

A man with short, dark hair and a light beard is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark leather jacket that is open. He is looking down and to the right with a serious expression. The background is dark and textured, with a faint, dark silhouette of a building or structure in the distance.

Darkest  
Book III

*A journey into a turbulent sea of  
betrayal, mystery, and . . . love?*

# Darkest Intentions

S.K. Yule

Amira Press

Darkest Intentions

Copyright © January 2011, S. K. Yule

Cover art by Anastasia Rabiya © January 2011

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this novel are fictitious or used fictitiously. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

ISBN: 978-1-936279-65-4

Amira Press, LLC

Charlotte, NC 28227

[www.amirapress.com](http://www.amirapress.com)

## Chapter One

Malachi leaned against the black iron railing that ran the perimeter of the sidewalk he'd been scouting for the past hour. He was tired and hadn't seen the back of his eyelids for days. Sleep wasn't his friend. In fact, he only dozed when he absolutely had to. Once he closed his eyes, the nightmares came out to play hard and ruthless, laughing at his unconscious vulnerability while plaguing and torturing his prone mind with memories he'd spent years trying to repress. He was nearly a thousand years old and thought the dreams would have disappeared over time—at the very least diminished—but even centuries hadn't been able to entice the haunting recollections to fade. They were as clear as if they happened yesterday.

He took a long drag off his cig and flipped the cherry on the cracked cement under his booted feet. He glanced up at the night sky, and millions of twinkling stars blinked back at him. A fat harvest moon hung in the darkness, marking the autumnal equinox. He didn't really care about such trivial bullshit as moon phases, but he'd learned a lot of it throughout his long existence. Like that North Carolina became the twelfth state in seventeen eighty-nine, or that a hummingbird could flap its wings up to two hundred times per second during courtship, or that in Denver, it was illegal to lend your vacuum to your next door neighbor.

The last useless fact came from one of the teenage girls who worked in the grocery store a couple blocks from his house. Susie, or Sandy, or something that began with an 'S,' he didn't know her name for sure, but he did know one thing about her. The girl was never without a piece of gum in her mouth, and she never stopped chomping it while she talked his leg off every time he'd been forced to go through her checkout lane. The conversation was always one-sided as he really didn't like talking to people much, but he had to admit to being intrigued, somewhat, by the useless font of crap that Sheila, or Sara, or whatever her name was spit out of her yap as easily as a seven-year-old recited the alphabet.

He grunted and pushed away from the railing. He liked the little town of Ransom, Colorado. He'd lived here for the past fifty years, and everyone pretty much left him alone. That was the main reason he'd stayed. Unfortunately, all good things had to end at some point. The past few months, his normal routine of hunting shadowdrifters and keeping to himself had changed drastically.

Somehow, he'd gotten himself stuck in the middle of a fucked up mess of an uprising of drifters. The little bastards' norm was to keep to the shadows, wreak as much chaos, torture, and damage as possible, then run like hell when a hunter got close. Nearly a year ago, he'd been contacted by Ashe Aleksandrov, a hunter who lives in St. Louis. He'd heard of Ashe, of course, but had never actually met the man until recently. He'd attended several meetings at the Aleksandrov house since that call, along

with two other hunters, Dominic Zelasko and Conrad Reyes. The Aleksandrov brothers, Ashe, Aiston and Aldin had been the first hunters to notice the drifter's increasingly peculiar behavior.

The things had become more aggressive, begun working together, and had been saying strange things about having a leader. They'd even started showing some fighting skills, giving some credence to the claim they had a leader because someone had to be training the inadequate little shits. The drifters preferred weapon had always been their poisonous talons. Albeit not lethal to a vampire like himself, the venom was capable of seriously weakening him, which could in turn give the enemy the upper hand. Not to mention the damn things could rip flesh and muscle to shreds.

Most of the hunters he'd known had remorse when they had to kill a drifter. He, on the other hand, was a strong believer that one was responsible for one's own actions—no matter how stupid or idiotic they may be. Selling your soul to Satan in return for the gift of never feeling emotional pain from loss again was a very dumb choice. It might seem an easy fix for the grief a vampire might feel after countless years of existence. Watching everyone you loved die over and over, potentially forever, wasn't easy, but it was a fact of life. Death was unstoppable and created a balance to nature. Everyone couldn't live forever. Even he could die. Not easily, but it could happen.

He palmed a lighter and pack of cigs from the pocket of his leather jacket and tapped on the bottom until another stick fell out. He shoved the pack back into his pocket and held the flame to the end until it burnt orange red. He took a long pull off the stick and let the smoke burn his lungs before exhaling slowly. While the Aleksandrov brothers wore long dusters to hide their favored weapon, a sword, he preferred a shorter jacket and a dagger in each boot.

At six-foot-seven, he didn't need anything encumbering his movement, and heavy leather swirling around his legs felt smothering. He wasn't clumsy by any means, no vampire he knew was, but he still didn't see the point of adding to his already huge frame.

The back of his neck tingled and he scanned the area slowly. The drifter he'd been hunting the past few nights was about to make an appearance. Malachi tossed his newly lit cig to the sidewalk and shielded himself, becoming invisible to everyone except other vampires, and his *viata amant*.

He snorted. He'd never find a life mate, and even if he did, he'd never ruin her life by shackling her to his sorry ass. He didn't want a woman—didn't need one—and he was sure even fate wouldn't be fucked up enough to saddle some poor soul with him. No, he had no worries where that was concerned. Malachi Mannering was damaged goods and good for nothing where relationships were concerned.

He prowled quietly down the sidewalk toward the park grounds. Being shielded gave him the advantage of moving freely in the open, and provided an opportunity for ambush on his target. He listened for any out of place sound, and watched for movements in the shadows. It didn't make sense that the drifter would be in the park at this time of night. The park was usually empty from dusk on, and humans were drifters' favorite prey. As he neared the entrance, he cocked his head to the side. A soft sob floated on the air.

Most people would have missed the quiet anguished sounds, but his ears weren't typical. In fact, all of his senses were as far from average as any human could imagine. He could hear a dog's bark miles away, see an ant crawling up a tree while standing on the top of a building five hundred feet away, and smell bread baking in the bakery the next town over. He could also read and compel minds and feel strong human emotions. Not to mention his *special* ability, the one that allowed him to call upon electricity. Most vampires had an ability of sorts, but most only used them in extreme instances as it weakened them. He rarely needed to use it, but couldn't deny the smell of roasting drifter always put him in a good mood, or a good mood for him anyway.

As he walked toward the park, the sobs grew louder. Whoever was crying might have fooled the normal person into thinking simple sorrow was the cause of such an outpouring of tears, but he could practically taste the humiliation, anger and regret mixed with that sorrow.

It had suddenly become obvious why the drifter had picked the park. The intended victim's private moment of emotional breakdown was no doubt drawing the thing's attention. It was his job as a hunter to protect humans from drifters. To exterminate the creatures that thrived on stolen souls, to send them to Hell where they belonged and release those imprisoned orbs, allowing them to finally travel to the next plain of life. Tonight was no exception. He would stop the drifter from stealing anything ever again.

He followed the sobbing to its source. Sitting on a secluded bench surrounded by trees was a tiny, red-haired woman. Her shoulders were hunched toward her chest and shook as she cried. She was oblivious to the danger lurking nearby. Malachi stopped and silently waited. Within moments, a shadow moved out of the copse to the right. He pulled a dagger from his left boot and stalked the drifter. Suddenly, all hell broke loose. The drifter tensed, signaling Malachi that it had somehow realized it was being hunted, and what should have been a quick, easy job turned complicated.

"Shit!" Malachi dropped his shield and became visible once again. He burst forward in a blurred, dead-out run, but the drifter was too close to its target.

He watched the woman jump and spin around in response to his expletive right before the drifter was on her. He was going to be too late for this one. *Hell I am*. He stopped five feet from the drifter who now had the woman by the throat.

"That's close enough, hunter." The drifter pulled the woman tighter against him.

The redhead's eyes were huge with fright, but Malachi was impressed with her silent composure. Most of the women he'd been around would have been screaming bloody murder if faced with the same situation.

"Let her go, drifter." He let the words slide from his lips, laced with the lethal promise of death.

A laugh that could only be described as a hoarse cackle escaped the creature's lips. "Why? So you can kill me?"

Malachi kept his hand at his side, hiding the dagger resting in his palm. "Ah, you assume too much. I will kill you whether you let her go or not. I would just prefer to have less of a mess to clean up. You dig?"

The drifter's talons grazed the woman's skin. If they penetrated too deeply, she would become very sick, even possibly die if too much poison got into her system. He was pretty sure it wouldn't take too much at all to put her on her ass for good, which would be a shame because she was quite an attractive little package.

"I don't much like bluffers. You hunters are all alike. You won't risk her getting hurt." The drifter buried his nose in the woman's red hair and breathed deeply, never taking his black eyes from Malachi. "It's your job, isn't it? To protect these pathetic, weak excuses of life?"

"I don't know what hunters you are used to dealing with, drifter, but I promise you, you will die tonight one way or another. Choice is yours, but you will never leave this park breathing."

The drifter hissed and tightened his grip on his hostage. She whimpered and Malachi knew he'd only have one shot to save her life. If he screwed up, she'd die. Her life was literally in his two hands. He waited for his chance, and was surprised when it came from the woman stomping down on the drifter's foot and lunging for freedom. Malachi took advantage of the opportunity and leaped into the air, caught the drifter with both size twelves in the chest, and cleanly dropped him to the ground where he buried the dagger into its heart.

The drifter screamed, and Malachi reached for the longer dagger from his other boot. He sliced cleanly through the creature's neck, and the thing promptly turned into black, bubbling, stinking goo that seeped into the ground. Malachi wiped both daggers on the grass, and slipped them back into the sides of his boots before turning to the woman. She lay on her side, bunched up in the fetal position, holding her leg. Her back was to him, and he knelt beside her.

"Are you okay?"

She groaned. "It burns."

Malachi pulled her hand from her leg and winced. The drifter had tagged her a good one. The denim of her jeans was torn wide open, and a six inch gash across her thigh seeped blood. His nostrils flared once he caught the coppery scent, and his body ignited hotter than the adrenaline from the fight a few moments earlier had provoked. He sucked in a sharp breath. He didn't understand his reaction to the redhead. He'd always been in steely control of his needs and wants, never allowing them to rule him. This time, the scales were tipping in the direction of instinct. He growled and squashed the urge to taste her as easily as he might squash a bug under his shoe.

The wound was potentially fatal. The poison was entering her blood stream, and attacking her immune system at that very moment. He had to get her someplace where he could help her. A hospital would be useless, as they'd never be able to treat her for something they had no knowledge of. He hated feeling obligated to anyone, but he felt just that to this woman.

*God damn it! I don't need this shit.* He clenched his fists, and his knuckles cracked one by one. He itched to have a cig between his lips, but there was no time for it now. He had no choice. He had to take her back to his place.

By the time he scooped her up, a bubble of panic was welling up inside his chest. He had no idea why he felt that particular emotion that was foreign to him. He'd never had such a reaction any of the other times a human had been in peril. He'd witnessed far worse injuries than this woman had sustained, seen death hundreds of times. In those cases, he'd felt a detached sadness, but never a tingling of desperation to save what might not be savable.

She was nearly unconscious, and sweat shined on her forehead. She was barely heavier than a feather, and it had nothing to do with his enhanced strength. Her face was pale, and her full lips were pressed into thin lines of pain, opening just enough every few seconds to allow tiny moans to rasp out. He took a deep breath and shimmered to his house with her bundled in his arms.

## Chapter Two

Malachi dumped her gently on his bed, shrugged out of his jacket, and went to start the water running in the tub. After adjusting the temperature, he returned to the bed and picked her back up. He carried her to the bathroom, sat on the rim of the tub with her in his lap, and peeled her clothes off. He was trying hard to be a gentleman, and not take advantage of the luscious package that was being unwrapped before his eyes, but a man only had so much chivalry. His cock twitched and his stomach promptly clenched. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had stirred any type of interest in him other than casual admiration.

If he wasn't a vampire, he'd swear he was about to throw up, but he wasn't capable of such a thing. No, it wasn't vomit about to make an exit. It was his screwed up psyche kicking his ass once again. It wasn't right that a man got sick from being turned on by a woman. And that was the reason he'd kept his distance from the fairer sex for his entire life. He'd been approached by women throughout the years, but every time it had happened, he'd high-tailed like a cat with its ass on fire in the opposite direction. He was so fucked up, and he'd never forgive or forget the bastard that had made him that way.

He continued undressing the woman, and when he pulled the last piece of fabric from her body, he gently placed her in the tub, holding her upright in the waist deep water. He soaped a washcloth and ran it over her, cleaned the gash on her thigh, and checked every inch of her to make sure she had no further injuries before cupping water in his hand to rinse the lather from her pale skin. He pulled the plug from the drain, grabbed a towel off a hook hanging on the wall, and wrapped it around her body after lifting her from the receding water.

Every single one of his muscles tensed when she cuddled against him. She was still completely out of it, hadn't a clue as to what she was doing, but he wasn't used to such intimacy. His heart beat a little faster as, this time, he pulled the blanket and sheets back before laying her on his bed. His breath hitched at the sight of her on his mattress. He never in his wildest dreams would have imagined a woman would ever be in his bed for any reason. He gave himself a good mental kick in the ass and focused his mind back on the task at hand. As horrible as it might make him seem, he was glad she was unconscious, because what he was about to do next would probably freak the hell out of her.

He pushed the towel high enough on her thigh to expose the injury, and sucked in a quick breath at the faint electricity that zapped his fingers each time they came into contact with her skin. He closed his eyes for a moment and got his breathing back under control before spitting in his palm. He pressed it over the jagged cut and rubbed it into the wound, and a crazy urge to bathe the wound with his mouth instead of his fingers washed through him. His saliva contained a healing agent and would not



only speed the mending of the gash, but would also kill the poison in her blood. He only hoped that it would be enough to save her. When he was done, he washed his hands, wet a wash rag with cold water and placed it on her forehead.

Her forehead was hot to his touch, indicating she already had a fever, and she groaned when the coolness touched her skin. He pulled the damp towel from her body and covered her with the sheets and blanket up to her chin. If she were still alive in the morning, she'd pull through. He slid a chair from the corner, scooted it closer to the bed, sat in it and pulled his boots off. He propped his socked feet on the end of the mattress and leaned back before linking his hands behind his head.

For the first time, he allowed himself to take a close look at her. Her red hair was shiny and fell straight to about mid back over creamy white skin, and even though she'd not opened her eyes since the attack, he'd seen that they were a deep green when they had been wide and scared in the park. Her lips were small, but full, and her cheekbones sat high on either side of her dainty, slightly upturned nose. A light, nearly discernible dusting of freckles scattered under her eyes, and her lashes lay against her skin in thick, brown fanned shadows.

While there was nothing remarkable about her, she was beautiful nonetheless in an earthy, natural way. His skin began to burn, and the sick churning of his stomach once again reminded him that he'd never be able to have her. In fact, she'd probably laugh herself silly if she found out he'd never been with a woman. And if she knew exactly how old he was, the laughter would probably turn to pity, that was if she was able to get past his age to begin with. Pity and laughter were two things he wanted none of. He'd been subjected to enough humiliation to last him a lifetime, no matter how long that might be. He'd never allow someone that kind of power over him again.

He'd spent countless nights going over the darkest days of his life, wondering how he might be different today had he been strong enough to keep the humiliation from happening, wondering what it would be like to be able to lust after a woman without getting sick. He snorted and closed his eyes. Dreams about things that could never happen were fucking useless. He didn't have room in his life to act like a moon-eyed teenager longing for a happily-ever-after. He was put on this earth to do one thing—protect humans. And, one day, no matter how far in the future, he'd die a lonely, angry, hollow man.

\* \* \* \*

*The damp, musty smell of the basement tickled his nose and ignited fear deep in his gut. He would come for him soon. He always did. The thought barely left his young mind when footsteps echoed on the wooden steps, a creak escaping here and there. Malachi bunched his body in the corner, trying to make himself blend into the wall, and begged God to make Him leave him alone. When that didn't work,*

*he tried to bargain with the Devil himself, but neither had ever helped before, and there was no reason to believe either would this time.*

*He scrunched his eyes shut when a rough hand grabbed the back of his neck, yanked him to his feet, and pushed his face against the cold cement blocks of the wall, his cheek scraping against the rough surface. He hated Trinidad and wished the bastard was dead. That wasn't the whole truth. If Malachi were older, he'd be strong enough to stop Trinidad from the disgusting acts he so thoroughly enjoyed inflicting upon him. If he had come fully into his powers, he'd make Trinidad pay in blood for every act of treachery he'd bestowed upon him. He didn't deserve the luxury of being dead. He deserved to suffer. He deserved to be filled with the hatred, the confusion, the absolute terror that slithered through Malachi's veins at this very moment . . . the utter helplessness.*

*Malachi jerked when Trinidad reached around to the front of him and tried to buck free, but the hand holding his neck did so with little effort. It was an age-old tradition—one that would never cease—the powerful bending the will of the weak for their own amusement. His attempts to escape would only make Trinidad's vulgar act take longer, but no matter how many times this had happened, he'd never be able to meekly submit or give up.*

*"Now, now, boy. Haven't you learned by now that I own you? I can do whatever I want with you, and no one will care."*

*It was the truth. Malachi was a mere slave to Trinidad. He'd been on his own since he was eight years old when his mother had been murdered by a drifter. He'd never known his father as he had been bled out and put to death by the guillotine before he was born. He was now sixteen, and had been suffering at the hands of Trinidad for nearly a year. Once he turned eighteen, he'd come into his full vampire powers and no one would ever humiliate him again. He was certain Trinidad would try to get rid of him before that happened, but he was determined to live to seek revenge one day.*

*"Then kill me." He was sick of Trinidad's threats, and even though terror ate away at his clenched gut, he tried to put on a brave front. He despised showing fear to this man.*

*"I don't think so. Not yet anyway, boy."*

*Trinidad's breath hissed near his ear, and Malachi tried hard not to heave. Trinidad's hand found its mark, and Malachi's breath nearly stopped, stuck in his throat forever. He did the only thing he knew how to do to survive the depravity about to be forced upon him for what seemed to be the hundredth time. He focused his thoughts on a far off place, one with a meadow, flowers and his mother's laughing face, and fought hard to tamp down the scream bubbling in his throat when his pants were yanked to his knees.*

*"No respectable woman will ever want you after she finds out you've already been someone else's bitch." The words were the last he heard as he found the meadow and his mother.*

\* \* \* \*

Malachi jerked upward in the chair. The memories made him shake in frustration and disgust. He scrubbed one hand down his face, trying to erase the images forever burnt into his brain. He grunted and jumped when he focused on his visitor. Clear green eyes peeked over the blankets at him. He hadn't expected her to regain consciousness until at least morning, if at all.

He sat up slowly and she burrowed deeper under the covers. "It's okay. I won't hurt you." He spoke low in a casual tone.

"Who are you?" Her eyes darted quickly around the room before resting back on him. "Where am I?"

Her voice drew him like a moth to a flame, rich, sultry, and soothing. And just like the poor moth, if he allowed the flame to lure him in, he'd get burned. What was it about her that tempted him when no other had?

"I'm Malachi Mannering. You were attacked in the park. Do you remember?"

She paused for a moment, and worked her bottom lip with her teeth before nodding. "I was mugged, and you saved me."

He didn't bother to correct her. She was better off believing that she'd been mugged rather than attacked by a creature that would have tortured her, killed her, and stolen her soul. Fortunately, she hadn't gotten a good look at the drifter since it had grabbed her from behind. Had she seen the thing, she would have immediately realized that she had been up against something way more menacing than a mere mugger.

"I brought you to my house to look after you until you recovered."

She moved her leg a little under the blanket, sucked in a breath and winced. "Why didn't you take me to the hospital?"

He shrugged. "Let's just say things were a little complicated."

Her brows drew down. "Complicated?"

"Get some rest. In the morning we'll see how you're doing and go from there."

He knew she was contemplating his suggestion by the way her fingers fidgeted with the blankets and her teeth continued working her bottom lip. He didn't blame her. She didn't know him and being alone with a strange, hulking man was enough to give any woman pause. He was surprised when after

only a few moments, her eyelids drooped and her soft, even breathing told him she had fallen back into a deep sleep. People rarely surprised him any longer, and he found her capability to do so amusing.

He had a nearly undeniable urge to run his fingers through her coppery hair, to feel the texture of it slide over his skin. The woman had secrets—*don't we all*—and he wondered if she'd tell him any of them. After all, why would she be alone so late in the park, and why would she not ask to call her family or friends upon waking at an unknown man's house? He rubbed his eyes and sighed. He'd worry about all those questions in the morning. On second thought, he wouldn't, because why should he care?

He went to the kitchen, where he poured a steaming cup of strong, black coffee from the pot that he'd programmed to brew earlier that day. He took a couple sips before setting the cup down and picked up the pack of smokes from the table, grabbed a stick, tapped it on the counter top, and lit it. He walked to the window, cracked it open to let the smoke out, and stared out at the sky that was beginning to turn pink with dawn's approach while he inhaled and let the familiar burn start deep in his lungs before exhaling. First thing was to get the woman out of his house as soon as possible. He couldn't have her lurking in his personal space making him feel things he didn't understand.

He thought about her green eyes, creamy skin and cherub mouth and his stomach churned violently. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

## Chapter Three

Geri stretched and then flinched when pain shot through her thigh. A groan slipped from her lips, and she snuggled deeper into the soft blankets. *Soft blankets?* Her eyes flew wide, and she sprang up into a sitting position. She looked around the bedroom, and terror nearly overtook her before memories of what happened rushed her brain. She took a deep, calming breath and began to push the covers off until she realized she was stark naked. She gasped.

“How are you feeling?”

She nearly jumped out of her skin when he spoke. She focused on the man standing at the end of the bed. He was huge. In fact, she didn’t think she’d ever met a man as tall as him. Six foot didn’t cover it. He had to be a good six inches over that if not more. She’d be a midget next to him since she barely registered five three. She immediately sensed a hardness about him and bet that most people would understandably feel threatened by his mere presence. She, for some strange reason, didn’t feel intimidated. Maybe it was because he’d saved her life.

He was dressed all in black, and even though he was so big, he had a refined leanness about him. While he was heavily muscled, she remembered how graceful and quick he’d moved, and never could have imagined a man his size pulling off such eloquent motion. His hands rested on his leather clad hips. She’d never been one to go for leather, but she couldn’t deny he looked good in it. His blunt fingernails were smooth and clean and a dusting of black hair covered the backs of his hands, ran up his arms, and disappeared under the fabric of his shirt. His shoulders were wide, and thick cords of tendon ran up both sides of the column of his throat.

His hair was straight, inky blue black, and hung past his shoulders. His lips were surprisingly full for a man, his jaw squared and his nose straight and perfectly proportioned to his face—neither too big nor too small—but just the right size. Geri’s heart skipped a beat when she looked into his eyes. They were the most beautiful, silver color she’d ever seen. They couldn’t be called gray by any means. In fact, calling them gray would be an insult. The shade reminded her of a fat, silver moon glistening in a midnight black sky.

“I’m okay. My leg hurts a little.” It hurt a heck of a lot more than a little, but she didn’t want to be a baby about it.

“Do you mind if I take a look?”

She bunched the blanket closer to her chest when he came around to the side of the bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress. “Um, I don’t have any clothes on.”

"I know." His voice rasped out, and sounded as if the words almost hurt to say them.

"Oh. I guess you would, wouldn't you?" For some reason, the thought of him taking her clothes off didn't upset her as much as she thought it should. What the hell was wrong with her? She was in no position to be finding any man attractive. She'd been living a nightmare for a week now because of a man. A man she thought loved her. A man she thought she loved. A man who'd betrayed her, hurt her.

He pushed the edge of the blanket up her leg, careful to expose only what was necessary to reveal her injury. She looked down at the gash. She would have thought it would be much worse judging by the length and discomfort of the jagged cut. Yet, it already appeared to be healing and looked to be more than a week old rather than a few hours.

He paused for a moment, his silver gaze resting on her before it drifted to her thigh. His long fingers hovered just above her skin, and he drew in a deep breath before allowing just the tips to shakily trace along the side of the cut.

After a couple moments, he pulled the blanket back over her leg. "Looks decent enough. I think you'll survive."

"Glad to hear it," she muttered as he got up and walked to a dark-colored dresser in the corner of the room. He opened a drawer, pulled out a T-shirt and tossed it to her.

"You can put that on." He dug around the second drawer, pulled out a pair of sweatpants and socks and tossed them to her as well. "Bathroom is over there." He motioned with his head and the thick tendons in his neck stood out. "When you're done dressing you can come to the kitchen, and we'll see about getting you home."

"Um, and why again didn't you take me to the hospital?" She watched his back straighten, and was pretty sure she wasn't going to get an answer to the simple question.

"I told you. It was complicated."

Yeah, just as she thought, vague and evasive. She waited until he left the room before letting her shoulders sag. She didn't have a home, at least not any longer. Mike had made sure of that. She had nothing. No money, no friends, no job, no family, no place to go. She'd been sleeping on the park bench for the past week trying to figure out what she was going to do. She'd been resisting, but it had finally come down to her last option—visiting the homeless shelter. Only sheer stubbornness and determination had kept her from doing so thus far. She had been hoping to land another job, but the false accusations and rumors Mike had spread about her had made it impossible to get a job at any reputable place in the area.

She'd been an only child of a small family. Her father, her mother, and two aunts were all she had had. Her mother had died in a car accident when she was only four years old, but still to this day, she could remember her mother's kindness. She remembered her smile and the way she'd sing to her

when she was sick or frightened by a storm. She also remembered the day her mother left and never came back home.

Her father had never been the same. He'd been a gentle man. The only times she remembered his vacant, empty blue eyes sparkling back to life after her mother had died was when he looked at her. He claimed it was because he loved her, but she thought it might have a little to do with her looking a lot like her mother. By the time she was fifteen, both of her aunts had passed away, and her father had been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. He'd fought through countless rounds of chemotherapy, and promised her that no matter what it took, he'd hang on until she was eighteen.

He'd kept his promise, and three days after her eighteenth birthday, and only two weeks after she'd graduated high school, she'd held her father's hand as he'd lain dying in the hospital bed. Various monitors and tubes had been attached to him, and as he'd struggled for his last few breaths, he'd smiled at her, and begged her to never give up on her dreams. His final whispered words were, "I love you, my dear, sweet girl. Do not be sad for me, for I will finally be with your mother once again, and you will have a happy and long life."

She sniffled back the tears that threatened to fall, and felt as if she'd let her father down a bit. Her dreams had been simple—have a comfortable home, a job she loved, and a husband who adored her. She'd had them all for awhile. Now she had nothing. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Geri.*

She got off the bed and limped to the bathroom. After taking care of necessities and dressing in the T-shirt—which hung past her knees—she stood staring at the woman in the mirror who'd become a complete stranger . . . herself. Her once lustrous, red hair looked limp and dirty. Her normally glowing skin was pale and blotchy, and she had huge bags under her eyes. She glanced at the tub/shower combo behind her and peeled the shirt back off. She couldn't resist. She was tired of washing up in public restrooms.

Five minutes later, after the steamy shower, she almost felt human again. She dried with a towel hanging on the wall and hoped Malachi wouldn't mind. She threw the T-shirt back on along with the sweats this time. The string from the waistband hung nearly to her knees, and the fabric bunched around her waist where she'd tightened it. She pulled the socks over her feet, which were as huge on her as the shirt and sweats, finger combed her hair, and sighed at her appearance. It was much better than before the shower, but for some reason, she felt embarrassed to be seen by Malachi in her current state—disheveled. It was ridiculous to feel that way. She'd only just met him, and he wouldn't expect her to show up to breakfast in a ball gown after last night's ordeal. She took a deep breath and went to find the kitchen.

She'd had enough of feeling inferior to others. Yes, she used to have a highly esteemed career as a CPA to most of the town's wealthy inhabitants and many businesses. Yes, she had been married to Mike Baxter, Colorado's next Governor, but after awhile it had felt as if she'd been doing all of it just to please Mike or her clients. No matter what she had done, no matter how hard she'd worked, it had never been good enough for her soon-to-be ex-husband. And now, he'd ruined her for any position having to do with money, but she refused to be defeated. Now that she'd spent a week completely

shell-shocked over Mike's betrayal, anger was kicking in, and she was ready to fight back. Today was the day Geraldine Baxter would turn her life around and start living for herself.

She smelled bacon cooking and her stomach rumbled loudly in angry protest of being ignored for so long. She squeezed her eyes shut for a quick moment, the full realization of how people took the simple things in life for granted hitting her hard. She'd never drooled over bacon before, probably because she'd always had access to it if she'd wanted it. Now, she'd never take food, or a shower, or even brushing her teeth, for granted ever again.

When she walked into the small kitchen, her heart kicked up a notch at the sight before her. Malachi was one sexy man. *Yes. And you have no business noticing that he is.* The kitchen was decent sized, but he made it appear much smaller than it was with his hulking frame.

"Have a seat." He hadn't given any indication that he'd known she was there.

She almost jumped out of her skin. She hadn't thought she'd made any noise. Maybe he was just one of those people with extra sensitive senses. She sat down in one of the wooden chairs at the matching table that gleamed back a shiny, clean cherry surface. She looked around. Everything was extremely tidy. The open cabinets revealed glasses arranged by size, and dishes and bowls in stacks of four. On the counter were various spices, all arranged in size as well from smallest to largest. Nothing else other than what he'd used to cook with, a coffee maker and toaster littered the counter. She wouldn't have thought a man could be so organized.

Maybe he had a girlfriend or even a wife that was a real nag about keeping things neat and tidy. She watched him for a moment. Each movement of his arms drew the fabric of his shirt tighter over his broad back, showing off his spectacular muscles. She licked her lips and gave herself another mental scolding for ogling him. She glanced around the room again. If she were a betting woman, she'd take the odds that he wasn't married. Girlfriend? Also unlikely. No signs of a woman, no high heels lying around, not even a trace of a brush or makeup had been evident. Not to mention, in the few seconds she'd talked to him, he'd seemed withdrawn, closed off to the world.

She wouldn't be surprised to see a sign hanging around his neck that said *Trespassers Will Be Shot*. He didn't strike her as a selfish man. He had helped her, a complete stranger. There just seemed to be an air around him, an invisible aura that pulsed with vibes that chanted *Do-Not-Touch*.

But damned if all the reasons why she shouldn't be attracted to him had little affect on tempering the strange pull she felt around him. What she couldn't figure out was why she should feel such a way for someone she barely knew. She decided it probably had something to do with the undue stressful situation she'd recently been thrown into, and maybe the fact that someone had shown her a little kindness and compassion.

He slid a plate in front of her piled with food, but the only thing she noticed, even over her growling stomach, was his thick forearm and the sprinkling of black hairs that dusted it. She wanted to run her fingers over him, and feel the hardness of his muscles flex under her touch. She started to reach



to do just that when her brain kicked out of fantasy mode and back into reality mode. She picked up the fork he'd set down for her instead.

He eased into a chair at the opposite end of the table. "Eat up. It'll help you get your strength back."

She watched him for a second as he scooped big bites of fluffy scrambled eggs into his mouth. His jaw clenched each time he chewed as if he had to force himself to eat.

"Thank you." She picked up her fork and speared some eggs.

He didn't answer. Merely grunted and continued eating. She decided she could take a hint and ate her meal in silence.

\* \* \* \*

He chewed his food without saying a word to Geri. He wanted her out of his house as soon as possible. It felt too crowded with her around. He was uneasy, and his stomach cramped every time he allowed his eyes to wander over her creamy skin or coppery hair that was now damp and smelled of his shampoo. He'd always been in tight control of everything in his life. His emotions, his reactions, the way his T-shirts had to be folded just the right way after being washed and dried, or the way everything in his house had a specific place.

For some reason, even a thousand years of tightly leashed restraint seemed to have trouble competing with the green-eyed woman sitting next to him. He was drawn to her, and it angered him that he could not simply turn the emotions off. It irritated him even more that he felt that way to begin with. Every time he imagined how her skin would taste, or how her silky hair would feel between his fingers, or how bad he wanted to peel his T-shirt and sweatpants from her, the familiar sickness crept up and crippled him. He didn't want to feel that way. Hell, what man would want to feel sick every time he found a woman attractive?

No matter how hard he had tried over the years, he'd never been able to heal the damage inflicted on his psyche. It wasn't so much that he'd ever seen himself as the settling down type, but hell, he was a hot blooded male, and he would have at least liked to have known what it felt like to have sex at some point in his life. If he ever got his hands on Trinidad, he'd make the bastard suffer. He barely stifled a grunt of disgust. Suffer at this point was too mild. He'd annihilate the man, shatter him, destroy his soul. After all, like for like.

"When you're finished eating, I can take you home." He didn't look at her when he spoke. If he did, he'd probably have to throw the rest of his breakfast in the trash. But fuck, the overwhelming urge

to lose himself in her eyes, to drown in them, to let them take away all the pain and humiliation, nearly got the best of him. He felt them on him, tugging at him, begging him to gaze into them.

“Um. That’s okay. I can find my own way home if you’ll just tell me where we are.”

Waves of shame rolled off her and hit him hard. He glanced at her. She toyed with her food now as if something had upset her. “I’d rather make sure you made it home safe, if you don’t mind.”

She stood. “No. I’ll be fine. Do you have my clothes?”

About two seconds after she asked, the dryer buzzed as if the damn thing was waiting for her to ask. “Yeah, they just finished drying. They’re over there.” He pointed to the door that led to his laundry room, and watched her hurry over to it and disappear behind it.

She’d gone from curious to fidgety in three seconds flat. He wondered why she didn’t want him to take her home. His first guess would have been that she was hesitant to show a strange man where she lived, yet he couldn’t detect any fear from her. In fact, she seemed peculiarly accepting of being in his house and around him. Most people were intimidated as hell by his size alone. She wasn’t. If he were honest with himself, that kind of fascinated him.

If he wasn’t hell bent on respecting people’s privacy, he’d simply read her mind, but he couldn’t do it. He knew what it was like to be stripped of privacy, to be humiliated, and reading someone’s thoughts was a gross trespass on both of those things. On the other hand, he wouldn’t feel guilty in the least if he secretly followed her home to ensure her safety.

## Chapter Four

It was nearly lunchtime before Geri had convinced Malachi to let her leave on her own. As she walked along the sidewalk that led to the shelter, her shoulders sagged, and the fall breeze cooled her skin. She'd always liked the crisp weather, but then again, she'd never lived on the streets. She'd been able to enjoy the brisk breeze, and go home to a warm house. While she'd donated to charities when she could and had always wished she could do more, she'd never understood first hand what the homeless went through.

Now, while she was at one of the lowest points in her life, she knew she'd dig herself back out . . . somehow, some way. She had an education and skills. How would it feel being where she was at the moment with no hope of ever getting out? She couldn't imagine living day to day for possibly the rest of her life filled with such despair. It gave her insight as to how strong those living on the street must be. It gave her a new understanding of how some people were able to do things she'd never imagined doing just to survive.

A shiver ran the length of her spine, and she peered over her shoulder. She had an eerie feeling that someone watched her, but she didn't see anyone close to her or even looking in her direction. She continued walking a little faster now toward the shelter she planned to spend the night at, the only shelter in Ransom. She sighed in relief when she caught sight of the brick building. Relief was short lived, however, when she read the *Filled* sign hanging in the window. She couldn't spend another night in the park, especially after what had happened last night.

She glanced down at the tattered slash in the thigh of her jeans and shuddered. She still had a few hours of light left, but hadn't a clue as to what to do. She pulled on the handle of the glass door framed by silver steel and went inside the shelter. The silver glinted in the sun and reminded her of Malachi's eyes. She made her way to the counter where the food was served and a short, plump gray-haired woman stood behind a huge pot of boiling soup holding a ladle.

The woman looked up and smiled at Geri. "Would you like a bowl of soup, hun?" the woman grabbed a bowl as if Geri had already answered and started ladling chicken soup into it.

"Yes, please." Geri hated taking charity from others. Odd that the one thing she'd always supported made her feel guilty to take herself.

"If you don't mind me asking, what is a pretty thing like you doing here?" The woman put the bowl on a tray with some crackers and silverware and placed it on the counter in front of Geri.

"Oh. Well, it's a long story."

The woman laughed. "Name's Louise, by the way. And they always are long stories. Long and complicated."

Geri smiled at Louise. "You've got that right. My name is Geri." Geri felt uneasy when Louise eyed her closely.

"You don't look like the normal hard luck cases I see every day. You look more refined." Louise cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry, really."

"It's okay. I just prefer not to talk about it, if you don't mind."

"Do you have someplace to stay tonight, Geri?"

Geri picked up the tray with the soup on it. "No, but I'll figure something out."

"Come on, girl. We both know there ain't no other place unless you got a friend or family that will take you in."

"No." Geri felt tears prickle the backs of her lids, but she refused to let them slide down her cheeks.

"Well, I'm sure you seen by the sign. The rooms are filled, but I could let you sleep in the storage room. It's tiny and cramped, but it has a cot and is warm."

Geri smiled at Louise. "That would be nice, Louise. Thank you so much."

"No thanks, girl. I would take you home with me, but at the moment, I'm living with family myself. Going through a little drama of my own. They didn't like it too well none when I brought the last person home with me that needed a bed for the night."

"No. No, really. The storage room is fine, Louise." At least she wouldn't have to sleep outside.

"Good then. There's a bathroom at the end of the hall over there." Louise pointed to the back of the shelter.

"Thank you again. Um, Louise, would you happen to know anyone who is hiring right now? Waitress, pizza delivery girl, I don't care—anything?" She had to find income from somewhere. She'd had ninety-eight dollars in her purse when Mike had pulled his stunt, but that amount didn't go far when one had to eat every day.

Louise smiled a big, half-toothless grin. "Actually, I do. Joe's Diner is hiring. It's only about three blocks from here. West."

"Thanks! I'll check it out after I eat."

Geri found a table amongst the throng of people. She ate all of her soup, and took the tray back up to Louise.

"I leave here at four o'clock sharp, Geri. The shelter has a separate door and I have to lock up when I go. If you don't make it back before then . . ."

"Don't worry. I'll be back. And if I'm not for some reason, I wouldn't expect you to wait for me.

"Good luck!" Louise waived at Geri as she left the building.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi followed Geri to the shelter. He hated being out in the daylight, but the thick shades he wore kept the sun from burning the shit out of his sensitive eyes. The myths about vampires catching fire and disintegrating in the sunlight were a load of crap, but the bright light was a bitch on the eyes.

Why the hell had she gone into the shelter? She certainly didn't fit the bill of the homeless type. Most of the homeless that roamed around Ransom reeked of booze and dirt. He'd donated to the shelter on several occasions, anonymously, of course. His money was probably what kept the little hole-in-the-wall going, but he didn't want recognition for it. He simply wanted everyone to have a place to go, to have a roof over their head and food in their bellies, someplace safe and secure. In fact, he wished they would expand and clean up the place a bit. He'd look into what it would take to accomplish it, and maybe do something about it later on.

He leaned against the corner of the building until Geri reemerged from the shelter about twenty minutes later. She looked around carefully, as if she knew someone was watching her, as if she knew he was there, but there was absolutely no way she'd be able to discover him. He'd been a hunter for too long, was too good at what he did for a human to detect him if he didn't want to be seen.

She folded her arms across her middle and began walking toward the *bad* end of town, the part he spent most of his time hunting in. The shelter itself bordered it. She might get away unscathed during the day, but nighttime would be a different story. The unsavory that lurked down those dark streets would eat a sweet morsel like her up alive. Come to think of it, he was one of them.

His stomach clenched and he cursed. He followed her all the way to Joe's Diner, slipping into the shadows each time she stopped to look over her shoulder. When a half hour had gone by and she remained inside, he peered through the window to see what she was up to, and was taken back by the sight before him. Geri had an apron tied around her slim waist, waiting tables. She was taking a family's order, and her smile lit the room, even brightening up the frazzled mother arguing with her two young children while the father ignored the commotion.

Now that he looked closer, the man appeared to be way more interested in Geri than a guy with a family should be. He didn't like it. In fact, rage punched through his gut like a shotgun shell,

splintering into millions of shards throughout his body, leaving tiny hot trails of shrapnel in their wake, reminding him of their presence. Strangely, the clenching sickness he usually felt when he had any strong feelings toward a woman was absent.

He took a deep breath and stepped around the corner to lean against the building. His breaths came in ragged pants, and tiny zaps of electricity zinged from one finger to another. His loss of control angered him even more, and the electricity began arcing from his hands, slamming into the ground about a foot in front of him. It took him several minutes to get his emotions in check.

Fear tickled his brain. He hadn't experienced fear since Trinidad. He had refused to allow it to be a part of him. He'd had enough of it to last him a lifetime, and until this moment, a thousand years had passed by him without so much a twinge of it. And it only took the slightest thought of losing one tiny human to bring it on in full force. *Losing her? She isn't mine to lose in the first place. Yeah, losing is right, like I'm losing my fucking mind.*

When he finally calmed down, he risked another peek through the window. Geri now served the family their food and the man was still looking at her like he'd like her to be on his plate instead of the spaghetti with runny sauce. Malachi felt a fang slide below his lip and decided it might be better if he waited outside without watching what was going on inside. Otherwise, he didn't know what he might do.

*Just fucking great! Fear and jealousy all in one fucking night.* He pulled a cig from his leather jacket and put it between his lips before lighting it, and waited for the familiar burn in his lungs and tobacco rush through his veins to soothe him.

\* \* \* \*

Geri's feet had never hurt so badly in her entire life. She hadn't expected Joe Davidson, the owner of Joe's Diner, to hire her on the spot. She was happy about the income she'd make, no matter how meager it was. All the waitressing skills she'd acquired from her college days were coming in handy now. She didn't remember her feet feeling like they had been chopped off at the ankle after only a few hours back then. Maybe it had something to do with her being nearly fifteen years older.

She had brought in quite a good amount of tips for such a seedy side of town. She glanced at the clock and her stomach dropped. It was four twenty-six. She'd missed her opportunity to stay at the shelter in the storage room. Joe had promised to let her leave by three, but at two forty-five a huge crowd of bikers had come in, and Joe told her she could either stay and help, or not bother coming back. Being in the position she was, she really hadn't had a choice.

She untied the apron that was splattered with food after taking the last round of refills to the crowded tables. She was glad that, for the most part, the bikers had been gentlemen. She counted the ones she had stuffed in her pocket—fifty-two dollars. That would more than buy her a room in a cheap motel, a cheap motel on this side of town. She sighed. It was that or outside, and she wasn't going to sleep outside again. The thought of it nearly terrified her.

"You leaving now, Geri?" Joe slipped by her and grabbed a box of fries from the freezer room.

Geri figured that, at one time, Joe had probably been a pretty good-looking guy. He was of average height, had dark hair that was now peppered with gray, and sparkling blue eyes. His middle was thicker than it probably had been ten years ago, and his forehead was creased with wrinkles.

"Yes. Do you need me tomorrow?"

A fleeting thought crossed her mind about asking Joe if she might be able to crash in the store room for the night, but she didn't figure her new employer with think much of a stranger he'd just hired camping out in his diner. He didn't know her, and she couldn't expect him to trust her with his livelihood.

"Mondays are usually pretty slow, but why don't you come in around lunchtime just in case." Joe opened the fries with a box cutter and poured some into the deep fryer.

She was going to smell like grease for days. "I'll see you tomorrow."

When she left the diner, the sky was already darkening. She looked from left to right, wishing she could head back to the shelter and the better part of town. She straightened her aching shoulders and headed in the opposite direction. She had driven through here a few times, but never after dark. She picked up the pace, wanting to make it to the little roach motel a few blocks away before nightfall.

It hadn't taken long for the eerie feeling that she was being watched to set back in. It had never really gone completely away, but it seemed stronger now that she was outside. Or maybe it was because she was alone in a place she shouldn't be. She was having some serious thoughts about strangling Mike, if she ever got the opportunity, for forcing her into this situation. A block later, she had bigger problems than worrying about someone watching her.

## Chapter Five

The last thing Malachi expected when Geri had stepped out of Joe's Diner was for her to turn and start walking even farther into the bad end of town. What the fuck did she think she was doing? If she had lived in Ransom for any amount of time, she had to know that she was potentially, no probably, putting herself in danger. His hands tightened into fists as he followed her, silently blending into the shadows cast by the rapidly fading sunlight.

While he admired the determination evidenced by her straight-as-a-board posture, he wanted to shake her for her naivety. She could be mugged, raped or even killed. Fortunately for her, while he was around, he wouldn't allow any of those things to happen. Maybe she'd get to where she was going without incident. *Yeah, and maybe I'll play fucking Santa Claus at the mall this year.*

She'd only made it a couple blocks before he spotted the first sign of trouble—two young men that appeared to be in their early twenties posing buffalo stances against the wall. When they saw Geri, one whispered to the other. Malachi's breath caught as he listened to the conversation they thought was private.

"Look at that sweet thing coming our way." The one with the dirty brown hair slid his palm along the front of his pants.

"Ain't seen nothin' that fine down in this part of town for months. Remember the last one?" The blond never took his gaze from Geri as he talked to his buddy.

"Yeah. She was nice. I think this one would be even nicer. I can practically taste that sweet cunt of hers now." Brown hair snickered.

"Let's get her. This time, I get to go first though."

They both pushed off the wall and walked toward Geri like two young cocks strutting their stuff. He was going to have to rip both sets of their balls off if either one touched her. They wouldn't, though, because they'd have to get past him first. And getting past him would be like an opossum getting past a semi going sixty-five with a full load. It just wasn't going to happen.

Geri suddenly stopped and started taking small steps back when she saw the two men. At least he couldn't fault her ability to spot trouble. She moved slow, as if trying not to attract attention to herself. When she came even with the shadow of the rickety steps of the fire escape he was concealed under, he reached out and pulled her to him with lightning speed. The two men would have only caught a blur of her movement before she disappeared.



She fought against him like a hell cat. He tightened his arm around her, and kept his other hand clamped over her mouth. About the time she started kicking him in the shins and stomping his feet, the two men stopped beside them, no doubt drawn to the sounds of her struggle. He stepped out of the shadows with her, her back rigid against his chest as he nudged her forward with his body.

"Sorry, boys. This one's mine." He buried his nose in her hair and breathed deep, never taking his eyes from the men. Her scent rushed in his veins like a torch to gasoline, and his world tilted for a moment. When she heard his voice, her struggles stopped and her body went limp.

"Who the fuck are you?" the one with the dirty brown hair, dirty jeans, and tattered T-shirt asked.

"Doesn't matter who I am. Just do yourselves a favor and move along." He jerked his head to the side, indicating they should head back in the direction they'd come from, and the two eyed him. He knew they were trying to figure out if they could both take him. They couldn't, and he hoped they figured that out. He wasn't in the mood to waste his time trying to teach two boys barely out of puberty a lesson in manners. He let one fang slide below his lip, and got perverse pleasure seeing the punks' eyes widen in fear. They both gasped in unison and gaped at him.

Finally, the brown-haired man nudged his friend. "Come on, Nate. She ain't worth it."

The blond snorted and they both turned and started back down the sidewalk.

Malachi watched until the men disappeared. He forgot he held Geri so tightly and that his hand was still over her mouth until she started squirming again. He let his hand slip from her lips, but kept his arm around her.

"What the hell are you doing down here, Geri? You have to know this isn't someplace you should be." He almost sighed when she relaxed against him. Her petite frame pressed against him and her sweet, natural fragrance made his heart thud. The familiar clench in his stomach was there, but it was manageable.

"Let me go."

"I asked you a question." He breathed the clean scent of her hair into his lungs once again, and this time a strange calmness washed over him. He wasn't sure, but he thought he almost felt serene. His life had been lived, for the most part, in a tense atmosphere created by his deeply buried insecurities. He'd never allowed himself to just let go and relax in apprehension of them rearing their ugly head in a time of vulnerability.

"And I said let me go." She began to fight him again.

"Damn it, Geri! You have to know the danger you've put yourself in, and you have to know that there is no possible way for you to get away from me unless I allow it." Son of a bitch. Her renewed struggles were bringing out yet more foreign feelings in him. He wanted to pin her to the wall and sink

his fangs into her sweet neck. He could practically taste her rich blood burst on his tongue and flow through him. She'd be an aphrodisiac worth more than the Hope Diamond.

"Then you are no better than the filth you just saved me from." Her quiet words floated through the air and stabbed into his chest deeper than any knife ever could.

Ice formed in his veins, and he spun her around by the arm to face him. "Believe me. If I were anything like them, you'd be pushed face first into that brick wall behind me with your jeans around your ankles while I pounded into you. Is that what you fucking think of me?"

She gulped, and a tear spilled down her cheek. "No. I didn't mean it, and it was cruel of me to insinuate such a thing after all you've done for me. I was just scared."

Utter disgust, laced with a bit of hurt, assaulted him from every direction. She said she hadn't meant to call him a rapist, but the thought that she might believe something like that about him even for a split second appalled him. His stomach cramped and his muscles quivered. He'd never be anything like Trinidad, and raping her would be right up that bastard's alley.

He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to catch his breath to calm himself, but couldn't do so with her staring up at him like a wounded kitten. He gasped when she laid her palm against his cheek, and the turmoil swirling in him instantly abated.

His eyes snapped open and she silently pleaded with him even before the words spilled from her mouth. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean it."

\* \* \* \*

Geri's stomach clenched at the pain she'd glimpsed in Malachi's eyes. He didn't strike her as a man who easily conveyed his emotions, and he probably had no idea that he'd shown any. It not only bothered her that she had been the cause of it, but that for some reason, she was sure she'd just seen the surface of something deeper, darker, and more disturbing. The fact that he looked as if he might throw up from the simple touch of her hand on his cheek didn't help her churning belly any.

What the hell had happened to him? She wanted to know, needed to know. Something deep inside her yearned to hold him, caress him, heal him. She'd never felt such an urgent need to soothe anyone before, not even her soon-to-be ex-husband. It was a tad bit unnerving that she'd feel such strong feelings toward him when she'd just met him hours before.

He stood staring at her not moving a muscle. She didn't think he'd taken a breath since she'd touched him. She whispered again. "I'm sorry I said that." She stroked her fingertips down his stubbly cheek. "Thank you for coming to my rescue."

Malachi sucked in a deep breath, let go of her arm, and backed away from her touch. "Don't worry about it."

He didn't move, didn't speak again for several seconds before she asked him, "Were you following me?" When his eyes met hers, her breath caught in her throat. The man was devastatingly gorgeous. His lips were full, and she couldn't find a single flaw on him. She would have guessed him at around thirty-five had it not been for the complete lack of lines or wrinkles anywhere on his face. It was bizarre. The way he talked, the way he moved, spoke of a more experienced man than his younger physical appearance attributed to.

His eyes met hers, yet he remained silent. She took a step toward him, closing the gap he'd placed between them only moments before. His inky hair flowed and blended into the black leather jacket he wore. The fabric hugged his shoulders, which now appeared even wider since the muscles that ran along the tops of them tensed as she drew nearer. The jacket stopped at his trim waist where matching black leather pants continued on. His thighs were amazing. She'd never been this close to a man of such size. She felt tiny next to him, feminine. Not a single thread of fear slithered through her. In fact, just the opposite, she felt safe.

She reached to stroke his cheek again, fully expecting him to evade her touch, surprised when he didn't. She didn't understand her deep-seated need to caress him, but was helpless to resist, and sighed at the feel of him. She let her fingers slide along his jaw, down the side of his neck and along the front of the buttery leather of his jacket. She gripped some of the soft fabric, stepped closer, stood on tiptoe, and placed her lips against his neck. He smelled spicy, and his masculine scent was complimented by the delicate aroma of leather.

The logical voice that screamed at her to stop this nonsense was muffled to an inaudible whisper by the desire consuming her. She was drawn to this man so strongly, so suddenly, that it should have scared the hell out of her. Instead, her unexpected hunger to taste him encouraged her. She ran the tip of her tongue up to his jaw and he let out a low, tortured groan that inspired a peculiar ache in her chest.

\* \* \* \*

A woman had never kissed him. He'd never been able to be intimately close to one without feeling sick. Even now, his gut clenched, but the familiar churning was overridden by her soft lips on his

jaw. He leaned in to her, closer, closer, while her mouth worked its magic on his skin. The feather light touch of her mouth sent sparks flying through him, and like kindling, he slowly began to ignite. Somehow, he was positive the slow burn was a mere glimpse of the fire she had the power to coax to full, roaring life.

Suddenly, every suppressed desire, every suppressed urge to explore sexuality he'd ever had over the years screamed to the surface. Every sleepless moment he'd spent staring at the ceiling in his room as he lay alone in bed, every time he'd witnessed a young man gently stroke the side of his lover's face while she leaned into his touch, every rare moment he'd yearned to know what holding a woman felt like clicked through his brain in slow motion. The feelings smothered him with an overload of need so intense, the beast that lurked inside him came to life and took control.

He barely heard her cry out when he yanked her to him and slammed his mouth down onto hers. His blood boiled and his head pounded. His cock stirred to life, and he slid his tongue into her mouth. She tasted better than he could have ever imagined, like heaven, like every forbidden pleasure all rolled into one. A low growl rumbled from his chest, and she gasped when he placed his hand over her breast and tugged at her pebbled nipple through the fabric of her shirt.

He tangled his other hand in her hair and held her to him as he continued ravishing her mouth while his body strained for more, while his heart demanded he take her. He tilted his hips toward her. His cock twitched when it came into contact with her feminine curves. He was nearly out of his mind. His brain screamed at him, *mine, mine, mine*, drowning out all other thoughts from entering his head.

Then, she cupped her hand over the back of his neck, and his blood went from boiling hot to freezing cold in one second flat. Invisible hands gripped him and sent him spiraling into the black oblivion of insanity created by Trinidad. The mind numbing kiss instantly careened out of control and turned into something twisted and sinister.

"Malachi! Please. Stop. Malachi!"

Humiliation sank into his bones. Rage filled his heart. Revenge's bony fingers controlled him.

"Malachi! Malachi!"

The strangled whispers finally penetrated his brain, and his vision cleared. He had Geri pinned against the brick wall, his hand around her throat, squeezing the delicate column. Horror and pain engulfed him, nearly bringing him to his knees.

"Fuck!" Her eyes were huge in fear, and confusion undulated off her, smacking into him like sonic booms. He released her and she fell to her knees gasping and holding her neck.

What the hell had he done? He'd almost killed her all because she had touched the back of his neck. A simple gesture of affection had turned him into a raging lunatic. *Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!* He grabbed the metal railing of the fire escape, ripped it off, and slung it across the street.

"Stop saying that." Geri's words were raspy from the strangling he'd treated her to.

He spun and stared at her. His heart and soul screamed at him to acknowledge the full meaning of her hearing the words he'd just thought, but hadn't said out loud. His mind, however, effectively squashed the implication. The vivid red marks around her throat made his chest ache. He reached for her, but before touching her, he jerked his hand back. He wanted to comfort her, but he didn't know how.

"I'm sorry, Geri."

"Why did you do that Malachi?" She rubbed at her throat.

"It's a long, complicated story that no one should ever be subjected to. I never meant to hurt you."

"I'll be okay." She continued rubbing at her throat and coughed.

"You'll be okay? Fuck. I almost strangled you." He clenched his jaw, and fought the urge to punch something.

"Yes. And, I said, please stop saying that." Geri watched him hesitantly.

He sucked in a deep breath and held it before releasing it slowly. "If you're asking me to stop swearing, you're wasting your time. I'm too set in my ways." He pulled a cig from his front pocket and lit it, and was surprised when Geri stepped up and took it from him before he could take a hit off it.

She flipped the barely lit cig on the sidewalk and crushed it under her shoe. "You should stop that too. Those things will kill you."

He didn't know why, but laughter bubbled up from his gut and poured out of his throat. She was something else. She'd been attacked by a drifter, nearly died, accosted by two low-down punks and strangled by him within the past twenty-four hours, yet here she stood, stubbornly chastising him for swearing and smoking.

When she laughed, too, the sound soothed his rapidly receding turmoil. "Geri, why were you in the homeless shelter earlier, and why are you in this part of town after dark?"

She quickly looked down at the ground. "I've had some bad luck lately."

Without thinking, he pushed her chin up and forced her to make eye contact with him. When he realized he'd touched her again, he jerked his hand back. "What kind of bad luck?"

She sighed. "As you say, it's a long, complicated story."

"Do you have a place to stay?" He wanted to know what the hell was going on, but he couldn't demand answers when he wasn't willing to give any himself.

She shook her head and tears filled her eyes. He admired her stubbornness to not let them fall.

"You can come back to my place tonight, and tomorrow we'll figure out somewhere more permanent." When she looked as if she were going to argue, he placed a finger over her lips. "Don't. This offer comes at a price."

Her shoulders sagged. "No."

"Yes. If you come home with me, you have to promise to tell me how this happened to you at some point." Her embarrassment slapped at him with invisible hands.

"Oh." She cast a sheepish glance his way.

He chuckled again. "What did you think? I was going to demand sex from you for letting you stay at my place?"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, images of Geri naked, thighs parted in invitation, lying on his bed, rushed him. He nearly growled in frustration when a pang of sickness churned deep in his gut.

The way her cheeks blushed bright red told him he hadn't been too far off the mark from what she'd been thinking. "Just promise me."

"I don't know if I can."

"I'll compromise. Promise me that you will try." He didn't understand why it was so important that she promised him this, but it was.

"Only if you promise the same."

"Believe me when I tell you that you don't want to hear." How could anyone want to listen to what he'd been through?

"If I have to make that promise, then so do you." Determination shined in her green eyes, making them appear a shade lighter.

He wasn't going to budge on this one. "No. I don't." He walked toward her, and when he came toe to toe with her, he almost grinned when she stood her ground, not giving an inch. The top of her head barely came to his chest, and the need to protect her surged inside him. "See the difference between you and me? I have someplace to stay."

She huffed in indignation, and her cheeks turned red. "Forget it! I do not need your charity or your demands of my private thoughts." She tried to walk around him, but he encircled her arm with his long fingers, effectively stopping her escape.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not making demands. I'm . . . concerned, that's all." He shrugged. "Look. You don't have anywhere to go, and I can offer you someplace to stay. It's that simple."

Why the hell was he inviting her back to his home? He was an idiot, that's why. He should be putting distance between them, not closing the gap. He could have killed her. He'd killed countless drifters over the years, even other people when there was no other option. He'd never regretted the actions, knowing it had either been him or them, but if he hurt Geri, he'd never forgive himself.

She sighed in defeat. "Okay."

## Chapter Six

They had barely made it back to his home before his cell phone started ringing. Geri headed down the hall toward the bathroom, and he waited until he could no longer see her before he answered the call. Now, he wished he'd let the damn thing ring.

"I don't give a rat's ass, Ashe. We all have problems, and my plate is full right now. I don't want to fucking come to St. Louis again!" Malachi paced the kitchen with the phone pressed to his ear.

"Listen up, Malachi. I know you have, shall we say, difficulty interacting with others, but we need you here." Ashe Aleksandrov's voice was calm.

"You don't know shit about me." He didn't find it difficult to interact with others. He didn't like to interact with others. There was a big difference between the two.

"Look, who knows what about you doesn't matter. The drifters are increasing in number around here, and we need more hunters in the area to fight them. You know as well as I do that you are one of the best. You agreed to help us. You do remember that right?"

He remembered all right. An agreement he'd regretted making every day since. "Can't you get Dominic or Conrad to help?"

"They are already here. In fact, they've both been staying here for the past two weeks. The frequent attacks are wearing us down, Malachi. We need some more back up."

Malachi punched the countertop with his fist, and it made a loud cracking noise. A small squeak sounded from behind him, and he spun around to find Geri standing wide-eyed in the doorway. He pinched the bridge of his nose, willing his frustration to recede. "Here's the deal. I come and help, but you have to put me and a friend up while we are there."

"No problem. The estate is more than big enough to accommodate everyone."

"I want secluded rooms with our own bathrooms, and everyone has to leave me the fuck alone unless it's drifter related, or I don't come. Capiche?"

"When can you be here?"

"I'll make the arrangements to fly in. I'll call you when I have more details." Malachi hit the disconnect button.



Ashe was right. He had an obligation to help. It was his job, after all, to protect humans. He hit number two on his speed dial, and within minutes, he was making flight arrangements with his pilot.

"Two hours? That will be fine." Malachi glanced at Geri. "I'll be bringing a guest. Have everything ready." He didn't wait for a reply. He paid the retired pilot well, and could count on Chuck to be where he was supposed to be when he was supposed to be. He hung up the phone, and Geri stood where she had been standing when he'd punched the counter.

"I can't go anywhere." Her brows drew down in the corners, pointing at her cute nose.

"Why not?"

"I just can't. Why would I want to?" She looked from him to the counter and back. Her eyes grew wide for a moment before she reeled the surprise back.

"I didn't think you had much going in the way of obligations at the moment." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the counter to prove that it was still intact and strong enough to hold him up. He hadn't broken it. If he'd wanted to, it'd be in pieces now. Of course, she had no way of knowing that, although she had seen him rip the railing from the fire escape.

And could he really blame her for being nervous around him after what he'd done to her? Yet, fear wasn't the strongest emotion he was picking up from her. Hesitation and insecurity were better choices for what she emitted.

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, chewed it for a moment, and let the plump, pink flesh pop free. "I don't, but . . . where is it that I'm supposed to be going anyway?"

"St. Louis."

He didn't have the foggiest idea why the thought of taking her with him had crossed his mind to begin with or why he wished he'd been the one gently chewing on her lip. He didn't want to go himself, and he was too uneasy around her. Yet, he was more uneasy around the other hunters than he was with Geri. He suspected that, subconsciously, he grabbed at something familiar, comforting, to take along with him to make the trip easier. He refused to contemplate as to why at this early stage she felt *familiar*.

"St. Louis? I've never been. But—"

"Don't worry about it. We'll be staying with Ashe Aleksandrov, his wife and brothers at their mansion. I assure you, it is enormous and it will be like a vacation at the fucking Marriott."

"I don't have any money to pay for a plane ticket, and please stop saying that word." She crossed her arms over her chest, mimicking his pose, and pointedly stared at him with one brow haughtily stuck up in the air.

"I said don't worry about it, and I also told you I'm set in my ways and am not likely to stop swearing anytime soon." He stared right back at her, unflinching and determined to make her understand that he wasn't about to change his ways.

"No. I do worry about it. It's not right. You don't owe me anything, yet you've done so much for me already. And you can at least *try* to stop swearing so much."

He took three steps and stopped about a foot in front of her. He wanted to reach out and touch her creamy skin, but the familiar gut clenching sickness gnawed at him. Strangely enough, it wasn't as fierce as it usually was. It was overridden with apprehension. He was worried he might hurt her again. *Not if you keep your hands and lips to yourself, you idiot.*

"If you're that worried about it, you can pay me back when you get on your feet again." He'd never let her pay him back a dime. He had more money than he'd ever be able to spend, and helping her out wasn't done out of charity. He had things she needed and he was happy to provide them for her. He wanted to take care of her, and that scared him more than any other emotion she'd brought out in him thus far.

He wondered what would happen when she figured out that the plane they'd be flying on was his own personal jet, because she was going with him, even if he had to drag her kicking and screaming. He could afford to buy her anything she wanted, but Geri didn't seem the gold-digging, bitchy type to him. He'd heard many stories about those kinds of women, and the way they could twist a man inside out. He'd never worried about being caught up with one because of his intimacy problem, but nonetheless, he was happy Geri wasn't the shallow type.

He'd never pretend to be an expert when it came to women, but he was an excellent judge of character. And the fact that he could feel strong emotions made it nearly impossible for anyone to pull the wool over his eyes for long. Sooner or later, no matter how good of an actor someone might be, emotions would get the better of them and lay them open like a favorite book to his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

It would be nice to get out of Ransom for awhile. She couldn't deny that. The thought of being far away from Mike and the horrible situation she'd been plunged into weighed on her heavily. Would it be so wrong to accept what Malachi was offering her? It was an escape from her current, undesirable circumstances, even if it was a temporary one. Would she be an awful person for allowing Malachi to provide her with this tiny measure of comfort?

And what about her apprehension of Malachi? He'd obviously not meant to hurt her when he'd choked her, but she'd be a liar if she tried to tell herself she wasn't a little leery of him now. For a second, she'd thought he was going to kill her, and he'd done it without much effort. She didn't fool herself for one moment by thinking she'd ever have gotten away from him if he hadn't snapped out of whatever trance he'd been in. His strength had been awing and frightening. She'd never felt such sheer power.

"How long will we be gone?"

Malachi shrugged his wide shoulders. "Don't know. Could be days, weeks, maybe more."

"Oh. Oh! I can't go. I just got a job at Joe's. I can't walk out on him." Her heart dropped. She really did want to go, but she had responsibilities, and she couldn't walk away from the only income potential she might have for the foreseeable future.

"I'll talk to Joe for you. He can manage without you."

"I can't afford to lose the job, Malachi."

"Geri, let's be straight with one another. I've been around for awhile, and you don't fit the bill of a waitress. In fact, even with your torn jeans on, you kind of have that air of professionalism about you, like you might expect a lawyer or doctor to have. As you've made it clear you aren't going to share whatever it is that's going on in your life at the moment, I'd be willing to bet that you have skills that you could put to better use than wasting your time waitressing at a dive like Joe's. So how about if you at least come clean, and tell me what it is that you really do."

She was taken aback by how well he'd read her. Had she been that obvious? She hadn't thought there was anything remarkable about her that might make the average person come to the conclusion Malachi had about her work. Yet, she couldn't really file him under the average category either. The way he looked at her made her feel as if he could see every one of her deep, dark secrets, made her feel as if her soul were laid bare to him, spilling out all of the fear, anxiety, and humiliation she'd been subjected to for the past several months.

Instinctively, she knew she had two choices: tell him the truth about her profession, or not answer him at all. If she lied, he'd know. She squared her shoulders and looked into his mesmerizing eyes. "I'm a CPA."

He frowned. "Why the hell are you waitressing and living on the streets?"

"I'm not answering that right now." She didn't want his pity. She didn't want him to look at her with that look—the one that said poor, poor little Geri.

"Fine. At least tell me one more thing. Are you in trouble with the law?"

That was a difficult question. While she wasn't technically in trouble with the law, Mike had the police in his back pocket. And after everything else he'd done to her, she wasn't going to lie to herself

and pretend that she'd be surprised if he carried things further. Yet, he probably wouldn't want to be publicly tied to a wife that had been in trouble with the law in his current political state.

"No."

"I'll make you a deal then. You come to St. Louis with me, quit your job at Joe's, and I guarantee you that I can get you some accounting work."

She wanted to go. *Then go, Geri.* It wasn't right. She shouldn't just take off with someone she'd just met because of selfish reasons. And wanting to escape Ransom instead of facing and dealing with her current situation was selfish. Escaping instead of bucking up and taking charge of her life again was also cowardice, but wouldn't going with Malachi give her a chance to finally think things through in a secure atmosphere? Maybe it wouldn't be selfish to go. Maybe it would provide her with enough peace, safety and solace to finally come up with a solid plan to get on with her life and put the embarrassing and painful things Mike had done to her behind her once and for all.

Before she could talk herself out of her decision, she spoke. "I'll come, but I can't work in an office or anything. I don't have any other clothes." She looked down at her torn jeans and cringed. She didn't miss the designer clothes so much, but she did, at the very least, like to look presentable.

"I'll take care of that, too." He put his hand up, stopping her protest before it left her lips. "Consider it an advance."

Maybe she wasn't as smart as she'd thought. After all, there was a gorgeous, obviously well-to-do man standing in front of her, offering her work, money, and a place to stay, and she wasn't jumping all over it. She'd always worked her tail off for everything in life, and this just seemed like it was coming too easily. She hadn't caught a break for months with her crumbling marriage, and she was scared to believe that things could possibly be turning around for her.

She really didn't have a choice. Well, she did. Work for this gorgeous man and stay at a mansion in St. Louis, or stay here, work at Joe's, and rent a room at a seedy hotel. "Okay. I'll go."

He smiled, or at least what she thought was a smile. "Give me twenty minutes to pack, and we'll get out of here."

She watched him swagger from the room, and her skin heated. The man had a rear end to die for. His back was broad and his hair shined blue-black. She was amazed at the way he moved. His steps were graceful, fluid, and silent. She didn't know how someone of his size could be so light on his feet. She was sure, after he'd rescued her from the two young thugs earlier, he'd been the reason she'd felt like she'd been being watched. Yet, she'd never heard or seen him.

How was it possible for him to move in such a quiet, lethal manner? He didn't exactly strut, but his stride was confident, deliberate. Maybe he was a Navy Seal or had been in some kind of special trained forces.

She sighed. She was getting in too deep with the wrong man at a completely wrong time in her life. She was drawn to him in a way she didn't fully understand. She wanted him to touch her, hold her . . . kiss her. Under the fire escape, his mouth had been heaven, at least until he'd had his episode and nearly strangled her. She had a nagging feeling that he would never willingly hurt her, though. She touched and rubbed at the raw marks on her neck. A shiver ran down her back. When she'd pleaded for him to let go of her throat, she'd seen the vacant look in his eyes. He hadn't known what he'd been doing to her, and as gullible as it might make her, she trusted him. *What if next time he doesn't snap out of his little trance? What if next time he kills you? You are getting in way over your head.*

## Chapter Seven

Geri hadn't said a word to him since they'd climbed into the cab and headed for the airport. Whatever mess her life was in at the moment, she wasn't budging an inch on telling him anything about it voluntarily. If she'd trust him, he could help her. He had money, connections, and if those didn't work, he had many talents he could use—persuasion, compulsion, intimidation. Whatever predicament she was in, he was certain someone else had played a part in it.

He'd heard her sobs that night in the park, had felt her anguish, humiliation, seen the emptiness in her eyes. The only thing that could cause those types of emotional scars was another person. He knew that firsthand. But who'd hurt her? Was it a friend? A lover? The thought of another man touching her irritated him on levels he didn't want to dissect. It would only open a chasm of shit he wasn't ready to deal with, would probably never be ready to deal with.

He was going to make a couple of calls on the jet and make sure her arrival at the mansion was one she wouldn't soon forget. He hadn't known her for long, but he had a knack for reading people. Geri was good-hearted. She was one of the few left that was beautiful on the inside and out. Most people were one, the other, or part of each, but not Geri. She was special, and he wanted her. He couldn't deny it, nor could he do a damn thing about it. It was true the normal gut clenching sickness that usually overtook him when he had a sexual thought was still present when he looked at her, but it was dulling. It was as if her mere presence was healing him.

Yet the physical sickness wasn't what had made him snap and strangle her. It had been the mental sickness, and the mind was an unpredictable thing at best. He'd never thought the queasiness in his gut at the thought of intimacy would ever abate enough for him to make love to a woman. And now that it might be possible for him on a physical level, it would never be so on a mental level. He'd never be able to trust that he wouldn't hurt her.

But fuck if he didn't want her, want to try to love her. He glanced at the fading finger shaped marks on her neck. He nearly laughed out loud. He was a fool. He had no doubt that the humiliation, the inner demons, would bring him to his knees if he tried to carry out his fantasies with her. He couldn't risk it. She was delicate, and he could break her bones or squeeze the life out of her before he even realized what he'd done.

He clenched his fist at his side. Familiar rage filled him, and he wanted to kill Trinidad. One day, he would kill the bastard and smile while the last spark of life died from his eerie blue eyes. Nothing would stop him.

“Are you okay?” Geri touched his arm, and he jumped.

“Yes. My mind was elsewhere.” He wanted to pull away from her caress, but another part of him took comfort in the warmth of her small hand.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He snorted. “Do you?” He looked at her after he’d made the scathing remark and nearly groaned at the hurt in her eyes. “Look—”

“No. It’s okay. Just forget it.” She folded her hands in her lap and looked demurely ahead as the cab pulled into the airport.

Twenty minutes later, they were boarding his black jet. He motioned for her to take a seat, then went up front to talk to Chuck. “We on schedule?”

“Yes and no.”

Malachi watched as Chuck flipped switches and pushed buttons, firing the engines to life. Chuck’s hair was dark brown and peppered with silver. His hairline had receded a bit, and his brown eyes held promise of a good story to whoever might want to hear one.

“Yes and no?” Malachi asked.

“Daniel, the head of the private airport we use in St. Louis is giving me trouble about the landing time, wants us to wait until morning. He keeps blowing smoke up my ass about the heightened terrorist threats and such. I think he just wants more money.”

“It’s always about money.” Malachi sighed in disgust. “Give the little weasel whatever he wants to accommodate us.”

Malachi waited while Chuck picked up his cell phone, dialed, and bickered back and forth with Daniel. Chuck hung up the phone five minutes later and gave Malachi a thumbs up.

“When’s take off?”

Chuck glanced at his watch. “Fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks, man.” Chuck nodded before Malachi turned to go back to the seats. There were eight black leather reclining seats along with a bed—which he never used—in the back, a fully stocked bar and food. Unless they drank continuously, vampires couldn’t stay drunk for long, but he had nothing against trying.

He’d spent countless nights of his existence sloshed off his ass, trying to forget his past for even a few hours. But the memories had only slammed back fiercer once he’d come out of the mind numbing effects of the alcohol. He’d be an excellent example for sobriety. He was living proof that no matter how much you consumed, it was never enough to make your problems go away. The glowing red eyes of

whatever you were running from would coax and guide you like a lighthouse right out of the fog induced inebriation every fucking time, and bring you right to your fucking knees.

He walked back to the seating area. "We're taking off in fifteen. Buckle up."

He watched Geri from under his lashes. She'd been quiet since the taxi had dropped them off at the jet. He figured part of her silence was due to his sharp remarks in the cab on the way to the airport, and he suspected another part was the realization that this was his jet, although most of it probably had to do with whatever secrets she was guarding in that pretty head of hers. The part of him that wanted to protect her burned hot with frustration over her lack of trust in him. He wanted to sooth away whatever was making her frown so much. Whatever was going on in Geri's life, he was sure she didn't deserve, but he'd never be able to force her to tell him what was wrong—well, he actually was capable of forcing her, but he wouldn't. At the moment, he'd have to suffer in silence, and wait for her to trust him.

Trust him? He stifled a snort. What the hell was he thinking? He wanted her to trust him? He who had never trusted another soul enough in a thousand years to be able to confide his past? How could he want, expect someone to trust him when he couldn't do the same? He was a hypocrite.

\* \* \* \*

She hadn't said a single word to Malachi since they'd pulled up to the black jet. While he'd struck her as eccentric, she would have never guessed he had the kind of money it took to have a private jet. At first, she'd thought that maybe he had a rich friend who'd let him use the aircraft, but right before she'd climbed the steps into the plane, he'd specifically told her to help herself to anything of *his* she wanted. Who exactly was he? She'd never seen him or heard his name before they'd met. Surely someone with the kind of wealth he obviously had would have been well known in a small town like Ransom. Unless, he went to great lengths to keep things low key.

If there was one thing she was certain of, Malachi was a very private man. She'd buckled her seatbelt when he informed her they'd be taking off shortly, and tried not to cringe. She'd never cared for flying much, and had avoided it when possible. She'd sat in the back seat furthest from the windows, and hoped she didn't get air sick and disgrace herself.

He sat in the same row of seats across the aisle way from her. She watched his large hands engulf the buckle of the seatbelt as he clicked it into place around his waist. He'd removed his leather jacket, and his short sleeved T-shirt gave her a glorious view of his perfectly sculpted arms. The muscles that ran their length were long, toned, and his biceps were huge. He had light golden skin, and dark hair sprinkled the back of his hands and got thicker on his forearms, but not too thick. They were just right, and her fingers itched to run over them and feel the texture against her skin.



She'd always admired a man who didn't shave off all his body hair. While she didn't particularly care for a man to look like a bear or have a hairy back, a guy was supposed to have hair on his body. Apparently, she was a dying breed because everywhere she looked lately, magazines, television, men were hair-free and waxed within an inch of their lives. She personally found hair in the right places masculine and a big turn on.

She sucked in a breath when she looked up at his face. He was staring at her with those wickedly sexy silver eyes. She shivered and glanced at his full lips, remembering the kiss they'd shared under the fire escape. She should feel guilty about kissing another man while still technically married, but she didn't. Mike had filed the papers, the ones he'd coerced her into signing stating that she didn't get a dime. All she was waiting for was the court-stamped divorce decree.

She'd never forget that day. When she had dared to question why he'd thought she wasn't entitled to half of the money in their accounts since she had made most of it, was when the real trouble had started. Mike had become enraged, and she had actually been afraid he might hit her. He'd forcefully thrown her out of the house, and by the time she'd made her way to the office, she'd been informed that she had been fired— which was kind of funny in a sad sort of way since she owned half of the company she worked for.

Once she'd made it back to the parking lot to get into her car, the one that was paid for by her, the one she thought she'd be able to sell and live off the money for awhile until she got the whole mess straightened out, had been gone. She'd been numb, and in shock. She had found herself homeless, jobless, and without transportation on a Friday night. She had no family, no friends—Mike hadn't allowed her to have friends—and not a clue what to do.

When Monday morning had finally rolled around, Mike had gotten to every contact she'd made over the last several years. He'd tarnished her name. He'd falsely accused her of stealing the election funds for his run for Governor, and no one would talk to her. It was as if Geri Baxter had never existed to anyone. No one would ever trust her with their money again. She couldn't even take him to court with fear that he'd have her arrested for stealing the funds she'd never touched. It was his word against hers, and her word wasn't worth much after Mike's slandering.

At least that had brought into light why Mike had gone nuts over her questions about money. He'd obviously been swindling contributions and needed a way out. *Nothing like letting your wife take the fall for you.* She'd always found it quite peculiar that she was a CPA, but Mike had refused to allow her to handle any of their personal accounts. That's what being a blind, trusting idiot got you.

It was true that their marriage had been rocky for the past year or so, but she'd never thought she'd meant so little to Mike. She had found herself sad on more than one occasion during that time when she had to admit to herself that her feelings for Mike weren't what they'd used to be, or should be. She had fallen out of love with her husband, but had been willing to give it her all and make the marriage work. He, on the other hand, had obviously had other ideas.

Now, here she sat with a man that the longer she was around, she found more attractive. He definitely had secrets, too, but somehow she didn't think hers were of the same caliber as his. Malachi seemed too calm, intense, coiled tight as if anything could set him off. He appeared nonchalant at most times, but she could practically feel the anger that seemed to crawl under the surface of his skin. He was definitely interested in her, but that confused her as well. Any man of his looks, of his wealth, would have most likely been up-front about being interested, yet he almost seemed unsure, scared, even intimidated by the attraction.

She believed that whatever secrets he was hiding involved someone else. Maybe a woman he'd loved had betrayed him. Whatever he was hiding would explain why he'd gone from kissing her to strangling her under the fire escape. It had scared her. Any normal woman would have been at least a little frightened if the man she was kissing suddenly started strangling her. Yet, when she'd pleaded with him to stop, she'd looked into his silver eyes, and no one had been home. It was as if he'd been in a daze, and Malachi had *checked out* for awhile. Something had triggered the event. She just didn't understand what, and she wanted to know.

Once she'd gotten through to him, and he'd realized what he'd been doing to her, the horror that had crossed his face had nearly brought her to her knees, that and relief that she could breathe once again. She was still shaken by what he'd done, but she honestly believed he hadn't meant to hurt her, even if that did make her a naïve fool. When he'd ripped the railing off the fire escape as easily as if he were tearing crust from bread instead of iron bolted to a cement wall, she knew he could have killed her easily. But he hadn't. *But he could have.*

The overwhelming urge to help him, comfort him hadn't receded and warred ferociously with her trepidation. The worst part was she wanted him. She shouldn't, but she did. She'd given in to the lure to kiss him, but she couldn't go any further with him until her divorce was final. She couldn't lie to herself. She'd probably kiss him again if given the chance, but she couldn't sleep with him. She didn't owe Mike a single thing, including respect, but she did owe herself. And she wasn't an adulteress.

*And you are a hypocrite. How can you expect him to tell you his secrets when you won't tell him any of yours?* The plane began hurling down the runway, and her stomach rolled.

\* \* \* \*

Geri white-knuckled the armrests on her seat while the jet taxied down the runway. It was one of the smoothest takeoffs Malachi had ever experienced. He'd learned another interesting fact about Geri. She was scared of flying. He didn't like the way she'd watched him after he'd buckled in. It was as if she was aware of all his deep, dark secrets. Her eyes sparkled with intelligence, and he knew the wheels

in her brain had been turning in overtime trying to figure him out. She never would if he had a choice. Some things were best left untold.

They'd leveled off, and the jet was gliding smoothly through the air. He was glad to see that her hands were now relaxed, and her lids were drifting downward. She looked tired, and after all she'd been through in the last twenty-four hours, her body could use all the sleep it could get. Her lips parted slightly, and her breathing became even and deep. It amazed him how most people looked so peaceful when they slept. He doubted his face had ever looked that serene while he slept. In fact, he'd bet on it. If his sleeping puss looked anything like the way he felt the many times he'd awoken from the hellish nightmares, it would probably scare the living shit out of anyone who witnessed it.

Geri sighed in her sleep, and his eyes trailed from her pink mouth to the curve of her creamy neck, and he licked his lips. He had an overwhelming urge to bury his face against the pale skin and sink his fangs deep. She'd taste like heaven, he had no doubt. Didn't he deserve a bit of heaven after all the years of hell he'd been through? He grunted. If she ever found out what he was, she'd probably run away screaming. How did a vampire explain to a human that it was perfectly normal to want to drink blood? It had, of course, been done. Aiston and Ashe Aleksandrov both had found their *viata amants* recently. Both their life mates were human—or had been until their mates had changed them.

He didn't understand why he was thinking of such things anyway. His heart screamed the answer to him. *Because you've never met Geri before.* He couldn't listen to such rubbish. If there was one thing he'd learned, it was never to wish for fairytales or happy fucking endings. They just didn't happen to men like him. *Why?* He ignored the question he'd asked himself hundreds of times pounding in his brain. Even if Geri could somehow accept what he was, he'd never be able to fully make her understand the hatred that was a constant burn in him named Trinidad. How could he utter the words of what had been done to him to her? She'd pity him, and he couldn't stand that. Not from her.

He wouldn't be able to deny what he knew to be true for much longer. There was only one reason this particular woman called to him when no other had. There was only one explanation as to why he felt so protective of her, and why she'd been the only one to pique his interest in sex enough to make him act on urges he hadn't had a problem controlling for hundreds of years. And there was only one solution. When they arrived at the Aleksandrov's, he'd find out all about Geri and her secrets, fix them, send her on her way, help with the drifter problem and get the hell back to Ransom where he'd pack up and move on. It was time. It was past time.

He had to let her go. She deserved better than what he could offer her. He stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles. He let his head fall back against the headrest and closed his eyes even though sleep would elude him.

## Chapter Eight

Geri's eyes flew open. Her breaths came fast and shallow. She'd just had a horrible nightmare about Mike leaving her penniless and homeless. She pulled in a deep breath. No. It hadn't been a nightmare. It was true. Tears threatened, but she refused to let them fall. Her skin was chilled, but she refused to let Mike steal the simple luxury of sleep from her when he'd stolen so much from her already. She let her eyes drift shut. The next time she jerked awake, it was to the echoing images of the jet she was on plunging to earth in a fiery mass.

Her heart hammered, her palms were sweaty, and her skin was clammy. She looked to her left at Malachi, and her breath nearly stopped altogether. God, the man was gorgeous. She'd never get used to his size. His presence was dominating . . . comforting.

He appeared to be asleep, and she admired the thick cords running up the sides of his neck to his square jaw covered in black stubble. She unbuckled the seatbelt and turned toward him. She wanted to snuggle against him so badly, was in terrible need to feel secure. Maybe if she was really quiet he wouldn't notice she was there. The need for comfort was overpowering. She slid from the seat, and tiptoed over to him, expecting his silver eyes to open and catch her, but they remained closed. When she reached him, she sat down slowly on his outstretched thigh and leaned against his chest. She almost moaned out loud. His body was rock hard and warm. She snuggled her cheek against him and brought her legs up so she could ease into the space between him and the seat.

His clean, spicy scent tickled her nose and begged her for another sniff. She obliged. When he didn't move, she sighed. She already felt better, the dream dissolving from her mind. She'd only stay for a few moments, and go back to her seat before he awoke. His body heat soaked into her, her bones thawed, and her muscles relaxed.

"What are you doing?" Malachi's deep voice vibrated against her cheek.

She squeaked and scrambled off his lap only to land with a jarring thud on her backside at his feet. "Ouch. Y-you scared me half to death. I thought you were asleep."

"Obviously." He stared unblinkingly at her.

"You never were asleep, were you?" Indignation quickly replaced the fleeting comfort his nearness had given her. "That was a rotten thing to do."

"I've never claimed to be a Saint." His silver gaze rested unwaveringly on her.

Her stomach clenched at his smoldering stare, but the throbbing in her hand quickly gained her full attention, and she looked down. She'd cut it on the leg of the small table next to the recliner and blood welled from the slice across her palm. When she struggled to get up, strong hands gripped her upper arms and lifted gently until she was sitting on Malachi's lap once again. He trailed his fingers down her arm, circled her wrist, and groaned when he saw the blood. She was about to ask him if he was one of those people that got queasy at the sight of blood, when his eyes turned obsidian black.

She sucked in a startled breath. "How did you do that?"

He kept his gaze on the blood welling on her palm. "Do what?"

"You're eyes. Th-they're black."

His lids closed for a moment and, when they opened again, they were the same familiar silver she remembered. "I think the shock of getting startled, dumped on your ass, and cut are making you see things."

She shook her head. "Huh uh. I know what I saw."

"Do you? Tell me, does what you saw frighten you?"

A little bit. "No."

His eyes sparkled at her answer. "Does this?"

Before she could ask what he meant, he placed his mouth over her palm and curled his tongue around the pooled blood. His tongue was sinful, velvety soft, and tickled her skin with pleasure. Tiny sparks shot through her when he stroked her, and she closed her eyes and moaned. When she looked at him again, he was watching her from under thick lashes. His tongue flicked over her again and he groaned low. Warmth crept through her and her body tightened in anticipation of what he'd do next.

She whispered, "No. That doesn't scare me either." Oh, it scared her all right, but she wasn't going to admit it.

He lifted his head slowly and licked his lips. He cupped the back of her head and pulled her toward him until her mouth was a mere breadth from his. "You are a strange woman, Geri Baxter."

Before she could begin to contemplate what he meant, his silver eyes turned black once again and his mouth claimed hers. She was lost to everything around them but the feel, the taste, the scent of him. The whole world ceased to be, the jet nothing more than a distant memory, a dream. When he kissed her, nothing but Geri and Malachi existed in the entire universe.

\* \* \* \*

Her blood sang through him like a choir of angelic voices. She was, indeed, a taste of heaven, the sweetest ambrosia he'd ever tasted. Her soft tongue glided around his, and he deepened the kiss. He'd never get enough of her. He was a doomed man. He could kiss her like this forever. His cock hardened and he waited for the sickening knots to clench his gut, but they never came, no doubt crowded out by the sexual desire coursing through him like a freight train. His body hummed, and the rush of blood through his ears dulled every other sound but the pounding of his heart as he devoured her. He twisted his fingers in her thick hair, and she whimpered when he deepened the kiss.

She clutched his shoulders, and he tensed, expecting her to reach for his neck. It would be a normal reaction in this situation, but he couldn't allow it. He wouldn't hurt her again. When he realized she wasn't going to touch his neck, he relaxed and nipped at her bottom lip. He groaned when she ran her fingers along his arms and back up over his shoulders, kneading his tense muscles through his shirt. He wanted to taste more of her, and wondered if she'd let him. He trailed his mouth along her jaw and to her ear where he nibbled her lobe before gently biting it.

"Geri."

"Hmm."

Her breathless response burned through him as effectively as the vapor from his favorite smokes burned his lungs. She arched her neck, giving his mouth, which trailed along the smooth column, better access. He breathed deeply. Her scent and the sweet hum of blood that rushed through her veins in pulses synched with her heartbeat under his mouth were almost more than he could take.

"I want to taste more of you." His words came strained from his tight throat.

"God, yes," she breathed.

He was certain she didn't understand the full implication of his statement, and even though, technically, she'd given him permission, he wouldn't take advantage of her.

"Geri. Look at me." He knew his eyes would be black again, his fangs were down and ready to play, and he was about to find out just how brave his Geri was.

Green, passion glazed pools stared straight at him. She didn't so much as blink. "Malachi?"

"Do you understand what I'm saying? Look at me. Really look at me."

Her gaze dropped to his mouth. "Oh!"

"So, little Geri, are you going to let me taste you again, or are you going to go screaming back to your chair?" He raised a brow. He wasn't going to play games with her. Not with this anyway.

"What are you, Malachi?" She stared at his fangs for several moments before her eyes rested on his once again.

"You already know the answer to that I think." He waited for the horror to cross her face at the realization of what he was. He'd become an abomination to her. He waited for the reaction, but it never came.

Her brows pointed down. "Will it hurt?"

He almost laughed, but settled for a chuckle. She sucked in a breath when he flashed more of his fangs. "No."

"I-I don't kn—"

"Never mind. Just let me kiss you again." He pulled her mouth back to his and kissed her gently, lazily this time, careful not to cut her with his fangs.

He traced her bottom lip before pushing his tongue into her mouth where it tangled with her own in an erotic dance. She moaned and gripped his shoulders again. The unknown emotions crashing through him were nearly more than he could take. Heat, anxiety, possessiveness, lust beat at him. His heart hammered, and his soul screamed for him to claim her.

He shifted so her bottom was resting on his cock, flexed his hips, and groaned when his hardness pushed against her softness. The gut wrenching sickness began to make an appearance at that move, so he stilled his hips. It receded, and he growled when she trailed kisses along his jaw and neck. Her lips left a trail of fire everywhere they touched him.

She ran her hands along his chest, and brought her mouth back to his. Fuck, he wanted to taste her. He had to stop this or he'd end up doing just that. She panted and moved restlessly against him. His cock tightened and twitched as her curves brushed against him. He pulled his mouth from hers and buried his face in the side of her neck, gasping.

"Do it, Malachi." She leaned back, pressing her neck against his face tighter. "I understand. Do it."

He rarely was surprised by people's reactions to things. However, Geri? She was a different story. The woman surprised him at every turn. She'd proven him wrong time and again. When he'd thought she'd pass out in the park after the drifter had attacked her, she remained calm, in control; when he'd thought she'd freak and run from the two punks on the street, she'd backed away from them slowly, hesitantly as if knowing instinctively they'd attack faster if she ran; and, now, when he thought she'd shriek in terror of knowing what he was, she'd simply accepted it.

She hadn't turned horror filled eyes on him. She hadn't called him a soulless abomination. She hadn't fainted at his feet. Maybe she thought he was playing with her, joking? If that were the case, she was in for a rude awakening.

Unfortunately, at that point he couldn't have stopped if the jet crashed. He put one hand on her lower back and pressed her against him tightly while the other tangled in her hair. He gave one long lick along the creamy line of her throat and popped his fangs through her skin into her jugular.

She moaned and writhed against him, and her blood, coppery, thick, sweet, slid over his tongue and down his throat. His heart thundered, his body tightened painfully, and her essence became a part of him. She became part of him. *Mine. Mine*, pulsed through him. *You are so fucked*.

\* \* \* \*

A part of Geri had thought Malachi was joking when he'd all but told her that he was a vampire. However, the fact became impossible to deny after his fangs sank into the tender flesh of her neck. She'd seen Dracula and vampire movies. They'd always made it look painful, animalistic when someone was bitten, yet this didn't feel that way to her. It was the most erotic thing she'd felt in her life. His lips worked against her skin and his tongue licked provocatively, slowly lapping at her blood like a cat enjoying cream, enticing heat to rush deep between her legs.

Now she understood his strength, and the way he was able to move with silence even though he was so big. His flawless features, his silver eyes, and the vibes he gave off. Could she really believe vampires were real though? Why not? She believed in God and there was no real proof he had existed either other than legends, tales, and stories. If she were truthful, she'd never really given vampires, werewolves, aliens or other mythical beings a second thought. She had never had time between school, work, college, marriage, and more work. Oh yes, and being homeless. Was it really so far fetched that these creatures could exist?

But Malachi wasn't a creature. He was a man. He had feelings, and showed more compassion for humankind than most. He'd helped her, and had selflessly given her shelter and protection. No creature would do such things.

Her skin flushed cool and hot at the same time, and pleasure so intense shot through her she thought she'd faint. She savored the touch of his mouth, and the feel of his hands inflamed her. She moaned and brought her fingers to his neck and cupped his nape to draw him closer to her. When he tensed, she knew instantly this was about to end as badly as things had under the fire escape.

She gasped when she was slung against the recliner next to them. The breath was knocked from her lungs, and Malachi loomed over her, his hand wrapped around her throat squeezing her air off. Fear roared up inside her, pumping adrenaline through her veins.



“Malachi.” She remained calm, or as calm as someone could when one was being strangled. He’d stopped in the alley, he’d stop now. She told herself that over and over to remain composed.

He wore the same expression as last time. The vacant stare that told her no one was home. She talked softly to him. Really, it was the only way she could talk with so little air.

“Malachi.” The words painfully rasped from the airway that was being squeezed off.

She stayed as still as she could. If she fought, it would make things worse. Her vision was starting to dim, and if he didn’t let up soon, she was going to pass out.

“Malachi! Look at me!” she pleaded.

And, just like that, he was back. His eyes snapped to her face, and horror filled them. This time, the horror was chased by what looked like guilt, and he abruptly released her.

“Fuck!” His roar echoed through the jet, and she winced.

He went to the bar, poured a brandy snifter full of whiskey and downed it. His head bowed, he gripped the edge of the bar so hard the wood cracked. She sucked in a breath, and the already tense muscles in his shoulders tightened more.

She scrambled back to her seat and pulled her knees up close to her chest before hugging her arms around them. He turned her on like no other man ever had. She’d wanted him to kiss her, touch her, but he also scared the crap out of her. Still, her heart ached for him, and cried out to comfort him. She truly believed he hadn’t meant to hurt her, but until she understood what was making him flip out, she thought it might be better for her health to maintain her distance a bit. Her life wasn’t exactly peachy at the moment, but that didn’t mean she wanted to die.

His breaths came in ragged pants as he gripped the bar, and suddenly, her fear took a back burner to her need to assure him she was okay. She slid from the chair, hesitantly walked to him, and reached a hand out toward his back.

“Don’t!” His voice hissed in a tormented whisper.

She snatched her hand back as if she’d been scalded, and her heart jumped into her throat. “Malachi?”

“Go sit down, Geri.”

“I’m okay. You didn’t hurt me. You—” He spun on her so fast she fell back into the seat behind her as he towered over her.

He pushed her head to the side exposing her neck. “The bruising around your neck doesn’t look like I didn’t hurt you.”

“It’s okay. Really.” His stare pierced into her, and she could barely breathe.

“No. It’s not okay. Really.”

## Chapter Nine

When she'd snuggled against his body earlier, he'd known he should have stopped her. He should have let her know that he was awake, but he'd been amused at the way she'd crawled onto his lap like a small child looking for comfort, and he'd wanted more than anything to provide that comfort for her. He'd been about to say something to her when her cheek had rested against his chest. She'd felt small, fragile, and shook with the after affects of the obvious nightmare she'd jerked awake from. He'd wanted to soothe her, hold her, but he didn't know how to. Hell, he didn't even know how to do that for himself.

Son of a bitch. Why had he ever thought for a moment that he deserved to touch a woman like Geri? She'd been nothing but soft, receptive, and kind to him, and all he'd done was hurt her. He had to stop this now. He couldn't have her no matter how badly he wanted her. One day he'd have one of his little fucking black outs and kill her.

He was too hard, too cynical, too . . . used up. He didn't have anything to give anyone. The part of himself that he should have been able to give to someone had been taken from him long ago. The heart that had once beaten in young curiosity of the wonders of the world had been damaged by Trinidad right along with his soul. Now, the only thing he had to offer was anger, nightmares, numbness.

And he couldn't forget the fact that, in her eyes, he'd be considered a killer. Just because he knew drifters had to be eliminated from the face of the earth for humans' safety didn't mean she'd see it that way. He'd learned, mostly from others and far away observation, that women tended to over exaggerate the importance of life. He didn't think life was something to be taken without a second thought, but it was, after all, fragile, and tenuous. It had no guarantees, and if he must kill evil in order to protect those who only wished to thrive, live, and be happy, he didn't see anything wrong with it.

If Geri found out everything that had been done to him, everything that he had done, she'd look at him like he was no better than shit scraped off the bottom of a shoe. And the moment she did look at him like that, he'd be a lost man forever. *You are a stupid bastard.* Why did this woman mean so much to him already in such a short amount of time? Why did how she looked at him even matter to him? *You know the answer to that.*

Yes. He did. She was the light at the end of the black tunnel of his soul, but it could never be. He'd never claim her as his own. She'd end up hating him. And even after the degrading humiliation Trinidad had put him through, even through the horrors he'd been subjected to throughout his life, the death, the war he'd witnessed, it would not compare to how Geri could hurt him. She had the capability

of destroying what little there was left of him. He couldn't allow her that power over him. He'd never allow anyone the power to hurt him again.

He gazed down at her. She was tiny and feminine pinned under him in the seat, and seeing her under him made him wish the situation was very different, made him wish he weren't fucked up and she was his and he was about to claim her. She reminded him of an angel with her big eyes, tussled hair and kiss-swollen lips. She stared up at him. He'd seen that look before. Fear clouded them, but something else shined stronger in the green depths. Hope—hope and determination that she could fix him. Well, she couldn't. Hell, not even a thousand years had fixed him. He was irrevocably fucked up and that's the way it was. *So deal with it you sorry piece of shit.*

"Go back to your seat, Geri. We'll be in St. Louis within a couple hours."

He watched her silently get to her feet and walk back to her chair. She looked at him from under her thick, brown lashes. The light freckles dotting her skin were barely discernible, but endearing nonetheless. Why had fate seen it fit to spring a small bundle of sunshine on him when it knew he preferred to live in the shadows?

He growled low under his breath when Chuck came on the intercom and asked Malachi to come up front. His foul mood wasn't helped after he was informed that Daniel was being yet more of a pain in the ass, and that they were landing just outside of Kansas City on a private airstrip for an hour before they could continue on.

By the time he made his way back to the seats after talking to Chuck, the jet was already coming in for a landing.

He glanced at Geri. "Sorry. There's a little hiccup in our accepted arrival time in St. Louis." That little bastard Daniel better hope he wasn't anywhere to be seen once they got there, or he'd strangle the shit out of him. "We'll be having a short layover."

Geri nodded at him, and he found that her response, or lack thereof, didn't help his mood in the least. He made his way to the exit door as the plane slowed.

"Stay here. I have to take care of a couple things." When the jet came to a stop, he unlatched the door and the stairs sprang smoothly into place.

\* \* \* \*

Geri watched Malachi leave the plane and sighed. She wanted to be a friend to him, repay some of the kindness he'd shown her—was still showing her. *Don't lie to yourself, girl. You want to be way*

*more than his friend.* Yeah. She did. But it didn't matter. It wasn't the right time in her life to start a relationship with a man. *Not just any man.* "Stop it!" She chided herself.

It was ridiculous to have such feelings for him. Her logical mind told her that anyway, but her heart wouldn't listen. Regardless of what she felt, he didn't seem especially receptive to her. Well, that wasn't entirely true. His kisses had scorched her, his hands had inflamed her—that was, until he'd strangled her. What on God's green earth could make a man like him react in such a way? She wanted to find out. She would find out, and she would help him.

Yes, she had no doubt the man was lethal. She hadn't asked him what had happened to her attacker that night in the park, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know. He was gruff, stubborn and cussed like a sailor, not to mention he had the disgusting habit of smoking. Yet, underneath, she knew he was good. If he wasn't, he would have never helped her that night in the park. He would have never taken her to his place and tended to her injuries, and he wouldn't still be helping her now. She was a stranger to him. Nothing but another passing face, but he continued helping her simply because she was in need.

She thought more on the vampire thing. Maybe he was delusional. Maybe he was confused. *Or maybe he's telling the truth.*

She got up and went to the small bathroom toward the back of the jet. She looked in the mirror and gasped. There were dark bruises around her neck from his fingers. She cocked her head to the side and an inch or so under her ear were two puncture marks with two thin, crusty trails of dried blood leading down under her shirt. *Well, he definitely bit me.* Did that make him a vampire though? Maybe. She wanted to know more. *Yeah, now who has problems? You are actually contemplating him being a living, breathing vampire as calmly as if you were picking out brown or white eggs at the supermarket.*

He was a living, breathing vampire, too, despite all the tales about vampires. He also had a heartbeat. She'd felt it under her cheek, thumping steady and strong when she'd snuggled against him. He wasn't cold either. He'd warmed her chilled bones with no problem. She'd seen him eat and drink. All these things made her wonder where all the tales had come from and why? *Wait, are you seriously contemplating that he is a vampire?* She was. Did that make her crazy?

She unwound some tissue and wet it. She cleaned the blood off her neck, ran her fingers through her tousled hair, and opened the door to go back to her seat. A black curtain caught her eye as she walked out. Curious, she slid it back and gasped. *Holy crap!* Behind the curtain was a huge king-sized bed with lush pillows and blankets. She pulled the blanket back and smoothed her hand over the silken sheets and sighed. Everything was black, the pillows, the sheets, the walls.

"Feel free to climb in and sleep if you want." Malachi's voice came from behind her.

She jumped and spun around to find Malachi standing a few feet behind her. He crushed out the cigarette he'd just taken a long drag from into an ashtray on the bar.

"You scared me half to death. Don't you ever make any noise?" She'd never get used to his silent movements. Her hand lay over her wildly thumping heart, willing it to calm.

One corner of his mouth turned up. "No."

She gave the bed a longing look before pulling the curtain back into place. "Thank you, but I think I'll stay in the recliner for now. And although smoking obviously won't kill you, it doesn't make it any more appealing." It wouldn't kill him if he was telling her the truth about being a vampire anyway. Or would it? Was vampire immortality another myth, or was it the truth?

He inclined his head to her, and her fingers itched to stroke the strands of long hair that fell over his shoulder. His stubble was thick now, and she remembered what it had felt like scraping against her skin when they had kissed. Her body tingled and heated at the thought. She swallowed hard. The man was hot.

"Do you have any water?"

He reached behind the bar, opened a small refrigerator, and tossed her a chilled bottle.

"We're getting ready to take off again. We got clearance quicker than we originally thought we would." Probably had something to do with what he'd threatened to do to Daniel if he didn't quit fucking around.

"Oh. Okay. I'll get buckled in."

Once they took off, and her nerves calmed down, she asked him, "Are you really a vampire?"

He snorted. "No. I just like making up stories."

"No need to be rude. I mean, how am I supposed to know you are really a vampire and not just some—"

"Lunatic? Nut job? Psycho? There are many ways I could prove it to you, Geri, but honestly, I think you've had enough shit to deal with lately, don't you?"

"I just—"

"Just forget it." He glanced at her neck and raised a brow. "Besides, I think you can probably figure out that I'm not lying, can't you?"

She idly rubbed her fingers over the bite mark and her body heated. "Maybe this can wait."

"Yeah. I think it can."

The rest of the flight was in complete silence. They smoothly landed in St. Louis, and he ushered her into a black limousine that waited for them on the tarmac. She watched out of the tinted window as he talked to a dark-haired man while he threw his bags in the trunk. The man was big, but not quite as

big as Malachi. He had dark hair as well, and wore all black. Were all of Malachi's friends huge? She couldn't see a lot of details through the dark windows, but she could tell the man moved with the same effortless grace as Malachi.

Men that big were not supposed to move so fluidly. Malachi's acquaintance was impressive from what she could see, yet paled in comparison to Malachi. She doubted many men could compare to Malachi. It seemed men were simply not made like him any longer. She could picture him being a Viking or a warrior. She snorted. He'd probably scare the heck out of his foes. She snorted again. *He probably scares the heck out of most normal people.*

Within moments, Malachi got into the limo with the man he'd been talking to. "Geri, this is Ashe Aleksandrov."

Ashe removed his sunglasses, and she barely stifled a gasp. His eyes were the most eerie shade of turquoise she'd ever seen. While she'd never be able to argue the fact that they were beautiful and unique, she preferred the silver of Malachi's.

"Nice to meet you, Ashe." She extended her hand, and he briefly took it in a firm, but soft shake. She assumed it was probably a lighter version of his normal handshake, reserved for women.

"Likewise."

"We'll be staying at Ashe's estate." Malachi leaned back into the leather seat.

She eyed Ashe closer. He was good-looking, no doubt. Malachi stiffened and shifted, and she slid her gaze briefly to his face. His lips were drawn tight, and she hadn't missed the way he'd been staring at her before he snapped his eyes to the window. If she was a betting woman, she'd bet the farm that Malachi didn't like her looking at Ashe one bit. She wasn't interested in Ashe in the least, but she was a living, breathing woman, and she couldn't deny the beauty of the man. He was as flawless as Malachi, but he didn't manage to make butterflies flutter in her belly.

"It's very nice of you to let me stay." Geri gave Ashe a warm smile.

"No problem. I assure you, we have more than enough room. And my wife, Ebony, and sister-in-law, Avril, will no doubt be thrilled to have another woman around for awhile. They are not happy with all the *testosterone* in the house.

Geri giggled and Malachi cursed under his breath. Ashe gave Malachi an amused smile.

\* \* \* \*

Ashe never thought he'd witness the day that the great Malachi Mannering met his match. Malachi had always been a hard-assed son of a bitch, and guarded his solitude aggressively. He'd never let anyone get close to him, and Ashe had never seen him with a woman. Of course, there were lots of rumors about him. He was gay. He was so lacking emotionally he was unable to have a woman. No woman would have him because he scared the hell out of them—that one would be the one he'd come closest to believing himself if he had to pick one, although he didn't believe any of them.

Personally, he thought Malachi portrayed a perfect picture of a man who had been fucked up royally. He reminded him of someone who'd lost something precious and now lived a mere shell of the person he had once been, waiting for death. He believed something horrible had happened at some point in Malachi's life that had shredded his soul.

Yet, underneath the gruff, tough, hulking façade, he believed Malachi was a good and decent man. And if his instincts proved right—they usually did—Geri was Malachi's *viata amant*. If that were so, Malachi had to know as well. However, he was probably denying and suppressing it as hard as Ashe had himself when he'd met Ebony. There were ways, of course, to prove someone was your life mate. A *viata amant* could see a vampire shielded and speak to him telepathically, or *minti conversatie*. Those rules only applied to human life mates, as all vampires could speak telepathically, although a vampire having another vampire as a life mate was almost unheard of.

Finally, once a vampire was exposed to a life mate, the beast that lived just below the surface awakened, and relentlessly demanded the claiming. He, himself, had known instantly that Ebony was his, but had refused to believe it. He'd denied his feelings almost to the point of losing her forever. That memory sent shivers through his body. He thought he'd been the king of denial, but looking at Malachi, he wasn't so sure he'd remain the reigning champion. If Geri was Malachi's, he'd be drawn to her. The predator in him would scream at him every moment to make her his.

Malachi could pretend, deny, and refuse to believe what was right in front of him all he wanted, but eventually, he'd have no choice. He'd either claim her, or any chance of him having true happiness would be lost to him. He could survive without her if he had to, but it was a life of misery Ashe wouldn't wish on anyone.

\* \* \* \*

The hunters were getting agitated. That fact was almost as good as the thought of them being dead. He'd make sure, in the end, that was the outcome. He'd kill them all. They still hadn't figured out what they were up against. He knew everything. He knew who all of the hunters were, and he knew the Aleksandrovs were the driving force of the hunters coming together to destroy him and his new army. He cackled. Pathetic losers was a better term to describe the drifters he'd been using to hide his



presence until the right time. At this moment, Ashe was bringing the legendary Malachi Mannering in in hopes of helping to quell the uprising.

They had no idea they were doomed. He had such plans for them. He'd watch all of them suffer just as he had. There was only one true way to destroy his brother. His lip curled. Just the thought of that bastard made him want to rip something, someone to shreds. He hated his brother, and he'd make him pay by taking out his children and all of his precious hunters.

A drifter entered the room and bowed before him. "What is it?" he snarled.

"The hunters are bringing Malachi in town now, my lord."

A smile curved his lips, and he looked down at the vial in his hands. If the contents did what they were supposed to do, he and his old friend, Malachi, were going to do some *major* catching up. He couldn't wait to see the hunter's face when he realized who he'd been captured by. He wondered if fear at the sight of him would creep into those silver, satin eyes of his once again. The thought sent shivers of pleasure through him.

Malachi had been one of his favorite toys. That was, until the day he'd escaped. He'd seen the hunter a few times since he'd come into his full size and power. He was a huge tank of a man, but that didn't worry him any. He was just as powerful as any of the hunters, more powerful than most. Malachi had never seen him lurking in the shadows, but he'd remembered the complete joy that had invaded deep into his bones when he'd glimpsed the torment still present in the man's eyes after all of these years. The thought that he'd been the source of it pleased him like nothing had in his life . . . his interminably long life.

Life tended to feel that way when you'd been deprived of everything that belonged to you. It wasn't his fault his mother had been a whore. He had been a helpless child, but that hadn't mattered. He'd been condemned right along with her.

"Keep an eye on all of them. I want to know everything they do. I want to know every place they go. If you fail me, I'll kill you."

The drifter visibly shivered. "Yes, my lord."

"Here." He tossed the vial and a dart to the drifter when he rose. "I want this tested out tonight on Malachi. If it works, bring him to me. If it doesn't, I want you to report to me the effects it had on him."

The drifter nodded and turned to leave.

"Drifter." He watched the creature, who'd still be a vampire if not for an unfortunate bargain with Hades, turn hesitant eyes his way. "Do *not* fail me. The consequences will be . . . *dire*."

The time was coming. The hunters' total destruction would be soon, but until he could carry out that feat, he had many other surprises for them. He laughed out loud. The eerie sound filled the room and echoed all around him.

## Chapter Ten

Geri was completely overwhelmed. She had just met Ashe's wife, Ebony, a petite woman with blonde hair and sparkling eyes. Avril, Ebony's best friend and sister-in-law, had also been at the mansion to greet her. Avril was tall, dark-haired and had dark eyes. The two women were complete opposites. Both were beautiful in different ways, and they, too, had that flawless look Malachi held.

She'd also met Aiston Aleksandrov, Avril's husband. All the men she'd met associated with Malachi thus far had been gorgeous. Still, none of them stirred her curiosity or her blood like Malachi.

The Aleksandrov mansion was huge and she and Malachi were given their own wing. Now she stood in the middle of a beautifully decorated burgundy and gold bedroom with dark, wooden furniture. And the huge bed sitting in the middle of the floor was covered in boxes with her name written on the top of them. She opened one and gasped at the sweater she'd pulled out. It was the color of emeralds and was made of the softest material she'd ever touched. She rubbed it against her cheek and sighed.

An hour later, she sat on the side of the bed in awe. Strewn boxes and every article of clothing she could ever wish for was scattered about her. Jeans, skirts, sweaters, tops, dresses, and even undergarments and personal items such as toothbrush, makeup, and scented shampoo. She shook her head. She and Mike hadn't been poor by any means, but this wardrobe had cost someone a small fortune, and she was pretty sure who that someone was.

A knock startled her from her thoughts. "Come in."

Malachi stepped through the door and her heart pounded. Just the mere presence of the man was daunting—in a good way.

He raised a brow. "Do you like everything?"

"Do I *like* everything?" When he scowled at her, she continued on. "Malachi, I can't even begin to pay you back for all of this. A couple pairs of jeans and tops would have sufficed."

He gritted his teeth and spoke low. "Did I ask you for money?"

She slipped off the side of the bed and walked toward him. She shook her head. "No. But I can't accept all of this." She waved her hand toward the garments piled on the mattress. "It's too much."

"No. It isn't. And since none of it can be returned, and I have no one else to give it to, I guess you're stuck with it. I'm sorry. I thought you'd like it all."

If she hadn't been watching him closely, she would have missed the small flicker of hurt that filled his eyes. He turned to leave, and she caught him by the arm. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him from behind. Her cheek rested against the buttery leather coat he still wore.

She breathed deep. "I do like the clothes. I *love* the clothes. It's just so much."

Her arms slid to her sides when he turned around. "I'm glad you like them."

"I do. Thank you." She didn't want to offend him again, and she certainly didn't want to hurt him in any way. She'd find some way later to make things right between them. She'd pay him back for all of this somehow.

"I have a meeting tonight, but I'll see you for dinner?"

She nodded her head. "Yes. Ebony told me the schedule for mealtimes."

He turned to leave, and she reached out and clutched his arm. She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. The dark stubble rasped enticingly across her lips. "Thank you. Everything is beautiful."

He tensed for a moment before he closed his eyes briefly and let out a quiet, raspy growl that sent heat pooling low in her stomach.

Why did he remind her of a deer caught in headlights every time she touched him? He was a powerful, lethal man that oozed sex appeal. So why did he give her the impression he had no idea how to react to affection, to a mere touch? Was he just one of those people who didn't like to be touched? She looked at him. No. His initial reactions were always of trepidation, but he hadn't kissed her earlier like a man who didn't enjoy physical contact.

He reminded her more of a shy teenager sharing a first kiss, unsure of what to do next. The memory of his kiss flowed through her. If that were true, he sure had learned fast. When he touched her, she lost track of everything else around her, didn't feel, see, hear or smell anything but Malachi. He invaded her senses. She smiled at him, longing to know what made him tick.

"You're welcome." He left, closing the door quietly behind him.

*Don't count on finding out, Geri. He doesn't seem like someone who's going to say, "Hey, Geri, do you have a minute? I'd like to tell you all about my life and why I act the way I do."* She'd always had a desire to help people who seemed to need it, but he didn't need monetary things. He needed . . . *you?* She laughed at the absurd thought. *Yeah. He's rich, has his own jet, and . . .* but those weren't the important things in life. She let out a long breath in resignation. She couldn't help those who didn't want it, and he obviously didn't. However, she would try as long as she was around him, and when they parted ways, she could do so with a clear conscience.

When a small flicker of panic hit her at the thought of leaving him, she frowned.

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, Geri sat in a colossal room with Ebony and Avril. The room was adorned with black and dark brown leather furniture, the floors were shiny hardwood covered in plush burgundy rugs, and the biggest TV she'd ever seen hung on the wall opposite the door. There was a bar, and a card table as well. Still, the large space managed to feel comfortable and homey. An extra large cheesy pizza heaped with toppings sat on the glass coffee table in front of her, and the aroma wafted through the air in a deliciously enticing manner.

"Dig in." Ebony snatched up a slice and placed it on a paper towel before tucking her legs under her on the couch across from Geri.

Geri reached for a piece after Avril got a slice as well. A glass of wine sat next to her chair on an end table. Ebony and Avril had invited her to watch movies, eat fattening foods, as they called it, and gossip. They told her it was a traditional *girls' night*. She took a bite of the melted cheese and groaned. It was the most fabulous pizza she'd ever eaten. She tried to limit her intake of high-calorie foods, but dang, it was really good.

"Good, isn't it?" Avril laughed.

"Yeah. Very." Geri took another bite. She closed her eyes and savored the perfectly seasoned sauce, cheese, and toppings that sat atop a perfectly chewy crust with just the right amount of crunch. "Mmmm."

"Don't fill up on that. We still have chocolate." Ebony nodded her head toward the box lying on the table next to the pizza. "It's imported from Belgium."

"Are you serious?" Geri hadn't ever had such a luxury, and was aware that it had probably cost a small fortune.

Avril nodded. "Yeah, her sappy husband likes to spoil her."

Ebony laughed. "You're one to be talking. If I recall correctly, just two weeks ago was when Aiston bought you the designer handbag you were mooning over in the catalog."

"Okay. Okay. I concede. We are both a little spoiled." Avril took another bite of her pizza.

"Sounds like you two have wonderful relationships." Geri felt a little pang of regret for the tattered marriage that nipped at her heels.

"Yes. We do, but they didn't start out that way. But, we'll save that discussion for another time. Now, are you ready for the most decadent treat you've ever tasted?" Ebony opened the box of chocolates and smiled at Geri.

"I always have room for chocolate." And she did. Chocolate was one of her weaknesses. That's why she usually steered clear of it. If she ate it when she craved it, she'd probably weigh five hundred pounds. Geri daydreamed as the creamy chocolate melted on her tongue, barely listening to Avril and Ebony chatter, until she heard Malachi's name. "Do you know him well?" The two looked at her with brows raised in question. "Malachi, I mean." Geri cleared her throat.

Avril exchanged a look with Ebony that made Geri feel a little uncomfortable. It was as if the two women were communicating somehow, and she couldn't hear it.

"No. Not really. He's been here a few times." Ebony watched Geri.

"Yeah. Under duress." Avril sipped at her wine and then hovered her hand over the chocolate box as if she couldn't decide which piece she wanted before finally snatching one and popping it in her mouth.

"Duress?" Geri leaned forward and set her wine glass on the coffee table in between the pizza and chocolate boxes.

\* \* \* \*

Ebony slowly twirled her wineglass. The dark liquid slid up and down the sides like waves. "Malachi doesn't seem to be a *people* person."

Avril snorted. "Huh. That's an understatement. The man is scary."

Ebony poked Avril. "Ow! What the heck did you do that for?"

*I think Geri is interested in Malachi. And he obviously was interested in her enough to bring her here. I mean, have you ever known Malachi to bring anyone anywhere?* Ebony winked at Avril.

Avril gasped. *Oh my God! You don't think—*

*Yes. I do.* Ebony smiled and glanced back at Geri.

"She didn't mean that. Malachi is just a little daunting, with his size and all." Ebony refilled her glass with more wine and picked it back up.

"Yes. He is quite large. But most of the men I've met today are, and most of them come across as a bit intimidating. I mean I can't imagine anyone would be all that happy to come across one of them in a dark alley."

“Well, she’s right there. Ashe, Aldin, Aiston, Dominic, nor Conrad are little by any means. I mean, Aiston is the smallest of the brothers, and I still wouldn’t classify him as lacking in size.” Avril smiled. “Anywhere.”

Ebony snorted. “Avril!” Ebony giggled when Avril batted her lashes at her. “You’ll have to excuse her, Geri.”

Geri smiled. “No problem.” She pursed her lips. “It’s just that Malachi is frustratingly secretive.” Geri frowned. “And he told me he was a vampire. I mean, he *did* bite me, but I don’t know. . .” She let her words trail off as if she didn’t know quite how to finish that sentence.

Ebony and Avril gaped for a split second before the two closed their mouths and Ebony spoke. “He *bit* you?”

“Mmm hmmm.” Geri nodded.

“Did he ask first?” Avril squeaked.

\* \* \* \*

Geri thought it was peculiar that she’d just said someone had bitten her, and Avril’s only reply was if he’d asked her permission to do so. That certainly wouldn’t have been her reaction to that kind of information. Avril leaned toward her, eyes wide with a look of utter anticipation.

“Yes, but I didn’t believe he was actually asking to really bite me. He proved me wrong.” Geri rubbed at the mark on her neck that was now barely visible.

“What did you think when he told you he was a vampire?” Ebony sat straighter.

“I know this will make me sound absolutely crazy, but at first, I thought, wow, that’s interesting. Then I thought, I am such a freaking lunatic for contemplating it to be real, and last, I thought maybe he was crazy.”

Avril laughed and Ebony shot her a look that was obviously meant to chastise. Avril swallowed hard and little giggles escaped. “I’m sorry. It just brings back old memories.”

“Old memories? You mean, you two believe him?” Geri was astounded.

“Geri, I really don’t want to freak you out, but um, we are all vampires.” Avril grunted when Ebony poked her again. “What?”

“Way to go with the subtlety.”

Avril snorted. "Since when has subtlety been my strong point, Ebony?"

Geri didn't know what to say. How did one respond to such information?

"Well, since you are going to have to figure out how to deal with this, we might as well bombard you with everything so you can just get the shock over with all at once." Avril got more wine and sat back against the cushions. "You might want to get another glass yourself. You'll probably need it."

Ebony nodded. "Yeah. You are in for some surprises."

Geri did what the women suggested and sat back into the cushy chair.

Two hours later, Geri lay in her bed. Her mind whirled. Everything Ebony and Avril had told her spun around in her head like a hurricane. She was awed, flabbergasted, and a bit scared. On the up side, she was pretty sure none of them would hurt her. *Unless Malachi freaks out again and strangles you.* She shook her head. She shouldn't blame him for something he obviously had no control over, yet it still didn't make his unintended violence any less frightening.

Vampires were real. And she was falling for one.



## Chapter Eleven

Geri sat in the kitchen the next morning for the *traditional* Aleksandrov breakfast. Aiston sat by Avril, and Ashe by Ebony. Marcus, Ebony and Ashe's son, giggled as Ebony tickled his belly after she cut his pancakes up into bite-sized portions. Aldin, the next to oldest Aleksandov brother, was also present. He made her uneasy. He was quiet, intense, and reminded her of a coiled rattler just waiting for an unsuspecting leg to bite.

Marcus' hair was black like his father's and lay in thick ringlets about his head. He was a beautiful little boy. Geri noticed that Ashe was not the only one with unique turquoise-colored eyes. While his were a deep sea color, Aiston's were more blue than green, and Aldin's more green than blue. Her eyes slid to Malachi who leaned against the counter looking thoroughly uncomfortable.

She sighed. He did things to her just by being in the same room. Her hands turned sweaty, and her heartbeat quickened. She wanted to literally use him as a lollipop. Malachi turned his silver gaze upon her as if he knew what she'd been thinking, and she blushed. *What the hell is wrong with you, Geri? He's only a man.* No. He wasn't only a man. He was a god.

McKayla, the housekeeper and cook, set a glass of juice in front of Geri and smiled.

"Thanks." Geri was grateful for the interruption to her wayward thoughts, and took a sip of the fresh squeezed orange juice. Her taste buds popped as the sweet flavor slid over her tongue.

Ashe cleared his throat. "Malachi told me that you are an accountant, Geri. If you are free, I'll let you have a go at the books after breakfast."

"Yes. That would be fine." Not like she had anything else to do.

Malachi straightened. *Dang the man was mouth wateringly impressive.* She ogled him as inconspicuously as she possibly could from under her lashes. She'd felt that hard body under her, and she had an overwhelming urge to see him naked. *Stop it! You aren't even technically divorced yet.* That little reminder went a long way in cooling her down.

"What time are we heading out tonight?" Malachi's deep voice vibrated down her spine.

"Nine," Ashe answered.

"What exactly are you boys up to tonight?" Ebony raised a brow in question before leveling her gaze on her husband.

"You know what we are up to." Ashe stared back, and Geri thought she might get scorched from the heat that passed between the two.

*Oh wow.* They were married and had a child, and still looked at one another as if they'd like to eat each other up. What a wonderful thing to have a relationship like that.

"I suppose you are going as well?" Avril left her chair and plopped down on Aiston's lap. She slipped her arms around his neck, and he hugged her to him.

"Yes. I love ya, babe, but you knew what you were getting into when you married me. We have a job to do." Aiston pushed some stray tendrils of Avril's dark hair behind her ear.

"Good God! What the hell happened to my brothers' balls? Would you two grow a pair already?" Aldin snorted.

Ashe chuckled. "One day, brother, you'll be dealing with the same thing."

Ebony playfully smacked Ashe. "Dealing with what exactly?"

He pulled Ebony to him. "Why, deal with a beautiful woman that he will spend the rest of his life loving."

Ebony blushed and kissed his cheek. She whispered something in his ear, the laughter in his eyes died instantly, and Geri could have sworn she saw flames of desire dancing in their depths.

"Son of a bi—" Malachi glanced at Marcus and caught himself before grunting. "You are all women." He put his coffee cup down and quit the room without a glance her way.

Geri wanted to talk to him. She had so many questions after her chat last night with Avril and Ebony. She dabbed at her mouth with a napkin.

"Did Mom tell either of you when or if she plans on coming back since she doesn't seem to see it fit to tell her youngest son anything?" Aiston spooned some eggs into his mouth.

"She said she'd be back in a few weeks." Ashe sipped at the black, steaming coffee in his mug.

"Where the hell did she go? We haven't seen her in so long, and when she finally visits, she's gone within days." Aiston looked at Ashe, who was staring at him with a look of what Geri could only describe as boredom.

"You know very well Mom was here for a couple months. She'll be back. We've all missed her, but she's always done what she wants when she wants." Ashe took another sip of his coffee. "Besides, she won't be gone for long this time since she now has a grandbaby." He reached over and ruffled Marcus' hair.

"Why doesn't she ever tell anyone but you what she's doing?" Aiston snorted.

"Probably because she knows you two try to treat her like a child and tell her what she should and shouldn't be doing," Ashe said.

"She's a woman who needs protection, and she's our mother," Aldin said quietly.

"Yeah," Aiston agreed.

"Mother is not some simpering female that needs protection. She's been around a long time, and could probably kick all of our asses—buts." Ashe glanced over at Marcus, and then Ebony's disapproving stare. He sighed and shrugged. "Sorry, baby."

Ebony rolled her eyes. "Men."

"I don't like it. She didn't seem like herself. It was almost as if she was hiding something." Geri didn't miss the way Avril furrowed her brows and looked at her husband. Had Avril thought the same thing?

Ebony and Avril hadn't told her much about Marilena. Mostly only that she was Ashe, Aiston and Aldin's mother. And that she was absolutely beautiful. Her husband had been murdered years ago, and she'd never quite recovered. She'd only just recently come to the mansion after years and years of traveling and grieving.

Ashe kissed Ebony and stood. "I'll see you later, baby." He inclined his head to Geri. "You ready?"

"Yes." She told the others goodbye before she followed Ashe down the hall to the den. Did all of them have to swagger? She'd be a blind woman if she didn't at least give his fine butt a once-over.

After they entered the den, Ashe piled all the ledgers on the huge desk. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"Okay. Oh, do you mind if I use your telephone?"

"No. Whatever you need. Make yourself at home."

"Thank you. For everything."

Ashe stared at her with those sea-colored eyes. "If you can get those books straightened out, believe me, I'll be the one thanking you." He turned and left.

She looked around the den. The desk was masculine, and the high-backed leather chair was made for a much larger person than she was. Not that it wasn't comfortable, but it dwarfed her. There were bookshelves lining the walls, all of them full of expensive-looking old books, a black leather couch against the far wall, and a couple matching chairs beside it. There was a stocked bar in the far corner.

Before she dove into the ledgers, she picked up the phone. While Mike had confiscated her cell, as well as everything else she owned, he told her he'd keep her voice mail active just in case he needed

to leave her a message. *How magnanimous of you.* She dialed the number. No messages. She hung up and dialed Mike's number.

"Hello." His voice was slurred, telling her that he'd probably still been in bed.

She thought she'd be upset at the sound of his voice, feel some sort of pain, emotion, but instead, she felt numb. "Mike."

He blew out an agitated breath. "Geri, what do you want?"

"I just wanted to know if you got our divorce papers back yet?"

"In a hurry? Already got some action lined up on the side?"

"Don't be crude, Mike. I want this over with." And yes, maybe she did have some action on the side. No, that wasn't true. She wanted way more than that with Malachi. Could she have more than that with Malachi? Would he try to strangle her every time they kissed?

"Not as much as I do, babe." A female voice in the background asked him who was on the phone. It sounded as if he tried to cover the mouthpiece, but Geri still made out the whispered, "Quiet, I'm talking to the ex."

"Don't call me that." She wondered if he'd been sleeping around the whole time they'd been married. Probably. And here she'd felt guilty about kissing Malachi.

"You never had a problem with it before." His voice was flat, bored.

"I do now. Please, did you get the papers?"

"No. But, you will be happy to know that the judge has signed them, and it is official. I just haven't gotten a copy yet."

She wasn't surprised in the least at how fast Mike had pushed the finalization of their marriage through the legal system. He had no doubt pulled several strings to get it accomplished this quickly. The fact that he'd forced her to sign the papers uncontested helped greatly as well.

She looked around in frustration, trying to find a business card or something with the Aleksandrov's address on it. Finally, she opened one of the ledgers in front of her and found a telephone bill. She read Mike the address. "Please send me a copy as soon as you get the papers."

"What the hell are you doing in St. Louis?"

"I really don't think that's any of your business," Geri said through tight lips.

"Have a nice life, Ger." He hung up on her.

She didn't care. He was in her past, and that's where he'd stay. She'd have a clear conscience now where Malachi was concerned, but should she tell him she had been married? She shook her head.

She didn't see why it would matter, and it wasn't really something she wanted to discuss with anyone. It was humiliating, and she wanted to forget the whole mess.

She stared at the pile of ledgers and stretched before grabbing the first one. Two hours later, she had a headache and was flabbergasted. She'd known from the moment she'd stepped foot into the mansion that the Aleksandrovs had money, but she'd never have guessed in a million years they had so much. She'd also been amazed at the amount that had been donated to different charities throughout the years. She'd gained a whole new respect for the Aleksandrovs.

The books hadn't been in all that bad of shape, and she guessed Ashe had only recently neglected them in favor of more important things. And, now that she'd had time to settle in, she had questions.

What had been so important that Ashe had wanted Malachi to fly in immediately? Her head had been reeling since she'd met Malachi, and the information overload Ebony and Avril had exposed her to the night before had not allowed room for anything else.

"How's it going in here?" Malachi leaned against the door jamb.

Geri nearly jumped from her seat when he spoke, and blushed at being caught daydreaming. "I'm just finishing up."

"Books must not have been too bad?"

"No. In fact, I'm not sure Ashe really needed me at all." She eyed him suspiciously. She'd realized not far into looking over the ledgers that Malachi and Ashe had probably created the job for her out of charity. Or worse, pity.

Malachi didn't utter a word, just stared at her with those spectacular eyes.

"I have some questions." She stacked the ledgers in a neat pile on the corner of the desk.

One of his dark brows rose, which she took as silent permission for her to continue on.

"What happened to the man who attacked me in the park?" Although subtle, she didn't miss the way he stiffened.

"Don't worry about it. It was taken care of." Malachi straightened, and turned to leave.

"Wait!" She hurried over to him. "Please. I need to know some things."

"No. You don't."

His response angered her. "Yes, I do," she said through clenched teeth. "In the last couple days, I've been attacked, almost twice, found out vampires are real, and dragged all the way to St. Louis, not to mention other things I've been dealing with in my personal life. I am involved in whatever is going on, and I want to know what happened. I have the right to know."

"I'm sorry if I inconvenienced you in anyway by *dragging* you to St. Louis." His voice was low.

She took a deep breath. "Malachi, I'm sorry if I came across as ungrateful. I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me. I'm just confused. I don't understand why you would do all those things. I'm a stranger to you."

He didn't feel like a stranger to her, though. He felt real, enticing, familiar, and she was finding it harder and harder to keep her distance from him. She wanted to crack the invisible walls he'd placed around himself to keep everyone out. She wanted to know what was hidden behind them.

"I would have done the same for anyone." He briefly glanced at the ground.

"I don't think so." His eyes snapped back to her face, and she frowned. "Not that I believe you would simply walk by anyone in need, but nor do I believe you normally go to the lengths you have with me to help someone. I can't help but wonder why?"

\* \* \* \*

If she knew the reason why he'd helped her to the extent he had, she'd probably pass out from shock. And when she woke up, she'd run away in terror. She'd been receptive to him, his touches, his kisses, had even calmly faced him with an underlying strength of composure he'd always admire when he'd blacked out and strangled her. Yet, he was aware she'd sensed the darkness that lived inside him. If she found out his true nature, and what had made him the way he was, she'd never look at him as a real man again.

She'd pity him. Geri was his life mate—a fact he could no longer deny—but if he could help it, she'd never be shackled to him. He was no good for her. Yes, it was true that she could bring unfound joy, love and tenderness to him, possibly even happiness. He, on the other hand, had nothing to offer her. He was broken inside, hollow.

"This conversation is pointless. I helped you because you were in need, and there was no one else around to provide for you." Her hair fell around her face and he longed to run his fingers through the tendrils.

He wanted to feel her satin lips under his, wanted to devour her. She made him burn, made his body demand things of him he'd never felt before. He wanted to rid her of every piece of clothing, and kiss every inch of her naked skin. He wanted to hold her as he rode her and made them one. Although his reactions of lust toward her were triggering less and less of the familiar stomach clenches, he couldn't deny another emotion that bled just under the surface . . . rage.

He wanted to hold her, make love to her, and instinctively knew that it would be the most wonderful experience of his life, but the only real emotion he had tied to sex was anger. He was worried what might happen if he gave into his desire to love her. Would that rage finally bubble to the surface? Would he black out again and hurt her? Kill her? He couldn't take the chance. Sexual physical stimulation had only ever gone along with violence and pain for him.

"Okay. If you say so, but I still want to know what happened to the man who attacked me? Was he arrested?"

She'd hate him if he told her the truth. "Please don't ask this of me."

"I have to know, Malachi." Her eyes pleaded with him.

"He's dead." His heart lurched when she gasped.

"Did you kill him?"

He nodded, and waited for her condemnation.

"The police will be after you."

He was shocked when no accusations of what a monster he was came from her, but instead, concern for his safety. "No. They won't be."

"Of course they will be. They must have found the body by now." She paced the room.

"There isn't a body to be found."

"How is there not a body to be found?"

"Have a seat, Geri." He nodded toward the couch. "There are some things I need to explain to you." He waited for her to sit down before sitting beside her. This wasn't going to be easy. *When exactly has your life ever been easy?*

## Chapter Twelve

“The thing that attacked you in the park is called a shadowdrifter. We call them drifters for short. Once they are taken out, they dissolve into the ground. There is literally nothing of them to be found except some remnant of black, pungent goo.”

“A shadowdrifter? What is that?” Everything she’d learned from Ebony and Avril swirled in her brain, and she wondered why they hadn’t mentioned drifters.

“It’s a vampire that has traded its soul to Satan. In exchange, the vampire becomes a drifter, or shadow of its former self, and can no longer feel joy or happiness or love.”

How in the world could someone trade their soul to the Devil for anything, much less in exchange for never feeling love? “Why would a vampire do such a thing?”

“While I won’t pretend to condone such a thing, I can tell you that I understand the reasoning behind it. Imagine existing for hundreds of years only to watch everything and everyone you loved die over and over again. Some vampires cannot take the pain, and think that their lives will be better off if they never fall in love again or experience any emotions of happiness. The problem with the theory is that, if one is void of such emotions, the feelings that are left, which are hate, anger, and everything opposite of feeling warm and fuzzy, are consuming. The drifters become bent on torture, and inflicting pain on others.”

“Oh my. Are you telling me that Satan has sugar-coated this deal to make it appealing to vampires?”

“He wouldn’t be Satan if he wasn’t the king of manipulation.”

“That is horrible.” She gasped. “Could you become a drifter?”

“Technically, all vampires can become drifters, but you never have to worry about me making a deal with Satan. I will not do such a thing. I don’t know if there is a hunter alive that could take me out. I would be evil incarnate, unstoppable.”

“I don’t believe that.” Geri couldn’t imagine Malachi as such an abomination.

“It’s true. That’s why I will never choose such a path to walk down. I have sworn to protect humans from drifters, and will never break my vow.”



"Why do you do it?" She didn't understand why any of them would bother protecting humans. *Oh, wait.* "It's because we are your food supply, isn't it?"

Malachi laughed, and the noise startled her. It was the first time she'd heard genuine amusement come from him in the form of a smile.

"No. It's because I, and the other hunters, believe that just because humans are weaker, does not mean that they should be subjected to the depravity of those who are stronger. Everyone deserves a fighting chance, Geri. No one deserves to feel trapped and helpless. No one deserves to be a victim. Not to mention the small fact that drifters steal the souls of their victims."

"What?"

"The souls are released when the drifter is executed. That's the only way to set them free. I can't abide those who torture and steal from those who are weaker."

She had a feeling that Malachi's convictions stemmed from personal experience, but she was sure he wasn't going to discuss them. "You are a good man, Malachi. I'm honored to have met you."

"Just because I'm not a drifter doesn't make me a good man. I'm not. I'm a killer, and I've seen things that could give you nightmares."

By the way his mouth tightened, she'd bet he'd seen things that had given him nightmares. "How old are you?"

"A thousand years give or take a few."

"A th-thousand years?"

"Yes."

Good God! Her head swam, and she grappled with trying to understand the full significance of living for that many years, and the effects such a thing would have on one's emotional well being. How would she react to seeing her loved ones die over and over again? Did she blame vampires for turning drifter?

In all honesty? No, she didn't blame them, yet she couldn't condone the choice either. It was an unfortunate and desperate solution that came with tragic circumstances.

"Does your coming to St. Louis have something to do with the drifters?" She decided to leave the age thing alone for now. She simply could not wrap her mind around it at the moment.

"Yes. The past several months, we've seen an uprising. They've become increasingly violent. Their attacks have become more frequent, more planned, more centered on the hunters, especially in this area. They claim to have a leader, which in itself is odd."

"Why?"

“Drifters have never worked together. They have never been capable of doing so. They are too violent.”

“Oh.” She cleared her throat. “By the way, Ebony and Avril filled me in on quite a few facts about vampires.”

“As in?” His brows shot up in what she thought was amused curiosity.

She spent the next twenty minutes telling him of all the things she’d been told. Vampires hardly needed sleep. If born a vampire, they didn’t come into their powers until around eighteen. They drank blood somewhat sparingly, but more if they were injured. They could shield themselves, or become invisible to everyone but their life mate. They could shimmer, which Avril had shockingly demonstrated by disappearing and reappearing in the room right in front of her eyes, and could compel others to do things—which was quite frightening.

They were able to speak telepathically, or what they called *minti conversatie*, and could sense strong human emotions, and read minds, although most refrained from reading minds out of respect. Geri was mostly fascinated by the life mate subject, but Ebony and Avril had told her that she should ask Malachi more about it. She didn’t know why they had thought he should be the one to tell her since he didn’t strike her as a particularly open guy about feelings, but she hadn’t pushed the subject.

They had heightened senses, speed, strength, and each had a unique ability. Avril and Ebony had no unique ability since they had been changed and not born vampires. They had once been human like Geri. Avril’s husband, Aiston, controlled fire; Aldin, their brother-in-law, nature; and Ashe had several abilities on a smaller scale. She had wondered what Malachi’s unique ability was.

“What is your special ability, Malachi?”

“Electricity.” The words came from his mouth as casually as if they were talking about if he liked his coffee black or with cream and sugar.

Her jaw dropped. “You can control electricity?”

He nodded. “Or, let’s say I can control it fairly well when I’m in the right frame of mind.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“It means that if I get extremely pissed off, I have trouble containing it.”

“Oh. I guess I’ll try not to piss you off.” She almost laughed at the way his brows shot up at her. She rarely cursed, but at that very moment, it seemed appropriate somehow. “How long have vampires existed?”

“Not even I know the answer to that for certain, but I can tell you it’s more than likely thousands of years. There is a legend of our kind that says a king of vampires exists. His name is Ragnar or Ragnar. He is referred to by either name—same name really. One is just more old school than the other. The

legend says there was a god named Christos who was beloved by all the people of his kingdom. He had the reputation to be somewhat of a playboy until the day he met the goddess Riella. Christos and Riella fell in love. He vowed to cherish her for all eternity, and they married.

“Unfortunately, it wasn’t long before Christos’ eyes wandered to a comely servant, and he started a tumultuous affair with the woman. Unbeknownst to Christos, his new lover was a witch. Once he found out, he was horrified as any kind of sorcery or witchcraft was considered sacrilege, and banned her from the kingdom. His jilted lover was filled with such rage over his rejection that she cursed him.

“From then on, all children born to Christos were required to drink blood to survive and unable to stand the sunlight. Christos was not without powers and resources of his own and finally found a way to reverse part of the curse. While the sun would no longer hurt his offspring, they still had to drink blood to survive. Needless to say, Ragnor was Christos and Riella’s first born son, therefore becoming first of our kind, although, none of us have ever seen Ragnor.

“Being descendants of gods is where we get our strengths and our unique abilities. Being cursed is where we get our need to drink blood.” He watched her, his arms tense, resting on his knees, his clear eyes staring straight through her. She wanted to rub his muscles until they relaxed, feel the hard texture of them under her fingers as she massaged them.

“Can I ask you something else?” She cleared her throat.

“What?” His voice was husky.

“What happened when you were kissing me? I mean, why did you, um, choke me?”

His shoulders expanded when he took a deep breath, and his muscles tensed harder under his snug shirt. She shouldn’t have asked him, but she wanted to know, wanted him to trust her.

“I have things to do.” He got up and walked toward the door.

“Wait!”

Geri quickly followed him, stepped around him and pushed the door shut, giving them some measure of privacy. “I’m sorry, Malachi. I didn’t mean to pry. I was just curious because—”

“Because I’m a complete freak?” He scoffed at her.

“No! No! That’s not what I was going to say at all. I’m not even sure curious is the right word.” It wasn’t. She had a deep need to know what had caused an honorable, strong man like Malachi to snap. That wasn’t entirely true either. She didn’t care about an honorable, strong man *like* Malachi. She only cared about Malachi.

She shouldn’t have asked him. She had no business digging this deep into his emotions. She was newly divorced, didn’t even have the papers yet, and here she was getting involved with another man. Hadn’t she learned her lesson the first time? Her heart beat hard, and her chest ached in denial. Malachi

was nothing like Mike. Her heart knew it, but her logical brain argued. She didn't want to go through that kind of pain ever again, and if she was completely honest with herself, Mike had hurt her. Malachi? He could destroy her.

Yet, she couldn't help but want to be near him, want to comfort him, want to make him smile. In fact, the urge to touch him was nearly overwhelming. The feelings he invoked in her were scary and . . . exciting.

"Don't worry about it, Geri. I know I live in the fucked up world of my brain. I just didn't mean to drag you into it. It wasn't intentional."

The pain in his voice scraped along her nerve endings. She reached out and ran her hands up his chest over his impressive pecs. She stepped close, encircled his waist and laid her head against him, his heart beat strong and steady in her ear. A tear threatened, but she squashed it into submission, knowing he wouldn't appreciate it, and would probably mistake it for pity.

"I'm sorry I asked. Don't say things like that, Malachi. I know you would never hurt me."

She gasped in surprise when he grasped her upper arms and jerked her from him. "I did hurt you, and I'd probably do it again. You don't know a damn thing!"

The pain in his eyes made her knees weak. What had happened to him? Anger rushed through her at the thought that anything had hurt him. "Stop it!" She twisted out of his hold and reached up to cup his cheek. "I know you would never intentionally hurt me, and whether you want to believe that or not, it's the truth. Yes, you manhandled me a bit, but you stopped. I won't lie to you and say it didn't frighten me a bit, but it wasn't you who did that to me."

"Lucky you. Did you ever stop to think that maybe next time I won't stop?"

She shook her head, and in that moment, she realized something. She wasn't frightened of Malachi. She'd only been frightened of the situation—understandably so. But suddenly, she knew with every fiber of her being that he would never intentionally hurt her even if he wasn't sure himself. Whatever darkness lurked inside him was no match, when push came to shove, with her safety.

"No. I know you would stop. I'm not afraid of you, Malachi."

To prove her point, she placed her hands on his shoulders, stood on her tiptoes, and put her lips to his. "Kiss me." When he shook his head, she tightened her hold on him. "Kiss me, Malachi."

For a moment, she'd thought he'd deny her, but just when her hope was fleeing, his lips softened then firmed, expertly taking control. Her skin flamed hot, and her insides turned to molten jelly. She'd never been affected by a kiss like she was by Malachi's. Her heart screamed for surrender, her mind—denial. His tongue dipped inside her mouth, and all coherent thought was lost.

She sagged against him when his arms came around her, and she tilted her head back further, allowing him deeper access to her mouth. He devoured her, and she willingly submitted to every lick,

nip, and demand. Her breaths quickened and heat pooled between her thighs, begging for his possession. Suddenly, she was slammed against the closed door with enough force to knock the air from her lungs. She gasped, trying to catch her breath while Malachi kept her pinned face first with one big hand on her nape.

She tried to call to him, but she didn't have enough air to say his name out loud. His breaths were ragged, but not in excitement. They sounded much like what would come from a trapped and wounded wild animal. She was afraid, but deep down she clung to the belief that Malachi would never hurt her. She forced the fear down and took a few deep, much needed breaths once her lungs started working properly again.

"Malachi." His name whispered from her lips.

"Shut up!" The words hissed close to her ear.

His hands rested on the door on either side of her head. She started to turn around, thankful he'd released the hold he'd had on her neck, but he slammed his hands hard on the wood, making it crack, and she froze.

"Do not fucking move." His voice rasped out menacingly.

She wanted to face him, look into the silver eyes that she knew would be clouded with confusion, but she didn't move, scared she'd set him off even further. What was it about intimacy and Malachi? Every single time he'd had a spell like this, they'd been intimate. She'd never seen him so much as miss a single step or speak a word wrong other than at those times. It had to have something to do with—*Oh dear God*. Someone had hurt him sexually. Maybe abused him, maybe worse. Her heart clenched in pain.

His hard body pressed against her back, wrapped around her, trapping her against the door. And as perverse as it might make her considering the situation, she loved the feel of him against her. She would not struggle. If she did, it would make matters worse. For now, she'd cooperate with whatever Malachi wanted.

## Chapter Thirteen

Rage pounded through him. His heart beat to the rhythm of hatred. Some other emotion fought to get through, but it was squashed by the bitterness. He was no longer a man. He was a boy trapped in the psychotic prison of his mind created by Trinidad. He had the bastard now, and he was going to make him pay. Yet, his soul screamed at him that something was wrong. Things were foggy, like he was in a dream.

Suddenly, a sweet, womanly scent tickled his nose. His disillusioned world swirled then spiraled, jerking him back to reality where he had Geri pinned against the door. He was wrapped around her, pushing her against the hard surface. The deep red marks on the back of her neck bore testament to his rough handling. He sucked in a breath and stepped back from her.

Terror replaced the rage thumping through him. He could have killed her yet again. He was a danger to her, but continued to put her in harm's way. He was a selfish bastard. He'd put his own pleasure before her well being again. She slowly turned. Now he'd see the hate in her eyes, the disgust, but to his surprise, when she rested her gaze on him, neither emotion was evident. There was a calm acceptance of what had just happened.

He wasn't sure who was crazier—him for being relieved or her for not condemning the monster he was. "I'm so sorry, Geri." He barely got the words from his dry throat. He wanted to touch her, hug her, but he was terrified he'd hurt her again.

She took a couple tentative steps toward him. "Malachi, it's okay."

"No. It's not. I'm going to end up killing you."

"No. You aren't."

"You don't know that!" His words clipped with the desperation and anger swirling in him.

"Yes, I do." She raised her hand and ran her fingers down his chest. "You won't hurt me."

He wanted to believe that, needed to believe that, but wouldn't dare allow himself to do so. Her fingers felt heavenly stroking him, soothed him in a way he never thought was possible. He started to tell her he was leaving so she'd be safe from now on, but she did something so unexpected, it sucked the words and coherent thought from him. She sank to her knees before him.

She reached for the front of his pants and undid them with deft fingers. Before he had time to protest, she wrapped her hand around his cock. The breath left his lungs as swiftly as if it had been

physically knocked from him. He'd never been touched by a woman. She was soft, gentle, firm, warm. She stroked him tentatively from head to base. He let his lids lift, and looked down at a sight so beautiful it stole the breath he had just regained.

She peered up at him, trust burning deep in her eyes. She didn't show any sign of disgust or fear for the way he'd treated her just minutes before. She didn't touch him in anger. His cock grew with each hesitant stroke, and he knew he was lost. She was the only one he'd ever met that could make him burn hot enough to forget, even if only for a moment, what had been done to him. He longed for her touch, was desperate for it. Yearned to know what being touched out of love felt like.

He'd never wanted something so badly in his entire existence, yet the fear of what he was capable of doing to her if he lost himself in the riptide of emotions she stirred in him scared the hell out of him. He hated himself for hurting her. He could be lesser of a man and blame his actions on Trinidad, but deep down he knew he'd be a liar if he did. He was to blame, and only him. He'd allowed what Trinidad had done to him eat away at him, corrode him for years. He'd ignored it, denied it to the point of near insanity.

Had he dealt with it head on, talked to someone . . . He'd still be scarred for life from the experience, but the fault lay at his own feet. He'd refused to face it, thus causing the fierce buildup of hate, anger, regret, fear, and mistrust that boiled in him constantly. But how could he, Malachi, a hunter, have ever looked another person in the face and confessed what had been done to him? He was a warrior. He would be ridiculed for being weak. *Yeah, and imagine what your life mate would think of you?* The words in his brain mimicked the mocking voice of Trinidad.

Suddenly, he felt tired, defeated. He sank to his knees in front of Geri and rested his forehead against hers, his eyes squeezed shut. His arms hung limply at his sides. "I can't do this." The whispered words tore raggedly from his throat.

Geri cupped his face in her hands. "Malachi?" She waited until he opened his eyes to speak again. "Please. Tell me what is wrong. What happened to you?"

Her words slammed against the invisible walls he'd so meticulously built around himself, and he could feel them cracking for the first time in his life. He ached to tell someone, to have just one person who he could talk to. But Geri? Deep down, he was certain she'd never ridicule him for his past, but that tiny spark of doubt had immense power, and it held his tongue.

"I can't, Geri. Please don't ask this of me." He'd eventually cave, tell her everything if she continued staring at him with her beautiful eyes and angelic face.

"You can tell me anything. I won't ever think less of you." She brushed the errant hairs from his cheek with her fingers.

*Please don't ask this of me. Not yet. Not now.*

"Okay. But, I'm here for you."

Once again, she hadn't realized she'd heard the words he hadn't actually spoken. He wasn't going to tell her. Why add complications to something that would never work anyway? But damn if he didn't want it to work. He wanted her with a ferocity that shook him, wanted to reach out and take the one thing that had eluded him his entire existence . . . love.

"Malachi?"

"Yes."

"Promise me something?"

He took a deep breath, and she smiled.

"It's nothing so bad."

"What is it?" He'd give her anything she asked. He wondered if she realized the power she held over him, and if she'd use it if she did. No. That was his littered past and doubts talking for him. Geri wouldn't do that to him. Would she?

"If there ever comes a time when you feel like you can talk about whatever it is that's going on, come to me."

He shook his head in protest. "I don't think—"

She kissed his lips. "I give you my word that I will never judge you or pity you. I can't promise that whatever you tell me won't make me sad or angry, but I can promise that it will not make me feel any differently about you. Whatever it is, in part, made you the man you are today, and I think you are honorable, trustworthy and beautiful."

How could she make a promise like that? "Men are not beautiful, Geri." He trailed the backs of his fingers down her cheek. "You are beautiful."

"Add stubborn and infuriating to those qualities," she muttered under her breath and he chuckled.

"I can't make that promise to you." He put his fingers over her lips to stave off the protest about to tumble from them. "I can, however, promise that I will make every effort to fulfill your request if I'm capable."

She sighed. "I guess that's all I can ask for. Thank you."

It was then that he realized his pants were undone, and his cock was still exposed. His face burned when it twitched from being in close proximity to Geri. He reached down and tucked himself back in and redid his pants.

She reached out and stroked his thigh. "I didn't do that out of pity either. I wanted to make you feel good. You deserve that. You've done so much for me."



Her words confused him a little. "You don't owe me anything, much less that. I would never expect that for any type of payback."

"No. I'm sorry. I don't seem to be very good at choosing the right words lately. I did mean that I wanted you to feel good, but I didn't mean I was doing it for payback. I wanted to do it. Not just for you, but for me also."

"Why?"

"It makes me feel good when you feel good."

He'd never imagined someone could feel that way about him. Trinidad sure as hell had never cared about his feelings. He'd only cared about what he'd gotten from him. No one had ever given a shit about what consequences he suffered. Yet, even though a turbulent sea of emotion frothed where Geri and getting intimate were concerned, he had wanted to please her. He felt good when she felt good as well.

"No one has ever said that to me."

Her brows furrowed downward. "No one?"

Malachi shook his head slowly back and forth. "No." When her lips slanted in a frown, he grunted. "Don't be sad for me, Geri. It's okay. It's just never happened for me, that's all. It's no big deal."

"No big deal? Are you kidding me? It's a huge deal. Malachi, you deserve to be cherished, to be valued, to be . . . loved."

He watched her until her lovely cheeks turned red and her eyes cast down to the floor. He tilted her face back up with one finger under her chin. It touched him that she'd worry for him. "It's not really anyone's fault but my own. In case you haven't noticed, I'm not really very *social*. I have issues."

"Well, I can see how you might appear a bit intimidating to others. You are very big." She let a grin slide over her pink lips.

He wanted to kiss her, wanted to feel her fingers stroke him again. He leaned toward her, then jerked back when a knock sounded on the door.

"Malachi? You in there?" Ashe's voice called from the other side of the closed door.

"Yes. I'll be right there."

Malachi helped Geri up from the floor, and didn't protest when she grabbed him for a quick hug.

Malachi opened the door. "What's up?"

"We have a problem downtown. We need your help." Ashe glanced at Geri. "Sorry for interrupting." He cleared his throat.

"You're not interrupting. Let's go." Malachi turned back to Geri before following Ashe down the hallway. "I'll see you later."

"Yeah. Later." She grabbed his arm when he turned to leave. "Be careful."

He nodded.

\* \* \* \*

How was she going to get through to him? How could she make him trust her? Something deeply disturbing happened to Malachi that had left gaping, unhealed wounds. Whatever it was, she was determined to help him. If she could help him, she'd feel less guilty when she left, and she had to leave. She was getting in way too deep with Malachi. Her feelings for him were growing too quickly for her comfort. The ink was barely dry on her divorce papers, and she'd already been on her knees in front of another man ready to do the dark, erotic things she'd only dreamt about with Mike.

No. She had been on her knees in front of Malachi, and she wished she were still there. She had wanted him in her mouth, wanted to taste him, the salty clear drop of moisture that had glistened on the tip of him. The thought made her wet, made her nipples peak and ache for his touch. *Stop it, Geri.* Malachi was obviously not ready for a relationship of such nature. While he hadn't exactly protested her touch, in fact had been very enthusiastic at times with his kisses, his caresses, there was always that dark precipice that he teetered on. She had felt it in his quivering muscles, sensed it in the turbulent aura that danced about him. Still, she wanted him.

Why was she so bent on jumping from one bad relationship to another? While she thought Malachi was a spectacularly giving man, the simple fact remained that he was damaged, and she had no way of knowing if that damage could ever be undone. She wanted to help, but getting involved with him further than friendship could have devastating complications on her heart. Yet, that same heart cried in rage at the prospect of denial. What should she do?

She took a deep breath. *First of all, no matter what I may feel for him, I am going to help him if I can.* She would be no better than everyone else who had ignored him or speculated about why he was the way he was if she walked away now. She had to at least try, even if it meant getting her heart broken.

## Chapter Fourteen

Malachi, Ashe, Aldin and Aiston squared off against ten drifters in the middle of the dark, abandoned street. “Where the fuck are Conrad and Dominic?” Malachi assessed the positions of each of the drifters.

Ashe answered Malachi. “They’re on their way.”

“They’re going to be too fucking late.” Malachi straightened and leaned slightly forward, bracing for the impact of the drifters now running at them.

Malachi slipped the daggers from the sheaths strapped to his legs and gripped the handles tightly in each hand. The deadly hiss of Ashe, Aldin and Aiston’s swords whispered through the still night air. Three drifters lunged for Malachi. He figured he got an extra one because of his size, and Aldin would get the other extra since he was next to biggest of the hunters. He sliced through the neck of one, and stuck a blade deep into the heart of another, but the third sank all five poison-tipped talons into his side. The pain was excruciating, but he pushed it from his mind with practiced determination, sheer willpower, and experience that came from being a hunter for so long.

A reaction to pain could cost him his life, and he wasn’t about to let one of these bastards take it from him. He laughed at the drifter, his eyes widening in surprise at his reaction.

“Is that all you’ve got for me you pathetic fucker?” Malachi snarled at the ugly thing.

The drifter screamed in frustration and brought the talons back for another dig. Malachi blocked the blow and kicked the drifter in the solar plexus, sending it backwards into a gasping sprawl on its back. Just as Malachi started for the drifter to finish it off, something pierced his back. Everything spun in slow motion, and his sight dimmed, blinking in and out of focus. Had he been stabbed? No. Stabbing him wouldn’t have this kind of affect on him. He felt drunk. Then it dawned on him. He’d been drugged. As suddenly as the thought had crossed his mind, his vision tilted and blackened into a dizzying vortex. *Fuck*. It felt as if a thousand bricks had been strapped to his shoulders and he listed forward. He was going down for the count.

\* \* \* \*

"What do you mean he's gone?" Geri paced frantically back and forth. Ashe and Aiston stood in the entryway while Avril and Ebony assessed their wounds.

"One minute we were all fighting the drifters, the next, the fight was over, and Malachi was gone." Ashe winced when his wife poked at an exceptionally deep cut that ran over his shoulder, exposed by his tattered shirt. "Easy."

"Don't be such a baby," Ebony admonished.

"You don't look too worse for the wear." Avril ran her hand over Aiston's chest before resting it on his split cheek.

Aiston grunted. "Yeah, well, I feel worse for the wear."

"Excuse me?" Geri caught Ebony and Avril's attention. "Will they live?"

"Of course." Avril smiled.

"Well, then please forgive me for saying I don't give a flying pig's ass about this at the moment. I want to know where Malachi is." Had she actually said pig's ass? Yes, she had.

"I'm sorry, Geri." Ashe walked over to stand next to her. "I didn't mean to give the impression we weren't concerned over Malachi's disappearance. It's just that we honestly don't know what happened. While we initially thought one of the drifter's took him, after thinking on it, we don't really see how that is possible. You've seen Malachi. A drifter doesn't stand a chance against him. Unless—" Ashe's brows pointed down in obvious thought.

"Unless what?" Ebony patted her husband's arm.

"Unless he was drugged."

"Drugged? That's not possible. Is it?" Avril looked at Aiston, brow raised in question.

"Not to this point, but the drifters have been displaying all sorts of new surprises lately." Aiston leveled Ashe with a concerned look. "It does fit the scenario."

Ashe nodded. "Son of a bitch."

"We have to find him! We can't just leave him." Geri started for the door. Ebony gently but firmly grabbed her hand, stopping her progress.

"You can't go after him. It's too dangerous." Ebony held fast to Geri's hand when she tugged at it.

"She's right, Geri." Ashe agreed. "We will get cleaned up and look for him. Dominic and Conrad have already started searching for him."

"But—"

"You've seen Malachi. He's a big boy. He can take care of himself. He'll be all right." Ashe gave Aiston a look that belied the confidence he was trying to convey to Geri.

Aiston and Ashe both kissed their wives before retreating upstairs to change. They both came back down a few minutes later, both in black with long leather dusters.

"We'll let you know as soon as we find anything." Ashe hugged Ebony.

Aiston did the same to Avril and followed Ashe out the door.

"Come on, Geri. Let's go to the kitchen and have some tea." Ebony smiled.

Geri was sure Ebony's smile was a try at making her feel better, but it didn't work. She followed Ebony and Avril to the kitchen. Her stomach was upset and her heart pounded a hundred miles a minute. She was terrified for Malachi. Where was he? What had happened? She felt completely useless. There was nothing she could do to help him, especially if a drifter had gotten a hold of him. She was weak, and it angered her.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi's eyes felt as if they'd been glued shut. He cracked his lids, but couldn't make out anything through his blurry vision. Where the hell was he? His head screamed in protest when he tried to move, and his limbs felt as if they weighed a ton.

"Well, well, well. The great Malachi finally awakens."

The voice turned his blood frigid, and his muscles clenched in fear and protest. He had to be dreaming. He'd never be at Trinidad's mercy again. He turned his head, and his vision cleared, and focused on the one man he hated most in the world.

"I see you remember me. Glad to know I had such an impression on you."

Malachi's teeth ground so hard together, he thought they'd break. He tried to sit up, but found his wrists and legs restrained. But how? There was nothing strong enough to hold him. Yet, here he was, flat on his back, trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Trinidad laughed at Malachi's confusion. "Yes, not only did I find a way to drug you lunatic hunters, but I also found something strong enough to *contain* you as well."

"How the fuck did you do this?" Malachi's rage warred with fear.

Trinidad walked to Malachi and ran a finger down his bare chest. "Surely you remember me well enough to know I never give away my secrets. I prefer the art of surprise." Trinidad bent close to Malachi's ear. "I know you remember."

Malachi bellowed in fury, yanking at the chains around his wrists until they cut into him and blood dripped to the floor. "I'm going to kill you, Trinidad."

"That's not a very convincing threat considering your current state. You know, I've wondered over the years what ever happened to my favorite play thing. I've caught glimpses of you here and there, but a glimpse doesn't oft tell much. I must say, you've turned into quite an impressive specimen."

Trinidad ran long fingers down Malachi's thigh, which was thankfully still covered by his pants. Malachi's gut clenched, and if he was capable, he'd throw up. His stomach rolled in protest of Trinidad's touch. He wanted to cower away from him, but refused to show any type of weakness ever again to this sorry excuse of a man.

"Yes, and don't think for one moment that I won't kill you, regardless of my current state."

Trinidad laughed. "I know you would like nothing better than to have my blood on your hands, my dear boy, but I have other plans for you. In fact, I'm thinking it would be very nice to get reacquainted with you." Trinidad squeezed Malachi's thigh. "Do you know what I mean?"

Malachi's jaw ticked, betraying his turmoil.

"Ah, yes. I see you do. I thoroughly enjoyed you as a boy, but I'm thinking having you as a man will be even more pleasing. I mean, really, look at you." Trinidad ran his palms over Malachi's bare abdomen. "I don't think I've ever seen a man as put together as you. I can imagine having all of that power under me, controlling it, conquering it."

"You will never have control over me again." Malachi spit the words out.

Trinidad smiled. "I don't think you have much say in it at the moment." Trinidad bent and brushed his lips over Malachi's. "Don't worry. I have a few things to do first. The time will allow you to accept what is going to happen. Who knows, maybe you will even learn to enjoy it. After all, you aren't an inexperienced whelp any longer."

Trinidad straightened and left through a heavy metal door that creaked when it opened and closed. Malachi couldn't go through this again. His soul would never survive what Trinidad had planned for him. He'd rather be dead. He frantically looked around the room trying to find something, anything that would help him escape. White walls, white floor, and the table he laid on was stainless steel. He yanked at the chains again with all his might, but it only opened his healing wounds and made them bleed again.

There was no known material that could contain a vampire. How had Trinidad done it? There had to be something Malachi was missing, but what? There had to be a way out, but just as Malachi tried to sort out all the facts, the door creaked open, and Trinidad returned.

“Ready to play?”

Malachi stared at Trinidad with all the hatred he had blazing inside. He even tried to summon electricity to his fingers, but he was too weak. Must be a side affect of the drug. He had some small measure of comfort knowing Trinidad couldn’t do much to him while he lay flat on his back. That comfort was quickly jerked from him when Trinidad flipped what sounded like a latch between his feet and at his head.

The table split down the middle, and Trinidad folded the two sides out and locked them in place. Malachi’s stomach lurched in protest once again as the table dropped away from under him, but still held him in place. The bastard must have spent hours designing the table with just this purpose in mind. Malachi wondered how many other poor souls had been tortured by this demented asshole. Trinidad turned a knob on the side of the table, and Malachi slowly rotated until he was hanging, staring at the floor.

No! He couldn’t go through this again. He willed the fear away and noticed a design drawn in a circle on the white tiles surrounding the table he was chained to. It looked to be a spell of some sort. It finally dawned on him. The chains weren’t what held him. It was a damn spell. Vampires weren’t known to use spells, except the ancient, true bloods. How in the hell had Trinidad gained knowledge of something like this?

This was a serious threat to the hunters and any other vampire who got in Trinidad’s way. Trinidad ran his fingers down Malachi’s back, and he fought hard not to shy away from the bastard’s touch. He couldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“How the hell did you get drifters to do your dirty work for you, Trinidad? They don’t work with anyone.” Malachi hoped to distract him long enough to figure a way out of this mess.

“Everyone works with someone, especially if that someone can kill them. I find them quite amusing little puppets. I pull the strings and they dance around.”

“You are their new leader, the one they’ve been talking about?” It would take a powerful vampire to control the drifters. Trinidad was that. But how powerful was he?

Malachi didn’t know much about the man, where he’d originally come from, or if Trinidad was his real name. He only knew how sadistic he was and that Trinidad was older than he was. Not finding out every little detail about Trinidad after he’d escaped had obviously proven a very bad mistake on his part. Had he gotten to know his enemy, he might not be in this situation now. Hundreds of years of fighting had taught him that simple fact, but his mind had vehemently rejected anything to do with Trinidad other than the energy it took to hate him.

"I'm tired of talking. I'm in the mood to play."

Trinidad grabbed the back of Malachi's neck, and a red haze colored his vision. Rage boiled through him. He wanted to rip Trinidad to pieces with his bare hands. He struggled against the hated, familiar touch that brought back every memory of abuse from this demented bastard. He had to gain control of his emotions. He'd get nowhere without his wits about him, but God, it was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do in his life. He had to accept what might happen to him, had to stay in reality, not escape to the far away place in his mind he'd hidden in as a boy. He was a man now, and he had to deal with this situation head on and coherently.

Just as he thought he was doomed to suffer Trinidad's sadistic plans, he noticed the blood dripping from his wrist to the floor. As it splattered on the thick outline of the circle, he wondered, if the circle was broken, would the spell be broken? It was a crap shot, but the only plan he had. He struggled as Trinidad's sickening caresses became bolder, willing the droplets of blood to fall in the right place. After long, excruciating moments of groping, the last drop fell onto the floor, dissecting the line perfectly.

He yanked at the chains and felt them give. The spell was weakened. He could get free, but would he be too weak from blood loss, the poison from the drifter's talons, and being drugged to fight his way out? He stopped pulling at the chains for a moment, and cleared his mind. "So, Trinidad, what stops me from shimmering out of here?"

Trinidad laughed. "For one, the spell wouldn't allow it, for another, if you could, you would have already."

"Not to mention that pesky little thing of you inviting me to do so." A vampire could not shimmer in another vampire's home unless invited, but Malachi had a suspicion that that rule did not apply to this situation.

"Yeah, whatever you say. Boring semantics don't interest me at the moment."

He was right. This was not Trinidad's place. If it were, the bastard would mock him with the knowledge of his inability to shimmer. He only hoped like hell it wasn't owned by another vampire. Very unlikely, but considering the knee deep shit he was in, it wouldn't surprise him. It didn't matter. He would escape or die trying. One way or the other, he wouldn't be subjected to Trinidad's disgusting depravity again.

He took a deep breath and yanked his arms and legs with all the strength he had left. The chains gave, and he hit the floor with a resounding thud.

"What the—"

"Sorry, Trinidad, but you'll excuse me if I don't feel much like playing this sick game of yours again." He was going to finally kill the bastard.



“Get your sorry asses in here now!” Trinidad screamed at the door.

Just as Malachi got to his feet, a dozen drifters ran through the door. His revenge was going to have to wait. “Have no doubt, Trinidad. I will kill you.”

The last thing Malachi heard before he shimmered was Trinidad’s furious threats to maim any drifter who let Malachi escape. A lot of drifters were going to die tonight, and Malachi didn’t have a tiny tinge of guilt over it.

## Chapter Fifteen

The front door to the Aleksandrov mansion swung open with a loud bang. Geri was the first one to make it to the entryway, which was impressive since she wasn't a vampire.

"Malachi!" His name sobbed from her lips with the relief that poured through her.

She ran to him. The way he leaned against the jamb told her he wasn't feeling well. He was shirtless, and his face was a mask of such anger and hate, she forgot to breathe for a moment. She tentatively reached for him, and when her fingers made contact with him, his silver eyes snapped to her face. Fury burned bright in them, but she was fairly certain none of it was directed at her. She cautiously ran her hands over him, and when she felt the puncture wounds on his side, she gasped.

"Are you okay?"

He nodded. "How long have I been gone?"

"About four hours. Ashe and Aiston are looking for you, as well as Dominic and Conrad."

He straightened and Geri looped an arm around his waist. "Let me help you to your room."

He stepped away from her. "I can manage on my own."

He'd never been so cold toward her. Something terrible had happened, she just knew it. "At least let me—"

"I'm a grown man, Geri," he said through gritted teeth. "I've managed up until now fine on my own."

Geri sucked in a breath of surprise. She watched, mouth agape, as he slowly walked up the stairs. When she looked back at Ebony and Avril, their faces were much like her own.

"I have to make sure he's okay," Geri said more to herself than to Avril or Ebony.

"You might want to give him some time, Geri." Ebony spoke.

"No. Enough is enough. He needs to talk to someone." Geri started for the stairs.

"Yeah. I didn't think you'd go for that suggestion anyway, and I can't say I blame you. I'd probably do the same in your shoes." Ebony's quiet resolve strengthened Geri's decision to go after Malachi.

She was worried he'd reject her. In fact, she was quite certain that was exactly what would happen. He'd push her away, keep everything bottled inside him. The problem with bottles? After awhile, even if it took years, they had to vent, whether on their own or because someone cracked them open. It was time for Malachi to vent.

She straightened her shoulders and marched up to his door. She knocked, but he didn't answer. She was quite aware that he'd heard her with his superb hearing, and it irritated her that he was ignoring her. Determined not to be shunned, she pushed the door open, which quite frankly, she was surprised wasn't locked.

She walked into the dim room and whistled under her breath. Apparently no room went without attention at the Aleksandrov mansion. She couldn't quite make out the exact shade of the walls, but the accents in the room, including the bed coverings, were royal blue.

"Fit for a king," she muttered under her breath.

Malachi was nowhere to be found, and she assumed he was in the bathroom. She'd wait. She sat on the edge of the bed and, within a few moments, the bathroom door swung open, and out strolled Malachi wearing only a dark navy towel fastened around his lean hips. She sucked in a sharp breath. He was perfection, and he was a big one. She wanted to explore every contour of muscle on his ripped body.

"What are you doing in here?" Malachi stopped halfway between the bathroom and the bed.

"I wanted to make sure you weren't hurt badly." She glanced at his side, and had to admit that the punctures already looked better.

"I told you I was fine. Now, please go."

"No." By the look on his face, she was pretty sure no one had ever told him no before. Too bad. It was time for someone to do so.

"Last time I looked, it was my fucking room. I'm not in the mood for this bullshit right now."

She knew he was trying to rile her with his language, but she refused to fall for it. "Yes. It is your room, but I needed to see you, make sure you were okay."

He lifted his long arms and held them straight out at his sides. "As you can see, I'm well."

*And mouth watering delicious.*

"Excuse me?"

She hadn't said that out loud, had she? No. She was pretty sure she hadn't. "Um, I didn't say anything."

He closed the gap between him and the bed. "Look, Geri. All I want to do is lie down for awhile, even an hour, and relax."

She stood and waved her hand at the bed. "Be my guest."

"Have it your way." His silver gaze raked over her.

He reached for the towel. *Lord. He's going to drop the towel right in front of me.* She averted her eyes just as he finished unknitting the terry cloth. She heard the rustle of the towel hitting the floor, and nearly lost the fight of taking a peek at him. There was some more rustling, and then silence. She turned and Malachi was lying on his back, one arm thrown over his forehead, the other behind his head, his mouth set in a grim line.

She sat back down on the edge of the mattress. He had barely pulled the blanket past his hips, and his golden skin beckoned to her. How did a vampire have such a perfect tan? Weren't they supposed to be pale? She lost that train of thought when he took a deep breath that expanded his already impressive chest. His flat, brown nipples were perfectly perched atop some of the best looking pecs she'd ever seen. His shoulders were wide, and his six-pack was phenomenal. So was the straight line of black hair that trailed from the bottom of his navel and disappeared under the blanket.

"What happened, Malachi?" He remained silent. She touched his arm in encouragement, but he didn't respond. "Please talk to me." Her whispered plea must have hinted at the desperation she felt for he moved his arm from across his face and stared into her eyes.

She could lose herself in those silver pools quite easily. She waited, hoping he'd say something, and almost wept with relief when he finally did.

"Geri, I'm begging you. Don't ask this of me."

"It can't be as bad as you think." As the words left her mouth, she had a sinking feel that it was even worse.

He sat up so quickly, she nearly tumbled off the bed, but his hand shot out and righted her. He pressed his face a scant inch from her own. "You don't have any fucking idea what you're talking about."

The anger, the torment lacing his voice tore at her chest. "You're right. I don't. Tell me." She reached out to him and gently pushed the damp hair from his forehead. "Please."

He squeezed his eyes shut and laid back on the pillows. "Don't make me do this. You must know by now that I can't deny you."

She didn't know that, but it did give her much insight to his feelings for her. Surely she meant more to him than he'd let on if she held that kind of power over him. Was he afraid she'd use it against him? She'd never intentionally hurt him. Yet, how did a man as obviously wounded as he believe that someone cared for him?

"I'm only asking for a tiny bit of trust from you." She knew that if he confided in her, it would forever bind them together, and that made her want him to trust her more.

"No, you aren't. If you had any idea what you were asking from me, tiny bit would not come close to describing it. Mammoth, tantamount, infinite trust, maybe. But tiny bit? I don't think so." His voice was quiet. "Besides, you haven't exactly trusted me, have you? We both have our secrets, don't we?"

He was right, but she wasn't going to cave right now. She would tell him what she'd been through at some other time, but now she wanted him to talk to her. He was trying to change the subject, get the focus off of himself, and she had a feeling what she'd been through was nothing compared to whatever Malachi's secrets were.

"Don't change the subject. We're talking about you." Geri gasped when he suddenly sat up.

"No. We aren't. Please leave my room."

She wasn't getting anywhere with him. If he'd only let down his guard for one second, let her in. He was still angry. Maybe after he cooled down for awhile, he'd be more open to talking to her. *Yeah, because he's been such a chatterbox up to this point.*

"Okay. I'll leave if that's what you want, but I'm here for you if you need me." She laid her palm gently against his stubbly cheek.

When she went to leave, his hands wrapped around her upper arms and jerked her down to him. His mouth slammed down on hers, smothering her squeak of surprise. Her eyes were wide, but the instant his tongue dove into her mouth, they grew heavy with desire. There was nothing like the smell and taste of Malachi. He was like a drug, and she'd never get enough of him.

A half groan, half growl rasped from his throat into her mouth, and a riptide of anger and sorrow hit her. She was feeling his emotions. She didn't know how, but she was, and they were so intense she nearly screamed. On a deeper level, she was aware she was only catching a glimpse of his pain, and wondered how anyone could walk around day after day carrying such misery. Just the glance she'd gotten was nearly crippling.

She moaned, and he broke the kiss. His breathing ragged, he stared into her eyes, his grip on her arms never wavering. "Malachi?"

"Fuck!" He released her and practically ran to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

\* \* \* \*

He was a fucking idiot. Malachi leaned against the bathroom door. At his best, he'd strangled Geri, and now, with the hatred he carried for Trinidad swirling hot in him, he'd kissed her? No telling what he would have ended up doing to her in his current state of mind. He looked down, and was amazed that his cock was still hard. But damn, when his lips had touched hers, he'd felt a fog of calmness start to envelope the turmoil. She eased him, calmed him.

Why couldn't he have the one thing that had been fated to him? Why couldn't his feelings for the woman who was most precious to him in the world be untainted by his past? Why couldn't he have this one fucking thing for himself? Hadn't he suffered enough? Didn't he deserve a scant scrap of happiness? All he wanted to do was make love to Geri without fear, without having to worry about what he might do to her. He shook his head in disgust.

None of that mattered. He couldn't risk endangering her. He walked to the shower he'd gotten out of only a few moments earlier and flipped the cold water on. When he stepped under the spray, he swore steam billowed off his hot skin. After several minutes, his damn dick was still hard. He wanted Geri, wanted her worse than he'd ever wanted anything in his entire existence.

He reached down and palmed his balls, expecting the familiar sickness to churn in his gut, but it didn't. He stroked up his shaft hesitantly, and fire shot through him. He clenched his teeth hard, and stroked down and back up. His skin prickled and pressure built inside him, threatening to blow his head right off.

He groaned as his hand stroked up and down, up and down, but the pressure now building in his cock only grew and grew. Every time he felt like he was on the precipice of release, the feeling would subside, and the aching pressure would kick up another notch. His breathing came in pants, and he grunted with each jerk of his hand. Tears formed in his eyes, but he refused to let them spill. He cried out in agony while he continued on, striving for what was just out of reach, striving for what he'd never known.

His head bowed down, and he supported his weight with an outstretched arm on the shower wall while he worked himself with his hand. He didn't hear when Geri entered the bathroom, didn't even notice when she opened the door to the shower and turned the cold water off. But when her small hand rested over his, he froze. His balls hurt, and he thought for sure his cock was going to explode, although anything would be better than the blinding, aching pressure.

"Get out of here, Geri!" He didn't want her to see him like this.

"No." She placed a palm to his chest and gave him a surprisingly strong push. His back hit the tiled wall behind him and she kissed his cheek before standing on tip toe and whispering in his ear. "Relax, Malachi."

He started to protest again, but she shushed him with her fingers over his mouth. Her other hand pried his fingers from around his cock and encircled him. His eyes closed and he growled. She kissed his chest and stroked him. When she did it, it was different than when he had. When she touched

him, he didn't feel like he was barreling toward a goal he'd never reach. When she touched him, his instincts told him she was going to give him more pleasure than he'd ever felt, that everything would be all right.

He placed his palms against the wall his back was flattened against and focused on Geri and what she was doing to him. He wanted to touch her, but he didn't trust himself. He would keep his fucking mind on her, not let it wander to the past where he might flip out and hurt her, and keep his hands to himself.

She looked up at him and smiled, and his heart stuttered, then began an erratic beat. Her hand stroked up and down, up and down, up and down. The pressure built, and built, and just as he thought he couldn't take anymore, she reached down with her other hand and gently squeezed his balls. Fire shot up and out of his cock. He cried out, her hand never ceasing as his release erupted.

He sank to his knees. Every ounce of his energy spent. A strange, frightening calm settled over him. He'd never gone a second without vicious anger and confusion churning in him until now. It was all because of one tiny, human woman. Geri.

"Malachi?"

"Please, wait for me in the bedroom."

He was relieved when Geri kissed him on the top of the head and left, closing the door behind her. He cleaned up and wrapped another towel around his waist before heading for the bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

Geri had never been so humbled. When she'd found Malachi in the shower in obvious pain, all she'd wanted to do was help him. She'd never dreamed he'd actually allow her to do what she'd done. He'd seemed bent on not allowing physical contact, and it hadn't been all about getting him off. Much more had been involved in what she'd just shared with Malachi. Afterwards, it was as if he'd been different. His face had been serene, and hadn't held the sharp edges of whatever it was that constantly seemed to haunt him.

She reeled around when the bathroom door opened and Malachi strolled out with another towel around his hips. She kind of half expected him to not come out, but was glad he did. He sat on the edge of the bed, and she walked slowly to him and sat beside him.

"Malachi, what happened to you?" she whispered.

"You don't want to know. I'm not even sure I can say it out loud." Malachi's words sounded as if they were being choked out.

Her heart ached for him. "I can tell you are hurting. I only want to help. I'm begging you."

Before she could blink, he framed her face with his hands, holding her firmly so she could not look away from him. His features contorted, and she winced inwardly. His lips were so close. When he spoke, she could feel his warm breath fan over her cheek.

"God damn it. If you want to know so fucking bad, I'll tell you. But be warned, when I'm finished, I don't want one ounce of pity from you. Do you understand me?" She barely nodded before he continued, his grip never easing, his face staying close to hers.

He refused to let her look away from him, and she wondered if it was so he wouldn't miss the disgust that he had no doubt she would feel about whatever it was he was about to tell her. He would be disappointed. She'd never feel that way about him.

"What if I told you when I was a boy, before I came into my powers, I was brutally used by a sadistic man? What if I told you I was too weak to do anything about it? What if I told you it went on for years? What if I told you I've been fucked up in the head ever since? I've never been able to touch a woman because every time I feel any kind of lust, I get sick to my stomach . . . until you. You make me forget the scars that bastard permanently carved into me one by one.

"How ironic it is that I finally find a woman I want to touch only to realize I'm even more fucked up than I thought? Imagine how you would feel if you spent hundreds of years mistrusting everyone. Then, you come into my life. You make me want the things I never thought I could have. Turns out I've suffered another little side effect from my fucked up past. Every time I get too close to you, I try to kill you.

"To top that off, the bastard that did this to me is the one and the same that kidnapped me tonight. Who, by the way, wanted to carry on exactly where he left off from our last happy get together."

"Oh my God! Malachi, I'm sorry. I had no idea. I—"

"Don't! That's exactly why I didn't want to tell anyone." He finally dropped his hands from her face. "The badass hunter Malachi is not all he's cracked up to be. He's less of a man than everyone thinks. He couldn't even stop someone from using him."

"You are not less of a man. You were a child when it happened. How could you possibly think such a thing?"

It was her turn to cup his face. She wanted to weep at the turmoil in his troubled eyes. He honestly believed he was less of a man because of what had happened to him. None of it had been his



fault. He'd been nothing but a baby. His elders should have protected him, not abused him. She couldn't imagine the hell he'd gone through.

"I should have found a way to stop him." His voice rasped from his throat.

"No. You couldn't have." She stroked his cheek. "You have to stop blaming yourself. It was not your fault. I can't pretend to fully comprehend what you went through, but I know that horrible things happen to others every day. I will never understand why people do the sick things they do."

"He's not people. He's an animal." Fury shined bright in his eyes.

"Yes. I do believe you are right." She wanted to hold him, but didn't think he'd let her.

"You must know how much I want you, Geri. Now you understand why it's impossible for us to be together. I understand why I went off the deep end the night under the fire escape—you touched the back of my neck, but the other times I can't explain."

She shook her head in denial. "I'm sorry I did something that brought back the pain you've suffered. I'll be careful to never do it again. I have to disagree with you. I don't believe it is impossible for you to be with me."

He flopped on his back. "Every time we've been together intimately, I've tried to kill you. I don't even remember doing it. It's as if I black out. I couldn't live with myself if I hurt you. I can't trust myself with you."

Her heart flip-flopped. He did care about her. She could no longer deny that she cared about him as well, more than just as a friend. She was falling in love with him even though she'd fought to keep from doing so. She had no business being in another relationship so soon after her divorce, but it wasn't as if she'd gone looking for Malachi. It was as if they had been fated to meet.

"I trust you, and you can trust me. You won't hurt me. If you were going to, you would have done it by now. You've had your opportunities to do so, and have stopped each time. It will just take time for you to heal. You didn't so much as put a scratch on me in the shower a few minutes ago."

He propped himself up on his elbows. "I don't think you understand. It's been hundreds of years, and I'm still not healed. I'll never be healed. Do you truly get what I'm saying, Geri? I've been so messed up over what happened to me, I've never been with a woman. Ever."

He was a virgin? It was hard to look at a man as sexy as Malachi and believe so. Yet she didn't believe he would lie about something like that. The thought of being the first woman he'd touched intimately in any way sent delicious shivers through her that settled between her thighs. She wasn't going to address his lack of intimacy any further. Now was not the time, and it really had nothing to do with her feelings for him. He had already trusted her with more information than he'd ever given anyone about his personal issues. It didn't matter whether he'd been with other women or not. In fact, if the reasons as to why he hadn't weren't so horrible, she'd be relieved.

"While it's obvious you will always have scars, I don't believe that you cannot overcome this. You've never spoken of this to anyone. You've held it in for all of these years. It has spiraled into a beast with a gaping mouth that eats at you because you've had no one to lean on, no one to share your feelings with. Now that you have, you will get better."

He shook his head in denial. "I don't think so, but you have no idea how much I hope you are right."

"I am right. You'll see." She smiled at him, her heart still reeling in protest of the horrible images racing through her brain of how much he'd suffered.

"I need to rest for a little while. I have to tell Ashe about Trinidad." He let a long breath out. "Trinidad is the new leader of the drifters. He's the one that has been causing the uprising. We've been trying to figure out his identity for some time now. He's a dangerous, sadistic man, and has to be stopped. There is no telling what he's planning to do or why."

"Are you going to tell Ashe everything?" She couldn't imagine how hard it would be for Malachi to tell Ashe any of this.

"Just enough so he understands what kind of bastard we are dealing with. Believe it or not, I trust Ashe Aleksandrov. He's an honorable man. Still doesn't make me want to spill my darkest secrets to him, though."

"You are an honorable man as well." She smiled when he grunted in protest. "Do you mind if I stay while you rest? I promise I won't disturb you. I'll just lay by you and not say a word."

"You disturb me simply by being in the room, but I think I would like it if you stayed." He patted the empty place beside him.

She crawled up beside him before he had time to change his mind. She snuggled close to his side and laid her cheek on his chest. His muscles were deliciously hard, and he smelled like soap and man. She began to drift almost instantly.

"I lied. I have one last question, and I won't say another word after that."

He tensed under her, probably thinking she was going to ask more about Trinidad. "What?"

"Tell me what your favorite meal is." She smiled when he relaxed.

"Why?"

"Just tell me."

"You're going to laugh."

She shook her head. "No. I won't."

“Cheeseburgers and French fries.”

“Thank you for telling me.” She did want to laugh. He was a typical male, even if he didn’t know it.

## Chapter Sixteen

Ashe's turquoise eyes stared at Malachi, devoid of judgment, devoid of pity. Malachi respected the man even more now than he had before. In the last two hours, he'd confessed his darkest secrets to two people. He'd held those horrible memories inside himself for so long, he'd never thought he'd be able to dig them out of the black chasm they'd churned in deep inside him. But, he had. Somehow, he'd gotten them to the surface, twice. Somehow, he'd revealed them to Geri, and now, most of them to Ashe.

The somehow was actually someone. Geri. He'd wanted to trust someone for once in his life, wanted to have someone to lean on, to unload some of the pain of his past no matter how selfish that had made him. When Geri had listened to him, not judged him, but accepted him just as he was, he'd found a strength growing in him he'd never thought possible. And when he'd stood, staring down at Geri while she'd slept in the bed he'd shared with her moments before, he'd known he could do anything.

She gave him the inner strength, the confidence to tell Ashe instead of hiding like the frightened child he'd felt like so many times throughout his life when he'd thought about confiding in anyone. If one, tiny, fierce woman could listen to the horrors he'd lived through without running screaming from the room, how could he disappoint her and cower from what he'd known he had to do?

He hadn't told Ashe every sordid detail, but he wasn't so naïve as to think the man couldn't fill in the blanks. Through the terror that had begged him to hold his tongue, that had screamed at him that once the words came out of his mouth they could never be taken back, that he would be ridiculed for having been so weak, all he could think about was that he'd finally felt better. For once in nearly a thousand years, he had someone to share the burden that had eaten away at his sanity every second of every day. Some of the crushing weight had been lifted off his chest and from his heart.

The memories were still as vivid as they always were, the pain still etched deep in his soul, but the pain and memories were somehow less suffocating. A part of him would forever remain damaged, but he'd been wrong to keep everything to himself for so long. Still, he had no way of knowing if he'd ever get to a point where he was healed enough to trust himself where Geri was concerned. He'd never be able to take a chance with her safety.

He craved her, and the way she'd touched him earlier . . . he closed his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply. Her hands had been magic on him. She'd eased him, calmed him, and enflamed him.

"I swear to you, Malachi, that I will never divulge what you have told me to anyone. You're secret is safe with me. I'm sorry you had to endure such horror."

"Thank you." He slightly bowed his head. He believed Ashe would keep his word.

"Do you mind if I call my brothers and the other hunters in now so we can figure out what to do next?"

"Go ahead." Malachi inclined his head.

*Aiston, Aldin, Dominic, Conrad. Please come to the den.* Within moments of Ashe's telepathic request, the hunters filed into the den one by one, Aldin bringing up the rear.

Malachi told the other hunters about Trinidad minus the grizzly details of the horror he'd been put through by the bastard.

"You say this Trinidad is the leader of the drifters?" Malachi nodded in response to Aldin's question. "You're sure?" Malachi nodded again.

"We have to find a way to take the bastard down. He's developed a drug and is using spells. That is how he held me. I wondered how he'd kept me in the chains, for you know as well as I that there is no known substance that is strong enough to contain us. He used a combination of the drug, the spell he'd drawn on the floor around me, and the poison from the drifter's talons that attacked me." Malachi fought the churning in his stomach at the memories of being back at Trinidad's mercy.

"So the drug couldn't contain us on its own?" Aiston asked.

Malachi shrugged. "Don't know. I guess it could as long as it was never allowed to wear off. If it were used that way, it would keep us in an unconscious state. When I came out from under it, I came out fast. So, no. I don't think it is strong enough on its own if the goal is to have any of us conscious at any time."

"Son of a bitch. How did this happen, and why is this Trinidad asshole interested in us and the drifters to begin with?" Dominic rubbed his temples in obvious frustration.

"I don't know, but my gut tells me it's to settle some personal vendetta." Malachi walked to the bar and poured three fingers of scotch in a glass. He threw it back with one swallow, and enjoyed the slow burn of the liquid as it slid down his throat and into his gut.

Trinidad was definitely doing whatever it was he was doing for personal reasons. He never did anything unless it benefited himself somehow. That was the one thing, the only thing, Malachi was sure of where Trinidad was concerned. To try to figure out the way the psycho's brain worked and why would be like trying to figure out why the sky was blue. There might be some plausible answers, but no one could be one hundred percent sure as only God had the answer to some riddles.

"I say we find the bastard and rip his fucking head off." Aldin's low tone filled the room with menace.

"I agree. Except, he's obviously very good at hiding. We've been looking for him for a long time now, not even sure that he really existed. After all this time, we've only just found an identity." Conrad plopped down on the sofa beside Dominic, his ringlets of blonde hair bouncing with the movement.

Dominic slid what looked like an irritated glance in Conrad's direction. "Can't you ever just sit down? I swear, the fucking furniture is not a trampoline."

Conrad laughed. "Okay, Dad."

Dominic rolled his eyes and crossed his arms across his chest.

"We have to find a way to draw him out." Aiston rubbed his chin as if in deep thought.

"I know how to draw him out." Every hunter grew silent, and trained their eyes on Malachi. Malachi took a deep breath. He never wanted to place himself in Trinidad's hands again, but his desire to kill Trinidad overrode those fears. "Use me as bait."

"No." Ashe spoke abruptly.

Malachi stared into the turquoise depths of Ashe's eyes and tapped into the telepathic link only they could hear, unwilling to share their private exchange with the rest of the hunters. *Do not act like my daddy, Ashe. You fucking know as well as I that this will work.*

*Yes. I do know, but after what you've told me, I can't willingly or in good conscience put you in Trinidad's hands again.*

*It's not your decision. It's mine. You wouldn't hesitate if I hadn't told you what I had. Nor would you hesitate if you were the one being offered as bait. It is no different. We are hunters, and we have vowed to do whatever it takes to keep humanity safe. I don't think I have to tell you how much pain Trinidad would be capable of inflicting upon humans if he were able to roam free. If we don't find a way to stop him, and quickly, he will find a way to destroy us. Do not underestimate him. It will be all of our downfalls.*

Ashe sighed. *Okay, but I do not like it.*

*You don't have to like it. I'm doing it one way or the other. I would prefer, however, to have backup when it happens.*

"We'll do as Malachi has requested," Ashe said.

"I don't understand why he would want Malachi over any of us. Why is it that you think this will work? I mean, yeah, he grabbed you last night, but it might have simply been that you were the easiest to get to at the time," Aiston said.

"You're just going to have to trust me when I tell you that, out of all of us, he will be more than happy to go out of his way to get at me over any of you." Malachi glared at Aiston, refusing to give any further explanation.

"It's settled then. When do we carry this plan out?" Dominic raised his brows in question.

"One week. That will give us time to come up with a solid plan, and to practice it with several different scenarios. There can be no room for error. We must kill Trinidad." Ashe's anger reverberated through his words.

"We can do it sooner." Malachi protested.

"No. If we must do this, I will take no chances with your life, or the lives of any of the other hunters. This is not just about you and your safety." Ashe drummed his fingers on top of the desk Geri had sat behind earlier to go over the ledgers.

Malachi was pissed, but Ashe was right. He personally didn't want the deaths of any of the other hunters on his conscience either. If it was just his life at risk, fine, but he couldn't allow others to get hurt or die because of his burning need for revenge.

Malachi slightly bowed his head to Ashe. "When do we start discussing this plan?"

"Tomorrow night. As I well know it doesn't pertain to all of you, but I have an extremely stubborn wife that I must explain my actions to. If I do not, she will undoubtedly find a way to interfere and possibly get hurt. That, I will not tolerate. Therefore, I must spend the next several hours assuring her of my safety, and assuring her that I do not plan to leave her a widow or my son fatherless." Ashe pushed his fingers through his dark hair.

Aiston snorted. "Don't think I won't have to go through the same thing."

"Good God. I'm glad I'm not married. Besides, there are too many women in the world." Conrad chuckled.

Dominic glared at Conrad. "Have a little respect, man. It's not like it's a horrible thing to care about one special person."

Conrad glared back. "I didn't imply that it was."

Aldin rolled his eyes. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you two little girls had crushes on each other."

"Shut the fuck up," Dominic snapped at Aldin.

Aldin remained silent. A mischievous grin played at his lips as he stared at Dominic and Conrad.

"You just wait. When you find your *viata amants*, you will know exactly what I'm talking about." Ashe smiled.

"Won't likely happen. I'm sure God wouldn't be so cruel as to condemn some poor soul to me for life." Dominic walked to the bar, filled a glass with whisky, and downed it.

“Don’t be so sure. Who’s to say she would be some poor soul. She might be a fierce, smart-mouthed, stubborn type that would give you a run for your money.” Aiston slapped Dominic on the back in a friendly gesture.

“That, I would like to see.” Ashe laughed.

If God could condemn Geri to spending eternity with him, Malachi had no doubt Dominic could be just as likely to find a life mate. Yet, he wasn’t going to allow Geri to be tied to him . . . was he?



## Chapter Seventeen

Geri laughed as McKayla showed her what all the knobs did on the stove and oven. “My goodness. I don’t even think it would be this hard to get past Fort Knox.”

McKayla smiled at Geri. “It’s not so hard.”

“Don’t you believe it. I still can’t figure the dang thing out.” Ebony smirked as she wiped the pudding off Marcus’ face.

He really was a cutie. Geri thought he’d looked much like his father the first time she’d seen him, but now the hints of Ebony in him were hard to miss. He was going to be a heartbreaker. That was for certain.

“Yeah, I gave up on it, too. I can use the stove, but forget about the oven.” Avril tickled Marcus’ belly and he let out a high pitched squeal.

“Yes, I agree with you on that, Avril. I think I will be able to figure the stove out, but the oven can wait for another time. I think I can get by with just the stove anyway. Thank you so much for letting me use the kitchen and dining room tonight.”

“Oh. No problem, hun. I told you this is your home too as long as you are here. Besides, I have a sneaky suspicion that our husbands are up to something, and will have us otherwise occupied tonight trying to convince us that whatever it is, is a good idea.” Ebony chuckled.

“Yes. I believe you are right,” Avril agreed.

“What do you mean?” Geri asked.

“While I don’t like the fact that my husband is a hunter—”

“Me either,” Avril chimed in.

“I know that I cannot expect him to stop what he has done practically his entire life. Nor can I ignore the importance of what he does. If he did not do what he does, I would probably not be here now. However, I do enjoy giving him my stern disapproval of him putting himself in danger, and all the ways he comes up with to persuade me to his line of thinking. Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure he knows exactly what game I’m playing, but I believe he enjoys it as much as I.” Ebony’s cheeks turned red.

“Yes. The persuasion can be quite, um, rigorous.” Avril winked, then laughed, and Ebony joined in.

Geri felt a little embarrassed, but amusement overrode that emotion, quickly followed by concern. "Do you think they are up to something dangerous?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. Practically everything they do is dangerous. Unfortunately, it is something we must accept. I have faith in my husband, and his, shall we say, predatory talents. I know he is a fierce hunter, and will do everything in his power to come back to me. And let me tell you, what is in his power is quite impressive."

Ebony agreed with Avril. "Yes. I trust Ashe's judgment even if I don't always agree with what he's planning on doing. I am also humbled that he loves and respects me enough to be up front and honest with me. He is a stubborn, strong man, but he doesn't lie to me. Frankly, if he is placing himself in danger, I would rather know and prepare for it than be left in the dark."

"Yep. I agree. I would kick Aiston's butt if he ever lied to me." Avril started to say something, but was interrupted when Aiston's arms came around her from behind.

She laughed when he picked her up and twirled her around to face him. "You would, would you? I'd like to test that theory. I think you *trying* to kick my butt would be very hot."

Avril stopped laughing and kissed Aiston. "There would be no trying, my dear husband."

Aiston's eyes grew dark, and Geri's stomach clenched at the heat that passed between the two.

"I think we should test that theory right now." Aiston picked Avril up. "Bid farewell to your friends, my lady, for I am taking you up to the bedchamber." Aiston kissed Avril again, longer and deeper this time.

"Just go already. Not in front of the child." Ebony giggled and covered Marcus' eyes.

Aiston bowed and swept Avril from the kitchen.

"Wow. Are they always like that?" Geri asked Ebony.

"Yes. You might as well get used to it. The Aleksandrov men are not shy. They don't tend to hide their emotions. Actually, I think most of the hunters are like that. They have been around a long time. They don't really put much importance on hiding their true feelings, especially desire." Ebony's cheeks flamed again.

Geri cleared her throat. *Oh my*. Malachi had looked at her with the same burning desire in his eyes as Aiston had for Avril. In fact, just thinking about it made her burn for him.

"Just a tiny suggestion, Geri." Ebony smiled.

"Yes?"

"Be careful about strong emotions, because we can feel them."

Geri blushed fiercely. "Oh!"

"No. Don't be embarrassed. I only tell you so that you are aware that we are able to feel them, and desire is a fierce emotion." Ebony continued to feed Marcus.

"I-I'm going to go take a bath. I'll be back down later to destroy your kitchen." Geri gave McKayla a sympathetic look.

"Don't you worry about a thing. You'll do fine. I'll make sure everyone steers clear of the kitchen and dining room tonight." Ebony shoveled a spoonful of peas in Marcus' little mouth and he squished up his face in protest as McKayla left the room smiling.

"Thank you. Oh, I was meaning to ask. What is that little half-moon thing on the back of McKayla's hand?"

Ebony's mouth turned down, and Geri felt as if she'd just asked something she shouldn't have. She'd seen the symbol a couple times, but had been distracted before she could ask McKayla herself. It had appeared to be a tattoo at first, but when she'd seen it again, it reminded her more of a colored scar. "I'm sorry. Nevermind."

"No. It's okay. It just brought back some memories I hadn't thought about for awhile. McKayla used to be a drudge."

"A drudge?"

Ebony nodded. "A drudge is sort of a play thing or a servant to a vampire or drifter. There is a certain amount of time after a person dies that a vampire can choose to make them a drudge. If he chooses to do so, that individual becomes his slave more or less. Most vampires don't have drudges any longer. McKayla was a drudge to a drifter, and was terribly abused. Ashe rescued her before I met him. I'm sorry I had the reaction I did to your question, but I was attacked by a drudge the night Ashe and I met."

Geri was in awe. "Are you telling me that these drudges are completely controlled by vampires or drifters?"

Ebony fed Marcus some pudding that he seemed to like much better than the peas. "Yes. Until the vampire or drifter dies that made them, they are never free to make their own choices."

Geri was glad that Ashe had rescued McKayla. She seemed like such a sweet woman. "Thank you for telling me, and I'm sorry for reminding you of bad times. I'm going to my room now."

"It's okay, Geri. You had no way of knowing. After all, things turned out wonderful. See you later." Ebony continued spooning pudding into Marcus' mouth.

Geri walked slowly back to her room, but had to make a quick stop first. She knocked on Malachi's door. He answered almost before she got the second knock in and startled her. "Oh!"

"I didn't mean to scare you." Malachi's deep voice slid through her.

"It's okay. How did things go?" She knew it wouldn't have been easy for Malachi to tell Ashe what had happened with Trinidad so many years ago.

"As well as could have been expected."

He held his lips in a tight line, which told her she'd get no more from him at the moment. "Um, could you meet me in the dining room around seven tonight?"

He frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"No. I, well, I—"

"What is it?" Concern etched his face.

"It's kind of a surprise." Geri didn't want to tell him what she was up to, but she didn't want to worry him either. "Do you have other plans?"

"No. I'll be there."

"Thank you." Geri started to turn away, but Malachi's hand shot out and his long fingers encircled her wrist."

"No. Thank you."

"For what?" she whispered.

"For listening, and for giving me the courage to speak my darkest secrets." He watched her with his silver eyes.

He thought she'd given him the courage to do that? He was the strongest man she knew. She couldn't be responsible for such a thing. "I didn't do anything. You—"

"Shhh." He placed his index finger over her lips. "You did more than you can ever imagine. Just take my thanks. I wouldn't say it if I didn't believe it."

"You're welcome." If that's what he needed to believe, she'd give him that small concession, for now.

His finger rested on her lower lip and she had an overwhelming desire to suck it into her mouth. As if he had read her thoughts, he let his finger slide from her mouth.

"I'll see you later." Malachi closed the door.

"Later." She looked at the closed door, wondering if he'd ever truly open his heart to anyone.

\* \* \* \*

Geri gave one last look at herself in the mirror. She had chosen to wear a dark green, silk shirt that hung loosely off one shoulder, a black, just-above-the-knee skirt, and black ankle boots. She wore lacy panties and a push up bra that matched. She glanced over at the bed at the stockings and garter belt. She wanted to put them on, but hadn't been brave enough to wear something so sinfully sexy.

Actually, that wasn't the whole story. She'd never wanted to wear such erotic things until now, and it was because of Malachi. He made her feel utterly feminine and sexy. When his silver eyes rested upon her, the whole world tilted and spun sideways. She wanted to feel the soft fabric gliding against her skin as she imagined Malachi peeling it off her body.

She twisted her hair up into a knot and fastened it into a loose bun with a clip. Several tendrils escaped and lay softly against her face and neck. She hadn't put much makeup on, a little rouge, eyeliner, and a pinch of lipstick. She wanted to please Malachi tonight, wanted to give him something just for him. He'd been through a lot today, and she wanted to take his mind off of his abusive past. Her chest ached each time she thought about what he'd endured as a child, and the psychological impact it had had on him since.

She took a deep breath, and pushed the thoughts away. They would overtake her if she allowed them to, and she wanted tonight to be happy for Malachi. She wanted to show him he was worthy of fun, of joy, of happiness, of . . . love. She had come to terms with the fact that she wanted him. She could no more deny that than her next breath. But could they have a future together? Could he overcome his emotional barricades? She didn't know, but she refused to give up on him.

She walked to the door, opened it, glanced over her shoulder and shut it again. She hurried over to the bed, toed off her boots, rolled the stockings up her legs, and fastened them with the garter belt she'd slipped on after. The feel of the soft fabric on her skin made her feel naughty. She slipped her boots back on and hastily made her way to the kitchen before she wussed out and took them back off.

Forty minutes later, Geri nearly had her surprise dinner for Malachi done. She'd finished the hamburgers, the cheese was melting on them, and the buns were toasting. She put several napkins down, dipped the golden, crispy fries from the pan, and scattered them over the surface to let the grease drain off. She'd have to start watching what she ate after the pizza, wine and chocolate the other night, and cheeseburgers and fries tonight, but she had to admit, they smelled and looked mouth watering. She would enjoy the meal, and spending time with Malachi.

She hurried to the dining room and sat two pristine, white plates on the dark, regal cherry table and placed silverware and napkins beside each. She set two wine glasses down, went to the fridge, pulled out the red Ebony had insisted on giving her for tonight, and popped the cork. She had just finished filling the two glasses when Malachi walked in.

She smiled at him. "I hope you are hungry."

He looked at her, at the table, and back. "You cooked for me?"

"Yes. Is that so hard to believe?" She could tell by the bewildered look on his face that it was.

"Actually, yes. No one has ever cooked for me."

She set the bottle of wine on the table and walked slowly to him. She held out her hand, and when he placed his in hers, she tugged him to the table. "Well, that is about to change. Please sit down."

He pulled a chair out from the table and sat. How had no one ever cooked for him? It seemed a simple enough thing, yet he'd been deprived of it.

\* \* \* \*

He'd smelled the food before he had come down to the dining room. His stomach had grumbled the whole way down the stairs, but he'd never imagined to find Geri cooking for him. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had done anything nice for him, although he had only himself and his unfriendly nature toward others to blame for that.

He'd been so distracted by that fact that it had taken him a few moments to see what Geri had on. His heart began a slow, thumping rhythm, a beat that pushed the blood that was now thick with desire through his veins. A good portion of shapely leg was revealed by the high riding, yet modest skirt, and the creamy skin of her shoulder exposed by the emerald fabric made his mouth water more than any food possibly could.

He wanted to touch her, feel her under him, taste her. An inner voice chanted inside his head. *Mine. Take her. Now.* He stamped the urge down with every bit of self control he could muster. She smiled at him, a dazzling smile that lit up the room and his battered soul. She told him she'd be back in a moment, and he focused on her delectable ass that was hugged provocatively by the black fabric of her skirt. Before he had himself fully in check again, she'd come back through the door carrying a heavy tray laden with cheeseburgers and French fries.

"You cooked my favorite meal for me?" He was in awe. It was the first time in his life he truly felt humbled. It would probably seem such a trivial, simple thing to most, but to him? It was monumental.

"If I'm going to cook for you, it might as well be your favorite, right?" She grinned and set the platter down in front of him. "What do you like on them?"

"Ketchup, mayonnaise, and lettuce."

"Got all of that. Be right back." She was back again in an instant. "I wasn't sure, so there is also onion, tomato, and pickle."

He sat staring at the food. "I still can't believe you did this."

"It's not really that big of a deal."

He looked closely at her, and realized she really thought that.

"Eat up." She smiled.

She grabbed a burger and put some mayonnaise and lettuce on it, scooped a small amount of fries onto her plate and squirted some ketchup beside them. He took two burgers, slathered them with his favorite toppings and took a heaping pile of fries. They were the best cheeseburgers he'd ever eaten. By the time they were finished, he'd eaten four and not a fry was left in sight.

She giggled. "I guess I know you enjoyed it anyway. Would you like some more wine?"

He went and got the bottle off the sideboard. "Yes, but I'll pour." He filled his glass and topped hers off as well.

"I don't usually drink much, but tonight is a special occasion." She tipped her glass up and drank deeply. "Mmm. That is very good."

"Yes, it is." He swirled the contents around in his glass before draining it. "Geri?"

"Yes?" She leaned toward him, and her glass tipped over, spilling wine on the table. It ran quickly off the edge and onto her leg. "Oh!"

Malachi was there before any of it dripped onto the floor. He dabbed the liquid from the table, then stroked her leg with a cloth napkin. He groaned, and when she sighed in response, his eyes met hers. He was a lost man, drowning in what he knew he should not have, but was going to have anyway.

He reached up and stroked her cheek. "Geri." Her name tore from his throat in a whisper laced with desperation.

He had to have her. She leaned toward him and brushed his lips with her own. He closed his eyes and willed the sudden urge down to throw her on the table and bury himself in her. He wouldn't take her like that. He'd never known a woman intimately, still had doubts, and feared that he would hurt her. But he could no longer deny the demands of his body, his soul, his heart.

She cupped his face, and he opened his eyes. "Malachi."

"Geri."

"Make love to me. Please." She kissed him once again, fleetingly.

“I don’t think I have the will to resist doing so any longer. But—”

She placed two fingers over his lips. “Shhhh. You will not hurt me. I know this.”

“How can you know for sure? I do not even know.”

“I know in my heart.” She took his hand, placed it on her chest over the steady rhythm beating within. “You will not hurt me.”

“If I did, I would never recover. Do you understand?” The thought of hurting her again was nearly crippling. His chest ached, and each breath became painful.

“Malachi.” She waited until he looked into her eyes. “I trust you. You’ve always stopped before, and earlier you didn’t so much as lay a finger on me. You will not hurt me now. Please. Take me to bed.”

Before allowing good sense to talk him out of what he was about to do, he scooped her up and carried her upstairs to his bedroom.



## Chapter Eighteen

Malachi let Geri slide down his body until her feet touched the ground. He shook from the contact. He wanted her desperately, but need and fear warred. This time, need would win. She stood on tiptoe, placed a kiss on the corner of his mouth, and fire shot straight to his groin. He could no longer deny himself the tempting piece of heaven that stood in front of him.

He tugged her to him, wrapped his arms around her and claimed her mouth. She was sweet and hot and stoked every nerve in him to life. His long battered soul screamed for redemption, the redemption that could only come from her touch. He groaned, deepened the kiss, eagerly pushed her to the bed until she tumbled backwards, and followed her down onto the mattress. It took him a few moments to realize that she was struggling against him.

He released her mouth and leaned up on his elbows. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No. You just weigh a ton." She gasped.

He scrambled to get off her, but she reached for him. "I'm so sorry."

She chuckled. "It's okay, Malachi." She brushed her knuckles down his cheek. "You didn't hurt me. You were just heavy, and I was having trouble breathing."

He sat up on the edge of the bed and propped his elbows on his thighs. "I've never done this before."

She sat up on her knees, massaged his shoulders, and ran her fingers over his back. "I know. That doesn't matter, not to me. It will be marvelous."

He took a deep breath. Her fingers worked magic on him, and his muscles relaxed. "How do you know?"

She put her lips next to his ear. "Because how can it be any other way with you?"

"You make me burn, Geri." He reached back, fisted his fingers in her luxurious hair, and gently pulled her around until she was lying across his lap.

He kissed her gently, softly at first, then deeper. His tongue met hers and lightning shot through him. His cock grew painfully hard, and white-hot need nearly blinded him, robbed him of all his senses, submerged him into an inferno of soul-consuming yearning for what he'd never known.

She moaned into his mouth, and he drank her in as if he was dying of thirst and she was a cool stream. His fist tightened in her tresses, and she reached for his shoulders, careful not to wrap her hands around his neck. She pressed her full breasts against him, and the tightened peaks of her nipples pressed into his chest through the fabric of their shirts. He groaned and cupped one globe in his hand. She was perfection in his big hands. He rubbed his fingers tentatively across the peaks, becoming bolder with the strokes as she pushed against him, silently begging for more.

She trailed her fingers over his chest. The whole time his mouth ravaged hers, taking what he'd been wanting for so long. She gave him everything he demanded and more. Her hand slid between them and cupped his erection. Suddenly, a black cloud of fear engulfed him, and spun him back to the past. He would not let Trinidad ruin this for him, and he fought like he'd never fought before to break free from the sickening fog threatening to turn him into a mindless, violent fool.

\* \* \* \*

Geri's body tingled and tightened. Wetness seeped between her thighs, readying her passage for Malachi's possession. He demanded everything, and she gave him all that she had. His tongue plunged deep into her mouth, and he claimed her as she submitted willingly to him. She'd longed for his touch, and now nothing could make her turn back.

She cupped him in her palm. He was so hard and big. She groaned, imagining what it would be like when he finally buried himself inside her. He would fill her to the point of pain, and she would welcome every inch of him. Suddenly, she was thrown face down on the bed, the air whooshed from her lungs, and Malachi leaned over her, pinning her down by the back of her neck.

"Malachi?" The words were painful to get out through compressed lungs fighting for air.

"Did you think I'd let you do this to me again?" His words were etched with raw menace.

"Malachi? It's me. Geri." He had snapped again, and while the situation was exceptionally intimidating, she held fast to her belief and trust in Malachi that he would not hurt her.

"You will never hurt me again! Do you understand?" His words were now clipped, angry.

"Please, Malachi. It's Geri. Trinidad isn't here. Don't let him hurt you anymore." She wanted to cry out in rage at his pain, at what had been done to him. He was such a good man. He hadn't deserved what had happened. She remained calm, knowing if she fought him, it would make matters worse.

His fingers tightened on her neck. She squeezed her eyes shut and started praying. *Please, God. Don't let him do this. It's not his fault. He won't be able to handle it if he hurts me. Please let me get*

*through to him somehow. Oh, Malachi. If you could only see what a good, decent man you are. It's not your fault. None of this is your fault. Please. If you hurt me, don't feel guilty for it. I forgive you.*

\* \* \* \*

Malachi's anger began draining away. Sweet words that seemed far away drifted through his mind. *Please, Malachi. This is not your fault. I forgive you.*

*Geri?*

*Malachi?*

Suddenly, reality swept back, and he realized what he was doing, but when he saw Geri trapped under him, instead of being disgusted with what he'd done, desire shot through him once again, and his blood pounded. *Take her. She's yours. Take her. Now!*

He softened his hold on her, and she sucked in a gasp of breath. He was too far gone. He had to have her. Need like he'd never known tore through him, ripping, demanding. He shredded her shirt down the middle of her back, exposing her flawless skin. He sucked in a deep breath at the beauty of her.

*I'm so sorry, Geri. I can't stop myself. Not now. It's too late. I have to have you.*

*Then take me, Malachi. However you need to. I'm yours. I willingly give myself to you, my blood too if you so desire.*

He released his hold on her neck, but when she started to move, he lay his palm on her back, fingers splayed wide. "Don't move."

She froze. He trailed a finger down her back and popped the opening on the black bra. He continued on and rolled her skirt up around her waist, exposing her black panties, stockings, and garter belt. His stomach clenched, not in protest, but in sheer excitement over what he'd just exposed.

She was perfection everywhere, and she was going to be his. He tugged at her hips until she rested on her knees, her delectable ass raised perfectly for his viewing pleasure. He pulled the top of her panties from beneath the garter belt and yanked them down her legs. He sucked in a deep breath as her sex was bared. His cock ached, begged to be buried inside her. He couldn't wait, not this time.

He undid his pants and his erection sprang out. The tip glistened with moisture. He ran a finger up the inside of her thigh, through the wetness, to the short curls of her mound, and she quivered, not in fear, though. She was as excited as he was. Her need beat against him. She wanted him as badly as he

wanted her. Her desire moistened his fingers, and he growled. He slipped two fingers inside her, and they slid in easily. She was tight, and she was going to be a very snug fit.

He wrapped his arm around her waist, lifted her, and sat her back down about a foot further up the bed so he had enough room to sit on his knees behind her. He nudged her legs wider to accommodate his size. He gripped his cock and guided it to her entrance where he started to push inside her.

*My God. You are so fucking tight. I don't know if I'm going to make it all the way inside you before I explode.*

*I think you will.* And with that statement, she lifted her hips higher and pushed back against him.

He effortlessly slid in to the hilt, and yelled out a ragged cry that echoed hers. He rested his forehead on her back as he remained perfectly still. "You're so warm, and soft and slick," he groaned.

His body quivered, and his blood boiled. How had he foregone this for all these years? The answer to that was obvious. He hadn't found Geri until now. It would have never felt this good had it not been Geri.

"You feel amazing inside me," she whispered.

When she shifted under him again, he broke, and slammed his hips into her. Over and over and over, until there was no longer any doubt about him exploding. The storm raged, grew inside him until he thought he might shatter with pure elation. She cried out his name and he pounded into her, her muscles strangling every inch of him. She was so tight, and he tried to be gentle with her, but he knew he was being rough.

Geri didn't seem to mind as she met his every thrust. She groaned, and her skin slickened with a fine sheen of sweat. He balled her hair into his fist, and yanked her head to the side, exposing the exquisite curve of her throat. The pressure inside him built until he ached, and with one last slam of his hips, he buried his fangs into her vein, and drank of her essence while his seed emptied into her.

Her screams of pleasure were music to his ears. Her body clenched around him, squeezing every last drop from his cock.

\* \* \* \*

Malachi laid on his side, Geri tucked up against him, her back to his chest. His arm was around her waist, and his lips rested lightly against the top of her head. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

She squeezed his hand. "You didn't hurt me."

"I know I did."

"That was the most amazing lovemaking I've ever experienced in my life. You have nothing to be sorry for. I told you it would be marvelous, and it was." She tipped her head, kissed him on the chin, and snuggled back against him.

"You are too forgiving with me, Geri."

"Why do you say that?"

"I hurt you, and you tell me it is okay. It is not."

She turned so she could face him. "Listen to me, and listen to me good. If you had hurt me on purpose, no, it would not be okay. But you did not hurt me intentionally, and you stopped. I am fine. I only got the wind knocked out of me a little. As for the rest, that is a soreness I will smile about."

He ran his hands over her. "Sore? Where are you sore, and why would you smile over it?"

She laid her hand over his and guided it between her legs. "I'm sore here, and I wouldn't have it any other way. It is a delicious ache that reminds me of how thoroughly you possessed me, and how wonderful it felt."

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "Oh."

She giggled. "And by the way, I can't wait to do it again." She reached down and cupped him, and gasped when she realized he was already hard again.

He smiled. "I don't think you have to wait if you don't want."

She loved him. The fact that he had chosen her to be his lover, his first lover, was bewildering and fantastic. "Then let's not wait."

She covered his mouth with her lips, and he growled. He stroked her tongue, stoking the dying embers of her desire instantly back to life. She pushed at his chest until he rolled to his back and she straddled his hips. She sat up, wrapped her fingers around his erection, and slowly impaled herself on his thickness. Her inner muscles stretched and gripped him, and they both groaned.

She bent and suckled one of his small nipples into her mouth, and smiled against him when a growl rumbled low in his chest. She flexed her hips up until only the tip of him remained inside her, and slid slowly back down. He stretched her deliciously, scraping against every sensitive spot. She laced her fingers with his and brought his hands to her hips.

"This time, let me love you, Malachi." She slid up and down on him.

He pushed his hips up while pulling her down. "You can do anything to me you want, Geri. I'm yours."

His whispered words embedded in her heart where they'd stay forever. She took him up on his offer and did anything and everything until they were both shattered by ecstasy once again.

## Chapter Nineteen

“I want him back! Do you hear me, you incompetent fools?”

Grady stayed kneeling in front of Trinidad and nodded his head. They were all going to end up dead. Trinidad had promised to lead the drifters, teach them how to defeat the hunters, but before they had figured out what Trinidad was really up to, it had been too late to sever their ties with the vampire. They were doomed one way or the other. If they stayed, they would die. If they left, Trinidad would kill them.

The vampire was insane, and even he, someone devoid of joy and happiness, experienced fear like he'd never known before, not as a vampire, not as a drifter. Trinidad was hell bent on slaughtering every hunter in existence, especially the Aleksandrov brothers, and wanted Malachi as a play thing. Trinidad was powerful, an ancient long thought dead, but taking down the hunters would require cunning and power that he didn't think Trinidad had.

There was no stopping Trinidad unless he was dead, and he could not carry out such a thing. He was not powerful enough, nor was any other drifter. The hunters might be. However, if Trinidad was, in fact, the thing he was rumored to be, it would take more than even the mighty hunters to take him down. But they were capable of injuring Trinidad. Possibly long enough for the drifters to escape his clutches. Dare he risk his life approaching one of the hunters?

It didn't matter. If the hunters killed him, it would probably be a more merciful killing than what Trinidad would eventually treat him to. Trinidad was hell bent on revenge. Revenge for what, no one but Trinidad knew.

“Yes, my lord.” At this moment in time, Grady's utmost concentration must be placed on keeping Trinidad happy and surviving long enough to find a hunter.

What was more confusing was why he even cared. He'd only been a drifter for a few years, and had known he'd made a mistake the instant he'd agreed to Satan's bargain. Yes, it was true his heart no longer ached for Katrina, but the hollowed out abyss inside him that now resided where his joy and happiness had once lived was just as troubling. He didn't feel hurt, or love, or elation, but he could still feel that that part of him was missing. The lack of those emotions didn't make anything easier. He felt only half alive, and the taste he had for mayhem seemed a lowly excuse for clawing at something that was just out of reach.

Just like any other living thing, he wanted to continue being. He had no desire for death, no desire to reside in the house of the bastard whom he'd sold his soul to. Did he dare carry out his plan?

The answer was simple, absolute. He had no other choice. It was the only way he saw that held a shred of a chance that he would survive this ordeal. He could tell no one, trust no one.

“Good. This is your last shot, drifter. You fail me this time, and you will die a most painful death. Believe me, I’m good at inflicting pain.”

Trinidad’s voice grated through Grady, shredding his hope to pieces. He’d witnessed just how good Trinidad was at inflicting pain firsthand. “I won’t fail you.”

“Good. Now get twenty of your best trained drifters gathered, and we shall have a meeting in two nights.”

He nodded at Trinidad and left the room. If he was lucky, that meeting was one he’d never attend.

\* \* \* \*

“Hi.” Geri stretched. She was snuggled against Malachi’s hard, warm body. She’d drifted for awhile after they’d made love again, and nearly moaned when she thought of how he’d taken her.

She would have never known he’d never been with a woman if he hadn’t told her. His touches had inflamed her, and his kisses had melted her. How had she ever thought that what she’d felt for Mike had been true love? She’d loved Mike, but now that she’d met Malachi, she knew she’d loved her ex not with a fiery love born of the heart, but with a relaxed, familiar love similar to what she’d feel for a good friend.

She’d never quivered at Mike’s touch, never ached for him to possess her the way she had, the way she still did, with Malachi.

“Hi.” His eyes sparkled as they watched her every move.

“Did I sleep long?” She snuggled back against him, and his arms came around her, hugging her firmly to him.

“About an hour.” He kissed the top of her head.

“Did you sleep?” She yawned.

“I don’t sleep much.”

“Sorry, I forgot. It must be nice to not have to sleep. Do you get tired?”



"On occasion, but I don't require much down time." He nuzzled her hair and took a deep breath.

She leaned back and touched his cheek. "Don't you get bored being up all the time?"

He shrugged. "It's like anything else. You get used to it. Besides, you miss a lot of things when you sleep."

She raised a brow, and propped herself up on one elbow. "Really? Like what?"

"For instance, had I been sleeping, I would have missed your cute little snores."

She tossed a pillow at him. "I do not snore."

He chuckled. "Yes. You do, and I think it's adorable."

She yawned again, and made a point of ignoring him. "What time is it?"

"About three. You should try to get some more sleep."

"Mmm. I am pretty tired. Must have been something I did that wore me out."

She squeaked when she was tossed to her back, and Malachi stretched out over her. Their bodies pressed tightly together. She gazed up into his face, and his eyes turned dark. He wanted her again, which was all right with her.

"Maybe it was something I did that wore you out." He pushed her hair back from her face, and tucked it behind her ear.

"Maybe," she whispered. "And just maybe if you did it again, I might be able to get back to sleep for awhile."

"I think I can oblige."

He took her mouth in a gentle kiss. Their tongues tangled lazily, and he ran his hand down her side, over her ribs, and back up to cup her breast. He rolled the tightened peak of her nipple between his fingers, and she arched into him. He kissed a line along her jaw, down her throat, licked the pulse beating there, and he quivered. She ran her fingers through his hair, and tugged at it.

She knew he wanted to take her blood again. "You can if you want, Malachi."

He shook his head and took a slow breath in. "No, I can't. We need to talk about that later."

She started to argue with him, but he picked that moment to suck one nipple into his mouth where he rolled his tongue around it teasingly, giving a mere taste of the pleasure to come. She forgot everything in a moment except for the feel of him lavng her.

He continued down, kissing her stomach, her navel, and finally rested on her clit. She cried out when he circled the tiny bundle of nerves. For a man who had never known a woman intimately, he sure

knew what he was doing. In retrospect, he had been around awhile, and there were several ways to learn all nature of things without actually doing them.

He slid his tongue over her with expert ease, and sighed. "Had I known it would be like this, I would have conquered my fears long ago."

His hot breath on her mound excited her as much as his words. "I don't think it would have been like this with anyone else, at least not for me."

He suckled her gently, and licked a path along her slick folds. She tried to push into him, but he held her firmly by the hips. He gave her one last lick and covered her with his large frame. He nestled between her thighs, and his hardness nudged at the passage that was weeping for him.

He cupped her face between his hands. "That's what I meant. I wasn't speculating that it would have been this way with any other woman. I was speaking solely of you."

He kissed her. Her musky scent mixed with his spicy male scent was like an aphrodisiac. No. He was an aphrodisiac on two legs. Her fingers dove into his thick hair, holding him to her. He reached down to cup one cheek of her butt and tipped her hips up so he could slide into her. They both moaned. She doubted anything else she experienced in life would ever feel this good. He took her slower this time, and she thought she might scream from the overload of passion building inside her. Her skin grew hot, and felt as if something was tickling her from the inside. She knew it was every nerve, every cell in her body writhing in the complete joy and pleasure Malachi was bringing her.

How sad it would have been had she gone her whole life without ever experiencing this. His thrusts grew faster and deeper, and she knew he was nearing the edge that she was already teetering on. He never stopped kissing her, and when she finally fell, he drank every cry of her orgasm from her mouth, his black eyes staring into hers as she fell. With one last roll of his hips, he threw his head back and yelled out his own release. She kissed his chest and held him as he quivered against her.

"God, Geri. You're going to be the death of me."

She giggled. "I think it would take much more than one woman to kill you."

He sat up on his elbows and stared down at her. His eyes were silver again, the darkness of his desire barely staining the outer ring of his irises as it receded. "No. It wouldn't. In fact, I would go so far as to say that you are probably the only living thing that I know of that I think could kill me with great ease."

"Malachi, I—"

"Shhh. It was a compliment." He rolled to his side and tucked her up against him. "I will stay with you while you sleep."

"Thank you." Did she mean something to him? Could he possibly ever love her?

The thought that this man who'd been so badly used as a boy and had suffered a hundred lifetimes since could love her? It was humbling. *Geri, you're getting way far ahead of yourself.*

*Stop talking to yourself and go to sleep.*

*Malachi?*

*Yes. Don't act so surprised. We've talked this way before. You've just never noticed.*

She was quiet for several moments.

*Oh my God! We have. How did I not notice that?*

*Because it is natural.*

*Maybe for you, but not for me.*

*Go to sleep. We will talk about all of this soon.*

It did seem natural in an odd sort of way. She felt herself drift to sleep. A small smile played at the corner of her mouth as she snuggled deeper against Malachi's warm body, and she dozed off.

## Chapter Twenty

Malachi wondered how he was going to tell Geri that they were fated to be together. How would she react when she found out that he wanted to turn her into what he was? He landed a solid blow on the punching bag and it shook on its chains with a force that threatened to rip it from the ceiling. He was glad that the Aleksandrovs had a training room. He had so many emotions twirling in him he felt like a chick at the moment and needed to beat the shit out of something—that always made him feel better.

He wanted to make Geri his in every way, but he still feared hurting her. There had only been the one setback during their lovemaking, but the ‘what ifs’ plagued him, and filled him with doubt. Another question tugged at him incessantly. Did he love her? He’d never loved anyone or anything. He didn’t even know what love felt like, but he cared about her at the very least.

He kicked the bag. It swung back hard at him, and he spun and gave it a roundhouse.

“Impressive. You wanna go a few rounds in the ring?”

Malachi had been so lost in thought he hadn’t heard Aldin’s approach. Aldin was the next to oldest Aleksandrov brother, and was built more like he was. Aldin was the biggest brother, not that Ashe or Aiston were slouches. They both had leaner builds where Aldin was heavily muscled. He also had more of the same type personality as Malachi, quiet, intense, never said more than needed to be said. Ashe was a man of words, and Aiston was a prankster. Aldin was all about the action.

“Sure.” Malachi followed Aldin to the boxing ring. They both climbed in. “Bare knuckles?”

Aldin nodded. “Kind of stupid any other way. It isn’t like we are going scar up our pretty faces.

Malachi snorted. “Unless I rip your head off.”

Aldin snorted back. “As if you fucking could.”

Aldin didn’t mean anything personal any more than Malachi did with the idle threats. It was merely ruffling each other’s fur, so to speak.

“Ding, ding.” Aldin said in a flat voice and began circling Malachi.

Malachi smirked. He hadn’t participated in hand-to-hand training with another hunter for years. He was going to enjoy this. He ducked and rolled from under the first punch Aldin threw, came smoothly

to his feet, and kicked behind him, catching Aldin squarely in the chest. The hunter flew back, but did a back flip, landed in a crouch, and did a sweep kick that caught Malachi in the calf.

Malachi hit the mat, but not before he clamped onto Aldin's forearm and flipped him neatly on his back beside him. "Good one."

"What are you, a woman? Stop with the pansy compliments." Aldin flipped to his feet.

Malachi gained his footing as well and crouched. He waited for Aldin to come at him, spun away, and caught him with an elbow in the throat. Aldin grunted and gasped.

"What the hell are you doing?" Malachi turned to the door where Geri was standing, her face pale.

She obviously thought the fight was real. He started to tell her everything was okay when a fucking freight train named Aldin hit him, and took him down. His arms were wrenched behind him and a knee planted in the middle of his back.

"That was just fucking dirty," Malachi sneered.

"Since when do we fight clean? I don't remember being concerned about fighting clean when we are taking out drifters." Aldin chuckled.

"Get off him!" Geri ran to them and pushed at Aldin.

"Hey! Back off bi—"

Before the word was out of Aldin's mouth, Malachi rolled from his hold and had Aldin's neck squeezed between his thighs. "Don't you dare call her what I think you were going to." Malachi's blood boiled. He wanted to kill the hunter.

Aldin chuckled again. "Wasn't nothing personal, bro."

"It was to me," Malachi snarled.

Geri laid a hand on Malachi's shoulder. "Let him go."

"We were only practicing, by the way, except I don't think he's practicing now," Aldin gasped. His face was turning red.

"Malachi, let him go. Please."

After a few moments, he released his hold on the hunter and let him up. Aldin staggered for a moment before righting himself. "Sorry, Geri. I didn't mean anything by it."

"It's okay."

Aldin climbed from the ring and left the room.

"I thought you two were going to kill each other."

Malachi stared at Geri. "It was pretty harmless." He shrugged. "At least until he almost called you a bitch."

She smiled. "I'm flattered that you were protecting me, but I really don't think he meant anything personal."

"Maybe not, but I still didn't like it."

She hugged him, and he wrapped his arms around her, hugging her back. "I missed you when I woke up."

"Sorry. I got a little restless." Malachi smoothed her hair back from her face.

Damn, she looked good. She was dressed in black jeans, the kind that hugged her curves to perfection, and a burgundy-colored top that outlined the globes of her breasts. His mouth watered.

"So I see." She eyed him from head to toe and back.

All he had on was black sweatpants and a layer of sweat. "Sorry." He grabbed a white towel from the corner and wiped his face, arms and chest.

She held out her hand. "Give me the towel." He handed it to her. "Turn around."

He turned around and she rubbed his back down. Even with the towel between them, her touch was magical. She was always careful to respect his wishes about touching his neck. The fact that she remembered made his chest ache in a peculiar way. He faced her once again when she was finished and took the towel from her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry I interrupted. I was looking for you, and I guess I was just surprised when I saw you and Aldin fighting. I should have known that you were just training, but it caught me off guard."

He grinned. "Don't worry about it. Everything is good." He bent and kissed her on the lips. He'd been dying to do so since she'd walked into the room. She kissed him back and his cock instantly hardened. He groaned after a few moments and reluctantly broke the kiss.

"I have meetings with the hunters for the next several nights." He didn't want to tell her what they had planned. She wouldn't like it, and he didn't want to worry her.

By this time next week, he could possibly be dead. He, of course, didn't plan on it ending that way, but he was a realist. The chance of him dying was just as likely as their plan actually working out to their advantage.

"Oh. Okay." She bit at her bottom lip. "Will I see you then?"

"Probably not much, but I don't think I can stay completely away." He put his forehead against hers.

"Good. I don't think I'd like that." She smiled.

\* \* \* \*

He was holding something back from her. She could feel it. "What's going on, Malachi?"

"What do you mean?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I just get the feeling that you aren't telling me something."

"Don't worry about anything."

She backed away from him. "Okay. That proves that you aren't telling me something."

"What? Because I tell you not to worry?" He frowned.

"Yes. When a man tells you not to worry about anything, it usually means he's going to do something very dangerous . . . or stupid. You and the others have something planned, don't you? That's why you are meeting every night."

He reached out to her, encircled her wrist with his fingers, tugged her to him, and hugged her. She felt good, and her sweet scent tickled his nose. "It's nothing that you need concern yourself with."

She pulled out of his arms. "Will you be in danger? Does it have something to do with these drifters and Trinidad?"

He sighed. "Yes. But it will be okay."

"You *are* going to do something stupid, aren't you?" She had a pretty good idea what that stupid something was, too. "Please don't tell me that you are going after Trinidad."

He nodded, but remained silent. The muscle in his jaw ticked.

"No!"

He curled his hands around her shoulders. "I have to do this. I told you before that I was going to kill that bastard, and I haven't changed my mind."

A tear ran down her cheek. "I know, and I do understand. I just don't want anything to happen to you. I'm worried." The bewildered look on his face made her sad. Was it still so hard for him to

believe that she cared about him, especially after the intimacy they'd shared? "Malachi? You know I care about you, right?" She more than cared about him, but she wasn't sure he was ready to hear it yet.

"Thank you, but this is something I have to do."

"When is this going to take place?" she whispered.

"Saturday."

"That's only five days from now."

He nodded. "Yes."

"There's nothing I can say to talk you out of this is there?"

"I'm sorry. No."

"Promise me one thing then?" She gave him her best smile under the circumstances. She didn't want anything to happen to him, but nothing would deter him from going after Trinidad. She should thank her lucky stars that he'd have backup, and that he wasn't going after him alone.

"What's that?" One dark brow rose.

"Swear to me that you will be careful, that you will do everything in your power to stay safe and to come back to me." She laid her hand against his chest.

He covered her hand with his own. "I swear."

"Thank you," she whispered, and wrapped her arms around him. They stood and held each other for a long time.

She knew she'd have to tell him she loved him soon. She didn't deny it to herself, but she was worried how he'd take it. He'd had so much to deal with lately, and now with God-knew-what he had in mind for Trinidad, she was scared of distracting him. She wanted his thoughts completely focused on whatever he was planning. If she caused him to get hurt, she'd never forgive herself. Yet, if something did happen to him, could she live with knowing she'd never told him?



## Chapter Twenty-One

Geri sat at the table with Ebony, Avril and Marcus. McKayla was happily humming as she cleaned up the after dinner mess. Ebony had insisted on not only the Aleksandrov traditional breakfast, but also dinner, as well, for the week. Geri knew it had to do with whatever was going down tomorrow night. How had it gotten to be Friday night already? She'd barely seen Malachi since that day in the gym.

All of the men had left for their *meeting* a few moments earlier, and the mood had been somewhat somber all around at the table during dinner. Geri didn't talk to Ebony and Avril about what was going on, as she got the distinct feeling they were as on edge as she was. Ashe and Aiston were going to be in danger right along with Malachi. Although, she still had a sinking feeling that Malachi was going to be on the front burner. If anyone got hurt, it was likely going to be him. She was sure of that.

"I don't mean to bring this up, but as I'm sure it's on all of our minds, do either of you know exactly what the guys are going to be doing tomorrow night?" Geri looked at Ebony, then Avril.

"Well, as you are very aware, our men are overly protective. They don't give us many details about anything. Which, by the way, burns my ass," Avril huffed.

"Avril. Watch the language around Marcus." Ebony sighed. "He's already picking up words from his father and uncles. It's going to be impossible to keep him from having a potty mouth."

Avril covered her mouth. "Sorry. I keep forgetting, but you know it's true."

"Yes, but I also know it's never going to change." Ebony took Marcus from his highchair and sat him on her knee. She bounced him gently and he giggled.

"I'm worried about Malachi. I have this feeling that he's going to be in more danger than anyone else." Geri glanced at the door, wanting to go find him. She wanted to hold him and never let him go.

"I know it's easier to say than to believe, but Malachi can take care of himself. In fact, I shouldn't have said that at all. I'm a complete hypocrite, because Ashe can take care of himself as well, and I worry about him every time he goes out on a hunt for drifters." Ebony kissed Marcus on the top of the head.

"Hey! Quit hogging the baby." Avril reached for Marcus, and Ebony laughed as she handed him to her. "I worry about Aiston, too, but they will be okay." Avril took over bouncing Marcus on her knee.

"Did they tell you about Trinidad?" Geri asked.

"Very little. They don't know anything about him other than he's a very old vampire." Ebony sipped her coffee.

"Maybe they should try to find more out about him before they go all gung ho after him." Geri sipped at her own cup as well.

"Thank you! That's what I tell Aiston all the time. Does he listen? No." Avril cringed when Marcus grabbed a handful of her dark hair and tugged.

"You're beating a dead horse, hun. Look at it this way. They are warriors. They will never back down from a fight. They are lethal, and they are careful. They will not intentionally run into a situation with blinders on. Especially when so many lives are at stake, and right now those stakes are high. If the drifters gain power, humans everywhere will be in danger." Ebony sat back in her chair.

"I'm just so worried." Geri sniffled.

"Have you told him?" Ebony asked.

"Of course I've told him I'm worried about him," Geri replied.

"No. Not that." Ebony shook her head.

Geri chewed her bottom lip for a moment, trying to figure out what Ebony meant. "Then what?"

"Have you told Malachi that you love him?" Ebony raised a brow as if she were waiting for Geri to deny it.

"No." It was no use in lying to Ebony. Probably the only one who didn't know was Malachi.

"Maybe now is the time. If something did happen, which I'm not saying it will, wouldn't you want him to know?" Ebony smiled.

"I've thought about it. I'm worried about how he will react. I don't want anything to distract him. Malachi is not good with emotions. He's just learning to deal with certain ones." Geri crossed her legs.

"I understand your logic perfectly. When Ashe and I first met, our relationship had a tumultuous start. He got hurt because I was a distraction. I felt horrible, but you have to understand that things like this happen. It's life, and you cannot control the outcome of everything by deciding which actions to take or not take at any given time. I would never do anything that I knew would put Ashe in danger, but I cannot and will not hide things from him." Ebony leaned in and patted Geri's hand. "Well, it's your call, but did you ever think that maybe telling him how you feel might have a positive effect on him? Maybe it wouldn't be a distraction. Maybe it would make him even stronger."

"Tell him," Avril instructed through giving Marcus raspberries on his cheeks.

"Maybe I should." Geri stood.

"Oh! I almost forgot." Ebony got up and walked over to the fridge. She reached up, plucked a thick envelope off the top, and handed it to Geri. "This came for you this morning. I'm sorry I didn't give it to you earlier, but with everything going on, it just slipped my mind."

Geri looked at the address. Mike. It must be a copy of the divorce papers. Finally. "No problem. Thanks. If you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to go up to my room for awhile."

"Sure. Have a good night." Avril waved.

"Night," Ebony called as she left.

\* \* \* \*

Geri glanced at the clock, three in the morning. She'd been sitting in the family room for the last three hours because she hadn't been able to sleep. She'd dozed for awhile in bed, but had tossed and turned thinking about Malachi, finally giving up on sleep altogether. She flipped through the channels on the big television, and stopped on a cooking show. Emeril was whipping up some kind of Cajun shrimp recipe.

She pulled the throw off the back of the sofa, curled her legs under her and snuggled under the warm fabric.

"Geri."

She jumped at Malachi's low voice. "You have to stop sneaking up on me like that."

He frowned. "Sorry."

She smiled, and patted the cushion next to her. "Come. Sit." She loved the way he moved. Dominant male, predator . . . lover. "Are you done for the night?"

"Yes." He sat next to her. Only an inch separated them.

She could feel the heat of his thigh soaking into her skin and scooted against him. "You are so warm."

His brows drew down. "Are you cold?"

"A little." She smiled as he wrapped his arms around her, and she snuggled against his chest. "Mmm. Much better."

"Yes. It is." He nuzzled the top of her head and breathed in deeply.

She smiled up at him, and sighed when he caught her lips in a brief kiss. Suddenly, the decision she'd been warring with all week was made. "Malachi."

"Yeah?" His low voice warmed her.

"I have to tell you something." She put her finger over his lips. "No. Let me get this out." She took a deep breath. "I love you."

His back stiffened. "What?"

"You heard me. I said I love you." When he stared at her, speechless, she hurried on. "Look. I don't expect anything in return. I know you've had a lot to deal with this week, lots of new emotions. I just wanted you to know. I needed you to know before tomorrow night. I couldn't stand it if something happened to you, and I hadn't told you."

"Nothing is going to happen to me. But I have to be honest with you. I've never loved anyone, Geri. I know I care about you, but I just don't know. I don't want to say something that I'm not sure of." His words sounded strained. "You deserve more than empty words. I just—I just honestly don't know how I feel."

Her chest tightened and her heart ached. She hadn't expected him to say it back, but she'd wished for it. "It's okay. I simply wanted you to know." She trailed her fingers down his cheek. "I love you for you. I wouldn't change one thing about you."

"I'm overwhelmed. No one has ever told me that. I don't know what to say. Damn it, Geri. You're ripping my heart out here." He took her hand in his and kissed it.

"Just feel happy, okay? I don't want to upset you. It's a wonderful, good thing." She pulled his hand to her face and rubbed her cheek against the back of it.

\* \* \* \*

How could anyone love him? He looked into her eyes and saw the truth. She'd meant what she said. She did love him. He wanted to say it back, but he never wanted to lie to her. It was true when he said he wasn't for sure what he felt for her. He did care about her, but was it love? He didn't know for sure. How could he ever be sure? His heart ached. He wanted to give her so much more.

He'd hurt her again. She tried to shrug it off when he hadn't said he loved her back, but he hadn't missed the quick flicker of pain in her eyes. He wanted to give her those words, but he refused to lie to her. For all he knew, he might love her, but he'd never felt that way about anyone except his mother. Yet, love for a mother, he was sure, was not the same as love for a life mate, and it had been so

long ago, he wasn't sure he remembered how it had felt. He still missed his mother at times, but a thousand years had a way of dulling memories and even the fondest of emotions.

He did have one thing he could give her wholeheartedly. One thing he was absolutely sure of. Himself. She was the only person in the world he trusted wholeheartedly with his mind, his body, his heart, and his soul. His life was literally in her hands. He'd never betray her, he'd never lie to her, and he would never disrespect her. He would protect her with his life. Wasn't that love? His inner turmoil fought with his instincts. He refused to say the words to her until not a shred of doubt remained in his mind.

"I'm sorry I can't give you what you want, Geri." He kissed her on the lips when she began to protest. "Shh. I know you say it's okay, but it's not. I want to give you those words, but I won't say them until I'm sure. I cannot have that type of lie or doubt between us. You are too important. Now, for the time being, will you let me make love to you?"

"Please do." Geri's eyes were bright, shining with the love she had for him.

He scooped her up and carried her up the stairs and to his room. She was kissing him before her feet ever hit the ground. He pulled her shirt over her head, and drew a sharp breath when he realized she had no bra on.

He circled her nipple with his finger. "You are so damn beautiful."

He didn't deserve her. She'd given him everything. She'd bared her heart to him, and what had he done? Disappointed her. He vowed to make it up to her no matter how long it took. He'd spend the rest of his days making sure she had everything she wanted, making sure she was happy.

She unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. "You aren't so bad yourself."

He smiled and took her mouth again with his. Their tongues tangled together in a rhythmic dance. He held her close, her breasts pressed against his chest, her softness enticing him, exciting him. His cock hardened, and he groaned. She pulled back slightly and unsnapped his leather pants. He pushed her hands away, knelt in front of her, and tugged her leggings down until she stepped out of them.

He groaned. "No panties either. You're going to kill me, woman."

He ran his hands along her sides, down her hips, thighs, calves, and up again. On the second pass, he trailed his fingers up her legs to the tight curls covering her sex. She cried out when he circled her clit. He stared up at her. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, and she was his. He cupped the back of one knee and lifted it, draping it over his shoulder. He spread her labia with his fingers and tongued the moist, pink folds he'd exposed. Her body quivered, and he drove his tongue deep, retreated and licked her center while she moaned low in her throat. The sound made him feel similar to when a good shot of Tequila slid down his throat, a refreshing drink, rich and flaming his insides every where it touched.

Each time her body tightened, shivered, he knew she was near orgasm, and he'd pull back just enough to keep her from falling over into pure euphoric oblivion. He wanted to prolong her pleasure as long as possible. Her dainty fingers tangled in his hair, tugging as he suckled her, nipped, licked and kissed. She tasted of the sweetest nectar he'd ever had, and he would be happy to spend eternity on his knees in front of her.

He cupped the smooth, firm, rounded cheeks of her ass in his hands that fit in his palms as if custom made just for him. He squeezed, imprisoning her securely against his mouth.

She tugged harder on his hair. "Malachi, please."

Her voice was laced with passion that matched his own. He gave her one last slow lick and stood. He guided her to the bed and sat down, where he pulled her gently across his lap and nibbled her shoulder. She reached to circle his neck, and stopped an instant before, letting her hands rest on his shoulders.

He pressed his face into that delicate hollow between her neck and shoulder and shuddered. "Geri, do it."

Her body tensed for a moment. "Are you sure? I don't want to do anything that might cause you any discomfort, be it mental or physical."

He pressed closer to her. "Please. I need you to do it."

"Okay."

He could tell by her whispered words that she was worried, but he had to know for sure that he wouldn't hurt her. If he could endure this, he'd never harm her again. Something deep inside him told him it would be okay, but another part feared he'd snap. Maybe he shouldn't let her do it.

He encircled each of her wrists before she did what he'd asked. "Maybe it isn't a good idea."

She cupped his face. "Look at me." His eyes met hers. "You will not hurt me, Malachi. I know it here." She took his hand and placed it over her heart.

"I can't risk it." He kissed her cheek.

"Do you trust me?" she whispered.

"Of course I do." He did. She was the only person he trusted completely.

She reached for him, and he stopped her once again. "What's wrong?"

"Wait." He leaned over to the nightstand, picked up one of his daggers, and wrapped her fingers around the hilt. He then brought the tip of it to his chest, resting it just over his heart.

"What are you doing?" Geri gasped and tried pull away, but he held her hand around the dagger effortlessly.

"I will only do this if you promise to bury this in my heart if I try to hurt you."

She shook her head from side to side in a clipped motion. "No! You cannot ask that of me." Tears pooled in her green eyes.

"It's the only way I will agree to it."

"Then I will never touch your neck," Geri insisted.

"Geri." Her name tore from his throat in a plea. "I have to know. If I can endure this, I will finally know that you are safe with me. Please. Do this for me."

She stared at him for several minutes, her emotions playing over her beautiful face. Finally, she nodded. "I'll hold the dagger."

He let go, and she kept her word. She held the point of the dagger where he'd placed it against his chest.

He sighed. "Swear to me that you will use it if you have to. I know you will never lie to me, Geri."

She nodded.

"Say it out loud. Tell me that you swear to use it on me if you have to. Say the words," he pleaded through clenched teeth.

"Okay. I swear I will use it if I have to, Malachi, but I won't have to. Now stop worrying." She stroked his cheek and smiled.

She placed the hand not holding the dagger on his shoulder and stroked it before gliding her fingers up the side of his neck. He tensed, waiting for the familiar, sickening feeling to invade him . . . but it didn't. All he felt was Geri's gentle touch. She continued to his jaw line and up through his hair. Her fingernails lightly dragged along his scalp. He closed his eyes, enjoying her caresses, and by the time she had made it down to the back of his neck, he was in such a state of bliss that he didn't notice at first.

Suddenly, his eyes snapped open, and Geri's smiling face was beaming up at him. One tear spilled from the corner of her eye. She stroked his nape lightly, barely putting any pressure on his skin, a butterfly's touch.

"See. I told you it would be okay." She tossed the dagger to the floor as if it were poison and stroked his neck again.

A feeling of peace washed through him. He felt free. A weight had been taken off him, and it was all because of Geri. He leaned forward and captured her lips with his own. He devoured her, and

when she wrapped her arms around his neck, he reveled in the joy of her touch. He pushed her back on the bed and shimmied his pants off his hips and down his legs before nudging her legs wide.

He cupped her breasts and kneaded them before sucking one nipple into his mouth. He tongued it and nibbled at it until she writhed under him. He rocked back on his knees, held a thigh in each of his hands, spread her wide and tilted his hips until the tip of his cock rested inside her. He pushed into her one torturous inch at a time until he was buried deep. Heaven and home. That's what she felt like.

Her wetness eased the passage of his journey, and her muscles gripped him, tightening each time he withdrew as if trying to pull him back in. She tossed her head back and forth on the pillow, her hair tangled around her face, her fingers gripping his hands holding her thighs. He slammed home time after time until his breaths came hard and they were both covered in a fine sheen of sweat. She arched her hips up and cried out. Her orgasm quivered through him, wave after wave until it triggered his own release. He threw his head back and growled out her name as he came inside her.

He kissed her, a slow, lingering mating of mouths, savoring her taste. "You are so wonderful."

"So are you."

She snuggled against him. "I would have never used that dagger on you."

He smiled. "Yes, you would have, because you promised me."

He watched her, stroking her hair gently until she fell asleep, and grinned when she started snoring softly. It was time he had the life mate talk with her. He wanted to claim her, spend eternity with her. Would she say yes? If she didn't, he'd respect her decision even if it killed him, but he prayed for mercy. Fear clawed at him. What would he become if she said no? The answer to that was one, he didn't like.

He'd never let Trinidad control him again, mentally or physically, but if Geri denied him? He'd sink into a black hole of despair that not even all the years of psychological suffering he'd endured from his past abuse could rival. He'd become something worse than the drifters.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

“You have to be the dumbest fucking drifter I’ve ever come across.” Malachi stood in the dark alleyway staring at the drifter that looked like an ordinary, average human, which was surprising since most of the time drifters looked like death warmed over.

He estimated it to be about seven or eight inches shorter than he was with spiky blonde hair and a nose ring. It was dressed all in black, and showed no sign of aggression. He’d heard the drifter following him for the past several blocks. When he’d left Geri earlier, he’d needed to clear his head and had decided to take a stroll. Even though he and the other hunters had agreed to stick in pairs for the time being, he’d needed the time alone. He’d yearned to tell Geri she was his life mate, but doubts about how she would react to the news plagued him. Besides, what woman would want to spend forever with him if he couldn’t even say I love you?

She was the first person he’d trusted enough to tell his deepest, darkest secrets to, and if he asked her to be his forever and she turned him down, he didn’t know what he’d do. That one tiny woman had helped his soul begin to mend when a thousand years hadn’t touched the pain. He didn’t want to be without her. Just the mere thought of her lying curled up in his bed back at the Aleksandrov mansion made his heart jump hard in his chest. And that’s all it took for him to finally realize he did love her.

He needed Geri, and the thought of something happening to her terrified him. He had a burning desire to make her happy, to see her eyes light up at the sight of him, to hold her against him for hours as she slept and let her delicate scent soothe him. He wanted to protect her, and provide for her. If that wasn’t love, he didn’t know what was.

Malachi swung and stalked toward the drifter after he pulled a dagger from his left boot. The drifter backed away slowly, hands raised, still showing no aggression.

“I didn’t come to fight, hunter.” The drifter’s voice was quiet, but steady.

“No. You came to die.” Malachi continued toward the drifter until it’s back came up against the cement wall of the building, and Malachi stood a scant few inches from the thing.

“I didn’t come to die, although I am no fool, and know that dying was a possible, if not probable, outcome. I needed to talk to a hunter.” The drifter stayed perfectly still.

“Tell me why I should talk to you? You’re a piece of shit, and I’m going to send you to Hell where you belong.” Malachi had never seen a drifter act this way. It was almost as if it had given up and wanted to die, because it had to know he would kill it.

“My name is Grady. I’ve come for help, an alliance, if you must.”

“What the fuck kind of alliance would I or any other hunter want with you?” Malachi kept his dagger raised and ready to take the drifter out if it so much as sneezed.

“Because I know where Trinidad is.”

Rage boiled through Malachi, and he grabbed the drifter by the throat. “Tell me,” he said through clenched teeth.

Grady gasped. “Not unless you promise not to kill me.”

“Why would I make a promise like that?” Malachi barely kept his rage leashed.

“If you don’t, it may take you months to find him, if ever. I have a feeling you want him just as badly as he wants you, Malachi. Albeit for very different reasons, I’m sure.” Grady gasped again through lips that were turning blue.

Malachi loosened his hold on Grady’s neck a bit, and his lips went back to pink. “This is a trick. Why would you want to let a hunter know where your leader is?”

“He tricked us. He promised he would help us become stronger, show us how to defeat you and the other hunters so we could live without fear of being executed. He lied. He uses us to do his bidding, and kills any of us at will who displease him. I didn’t have anything to lose by coming to you. It was only a matter of time before Trinidad killed me. I had to take my chances on striking up an alliance, and possibly saving my life, and maybe some of the other drifters’ lives as well. He’s a monster, and while he won’t tell us exactly what his plans are, it’s something big, and it involves making sure there are no hunters left breathing. I figured if I came to one of you, told you where Trinidad was, you could kill him.

Could Grady be telling the truth? Malachi was beginning to think so. He could feel the genuine fear coming off him, and knew Trinidad was capable of everything he’d said. “If he promised to wipe the hunters out, why would you risk fucking that up?”

“I told you. He’s going to kill me because I’m going to fail the mission he sent me on. He told me he would if I messed up again, and he doesn’t lie about things like that. What does it matter if all the hunters are gone if Trinidad still lives? We’d still not be free.”

“What mission did he send you on?” Malachi itched to kill the drifter, but his instincts were telling him Grady was telling the truth.

“He wants you back, and I’m not stupid enough to think I can take you.” Grady’s black eyes stared into Malachi’s unflinchingly.

“You were right about that. Do you know what kind of drug and spell he used on me?”

“No. He doesn’t tell us anything. He only barks orders, threatens us and worse.”

“Tell me where he is. I want to go kill him now.” The thought of finally killing that bastard was nearly too much.

Grady shook his head. “You can’t kill him on your own. You don’t understand how powerful he is.”

Malachi’s hand tightened around Grady’s throat again. “Tell me.”

“You can’t kill him. He’s an ancient, a true blood,” Grady choked.

Malachi released the drifter and he sagged against the wall. “No true bloods exist. Even Ragnor, the king of vampires, is a myth. No one has ever seen him.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think. I’m telling you the truth, and you cannot kill him on your own. He’s more powerful than you know.” Grady’s whispers grew stronger as his windpipe rapidly healed from Malachi’s abuse.

Malachi slipped the dagger back in his boot and clenched his fists. He wanted Trinidad bad. It didn’t matter what the bastard was. He would kill him. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

“You’re going to tell your story to the other hunters.” Malachi watched Grady stand straight.

“Huh-uh. They’ll kill me.”

“Maybe. But if you don’t come, I’ll kill you. So what’s it going to be? Die now or possibly later?” Malachi shrugged.

Grady let out a long, slow breath and pursed his lips into a thin line. “Fine.”

Malachi turned and waited until he heard Grady’s hesitant footsteps behind him before he started back to the Aleksandrov mansion.

\* \* \* \*

“What the fuck did you bring that thing to my house for? You’ve put my family in danger. I should kill you for that.” Ashe paced the room, shooting Malachi dirty looks while Grady cowered in the corner of the den.

“You could try, but I don’t think it would go down well for you, and I don’t think Ebony would appreciate me killing her husband.” Malachi leaned against the chair that sat in front of Ashe’s desk.

He understood why Ashe was so upset. He’d have the same reaction if he were in Ashe’s shoes, but Malachi would never bring anything to Ashe’s house that he thought was a true threat. He respected the man, and respected his love for his family. He’d never intentionally place any of them in danger.

Ashe glared at him and raked his fingers through his dark hair. He took a deep breath, and sat in the big chair behind his desk. “Okay. Before this gets out of hand, and we start chopping each other into pieces, explain to me why that”—Ashe jerked his head toward Grady—“is under the same roof as my family.”

“He’s no threat to you or your family, Ashe. Do you really believe I would bring a threat to your doorstep?” Malachi was getting a bit perturbed. By now, Ashe had time to cool off, and Malachi had just about had enough of the accusations.

Ashe closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, some of the turmoil that had been swirling in them moments before had disappeared. “No. I don’t believe you would put my family or me in harm’s way. Now, please, explain to me why you brought that thing here.”

“His name is Grady, and he says he’s willing to tell us where Trinidad is in exchange for our promise not to hunt him. He also says Trinidad is a true blood, an ancient.”

One of Ashe’s brows rose. “Excuse me? The only true blood thought to still exist is Ragnar, and in my opinion, he’s most likely only a non-existent legend.”

“Those were pretty much my same sentiments, but Grady here thinks differently.” Malachi and Ashe both stared at the drifter.

“It’s the truth! I swear it! I just want to live. I can’t go back to the compound. By now, Trinidad will know I’ve double-crossed him. If he ever gets his hands on me again, he’ll kill me, probably slowly and very painfully.” Grady looked from Ashe to Malachi.

“Why do you think he’s a true blood?” Ashe asked.

“That’s the only bit of personal information he’s given us. I’m sure it was to keep us adequately petrified and in line. It worked. He also told us that if we breathed a word of it to anyone, he’d make us wish we were never born.” Grady nodded toward Malachi. “He wants him bad. That was my mission. To get Malachi back for him.”

Grady stepped toward Ashe’s desk, and Malachi and Ashe stood tense, ready for a fight. Grady stopped, then continued more slowly. He reached in his pocket, and pulled out a syringe and dart. “This

is the drug he had us use on Malachi the other night. I don't know what it is. He only gave it to me to take Malachi down again. As I've said, he doesn't explain anything. Just gives us orders, and we are not allowed to question him."

Ashe reached for the syringe Grady laid on his desk. "We need to find someone to analyze this for us. I have an old contact at the local hospital. I'll see what he can tell us about it. If Trinidad is an ancient, we'll have to tread carefully. None of us on our own will be a match for him."

"Speak for yourself. I'm going to kill that bastard." Malachi's hands balled into tight fists.

"Don't be stupid, my friend. You know it's the truth. Don't let him get away after all this time. We'll get him, and I'll make sure you get to deal the final blow." Ashe looked at Grady. "Spill it. Tell us where Trinidad is."

"Not until you promise to leave me alone." Grady's voice shook.

"The only thing I will promise is we will leave you alone as long as you don't touch another human. I would suggest you get the hell out of here, fast and far away. If what you say is true, Trinidad will be breathing down your neck before you know it." Ashe sat back in the chair behind his desk and rolled the syringe with the black liquid back and forth in his hand.

"Deal." Grady sat on the black leather couch against the back wall of the den and started talking.

Twenty minutes later, Ashe and Malachi had the information they needed, and Grady was gone. "I'm calling a meeting. It's about dawn now. We'll revise our original plan tonight, and go after Trinidad tomorrow night."

Malachi nodded. "I want this bastard dead."

"I know. We'll get him." Ashe glanced up at Malachi, and Malachi relaxed when he saw the determination burning in Ashe's eyes.

"Can you get that analyzed by tonight?" Malachi nodded toward the syringe.

"I doubt it, but I'm going to try."

Malachi turned to leave the den. He wanted to see Geri. He was going to tell her he loved her. He was going to trust someone with his heart for the first time in his life. "Until tonight."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

He smiled as he stared down at Geri. She was asleep in his bed where he'd left her a few hours earlier. Her red hair was tousled over the pillow and she lay on her stomach, her head turned to the side. The sheets rode low on her back, exposing a tantalizing expanse of skin that made his cock twitch in interest. He reached out and stroked one finger gently down her back. She sighed, and her eyes blinked open. The smile she gave him nearly stopped his heart, and lit up his blackened soul, filling it with happiness.

"Malachi." His name tumbled from her lips, raspy with sleep.

He crouched beside the bed and kissed her on the shoulder. She sighed, flipped to her back, reached up to encircle his neck and pulled him down for a kiss that inflamed him. Her touch on his nape held only a fleeting moment of dark memories before being replaced by the pure magic only her fingers could bring to him.

"I missed you." She smiled against his lips.

"I missed you, too." Missed her too much in the short time he'd been away from her.

He reached under the sheets and traced a path along her toned thigh and groaned. She covered his exploring hand with her own and tugged at it. He frowned and she laughed. She sat up on her knees and the bedding fell to the mattress, exposing her body to him. He growled. His cock hardened until he thought he would explode, and he would, but he wanted to be inside her when he did.

Her dainty fingers worked at the snaps on his pants. "Lose the shirt, Malachi." She licked her lips when she uttered the words, and yanked the shirt off as if it were on fire.

Once she had all the buttons undone, he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled his boots off. When he stood up to take his pants off, she pushed his hands away. She hooked her fingers in the loops of the leather and worked them down his hips and thighs, kissing the exposed skin of his lower abdomen. His muscles tightened, and his cock sprang free, the cool air doing little to ease the ache in his groin. Only Geri could do that.

Once he was completely nude, she tugged at him again until he lay on his back on the bed. She nibbled at his ear, and sucked the lobe between her teeth. Lightning zinged through his veins and he was worried electricity might start shooting from his fingertips, but he held it at bay . . . barely. She kissed his neck, shoulders and chest, and he stroked her back as she set him on fire with her lips and tongue.

She looked up at him, smiled, kissed him quickly on the lips, then sank between his thighs. He nearly came when her hot breath fanned over his cock. He propped himself up on his elbows so he could watch her, and his breath nearly stopped. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He didn't deserve her, yet she was his. Her tongue darted out and swirled around the tip of him, and his hips bucked off the mattress.

She looked up and smiled again before licking a slow path along the thick vein that ran along the length of him. A blissfully, torturous pressure built in his cock, and fire churned through his balls and up his shaft. She cupped his sac in one hand and encircled the base of him with the other. Her fingers barely touched. She stroked him once, twice, and slipped her mouth over him. She sucked until he slid down the back of her throat where her muscles tightened around him.

"Geri! That feels so fucking good." He barely got the words out through his clenched jaw.

The vibrations of her hummed response nearly made him come, and he fisted the sheets in his hands, not wanting it to end, but knowing he couldn't hold out much longer. She massaged his balls, sucked him deep into her throat while she stroked him, and let him nearly pop out of her mouth while she quickly swirled her tongue around the head before swallowing him down again.

He pumped his hips, encouraging her to move faster. His heart beat in excited staccatos and the base of his shaft began to pulse. Fire shot through him. He tried to pull away from her, but she gripped him tighter. He growled deep in his chest and came. She milked him, sucked every drop from him as his seed shot down her throat. When she was done coaxing every last drop from him, he tugged her up by the armpits and tossed her onto her back.

Her green eyes sparkled with the same passion burning through him. He kissed her, and settled between her thighs. She locked her ankles around his waist, and he rolled his hips against her. She moaned, and he tangled his tongue with hers. The taste of him on her tongue sent a freight train of lightning straight to his cock. He bent his head to her nipple, bit down gently on the peak, and surged into her, joining them with one smooth thrust.

Her moans encouraged him to pump his hips faster, faster. Suddenly, her inner muscles clamped down around him, and she cried out.

"Malachi!"

His balls tightened, and his release ejected from him in spurts. Her contracting muscles persuaded every drop from him.

Malachi lay on his back with Geri sprawled half over him, her head on his chest while he stroked her silken hair. "I love you, Geri."

She sprang up and looked at him. "What?" Her dainty mouth formed a small "o" and hope glimmered in her eyes.

He smiled. "I said, I love you, Geri."

A tear slid down her cheek, and he grew alarmed. "Did I say something wrong?" Why was she crying? Did his love for her make her upset?

"No. No. I'm just a little surprised is all, in a completely good way. I mean, I didn't expect you to say that you loved me, Malachi. I can't tell you how happy that makes me."

She reached up and stroked his cheek. He caught her fingers, brought her hand to his mouth, and kissed her palm. "There are things I need to tell you, things I need to talk to you about."

She frowned. "Okayyy."

He chuckled. "It isn't anything horrible." At least, he hoped she didn't see it that way.

"What is it?" She watched him expectantly.

He wanted to tell her everything right now. How they were life mates, how he wanted to be with her forever, how he wanted to change her. He was still a little worried about her reaction to the last one, though, and he would only be doing this one time in his life. He wanted to do it right. Geri deserved that. He shook his head.

"We should be going back to Ransom in a couple days. I'll tell you there." He wanted to prepare a nice meal at his home for her. Have candlelight, champagne, and silk sheets. He would give it all to her. She was the most important thing in the universe to him, and he wanted to make sure everything was perfect when he asked her to be his.

"You can't just drop a bomb like that on me and not tell me. That's not fair!" She giggled.

He tapped her on her cute nose. "Too bad. You'll have to wait."

She stuck her bottom lip out in a pout. "Okay, but I'll get you back for this."

He chuckled and pulled her up his body to kiss her on her cute mouth. She quickly got over any feelings of indignation and kissed him back. He broke the kiss and pushed her hair behind her ear. Maybe he should tell her. What if he didn't survive his face off with Trinidad tomorrow night? No. If he didn't survive, she'd know at the very least that he loved her. He didn't want to make plans for their future with the possibility of him being killed looming over his head. It wasn't fair to her.

\* \* \* \*



She couldn't believe Malachi had confessed his love for her. She'd known he loved her even if he hadn't, but she'd honestly not expected him to figure it out so soon. She'd gone from being married, to her life being turned upside down, to meeting the man of her dreams in what seemed to be two seconds flat, and it felt right. She had no doubt that she and Malachi belonged together. He was holding something back from her, though. He'd told her he was going after Trinidad tomorrow night in the gym a few days ago, but he'd refused to tell her any details other than when it was happening.

She still had a horrible feeling that Malachi would be in more danger than any of the other hunters. After everything he'd told her about Trinidad, it was obvious that Malachi would be Trinidad's prime target.

She rested her chin on his chest and stared up at him. "Malachi?"

"Yes?"

"I'm scared about tomorrow night."

He wrapped his arms around her and caressed her shoulder with his fingers. "It's nothing to concern yourself with."

She huffed. "If it has anything to do with you and your safety, it concerns me." She worried her bottom lip. "You're still going after Trinidad, aren't you?"

He watched her for several seconds before finally nodding. "I shouldn't be discussing this with you. It'll only worry you for no reason."

"I do not consider worrying about your life 'no reason.'" She cupped his cheek in her hand and stroked her thumb back and forth over the dark stubble. "I don't doubt your ability to protect yourself, but things happen. If you want me to be honest, I'm more worried about you being able to keep your emotions in check where Trinidad is concerned. Letting that get the best of you is the surest way for distraction and mistakes."

"I always want you to be honest with me. I promise you that I will not allow what Trinidad did to me in the past to distract me. He doesn't have such a powerful hold on me now, and that is mostly because of you. I'll be all right, Geri."

"Everyone always says that, but how do you know?" She kissed his pec.

He sighed. "I just know."

"I'm very happy that you are so confident, but you don't have control over everything, and things happen. I don't want you to get hurt . . . or worse." Her words trailed off. She closed her eyes, reveling in the feel of his warm fingers gliding over her skin. She couldn't bear it if something happened to him. The mere thought sent tiny stabs of pain through her chest.

“Look at me.” He waited until she peered up at him. “As long as I know that you are waiting here for me, I’ll be back. I’ve never, in my entire life, had more of a reason to live.”

“Oh, Malachi. I love you so much.”

“And I, you.” He kissed her.

“What time does this showdown happen tomorrow?”

“Geri, I—”

She placed her fingers over his full lips. “I promise I won’t interfere. I just don’t want to have to worry for one minute longer than I have to.”

He nipped at the ends of her fingers and she squealed and jerked them back. “I’m not sure. We will be meeting tonight to make sure everyone knows what they will be doing and when. We do take every measure to make sure no hunter gets hurt.”

She climbed up his big frame, peppering kisses along the way, until she straddled him. “Since it’s obvious I won’t be seeing much of you tonight and tomorrow, I’d like to show you just how much I love you again.”

He flexed his hips, and his hardness pressed against her. “I’d like nothing more.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Later that night, Malachi leaned against the wall in the den. Ashe was on the phone with his contact from the lab about the contents of the drug in the syringe Grady had given them. Aiston, Dominic and Conrad sat on the leather couch, and Aldin sat in a chair situated at the end of the couch. A tall blonde named Alaina sat across from Aldin in another chair. Malachi had never seen her before tonight.

He would have remembered a hunter that looked like her, not that he was attracted to her, but he imagined most men probably would be. He wasn't such a liar that he couldn't admit that the woman was a stunner with her long legs, platinum hair, big green-brown eyes and even bigger boobs, but she did nothing for him. His heart belonged to a tiny redhead, and nothing could change that.

He didn't miss the nervousness Alaina was trying hard to hide either. While the other hunters' casual convo and lounging poses painted a picture of men at ease, Alaina's eyes never stopped moving from Aldin to Ashe and back again. She fidgeted and shifted more than a relaxed person should. Malachi had a feeling something was going on between her and the two Aleksandrov men, but what, he didn't know, and quite frankly, didn't care all that much about finding out.

Ashe hung up the phone, leaned back in his chair, and stretched his legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles. "Benny's a good man. I had a courier take a sample of the syringe's contents over, and he's already done a preliminary. The bad news, the substance is thus far not recognizable, although I'm not sure that comes as a huge surprise to any of us. He did say it appeared to be somewhat similar to anesthesia with one exception—about three drops of the stuff is potent enough to drop an elephant. He's never seen anything like it, and is going to run more tests over the next several days.

"We aren't waiting that long. We have to move forward with the plan to take Trinidad out tomorrow night. If we don't, he'll find out that we are on to him and run." Malachi straightened. There was no way in hell he was going to let the bastard get away, even if it meant going after him alone.

"I agree." Ashe looked around at the others. "I think we all agree."

Malachi let the air he'd been holding out of his lungs in relief of Ashe's answer. "Since our original plan is useless, I have an idea. Grady gave us Trinidad's location as an abandoned warehouse, and while I didn't see much of it while I was captive, I'm inclined to believe him. I shimmered out when I

was able. The building is not owned by a vampire, so we can shimmer in. You still have the rest of the drug in that syringe?"

"There's about half of it left." Ashe nodded.

"Good. The original plan is still a good one then, with the exception of location. I say we go straight to the warehouse, and I'll still be bait. I'll tranq the fucker, and we can finish him off." Malachi felt the adrenaline rush his veins at the thought of Trinidad's death.

Ashe shook his head slowly from side to side. "It's too risky. If you face him head on, he could take you out before any of us could get to you. You said he was using spells, too. What if he's put some kind of block around the building to keep us from shimmering?"

"He doesn't view me or any of you as threats. He won't be expecting anyone to shimmer in." Malachi clenched his jaw.

"Why can't we just all go in and take him down the old-fashioned way?" Alaina said in a low, hesitant voice while watching Aldin from under thick lashes.

"Grady said Trinidad was an ancient. While I'm not sure one still exists, if he is correct, the chances of him slaughtering a few of us before we get the upper hand is probable. I don't want to risk anyone's life anymore than necessary." Ashe watched the hunters.

Malachi could tell the hunters weren't happy about using him as bait, but they also knew it was their best course of action, and best possible chance of catching Trinidad.

"We should just blow the fucker up," Conrad said.

"Yeah, and who'd do that?" Dominic laughed.

Conrad reminded Malachi of a golden-haired teenaged boy, but looks were as far as Conrad's boyishness went. He'd seen Conrad fight, and had been impressed with his skills.

"That'd be me." Conrad wiggled his eyebrows up and down at Dominic.

"You?" Dominic laughed again.

"Yeah. You gotta problem with that?" Conrad glared at Dominic.

"No. You just remind me of such a young pup sometimes I forget you're one of us," Dominic replied, nonchalant with no reaction to Conrad's hostility.

"Don't let my good looks fool ya. I trained in the Seals. I'm more than capable of setting a few explosions. In fact, I've got enough explosives and bomb materials to make the Military envious." Conrad stood, stretched, and went to the bar on the far side of the room to pour himself a drink.

"I doubt they'd be envious, but I bet they'd be more than happy to put your ass away for life if they found out." Aiston appeared bored with his hands linked behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

"We can't blow up a warehouse. The cops would swarm our asses." Aldin rubbed his hands together.

"We'll all go tonight and scope the warehouse out. We need to find every point of escape so we can secure it tomorrow night. Malachi, we'll do this your way, but you can't go in alone." Everyone nodded at Ashe in agreement.

"If he's in that building, his ass is mine." The rage Malachi felt inside wrapped around his quiet words.

"Anyone else have anything to add?" Ashe asked. Everyone shook their heads no. "Okay then. We'll all meet tonight at midnight at the warehouse to pinpoint all exit points. Tomorrow night, we'll meet at eleven. That should give us plenty of time to secure the area, and make sure Trinidad is in the building before heading in." Ashe tunneled his fingers through his hair.

Aiston nodded and stood. "See you all at midnight."

Malachi waited for the rest of the hunters to leave the den before he turned and left himself. He wanted to see Geri. The possibility that Trinidad was going to be out of his life once and for all was creating conflicting emotions in him. He'd lived with the turmoil of Trinidad's shadow for so long, he was a little worried about how that weight being lifted from him would affect him. Would he finally be normal? Would he go insane? His entire life had been lived around his fucked up psyche. Once that threat was removed forever, what would happen?

He needed comfort from the only place he'd ever found peace. Geri's arms.

\* \* \* \*

Aldin stood in his bedroom while Alaina paced back and forth. "Stop it. You're irritating the shit out of me."

Alaina spun on him. "Everything I do irritates you. I still don't feel comfortable here. I can tell Ashe would rather slit my throat than look at me."

"That's not true. He's just hesitant about trusting you. He's aware I wouldn't bring you into the house if I thought you were any threat to Ebony. You can't expect him to forget about you kidnapping his wife." Aldin sat in the chair in front of his computer.

"I don't expect him to forget it, but I'm a different person now. I know what I did was foolish and reprehensible. I've said I'm sorry, and I think I've come a long way in proving that I meant it." Alaina stuck her bottom lip out in a trademark pout.

Aldin sighed. "You shouldn't be worrying about this any longer. Whatever will be, will be. Tomorrow night is your first mission since beginning training. You need to focus on it, not on what Ashe is thinking of you."

Alaina smiled. "Jealous?"

Aldin snorted. "Fuck, no. I would need to feel something for you to be jealous."

"You are such a bastard, Aldin." Alaina huffed and left the room.

Aldin watched her retreating, ram-rod straight back. He was such a liar. He did care, but he didn't want to, and the fact that Alaina had once been so obsessed with his brother that she'd kidnapped his life mate provoked green teeth of envy to eat away at him. Alaina had come a long way since those days, and he was proud of her. She'd come to him after apologizing to Ashe and Ebony, insisting that she wanted to learn to be a hunter.

He'd laughed at her at first. She'd always been the finely manicured, model type, but she'd proven him wrong. She'd turned out to be a talented and ruthless fighter. He had no business having feelings for her. He'd never met a woman who had gotten under his skin like Alaina. She was stubborn, bitchy, and beautiful, but he couldn't be with someone his brother didn't trust. He told her to get over what she'd done, but the simple truth was that she'd hurt his family, and his loyalties lay with his blood.

He let his fingers fly over the keyboard, and the familiar ache for something he could never have built in his chest. He'd been around a long time, and that's how life was. It fucked you in the ass every time you turned your back.

\* \* \* \*

Dominic laid across his bed, his foot propped on the edge of the mattress while Def Leppard's *Pour Some Sugar On Me*, blared from the stereo speakers. A knock sounded on the door. "Come in."

Conrad strolled in and closed the door behind him. "Nice tune."

"Yeah, right. I know it isn't your style. You prefer that alternative crap, don't you?" Dominic watched Conrad's approach. He reminded him of a jungle cat stalking prey, and oh, wouldn't it be nice to be that prey.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate other types of music. Hell, I’ve even been known to listen to classical and jazz on occasion.” Conrad smirked.

“What? When you’re shit faced?” Dominic grunted.

“Whatever you say, Dom.”

“What do you want?”

“You know what I want.” Conrad’s voice was low.

Yeah, he knew what Conrad wanted. The same thing he’d wanted for months, and he was shit tired of denying it. Dominic stood and stared at Conrad. He was gorgeous. His blond hair lay in perfect waves against his golden skin, and he ached to run his fingers over the smooth surface.

“We going to keep up the damn charades, or are we going to do something about this thing between us?” Conrad moved forward until their chests nearly touched and stared at Dominic with an intensity that stole his breath.

Dominic reached out and ran the backs of his fingers down Conrad’s cheek. Conrad’s eyes flared a deep onyx almost instantly, and Dominic’s cock grew hard. “Aren’t you worried about what the other hunters will say?”

Conrad grunted. “I’ve been in this world too long to care about what anyone else thinks of me. I’m my own man, and what I choose to do with my life has absolutely nothing to do with them. So, what’s it going to be?”

Dominic licked his lower lip. “I’m fucking tired of the charades. Even more tired of trying to convince myself what I feel isn’t right when I know it is.”

“‘bout fucking time.”

The words had barely left Conrad’s mouth when his lips came down on Dominic’s. Dominic fisted a handful of that glorious blond hair, and held Conrad firmly to him while he deepened the kiss. Their tongues dueled, and Dominic’s skin heated. Conrad pulled his shirt off, exposing his toned chest and abs. Dominic did the same, and as they fell onto the mattress, mouth to mouth, arms around each other, he felt utter relief that they would finally be together.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“What the fuck is this?” Malachi had come to Geri’s bedroom to find her. When he’d heard the shower running, he’d decided to wait for her. Now she stood in the doorway, wrapped in a towel, and he was staring at the papers that were lying on top of the manila envelope on her dresser.

“Malachi, I didn’t expect to see you so soon.” Geri walked to him, took the papers from his hand, and stuffed them back into the envelope.

“I asked you what those were.” He had seen what they were, but he wanted to hear it from her lips.

“You know what they are,” she whispered.

“How could you lie to me? I trusted you. I told you everything about my past, and you couldn’t even tell me you were married? Hell, according to the date, you were still married when we met.” He was angry. He couldn’t believe the one person he’d trusted with everything had betrayed him.

“I didn’t lie to you. I just didn’t tell you. I didn’t think it was important.” She stood inches from him, watching him.

“You didn’t think something like a husband was important?” He paced the room. “Son of bitch, Geri. You were married while you were with me.”

“No. I wasn’t. I waited until the divorce was finalized before I slept with you. I didn’t want that between us.” She laid her hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off.

“How fucking proper of you.” She flinched at his words, and he pushed down the urge to comfort her, and tell her he was sorry.

“Malachi, I wanted to tell you, but I was—”

“I don’t care, Geri. Bottom line is, you lied to me. I thought I could trust you.” He was hurt, and for the first time since he was a child, he felt like weeping. “You said you’d never lie to me. You said I could trust you, and yet the whole time we were together, you were lying to me.”

“Please, just let me—”

He turned to face her. “You were the first person I let in. You were the only person I’ve ever told all the details of my past to. You are the first woman I’ve wanted bad enough to pursue.” His voice



turned hoarse, and his throat felt raw. "You are the first woman I loved. I gave you my heart, my soul, everything I had to give, and you betrayed me."

"I love you, Malachi. I swear I didn't mean to hurt you. I won't ever do it again. It was a bad misjudgment on my part, but I didn't do it to be manipulative."

"You're right. You won't ever hurt me again. I want you out of here. I'm sending you back to Ransom tonight." He turned to go to the door.

"Malachi! Please. You don't understand." She backed away when he spun on her.

"I understand perfectly. Here I was pouring my stupid fucking heart out to you, and you couldn't be honest with me about something like this? What the hell else have you lied to me about?"

"Nothing! I swear, and again, I didn't lie to you. I just didn't tell you." Geri's words trailed off as she sniffed.

"Lying by omission."

"You haven't omitted telling me a few things like what you are planning to do tomorrow night?" Geri's eyes blazed not only with hurt now, but with anger and pain.

"It's not the same thing. Not even close. What I'm doing tomorrow night is my job. It has nothing to do with us." He most certainly didn't have a wife on the side.

"Are you kidding me? You are putting your life on the line. You are going after Trinidad. You could be killed for Christ's sake, and that has nothing to do with us?"

"Not anymore. There is no 'us' any longer." A sharp pain shot through his heart at her outraged gasp.

"Because I didn't tell you I was married? Malachi, I—"

"You can stay at my place until you find somewhere else. I'll be staying here for awhile anyway." He'd probably only be there until sometime tomorrow night, but he wasn't so shallow that he'd kick her out on the street. She didn't have a place to stay, and he wouldn't let her be homeless no matter how angry he was at her. He'd stay in a hotel if he had to until she found some place to live.

Her lip quivered, and tears spilled from her eyes and ran down her cheeks. "So that's it? You won't even let me explain?"

"Pack your things and be ready to leave in an hour." He yanked the door open and closed it behind him with a bit of force.

She'd been the only person in almost a thousand years he'd trusted, and she'd betrayed him. He squeezed his eyes shut and scrubbed his hand over his face, trying to erase the blinking images of Geri with another man, another man touching Geri, kissing her. His hands shook, and he barely kept the rage

from erupting. He felt sick. The familiar clenching in his gut swamped him. Only this time, it wasn't because of Trinidad. It was because of Geri. The woman he loved, his *viata amant*.

\* \* \* \*

How could he not let her explain why she hadn't told him of her marriage? She hadn't deliberately lied to him. She'd been ashamed to tell him the truth. She'd made a mistake by not telling him. When she'd seen the vacant look on his face while he'd stared down at the divorce papers, she'd hated herself for hurting him. She loved Malachi, and would never intentionally do anything that would cause him pain. Yet, if he loved her like he said he did, he'd have given her a chance to make amends.

Her heart ached, and she sat on the edge of the bed and wept. She'd never wanted, needed or loved a man as much as she did Malachi, and the thought of being without him tore at her insides. Now that she'd seen his reaction to her marriage, she could understand why he'd felt such betrayal. She'd been the first person he'd trusted. He'd told her the horror of his past, and she should have swallowed her pride and told him about Mike. She'd been so ashamed, though, and hadn't wanted to admit how gullible and blind she'd been where her ex-husband was concerned.

She had mocked Malachi's trust. It hadn't been intentional on her part, but nor had she taken into consideration all the circumstances of the situation. She'd ruined what they had. She wanted to go to him, beg his forgiveness, but he wouldn't accept her apology, at least not now. His emotions were too raw. Could he forgive her in time? Now that he was sending her back to Ransom, she'd go crazy worrying about his confrontation with Trinidad. Not that she wouldn't have been crazy waiting at the mansion, but the distance that would be between them would make it that much worse.

An hour later on the nose, a knock came on her door. "Come in."

She hadn't expected her visitor to be Ebony. "What happened?"

"Nothing. Everything." Geri thought she'd cried herself out, but apparently she hadn't since fat tears fell down her face once again.

Ebony hugged Geri. "Tell me what happened."

"I didn't tell Malachi I was married when I met him. He found the divorce papers, and needless to say, he wasn't happy." Geri sobbed.

"You were married? Why didn't you tell him?" Ebony asked.

"I can't tell you. If I didn't bother to explain it to him, I don't feel right telling someone else. I had my reasons. Maybe they weren't great reasons, but they were tantamount to me."

"He'll get over it, hun. I'm so sorry." Ebony patted her on the back.

Geri shook her head. "I don't know. He's sending me back to Ransom."

"What? No. If you don't want to go, you can stay here as long as you want. This isn't his house, and I say who stays and who goes."

"No. It's okay. I should go back. I need to figure out what to do now anyways. I have to get back on track, and get my life together." Geri swiped the tears from her cheeks.

"If you're sure you want to go, but we'll miss you. You have to come and visit sometime." Ebony gave Geri a quick hug.

"Thank you. You've all been so kind to me. I can't tell you how much I needed that at this time in my life." Geri didn't have the heart to tell Ebony she probably wouldn't visit because this place would always remind her of Malachi.

"Do you need help with your bags?"

"No. I don't have any." Geri looked at the floor.

"You have tons of clothes. I know because I helped delivery bring them up here."

"They aren't my clothes. I'm leaving with exactly what I came with. The outfit I have on." Ebony started to argue with Geri when another knock came.

"Come in," Geri called.

It was Ashe. "The limo is here to take you to the airport, Geri." Ashe exchanged a somber look with Ebony.

"I'm ready." Geri hugged Ebony, and even gave Ashe a quick hug, and she was surprised when he gave her a quick squeeze back. "Thank you for inviting me into your home."

"Here. I have this for you." Ashe handed Geri a check.

She gasped when she saw the amount. "I can't take this."

"Yes, you can. That is for straightening out my books." Ashe refused the check when Geri tried to hand it back to him.

"It's too much." It was insanely too much, and the sad part was, Geri knew it was pocket change to him.

"Take it, Geri, or you'll offend my husband." Ebony smiled at Geri, gave her a wink, and stood on tiptoe to kiss Ashe's cheek.

Geri knew she wasn't winning this battle, sighed, and tucked the check that she had no intention of cashing into her pocket. "Thank you both again. One last thing."

"What is it?" Ebony asked.

"Will you please let me know when it's all over tomorrow night? I just need to know he's safe." Geri sniffed back more tears.

"As soon as I know anything, I'll call. You need to give me your number." Ebony frowned.

"On second thought, I'll call you the day after tomorrow if that's okay?" Geri didn't have a number to give Ebony, and she wasn't going to explain why at the moment.

"No problem." Ebony nudged Ashe, and he dug a business card out of his wallet. Ebony handed it to Geri. "Our number is on here. And, Geri? Feel free to call anytime, just to say hi, or if you need to talk, or for anything."

"Thank you," Geri whispered as she took the card and tucked it into her front jeans pocket.

"We'll walk you to the door." Ebony took Ashe's hand and followed Geri out of the room and down the stairs to the foyer.

Avril sprinted down the stairs right as Ashe opened the door for her, hugged her and told her goodbye. Geri climbed into the back of the limo through the door the chauffeur held open for her. He waited for her to get situated, then closed her in. She watched out the tinted window until the Aleksandrov mansion disappeared. She felt empty.

\* \* \* \*

The next night, Malachi and the other hunters got into position around the old warehouse Trinidad was holed up in. It was funny how bitter the sweet taste of revenge had turned. Maybe not funny, maybe more like sad and pathetic. All he'd thought about was Geri, and how he'd thrown the best thing that had ever happened to him away as if she'd been no better than a piece of trash. Every second that she'd been gone had been misery. His chest ached, and every breath he took tore through him with sharp talons.

He was having trouble focusing on where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. That was something that would get him killed. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad. Maybe if he were dead, the pain would finally stop. Would Geri even care if he died? He'd seen the look of hurt in her eyes when he'd refused to let her give him an explanation for not telling him she'd been married. Now that he'd

cooled off, he knew he'd been a complete ass, but when he'd seen the papers, fury had swarmed him. The thought of some other man having his Geri filled him with rage and jealousy like he'd never known.

He'd wanted to find her, throw her over his shoulder, and take her to a remote island somewhere he could protect her and keep her away from every other man on the planet. It was a caveman reaction that he barely suppressed. What if she'd gone back to her ex after he sent her away? He couldn't entertain that idea because it would literally drive him insane if he thought about her being touched by someone other than him.

After this charade with Trinidad was over, he had two choices: Hole up somewhere and live in misery, or go after Geri, beg for her forgiveness and convince her they belonged together. He grunted. He was stupid to think he could lie to himself. There was no choice. He wasn't whole without Geri. He'd fight for her until the day his last breath left him.

*We're all in position. You ready, Malachi?* Ashe's voice whispered through Malachi's mind.

*More ready than you will ever know,* Malachi sent back.

He palmed the dart and shimmered into the warehouse. He moved silently through the pitch black his eyes could see perfectly through. His best guess was that Trinidad was hiding out in the basement. All bottom feeders preferred to be as close to Hell as possible, maybe because they felt a kinship for their future home. Trinidad would be home soon. He'd make sure of it.

He went down two flights of stairs before he came to a door. He cocked his head to the side and listened. Several voices, laughter and the smell of cigarette smoke and alcohol drifted from inside. He shielded himself and shimmered into the room. Dozens of drifters were playing cards, watching a big screen television that hung on the far wall, and engaging in sexual activity with several women who looked to be professional prostitutes.

He'd never seen anything like it. Drifters never hung together. They usually tore one another apart. Trinidad must scare the shit out of them to keep them in line like this. *You won't fucking believe this.*

*What's wrong?* Ashe answered.

*There are fucking dozens of drifters loafing around in here like they are best friends.* Malachi shimmered back into the hallway. *I think Trinidad is probably in the basement. I'm going down there now.*

Ashe didn't answer him, but he knew the hunter had heard him. He didn't answer unless necessary as they were trying to keep the energy of their telepathy to a minimum so as not to tip Trinidad off to their presence. Malachi only projected messages to Ashe, and Ashe then relayed the necessary info to the rest of the hunters as needed.

Malachi continued on until he found another flight of stairs. At the bottom was another door. He listened again, heard nothing at first, but then soft sobs floated to his ears followed by a menacing laugh he knew all too well. The bastard was torturing someone. It was going to be the last time Trinidad did so. Malachi gripped the dart with the tranq and shimmered inside.

The table he'd found himself strapped to several nights ago stood in the corner. A boy who looked to be about fifteen or sixteen with shaggy blonde hair was chained to the wall. He was nude and sobbing. Fortunately, it looked as if Trinidad had only just started whatever sick game he'd been planning to play with the boy, and the kid looked more scared than hurt. Malachi had no doubt, if he'd been much later, he would have walked into a completely different and horrifying scenario.

Trinidad's back was to him. Malachi raised the dart, shimmered directly behind him and buried the tip in the back of Trinidad's neck. He shimmered and reappeared a few feet from the bastard. Trinidad screamed in fury and spun around. His eyes narrowed on Malachi, and his mouth contorted in a sneer before he reached behind him and pulled the now empty dart from his neck.

He walked slowly toward Malachi. "Did you actually think this would work on me?" He laughed, the sound like fingers on a chalkboard.

Malachi was a little surprised the drug had no effect on Trinidad, but he didn't allow the emotion to show. If there was one thing that would get you killed quickly, it was getting sidetracked by emotions. He'd barely been able to push Geri from his mind before he'd entered the warehouse, but knew he'd be as good as dead if he allowed any distractions to fog his brain.

"Doesn't matter if it works or not. You still die tonight." *The tranq didn't work on him, Ashe.*

*I'm sending in back up.*

*Not yet. I can handle this.* He wanted Trinidad to die at his own hands. Malachi wanted to see the life drain out of the bastard's eyes firsthand, wanted to know he was finally in Hell where he belonged.

*I'm sending in back up, Malachi.*

*I said no.*

*It's not a choice. Dominic, Conrad, Aldin, Alaina, and I are going to take care of the drifters. Aiston will be with you in a moment. He'll stay out of the way unless you need him.*

Malachi cut the line to Ashe's mind. He knew the hunter would allow him to handle this on his own. Aiston would only step in if absolutely necessary.

Within seconds, Malachi could hear the screams and fighting one floor above. The hunters would take every drifter in that room out because none of them would be expecting an ambush. Surprise was one of the best weapons in a fight.

“Do you really think you can kill me, Malachi? Did you learn nothing from our time together?” Trinidad walked over to the boy and tilted his chin up. “You do remember our time together don’t you, Malachi?”

The boy whimpered and Malachi wondered how many, like him, Trinidad had degraded. “I know I can kill you, and I will. Tonight.”

Trinidad cackled. “You have grown quite humorous. You can’t kill me. Neither can your little hunter friend standing behind you trying to look fierce.”

Trinidad looked at the two hunters as if they were puppies yapping at his ankles with a bored stare. Malachi couldn’t wait to slice his head from his body.

*When I go after Trinidad, you get the boy to safety.*

*Will do, but I’ll be back. This guy is either really full of himself or extremely powerful. Tread carefully. We don’t want any casualties unless they’re the bad guys.*

“Let’s you and me do some dancing, Trinidad.” Malachi slipped the daggers from his boots, and took a fighter stance.

Trinidad tsked him. “You really don’t know when you are in over your head, do you?”

Trinidad slid a gleaming sword that curved into a hook at the end from the table next to him. He raised it and gave Malachi a smile that made his stomach clench. As long as he’d lived, he didn’t think he’d ever met anything more evil than Trinidad.

Malachi and Trinidad circled one another, and Malachi waited patiently for an opportunity to strike. Seconds later, he got that opportunity when the boy was rescued by Aiston. Trinidad glanced over his shoulder at the sound of the rattling chains, and Malachi lunged forward and sliced at Trinidad’s neck. Trinidad dodged the brunt of the blow and got only a small cut to the top of the shoulder instead.

The bastard was quick. Trinidad spun and sliced at Malachi’s stomach. Malachi dodged, but still took a good bit of the blade to the abs. He could feel the hot stickiness of his blood as it seeped down his skin. He tucked into a quick somersault, and when he came up, he caught Trinidad on the calf and smiled when Trinidad cried out.

The fight went on for what seemed like hours. Malachi had tagged Trinidad several times, but Trinidad’s blows had landed truer, and Malachi was getting weak from blood loss. If he didn’t take Trinidad down soon, the fight was going to end very badly for him. Trinidad was stronger and quicker than any drifter or hunter he’d ever fought. He’d never seen anyone or anything fight with Trinidad’s skill and stealth. Malachi was beginning to believe there might be some truth behind what Grady said about Trinidad being an ancient true blood.

Malachi was fading, and time was running out. At least the boy had been rescued, but the possibility that he’d never see Geri again brought every ounce of adrenaline and strength he had left to

the surface. Trinidad came at him. Malachi dodged the blow, turned and buried a dagger deep into the middle of Trinidad's back. When Trinidad spun, eyes wide, mouth gaping, he buried the other dagger in his chest, brought his hands up and used the last bit of his energy to call the electricity from his fingertips.

Blue streams of lightning arced from his fingertips and hit Trinidad with a force that sent him to his knees. It zinged and crackled as it burned through Trinidad's body. When Malachi depleted every last ounce of electricity he possessed, he sagged against the wall. Trinidad still sat on his knees, breathing hard, head bowed, and when he raised his head a minute later, Malachi knew he was going to die. Before Trinidad got to his feet, Aiston shimmered back in and called forth the fire from his fingers, lighting Trinidad up like a campfire.

They watched until Trinidad quit screaming and lay in a charred, unrecognizable heap on the floor.

"I think we should cut his head off just to make sure." Malachi said, still sagging against the wall.

"He's charcoal. There's nothing but ash left. He's dead." Aiston looked at Malachi. "You need help?"

Malachi shook his head, slowly pushed off the wall, and stood on his wobbly legs. He'd never been so tired in his entire existence. He'd never felt so lonely either. "Is everyone else okay?"

"Yes. All of the drifters upstairs are dead except for a couple that were lucky enough to get away."

Malachi took a few deep breaths and somehow got up just enough energy to shimmer back to his room at the Aleksandrov mansion. It was finally over. Trinidad was dead, and it was time for him to go home. It was time for him to make things right with Geri.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

Geri had stayed at Malachi's one night. After that, she hadn't been able to stand being in a place that reminded her of him everywhere she turned. The worse had been trying to sleep in his bed. His scent had curled around her, and made her long for him with an intensity she'd never known. It was as if she was missing a piece of herself. In a way, she guessed she was, for she'd come to believe Malachi was her soul mate. The other half of her was gone, and she doubted he'd ever be able to forgive her.

She'd called Ebony and had been relieved to hear all of the hunters, including Malachi, had survived their attack on Trinidad. She hadn't asked for any details, had only needed to know that Malachi was safe.

She was now staying in a run-down, shabby motel room. She'd swallowed her pride and cashed the check Ashe had given her. She planned on taking just enough to find her a quaint little apartment somewhere and to live off of until she got her life back together again. The rest would go to charity. She had already called a realtor, and the woman on the other end of the line had promised that they'd find her something within a few days. She'd toyed with the idea of moving away from Ransom, but she wasn't sure where she wanted to go.

For the time being, she'd decided to stay in town and start her own business working from home. Once she got some clientele built back up, she could live anywhere she wanted. She folded the couple pairs of jeans she'd bought, and had just laid them on the end of the twin bed with the ugly floral coverlet when someone knocked on the door. She frowned. No one knew where she was.

She left the chain on and cracked the door only to find the one person she'd be happy to never seen again. "Mike. What do you want?"

"Let me in, Geri. I need to talk to you," Mike said in his casual, bored tone.

"No. I don't have anything to say to you." She'd had enough of Mike Baxter.

"Please, Geri. I need your help," Mike pleaded.

"Why should I help you with anything after what you did to me?" Geri huffed.

The nerve of the man. She didn't have the foggiest idea what she could possibly help him with anyways.

"Come on. Just hear me out, and then I'll leave. If you don't, I'll stay out here until you come out. You can't stay in there forever."

She sighed, closed the door, and slid the chain free. When she opened the door back up, Mike waltzed in like he owned the place in natural Mike fashion.

"What do you want?" Geri crossed her arms across her chest and stared at him, waiting for his answer.

"Geri, I made a huge mistake. I want you back." He walked to her and rubbed her arms.

"What? Are you freaking kidding me?" Had he gone completely mad?

"No. I swear I didn't mean to treat you the way I did. I was under immense pressure. You're the only one I know that can get me out of the financial mess I've gotten myself into. You're a genius with the books."

Now it was clear. Mike only wanted to use her some more. "Mike, you can go to hell. You can dig your own self out of whatever hole you've dug yourself into."

Suddenly, his pleading, sad act came to an abrupt halt, anger danced across his face and dotted his cheeks red. "If you don't get me out of this mess, I swear I'll make you pay."

"I doubt there is anything else you can do to me, Mike. You've already taken my home, my car, my job, my integrity. What else is there?"

"Oh believe me, little girl. There's plenty more." He sneered.

"Get out. We're done. I never want to see you again." Geri started past Mike when he grabbed her by the shoulders. "Mike! Let go of me."

"You're going to do this for me, Geri," he said through clenched teeth.

"No. I'm not. Now get out like I said, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what?" He laughed.

"Or she'll have me kick the living shit out of you, asshole."

Geri froze when Malachi's low voice came from behind Mike. Mike released her and spun around. Geri almost laughed when he had to tilt his head back to look up at Malachi.

"Who are you?" Mike asked before looking back at Geri.

"I'm your worst nightmare, buddy. Now get the fuck out before I throw you out."

Mike stood as straight as he could, which still only put him level with Malachi's shoulder. He looked at Geri. "This isn't over."

Geri winced when Malachi wrapped a hand around Mike's throat and shoved him against the wall. "It's over all right, and if you so much as come within a hundred feet of her again, or even dare to whisper her name from your lips, I'll hunt you down. You dig what I'm saying you fucking piece of shit?"

Mike's face was turning beet red, and he nodded. When Malachi let him go, he made like a rat, scurried to the door, and disappeared.

"Was that your ex?" Malachi came forward until he was a mere inch from Geri.

"Yes." Why was Malachi here? She'd never expected to see him again. Her heart galloped in her chest, and she ached to hug him.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Malachi's low whisper made her skin burn.

His eyes held no hint of accusation. "I was humiliated by Mike. I was too ashamed to tell you what he'd done to me. By the time I realized it had been a mistake to keep it from you, you found the divorce papers. I would have explained then, but you wouldn't let me."

"I know. I was upset. I felt betrayed. I had told you my deepest, darkest secrets, and you couldn't even tell me you were married." His lips pressed tight together.

"I know, but I swear to you, I was never with you until the divorce was finalized. Believe me, I wanted to be with you before, but I couldn't. Not until I was legally free. I didn't ever want that between us." She watched him, hoping he'd understand.

"What did he do to you?" Malachi reached out and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

She sighed at the comfort his touch brought. "He used me. He made me think he loved me when, really, all I was was a tool to him. He used my skills to further his career, and when he thought I could help him gain no more, he took everything from me. My home, my car, my job, my pride. He even accused me of stealing funding from his run for Governor. He'd been the one stealing the funds, and I'd never known it until it was too late. I never thought someone who loved me could turn on me like that. That's when I realized he never loved me.

"When you found me in the park that night, I'd been homeless for a few days already. I'd refused to go to the shelter up to that point, but knew it was useless to keep delaying the inevitable. Mike had ruined my reputation. I called all of my clients, but Mike had gotten to them first."

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Malachi growled.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I just didn't want you to see me as some weak, pathetic, gullible fool." Geri sat on the side of the tiny bed.

Malachi sat beside her. "Look at me." He waited until she stared up into his eyes to continue on. "I was an ass. I should have let you explain. I was hurt, and I let my trust issues rule me instead of being reasonable. You were hurt by your ex and were going through a tough time. I expected too much of

you.” He stroked a finger down her cheek, and she closed her eyes for a moment before blinking them back open.

“No. You didn’t expect too much of me. After everything you shared with me, I was the coward. My issues were nothing compared to what you had endured, and you were honest with me. I’m so sorry I hurt you.” She sniffed

“Don’t start crying, Geri. It’ll rip my guts out if you do.” He brushed his knuckles over her jaw. “I love you. I never want to be without you. You’ve healed my soul. You make me happy, gave me something worth living for.”

“Oh, Malachi!” She threw her arms around him and kissed him.

He hungrily kissed her back, and chuckled when she moaned after he pulled back, breaking the kiss. “I don’t want to stop either, but I have to tell you something first.”

“Okay.” She reached for his hands, and he eagerly accepted them, enveloping them in his bigger, warmer ones.

“You are my life mate, my *viata amant*. You have been fated for me, and I for you. When a vampire meets his other half, we mate for life. I want to be with you forever. I want you to become like me, but I cannot force this upon you. I cannot change you without your permission. I’ve already taken your blood twice. The third time I do so, there must be a blood exchange, and you will be turned.” His silver eyes never left hers.

“How can you be sure I’m yours?”

*The first sign is that you can speak to me minti conversatie or telepathically. You do remember that we can talk to one another like this?*

*Yes. I have to tell you, although it is very strange for me to speak this way, the feel of your voice in my head is quite . . . stimulating.*

*It is that way for me as well. It is a very intimate thing, The other way to be absolutely certain that you are my life mate is if you can see me shielded.*

“What’s shielded?”

“I can make myself invisible. If I do so, no human can see me, unless—”

“Unless they are your life mate,” Geri continued.

“Yes.”

“Do it.”

“I already am.”

She wasn't all that surprised by the fact that she was Malachi's life mate as she had suspected it herself. The part about being turned was what had thrown her off a bit.

"Malachi, only a short time ago, I didn't even know vampires existed. Now you want me to become one. It's a big decision."

"Yes. I know, but I promise to do everything in my power to make you happy always. I'll be there to help you through the change every step of the way." He gently squeezed her hands.

"Does it hurt?" Did she really want to become a vampire? She wasn't sure. She was sure of one thing. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with Malachi. "Will I have to drink blood?"

"At first you will need it more, but you can get all you need from me. The only way you will ever have to drink from a source, which is what we call a human who we get blood from, is if you are injured. You cannot drink from another vampire while wounded. If you do, your blood and the other vampire's blood will war with one another, and in some cases, it can make you weaker."

"When you drank my blood, was it only because you were hungry?" She rubbed at her throat.

Malachi growled. "No. It was because I was horny, and I wanted you like I've never wanted anyone. I have to drink very little blood to sustain myself, only more if I'm injured. We sometimes drink during sex because it heightens the experience. I won't lie. You taste like heaven."

Geri's skin tingled. Thinking about drinking Malachi's blood didn't appall her. In fact, it was quite the opposite. She imagined how he'd taste on her tongue, coppery and masculine. He'd taste like sin, sex—like Malachi.

"I can't force you to change. It has to be your decision, but if you choose not to, I will stay with you until the day you draw your last breath, and I will follow you into death." Malachi squeezed her hand gently.

"Why would you do such a thing?" Before the words left her mouth, she already knew the answer. She felt the same way about him. Her life would always be missing something without Malachi in it.

"You make me happy. I've never truly been content until you came along. You are my joy, the reason I had the strength to overcome what a thousand years couldn't touch. You're everything to me." He took her hand and pressed it against his chest over his heart. "It beats for you now."

"I don't ever want to be without you, and I certainly don't want to be the reason for your death. I love you. As long as you are by my side, I know I can get through anything. Yes. My answer is yes." She smiled up at him.

She squeaked when he hugged her tightly to him.

He whispered, "Sorry."

"It's okay. You just startled me." Geri tilted her chin up and kissed him.

Sparks ignited in her blood and electricity rushed over her skin. He stroked her tongue with his, and she went up in flames. "Do it now, Malachi. Change me now."

He broke the kiss and rested his head against hers, his shallow breaths giving away how affected he was by their kiss. "No. You deserve better than a shabby room in a hotel. Why didn't you stay at my place?"

"I couldn't," she said quietly. "It reminded me of you everywhere I went. I missed you. I didn't think you'd ever forgive me. I knew I'd hurt you. It wasn't fair of me to keep my marriage from you after you'd trusted me with so much. My insecurities were nothing compared to what you'd suffered, and still, you told me." She hiccupped as a tear ran down her cheek.

"Hey." He wiped the tear away with his thumb. "Don't cry. You're killing me. Let's just put all of it behind us and start new from here."

"Oh! I almost forgot. What happened with Trinidad? You didn't get hurt, did you?" She looked him over from head to toe. She'd known he'd made it out alive, but she hadn't known if he'd sustained any injuries.

"He's dead, and I'm fine." His eyes turned dark. "I never want to talk about him again. He's finally gone. That's where I want him to remain."

She hugged him. "I was so worried about you."

He hugged her back. "Come back with me to my place?"

"Okay." She grinned.

"Get your things packed. There's a car waiting downstairs." He kissed her one last time before he stood.

"Were you that certain I'd come back with you?" She smiled.

"Yes. You were coming even if I had to carry you over my shoulder kicking and screaming."

"You are a Neanderthal." She laughed.

"When it comes to you? Yes. A little." He chuckled.

The whole time she packed, his eyes never left her. She couldn't wait for him to make love to her, wanted to feel him inside her where he belonged. When she was done, he picked up the big duffel bag she'd bought at the same time she'd gotten her jeans. He held his hand out to her, and she took it and followed him to the car.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Malachi opened the front door to his place and waited for Geri to enter before following her in. "I was thinking maybe we could find a new house to live in together. Make a clean start."

She turned and gave him a smile that made his heart hammer and his cock pulse to life. "I would love to do that. I like your place. It's very nice, but truthfully, I've always dreamed of having a little cottage somewhere with a few acres. Maybe have a couple chickens or goats, maybe even a dog or two."

"Goats? Chickens? Are you serious?" Malachi grinned.

He'd never been a goats and chickens sort of guy, but for her, he'd do anything if she'd just keep smiling at him. Her smile was as warm and bright as the sunshine and was as magical as her touch.

"Yes. It would be absolute heaven to be able to have fresh eggs to eat. Have you ever eaten goat cheese?" she asked him excitedly.

"Yes."

"Imagine it fresh from your backyard." She shut her eyes and sighed.

Malachi closed the distance between them and cupped her face in his hands. He groaned when she stared up at him with those dark, emerald pools. "I would be happy living in a ditch with you. If you want dogs, goats, chickens, or whatever, I'd be more than happy to give them to you."

He swooped down and took her mouth in a hungry kiss. When she moaned, he slipped his tongue inside and tasted her. She was his heaven. As long as he had her, nothing else mattered. She pushed at his chest until he broke their kiss. "What?"

"I don't want you to give me anything but your heart and trust. I swear I will never keep anything from you again, but I plan to continue working from home. I can't just sit around and do nothing all day. I've worked my entire life." She stroked his stubbly cheek, and he leaned into her touch, reveling in the silk of her skin.

"I don't care what you do as long as it's nothing that puts you in danger. You have my heart and my trust, but I will not lie to you. I will never tolerate or allow you to be in harm's way. That will never change about me, and you will have to learn to accept it." Malachi tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"I feel the same way about you. The only thing I can promise you is that I will not knowingly put myself in a dangerous situation. But, Malachi?"

"Yes?"

"Do not ever expect me to keep that promise if it comes to your safety. If you are ever in danger, and there is something I can do to get you out of it, I will do it."

Malachi growled. "Do not ever put yourself in harm's way because of me. Your life is so much more important than mine."

"Why? You only say that because of how you feel for me. You have to understand I feel the same way about you. I would be lost without you. If you were going to die, I would rather die with you than be left alone. Don't get me wrong. I don't want or plan on dying anytime soon, but I can't imagine a world without you in it." Geri's eyes sparkled with anger.

"I get it. I really do, but don't expect me to be happy about it." If something like that ever did arise, he'd make damn sure she'd never find him to put herself at risk. He'd waited for her, longed for her so long, he'd never allow her to come to harm.

"Take me to bed, Malachi. I don't want to talk about these kinds of things anymore. I missed you, and I need you."

He sucked in a sharp breath and scooped her up. "Not half as bad as I need you."

He carried her to his bed and smiled when he thought of how it had all began with Geri right here. This room is where he'd first realized she was his, even if he'd denied it at the time. He laid her on the bed and covered her with his body, careful not to put too much weight on her. He framed her face with his hands and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around him and stroked the back of his neck, and when she touched him in the one place that used to send him tumbling to his black past, he felt nothing but the magic of her caress.

Her tongue danced with his, ran along his bottom lip, and dove back in. She tasted of sunshine and fresh air. She tasted of love and passion, love and passion that burned only for him. He skimmed his fingers along her neck, collar bone, and let his hand rest on the breast that fit perfectly in his palm. The tightened nipple pushed through her shirt, and he rolled it between the tips of his fingers. When she moaned, fire rushed through every cell in his body.

How could something so pure and flawless belong to him? He didn't deserve her, but she wanted him nonetheless, and he wasn't man enough to question his good fortune any longer. He'd take what God and Fate had handed him, and worship her every day for the rest of his life.

She ran her fingers along his shoulders, around to his back and back to his shoulders. When she touched him, he felt alive and whole. He hesitantly left her lips to kiss a path along her neck, where he breathed in her feminine scent. He sat up and pulled her shirt off. White lace cupped her breasts and



pushed them slightly upwards until they spilled out of the top. He caressed a trail along the top of the lace over her warm skin, and followed the edge of the strap to her shoulder where he coaxed it to slide down her arm.

He did the same to the other side, and her breasts fell free. Her dark pink nipples tightened in buds, and strained toward him. "You are so damned beautiful."

"Only to you," Geri whispered.

"Don't. You are beautiful to anyone. Any man would be lucky to have you. I'll never understand how that idiot of an ex-husband of yours threw you away. I'd kill anyone who touched you. I'll never betray you, and I swear I will love you until the day I breathe my last." He squeezed his eyes shut momentarily as emotions swamped him.

Tears slid down Geri's cheek. "I believe you, Malachi. I know you would never betray me like Mike did. I trust you, and I will love you always. On the note of any man touching me, if any woman touches you, I'd think seriously about doing bodily harm to her."

He brushed her tears away with his thumbs. "You'll never have to worry about that."

He gave her a quick kiss then got off the bed. She knew by the way he put a bit more swagger in his step as he walked to the dresser that he was aware she was ogling his backside. He lit the candles lined on the top with a lighter and made his way back to the bed. He tugged his shirt off and let it slide to the floor, then pulled the tie from his hair. The freed strands fell around his shoulders while Geri watched him hungrily. He'd never see anything more spectacular than Geri lounging on his bed with only a pair of jeans on, her red mane fanning out over his pillow. When he reached for the snaps on his pants, she sat up and covered his hands with her own, brushing them away so she could do what he'd started.

He sucked in a breath when his pants hit the floor, her hand encircled him, and her hot lips greedily sucked him into her mouth. His hips bucked and he tangled his fingers in her hair, encouraging her on when she picked up a lazy rhythm. She sucked him deep, then ran her tongue along the thick vein that ran along the underside of his cock before letting him nearly pop from her lips. She'd lick the tip like it was a lollipop and repeat. Within moments, he felt his release rising to escape.

He tightened his hold on her hair and gently tugged her away from him. When she looked at him with puzzled eyes, he smiled, kicked his boots off followed by his pants, and worked her jeans over her hips and down her shapely legs. He hooked his thumb in the matching white lace panties and got rid of them as well. He reached behind her, undid the snap on her bra and, finally, she was completely bared to his view.

\* \* \* \*

The emotions and fire burning through her were nearly too much. Malachi got her worked up like no man ever had or could. His salty taste lingered on her lips, and black bled over the silver of his eyes until they were pure onyx. She sucked in a breath when he pushed her flat on the bed and gripped her upper thighs in his big hands. He nudged her legs wide until she was exposed to him, and growled.

He looked up at her with those obsidian eyes, licked his lips, and she nearly climaxed. He bent his head and ran his tongue from her clit down her wet slit and back where he laved her with slow circles. She cried out and gripped his shoulders while he ate at her as if she was a feast and he was a starving man. His tongue stabbed into her and she tunneled her fingers in his hair, holding him to her. She cried out with each delicious stroke until lightning coursed through her veins and her release splintered free.

Small sobs escaped with each panting breath as she tugged at his hair. Her inner muscles were still clenching when he crawled up her body. She wrapped her arms around him, and just as he slid into her, his fangs sank deep into her neck. She immediately screamed out as she climaxed again. Never could anything have prepared her for the mind-shattering, passion induced euphoria she soared in. Pleasure so intense made her feel as if she were floating above her own body.

Malachi's mouth worked at her throat while his cock pounded into her, deeper, faster, until he released his fangs from her neck, licked the punctures, and threw his head back to cry out his own release. His hungry lips came down on hers, and she felt the turmoil of another orgasm building deep inside her. His tongue coaxed, demanded, possessed, and she gave him everything he asked for and more. He shifted to reach for the nightstand, and she watched in fascination when he pulled a dagger from the drawer and drew it across his peck. Dark blood welled from the cut, and he returned the dagger to the nightstand.

He stared down at her with his onyx eyes that were now ringed in familiar silver. She knew what she needed to do, and when she sat up on her elbows and stared at the blood on his chest, he growled. She looked up at him, and he cupped the back of her head and slowly guided her mouth toward what would mark the beginning of her new life. She licked at him, and his coppery, tangy, spicy blood hit her tongue. She moaned when he tightened his hold on her, encouraging her to take more. When her mouth closed over the cut and drew deeply, he bucked his hips forward, impaling her once again.

He rammed into her once, twice, three times, and cried out in release again as she fed from him.

\* \* \* \*

Three weeks later, Geri and Malachi had found a quaint little cottage on the outskirts of Ransom. It was sea green with a white picket fence, had a barn and chicken house, and sat quietly nestled on one hundred acres of seclusion. Geri was unpacking the last box when Malachi walked into the kitchen.

“Come with me.” He held his hand out, and she didn’t hesitate to take it.

He led her out to the barn, and over to a stall in the corner. She peered in, giggled and jumped up and down while clapping her hands. “You got me a goat.”

“Yeah. Better watch him, though. He’s butted me twice already. He’s quite an ornery little fu—fella.”

She gave him a chastising look from under her lashes.

“What?” Malachi shrugged. “I quit smoking. It’s just going to take a little longer with the language.” He smiled when she grinned at him. “Don’t tell anyone I bought a goat for you. If the other hunters find out, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

She pulled him down for a slow kiss. “Does it really matter?”

“No. Not as long as I have you.”

“You know we need some nanny goats now, right? I mean, we can’t get milk to make cheese from old Fred over there.” Geri reached in and patted the goat on the head.

“Fred?” Malachi chuckled. “We can get as many girl goats as you want. I’m sure Fred will be extraordinarily happy over that.”

“Thank you.”

He hugged her. “You can thank me properly later.”

She playfully swiped his shoulder and wiggled her eyebrows. “What’s wrong with right now?” She giggled and sprinted for the door, but never made it.

She had gotten used to her new vampire senses fairly quickly with Malachi’s help, and they’d spent every night since he’d changed her making love and simply talking. Malachi had donated a huge sum of money to the local shelter, and now it was expanding and moving to be able to help more people.

The only strange thing that had happened—other than her becoming a vampire—was when she’d sat down to read the morning paper a few days ago. The headline read *Governor Mike Baxter, No More*. Apparently, an anonymous tip had lead to his arrest for stealing funding and election monies. When she’d mentioned it to Malachi, he’d stared at her, one brow raised, and never said a word.

The upside to that was, since Mike's lily white reputation had been sufficiently tarnished, several of her old clients had contacted her wanting her to go back to taking care of their finances. She'd even landed a couple new big accounts.

"I'm so happy. I love you so much." She lay under Malachi on the soft, clean straw where he'd foiled her playful escape, although she hadn't been trying very hard.

She giggled when he stood and started pulling his clothes off, and she tugged hers off as well. She admired his broad chest and six-pack abs, and licked her lips when her eyes rested on the small black rose nestled on his hip.

He trailed his eyes down her body and stopped at her hip. She had no doubt he was looking at the exact replica of his black rose that colored her skin. She'd been surprised when it had shown up suddenly after Malachi had changed her. When she'd asked him about it, he'd told her it was a mated mark. They would both have it forever unless one of them died. If he died, hers would disappear, and vice versa.

She'd never thought a rose could look so sexy on such a masculine man, but Malachi knew how to sport it like no other could. She gave him her best come-hither smile, and crooked her finger at him. He took her up on her invitation, blanketed her body with his, and cupped her face between his hands.

"Thank you for making me the happiest man alive. I love you." He lowered his head and kissed her.

## Epilogue

Ashe, Aiston, Aldin, Avril, Ebony, and Alaina sat in the family room. Ebony and Avril were sobbing. Ashe looked at his brothers and knew they felt like crying themselves. Pain throbbed in his chest, but the urge to kill someone raged in him nearly as strong as the sadness. Ebony clung to him, and he caressed her back, trying to give her some measure of comfort while Aiston did the same with Avril. Aldin sat in the chair across from them, staring at the floor, a tick pounding in his jaw with every heartbeat. Alaina sat beside him on the arm of the chair with her hand on his shoulder.

Their baby sister, Estril, had been savagely murdered. Her head had been delivered to their doorstep. Ashe was pretty sure that his brothers had come to the same conclusion he had. Trinidad had not died that night in the warehouse. Now they had to find the bastard all over again, and tell Malachi that the evil son of a bitch still breathed.

Estril had never hurt a soul. She'd been away for some time, and Ashe had mistakenly thought she'd be safer away than here with all the chaos with Trinidad and the drifters. Her murder had been a blatant attack directed toward the Aleksandrov's. Ashe would never rest until he'd made sure his sister's killer was dead, and his brothers would undoubtedly feel the same way. He rocked Ebony and stroked her hair.

"Shhh. It'll be okay, baby. It'll be okay." All the while knowing things would never be okay again.

A war had begun, and he had no idea who'd come out on top. His entire family was in danger. All of the hunters were. They had to stop Trinidad before he killed someone else.

\* \* \* \*

"My daughter is dead, Ragnor! She's dead!" Marilena sobbed so hard she fell to her knees.

"She's my daughter, too," Ragnor whispered.

"No! You walked away from our children when you refused to do anything to stop the prophecy."

"I know you are talking out of pain, Marilena. You know I love our children. You are the one who left and took them away from me. It is time that you tell our sons everything. You can see that no matter how you play with Fate, She's still going to get her way in the end, even if She's delayed a bit."

"No. This wasn't supposed to happen. Aldin still hasn't found his life mate, neither had Estril. The prophecy was not supposed to come about until all of our children found their *viata amants*."

"Don't you see? Fate just removed one of the obstacles. You are going to get another one of our children killed if you don't tell them everything." Ragnor knelt beside Marilena. "I mean it. You have to tell them about Uriah and the prophecy."

"No! They will hate me. They'll never speak to me again. I can't live without my children."

Ragnor put his arm around Marilena's shoulders. "I've had another vision."

Marilena shrugged Ragnor's arm off her shoulders. "Tell me."

"I still cannot see who is behind the uprising, but I do know that within the next year, Aldin will find his life mate. I also know that Uriah's *viata amant* is near. It was clear in my vision that the only chance they had for survival was standing together. You have to let them become what they were destined to be. If you don't allow them to find their life mates and come into their full powers, they will not survive."

"Oh my God! This can't be." Marilena sobbed.

"I never wanted this, but your stubbornness at believing I could somehow stop this has made matters even worse. I will not allow you to manipulate our children any longer. I will give you six months to tell them everything, and to set Uriah free."

"If I tell them, you know they will hate me."

"Possibly. But if you don't, they will die. You will tell them about me as well. I will be there when you do so. It is time for me to make my presence known . . . and remembered."

Ragnor raised one hand when Marilena tried to speak. "No. This is no longer negotiable. You have six months, Marilena. I suggest you start with Uriah, if it is even possible to make amends with him. After that, telling Ashe, Aiston, and Aldin will come easy in comparison."

All she'd ever wanted was to spare her children from the prophecy, and now she'd gotten one of them killed. They'd never forgive her, but she had six months. Six months to spend with her sons before they never wanted to see her again.

The End



## About the Author

S. K. Yule lives in a tiny Midwestern town with her husband and dogs. She is the author of Bestselling Paranormal Romance Novels, *Darkest Hours* and *Darkest Desires*, and Bestselling Paranormal Romance Novellas, *Jericho's Revenge*, *Lycan Lover*, *Lycan Lust*, and *Demon Scorned*.

She became a fan of monster movies at a very young age, and after reading her first paranormal romance several years ago, she fell instantly and irrevocably in love with the genre. The genre immediately sparked a desire to write about two of her favorites in life; love and scary things that go bump in the night.

For more information on S. K. Yule please visit: <http://www.skyule.com>.



