands on each side of her hips, he elevated them slightly and thrust the full measure into her very wet and sweet welcoming warmth. He stretched the delicate tissues to their limit,

and into the deepest regions. She arched her hips to meet his thrusts in a frenzy of yearning until she shuddered with a powerful orgasm underneath him. Throwing his head back, he continued to pump in and out, prolonging her pleasure. With flared nostrils, his fangs erupted, and he lunged toward her neck. The wetness of his tongue then the scrape of his sharp canines heated her flesh. Then...

With every stroke of his tongue sucking the sweet carmine liquid from her veins, she sensed the same pleasure of the thrusting between her thighs. They were in complete synchronization. The sensation sent her into another climax. Time seemed to stop.

I love you Payton, he whispered in her head.

"I love you, too."

He pulled away from her neck. She opened her eyes and saw her blood just as he licked the remaining traces from his lips. He told her, "I hope the experience gave you pleasure, love."

"I didn't feel you bite me. I think every nerve ending shifted into hypersensitive mode because when you touched me an electric pulse of exquisite pain waved through me. I think I could have been shot and I would have felt pleasure instead of pain. You didn't try to erase the memory did you?"

"Nay, any pain should only be felt as pleasurable. That's the whole idea. Like doing this." He ran his fingers over her nipples, and she quivered. "Or doing this." His hand grazed her belly down to her swollen clit.

"Oh, you naughty boy. You're going to make me come again, aren't you?" She closed her eyes and moaned.

"If that's what you want, I shall obey my goddess." He sat up and pulled her up onto his lap.

She maneuvered her way onto his still erect penis, and wrapping her arms around his neck, she pressed into him. He grabbed her hips and guided her with each penetrating thrust.

"Christian," she gasped, struggling to speak. "I want to taste your blood."

He jolted back. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I told you I wanted to know you completely."

His fangs came down, and he bit into his wrist. Blood dripped from the two punctures, and he brought the wounds to her face. She embraced his arm and pulled his wrist to her mouth, hesitating as she felt the wet liquid touch her lips. Swallowing hard and taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and pressed him closer. The metallic taste was not offensive as she thought it would be. Not much different than her own blood when she would cut her finger and sucked the cut to stop the bleeding.

Her tongue swirled around the puncture wounds, licking the blood from them. The thick liquid made her mouth tingle, and the feeling shimmered down her body in an erotic wave. His clever hand found its way to her clitoris and twiddled with the tiny nub until swollen and bringing her to another cataclysmic orgasm. He continued pumping into her, his eyes becoming blood red, heading toward his own release. She dropped his arm and embraced his neck. Her mind went fuzzy, and she felt light-headed. *Did it come from him or...?*

God help her, she loved his blood, despite how repulsive the thought of drinking someone's blood had been before she met him. Every nerve ending in her body shuddered with pleasure. She wanted more. He responded to her needs with strong and frantic thrusts. She felt his eminent release with a sudden swelling against her tender tissues. He ground against her, and she cried out. His climax merged with hers and filled her with warmth and contentment. For an instant they merged into one complete being, perfect in every way, before collapsing breathlessly into each other's arms.

"That was incredible!" She looked at him, smiling. Her body still quivered uncontrollably from the sensual pleasures of their lovemaking. "For an old man, you are the best lover I have ever had. Your vampire voodoo is working overtime. More than in Elounda."

"I hid my true self back then. I'm now free to love fully, and you to love me. I used no, what did you call it, voodoo?"

"Yes, what else would you call it?"

"Mmm, magic, like our love?"

“Or a drug. Oh, Christian, I’m afraid my body and mind are becoming addicted to you. I can’t live without you. I’d die.”

He stiffened, releasing his embrace, and stared up at the ceiling.

“What’s the matter? Did I say something wrong?”

With the look he gave her, she definitely sensed something troubled him. He appeared sad, seeing a far-away expression in his eyes. “I do not ever want to hurt you. I couldn’t bear to see you die, never to see you again to share my life with yers. I just found you.”

“The only way would be to...kill me and change me, right?”

“Aye and I’d never do that without yer approval. Transition to vampire is not an easy choice to make. Either way, I could lose you, my beautiful goddess.”

“No, I can’t imagine that happening. The choice would be difficult, but—you know let’s not think about this right now. It’s late, and I’m not planning on going anywhere anytime soon. I’m with you now and that’s all that matters. We can talk about all this serious stuff tomorrow.” She lay down beside him and nestled her head on his chest with his arm around her, holding her tight.

She soon drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

A knock on the bedroom door woke Payton from her sound sleep. Disoriented for a brief moment, she wasn’t sure where she was until she remembered Christian lay next to her. She sat up and looked down at the slumbering, beautiful man. He looked so peaceful. She brushed his cheek with her knuckles. He didn’t feel dead, but then, she’d never felt a dead person.

Another knock on the door, and a voice this time.

“Payton, hey, you awake in there?” Jason said softly.

“Give me a minute,” she said softly. Afterwards, she wondered why they were whispering. The vampires weren’t going to wake up no matter how loudly they talked. She snorted. *Where are my clothes? In shreds!* “Aagh!”

Snatching the sheet off the bed, she wrapped the linen around her body, and went to answer the door, slightly cracking it open.

“Hey, good morning,” she said.

“Good morning, sleepy head. You okay?” Jason asked.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Jean-Pierre and I have been making plans for the day. I wanted to run them by you. Can you join us and give your input?”

“Let me take a shower first,” she said with a nod.

After closing the door, she looked over at Christian. He wore lounge pants. He must have put them on sometime during the night while she slept. She’d tuck that away in her mind—he doesn’t like to sleep naked.

“Now where would Albert put my clothes if he assumed I moved into Christian’s room?” She rummaged through the dresser drawers and found her underwear in the middle one. Smiling at first, as she pulled out a pair of panties and bra, only to frown when she realized Albert had touched her lingerie. *Oh dear, this could be embarrassing.*

Padding quietly to the walk-in, she hoped to see her other clothes hanging there. She found a pair of jeans and a white button down shirt. They would have to do.

Jason and Jean-Pierre were seated at the breakfast bar in the kitchen, speaking with Albert, when Payton shuffled in.

“Sorry, I slept late. I need my caffeine fix. Any coffee made?”

“I’ve made a fresh pot, *French Roast*. Is that a strong enough fix for you?” Jason asked.

“Mmm, my favorite. So, what’s on tap for the day gentlemen, vanquish a vampire or two?” she asked half-joking, still mildly sleep besotted—the night had been a long and exhausting. Pleasantly exhausting. *Damn! I’m sore. I have muscles I didn’t know I had.*

“Actually, you’re not too far from the truth. Jean-Pierre and I have been talking about how we can get into Ian’s lair without being caught. You found it. Maybe you can come up with a brilliant idea to get inside.”

“Yeah, sure, like I’m supposed to know how to penetrate the stronghold of a powerful vampire. I’ll just pull the solution out of my copy of *How to Kill Vampires for Dummies* I picked up last week.”

“*Ma chéri*, someone wrote a book on how to kill vampires?” Jean-Pierre asked, seriously.

Jason and Payton looked at each other and laughed. “No, I was kidding. No such book is published,” she said, snickering.

“Oh, you made a little joke. I see. Ha-ha. The joke is on Jean-Pierre, *non*?”

“No, I didn’t mean to make fun of you, Jean-Pierre.” She walked around the bar and gave him a kiss on his cheek. He blushed.

“Miss Payton, would you like something to eat? I can fix you anything you like,” Albert said.

“That’s so sweet, but not necessary. I’m good with the coffee, thanks. Gentlemen, I think I do have an idea about getting in to see Ian’s lair. Albert, is my laptop still in the living room?”

“No, Miss, I put everything in your bedroom. I’ll get it for you.”

“What do you have in mind, *ma chéri*?”

“Let me check something first, and then I’ll fill you in.”

Albert returned with the laptop. Payton settled onto the couch and booted up the computer. She typed in several entries and exclaimed excitedly over the results. “It’ll work. Gentlemen, I know how to get us in the house.”

“So, tell us already,” Jason demanded.

“The property is still listed for sale. Jason, you’re going to be my client, and I’ll be showing Ian’s place to you. I have to think about how to orchestrate a legitimate showing. If I can’t, we’ll play dumb and show up, take pictures, and be in and out. I think we can pull this off. Are you game?” she asked.

Jason contemplated the idea. “Hmm. You know I think your plan might work. What about the guards? They won’t be cooperative and probably suspicious.”

“I can take care of them. I can cause a diversion while you two are inside. Do you think you can work quickly?” Jean-Pierre asked.

“Yes, I think we can. Don’t you think we can, Jason?” She looked at him.

“Sure, in and out, as long as Jean-Pierre can create a good diversion and keep the guards away from us long enough.”

“Don’t worry about me. I can cause great diversions. When do you want to do this? I’m ready to go now.”

“Let me make a call.” Payton walked to her bedroom to use her cell phone and returned a few minutes later, a smile on her face.

“We have a go. I have the security gate code and according to the agent, the house is vacant. Ian must be using his vampire voodoo on the agent, huh?” she quipped. “Now I have to figure out what to wear. I don’t have anything here that’s appropriate. What about you Jason?”

“What’s wrong with this?” he asked.

“Jason, are you serious? Jeans and a T-shirt? This is a multi-million dollar property, and you are a prospective buyer. You have to look the part. I do too. I need to go to my condo.”

“Do you think that is wise, Payton? What if your place is bugged or some of Mr. McAlester’s people are waiting there for you?” Albert asked.

“What can happen in the middle of the day? Besides, my building has security. No one can get in without them knowing.”

“I’ll go with her, and we’ll stop at my house and get something more appropriate for me to wear. We can’t upset Little Miss Fashionista here,” Jason said reluctantly.

With a stern cut with her eyes, she said, “Be nice, Jason.”

“I don’t think Mr. Sir is going to be happy with you doing this without his knowledge. Venturing into a sleeping vampire’s den is extremely dangerous. Especially for a human,” he said glaring over at Jason and Jean-Pierre.

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. He’s sleeping just like Ian, and we’ll be back before he wakes. Don’t worry, Albert. We’ll be okay,” she said confidently.

“Albert, I’ve known her for years. When she makes up her mind to do something, she doesn’t change. She usually gets what she wants. You learn to go with the flow,” Jason said and snorted.

Chapter Nineteen

Three hours later, Payton and Jason returned to the Ocean Boulevard house. Getting appropriate attire for Jason took no time, but for Payton the never-ending story of finding the appropriate outfit plagued her. She couldn't decide on a dressy business suit or casual business dress. Jason offered no help. A black pencil skirt with white cotton shirt and hot pink pumps won out.

"What happened to the two of you? I began to think you were backing out of the plan," Jean-Pierre said when they finally returned.

"No, Little Miss Fashionista here couldn't make up her mind what to wear," Jason quipped.

"Jason, be nice. I have to look the part." She cut him with her gaze again. "I look good, don't I?"

"You certainly do, *ma chéri*," Jean-Pierre commented. "You will no doubt charm the pants right off the guards. You can be the diversion. Forget about me," he teased with a snicker.

"You are such a sweet man," she said, kissing him on the cheek. She couldn't figure out what seemed different about him. Suave and debonair, he acted like any stereotypical Frenchman she'd read about, but he had an air about him, something else she couldn't quite put her finger on. Maybe his air of confidence came from all the years working for Christian.

"You know this is dangerous, and if Christian knew you were doing it, he would be upset. Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Jean-Pierre asked.

"He's right, Payton. Jean-Pierre and I can do this," Jason said.

"Yeah, right. Just how do you think you two could get in the house disguised as an agent and client without my expertise? No, my plan is the only way for us to get the pictures and layout

of the house, so Christian and the others can get in and vanquish Ian and his vampires,” she insisted.

“Okay then, are we ready to rock and roll?” Jason asked.

“I have one thing to take care of. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

After excusing herself, she left for Christian’s bedroom. She hadn’t seen him since that morning and had been thinking about him all day. She tiptoed into the room and noticed he had not moved.

“Why am I tiptoeing? He can’t hear me. Duh, Payton.” She walked toward the bed and gazed down on her young man. He may have been nearly three hundred years old, but he still looked young and always would. She ran her fingers over his cheek. Yes, he would always look this handsome and young, unlike her. That truth still nagged at the back of her mind. No amount of love could erase that reality.

Bending over, she placed a kiss on his cheek. “Sleep tight, my love. I’ll be back before you wake up.”

* * * *

The entrance gate of the Sheik’s property was a white painted closure flanked by Roman god statues, naked with private parts painted neon colors. Payton entered the security code and the gate opened.

“Ian didn’t change the code. Good so far.”

Clear of the gate, she stopped the car. Turning to the backseat, she watched Jean-Pierre slip out and noticed a quick flicker through the heavily tinted back window as a car slowly drove by. *Who would be slowing down like that?*

“I’ll see you later, *mes amis*,” he said. “Don’t do anything until you hear my diversion.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“You’ll know just wait.” He jogged off across the lawn, ducking and hiding behind shrubs, working his way toward the house.

Payton turned to Jason. "Are you ready?" He nodded. "Then let's do this."

She parked the car in the driveway. No sign of any guards. Obviously, they didn't expect visitors during the day. If they were guarding Ian and his other vampires, they were inside. The vampires were tucked away and sleeping. She took a deep breath and let the warm, steady air out. *I must be crazy to do this.* What did she hope to prove? Infiltrating a group of vampire guards was a suicide mission.

The lockbox containing the house key hung on the front door. She opened the metal door to the key box, removed the key, and slid it into the lock.

"Don't you want to ring the bell?" Jason asked.

"The agent said the house was vacant, remember. Why would I ring the bell? Play along with this, Jason. We'll look surprised if and when someone shows up."

"Oh, we're going to play dumb. You got this out of your Dummies Book, right?"

She glared back at him. "Be nice, Jason." She opened the door, slowly.

"Okay, Mr. Worth, here we go. Please come on in. I think you will like this property," she announced, playing her part. "Let me show you around." She nudged him forward into the foyer, then turned and closed the door behind them.

The sound of footsteps on the marble floor and a gun ratcheting stopped them cold.

"Who are you?" a deep voice asked from behind them.

They slowly turned and faced the tall, burly man who'd spoken. He stood no shorter than six feet, broad shouldered, and dressed in khakis and a black T-shirt.

"Ah, I'm Payton Fleming with Luxury Properties. This is my client, and I was told this property was vacant. There must have been a misunderstanding." She spoke with a hesitation and a high-pitched voice, showing her fear. She searched through her handbag. "I have a business card. I can show you my ID to prove who I am."

"Look, lady, you're not supposed to be here. You can show me all the IDs you want, but my boss is the new owner. He just hasn't closed on the property yet. He's going to be very upset if

he finds out I've let anyone in here without his permission. I suggest you leave right now. I really don't want to have to call the police."

"This is really strange. I spoke with the listing agent earlier, and she didn't say anything about this property being sold or even under contract. As a matter-of-fact, she said the property is annotated as available and vacant. Here is my card. I'm here with my client, and he's expecting to see this property." She handed a card to the guard. He looked curiously at her, to the card and back, and then radioed to another guard.

A voice responded through the radio. "I'll be right there."

"What's going on now?" she asked.

"You will wait here for my supervisor. Do not move." He kept the gun focused on them.

This goon missed a few brain cells. Ian sure knew how to pick them. He wanted brawn and no brains. *Where were Jean-Pierre and the diversion he'd promised?*

The owner of the voice from the radio appeared around the corner. "Who the hell are you two, and how'd you get through the security gate?" He spoke with a Spanish accent and didn't appear to have more brain cells than the first lackey, but maybe more brawn.

"I guess I could ask the same of you. As I explained to your buddy here, I'm Payton Fleming, and this is my client, and I'm showing him this property. The listing agent informed me the property is supposed to be vacant. So who are you and why are *you* here?" she demanded.

"I ask the questions here. The misunderstanding is obviously your problem. This house is not available. You need to leave."

"Payton, this bully is not going to get away with this, is he?" Jason piped up. "I want to see this house. I love this wallpaper and the naked statues, oooh, be still my beating heart. You have to get them to let us see this house, Miss Payton." His lispy effeminate voice almost made her laugh. His hand gestures were a nice touch too. A lot of concentration on her part to keep from grinning, including biting her bottom lip, almost didn't work, so she turned away from the two guards to keep from blowing their cover. She found Jason playing his part too easily meant there

had to be a story somewhere behind this aptitude, one she wanted to hear at a time she wasn't scared to death.

Gunshots rang out. Payton jolted back into Jason's arms. *Jean-Pierre's diversion?* The two guards, startled, turned to a new guard running into the house through French doors off the living room.

"There are two of them! Carlos, we need help. What do we do?" the new guard yelled.

"Manuel, two of what?" Carlos, the supervisor, asked.

"Lobos. Huge ones! Two black ones. They came running out of the underbrush and attacked. Julio is pinned down, and I think he might be dead. We need your help." Manuel ran back out.

Carlos turned to Payton and Jason. "You two leave now!" To Luis he said, "You check the bedrooms and make sure they haven't been disturbed while I take care of this." Payton watched as Carlos ran out the door, and Luis began searching the house.

Two Lobos! Could that be Jean-Pierre's diversion? Could the wolf be Jean-Pierre? Not unless he was a werewolf, and there are no such beings. Could things get any stranger than vampires? If vampires are real, maybe werewolves were too. A schizophrenic werewolf? One for Jean and one for Pierre? Oh God, Payton, you're losing it.

She shook herself out of it. They had to take advantage of the opportunity presented. The two guards didn't have any brain cells and had left her and Jason standing there in the foyer, unattended, expecting them to see their own way out. *Yeah, right.*

"I'll take this side, you check out the right wing. Avoid that Luis guy and be back here in five minutes, no more. I don't know how long Jean-Pierre can keep these guys occupied. Five minutes, Payton," Jason told her. "Got it?"

"Got it, *sweet cakes*." She said "sweet cakes" imitating the effeminate tone he used earlier. "I didn't know you had that kind of talent in you." Nervous pent-up giggles accompanied her simper.

“Janice and I used to role play. That doesn’t leave this house. I have a reputation to uphold,” he told her sternly.

As she walked down the hallway, she said, “Your secret’s safe with me, *sweet cakes*.” She giggled as she took pictures with her cell phone camera.

She hurried down a long hallway to a bedroom wing. The doors were closed. Approaching the first one, she slowly opened it. There were a couple of vampire bodies inside. She clicked off a picture and quickly stepped back into the hallway and went to the next room. There were three rooms along the hallway, with several bodies in each.

Two minutes left. A set of double doors appeared at the end of the hall. The master bedroom? She rushed to the doors and took a quick photo, and then slowly turned the knob. They were not locked. She surmised that Ian had to be in the room. His arrogance dictated his behavior, only the best for him.

The massive doors implied a similar scale existed in the room beyond. She clicked off pictures to show the details, unsure of exactly how many were needed. More seemed best. Not one sliver of light shone in the dark room. Using the screen of the cell phone, she lit the way into the blackness. As she stepped around the corner, faint light filtered through several draped windows to give her the sense of the vastness of the room. The large canopied bed came into view. There he lay, sleeping, dead to the world. Ian McAlester, the monster who killed her friend, the creep who probably had Maritsa killed, and the other people caught in the wake of his nocturnal killing spree. She stepped closer, not taking her eyes off him.

Standing over him, she thought how easy it would be to kill Ian while he slept. So vulnerable, with no one to protect him. All their lives would be so much easier if she took care of the problem. The dilemma posed, however, was how to deliver the final message to him. Christian said the only way to kill a vampire was to cut off the head or stab one in the heart. What should she use? A cell phone? A ballpoint pen? She didn’t think they would be too effective.

The sound of doors opening and closing outside in the hallway broke her thoughts of killing Ian. *The guard had gotten around to checking the bedrooms.* She panicked. Hiding under the bed didn't offer a viable solution. No doubt, the first place they'd look. In the bed, under the covers? *No freakin' way. The closet!*

Turning quickly to find the closet, she stumbled, hitting her ankle against something hard. *Dammit! It's too dark in here!* She turned the phone light toward the floor so she could see where she stepped. Ian's broadsword. "Great, now I find a weapon," she whispered.

With the aid of the light of the phone, she shuffled along the floor. The searching guards grew closer, opening and closing the doors along the hallway outside the bedroom. They would enter the room shortly. She saw another door. *Let this be the closet, please.* Fortunately, the correct guess allowed her to slip in quietly. From what she could tell, not many places were available to hide behind. Some clothes were hanging on the rack, but not many, a few slacks, jackets, and shirts, from what she could see. Small boxes, shoes, and a messy pile of discarded clothes covered the floor. She went to the far corner and slumped down, becoming as small as possible, and pulled some of the discarded clothes up to hide behind.

The double doors to the bedroom opened, followed by footsteps crushed against the shag carpet. One of the boxes shifted and made a noise. *Oh God!* No words were spoken, but she heard hissing. Was the heavy breathing her own or the unknown person standing outside the closet door? She held her breath, heart pounding in her chest so hard it hurt. *Go away.*

They didn't go away. The closet door opened. She stiffened. A small sliver of light peeked through the clothes she had piled on top of her. *Oh, God, they had a flashlight.* Were they going to see her? A crackly voice from a radio broke the silence.

"Luis, the cops are here. Get back here now. They're banging on the door, demanding to come in. I need back up." She recognized the voice as Carlos.

"I'll be right there," Luis told the squeaky voice and closed the closet door.

She was safe for the time being.

Gunshots rang out. She leapt to her feet, clothes flying, and crept slowly toward the door, listening closely. This was always the scene in movies where the heroine got lured into believing the bad guy didn't see her hiding. He pretends to walk away, only to jump out and catch her. Except that only happened in the movies, not real life. She'd heard him leave, followed by the popping sound of gunfire. Jason and Jean-Pierre were being shot at? Or had the police arrived to save everyone? Wishful thinking on her part. Who would have called the police? A neighbor? Unlikely with the distance between those luxury homes. The gunfire had to be the exchange between Jean-Pierre and the guards. His diversion? Either way, they'd find her and save her from this mess.

Several minutes of silence followed. Did the cops subdue Ian's lackeys? Or, God forbid, the peons subdued Jason, Jean-Pierre, and the cops? Why didn't she listen to Albert? This was a crazy plan, and she should have stayed away from Ian. How would she get out of this closet and back to the safety of Christian's arms?

A door opened, footsteps on the carpet, and then the closet door flew open. She stood there, paralyzed in the beam of a flashlight. The man standing before her was not Jason, not Jean-Pierre, and definitely not the police. Slowly raising her head, Carlo's slightly relieved countenance met her gaze.

"There you are," he said.

"I told you I heard something in here earlier," Luis said.

"Well, *chica*, the boss will take care of you when he rises." Carlos grabbed her arm and ushered her out of the closet. He dragged her across the room and out the double doors toward the main part of the house. "You've made a little problem for us, Miss Fleming, or whatever your name is." He pushed her down on the black, patent-leather couch in the living room. She fell back but righted herself, flattening her skirt down from where it had ridden up high on her thighs.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked, trying to stay calm.

“Mr. McAlester will take care of you in about an hour. Until then, sit there and be quiet,” Carlos ordered.

An hour? Which meant sunset was close. Ian and his entourage of vampires would be awake. *Oh God!* She would be at the mercy of a monster, a murderer. Christian would be awake, too, and he would know she was in trouble and come for her.

Scanning the room, she counted four guards, including Carlos. There must be others outside, but how many? There were ten vampires including Ian when she’d counted those in the bedrooms. That didn’t include any Jason may have counted on his side of the house.

Carlos didn’t search her handbag, which held her cell phone. She could contact the outside world for help. Slipping her hand into the handbag, she felt around for her phone. Keeping an eye on her captors’ movements, she waited until no one looked at her and glimpsed into her bag to see the number keys. She punched in the phone number for Jason’s cell phone. She started to talk as soon as it started to ring to mask his voice when he answered and for him to know where she was.

“Carlos, that’s your name, right?” She tried to start a conversation with the head guard. “I think we have a big misunderstanding here. I’m not sure what’s going on, but it appears my client bugged out on me when the trouble started. I can’t blame him. When I heard gunshots, I panicked and ran for cover. I can—” She tried to ramble on. Unfortunately, Carlos would not allow her to talk, and cut her off mid-sentence.

“Enough of your mindless chatter. You will wait here and let Mr. McAlester decide whether you can go. Now shut up and be quiet, or I’ll take care of you myself.”

“Okay. I’ll be quiet, but I think you’re making a big mistake.”

Chapter Twenty

Jason finished taking his pictures of the left wing of the house and returned to the foyer in the five minutes he allotted. *Where are you Payton?* Maybe she had finished and went outside already. He stepped outside the front door, and Detective Gutierrez confronted him.

“Detective, what are you doing here?” Jason asked, surprised to see him.

“Ochoa and I have been tailing you and Miss Fleming. Where is she, inside?” the detective asked.

“No, she was supposed to be out here.”

Gunfire rang out. The two men were startled and jumped back from the front door, running toward Payton’s parked car in the driveway.

“What direction did that come from?” Jason asked. “Could you tell?”

“Sounded like from the rear. What’s going on?”

“How should I know? Payton was showing me the property. I wanted to see where Janice died, and we were accosted by a couple of oversized goons. The listing agent told her the place was vacant, and these guys with assault rifles attacked us.”

“So where’s Miss Fleming?”

“I don’t know. She must still be in the house. We have to go and get her out of there.” Jason started up, but Gutierrez stopped his forward momentum.

“No, not until Ochoa and I assess the situation. Do you know how many of these so-called goons are in there?”

“Three, maybe more. Ochoa? Where’s he at?”

“He went around back.”

“Uh, maybe he ran into others; that’s the gunfire we’re hearing.”

“Maybe.”

A few moments later, Ochoa and Jean-Pierre came slinking up like wild animals seeking their prey, adjusting their clothes.

Gutierrez drew his Beretta. “Who’s that with you, Ochoa?”

“This here is Jean-Pierre.”

“Where did he come from?” Gutierrez asked.

“He’s with me,” Jason said.

“And with me,” Ochoa seconded.

“He was in the car? How did we miss him?” Gutierrez asked.

“I slipped out after coming through the gate and hid behind the bushes, *mon ami*.”

“We followed you for several miles. I’m not surprised; you can’t see anything through the back window tint,” Gutierrez said.

“Where is *ma chéri*, Jason?” Jean-Pierre asked changing the subject.

“I think she’s still inside.”

“Oh, *mon Dieu, non!* We have to get her out before Ian awakes. We don’t have much time. It’s almost sundown!” Jean-Pierre exclaimed.

“I know we don’t. I think we’re outnumbered and out gunned. You have any ideas?”

“What are you two talking about, almost sundown? Is Ian, Ian McAlester?” Gutierrez asked.

“Yeah, the murderous bastard killed my wife! Payton could be next if we don’t get her out of this house before the sun goes down!” Jason exclaimed.

“We’ve found no evidence to prove Mr. McAlester had anything to do with your wife’s murder, Mr. Worth.” Gutierrez stated.

“As far as I’m concerned, he’s guilty until proven innocent. Look, you’re the cops, bang on the door and demand to gain entrance and get Payton out of there before Ian kills her too.”

“All right, let me handle this. Ochoa, come with me.” The two detectives walked up to the front door and knocked. No answer. They knocked again and Gutierrez announced loudly, “This

is the Miami Beach Police Department, please open the door!” No response. They knocked again. This time the door cracked open slightly and Carlos answered.

“What can I do for you officer?”

“That’s Detective Gutierrez to you, not officer. There were reports of gunshots and that a Miss Payton Fleming is being held hostage at this address. We would like to come in and see if she’s on the premises.”

“There were no gunshots, and no Miss Fleming is here. Unless you have a warrant, you’re not invited in, *Detective*,” Carlos said.

“Sir, I am going to have to insist,” Gutierrez pressed.

“Sorry, I’m under strict orders not to allow anyone in.” With that, Carlos mumbled some expletives in Spanish and slammed the door.

“I think we got our answer. We need to regroup and call for back up,” Gutierrez said.

“I agree. We need to get Christian and the others,” Jean-Pierre said.

“I don’t know who this Christian dude is, but we’re calling the MBPD,” Gutierrez retorted.

“No, we can’t leave Payton here. Ian will kill her,” Jason cried.

“*Mon ami*, we have no choice. They outnumber us. We need Christian, and he’ll know what to do. He won’t let anything happen to her.”

“Who is this Christian?” Gutierrez asked.

Jason glared at Gutierrez. “Who is Christian? Christian MacKenzie, my client, you interrogated him for the murders.”

“I did? I don’t remember any interrogation.” He turned to Ochoa. “Did we interrogate a Christian MacKenzie?”

“Let me look through my notepad, but I don’t think so.” He flipped through his notepad as they raced back toward their car on the outside of the property gates.

“This is absurd. I’m calling for back-up,” Gutierrez said as he flipped out his cell phone to dial.

Ochoa grabbed Gutierrez's hand "No, Mike. Trust me on this one. We can't call in reinforcements yet."

Gutierrez glared at Ochoa. "This is bullshit. They refused to let us in and called...you know. I'm not going to piss off the Captain and break protocol just because you say so."

"Mike, since when have you known me to ever steer you wrong? Trust me on this. Give these guys a chance to explain."

For a few agonizing moments Gutierrez glared at Ochoa. He gazed at the other two men a quick look over and then turned back to Ochoa. "Fine. If we get to wherever we're going and nothing happens, I'm calling for backup to cover my ass."

"Fair enough," Ochoa said.

"Let's just get out of here," Jason said, grateful to Ochoa, knowing they'd violated standard police procedures.

"Where are we going, by the way?" Gutierrez asked.

"5367 Ocean Boulevard. Make it fast, we have less than an hour," Jean-Pierre said.

"What happens in an hour?" Gutierrez asked.

"You'll find out. Now floor it," Jason said. "By the way, what did that guy say to you before the door slammed? The few words I did understand didn't sound too nice."

Gutierrez snarled and didn't say a word.

Ochoa snorted and said, "The guy called his mother a whore and him a gay bitch because he dressed like one."

Jean-Pierre, Jason, and Ochoa broke out laughing. Gutierrez muttered, "You have room to talk, fashion sense coming from a stuffed shirt attorney and two scruffy, chubby guys."

The other three paused, looked at each other, and then all four of them started laughing. The tension among them broke. Gutierrez pressed the pedal to the floor.

Jason's phone rang, and he saw Payton's number display.

“Payton?” he asked, but then heard her talking in a muffled voice. She talked to the guard named Carlos. Relieved for the moment that she was still alive, Jason knew that might not be true for much longer.

Chapter Twenty-one

The sun neared the horizon when the four men pulled through the wrought-iron gate to the Ocean Boulevard property, speeding down the winding driveway to the house set far back from the main road.

Jason jumped out of the passenger's side before the engine cut off and ran into the house. The mortal guards recognized him and Jean-Pierre and did not retain them at the door, waving them through the security barriers. Gutierrez and Ochoa followed.

Albert greeted them. "Where have you two been? Where is Payton?" He paused, looking at the two strangers who walked in behind them. "Who are these two?"

"Don't worry about them right now. Is Christian awake yet?" Jason asked.

"No, sir, I haven't heard him stir."

Jason began to pace the floor; sundown could not come fast enough. Christian had to wake soon so they could make plans to rescue Payton. How would he explain the unfortunate mess-up that caused their plan to go awry?

Albert didn't accept being brushed off when he asked who the two strangers were. He walked up to the two men and introduced himself. "I'm Albert, Mr. MacKenzie's personal assistant. May I ask who you are?"

"Detective Gutierrez," the first stranger said, extending his hand.

The other replied, "Detective Ochoa," extending his hand as well.

"Detectives? You are here because?" Albert asked. Turning to Jason, he said, "You want to explain?"

"No, he's a nervous wreck. I can explain," Gutierrez replied tersely. "In short, we were tailing Mr. Worth and Miss Fleming and followed them to a previous crime scene. It appears she

has gone and got herself kidnapped by some gun toting creeps. Does that pretty much sum things up, Mr. Worth?”

“Yeah, yeah. That sounds about right.” He still fidgeted and paced.

“What does he mean gun toting creeps kidnapped Payton, Jason?” Albert asked, turning to Jean-Pierre. “What does he mean?”

“*Merde*, Christian is going to be pissed with us. We left her unprotected at the house with Ian and his other vampires. We need to rescue her before Ian harms her.”

“Holy *merde* is more like it. Mr. Sir is really going to be upset. I knew your plan was risky. Let me go check and see if he is awake.” He said the last hurrying off.

Ramsey and the other vampires made their way into the living area where Jason, Jean-Pierre, and the two detectives were gathered. Jason still paced the floor nervously.

“Hey, guys, what’s up?” Ramsey asked, stretching. “Jason, you up for checking out Ian at his club tonight? To gather evidence against him?”

Jason stopped pacing and stared at Ramsey like a deer caught in a car’s headlights.

“Bro, what did I say? What’s wrong with you?” Ramsey noticed Jean-Pierre’s expression, not much different from Jason’s. “*Et tu*, Jean-Pierre? Better yet, who the hell are you two?” Ramsey asked as the two detectives came around the corner from the kitchen. He drew his broadsword from the sheath strapped along his back.

Gutierrez and Ochoa drew their respective side arms. The other vampires, seeing Ramsey and the detectives, drew their swords—the proverbial Mexican Stand-off followed.

Jason pulled back in shock. Jean-Pierre jumped in and shouted, “Whoa, *mes amis*, put down your weapons, we are all friends here. Ramsey, this is Detective Gutierrez and Detective Ochoa, they helped us at Ian’s lair.”

“What were you doing at Ian’s lair? What’s wrong with you, Jason?”

Jason turned and walked into the kitchen without saying a word.

"I know something is wrong. His heart's racing, and he's sweating like a pig. Someone want to tell me what's really going on?" He glanced at the two detectives, then back at Jean-Pierre. "Someone is missing."

Albert returned, asking, "Have you been informed about Payton, Ramsey?"

"I was just about to ask. I noticed she wasn't here. Where is she?" Ramsey glared at Jean-Pierre.

"Uh, we had to leave her. She didn't get out in time, and the day guards must have found her. We had no choice. We came back to wait until you and Christian awakened," Jean-Pierre explained, cowering as he spoke.

Jason walked back in the room. "This is entirely my fault. If I hadn't insisted we split up, none of this would have happened. C.J. is going to kill me. Payton is..." He didn't finish. Christian walked in.

"Payton is what? Where is she?" Christian asked, and then saw the detectives. "Would someone like to explain why these two are here?"

"Do we need to wear signs?" Gutierrez asked. "For the third time, we were following Miss Fleming and Mr. Worth and ended up at what turns out to be this Ian dude's lair, as you people call it. Does that answer everyone's question once and for all?"

"Jean-Pierre?" Christian glared at him, looking for an explanation, with his eyes turning an intense emerald green.

"*Mon Dieu*, I am so sorry. I did not protect *ma chéri*, but the guards were more than we expected. An unexpected distraction interrupted my diversion." He paused and glanced in the direction of Detective Ochoa. "I had to break off the diversion because the unexpected arrival caught me unprepared, which put our Payton in grave peril."

"Payton is where?"

"She's at Ian's lair and managed to call and alert me of her status. She's alive, and I think safe for now. We can rescue her. That's why we came back here to get you," Jason explained sheepishly.

“Dammit! Who let her go there? Jean-Pierre, what were you thinking?” Christian nostrils flared and eyes glowed red.

“Mr. Sir, I know you don’t want to hear this, but the plan was actually her idea,” Albert interjected with his calm voice. “She knew the risk involved. Jean-Pierre and Jason both did not want her to go, but she insisted. She’s very strong-willed as you know. All you can do now is go get her and hope and pray Ian has done no harm to her.”

“He’s right, bro, let’s go,” Ramsey said. “She’s strong and a tough cookie. Payton is a smart and resourceful woman. Maybe she’s hiding out somewhere in the house. Keep the faith. She’ll keep her wits about her until we can get there. I’m sure of it.”

Christian smiled bleakly, not totally reassured by Ramsey’s comments.

“Hold on here,” Detective Gutierrez retorted. “This is a police matter. I’m calling for back-up, and we can get Miss Fleming out of there. Ochoa, you haven’t shown me anything as of yet to convince me not to call in reinforcements. These men aren’t trained for this. We don’t need any innocent people harmed or put in danger.”

Jean-Pierre turned to Ochoa and said, “My friend, I think it is time to divulge our special talents to your colleague so he can see the inadvisability of introducing further human intervention.”

Gutierrez looked at his partner, “What’s he talking about?”

“I have to tell you something I’ve never told you before. I’m a wolf, a werewolf.”

Gutierrez laughed. “Werewolves don’t exist.”

“I beg to differ, *mon ami*.” Jean-Pierre partially morphed into his alter ego, enough to show Gutierrez and not damage the clothes he wore.

Jean-Pierre returned to human form and Ochoa told Gutierrez, “Close your mouth, Mike, or a fly might get in.” He paused, briefly before adding, “You see why we wouldn’t want backup now?”

Still staring, Gutierrez shook his head in denial.

“Ochoa? Something seemed different about you. I couldn’t figure it out. Now the scent I picked up on makes sense. I should have known with yer name. Spanish Basque for wolf, am I right?” Christian asked.

“Yes, I’m impressed. Not many know the language. I feel bad about what happened to Miss Fleming. I want to help and would be honored to join in your mission to rescue her,” Ochoa said.

“I would appreciate yer help, and Payton will too. Thank you. Now what do we do with the other one, he’s human, but he could be of some use.”

“Gutierrez is a good cop. Let me deal with him. He can help,” Ochoa said as if Gutierrez wasn’t even in the room, but then Gutierrez was in a shocked stupor, standing much like a statue.

“Okay, take care of him.” Christian turned to Albert. “How long has the sun been down, Albert?”

Looking at his watch, Albert said, “About twenty minutes, sir.”

“By now Ian knows I’ll be coming for him. He may move from the house and take Payton elsewhere. The club, you think, or someplace else? Any ideas, anyone?” Christian asked.

“Payton had a list of the properties where the serial murders occurred. She figured out the house we went to was one on the list. If Ian and his coven committed them then maybe they’re using those properties too. It’s worth a shot,” Jason offered.

“Where’s the list?” Jean-Pierre asked.

“She printed the information out,” Albert said. “I put everything in the bedroom, I’ll get it.”

“Once we get the list, we need to split up among all the properties. We’re running out of time. As soon as we know where Payton is, we call each other and converge before Ian has a chance to move.”

Albert returned with the list.

“Let me look this over. Maybe I can figure out which one might be a possibility,” Jason said.

“Boys, get yer weapons and gear together. We’re going to see some action tonight,” Christian said. “Jean-Pierre, put the teams together, and Ramsey, if Ochoa has trouble with

Gutierrez take care of him.” He motioned toward the detectives. “Send him home and erase his memory of what happened here.”

Gutierrez snapped out of it with a vengeance. “Whoa, what are you talking about erasing my memory? I don’t believe that’s possible.” He looked them all over, shaking his head again. “Although after what I just saw, I’m not sure of anything! Ochoa?” he demanded from his partner.

“Mike, we can call in back-up if we get to the property and things look bad. Trust me, I don’t want my cover blown, and you can understand these guys don’t either. Let this play out,” Ochoa said.

Gutierrez gave his head one last shake and acquiesced. “Fine, but this is the last time I agree with you. We get there and things start to come apart, I’m on the phone. You’re weird problem or not, I’m calling reinforcements.”

“Are we done arguing because I’ve read the list? There are seven properties including Ian’s lair. What does that mean, two or three for each property?” Jason asked.

“The club will make eight,” Ramsey added.

“Jean-Pierre, take care of it. I’ll start at Ian’s lair and go to the club if she isn’t there,” Christian ordered.

“I’m going C.J.,” Jason said.

“Ye’r staying here with Albert. You haven’t been trained to fight our ways. I’m not going to have another human in danger tonight. You can help coordinate from here.”

“No, I’m going with you. You don’t understand. I have to. I’m not staying behind. I blame myself for leaving her.” Adamant, Jason didn’t back down. He turned to Gutierrez. “I need a gun. Do you have a spare? I know how to use one and have a license. I just don’t have mine with me. I had no idea I would need a gun tonight.”

“Normally, I wouldn’t do this for a civilian, but this isn’t an ordinary situation. I have extras in the back of my sedan. C’mon.” Gutierrez patted Jason on the back. “By the way, are all these dudes werewolves? Some kind of super spies? CIA? FBI? MI6?” he whispered.

“No, several hundred year old vampires,” Jason whispered back.

“Huh?” He grimaced with yet another shake of his head. “Who’s going to show up next, the Frankenstein monster?”

“No, they really are vampires. C.J. and his coven are the good ones. Ian and his are the bad ones.”

“There are good ones and bad ones? I thought they were all bad.” He paused. “By the way, if I’m not mistaken tonight no full moon is happening. Isn’t that the legend? How can you turn?” Gutierrez asked of Ochoa.

“Actually, Mike, if you’re an Alpha like me, you can morph anytime. I’ve been meaning to tell you about me for a while now,” Ochoa said quietly.

“Huh? My partner is a big bad wolf, and now I’m helping bloodsuckers save a woman. What is this world coming to? I’m stuck in a bad movie, and I can’t get out.”

“C’mon, let’s get me that gun, and I’ll explain what I know.” Jason led Gutierrez out. He turned toward Christian. “Don’t leave without us.”

“I’ll wait, but not for long.”

“Bro, we’ll find her. I told you before, she’s a tough cookie. Just hang in there, man,” Ramsey told Christian.

“I know. I just want to move before Ian slips away.”

“Another five and we can go.”

* * * *

Payton checked her watch, and then craned her head as far as she could to see out the French doors. She checked the horizon and the sun’s position. The two closed in on each other. Damn, Ian and his vampire minions were going to be up soon, and they were going to be looking at her like their fast-food tidbit, a prospect she did not relish. The cavalry didn’t look like they would come to her rescue any time soon, so she needed to finesse her way out of the predicament by her own ingenuity.

She had learned the art of negotiation from one of the best in the business, Demetrius, and had become one of the top producing agents. *Surely I can talk my way out of this big mess. I can buy myself enough time for Christian to find me, and if I'm really good, have Ian release me. Ha. Wouldn't that be a hoot? Have Ian release me. In my dreams!*

The sun set and darkness swept across the interior of the house. Carlos motioned for Manuel and Luis to turn on the lights. Within a few minutes, the first stirrings of the contingent vampire minions began to file into the living area where Payton, Carlos, and the other guards were waiting.

When the first ones saw Payton, their eyes glowed with excitement, she was sure, at the prospect of her being their dinner. Carlos set them straight. He informed them Ian had first choice and would undoubtedly claim her. Despite a few hisses and snarls, the other vampires backed off. Although grateful, Payton didn't understand why he was so nice. Then again, he probably didn't want to get in trouble with Ian. She thought he wanted to make amends for messing up and offer her to Ian as a gift. *Simple-minded lackey.*

More vampires wandered in as the time passed. Ian was either late in waking or busy, for which she was grateful.

Carlos finally made his position perfectly clear. "Why don't you boys go out and hunt for your own dinner and leave her alone."

"Who said she belongs to Ian?" the red-haired one asked.

"Who belongs to me?" Ian asked. He moved in and a cool breeze rushed through the room. Dressed in black jeans, a maroon silk shirt, and worn cowboy boots, he sauntered in, taking notice of his new houseguest.

"Who have we here? If it isn't Miss Payton Fleming, real estate agent extraordinaire," he said. "Had I known we had a guest, I would have been in sooner."

He looked at Carlos as if to ask why he hadn't come after him. Carlos looked at the floor.

She rose slowly from the patent leather sofa, her bare thighs slightly sticking to the fabric and making movement to stand awkward.

“Ian. So nice to see you again. Could you please tell your guys here that there has been a mistake? I came here to show this property to a client, and there were gunshots and a little confusion, and I tried to hide, and the next thing I knew, Carlos detained me.” She recited the rehearsed cover story.

“Carlos, what is she talking about?” Ian asked, glaring at him.

“Mr. McAlester, we were attacked, by, ah, two huge wolves, big black ones, right after Miss Fleming showed up with some fancy dude demanding to see the house. I told her to leave and thought she did. Next thing I know the cops were banging at the door, demanding to come in to get her out. I found her in your closet.”

Ian moved in closer to Payton, staring into her eyes. She knew to control her breathing and the beat of her heart. Being around Christian had taught her that much. She knew Ian would pick up on her emotions by reading her body and mind. *Keep cool, Payton. You can do this.*

“Ye were in my closet?”

“I told you I hid. I didn’t know the space was your closet because the room was dark. At the time, the room seemed safe. I was scared.”

“Ye doona seem like the type who is easily scared. My guess is ye were here to spy on me, maybe even to try to kill me.” He ran his fingers down her cheeks and brushed a few strands of hair back over her shoulder. Walking behind her, he stood directly against her back and whispered in her ear, “Can ye negotiate yerself out of this one, Miss Fleming?”

“Why would you think I would want to kill you? Can we speak privately? There are too many hungry eyes staring, making me feel uncomfortable. I can explain everything.” She blinked innocently and bit her bottom lip.

“Why are ye playing dumb with me? Did C.J. plant a thought in yer mind to play this way if ye got caught?” He became angry. “Does he think I’m that stupid? He’s not going to get away with this! Putting his human whore in danger like this is crazy, even for him. I thought ye were important to him.”

“Whoa, there, mister. No one calls me a whore! I *am* important to Christian. He prefers Christian by the way, not C.J., and he didn’t know I came here today. I was doing my job showing a client this property. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. So why don’t you just let me go and forget I was even here. You can use your vampire mind control, memory erasing voodoo if you want.”

He snorted. “Voodoo? I’m not into that kind of magic. Ye’r an exhausting woman, Payton, and I canna let ye go, so stop lying to me. I know ye were here under false pretenses. Ye do have spirit, though, I’ll give ye that.”

“Hey, Boss, you don’t think your enemy sent her here as bait to entrap you, do you? There were those two wolves earlier who got away and the cops showing up out of nowhere,” Carlos said.

“Your idea has merit for once,” Ian said.

“*Christian...*” He emphasized the name, pointedly looking at Payton, but continued speaking to Carlos. “... would be a fool to put her life at risk, but I wouldn’t put anything past him to try a stupid plan.”

“I’m telling you, he doesn’t know I’m here and has no idea where to start to look for me. I don’t check in with him and tell him my schedule. My life is my own, and I like it that way.”

“She’s annoying. Why don’t we just kill her, leave her for Christian, attack him when he shows up and be done with this?” Ruben interjected.

“No, she’s useful to me. We’ll split up between the club and the other two Ocean Drive properties. We’ll regroup at the club at midnight. That should keep Christian off balance until I can decide what to do.”

“Where will you be?”

“I’ll move to the club with the woman.”

“Why don’t we stay and fight now? My men are ready and can take those so-called warriors of MacKenzie’s. I saw them the other night, and they aren’t all that special.” Ruben stood straight and folded his arms for emphasis. “We can take them,” he repeated insistently.

“In due time, Ruben. I want Christian to sweat a little before I finish him off.”

“I’ll take Klaus, Vasily, and Nicolas with me to the other Ocean Drive property. Anton, Tomas, Luka, and Ivan can go to the other house. Viktor and Stephan can go with Carlos and the guards to the *Reverie* with you. We’ll meet back at the club at midnight.” Ruben said.

“Verra good.” Ian turned to Payton. “Ye’r with me.” He grabbed her by the forearm.

“You’re hurting me. Let me go,” she demanded, trying to pull away from him.

“Hold still. Our transportation to the club will be easier if ye cooperate. If ye don’t, I could make your life difficult, my dear,” he said, pulling her closer to him. He nodded to Ruben. “Bring the SUVs around to the front.”

She struggled fiercely to break free of his embrace. “I’m not going anywhere with you!”

His fangs elongated, and he scraped them against her neck. She froze and stopped struggling. “Ye will come with me or die now. Yer choice.”

“No, you’re not going to feed from me. I won’t let you!”

“No, I’m going to do that in front of yer beloved Christian. He will watch, helpless, as I drain every last drop of blood from your body. No, doona worry, my dear, ye won’t die yet. I want him to watch me kill ye first, or maybe I’ll change ye and make ye my whore before I kill him. Then watch ye suffer and mourn for him forever.” He grabbed her chin, kissed her hard and released her.

Struggling with every ounce of strength in her body, she pulled away. “I hate you!” She spat at him.

He wiped his face and grinned.

“You sadistic monster! Killing me gives you pleasure, doesn’t it? What’s wrong with you? Couldn’t get it up when you were alive, and you still can’t get it up when you’re dead! Is that why Cassandra left you?” She knew two seconds after the words came out, she said the wrong thing. Christian told her how enraged Ian had been about the betrayal. Ian could turn his fury on her at any moment for just mentioning the woman’s name.

Ian stopped grinning, and his eyes took on an insane glitter. “What do ye know about Cassandra? Christian told ye about her, dinna he?” he ranted. Moving closer, with eyes turning red, he grabbed her shoulders and angrily shouted, “Doona ever speak her name again.”

“Your vehicle is pulled around. Do you want us to wait for you, Ian?” Tomas asked over the radio.

Ian released Payton to answer Tomas. “No, go on, I’ll be right behind. Payton is going to behave right?” He glared in her direction with a wicked grin.

She nodded.

The front doors burst open. Tomas burst into the room, “Ian, we’re under attack!”

Christian followed within seconds, brandishing his broadsword. “Release her, Ian!”

Payton let out a sigh of relief; Christian had finally arrived to save her. The feeling soon shattered. Ian pulled her closer, pricked her skin with a fang and withdrew. “Come any closer, and the next move I’ll sink deeper into her throat and rip it open.”

“You bastard! Don’t hurt her!”

Ian laughed as he backed up, and Payton saw the pain in Christian’s eyes. She tried to call his name, but the piercing noise of fangs penetrating her flesh echoed in her head, and his image faded.

Chapter Twenty-two

Payton became aware of her surroundings, consciousness returned, her eyes adjusted, awaking from the nightmare. Alone, lying on a bed in the dark, she wondered if she died. The memory of the sharp prick of the fangs scraping on her neck flashed forward. She grabbed for her neck and the sting there, and felt blood. *Dammit! Ian wasn't kidding. He bit me? Oh, shit, I am dead!*

Trying to stand weakness buckled her knees. She fell back against the bed, bracing her hands to steady herself, not a good sign.

After catching her breath, she gathered her thoughts. *Christian! He came for me.*

Jumping from the bed, her hands patted frantically. Next to the bed she found a lamp and turned it on. Then she ran unsteadily to the bedroom door and attempted to turn the knob. Screaming and banging on the door when the knob wouldn't turn, "Christian, in here! I'm in here!" When the door finally opened, a large man blocked her way, Carlos.

"Sorry, but you're not going anywhere." He pulled the door shut.

The muffled sounds of the clashing of swords, took her at a run to the bay window. Complete mayhem swarmed the back terrace and lawn area. Christian fought one of Ian's vampire minions with a sword. Other vampires from Christian's house fought valiantly. Then she saw Jason. *Oh, my god! What is he doing here? He can't fight vampires! Detective Gutierrez?* The two men had guns and were shooting vampires and humans, but the bullets appeared to have no effect on the vampires, only the human guards. Then they disappeared from view.

She gasped in shock when a vampire, stabbed in the heart, let out a shrill cry right before his demise, the scream ending as he turned to dust. Another eerie shriek pierced the darkness. She

turned away, unable to look at the gruesome sight. Reality hit as the ugly side of being a vampire played out before her. Tears welled in her eyes.

Scuffling sounded outside the bedroom door, then silence. The doorknob moved. She stiffened and looked around for something to defend herself with. Nothing. Makes sense, she thought. What would a vampire need to defend with? He already was a weapon.

The door opened slowly, then a voice from the other side whispered, “Payton, are you in here?”

“Jason, is that you?” she responded and ran to meet him.

She threw her arms around his neck, and he held her tight around the waist. “You all right, Payton?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Thank God, you’re here.”

A low pitched growl came from behind Jason. She jumped away from his embrace when she saw the black wolf standing a few feet from them.

“Jason, don’t move, a—a big wolf is standing behind you,” she stuttered.

He smiled and petted it on the head. “I know. This is Jean-Pierre. My new best friend. He took care of the guard outside so I could come and get you.” He smiled again at her. “Didn’t you figure out he was the diversion at the house?”

“I thought something sounded funny about that, but the guards said there were two, so I thought—Oh, never mind what I thought. Let’s just get out of here before Ian or his minions come back.”

He motioned to Jean-Pierre. “Lead the way, big boy.”

They ran down the back hallway to the living room. The sound of the clanking metal swords grew louder. Her heart pounded hard in her chest. The smell of blood lay heavy in the humid air. Had the blood come from the human guards Jason and Detective Gutierrez shot? More eerie screams echoed in the dark. Another vampire bit the dust, a good one or bad one, she didn’t know. She stepped onto the terrace, staying a couple steps behind Jason and Jean-Pierre.

Most of the fighting ceased. The survivors stood back and watched the two fierce rivals continue to spar. Christian and Ian fought on alone. The rivalry between these two powerful, vampires had gone on for centuries. Now one would meet with their demise. Payton prayed that end of existence belonged to Ian. He had murdered two of her friends and countless other people, he'd threatened her life, and he deserved to pay with his own.

The two men parried around the brick paver terrace with swiftness almost too fast for the eye to follow. The deafening sound from their meeting swords was a grind of metal against metal. Both adept at wielding the heavy weapons, they seemed evenly matched, and she did not know if there would be a winner. Christian's face showed such concentration, poise, and determination. Ian struck a swift, glancing blow against Christian's stomach, tearing his shirt slightly and drawing blood. She cried out his name, which drew his attention.

"Ramsey, get her out of here!" he shouted, continuing the fight without missing a beat.

Ramsey moved with speed to her side. "You heard him. Payton, time to get you out of here. I suggest you leave as well, Jason," he said.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying," she said defiantly.

"He can fight better knowing you're safe. He's an excellent warrior. He'll be with you again. Let's go so he can finish Ian off."

* * * *

Christian watched her image fade out of the corner of his eye, promising himself he would see her again, he turned his concentration back to the battle. He couldn't afford the distraction. With that, he searched for the edge he needed to complete the task. He saw the opportunity. Pushing Ian toward the outside wall of the house, he maneuvered Ian into the corner, trapping him. Ian rose to his full height to strike a decisive blow. Seeing his chance, Christian moved at full vampire speed, a blur to human eyes, striking upward from below. The blade of his broadsword grazed Ian's wrist, causing him to drop his weapon. Christian moved in, putting his sword to Ian's chest.

Ian laughed. "Make it count, friend. I'll see ye in Hell!"

"My pleasure." Christian ran his sword through Ian's heart.

An eerie scream and then dust.

* * * *

Emotions were heightened after the night's near-death experience. Her life the past couple of days had been turned upside down and her heart ached. Until the battle and death she witnessed at Ian's, Payton stood ready to accept Christian and his life and be a part of his world. The reality of the frightful scene tonight disturbed her to the core. Over and over, she wondered if their love could overcome all the horrors she had seen. *Would there be more killing like what she witnessed?*

The slight chill washing over her skin from the late evening air disappeared, and sudden warmth enveloped her. She quickly turned and saw Christian standing directly behind her, his eyes fixed on hers.

"I thought I'd never see you again. You scared me so." He pulled her into his arms, tightly holding her in his embrace.

"I know," she said. "It was stupid of me to get caught like that, but in the end I knew you'd come for me." She snuggled closer. "You did. Thank you."

"I love you, Payton," he whispered softly, with his breath touching her lightly on the cheek before he began to kiss her ear, working his way down her cheek until he met her lips. The sweet kiss, not designed to arouse, gently comforted her.

"I love you too, but I'm tired and now that you're here, I want to change out of these clothes. Can we go inside?" her voice uttered low and raspy, almost unfeeling.

They walked back to the house, his arm around her waist.

After showering, she dressed for bed. When she crawled under the covers, she curled up without saying a word. Her thoughts returned to the scene at Ian's house. The sights and sounds played over and over in her head. Vampires fighting and turning to dust and humans shot and

bleeding. Total mayhem. Other creatures. Jean-Pierre and Detective Ochoa were wolves, big-ass, black, hairy werewolves! God, what kind of world was this? What did they eat? She didn't want to go there, and Jean-Pierre seemed so sweet.

I'm getting too old for this shit! I love a thrill, but this is too weird. Just sleep and think about it in the morning. Sleep.

* * * *

Christian watched Payton as she slept. Barely two words had been spoken between them after coming in from the terrace. She'd showered, dressed and turned her back to him once she crawled in the bed. He sensed the conflict within his goddess and didn't know how to make the suffering go away, short of removing the memory. He lay down beside her, and when he put his arm around her to comfort her, she flinched. He pulled back. She didn't want his touch, not a good sign.

Maybe the events of the past several days had been too traumatic. He'd told her of his nature. Her friend had been murdered, and she had been kidnapped by Ian. She was safe for now. He had seen to that. No harm would come to her again; he promised her.

He stayed with her in the darkness of their room until he knew she was sound asleep before leaving her to dreams.

Unfinished business had to be taken care of.

He moved to the family room where Ramsey, Jean-Pierre, Jason, the detectives, and the others were gathered.

Ramsey walked up to him. "How's she doing, bro?" He put his arm around Christian's shoulder and gave him a pat.

"She's sleeping. Physically she's okay; mentally, I'm not sure."

"I told you before, she's a tough cookie. She'll be okay."

"I hope you're right." He paused, looked around the room, and directed his comments to Jason. "Thanks for getting her out of there safely. I owe you. One more favor. Can you go with

Jean-Pierre and retrieve Payton's car from Ian's old lair? We need to clean the place too. I don't want any evidence of him left there."

"Sure, no problem," Jason said.

"Hey, that's a crime scene. You can't go and remove any evidence!" Detective Gutierrez yelled out from across the room. He pushed his way past a couple vampires standing in his way.

"Detective," Christian said, "I want to thank you. I need to explain the way things are going to go down. You and Ochoa are going to solve the case by linking the murders to gangs. Vampires don't exist, right? We have to remove any evidence to protect ourselves, both human and vampire. You understand right?"

"You aren't using any of your vampire mind freakin' control crap on me are you?"

"No, but if you want me to, I can."

"No, no man. Last time you did that shit, people thought I was crazy. I'll fix my report to say what you want."

"Good. Ochoa, if you want to quit the police department, we could use someone with yer talents at Nocturnal. Are you interested?"

"No, he's my partner. He's going nowhere!" Gutierrez said adamantly.

"I can speak for myself, thank you very much, Mike," Ochoa fired back. He turned to Christian. "Thanks for the offer. I like working with Mike here, but I wouldn't mind a part-time job every now and then. This was fun tonight. Please keep me in mind."

"Jean-Pierre does the same for me. I will."

"Bro, if you don't need anything else, I'd like to get back to London as soon as possible," Ramsey said.

Christian didn't answer right away. He thought back to the moment of Ian's demise, of standing over his former friend's ashes, as a tear rolled down his cheek and splattered on the pile of dust. He had destroyed his friend—and enemy. To the victor, go the spoils. What Ian once owned belonged to him.

"Are you up to indoctrinating some new recruits?" Christian finally asked.

“Sure, bro. I’ll need to square it with my other boss.”

“Don’t worry. Braedon Delaney might be the big shot CEO of GSIS, but he and I go back a long way. I know how to talk to him.”

“I guess I’m going to have my work cut out for me because of all the bad habits they picked up from Ian.”

“Their young, they should be able to learn my rules. If not, the alternative is destruction.”

“The first thing I’ll do is put our new recruits to work cleaning up the mess they made at the house. The house and the outdoor areas are in shambles. It’ll take them a good eight hours to set things right.”

“It’ll get things off on the right foot with them too. If you want to take off with Jean-Pierre and Ramsey, you can. Let’s get this ordeal behind us. I’ll talk with you tomorrow night.”

One by one, everyone started out. First, Jason with Jean-Pierre and Ramsey and a few of the young vampires departed. Followed shortly by Detectives Gutierrez and Ochoa, they had to file the reports and the cover story. The remaining vampire boys left for the cleaning detail, leaving Christian sitting in an empty, silent room at three o’clock in the morning. Only Albert remained and way past his bedtime, but Christian needed his counsel and begged him to stay.

“Mr. Sir, you look exhausted and weak. Do you need something to drink?” Albert asked.

“That would be good, Albert. I’m feeling hungry. The fighting exhausted me. I must be out of shape. We have to practice more.”

“Yes Mr. Sir, anytime. I’ll be back.”

Christian slumped over on the sofa, his hands cradling his face, elbows resting on his knees, tired and sad.

“Here you are, Mr. Sir.” Albert handed him a large glass of blood.

“Thanks, Albert,” Christian said, taking a large gulp. “Albert, what am I going to do if she walks out? She’s withdrawing. Something has changed.”

“You need to sleep and rest before you make a decision. The wounds are too fresh to act on right now. Let them heal before you assess them.”

“You’re right. She’s still in shock. We’ll talk tomorrow night.”

* * * *

Payton slept until almost noon. Christian lay next to her in his death sleep. She looked at him, resting so still, so peaceful. Unlike her, he didn’t feel anything. She felt everything. The pain from the evening before still haunted her. Sleep provided only a temporary respite.

After putting on her robe and slippers, she shuffled off to the kitchen. Coffee. She needed a caffeine fix. The smell of the aromatic brew permeated through the house. Albert must have heard her stir and brewed a fresh pot. She hoped Christian appreciated his good fortune to have him in his employ and as a friend.

“Good morning, Payton. Hope you rested well,” Albert greeted her.

“I did, thank you. Hope that coffee’s ready. I need some,” she said groggily, climbing onto a barstool at the breakfast bar.

“It is *French Roast*, your favorite, I believe,” he replied. He poured a mug full and placed it in front of her along with the cream and sugar containers.

“Thanks,” she said softly.

“Do you have something on your mind? Do you want to talk? I’m a good listener,” Albert suggested.

She gave him a half-smile. The overwhelming desire to talk to someone about what frightened her began to give her a headache. Who could she speak to about what she experienced the night before? She just wasn’t sure Albert was the one to help. He worked for Christian, the person she wanted to talk about. Awkward.

Apparently, he sensed her uncertainty. “What you say to me stays between us,” he offered. “I’m loyal to Mr. Sir where his business is concerned, but with his love life I’m more open. You can trust me.”

Was he reading her mind? “My concerns don’t involve his business,” she said.

“I gathered that. You love him?”

“I’m that transparent, huh?” She took a gulp of her coffee. “I don’t fit into this world, Albert. How do you do deal with the entire fighting and blood thing, being human, I mean, in a vampire’s world?”

“Sometimes I have difficulty, but Mr. Sir is very good to me and protects me. I’ve also learned to protect myself over the years.”

“Protect yourself, how? By learning to fight like they do?” She took another sip of her coffee, feeling the headache easing with the caffeine.

“I spar with Mr. Sir and occasionally with the others, but mainly with Mr. Sir, either in martial arts or swords. I’m actually quite good. I could teach you.”

“No. I don’t think I could lift a broadsword, let alone wield one, not even a fake one. Thanks for the offer.”

“Are you sure? I’m an excellent instructor, with good moves for an old man. I can teach them to you. Mr. Sir would probably be impressed.” Albert made a quick move with his arm and swift kick with his leg.

“Whoa, now that is something else, but I still think fighting vampires is out of my league and well there are...” her voice trailed off.

“Is there something else bothering you?”

“Yes, but I need to talk to Christian first.”

“I see. This vampire domain is hard to understand all at once. I tend to forget since I’ve been living in their world since I was very young. I barely remember life before meeting Mr. Sir. I promise you, he will understand whatever you need to discuss with him, just be yourself and be honest.”

“Thanks, Albert. Christian is lucky to have you.”

“I *know*. Would you like something to eat? You need to keep up your strength.”

“No, the coffee is fine. Maybe after I get dressed.” When she reached the door, she turned back to Albert and asked, “Who else is here at the house?”

“Only the bodyguards. Everyone else left before daybreak with Ramsey.”

“To where?”

“He went to take care of business for Mr. Sir.”

“Oh. That’s good.” She would have privacy to talk with Christian. She didn’t need all the vampires hanging around, listening in.

She went into the bedroom, dressed, and packed the remainder of her clothes. Her decision to stay with Christian had never meant she would live with him. She was still her own woman. After three failed marriages, she promised herself not to fall into another relationship making her dependent on a man. Her condo belonged to her. Her real estate business thrived. She paid her own way. How could she fall back into the trap of having a man take care of her again? Especially a vampire. No way could she take care of herself living with a vampire. She would be under his care, completely.

No, their relationship wouldn’t work! She had to leave, before he could change her mind, before those beautiful green eyes convinced her to stay. Before his vampire voodoo could work on her, but she had to come back tonight, prepared. She made the honorable decision; she decided to leave him. Their love affair could not survive, and she had to convince him leaving was for the best.

Leaning over, she kissed him good-bye.

Albert sat on the couch in the family room reading when she came out of the bedroom with her bag. He had a look of sadness when he saw her.

“A sad story?” she asked.

“No, I’m sad for you and Mr. Sir. I thought you would wait to speak to him.”

“I’ll be back tonight. My car, is it still at the other house? With my handbag? I couldn’t find it.”

“Jason brought your car back earlier, and your handbag is in the guest bedroom.”

“With my laptop?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks, I’ll get them. I didn’t think to look there.”

A few minutes later, when she returned with her laptop and handbag, she went up to Albert and hugged him, kissing him on the cheek. She stood back and said, “This really is for the best, Albert. I’ll be back tonight. Let him know I’m okay.”

“I will.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Christian awakened from his dead sleep to a silent house. Payton was not in the bedroom. *She must be with Albert.* He showered quickly and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. Everyone had left with Ramsey before daybreak, after she'd fallen asleep. He wanted to be alone with her, sensing the trauma she'd endured. He needed to comfort her, to let her know he would protect and keep her safe. Being the only female in the house with other male vampires was not the most comfortable situation for her. Besides, Ramsey could take care of cleaning up any of Ian's business in London.

Shuffling into the kitchen, he first grabbed a bottle of blood from the refrigerator and popped the container in the microwave to warm up. The quiet of the house pressed in on him. He called out for Albert, then Payton. No answer. The microwave dinged.

As he poured his breakfast into a glass, Albert walked in from the outside terrace.

"Christian, you're up," Albert said, acting surprised.

"Aye and where's Payton?"

"She's not here, but she wanted me to tell you she is okay and will be here tonight to talk with you."

"Oh, no, I felt in my gut this would happen. Last night she wouldn't talk to me. She curled up in a ball and fell asleep." He gulped down the glass of blood and put the empty glass in the sink.

"She packed up her belongings and returned to her place. I think she's worried about fitting into your world. She asked me what it's like being a human in a vampire world this afternoon. I think she's afraid to love you."

“I know. She’s been afraid since the day I met her. Afraid because she’s been hurt by so many men in her life, and now I have quite possibly done the same. I didn’t trust her to tell her the truth about me from the beginning, and I put her in danger. She’s running away. Albert, how am I going to fix this?”

“Well, I told her not to make a decision until she spoke with you, and she said she would return tonight. You can convince her. You do have a way with women.”

“No, I promised her I would not use mind control on her or mess with her memory without her permission. I won’t use my powers to change her mind to stay. I want her of her own free will, not through manipulation.”

“I meant through your words and actions, Mr. Sir. You are an honest and honorable man. Show her, talk to her, love her. She will see you for who you are and respond.”

The doorbell rang.

“Payton.”

“I’ll get the door, Mr. Sir.”

Albert flicked the porch light on and opened the door. Payton smiled. “Good evening, Albert.”

“Good evening, Payton. He’s waiting for you in the living area.”

“Thanks.”

As she followed behind Albert, Christian watched her glide across the marble tiled floor, heels clicking. The sound echoed loudly in the vaulted ceilinged rooms. As she and Albert came into the room, Christian rose from the chair. Albert dismissed himself and left them alone.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“Hey, how are you?”

“I’m okay, so far.” She moved in front of the sofa across from the chair he stood beside. “Please sit, we need to have a serious talk.” Her voice cracked, and her eyes dropped, gazing at the floor.

His heart thumped hard when he discerned her suppressed behavior.

“I do not like the sound of that, but I have expected this would happen.”

After an uneasy moment of silence, she swallowed hard, stared directly at him, and began to speak. “This is very hard for me. I’ve thought long and hard about us. I want you to know I do love you, but...”

He didn’t let her finish. “Aye, I knew you would have a ‘but’ to yer acceptance of our love. You don’t accept me for what I am—a vampire. I’m a monster that kills and drinks the blood of humans. That’s the real reason, right?” His hands turned to fists.

Rising from her position, she answered with desperation in her voice, “No, that’s not why. Please, let me finish, Christian. I told you this is hard for me to say. Please let me finish, and then you can speak.”

“I’m sorry. This is hard for me too.”

“I thought I could accept you and your lifestyle, no matter what, until last night. I went to Ian’s house to gather information to help you and your friends kill him. Then, I got caught and realized just how dangerous your lifestyle is. Reality hit me like a ton of bricks when I watched you fight Ian.”

“Aye, love, but the fighting with Ian is over and ye’r safe. I’ll never let anything happen to you again. I’ll protect you.”

“You can’t protect me every waking hour of the day. You don’t know what Ian said to me. He was horrible, so evil and cruel. He told me what he would do to me *and* you. I know he’s gone, but I worry someone else could be out there to take his place, someone else bent on doing you harm.”

“Ian was dangerous, and I have made a lot of enemies because of my position. Some are not worth worrying about, though some are, I’ll admit. I’m strong and can handle my enemies. You don’t have to worry.”

“I do worry. I am the reason Ian entrapped you into fighting him. I’m your weakness. I almost got you killed. If I stayed with you, who’s to say the same thing couldn’t happen again? I don’t know if I could live with myself if I were the cause of your death.”

“Payton, ye’r not to blame for Ian kidnapping you. Ian and I have been enemies for years. If not you, another conflict or innocent human would have pushed us into our final confrontation. Don’t blame yerself, love. I don’t either. If anything, I blame myself for not protecting you better.”

“No matter how hard you try to protect me, your enemies could get to you through me. I can’t let that happen. We live in two different worlds.”

“So, what are you saying?”

“Albert told me I should free my mind and open my heart, and I did. I do love you, Christian. I didn’t think I could, but I do. My mind accepts you for what you are. You are a beautiful, honorable, and honest man, worthy of love. Those qualities are why I love you and at the same time, why I have to let you go. I can’t cause you any more harm, and I will if I stay. If I don’t do this now I will eventually, and my heart would be in even more pain. I can’t risk you harm or me pain. I’m too weak.”

Closing the distance between them, he wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around her and hold her tight. That, and tell her everything would be okay. They could make their relationship work. If their love was strong, no impossibilities existed. He held back from touching her or saying any of those things.

“Ye’r not weak, love. I’ve never met a stronger woman in all my nearly three hundred years. I understand that you didn’t make the decision lightly.”

Blinking, tears rolled down her rosy cheeks. He did understand her feelings.

“Thank you for understanding. I have one request.”

“Anything.”

“I couldn’t bear living and loving you and not having you, so I want you to remove my memory like you did before. Can you do that for me?”

He hesitated, hurt that she wanted to purge the memory of him from her mind, but he couldn’t take the anguish away for her any other way. Fate demanded a high price, but he loved her. He had to be strong for the both of them though he would endure the pain for eternity.

“I will,” he agreed, reluctantly.

She smiled. “Christian, in some way you will always be in my heart. You have loved me, drank my blood, and I yours. You have left an indelible mark on my soul and heart for all time even if I won’t remember you.” She leaned into him and brushed her lips against his.

Christian returned the kiss as he gently held her. He tapped into her thoughts and removed her memories of the past several weeks.

Chapter Twenty-four

Elounda, Greece—Eleven months later

Christian lay in his bed looking up at the ceiling. Again, his first thoughts upon awakening from his dead sleep were of Payton. Each night, a little more of her beautiful face faded into his deepest memory. He didn't want to let her go, but the decision she made was for the best for her. His heart began to heal, and Ramsey had been right. He needed to get away to his favorite place in the world, kick back, and find peace in his existence again. He had thrown everything into his work, trying to forget her, but her loss hadn't been easy.

After cleaning up the mayhem left by Ian and his minions in Miami Beach, he set about taking over Ian's business affairs. He converted the Goth-style clubs to more upscale, modern clubs or closed them down completely. The worldwide recession affected even the vampire world. The affluent weren't patronizing NEHC establishments as frequently, so cost-cutting measures had to be put into place. The busy work came as a welcome relief, keeping his mind and body occupied many lonely nights.

As he'd promised, he spent Christmas in London with Ramsey. The weatherman called for snow an infrequent event for London at that time of year, and six inches fell. By contrast, the warm, sunny and eighty-two degrees in Miami when he returned, a perfect tropical holiday season. Spring came and rolled into summer, then drifted into fall but he appreciated none of it. His world without Payton rolled aimlessly on. Albert told him, "In time, things will get better." He hoped so.

Time became all he had. Too much time. Tonight, he wouldn't dwell on the past. He would move forward. She was right, they were from two different worlds, and the chances of their love

surviving were near to impossible. Danger filled and encircled his life, and he could not protect her completely. One of his enemies would somehow try to use her to get to him, putting them both in jeopardy. She would not risk endangering him again because she loved him too much. Such a selfless act of love he'd never experienced before.

She loved me, but didn't want to risk my life. She didn't reject me. She renounced my lifestyle, and what it would do to us being together. I loved her more at that moment than I realized, and I still do. I couldn't deny her request. I've lost her forever.

After drinking some synthetic blood to quench his hunger, he jumped into the shower, washed quickly, and dressed. Yes, tonight he would mingle with his guests, pick up a fine young female, have sex, take a late night jog, and leave for London early tomorrow night. He would enjoy tonight like old times.

On his way to the Beachfront Bar, he decided he'd give Ramsey a call and have him join in the evening fun. Since kicking back at the bar would be like old times, what would be better than having an old friend and a few ladies along to make the night perfect?

As he arrived at the bar area, he glanced around and stopped dead in his stride. "Payton?" he murmured. A woman with long, dark brown hair sat with her back to him. She had just taken a seat on the barstool, and he caught a quick glimpse of her profile. The woman certainly looked like Payton, but how could she be here in Elounda? Yet the curve of the waist to the hip, the way she crossed her legs, certainly reminded him of her.

I'm going crazy! Vampire lovesickness? Is there such a thing? Get a grip, Christian!

He approached the mystery woman. Something else seemed familiar. Her scent filled his nostrils. She wore perfume, with an underlying citrus scent. Mandarin orange. The same as Payton wore? Coincidence? He walked closer, and his heart raced.

His goddess.

Something fell from her lap to the ground. He moved quickly to her side and bent to pick it up. She bent down to retrieve her clutch at the same time.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, as they bumped hands.

Their eyes locked onto each other, and they both smiled.

“Thanks,” she said, and stood up, but slid back onto the barstool. He held onto the clutch.

“Can I have my clutch?”

“Oh, aye. Yer eyes captivated and paralyzed me, sorry,” he said and released his grip.

“Okay.” She chuckled, extending her hand and said, “Hi, I’m Payton Fleming.”

In shock, he didn’t say a word. Was fate toying with him? If so, she played the cruel beast.

“Hello, is your tongue paralyzed too? Do you have a name?”

“Ah, what, aye, my name is C.J., no actually it’s Christian. My friends call me Christian MacKenzie. I’m the owner of the resort. Are you enjoying yer stay, Miss Fleming?”

“So far, yes. I just arrived late last night. Jet lag had me down most of the day, but so far I like what I see.” She paused, looking at him more intensely, and continued. “You’re so young, and you’re the owner?” She looked away, seeming embarrassed by what she’d said. “I’m sorry, how very rude of me. Age shouldn’t have anything to do with owning and running a company. I don’t know why I said that.” She gazed back into his eyes and smiled.

Returning the smile, he told her, “That’s all right. I get that all the time.”

“You know I’ve actually been to your resort before.”

“Really?”

“Last year. Except I don’t remember visiting this place. That’s why I’m here. I’m trying to see if anything can jog my memory.”

“You remember being here, just not the details?”

“Yeah, that is weird, right? I suffered head injuries in a car accident. I don’t even remember the accident. Everyone told me I had one. I started having these dreams and flashbacks a couple of months ago. I can’t make sense of them and started seeing a psychiatrist. He suggested I take this trip and maybe the location would help me piece together the memories with the flashbacks. So, here I am. My first night here and nothing yet.”

The bartender interrupted their conversation. “What can I get you to drink?”

She turned to Christian. “What’s good here? I usually get white wine, but someone once told me to live outside the norm and do unexpected things. Hmm, for some reason, I feel like doing that tonight. That’s so strange, like I just had a flashback memory. I don’t know who told me that.” She made a funny shake of her head, squinted her eyes, and looked at him for a response. “So, what would be good to try that’s different?”

He grinned, thinking, why not? “Try the house special. I’ll make it for you.” He slipped back behind the bar and out of her immediate view.

“So, what is this house special called?” she asked.

“House Special.”

“Oh, that’s original.” She chuckled softly. “So what’s in the drink, or should I guess?”

“You can guess, but I don’t think you’ll get all the ingredients right.”

“A challenge. Hmm. Well, let me taste first and give it a try. I’m pretty good at knowing my liquors.”

Arriving back with two glasses of the house special, he handed the one made just for her and kept the other. He raised his glass to toast. “To trying new things.”

“To trying new things.” She clinked her glass to his and took a sip. She started coughing, trying to be polite, and not spit the drink out. “Wow, that’s a bit strong. Is there a watered down version available?”

“No, that’s the blend. Are you all right?” He patted her on the back.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I guess you have to like Scotch to drink that one. I taste something sweet too. I guess you win. I don’t recognize the ingredient. What is it?” she asked.

The description came again; she said he tasted sweet. No one ever said that about him before. No one. Only Payton. His beautiful goddess, Payton.

Eleven months ago she asked him to erase her memory and let her go. To give her life back to her the way everything was before they met, and he did. *Why is she having flashbacks and memories of their past?* Was there truth in what she told him right before he erased her memory—he had already put an indelible mark on her soul and her heart for all time? If true,

they were being given a second chance. This time, he would make sure he made their second chance right.

He laughed. "The drink is an acquired taste."

"Maybe I should take it down at once instead of slowly sip."

"Hmm. That is one way. You should stay with white wine if you want to sip a drink, I think."

"Maybe trying new things isn't always a good thing." Their eyes met as she laughed, and mutual comfort settled over them. She broke the momentary silence. "I find something so familiar about you. I don't know if it's your smile, or your eyes, or the subtle hint of sandalwood you're wearing. I feel attracted to you, like...I don't know, that sounds so cliché." She turned away embarrassed.

Seizing the opportunity, Christian asked, "Payton, I would like to show you a special place."

She grinned. "Let me guess...your suite?"

"Aye, smart lady. Except you called my suite a villa when you were there last."

"So, I did know you before?" she asked. "You've piqued my interest, so you can help with my memory."

"Aye, my love, you did, and I will."

As she stared at him, he perceived the strain on her face came from trying to find some familiarity deep in her memory, but her brow wrinkled, unsure of those memories. He stood and extended his hand to her. "Come with me," he said softly.

Without saying a word, she placed her hand in his. He enveloped her in his warmth, and he felt the loneliness within her soul, her broken spirit that had kept her from living her life since they parted many months ago. He knew he appeared as the faceless man in the dreams she'd been having the past several months.

They walked in silence to his villa. He opened the front door, escorted her in through the living area, and stopped. "Does any of this look familiar?"

She surveyed the room and shook her head. “No.” She wandered through the sliding doors onto the pool terrace. The night was bright, with the moon shining down on the dark waters of the bay, glistening like thousands of sparkling diamonds dancing on the ripples of the water. The splashing against the rocks below cut through the silence in the air.

Standing at the wall, she stared out into the abyss of the night for what he thought seemed like hours, but only minutes elapsed. Sensing her confusion as she became lost in her thoughts, he drew closer and spied a tear slide down her cheek, sparkling in the moonlight. Cupping her face, a thumb wiped the tear away as their eyes met.

“I loved it here, didn’t I?” she asked him.

“Aye, you did.”

“I loved you here.”

“Aye, you did.”

She turned and looked back out to the open water.

“I wasn’t in a car accident, was I?”

“Nay, my love.”

“I was afraid to love you?”

“Aye, you wanted to forget.”

“I’m not afraid anymore. I want to remember. I want to love again.” She turned to face him, and their eyes locked again. “I want to love you. Will you tell me our love story?”

He smiled. All he ever wanted was to love and be loved. As he took her into his warm embrace, he whispered, “Aye, I will, tonight, and every night for the rest of our lives.”

THE END

About The Author

Cynthia resides in Orlando, Florida, the land of magic, surrounded by the treasured gems in her life, a caring, loving husband, dutiful and loyal daughter, and precious, delightful granddaughter. Oh and not to forget her mischievous Yorkshire terrier, Thumper.

Cynthia was a “Navy Brat” calling a different port home every couple of years—from Southern California, to Boston, to Virginia, to Florida. She developed wandering feet and diverse interests, and passionately incorporates those experiences into her stories, bringing characters to life, and eloquently sharing the vivid images of her mind with her audience.

Cynthia worked as a real estate broker for over twenty years before retiring to Florida. Until recently, then she turned to writing to stretch her creative muscle. Those ideas of faraway places and quirky characters lay dormant for years and finally demanded their story be told.

Cynthia plans on putting some mileage on those wandering feet and travel to exotic locations in the coming years.

<http://cynthiaarsuaga.weebly.com>



Other work by Cynthia Arsuaga with Secret Cravings Publishing

Born To Be Wild

My Life As A Dog (Co-authored)

Secret Cravings Publishing
www.secretcravingspublishing.com

