

BELOVED FOREVER

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Beloved Forever

Kit Tunstall

Chapter One

Emily shivered as a chill wind cut through her camel-colored fleece jacket, while also sending long strands of chestnut-brown hair around her face. She glanced over at Sara, who also shivered before burrowing closer to her boyfriend, Ron. She cast a quick look at Ron's cousin, visiting from a college two states away, and dismissed the idea of snuggling up to him. Within thirty minutes, she had realized she didn't like him.

"Where do you want to start?" Ron asked, slipping his arm around Sara to pull her even closer.

Troy scanned the fall carnival set up on the football field, and his nose curled. "It's all pretty lame."

Ron nodded. "Yeah. This is what Huxley Junior College spent the homecoming fund on."

Sara's lean face twisted into a grimace. "Whatever happened to dances? Who wants a stupid carnival?"

"I like it," Emily said. "It reminds me of being a kid again."

Troy eyed her slowly, focusing his eyes on her chest. "You aren't a kid, Em."

"Emily."

"Yeah, whatever. You're almost an adult. Wait until you transfer to NYU next year. Then you'll see."

She rolled her eyes, but gave him a smile. From the stories he had related thus far, Troy spent all of his college time partying, squeaking by in his studies and scoring with chicks. She doubted the last boast, but not because he wasn't handsome. He was. He was probably six-two and muscular, with thick brown hair and blue eyes. Too bad he ruined his handsome exterior every time he opened his mouth.

"How about the Spider?" Sara suggested. "When you go around the spin, it presses you against your partner." She grinned up at Ron.

She had no desire to share that ride with Troy, squished against him in a tiny car. "No." Emily leveled her voice. "No, I don't like that ride. How about the swings?" They were solo.

Troy laughed, and it held an edge of mocking. "'How about the swings.' Jesus. You really do want to be a kid again, don't you?"

She huddled deeper in the fleece jacket, staring at the ground and deliberately avoiding eye contact with Troy. "What do you want to do?"

His tone was suggestive. "How about the Tunnel of Love?"

Ron shook his head. "It's lame, Troy. They put up a big tent, and you ride these little cars through. Only lasts about two minutes."

Sara frowned. "How do you know? Have you been on with some other girl?"

He sighed loudly. "No. I came to the field earlier and watched when they were setting up." Ron's expression changed, becoming secretive and malicious. "You guys wanna see something?"

“What?” Emily looked at him with narrowed eyes.

He gestured them closer, so they were in a loose circle. “They have an honest-to-God freak. Like out of a show.”

Sara’s mouth dropped open. “Really? Where?”

Troy looked skeptical. “How do you mean freak?”

“He’s all twisted and deformed. C’mon. I’ll show you.”

“I don’t think so—”

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Em.”

She gnashed her teeth and trailed behind the three of them as they walked through the crowd, moving across the small carnival. Her feet crunched dead leaves on the field, and the wind picked up a little more, blowing dirt in her eyes. She blinked and slowed, removing her contacts to clear her eyes.

By the time she caught up with the three of them, they were standing in line for the funhouse. She bit her lip, hesitating to go inside, but reluctant to mention her fear of the barrels all funhouses had. As a kid, she had been afraid she would be sucked into one and never find her way out. That was before she realized how they worked, but the remnants of fear remained.

“Took you long enough,” Troy said.

She inserted one of the contacts in her left eye, and then the other in her right. Emily blinked until the world came into focus again. She shivered at the lurid images on the funhouse. Vampires seemed to be a big theme. In the near left corner, a caped Dracula-type prepared to feast on the neck of a girl wearing a Victorian-era dress. In the top corner of the trailer, a hoard of vampires moved across a cemetery, forever frozen in ferocious and twisted postures. The most chilling picture of all was the handsome face painted in the center of the trailer’s montage. His features were perfect, even if he was too pale, and his dark hair was combed straight back. He looked like any other model for any type of ad, except for the single drop of blood dripping down his chin from the corner of his mouth. His eyes held an element that made Emily shudder. She didn’t know why they bothered her. Maybe because the eyes seemed to possess terrible knowledge no human would ever know.

“I don’t want to go in.”

Sara groaned. “It’ll be fun, Emily.”

Troy put his arm around her. “We’re not here just for the funhouse.”

She shrugged him off and took a step away. “Then why—”

He pointed to the person taking tickets. “That’s why.” He snickered.

At first glance, she thought the man was simply a midget. Emily looked again when Sara gasped. She realized he was probably of normal height—or would be if his twisted spine didn’t cause him to stand in an awkward position, nearly bent over. It should have been impossible for him to stand at all. His legs

were stumpy and misshapen. He seemed to be missing one arm completely, but the other was industriously taking tickets and moving the turnstile to admit customers to the funhouse.

“He’s hideous.” Sara shuddered, burying her face in Ron’s jacket. She moved it away from her eyes so she could peek before shivering again. “Is that the freak?”

“Sure is. I saw him eating cotton candy earlier. Can you imagine? Something like that should eat stuff like fish guts and raw beef liver.”

“Yuck.” Sara’s disgust was evident, but also mingled with titillation. “How do you think it happened?”

Emily frowned at her friend’s avid curiosity. “The poor man was probably born that way. It’s amazing he’s standing and working.”

Troy laughed. “Amazing? It’s a freak show.”

The ticket taker suddenly raised his head, and his cloudy brown eyes seemed to focus on them. His face was the most misshapen of all, as if he had survived a fire. The skin had grown back in bubbles and raw pink areas. A flap of membrane had grown over half of his mouth and one nostril, barely missing his left eye. The flesh unaffected by what appeared to be fire damage still looked rough, bumpy and pale.

“Shush. I think he heard you.”

Troy shrugged. “Who cares? He’s probably a retard too. I bet he doesn’t understand a word.”

“Lower your voice,” Emily snapped, standing straight. “How would you like it if someone—”

“Spare me the morality lecture.” He forced a huge yawn, but his voice lowered an octave, taking on a theatrical lilt. “I bet he wasn’t born like that. He was probably evil and sent to the devil in a former life. He was forced to look like a demon while living among people like us.”

Sara and Ron absorbed every word, but Emily rolled her eyes again. “You know how often Satan assigns his minions to funhouse duties.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

She gave him a sweet smile, but didn’t answer as they advanced in the line. Once more, her eyes fell on the vampire dominating the funhouse’s façade. For a moment, she swore the eyes followed her. Then she shook her head and dug in her fanny pack for three tickets.

She froze when a bloodcurdling scream issued from inside the funhouse. Emily’s doubts about entering returned. The one and only time she had gone in, at the age of eight with Sara, she became stuck on the barrel, paralyzed with fear, and unable to go forward or back. Sara had to drag her through. She remembered her desperate flight from that small, smelly trailer. She had ignored the attractions, too consumed with the need to escape. The relief of reentering the bright sunshine that long ago summer day came back to her. “I really don’t want to go in.”

Troy shook his head. “Are you going to stay out and talk to the freak?”

Once more, the man looked in their direction, making Emily cringe with embarrassment at her friends’ behavior. She nudged Troy with her elbow and hurried forward to offer her tickets. Anything to get Troy

away from the poor guy. She yelped when he elbowed her in return, before cutting ahead of her.

Troy very carefully handed over his tickets. "That's one, two, three. See?" He pointed to the sign reading "3 Tickets for Admission", scrawled in sloppy red writing. "Exactly the amount I need for admission. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." The man's voice was surprisingly clear. His words were sharp and crisp with a New England accent, despite the flap of skin marring half of his mouth. "Three tickets for the time of your life."

Troy snickered. "In there? You have to be kidding."

The ticket taker gave him a half-smile. "It's to die for."

Emily waited for Sara and Ron to give their tickets. Neither said anything, but their repulsion was evident. The man didn't seem to notice, although his eyes looked like they were tearing up. Finally, reluctantly, she handed him three tickets.

He took the strip and paused, staring up at her. He shook his head and tried to give back the tickets. "No. You can't go in. This attraction isn't for you."

She reached for the tickets, but Troy intercepted. He pushed the man's hand away, causing him to drop the vouchers. Troy ground the tickets into the dirt, kicking them into a puddle of spilled soda and dirt, getting them muddy. "Look what you've done. You're useless."

The man frantically lifted the tickets and wiped at them before trying to hand them back to Emily. "You can't go in. Take these tickets back, and it won't count."

A frisson of fear pulled its way up her spine. She frowned and reached for the scraps of paper. "I'll just wait for you guys."

Troy shook his head, shoving the man's shoulder and sending him sprawling in the dirt. "Your job is to take the tickets, retard. Now take them, or I'll report you to your boss."

The man's eyes widened with fear. "Not the master."

"Yes, the master." Troy swaggered forward, grabbing Emily's arm to drag her forward. "I showed him."

"Yeah, a poor crippled guy who probably isn't all there mentally. You really showed him." She glared at him, even as she wondered if the ticket taker had been mentally impaired. His eyes had appeared intelligent, as had his words. His fear had transmitted itself to her, multiplying with her worry and making her even more reluctant to enter.

She hesitated at the entrance, confronted with a spiraling barrel. Red and green spun together in an almost hallucinogenic pattern. This must be like what her mother called an acid trip from her college days. Emily found her eyes focused on the whirling colors, unable to tear away her gaze. She watched them blend until she seemed to be seeing past the colors, to some shadowy place beyond.

"Jesus, just go." Troy pushed her forward.

Emily stumbled and cried out, falling toward the spinning barrel. She landed hard, smashing her elbow into the side of the portal. Once inside the barrel, she realized it wasn't moving nearly as fast as she had

thought, and scooted forward a few inches, until accustomed to the spinning. Then she got to her feet and walked sideways through the barrel, balancing herself with her hands against the smooth plastic until she emerged just in time to avoid having Troy push her out of the way, as he came up behind her.

“Took you long enough,” he said, shaking his head.

Emily turned her back on him, standing in the dark room and waiting for her eyes to adjust to the periodic bursts of strobe lights coming from the ceiling. She jumped when someone touched her arm.

“You’re so on edge,” Sara said.

“I hate these things.” She saw Ron trying to catch up with Troy, who hadn’t bothered to wait for anyone. “You know how much the barrel scares me.”

Sara appeared to shrug. It was difficult to tell by the way that the strobe light seemed to change everyone’s movements to slow motion. “You made it through with Troy’s help.”

“He pushed me.” She rubbed her elbow, grimacing at the pain shooting up her arm.

“He had to get you moving.” Her voice dropped. “Isn’t he cute?”

“Yeah. Too bad he’s a jerk.”

Sara sighed. “I can’t please you, can I? You’re never satisfied.”

“It isn’t that—”

“I’m not setting you up anymore, Emily. You won’t even try to snag a great guy like Troy.”

Emily gave up trying to justify her reasons for not liking her blind date. “Please don’t arrange dates for me in the future. The guys you’ve set me up with—”

Sara tossed back her blonde hair. “If it wasn’t for me, you’d never date. There’s always something wrong with them, isn’t there?” Her eyes narrowed. “Did you ever think maybe the problem’s with you?”

She tried to hide her hurt from Sara’s words. “Maybe.” She shrugged. “For whatever reason, I haven’t met a man who interests me.” Regardless of whether they were a set-up from Sara or someone of her own choosing, each boy she had dated in high school and college hadn’t measured up. She wasn’t sure to what standard she held them, but they all fell short, even if she didn’t know exactly what she sought in a partner.

Sara sniffed. “Yeah, well, you’d better change, or you’ll end up alone.”

Emily glared at her friend. “That’s fine with me. I like being alone.”

“Well, fine then. I’ll leave you alone.” Sara hurried after Ron and Troy, who had disappeared into the next chamber, not bothering to look back as she moved from Emily’s sight.

Emily watched her go, regretting the small argument. She had no desire to be alone in this funhouse. With feet frozen to the spot, she knew the only way out was through the funhouse or back through the barrel. She glanced through the spinning barrel—careful not to fixate on the colors this time—and saw a

new group preparing to enter.

She forced her feet forward, moving from the dark entryway to the next chamber, freezing when she saw hundreds of clones surrounding her. Emily almost cried out before realizing it was the hall of mirrors. Her eyes focused on a short, fat image of her, and she imagined how it must be for the man taking the tickets. Damn Troy for being such a jerk. People like him must make the man's life even more miserable.

She walked straight through the room, determined to escape the funhouse in record time. "Humph." Her breath left her when she ran into a wall directly in front of her. She blinked, trying to figure out why it was in the middle of the room. It took a long moment to realize it must be a maze of mirrors. She cursed under her breath and felt for the edge of the glass. The space next to it was empty air, so she slid around the mirror. "Why does it have to be so dark?" she whispered, reassured by the sound of her voice.

She held out a hand to find the next mirror and was able to take several steps before running into it. Emily felt for the edge and gasped as her finger caught on a sharp edge. She pulled away quickly and examined the wound under the meager light. A glass shard extended from her index finger, and she grimaced while yanking it out.

Emily searched in her pocket for a tissue and found a napkin she had stuffed there after their dinner of corn dogs and cotton candy. She wound it around the wound and eased past the next obstacle. To her relief, she entered a black-light room. She glanced at the walls, curious to see what other patrons had written with the special markers hanging in midair from steel lines attached to the ceiling.

Lifetimes of waiting, Emily...

You're mine now.

It's to die for.

She rolled her eyes at their silly messages. "Very funny, guys," she called out, hoping they could hear her. Briefly tempted to write a less than complimentary reply to them, she held back, knowing Troy, Ron and Sara wouldn't read her words unless they went through again.

She glanced at the messages once more as she exited the room and froze.

Eternity, Emily.

She frowned, certain that hadn't been there when she looked at the walls a second ago. She took a deep breath and relaxed, knowing her friends were responsible. Since Sara was angry with her, who knew what kind of tricks they might play. She scanned the room, searching for Troy, Sara or Ron hiding in a corner, but she was the only one in the small room. She took another deep breath, trying to restore her calm. The message had been there all along. In her distressed state, she had simply missed it the first time.

She hurried from the room, stopping in front of the stairs. She eyed them cautiously, expecting them to start shaking. They were probably motion-activated. She grasped the railings on each side, dropping the napkin wrapped around her finger. Emily bent to pick it up, but the stairs started to rattle, distracting her. She held onto the rails and climbed up each step. About halfway up, she realized they always trembled to the left, then back to the right before pausing for a moment. She counted the intervals before taking another step. As soon as she had it timed, she was able to walk up the remainder without fear of falling.

Emily emerged into the second level and gasped. The room was spinning. She reached out to grasp anything for support, but there was nothing to hold on to. Her head began to spin, and she grew nauseated. Several seconds later, she realized she wasn't actually moving. The room was round like a barrel, except for the walkway under her feet, which was flat, straight, and stationary. She concentrated on walking the thin strip of wood and ignoring the spinning walls and ceiling as she made her way through the room.

Emily was more cautious when she entered the next room, freezing when she heard a scream in the room in front of her. It sounded like Sara. Ron's voice followed quickly, but not Troy's. "Must be scary," she whispered, preparing herself.

The brightly lit room featured more lurid paintings, similar to those decorating the exterior of the funhouse. Stereotypical vampires drained women in various states of undress, as monsters of all kinds watched or went about their own scary activities. Frankenstein dragged the gnawed-on, severed leg of a villager behind him. She lifted her eyebrows at that, not remembering anything from her literature class about Frankie being a cannibal. Emily forced herself to view the drawings objectively and systematically eliminate any fear they inspired.

She calmed herself and was almost out of the room prior to realizing every vampire in the mural was the same one from the front of the funhouse. He still appeared sinister and full of dark knowledge, but also charismatic. She blinked when she found herself drifting from the doorway to a picture, touching it reverently, as if she weren't controlling her own hand. The vampire held a willing victim in his arms. She wore a light-brown jacket and jeans. Her brown hair flowed over the white of his shirt, and her blissful expression belied the pain she must feel from the gaping wound on her neck. He held her with tender cruelty, seeming enamored with her upturned face. She had Emily's features.

She blinked and looked again, frowning. The girl in the vampire's arms had long black hair and dark green eyes. The victim looked nothing like her. "Losing it." She shook her head and hurried from the mural room.

Emily took two steps into the next room and paused. There was nothing at all in the room, except a bare bulb hanging from a chain on the ceiling. It wasn't bright enough to show anything in detail, except the fact that there was nothing to show in detail.

They must have run out of money when they got to this room—either that, or the trick was so terrifying, they didn't need window-dressing. She shrugged and walked on, waiting for whatever had frightened Sara and Ron into screaming. Emily was determined to be prepared, but still screamed when the floor opened under her when she stepped on a trapdoor.

She went flying down a chute, and it wasn't until she landed on a soft foam floor that she realized the conveyance was a twisting slide. Her entire body trembled, and she had a hard time gaining her feet. She could hear her heartbeat racing in her ears and clutched her chest, as if trying to keep her heart from escaping.

When her knees were steady, Emily moved across the spongy floor. The owner of the funhouse was in the business of scaring people, but what she had gone through was beyond fun. She should have her father sue the company. It was too bad he was a tax attorney.

She opened a heavy metal door, expecting it to lead her outside the funhouse. Instead, she entered another room. This one had soft carpeting of indeterminate color, dark walls and a metal light fixture hanging from the ceiling. The illumination was dim, with a pinkish cast.



How had they gotten all this into one portable trailer? The better question was, why had they gone to the trouble to add this room? Emily moved slowly, not certain what to expect. It was logical that the climax should have been the unexpected drop and slide. Whatever finished out the experience must be bordering on truly terrifying.

She saw a misshapen bundle ahead and tensed, preparing for whatever the designer of the funhouse had dreamed up to scare her. She kept walking, trying to determine what was on the floor, until she heard a sound behind her. Emily turned, expecting the group who had followed her. Instead, the man who had modeled for all the vampire pictures stood in front of her. His features were just as perfect, but the light lent his skin the illusion of a flush. He wore a white flowing shirt tucked into black trousers. His hair had grown out from the short length in the paintings, but he was obviously the same person. She found her voice trapped in her throat as fear crawled up her esophagus and strangled her from the inside. She took a few steps back.

He followed, walking toward her slowly. "Have you enjoyed my funhouse, Emily?"

She shook her head.

He took another step forward. The carpet muted the click of the low heels on his leather boots. "Why not?"

Emily coughed, clearing her throat. "I don't like to be scared." She frowned when she realized he knew her name. "How did—"

He smiled, but the quick slash of his lips appeared to hold little amusement. "You were frightened?"

She nodded. "I was terrified. Especially with the last part."

He smiled. "The slide. It always increases the adrenaline."

"Uh-huh." She scanned the room around her, wondering if the owner interrogated everyone who paid to enter his funhouse. Had he gotten her name from Sara when he cornered them? "I've had enough fear today. How do I get out of here?"

He took two more steps forward, until he stood in front of her. "Silly girl." He reached out to touch her face.

Emily jerked away, taking a step back. She tripped over something on the floor and fell backward. Her eyes widened when she found herself sprawled across Troy. His lifeless eyes stared up at her. His mouth hung open in an aborted scream, and an expression of terror would remain frozen forever on his face.

"Forgive my attendant. He hasn't disposed of the remains of my most recent meal yet." The man stepped forward and lifted Emily into his arms.

She struggled to pull away, straining against his hold. "Where's Sara?"

He licked his lips. "Delicious. The adrenaline always gives the blood such perfect flavor."

Emily whimpered, even as she redoubled her efforts to escape his hold.

“Look into my eyes, Emily.”

She shook her head, forcing her gaze to remain on Troy’s dead body. She knew she mustn’t look into his eyes. Every instinct in her protested doing so.

“I’ve waited a long time for you,” he whispered, pressing his mouth against her ear, perilously close to her carotid artery. “An eternity, Emily.”

Her eyes widened when the deformed ticket taker shuffled into the room through a door off to the side. His eyes were sad when he met hers.

“Tried to warn me,” she whispered.

The deformed man squealed with pain, and a new sore appeared on his face, weeping clear fluid.

“Yes. He was foolish to risk more of my punishment, having experienced so much in the past.” The man lifted her hand to lick the thin trail of blood from her finger.

Emily reflexively watched the action, grimacing. She made the mistake of looking into his eyes and instantly felt as if she was gazing into the spinning barrel again. Only this time, there was no green to counteract the red. Only the bright crimson of fresh blood, coupled with the dark reddish-brown of dried blood. It was as if his eyes had sucked her into a whirlpool. Her body struggled to move closer to him, and her mind had no control over her actions.

She whimpered when he broke eye contact and lowered his head to her neck. She wanted to push him away, but her arms remained limp at her side. Only her head moved, tilting backward to allow him better access. A protest formed in the back of her throat when his teeth pricked her neck, but she couldn’t voice it. The wounds throbbed with heat, but not pain. Instead, a surge of ecstasy swept over her. Soft sucking sounds broke the silence, and she mentally cringed to know he was drinking her blood, even as her body clamored for more of the sensual sensations his bite evoked.

Her head spun incessantly, and she felt like she had fallen into a never-ending hole. Her eyes closed, and their conversation seemed to come from a long distance.

“Prepare for travel. We’ll be leaving in a matter of minutes.”

“What of the funhouse, Master Vallsade?”

“Leave it.”

“But—”

“It served its purpose. I’ve found what I sought.”

He caressed her face, and his fingers transmitted slivers of ice through her skin wherever he touched.

“The change has begun. She’ll be ready for travel as soon as she dies.”

Emily struggled to keep her eyes open. Someone shoved something against her mouth, and thick liquid trickled inside. She tried to spit out the coppery solution, but her mouth refused to obey her brain’s command. The viscous substance slid down her throat with no impediment. Even her gag reflex didn’t

respond.

“We will be at our destination in a matter of hours. She’ll have time to recover from this experience then. An eternity, in fact.”

His hard laugh accompanied her into a state deeper than unconsciousness.

## Chapter Two

Within minutes, she had drifted out of the deep coma-like state. Emily’s senses remained keen, even though she couldn’t open her eyes. She was conscious of a long period of pain. Like acid pumping through her veins, it coursed through every inch of her body, soaking her skin with perspiration, and feeling as though a fire burned inside her. She moaned, but no sound emerged. She still seemed to be caught in that frozen state Vallsade’s will had imposed upon her.

At some point, he carried her outside. A cool breeze whipped across her hot skin, but she couldn’t draw in a deep breath to cleanse her insides. Nor could she open her eyes. She could smell the mingled scent of sandalwood and blood emanating from him, and feel a solid mass beneath her when he laid her down, but didn’t identify it as the backseat of a car until she heard the engine turn over.

Sometime during the ride, the swaying and gentle rocking of the vehicle lulled her back into deep unconsciousness. She fell into a dream, tossing and turning. She whimpered and tried to force herself to awaken, but the dream overpowered her.

England, 1215

Emma opened her eyes at the furtive sounds issuing from the shadows of her room. She sat up in the massive four-poster bed, shivering as the cold air in the bedchamber invaded her warm cocoon. She pulled the fur coverlet up to her neck and scanned the recesses of the room.

She gave up on seeing anything and slid from the bed to light the candle on the table. Her bare feet touched icy stone, reminding her of how cold the room was. She frowned when she realized the fire had gone out. The chambermaid wasn’t tending to her duties, and would face reprimand in the morning.

Emma reached for the candle and gasped when someone arrested her hand in mid-motion. She opened her mouth to scream, and a cool hand clamped across her face. Her deep-green eyes widened when someone turned her around. Shock made her sway when she saw her betrothed standing before her.

“Leave off the light,” he whispered.

As soon as he dropped his hold, she took an involuntary step back. Her feet sank into the thick fur of the wolf hide draped across the floor, given by Nicholas one afternoon long ago. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up as a chill seized her spine. She crossed herself.

Nicholas frowned, taking a step back. “What troubles you, my beloved?”

“You are dead. News was brought by your kin upon his return.” She took another step back. “William told us you were killed in a battle near Jerusalem.” She heard him light the candle and a moment later, he was dimly illuminated.

“Do I look dead, Emma?”

She eyed him in the dark-blue tunic, yellow hosen, and leather boots. He looked much as he had when she last saw him in a hauberk and surcote, before he left England for the Crusades two years ago. His dark hair was several inches longer now, flowing over one shoulder, and his dark eyes seemed haunted. His skin was also paler than she had ever seen. Nicholas was a man who enjoyed the outdoors—hunting, practicing with his men and riding his stallion at breakneck pace through green pastures. His pallor gave her doubt of his good health.

“Well?”

“I cannot tell, sir.”

He frowned. “How could I be dead and stand before you?”

Emma shrugged and took another step back as he approached. She stopped only when she felt the chill from the stone of the fireplace at her back, shivering when he walked to her, pressing his body against hers. She yelped and tried to push him away. “’Tis indecent.”

Nicholas sighed. “We have wasted much time with being proper. Let me taste you, Emma. Join me.”

Her eyes widened at his seductive drawl, and she groped on the mantle for the cross she kept there. She felt an urgent need to hold it. “I know not if you are a fevered dream or my own heart’s longings, but you must leave, sir.”

“I am here and real.” He touched her bare arm, unprotected by the square-necked, sleeveless sleeping gown fashioned from white cotton. “Feel me.”

She cried out when he pulled her into his arms, pressing her against him. She could feel the coolness of his skin even through the thick tunic. Emma could hear his sluggish heartbeat where her ear pressed against his chest. She lifted her head, trying to keep any trace of fear from her voice. “I pray you will come back tomorrow, good sir. Father will surely wish to speak with you and make arrangements.” She forced a shaky smile, while keeping her eyes averted from his. He mustn’t see how desperate she was to have him gone. “’Tis a miracle you are alive. There is no reason to postpone our union.”

He grinned, displaying flashing white teeth. They seemed sharper than when she saw him last. “My thoughts mirrored, sweet Emma. I thought of naught but you while in distant lands.”

Her heart ached at the words, for she had thought of him every day for the two years he had been gone. Six months ago, when his brother brought news of his demise, she had thought her heart would never mend. Without William’s steadfast support these past few months, she couldn’t have endured the pain. “My heart wept without you.” She relaxed in his embrace, temporarily shoving aside her misgivings. Her body warmed to his touch, aching for something she didn’t know how to articulate.

“Oh, my love,” he whispered in an urgent tone, “I cannot be without you for even another day.”

Even in the swell of passion that threatened to overwhelm her, she stiffened when he pushed aside one of

her braids and placed his lips against her neck. He still felt colder than he should have, even for moving about in the middle of the night in midwinter. She renewed her search for the cross. Her fingers brushed against the smooth wood, and she grasped the large symbol in her hand. Nicholas seemed not to notice as he licked her neck, murmuring words she didn't understand. His hold tightened abruptly, and she whimpered.

Nicholas raised his head. "Do not fear. It shall not pain you for long."

Emma thrust the cross into his face, causing him to recoil. She stepped around him and away from the fireplace, keeping the cross extended. "I implore you to leave. Now."

His face reflected pain and fear, and he moved farther away from her and the cross. "Cast aside that cursed thing," he snarled. "Be not afraid of what I have become, Emma. 'Tis wondrous in many ways."

It did not look wondrous. Pain contorted his expression, with his upper lip skinned back to expose elongated fangs. He appeared to be suffering. She wanted no part of it. "Leave now or I shall scream. Father will send you back to the Hell you have come from if he finds you here in this form."

Nicholas took a single step toward her. "You are my betrothed. My promised one. Do not forsake me, beloved."

She forced aside her pity, refusing to acknowledge the pain in his eyes or the desperation in his stance. She wouldn't let his anguished tone or the clamoring of her own body affect her. Her immortal soul was much too precious. She had no name for what her former fiancé had become, but knew it must be evil. God Almighty must surely have turned his back on Nicholas. "Go now. I shall give you a chance to flee before I scream."

He gave a mocking bow, and all traces of hurting disappeared from his face. His haunted eyes turned cold. "So kind, m'lady. Mayhap we should see how well you scream with your throat torn out."

She swallowed heavily and opened her mouth to cry for help, but hesitated. Once the words left her, she couldn't call them back. She closed her mouth with a click, without shouting. "Go now, Nicholas. Do not be foolish. Father will slaughter you."

His lips twisted. "My existence cannot be undone by one such as your father."

Emma forced her voice to emerge clearly and confidently, denying what her heart told her. Her soul's urgings were stronger. "I could not love you as you are now. Leave me to my life with William."

He froze, as if rendered from stone. Finally, his lips moved, though barely, to ask, "What do you speak of?"

She met his eyes, knowing she could not betray a trace of fear. "William kindly offered to act in your stead. He has been my lord husband for a fortnight, Nicholas. I was reluctant when he first offered, but I love him now." *Never as I loved you*, her heart cried out, but she ruthlessly suppressed the betraying words. He would use any weakness against her.

He shook his head, sending long waves of black hair flowing around his sharp, devastated face. "I do not believe you." His brow furrowed. "'Tis not possible. You would be at Vallsade Manor were it true."

"William has been dispatched on an errand for King John." She hugged herself. "Vallsade Manor is too

large, and I have not taken command of the household yet. Nor do I wish to without his support. I opted to stay with Father until his return.”

Nicholas seemed to shrink before her eyes. He was normally tall and imposing, but his shoulders slumped forward, and a tear hung motionless from his lashes before falling down his cheek when he bowed his head.

Emma’s heart twisted with his pain, so closely mirroring her own. Why now did he return, just as her heart had begun to embrace another? She took a hesitant step toward him, reaching out her hand. “I did not know you lived still.”

“Lived?” He raised his head quickly. Rage distorted his features, and his eyes burned a dark shade of red. “You call this living? I am undead, my beloved.” He spat the final word. “I was desperate to return to you. I would have done anything.” His mouth curled. “I became this to return to you, only to find you wed to my brother.”

She jumped when he smashed his fist into the fireplace. Horror consumed her when he lifted his hand to examine the damage. A thin smear of blood marred the injured knuckles. Even as she went to him, she saw the bones in his hand moving under the skin—repairing and reforming to their former state. She froze inches away from him. “What have you become, Nicholas?”

He lifted his head, turning his gaze from his hand to her. “Vengeance given form, my faithless wench.”

She yelped when he jerked her into his arms, causing her to drop the cross. Emma beat her fists against his chest, but she might as well have been a fly for all the damage she did to his solid frame. He easily subdued her, crushing her against him in so tight an embrace that she could barely draw breath. Coldness emanated from him, seeping into her bones, and making her become limp. Deeper inside, a fire that had simmered swelled to an inferno, urging her to ignore her misgivings and surrender.

“Look into my eyes.”

She shook her head, barely finding the energy to do so.

“Do not defy me. Look into my eyes, Emma.”

Against her will, she felt her neck curving and her head lifting. Her dark green eyes locked with endless pools of scarlet-tinged ebony. She could see her own death reflected back to her. “Please, have mercy,” she whispered.

He ignored her plea and broke eye contact to place his mouth against her neck. His lips moved against her skin with feathery softness, evoking sensations that raced down her spine. Despite herself, she moaned when his tongue traced the vein pulsing in her throat. She arched her neck further, offering him more. The voice of reason was fading to a shadowy whisper she could barely hear.

Emma stiffened when his teeth penetrated her skin. A flash of sanity returned, and a scream built in her throat, but she couldn’t give it voice. Her body was no longer her own. She lay helpless in his arms, aware of every prick of his fangs as he greedily sucked her blood, and each corresponding shiver of pleasure her body gave in response. Soon, she was floating. His husky laugh brought a measure of lucidity, and she struggled to focus on his face when he lifted his head.

“From bridegroom to widower in a fortnight.” His eyes were cold, and he wore a humorless smile.

“William has tasted but one of your delights, beloved. Before the night is through, I shall taste them all.”

She wanted to cry as he carried her to the bed, but the tears remained locked in her throat in a thick ball when he lowered her to her feet beside the bed. Her body responded when Nicholas’s hands molded to her breasts, caressing her nipples through the dressing gown. She leaned against him, hiding her face against his chest, ashamed of her reaction. How could she let her body lead her to damnation?

His harsh inhalation as one hand slid lower to massage her hip returned Emma’s attention to Nicholas, instead of her introspection. She lifted her head to meet his eyes, seeing urgency burning there, but also tenderness. Anger emanated from him, but not in greater quantity than the love she could sense. It wasn’t desire leading her astray. It was love. Whatever he was, she could accept it, couldn’t she? Better that than to face another separation without end. When he had departed for the Crusades, her heart had broken, not knowing if she would ever see him again. Upon word of his death, she had wanted to die herself. Having him back now, no matter what he was, should be savored as a gift.

“My love,” he whispered, before moving his mouth down her neck, toward her breasts. “So long...”

“Yes.” Too long. Why hadn’t she spoken up when he announced his plan to join the holy wars? Would he have listened if she had sacrificed her pride and begged him to stay? What would have been different in their lives? For one thing, she wouldn’t feel a frisson of fear underlying the pleasure created each time he touched her.

Emma gasped when Nicholas stripped off her gown before taking one of her nipples into his mouth, as both of his hands went to her buttocks, cupping and pressing them to bring her pelvis in snug alignment with his. His cock pressed against the moist entrance of her pussy, held at bay only by the cloth of his hosen. When he flicked his tongue across her nipple, she could feel her own blood from his mouth as he smeared it over her body. The wound on her neck wept rivulets of life force in a steady stream. She reached up to touch it, almost jilted from the idyllic interlude, but his hand left her buttocks to catch hers before she could reach her neck. Nicholas lifted his head from her breast.

“Look at me.”

She looked up, compelled to obey the command in his voice, as surely as her body demanded she do so. Anything for his heavenly touch to continue.

“Do not fret, beloved. Lose yourself in this moment. Forget about anything my brother might have taught you and remember only me...your husband.”

“Yes, m’lord.” Slowly, her hand dropped back to her side, while his still held it. What had she planned to do with it?

“Touch me.”

Yes, that must be what she had been about to do. Emma ducked her head, too shy to meet his eyes when she stroked the bulge at the front of his hosen. Her eyes widened at the way his hard cock twitched at her light touch. “Does it hurt?”

“Nay.” He thrust his hips, pushing his cock deeper against her hand. “’Tis pleasurable.”

Curiosity compelled her to explore more of the length of him, but propriety stilled her hand. She couldn’t bring herself to cup his cock, nor could she withdraw.

He laughed, pulling her closer to him. She looked up to meet his gaze, searching for a trace of anger, and finding none. Her brow furrowed. Why would Nicholas be angry with her?

A blush heated her cheeks when Nicholas stepped away from her to strip off his surcote and hauberk. Still, she couldn't tear her gaze from his muscled chest, dusted with a sprinkling of dark hair. His skin was as pale as the moonlight spilling through the barred window, but wasn't unappealing. Her hand trembled when she reached out to stroke his chest. The stiff hairs tickled her fingers, and she smiled at the sensation, letting her self-consciousness slip away. Secure in his love, what did she have to fear?

He brought her against his body again, lifting her around the waist to set her on the bed. Emma leaned back with her arms behind her, staring up at him with awe. Something worried at the back of her mind, but looking into his eyes made it easy to banish all thoughts that didn't involve the moment unfolding between them. She held out an arm. "I love you."

He closed his eyes for just a second, as if savoring the words. Emma's insides melted at the vulnerability in his reaction.

Nicholas kicked off his boots and stripped his hosen with hurried movements. Emma's courage deserted her as his cock sprang free, and she averted her eyes from the nest of curls surrounding the shaft. Instead, she let her eyes remain on his chest as he walked forward with the gait of a panther. As he dropped onto the bed, pushing her onto her back, her nose wrinkled in response to the scent of blood. Was he hurt?

The thought fled when his mouth slanted over hers, and his tongue thrust inside to sweep the depths. She moaned, curling her fingers into his hair. A coppery taste lingered on his tongue, but she couldn't place it. As her mind tried to focus on identifying it, a kaleidoscope of colors whirled behind her eyes, and her thoughts scattered, becoming unfocused.

She closed her eyes when Nicholas's thumb slipped inside her pussy, stroking gently. She gasped when he feathered it across her clit, and her hips arched of their own accord, seeking more.

"Wanton," he said with a growl. His tone was a mix of affection and annoyance.

Emma opened her eyes, prepared to question his reaction, but got lost in the liquid depths of his dark eyes. Her own became unfocused, and a sigh passed her lips when she sank back into the erotic trance imprisoning her.

Her lids drifted closed when Nicholas's finger slipped inside her, probing at her entrance. She winced as he went deeper, but couldn't muster the energy to protest. It was more pleasurable than painful anyway, even when his finger was deep inside, wriggling against the walls of her pussy. Her hips were thrusting in leisurely time with his hand, and a sensation she hadn't experienced before was building inside, hovering on the edge of release.

"Surrender to it, my love."

Nicholas's coaxing whisper released the floodgates holding back her natural reaction. A sob escaped Emma when the sensation exploded inside her, feeling as though it dragged her stomach into her pussy, before small ripples of pleasure spread outward, engulfing her body. She clung to him, frightened and exhilarated simultaneously.



“Mine.”

His cold tone brought her back to reality. Her eyes snapped open to stare into his, and she remembered flashes of the events leading them to this moment. Her body still shuddered with pleasure, but fear was sweeping through her in equal measure. It increased at the frigid expression on his face, and the distant way he held himself as he fused his body with hers, as he said once more, “Mine,” with a manner of finality that sent a shiver up her spine.

Emma experienced a brief surge of pain at his possession and saw his eyes widen. She tried to move her mouth to explain William’s summons arrived the very day of their wedding, but her lips refused to form the words when her eyes locked with his. Lightheadedness swept over her, and the vortex of his eyes sucked her into a near oblivion.

“So, William has not tasted you.” He appeared unsettled, and the coldness faded for a moment, before he scowled again. “Nor will he ever.”

She lay still as death under his passionate onslaught, crying internal tears at their joining. Just minutes ago, her body had been singing with joy at his touch, but now everything had changed. In her many girlish fantasies of their wedding night, she had never thought their union would be like this. She had remained ignorant of the ways of coupling, but had expected Nicholas’s touch to be full of love when he demystified the experience. He had been so gentle with her scant moments ago, until it came time to join them. Maybe the action had reminded him of her marriage to William and rekindled his rage.

Her memory had returned, but she was too weak to fight against him. Tears slipped from her eyes when her body responded to each thrust of his, awakening with renewed sensitivity and building anew toward another release. A small sob escaped her when her body betrayed her with another orgasm, as Nicholas’s cock spasmed inside her. Out of his thrall, fear for her soul outweighed the cry of her body for his touch.

After dropping a gentle kiss against her forehead, he rolled away and stood up with his back to her. His shoulders bowed, and he made no move to touch her. He began to pace.

She tried to turn her head to see him when he moved from her line of sight, but couldn’t. Emma dared to hope he would leave, having had his revenge for her supposed sins. While she waited to see what he would do, she grew increasingly lightheaded. Even if he left now, she doubted she would survive the night. The keep’s physician would no doubt bleed her, while priests prayed for her, easing her passage to the next world. William would return home in a fortnight to find her dead. He truly loved her, and she dared not consider how he would take the news.

Emma decided her death would have no witnesses besides Nicholas when she felt the bed dip upon his return. His would be the last face she saw before death claimed her. She wouldn’t find comfort or solace in his harsh visage. His cold rage wouldn’t allow him to understand her actions.

A breath escaped her when he pulled her into his arms. She lay as still as a statue, unable to return his embrace as her life force ebbed.

“I forgive you, my beloved,” he whispered into her ear. “You will join me in eternity.” He leaned down to brush a kiss against her lips. “You are even more beautiful near death.”

She was able to voice a small whimper when his mouth returned to her neck. Once again, his fangs claimed her vein as his loins had so recently taken her innocence. Rather than pain, this time warmth

surged through her. Was it the flush of death, or something more?

Minutes later, when he lifted his head, she felt nothing at all, except cold and numb. When he slashed open his wrist with his own fang, she wasn't repulsed. Not even when he held the dripping wound to her opened mouth and let the blood flow inside did she try to resist. It oozed down her throat and lodged like a small ball of ice in her stomach.

“Soon, you will become. We will rest a while, until your death. Then I shall take you from here.”

Her unblinking eyes remained fastened on the ceiling as she felt unconsciousness slip over her.

“Open your eyes, Emily.”

She heard the summons from far away. The voice was so compelling that she struggled to cast off the dream holding her hostage. For a moment, she was frozen somewhere between Emily and Emma. Slowly, his voice grew stronger and penetrated the dream state, enabling her to blink open bewildered blue eyes.

“You must drink this to speed up the change.”

The man from the funhouse—Nicholas in her dream—hovered over her, holding a crystal goblet filled with dark-red liquid, which he pressed to her lips. She tried to turn her head, but found herself still unable to move. Once more, coppery fluid flowed into her mouth, but this time she choked as it dripped down her throat.

“Drink it all.”

“Perhaps it is too much, master?”

“I know what she needs. Leave us, Tremont.”

Emily's chest was heavy when she tried to draw in a deep breath, with no success. It was as if she wasn't breathing at all. To her relief, he withdrew the goblet. His face moved closer to hers, and she could see the silver rings around his pupils, the only color in his eyes aside from black. Stubble was forming on his chin, indicating he had been too busy to shave.

“Sleep now, my beloved. Dream of other times and other lives.” He lifted her hand and kissed the palm.  
“Dream of me.”

As if obeying his command, her eyes closed as though they had tiny weights tied to them. She returned to the dream of Emma.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emma woke early in the morning and turned her head. She realized she could now move and scooted away from Nicholas's still form. He seemed to be in a death-like state. His chest barely rose and fell, with long seconds between each shallow breath. He would have looked dead, but his skin wasn't pale enough—because of her blood?

Moving carefully, she slid from the bed and examined herself in the cheval looking glass. Dried blood smeared her pure white skin in several places. Heavy purple shadows bruised her eyes. Crimson streaks had dried on her lips, and she hissed with disgust when the stench and taste of blood flooded her nose and mouth. It was only a memory, but was nonetheless repulsive.

Now she knew what her love had become. Vampire. The villagers whispered such words in the night, blaming the creatures for the Plague, deaths of cattle and small children, and any number of misfortunes. She hadn't known whether to believe or not, until now. She had become one. She knew she must be. She could hear the birds outside her window stirring in their nests and feel the wild ones moving in their dens far away. Their heartbeats echoed in her ears, as did those of the people stirring in her father's castle and the village beyond. She was more alive and infinitely less alive than she ever had been in her life.

Emma racked her brain, struggling to remember the cures for vampirism. All she could recall were methods to kill them permanently. Holy water, a stake through the heart, sunlight—

She didn't think twice before rushing to the window in her room. The first rays of sunlight streaked across the sky, and she thrust her bare arm through the iron bars in place for protection during a siege. She waited for incredible pain to consume her as the sun touched her fingers, but the only pain she felt was an aching between her thighs that had been with her since waking. She frowned and reached out farther, until the sun touched her wrist. There was still no burning.

“'Tis not strong enough yet to harm you,” Nicholas said from behind her. He sounded bored. “Even at the highest point of midday, it would do naught but turn your skin a light red, and that would take hours. We are more sensitive to sunlight, but it cannot kill us. You will probably never again ride through a meadow on a summer afternoon, but nor will you find escape in so innocuous a source.”

She cried out with frustration and whirled away from the window. “I curse you to Hell for what you have made me.”

He laughed. “I have given you eternity in my arms, beloved.”

Emma shook her head, clamping her hands over her ears. “I do not want it.” But a small part of her did want it...wanted him...and everything accepting him would entail. She shook her head more vigorously, struggling to deny the urge.

“We shall be together forever.” He spoke more loudly so she could hear.

She tore her hands from her ears to glare at him. “I did not ask for this.”

His lips curved into a mocking smile. “Think of it as a second chance. I heard those words once, when I thought I had lost everything.” Nicholas's cold laugh filled the room. “Look where they brought me.”

She huddled on the floor, and a wail broke from her, ignoring Nicholas when he rushed forward and tried to quiet her. She broke away from him somehow and crawled across the floor. Salvation beckoned.

“Where will you go that I cannot follow? I will always return you to me.”

She blocked out his confident words and focused on getting to the cross lying so near. He moved behind her as she reached for the cross, stepping on her hand. She grasped the wood in her hands and screamed as it burned into her flesh. Her expression mirrored her agony when she looked into his eyes.

Arrogance reflected back at her, but it was tinged with fear.

“Hurts, does it not? I have heard you may overcome the pain if you stop believing.” Nicholas’s mouth twisted. “I have not yet been able to overcome a lifetime of indoctrination.”

She forced herself to endure and even embrace the pain. The cross was her only way back from an eternity of evil. She knew she could never go back to her days as Lady Emma. Nor could she stand a half-existence as what Nicholas had made her, much as her heart wanted her to give in so she could be by his side. Sweet oblivion was the only alternative.

He ground his foot on her hand. “Release it before you burn through your flesh, foolish girl.”

Emma shook her head and gritted her teeth. She forced her wrist to twist unnaturally so she could touch the cross to the bridge of his bare foot. A savage grin split her face when she heard him scream. He backed away, and she hugged the cross against her as she sat up.

His eyes narrowed and focused directly on her face. “Do not, Emma. I command you to release it.”

She felt her arm go numb, and her hand loosened on the cross at his severe tone. She concentrated on maintaining her grip.

“Look at me.”

Sweat beaded her forehead when she brought the cross against her arm, searing the flesh, and blocking out his summons.

“It shall not work. You cannot burn yourself to death with that. You could not if you crucified yourself to a full-size cross.”

She forced her mind away from his voice, making her fingers grasp the wooden symbol firmly.

His voice dropped an octave. “Put it down.”

She raised her arm high in the air, preparing herself.

A hint of desperation crept into his tone. “Suicides go to Hell.”

She turned her head and looked at him, finding it easier to resist the dark pull of his eyes and the dark urgings of her own heart. “I am already dead.” She turned her head away from him again and closed her eyes, sending a prayer to her maker.

Emma bit her lip, wincing as a newly grown fang broke through the tender skin. In one last movement of desperation, she grasped the cross in her hand and brought it toward her chest with all her strength, impaling herself with the blunt end. The strength borne from the change aided the unsharpened stake in its quest for her heart. It was as though a fire had consumed her chest cavity, searing away her heart in a single burst of agony.

Her final scream was mingled pain and pleasure. She had escaped eternal damnation. She only hoped it wasn’t too late for redemption.

Emily's eyes snapped open, and she sat up in one jerky motion with a scream trapped in her throat. She could still feel the burning wound from the cross and lifted her T-shirt—someone had removed her jacket at some point—to check for a wound. The skin around her lacy white bra was as smooth and creamy as ever. It had all been a dream.

She blinked and looked around the room, realizing everything was fuzzy. What had he done to her? Her eyes burned, and she couldn't focus on anything. She reached up to take out her contacts for cleaning. Upon removing them, the room came sharply into focus. She frowned. Her vision was never good enough to see across a room without her lenses or glasses, yet she could read the hands of the small chrome clock on the opposite wall: 11:00. But was it a.m. or p.m.?

Emily turned her head to look out the window, but heavy drapes blocked the view. She scooted to the edge of the large bed, briefly noticing how smooth and silky the coverlet was, and swung her bare feet onto the floor. They sank into plush black carpeting as she leaned forward to put the contacts on the black lacquered nightstand.

Lightheadedness swept over her, and Emily paused to rest before attempting to stand. Her gaze drifted around the room, taking in the obvious opulence. Black lacquered dressers and tables of a sturdy and antique design complemented the black carpet. Red accent touches like the drapes, coverlet, and swirls in the marble mantle above the fireplace brought the only relief to the stark color, aside from small touches of chrome. Even the walls were black. She tilted her head to examine the ceiling, finding it too was black. What a depressing color scheme.

Emily took a deep breath and realized she had drawn in only a shallow breath. Her chest seemed paralyzed and incapable of taking in sufficient oxygen, but how could it be? She couldn't live on tiny breaths. Fear filled her again when she recalled the last moments of her dream as Emma.

How much had truly been a dream? It wasn't the first time she had dreamed of people in the past, but never in such detail. Only brief snatches here and there. She couldn't remember having dreamed of Emma before, and certainly never *as* her.

Her stomach gurgled and clenched, reminding Emily how hungry she was. She had no idea how long she had been unconscious in this place, but she had to escape. Her parents must be worried sick. She blanched, imagining how Sara and Troy's parents would feel when they learned what had happened to their children. Ron probably shared their fate, although she had not seen him or asked about him.

She gained her feet on trembling legs, feeling worse than the time she had the flu and ran a hundred-and-five fever. She had the same disconnected sensation in her head, but the sharp pangs of hunger kept her focused on the here-and-now.

Emily shuffled to main black door and twisted the highly polished chrome knob. It made a quarter-turn before freezing. She tried the other direction, with the same result. As she had anticipated, he had locked her in. Her captor wasn't likely to make escape easy for her, after all.

She moved to the next door, finding a walk-in closet. The wardrobe was bare, save for her fleece jacket hanging neatly on a hanger. She slammed the closet door and hurried across the room to the last door, twisting the chrome handle, and finding a bathroom. Like the bedroom, the colors were black and red, with small touches of silver chrome.

She walked across the shiny black tile, wincing at the coldness against the soles of her feet, and propped

her elbows on the counter. She bowed her head forward and turned on the chrome faucet. When the water was cold enough, she splashed handfuls on her face, hoping to dispel the lingering fuzzy feeling. When she lifted her head, she saw her reflection in the mirror and winced. Her skin was deathly pale. Huge purple bruises under her eyes dominated her face. Crimson smears of blood, freshly moistened by her clumsy face washing, trailed across her cheeks. Once again, she remembered Emma's image reflected in the antique mirror and couldn't help noting the similarities to her current appearance.

Emily hastily averted her eyes from the mirror and lifted a fluffy red towel from the rack. After drying her face, she examined the rest of the bathroom. Aside from the grimly depressing black decorating scheme, it was unremarkable.

Feeling slightly refreshed, she left the bathroom and returned to the room where she had awakened. Once more, Emily tried the door. She twisted the knob viciously back and forth, and then rattled it. When the door failed to yield, she pounded on it, raising her voice. "Let me out," she cried repeatedly. Her tone started out firm and demanding, but as the minutes passed without any acknowledgement, her voice weakened, as did the impact of her fists against the black door.

Finally, she sank to her knees on the thick carpeting and stopped shouting. As tears streaked down her cheeks, she found herself thinking maybe it was better to be ignored than noticed. Who knew what the man planned to do to her?

She crawled across the floor and climbed back onto the bed. Her head pounded, and her stomach twisted itself in knots. Her entire body ached for something, but she didn't know what. As she lay in the dark, staring up at the black ceiling, Emily became aware of the sounds outside. Traffic, horns and music merged into a thunderous cacophony, indicating she was in a large city. Most of all, she could hear the millions of heartbeats pounding as one inside her head. Her stomach growled, and she had the urge to hold a still-beating heart in her hand. To taste the lifeblood pumping from the organ, before the heart ceased beating when it discovered it had been severed from its body. She longed to savor that eternal stillness, to take it inside her as part of her forever.

Emily cried out at her disturbing thoughts and buried her head under the pillows. The pounding in her head didn't diminish. Nor did the hunger surging through her. A keening cry broke from her as she struggled to suppress the dark thoughts and emotions overwhelming her. She tried to deny her hunger for blood, even as her body clamored for sustenance.

### Chapter Three

She heard a key in the lock, followed by the twisting of the doorknob, several hours later. Emily's eyes reflexively darted to the small chrome clock, which read 6:00, still not knowing whether it was a.m. or p.m. She slid into a sitting position on the bed and was in the process of gaining her feet when the door opened. He stepped inside as she stood up.

For several seconds, he stared at her. His eyes moved over her face, down her body and back to her eyes again. She shivered under the scrutiny and crossed her arms over her chest. Emily's voice remained locked in her throat, smothered by fear.

He walked toward her, moving with such inherent grace he appeared to be floating. His body was fluid perfection, with each muscle visibly contracting under his pale, smooth skin—at least the sections

showing around the black silk shirt unbuttoned to his waist. Unlike when he had taken her in the funhouse, his skin bore no flush. Instead, he was pale. On anyone else, the pallor would have made the person seem ill, but it only added to his captivating appearance.

When he stopped before her, almost within touching, Emily took a step back. Her leg collided with a nightstand, and she winced when the sharp edge gouged her skin through the denim pants.

His lips curved into a smile. His eyes gleamed seductively. "Welcome, Emily." The words sounded like velvet given a voice. "I trust you slept well."

Was there a hint of mocking to his tone? Her eyes narrowed, and she was able to summon her voice. "What have you done to me? Why am I here? Who are you?" The questions tumbled from her in a rush.

"All answers will come in good time." He took another step forward, reaching out to touch her hand.

She jerked her arm away and stared up at him with frightened eyes. "Why me?"

His expression grew troubled, and his eyes clouded. He turned his head from her to avoid her gaze. He wore a brooding expression. "The dreams will give you all the answers, beloved. You know some of it already. Who I am and what you are. Don't you, Emily?"

She shook her head, denying the truth. "It was just a dream. It doesn't mean anything. I don't know anything."

He snorted softly. "Resist if you must. The memories will open your eyes soon enough."

"Please, let me go home." She hated the weak, pleading tone in her voice, but couldn't force a defiance she was far from feeling. She longed only to return to her own room and her boring family. Emily would give anything to hear her father complain about changes in the tax code or her mother prattle on about her friends. Even her butthead little brother's practical jokes would be welcome.

He shook his head. "You are home. It isn't Vallsade Manor, but we make do."

She blinked at the familiar reference. "How did you—"

His head dipped lower, placing his mouth near her ear. "Memories have become dreams. You've had them all your life, haven't you?"

Refusing to meet his eyes, she jerked her head away. "Just dreams. Nothing more."

"Dreams of other times, other lives. Dreams of another you. Dreams of me, perhaps?"

Emily shook her head. "Never of you. A shadowy man sometimes, but he has no face." She shuddered, remembering snatches of the dreams that had haunted her since childhood. "Such power and danger."

His lips curved into a smile, flashing his fangs. "Me."

"No. I don't believe it."

He sighed. "You will accept the truth as the dreams become more vivid."

Her eyes widened. “More vivid?”

“Like the dream of Emma.” He touched her face, ignoring the way she stiffened. “The memory of your former self.”

Emily shook her head again. “I don’t believe in that junk.”

“Reincarnation?”

“It’s nonsense.”

He shrugged. “You will learn, beloved.”

Her shoulders tightened. “Stop calling me that.”

A bittersweet smile curved his lips. “You once lived to hear the words fall from my lips.” He chuckled. “Now you have died to do so.”

She stepped away from him, placing several feet between them before turning around. “I don’t know you. Why won’t you believe that?”

His expression hardened. “You do know me, but you’ve forgotten. You will know me again. This time forever.”

Emily’s eyes connected with his. A frisson of terror slithered down her spine at his words. “You’re obviously some kind of nut job.”

To her surprise, he laughed. “Sweet Emily. Ever the brave one.”

Before she could blink, he stood beside her. Emily turned her head, finding her face inches from his chest. “How did you move like that?”

“It is natural now. One day, you’ll know how too.”

Tears sparkled in her eyes. “Please, please, please. Just let me go home. I won’t tell anyone about this. I swear.”

His dark eyes grew cold. “As I have said, you are home. You belong to me, Emily. Get used to the idea. Your life as Emily Swesso is over. She’s dead.”

She clapped her hands over her ears. “No.”

He dragged down her hands, holding them locked in a vise-like grip at her sides. “I killed her. The new Emily was born in a rush of death and pain.” His expression became tender. “My Emily.”

A sob broke free when she tried to wrench away from him. A cry tore from her lips as pain shot up her arms, and she failed to escape his hold. “I don’t belong to you. I’m Emily Swesso—twenty, just finishing my last year of junior college with a 3.9 GPA and transferring to NYU next fall. I hang out with my friends, and just got a new car after earning the down payment working at the grocery store. None of this is real.” Her voice had continued to rise, and she shouted, “You aren’t real!”



He slapped her. Not hard enough to bruise or even make her fall, but the sting of his palm against her cheek quieted her. “Your stubbornness will get you nowhere. Aren’t you hungry, Emily?”

At his words, her stomach twisted and convulsed, as if tying itself in knots. Sweat streamed off her body, and her heartbeat pounded in her ears—no, not her heartbeat. Rather, the heartbeat of the entire city. The dark thoughts that visited her earlier returned in crashing waves. Her legs trembled, and she nodded, too weak to speak.

“Show me you’re beginning to remember who you are, and I’ll let you feed.”

She bit her lip, wincing as a sharp tooth slid through the skin. He must have splintered it during the kidnapping. She stared up at him with confusion. Her need battled her will. Although aching for food, she couldn’t give into his deluded fantasy. If she played along, she would be lost forever. “I am Emily Swesso,” she said in a clear, strong voice. “I’m not Emma, or whomever you want me to be. You probably drugged me, which caused the crazy dream.”

His shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. “Why must you resist?” he whispered. Then he ran a hand through his long black hair. “I will return to you in a while to see if you have accepted the truth.” He moved away from her, heading toward the door.

Emily rushed past him, throwing herself at the door. She reached for the handle and twisted it. A sharp pain shot up her arm from her hand, and she looked down. In place of the doorknob, she held a fat black snake in her hand. Its skin was scaly, but not slimy. It had buried its teeth in the back of her hand. With a scream, she tried to cast it away from her. The tenacious snake’s fangs stayed buried in her hand.

She shook it, trying to dislodge the serpent. Emily looked down, and another scream ripped from her throat. An oozing mass of snakes slithered around the door. Green, brown, red and multicolored skins blended in a riotous display. Short, thin snakes oozed over fatter, slower snakes. Several of the larger ones were dining on their smaller compatriots, and Emily could smell the coppery stench of their blood fill the room. The faint bitterness tainting the odor curbed her hunger. Several of the snakes hissed at her when her eyes fell on them, as if warning her away. She heard the rattle of a rattlesnake and turned to run.

Emily collided with him. He stood behind her, with his arms crossed. He looked calmly at the snake attached to her hand, then at the snakes slithering around the room. His expression didn’t change.

She whimpered when one crawled across her bare foot. Looking down, she saw a blood-red snake with a black face squirming over her foot. It opened its mouth to hiss at her, and she saw glistening drops of clear fluid drip from the snake’s wickedly sharp fangs. Was it venom? “Please.”

“Please, what?” He sounded bored.

“Make them go away.” Emily cried out when the snake struck without warning, burying its fangs in her ankle. Her head started spinning as pain coursed up her leg in throbbing waves simpatico with those issuing from her hand. The red snake continued on its way after tasting her, moving far from the path of the man in front of her.

He lifted her hand and grasped the snake by the back of the head. He squeezed so hard blood oozed around his fingers, accompanied by a small cracking sound. The snake went limp, and the fangs slid from her flesh. He held up the dead snake to show her the crushed skull. “So easy.” His voice was a husky whisper. “Such a fragile thing, and so easily crushed.” His eyes locked with hers. “Imagine the pain.”

It was as if a hand grasped her skull and squeezed. Emily gasped and reached up with both hands, trying to pry away the invisible forceps. Her body became one mass of agony, between her head, hand and ankle. She cried out and fell to her knees. The snakes surrounded her, crawling over her legs and feet. She wanted to brush them away, but most of her attention remained focused on the crushing pain in her head. “Stop,” she forced out through gritted teeth.

“What is my name?”

The question was unexpected, and her mouth fell open. She took a deep breath, trying to combat the anguish he inflicted. “I don’t know.” Her voice was a reedy whisper, completely lacking the conviction she planned to interject.

The pain grew sharper, and pressure filled her skull. Emily’s eyes bulged outward, and she vomited on the carpet. A scream rose in her throat, but she had no voice to give it life. Once more, she heaved, disgorging the remainder of the meager contents in her stomach. A fresh wave of nausea swept through her when she saw the red-black color of her vomit. It looked like blood.

He knelt before her, brushing aside the snakes casually. “Say my name, and the pain will end.”

She whimpered and tried to fight back the word hovering on her tongue. Uttering it gave his insanity validation. She was determined not to give in, but the name forced its way through her locked teeth, as if she were not in control of her own tongue. “N-nich-nicholas.”

The pain eased immediately. She dropped her hands from her head to support herself and touched soft carpet. When she looked down, all the snakes were gone. Only the vomit remained. She looked at the back of her hand and saw the wound close before her eyes. By the time she leaned back and brought her ankle up for inspection, the skin was smooth and unmarred—as if the bite mark had never been there. Was it all an illusion?

Her eyes were wide, and she felt a phantom pounding in her ears, though she could barely hear her own heartbeat thumping faintly. “Where did the snakes go?” Her voice emerged as a rasp.

Nicholas pushed the hair off her face and smiled at her. He didn’t answer her question. “Obey me, and there will be no more need for unpleasantness.”

She swallowed back a protest at the quaint description of unpleasantness. The last few minutes had been torture and terror, but nothing so easy as unpleasantness. “Never.”

He sighed, but his anger didn’t appear to return. “Never is a long time, my beloved. Rest now and dream. When I return, I may allow you to feed.” With one last caress of her cheek, he got to his feet and walked to the door.

Emily reached out for him, but her hand missed his leg. “I’m so hungry.”

He opened the door, not giving any indication of having heard.

“You can’t do this to me. You can’t starve me to death. What kind of monster are you?”

He half-turned to look over his shoulder. “Enough,” he said impatiently. “Sleep.”

“I’m not—” Even as the protest formed, Emily’s eyes grew heavy. Her body relaxed, and she slumped forward. She was vaguely aware of him returning to lift and carry her to the bed, but was unable to pull away from him. Within seconds of her head touching the feather pillow, she was asleep.

1511, San Juan Bautista (Puerto Rico)

He didn’t seem to be like the Spaniards. The differences went deeper than his pale skin and dark hair, or his name of Nicholas, which sounded nothing like the others’. There was darkness in his eyes that drew her in. They seemed to watch her every move since his arrival at Boriken—or San Juan Bautista as the foreigners called the island—a few days ago.

Erukán’s eyes were just as quick to follow him. Something about the man drew her to him. She had seen many foreigners in her fifteen years. The Spaniards invaded her home just a few years before her birth, so she had never known the glorious times when the Taíno were free, or when her father’s status of Cacique still meant something. All she had known was the casual cruelty of the men who had invaded her home. Her knowledge of glory days came from tribal elders.

He was different. He didn’t assume he could have any woman near him, and he had not beaten anyone in the days she had watched him. He kept strange hours, often sleeping through the afternoon, but when disturbed from his slumber, he might be impatient, but never violent.

She loved him. Erukán had no idea when it had happened. Perhaps the moment their eyes locked when the latest ship from Spain arrived. She had stood in the pre-dawn light watching the men unload the dark-skinned African slaves and had noticed the way he knelt to assist an elderly slave to his feet after one of the Spaniards knocked him down.

How could she love him when they had never even spoken to each other? It made no sense, but she knew him in a way she couldn’t explain. He had haunted her dreams, even before his arrival on the island. She shivered as a dream fragment came back to her. It was the one she hated, of the woman with the cross so similar to the ones the Spaniards worshipped.

Erukán blocked out the memory and slipped across the rocky shore to follow him. She knew his destination, if he followed his pattern of the past few days. Near sunset, he always went to a private section of beach where few ventured. After bathing, he would slip into the foliage and return anywhere from a few minutes to an hour later. Once he washed his face, he would return to the settlement. She didn’t know what he did during his trips into the undergrowth and hadn’t been confident of her ability to follow silently.

She stopped several feet from him, pressed herself behind a large rock, and leaned out to watch him disrobe. Her cheeks flushed pink when he stripped off the leather tunic, followed by the boots and trousers. She couldn’t keep her eyes from drifting to his lower body, to admire the size and shape of his cock, resting on a bed of dark curls that beckoned her fingers to run through them. Although she had seen him nude every night for the last four, his body still awed her. Never had she seen skin so pale, even on the Spaniards, whose olive skin was no match for her own deep bronze, and certainly not on the imported slaves, with their skin of matte black.

She held her breath as he walked into the gently rolling waves. From her vantage point, she couldn’t clearly see the details of his body, but the bunching of his muscles and the fluid way he moved was visible, making it difficult to breathe. Warmth spread through her body, seeming to radiate from her

pussy. She knew the ways of men and women, thanks to her mother's warning to avoid the Spanish men. Her mother's description of rape had haunted her, making her wary of any man, but for the first time in her life, she wanted to lie with a man—him. Nicholas.

He stayed in the warm water for several minutes before returning to the sand. He perched on a rock near the waves until his pale skin had dried in the fading sun before slipping on his boots and trousers, but leaving the leather tunic hanging over the rock.

She watched him disappear into the jungle and dared to slip away from her hiding place. Erukán's eyes darted around the stretch of sand, seeing no one. On fleet feet, unimpeded by the heavy brown dress she had wound around her hips and tied at her waist, she went to his tunic and lifted it, burying her face in the leather material to inhale his scent. Her nose wrinkled at the faint smell of old blood, not quite masked by the mingled scents of sandalwood and perspiration. Had he injured himself?

"My little follower," he said in a smooth, rough voice, with an accent different from the others.

Her eyes widened when he spoke behind her, and she whirled to face him. He stood inches from her, and her stomach quivered. Never had she expected to stand so close to him. Her heart pounded in her ears, and she dropped his tunic. Erukán ran from him, but skidded to a halt when he was suddenly in front of her again. She blinked, and then looked back at the rock. "I—"

He smiled, revealing even teeth with pointy incisors. "You speak Spanish."

"I went to the school in Caparra for a time." She couldn't believe her first spoken words to him were about her enforced education. At least she hadn't blurted out her tender feelings.

He stared at her in silence, and then reached out to touch her coarse dark hair, bound into braids. "So different in appearance, but I recognize your soul."

"I do not understand."

Nicholas smiled at her. "You do not have to. Come with me, Erukán."

She frowned. "You know my name?"

He nodded. "I know all about you." He took her hand and led her back to the rock, where he knelt to pick up his tunic. "You are the reason I am here, beloved."

His use of that endearment stirred shadowy cobwebs in her memory. Her frown deepened. "I am? But, why?"

He sat on the rock and pulled her down beside him. "A woman I met nearly a hundred years ago—"

Her eyes widened. "A hundred? How can that be?"

Nicholas pressed a finger to her lips. His eyes clouded, and his mouth twisted. "I knew her briefly. Her gift of sight led me to you." He must have seen her confusion. "I had despaired of ever finding you again. She told me to seek out Ponce de León to find my lost love."

"The governor?"

He nodded and put his arm around her. “Yes. She told me I would understand when the time was right. I awoke a few months ago and knew where you were, as surely as I know myself.”

Erukán shook her head. “You are confusing me.”

Nicholas shrugged. “You will remember after the change. She told me the memories would return as dreams, with a little prodding from me.”

“Dreams?” Her eyes widened. “How do you know of the dreams?”

He looked surprised. “What do you dream about?”

“You.” She blushed and dropped her eyes. “And a woman,” she whispered. “She has a cross like the priest’s, and she—” She broke off, unable to give voice to the woman’s deeds.

“What of this woman? How does she look?”

“Long black hair and dark green eyes. Her skin is nearly as pale as yours.” She met his gaze, drawn into the deep black pools. “Who is she?”

“She was Emma de Gaunthet, my betrothed.” He lifted her hand and kissed the palm. “You are she.”

Erukán’s brow furrowed. “How can that be?”

He lifted a shoulder. “I do not know how you came to be again, but I am thankful. Is there somewhere private we may go?”

She didn’t feel even a moment’s hesitation when she nodded and grasped his hand before standing. “The caves. We must walk.”

“I am capable. Show me the way, beloved.”

She led him up the mountain, grasping his hand. Her bare feet moved easily over the rocks exposed under the gray dirt. Her mother had told her of the days when this mountain was covered with trees, before the Spaniards came and dug holes inside, forcing the Taíno men to mine for the gold they hoarded and sent by shiploads back to their homes across the vast ocean.

“You are not winded,” she commented near their destination. Many of the Spaniards had grown fat and lazy because her people met all their needs, and they could not have made such a trek without being carried by a slave or horse.

A strange expression flitted across his face. “Nay, I am not. I did say I was capable.” His eyes gleamed with a teasing glint. “I am capable of many things, beloved.”

She looked away, alarmed by the heat suffusing her face. It was almost painful to meet his eyes as her heart pounded in her ears.

Halfway up the mountain, a few of the trees had maintained a tenacious hold, before giving way to a rocky outcropping. She detoured around the trees and knelt on her knees, slithering in through the small hole as she wondered if Nicholas would fit.

Erukán turned to see if he could come inside. Her eyes widened when he stretched his body to slip inside the dark cave. “Are you a god?” she whispered reverently.

He laughed. “Of course not. I am...gifted.”

She started to ask more, but her eyes locked with his, and she forgot the questions. Her head started spinning, and she felt dizzy. As she looked into his eyes, it was as if they were sucking her into a vortex. Crimson and red-brown swirled together, blotting out the black. Her body went limp, and she fell onto her back. Moistening her lips, Erukán fought down a stirring of fear. She loved him and was safe with him.

He sprawled beside her, touching her lips with his fingers. “I have not eaten this evening. I feared you would slip away if I took time to hunt.” His lips quirked. “An exercise in self-control, no?”

“What?”

He touched her thigh, bared by the way she had wrapped the dress once out of sight of the village. “I will not change you until our return to England. It is too risky to have two such as I on the same ship, with no protection.”

She fixed bewildered eyes on his face. “Please make me understand.”

“Later.” His voice was an impatient growl. “It has been too long, Erukán.”

She experienced a moment of fear when he gathered her in his arms. The first touch of his lips on hers sent waves of warmth cascading through her, and she trembled. Erukán threaded her fingers through his hair and returned the kiss. When his tongue entered her mouth, she instinctively mimicked the action and cried out when her tongue raked across his sharp tooth.

He groaned and pushed her away. “You are bleeding, my beloved.”

“I am fine.”

A shaky smile split his face. “I fear I shall not be.” Sweat beaded his forehead, and he visibly trembled. He looked even paler than before. “Give me a moment.”

She stayed still as he pulled away and closed his eyes. She blotted her tongue on her finger, and his eyes opened. He watched the finger bearing her blood as she moved to wipe it on the rough cotton gown. She cried out when he seized her wrist in a tight hold and pulled her hand to his mouth. “You are hurting me.”

His hold loosened as his tongue darted out to lick away the small smear of blood. “You taste so sweet, beloved.”

Her fear returned when his eyes shifted from black to dark-red. “Nicholas?” she asked with a catch in her voice.

He blinked, and the strange color faded a bit. “I cannot change you, but I must savor you. Will you let me taste you, Erukán?”

His expression was so tender, and his need was so visible, that she found herself unable to refuse him. She nodded, and he returned to her. Her stomach churned when he sprawled beside her, and she tensed

when his hand slid up her dress to touch her. His head descended, and he buried his face against her neck.

As his fingers penetrated her pussy, circling her clit, his teeth slid through the smooth skin at her throat. She gasped with the mingled bliss and pain. Almost immediately, the sting faded, and pleasure swept through her. She had never known such a feeling existed. Pure sensation overwhelmed her, and she willingly surrendered to his touch. Her hips moved in rhythm with his hand, and his hand responded by increasing in tempo. As he caressed her clit with his thumb, one of his fingers sought out her entrance, easing its way inside to slowly stretch her.

Erukán whimpered at the burning sensation that lingered for a moment, before fading to pleasure again, as he pushed another finger inside, past the barrier of her virginity, and began thrusting in time with the movements of his mouth at her neck.

A quiet sucking sound penetrated her dazed brain, making her realize he was drinking her blood. Rather than repulse her, the knowledge heightened her pleasure, and ecstasy rushed through her. A new rush of moisture drenched his hand, and her muscles convulsed around his fingers, as her body sought release.

“Nicholas.” His name was a rasp from her dry throat. She arched her back, emphasizing her breasts. He complied with her unspoken request, moving his free hand to caress her nipples through the thick garment, before groaning with impatience. Her neck absorbed the sound, and her spine shivered in sympathy with the vibrations of his mouth.

Spasms swept through her pussy, alternately contracting and releasing, bringing along a wave of pleasure. Erukán moaned at the sensation, while arching her hips, wanting more of his touch. A small cry burst from her, and her heart raced. The release of the orgasm, coupled with the floating sensation in her head, was enough to make her go limp.

As her orgasm faded, he lifted his head and met her eyes. His face bore smears of her blood. “I dare not take more.”

She sighed and reached for him, incapable of speaking at that moment. She wanted only to hold him and enjoy the peace and pleasure filling her. When he took her in his arms, Erukán was complete, as if part of her had been missing, but had now returned. She could stay with him forever. “Show me more.”

He chuckled, a rich sound, warm with love. “Of course, beloved.” He straddled her, sitting up with his thighs keeping her lower half clamped to the ground, while he urged her to sit up with him. Nicholas’s fingers were deft when he unfastened the first of the small buttons that led to the waist of the dress, not bothering to undo them past her neck. The garment went easily when he lifted it off her, exposing her nudity underneath.

She looked down, caught between shame and defiance. “The priests at the Convent of Franciscans say we must wear undergarments, but it is too hot.”

“I am thankful.” Nicholas leaned forward to press a kiss to her shoulder. His lips were little more than phantoms as they skimmed over her skin, eliciting sparks wherever he touched. She threw back her head when his tongue slid over her skin, heading upward, to lick the trickle of blood still seeping from the wound at her neck. She stirred against him when his tongue raked the punctures left by his teeth, renewing their sensitivity. Her nipples throbbed in simpatico with the pulsing wound, and Erukán threaded her fingers through his hair, trying to hold him against her neck.

He pulled away. "I dare not take more, beloved. You would not survive if I were to drink my fill of you, and you cannot change yet."

Her brow furrowed with confusion. "Please explain. What is this change you want me to make?"

He pushed her flat again. "There will be time for explanations later, Erukán. Right now, I want to feel the heat of your pussy enveloping my cock. I need you."

How could she ignore his necessity, when she desired him just as desperately? As he said, there would be time to learn all of his secrets later. She relaxed under him, watching with rapt attention as he stripped off the leather tunic before opening his trousers to expose his cock. She had seen it from a distance, but up close, it was more impressive and more frightening. Her thighs clenched involuntarily when she imagined his cock driving into her pussy. Would it hurt? His fingers had hurt, but had also eased open her snug passage. She would place her trust in him because she knew he wouldn't disappoint her.

Erukán's hand trembled when she reached out to run her fingers through the hairs shielding his tender sac. She smiled when they tickled. "The hair is coarser than I thought it would be."

His eyes sparkled. "If you want something soft, caress my balls."

She did as he bid, running her fingers down the skin, finding it soft as velvet and damp from his bath in the ocean. With light pressure, she cupped the balls, running her thumb over them, to the base of his cock. He groaned when she touched his cock, and it twitched. With her eyes cast away from his, Erukán leaned forward, extending her tongue to catch a pearl of moisture falling from the tip of his cock. It was salty, but not unpleasant.

He leaned back more, to allow her greater access. Obeying instinct, she stretched forward to take the bulbous head of his cock, painted a deep purple from passion, into her mouth. He groaned louder, thrusting his hips. While continuing to stroke his sac, Erukán's other hand came up to hold his cock steady, as she swirled her tongue up and down his cock, eliciting more sounds of pleasure from Nicholas. With an air of experimentation, she suckled his cock, jumping when he jerked under her hand. She looked up at him with questioning eyes, fearing she had done something wrong.

"Keep going." His lips had skinned back from his teeth, showing sharp fangs. She experienced a flash of fear at the sight, knowing her lover was not human, but it faded when he pumped his cock deeper into her mouth. Resolved to trust him, Erukán continued her amateur ministrations, as Nicholas writhed with pleasure.

A surge of moisture heralded his approaching orgasm, and she was surprised when he pushed her away before attaining satisfaction. Hurt shadowed her eyes when she met his gaze, noting the hint of red in his dark depths. "Did I displease you?"

Nicholas pushed her back onto the rough ground and laid atop her. "Never." His mouth devoured hers in a hungry kiss, his tongue sweeping inside to plunder her honeyed depths. "I want to be inside you when I come," he said when lifting his mouth some time later.

She nodded, eager for his possession. "I want that too."

A hand pushed between her thighs, nudging them apart. Nicholas shifted until the tip of his cock hovered at the entrance of her pussy. He pressed a kiss to her forehead as his hand guided his cock into her entrance. "I do not want to hurt you."



She nodded, understanding it might hurt when he joined his body with hers, despite his desire to avoid causing her pain. "I am ready."

His cock slid inside her slowly, encountering brief resistance, before pushing through to settle deep inside her. Erukán grimaced at the moment of pain, but it faded quickly. As he began thrusting, she met each pump of his hips with her own, until their bodies were moving in synchronicity. Breathing was a chore, taking too much focus away from the desire reflected in his eyes, and she had to force herself to keep doing the simple task. As another orgasm approached, she held her breath for a longer period of time, sensing she was on the cusp.

Convulsions radiated from her womb, contracting her pussy around his cock to milk every drop of his satisfaction as the orgasm ravaged her. Her breath exploded with a harsh exhalation, and her head spun. She held onto Nicholas as the release ravaged her body. She never wanted to release him. Some of his words made sense as she had a sudden epiphany, remembering much of their past life together. They had lost each other for much too long, but would never part again, now that they were reunited.

Emily awoke to a damp sensation flooding her pussy. Her face felt hot. She was embarrassed, knowing the dream had aroused her. She could still feel a phantom hand between her legs, and her neck throbbed almost painfully. She reached up to touch the spot and found two small puncture wounds. The marks were tiny and nearly smooth, indicating they were old and healing, unlike the wounds Nicholas left on Erukán in her dream.

Her stomach clenched as the girl's name forced its way into her mind. She didn't know what had happened to the girl, but Emily was ready to believe, at some point in the past, she had existed. That didn't mean she was Emily in a former life.

Her cramping stomach distracted her from thoughts of the dream. She cried out from the pain. "Please," she shouted. "I'm so hungry." How long had it been since she ate corn dogs and cotton candy at the carnival? Surely, longer than a day or two, judging by the way her body cried out for sustenance so desperately. It must be closer to a week. How could he let her go without eating for such a long time? It made no sense to kidnap her just to starve her.

She tensed when she heard the key turn in the lock. Emily prayed Nicholas had relented and was bringing her food. As much as she didn't want to see him, her hunger outweighed her fear. It consumed her thoughts.

He sauntered in without so much as a glass of water. "Did you have sweet dreams, Emily?" Nicholas laughed as he approached the bed. His ambiguous expression gave no clue to his thoughts.

"I need to eat." She cringed at the pleading tone, but pride wouldn't fill her twisting stomach.

He nodded, looking sympathetic. "So you shall, when you tell me what you dreamed of." His flushed face bore a calm expression when he sat on the bed beside her. "How much do you remember now?"

Reminding herself again that pride and stubbornness wouldn't soften him, she said grudgingly, "I dreamed of an Indian girl."

"Erukán," he said sadly. "I wish—" He broke off. "Wishes are for fools." Nicholas grimaced. "Did you

dream it all?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I woke up just as they finished in the cave.” Emily’s eyes dropped away from his when she saw his knowing glint. “May I eat now?”

A seductive smile curved his lips, and he unbuttoned the scarlet silk shirt he wore, stripping it off with fluid movements and draping it over the footboard. He leaned back, propped himself near her.

Her eyes widened, and she couldn’t help comparing his chest to the dream version. He looked much the same, except for a patch of scars on his shoulder and whip marks across his side. She reached out to touch them, but stayed her hand before she made contact with his scarred flesh. “What happened?”

“It’s a long story, and you’re hungry.”

She nodded. “I can eat now?”

He extended his arms, as his smile turned mocking. “Come and get it, Emily.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Nicholas tilted his head to display his carotid vein. “You aren’t ready to feed alone. I’ll be your proxy.”

“But...” She trailed off when she realized he wanted her to drink his blood. Her stomach churned, but not with repulsion. She found the idea much too exciting for her comfort. Her body clamored for her to eat, but she resisted. “That’s insane. I want real food.”

He chuckled. “I assure you the blood is fresh and tasty. I recently dined.”

She firmed her lips. “I won’t play your games.”

Nicholas sat up. “Very well. You aren’t hungry enough yet.”

She watched him stand with disbelieving eyes. “What? You’re leaving? I haven’t eaten.”

“I gave you a chance.”

Emily shuddered. “You want me to drink your blood.”

“Yes. It’s what you need, what you crave and what you can’t live without.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He scowled. “Then believe what your body tells you. Listen to its plea for my blood and give in.”

She hesitated, unable to commit to such an act. How could she bring herself to indulge in his psychotic fantasy? Emily squirmed and faced the truth. She was afraid she would like it too much, so what did that say about her? She yearned to taste his blood, and that frightened her. More than that, it aroused her.

“Well, what will it be? I won’t stand here all night.”

Tears pricked her eyes as she struggled to make a decision. Either starve or drink his blood. Her

stomach gurgled, and she bent forward, cradling her sides in a futile attempt to deny the hunger pangs. Finally, her shoulders dropped. “All right,” she said in a low voice. Her eyes widened with apprehension when he returned to the bed and gathered her close. How would she live with what she was about to do? Yet, she would die if she didn’t surrender. She was determined to escape this lunatic, and that meant she had to do everything in her power to survive. The thought wasn’t enough of an excuse to justify her actions, even to herself.

## Chapter Four

Emily tensed when he wrapped his arms around her. He shifted until her lips were near his neck. Her eyes locked on the pulsing vein, and her stomach rumbled. Still, she hesitated. “I don’t know what to do.”

He smoothed away the hair on her face and pushed it over her shoulder with a gesture full of tenderness that repulsed and attracted her simultaneously. His arm remained around her. “Sink your fangs into the vein and slash it open. When the holes are wide enough, you’ll be able to suck freely.”

She shuddered. “Won’t that hurt you?”

Nicholas lifted a brow. “Do you care?”

She licked her lips and didn’t answer.

“You will learn how to feed from the wound with your incisors eventually, but I suspect you’re too hungry for finesse tonight.” He relaxed completely, keeping his neck exposed. “I’ll teach you how to take away the pain for the ones you feed on, but you can’t do that for me.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

His lips twisted into a half-smile. “Your powers are still dormant until you feed. Even if they weren’t, your mind isn’t strong enough to overcome mine and convince me I’m enjoying the experience.”

Emily pushed her face against his skin, realizing he was warm compared to her cool skin. Her stomach quivered with nerves as she positioned her neck to a semi-comfortable position. She touched her lips to his vein, but couldn’t make herself bite him. She sighed and said, “I can’t do it.” Having her lips against his neck muffled her voice.

He was firm. “You must. If you can’t feed from me, how will you ever learn to hunt on your own?”

She shook her head against his neck, brushing her hair across his skin. Slight shudders rippled through him at the action. “I won’t be hunting.”

Nicholas laughed. “You can bet I’m not going through this every couple of nights, love. Bite me.”

She shook her head more vigorously. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Yes, you do. You must be seething with anger at the moment.” His voice was a low whisper. “I took you from your home and changed your life forever. You must want to hurt me at least a little.”

She didn't want his words to work, but they did. Emily's anger stirred again, propelling her forward. She paused to trace her tongue across the vein, getting a feel for where it was. A corresponding dart of arousal in her pussy made her eyes widen, and she struggled to block out her reaction as she concentrated on feeding. Before losing her nerve, she slid her fangs through his supple flesh. Immediately, blood trickled from the wounds and down his neck. She caught a drop with her tongue, which only served to heighten her hunger—for blood, and for him.

He had stiffened when her fangs penetrated his skin. Now, his muscles bunched further and he moaned when she pulled down her teeth, opening the vein wider. Blood flooded her mouth and dripped down her chin. The coppery odor invaded her nose through the roof of her mouth, making her desperate to feed.

Emily nuzzled closer, fastening her mouth around his weeping neck and sucking greedily. Blood flowed into her mouth faster than she could swallow, and she choked. Before the blood had completely cleared the back of her throat, she was lapping up more.

He twitched under her, and his quiet moans increased her excitement. She felt more than his blood flow through her body. As her heart began to beat faster, power surged within her. She held his life in her hands. It was her choice whether he lived or died. It was heady to have the ability to choose, but her attention strayed from her thoughts to the sensations coursing through her body.

She was more alive than she had ever been before. She could feel the individual threads of the weave of the denim jeans against her legs. The stench of the filthy cotton T-shirt she wore temporarily blotted out the scent of blood, and she thought about taking it off. Pulling away from his throat required too much effort, so she forced herself to ignore the odor.

Tingling warmth had settled inside her pussy, and her nipples hardened against the lace of the bra. She wanted him.

The realization focused her thoughts clearly for a moment. She was scared and confused. In her secret thoughts, Emily had begun to wonder if she was a lesbian—not because she was attracted to girls, but because of her lack of reaction to the opposite sex. No man had ever caught her eye or turned her on before. To feel it now, with Nicholas, was a blessing and a curse. She was relieved to realize she wasn't frigid, but why was he the one she desired?

She shifted with discomfort, inadvertently tearing the healing vein open again. Once more, blood rushed through her lips, and she forgot about everything but the metallic taste filling her mouth. She forced herself closer, eager to take in all she could.

“You need to stop now, Emily.” He sounded weak.

She ignored him, darting her tongue into a hole and probing for more.

He grasped her shoulders and pushed. “Get off. You're taking too much.”

The rush of power returned, and Emily slid on top of him until she straddled him. She grasped his arms and held them down, while continuing to consume his blood.

“Dammit. I said stop.” His voice sounded weak, but he nearly succeeded in throwing her off when he strained against her hold.

Emily tightened her grip, then suddenly screamed and broke away. Wave after wave of bright light crashed through her mind, behind her eyes. Each brought a sharp, tearing pain with it that carved straight through her brain. She slumped forward and grasped her head, crying out.

As quickly as it had come on, the pain and light disappeared. She cautiously lifted her head and met his eyes. They were calm. His skin was pale, but he didn't appear unduly shaken. Phantom pain lingered for a moment longer before fading away. Then she realized she was lying on top of him with her breasts pressed against his chest. She could feel his cock pressing against her leg, and her eyes widened when her pussy provided new lubrication.

He grasped the back of her head and pulled her face to his, licking away a smear of blood from her mouth before tracing her lips with his tongue.

Emily shivered as the sensation spread liquid warmth through her body. She didn't even think to protest when his tongue slipped between her lips and raked across her fangs. Then his mouth was on hers, and she couldn't catch her breath, though the ability to take a deep breath had returned with feeding. Her lips moved hesitantly with his, and she groaned as her pussy clenched, aching for his cock to fill it.

He continued to explore the recesses of her mouth, while his hands settled on her hips and shifted her down a few inches, to align their pelvises. She lay sprawled across him, with her hands on his chest, and their groins pressed together. Emily stroked the expanse of his chest, relishing the contrast of his cool skin against hers, which now burned with an internal fire. He had little hair to impede the progress of her long, unpolished nails along their journey. He hissed when she raked a nail across his nipple.

His kisses had grown more passionate, and he nipped her tongue.

Emily stiffened at the small pain, then felt the urge to retaliate. Before she could, his hand cupped her breast through the T-shirt. She moaned and arched when he rubbed a nipple, creating friction with the lace of her bra. She wanted to feel his fingers on her bare flesh.

Maybe he guessed, or perhaps he read her mind, because he broke the kiss and pushed her far enough away to remove the shirt. His supple fingers easily navigated the front clasp of her bra, and he pushed it open.

Emily's back arched when he cupped her bare breast. She had never felt anything like this. She could feel more than him touching her. She could also sense the way she felt to him. She could feel his pleasure and arousal, mingled with hers. It was almost as if they were one being, not two.

He pulled her closer and sat up so his mouth was level with her breast. He took one in his mouth and flicked his tongue across the tight bud. His fang grazed the soft skin and sank through, making her wince with a combination of pain and pleasure as he licked the wound. He returned his attention to the nipple, carefully keeping his fangs from the delicate peak.

She could feel him tremble as he suckled—or was she the one trembling? She wasn't certain, and she didn't know if she cared to separate their reactions. She wanted this feeling to last forever.

Forever. The thought caused her passion-heavy eyes to open wide. She couldn't spend forever with this man. She didn't even know him, aside from a couple of dreams, and what she had observed and experienced at his hands. He was cold and cruel. The passion they shared was an illusion. Maybe it was a side effect of the drug he had given her and the beginnings of starvation. She firmly squashed the voice in the back of her mind that denied such excuses.

She pushed against him, desperate to escape his arms. “Let go.”

Nicholas raised his head, confusion clouding his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not doing this. Not with you.” She pushed him again, this time succeeding in getting him to drop his arms. Emily rolled off him and scrambled from the bed to stand several feet away. “I don’t know what you’ve done to me—”

“I’ve given you eternal life.”

“I’m not a vampire,” she shouted, stamping her foot. The childishness of her reaction would have bothered her under other circumstances.

He moved faster than she could follow. One moment, he was lying on the bed. The next, he held her arm in a tight grip and dragged her into the bathroom. He stopped before the mirror and flicked on the light. Nicholas grasped her chin and forced her to face straight ahead. “Look at yourself, with blood smeared across your face. Blood from my last meal, Emily.” He shook her so hard her teeth clacked together. “You are a vampire.”

She struggled to pull away. She wanted to deny the truth of what he said. She deliberately averted her eyes, because she was unable to look at the evidence of what she had done staining her skin. “I’m not. You’ve done something to me. Twisted my mind with drugs or something. Vampires aren’t real.”

He pushed her onto the floor and held her with one hand while rummaging through the drawer for something.

Emily felt stronger than she ever had, but even her added strength wasn’t enough to throw off his hold. She continued to struggle.

“Nothing here,” he muttered. He slammed the drawer shut and dropped down beside her. Nicholas held her chin and stared into her eyes. “You will stay here. You can’t move until I return.”

She tried to blink and break eye contact, but her body refused to move. Not even her lips would budge. An invisible giant weight pressed her to the cold tile floor, and she wasn’t able to throw it off.

Nicholas got to his feet and left the bathroom. She continued to struggle with the mental bonds he had placed on her, but was unsuccessful, save for the ability to wiggle her toes. Her eyes were wide with apprehension when he returned holding an old-fashioned pistol.

He knelt beside her and showed her the pistol. “It’s an antique, from the early 1800s. This piece was a gift from...someone for an anniversary, which is why I haven’t disposed of it.” He caressed the wooden barrel. “Until tonight, I had no need of this dueling pistol, save sentiment.” His cold smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I’ve found a purpose for it once more.”

Emily remained rigid when he lifted and carried her to the tub, still unable to fight his hold on her. She wanted to scream, plead and beg him to release her when he lowered her into the deep porcelain bathtub. She managed to force out a small whimper when he pressed the gun to her temple.

“You’ll believe when this is finished.”

She whimpered again, frantically trying to force out the words.

“You may speak.”

“I believe,” she blurted out. “I’m a vampire. We’ll live forever.”

His lips twitched. “Your conversion is amazingly quick and unconvincing.” His finger tightened on the trigger.

“No. Please don’t. I swear I believe you.”

Nicholas laughed. “If you truly believed, you wouldn’t be afraid.”

“But—”

He depressed the trigger, removing a chunk of her skull with the lead ball that issued from the pistol.

\* \* \* \* \*

She awoke with a slight ache in her head. Emily cried out and reached up to touch the wound, searching for the bullet hole. She felt only hair and the skull underneath, which seemed to be configured as it had been during the past twenty years. She turned her head and saw Nicholas sitting on the closed lid of the toilet. Blood had sprayed across his pale chest in heavy spurts and light splatters. A small gob of gray matter clung to his shoulder. “You shot me.”

He nodded. “Yet here you are ten minutes later, with your skull reconstructed, and not even a hair is out of place. You live again, because you’re undead, Emily.”

Her stomach heaved when she sat up. “How could you do that to me? You could have killed me.” She mouthed the words, but her mind didn’t seem focused on her reaction. She was too busy obsessing about the missing memory of the last few minutes. She remembered an incredible pain, then nothing until waking a second ago. Had she truly been dead?

No, that couldn’t be. If she had died and returned, everything he said was true. She was Emma reincarnated, and now a vampire, thanks to him. If she were undead, there would be no escape from him. He would keep her with him forever.

Nevertheless, could she deny what her body told her? She had felt the bullet penetrate her skull before fading away. Yet, there wasn’t even a small hole. Absolutely no proof that she had ever been shot remained, aside from the blood on both of them.

And what of her craving for blood? When drinking from Nicholas’s neck, she hadn’t wanted to stop. She had yearned to drain him dry, until he was a husk of his former self. She had wanted to feel his life flow away, from him to her.

She met his eyes again when he knelt on the bathmat by the tub. “Why me?”

He shrugged. “I can’t say why you were reborn in this form. I don’t control the cosmos.”

Emily blinked back tears of self-pity. “How did you find me?”

“There is a gypsy family I seek out from time to time. Every eighth female descendent of the line has the gift of sight. I have used this family to find you time and again.” His mouth twisted. “It’s inconvenient to wait a couple hundred years or so for one to be born who can find you, but I had no choice.” Nicholas’s eyes grew haunted. “I once thought to turn a daughter into a vampire so she could always find you in each lifetime, but she lost her gift when she changed. She hated me for that.” He shook his head, and his eyes cleared. “It doesn’t matter. This time, nothing will take you from me.”

An icy sensation crawled up her spine with his determined words, but she chose to ignore them. “I don’t understand how those women found me.”

He waved his hand. “Never mind. Suffice it to say, eighty years ago, the last daughter I sought told me to buy a funhouse and travel with the carnival during the summer and early autumn. She said you would come to me, and I would know you instantly.”

Emily shook her head. “But the ticket taker knew me before you ever saw me.”

He nodded. “Tremont is bonded to me. I know all he knows, and I sometimes allow him to know a tiny bit of what I know. I used him to scan each customer, and when I recognized you, he recognized you.” Nicholas frowned. “When the fool warned you, I could have killed him.”

Emily shook her head at her own stupidity. If only she had listened to the deformed man, she wouldn’t be here now.

“Wrong,” he said. “I would have come for you some other way.”

Her eyes widened. “I was thinking that. I didn’t say it aloud.”

Nicholas smiled, and it held a note of tenderness that was unsettling. “You don’t have to. We’ve bonded now, Emily. You drank blood that flowed from my veins. It makes it easier to read your thoughts, but I could before if I concentrated.”

She swallowed thickly. “How long will this last?”

He shrugged.

“How do we reverse it?”

Nicholas lifted a brow. “You wish to break our link?”

“Hell, yeah. I don’t want you creeping around in my thoughts.”

“So I can’t eavesdrop on your futile plans to escape.” He laughed. “You’ll be relieved to hear the strength of the connection weakens as time passes, until our blood mingles again.”

“That won’t happen. This was the only time.” She pursed her lips.

“You must eat, and you aren’t ready to take your own prey yet.” He caressed her cheek with a bloody hand. “It must happen again, my beloved. You can’t fight me forever.”

She crossed her arms. “I can.”



He seemed unconcerned when he stood up. “I’ll go now so you may clean up and rest.”

“I’m tired of resting. I want out of this room.”

His mouth tightened. “Not yet.”

“I can’t wash. I have no clothes.”

A wicked grin flashed across his face. “You don’t need them.”

She glared up at him. “You went to all this trouble to find me and kidnap me, but didn’t even think about clothes?”

“As it happens, I did. They arrived this afternoon, but I forgot about them in the intervening hours.” His eyes darkened. “I was too eager to bond myself with you to focus on garments.”

She slumped. “Oh.” Why did she feel guilty for not responding to his bonding enthusiastically? She owed him nothing—least of all, emotional assurance. “Okay. Where are they?”

“Still in the hall, I imagine. I’ll ensure Tremont hangs the items in your closet while you bathe.” His nose wrinkled. “It is certainly time to indulge in a bath.”

“I can’t help that you’ve kept me unconscious for weeks—”

“Four days,” he interrupted. “The hunger convinced you it was longer, but you’ve been with me four days only.” He walked to the door and stepped through. He glanced back. “I’m sorry if I hurt you,” he said stiffly. “I had to prove to you what you are.”

“Gee, thanks. I appreciate the enlightenment.” She glowered at him.

He inclined his head and disappeared from the doorway. A second later, the bedroom door closed behind him, just before the lock engaged. She marveled at her ability to hear so sharply from such a distance before remembering why she could. She crumpled in the tub and sobbed quietly, assuming his hearing was as good as hers. He had no right to her pain. It was the only thing she could truly call her own now.

Emily took a deep breath, noticing how tight her chest was. Her heartbeat was already sluggish again, and she assumed it would remain so until she fed once more. Did she die permanently if her heart stopped beating again? She would have to ask Nicholas.

She forced her thoughts from feeding, not wanting to dwell on the thought of Nicholas’s arms imprisoning her again. Instead, she turned her attention to showering, paying special attention to the blood crusting her face and hair.

When she emerged from the bath a while later, she wrapped herself in a thick black towel and wiped off the condensation on the mirror. She was pale, but not ghostly white. A tinge of pink remained in her cheeks. “Not too bad for someone who’s died twice this week,” she said to her reflection, with a wry twist of her lips.

Emily unwrapped a toothbrush and spread toothpaste on it. It was strange to brush her fangs, which extended down about an eighth of an inch past her other teeth, meaning she had to open her mouth wide.

She couldn't help but wonder how a dentist would react at her next checkup. Would he tell her blood was bad for her teeth and admonish her to brush more frequently? More likely, he would take one look at the fangs and run away screaming.

She spat out the toothpaste and rinsed her mouth, fighting back a small grin at the absurd image of herself with fangs and the braces she had worn two years ago. If he had found her sooner, she might have had them for all eternity. That thought erased her amusement, and she sped through brushing her hair with a new brush she took from the package. She kept her gaze averted from the mirror, anxious to avoid her own eyes. They held a disquieting note that hadn't been present before this night.

After she had dried her hair with a hairdryer she found under the sink, she leaned her head out the bathroom door to scan the room. It was empty, and she padded into the bedroom, leaving the black towel on the counter by the sink. She went straight to the closet to examine the clothes Nicholas had ordered.

She grimaced at the collection of long, flowing dresses, long skirts, and loose, lacy blouses. They were reminiscent of times past, and she disliked them all. She closed the closet and went to the dresser when she noticed one of the drawers hadn't closed completely. Opening it, she found neatly stacked underwear and bras. The next drawer revealed sleepwear, ranging from practical cotton gowns to sexy nighties. She chose a pair of red silk pajamas, figuring she wouldn't be leaving the room anytime soon and might as well be comfortable during her captivity.

The remaining two drawers were empty, dashing her hopes of finding any casual, comfortable clothes. Nicholas would just have to pick up some jeans and sweaters for her. Living in a large city—she thought it must be New York, although she had no idea how long they had driven—he shouldn't have any trouble furnishing her with a suitable wardrobe. Judging from this room alone, he had the funds.

A yawn surprised her when she pulled on the pajama pants. It seemed ridiculous to be sleepy again after spending the last four days in and out of consciousness, but she couldn't deny the wave of fatigue that swept over her.

It was a struggle to keep her eyes open as she got in the bed. Emily tried, nonetheless. She had no desire to have another dream of her previous lives, but had a feeling they would haunt her until she knew it all. She briefly wondered why she didn't dream of all her lives as she snuggled against the pillow. Then she remembered snatches of vague dreams from over the years. They were unmemorable, so perhaps the lives they came from had been uneventful. Maybe she would only dream of her lives as Nicholas's love in such vivid detail. Perhaps he was imposing the dreams on her, even. How many lives could it be? She nodded off while trying to calculate how many times he might have found her in eight hundred years.

Erukán woke with a stiff neck, having slept with it bent sideways. Nicholas lay against her chest, snoring softly. She eased away from him, feeling nature's call. She grimaced when she slithered toward the exit, as an ache between her thighs made itself known. Three times during the night, he had reached for her, teaching her firsthand about the union of a man and woman.

"Erukán?" he asked in a sleepy voice. "Where are you going?"

"I must return to the village before my father awakens. He is very protective of me."

He stretched. "I shall come with you."

She shook her head. "Stay here and rest. No one will disturb you. I will meet you at the beach near sunset."

He nodded and yawned.

She leaned forward and kissed him on lips, wincing as his fang grazed her lip. Erukán touched his face. "Sleep well, my beloved."

His eyes closed almost immediately, and he returned to a deep sleep.

She squeezed through the opening of the cave and slipped on the dress, feeling lightheaded, and swaying when she stood completely upright. Erukán paused a moment to regain her strength before hurrying down the mountain. The sun was growing progressively brighter as she cut across the beach, before creeping toward the village.

She was near the village when the stench hit her. The mingled scent of smoke and blood caused her already quick feet to break into a run. She was breathless when she entered the village.

Erukán froze, at first too stunned to recognize what she saw. Then it hit her, and she fell to her knees, vomiting. Several of the younger men who had quietly voiced discontent with the Spaniards hung suspended from thin wooden poles with sharpened ends. Most had been impaled through the bowels, and the sharp edge of the pole, coated with gore, extended from their necks. The Spaniards had chosen to skin the remaining men. Having witnessed their cruelty firsthand, she knew the men had probably been alive at the time.

The smell of smoke came from the burned homes and several pyres of burning bodies. They were stacked haphazardly, and many had fallen from the piles. Several of the Spaniards were still in the process of carrying dead bodies to the fires, but made no move to remove the young men from their grisly poses.

She turned to run and heard shouts behind her. Knowing she couldn't lead them to Nicholas, she veered away from the beach. Erukán ran with all her strength, but didn't get far before someone tackled her, knocking her to the ground. She choked on the sand clogging her mouth and nose.

The soldier rolled her over and straddled her with a leer on his face. "Urayoán's daughter. The governor will be pleased." He ran his hand up her thigh. "It is a pity I have no time to savor you. You must not be late for your father's execution."

Erukán refused to believe his words. She kicked out at him when he lifted and dropped her over his shoulder. Her nose wrinkled at the odor of his musty cotton shirt. It smelled of sweat, blood and smoke. She continued to kick her legs as he strode across the beach and returned to the village.

They passed the remains of the rectangular caneyes, including the fine one she had shared with her father until last evening. Whoever set fire to the wooden frame and straw had ripped apart their home first. Her father's canoe had survived the fire and pillaging, but it was the final resting place of a young Carib child, whose blood had seeped into the wooden frame. Throughout the village, she saw similar destruction, and several dead bodies the soldiers hadn't gotten around to disposing of yet.

At the other side of the village, the soldier dropped her on the ground. She landed hard on her buttocks and felt tears at the back of her eyes. She looked up and saw the governor standing before her. Erukán

had only ever seen him from a distance. She'd had no idea he had such a long nose, or used something slick to smooth and separate the curls in his beard. He wore a brimmed hat with a ridiculously large feather, a simple cotton shirt, and leather trousers, along with an armor vest. He sat astride a chestnut stallion, staring down at her with contempt.

She moved her eyes from him and cried out. Thousands of her people, mixed with Caribs, who must have joined in the rebellion, lined up in rows past the village. Most of the soldiers stood nearby, holding muskets. Her father was separate from the others, bound to a thick log someone had planted upright in the ground. She could see blood coating his body, and, even now, one of the soldiers occasionally whipped him with a leather strap. He remained proud and tall, despite his advanced years and the way he must be suffering.

The soldier bowed before the governor. "Urayoán's daughter, sir."

Governor de León lifted a brow. "Perhaps the most appropriate punishment to break the leader of the rebellion." He waved at her. "Bring her." Then he turned his horse and crossed the distance to her father.

She tried to scoot backward when the soldier reached for her, but he lifted her easily. She screamed and kicked him during the walk to where her they had bound her father, but he remained unaffected. Once more, he dropped her on the ground, this time before her father.

Erukán got to her feet, straightening her spine. She walked to her father and touched his shoulder. "How are you, Father?"

He grunted. His noble brown face, normally lean and lined, was smooth and puffy from his beating. Someone had gouged out his left eye, and blood still dripped down his cheek, along with bits of thicker tissue. His mouth was swollen shut, and his jaw was out of alignment. Bloody lashes covered his body, and the soldiers had peeled away the skin from the soles of his feet. Ants covered the wounds in writhing black masses.

Tears came to her eyes, and she longed to ask why he had chosen to rebel when he knew the Spaniards were too powerful to overcome. She didn't have to ask why though. Like all of her people, she had grown tired of being a slave to the invaders. She had known her father wouldn't be able to tolerate much more when two soldiers raped and beheaded her mother a few months ago. "Yocahu be with us," she murmured before turning to the governor, boldly meeting his eyes.

Governor de León scratched his beard and eyed her from head to toe. "What to do with this one? What will hurt the father the most? Defilement?" He paused, considering, and then shook his head. "Death, most certainly." He looked at the sun, rising higher. "Time grows short, and my replacement may arrive at any time. Diego Columbus is already weeks late. We shall make this swift in case he finally makes his way across the ocean." He chuckled.

He turned his horse to face the men guarding the rows and rows of Taíno and Carib people. Men, women, and children pressed together so closely they seemed to be one large brown mass. "Shoot them all," he shouted. "Shoot until you run out of ammunition. Then turn to your swords. Do not leave one rebel standing. We shall send a message to all the indigenous curs of San Juan Bautista."

The governor turned back to Erukán, who stood proudly. She longed to see Nicholas once more, but was thankful he was spared witnessing the mass slaughter. She had no doubt he would have tried to save her if he was there, and he would die too. During the night, he had told her he was a vampire and lived eternally, but he was no match for the large number of men with muskets and swords. Her lover was

safe, and she had gotten a night with him. She must be content with that.

He motioned to the soldier. "Behead her."

She didn't try to fight when the soldier pressed her against the log supporting her father's bound body. She even threw back her head defiantly.

The soldier crossed himself and stepped away from her. "Governor, she bears the same marks as the dead man we found in the jungle two days ago." His eyes didn't stray from the puncture wounds that had crusted over.

"I do not care if she bears a mark of Divinity. Cut off her head." He turned and rode away, not bothering to witness the carnage his orders caused.

While the soldier drew his blade, Erukán's eyes darted to the rows of her people being executed. Few cried out or tried to escape. Most stood peacefully and proudly, eagerly awaiting their liberation from the hell of life under Spanish rule.

She could do no less. She kept her eyes straight ahead when he drew back his sword, forcing herself not to look as the blade rushed toward her neck. Erukán's last thoughts were of Nicholas, wishing she could spare him the pain of the discovery he would make upon waking. She was certain he wouldn't be a focus of the Spaniards' wrath, since they thought he was one of them, and that gave her a small measure of comfort. The pain was excruciatingly brief, and then she was aware of nothing.

## Chapter Five

A tap on the door woke Emily from the deep sleep she had slipped into once the dream ended. When she lifted her head from the pillow, a dull pain shot through her neck. She touched the skin to ensure there was no wound and found it smooth.

The knock came again, this time lasting longer.

"Come in," she said in a hoarse voice, then cleared her throat. Emily sat up and scooted off the bed, noticing her heartbeat was even slower than it had been before she fell asleep.

The key turned, and the door opened. His assistant stepped inside, keeping his head bowed, with his gaze on the floor. "The master wishes for you to join him."

She frowned. "Join him? Where?"

"For dinner, mistress."

"Dinner? But—"

He bowed and took a step back. "I will return for you in thirty minutes."

"Uh, wait, um—"

He paused. "Tremont."

"What does Nicholas want?"

Tremont shrugged, which brought attention to the place where an arm should hang. "I didn't ask." He turned his back to leave.

She took a step toward him. "Please help me."

He shook his head, not bothering to turn around. "I can't."

"You tried to before." Her voice broke. "I need your help."

His shoulders slumped, and he took another step into the hallway. "I'm sorry." He closed the door behind him.

She sighed, realizing she was alone in this apartment, at Nicholas's mercy. Emily slid from the bed and went into the bathroom to take a quick shower. When she returned to the bedroom a few minutes later, she found her shirt and jeans laundered and placed on the dresser. A deep red stain remained on the soft-pink T-shirt, and she left it folded. She went into the closet and selected a red silk shirt with flounces and frilly cuffs. It wasn't to her taste, but she had to admit it was sexy when she eyed herself in the mirror.

She had taken a step away from the mirror when she froze and turned back. Yes, her reflection was as clear as ever. Transformation into a vampire hadn't changed that. If the dreams were reliable, sunlight wasn't fatal either. She wondered what other myths were nonsense as she walked back to the closet, searching for a pair of shoes.

A shoe rack lined one side of the closet, but her sneakers weren't in the neatly arranged piles. Emily settled for ankle boots in supple kid leather. When she lifted the boots, she saw her fanny pack lying on the floor. She lifted it too and carried everything to the bed.

She put the shoes aside and opened the pack. Emily counted the money and was reassured to find it all there. If she could devise a means of escape, she would have enough money to get home.

A knock at the door had her jumping up and shoving the pack under the bed. The comforter dangled over long enough to obscure the shadowed recess under the bed. She probably had no need to hide the pack since he returned it to her, but went with her instincts. "Yes?"

The key turned in the lock and Tremont entered. "The master is ready for you."

She held up a finger. "Let me put on my shoes."

He watched impassively as she laced the boots, and then slipped them on her feet. "A perfect fit." The thought was disturbing. What else did he know about her? She tied the strings and stood up, trying to push the disquieting thought from her mind. She would need all of her faculties to confront Nicholas again. "I guess I'm ready," she said with a sick smile.

His expression remained bland as he beckoned her forward. He stepped aside to allow her passage, before following. Once outside the room, he took the lead.

Emily's eyes scanned the long hall. The décor was black and red, like her room. She saw no deviation of color at all, not even in the wallpaper, which was matte black with tiny red diamonds forming a border at eye-level. Several closed red doors marked their passage, but they gave no hint to what lay behind them.

The same color scheme made up the living room when they left the hallway. Nicholas was sprawled across a vermilion leather sofa that appeared to be floating in a sea of black. Only the electronic equipment in the black lacquered entertainment center deviated from the red and black scheme.

He held an opaque goblet in his hand, and he set it on a chrome coaster on the black table before standing. "Emily." His voice emerged as a silky purr. "That color is ravishing on you."

She reflexively pulled at the dipping neckline as his eyes settled there, wishing she had worn something else. Even a turtleneck wouldn't make her feel more secure, though it would cover the vein throbbing sluggishly in her throat. His dark eyes would still make her feel stripped bare.

"Are you hungry?" He handed the goblet to Tremont and waved him away.

She shuddered, dreading the prospect of feeding from him again. She was more afraid of her own reaction than taking his blood. However, she could feel the hunger building again. It wasn't as sharp and painful as last night, but she wanted to eat. "Yes."

He nodded. "Come with me." He held out his hand.

She frowned and slowly took it, wondering where he planned to feed her. Any place was preferable to a bed. It would make temptation easier to withstand.

Nicholas led her into the kitchen, and she blinked. The color scheme shifted from red and black to white on white. The sudden change hurt her eyes, and she lifted a hand to block them.

"Blinding, isn't it?" He sounded cheerful. "Tremont insisted on being able to see what he was doing in the kitchen."

"Oh." She eased away her hand, and her eyes didn't protest as much, although the bright color still seemed to drill into her brain.

"Your eyes are more sensitive now," he said, leading her through the swinging door at the end of the long, narrow kitchen and into the dining room. The colors were once again black and red. "Black and red are the easiest colors to tolerate, though not the most impressive decorating scheme."

"I wondered about that. I thought you had an extreme fondness for the colors."

He nodded. "I do like both. Black is the color of death, and red is the color of life. A complimentary pairing, but I've grown bored with it after eight hundred years."

The blasé reminder of how old he claimed to be caused the breath to stick in her throat as she slid into the chair he held for her. She wanted to doubt his sanity, but couldn't after last night. If she was a vampire—and she had to be after surviving the bullet in her brain—he must certainly be so. Even her dreams confirmed his age. "What's it like?"

He settled into the other chair across the small table. "What's what like?"

“Living so long.”

Nicholas’s mouth twisted. “Interminable at times.”

“Then why do you do it? Why don’t you end it all? Are you afraid of Hell?”

He laughed. “Not at all. I have long since cast aside such antiquated notions. Vampirism it isn’t a curse from Satan, nor a punishment from God.”

She acted from habit when she lifted the napkin at her elbow and folded it on her lap, briefly wondering about the silverware she found wrapped inside, before her thought returned to their conversation. “You don’t believe in God?”

He shook his head. “I’ve lived hundreds of years and never seen any proof of an almighty being. I can hold a crucifix in my hand for hours. I often visit my friend at St. Peter’s. He’s a priest and a vampire. Entering the church doesn’t bring me pain.”

“I don’t understand. In the dream, you told me—Emma—that you had to stop believing. She believed, and you know what happened to her. How can your friend be a priest?”

Nicholas held off answering as Tremont entered carrying beige china plates with navy borders. Each plate held a sliver of steak, a few baby potatoes and two asparagus tips. He placed one in front of each of them before leaving the dining room and returning quickly with two crystal glasses and a decanter of dark red liquid. “Will there be anything else, master?”

“Not right now, Tremont.” Nicholas waved him away. When he had gone, he said, “Michael has reconciled his faith with his circumstances. He doesn’t believe vampirism originated from evil, and so he is able to sustain his beliefs. The mind is powerful, Emily.”

“I see.” She looked at the food before her, then at the silverware. “Is that what allows you to eat?”

He poured the liquid into their glasses, and the tangy scent of blood wafted through the room. “No. You function much as you did when alive. You can still eat and drink, in moderation. Your normal bodily systems will continue almost as normal, including your period.” He grinned. “Not even death can stop that curse, I’m afraid. You can still have children. The only real difference—aside from an increase in strength, mental prowess, healing and agility—is your body no longer makes blood.”

“I-I don’t understand.”

Nicholas lifted his glass and stared at the contents. “In addition to altering the physiology of your brain and other cells, the change converts your bone marrow so that it can no longer make blood cells. If you go a long time without blood, you die. Hence, we must replenish the blood.” He lifted the glass. “Salute.”

She shook her head. “My heart stopped beating. I should have died.”

“Very few things will kill a vampire and prevent regeneration. You were going through the change. Your heart stopped beating, but you continued to live on a cellular level for several hours after brain death, as do we all—human and vampire. Combined with our ability to heal, it makes us virtually immortal, as long as we provide nourishment for our bodies to rebuild. The idea that vampires could die from being staked is laughable—”



She shook her head, interrupting him. “What about Emma? She impaled herself on a cross and obviously died. Explain that.”

His eyes clouded with pain, but he nodded. “She believed she had been turned to something evil. She saw the cross as her salvation. I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase ‘mind over matter’. That’s all it was. She believed she would die, so she did.”

She frowned. “Then how does one kill a vampire?”

A small smile flashed across his face. “Are you thinking of doing away with me?”

She refused to answer.

Nicholas chuckled. “Really, the only thing that kills a vampire is excessive force—the type it’s impossible to recover from. Violent impact from a car accident would do it, if it severed the right body parts or caused us to bleed out. A guaranteed way is severing the spinal column. Remove or destroy the heart. I mean, really destroy it. Remove a stake, and the heart can regenerate. Cut it out or blow up the organ, and there’s nothing our bodies can do in time to save ourselves.”

She lifted a brow. “It sounds fabulous,” she said mockingly. “What’s the catch?”

“We require blood to live. It’s as simple as that. We have to consume several liters every couple of nights. There must always be at least four liters in an adult vampire at all times. Fresh is best, but preserved blood will sustain us, leaving us free to only hunt once or twice a week.”

She lifted a brow. “That doesn’t make sense. I remember learning in biology that blood cells can live for weeks or even years, depending on which type they are. You should only have to eat once every few months.”

Nicholas shrugged. “What I’ve learned has been gleaned from a small group of researchers with a stake in learning the origins of vampirism.” He winked. “Forgive the pun. I’m an investor, not a researcher. I don’t have all the answers, but I do know the blood we consume lives only forty-eight hours or so in our bloodstream before it’s absorbed. The physical changes to our cells that gives us increased strength, faster regeneration, and mental powers speeds up our metabolism and causes our bodies to process the blood at a rapid rate. Apparently, borrowed blood isn’t as durable either. It doesn’t have the same characteristics as the blood your body used to produce.”

She struggled to understand his words, wishing she had opted for advanced biology courses to fill her core science requirements at Huxley J.C. “What about blood types? I’m O-positive, so can I only consume O-positive?”

Nicholas shook his head. “No. It doesn’t matter what type you ingest. It has something to do with cellular mutation during the change. If you want to know more, you’ll have to ask one of the researchers. Personally, I don’t care to know every facet of how the process works. I’m satisfied with knowing I must feed.”

Her brow furrowed. “How can you do it? Doesn’t it bother you to kill people to stay alive?”

Nicholas met her eyes. “Feeding is a fact of life for me, beloved. You’ll adjust in time.”

She shook her head. "I won't do it. It's murder."

"Survival isn't murder. We're hunters, and we need them to live." He shrugged. "We happen to have the advantage when it comes to pursuing humans. After your first few feedings, you'll cease to worry about such things. It'll become second nature. "

Emily shuddered. "I'd rather die."

"That isn't an option." Nicholas slammed his hand against the table, causing the glasses and decanter to rattle. "I won't lose you again."

She bowed her head to hide the tears threatening to stream down her face. "Why are you doing this to me? Why couldn't you just let me go?"

He sighed, and his anger seemed to fade. "I tried, though I doubt you believe that. I wanted to be free of this obsessive love I have for you." His mouth twisted, and his brow furrowed. "It must be a trait common to vampires. We can't seem to let go of the past."

He lowered his glass to the table and stared at his plate, where his food remained untouched. "You own my soul, but I thought I could go on without you. If not for the gypsy woman who tried bargaining for her life with information about you, I probably never would have seen you again. That may have been for the best, but I can't alter my decision now."

She swallowed heavily. "You killed the woman who led you to Erukán?"

Nicholas nodded. "She was convenient, and I needed blood. When she told me of you, I had to find out if it was true." His face twisted with pain. "When I found you, only to have you stolen from me once more, I knew I had to find you again. I owed it to you for not saving you."

"You couldn't have," she said reluctantly. "You would have been killed, and I didn't—I mean, she didn't want that."

He shook his head. "I've lived with what I didn't do for centuries. I've lived with the guilt and continued agony each time I lost you. With everything we've been through, I've realized one thing. We belong together, Emily. We are soul mates. If I didn't cling to what I believed, everything that's happened would have been for nothing."

A harsh laugh broke from her. "You can discard religion, but not a silly belief in soul mates?"

His dark eyes glittered. "Don't mock me. Don't deny what you know is true. We're bound to each other. Forever. This time will be different."

Her eyes widened, and she immediately recalled the outcome of her two dreams. The realization seemed to hit her over the head. She had died in her previous lives. She had known that abstractly, but now wondered if each time she had died had been because of Nicholas's reappearance.

His expression cleared, and he seemed to be visibly calming himself. "Eat, Emily. You need your strength. Drink all of your *wine* ."

"I didn't ask for this," she said as she lifted her fork and knife. "You never gave me the choice."

He took time to eat a bite of steak before answering. "I couldn't risk losing you. It was necessary."

She cut through an asparagus spear with more force than necessary, causing the tender vegetable to shred under the force of her knife. "Was it necessary to kill my friends too?"

"They were there."

She blinked, allowing a tiny bit of the grief she had suppressed to rise in her throat. Her voice emerged as a husky murmur. "Sara was my friend my whole life, since pre-school. Do you know what it does to me knowing you killed her? How can you expect me to feel anything for you, knowing what kind of monster you are?"

His expression remained bland. "You aren't completely innocent."

Her fork fell to the plate with a clatter. "What did I do wrong besides being in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

He dabbed his mouth with a napkin and met her eyes. "I saved the auburn-haired boy for your first feeding, Emily. I took his life, but his blood flows through your veins as we speak."

Nausea churned in her stomach, and she pushed away from the table, shaking her head, desperate to deny his words. It couldn't be. She wasn't responsible for Ron's death. "I didn't do it," she said forcefully. "You killed him, not me. I didn't know."

He looked up at her. "But does it matter if you didn't know? You're still receiving nourishment from your friend's blood. If I'm a monster, so are you."

Rage coursed through her, setting her teeth on edge, and making her thin pulse thump steadily. Before she could stop herself, Emily leapt from the seat and rushed forward, hurling herself at him. The impact of her body against his caused the chair to topple backwards, spilling them on the floor. She straddled his stomach and raised her hand. She brought it down with all of her strength and ripped at his face. When blood flowed from the wounds, a savage thrill of pleasure shot through her. She wanted to tear at him until nothing remained.

Emily slapped him on the other cheek, catching his nose with the sharp nail of her pinky. A chunk of his flesh tore away, and air hissed between his teeth. She pounded her fists against his chest, growing more enraged as he remained passive. "You're the monster," she screamed. "You did this to me."

"Yes," he said with an air of calm.

She hit him across the face again, reopening the wounds that had begun to heal. "I hate you for what you've done to me." Her voice broke, but her anger remained pure, "What you've made me."

"What have I made you?" His voice was a whisper of silk against flesh and held an unexpected note of tenderness.

"Like you," she said with a sob and hit him again. He didn't retaliate, and she ached for him to. "Why won't you fight back?" He lifted a hand and she tensed, awaiting the pain, welcoming it as a reminder of who she was. If she hurt and bled, she could pretend to be human again, if only for a short time until she healed.

Instead, he pushed the hair off her face and over her shoulder. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

She sagged. “You can’t hurt me more than you have already.” Her hands lowered to the carpet under his back, and she started to get up.

He wrapped his arms around her to hold her against him. “I can’t be sorry for the choice I’ve made. I want you to believe I would never intentionally hurt you, but if I did, it had to be. I love you and want you with me. I’ll do anything to ensure that.”

Emily shook her head. “You contradict yourself. You claim to love me, but you don’t care what your love does to me.”

He scowled. “What has your love done to me, Emily? I’ve lost you four times, and I loved you more each time I found you. Each time, my heart died a bit more with you. If I could remove my love by tearing out my own heart, I wouldn’t hesitate.” His eyes clouded with pain. “To be able to walk away from you without feeling anything for you would be for the best, but I can’t do it. My soul is dead without you.”

“And now I’m dead too.” A tear splashed from her eyes and fell onto his lips. Her chest tightened with emotions she refused to acknowledge when he licked it away. “You can’t expect me to love you after what you’ve done to me.”

“You will,” he said with steely determination. “You do, but you’ve forgotten. With time—”

“I won’t stay with you,” she said.

His eyes were sad, and his voice was level. “I’ll always find you, no matter where you go. I won’t let you go. I can’t.”

A shiver ran through her at the tender possessiveness she saw in his expression. “You don’t own me.”

He shook his head. “I do. We’re bound to each other. You own me as surely as I own you.”

“I don’t believe that. It’s crazy.”

“Your mind may not believe, but your body does.”

Emily whimpered when he flipped their positions and pinned her underneath him. “No,” she said as his lips touched hers. She wasn’t sure whom she was speaking to—Nicholas or her own treacherous body—as desire spread through her. She wanted to push him away, but her mouth refused to listen to her brain. She eagerly returned his kiss, raking his lip with her fang. She flicked her tongue across the wound, lapping up the drops of blood before the puncture closed.

She murmured a protest when his hands ripped open the buttons on the blouse, but didn’t try to stop him. Instead, she buried her hands in his long hair and pulled him closer. Emily’s thoughts became hazier as his hands moved over her body, until she had no thoughts of resisting. Touching him no longer seemed wrong. In fact, it became necessary. Her body clamored for him.

Nicholas slid down the length of her after unfastening the bra. He kissed her stomach, near her bellybutton, and she arched against him. Emily’s breath lodged in her throat when she felt his fangs penetrate her skin. When he drank her blood, her arousal increased, and she moaned.

He pulled away a moment later, pausing only to lick one of her nipples before returning to her lips. He kissed her opened mouth, sweeping his tongue inside. One of his hands settled on her hip, and the other took possession of her breast. He moved his mouth to her ear. “Do you want to taste me?”

She nodded, incapable of speaking. He rolled on his side and pushed her face against his chest, near his left nipple. Her tongue darted out, seeking the artery leading to his heart. She could hear the blood flowing in his veins, blotting out the hushed buzz of the other heartbeats around the city. At that moment, there was only the two of them.

She found the vein and punctured his skin with a quick slice of her fangs. He tensed underneath her, and she instantly recalled the feeling of power that surged through her the last time she fed on him. Tonight, it was tempered with a stronger need—the need to feel him inside her, to be joined with him.

Blood flowed into her mouth, and she vaguely remembered it was the remnants of Ron’s life, but her disgust was fleeting and soon overwhelmed by the desire and hunger coursing through her. She wasn’t as ravenous or savage as last night and could feel the blood flowing around her fangs in small spurts. The process was slower, although infinitely more sensual, but the taste wasn’t as satisfying as the night before. She pulled away and lifted her head, frowning. “You taste different.”

He nodded. “The blood is tainted now. The best time for a proxy feeding is within an hour or two of consumption of fresh blood.”

She jerked away from him. “He was alive last night. You killed Ron last night?”

He sighed. “I had drank lightly of him two nights before, but yes, last night I drained him to feed you.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “Why him? Why someone I know? Why not a person off the street?”

Nicholas’s mouth twisted. “As I’ve said, he was convenient. He meant nothing to me. Simply a means to an end.”

When she realized she was still lying under him, Emily pushed him away and sat up. “How can you be so cruel?”

“I’m realistic, and if that makes me cruel, so be it.” He waved his hand. “You’ll learn to do what must be done.”

“I would never hurt a friend.”

He ran a hand through his hair as if attempting to restore order. “He wasn’t my friend, if you recall. And don’t be so certain of what you will or won’t do when your survival depends on it.”

“I can only die once.” She glared at him and got to her knees. “You’ve already taken care of that.”

He put his hand on her arm, keeping her from rising to her feet. “Wrong, my love. Do you remember what I told you earlier, before you became so...emotional? You can still die as a vampire. To starve to death must be the worst way to go. It’s even more terrible than decapitation or burning alive. Your civilized side tells you what I’ve done is wrong, but your true nature understands and embraces my acts.” His voice lowered an octave, and his eyes burned with a red glow. “You’ve been waiting for me to return all this time. Deep in your heart, you’ve known what you were and would be again. Deny it all you want,

but I know what's inside you, Emily. I can hear your thoughts and feel your soul as clearly as my own."

She shrugged off his hand and stood up so quickly her head spun. "You don't know me or what I want. I don't want any of this, and I don't want you."

"Liar," he accused in an amused voice. "I can smell how much you want me. I could follow you to your room and take you now."

"No."

He nodded. "Yes, and you know you wouldn't fight me. You want me as your lover. More than that, you need me to complete you. It's the same for me."

With a cry, she turned away from him and ran down the hall, struggling to block her thoughts from his. Their blood exchange had renewed the bond between them, allowing him to easily feel what she felt, and think what she thought. She would be able to clearly feel him too, if her powers were fully developed.

In her room, she slammed the door and locked it from the inside. She knew the flimsy flip lock wouldn't keep him out if he chose to carry through on his threat, but felt more secure with it in place.

In her mind's eye, she could picture him breaking through the door and carrying her to the bed. Emily's thighs quivered, and she couldn't deny the rush of pleasure that accompanied the thought. She didn't understand her dark compulsions. How could she ache to belong to him? He had murdered her friends and taken her from everything she had known. She should hate him with all of her heart. So why did she continue to yearn for his touch?

With a frustrated cry, Emily hurried to the velvet drapes against the wall, tearing them down in a fit of rage, grinning at the ripping sound the fabric made. The new her seemed to revel in destruction, and it frightened a measure of control back into her.

Behind the curtain was a pair of locked French doors. She gathered her strength and kicked against the door, splintering the wood, sensing a means of escape. The ruined doors opened easily, and she stepped out onto the balcony.

The city sprawled out before her, farther than her eyes could follow. The lights hurt her eyes, causing her to close them. As soon as she did, her hearing increased tenfold. The sound of cars rushing by easily reached her from four stories below. From the end of the next block, she could hear the muted screaming of a man cursing at someone, followed by a cry of pain that sounded feminine. Most of all, she could hear millions of heartbeats joined as one, echoing through her ears.

Her eyes snapped open when she remembered the urge she'd had several nights ago to hold a beating heart in her hand until it stilled. She had no urge to relive the vividness of that image and forced herself to concentrate on a glowing neon light two blocks away, until the thought passed. She could see the sign as clearly as if she stood in front of it, and without her contacts. It was the first good thing she had discovered about her new state.

Casting a look over her shoulder, she wondered if Nicholas knew she was out here. She focused on emptying her mind and allowing only a tiny part to mull over how to escape.

She walked to the iron rail and glanced down. They were at least four stories up. If she jumped, she would surely die. Yet, a bullet through the brain hadn't kept her from living again, so would a fall? She

didn't doubt it would be incredibly painful for a short time, but the pain seemed preferable to staying as Nicholas's captive. It was only a matter of time before her body gave in to its urgings. She couldn't allow that to happen.

Emily returned to the bedroom to retrieve her fanny pack from under the bed before taking her fleece jacket from the closet. As soon as she stepped inside, the roar of heartbeats settled to a muted murmur, and she wondered if Nicholas had caused that. She didn't want to wait around to ask him, she thought with a quirk of her lips.

Standing in the walk-in closet, she slipped off the ruined shirt and pulled on a plush lavender sweater. Once she slipped on the jacket and fastened the pack, she returned to the balcony. With her first step outside, the mingled heartbeats flooded her senses again, making it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand, which would also make it difficult for Nicholas to read her thoughts.

She stumbled to the railing and took a deep breath, leaning over to look down, seeing an alley below. She used her keen eyesight to scan the recesses, determining the alley appeared to be deserted. She also saw a fire escape just a few feet below and to the side of the balcony. If she could make it to the ladder, she wouldn't have to jump four stories onto cement.

Emily swung her leg over the railing and gripped it with both hands. Fear surged through her, and she was stuck for a moment, unable to continue, and unable to pull her leg over and go inside.

Finally, she remembered how to breathe again and slowly eased her other leg over the balcony. She maintained a white-knuckled grip on the railing as she eased each foot under the gap between the marble of the balcony and the rail. When she felt secure, she slid her hands down to the balustrades and slowly sank to a crouch. She hung there for a moment, gathering her courage.

Emily grasped the bottom of the railing and dropped one foot from the balcony, into midair. Her left leg screamed in protest at its cramped position, and she moved it away from the tenuous support of the balcony.

She hung suspended from the balcony railing, with her feet flailing for a hold. Emily craned her neck and judged the distance to the ladder, groaning when she realized it was farther away than she had thought. Her eyes fell on hunks of torn metal bolted to the side of the apartment building near the railing. Someone had deliberately ripped away the section of ladder connecting to the main escape.

Nicholas, of course.

She refused to cry out for help or attempt to get back in the room. Carefully, Emily slid her hand down the railing, releasing her left hand to move around a balustrade and grasp the rail on the other side. The world spun when she hung four stories up by one hand, but righted itself with a false sense of security when she again grasped the iron rail with both hands.

Moving slowly, she worked her way to the edge of the balcony. When she had gone around the corner and was pressed against the wall of the brick apartment building, she drew in a painful breath and waited for the vertigo to pass, ignoring the burning pain in her arms while keeping her hands locked around the balustrades at the same time as she kicked out with her left foot, attempting to connect with the ladder.

She missed and returned to the wall. Emily took a deep breath, wincing as her lungs burned, and swung her entire lower body. Her left foot touched the ladder before falling away. Her body jerked when she returned to a hanging position. Her right hand loosened, and she cried out when she started to fall. She

immediately tightened her hold and calmed down before swinging again, this time kicking off against the wall from an awkward, twisted angle.

She sobbed with relief when her left foot landed solidly on a rung. She wedged her boot sideways to keep from falling away and hung there between the railing and ladder without moving for several seconds.

Now what? She couldn't get her right foot on the ladder too. She simply wasn't tall enough, and the fire escape was too far away. She would have to let go of one of the balustrades and reach for the ladder.

She choked back a cry and forced her left hand to relax its hold. As soon as she did so, she could feel herself sliding. She reached for the ladder and missed, causing her right hand to let go of the balcony railing. Emily started to fall and desperately tried to grasp the railing. She missed that too, and her foot slipped free from the rung.

She flailed her arms in an attempt to grab onto anything as she fell through the air. Nothing was within reach, and the ground rushed toward her. A scream tore from her throat as she fell past the first-floor window. She tried to brace herself for impact with the ground by putting an arm behind her head, but nothing prepared her for the pain that exploded up her legs, back, neck and head when she hit the concrete with a wet, smacking sound. The cracking sound of several of her bones breaking followed. Agony swept over her in debilitating waves. Emily found herself unable even to cry out, and couldn't move at all. Her head filled with pressure, and she passed out under the onslaught. Death quickly followed.

## Chapter Six

When Emily's eyes opened, she noticed she still ached everywhere. That her eyes had opened was a good sign, she decided, and tried to sit up. Her back protested, but she was able to move. She sat frozen for a long moment, figuring out what hurt and what didn't.

A constant dull twinge radiated from mid-back up to her shoulder blades. Her head throbbed with pain. Her legs felt fine, as did her arms, hands, feet and fingers. She lifted a hand to touch the back of her head and grimaced at the squishiness she found. She could feel her skull firming under her fingers.

Emily looked around her, wincing as her neck popped when she turned her head. The alley remained deserted, aside from a moving mass in a pile of boxes nearby. It was too small to be human, so she chose not to investigate.

The night sky was darker, but a steady stream of cars and people continued to move down the street. She didn't have a watch, but estimated she had been out between thirty minutes and an hour.

The pain in her back had almost faded, and she eased herself into a standing position. The throbbing in her head had diminished to a slight ache, and the bone felt firm when she touched it.

Emily blanched when she looked down to where she had fallen. A huge red stain, still glistening in places, marred the spot. Bits of tissue were mixed into the mess, along with bone fragments. She clamped a hand over her mouth to fight down nausea and took a step backward. Even before she had turned away, she saw several rats peeking out of their box camouflage. A daring one—fat and greasy, with dark-brown fur—walked boldly to the stain and sniffed it.



She shuddered and turned away, putting several feet between herself and the rats. A few feet before she stepped onto 6thStreet, according to the green sign, she paused. She must look like she had fallen from a four-story balcony. Blood had surely drenched the back of her clothes, and she didn't want to speculate about what else had matted her hair.

She shrugged off the fleece coat and held it up to examine it in the meager light filtering from the street. Dark stains had soaked through so deeply into the weave that they appeared to be part of a gruesome dying process. She turned the jacket inside out and found it was mildly better. She slipped it on, unable to hold back a sound of disgust when the stained side clung to the fuzzy sweater, and drying blood—the consistency of gel—soaked through to her skin.

After she stuffed as much hair as possible under the hood of the jacket, Emily checked for her fanny pack, then plunged into the foot traffic of 6thStreet. She kept her head down, but her eyes moved constantly to watch those walking with her. A cold sweat trailed down her face, and she was shaking with hunger. Their heartbeats ricocheted in her head until she wanted to clamp her hands over ears and scream. She resisted the urge, knowing she was drawing enough attention already.

Ahead, at the corner of Bleecker and 6th, she saw a street vendor with jackets and shirts. She turned west on Bleecker and pushed her way toward his cart, grabbing an "I ? New York" shirt at random, along with a black hoodie. The lights were hurting her eyes, and she added a pair of sunglasses to the pile.

The clerk was staring at her, with his mouth half-opened. Two gold teeth were visible among the shining white teeth that contrasted so vividly with his dark skin. "That be all?"

She nodded and avoided his eyes.

"Thirty-seven dollars," he said.

She didn't bother to haggle over the price, even though it cut into her cab money. She fumbled for the money and handed him exact change. "Is there a gas station near here?"

He nodded and pointed. "Keep going down Bleecker, 'til you get to MacDougal. There's an all-night station there."

"Thanks." She gave him a quick smile and took the clothes, not bothering to wait for a sack. Emily hurried through the pedestrian traffic, anxious to be somewhat inconspicuous as soon as possible. It was only a matter of time until Nicholas discovered she had left, and if he remained true to everything he had said, he would come after her. She wanted to be far away from New York City as soon as possible.

The station came into sight, and she started jogging, pushing aside a couple of people in her rush. She heard someone shout obscenities behind her, but ignored them. At the crosswalk, she crossed with several others. Halfway across the street, one of the girls tripped.

Emily almost fell over her, and skidded to a stop, swaying, inches from the girl. She watched as a boy knelt beside her to examine the cut on her knee. She licked her lips when she saw the blood flowing, and her stomach rumbled. With a cry, she hurried around them and across the street, running through the lot to the outdoor bathrooms around the side of the white station.

She cursed when she found the knob locked. Emily looked over her shoulder and saw no one nearby.

She grasped the handle and twisted firmly, feeling it slowly give under her hand. With a cracking sound, the doorknob turned freely, and she pushed against the door, stepping inside.

It was a one-person bathroom, without a stall for privacy. She had the room to herself, to her relief. Halfway through breaking the lock, she had briefly wondered if it wasn't locked by station policy, but because someone was inside.

She looked at herself in the mirror, alarmed to see how pale she was. She felt weak, and her body cried out for sustenance. Emily knew what she needed, but denied it, telling herself it was all in her head while she slipped off the jacket and sweater. She wet a paper towel and washed her face and hair as best she could. Blood had splattered her neck, and she washed that area with a fresh towel.

More blood was on her stomach, where several of her ribs had punctured the skin. Faint lines remained, but they were the only indication of a wound. The bones felt whole and strong under her probing fingers.

She didn't bother to remove the jeans and wash her legs. She knew her right leg must be covered with blood, because there was a hole in the denim and a bloodstain, indicating her bone had punctured skin and material alike in the fall. It felt fine now, and she had no fresh pants, so didn't take time to investigate.

She found a small travel brush and hand lotion in her pack. She used the brush to smooth her hair before rubbing handfuls of the raspberry-scented lotion over her body and through her hair, hoping to partially disguise the scent of blood. After returning the items to her pack, she slid on the dark glasses. Her eyes immediately felt better.

When she had cleaned up as best she could, Emily slipped on the white T-shirt and black hoodie, and then tucked her hair inside the hood. She stuffed the ruined sweater and jacket in the trash before leaving the bathroom.

Emily crossed the street again and got back on Bleecker, hoping to hail a taxi. One sped by, but ignored her raised arm. She continued walking, and *Il Mulino* caught her eye. She was starving for a plate of spaghetti. Just from the scent wafting from the restaurant, she could almost taste the warm marinara, paired with perfect al dente noodles and plump meatballs.

She gagged when her imagination changed the meal to worms wriggling in her mouth, covered with blood, and served with eyeballs. She lost all appetite for Italian food as she continued on her way, spotting three taxis in a row in front of the building housing Terra Blues, and sprinting the half-block distance to ensure that at least one remained available.

She chose the first one and slipped into the back.

The cabbie craned his neck to look at her. He was in his forties and of Mediterranean descent. "Where to, miss?"

"Can you take me to Huxley? It's about forty miles from Goshen."

He whistled and looked at his dash clock. "I'm due to go off-duty in twenty minutes. That'll take a couple of hours, one-way."

"Please? I really need to get there." She opened her fanny pack and counted the money. "I'll give you one hundred forty-three dollars and seventeen cents."

He chuckled. "You can keep the three-seventeen, miss."

She relaxed against the seat, not realizing how stiffly she had held herself. Her back gave a twinge as she settled, then quieted. She noticed her headache had gone too. If only her hunger would dissipate.

He merged into traffic and turned on his radio. He didn't look back or try to engage her in conversation during the slow drive through the city. She found her eyes closing and struggled to ward off sleep, not wishing to have another dream in the back of a taxi. She wanted to remain alert in case Nicholas caught up with her before she reached home.

When they joined the traffic on 87, she wondered why she hadn't gone straight to the police. The thought caught her by surprise, and she nibbled on her lower lip, wincing when her fang broke through. It was a habit she would have to break, or her lower lip would be constantly sore.

Why hadn't she called the cops or had the cabbie drive her to the nearest station? It wasn't to protect Nicholas, she assured herself. She couldn't think of a logical explanation for not going to the police and opened her mouth to tell the driver to take her back. Her tongue refused to move. She frowned and tried again, with no success. She couldn't speak the words.

She tried something else. "How long until we arrive?"

He looked up briefly in his rearview mirror. "About thirty minutes. You'll be there in plenty of time to get settled."

She frowned. "What?"

"Before the memorial service and funeral tomorrow."

"What funeral?" Even as she asked, her heart seized with dread.

He looked straight ahead again, but answered her question. "Sorry. I assumed you were going to the service planned for tomorrow morning. Apparently, two kids were found dead in an abandoned funhouse at the Homecoming carnival. Two more kids are missing."

Her voice emerged as a croak. "How did they die?"

He shrugged. "I ain't sure. I heard different versions. Someone said a maniac cut them up with a knife. Someone else said some wacko with a vampire complex drained their blood."

"And the two who are missing?"

"Ron something. I don't remember the girl's name. Most of the police figure they was kidnapped, tortured and murdered elsewhere."

She blinked. "They don't think they're alive?"

He shook his head. "Don't imagine so. The crimes were vicious. I imagine if one of them kids did surface, they'd be questioned pretty thoroughly."

"Uh..." She cleared her throat. "Why is that?"

“Some jackass FBI agent thinks the two missing kids are the killers.” He snorted. “Announced at a press conference that any survivors would be tested to see if they drank their friends’ blood.”

She blanched. Had traces of Sara and Troy’s blood remained in Nicholas when she fed from him? If not, she would still have Ron’s blood in her veins. They may not figure out it was his right away, but they would know it wasn’t hers. Her throat tightened, and she struggled to breathe. What kind of physical proof would there be of the change? Altered cells, failure to produce her own blood, and sensitivity to light were just a few she could think of. If they discovered what Nicholas had made her, she didn’t know what they would do to her. What if they blamed her for Sara, Troy, and Ron’s deaths? It was certain they would, if they investigated her physiology. The most she might be able to hope for would be years of experimentation in some government lab, as opposed to a life sentence.

“You okay?”

She blinked and looked up. “What?”

“Are you okay? You’re awfully pale and sweating. You sick?”

She nodded. “I’m anemic.” Emily bit back a hard laugh that wouldn’t hold any amusement. Anemic, yeah, that was one way to look at it. “I’ll be fine.”

He nodded and returned his attention to the road.

Emily turned her gaze out the window, watching the highway as they passed. Her stomach cramped with mingled hunger and nerves. She couldn’t go home. If she saw her parents, everyone would know she was alive—until they discovered how non-alive she was.

She could feel Nicholas’s silk-covered iron fist closing around her. His trap was perfect, leaving her no escape with her family and friends. Had he planned it, or were Sara and Troy convenient, as he had said?

“What about the funhouse?” she asked abruptly several minutes later. “Did they trace the owner?”

The driver’s brow furrowed. “I think it was something like Tremont Amusements, but the trail led back to a bankrupt company. FBI thinks the owners were running the business on the sly of the government and got scared when they discovered the dead kids. They just cut and ran, probably.”

“They aren’t suspects?” she asked with disbelief.

“I guess they are. I don’t know. The news doesn’t cover much about that. They spend all their time replaying the interview with the missing kids’ families, begging for the return of their kids.” His disgust was evident. “Damn media goes straight for the jugular.”

She nodded and once again subsided into silence, searching for a way out. During the last twenty minutes of the ride, she came up with nothing. When they entered the small town of Huxley, population four thousand, she had him pull over to the curb in front of Huxley Grocery. The lights were out because the business had closed at nine.

He frowned and eyed the area. “Are you sure this is where you want to stop? I’ll take you wherever you’re headed.”

“This is it,” she said quickly. “I’m meeting someone.”

He shrugged and took the seven folded twenties before driving away.

Emily watched the taillights of the cab until it disappeared by turning off Main Street. Once the street was quiet again, she hurried around to the back of the grocery store, fishing in her fanny pack for the employee key given to her when the manager hired her three months ago for cleaning after hours.

A privacy fence to lessen the noise disturbance to homes nearby during deliveries surrounded the back of the store. She went to the back entrance without fear of being observed and slipped the key in the lock. It turned easily, as always, and she entered the stockroom.

Emily flipped on the lights and moved through the dusty back room. Boxes were stacked against one wall, and a large table and several folding chairs sat in the opposite corner. A coffeemaker was on the table, and the area passed for a break room.

She exited through the swinging doors and turned to her left, heading for the butcher's department. She didn't know if cow blood would nourish her properly, but hoped it would take off the edge of her hunger.

She entered the meat area and went to the tubs of beef livers stacked in the coolers. She opened one and fished out the liver before draining the blood in three quick swallows. It was cold and slimy and slid down her throat without the same rush of pleasure she had previously experienced. Her stomach was less empty, but her heartbeat was still sluggish. She drank two more containers before her hunger faded to a persistent ache.

As quickly as possible, Emily tossed the livers back in the containers and took them behind the counter to the industrial sink in the corner. She threw the raw livers down the garbage disposal and tossed the empty containers in the trash. With any luck, Chuck would assume one of the evening employees had disposed of spoiled liver. The last thing the town needed was rumors circulating of someone drinking blood and leaving the livers in the containers. Vampire paranoia must be running rampant as it was.

After her impromptu meal, Emily left the store and stepped into the quiet night. She heard a cat meow from two blocks over, followed by a hissing growl from another cat. Within seconds, a trashcan lid clattered to the ground, making her jump.

Spurred on by the cats' fight and the subsequent fright, Emily walked away from the store. Within a block, she decided Main Street was too visible, even at four in the morning, and cut down Elm Street. As she passed Mrs. Johnson's house, she saw several candles displayed in the window. Each burned in candleholders with crosses embedded in the glass.

She looked around and saw most of the houses had crosses on their doors, candles in their windows, or flowers tied to their doorway. Almost every house had a wreath of garlic around their door or fence latch. She didn't know whether to interpret the candles and flowers as a vigil for the dead and missing, or if they were some obscure way to repel vampires. Emily had never been a fan of vampire books or movies, but now wished she had paid more attention. Jeremy was obsessed with all things supernatural, so she'd had many opportunities to learn from her brother's interest—if only she had known she would end up as a vampire herself. Her mouth twisted at the bitter thought.

A thick ball lodged in her throat when her brother's face popped into her mind. She had been so certain escaping Nicholas would be the end of her worries. She would return to her family, who would help her fix whatever he had done to her. She hadn't expected life to be the same with Sara gone, but had really

believed she could go back to being Emily Swesso.

She swallowed heavily and turned onto Fourth Street, surprised to find the heartbeats of Huxley had muted to a dull roar. As soon as she thought of them, they returned to a cacophonous level. The more she tried not to think about them, the louder they grew. It was several minutes before they faded, when she was distracted from the sound of the heartbeats by the sound of arguing from a house as she passed it.

She wandered aimlessly through town, wanting to cut across the park and head home. She knew her parents would be relieved to see her, but didn't know how to explain what had happened to her.

She paused on Sycamore and leaned against a wooden privacy fence, a few inches from their wreath of garlic. Emily's hand shook as she reached out to touch it, curious to know if it really was a repellent. She touched a bulb, but nothing happened. Emboldened, she leaned a bit closer and took a cautious sniff. A loud sneeze escaped from her, breaking the quiet on the street. Her nasal passages burned from the strong odor the garlic gave off, making her sneeze again.

Behind the fence, a dog started barking. It sounded large and angry, with a deep growl that was sure to wake its owners if it continued to bark. Emily stood up and hurried down the block. Her feet guided her to the park, where she hesitated.

Emily looked behind her, then at the expanse of the park that covered an acre. She stepped onto the damp grass and took a few tentative steps in the direction of the shortcut. If she turned at the dugout and cut across the baseball diamond, she could be squeezing through the hole in the fence just a minute or two later. She was less than five minutes from home.

Home had never seemed so far away.

She plodded through the grass to the dugout, but instead of crossing the diamond, she settled on the bench inside the dugout and stared out at the empty field. Her heart ached when she realized she and Sara wouldn't be playing on the softball team this year. Never again would she pitch a curveball while Sara taunted the batter from her position as catcher.

She wouldn't be doing any of the things she had planned. There would be no welcome packet from NYU in the coming months. She couldn't ever return to Huxley Junior College to finish out the rest of the year. Her chest ached when she thought of all the missed tests she wouldn't sit for. What she wouldn't give to have finals as the biggest challenge she faced.

Tears streamed down her cheeks when she remembered Sara and Ron would miss everything too. Sara would never be the fashion designer she had dreamed of being from the time they were little. Ron's tenure as halfback had been painfully short. Even Troy, as big a jerk as he had been, deserved to graduate from college and go on to make many women miserable. He didn't deserve to be dead at twenty-two. No one did.

She hated Nicholas at that moment. Even the dark attraction she felt for him wasn't enough to overcome the surge of emotions. If she had the chance, she would kill him for everything he had taken from her.

Emily leaned back and propped her feet on the bench so she could rest her head on her knees. The tears seemed never-ending, as did the sobs that soon issued from her. The tears finally dried up, and the sobs turned to hiccups, but the aching sadness remained.

When she lifted her head, Emily found her feet sliding from the bench to the ground. Her body tensed as she stood, and her legs carried her across the field, in the direction of home. She couldn't walk away without a last look, just as she couldn't leave without saying goodbye to Sara. She wouldn't be able to attend the memorial service, but could watch from a distance as officials put her friend in the ground. The image would remain forever in her memory, acting as a constant reminder of why she couldn't give in to Nicholas.

She slipped easily through the hole in the fence, which had been cut with a pair of wire cutters by her next-door neighbors years ago, before the oldest son went off to college. From there, it was a short walk to her house.

She froze near her backyard. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and a peculiar sensation of being watched swept through her. She looked up at the second-floor windows and saw all were dark.

She hesitated a moment longer, drinking in the sight of her backyard. Her father had removed the Koi from the pond for winter, but the hose still fed the pond with a gentle bubbling sound. Nothing was in bloom. The scene seemed tense, as if waiting for something to shatter the preternatural silence.

She thought about sleeping in the treehouse her father and Uncle Bernie built several summers ago. The two-room Victorian-style was more than spacious enough for her to lie down, and Jeremy probably had a sleeping bag up there, along with his hidden collection of erotic magazines stolen from Uncle Bernie.

She took a step toward the massive oak before freezing. Something didn't feel right, and she turned around, back toward the fence. Emily paused once more at the hole and lifted her hand, waving goodbye to her family inside, although they couldn't see her. She whispered a quiet farewell and slipped through the hole.

Emily returned to the dugout and curled up on the bench. The night was cold, and she noticed it for the first time. Had she been preoccupied, or was her tolerance for cold higher now?

She closed her eyes and tried to rest without falling asleep. She had almost dozed off when she heard leaves crackle under someone's feet. Her eyes snapped open, and she saw a short, slender form approaching. Muscles tense, she didn't move, hoping the person crossing the diamond wouldn't see her. She was more exposed than if she had been naked in Times Square.

The other person stopped a few feet from the dugout. He or she wore a coat with a hood, obscuring their features. "Emily?"

She jumped at the whispered query, recognizing her brother's voice. "Go away," she said, trying to sound menacing.

He ignored her and walked closer. Jeremy pushed off the hood to reveal dark-brown hair and blue eyes the same shade as his sister's. "You're alive." His voice was a curious combination of relief, excitement, and fear.

She moved to a sitting position, knowing he wasn't going to leave until he was ready. She patted the bench beside her and frowned when he warily approached. "What's wrong?"

He shrugged and sat down, wedging his shoulder against the wall opposite from her. He eyed her uncertainly.

“Are you afraid of me?”

He shrugged again. “I dunno. Maybe.”

Emily’s mouth dropped open. “Why? I wouldn’t hurt you.”

Jeremy sighed. “That FBI guy says if you’re alive, you killed Sara and that guy.”

She shook her head vigorously before pausing. She did share responsibility for Ron’s death—for them all, in fact. If they hadn’t been with her when Nicholas found her, they would still be alive today. “I didn’t kill Sara or Troy,” she said in a thick voice, trying to convince herself along with her brother.

He nodded, instantly believing her. “That’s what I thought, pretty much.”

“How did you know I was here?”

Jeremy looked across the field, in the direction of their house. “I saw you from my window. Since you disappeared, I haven’t slept well. I guess I’m afraid someone will take me too.” He sighed. “Those cops parked in front of the house should make me feel safer, but they don’t.”

She froze. “Cops?”

“Yeah. They told Mom and Dad they’re around in case you come back.” His mouth curled. “Dad says the feds are hoping you’ll turn up so they can pin the murders on someone.”

She blanched at her brother’s casually shared information. “I didn’t do it.”

“No one who knows you really thinks you did, sis.”

She breathed a small sigh. “Just a little doubt?” she asked, so softly he didn’t hear.

“What happened to you?”

She almost bit her lip before remembering her fangs, as she considered how much to tell him. “I can’t tell you.”

He frowned. “Are you really a vampire?”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

He dropped his gaze. “A couple of guys at school say you and Ron are vampires.”

“Ron’s dead.” Her voice cracked. “I don’t know what I am.” *Copout*, her inner voice admonished. “All I know is I can’t come home. Not right now anyway.”

Jeremy’s blue eyes welled up with unshed tears. “Why not?”

He surreptitiously brushed at the tears while she pretended not to see them. She didn’t want to embarrass her thirteen-year-old brother. “It isn’t safe.” The threat posed by the FBI paled in comparison to the haunting presence of Nicholas, who had sworn to follow her anywhere. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t considered what he might do to her family if she led him back to her home. He was ruthless



enough to do anything to ensure her cooperation.

“When can you come home?”

She forced a confident smile onto her face—a confidence she was far from feeling. “Soon.” She ignored the disbelief in his eyes that she knew must mirror her own. “You need to go home now, Jeremy.”

He shook his head. “I want to stay with you.”

“No. Go home. I promise I’ll see you soon.” Her heart stuttered at the lie, but she forced her voice to remain steady.

He slowly got to his feet. He stood before her for a long time, just staring, as if he was memorizing her face. “Hurry home, butt-breath.” His voice broke on the insult. “Mom and Dad miss you.”

She forced a smile. “Don’t even think about moving into my room, twerp.” She waved at him as he turned and walked away. Emily watched him until he slipped through the fence, wondering if she would ever truly come back, or if that author whose name she had forgotten was right about not being able to go home again.

\* \* \* \* \*

She spent the rest of an uncomfortable night in the dugout, waiting for the sun to rise. As the sun peeked over the horizon, she left the park and walked to the cemetery, moving with cautious paranoia, convinced the police were watching the entire town. To her surprise, she made it to the cemetery without anyone stopping her. It was so early in the morning that few people were up and stirring yet.

At Huxley Cemetery, whose simple name fit well with the identical marble markers flush to the ground, she searched for a hiding place. The only structure around, aside from the mortuary across the street, was the groundskeeper’s shed. She tried the door and found it locked. The flimsy pushbutton handle was no deterrent for her. She turned it once with a burst of strength, and the knob fell into her hands. She cursed under her breath as she opened the door.

Emily put the handle back in the door as best she could, attempting to hide her presence. She hoped Mr. Grinden wouldn’t be doing any upkeep until after the funeral, because there was nowhere to hide from sight in the shed.

It had a dirt floor, and the earthy smell filled her nose like a cloying perfume. Gasoline from the can near the lawnmower mingled with the scent, causing the air to take on an acrid tinge she probably wouldn’t have noticed last week.

Emily lifted a bag of mulch from the rickety shelf against the back wall and dropped it on the ground. She used it for a makeshift seat and sat down to wait, ensuring she could see the position of the sun through the small window before trying to get as comfortable as possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

She had planned to tell time with the sun’s position, but forgot she had no idea how to do that. Emily managed to steal a couple of hours of sleep without dreaming, before the sound of car doors slamming and the sudden swell of heartbeats in her immediate vicinity woke her.

She rose and stretched her tight muscles before slipping from the shed. Emily hovered near the building, watching as nearly the whole town gathered near a plot halfway across the cemetery.

She looked up and saw several people were walking too close for her comfort. Emily ducked around the side of the shed and searched for the sunglasses in her jacket pocket. After putting them on and hiding her hair and as much of her face as possible under the hood, she slipped back around the shed to watch the service from a distance.

Her newly improved vision aided her in seeing just one coffin near a mound of dirt covered by a blue tarp. She could make out the droning words of the Episcopalian minister as he said a final blessing for Sara, but tuned him out. Her gaze remained locked on the white coffin, as she envisioned the white dress Sara had bought for the Christmas dance during their last shopping trip into NYC, just a few days before the carnival.

Her focus shifted at the sound of someone breathing nearby. She jerked her head up and saw a blond-haired man in a dark suit staring at her. He wore large sunglasses that hid his eyes and obscured his expression. Emily ducked her head and took a step away. When she looked back, he was following her, so she broke into a run, obeying her body's order to escape.

She ran into the street without looking and screamed when a car stopped inches from her. Emily's sluggish heartbeat seemed to be pounding in her ears, and she had barely regained her breath when the door opened and Nicholas leaned out enough to see her.

"Get in," he said in a crisp voice. "You've stayed away long enough."

She cast a glance over her shoulder at the man who had paused at the side of the road, then back at Nicholas. It was clear that her immediate future lay with Nicholas, so she walked to the passenger side and slid inside. He pulled away quickly, and she turned her head back in the direction of the man in the dark suit. His head remained turned in their direction until Nicholas turned a corner. For a moment, she felt safe, before remembering who sat beside her in the driver's seat of the black Subaru Forester. She wondered what her punishment would be for escaping him. He was not a forgiving man.

## Chapter Seven

She didn't want to be the first to break the tense silence, so Emily stared out the tinted windows of the Forester, waiting for him to lash out at her.

"There's sunscreen in the glove compartment." His tone was bland. "It should protect your arm by the window until we get back to the city."

Her eyes widened. Sunscreen? His first words to her were about sunscreen? As she fumbled for the sunscreen, she glanced at him from the corner of her eye, out the side of the thick sunglasses.

He looked different in the sunlight. His gleaming black hair had been pulled back into a loose ponytail at the back of his neck. He wore jeans and a white polo shirt with long sleeves. He could have been any other driver on the road. His relaxed posture and one-handed grip on the steering wheel suggested he was comfortable driving. His very ordinariness made her even more frightened of his response to her running away. Would he be so calm and at ease when he tortured her?

“Would you like music? I usually forget to turn it on.”

She licked her lips. “Uh, sure.” Anything that filled the silence had to be good.

They reached for the dial at the same time, and their hands brushed against each other. Emily immediately jerked away and pressed herself into the seat. He looked briefly in her direction before turning on the radio and returning his attention to the road. Was this part of her punishment? Did he intend to drive her mad with fear and worry before he hurt her?

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said in a conversational tone.

She cursed herself for forgetting he could read her thoughts.

“Not all of them. Just your strongest emotions.”

“Oh.” Her voice was a hoarse croak. “Why?”

“That’s when our connection is strongest—”

“No. Why aren’t you going to hurt me?” She forced the words through the thickness in her throat, suddenly anxious to have it done with. “I ran away. You must have searched for me for hours.”

He shook his head. “I knew exactly where to find you.”

“How?”

“I sent you here, Emily.”

Her mouth dropped open, and a strangled sound emerged from her lips. “What?”

“I allowed you to leave. I’ve guided each of your movements since you broke through the balcony door.” He looked at her for a second, and his mouth twisted. “I’m surprised you fell, I’ll admit. I should have remembered you aren’t used to your new abilities yet.”

A million questions rushed through her head, but only one emerged. “Why did you take away the ladder then?”

“I couldn’t make it too easy for you to leave.”

“I don’t understand.” Emily clutched her hands in her lap. “Why would you do this?”

“So you could see for yourself there’s no going back.” He stopped speaking as he merged into the exit lane. “You wouldn’t have taken my word for it.”

She pushed back the hood of the jacket as sweat coursed down her face. “How do I know any of it was true? You could have set up everything—”

He nodded. “I arranged for that particular driver to pick you up and relay the news of your friends.” Nicholas chuckled. “Didn’t you wonder why he was willing to take such a low fare for the drive to Huxley?”

She frowned, realizing how small a fee one hundred forty dollars was for a cabbie driving that distance, round-trip. A small flutter of hope stirred when it penetrated her thoughts how he had manipulated her. “The rest is an illusion too.”

“Even what your brother said?” He shook his head. “The FBI agent chasing you was real, Emily. Everything you discovered last night is the truth. I knew you had to see your past before we could move on to the future.”

“We aren’t moving anywhere,” she snapped. “I want nothing to do with you.”

He seemed unconcerned by her defiance. “You’ll change your mind.”

She lapsed into a sullen silence as they reentered the city, refusing to even look at him as he negotiated through traffic and turned down Bleecker. A few blocks later, he pulled into a parking garage. Curiosity caused her to break the silence. “What are you doing?”

“There’s no parking near the apartment building.” He rounded the corner of the first level and parked beside a red Cadillac. “We walk from here.”

She got out of the Forester reluctantly, unconvinced he wouldn’t turn violent as soon as they entered the apartment, and the car seemed moderately safer. She resisted when he picked up her hand, struggling to pull away. Emily hissed with pain when he tightened his grip. With a glare, she submitted to his hold as they walked to the elevator.

Two other people were in the car when the doors opened. They were glued to each other and whispering softly, punctuating every few words with breathy giggles. Both seemed oblivious to sharing the elevator with Nicholas and Emily as it whisked them to street level.

They stepped out of the elevator and left the small building housing it. The sidewalk was full of activity, and the autumn sun burned high in the sky. Emily’s skin felt hot, and she put up the hood of her jacket. She glanced at Nicholas, who seemed unaffected.

“It’s all in your head,” he said softly. “Yes, the sun is stronger to us, but it isn’t really burning you beyond a mild sunburn. You’ve been influenced by too many years of exposure to the media version of our kind.”

She shivered when he said “our kind”. She wanted to protest she wasn’t any kind, but it would be a waste of breath. Last night, she had accepted what she was, but wasn’t ready to hear a reminder every time he spoke.

He moved with fluid grace, seeming to dart through every small opening between the other pedestrians. Emily felt like a graceless klutz next to him, as she tried to mimic his movements. To her surprise, her gait grew smoother when she concentrated on the way each muscle moved. She was keenly aware of every aspect of her body, from the sluggish heartbeat in her ears, to the muscles in her legs bunching as she walked.

“Beautiful.” Nicholas gave her a tender smile. “You’ll soon be able to move like this without thinking about it.”

His praise broke her concentration, and she stumbled. He was there to catch her, and she crashed

against his chest. Their faces were inches apart, and Emily's breath caught in her throat when she met his eyes. She could see and feel how strongly he believed she was beautiful. It made her feel beautiful and sensual, as if she was a creature of sensation, without consequence. She wanted to sink against him and feel his lips on hers. She wanted more than that, and her body clamored for her to give in to her urgings. Her own desires frightened her more than his. She cleared her throat and pushed against him. His arms dropped away, and he took a step back as she swayed unsteadily for a second before regaining her balance.

He took her hand again, and they continued down Bleecker. As they passed the alley, a wave of fatigue swept through Emily, and her head started pounding. Her legs turned to jelly and refused to move her forward.

"You must be starving and exhausted." Nicholas put his arm around her waist and led her to the front of the brownstone. She leaned heavily on him, unable to muster the energy to walk on her own. "I hadn't planned on your fall, or I would have rations on hand. I'm afraid you'll have to make do."

She didn't bother to ask for clarification as they entered the foyer and bypassed the rows of mailboxes. Nicholas took her straight to the elevator and propped her against him while they waited for the car to appear. She questioned how suddenly the wave of exhaustion swept through her, but was too tired to focus on what was happening or even be suspicious of Nicholas. Part of her suspected he was manipulating her again, but she didn't care right then. All she wanted was to sleep for years. Her stomach growled, reminding her she wanted to eat too. Her mouth watered when she thought of blood. Intellectually, her reaction disgusted her, but she couldn't deny she craved the taste.

On the fourth floor, Nicholas lifted her into his arms and carried her to apartment 4-A. He rang the bell with his elbow, and Tremont opened the door within seconds. He looked alarmed as they walked past him, and he followed behind.

Emily wanted to reassure him, but couldn't lift her head from Nicholas's chest. It was too comfortable being held in his arms, and she wanted to tell him to put her down, but was afraid of falling. A part of her didn't want to lose the connection with him. She quickly squashed that thought.

Nicholas pushed open the door to her room and laid her on the bed before he turned to Tremont. "Bring blood."

"There's only a tiny bit left from the last shipment you received from the blood bank, master."

"Blood bank?" Emily asked in a daze.

He smoothed the hair off her face. "They believe I suffer from a rare illness that requires constant transfusions. It's convenient to sustain us, but we still need fresh blood." He turned back to Tremont, saying, "Bring what you can find. It should tide her over until tonight."

Emily's tongue felt thick when she asked, "What happens tonight?"

He removed his sunglasses and hung an earpiece in the pocket of his jeans. "It's time you learned to feed on your own."

She feebly shook her head.

He touched her cheek. His tone was firm when he spoke. "You will hunt and eat if I have to force the

blood down your throat.”

She wanted to protest his dictate, but couldn't find the energy. She didn't even fight when Nicholas took off her sunglasses and hoodie. She put up her hands when he pulled at the T-shirt, but he pushed past her weak resistance. She tried to roll off the bed when he went to the dresser for pajamas, but didn't make it far.

He treated her like a recalcitrant child as he removed her jeans and slid on the pajama pants. His dark eyes burned brightly when he removed her bra, but his fingers were quick and efficient with the top. Soon, she was dressed and under the covers.

“I want to shower,” she whispered.

“Later.”

Tremont knocked on the door and entered with a wineglass of deep-red liquid. Nicholas took it from him and sat on the bed beside her. He lifted and propped her against his arm, then held the glass to her lips.

She consumed the blood eagerly, blotting out the part of her urging to spit it in his face. Emily drained the last drop and whimpered, wanting more. She licked the rim of the glass, then her own lips, catching his eyes as they followed her tongue. She heard him groan, and a small smile teased the corners of her mouth. He pulled the glass away, and she reached for it. “More.”

“Tonight,” he said in a soothing voice. “Sleep now and recover some measure of strength.” Before he had even gotten up from the bed, she was asleep.

1664, Virginia

Elspeth looked up from the hearth as Griselda burst into the room. She tucked a strand of auburn hair escaping her mobcap behind her ear and stepped away from the hot fire. “It is about time you showed up. I do not want to stand here all day.”

Griselda waved a hand, ignoring her sister's rebuke. “He is here.”

Her eyes widened. “Whom?”

“Vallsade, the trapper.” A teasing glint appeared in her blue eyes. “But I suppose you do not care, sister?”

Elspeth's cheeks bloomed with color, and her eyes darted to the doorway. “Shush,” she hissed. “You cannot speak of such things. What if Johanna heard you? She would run to the master.”

Griselda lowered her voice. “I heard him tell Abel he would stay the night if Lord Tremont permitted. He is passing through on his way to Jamestown.”

A giddy sensation swept through Elspeth, and she had to fight back a giggle. She longed to tear off her apron and run to greet Nicholas properly, but couldn't. Instead, she returned her attention to the bubbling stew and struggled to appear calm. “Mr. Vallsade always has such interesting stories.”

Her sister giggled and started to say more, but Johanna's arrival caused her mouth to close with a click.

The housekeeper eyed them both with displeasure, pursing her mouth. As always, an immaculate striped dress and roomy apron covered her rail-thin body. Not a strand of her mousy brown hair peeked out of the lap cap. "You appear short of tasks, Griselda. Allow me to fill your time."

"I—"

She ignored the interruption. "The hearth in the main hall needs a good cleaning."

Griselda grimaced. "But I cleaned it two days ago."

Johanna's smile was cold. "Clean it again." She cast a disparaging glance at Elspeth. "Heaven knows Lord Tremont would not wish your sister to leave the kitchens for something so menial as scooping cinders." Her mouth twisted. "He values her culinary skills too highly."

With a sigh, Griselda inclined her head and scurried from the kitchen.

Elspeth's shoulders tensed as she awaited instructions and scathing remarks from the slightly older woman. The last thing she wanted to do was stand there during one of the housekeeper's tirades when Nicholas was so close.

"Culinary skills," she repeated in a low voice. She shook her head. "Lord Tremont will have a visitor this evening. Ensure you have proper food, and not the slop from last night."

She bit back a retort about the slop from the night before, because she didn't have permission to speak unreservedly to Johanna, who was a freewoman. "Yes, ma'am."

With another sniff, Johanna left the kitchen. When she was gone, Elspeth laid the ladle on the wooden table and sat on a stool. She cast an anxious glance at the door leading out the back of the cross-plan house. She wondered if Nicholas would try to see her immediately. As much as her heart yearned for a glimpse of his face, she knew it would be too risky. If Lord Tremont caught them, he might extend the length of her contract as punishment for disobeying him.

She rose from the stool and went to the bowl of dough, lifting the cloth and removing the lump to knead it briskly. A small smile darted across her mouth when she imagined Johanna's face on the bread dough. How satisfying it would be to pound her against the table a few times.

Nicholas didn't try to see her before dinner, so Elspeth slipped from the kitchen to her small room on the third floor. She changed the plain black dress for a white one with small yellow flowers and tied a matching pocket to the waist of the dress. She had only the white apron she had worn during the day, so retied it around herself. As a final step, she brushed out her hair and redid the bun before securing the white mobcap over her hair. As usual, her hair was too thick and long to fit comfortably under the confines of the bonnet, and she knew Johanna would rebuke her for a messy appearance.

Tonight, she didn't care. She had thoughts of soon seeing her lover to sustain her. It had been over a year since their last meeting, and she found herself impatient for the dinner to pass so she could be with him again.

She took the back stairs and reentered the kitchen to find Johanna sampling the stew. She stiffened when the other woman spat out the bite onto the floor.

“Terrible swill. It has no flavor.”

“You hold the key to the spice cabinet, Johanna. I cannot add salt if you will not part with it.”

She glared at Elspeth. “A good cook would not require such large quantities.”

She tried to let the insult roll over her as she busied herself with taking bowls from the cupboard and stacking them on a wooden tray. Johanna watched every move, as if waiting for her to make a mistake. She pushed past the other woman and lifted the ladle. Elspeth hissed and dropped it when it burned her hand. She whirled around to confront Johanna, who smiled. “Are you pleased, Johanna?” she made herself ask in a calm voice. “I assume you held the ladle to the fire in the hearth until it was sufficiently heated?”

Johanna nodded. “Aye.”

She closed her eyes and forced down her anger by picturing Nicholas’s handsome face. “Next year, when my contract has ended, I will say all the things I have saved these past three years, Johanna.” She kept her voice deliberately light.

Johanna’s spine stiffened, and her anger was palpable. It was disconcerting when her lips curved from an angry expression to a smile. “Lord Tremont will find a way to keep you bound. You know he will not let you go.”

She didn’t bother debating. Instead, Elspeth said, “And he will never look at you the way you wish him to as long as I am around. You are only the housekeeper to him.”

Johanna’s hand connected with her cheek with a resounding crack. “Bite your tongue, wench. I am a freewoman.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she winced at the throbbing in her cheekbone. “Now,” she bit out. “Two years ago, you too were indentured.” Elspeth took a deep breath. “Why do you not leave? You could have married long ago and collected your land when you received your freedom dues.”

Johanna’s chin raised a notch. “I will be mistress of Tremont Plantation.”

Elspeth sighed and lifted a cloth from the table before retrieving the ladle. She knew of Johanna’s aspirations. She hoped Lord Tremont would fall madly in love with his housekeeper—once her contract ended. As unpleasant as Johanna was as a supervisor, she couldn’t imagine tolerating her if she was mistress of the plantation.

She dished the stew into the serving bowl and set it on the tray. Johanna stood in her way, and she eased past her. “I must serve,” she said in a neutral voice, although her stomach churned with excitement. Nicholas was only a few feet away.

She hurried into the hall, where Lord Tremont sat at the head of the table. Elspeth kept her expression bland as her eyes danced briefly over Nicholas. His hair had grown longer, and he wore it confined with a leather thong. His buckskins were clean, but in need of repair. He looked as if he had spent the last



year in the wild, trapping animals. In reality, he had probably returned to England, where sustenance was plentiful.

Bartholomew Tremont's eyes followed her every move as she set the serving bowl on the imported French table and put bowls before the two men. Elspeth tried to ignore the way her skin crawled as his eyes bored into her. After three years of having the man visually devour her, she should be accustomed to it. Most times, she didn't notice, but tonight she was keenly aware of Nicholas watching Tremont watch her. She could sense his anger, which frightened her. He could destroy Tremont easily, and she didn't want that. She didn't want Nicholas to be condemned as a murderer or recognized for what he was.

"Another excellent meal, I am certain," Tremont said in a smooth, clear voice. His voice was just as handsome as the rest of him. He took pride in his neatly groomed blond hair, deep brown eyes, fine European clothes, and cultured accent. He was a tobacco farmer by trade, but retained the airs of the nobleman he had been when he lived in England.

Elspeth gave him a brief smile and curtsied to both of them before leaving the hall. She hid in the kitchen, waiting for the meal to end, and the house to retire. She could already feel Nicholas's arms around her.

Griselda had quietly arranged to share a room with Agnes, the other household servant, so Elspeth had the bed to herself. She lay under the covers tensely, waiting for the sound of Nicholas at the door. Her heart stuttered when she heard him rap lightly, and she slid from the bed to let him in. Her nervous fingers fumbled with the latch for a moment, and then the door swung open with a creaking sound. They both froze for a second, waiting to see if anyone would investigate.

Finally, he moved forward and closed the door. He frowned. "I dislike the need for secrecy."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and held him. "Please, let us not argue tonight."

Nicholas frowned, but his arms encompassed her. "Aye. We have precious little time."

"I have dreamed of you every night we have been apart," she whispered, hiding her face against the scratchy wool of the shirt he had changed into.

"You could have been with me," he said, with a trace of bitterness.

Elspeth groaned. "We agreed not to argue."

He tilted her chin and kissed her lips. His tongue darted into her mouth, and he moaned. "You taste like Heaven," he said when he lifted his head. "How can I bear to part from you tomorrow for months on end?"

She closed her eyes, briefly tempted to run away from her obligations so they could be together. For fear of recklessly giving in, she said only, "Let us not think on this now. Make love to me, Nicholas."

His hands were warm when they pulled at the ties on her chemise, indicating he had recently fed. A flush of desire on his cheeks was more proof. She wondered who had been his victim, but her thoughts wandered from Nicholas's dinner to what his hands were doing at her breasts. She arched her back as she pulled at the buttons on his shirt. A year of abstinence lent her fingers an urgency that allowed her to

have him stripped of the garment in seconds. Even the burn on her hand didn't impede her ability.

She ran her uninjured palm down his chest, tracing the line of his ribs where they poked out slightly. "You have grown thin, my love."

"I pine for you," he said against her mobcap.

Elspeth hid her smile of pleasure against his chest, while continuing to stroke him, letting her hand slip lower. His hands were equally busy. "I have missed you," he said as he removed the mobcap to reveal her long fall of auburn hair. "I ache for you." Nicholas ran his hands through her hair, lifting strands to his face to rub against his cheek. Her chemise and petticoat quickly followed the route of the hair covering.

She brushed against the placket concealing his cock, although it pushed insistently against the fabric of his knee breaches. Elspeth palmed him, while letting her other hand drift to his buttocks, where she squeezed lightly.

He growled low in his throat before tipping back her head to claim her mouth. His kiss was urgent, but tender, coaxing her mouth to soften as her lips parted. She met his tongue eagerly with her own, engaging him in a duel for supremacy that ended only when she pinned his tongue between her cheek and teeth, before nipping him.

He jerked in reaction, swatting her on the buttocks, as he disengaged her tongue. "Minx."

"You bring out the animal in me," she said against his lips, nipping him again. She ran her tongue across his teeth, pausing to flirt with his fangs. A shiver ran down her spine, anticipating the day she would be free to allow him to change her to a vampire so they could live together forever.

"I would rather bring something into you." Nicholas cupped her pussy in his palm, caressing the outer lips, where moisture dripped from her. "I thought I would die without you."

She nodded, equally anxious for his possession. It had been too long since the last time he made love to her. He paused only to strip off his knee breaches before lifting and carrying her to the narrow bed.

"As did I. I cannot wait, my love." Once on the bed, Elspeth spread her legs for him, welcoming him with little preparation. Her body was wet and waiting for his cock. Later, there would be time for slow loving and whispered words. Right now, she wanted to feel him inside her.

She had almost forgotten how big he was. A gasp escaped her when his cock filled her pussy, stretching her almost beyond endurance. As her sheath relaxed, accepting the unaccustomed presence of him again, Elspeth pulled him tightly against her, listening to his heart race against her ear. He whispered her name several times as he thrust in and out of her. She met his thrusts with her own, straining for fulfillment. When his hand slipped between their bodies to stroke her clit, swollen with need and begging for attention, she barely bit back a cry.

He massaged her clit in rhythm with his thrusting hips, making it difficult for Elspeth to remember to thrust in time with him. She closed her eyes and held onto him, counting on Nicholas to guide her to the peaks of pleasure. Her pussy throbbed with spasms, mirroring his, and release was near. She almost didn't want it to come, preferring to stay just like this with her lover forever.

As an orgasm swept over her, seconds before he found satisfaction, her eyes pricked with unshed tears. She didn't know how she would stand to watch him ride away tomorrow. Her only consolation was, at

their next reunion, she would be a freewoman. She would have fulfilled her contract and received her freedom dues. As soon as they married, she could get her land, and they would have the life she dreamed about. Nicholas would realize she didn't want to return to England when she maintained her resolve to stay in the Colonies.

Near daybreak, when their passion had faded in the aftermath of physical exhaustion and temporary emotional fulfillment, Nicholas held her in his arms. "Come with me to England."

She sighed and rolled over onto her side. "Must you ask every time when you know my answer?"

He nodded. "I cannot stand to see you here as a slave to Tremont."

"Griselda and I made a bargain, love. I must uphold my end."

"You are not his property, Elspeth. The way his eyes follow you..." He trailed off, looking grim. "He wants you."

She touched his cheek. "He will not have me. I belong to you, Nicholas."

A short laugh escaped him. "You are no more my property than his, beloved. If you were, you would listen to me."

She shrugged. "I cannot do less than honor my word. Besides, if I left with you, what would happen to my sister?"

"She would come with us."

Elspeth shook her head. "No, she would not. You already frighten her, Nicholas, and she does not know what you are. She would not come."

"Let her make her own decision. We could be gone before anyone knows. I have a ship waiting. We could be sailing down Chesapeake Bay before Tremont could form a search party."

She pulled away from him and sat up. "I do not want to return to England. I love the Colonies, Nicholas. There is such open space here in Virginia. Trees stretch as far as the eye can see, and there is not the bustle you find in London. I cannot imagine returning to that barren place after living here. The land is a part of my soul now."

His mouth twisted. "Perhaps I should leave you to Tremont. As his wife, you would have everything you seem to want."

She bit back a giggle at his petulant words, touching his arm. "I would have everything but that which I want most."

His expression softened as she rubbed his arm. "What is that?"

She smiled. "You. I have loved you since you first found your way to Tremont Plantation two years ago." She had met his eyes as he rode across the rolling green hills on his magnificent black stallion, and she had been lost. Struck by the eerie sensation of already knowing him, she had found herself in his arms

in less than two days.

He nodded. “You love me, but sometimes I wonder how much. Why can you not leave this place and be with me? Vallsade Manor is elegant and private. When you look upon the grounds, you will never want to return to Virginia.”

“I have no doubt it is beautiful, and we will visit it many times during our life together, but my home is here.”

He ran a hand through his disheveled hair. “Then let me make Tremont an offer for your contract. If I purchase your freedom, you are free to marry.”

Elsbeth shook her head, unsurprised by his familiar suggestion. She responded as she always did. “You know he will not sell me, Nicholas.”

His brow furrowed. “I could make him.”

“Nay, my love. It would be dishonest.” She slid from the bed and walked to the smaller chiffarobe, where a pitcher and basin rested. Elspeth poured water into the basin and took a rough cloth from the drawer. “The sun will rise soon, and you will be on your way. Do not let our parting words be acrimonious.”

Nicholas sighed as he slid from the bed and slipped on his knee breeches and shirt. “I must return to my room and prepare for departure.” He sounded anguished when he added, “Why must you be so bound by your honor, Elspeth? You are not a man.”

“Honor is not exclusive to the realm of men,” she said tartly. “I am who I am. You would not love me were I different.”

His eyes narrowed. “You never used to be this stubborn. As Emma—”

She shivered. “Please do not mention that. You know how disconcerting I find the memories.”

He nodded abruptly. “I know you prefer to avoid all thoughts of who you were.”

She knew he wouldn’t admit though she harbored the soul of the women of his past, she was her own person. Elspeth ignored his comment and finished washing. Once she had wound her hair into a bun and secured the mobcap, she retrieved her chemise and petticoat from the pile. Under his watchful eyes, she put them on, wishing she could take them off and return to the bed with him. She slipped on another black dress and tied a modesty cloth across her torso before adding a pocket and the apron. Then she walked to Nicholas and put her arms around his waist. “You know I love you.”

He caressed her cheek. “You have always loved me.”

She shrugged. “I love you as you are now because of who we are today. Not because of who I was in the past.”

Nicholas groaned. “How can I leave you?”

“You must.” She forced a smile and swallowed down tears. “Next year, I will be free. We will build a house—”

“We will return to England, where we shall not starve.” He gave her a crooked smile. “Or rusticate.”

She frowned up at him with a look of annoyance, but continued spinning dreams. “We will have children and be together every day. Let those thoughts sustain you.”

He sighed before lowering his lips to hers. When he raised his head, he said, “I suppose they will have to.”

She hugged him once more before stepping away. “You must go now. I have to report to the kitchen, and you will be leaving after breakfast.”

“I have no appetite, so I will leave now.”

Elspeth kissed him again, tracing her tongue with his. She pressed against him, but reined in her passion. There was no time for more lovemaking. Already, it was late enough to be risky for him to leave her room. She broke away and turned her head. “I love you.” She kept her eyes focused on the whitewashed wall, refusing to allow him to see the tears in her eyes.

“When I return, you will leave this place.” His voice was firm, but sounded thick. “Contract or no contract.”

She nodded, unable to watch as he left. Their reunions were joyous, but the partings always robbed her of the euphoria she experienced when he held her in his arms. As soon as she heard the door close softly behind him, she collapsed on the edge of the bed and sobbed. Her words had been brave, but another year on Tremont Plantation without Nicholas would seem like forever.

After restoring her appearance, Elspeth went downstairs to begin breakfast. She was surprised to find Johanna already in the kitchen, stoking the fire. She looked at the sky through the window, noting it was near the time she always began breakfast.

“Did you have a lie-in?” Johanna’s voice bordered on friendly.

Elspeth blinked. “No. I did not think I was tardy.”

“No matter.” Johanna waved to a basket on the table. “Lord Tremont has requested fresh berries. You are to pick them.”

Her eyes widened. “The briar patch is over an hour away, Johanna. Breakfast will be delayed if I go for blackberries.”

She shrugged. “I cannot counter the master’s whims. I obey his instructions.” A small smile flashed across her face. “I suggest you enjoy the sunshine and a morning off. Abel has a horse waiting for you.”

She bit her lip, hesitating. The thought of picking berries was tempting, but she was reluctant to go. It was disconcerting to see Johanna so cheerful, and she wondered at that. When the explanation occurred to her, she almost giggled. Clearly, the housekeeper was happy to have her out of the house for the morning. Perhaps she imagined serving Lord Tremont breakfast would prompt him to make a marriage offer. It would be nice to spend some time alone, and if Lord Tremont was ordering her to go, what

choice did she have? "I shall return later in the morning."

Johanna nodded, not taking her attention from the forming fire.

Elsbeth slipped through the back entrance of the house and ran across the hilly green ground to the stables. As promised, Abel waited with an elderly sorrel. She mounted and rode away at a steady pace, until the plantation faded behind her. Once out of sight, a happy laugh escaped her. For a few hours, she could pretend she was free of the obligations imposed upon her. She could fantasize she was meeting Nicholas.

She sighed. If only she had known of this morning's duty, she could have arranged to meet Nicholas away from the plantation. She would have loved another hour in his arms, but would have to be content with last night until she saw him again. A year was not so long, she consoled herself. It was barely enough time for a horse to foal or the seasons to change. The time would pass quickly.

## Chapter Eight

Emily awoke with a dull headache and a raging appetite. Her head spun when she sat up, and she had to clutch the nightstand for support when she gained her feet. She waited until the room stopped spinning before shuffling into the bathroom, shedding the pajamas as she went, leaving the pants in the doorway.

She turned on the water as hot as she could stand before stepping under the stream. A hiss escaped through her teeth as the pulsing jets seemed to strip the skin from her body. She turned down the hot water, and the painful sensation faded. She leaned against the wall and let the water flow over her.

When she felt completely steady, Emily washed her body and hair, lathering a second time to remove the dried blood matting her hair. She left the conditioner on double the recommended time in hopes of combating the tangles.

When the water turned cool, and her skin wrinkled, she turned off the spray and stepped onto the bathmat. Her head felt clear, and the dream returned to her in full force.

She met her haunted eyes in the mirror after wiping away the condensation. Could it be that the Bartholomew Tremont from her dream was the same pitiful creature enslaved by Nicholas? A chill ran through her when she pictured the handsome face of the man in the dream before Tremont's current visage took its place. How the man had been tortured. What could he have done to deserve such cruel treatment?

Emily longed to return to bed, in case the memory revealed itself fully, but was too hungry to sleep. Her stomach cramped and twisted with the need to feed. She looked away from her own eyes when she remembered Nicholas intended to take her hunting tonight. How could she kill someone to live?

A dark thrill coursed through her when a vision of a stilled heart resting in her hand flashed through her mind. The thought should sicken her, but instead, she salivated. Emily whimpered. She didn't want to feel the way she did, and vowed she wouldn't allow herself to do anything terrible. As long as she maintained her resolve, she would be fine. She wouldn't be a monster like Nicholas.

Once she had dried off and brushed her hair, she left the bathroom and went to the dresser for fresh

underwear. She rummaged through the drawers, but found no pants. She hadn't expected to, since there hadn't been any before. She went through the closet again, but found only skirts and dresses.

She finally settled on a long denim skirt and a black turtleneck sweater. The brush of denim against her calves felt strange as she walked. She eyed herself in the mirror and grimaced. She wasn't particularly feminine, and it showed. She stood awkwardly, trying to adjust her posture to fit the skirt, but it was hopeless.

There was nothing else to do, so she walked to the door. To her surprise, the knob turned easily, and the door opened. She peeked into the hallway, but neither Nicholas nor Tremont lingered near the doorway. She took a step outside the room and froze, waiting for someone to stop her. Eventually, she continued walking down the hallway, until she entered the living room.

Nicholas stood by the large window, but turned when she stepped into the room. "How did you sleep?"

She hesitated, torn between the need to know about Tremont, and the reluctance to admit to having dreamed. "I dreamed."

His brow quirked. "What did you dream about?"

"You," she said abruptly, "and Tremont Plantation."

His smile was bittersweet. "I thought Elspeth was the most stubborn of all your manifestations, until you."

"What happened?"

Nicholas's mouth firmed. "I don't wish to discuss this."

She frowned. "But—"

"You will remember in time." His voice cracked. "Don't make me recount the memory of finding you..." He trailed off. "The image remains in my mind to this day. I can't speak of it."

"What about Tremont? Is your servant the same man?"

Nicholas nodded, but didn't speak. He walked toward her, putting his arm around her shoulders. "We will go now. I can feel your hunger."

She sighed, but didn't press for an answer. His closed expression indicated how receptive he was to answering questions. She would have to finish the dream before she knew what had happened.

They left the apartment, turning onto 6th Street. Emily attempted to shrug off his hold a couple of times, but he tightened his grip each time. She eventually settled into his embrace, matching her pace to his. Walking beside him felt more comfortable than it should have. As they neared Greenwich Avenue, she searched for a topic of conversation, suddenly desperate to fill the silence. She thought of Jeremy and winced. "Is it really true? Everything I learned in Huxley is real?"

He nodded, obviously attuned to her thoughts. "Yes."

"Did you know this would happen?" she whispered, dreading his answer.

Nicholas shrugged. "I didn't think of it. My goal has been only to find you again." His mouth twisted into a grimace. "I didn't think much beyond that. It was so easy before."

She lifted a brow. "I don't understand."

Nicholas turned his head to gaze down at her. "You've never hated me before." His face revealed traces of his pain. "Always, your soul recognized me, and you loved me."

She sniffed, denying a dart of guilt. "Did you kill my friends and take me from my family before?"

His eyes slid from hers, and he quickened their pace. Once on Greenwich Avenue, his posture became different. He seemed leaner and longer, with a magnetism Emily didn't think she was imagining. His dark gaze turned watchful and more predatory than usual as they scanned the people milling about.

He wasn't the only one who changed. A boneless sensation passed through her body, making her gait sexy and tempting. She scanned the passersby, looking for one to lure away.

She blinked, alarmed by her thoughts. She was straying into dangerous territory by allowing her thoughts and actions to mimic Nicholas's. She would have to be on her guard.

"There," he said, pointing down an alley. A small group of people huddled at the end of the lane, just barely visible behind a pile of boxes. He pulled on her arm.

Emily tried digging in her heels and going slack, but he was undeterred by her efforts at resisting. As they walked down the filthy alley, her nose crinkled from the pungent odor coming from a large dumpster. Her senses were heightened, and she could hear the heartbeats of the small group collectively and individually. It was like four separate heartbeats pounding in syncopation. Dark hunger clawed its way up her stomach to the back of her throat. Her sluggish heartbeat accelerated, and her mouth watered.

They stopped a foot or two from the group of people. No one spoke. The four, huddled around a small fire of burning paper, looked up at them with slack faces and shining eyes. There was a sense of detachment about them, as if nothing she or Nicholas might do would surprise them. The child stared off into space, as if he was beyond seeing them.

Each wore ragged clothes covered with stains. They appeared to be a family, with a woman and man in their late-thirties, and an elderly woman, in addition to the boy of perhaps eleven. Her stomach churned looking at them, and her mouth fell open to utter an admonition to run. She discovered she couldn't move her tongue when she tried to speak. Nicholas shot her a look before focusing a charming smile on the group.

"It's a cold night," he said in a soft, seductive voice. "Wouldn't you like to be warm?"

The woman's eyes widened, and she nodded. The man still looked hesitant, as did the elderly woman. The boy's gaze remained fixed on the wall in front of him. A thin line of drool hung from the corner of his mouth, and his expression remained blank.

Emily found her voice as the urge to shout at them passed. "The boy. What's wrong with the boy?"

The man's shoulders hunched, and he looked defensive. "There's nothing wrong with my son." Her question seemed to have shattered the trance Nicholas had been trying to impose upon him. "What do you want?"



“To ease your burdens.” Nicholas’s words were charitable, but his tone was mocking. “And ours,” he added.

The older woman crossed herself. “Be gone,” she said in a low whisper. Her lips parted to reveal blackened gums, minus teeth.

Nicholas’s gaze locked with hers. “Be still.”

She ceased to move. She didn’t even blink. Her face froze in an expression of terror, and her hand remained frozen in air, having been partway through crossing herself again.

Nicholas’s dark gaze clashed with the man’s for a long moment, and then he stopped moving. The woman burst out sobbing and muttering. Nicholas barely gazed at her, and she stiffened. She was already beaten. He didn’t bother with the boy.

Emily stood back as he went to the elderly woman and lifted her effortlessly. Her eyes darted around with terror, but she didn’t even cry out as Nicholas’s head dipped to her neck.

She turned away when Nicholas began to feed, not wanting the sight of him feeding to fuel her hunger. However, she could still hear the sounds of him sucking the blood. They echoed through her in time with her heartbeats, seeming to call to her. With a tiny cry of defeat, she spun around.

Nicholas looked up from his victim. Her blood had smeared across his face and teeth. His red eyes gleamed even in the meager light. He licked his lips and lifted his head. “Come.”

She shook her head, even as her feet obeyed his command. Emily tried to stop walking toward him, but couldn’t control her body. When he lifted his hand, she abruptly stopped, inches from the two of them. Her mouth fell open, and she whimpered when he returned to the throat of the old woman. Her stomach growled as his fangs penetrated the sagging, leathery skin of the grandmother. She saw blood seep from the wounds before his tongue lapped it away. She wanted to feed.

A stirring of resistance built in her, but she was beyond paying it heed. Emily’s thoughts focused only on taking part in the feast. She ached to feel the blood sliding down her throat, wanting the coppery taste to fill her mouth.

Nicholas dropped the old woman, and she landed on the cement of the alley with a moist thud. Her eyes stared up into the sky, as if begging God for an explanation. She was dead.

He held out his hand to her.

Emily’s arm lifted of its own volition, until her hand was snug in his. She took a step when he took a step, moving with him toward the man. She couldn’t seem to tear her gaze away from Nicholas’s.

“Yours.” He touched the shoulder of the man and pushed Emily down onto her knees beside the man.

She stared at him with wide eyes, unable to get up, and unable to lean forward. She remained frozen, torn between her hunger and her conscience. Her eyes fastened on his carotid artery, visibly pulsing. She could smell the fear on him, and her stomach rumbled.

Nicholas knelt beside her, smoothing hair off her shoulders. “It’s just like with me, love. Tear the vein

and drink the blood.”

“Will he be in pain?”

He shook his head. “No, I’ll see he enjoys it.” He leaned closer. “If you can concentrate while feeding, tell him with your thoughts how pleasurable the experience is.”

She nodded, tentatively reaching out to touch the man’s neck. It looked none too clean, and the stench emanating from him nearly quelled her appetite, until she glanced at Nicholas and saw the blood on his lips. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before leaning forward.

When her face was in the crook of the man’s neck, she gagged on his scent.

“Think of roses,” Nicholas said as he smoothed his hand down her back. “Your mind is powerful enough to make him smell like anything.”

Emily tried to recall the smell of the honeysuckle near the backdoor of her parents’ house during summer. Soon, the scent filled her nostrils, along with the gentle hum of the bees that spent the season circulating the bush whispering in her ears. She opened her mouth and traced her tongue along the path of the man’s vein. Dirt and sweat clung to her tongue, and she scraped it along the top of her teeth, puncturing herself on her fangs. The taste of her own blood was a welcome respite from the taste of her victim’s skin.

Nicholas put his arm around her waist and leaned forward with his head on her shoulder. “Bite through the skin, Emily. You know how.”

She swallowed down her fear and self-disgust as her fangs penetrated the man’s skin. It was like sliding a hot knife through butter. His flesh offered no resistance, and soon a well of blood pooled in her mouth. It was warm and intoxicating. The aroma sent shivers racing down her spine, and she gulped greedily, tearing with her fangs to widen the wound.

A veritable river of blood flooded her mouth and spilled over, running down her chin and staining her shirt. She remained too focused on feeding to worry about the proper etiquette of ingesting a victim’s lifeblood. She lapped and sucked eagerly, desperate for every drop. When the flow began to diminish, she pushed her face deeper into his neck, ripping at him with her fangs.

“Stop, Emily. There’s nothing left.”

She ignored Nicholas, determined to wring every drop from the man in front of her. She rooted against his neck, licking at the skin, and not noticing the awful taste that had previously repelled her. Her heart raced in her ears, and delicious warmth spread through her.

She cried out with pain when Nicholas yanked on a handful of her hair, pulling her away. She glared up at him, baring her fangs and hissing.

He gave her an indulgent grin. “There’s nothing there to drain. You’ve taken it all.”

She snarled at him again and tried to return to the man’s body. It had fallen to the ground in a permanent slump. His eyes were wide with pleasure, and he had an erection visible in his baggy trousers.

Nicholas pulled her to her feet.

She pushed against his chest, determined he wouldn't stand between her and the blood.

"Calm yourself. There's another."

She tried to drop to her knees again, and Nicholas held her. Emily struggled against his hold, throwing off one of his hands. She reached for the body of her first victim, but he was out of reach. "More."

"Not him." Nicholas shook her shoulders to get her attention.

Emily's mournful gaze remained on the man's torn throat. Her puncture marks were nothing like the neat, tiny holes Nicholas had drilled through the old woman's throat. His wound was messy and gaping. He looked like he'd been torn apart. Rather than repulse her, the thought excited her, and she shoved against Nicholas.

He shook her just hard enough to get her attention, bringing his nose against hers. His black gaze bored into her eyes, and he spoke clearly. "Relax."

Her body went limp, though the bloodlust didn't pass so quickly. Slowly, Emily became aware of her surroundings, and her eyes came into focus to meet Nicholas's. "What happened?"

"You got caught up in the moment." He shrugged. "It happens to most new vampires during their first feedings."

She laid her head against his chest, feeling as though she couldn't stand up. "I'm still hungry."

He nodded. "We'll share the woman. I'll go first." He grinned. "I want to ensure there's something left, and you'll get sick if you drink too much."

She nodded, following him to the woman. Her eyes were wide and vacant, and she made a low, keening sound. Her mind had clearly left her body already.

Emily didn't even experience a vague stirring of conscience as she knelt on the filthy ground on one side of the woman. She leaned forward avidly as Nicholas's fangs punctured the mother's skin, watching his throat as he swallowed several times. She was enchanted by the rhythmic movements of his Adam's apple as he took in the blood carefully, with little wasted.

When Nicholas lifted his head a few moments later, the woman's eyes were glassy, and her cheeks were pale. She slumped forward, leaning in Emily's direction. She moaned softly when Emily took her into her arms, but didn't try to pull away.

Emily tilted the woman's neck and sank her fangs into the unbroken skin on her left side. She struggled to feed with the same finesse as Nicholas, but the blood seemed to drip into her mouth. She didn't have the patience to wait, so she ripped through the vein, struggling to swallow quickly enough to take it all in and not waste any. Rivulets of blood still flowed from her mouth and down her chin.

With the edge taken off her hunger, Emily became aware of the woman's body. She could hear the heartbeat slowing to a stop, and was aware of the moment when the woman's breathing ceased. She longed to continue feeding, but peripherally saw Nicholas watching her carefully. Reluctantly, she pushed the woman's body away, letting it topple over backwards to stare skyward, as if stargazing. She wore a contented expression.

Emily crawled toward Nicholas, unable to summon the energy to stand. She was full and sleepy, but still hungry. Her head turned in the direction of the boy when she heard his fingernails scraping across the concrete. She licked her lips.

Nicholas touched her cheek. “No more right now. You’ve had enough, and his blood is tainted.”

She frowned. “Tainted?”

He nodded, rising to his feet and helping her up. He pulled her toward the boy, dropping her hand when he knelt to lift the boy. “Smell him. Put your nose against his neck and breathe in his scent.” He passed the boy to her. “Don’t bite him though.”

She did as Nicholas said, though she found it almost impossible to fight back the urge to slide her teeth through his tender skin and rip open a vein. She inhaled deeply, at first smelling only the scent of the streets, unwashed body, the tangy odor of urine, and the dumpster nearby. When she took another deep breath, she detected a bitter odor underlying it all. It was sickly-sweet, like the smell of decay. She put the boy on the ground and lifted her head. “I don’t understand.”

“He’s sick.” Nicholas shrugged. “It doesn’t matter what he has. It might not harm you, but why take the chance?”

“Can you always tell?”

“Yes.” He walked forward, putting his arms around her. “If the blood smells foul, don’t ever drink it.”

She put her hands on his chest, feeling a second type of hunger stirring, even as she forced herself to remain focused on the conversation. “Would I die?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know what would happen. My sire warned me about it. I’ve never seen a vampire who drank bad blood.”

“I see.” She tilted her head, catching the way his eyes lingered on her face. A hint of red had crept into his pupils, and he licked his lips. She reciprocated, once again tasting the blood of her victims.

He pulled her closer, crushing his mouth against hers. The kiss was brief, but it left her knees weak. Then his tongue moved to her chin, and he began to lick away the blood. Emily moaned with pleasure as his fangs raked across her cheek. The pain was delicious. She dug her nails into his arms until she heard him groan. His blood trickled over her hands, and she broke away from him to lick at the wound on his left arm.

With a rough motion, he pulled her face back to his and continued to clean her. Emily pressed her body closer to him, feeling liquid heat pool in her pussy. She briefly wondered if her inhibitions and common sense had been lost in the frenzy of feeding, but thinking required too much concentration. She lived only to feel—the rasp of his tongue across her skin, the hardness of his cock pressing into her stomach and his yielding flesh under her punishing nails.

She lifted her hands to frame his face and force his mouth back to hers. Emily plundered the hot recesses of his mouth, growling with pleasure at the mingled taste of blood and Nicholas. She nipped his tongue, adding more blood to the cocktail, and cried out when his nail scraped across her throat, grazing the vein. A thin trail of blood rolled down her neck, and he broke the kiss to position his tongue to catch it.

His hunger and desire slammed through her when he nicked the vein with his tooth and took some of the blood flowing through her. She could feel him under her hands, but could also feel her breasts in his hands as he moved to cup them. She moaned as the simultaneous sensation of her nipples hardening and his fingers rolling her nipples swept through her. The coppery taste of her blood filled her mouth as he drank lightly from the already-healing wound he had inflicted.

A cry of anguish broke them apart. Emily stumbled away from Nicholas, feeling coherence return in an instant. Her gaze swung wildly around the alley, expecting to find someone gazing with horror at what she and Nicholas had done. Instead, she saw only the boy on the ground. He had crawled over and laid his head on his mother's shoulder. He held her in an awkward embrace and hummed some strange music softly. Tears glistened on his cheeks. "Momma," he said in a broken voice, sounding as if he was rusty with the word.

Repulsed, she turned and ran down the alley, ignoring Nicholas calling her name. She plunged headlong into the foot traffic on Greenwich Avenue, unheeding of where she ran. She pushed aside anyone who got in her way, frantic to escape what she had done, desperate to deny the hunger still pulsing through her, and the desire pounding into her. She was desperate to outrun the truth. She had enjoyed the carnage and taking the lives of her victims. She had reveled in killing those people.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nicholas found her several minutes later. When she raised her head, Emily saw him at the end of the alley where she had taken refuge. His expression was tender as he drew closer. She cried out and pressed her face against her thighs, unable to look at him without remembering what they had done, without wanting to do it again.

He crouched beside her, gently smoothing the hair off her shoulders. "It's okay," he said in a soothing tone. "I felt the same way the first time I fed."

She shook her head against the denim skirt. "You don't understand. I'm a monster."

Nicholas sighed. "You're a hunter now, Emily. There's no shame in taking pleasure in the victory."

Her head whipped up with a popping sound. "It wasn't a victory. We slaughtered those people. We left that boy without his family." Her voice trailed off to a soft whisper. "I enjoyed it."

"So did I. It's part of who you are now. You'll adapt."

Her stomach knotted, and she rolled over onto her side to vomit on the cement of the alley. Dark-red blood splashed everywhere, including on them. "What have you done to me?" she whispered. "It's your fault."

"Yes." He stood up and lifted her into his arms. "I'll take you home now. After you've rested, you'll feel better about what had to be done."

She wanted to protest, to insist she could walk, but was too weak. It was easy to snuggle against him and let him carry her to a cab that he hailed on the street. She lay in his lap as the driver took them home, listening to the sound of his heartbeat thundering against her ear and oddly comforted by it. Perhaps it reminded her of prenatal days of floating in the womb, when she was still safe from the world. When she had been protected from Nicholas's dark love and what she had become. What he had made her.

At the apartment, Nicholas left her in the cab while he paid the driver. Then he lifted and carried her inside. At the elevator, he said in a teasing tone, “The neighbors will think you can’t walk if I keep carrying you into the building.”

She tried to summon a smile, but was too overwrought. It was as if her body had shut down in response to her emotional turmoil. She didn’t know if she wanted to sleep or sob for an eternity. Either way, she would still have to face up to what she had done eventually.

In her room, Nicholas stripped off her clothes, as he had done that morning, and dressed her in pajamas. He placed a chaste kiss to her forehead before sitting on the bed beside her. He picked up her hand. “Do you want me to stay until you fall asleep?”

She didn’t want to be reminded of her atrocity, as she was each time she looked at him, but also didn’t want to be alone. Emily nodded. “How did this happen?” she asked in a groggy voice. “How did you become a vampire?”

He settled more comfortably on the bed, until his hip pressed against her shoulder. “Let me see if I can remember that far back now.” Absently, his hand stroked through her hair. “I was idealistic and more naïve than you can imagine. I was the eldest son of a baron, and I was devout, as he had raised me to be.”

“Catholic?” she asked around a yawn.

“Of course.” He chuckled, and it held an edge of bitterness. “When King Richard put forth a call for pious young men to take back the Holy Land, I was eager to go. So was William.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes. Father tried to stop us, but we were headstrong. At twenty-four, I thought I knew everything.” He snorted. “It didn’t take long to discover differently. Before I ever saw Jerusalem, I was fatally injured. William left me to die, intent on claiming his place as the next baron.” He touched her cheek. “I guess he was anxious to claim you—Emma—too.”

“What happened then?”

“I spent two agonizing nights in pain, begging for God to send me an angel of mercy to end my pitiful existence.” He sighed heavily. “Instead, Koss came.”

She blinked rapidly, struggling to keep open her eyes. “Who’s Koss?”

“My sire. He was an Egyptian reservist, called in by Saladin.” Nicholas paused. “I guess he saw something in me he wanted, because he offered me eternal life and the way to return to Emma. I seized the chance, not realizing the price.”

Emily had more questions to ask, but her eyes refused to stay open. She opened her mouth to ask him what happened before he returned to Emma, sensing there was more to the story, but couldn’t find her voice. She thought she heard a snore issue from her opened mouth, but wasn’t certain as she slipped into a deep sleep.

## Chapter Nine

Elsbeth returned to the plantation when the sun was high in the sky, having taken extra time to find the juiciest berries. She returned the sorrel to Abel, frowning when she saw the way he looked at her. His dark eyes refused to meet hers.

With a shrug, she grasped the basket of berries and hurried across the grass. Surely, Lord Tremont had eaten breakfast by now. It was nearly time for the noonday meal, and she wanted to ensure the berries were ready for him.

When she entered the kitchen, no one was there. Johanna wasn't near the fire, and Griselda wasn't kneading bread dough, as she was supposed to be doing. She set the basket of blackberries on the table, wincing at the scratches on her hands from the briar patch. She got a heavy earthenware bowl from the cupboard and dumped the blackberries inside before adding fresh cream, as Lord Tremont liked.

Muttering to herself, Elspeth fixed her hair and smoothed her hands down the apron before leaving the kitchen to search for her sister. The bread should have been baked by now. Griselda's absentmindedness would see them both in trouble with Johanna and the master.

She entered the hall, relieved to discover Lord Tremont wasn't at the long table, waiting for lunch. The hall was empty, and she frowned when she noticed no fire burned in the fireplace. She stepped closer to it and touched the stones of the hearth, finding them cold. Had anyone started a fire this morning? Lord Tremont would reprimand Agnes if he found out.

She didn't take time to build the fire, feeling more of a responsibility for her sister than the other servant. She went up the stairs and hurried past the second floor to avoid having Johanna see her, knowing she probably lurked in the master's room, under the guise of changing the linens. A small smile flashed across Elspeth's face as she recalled once catching Johanna lying on the bed with her hand under her skirt. She had crept out without the housekeeper knowing she was there. If she had revealed her presence to the other woman, punishment would have exceeded her worst imaginings.

She found all doors closed when she stepped onto the third-floor landing. Surely, Agnes and Griselda weren't still in the room. She walked over to Agnes's door and tapped softly. When there was no answer, she opened the door and peeked in. A neatly made bed and empty room was all she saw.

She closed the door and moved down the hall to the room she normally shared with her sister. She opened the door and slipped inside after a quick glance over her shoulder to confirm Johanna wasn't lurking behind her.

She became alarmed when she saw her sister lying on the bed, under the covers. "Griselda, are you ill?" When she didn't answer, Elspeth walked over to the bed and sat on the edge. She touched her sister's shoulder, frowning when she felt how cold she was. She pulled back the thin blanket and rolled her sister over. A scream blocked her throat, and she felt light-headed.

Griselda's vacant eyes stared up at her. Her expression was one of terror. Dried blood covered the jagged wound across her throat, and the sheet she had been lying on was soaked through with a huge puddle of dark-red blood. Her sister was naked, and various cuts and bruises—forever frozen in the forming stage—marred her body. Blood had dried on her thighs.

The scream found its way through the blockage in her throat. Elspeth tried to clamp it off, but couldn't. The shrill sound continued to pour from her, building in intensity until the door slammed against the wall. Even when she heard the heavy clomping of Lord Tremont's boots on the thin floor, she couldn't make herself stop screaming.

She couldn't turn when he stepped up behind her, because her body remained frozen. Elspeth's eyes widened when he clamped his hand over her mouth and nose as he pulled her against him, holding her so tightly her ribs ached.

"Whore," he thundered against her ear. "Look upon the wages of sin."

She struggled to breathe, but he held her too tightly. Elspeth's hands clawed at his, trying to dislodge his grip. Her eyes grew round with terror as her oxygen supply diminished. She slumped forward.

He spun her around in his arms, dropping his hand from her mouth, and allowing her to draw in deep breaths. "You brought sin into my house." His face was bright red, and the veins in his temples pounded visibly. "You were a party to your own defilement." He roughly grabbed one of her breasts. "You are mine. How dare you allow another man to touch you?"

She yelped when he pinched her nipple. "Please—"

Lord Tremont shoved her toward the bed, sending her sprawling across her dead sister's legs. He fumbled with his belt before lowering his breeches. "You will pay for this abomination."

She screamed as he came near her. Elspeth kicked out at him, but he was like a man possessed. He easily subdued her and pushed up her skirts, tearing away her drawers as he settled between her thighs, taking her as roughly as possible. She cried out at the unbearable pain and lost consciousness as he thrust into her with all of his strength.

Emily's eyes blinked open, aware of a heavy weight on her side. At first, she thought it must be Tremont, but when she turned her head, she saw Nicholas stretched out beside her, snoring softly. She wanted to push him off her and send him away, but her eyes closed again before she could form the words.

Elspeth lifted her head as the cellar door creaked open. She briefly wondered what Lord Tremont had in store for her today, but was too weak to sustain the line of speculation. The days had blurred into a seemingly endless string of tortures. Since he had covered the windows weeks—months, maybe—before, she couldn't even look outside to tell day from night. Time had lost all meaning for her. If not for her swelling waistline, she would have had no measure of time passing at all.

The familiar thud of his boots on the stairs preceded his arrival. It was difficult to tell in the meager light provided by his candle, but he looked ruffled, as if he had thrown on his clothes in a rush. The only thing visible was his wide smile. She drew herself into a tighter ball on the dirt floor, temporarily ignoring her assorted aches and pains, dry mouth and rumbling stomach, deprived of the proper nourishment to ensure her babe grew correctly. Of course, Tremont had no concern for the child in her womb, never having mentioned it. He must assume it was Nicholas's. She didn't know herself, but preferred to believe she sheltered her lover's son or daughter in her body, not her tormentor's.



His chilling expression made her forget it had been a long while since he brought water, and even longer since she had seen any food. She sensed today would bring a new torture that would overshadow the others he had inflicted upon her during her confinement in the cellar. She was close to delivering the child and knew he would inflict great pain upon both of them when it came.

“Your lover draws near the plantation. My men saw his boat dock last evening.”

She frowned at his cheerful tone. Why would Nicholas’s arrival make him pleased? What was he scheming? She took a deep breath and tried to reassure herself that nothing Tremont planned to do would harm Nicholas. He could survive almost anything.

Lord Tremont walked over to her, jovially swinging the key to the iron clamps on her wrists. He knelt near her, but instead of opening the restraints on her wrist, he removed the bolt from the bar where she was tethered. He used it as a leash to haul her to her feet.

Elsbeth swayed unsteadily. The room spun, and her legs refused to support her. She collapsed to the dirt floor, crying as he continued to drag her. She struggled to get to her feet, but didn’t succeed until he dragged her to the rough staircase, and her knees collided with the bottom step. She used her bound hands to push herself up and grasp the wooden railing as she hobbled up the stairs.

When they reached the door, she realized he was taking her out of the cellar. A deep blush spread across her face. She wore nothing but a tattered chemise and a torn petticoat. Dirt and blood stained both garments, and the petticoat stretched across her stomach in such a way to make her condition painfully obvious.

He lifted the doors, and the early morning light drilled into her eyes, making her cry out and shield her face. She hadn’t seen the sunlight in so long that it made her head pound to look upon even the pale light of dawn.

He dragged her outside, muttering with disgust when she tripped. Tremont jerked her to her feet and pulled her along without a trace of gentleness.

“Where are you taking me?” she dared to whisper. He preferred she didn’t speak, but she didn’t think obedience would earn her a reprieve.

“To prepare a surprise for Vallsade.” The merry note remained in his voice, though he was grimacing. “We cannot have him arrive without the proper welcome.” He chuckled, a dark sound that sent shivers up her spine.

They stopped near the barn, and Elspeth stumbled to a halt. All of the inhabitants of the plantation had gathered in a circle around a pole in the ground, with sticks and hay at its base. Many of those standing appeared anxious to be elsewhere, but she could see an avid expression here and there among the crowd. Standing slightly apart from the others was Johanna. She wore a red dress made from high-quality wool. Her hair was pinned under a bonnet rather than a mobcap, and she had black silk slippers on her feet. She held a basket in her arms and looked absurdly as though she was about to attend a picnic.

It was only when a cry issued from the basket that Elspeth realized it held a baby. How long had she been Tremont’s prisoner? Obviously, long enough for Johanna to become the mistress of Tremont Plantation and bear a child. She idly wondered if it had been worth it to the former housekeeper, to know she purchased her position with betrayal and Griselda’s blood. How had she felt, knowing

Tremont kept Elspeth as his plaything in the cellar and visited regularly? Did he come to his marriage bed as often?

A sinking sensation filled her when she realized the child in her womb couldn't possibly be Nicholas's if there had been enough time for Johanna to birth the master's child. Time truly had slipped away. All this time, she had assumed it would be his baby, had clung to life on the frail hope of escape, all to save a child she now didn't want.

The babe kicked then, and tears misted Elspeth's eyes. She put her bound hands on her stomach, trying to soothe the tiny life inside her. It didn't matter who had fathered the child. She loved it either way and would gladly die for it. Nausea rolled in her stomach when she glanced around again, taking in the scenario. She would have the chance to prove that soon, she sensed, locking gazes with Johanna once more.

The malice and dark satisfaction she saw when she met Johanna's eyes sickened her. Had it been any other woman, she would have wondered how she could stand to bring her child to an execution. She didn't wonder about Johanna though. The woman was content to be married to a murderer, rapist and sadist. She clearly held no fear that he might someday turn his tendencies against her.

Tremont tossed the chain affixed to her manacles to a burly black slave in trousers. His ebony chest, bare as the day of his birth, gleamed with sweat, even so early in the morning. "Tie her to the post."

Elspeth tried digging in her heels, but was no match for the strength of the man. He lifted her easily and carried her to the post, where Abel waited with a rope. Neither man met her eyes as they secured her to the makeshift post, a tree someone had chopped down.

Tremont watched with obvious satisfaction as they bound her. When the men stepped away, he raised his voice so all could hear. "This woman has brought sin into our midst. Like Eve in the Garden, she is unclean. We must rid ourselves of her presence."

At least no one cheered, Elspeth thought with uncharacteristic cynicism. She saw Johanna's smile widen and felt a rush of pity for the child. With two parents such as Lord and Lady Tremont, the babe was doomed. "What of my child? Your child, Tremont. It has committed no sin," she yelled, taking a measure of satisfaction in Johanna's scowl and the way those standing around flinched.

Stepping forward, Tremont took a torch from the slave and lifted it high in the air, apparently ignoring her words. He inclined his head in Johanna's direction and received a girlish wave. As he touched the flame to the kindling at Elspeth's feet, he said, "Today, we do God's bidding."

Elspeth closed her eyes as the temperature around her suddenly shot up several degrees. Already, the fire singed her feet, though the flames hadn't reached them yet. She balled her hands into fists and summoned Nicholas's image in her mind, clinging to him. As the first lick of flame reached her toes, she imagined the soft touch of his hands upon her, obliterating the things Tremont had done to her.

She was aware of the fire spreading up her legs and whimpered before biting down hard on her lip. She refused to give them the satisfaction of voicing her screams. Instead, she pictured the house she and Nicholas would have built. In her fantasy, children filled the house, and her sister was there. Each night, her husband held her close and told her of his love. He would embrace the child growing in her womb as his own.

The flames reached her waist, bringing intense pain with them. The baby kicked with a frenzy of

movement, and she cursed her helplessness. Despite her resolve not to cry out, a scream ripped from her throat. It echoed around the clearing, making most of those required to attend flinch with horror. Surely, it was so loud it carried straight to God's ears.

Emily awoke with a scream trapped in her throat and the phantom sensation of flames consuming her flesh. An acrid odor of smoke and burning skin lingered in her nostrils, and for half a minute, she was convinced she was burning alive. She was trembling, and the cry tore its way from her throat.

Nicholas was there, still beside her. His comforting arms immediately enfolded her, and she was aware of him whispering against her ear. "It's a dream, my beloved. Just a dream."

She shuddered. "No, a memory," she said in a thick voice. "Tremont—" She turned her head to see Nicholas's expression and was surprised to find him even paler than normal.

He nodded. "I know. He left you for me to find when I brought in my horse. Right there in the stables, swinging from the rafters, to be assured I would see you—" He took a deep breath. "Don't think of it, Emily."

Her haunted eyes searched his. "How can I not? Every time I see him, I'll remember what he did to me...to my baby."

Nicholas sighed. "That was almost four hundred years ago. I hope you'll believe me when I tell you he isn't a danger to you. He won't harm you." He stroked her arm. "Tremont is a man to be pitied in many ways."

Before she could argue with his assessment, a wave of pulsing pain swept through her head, distracting her. She touched her pounding temples. "What happened? Why are you in my room?"

"You didn't want to be alone. Do you remember last night?"

She frowned, searching her memory. She recalled leaving the apartment with Nicholas and returning later. Her brows furrowed as she struggled to regain the memory of the lost time in between. The blissful expression of a dead man flashed behind her eyes, followed by a wave of sexual arousal as she remembered the way she and Nicholas had reached for each other after feeding.

She grasped her head and leaned forward, whimpering. "What have I done?" she asked in a hoarse voice.

"You fed," he said with a complete lack of emotion.

"How could I do that?" A surge of pleasure shot through her when she recalled the moment the man's heart stopped pouring blood from the wound on his neck into her sucking maw. She moaned, disgusted and simultaneously delighted. "I killed someone," she whispered.

Absurdly, a memory of a conversation with Sara flashed through her mind. She had stayed over at her friend's house, and they had just watched a movie about a woman who killed her husband for cheating on her.

"Could you do it?" Sara had asked, as she snuggled against the pillow and cocked her head.

Emily had frowned. “Do what?”

“Kill someone.”

“For cheating on me?” She made a scoffing sound.

Sara shrugged. “Suppose it was self-defense. Could you then?”

She had emphatically shaken her head. “I couldn’t kill anyone, ever.”

The words took on a mocking tone as they echoed through her brain. She lifted her head to glare at Nicholas. “It’s your fault. You’ve made me like this.”

He sighed heavily. “Yes, I fully acknowledge changing you.” He rolled from the bed and gained his feet. His expression was cold when he stared down at her. “Grow up. Stop whining about how tortured you are, and what you’ve become. Appreciate what I’ve given you.”

A harsh laugh escaped her. “What have you given me? You’ve done nothing but take from me since the moment I met you—my life, my friends, even my humanity. You want me to be grateful?”

He moved so quickly her eyes couldn’t follow him. He went from standing by the bed to sitting in front of her, holding her face in his hands. His fingers bit into her cheeks. His eyes blazed with anger when he pressed his face against hers. “I’ve given you eight hundred years, Emily. I’ve given you eternal life, and I’m offering you undying love.” He shook her roughly. “You’re too foolish to accept what’s in front of you. You prefer to moan about how you’ve been wronged.”

She cringed as his nails punctured her right cheek, causing blood to ooze down her face. “Pweesh,” she tried to say, but the word came out distorted.

Nicholas’s fingers bit even deeper into her flesh, sliding through the skin of her left cheek too. “You’re a child. A spoiled child.” He sagged forward, and his grip eased before his hand fell away. His shoulders hunched, and he looked defeated.

Emily tentatively touched her face, wiping away the trails of blood. She stared at him for a long time without speaking, not sure what to say. He was wrong. How could he expect her to appreciate what he had done for her? She sighed softly, torn between a need to scream at him and an unsettling need to comfort him.

He looked up, and his eyes were a dull black when they locked with hers. “What do you want from me?”

Her breath caught in her throat at his whispered question. She struggled to breathe as emotions flooded her—guilt, torment and fear. Her clumsy tongue formed the words before she could tell herself not to say them. “Make it like it was.”

He shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Let me go home.”

Nicholas shook his head again. “No! You belong here with me. After all I’ve been through to find you

again, I won't let you go."

Anger brought a flush to her cheek. "I don't want to be with you. I don't want what you're offering."

"Too bad." He spoke with cold finality as he got to his feet. "You know I'll never let you go."

A shiver of dark delight at the promise in his words caught her by surprise. She squirmed, anxious to deny what she felt. She didn't want him, and she didn't want him to need her. She wanted her freedom. "I won't live like this."

He laughed, but it didn't sound like he was amused. "You don't have to. You're not really alive anymore, remember, beloved?"

She bounded from the bed, buoyed on a tide of anger, pushed past him, and rushed to the bedroom door. When she reached the black wood, she jerked on the doorknob, but it refused to move under her hand. She whirled around to face him. "Let me leave. Now." Her defiance threatened to crumble in the wake of his baleful glare, and she firmed her shoulders. "I don't want to be like you. You're a murderer."

"You're just like me." His lips twisted. "You're already a murderer. You killed two people last night." He began walking toward her. "You felt their pulse stop beating under your touch."

She swayed at his seductive tone, struggling to deny the hunger his words stirred. "No, I—"

"You tore into them like a mindless animal." His voice dropped an octave as he stopped an inch away from her. "You consumed their blood, and you *loved* it." He pressed his body against hers, placing his mouth against her ear. "You were so turned on by what you'd done, you would have let me take you in the alley, amid the carnage we wreaked. We would be lovers now if that boy hadn't cried out."

She groaned as his words sent her head reeling. Frissons of desire swept through her, making her knees weak. She leaned against him as much as she dared. "Please stop. I don't want to remember."

Nicholas's hand rose to caress her breast through the silk of the pajama top, finding her nipple erect. "Yes, you do." He brushed his lips against hers. "You want to tear into me as you did that man." He pressed his cock against her stomach, offering proof of his arousal. "You want me inside you while you're drinking from me."

She collapsed as her legs trembled too fiercely to stand. Only his strong arms and body kept her upright against the door. "Yes," she whispered, parting her lips when his breath caressed her cheek. She closed her eyes, waiting for him to touch her.

He pulled away, but continued to support her. "You'll have to wait, Emily."

Her eyes snapped open. "What—"

He chuckled, and not a trace of his previous anger or angst remained in his expression. "We're having company this evening." He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and kissed her gently on the lips before raising his head. "Otherwise..."

She blinked with confusion. "But, I thought you wanted me." Her cheeks reddened with a flush, and she dropped her eyes. He took her hand and pressed it against his cock. Her eyes widened when he pulsed beneath her palm.

“I do,” he said in a throaty whisper, before standing straight again. He sounded regretful when he said, “But satisfaction will have to wait until we have more time.”

She nodded, suddenly anxious to have him out of the room so she could collect her thoughts. With him so near, she couldn’t think about anything except how close the bed was, and how she ached for him to complete her. “O-o-okay.”

He stepped away. “You have an hour until he arrives.”

She nodded and moved aside so he could leave. She noticed he had no trouble turning the knob. He glanced back briefly, and she forced a shaky smile. As soon as he closed the door behind him, she ran to the balcony, shoving aside the curtains. While she was gone, they had put in new doors, but she could get through them again.

She reached for the handle, but her hand hovered a half-inch from the door, unable to move forward to grasp the knob. She took a step back and raised her bare foot to kick at the door. She came no closer than she had with her hand. No matter how she tried, she couldn’t force herself to move forward and touch the door.

How would she ever escape if she couldn’t get past Nicholas’s mind control?

She turned around and walked back into the bedroom, collapsing midpoint as an unwelcome thought swept through her mind. Did she want to leave him? Tears flooded her eyes, but she couldn’t weep. All she could do was rock back and forth, as she searched for the answers. When the questions—and their subsequent answers—became too much to face, she shied away from them and rose to her feet to walk into the bathroom, hoping a shower would sluice away her confusion, at least temporarily.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later, wearing a plain black dress she found in the closet, Emily found the doorknob turned easily. She walked down the hall, drawn to the sound of voices in the living room. As she entered the room, her eyes fell on Tremont, and she flinched. She swayed unsteadily as he eyed her, unable to see his current form as memories of the past welled up in her mind. She didn’t clearly remember all of the horrors he had inflicted upon her, but could feel flames lapping at her as a phantom child squirmed in her womb. A general sense of terror overwhelmed her, and she took a step back. When he lifted his hand, she whimpered and turned to flee.

“Emily.” Nicholas’s voice was soothing, and it served to stop her panicked flight in mid-step. He walked forward and touched her arm, massaging her stiff neck. “Come meet Michael.”

Under his gentle touch, her racing heart slowed and the tension in her body eased. The fear faded away, and she nodded. She kept her eyes averted from Tremont as she turned back to meet Nicholas’s friend.

Her first thought was that he looked nothing like a vampire should look. He was short and balding, with a paunchy belly inadequately hidden by his cassock. The white collar fit tightly against his fleshy neck. His skin was pale, except for a pink flush in his cheeks, indicating he had dined recently. His blue eyes were warm, and his smile was friendly.

Emily curtailed the ridiculous impulse to curtsy. Instead, she inclined her head and murmured, “Father.”

He stepped forward, extending his hand. When she took it, he enfolded hers in both of his. "Michael, please." He eyed her from head to toe. "And you are Emily."

She nodded, discomfited by his intense appraisal. She breathed a small sigh of relief when his eyes lit with approval, though she didn't know why. She could sense this man was important to Nicholas and hoped his emotions were simply transferring to her. She didn't want to crave his friend's approval.

Nicholas turned to Tremont. "We'll go through now. Begin serving."

Emily was surprised when Michael took her arm and looped it through his. She stood three or four inches taller than the rotund priest and had to bite back a grin as she imagined the picture they presented. She cast a glance over her shoulder and saw Nicholas watching them with a small smile.

He escorted her into the dining room and seated her before taking a seat. Nicholas sat down without speaking, but his eyes remained on them.

Michael sipped from the wineglass in front of him before turning his gaze back to Emily. "You're unhappy," he said abruptly. "Troubled, angry and confused."

She shot a glance at Nicholas before meeting the priest's eyes. She cleared her throat. "Nicholas said you're a priest at St. Peter's."

He nodded. "Yes, but don't change the subject." Michael's unsettling gaze turned to Nicholas. "Leave us."

He frowned. "But—"

"Please."

With a sigh, Nicholas got up from the table and left the dining room. Seconds later, his voice carried from the kitchen when he told Tremont to put a hold on dinner and bring him a glass of wine in the living room.

When he had gone, Michael shook his head. "He's hurting because of you."

"I didn't ask for this," she began defensively.

He nodded. "Of course not. He's headstrong. I spent the last fifty years trying to convince him to take a different approach if he found you again." He took another sip of the wine. "He loves you too much to listen to reason."

She bit back a thousand protests or blasé remarks. Instinctively, she responded to the kindness and concern she saw in his eyes. "What do I do, Fath—Michael? He frightens me."

"Yet you love him."

She shook her head vigorously. "No! I don't even know him. I don't love him."

He sighed again. "You're equally stubborn. You'll have to find the answers for yourself. Nothing I can say will convince you, as I told Nicholas."

She frowned. "He asked you to speak to me?"

"Yes, for all the good it has done." The priest took another sip of his wine and lowered the empty glass to the table. "Shall we eat now? I'm starving."

At his mention of eating, her mind's eye conjured an image of the seemingly benevolent priest tearing into the throat of a person and lapping away fresh blood as he drained the life from his victim. "How can you do it?" she burst out.

"Do what?" He regarded her calmly.

"Murder people. You're a priest. Don't you think it's wrong?"

He nodded. "Of course I do. I don't kill for blood."

She found herself hanging on his words. "Then how do you live?"

"I purchase blood from donors or, if I must, I take a small quantity from whomever happens to be convenient."

She felt a flutter of hope. "I don't have to kill anyone?"

He shrugged. "No, but it's difficult to fight the instincts." Michael's eyes dropped, and he looked troubled. "It took many years for me to control the impulses." He crossed himself. "I have much to atone for."

The hope flickered and faded. If a man of the cloth, driven by his beliefs and his devotion to God, couldn't overcome the dark compulsions for years, what chance did she have of controlling them? Especially when dark joy filled her at the prospect of killing again.

He cleared his throat, and the twinkle in his eyes returned. "I suppose we should eat. Tremont has worked diligently to prepare my favorite dish."

She shivered and, not being Catholic, resisted the urge to cross herself at the mention of Tremont's name.

Michael gave her a small smile. "Don't be afraid of him anymore. Whatever evilness that was in him is gone now." A sad expression swept across his face. "Nicholas's rage twisted him into something else centuries ago. He is pitiable now and not to be feared."

She nodded, but couldn't find it inside herself to accept the priest's words on faith. He had not been the one burned alive by Tremont.

## Chapter Ten

Did she love him? Emily found herself studying Nicholas with disturbing intensity throughout the meal, and even after Michael had returned to his parish. When the priest first said the words, she had been shocked. An automatic denial came to her lips. As she mulled over the idea, she became less sure. Her



uncertainty frightened her almost as much as the original statement had.

She shifted positions on the sofa slightly to better observe him where he stood looking out the window. He had his back turned to her, and she studied his form at her leisure. He had bound his hair tonight, and he wore a simple red sweater and faded blue jeans. She propped her chin on her hand. The way the light reflected off his dark hair caught her attention, and she focused on the varying shades of dark-brown and black. Her fingers itched to run through his hair.

Emily realized she was arousing herself and cleared her throat. He turned around immediately, and she was sure he had caught her staring. She fought down the flush struggling to stain her cheeks and forced a smile. "Michael's nice."

He nodded and walked over to the sofa. He stood behind it, rather than sitting down.

His position forced Emily to look up at him, and she craned her neck. "How did you meet?"

He hesitated a long moment before answering. "I recognized him."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"We met about sixty years ago. I recognized his soul." Nicholas's mouth twisted. "He's my father."

She blinked. "What? But he's a priest."

He brushed his hand against her cheek, where the marks he left earlier had faded long ago. "He used to be my father. Aside from you, he's the first person I met from the past."

"Does he know?"

Nicholas nodded. "Yes. I thought he would think me insane when I told him, but he had recognized me too, on a subconscious level. It took little time to convince him."

She touched his hand, disconcerted by how pleasant it was to have him stroking her skin. "You made him a vampire so you wouldn't lose him again?"

Nicholas stiffened. "He was a priest. Of course I didn't change him." His tone was icy, and his hand dropped away. "Though it was my fault he was attacked." His eyes revealed his anguish. "If I hadn't introduced myself—"

She touched his arm, and he relaxed. "What happened?"

"Koss," he spat through clenched teeth. "To hurt me, he changed a priest to a vampire. He had no idea Michael was a reincarnation of my father."

Her brow furrowed. "Why does this Koss want to hurt you?"

Nicholas's eyes lost focus, and his voice softened to a whisper. "It's not important."

"But—"

He looked down at her, and his expression was clear again. "I had thought to take you out tonight, after

Michael left.” His mouth curved into a seductive smile, displaying a hint of his fangs. He rubbed his thumb across her lips. “Unless you would rather stay in?”

She swallowed, desperate to ignore her body’s yearnings and restore order to her besotted brain. “It might be... nice to go out.”

He laughed, and didn’t look at all put out. “I thought you might say that.”

She looked down at the simple black dress. “Is this okay?”

He nodded. “It’s perfect.”

“Where are we going?” she asked as she stood up.

“A club.”

Emily shook her head. “I can’t. I’m not old enough...” She trailed off when the realization hit her that she would never reach her twenty-first birthday. She would be twenty forever. She bit down on her tongue to avoid mentioning it, not wanting Nicholas upset with her again when he seemed to be in an ambiguous mood.

He waved a hand. “It won’t matter. This is a special club, and not likely to garner the attention of authorities.” He took her hand. “You’re with me. You’ll get in.”

She nodded and followed him to the door of the apartment, stopping only to grab a jacket. Nicholas didn’t bother with one. Once she had slipped it on, he took her hand again and led her into the hallway. She stared at him from the corner of her eye in the elevator, trying to decide what mood he was in. He seemed brooding, she decided. Perhaps even melancholy.

When they left the apartment building, he hailed a taxi.

“What about your car?” she asked as she slid in first and smiled at the driver. He was surly-looking, with greasy black hair and yellowed teeth that she saw when he grimaced at her.

“Parking is a problem at the club.” Nicholas settled in the seat and directed the driver to their location before he scooted closer and put his arm around her shoulder.

Emily started to protest as he kissed the pulse point at her throat, but gasped instead when his tongue flicked across the sensitive area. She tensed, waiting for him to bite her—eager for him to bite her.

“Your blood is tainted,” he whispered in her ear, and his breath caressed her lobe. “We’ll feed tonight before we go home.”

She nodded, as her throat was too thick to speak. She wanted to tell him nothing would happen when they arrived back at the apartment. She should apologize for giving him the wrong idea or leading him on, make it clear she wouldn’t make love with him, but when her eyes locked with his, she forgot all about her good intentions and moved forward to press her lips against his.

Nicholas gathered her in his arms, pulling her tightly against him. She could feel his heartbeat echoing hers like a shadow. Her fingers moved to the hem of his sweater and slid underneath the soft cotton. Emily raked her fingers across his stomach and heard him hiss softly.

“The cab,” he said in a hoarse voice. “It’s stopped.”

She looked up and realized they had parked on the side of the street. The driver was eyeing them impatiently. She pulled away from Nicholas, who fished money from his pocket before sliding out. She followed him and paused to eye the pedestrians milling around the streets. They were an eclectic bunch of professionals and casuals. Amid the sea of leather were glimpses of Gucci, Armani and Saville Rowe. A young girl with purple hair and a shredded denim jacket clutched a silver Prada bag.

“Come on.” Nicholas took her arm and pulled her forward. They walked half a block and paused before a black door with a red symbol.

Emily looked up and saw a neon light flashing the name of the bar: *Transfusions* .

“Stay by my side,” Nicholas said as he draped his arm over her shoulder and steered her to the door. “You reek of nouveau, and there’s always some vampire out to prove themselves.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

He opened the door, and mellow jazz music flowed onto the street. He paused before entering. “Some consider it fashionable to make a vampire kill. A first human kill doesn’t count for anything with these kids.”

Emily’s eyes widened. “You mean they kill each other?”

“Stupid fools,” he muttered. “You’ll be an easy mark if you get separated from me.”

She nodded and pressed herself against his side as they entered the dimly lit bar. The moment she stepped inside, she felt different. It was like the sensation of pressure dropping right before a storm. Tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up, crackling with static electricity. The room hummed with power.

The bar itself was decorated in black and red. Black walls, a black floor, red stools, and red upholstered benches, all full. A black bar stood in the middle of the room. Most intriguing of all was a line of people sitting on high-backed barstools against one wall. There must have been ten or twelve of them sitting so close together they couldn’t possibly have room to move. Four burly men stood in pairs at each end of the men and women.

Nicholas saw where she was gazing. “Donors.”

She frowned. “Donors?” Hadn’t Michael mentioned something about them?

“They take money for their blood.” He took her hand and led her across the makeshift dance floor, finessing them through several straining and gyrating couples that seemed unaware of the rhythm of the jazz music flowing from the jukebox. “Normally, I wouldn’t touch any of them, but I don’t want to spend time hunting tonight.”

She tensed as they moved closer. “I...you’re—”

“We’ll have a snack,” he said with a feral grin.

She shook her head, though she was reluctantly fascinated as she saw another vampire approaching the

group of humans. He was young, surely not more than fourteen, but he passed two bills to one of the bouncers as if they were pennies. After paying, he walked up and down the line of donors, eyeing them critically. He finally settled on an older looking teenager with a shaved head and zombie-like expression. She was pliant when he pulled her from the chair and into his arms.

“He’s so young,” she whispered to Nicholas. “How could anyone turn a child?”

Nicholas eyed the young vampire who was feeding, then shook his head. “He’s pure, Emily.”

She blinked. “Pure?”

“He was born from two vampire parents, not changed.”

“What?”

Nicholas pulled her closer and leaned down to speak into her ear. “Pure vampires age, but only for a few years. A short while after puberty, when the vampire gene kicks in and they stop making their own blood, they stop aging. That’s when the bloodlust starts. Most look no older than fifteen-years-old. A handful might stop aging at sixteen or seventeen, but no pure vampire ever looks old.” His eyes slid over form. “When you come into your powers, you’ll probably be mistaken for pure.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s cruel. How can parents do that to their children?”

He shrugged. “How is it cruel? They have the same advantages of changed vampires, and they don’t have to go through the painful bother of dying.” He laughed. “Now, have you chosen which one you want to purchase?”

She shook her head. “It’s like prostitution.”

“Some call them blood whores.” He shrugged again. “Blood is blood, I suppose.” He pointed to two young men at the end of the line. “They look fresh. There’s still color in their cheeks, and their eyes are alert.”

Their eyes looked full of fear to her, but she didn’t say that. “Do they die?”

“No. Donors work one night a week and make enough for a whole month. Each never gives more than two pints on a shift.” Nicholas waved a handful of bills at the bouncers, and a heavysset black man, with a neck as large as a tree trunk, stepped forward. “Those two on the end.”

“What happens if someone wants more than two pints?” she whispered apprehensively, remembering her actions from the previous night.

“That’s what the bouncers are for. They protect the donors and collect their money.”

“Pimps,” she said with a shrill giggle as the black man brought one of the boys to them. He was tall and skinny, and barely past legal. She stared into his frightened eyes and tried to summon a shred of pity for him to keep her from drinking. Her eyes darted to the T-shirt pocket of the bouncer, where a wad of cash was visible through the thin red cotton. Unlike last night’s victims, this young man knew what he was getting into.

Nicholas took the boy from the bouncer and tilted his neck. “I’ll tell you when to stop.”

She nodded and eased forward. Emily was still afraid she would try to take too much, but she was hungry. She touched his face and snuggled against him. She felt his cock poking against her hip when she burrowed against his neck. She hadn't even bitten him yet, or convinced him the experience was sensual. He must be very young indeed, to simply respond to the sight and scent of a pretty girl.

Emily slid her fangs through his neck. She was careful to tell him it was enjoyable, while curbing the impulse to tear into the vein and rip it wide open. Perhaps it was easier when she wasn't ravenous, because she had a better sense of control this time. The blood trickled into her mouth at a delicate pace. It made her impatient for more, but she was able to resist her darker impulses. When Nicholas touched her shoulder, she tore herself away and turned her head as the bouncer led the boy from the room. She assumed he couldn't give any more blood for a while.

She stood nearby as Nicholas fed on the other boy, who appeared equally scared. She watched the way his throat moved when he swallowed and wanted to push him aside to have more. Fortunately, the hunger wasn't at a fever pitch, and what she had consumed would sustain her for the remainder of the evening.

When Nicholas had finished, he led her to the bar. "Do you want alcohol?"

She shook her head. "Just a Sprite."

He placed their order and waved to a table nearby that had become free. "I'll join you in a minute. I want to talk to Lenny." He turned back to the tall, cadaverously thin man behind the bar, who must have been Lenny.

"Okay." Emily was nervous when she left his side, but reasoned he could turn around and see her easily enough. Still, she felt exposed as she scanned the bar, meeting several pairs of assessing eyes. When she reached the table, she huddled into the booth and tried to tune out the bustle of the bar.

"You're new," a voice announced.

She looked up to find a man near her age standing in front of the table. He had thick blond hair, dark-green eyes and an incredible tan. "How did you get that tan?" she asked before she thought better of striking up a conversation.

"I'm an Aussie boy," he said. "Can't you hear my accent?"

She frowned, concentrating on his voice, but not detecting a noticeable accent. "Maybe a little."

He laughed and sat down without asking. "Nah, I'm fooling you, sheila. I haven't been a native for eighty years. Lost my accent, pretty much. These days, my tan comes from Bain de Soleil."

"Oh." She smiled. "It looks real enough."

He grinned and raised his Heineken. "You look real too, sheila. Really tasty." He smacked his lips.

She giggled, unable to take him seriously. "Careful. I might bite you."

He shook his head. "I saw you snacking. I'm safe enough." He swigged from the green bottle and slammed it down on the table. "Do you have a name?"

She hesitated, shooting a glance in Nicholas's direction. He was engrossed in a conversation with the bartender. "Emily." She held out her hand.

He took it, but caressed her palm rather than shaking it. "I'm Thomas. Can I buy you a drink, Emily?"

She shook her head. "I have one coming."

His eyes followed hers to where Nicholas leaned against the bar. "Who's the bloke?"

"A...friend."

He smirked. "In that case, your friend won't mind if I buy you a drink."

"Really, I can't."

Thomas shrugged. "How about a dance? Is that permissible?"

She hesitated again. Michael's words echoed through her head, prodding her to accept. If she could respond to anyone else the way she did to Nicholas, she would disprove Michael's accusation, and settle her own fears of being in love with him. "Why not?"

He slid out of the booth and offered his hand. Emily looked once more at Nicholas, who was still engaged in conversation, and held out her hand. Thomas practically dragged her from the booth and onto the dance floor. He found them a spot between two other couples pressed close to each other.

Emily's eyes widened when she realized one of the women in the pair on their right was fondling the other's bare breasts. Her eyes wandered around the other couples on the floor, and she was surprised to see most wore few, if any, clothes.

"You looked shocked, sheila." Thomas pulled her against him. "Haven't you seen naked people before? You know how it is right after you feed." He winked. "Gotta work off that excess energy somehow." His voice lowered to a purr. "How do you ease the tension? You just fed."

"Uh..." Emily licked her lips and resisted the urge to pull away when Thomas pressed his body close to hers. She sidestepped the question by saying, "What if the police come? Won't these people get tickets?"

Thomas laughed, and the red light overhead cast a pinkish tinge on his gleaming white teeth. "The cops don't come here, sheila. They can't see us."

Her brows furrowed. "Why not?" She struggled to put a few inches between them when a slow, sultry song started.

His hold on her waist tightened to keep her from moving. "This place is shielded from humans. They can't see it or find it. An occasional one might get a shiver up their spine, if they're sensitive enough to sense the power coming from this place, but most are completely oblivious."

She shook her head. "What about the donors? How do they—" She broke off as he ground his cock against her. "I—"

He shrugged. "Most are recruited. A few seek us out through vampire friends." He winked at her. "Some are so good, they get brought in."

Her eyes widened. "You mean, they're brought against their will?"

Thomas nodded. "It happens. Most adapt or..." He shrugged again, even as his hand ventured down to cup her buttocks.

"Don't," Emily said, pushing away his hand.

"Don't be shy, sheila." He grinned at her, but his smile was predatory. "It's obvious you need someone to watch out for you." His other hand moved under her breast, and he slid his thumb across her nipple. "You can't be more than a few weeks old."

"Let me go." Emily took the hand trying to grope her nipple and squeezed it tightly in her own. All thoughts of trying to respond to Thomas in the same way she did Nicholas fled. "I don't want to dance anymore."

His laugh wasn't friendly and charming like it had been. "Everyone's going to want to eat you up." His voice lowered, and he pressed his mouth to her ear. "I just want to taste you. Others will want to tear you apart. You need me for protection." He squeezed her buttocks again. "And I need you right now."

She slapped him across the face. "I don't need you. What I need is for you to let go." Emily's frantic eyes scanned the crowded dance floor, searching for Nicholas. He wasn't at the bar, and she didn't see him. "If Nicholas comes—"

"I'm not scared of your bloke." He twisted his wrist and ended up holding her hand in his. He squeezed tightly enough to make her whimper. "Let's get out of here, sheila."

She snarled at him, suddenly frightened of what he wanted from her. Emily's lips parted, and she licked her fangs. Instinct urged her to attack, and she lunged at his face.

He laughed, easily restraining her. "Maybe we'll skip the formalities. If one kill is good, two is even better." His eyes took on a reddish tint, and his head dipped toward her neck. "How do you feel about being my second, sheila?"

Emily struggled to release his hold on her, wondering why no one came to her assistance. She looked at the crowd and saw most weren't paying any attention. Those who were watching appeared ready to pounce on her too. "Nicholas," she screamed, hoping he heard her over the music and hum of voices.

He was there within seconds, peeling Thomas off her and tossing him to the ground. To Emily's surprise, he turned to her and slashed her across the face. Tears welled from her eyes as blood flowed from the cut on her cheek. She held her hand against it, trying to staunch the blood before it attracted too much attention.

"You're mine." His lips curled, and he turned back to Thomas, who had picked himself up off the floor and was visibly trembling. "Mine," he said with a snarl, lifting Thomas by the front of his shirt.

Thomas was obviously frightened, but seemed determined to hide it behind bravado. "She was a lonely bird, sitting all alone. If she's really yours, why weren't you with her?"

Nicholas didn't bother to answer. Instead, he slapped the boy across the face. "You need to learn respect for others' property."

Surprise and lingering fear had kept her frozen, but his words snapped her out of the semi-trance. "I'm not your property."

Nicholas barely looked at her. "Go sit down."

"I'm—"

He turned his ferocious expression on her. "Now is not the time. Sit!"

Emily trembled at his tone, and found herself backing away. A few steps from them, she stopped and crossed her arms. It was a small defiance, but all she dared risk for now.

Thomas's feet kicked in the air as Nicholas lifted him higher. He cried out when Nicholas's head moved forward, and his fangs broke through the skin of his neck. He clawed at Nicholas's face and kicked out with his feet, succeeding in breaking Nicholas's hold. When he backed up a step, blood flowed from his neck. "Listen, it was a misunderstanding—"

Nicholas didn't wait for the boy to finish. Emily bit her lip as he lunged forward and knocked him to the floor. The other couples were finally aware of a brewing fight, and they formed a circle around the pair. She rushed forward, pushing herself between two vampires who looked like they were in their forties.

Thomas squealed in agony when Nicholas's nails ripped through his stomach. Within seconds, he was holding his grisly prize aloft. The rest of the intestine remained in Thomas's body, but the few feet Nicholas held coiled in his hands glistened with blood.

Nicholas tossed the intestine aside and grasped Thomas's throat in a crushing grip. "Mine," he said again, this time in a fierce whisper. His hand tightened, and the boy's legs began to kick against the floor. Soon, seizures passed through his body, right before a crunching sound issued from his neck. "Next time, I'll kill you, and you won't come back."

When the boy lay still, Nicholas rose and turned to Emily. His eyes glowed red, and his face looked leaner. He was obviously enraged.

She turned to run from him and cried out when the middle-aged vampire behind her grabbed her arm. "Let go."

He shook his head. "He's your master. You have to face him."

She tried to pull away until Nicholas's hand fell on her arm. Then she went limp, knowing she wouldn't escape. Her feet barely moved as he dragged her along with him toward the door. The crowd had grown silent, and they moved out of their way like the Red Sea parting. They watched their departure with the avid expressions of vultures. As they stepped through the door, Emily saw their attention turn to Thomas, who was sitting up slowly.

Once they were outside the club, she shot a glance at him from the corner of her eye, trying to gauge his mood. He was still angry, but she thought he was making the effort to calm down. She moistened her lips and said, "I—"



He spun to face her. “Don’t talk to me until we return to the apartment.” He pressed his face against hers. “I can’t talk about this yet without hurting you.”

“But I—”

He dragged her toward a cab as it stopped at the curb. “Later.”

She subsided into silence as they got in the back of the car. Emily eyed him apprehensively as the driver drove down the street. What had she done to enrage him so completely? She had danced with another man, but why would that make him so angry? She hadn’t even enjoyed it.

As the car stopped before the apartment building, she swallowed her fear and straightened her shoulders. Nicholas was mistaken if he thought he could treat her as his property. She knew if she didn’t stand up to him now, she would never be able to.

She matched his pace as they walked into the foyer and to the elevator. Some of her resolve faded when she saw his eyes were still red, a sure sign he wasn’t in control of his emotions. She renewed her determination as they stepped onto the fourth floor and walked to the apartment. She stood with a rigid spine as he unlocked the door, and then swept past him with squared shoulders.

The door slamming behind him caused her to jump, making her admit she wasn’t as calm as she pretended. It didn’t matter, as long as he didn’t realize that. She kept her back to him when she spoke. “I don’t appreciate the way you treated me tonight.” She took a deep breath, forcing out the wobbly note in her voice. “You have no right to strike me.”

His continued silence piqued her curiosity and stoked her fear. There seemed to be a battle of wills between them, and she was determined not to be the first to surrender. However, as the seconds passed and he didn’t move or speak, she had to know what he was doing. Emily turned around to look at him and flinched.

Deep grooves lined each side of his mouth. His eyes burned bright red, and he was visibly shaking. He seemed to have only a tenuous control of his fury. She immediately decided going on the offensive had been a bad idea. “I’m sorry,” she said, striving to sound sincere, since apologizing was the last thing she should have to do. She was unable to resist adding, “It was just a dance. I don’t know why you’re so upset.”

He moved faster than her eyes could follow. She saw a blur right before she felt her body slam into the wall. Pain flashed up her spine to the back of her neck, causing black dots to appear behind her eyes.

“His hands were on you.” He said each word with precision, putting a pause between each, as if it was a struggle to be coherent enough to speak at all. “You let him touch you.” He slammed her against the wall again. “You belong to me.”

“I don’t,” she forced out through gritted teeth. “I can dance with whomever I choose.”

Nicholas shook his head. “I’m your master—”

She forced herself to smile through the pain. “It’s strange how you never mentioned that aspect of your love before. Is that why you love me? Because you think you own me?”

His eyes narrowed, and he raised his hand to strike her.

“Go ahead.” She could feel her own control slipping. “I didn’t do what you wanted. Discipline me. I’m your property, right? What’re you waiting for?”

His expression contorted with antagonism, but his arm dropped. He stepped back from her and took several deep breaths.

Anger caused her to continue. “You don’t own me. You aren’t my master. I won’t tolerate—”

Nicholas lifted her into his arms, ignoring her struggles.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, pulling on his hair. “Put me down.”

“Shut up,” he said, very clearly, as he stormed down the hall and threw open the door to her room. It bounced against the wall and slammed behind them as they entered the bedroom.

Emily’s eyes widened as he strode to the bed and dropped her. “Please don’t hurt me.” She hated the way her voice trembled. “I don’t want it to be like that.”

He gave her a long look, and his shoulders dropped. “I’m not going to rape you. Right now, I can’t even stand to look at you.” He grabbed a handful of her hair, pulling her head back. “Why did you do it? I thought we—” He broke off and shook his head. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. I see nothing has changed.” He let go of her hair and turned on his heel. He walked away without looking back.

She lay there, watching him move farther away, and unsure what had happened. Being with Nicholas was like being in a permanent state of confusion. Most disconcerting was, of all the emotions that had besieged her tonight, why was she now consumed with guilt? Why did she feel responsible for what had happened when she had done nothing wrong?

As he turned the doorknob, she whispered, “I wanted to see if I felt the same way with anyone else that I feel with you.”

He paused, but didn’t turn around. After a second’s hesitation, Nicholas opened the door and stepped through.

“I didn’t feel anything for him,” she said as he closed the door. “I didn’t,” she shouted. Emily held her breath, waiting to see if he would return to her. As the minutes passed, she realized he wouldn’t, and tears trailed down her cheeks. How could she fear him as much as she did, yet yearn for him at the same time? What was wrong with her? She brushed impatiently at the tears on her cheeks, but they were replaced as soon as she wiped them away. She curled up on the bed and hugged a pillow as she tried to convince herself she didn’t want Nicholas to come back. He was dangerous, and the possessiveness he had displayed tonight frightened her more than anything else she had experienced at his hands did. He loved her enough to kill for her. Did that mean he loved her enough to kill her if she displeased him again?

## Chapter Eleven

It was late in the night before Emily fell asleep. Thoughts of Nicholas kept her eyes from closing for a long time. Thoughts of their past, the present and her future swirled through her mind. One moment, she

ached to be in his arms, and the next, fear consumed her. Eventually, the night did catch up with her, and she fell asleep, sprawled across the bed, still wearing the black dress.

Scotland, 1813

The twilight was just beginning as Erin's feet crunched through the brown leaves dotting the forest floor. She looked up at the setting sun as a soft breeze caressed her cheeks, blowing the ends of the ribbon tying back her hair against her neck. Her gaze returned straight ahead, to where Nicholas and the priest waited for her. She held a small leather bag in one hand, and the other clutched a handful of the McCairn plaid arisaid covering her.

As she drew closer, Erin saw Nicholas wore a satin damask vest over a white shirt with puffed sleeves. He hadn't bothered with a jacket. The autumn wind had disheveled his short hair, but he didn't seem to realize it. He held out his hand as she neared. "You are beautiful."

She smiled and took his hand after dropping the bag near their feet. She turned to the priest and curtsied. "Father Gilgerney."

"Lass McCairn." He cast a nervous look over her shoulder. "Does your papa know...?"

She shook her head, casting off a twinge of regret that her family wouldn't be present her wedding. When she ran away this evening, she had cut all ties with them. She looked at her intended from the corner of her eye. His tender expression renewed her resolve about her decision. She loved Nicholas, and if her father couldn't accept that, she would live without his approval.

The priest nibbled on his lip. "Perhaps you should wait. I could speak to Laird McCairn, lass. Mayhap—"

"It will do no good." Nicholas spoke firmly, locking eyes with the priest. "Her father will not agree to our marriage because he does not want Erin to go with me to England."

Father Gilgerney wiped his brow with his arm. "With good reason, m'lord. The lass is his child—"

Nicholas's eyes didn't waver. "Erin wants to be my wife. You will perform the ceremony and tell no one."

The priest's brow furrowed, and he shook his head. "I will not speak of it," he whispered. He frowned. "Can you not stay in the Highlands, Lord Vallsade?"

He didn't deign to answer the question. "Marry us."

Nicholas's harsh, impatient tone caused Erin to flinch. She forced a smile for the priest. "Please, Father, marry us."

With a weary sigh, the priest opened his Bible and began to read. Sweat continued to pour down his face, and he looked nervously over their shoulders every few minutes.

Erin didn't share the priest's fear of her father catching them. She had gone to bed early with one of her headaches, knowing no one would miss her until morning that way. By then, she and Nicholas would be

away from her father's holdings. She kept her eyes locked with Nicholas's as she repeated the sacred words that would bind them. She experienced no hesitation when the priest told them to kneel for the final blessing. She grasped his hand and knelt with him in the rich green grass. Before bowing her head, she met his eyes and smiled at the love she saw there. It didn't matter that she hadn't been married in the church near the keep, and that her mother and sisters hadn't attended. She hardly missed the music, gifts and guests. All she required was Nicholas's love, and she was secure in the knowledge she had it.

The priest crossed himself and indicated they should rise. Nicholas pressed a small bag of coins into his hands and said, "Tell no one of this union, priest."

The priest was pale, and his eyes were wide. The wind tossed his thinning red hair about as he nodded vigorously. "My discretion is assured." He cast one last look at Erin. "I do hope you have not broken your father's heart."

She swallowed thickly. "I cannot deny what my heart wants out of consideration for his."

Father Gilgerny trudged away from them, shaking his head all the while. When he disappeared from sight, she turned to Nicholas and hurled herself into his arms. "My husband." She caressed his silky black hair, running her fingers through the short strands.

He lowered his head to kiss her, and his lips were gentle on hers. He pulled her tight against him as his tongue eased through the barrier of her closed mouth.

Her knees grew weak as his tongue explored her mouth. Erin pressed herself against him, eager to learn all about her new husband. She let him support her as she grasped handfuls of his vest and ardently returned his kisses.

He broke away with a gasp. "We must depart, dearest. By morning, we have to clear Lachlorn's land, or your father will catch up with us." He pushed back escaping strands of hair the shade of wheat and smiled down at her. "I cannot defeat his soldiers."

She nodded, aching to lay with her new husband, but allowing necessity to overcome her desires. Nicholas whistled for his horse, a strong stallion as dark as her sister Agata's hair, with glistening dark eyes and a proud demeanor. He was muscular and rugged, much like his owner, and would have little trouble carrying the two of them across McCairn and Lachlorn land by morning.

Nicholas lifted her onto Fury's back first, and then mounted. Once seated on the sturdy horse, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her into the curve of his body. "Sleep, my beloved. The journey is long."

She snuggled against him, feeling not at all sleepy. How could she when she was so excited about starting a new life with Nicholas? A new life as a vampire. A small shiver worked its way up her spine, and she wondered again if he spoke the truth. Could he really be the creature he claimed to be? Was it truly not an evil abomination to become one? Would she damn her eternal soul to Hell if she let Nicholas change her?

She gnawed on her lip, confronting the issue she had pushed to the back of her mind. Part of her was skeptical of his claim, yet she had seen him revitalized after feeding from a warrior who didn't remember the incident. Could she drink the blood of others to live?

Despite her moral turmoil, she knew she would allow Nicholas to convert her to a vampire. If he truly

was immortal, she wanted to be as well, so they would never be apart. He filled a void in her she hadn't recognized until she met him. Deep in her heart, she knew he spoke the truth about what he was, because she had remembered her other lives, having experienced the dreams. She knew who he was. He was her other half, the missing piece of her soul.

At the edge of the valley, nearly two hours later, she touched his arm and tilted her head so he could hear her. "Can you stop Fury and turn?"

He pulled sharply on the reins, and the ebony stallion whirled around and reared his front legs as he voiced his displeasure. Two firm pats from his master calmed him, and he snuffled as he settled his hooves back on the ground.

Erin stared at the border of her father's land, feeling a sadness she hadn't expected. All her life, she had longed to escape Scotland and the marriage contract to Brouden, her father's most skilled warrior and heir-apparent, since her brother was killed seven years ago.

When Lord Nicholas came to the Highlands two months ago on business for George III, she had taken one look at the regal baron and fallen in love. He had regularly appeared in the visions accompanying her strange headaches for as long as she could remember. In addition to recognizing her lost love, she had also seen a way to escape a bleak future. She made the mistake of confiding in her bubbly younger sister, who was her best friend, but also too impetuous at the tender age of fourteen. She hadn't been able to guard Erin's secret for long before her tongue betrayed it.

Laird McCairn hadn't been pleased to hear of his daughter's affections for the baron. He had tried to kill Nicholas in a fit of rage, and he was further enraged when Nicholas bested him. His subsequent forbiddance of Erin seeing Nicholas had done nothing to separate the lovers.

During their long nights of talking and touching, she hadn't truly realized what it would mean to leave her home. Papa was an austere man, and he wouldn't forgive her betrayal. She would never see her mother or sisters again, would never ride full-tilt across the wilds of the Highlands, hunting rabbits with her bow.

Perhaps her melancholy thoughts clouded her perception, but there seemed to be a dark shadow shading the land they viewed, even in the light cast by the tumescent moon. The valley lay before them, a massive wall of towering trees and rich greenery. Was England so inviting? Would it ever feel like home?

"Erin?"

His voice was gentle, and he was asking if she was certain. She could tell by his tone of voice, and the way he stroked her arm. She put her hand on his and nodded. "Let us continue." When he turned the horse, she bit back tears and refused to try to look back. Her future lay with Nicholas, and her past must stay behind her.

It was near dawn when they passed Lachlorn's land, into the MacDonalds' territory. Erin knew Laird MacDonald harbored no love for her father, and he wouldn't assist him by allowing McCairn and his soldiers passage across his land if they pursued her. Nor would he hesitate to slit the throat of his enemy's daughter and her new husband if he discovered them trespassing.

Nicholas had found the secluded glen she had told him about, and they would sleep here for the day. They would continue their journey across MacDonald land that night, when there was less chance of discovery. He took her hand after lifting her down. "Is this the glen you spoke of, Erin?"

She nodded, nearly too exhausted to speak. "Aye. Agata and I often sneaked here as children. Mother used to have fits, and she would stir up everyone to find us." A sad expression flitted across her face. "That was before Daniel was murdered on MacDonald land, and the feud began." Her eyes darted around the glen, before settling on a large tree with branches sweeping the ground. It had matured and bent under its own weight during the eight years since she had passed this way. "Fury should be hidden there, if you can get him to stay."

Nicholas took the reins and dropped her hand, moving toward the sheltering tree. Before he took the horse into the thick growth, he removed a roll from Fury's back and stroked his muzzle, while staring into his eyes. He whispered something, and the horse's ears twitched. Its eyes looked glazed as it voluntarily walked through the limbs. After Nicholas smoothed down signs of Fury's passage, it was a perfect shelter for the horse.

When he returned to her, she bit her lip. "Should you tie him? If he wanders away and is discovered, we will have no way of leaving."

Nicholas shook his head. "I commanded him to stay in the canopy of the tree limbs until I come for him."

She lifted a brow. "You...commanded a horse to stay?"

He nodded, looking amused. "There are many things you find unbelievable now, but will soon accept as commonplace."

She bit back further protests, assured by the confidence in Nicholas's posture. She felt the first stirrings of nerves as she followed him into the cave. It was dim inside, but she could vaguely see Nicholas as light cast by the rapidly rising sun filtered into the cave. She looked over her shoulder, wondering why she and Agata had loved this place as children. She remembered their games of rescued princess, where they took turns slaying the dragon to save each other. They must have been oblivious to the dangers as children. No wonder Mother had been so worried by their disappearances. If she had ever discovered where they went on their adventures, she probably would have locked them in the highest room of the McCairn keep and never let them out.

"We are alone," he said while spreading the bedroll on the hard ground before he removed a small leather bag.

She couldn't help another look over her shoulder, unable to remember how far the cave extended down the passage behind them. "How can you be certain?"

He tapped a finger against his temple. "I can sense life, or a lack of it. Nothing with a heartbeat is nearby, aside from us and Fury."

She allowed his reassurance to assuage her fears as she crouched on the thin blankets he had unrolled. It was cold in the darkness, making her shiver. She looked at Nicholas, who was removing a silver flask from the bag, along with a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese. He didn't seem bothered by the cold.

He removed a knife from his bag and sliced a hunk off the bright yellow cheese, then tore the bread in half and extended her share, along with the cheese. "Eat," he urged. "You need your strength for the

journey. It is three more days until we reach the border, and another two days' journey to Vallsade Manor from there."

She took the food and bit into the flaky bread, surprised to find it fresh. Her stomach rumbled as she devoured the meager meal, and her mouth was dry when she had finished. She reached for the flask Nicholas had been sipping from, and her eyes widened when his hand came down on hers and squeezed. She frowned.

"That is not wine, Erin." His voice was soft and smoky. "It is blood."

She snatched her hand away, repulsed by the thought of drinking blood. "Where did it come from?" she whispered.

"I imposed upon a woman to provide sustenance for our journey." His mouth curled into a feral smile. "I took more than bread and cheese she offered in exchange for the silver."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "You killed her?"

He shook his head. "Nay, I merely took enough for a meal this morning. Blood does not last long, and there was no point in draining her since most would waste."

She breathed a sigh of relief. Nicholas had always been honest with her, and she knew he usually killed his victims. As much as she loved him, she didn't know how she could sustain herself with the life of others. She was resolved to never kill, though he had bluntly told her it was almost impossible to overcome the compulsion, especially the first few years following the change.

He leaned forward and took her hand. "Be sure you can share my life, Erin," he said gruffly. "If you cannot, I will return you to your father."

Tears slid down her cheeks. "You would do that?"

He hesitated. "I would try," he finally said. "I would try to do what is best, but I have waited so long to have you with me again." He tightened his hold. "I do not want to lose you this time. I cannot bear to watch you grow old and die when I can prevent it. You must be certain, my beloved."

She bit her lip as her light green eyes explored his. Could she walk away from him, loving him as she did? How would she live with the emptiness in her soul if they parted? Somehow, she would find a way to overcome her revulsion to taking blood. Perhaps the change would assist her by dulling her conscience with insatiable hunger. "I am certain, my love." She tilted her head and removed the bow that now hung haphazardly in her hair. Erin pushed the hair away to expose her neck. "Take me."

He smiled, and his eyes were gentle. "Not yet. We will wait until we arrive at Vallsade Manor." His eyes darkened with passion, and he reached for her, pulling her onto his lap. "However, there is another passion we can indulge."

She melted into his embrace, eager to belong to him completely. Soon, she would be his wife in every sense of the word. She experienced no hesitation when his mouth slanted over hers. Erin parted her lips to allow his tongue inside her mouth, shyly touching it with her own. Her body tingled with warmth, and a pit of lava burned in her stomach, sending heat spiraling through her body. Her thighs quivered when Nicholas rested his hands on them, anticipating him seeking out her pussy.

He stroked the woolen material of her arisaid, fashioned from her clan's tartan, gradually pushing it up her legs, until her calves were revealed. Erin undid the buttons of his damask vest, running her fingers along the smooth satin. When it hung open, she went to work on the shirt, until it was opened to his waist, where the hem disappeared into his trousers. She had touched him like this many times, but never below the waist. He hadn't pushed her to make love before their marriage, although she would have been more than willing.

Her fingers remained steady when she unfastened his trousers and reached inside to stroke his cock through his drawers. She met his gaze, wetting her lips when she saw the heat in his eyes. Erin leaned forward, still palming his cock, to kiss him, exploring his lips with her tongue, before easing through them to explore his mouth, darting her tongue across his, prior to retreating.

Nicholas's hands trembled slightly when he unfastened the brass brooch at her breast to let the arisaid fall to her waist. His hands were warm through the thin cotton of her yellow blouse, and she arched her back, offering him more. He dipped his head to suckle one of her nipples through the cotton, abrading the tender peak in a manner that had her close to screaming at the gratifying sensation.

When he lifted his head, he rubbed the wet material against her nipple, further agitating the bud, making Erin bite her lip. Their hideaway was secure enough for the day, but she couldn't scream her pleasure for risk of a MacDonald soldier hearing her. "Stop teasing me."

He grinned at her, letting his hand drop to her belt with sensuous slowness. "Very well, beloved." He made quick work of undoing the belt and tossing it over his shoulder. Without the support of the brooch and belt, the arisaid pooled around her legs, revealing her blouse and petticoat. "What shall I do next?"

She frowned at him. It wasn't like Nicholas to be so playful, especially since he must have realized how she was yearning to complete the lessons she had learned in his arms during their stolen meetings. "Make me your wife."

His grin faded, and he pulled her more snugly onto his lap. "You already are, Erin. You have been since I first laid eyes on you in 1212, at the age of fourteen."

She shook her head. "No, make me your wife in every sense of the word." Erin stroked his face. "I want you in this life, not in some past life I barely remember."

With tender urgency, Nicholas stripped off her blouse and chemise. "Lean forward." Bracing her hands on his shoulders, Erin lifted her bottom into the air to allow him to strip off the petticoat. When she sat on his lap again, her bare buttocks rested on the wool of his trousers. A laugh escaped her when she looked down to see she still wore her brogues, and nothing else. With a flip of each ankle, she kicked them off, before clamping her thighs around his waist. "You wear too many clothes, husband."

He grunted. "Aye, but I have no wish to part from you to remove them."

"Allow my assistance." Erin pushed off his vest before tugging his shirt from his opened trousers to undo the last button and slide it off as well. She nibbled on her tongue, considering the logistics of removing his trousers with him seated and her sitting atop him.

Nicholas took over, sliding her from his lap so he could remove his boots and strip off the trousers and drawers. When he was nude, he beckoned her close again, and she settled back onto his lap. Heat flooded her pussy when his cock brushed against it. Sitting on him without the barrier of clothing was much more intimate and invoked a trace of fear. Not of him, but of the unknown that was coming.



She gasped when Nicholas leaned forward, laying her on the ground in one smooth movement. Erin clutched his shoulders as he shifted to kneel between her thighs, and his face nestled against her stomach. She loosened her grasp and moved one hand to his head, to stroke his short locks. “What are you doing?” she asked, when he kissed her stomach.

“Tasting you.” Her stomach quivered under the teasing touch of his lips as he kissed her again, gradually moving lower.

She caught her breath when his tongue swept around her bellybutton, moving south. Releasing his hair, fingernails digging into her hands, she had to rein in the impulse to stop him. Part of her said what he planned couldn’t be proper, but the rest of her didn’t care. Her pussy convulsed with anticipation as his tongue probed the curls shielding it. When his tongue swiped down her slit, she couldn’t entirely hold back a cry of shock and pleasure that emerged as a squeak.

“Be calm, love. I will never hurt you.” His breath whispered against her slit as he spoke his assurances, inflaming the swollen flesh further.

“I know,” she managed to whisper. Her mouth was dry, and her stomach clenched with nervous expectation just as his tongue delved inside her, to taste her clit. She dug her nails deeper into her palms to hold back another cry when his appendage swept down her slit to probe her opening. Her body was one quivering mass, and she couldn’t focus on a single thought, too lost in sensation. “Nicholas.”

He ignored her crying his name, continuing to lick every inch of her, inciting pleasure beyond anything she had ever imagined. Erin thrust her hips against his face, wanting more of his tongue, as he slipped it inside her. Tears streamed from her eyes, brought on by the frustration of being unable to give voice to her delight.

The convulsions increased in strength, seemingly radiating from her pussy throughout her body. Her thighs clenched around Nicholas’s head, and a gasping sob escaped Erin as an orgasm swept through her. She continued to tremble under the onslaught for several moments, unaware of anything until she felt a small stabbing sensation in her inner thigh.

She rose up to see Nicholas, eyes wide when she saw he was feeding from the vein in her thigh. The pain had faded quickly, replaced by incredible bliss that flooded through her in warm waves. She laid down again, losing herself in the soft sounds of his sucking, the faint copper odor of blood mingled with the mossy smell of the cave and her arousal, and the beating of her heart lulling her into a semi-trance as it slowed.

When he lifted his head a few minutes later, a trickle of her blood marred his chin, but there was little else to prove he had been supping from her. Erin held out her arms, too content to speak, and he came to her.

He kissed her lips, merely brushing his against hers, but Erin lifted a hand to hold him against her while she deepened the kiss. The first taste of her essence, mixed with blood, was unpleasant, but she kept kissing him, sweeping her tongue around his mouth, determined to show she accepted him for what he was. When she finally chose to break the kiss, she said, “Make love to me now, my love.”

“It has been too long.” His hand slipped between their bodies to guide his cock to her pussy, hovering at the entrance. “I do not want to hurt you...”

Erin touched a finger to his lips. “Do not fret.” She braced herself for pain when he surged inside her, finding it uncomfortable, but not intolerable. Soon, his thrusts incited more pleasure than pain, and her hips rose to meet each one. Their rhythm was easy to find, as if they had established it long ago. They had lifetimes ago, she reminded herself, before the ability to form coherent thought left her.

Her body geared up for release, shaking with the strength of her impending orgasm. Nicholas filled her with his satisfaction seconds before another orgasm overwhelmed her, more intense than the last. Convulsions swept from deep inside her, radiating outward, contracting her pussy around his cock. Erin bit hard on her tongue to restrain a cry, somehow managing to breathe as her world fell apart and reformed in the space of a few minutes.

Afterward, they lay together in contentment for a long time, with Nicholas careful not to brace his full weight upon her. Erin rested her head on his shoulder, breathing in his scent, and contemplating how complete she was. How had she lived eighteen years without him? Her mind couldn’t comprehend how Nicholas had managed to survive six hundred years without her, except for all-too-brief incarnations.

She pulled away to stare into his eyes, as her fingers played with the hair at his temples. “I love you.”

“I would die for you,” he said with utmost seriousness.

Tears blurred her vision, and she smiled at him. “I want to die for you. Make me yours forever, Nicholas.”

He hesitated. “I cannot. The journey—”

She put her finger to his lips and brushed her thumb across one of his fangs. “Do it now. Please.”

“Erin—”

She sighed. “You have my permission. I know how important that is to you, after what happened with Emma.”

He looked startled. “How did you...?”

“I have dreamed of the past. I know you did not change me again, after the first time. Each time, I was lost to you.” She caressed his cheek. “Ensure nothing can take me from you again. Change me,” she begged with quiet desperation. She doubted the change would alter the future, but dared to hope.

With a groan, he moved his mouth to her neck. His teeth slid into the skin of her neck, as his cock pressed against her thigh. She felt a flash of pain, and then desire surged through her once more. She clutched Nicholas’s shoulders and pulled him closer. As weakness overcame her, she managed to whisper, “If anything happens to me, promise you will find me again and make me yours.”

He pulled away long enough to stare into her eyes, looking haggard. Her blood colored his lips. “I will not lose you again, love.”

“We were not meant to live apart. Promise me.” Her head spun, and blood trickled down her neck.

He hesitated before nodding. “I will always find you.”

“Change me immediately next time. Do not take any chances.”

Nicholas shook his head. "Do not speak of this. Nothing will happen to you again, Erin. Soon you will change, and I will not let harm come to you."

She smiled. "Then finish it, my beloved." As his head returned to the bend of her neck, she tried to ignore a twinge of sadness, knowing Nicholas would have to find her again. Shadowy dreams of the future occasionally came to her when she had the headaches. Like the other visions, they had haunted her all her life. Even before Nicholas found her, she had seen the visions. They weren't clear like the others she experienced, but she knew they were just as real. In each of those mental flashes, she was herself, but didn't look like herself at all. She was a different person, although she was also the same on a fundamental level.

Erin held tightly to him as her strength ebbed under the onslaught of his fangs, wishing she could impart strength with her blood, knowing Nicholas would need it. He would be devastated when he lost her again. If the change didn't sharpen her gift enough to reveal her own fate, she hoped it would blind her third-eye. Her grandmother had been proud Erin was born with the Gift, but Erin was more inclined to agree with her father, who alternated between ignoring and denouncing it. Her flashes of the future were a curse, because nothing she'd ever tried had changed what was supposed to happen.

The time she dreamed her baby brother would drown, she had convinced her mother not to let him from the house. They had watched him constantly, but in the end, the nanny had fallen asleep while bathing him, and he drowned in three inches of water.

When she told her father the MacDonalds would ambush his soldiers when they left McCairn land, kidnapping Daniel, he had ignored her. She had warned Daniel, who had tried to indulge his little sister, but went along with the raiding party anyway. In the end, his blood had flowed into the river.

The future was immutable, so what was the value of receiving brief glimpses of events she couldn't alter? As Nicholas pressed her mouth to his bare chest, where he had opened the vein near his heart, she tried to concentrate on the present and tell herself the future wasn't set, while drinking deeply of her husband, praying his strength would somehow give her the power to alter the course destiny had set for her.

Emily's neck throbbed when she awoke, so she touched the spot, almost surprised to not find wounds where Nicholas had bitten her. Hers had healed long ago, but those from the dream had been fresh. The rest had been so vivid that she wouldn't have been shocked to find physical manifestations.

How much of the dream could she trust? Had she truly begged Nicholas to change her at their next meeting? Could she believe Erin had been mildly psychic, or was the dream the result of subtle suggestions imparted by Nicholas? She assumed he could control her dreams, if he wished. Was he manipulating her again?

With a sigh, she slid from bed. Her head ached, and she was dizzy. She looked down at the crumpled black dress, then at the clock on the nightstand. Although she had slept less than five hours, she didn't think she could fall asleep again.

She went into the bathroom to shower. After she returned to the room and dressed in a short black skirt and red shirt, she sat on the bed, trying to muster the nerve to leave the bedroom. She had to face Nicholas some time, but was frightened. His rage last night had scared her, and the dream had confused her. What if Erin was correct, that they weren't meant to be apart? How could she reconcile her

supposed destiny with what had become of her life, what he had made of her life?

Eventually, she made herself leave the bedroom. The door had been unlocked, though she had half-expected him to confine her to the room. She hesitantly entered the living room, which was empty. She went into the kitchen and froze when she saw Tremont scrubbing the counters. Her skin crawled, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She started to turn, but his voice stopped her.

“The master had a business appointment.”

Her eyebrow lifted. “Nicholas had an appointment?”

Tremont put down the sponge and clambered from the stepladder. He made a pathetic figure in the overly long apron, with a cheerful yellow glove on his hand. “Yes, mistress. He shall return by six.”

It seemed ridiculous to fear him, as he was in his present form. Perhaps Michael and Nicholas were right about him. He was no longer an object of terror, but pity. She leaned cautiously against the doorframe. “What kind of business?”

“Master Vallsade runs an import-export business, and he consults for universities and collectors from time to time.” His last word was nearly lost under the snapping sound when he peeled off the glove by using his teeth to grip the reservoir tips hanging over his stubby fingers.

“What does he consult with them for?”

“Historical artifacts. He’s somewhat of an expert, especially on objects dated within the last eight hundred years,” Tremont said in a light tone.

“Oh, I see.” For some reason, it hadn’t occurred to her that Nicholas did something so mundane as run a business or work. Had she imagined he maintained the lifestyle he lived with his mental powers? She shrugged, not having thought about it at all until now. “Am I allowed to leave the apartment?” She didn’t have a destination in mind, but was curious to see if she was under house arrest.

He frowned. “I do not know, mistress.” His eye darted around the room, avoiding hers. “I can have many things delivered—”

“I want to shop.” She eyed the short skirt and grimaced. “Nicholas’s clothing selections aren’t to my taste.”

He sagged. “I would be happy to drive you, mistress.”

She groaned when practicality interfered with her plans. “I don’t have any money. Darn it.”

A smile curved across Tremont’s grotesque face, bringing a previously unrevealed depth. There was genuine amusement in his expression. “That is not a problem, mistress. I know where the master keeps his credit cards.”

A giggle bubbled from her, and she shared a laugh with Tremont. The edgy sensation she had experienced in his company dissipated, and she relaxed. “Well, let’s hit the town then.”

Tremont nodded. “I shall fetch one of his cards from the safe.”

Emily followed him down the hall into Nicholas's office. She hadn't been in this room before, but wasn't surprised to see the same red and black decorating scheme. A huge antique desk took up about a quarter of the room, and three of the walls were dominated by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, stuffed full of books ranging from business to classic literature to dog-eared paperbacks written by Peter Straub, Ray Bradbury, and Stephen King. She felt a flicker of amusement when she noted no Anne Rice books adorned his shelves.

She waited a few feet from Tremont as he lifted a print from the wall and awkwardly conveyed it to the desk. She turned her head when he returned to the safe and entered the combination. "Nicholas must trust you."

He nodded. "Master relies on me greatly. Once I proved my loyalty, he gave me more responsibilities."

"How can you..." She trailed off, biting her lip.

He removed something from the small safe and closed the door. "What, mistress?"

"How can you stay with him? After everything that happened, how can you..." She shrugged, unable to articulate what she wanted to ask.

"The master is my life," he said simply. "I would die if our connection was severed."

"That's why—"

He shook his head. "There is more to it, mistress. Nicholas and I shared an intense hatred for each other for more than a hundred years." As he spoke, he busied himself with returning the print to the wall. "We hurt each other deeply." His eyes seemed to avoid hers. "I did what I did, and Nicholas destroyed me in retaliation. He took everything I had worked for in my life as master of Tremont Plantation. He took my family." His voice softened to a whisper. "I begged him for death, you know, but he refused. He linked me to him as a deeper punishment."

She frowned with confusion. "I don't understand how you can be so loyal to him, or how he trusts you."

Tremont blinked, as if the question was equally confusing to him. He seemed to have trouble understanding why she couldn't grasp their relationship. "We need each other, mistress. Nicholas is a man who has suffered great pain. I contributed heavily to the anguish he endures." He bowed his head for a moment, and then took a deep breath before continuing. "In caring for him and acting as his companion, I found redemption. Without him, I would not have become the man I am. It is difficult to comprehend, but he saved me from what I had become."

She assumed he wasn't speaking about his physical appearance, but didn't really understand what he meant. "I..." She shook her head. "I guess it doesn't matter."

"Perhaps you will understand in time."

She nodded, though the relationship seemed too complex. "Can I ask you another question?"

"Of course, mistress."

"How do you drive?" She winced, hoping he wouldn't take offense at the insensitive question.

“The Lincoln is modified, mistress.”

“I see.” She turned and left the office, with Tremont trailing at a respectful distance. “One more thing.”

“Yes, mistress?”

“Can we dispense with this ‘mistress’ nonsense?” She shook her head. “It’s so archaic.”

He hesitated, but finally said, “If you wish.”

“I do.”

“What shall I call you? Miss Swesso?”

“Just Emily will do.”

“Uh, well, I do not know if the master will allow such forwardness.”

She rolled her eyes and stopped in mid-step. She turned to face Tremont, looking down at him with a firm expression. “I want you to call me Emily. Don’t be so concerned with Nicholas’s wishes.”

He looked skeptical. “We shall see if you find that as easy to do as say, mistress.”

“Emily,” she said impatiently.

He nodded. “Emily.” He sounded uncertain, but stopped protesting.

\* \* \* \* \*

They returned to the apartment later than she had anticipated. The shops had been busy, and she had searched through several before she found casual clothes at what she considered an affordable price. Tremont had just put the key in the door when the knob twisted, and the door wrenched open.

She swallowed down a surge of fright when she saw Nicholas framed in the doorway. He wore a white business shirt, slate slacks, and a charcoal vest, having discarded the jacket and tie. He looked elegant, until she met his eyes. Then she realized he was a seething mass of fury, barely restrained. Another emotion was less identifiable in his gaze.

“Go,” he hissed to Tremont through clenched teeth.

Tremont’s shoulders hunched, but he lifted his hand. “Master—”

Emily lightly touched his shoulder as she shifted the bags in her hand. “Go on.”

He shot her a look before scurrying down the hallway.

They stared at each for several seconds without speaking. She was attempting to assess his expression, while he seemed to be trying to rein in his temper.

The sound of Tremont’s door closing broke the silence.

She took a deep breath and entered the apartment. She had to pass near Nicholas, and with the bags in her hands, it was difficult to navigate the narrow space. Her body brushed against his, and he made no move to step aside for her. She forced a shaky smile and slipped past him, while her heartbeat accelerated, and her body started tingling. When she was in the living room and several feet separated them, she dropped the bags, taking a deep breath in preparation for facing him, while mentally schooling her expression to hide her physical response to him.

“Where were you?” He sounded uninterested, but the coiled way he held himself revealed his true feelings.

Emily looked at the bags strewn on the floor before looking up at him. “I went shopping.”

He lifted a brow. “You have clothes.”

She shrugged. “I don’t like dresses.”

“Hmm.” He took a step toward her, but didn’t seem too menacing. “You should have said so sooner. I would have been happy to order things for you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t really know what I like until I see it. More to the point, I was going stir-crazy here in the apartment.” She forced a careless grin. “Tremont was kind enough to offer to drive me, and he knew where you stashed the credit cards. Oh, that reminds me,” she dug into her pocket and pulled out his Platinum card, “I should return this.”

“Keep it,” he said.

Nicholas covered the remaining distance between them, but she didn’t cower. He was clearly angry, but the other emotion in his eyes tempered her instinctive urge to escape. She still hadn’t identified it, but thought it might be well-concealed fear. No doubt, he had assumed she had somehow convinced Tremont to help her flee.

“I would prefer you don’t leave the apartment without me.”

She frowned. “Do you plan to keep me your prisoner forever?”

He sighed, running a hand through his tied-back hair, causing strands to work loose from the elastic band. “I’m not overly concerned with you running away. You have nowhere to go.”

“I could—”

He waved a hand impatiently. “Word reached me today that Koss has arrived in New York. He can only be here for one reason, and that’s to torment me.”

She lifted a brow. “Why? What is it between you two?”

His eyes avoided hers, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Never mind. I just want you to be cautious. One of the easiest ways for him to hurt me is to hurt you.” A shadow crossed over his eyes. “He’s ruthless. I don’t want you unprotected in the city, vulnerable to him.”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t even know me. How would he—”

“Koss is gifted, love. He’ll find you easily enough, if he’s determined.” Nicholas sighed.

“Gifted?” *Like Erin*, she almost asked, but called the words back in time.

“He’s almost five thousand years old. His powers are formidable.”

“Five thousand...” She trailed off, unable to comprehend his age. She sensed Nicholas’s discomfort with the topic and forced herself to change the subject—for the moment. “So, you were worried about me?”

He made a noncommittal sound as he crossed his arms. He didn’t seem overly fretful, though he still appeared angry.

She stared at him uncertainly. “Are you still angry about last night?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation.

“And about finding me gone today?”

He nodded.

She frowned. “Why aren’t you more...emotional? You usually don’t hesitate to show your anger.”

He sighed again. “I had little room to be angry when I came home and found you gone. Fear for your safety overwhelmed my other emotions. I didn’t like having you gone and worrying about you.” The confession sounded like it was painful for him.

A small smile formed on her lips. “I see.” Two steps separated them, and she took one toward him. “Can I ask you a question and have you answer honestly?”

He looked irritated. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“But you don’t always tell me everything,” she muttered under her breath. “Can you manipulate dreams?”

He blinked. “Yes, if I concentrated, and I knew the dreamer very well.”

“Have you ever manipulated any of my dreams?” She held her breath, waiting for his answer.

He shook his head, and his gaze didn’t waver from hers. “No. I have no reason to. If I wanted to control your thoughts, it would be much easier when you’re awake. Eye contact is the most effective way to manipulate someone’s mind.”

Her shoulders sagged, and she took another step forward, until their bodies were touching. Emily stroked his cheek, caressing away the line of worry she found. “It’s all true then.”

His brow furrowed as his frown deepened. “What is?”

She touched his lips with her fingers. “It doesn’t matter.” Erin had known he would find her again. She had given him permission to change her upon their reunion. She had spoken for her future self. Did that mean Emily had acquiesced to Nicholas? A small headache formed behind her eyes when she tried to



figure it out. She decided—standing so close to Nicholas, hearing his slow heartbeat reverberating in her ears, feeling his lips under her fingers—it didn't matter right then. In each of her past lives when they had met, she had recognized him. She did now too. He was the other half of her soul. She didn't know if she loved him yet in this life, but could see a day when she would. The thought was intoxicating and scary.

“What's gotten into you?” Her fingers muffled his voice.

She smiled, but didn't answer. She wasn't ready for him to know she knew about the promise Erin had extracted from him. Right now, she only wanted to feel his arms around her. She didn't want to have to think about how accepting him would change everything she had been certain of before. She didn't want to think at all. She just wanted to feel.

Emily leaned forward to kiss him.

## Chapter Twelve

Nicholas stiffened as he pushed her away. “What are you doing?”

She stared at him with wide eyes. “I just wanted to touch you,” she whispered, finding it difficult to maintain eye contact in the face of his rejection.

“Why?” His eyes searched her face, and he was clearly puzzled. “Most of the time, you don't want me near you. What's different?”

She shrugged. “Never mind, okay?” Emily walked past him, averting her eyes. Didn't he realize how difficult it had been for her to reach out to him? Why did he have to make it so hard for her?

He sighed and touched her arm. “Don't go.”

She kept her head turned away. “I'm sorry about last night. I've already apologized. I told you why I did it. If you can't forgive me for something so harmless, there's nothing else I can do.”

Nicholas stepped closer to her, nudging her chin around to meet his gaze. “It didn't feel harmless. You hurt me.”

She looked up at him, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Unconsciously, she touched her cheek. “You hurt me too.”

He nodded. “I know.” Nicholas ran a hand through his hair, mussing the tight ponytail. “I can't seem to control my anger around you. I think it would be better to let you go.” His eyes were flat, and his voice was full of pain.

Her heart stuttered, and she shook her head. Something had changed after the dream, and she didn't want him to send her away. She touched his arm, as tears broke free. “Please don't.”

“You would be safer.” He shook his head. “With Koss here, you shouldn't be near me. I'll arrange—”

“No!” Emily threw herself against him. “I won't leave. You can't send me away. Not now, when...”

He frowned as his arms settled around her, seemingly automatically. “Why? I thought you’d be pleased when I decided to do this earlier. You can stay at Vallsade Manor for a time, until it’s safe for you to go home.”

She pressed her face against his chest, ignoring his stiff resistance. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“You’ll be safe from him...and me.” His voice was gruff. “You bring out the best and worst in me, Emily. I never should have changed you. You’re much too young, and things have changed since the last time we were together. It’s time to let this unnatural love die.”

“Erin,” she whispered. He stiffened even more, and she lifted her head. His features had formed into a scowl, but his eyes were moist. “She made you promise.” She knew she was exposing her weaknesses to him, but it didn’t matter. The only important thing was to dissuade his streak of nobility. She would never figure out what her destiny was with Nicholas if he sent her away. She touched his cheek. “I made you promise.”

A harsh sound ripped from Nicholas, and it sounded like a sob. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to step away from her.

She followed his movements. “She knew—”

“That was too long ago...”

She moved her hand from his cheek to his lips. “I don’t want to leave now that things are starting to make sense. You have no right to make these choices for me.”

He nodded, dislodging her finger, and his eyes opened. “Exactly. I had no right to do this. You should go while I have the strength to let you.” He bowed his head, and his voice was shaky when he said, “I don’t know how long I can do this. Leave. Now. Tremont will drive you anywhere—”

She cupped his face with her hands and urged him to lift his head. Their eyes met, and the air crackled with electricity. She stared into dark pools of pain and confusion, and all she wanted to do was ease his suffering. Emily tilted her chin and pressed her lips to his once more—softly, hesitantly, waiting for him to push her away.

He groaned as his fingers tangled in her hair, and his mouth pressed against hers. His tense muscles relaxed.

Emily let go of his face and wrapped her arms around his shoulders to pull his body closer to hers. She slipped her tongue through his lips, sensing she was in control, and he would wait for her to set the pace. She stroked his tongue lightly, unsure of herself, even though there was a sense of familiarity about each action, as if she had touched him this way many times before.

She flicked her tongue against the tip of his and almost giggled when his body jerked. Her surge of feminine power weakened when Nicholas’s hands framed her waist and pulled her more tightly against his lower body, bringing her in intimate contact with his hard cock. He wanted her. Her pussy quavered at the knowledge.

She might have been more afraid if she hadn’t witnessed his vulnerability. Emily ran her tongue across his fangs as she nudged him toward the couch. She thought briefly of Tremont seeing them, but didn’t care.

When Nicholas reversed their stance and pressed her back against the sofa, she stared up at him and licked her lips.

He stood above her, bent forward at the waist so they were still touching. His dark eyes burned with liquid heat, and his cock pressed against her thigh. His hands moved to the buttons on her shirt.

She smiled at him as his fingers fumbled with the tiny buttons of the white shirt she had changed into at one of the stores. She grinned, imagining his frustration when he found the same buttons at the hip of the matching pants. She could see his frustration growing and put her hands over his to stop him. "I'll do it." Emily's eyes widened at the husky note of passion in her voice. She couldn't recall ever feeling like this.

She had burned for Nicholas before, but always with an urgency born from feeding. She didn't feel the same pressing need for release this time. Her movements were unhurried, and she saw tenderness in his eyes as she unfastened the tiny buttons one at a time. They had connected on more than a physical level now, and the timing was right. She slipped off the shirt and dropped it over the couch to land on the cushions.

Nicholas brushed his fingers against the lacy cup of her white bra, and his breath hissed through his teeth. He seemed to be moving with deliberate slowness too, as he slipped the bra strap down her shoulder. His lips followed the path, and he pressed kisses against her flesh, without a hint of his teeth grazing her skin.

Emily put her arms around him, pulling him closer. His fangs scraped against her shoulder, and she winced at the dart of pain. He immediately pulled back to look into her eyes, and she summoned a smile, trying to hide her nervousness.

He tangled his hand in her hair. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

She ignored the quivering in her stomach and nodded twice, rapidly. "Yes."

He stood up and lifted her into his arms. "There's a more appropriate place."

Emily put her arm around his shoulder, but didn't hold tightly. He wouldn't drop her. She cuddled closer to him, breathing in the scent of him. Underlying his expensive cologne and soap, she caught a faint whiff of blood. It reminded her she hadn't fed, and her stomach growled. However, the hunger wasn't urgent enough to supplant her desire for Nicholas.

He strode down the hallway and kicked open his bedroom door, placing her on her feet before closing the door behind them. Emily took the opportunity to examine his room and found it much the same as hers. His bed was larger, with four posts and a privacy screen. His furniture was more masculine and built larger, but it was as black as the carpet. Touches of red and silver contrasted with the black. The only deviation from the bland décor was the zebra-printed comforter on the bed, in alternating stripes of silver and black.

When he returned to her, he swept her into his arms. "You don't know how long I've waited for this." His voice had become a rough growl, but there was a hint of tenderness underneath.

"I think I do." Her stomach lurched again when her gaze skittered to the bed and settled on the comforter. She had an image of the two of them writhing on the bed, and she shivered. The thought excited and alarmed her simultaneously.

As his lips brushed against hers, the phone rang. Emily started to pull away, but he tightened his hold.

“Ignore it.” He buried his face in her neck as the phone rang again. “It’s not important.”

She closed her eyes and tilted her head, waiting for his teeth to sink through the skin of her neck. Instead, he licked her. She frowned, and then remembered the blood in her veins was now tainted.

The phone rang again, and she stiffened. “Nicholas...”

He sighed impatiently and lifted his head. “Tremont will handle it.” As he spoke, the phone trilled again, but cut off in mid-ring. His lips slashed into a smile that revealed a hint of his teeth. “There. All’s quiet. We won’t be disturbed again.”

She nodded and laid her head on his chest, unable to prevent a whimper when his hands moved to the clasp of her bra. When he stopped moving, she lifted her head. “What?”

He sighed. “I don’t think we should do this.”

She swallowed down an instinctive dart of relief. Emily shook her head. “I want to. I want you. I’m just...” She hesitated and licked her lips. “I’m kind of nervous. I’ve never...” She looked down, trying to suppress the tinge of pink blossoming on her cheeks.

“I know. That’s why we should wait.” He stepped away from her. “You’re still confused. In a few days—”

“No. I don’t want to wait.” She took a step forward so they were touching again. “I’m ready now.”

“Emily—” A knock interrupted whatever he might have said. He strode to the door wearing a frown.

Emily darted behind the bed and drew the privacy curtain across her upper body to hide her bra. Tremont didn’t come in, but his voice carried to her. She didn’t catch the words, but caught his sense of urgency. When Nicholas closed the door, she sensed their interlude was over for now, but not for long. She was determined to make him understand she was ready, despite her fear. He hadn’t let her fears in other lives dissuade him.

She stepped away from the curtain and walked over to him. He was straightening his appearance in the mirror on the wall when she brushed a hand down his arm. “What’s wrong?”

“My warehouse is on fire.” He spoke in clipped tones. “I need to get down there. My insurance agent is meeting me there, and I know the police will want a statement.” His movements were stiff and jerky, and his eyes sparkled with rage.

“What caused the fire?” she asked softly.

He shrugged as he walked to the door. “The man Tremont spoke with didn’t say, but I don’t doubt it was Koss.”

She gasped. “Why would he? Please tell me what’s happening, Nicholas.”

He hesitated at the door, with his hand on the knob. Nicholas sighed. “I don’t have time right now, but I’ll tell you everything when I get back. I promise.”

She nodded, knowing she couldn't delay him, no matter how badly she needed an explanation. "Be careful."

He opened the door. "You'll be safe until I return. I'll shield the apartment, which should fool just about anyone." He hesitated once more, as his eyes moved over her, drinking her in. "Stay in the apartment, okay?"

She nodded. His demeanor brooked no argument, and his fear transmitted itself to her.

He cursed softly as he stepped back through the bedroom and strode to her, pulling her into his arms to press a kiss to her mouth. When he lifted his head, his eyes caught hers. "I don't want to leave you, but it isn't safe to take you with me."

"I know." She forced her arms to let go of him and made her legs take a step back. "I'll be waiting." He nodded once more and left, this time without hesitating.

She watched him go, biting on her tongue to beg him not to leave. She didn't understand why Koss tormented Nicholas, but she was terrified the other man would hurt him tonight. The sooner he was back, the sooner she could relax. The time would drag until his return, and she knew her thoughts would insist on imagining various tortures Koss might inflict upon him.

\* \* \* \* \*

After slipping on a light blue shirt from Nicholas's closet and rolling up the sleeves, Emily walked down the hall to return to the living room. She found Tremont in the kitchen and let out a startled gasp. She clutched her chest, trying to slow her racing heart.

He frowned. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head, panting to catch her breath. "I thought you'd gone with Nicholas. I was startled."

Tremont gave a lopsided shrug. "I don't always accompany the master. There can be...awkward questions. He asked me to stay with you tonight."

She smiled when she noticed he was making hot cocoa from scratch. "My mother used to make cocoa when I was sick, but that was years ago."

"If you would like to sit in the living room, I'll bring it through directly."

She turned and walked into the living room, curling up on the burgundy sofa. A blush swept through her cheeks when she saw her blouse neatly folded on the coffee table. Tremont obviously knew what they had been doing. Her lips twisted into a tiny smile as she glanced down at Nicholas's too-large shirt covering her. If Tremont hadn't figured it out by seeing her in Nicholas's room, her wearing his shirt was another clue. She leaned back and tried to pretend it didn't embarrass her. Tremont didn't seem bothered by the knowledge, and Nicholas certainly wasn't. She simply had to be more adult about the situation.

Emily was surprised at her ease of fighting back a flush when Tremont carried in the tray of cocoa and gingersnaps. She blinked back tears as a memory of sitting in bed and drinking cocoa with her mother flashed through her mind. She cleared her throat, reminding herself those times were over. "Thank you."

He inclined his head. "It is my pleasure, Miss Emily."

She sighed at his insistence of using "Miss" in front of her name, but knew he wouldn't change his mind. After using her given name just once, he had taken to addressing her as Miss Emily. At least it wasn't Mistress.

"If there's nothing else, I'll retire to my room."

"If I need anything, I can get it."

He looked scandalized. "It is my job to see to your needs."

She chose not to answer. Instead, she lifted the mug of cocoa and sipped it through the layer of whipped cream. "Delicious. Thank you."

He nodded and left her without another word.

When he was gone, Emily sat on the sofa, wondering what she would do with herself. A few weeks ago, she might have watched a TV program, but didn't think any would keep her attention now. Still, it was background noise to blot out her thoughts. She didn't want to dwell on what Nicholas was doing right then, nor think about how things had changed between them tonight. However tacitly, she had accepted her new future. Even though they hadn't made love, there was no going back now.

She still didn't know how she felt about that. Being close to Nicholas was intoxicating, exciting and dangerous. Her old life had been safe and predictable. She had known exactly where it would lead her, at least through college. She wasn't ready to embrace the new enthusiastically, and couldn't quite turn her back on the old. She was in limbo, trapped between her choices.

Emily sighed deeply. Her weighty thoughts made no difference. No matter what course of action she decided on—if she could manage to choose one—she knew she would react to Nicholas, not act. She didn't seem capable of rational thought around him. Was that because her actions had already been predetermined by fate, or simply because she reacted so strongly to him as a man?

She sighed again as she reached for the remote. She was determined to clear her mind and tried to concentrate on a drama she vaguely recognized.

She must have had limited success in focusing her attention on the attorneys' plight, because the doorbell ringing caught her by surprise. She sloshed the remains of her cocoa down the side of the cup and stained the hem of Nicholas's shirt. With a muttered curse under her breath, she stood up and put the cup on the tray before lifting and carrying the serving dish from the living room.

The doorbell rang again as she entered the kitchen. She put the tray on the counter and turned to the front door. As Tremont appeared in the hallway and walked to the door, Emily froze. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and her stomach churned with nausea. As he reached the door, she said, "No, don't open it."

Tremont looked back at her with an expression of surprise. "But Miss Emily—"

She shook her head, struggling to remember something Nicholas had said. Her eyes widened. "Nicholas shielded the apartment before he left. How is someone at the door?"

Tremont's hand fell from the door, and he rushed toward her as fast as his squat legs would carry him. "Run to the fire escape, out the kitchen window." He fumbled in his pocket and withdrew a cell phone. "I'll call the master—"

Before Tremont finished the sentence, the door started shuddering. The wood groaned, and the door rattled in the frame. With a screech of protest, it tore free from its hinges and slammed against the wall of the entryway.

Emily's feet froze to the spot as Tremont placed himself in front of her. He was trembling badly, and the phone fell from his hand to the floor. She wanted to push him aside, but couldn't seem to move.

Seconds after the door opened so forcibly, four people stepped through the doorway. There were two men and one woman standing in front of another. He was taller than the others, but by a trick of the light, or his own powers, shadows obscured his face.

The two men in front of him were a study in contrast, except for their nearly identical jeans and dark coats. One had blond hair, with icy gray eyes. He looked to be in his late forties, on the chubby side. The younger man was dark—Hispanic or Mediterranean—with black hair, olive skin and smoldering dark eyes. He was short and slight, but held himself in way that suggested he was more than capable of handling any situation.

The woman's hair was as dark as the short man's, but her features were completely different. Her skin had a golden tinge to it, and she had oddly shaped amber eyes. Only a tiny sliver of sclera showed on either side of her large irises. She wore a flowing red dress topped with a black bolero jacket. She looked like she was all dressed up with no place to go, and her planned outing had been more than a hundred years ago.

Emily's paralysis broke as the man hidden behind them moved to the front of the group. The others stepped aside for him with the same gracefulness inherent in Nicholas's movements. She guessed they were all vampires, and all older than she. With a muted cry, she turned to run, desperate to avoid meeting Koss face-to-face. She had no doubt it was he approaching her.

"Halt a moment, Emily." He spoke with a rich baritone, and it held a trace of an accent she didn't recognize.

As he spoke, her limbs turned to stone. She couldn't move, no matter how she struggled to lift her feet. She couldn't even wiggle her fingers. The only part of her still responding to her brain's commands was her eyes. They darted around the room, searching for escape.

When Koss walked toward her, the light in the hallway revealed him more clearly. He was shorter than Nicholas, but muscular, giving him a solid presence. He had bronze skin, dark eyes and black hair, shaved close to his skull. His nose was a large beak, and his lips were thin. She searched for the perfect way to describe him, but the only word that came to mind was foreign. There was something alien about him.

As he stopped a few feet from her, she gasped and was surprised when her body cooperated to make the sound. Even her tongue seemed frozen. The cause of her shocked gasp was the scar on his face. It was cross-shaped, but decorative like an ankh. The scar was ragged, with knots of white flesh on faded pink skin. It was obviously old, but it hadn't disappeared. He must have been marked before his transformation to a vampire.

Tremont threw himself in front of Koss. His desperation was clear in the set of his shoulders.

Koss didn't even pause. He waved his hand, and the diminutive man went flying against the wall. He hit with a loud cracking sound, followed by a cry of pain. Within seconds, the three who had lingered near the door rushed to him, ripping at him.

Emily watched with horror, unable to move, as they tore at Tremont's clothes and skin. She couldn't clearly see what they did to him from her angle, but could guess from the sounds he made. He continued to scream with agony as he tried to defend himself. It didn't take long for them to subdue him and for the screams to fade to silence.

"No one heard him cry out," Koss said with mock sympathy. "Nicholas did an excellent job of shielding this residence. It was difficult *forme* to find. His power has increased. He is to be commended."

She glared at him, still unable to speak or move. As distressing as was the sound of the three feeding on Tremont's remains, this man's gaze was infinitely more disturbing. She tore her eyes from his, pointedly averting them from the eager sounds issuing from the pack of animals consuming their meal.

"Do they sicken you, Emily?" A cold smile flashed across his face. "Surely, you felt no fondness for Tremont after what he did to you?"

She refused to look at him.

He crooked his finger. "Look at me."

Her frozen muscles loosened, and her neck turned so she was facing him. Emily squeezed her eyes shut, praying for the strength to avoid his gaze.

He chuckled. "You're strong for a young one." Koss's voice dropped to a whisper. "But not strong enough to resist my commands. I could make you scream as loudly as Tremont."

"I wouldn't give you the satisfaction," she bit out, shocked to be able to speak.

He laughed again. "There are more efficient ways, dear, and I want you fresh for the night's activities."

She held her breath when he walked up to her, stopping less than an inch from touching her. She swayed as a roaring filled her ears, and her eyes popped open of their own volition when he touched her cheek. She whimpered as she found her gaze locking with his.

"Do you recognize me yet? We've met before." He caressed her cheek. "Remember, dear? Do you have that sense of *déjà vu* yet, like we've done this all before?"

His soothing tone was seductive, and his eyes were like whirlpools, sucking her in. Emily felt her consciousness flowing from her into him, but couldn't break eye contact. She tried to resist as her body relaxed, but was unable to stand upright. As she crashed into his arms, blackness overwhelmed her, and a dream violently overwhelmed her.



Erin blinked back tears and tried to give her husband a brave smile. "It is only three nights, Nicholas."

He caressed her cheek, pushing back her blonde hair. "I hate to leave you for three minutes, beloved." His other hand cupped her distended stomach. "With the birth so close..."

She shook her head. "More than a month, love. You will return in plenty of time."

Nicholas sighed. "I do not want to leave you. What difference will my vote make?"

She felt a flutter of panic and struggled to suppress it. She knew Nicholas must leave. "As long as the Tories are so vehemently opposed to the Reform Act, even one Whig vote might make all the difference. Your party needs your voice. The people need you."

He sighed again. "I know you are right, but I have not spent one night away from you in eighteen years."

She smoothed the full skirt of her loose dress and managed to avoid his eyes. "I will be here when you return." She nearly broke down sobbing, but somehow found the strength to continue her pretense. She must protect Nicholas. With a tilted chin, she met his gaze. "All will be well."

Nicholas nodded briskly and took the reins Tremont extended for him. Unmindful of the staff milling about the courtyard of the manor, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply. When he reluctantly pulled away, he said, "I shall think of you every moment."

She nodded, unable to respond for the lump of moisture in her throat. She touched his cheek. "Travel carefully, my love," she managed to choke out hoarsely.

He mounted the chestnut stallion as Tremont scrambled into the saddle of a tame gray gelding. Nicholas lifted his arm in a wave before turning the horse toward the lowered drawbridge.

Erin drank in the sight of her handsome husband astride his horse as he galloped out of her sight. When he had reached the end of the path, where it turned a bend, and he was no longer visible, she squeezed shut her eyes. She wanted to savor her last glimpse of him. It would feel like an eternity before they were reunited.

As she had dreamed countless times, a disturbance woke her early in the morning. Erin was surprised to have slept at all, with knowing what was coming. She grasped the ornate brass handle of the dagger tucked under her pillow and slid out of the bed that was too large without Nicholas's presence.

She briefly wondered if she should have told him what would happen tonight, but quickly shook her head, knowing if he had stayed, he would have died too. When Koss came for her, he wouldn't let anything stand in his way. His obsession with Nicholas was bound to spill over to her at some point. She was an easy way to hurt her husband.

Would it have made a difference if she accompanied him to the townhouse in London? Would that have stopped Koss from carrying out his plan? Would Nicholas have been able to protect her if he came for her anyway, or would he have died with her and took any chance of them being reunited with him?

A sharp pain shot through her stomach, causing her to gasp and bend over at the waist. It reminded her

of why she hadn't gone with him. The pains had bothered her off and on for the last two days, and she knew their daughter was eager to make her appearance. Tears streamed down her cheeks at the thought. It was no solace to know her baby would have life again in the future. She longed to hold her daughter in this life, even though her visions told her that wasn't to be.

As she lit two of the candles, she heard footsteps on the stairs, and then someone shouting. A cry of pain and the sound of someone tumbling down the stone steps followed the shouting. It sounded like the butler, Eves. If her vision proved correct—as they always did—he would survive the night's events.

Before she knew it, someone was pounding on her bedchamber door. Erin backed into the shadows of the room and waited for a man she had never met to enter her room to kill her.

She recognized him instantly. He was the third to enter, following Nina, the perfidious bitch, a blond-haired man in his forties and a dark-haired man who kept his face in shadows. The scar on his face was the same she had seen repeatedly in her dreams during the last eighteen years. She didn't doubt he was Koss.

Erin tensed as he scanned the room, knowing he saw her when his eyes moved in her direction. She struggled not to move, hoping she was wrong, but still twitched when she saw him turn in her direction. Erin pressed the dagger against her leg, hiding it in the voluminous folds of the linen shift. Every vision she'd had showed her attempts to defend against Koss were futile, but she wouldn't give in without a fight. Not only did she have a child to protect, but she also wanted to be there when Nicholas returned. She had too much to lose to yield easily to her fate.

Koss chuckled. "You think you can fight me, Erin?"

She swallowed heavily, but didn't answer.

"Do you think you can hide from me in the corner?" His eyes bored into hers. "I see you." He crooked his finger in her direction. "Come to me."

Her feet moved forward against her will. Erin tried to stop walking forward, but couldn't control her own body. Her hand on the knife loosened, and she bit down hard on her bottom lip. The flash of pain helped collect her thoughts, allowing her to tighten her grip.

He met her halfway. As they stopped before each other, Nina lit the last candle on the bedside table, providing more illumination. The scar on his cheek caught her eyes, and she shuddered.

He nodded, touching it as if by reflex. "It is hideous, is it not?"

She didn't answer.

Koss's mouth twisted. "How I came to get it is a long story. Has your husband revealed it?"

She shook her head. In the early days of their marriage, Nicholas rarely spoke of Koss, and hadn't at all for some years. He seemed to think the other man had finally decided to leave him alone. Erin had never corrected his assumption. If she had told him about her visions of Koss, it would have meant admitting to him that she could see the future. She had kept her secret all these years, fearing he would pressure her for glimpses of the future, and she hadn't wanted to tell him what she saw. He would have tried to change it, and in doing so, he would have died too. She was certain of that.

Koss spoke again. "That is just as well. He doesn't know all of the facts." He laughed as his eyes swung in Nina's direction, but it was a cold sound, lacking any humor. "It is not a pleasant tale, and better reserved for another time." A cruel smile slashed his lips. "Then again, your time is limited, is it not, Erin?"

A frisson of fear darted up Erin's backbone. He committed violence without a second thought. She knew he wouldn't have mercy for her or the child she carried.

Koss shook his head. "Enough of the past. It is the present I am interested in, m'lady." His respectful tone was mocking. "Where is your husband?"

She kept her silence. He was toying with her. His goal was to cause Nicholas pain, and Koss had deliberately waited until he was away. She had no doubt he knew exactly where Nicholas was and when he was due to return to Vallsade Manor.

"He will be heartbroken, will he not?" Koss touched her shoulder. "I do hope you understand this is not personal. You could be anyone."

She found her voice as he drew her nearer. "And my child? Does her life mean nothing?"

"No," Nina snarled, her face contorted with rage. "Destroy them both, Koss."

Koss hesitated for a brief second before shaking his head. "I'll admit the child makes me second-guess myself. Something..." He shrugged. "I do not tolerate indecision in anyone, especially myself. I can find no pity for your child, whatever my instincts might tell me." His eyes fastened on her stomach. "Nicholas must be punished."

She brought up the dagger in one smooth motion and plunged it deep into his heart. Erin let out a hoarse cry of triumph when his eyes widened as he clasped his chest. Blood poured from the wound, soaking his hands.

He coughed as he fell to his knees, and a trickle of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth. He grunted with effort as he ripped the dagger from his chest and flung it away.

Erin's mouth fell open when he struggled to his feet. He grinned at her, and a sob broke free from her throat. The dagger had been ineffective, despite the magical charm placed on it by the witch she had consulted with.

Koss wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his black greatcoat. "I commend your useless efforts, m'lady." He bowed mockingly. When he stood again, he seemed as strong as he had before she stabbed him. "All for naught, I fear." He gestured to those who had accompanied him. As silently as they had been since arriving in her room, one man and Nina moved forward to flank her. The shorter man remained hidden in the corners of the room.

Erin watched them warily, waiting for one or all to lunge at her. She wondered why neither had appeared in her visions. Would she have been prepared for them if they had? Why hadn't she realized Nina would have such a prominent role in her execution? She could have told Brannon...

The man moved first, with careless haste. He made a roaring sound as he rushed her, with his hands extended. His nails were sharp, and they gouged into her upper arm as he grabbed her with his left hand.

She waited until he was close before thrusting up her knee as high as the bulk of her stomach would

allow and connecting with his genitals. He howled as he backed away from her, swaying.

Before she could turn to face Nina, she was in her arms. Erin struggled to throw off the brunette's tenacious grip, but didn't have the leverage or strength to dislodge her. In desperation, she tried levitating to free herself, but couldn't summon the required energy to lift her own body, let alone break free of the other woman's hold.

"You are as weak as Brannon," Nina taunted as she tightened her grip.

Koss stepped around the man cradling his testicles and walked to Erin. He looked over her shoulder and nodded at the woman. "Well done, Nina. Hold her."

Erin screamed as Koss flipped open his coat and withdrew a sword. She recognized it as the one from the dreams that had haunted her. It had the same carvings on the slender silver handle, and the same slight curve to the sharp blade. She renewed her efforts to twist away from Nina's hold while he brought back his arm.

"I would say death is painless, but that is a lie." He smiled, but his eyes remained without expression. "I will ensure it is permanent by severing your spinal cord, so you will not suffer overly much."

"Please do not do this." She knew begging was useless, but had to try. The baby kicked vigorously, and a pain rippled through her stomach. Had her daughter registered her fear?

He didn't acknowledge her plea by so much as a flicker of his eyes as he swung the sword.

Erin closed her eyes and prayed that just once, one of her visions would be wrong, and this man would have nothing to do with her daughter's future when she was reborn. As the blade slashed through her neck, leaving a fiery trail of pain, she called out Nicholas's name without sound. Her eyes snapped open as pain flooded her, and her last sight was of Koss standing before her with a smile of dark joy on his face as he licked her blood from the blade of his sword before offering it to Nina to cleanse.

## Chapter Thirteen

Emily awoke to find her hands bound behind her back. She was on her knees, and her upper body had slumped forward. Her forehead rested against something hard. Nausea churned in her stomach, caused by fear and heightened by the lingering emotions from the memories. She shuddered.

"Emily?"

She turned her head at the sound of her name whispered close to her ear. Her eyes widened when she saw Michael beside her, bound in the same fashion. "Where are we? What's happened?"

Michael scowled. "They burst into the rectory this evening and overpowered me. I didn't stand a chance." He shook his head. "I fear for Nicholas."

As he spoke, Emily lifted her head and realized she had been propped against the chancel railing. The kneeler pads cushioned her knees, and she frowned at the thought of Koss making her and Michael comfortable. It seemed ominous. "Are we at your church?"

“Yes, St. Peter’s.” He closed his eyes. “It’s no longer a sanctuary, I fear.”

She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat. “What will they do to us?”

He shrugged awkwardly. “I haven’t had the courage to contemplate the thought.”

His fear fed her own, and she closed her eyes, struggling to regain a modicum of control. She was less than successful, because she couldn’t hold back a yelp of alarm when someone approached her right side and knelt beside her.

“Open your eyes and look at me.” His voice was firm, with a hint of steel that dared her to refuse his command.

With a whimper, Emily turned her head to meet Koss’s disturbing gaze. She licked her lips. “Why are you doing this?” *He has no pity for anyone*, she reminded herself, remembering what he had done to her as Erin when she was pregnant. “What do you want with us?”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “You know the answer to that.”

“You want to hu-hurt Nicholas,” she forced herself to say, having the irrational fear that voicing the words would give them power.

“Yes.” His stark answer lacked emotion. “Tonight, we play.”

She leaned her head against the chancel railing again, breaking eye contact. “Why do you hate him so?”

He laughed, but the sound held no amusement. “I don’t hate him. I love Nicholas.”

She stiffened when Koss’s hands stroked her hair. She struggled to turn away when he cupped her chin in one of his large hands. “Please.”

“I love him as much as he surely loves you, sweet Emily.” As he spoke, his hand twisted her head toward him with unrelenting pressure. His gaze was dark with desire. “I can hardly fault his taste, can I?”

She twisted her head, crying out with pain as he tightened his grip enough to force her tongue against her fangs and cause her mouth to flood with her own blood. “What do you want from me?” His grip made it difficult to speak at all and distorted her words.

“Very little.” He loosened his hold and stroked his finger down her cheek. “I only want to use you to cause him pain.”

“Why?” It didn’t make sense. From everything she had learned about Koss, she had thought he burned with hatred for Nicholas. Yet, he claimed to love him. Why did he insist on torturing Nicholas?

“It is my right.”

She shook her head as he read her thoughts, wondering how she could block him out.

He laughed. “You can’t.”

I can try. She winced as his fingers reflexively tightened. "Can't you just leave him alone?"

Koss blinked, and his eyes clouded. He hesitated, but finally shook his head. "No. Of all who belong to me, none have been so well loved as Nicholas." His brow furrowed, and a hint of anger crept into his eyes. "None has betrayed me as he did. He has to be punished."

"Hasn't it been long enough?" Michael interjected angrily. "You've tortured him for nearly eight hundred years."

Koss shrugged as he looked at the priest. "It can never be enough. It won't cease until he returns to me." His eyes narrowed as his gaze shifted back to Emily. "I could even share him with you, if he would come home where he belongs." He leaned closer, pressing his lips to her ear. "He could share you too."

The puckered flesh of his scar touched her cheek, causing her to squirm away. Emily stiffened as Koss nipped her earlobe. "Don't touch me."

"Just think of it. One big, happy family, my dear." His chuckle was a low, oily sound that slithered down her spine. "You're beautiful. Erin had a fey, childlike quality about her, but not you." Koss's other hand cupped her breast, and he pinched forcefully. "Your beauty is ageless." He sniggered. "Of course, it will never mature now, will it?"

She closed her eyes and tried to endure his assault on her body and senses, knowing he wouldn't stop until he had finished. She was determined to ignore him, though bile burned a path up her throat as her mind insisted on plying her with disturbing images of the three of them in various passionate embraces, surely transmitted from Koss's mind to hers.

She cried out when Koss jerked her to her feet as he stood up. Despite her vow to block him out, she asked, "What are you doing?" There was a sharp edge of panic to her voice.

He lifted and carried her to the communion table, where the woman was splashing holy water on the candles burning there. Once she extinguished them, she swept her arm across the altar and knocked everything to the floor.

Emily knew there was more to the woman's actions than a hatred of religious symbols. She screamed and kicked out with her feet as Koss dropped her onto the wet slab.

"It's time to consecrate the altar, dear Emily." Koss licked his lips. "It's overdue for a virgin sacrifice."

"No," she screamed as loudly as she could, praying someone on the street would hear her and burst into the church to investigate.

The woman laughed. "Make all the noise you want. Koss has shielded this place. Your precious Nicholas will be lucky to break through the barrier in time to save your life, let alone your innocence."

"Nina," he snapped. "You speak too freely."

She bowed her head and backed away. Her posture suggested she was chastened, but her eyes glowed with excitement. She watched avidly as Koss tore open Emily's shirt.

"How cozy, wearing your lover's shirt." Koss quirked a brow. "But then, he isn't your lover yet, is he? How does he find the willpower to resist your nubile young body?" He chuckled.

If she had thought it would do any good, Emily would have pleaded for him not to touch her, but knew he had no pity. The best she could do was stoically endure whatever he did to her, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

It was easier to think than do when he ripped off her bra, causing the elastic to bite into her skin before it broke. She took a deep breath and tried to pretend his hands didn't cup her breasts and twist her nipples viciously. *It won't be so bad*, she repeated repeatedly to herself. Nicholas would arrive in time to save her.

If he didn't?

She refused to let her thoughts go down the road. She would survive whatever he did to her.

An image of Koss licking the blood from the sword he used to murder Erin insisted on invading her mind, and she whimpered quietly.

She took a deep breath, trying to console herself with the thought of Nicholas not resting until he found her again. Dying now would only mean a temporary separation. That thought didn't bring her much comfort as Koss bent his head to lick her nipple.

"Don't be a robot. Cry for me, Emily." His fang penetrated the sensitive peak. "Let Nicholas hear your pain."

Emily gritted her teeth and shook her head. She closed her eyes and focused on the pain of lying on her bound arms, enabling her to block out the agony of what he did to her breasts. She struggled to recall happy memories of her marriage to Nicholas when she was Erin. She must have slipped away, because when she opened her eyes again, her pants were off, though she still wore her underwear. She didn't know what had brought her back to awareness until she heard the steady hum of Michael repeating a prayer. Shame burned in her when she realized the holy man would bear witness to her defilement.

"Koss!"

Her eyes widened at the sound of Nicholas's voice thundering from the nave and realized his presence was what had brought her back to the present. She made a low sound of relief in her throat, earning a cuffing from Koss for her optimism.

He pressed his face against hers, and his expression was one of rage. "Do you think he can save you? He can only do what I allow him to."

"You're wrong." Emily forced herself to meet his gaze without flinching. She expected to see evidence of insanity, but he appeared collected and rational. She didn't give voice to her terror, but it was more frightening to realize he acted of his own volition, and no demons of his mind controlled him.

He didn't bother to refute her as he stood up, withdrawing from her. He appeared jovial when he turned to Nicholas. "Welcome to our gathering, dear Nicholas." He swept out his arms to encompass those assembled around him. "We've been waiting for you."

"Emily?" Nicholas's voice shook with anger, but there seemed to be a thread of fear underlying it. "Are you hurt?"

“No.”

“Michael?”

“I’m fine, boy.”

Nicholas nodded, and he walked toward them. He moved with his innate grace, but there was a predatory gleam in his eyes, and he seemed to have the pent-up tension of a pacing tiger trapped in a cage. He stopped a few feet from Koss, facing him with his head held high. His dark eyes burned with rage. “This ends tonight, Koss.”

Koss shook his head. “No. It never ends. Not until you return to me. Tonight is just a game.” He licked his lip, and he glanced briefly at Emily. “You’ve interrupted the pre-game show, but the main event awaits.”

Nicholas stiffened. “What is it you want from me?”

“You know the answer to that. Accept your place.”

He tossed his head, causing his ponytail to swing freely. “I belong to no one, and I won’t be your slave.”

“Then be my equal.” There was almost a hint of pleading in his voice.

Emily frowned as she eased into a sitting position. She froze when she felt the sharp tip of a blade against her throat. Her eyes widened as she locked eyes with Nina.

Nicholas crossed his arms. “Release them. This is between us.”

Koss seemed to hesitate. “Will you come back to me?”

“No. Never.”

His shoulders sagged, and he shook his head. “If you won’t give me what I want, I can’t relent. They remain in my possession.”

Nicholas’s eyes narrowed as they rested briefly on his father before moving to Emily.

She gasped at the pain she saw reflected there, sensing he was close to giving in to whatever Koss wanted of him. “No,” she mouthed, wincing when Nina jabbed her with the point of the dagger. Blood trickled down her neck, and the wound burned like fire.

“You don’t own any of us, Koss. Michael is free, as is Emily.” His words held special significance when he met her eyes and said, “She has no master.”

Koss threw back his head and laughed. “How naïve you are, Nicholas. It was one of your most endearing qualities.” His voice hardened. “I have only to utter one word, and they both die.” With a flick of his wrist, the dark-haired man walked to Michael, pressing a sword against the base of his brain where it met the spinal column. “Shall I paralyze the man you hold in such esteem? Just a flick of Juarez’s wrist would be enough to mangle the cord. The injury might be permanent for as long as he remained alive...however long that might be,” he added silkily.



Nicholas held his silence, but his eyes were wide with apprehension.

Koss sighed. "Very well. I had forgotten how little joy you take in games, unless of your own devising," he said with evident bitterness, before shrugging. "We shall dispense with the pleasantries. Here are the terms of the game."

Emily saw Nicholas stiffen, as did Michael. She was aware of her own sharply indrawn breath and the fear that swept through her.

"You will choose one who may leave with you tonight." Koss glanced at the priest, and then met Emily's eyes. He smiled unpleasantly. "The other will be my possession, to use as I see fit." He turned back to Nicholas. "I will toy with them until their cries of agony cease to amuse me. Then I will kill whomever you leave behind."

Nicholas shook his head. "I won't choose."

Koss shrugged. "In that case, they'll both die now. Nina, Juarez, kill them."

Emily cried out as Nina nicked her again with the dagger. She heard Michael's stifled cry, but was unable to turn to look at him.

"Wait," Nicholas demanded. "Fine, I'll choose."

Koss chuckled. "I thought you would see it my way. Who shall be my plaything? Shall I torture the priest until he renounces his god?" He paused, turning once more to eye Emily. "Or shall I defile your love in a thousand different ways? I'll have her begging for me by the time I'm finished." His voice dropped to a husky whisper. "She'll die from the pleasure and the pain."

Nicholas looked ill, and there was the sheen of sweat on his forehead. "I pick myself."

Koss frowned. "What?"

"I choose to let Emily and Michael leave, and I'll take their place. You can torture me to death, and I won't fight you."

The other man flinched. "Unacceptable. You must choose the priest or the girl."

"Nicholas."

Emily twisted her neck, deepening the cut from the dagger, to look at Michael. Something in his tone alerted her to what he planned. She wanted to plead with him, but her tongue remained frozen.

Koss and Nicholas eyed him just as intently. "You can't volunteer, old man," Koss said.

"You didn't choose this. Remember that, son." With a lunge, Michael threw himself back on the sword pressing against his spinal column. His momentum caused the sword to penetrate all the way through his throat, severing his spinal column instantly. Death, rather than paralysis, was the outcome of his actions. His body slumped forward, held up only by Juarez's hold on the sword.

Koss shouted his anger as he rushed toward the priest, wrenching the sword from Juarez and jerking it from the priest's body. He shook Michael, but there was no life remaining in the body. He tossed aside

the corpse and turned his baleful glare on Emily. "That wasn't in the rules, Nicholas. You'll lose them both now." He turned back to him. "You'll watch it all, as I kill her slowly."

Nicholas lunged forward. "I'll never let you touch her."

"How will you stop me?" He jerked Nicholas against him. "You aren't strong enough, and she is too new, too weak, to help you. You're alone."

"That's not quite true," Nicholas said. As he spoke, an arrow fired from the balcony, penetrating Juarez's heart. He pulled away from Koss's hold as his minion fell to the floor of the church.

Emily pushed away from Nina with a burst of strength. To her surprise, the woman didn't try to restrain her. Instead, she rushed to her fallen companion and turned him over. A wail of anguish broke from her. "He's dead, Koss."

Koss shook his head. "How can that be? It was only an arrow."

"Tipped with the venom of the beaked sea snake," a voice said from the shadows of the balcony. "A single drop is lethal to humans. With the amount saturated into that arrow, his lungs seized, and he suffocated instantly."

Nina stiffened at the voice, as did Koss. Emily didn't pause to seek him out. She coaxed a burst of speed from her shaking legs and sought the safety of Nicholas's side. She was past Koss before he realized she had slipped away.

"I have plenty more," the voice said calmly. "Your heart is in my sights, Koss."

Emily's eyes widened when she realized Koss was frightened, although he made a good show of hiding his fear behind bravado. "Brannon, show yourself, and I might let you live to walk away."

"I don't think so. I'll remain right where I am until Nicholas and Emily have fled to safety."

Emily realized Nicholas was tugging on her bound arms and fell into step with him. Koss seemed to have trouble splitting his attention between them and the threat in the balcony. "You'll never leave here alive, dhampir," he hissed. "Already, Chadwick hunts you. He will find you."

The laugh that came from the shadows caused Emily to pause in mid-step. She shivered at the cruel sound, wondering if this person really was on their side. A gasp escaped her when a bundle fell from the balcony and landed with a thud on the tile floor. She barely bit back a scream when she realized it was the body of the blond-haired man.

"Two down..." The voice trailed off.

Koss hurried forward, pulling Nina from the floor and pressing her against him. "Now what will you do? Will you murder your wife to kill me too?"

Emily missed the conclusion of the melodrama as Nicholas lifted her over his shoulder and ran from the church. As he moved, he tore loose the ropes around her wrist, freeing her arms. He didn't stop running until they were at the Forester, and he put her inside with haste rather than gentleness. Then he was behind the wheel quickly, and they sped away from the church.

She turned her head to look at him, alarmed by his color and the suppressed tears in his eyes. She reached out to touch his leg. “Nicholas—”

“Not now,” he snapped. As he spoke, he briefly squeezed her hand. His voice cracked when he spoke again. “I can’t talk...not yet. Let me get through this first.”

Emily held his hand in a tight grip and subsided into silence. She could sense the low hum of his grief in the back of her mind and knew he was close to losing control. She was shaky as well, and tears burned at the back of her eyes. She turned to stare out her window at the night, wondering if it could possibly match the blackness in Koss’s soul. Upon remembering his touch, she shivered.

Nicholas’s fingers tightened gently. “You’re safe now.”

She bit back the instinctive question at the tip of her tongue: For how long? Instead, Emily put her head against the window, allowing the cool condensation on the glass to seep into her flushed cheeks.

How could she have ever imagined Nicholas was evil? He had the potential for evil, and he wasn’t a saint, but he could never match the malevolence in Koss. She shivered again, unable to rid her mind of the images of the night. She bit back a cry when the sounds of the three devouring Tremont replayed through her mind. Did Nicholas know? She opened her mouth to ask.

“I found him,” he said before she could speak. “I arrived at the warehouse to find everything in order. Immediately, I realized he had tricked me. On my way back to the apartment, I called Brannon.” He took a deep breath. “There wasn’t much left of Tremont when we found him.”

She licked her lips, trying to keep her mind from supplying probable images of his battered body. “What did you do with him?” Nicholas was silent for so long she began to wonder if he had heard her question. She wondered if she should ask again, or was his silence his answer? Was it better not to know?

“There wasn’t a lot of time, Emily. We won’t be returning to the apartment any time soon, if ever. I couldn’t leave the evidence there...” He trailed off, and a tear streaked down his cheek. “He deserved better.”

She stroked his hand with her thumb.

“I put him in the furnace in the basement, along with the rags we used to wipe off the blood Koss used to leave his message.” His voice turned icy. “He wrote ‘St. Peter’s’ on the wallpaper with Tremont’s blood, using a little heart in place of the apostrophe.” His voice broke again, and he drifted back into silence.

She closed her eyes, stuffing her fist in her mouth to avoid giving voice to her anger and pain. The thought of Tremont being disposed of in such a fashion nauseated her, as did the image of words written in blood on the walls. She was relieved they wouldn’t be returning to the apartment, but where would they go?

“A hotel for now. I’ve arranged to meet up with Brannon at the DoubleTree Guest Suites. We’re near there now.” Nicholas turned onto Broadway. “Tomorrow, we fly to England. Vallsade Manor is the only place where I can hope to keep you safe.”

“He doesn’t want me,” she said softly. “It’s you he’s after.”

Nicholas nodded once, but didn't respond as he merged with traffic. After a few blocks, he pulled into a parking garage attached to the hotel, where he took a ticket from the attendant and drove up to the third floor to find a space.

When he shut off the engine, Emily said, "I can't go in there."

"Why not?"

She waved a hand at the shirt with the ruined buttons and her missing pants, bra, and shoes. "Someone's going to notice I'm wearing a man's shirt with all the buttons ripped off and nothing else except panties. They won't let me in a nice place like this."

Nicholas nodded. "You're right." He slid out of the Forester. "Come on."

She lifted a brow. "But—"

"Emily, I'll make sure everyone who looks at you sees a respectably dressed young woman. We don't have any clothes for you, so there's no other solution."

She shook her head, bunching the material of Nicholas's shirt closer to her. "No."

He sighed. "I promise you no one will see how you look. Please trust me."

She wanted to continue to resist, but could see his tenuous control was close to slipping. He was pale and trembling. Tears shone in his eyes. They needed to get inside where it was somewhat safe. She hoped he could maintain his focus well enough to keep her clothed in public. She slid out of the SUV and joined Nicholas, trying to pretend she wore an elegant evening gown, keeping her head held high as she took his arm to walk with him to the elevator.

Her confidence faltered when they entered the elegant foyer and found several guests still milling around. There was a short line, and she stood stiffly beside Nicholas, keeping her eyes averted from everyone. She saw an old man eyeing her from the corner of her eye, but when she looked at him directly and frowned, he looked away.

The line moved quickly, and Nicholas was soon filling out a registration card while the clerk processed his credit card and examined his driver's license photo.

She smiled at him, and her expression was a bit more than friendly, Emily thought sourly. The twinge of jealously surprised her, and she shifted uncomfortably.

"We would like a three-bedroom suite," he said as he signed the card.

"I'm sorry, but we only have two-bedroom suites available," she glanced down at the card and looked up, brightening her smile another kilowatt or so, "Mr. Vallsade. Will that be acceptable?"

He ran a hand through his hair and nodded. "Yeah, I guess. Someone will be joining us. I'd like to leave a key card here at the desk for him."

She nodded and lifted a pen. She held it as if Nicholas was about to spout the meaning of life. "May I have his name?"

“Brannon Vallsade.”

Emily’s eyes widened at the name, and she shot a look at Nicholas. He wasn’t paying attention as he scooped up the electronic card the clerk slid to him, along with his driver’s license and credit card.

“Have a pleasant stay, Mr. Vallsade.” Her simpering tone disappeared when she glanced at Emily. “Ma’am.”

Emily walked with Nicholas to the lift, barely able to restrain her questions until they were safely ensconced in the metal car and the door had closed behind them. “Who is Brannon Vallsade?”

“The man who saved us,” he said with apparent weariness. He leaned against the padded wall and closed his eyes.

“But the last name... Vallsade isn’t common.”

“No, it isn’t.” He rubbed his eyes, and then looked at her. “He’s my nephew.”

She frowned, trying to puzzle that out. “He’s a vampire?”

“Dhampir.” Nicholas didn’t say anything else as the elevator opened on the third floor. He took her hand and led her to their suite, not speaking as he opened the door and gestured for her to precede him.

“What’s a dhampir?” she asked as soon as he dropped the card on the spindly-legged entryway table.

“The product of a human-vampire coupling. Usually male offspring, and they’re particularly adept at hunting vampires. Since they have only one vampire parent, dhampirs are still subject to aging, albeit at a much slower rate. Whether or not they have full vampire gifts depends on the strength of the vampire parent, how long the dhampir lives and whether they choose to hone their abilities.”

Emily shook her head, tuning out most of his explanation while following Nicholas into the suite. She paused briefly to eye the sitting room decorated in tones of peach and beige with the large fireplace reached by walking down a few steps. Two doors led off opposite ends of the room. Her mind remained focused on only one thing he had said. “But how can he be your nephew?”

“He was William’s son.”

She blinked. “Did William have a relationship with a vampire?”

Nicholas paused by the phone, but looked at her before lifting the handset. “No. William was a vampire.”

“But how—”

He held a finger to his lips and lifted the phone. He spoke quickly, ordering rare steaks and baked potatoes from room service, pausing to ask Emily if she wanted anything different. She shook her head and waited impatiently for him to hang up. As soon as he had, she asked, “How could he be a vampire? I don’t understand.”

He sighed deeply and took a seat on the peach sofa. “Koss has been torturing me since shortly after he turned me, Emily. When I returned to marry you... Emma, he followed me, although I didn’t realize it

then. He waited until William arrived home and told him I had caused Emma's death—and I had." He stared off into space, seemingly lost in thought. It took him a moment to continue. "He offered to change William so he could reap his vengeance for all eternity, prolonging it. My brother was a foolish hothead, and he accepted Koss's bargain."

She responded to his haunted gaze and sat beside him on the couch, putting her head on his shoulder. "What happened?"

"William pursued a campaign of revenge against me for far too many centuries. In the end, I was forced to destroy him."

She gasped. "Did Brannon hate you for killing his father?"

Nicholas snorted. "Hardly. William never acknowledged his existence. His mother had the misfortune of surviving being William's sustenance and ended up with a child she didn't want."

"What happened?"

"Brannon fended for himself until he was eleven, living in Marseilles. Then he tracked down his father, who turned him away. It happened William had followed me to Paris where I had settled for a time, and the boy saw us together when my brother made his move. He approached me, realizing I resembled his father."

She stroked his leg. "You took him in, didn't you?"

He nodded, not saying anything else for a long moment. "It was nice not to be alone," he finally said. A knock at the door signaled the arrival of room service, and he got to his feet. "We need to eat."

She nodded.

He stared down at her. "I mean feed, Emily. It's been too long since we had blood."

Her mouth parted. "You mean the server?"

He nodded. "You can't take too much. We can't have the boy die."

She stood up and followed him to the door, hanging back a few feet as he opened the door to admit the server.

The boy nodded at her as he rolled in the tray. "Where would you like it, sir?"

"By the window is fine," Nicholas said. As the boy turned his back to fold out the leaves of the tray, he lunged forward and pinned him in his arms. Before the boy could cry out, he spun him around and stared into his eyes. "You won't make a sound."

The kid's face went slack, and he nodded as if in a daze. He didn't make any noise as Nicholas buried his face in his throat and drank for a couple of minutes. He did emit a small whimper when Nicholas raised his head, and the boy saw his own blood on his chin.

"Shh," Nicholas said. He waved Emily over, passing her the boy. "Remember to focus on making it pleasurable for him."

She nodded, sinking her fangs into the holes Nicholas had created. She kept her thoughts on erotic images as she fed from the server, finding her thoughts increasingly sensual as his hot blood flowed into her mouth. Her hunger seemed to intensify rather than slacken, and she could feel herself losing control. With a cry, she thrust him away so hard he fell to the floor. She rushed into the sitting room, knowing she had to escape the sight of his open wound lest she jump on him and drain him completely. Convulsions shook her body, and her heart raced. She was vaguely aware of Nicholas speaking softly to the boy before closing the door behind him.

By the time he joined her in the sitting room, she had regained a semblance of control.

“You did better. You were able to stop yourself.”

She looked up, meeting his eyes. “I won’t always be able to.”

He shook his head. “No, you won’t. It’s inevitable you’ll kill sometimes. It’s our nature.”

She bit back protests about it not being her nature. She knew it was. It didn’t matter that she hadn’t chosen it. She still had to deal with the bloodlust and compulsion to take life.

“Are you hungry?”

She shook her head, unable to imagine eating the rare steak while mental pictures of Tremont still flashed through her mind.

“Neither am I.” He sounded strained. “You should get some sleep. Brannon will need the other room, so I’ll take the couch.”

She glanced at the short sofa and then at his long frame. “I’ll take the couch.”

He shook his head. “No. I insist—”

She rolled her eyes. “Chivalry’s dead. Practicality’s in. It makes sense for me to take the couch. I’m shorter—”

His mouth tightened. “No.”

She shrugged, gathering her nerve. “Fine, we’ll both share the bed. We’re adults.”

He hesitated before nodding. “Okay. You’re safe from my desires tonight.” His mouth trembled. “I’ve never felt less like making love.”

Emily rushed to Nicholas, embracing him, as his first sobs broke free. He didn’t attempt to hide his emotions or push her away. Instead, he drew her closer and buried his face in her hair. His body shook with the force of his emotions. He cried without sound, but she still heard his pain. She could feel it in her mind, and soon tears rushed from her eyes as well.

They collapsed together in a heap on the floor. Emily cradled Nicholas’s head against her chest as tears dripped down her cheeks. She stroked his disheveled hair and murmured soothing words, rocking him gently. He still didn’t speak, but his emotions transmitted to her, battering against the pathetic barrier she tried to erect. She soon couldn’t tell where his feelings ended and hers began. She had never experienced

anything like it and briefly wondered what it would be like to share such a connection when the feelings were happy.

They might have stayed that way for minutes or hours. She lost all track of time. They probably wouldn't have moved from the floor of the hotel room if the sound of the door opening hadn't roused them.

Nicholas pulled away from her, and Emily was physically bereft. Her hands shook as she wiped her cheeks and tried to restore a bit of order to her appearance. She remembered her state of undress and marveled that it hadn't occurred to her while she held Nicholas in her arms.

She hastily covered her exposed breasts as she heard soft footfalls. She started to get to her feet as Brannon joined them, but froze when she saw him. He was tall and muscular, wearing all black. Large sunglasses covered his eyes, even at night. He had blond hair.

She knew him.

He was the FBI agent who had chased her when she returned to Huxley after fleeing Nicholas. She shot a fearful look at him before switching her gaze to Nicholas. She wondered if her confusion showed.

"Let me explain—"

She glared at him as the explanation presented itself. He had completely manipulated her, right from the beginning. And she hadn't seen it, until now. She didn't know which one she was angrier with as she got to her feet and stormed from the sitting room—Nicholas for twisting her reality, or herself for not thinking things through and examining aspects below the surface.

## Chapter Fourteen

Nicholas followed her. She attempted to slam the door of the bedroom on his foot, but he wedged his fingers inside and pushed it open with little effort. She took a step back, releasing her weight so quickly he stumbled inside, thrown off-balance. Her hands found purchase on her hips as she confronted him. "Damn you. You've done nothing but manipulate me since the minute you kidnapped me."

He closed the door before turning to her. His shoulders were slumped, and he nodded. "I know."

She lifted a brow, having expected an argument or justifications. "That's all you have to say?"

"I owe you an apology. From the moment I found you again, I've tried to have things my own way." He ran a hand through his hair. "I was so desperate..." He trailed off. "As you must have figured out by now, I sent Brannon to Huxley. He wasn't thrilled at the idea, but helped me."

"Oh, so he's innocent in this deception?" She tossed her hair and abruptly remembered her bared breasts when his eyes darted low before returning to her face. She clasped the shirt together, still glaring at him. "How much of it was real?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Your friend's funeral, of course. The vampire paranoia was real. Brannon has a phenomenal well of psychic powers. Manipulating an entire town was fairly easy for him."



She swallowed back the tears pricking her eyes. "I see. So I can't go home because of him."

He was silent for a long moment, and then his shoulders slumped further. "He can fix it all. He'll be able to make the townspeople forget about the vampire paranoia. In fact, he can make them forget you were ever gone."

Her eyes widened. "You mean, I can go home?"

He nodded, and his eyes seemed to darken before he closed his lids. "As soon as it's safe to do so, I promise I'll take you home. Koss won't leave you alone right now, but once I've dealt with him, I'll let you get back to your life without me."

She shook her head, unable to believe his words. "So I can pretend like nothing happened?" She didn't like the screech in her tone, but wasn't able to regain full control. "Never mind I'm a fucking vampire." She saw him flinch, but pressed on. "Never mind I have to kill people to live. How am I supposed to hide that? How can I go back to my life?"

He sighed. "It won't be the same, but at least you'll be home. I wish I could undo everything I've done to you, but I can't. All I can do is make amends by fixing what I can. Once you're safe, I swear to you I'll never bother you again."

She glared at the noble tilt of his chin, not missing the faint trembling of his lips. She knew now wasn't the time for a confrontation, but couldn't seem to stop herself from pressing on. "There you go again, making all my decisions. You're such an arrogant pig. I'm not a child, Nicholas."

His eyes widened. "I thought that's what you'd want."

"How about you ask me what I want...just once," she said with exasperation.

He took a step back, and a frown marred his features. "Don't you want to go home?"

She opened her mouth, but no answer emerged. She stared at him. Her brow furrowed, and she bit her lower lip, wincing as her fang pierced the swollen flesh. She sighed.

"Emily?" There was a faint shadow of hope in his eyes, but it disappeared quickly, as if he made a conscious effort to will it away. "What do you want?"

She still didn't answer. Earlier, she had told him she didn't want him to send her away, but that was before she realized she could go home. A tear streaked down her cheek as she imagined sleeping in her own bed, waking to the smell of Sunday breakfast wafting up the stairs, studying for the term's finals, fighting with her little brother...

Never seeing Nicholas again.

She drew in a harsh breath. "I don't know," she whispered.

His frown deepened. "What?"

Emily turned away from him. "I don't know what I want. I have to think about it. Let's just go to bed, okay? I'm exhausted, and now really isn't the time for this."

He nodded and walked to the door. “Good night.”

She sighed heavily and turned around. “Where are you going?”

He turned partially to face her. “I’m going to bed. The couch…”

She rolled her eyes. “I thought we had settled that.”

He hesitated. “But what about—”

“I don’t want to think about it right now.” She brushed tangled strands of hair off her forehead. “I don’t want to think about anything right now. Nor do I want to be alone.”

He nodded. “Very well. Let me speak with Brannon, and I’ll join you shortly.”

“I’ll take a shower.” Emily watched him go, wondering at the odd dart of pain near her heart. She should be furious with him, not inviting him to share her bed. She went into the bathroom, a mass of confusion. She was angry, but also remembered their connection in the sitting room, the way he had shared his grief, and the way their emotions entwined. She didn’t know how she should feel after an experience like that.

Perhaps the simplest way to deal with her emotions tonight was to ignore them all. She nodded her head emphatically as she dropped Nicholas’s ruined shirt on the floor and started the shower. Yes, that was the right course of action to take. Maybe tomorrow, once the terror of the evening faded, she would be able to focus on what she had learned tonight. Maybe she could come to terms with her conflicting emotions and decide if she wanted Nicholas out of her life forever.

She stepped under the stinging spray, remembering with some nostalgia how easy that decision would have been just a few days ago. She wouldn’t have hesitated to return home when he first changed her. She would have gladly stayed in Huxley if she hadn’t returned to find herself a murder suspect. It hadn’t been nearly so complicated before she began falling in love with him.

She halted in the act of reaching for a sample bottle of shampoo, shaking her head, trying to dispel the disturbing thought, but it refused to leave her alone. With a weary shrug, she lifted the shampoo and stuck her head under the stream of water. It was too much effort to sort through her feelings tonight, and it wasn’t as if she could make herself fall out of love with him by her thoughts alone, if she had begun to slip down that precipice.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she returned to the bedroom, she found Nicholas in bed waiting for her. The covers rested around his waist, and his bare chest caused her to catch her breath. She wondered what he wore under the blanket, if anything. Her mouth got dry just thinking about that. Emily gestured at the bathrobe she had wrapped herself in. “Um, can you turn your head or something? I can’t sleep in this.”

“The hotel provides pajamas.” He gestured to a set lying at the foot of the bed on her side. He turned over on his side with his face averted.

Emily scooped up the pajamas and returned to the bathroom. She changed quickly and draped the damp robe over the hook on the back of the door, ignoring a twinge of nerves as she returned to the bedroom. What would it be like to sleep with Nicholas? Would he try to make love with her? She scowled, looking forward to setting him straight on that idea.

She couldn't help a small frown when she climbed into her side of the bed and found his back still to her. She waited for him to turn around and take her in his arms, but he didn't. Cautiously, she scooted a bit closer, until her hand brushed against his back.

"Good night." He sounded distant. He didn't turn to her after he extinguished the lamp on his side of the bed.

Emily followed suit before attempting to settle into a comfortable position. Nicholas had taken the side of the bed she always slept on, and she glared at his back. Well, he certainly was comfortable with the arrangement. He hadn't even turned to look at her.

A sound at the window caused her heartbeat to accelerate and forced her thoughts from her irritation. She turned to look, but saw nothing. She touched Nicholas's back. "What happens if Koss finds us here?"

He didn't speak for a long moment. When he did, he gave a half-answer. "Brannon and I have created a strong shield to hide our presence. He shouldn't be able to detect us here."

"But if he does?"

His silence filled the room. It grew oppressive before he said, "I'll die to protect you."

She shivered, knowing what he didn't say told her more than what he had. She couldn't quite choke back a sob, but pressed her fist against her mouth to muffle it.

He heard anyway and turned around, taking her into his arms. "Don't be afraid. Koss has a pattern. He'll typically strike, doing as much damage as possible, and then retreat for a time. Just when I think he's finally died or decided to leave me alone, he appears again."

"How long had it been since you last saw him?" Her voice was thick with tears, and she rubbed her cheek against his bare chest. She could feel the cotton of his pajama bottoms against her feet when she experimentally tested his leg.

"I hadn't seen Koss since he took you from me last time." His voice broke. "I returned home to find you and the babe dead. He and his entourage had waited."

She squeezed her eyes shut at his words.

"They restrained me, watching while Koss toyed with me for a while. He described Erin's death in detail, including how William took our baby..." Nicholas's voice was raspy, indicating he held back tears. "He told me it was my fault for resisting..." He trailed into silence, and it was long moment before he spoke again. "Then he left, but William stayed behind."

Her eyes popped open at the second mention of his brother's name. She concentrated, remembering the man who had remained in shadows during Koss's murder of Erin. It must have been his brother. Her hand found his under the covers, and she squeezed it. "What happened?"

"He was an adept pupil. Koss had trained him well in the art of pain. William spent several hours torturing me with fire, holy water, and a whip he soaked in more holy water." Nicholas expelled a harsh breath. "I lost the last remnants of my faith that night."

She wondered how much of his disillusionment had come from losing her again, and how much had been self-preservation to avoid the brunt of the pain from William's torture.

"He didn't expect me to get free. He definitely didn't expect me to be stronger than he was. I don't think he had Koss's permission to kill me, but he tried anyway." His voice grew thick, as if he was suppressing tears. "What kept me fighting was knowing what they had done to you and our daughter. I knew I had to find you again. I had to live, so I killed him."

His tone had been neutral, but Emily knew it must have cost him dearly to murder his own brother, even under those circumstances. She scooted closer to him, laying her cheek on his shoulder. She felt the mass of scars there, stroking it with her fingers. "William?"

"Yes." He pulled her closer. "Rest now, beloved. Try to clear your mind of all these thoughts."

Emily closed her eyes and curled against him. Despite the exhaustion she felt in every cell of her body, she didn't see how either of them would be able to sleep, but could tell he didn't feel like speaking. What would he say if he did? Would he explain why Koss wanted him? Would he tell her about his father and how he grieved to have lost him again? Would they form that same connection they'd had earlier? She sighed, not knowing what she wanted, aside from an excuse to evade sleep.

Her thoughts drifted, and she found herself remembering backyard BBQs, summer nights spent in her tree house, her first kiss in ninth grade and shared secrets with Sara. Inevitably, although she had decided not to think about it tonight, her thoughts turned to the choice Nicholas had offered her. Did she want to go home, or was her place with him now? Maybe she didn't belong anywhere anymore.

A part of her longed to return to her old life, to attempt to recapture those moments, but she knew that wasn't possible. She had outgrown the tree house. Next year, she would be living in a dorm in the city, so there would be precious few days at home for backyard picnics. She could never have back that first kiss, and after Nicholas had kissed her, she didn't know if she would want another man to anyway. And there was no way to see Sara again. Her friend was gone forever, murdered at the hands of the man snoring softly next to her.

She tilted her head to look at his face in profile. Even in sleep, his face still bore marks of pain, and he groaned softly now and then. The night had followed him into his dreams.

She tried to view him harshly, forcing herself to imagine him murdering Sara. She closed her eyes, concentrating on supplying all the details. Even when she was convinced she had captured the incident in complete Technicolor gore, she wasn't able to summon more than a mixture of anger and pain.

He was a murderer, but so was she. It was their nature. She had reveled in killing those people in the alley, who had surely been someone's best friends, once upon a time. She hadn't even thought about their lives or the people affected by their deaths, such as their disabled son.

Whenever she fed from someone, she would always have to fight the urge to kill her victim. He had probably murdered countless people in eight hundred years, but how many would she have killed in that time? How many would she kill in her future?

Could her family accept her if they knew what she had become? Did she have a place at home? Could she hide what she had become? What if she turned against someone she knew, someone she loved? Her parents or her brother, even.

She whimpered, trying to convince herself that couldn't happen, but unable to assuage the worry. In the grip of hunger, she might do anything to anyone. Even if it weren't a member of her family, would they stand behind her if she murdered someone in their small community?

Would she ever find anyone who could understand her struggle other than the man beside her? He wouldn't revile her for what she was, because he had created her. He was the same as she was. She would find acceptance with him.

She sighed, not knowing if that was enough. Maybe she would be better off leaving everything behind. She could move somewhere where no one knew her and start over. It would have to be a big city to hide her lapses more easily. She would have to remain aloof from everyone. No one would be able to get close to her, including men, and she would have pushed away Nicholas.

Emily firmed her mouth, doing her best to rid herself of the thoughts weighing on her mind. She couldn't make a firm decision tonight. It did no good to dwell on maybes. She closed her eyes and tried to will herself to sleep. To her surprise, she felt consciousness slipping from her grasp within a few short minutes.

1214, Arsuf (the Holy Land)

Emily knew she was dreaming, but it didn't feel the same as her previous memory-dreams. She didn't seem to fit, and there was a sense of confusion as to where she was. At first, she assumed it was just a regular dream, with no significance, before realizing she was on a battlefield. She lifted her head to examine the area, frowning when she saw an ocean of sand surrounding her.

Amid the sand was the carnage of battle. Hundreds of men—English, French and Middle Eastern—lay side by side, unified in death as they had not been in life. Scattered among the dead and dying were the horses. Some men and animals still cried out their anguish with pitiful screams and neighs, but most had fallen silent hours ago.

She lay propped against her horse, she realized. She craned her head and saw a spear sticking out its throat. A wave of nausea rolled in her stomach, and she heaved on the ground beside her.

A fierce pain flashed through her stomach as she vomited, and she cried out, leaning forward. Cautiously, Emily examined the wound under her chain mail, lifting her hands to look at them under the harsh light of the sun and gasping at the blood coating her hands. The wound must be fatal.

Slowly, she became acclimated to the body she was viewing this from and realized she was sharing Nicholas's memories. Emily felt herself drifting, until she hovered at the back of his mind, still able to see what he saw and feel what he felt, but without the sensation she was the one experiencing it. She was a bystander and unable to affect the outcome.

He knew he was dying. There couldn't be any question of that. Two days ago, when William saw the sword sticking through his stomach, he had ordered a squire to pull it out. Then he had knelt beside Nicholas, touched his shoulder, and promised to look after the Vallsade estates once Father passed on. Along with the rest of the army, they had ridden from Arsuf, flush with the victory against Saladin, and prepared to continue their march on Jerusalem.

Never once when planning to embark on the Crusades had he imagined he would end up dead in a foreign land, and without having laid eyes on the Holy City. Nicholas cursed his arrogance as he cradled his stomach. He thought of his sweet Emma waiting at home in England, where the rain fell plentifully, and his life would have been happy, if rather mundane. She would never be his bride now, would never know he had realized how foolish his quest was.

What had he been thinking, to leave her alone and join in the fight to reclaim the Holy Land? He hadn't even stopped to ask her if she minded him going. He had blithely assumed she would be waiting for him, as was her duty. He had never doubted his return as the conquering hero.

"Emma," he said aloud, wishing he could touch her beautiful face once more. He longed to stroke her dark hair and kiss her soft lips. He cursed himself yet again for the lost opportunities when he had chosen to honor the rules of chivalry rather than so much as hold her hand. She should have been the last lover of his life, not the whore he had paid for on their march through France.

If he could, he would throw himself at her feet and beg for her forgiveness. When he should be spending his last few minutes of life praying, his thoughts remained centered on her. "Forgive me," he whispered as he fell back against Falco's side. The horse stank of decomposition, as did the wound in his stomach. If the blood loss didn't do him in quickly enough, the rot would. He could feel his life fading and began to pray to God to send an angel to ease his suffering. His eyes closed, but continued to move his lips in silent prayer until he drifted off into a restless sleep.

He awoke sometime later, aware of the stealthy sound of footsteps coming in his direction. When the man approached, Nicholas thought he was an angel of mercy, until he stepped closer. He wore the armor of the enemy, and he had the same darker skin and weapons of a Saracen, although his features were different. He must have come to finish the job, not content to let nature subject Nicholas to a torturous death. He fumbled for his sword, but it wasn't beside him. With his last bit of strength, he spat at the enemy. "Go on, infidel, run me through with your curved blade. It will be a blessing."

"Such pain," the man said, but his lips didn't move. "You drew me to you."

"Aye, it hurts." He frowned. "How is it you speak in the Lord's tongue?"

The man laughed. "I am not really speaking to you. I am in your mind, dear Nicholas."

His eyes widened. "How do you know my name?"

The man crouched beside him. "Your suffering is a beacon, and it drew me to you. It is not your physical pain I sensed, for that surrounds us from many sources even now, two days after Richard's army withdrew. No, it is your emotional anguish I feel so strongly...and something else less definable." He touched Nicholas's cheek. "How may I ease your suffering?"

"Kill me." He didn't like the hint of pleading in his tone, but the man offered a way out of his torment. "Do not let my anguish draw out any longer."

"How would you like your precious betrothed by your side?"

Nicholas nodded. "One day, in Heaven—"

The man scoffed. "You have no need to wait for eternal reward. I can grant you eternal life."

He scowled. “Do not toy with me, infidel.”

The man’s hand tightened on his cheek, causing his nails to dig in painfully. “Do not call me any name but master, young one. I offer you what men would kill for. Do not rebuff me.”

“How?” Nicholas managed to ask as a fiery pain burned through his belly and up to his throat.

“You do not need to know how. You only need to accept one condition.”

He bent forward as the burning turned to ice. His head spun, and he knew death sat beside him, ready to whisk him away. “Wh-wha-what?”

“You are mine for as long as I want you.”

He screamed as the pain returned, and it drained the last of his strength. He fell back against his dead horse, eyeing the man uncertainly, noticing his ugly scar for the first time. “Emma. . .I need her.”

“You will have her. . .eventually. If you agree to my terms, you shall live forever.”

“Emma,” he said again, his voice a mere whisper.

“Yes,” the man said impatiently. “She will be yours. I swear.”

Anything was worth it—even his soul, if that was what the man wanted. He briefly wondered if he was making a bargain with Satan, but couldn’t muster the energy to care.

He laughed. “No. I do not want your soul, young one.”

He frowned when the man read his thoughts. Nicholas stared up at him, fascinated by the scar, wanting to ask where it came from. His vision grew dim, and he thought he felt Emma’s hands on his body. His head slumped forward, and he yelped when the man jerked on his hair.

“Do not sleep yet. Give me your answer. Will you pledge an oath to belong to me if I save you?”

He nodded, barely able to move his head.

“I know how you knights are bound by your word, so I must have your verbal promise. Swear to me.”

“Swear.”

The man moved so quickly Nicholas didn’t see him. One second, he was a few inches away, and the next, the man’s face was against his throat. He cried out at a flash of pain, but it quickly faded to pleasing warmth that encompassed his body. He stiffened, thinking death had finally come. “Emma,” he whispered.

“Master,” the man corrected in a steely tone. “Your first loyalty lies with me now.”

His eyes closed as the warmth faded to ice. Nicholas slumped sideways, almost against the man. Nicholas wanted to push away the wrist Koss offered, after ripping it open with his own teeth, but didn’t have the strength. As blood pooled into his mouth, instinct took over, and he feebly sucked on the gaping wound, taking in the sustenance as quickly as he could in his weakened state.

The man tilted up his head. "All will be well. Soon the transformation will begin. Rest now, love."

Nicholas's eyes widened as the other man pressed his lips against his. He wanted to protest when a tongue slipped into his mouth, but his body refused to cooperate. He couldn't move at all. He could only endure the onslaught of the foreigner's mouth on his and wonder what kind of bargain he had forged.

1215, England

"No," he screamed, rushing toward Emma as she fell to the stone floor. Frantically, he lifted her into his arms and turned her to face him. The cross protruded obscenely from her chest, and he pulled it out, barely registering the pain touching it brought him. He tossed aside the symbol of her faith and touched the wound. Tears burned in his eyes when he realized her heart had burned away. She had believed so strongly in the cross's power that it had ended her life in an instant.

From what Koss had told him, he knew there was no way to revive a vampire whose heart was gone. "No," he cried again, refusing to believe it. He brought his wrist to his mouth and slashed it with his fang. Surely, blood would revive her. He smeared it against her lips, waiting for her to begin drinking. When she didn't move, he forced his weeping wrist into her mouth, but she didn't suck. Nor did the blood pouring down her throat seem to affect her.

Nicholas kept the blood flowing into her until his head spun with dizziness. With a sob of defeat, he brought the wound to his mouth and sucked until it began to close. He cradled her body against his, weeping into her soft hair.

What had he done? He had murdered her as surely as if his hand had guided the cross. What right had he to force her into becoming like him? He should have known she would never be happy living the life he lived now. If only he had thought about her reaction before he changed her, Emma would still be alive.

But he hadn't thought at all. Escaping Koss's apartments at the palace and returning to Emma had consumed his thoughts to the extent that he hadn't stopped to imagine what she would think of his new form.

He cried out as a sharp pain flashed through his chest. He had never imagined she would turn to his treacherous brother for comfort. How could she have married William?

Because she thought I was dead. Would he really have wanted her to be alone if he had died? He squirmed at his honest answer of yes.

What could he do now? He looked down at her, smoothing strands of hair off her pale cheeks. Any time now, her attendant would come to wake her, and she would alert the household when she found Emma's body. He had to be gone before then.

The thought of leaving her brought another sharp pain to his chest. He laid her on the stones and got to his knees, searching for the cross he had discarded. He saw it and stretched to reach it. He hissed as it burned his hand, but held onto it, bringing it closer, until it rested against his chest.

He turned back to look at Emma, wondering if she would welcome him in Hell, or if she would still hate him. If God were just, he wouldn't send Emma to eternal damnation for suicide, although Nicholas was



certain that would be his final destination. If suicide didn't incur God's wrath, surely the murders he had committed the last few months had done so.

He hesitated. The cross burned even through his tunic, and sweat beaded his brow. He longed to hold her again and beg her forgiveness, but what if he spent eternity without her? Was it better to suffer in Hell, or to suffer on Earth?

Nicholas tried to force the cross into his heart, but didn't have the strength. With a cry of frustration, he flung it away and inched back to Emma, kneeling beside her to kiss her cooling brow. "My love, I tried." Tears streaked his face. "I cannot do it. I do not have your courage and conviction." He kissed her parted lips and got unsteadily to his feet, taking one last look at her before hurrying from the chamber. He couldn't believe his actions had lost her to him forever. He didn't deserve to live, but was too afraid of what awaited him to die.

1426, England

"I know what haunts you," the gypsy woman said in a shaking voice, as Nicholas drew her closer.

He lifted his head to stare down at her. "What?"

"I know what drives you to the acts you commit. You are a desperate man." It was difficult to tell if the trembling in her voice came from fear or the shivers racking her half-dressed body. "You punish yourself for what you did to Emma. You think she would want it that way, but she would not. She loved you."

He stiffened at the sound of his love's name on the gypsy's lips. "What? What did you say?" He shook her when she didn't answer quickly enough.

"She lives again. Release me, m'lord, and I will tell you how to find her."

Nicholas reeled away from the woman in shock, dropping his hold on her. He watched her with narrowed eyes, waiting for her to attempt escape. He stood between her and the only exit of her wooden wagon, and none in the encampment would hear her cries, because he had sent them all to sleep when choosing her as his victim earlier.

In the pale light from the candle, her resemblance to Emma startled him anew. In his grief and madness, he had forgotten his original purpose of feeding from her and started having sex with her. He didn't stop until he realized he was about to rape her. She wouldn't have been the first since losing Emma, but he couldn't do it when he looked into her face and saw his love once more. It would be like taking her innocence all over again, and he had pushed the woman away, disgusted by his actions that night and during the past centuries.

Still, she was convenient, and he needed sustenance. He had returned to his original plan of feeding from her, until she spoke.

Her eyes remained wide, and the fear on her face caused him to squirm with a trace of guilt, an emotion he thought he had banished during the past two hundred years frittered away on acts of wickedness. "Speak, woman. Tell me of Emma." He listened carefully as she spun a tale of spirits reincarnated. His eyes widened when she told him he would find Emma again in 1511, inhabiting the body of a native girl in the New World, whatever that was.

When she had finished speaking, she took a step back. "I have kept my word, m'lord. You shall find her."

He lifted a brow. "We shall see if your words prove accurate. You speak of events too far in the future for me to have much faith."

She shook her head. "But, m'lord, I do not know which body she possesses now. It is only because I sense great violence in Erukán's life that I am able to pinpoint where she will be one hundred years from now. Her lives will be uneventful until then."

He inclined his head. "If you have given me true information, I am indebted to you."

She sagged, and her trembling eased visibly, until he stepped closer to her, causing her to stiffen again, and the heady perfume of terror wafted from her pores. He enjoyed the tang the fear gave blood and deliberately sought to increase hers by flashing his fangs before speaking. "However, I would like something more tangible, if I am to be in your debt, madam."

She screamed as he reached for her, fighting with all her strength.

Nicholas easily subdued her. "Relax. You will enjoy this."

She shook her head, continuing to fight him.

"Look into my eyes." He spoke so forcefully she couldn't hope to resist him. Her head rose slowly, and then he was staring into deep pools of liquid fear. "You want to give me what I need, do you not?"

Slowly, she nodded, despite the fact her eyes were still large with fear.

He caressed her hip. "Anything I want."

She nodded once again and relaxed against him.

Nicholas buried his face against her neck, seeking out her carotid artery as his hands cupped her bared breasts. "In return, your death will be quick," he said softly, before sinking his fangs into her skin. After the disaster with Emma, he had vowed never to create another vampire. The next best thing to eternal life he could offer this woman was a quick death. It didn't even occur to him to walk away and leave her in peace. He held little hope in her predictions of Emma's reincarnation, which more likely came from a flash of psychic ability and her desperation, and he had to feed. She was convenient.

1511, San Juan Batista (Puerto Rico)

The burned bodies of Erukán's people surrounded him. The carnage was terrible, but he had no eyes for any of the suffering, beyond his love's. Her headless body had still been bound to the pole when he found her. He had cut her down and held her in his arms while sobbing against her chest. It had been a long time before he was able to lay her aside to prepare a grave.

Now, he knelt by the hole he had dug with his bare hands. She lay beside the mound of sand, her body finally reunited with her head. It had taken him nearly an hour to find it. With a gentleness she was far

from being aware of, he placed her body and head in the hole, staring down at her for a long moment before pushing the sand back into the hole, hiding her from his sight.

As Nicholas covered the grave first with sand, and then with large rocks to protect Erukán from wild animals, his mind insisted on replaying the horror of what had happened to her. He should have been there to save her. It should have been him, if either of them had to die. He should have stopped this massacre. He shook his head, trying to force away his recriminations, as he fortified her grave.

At last, when he anchored the last rock in place, he stood over her makeshift marker, searching for the proper words. None came to him, and he shook his head, scrubbing at his eyes when they began streaming again.

“I was too late to save you,” he whispered. A harsh sob broke from him. “But I swear to you, I shall punish as many of those who were responsible as I can track down. They will pay for your life with their blood, beloved.”

He took a deep breath and turned away. Nicholas took two steps before halting and turning back to her. “Next time will be different. I will not lose you again.” He knew he wouldn’t be content to wait to see if fate reunited them. He must make it his mission to seek her out again. Already, somewhere in the world, her soul had probably been reborn into a new body. He wouldn’t rest until he found her again, even if it took lifetimes. “Until next time.” He forced himself to turn away and walk toward the Spaniards’ settlement. More blood would spill before this night was over, but this time, it wouldn’t belong to innocents.

1665, Virginia

Nicholas vomited as he saw the burned body of Elspeth hanging from the rafters of the barn. Tremont’s unpleasant laughter sounded behind him, and he whirled to find the other man smiling snidely.

“You dared touch what was mine. She paid for allowing your filthy hands on her body.” He stared up at her body with glee on his face before returning his gaze to Nicholas. “You shall join her, Vallsade.”

Nicholas paid little attention to the two men coming at him. He rushed forward, pausing only to snap the neck of one and rip out the heart of the other before reaching Tremont. The other man’s arrogant façade shattered when confronted with the heart Nicholas shoved against his face as he jerked him closer by the ruff of his shirt. “I would love to make you eat your own heart, Tremont.”

Tremont began to quake with fear. “My men will kill you—”

He shoved the bloody heart into the other man’s mouth, effectively silencing him. “None will be alive when I have finished with this place.” He threw Tremont into the corner, impaling him on a pitchfork tine through the shoulder. “You shall be the last to feel my wrath.”

The other man spat out the heart and a mouthful of vomit before struggling to regain his feet. He screamed as the tines worked their way deeper into his flesh.

With a simple thought, Nicholas immobilized Tremont before beginning his bloody work. The sweet sounds of Tremont’s sobs followed him into the night as he left the barn.

He got lost in a mindless haze of blood, stopping only when everyone on the plantation who wasn't an innocent was dead. He returned to Tremont, bearing his gift wrapped in a bundle.

The other man had pissed himself, Nicholas noted with disgust, as he returned to the barn. Tremont was a trembling mass of nerves as he towered over him. "Now, it is your turn, Tremont." He smiled down at him. "However, I will not kill you. I have thought of a better punishment for you. Yes, you shall live with your pain each day, as I must now live with mine."

"Wh-wh..." he stuttered before falling silent.

Nicholas tossed the bundle at him. It spilled open, revealing the lifeless body of Tremont's son. His garment was soaked in blood from the wound at his neck.

He screamed and reached for the boy, forgetting Nicholas's power didn't allow him to move. The tines of the pitchfork embedded more deeply into his shoulder, but he didn't seem to notice as he struggled against Nicholas's mental command without effect. "My son. You killed my son!"

Nicholas knelt beside him. "And you killed the only woman I have ever loved." He touched an edge of the bloody blanket wrapped around the dead child. "Nonetheless, it wasn't I who killed your child. His frantic mother denied me that pleasure. She thought it better for him to die by a merciful cut of her dagger than by my hand."

"Johanna," he whispered. Tears welled in his eyes. "Barty. Please, let me hold him."

The note of pleading in the man's tone gratified Nicholas, but he wasn't finished torturing Tremont yet. "I really must tell you something else first." He leaned closer, dropping his voice an octave. "As evil as you are, I would never have murdered an infant to punish you. She killed your son for naught."

A keening wail broke from the man, as surely as his spirit broke right then, but Nicholas was beyond seeing the man's surrender. He had learned several things under the cruel tutelage of Koss, including how to create an eternal slave. He wanted to relish in Tremont's suffering every day for the rest of his life. With luck, that would span millennia.

1831, England (Vallsade Manor)

With a savage shout, Nicholas plunged the sword through his brother's throat, pinning him to the stone steps. He saw William's eyes widen with surprise before they grew dim as he passed from the world forever.

To ensure he did the job properly, Nicholas severed the head with one clean swipe and impaled it on the sword. He tossed aside the sword, separating the head and body by several feet.

Then he rushed up the stairs to the chamber he shared with Erin. In his heart, he knew Koss had killed her, but had to make sure. Perhaps she wasn't completely dead. Maybe he could still save her, although it had been more than a day since her murder.

When he found his wife, laid peacefully across the bed and cuddling the body of their daughter against her chest—slightly above the gaping cut in her abdomen where William had cut out the baby—his cry of agony rebounded throughout Vallsade Manor.

## Chapter Fifteen

Emily awoke with the sound of Nicholas's suffering still echoing in her ears. The images of the dreams whirled through her mind, and she lay absolutely still, struggling to comprehend all she had learned about him through his memories.

When she finally found the ability to move, she turned her head to look at him. He watched her with a brooding expression, not attempting to evade meeting her eyes, but there was a tinge of red in his cheeks, as if their shared intimacy embarrassed him. She licked her lips, wondering what she should say, if anything.

He put his finger to her lips before she could part them. "You know my secrets now."

She shook her head, pulling away from his fingers. "Not all of them."

His lips twisted. "What is it you want to know? Do you want an account of every atrocity I committed for nearly three centuries, punishing the world and myself for your death? Do you want to hear how I lived without hope, how I loathed happiness in any form, going so far as to destroy it each chance I got?" He lunged toward her, settling on top of her and pinning her to the bed with her wrists above her head. "Do you want me to tell you about the women I raped and murdered? About the debauched acts I committed?" He shook her less than gently. "Well, do you, Emily? Do you want to know how evil I am?"

She shook her head, disconcerted to realize she found his proximity more arousing than she found his anger frightening. "I don't need the details. I know very well you aren't a saint."

He scowled. "Of course you do. Poor, innocent Emily subjected to whatever I choose to do to you. You're another of my victims, aren't you?" he asked bitterly.

She held her silence, not certain what he wanted from her. If she agreed with him, she risked provoking his anger further and having it directed at her specifically. However, that thought didn't frighten her as much as it might have once. What she found most alarming was the thought of his tenuous control slipping, making him unable to function at all. They couldn't afford for him to fall apart while they were still in danger.

She knew why he was attacking her. She was a target for his conflicting emotions, a way to deal with his grief and the discomfort of her having seen so much of the real him. The question was, how did she respond to his lashing out at her? Was it better to counter his statements or ignore them and pretend they didn't hurt?

"You're so quiet. Do I frighten you?"

She didn't respond while struggling to hide her fear.

Nicholas released one of her wrists to caress her breast through the cotton pajama top. "Or maybe you aren't afraid. Maybe you like me being in control." He lowered his mouth to her cheek, and when he spoke, his lips brushed against her skin. "Maybe you want to pretend you don't want me so you can live with yourself after we have sex. You can convince yourself I forced you into this, too."

She glared up at him. With a surge of strength, she broke free of his hold and cupped his face in her hands. “You scare me. Is that what you want to hear?” Before he could respond, she pressed on. “There’s a darkness in your soul that you will never overcome completely. That does frighten me, but not like it should. Maybe because I know the same dark compulsions are inside me too. I could say everything that’s happened to me is your fault, but there’s no reason to go down that road again, is there? I can accept what’s been done to me, or I can hide from it, but there isn’t any point in blaming you.” Her brow furrowed. “After all, you were honoring a promise you made to Erin when you changed me.”

His eyes darkened, and he opened his mouth.

Emily interrupted before he could speak. “And I’m not having sex with you. Not like this.” She glared up at him. “If—when—we make love, it will be because I’m ready, not because you’re hurting, and you want to hide from your grief for a while.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Make love to me because you want me, not because you want me to hurt, too.”

Nicholas flinched and pulled his face from her hands. He rolled off her and didn’t look at her as he got out of bed. His tone was bland when he said, “Get ready. Brannon will have booked us on the earliest available flight by now.” He padded to the door, pausing to scoop up his clothes from the chair where he had folded them. “I’ll shower in his bathroom to save time.”

The resounding slam of the door behind him made Emily wince. She resisted the urge to run after him and offer comfort. She knew he was in pain, but refused to allow him to take it out on her. Nor would she let his anger and heartache overshadow her first time with him. With a long sigh, she got out of bed and went into the bathroom to shower, hoping they would have both calmed down by the time they spoke again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, Emily left the bedroom and entered the sitting room, clutching the lapels of the robe closed with her hands as she searched the sitting room for Nicholas. She grimaced when her gaze fell on Brannon, who still wore his sunglasses. She rolled her eyes at the affectation before turning to go back into the bedroom.

“Emily?”

She halted in mid-step. “Yeah?”

“Are you looking for Nicholas?”

“No. Yes. Actually, I’m looking for clothing.” She waved a hand at the robe. “I don’t want to wear this to the airport.”

He nodded. “There were some boxes delivered this morning. I guess Nicholas made arrangements last night.” He pointed toward the main door of the suite. “They’re by the entryway table.”

She walked over to the small stack and opened one at random. Lifting the lid revealed a pair of ecru linen trousers. The next box yielded a black silk shirt with a frilly yoke. The next box held underwear, and the last box contained a pair of black slip-on shoes. They were all in her size.

She lifted the stack and turned back to the bedroom. A few feet from the door, she stopped and turned

toward him, striving for a casual tone. "Where is Nicholas?"

Brannon shrugged. "He went out. He probably went to see about Father Michael's burial arrangements or to say goodbye in private. It will be a while before we return to New York."

She shifted the boxes. "How long is a while?"

"Until we stop Koss. It could take years. Nicholas has begun preparing Vallsade Manor for a long habitation, just in case."

She grimaced. "Sounds terrific."

He shrugged. "It's not so bad, although there isn't much to do out in the middle of nowhere."

She tilted her head. "Don't the people nearby find it strange, having Nicholas never age?"

Brannon shook his head. "Nicholas is careful to reside at Vallsade Manor no more than once a generation, and for no longer than fifteen or twenty years. Before he moves away, he always announces the birth of the next in his line. Nicholas is then 'reborn', keeping his first and last name, but changing his middle name. That's how most vampires do it, although it's gotten tougher since everyone's lives started getting tracked electronically from the moment they're born."

"No one's ever been suspicious?" she pressed.

He shrugged again. "In the old days, people might have realized what he was, but no one pays much attention now. The village near the castle is a ghost town these days, with economic conditions the way they are."

She nodded and turned back to the bedroom. Emily paused. "Do you really think it will take years for Koss to act?"

He hesitated. "I'm not certain. He has a history of prolonging the torture, but I can't imagine him allowing Nicholas to be happy with you for long. Nicholas is preparing for the worst."

She grimaced as she went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her. While dressing quickly, she mulled over Brannon's dour assessment. By the time years had passed, there would be no way for her to return home without people realizing she had been gone. They would naturally expect an explanation, if they even wanted to see her. Everyone would have forgotten about her by then, or at least moved on, including her parents and Jeremy.

She wondered if Nicholas also thought it might take years. Had his offer to let her go home been an empty promise to placate her? Was he still manipulating her, even now? What if Koss wasn't really his enemy, but was instead his ally? Would he stage this elaborate charade to keep her with him?

An image of Tremont's torn body rose in her mind, followed by the memory of Michael impaled on the sword. Coupled with the dreams she'd had through Nicholas's eyes, there could be no doubt that Koss truly meant her harm, simply because Nicholas loved her.

For now, her safest course was to remain with Nicholas and his nephew. She only prayed it wouldn't take years to deal with Koss. She couldn't tiptoe around Nicholas that long, let alone prevent falling in love with him...if it wasn't already too late to avoid doing that.

\* \* \* \* \*

The flight from JFK to Heathrow had been unremarkable, save for the incident with her passport in New York. When they arrived at the counter to check in, Emily realized she didn't have one. She had pulled Nicholas away to tell him, but he waved aside her concern. She had watched with amazement as he slid his and Brannon's to the clerk, who had given Emily a puzzled look, but after meeting Nicholas's eyes, stamped their passports and a Post-It note on the counter before sending them on their way, handing the Post-It to Emily.

She had spent most of the plane ride napping, or at least pretending to. Nicholas had ignored her, and Brannon's handheld video game held his attention. She had disregarded her hurt feelings and retaliated by pretending neither of them existed.

Now, as they left the huge hanger to hail a cab, she fumbled in her purse for sunglasses when the bright sun seared her eyes and saw Nicholas do the same. Brannon had never removed his.

As she walked, the stiffness in her legs began to dissipate. She hardly noticed the sting of returning circulation as she gazed at the people milling about. A babble of different languages mixed disharmoniously, and her eyes widened when they fell on a man about her age wearing a kilt. She couldn't help but appreciate his muscular legs. When he winked at her, she blushed and looked away, straight into Nicholas's eyes.

He looked angry, but didn't speak when opening the door to a cab and indicating she should slide inside. Emily did so, surprised when Brannon sat beside her, and Nicholas took the front seat. She frowned when he got on the driver's side, until she remembered they drove on the wrong side of the street in England—although she supposed the residents of the UK didn't consider it the wrong side.

"Probably not," Brannon murmured out the side of his mouth. He had his head cocked sideways and didn't seem to have his eyes on the game, but continued to play.

She glared at him as she leaned closer, keeping her voice low. "Do you always read my thoughts?"

He shrugged. "I try not to, but you don't have a good shield in place yet. You'll learn."

"If I live long enough," she muttered under her breath, as the driver pulled away from the curb. She would have been reassured if Brannon had offered even a token platitude, but he held his silence. She leaned back against the seat and watched the city of London pass through the window without really seeing anything.

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She frowned in confusion when the driver pulled up to a tall red brick and cream stucco townhouse in the heart of Mayfair. From her recollections as Erin, she knew this couldn't possibly be Vallsade Manor, but had no chance to ask questions as Brannon and Nicholas slid from the cab. Instead, she followed suit, pausing to admire the small section of garden she could see through the wrought iron fence surrounding the property. The flowers had a disorderly appearance that she suspected was carefully designed and maintained. She wanted to ask what the purple blooms were, but they hadn't waited for her.

She quickened her pace and fell in line behind them. As she walked after Brannon, she glanced up at the



second and third stories. Delicate shutters with carved hearts covered the windows, but they didn't seem like much of a deterrent for Koss. This place couldn't be safe from Koss. It wasn't a fortress, like the manor was. Perhaps they were stopping by to visit someone?

Nicholas unlocked the door, removing any doubt that he owned the place. Emily trailed behind them, removing her sunglasses and slipping them into her bag as she walked. She looked up and caught her breath when she entered the foyer. The highly polished hardwood flooring absorbed the click of her shoes' heels. The vaulted ceilings seemed to go on forever, as did the endless vistas of the white-papered walls. She frowned at the décor of varying shades of white, having expected red and black like his apartment in New York.

The colors blended well to form an elegant design, but the pale shades seared her eyes. She cupped a hand over her brow to shadow her eyes, noticing Nicholas did the same. Brannon seemed unaffected, and she assumed his sunglasses protected him, or maybe he wasn't sensitive to bright colors, being only half-vampire.

"We'll freshen up here before heading to Vallsade Manor," Nicholas said, seeming to be addressing both of them, although he didn't turn in their direction. "I haven't yet been in this house, but I viewed it on the Internet before purchasing it. I'm familiar enough with the floor plan to find the rooms. The staircase should be through here..." He trailed off as they left the foyer and entered a sumptuous living room. It contained only the bare bones of necessities—a white sofa, wingchair and tables—but the room still had an elegant air because of the ceramic tiles and arched ceiling. The staircase in the corner was itself an artistic masterpiece of carved blond maple and plush white carpet.

Emily followed behind them, pausing to admire the cherubs carved into the balustrades. When she realized they had reached the second landing, she increased her pace to catch up.

Nicholas stopped before a door and opened it. "Why don't you take this one, Brannon? It has an open design, and the decorator hasn't added more than a bed and a dresser. She was waiting for instructions from me."

Brannon inclined his head and slipped past Nicholas. He closed the door behind himself.

He didn't look in her direction as he resumed walking. Emily couldn't help being miffed at his aloof attitude. She shook her head at his continued stubbornness while following him down the carpeted hall. Was he still angry at her for refusing to sleep with him yesterday, or was his coolness motivated by something more?

He paused before another white door and pushed it open. "Here's your room. There's an *en suite* bathroom, of course. There should be plenty of clothing."

She frowned. "Why? Has some other woman stayed here?" She winced at the whining tone that came from her. She wasn't covetous, was she? She squirmed, recognizing an emotion that was a kissing cousin of jealousy, if it wasn't outright envy.

He sighed. "I imagine they have, since I'm not the original owner. However, I have never been in this house before. I bought it as an investment, and I certainly never expected to stay here. It's been on the market for months. I ordered the clothes yesterday morning, before we left New York. The property management company sent out someone to sign for the delivery. That person was given a list of what arrived and told where to place the packages in each bedroom, as per my instructions."

“Oh.” She felt very small at that moment, and his visible contempt did nothing to restore her confidence. She turned away from him and entered the room, closing the door behind her. Her eyes widened when he knocked a scant second after the latch clicked against the jamb. She opened the door a few inches and peered out at him. “Yes?”

“We will travel at night. Rest a few hours.” He glanced at the Rolex on his wrist. “We’ll leave around midnight...about ten hours from now.” He hesitated for a moment before turning away.

She nodded and closed the door again, leaning against the wood, wondering if he was on the other side, unable to leave. Was he waiting for her to walk away first? Maybe he had his fingers pressed to the wood this very minute, longing to reach out for her. Emily held her breath, waiting to see if he would knock again. Her heart felt like it sank into her stomach when her keen hearing picked up the sound of his shoes walking across the carpet, away from her room. She rested her forehead against the wood, sighing. Was it his intent to ignore her completely until he was able to get rid of her? After loving her for eight hundred years, could he so easily turn off his emotions?

\* \* \* \* \*

She was just finishing zipping her jeans when a knock came at her door around eleven-thirty. “Come in,” she called. She refused to acknowledge the dart of disappointment when her visitor turned out to be Brannon instead of Nicholas. “Yes?”

“Nicholas wants to leave as soon as you both feed.” He grimaced. “I’m not sure if you’ve realized it, but the suitcases are for the clothes. Hope you’ve packed, because your dinner waits downstairs.” He couldn’t seem to hide his disgust.

She nodded. “I assumed as much.” She gestured to the suitcase by the door, but he didn’t glance in that direction. “I’m ready.”

He nodded and left the room. Emily lifted the case and followed him down the staircase. When they got downstairs, she realized why Brannon was disgusted when she saw what Nicholas had on the menu.

The girl was young—probably not even seventeen—but had a jaded look in her eyes. A scar marred her brow, but it didn’t detract from her wild beauty. She gazed up at Emily and Brannon from her perch on the wingchair and deliberately parted her legs, revealing her lack of underwear under the short skirt. She glanced at Nicholas. “If they’re playing to boot, it’ll cost ya’ extra.”

Nicholas inclined his head in Brannon’s direction. “His tastes are different than ours.”

She shrugged. “Too bad. He’s cute.”

Brannon cleared his throat. “I’ll be in the kitchen.”

Emily stood awkwardly once Brannon had left. Hunger pounded through her veins, and she had the urge to grab the girl and rip open her throat. She took a deep breath and released it in a rough exhalation, finding it did little to ease her raging thirst.

“Emily?” Nicholas held out his hand, showing a hint of warmth.

She stepped closer, grasping the hand he offered for support as she looked down at the girl. She experienced a stir of guilt, but forced it away. As long as she didn’t kill the girl, there would be no

permanent harm inflicted. She assumed Nicholas had paid the prostitute well, which was more compensation than others she had fed from had received.

The girl smiled up at her. “What do you like, love?” Her accent was as thick as molasses.

Emily surprised herself when she reached out to caress the girl’s frizzy dark curls. She knelt on her knees and pulled the girl closer. The prostitute licked her lips, and she briefly thought about kissing her. At the last minute, she changed her mind and moved her face against the girl’s neck, inhaling deeply and finding no telltale odor to indicate the girl was unhealthy.

She was vaguely aware of the girl reaching past her to cup Nicholas’s cock in her hands, and her eyes widened as she imagined for a moment the things the three of them could do with each other. She blotted out the notion, disconcerted by the direction of her thoughts, and focused on the girl’s carotid artery, which she licked cautiously, tracing it with her tongue. The girl sighed with pleasure, and Emily’s panties dampened.

Nicholas stepped up behind her, and his hands joined hers in the prostitute’s hair. He pressed the girl closer to her, and she delicately pierced the skin of her victim. The girl whimpered, but didn’t seem to be in pain. Rather, it was a sound of arousal, and Emily realized her erotic thoughts had automatically carried to the girl, making the feeding pleasurable rather than painful.

She was aware of Nicholas crouching beside her and lifting the girl’s wrist to his mouth. The girl shivered, and she bit down harder, relishing in the blood flooding her mouth, lapping it greedily, as the sounds of Nicholas’s sucking increased her own hunger—for blood and sex. She tightened her hand in the girl’s hair, digging her nails into the prostitute’s head.

She heard the girl cry out with pain, but Emily ignored her distress. She pressed closer, eager for more blood, ignoring Nicholas pulling on her arm for as long as she could. When he pried her away, she turned and hissed at him. His eyes held a hint of red, but he appeared to be in control.

“No more.” He spoke firmly.

She tried to pull away, anxious to consume more of the girl’s lifeblood, but he held her effortlessly. Emily released the girl’s hair and raked her nails down Nicholas’s face. She gave him a toothy grin when he expelled a harsh breath. The sight of blood dripping from his wound heightened her bloodlust, and she lunged forward. He hadn’t expected her to do that, she knew, and he fell to the floor. She leaned forward and licked the blood from his face before grinding her lips on his, kissing him open-mouthed.

For a second, he returned the kiss, but then pushed her away. “We need to be going.” He spoke without emotion as he got to his feet and turned to the girl in the chair. He touched her neck and nodded. “She’ll be fine with a little rest.” Nicholas reached into his pocket to extract his wallet.

Emily watched as he peeled off another bill and tucked it in the girl’s bra, where a corner of the folded bills he had already paid her peeked out. She tried to keep the hurt from her eyes as she took deep breaths to regain her control. She was ashamed of her behavior, but couldn’t deny her body still burned with desire for blood and sex. For a moment, her eyes rested on the girl’s pussy, slick with arousal, and she speculated how the prostitute would taste. Her pussy spasmed at the thought, even as her stomach churned with disgust.

It was with some effort that she got to her feet and turned away from Nicholas to go to the nearest bathroom and wash her face. Emily looked at her reflection in the mirror as she turned on the faucet. The

sight of the blood smeared across her pale skin should have disgusted her, but it didn't. Instead, she ran her tongue around her mouth, lapping away as much of the precious fluid as she could. She brought her hands to her face and rubbed at the bloodstains before taking them to her mouth to lick each clean, until she met her own eyes in the mirror. They burned bright-red, and it was enough to sicken her. She wrenched her gaze away and hurriedly washed her hands and face before returning to the living room.

Nicholas and the girl were gone. Brannon stood by the unlit fireplace, gazing into the bare grate. "Where—" she started to ask.

"He's returning her to her *manager*," Brannon said with a hint of mocking. "She'll recover by tomorrow, although I doubt the man will be thrilled to give her the night off." He turned in her direction. "I'm glad you managed not to kill her."

She flinched, wondering if he meant her specifically. Did he know Nicholas had to wrench her away from the girl to get her to stop? She tilted her chin and strove for a cool tone, but her voice trembled. "I take it you don't approve." Instead of sounding like she didn't care, she sounded like she was begging for his understanding.

His brow quirked visibly behind the lens of his sunglasses. "I'm fortunate I don't have to stay alive at the expense of others. But, no, I don't approve of murder. You'll find few who do, if they aren't vampires."

She sighed, not bothering to offer any justifications. What could she say, other than it was necessary for her to live? He must know that. Her pathetic argument would be unlikely to change his mind. In fact, he was liable to retort that she could choose death and save countless lives. There was no way to counter that, because it was the truth. She just wasn't noble or brave enough to make that choice.

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As soon as the Mercedes topped the rise of a large hill and Vallsade Manor sprawled before them, Emily recognized it. She knew the layout of the structure, knew where to find the kitchens, and remembered how much she used to love spending time in the library in the tower, curled up in the window seat, immersed in her collection of books.

It was as though she had been inside the rectangular structure built from white stones just yesterday, she thought with awe. As they passed through the gatehouse built into the curtain, not having to exit the car to lift the raised portcullis, she couldn't wait to explore the castle. She wanted to see if it was as she remembered it. How much had it changed in a little less than two centuries?

In the courtyard, Nicholas parked the car. Emily didn't wait for them to get out as she opened the door and slid from the backseat. She rushed to the tall doors barring entrance and touched them. Surely, Nicholas had replaced the weathered wood since Erin's lifetime, but it felt just as she remembered it. As he neared, bearing a heavy key to fit in the old lock, she couldn't hide her excitement. "I remember this place."

His eyes widened. "You remember the keep?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes. I remember everything about the castle—how we used to take horses from the stable in the middle of the night and ride recklessly." She grinned at him, remembering the wild sensations those adventures stirred in her. "I remember how those rides often ended."

He looked uncomfortable as he slipped the brass key in the lock and turned it with a protesting click. "I

guess the caretaker's been using the small door in the kitchens, behind the castle. This lock needs oiling."

She touched his hand, getting him to look up again. "Do you remember renewing our vows in the chapel after we settled here at Vallsade Manor? I wanted to make sure God would recognize our union. I didn't know how he would feel about us being married outdoors without witnesses."

"I remember," he said gruffly. "Erin was always worrying about what God thought." He met her eyes. "But you aren't Erin, and the chapel isn't here any longer. I had it torn down decades ago."

She flinched at his words, not realizing until he spoke how easily she had slipped into "I" when referring to the memories circulating through her brain. "But—"

"Come on. I want to check the furnace before we get settled for the night." He turned away and pushed against the doors. They resisted with a squeal, and the muscles in his arms corded when he shoved them open with an extra spurt of strength.

Emily hung her head, hiding her tears, jumping when she felt a hand on her arm. She looked up to find compassion in Brannon's expression.

"A lot of memories haunt this place," he said softly, as Nicholas entered the keep without them. "I don't think he means to hurt you."

"It's more than that." She cast a glance at Nicholas's departing back as the doors started to close. "I think he hates me."

He shook his head. "He doesn't hate you. He's having trouble coping with his emotions—"

"Are you two coming?" he bellowed from inside the castle.

Emily sighed. "Why is he pushing me away? I thought he loved me."

Brannon pushed open a door and indicated she should precede him. As she slipped past him, he whispered, "How can you doubt he loves you? He's looked for you for eight hundred years."

She shook her head. "He's found me again, but doesn't seem to want me now, does he?" She took Brannon's silence for assent as she walked into the castle, gasping with dismay at how much it had changed. The walls had been stripped of the tapestries, including the one she had made of a medieval woman in a tower that used to hang above the huge fireplace. There was a decrepit-looking table tucked in the corner, surrounded by rickety chairs. There were no cobwebs or accumulated dirt, but it lacked any sign of life.

Nicholas stood to the side, near the winding stone staircase. He waved at it. "Since you remember where everything is, you can get yourself settled. You don't need me holding your hand."

She nodded, trying to keep her tone cool. "I can take care of myself." She ignored his snort of disbelief as she walked past him up the stairs, keeping her spine stiff until she was certain he couldn't see her anymore. Then she ran up the remaining stairs and turned to the right, going on autopilot to another set of steeply angled stairs. Two steps up, she remembered there was a section missing from the fourth step, and it could be dangerous if stepped on wrong. She skirted the damaged section and continued climbing, emerging into another hallway stripped bare of decorations. Not even a table or picture lined the passage.

The double doors at the end of the wing summoned her. Emily opened one, finding the knob turned easily under her hand. The caretaker obviously kept the castle ready for occupation at a moment's notice. She wondered why Nicholas had stripped the castle of personal possessions. Was it to save work for the caretaker, or could he not bear to see reminders of what he had lost?

Emily was relieved to see the four-post bed frame—certainly with a different mattress—remained in the room, although it lacked sheets, pillowcases and a spread. She went to the room that used to be a dressing room and found new packages of bed linens lining the shelf. A thin coat of dust clung to them, indicating they had been waiting for use a long time.

She busied herself with preparing the bed, trying not to think about how it hurt to have Nicholas keep pushing her away. Was he angry with her for rejecting him, or was he still grieving over the loss of his father? Would he have chosen to sacrifice her to Koss instead, knowing he would find her again? After all, he had found her four times before, but had only found his father once in eight hundred years.

She plumped the pillows and shook her head, knowing that wasn't right. He wouldn't have chosen either of them. He had offered himself in their stead. She suspected she had wounded him with her blunt words, but more than that, she thought he was avoiding her because she had seen through his eyes. She didn't know everything he had done, but he must be concerned that she couldn't look past what she did know. Was he pushing her away before she could push him away?

“What the hell are you doing in this room?”

Her heart stuttered as he shouted at her from the doorway. She turned from stacking the pillows to look at him. “What?”

He stepped into the room, though with obvious reluctance. “Why did you pick this room?”

She frowned with confusion. “Why shouldn't I? I remember it was our room...” She trailed off, blushing when she looked back at the bed. She had made it exactly as he preferred, with two pillows plumped on his side, the covers turned back and the privacy curtains parted. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be presumptuous.” She let out a startled cry as he came up behind her, turned her toward him and grabbed her arms to shake her. “I'll get another room—”

“No one *ever* uses this room. Do you understand?” There was a wild look in his eyes, and he seemed to have lost any semblance of control. “Never.”

“Why not?” she forced out through her clacking teeth, as he continued to shake her.

“Because you died here.” The words seemed torn from him, and he abruptly let go of her as tears flooded his eyes. “I found you lying on that bed, holding our babe...” He turned away from her, and his shoulders stiffened. “Sleep wherever you want.” He seemed to be struggling to sound as if he didn't care, but his voice wobbled. “I don't care.”

She reached out to touch his arm. “I'll pick another room. I didn't think about that.” Though she felt his pain, her heart rejoiced at his words. He hadn't made the distinction between her and Erin. He wasn't pushing her away as successfully as he thought.

He shrugged off her touch. “No, don't. You already have it made up now.” He walked to the door without looking back.

“Nicholas?”

He stopped walking, but he didn't turn around. “What?”

“You can't push me away forever, you know.” She licked her lips, awaiting his response, longing for him to turn back and gather her in his arms. She didn't even care if he apologized for his boorish behavior, so long as he showed some sign of still wanting her.

He stiffened. “It doesn't have to be forever.”

She walked closer to him, reaching out to touch his shoulder, but stopping an inch away and dropping her arm. “Really? I thought this eternal life business lasted eternally.”

He shrugged. “It does, for the most part, but that's not what I meant. I only have to keep you out of my way until you're safe from Koss. Then I'm sending you home.”

She balled up her fists. “What gives you the right to make my decisions for me?”

He spun around so quickly she didn't see him move. “I don't want you anymore. Don't you get it, Emily? You aren't as I thought you'd be. A lot has changed since 1831. I was blind to believe I was still in love with you.” His eyes were cold as he looked at her. “You're nothing like Erin. You don't have to go home, but you aren't staying with me when this is over. It's time I moved on.”

Tears pricked her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. “I don't believe you. You kept searching...”

“An obsession,” he dismissed. “No worse than Koss's obsession with me. I suppose I can even understand his need. Like me, he's driven by a thirst to possess, but it has nothing to do with love.” His eyes raked over her from head to toe. “He can't let go, but I've discovered I can.”

The tears rolled down her cheeks, but she shook her head, stubbornly clinging to the memories of their times together, and the way she felt. “You're lying. You don't want to get hurt again, so you're deliberately pushing—”

Nicholas made a scoffing sound. “Believe what you want. You're too naïve to see the truth. How could I have ever imagined you were a substitute for my dead wife?” He spun around and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

The silence he left behind him broke under the sound of Emily falling to the floor in a sobbing heap. She buried her face in her hands, wanting to deny his words. In her heart, she didn't really believe him, but couldn't stop crying. How could she love him so passionately one moment and hate him just as passionately the next?

## Chapter Sixteen

Emily made her way downstairs later in the day from the master bedroom. There had been little reason to change rooms after her confrontation with Nicholas, and she had eventually fallen asleep in the spacious bed. To her surprise, only a mild nightmare of Koss's grinning visage intruded into her dreams.

Mostly, she had dreamed of happier times as Erin, when Vallsade Manor had been her home, and her husband had loved her.

She found a flurry of activity in the hall. Strangers rushed in and out, carrying parcels, furniture and bags. Brannon sat on one of the rickety chairs, immersed in his Game Boy. She brushed past two men balancing an oversized chair, heading for the hallway at the end of the hall that she knew led to a sitting room.

She took a seat beside him, cautiously testing the chair before letting it absorb her weight. He looked up, but not quite in her direction. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Nicholas had some stuff brought up from London.” He slid a bowl of apples to her. “Breakfast, until after everyone leaves. Then I’ll whip up something. Nicholas has stocked your . . . provisions in the cooler in the basement, so you won’t need to hunt.” He spoke blandly, but the set of his shoulders was tense.

She took one of the red apples and polished it on her shirt. “Who brought up my luggage? It was inside my room when I woke up.”

He shrugged. “Wasn’t me. Probably Nicholas.”

She sighed. “Don’t you ever put that thing away?”

He clicked it off and looked up. “Yes.”

She drummed her fingers on the tabletop. “And those sunglasses—don’t you ever take them off?”

He frowned. “You’re certain you want me to?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Hmm.” He brought up a hand to slide the sunglasses onto the top of his head. “Satisfied?”

Her breath hissed through her teeth when she saw his eyes . . . rather, his lack of eyes. Empty sockets, marred with scars, stared back at her. “You’re blind.”

He returned the sunglasses to the bridge of his nose, hiding his eyes again. “You didn’t know?”

She shook her head. “How could I? You don’t seem blind. You’re always playing that game—”

“It’s a matter of sound and logic. I’m not that good at most of the games, but practicing keeps my senses sharp.”

“How do you get around? You seem so capable.”

Brannon shrugged. “Again, it’s a matter of using my senses. I’ve been blind for almost two hundred years. My senses of hearing, touch, taste and smell have compensated. Not to mention my psychic abilities.” As he spoke, one of the apples lifted from the bowl and twirled through the air. “It’s not a lot different from having my sight.” He grinned at her. “For example, I can tell you exactly what ingredients are in the perfume you’re wearing. *Charlie Red*, isn’t it?”

She nodded before realizing he couldn’t see. “Uh, yeah.”



“Don’t worry about your gestures. You’re easy to read.” The apple floated back to the bowl. “It’s actually an effort to block out your thoughts right now. It’ll probably be like that for another century or so.”

She sighed. “I doubt I’ll be around that long.”

“He didn’t mean it.” Brannon reached for the handheld game again. “Nicholas is stubborn as hell, and he’s decided the only way to get Koss to leave you alone is to make him think he doesn’t love you.”

“That’s not it. He would have said something—”

“Yeah, ‘cause you’d be convincing if you knew,” he said with mild sarcasm. He touched her hand casually. “Look, he’s not an easy man to get close to. He’s doing his best to push you away, because he’s trying to convince himself he doesn’t love you any longer. It’s the safest thing for you.”

She set the apple on the table, finding her appetite gone. “That’s stupid. Koss will hurt me either way.”

He nodded. “That’s what Nicholas hasn’t realized. Even if he didn’t love you anymore, Koss would know he had loved you once. And he’ll do anything to hurt him. If he can’t have Nicholas, he doesn’t want him to be happy with anyone else.”

“Why can’t he let Nicholas go?” She clenched her hands together. “Would he if I left Nicholas? If Koss knows Nicholas can’t have me, won’t he—”

“No.” Brannon spoke abruptly. “Part of torturing Nicholas includes watching him suffer each time you die. He promised Johanna he could make her mistress of Tremont Plantation if she betrayed Elspeth’s secret. Whom do you think twisted Tremont’s mind to convince him spend a year torturing Elspeth, a woman he was in love with? He convinced Tremont to marry Johanna, and he was the one who planted the idea of Tremont killing her right before Nicholas returned. It took Nicholas years to break Koss’s hold on the man and discover he wasn’t as evil as he had seemed. He loved Elspeth, and in the end, he was a victim, just like the rest of us. That’s what allowed Nicholas and Tremont to form a rapport despite the anguish they had caused each other. Their common hatred of Koss united them in a way I wouldn’t have imagined possible.”

“What about Erukán? Did he influence her death?”

Brannon shook his head. “No, Koss didn’t know about you then. He knew about reincarnation, but didn’t know Nicholas had found out about it. I have no doubt he would have been involved with killing you in that life if he’d had the chance, but the conquistadors beat him to it.” He gave her a sardonic grin. “Poor Koss.”

She didn’t respond to his black humor. “He wasn’t content to wait for someone else to harm Erin, I guess.”

“No, I guess not.” Brannon sighed. “I should have been here to protect you.”

Her eyes widened. “You knew Erin?”

He nodded. “Oh, yes. She was a bonny lass,” he said in a terrible Scottish accent. “Though I was already older than her when she married Nicholas, she was kind of like a mother to me.” His mouth

drooped. “She was the only one who didn’t try to dissuade me when I went after Koss.”

Emily’s brow furrowed. “Why would you go after Koss?”

He touched his sunglasses. “He took my eyes the same night he took my wife. I thought it was to hurt Nicholas in the beginning.” A bitter laugh escaped him. “Can you believe it? The sick bastard became infatuated with Nina, and he just took her.”

She started at the mention of his wife’s name, remembering the woman from the church. She didn’t need to ask the outcome.

“No, I guess you don’t.” He sounded weary. “By the time I caught up with them, he had her convinced she was in love with him. She told me it was all her idea, but I knew that was a lie. If you remembered Nina…”

She shivered, recalling the cold woman from her memory of Erin’s death.

“She wasn’t like that before he twisted her mind,” he said in a hard voice. Brannon’s mouth straightened. “I apologize. I have no right to read your thoughts and then argue with them. It’s more difficult to maintain a distance when I’m distraught.”

A memory stirred at the back of her mind, and she frowned, struggling to focus on it. A flash of Brannon’s face—several years younger and not lined with the cares of the world—came to her. She remembered them laughing together as they stood in the chapel. She knew the image must be from Erin’s lifetime, because the church was long gone. She scrunched her brow. What were they doing in the chapel? Had he witnessed her wedding? No, that didn’t seem right.

An image of Nina came to her as well. She wasn’t smiling like Brannon. Rather, she looked tired and strained, and there was a sullen set to her lips. She held a child in her arms. “What happened to your son?” she blurted out without thought.

Brannon flinched, but didn’t shy away from answering. “I wish I knew. Nina took him with her the night Koss attacked us, but when I caught up with them, he was gone. Koss nearly killed me that night.” His mouth twisted. “Do you know why he spared my life?”

She shook her head, leaning forward.

“So I could live with the agony of not knowing what they had done with my son, not knowing if he was alive or dead.”

The raw pain in his tone made Emily reach out to him. She grasped his hand in hers and squeezed, rubbing her thumb across the back of his hand. “Oh, Brannon—”

“If you two are through cozying up in the corner, I could use your help,” Nicholas said, approaching the table. “The supplies are laid in, and we need to ensure the perimeter is secure before we lock down the castle with ourselves inside. I want to be certain this really is a fortress before we close it to the outside world.” He looked angry, and his eyes lingered on their joined hands.

She looked up at him, pushing back the twinge of guilt. Holding Brannon’s hand was innocent, but even if it wasn’t, she didn’t owe him any explanations. She was a free agent since he didn’t love her anymore. She met his gaze defiantly, not relinquishing his nephew’s hand.

Brannon snorted softly as he moved his hand and got to his feet. He seemed to have cast off the bad memories haunting him, but for the slight slumping of his shoulders and grim lines around his mouth.

\* \* \* \* \*

They met back in the hall after examining each section of the castle, nearly two hours later. Nicholas stepped into the falling rain, wearing a light jacket, and ran to the gatehouse. The portcullis came down seconds after he stepped inside the small stone structure, and Emily assumed it worked by some electronic means. As he ran across the courtyard, the lightning flashed, and the rain began falling with more force.

He entered the castle, shaking out his wet hair, not bothering to take off the jacket before he and Brannon closed the doors. He glanced at both of them before turning the key in the lock. “No one gets in, and no one gets out until this is over.” The lock clicked, and he slipped the key back into the pocket of his jeans. Their eyes met briefly, but he looked away without speaking, then turned and walked to the staircase without looking back.

“Hungry?” Brannon asked.

She started to shake her head, but her stomach growled. “Yeah, I guess.”

“You like pizza?”

“Of course, but I thought no one could get in.”

“I’ll make it.” He offered her his arm. “I’m pretty handy in the kitchen, and Nicholas ordered enough supplies to last months.”

She looped her arm through his and walked with him into the kitchen. At some point in the last decade, Nicholas had upgraded the kitchen. An industrial size dishwasher and refrigerator nestled into an alcove near the stove, built into the cabinets. Somehow, the mix of ancient and modern looked more right than she would have believed.

Brannon gestured to the island in the center of the kitchen. “Hop up on one of those stools. You can help me chop vegetables.”

She went to a stool and clambered up, watching as he walked to the fridge and opened the crisper. “Do you need help?”

“Nah, I know which vegetable I’m holding by touching it. If all else fails, there’s always my nose.” The opened steel door muffled his voice, until he turned to face her, bearing an armful of produce bags. “Are there knives on the island?”

She glanced at the block of knives with wooden handles. “Uh-huh.” She extracted a chopping knife, noting how sharp it was. Would it make a good weapon? “Um, if Koss comes—”

“When,” he inserted quietly as he set the bags on the Formica surface.

She cleared her throat. “When he comes, how will I defend myself?”

His brows drew together, and he made a sound low in his throat. “Good question. Guns against vampires are mostly ineffective. They heal too fast, and it’s almost impossible to do permanent injury.”

She reached for a bag of bell peppers, extracting a red one. “I don’t know how to use a gun anyway.”

“Hmm. How about a sword?”

She shook her head. “No.”

Brannon unwrapped a carton of Portobello mushrooms and took out two large ones. “Are you a quick study?”

“It depends. Ask my parents about academics, and they’d probably say no. I had a high GPA in high school because the work was easy, not because I applied myself. Same with college.” She grinned, remembering how frustrated her father had been when she hadn’t been able to decide on a college, let alone a major. “They were annoyed when I decided to go to the local junior college with Sara for a couple of years. They thought I was wasting my potential, or something like that.”

“Why’d you go there?” Brannon popped a bite of the mushroom in his mouth, chewing it before saying, “Nicholas told me you’ve been accepted to NYU. You’re going next semester.”

“I didn’t want to go to college at all. It was a compromise.” She tried to be casual when she asked, “When did he tell you about NYU?”

“When he told me I had to fix everything I’d messed up for you. He said it was important to deal with Koss before you had to be at college.”

She stabbed the knife through the pepper with more force than was necessary. “He’s decided I’m going and that’s it, is it?”

“You know Nicholas. He’s stubborn.”

She slashed at a small section of the pepper, thinking it yielded too easily to the knife. “So am I.” If he thought he could go on making her decisions, he had another think coming. Rather than yell at Brannon for something Nicholas had done, she shifted the topic back to Koss. “How will Nicholas get Koss to come into the open? The way I understand it, he likes to draw out his games.”

“We won’t have to lure Koss.”

“You sound positive about that, but you weren’t sure the last time I asked.” Her eyes widened at his confident tone. “What changed?”

“I know he’ll come to us, and soon.”

She stopped chopping and looked up at him. “How do you know?”

“I had a vision. It wasn’t clear enough to pinpoint exactly when, but it happened here. We all wore about the same style of clothes, and I didn’t look any older. It’s just a feeling, but I think it’ll only be a matter of days. Weeks, at most.”

How could he sound so calm about it? She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Have you ever been

wrong?”

“No.”

“What happened in the vision?” she forced herself to ask.

He hesitated, and even his fingers stopped chopping the tomato he had moved on to after finishing the mushrooms. “It was obscure—”

“Brannon?”

He took a deep breath and looked in her direction. “He held a sword to your throat. I got the sense neither Nicholas nor I could stop him.”

Her heart rate, already slow, seemed to still completely. It was a long second before her heart began beating sluggishly again. “He’s going to kill me?”

“No, we won’t let that won’t happen.”

“But you’re never wrong,” she said stridently.

Brannon shook his head. “Nicholas and I will both do our best to protect you, but I won’t let you go into the situation helplessly. I may not be able to teach you much in the time we have, but you won’t be completely defenseless.”

“So it’ll just take longer for me to die.” Emily didn’t like the stark acceptance in her voice. She wanted to be in a fighting frame of mind, not weak and powerless. She didn’t want to be dependent on Nicholas and Brannon, but what chance did she have against Koss?

Brannon apparently couldn’t find an answer to her statement, because he picked up the knife again and started chopping the tomato without looking up. They worked in silence, moving mechanically.

She wondered how she would manage to eat, knowing this meal might be her last. If not this one, then surely some meal would be in the coming days. Knowing she had already died and returned several times should have brought her comfort, but she knew there would be no coming back this time, not as Emily anyway. Koss would see to that. And if Nicholas really didn’t love her any longer, he wouldn’t bother to look for her again. She would live the rest of her lives with no memories of ever having loved him or being loved by him, because he wouldn’t be there to remind her. That thought worried her more than facing death.

\* \* \* \* \*

“This sword should work for you. Notice how plain it is, but sturdy too?”

Emily stood in the center of the round weapons’ room, located in one of the castle’s four towers, holding the sword Brannon had handed her. She was barely able to lift it, more due to its length than weight. “It’s awkward.”

“Yes, but it does major damage—see how sharp the double-edge blade is? That one dates back to Nicholas’s ancestor. He carried it into battle when the Normans invaded Briton.”

“It looks sort of like a long metal club.” She grunted as she tried to lift the heavy sword. The only decoration was the crest etched into the brass ferrule. “Was he a Saxon?”

Brannon laughed. “No. He was part of the invading force. In case you hadn’t noticed, Nicholas doesn’t exactly have the Saxon look.”

“No, I guess not.” She felt her wrist weakening, and she was relieved when Brannon stepped behind her to support her arm. “You do though.”

“My mother was French. I get my coloring from her.” He spoke abruptly, indicating he didn’t want to speak about that topic. “There are five basic moves in sword fighting.”

He cupped his hand over hers and helped her raise it fully. Together, with him guiding, they swung the sword in a tiny arc. “That’s the cut. The objective is to connect the tip of the sword with your opponent’s body. When you’ve done so, you make a small swing to leave a cut. The preferred place is a location where the enemy will bleed to death.” He helped her repeat the motion. “When dealing with a vampire, the cut is ineffectual unless you manage to sever the spinal column completely.”

She swung the sword again, growing used to its weight. “The cut,” she repeated.

He kept his hand over hers. “Usually, the cut won’t have enough force to get through the spinal column. You have to use the swing.” He brought her arm all the way back, and then swung forward with a lot of force.

Emily’s arm protested as the sword sliced through the air, wrenching from her hand to clang against the stone floor. She rubbed her wrist and looked up at him. “Sorry. Maybe I should start with a smaller sword.”

“Go get it.” He stood there, speaking as she walked to retrieve the sword. “Normally, I’d start you with a practice sword, but it would take months to teach you anything. You need a solid sword if you’re going up against Koss, and I don’t have time to baby you.”

She nodded. “I understand.” Emily stepped in front of him again, and he cupped his hand over hers, lining up their arms. She was ready for the brunt of the swing this time, and her arm moved more smoothly. “This is for cutting the spinal cord?”

“And hacking off limbs, cutting deeply into trunks, and lopping off heads.” He spoke matter-of-factly. “If you get the chance, take off his head. Vampires can’t sprout a new one.”

She shuddered, picturing cutting off Koss’s head. Despite some of her darker impulses, she couldn’t embrace that image. “You mentioned five.”

“Yeah.” He supported her wrist when he brought the sword near her side. Suddenly, he pushed her arm forward, extending the sword out parallel to the ground with vicious force. “The thrust. If the enemy leaves himself open, that’s your best bet. Aim for his heart and twist the sword. Once he’s down on his knees—and even a vampire can’t withstand that kind of pain easily—you cut out his heart. Quick and brutal. He won’t show you any mercy.”

She nodded, imitating the movement again. “What else?”

“The last two are defensive moves.” He paused. “The truth is, I don’t think you’ll have much need for

these. If you get in a position of a sword fight with Koss, it's all over. You can't beat him. Your best chance is to take him by surprise."

"Show me," she said forcefully. She didn't even want to imagine facing Koss in battle with a sword as her only protection, but was determined to learn everything she could.

He nodded. "This is the block. It's hard to show it to you without another swordsman. Basically, you just anticipate your opponent's move and try to block his sword with yours."

She gave the sword an experimental swing, grimacing as it pulled on her wrist. "And the last one?"

"The parry." He positioned her in front of him. "Put your sword down, tip first. Yeah, that's it. Line up the tip with the hilt. You wait until your opponent moves, and then you move your sword, just as his point draws near your blade." He stepped away from her. "Let me show you."

Emily held the sword at her side as Brannon walked to a wall of the weapons' room where a rack of swords hung. He picked up the hilt of one unerringly before returning to her. "Go slow and easy, okay? I don't think you can kill me, but I'm not a big fan of pain."

She swallowed her nerves and grasped the sword. "I'm ready."

"Okay." He swung his sword in a small arc.

Emily brought up the sword and blocked him, pleased by the clang of steel against steel. When he came at her from the other direction, she blocked again. As he thrust at her, she dropped her sword into the vertical position to parry. She moved too slowly, and the tip of his sword sliced her arm. With a hiss of pain, she dropped the weapon.

"I'm sorry. How badly are you hurt?" Brannon laid his sword on the floor before approaching her.

"I'll live." The wound burned, but it was already closing. More damage had been done to her sweater than anything. She knelt to pick up her sword again. "Let's go."

"Are you sure? Maybe we should take a break."

She shook her head. "No. I want to learn this."

With a shrug, Brannon returned to pick up his sword. He stood still. "This time, you attack me."

Emily went at him with a cut, which he blocked easily. She tried swinging from the other direction, and he blocked again. She was soon caught up in the rhythm of moving the sword and became accustomed to the weight, losing track of time as she kept swinging at Brannon, looking for an opening.

She finally saw one and brought back her arm to swing, not putting much strength to the swing since neither of them wore protective clothing. Her intention was to stop the point against his leg, but the sword clanged against another blade as she brought it forward. The shock caused her to drop the sword, and she turned to see Nicholas holding a weapon.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, anger evident, as he faced Brannon. "Do you know how irresponsible this is?"

“She’s doing well,” Brannon said in a mild tone.

Nicholas scoffed. “It’s a recipe for disaster, pairing a novice with a blind swordsman. You’re going to get killed, or she will.”

“That’ll save Koss the effort, won’t it?” She brought her hands to her hips, forcing his attention back to her by stepping into his line of vision. “I guess you planned to let me go into this defenseless. At least Brannon’s trying to help me.”

“Brannon’s going to get you killed. He’ll fill your head with stupid confidence, and you’ll be convinced you can take on the world.” He lowered his sword. “Don’t be a fool, Emily.”

“Should I wait for you to protect me? Look how well you’ve done that job for the last eight hundred years.” Even as she said it, Emily longed to call it back. She saw how white his complexion got and the way he swayed. She reached out to steady him, but arrested the motion upon seeing the anger in his eyes.

“Leave us, Brannon.”

“Nicholas—”

“Now! If she wants a lesson, I’ll give her one.” His voice was barely above a whisper, but it vibrated with anger.

Brannon crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not going to let you hurt her.”

“This is between us. She’ll walk away.” He turned his back on his nephew to meet Emily’s eyes. Rage burned in his black depths. “Tell him to go, Emily.”

She swallowed her fear and nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

“Emily, you don’t know—”

“Please.” Fear hummed in her veins, but so did a curious sense of excitement. “I want to do this.”

He left the weapons’ room, muttering under his breath. When he had gone, Nicholas gestured toward her sword. “Pick it up.”

She pursed her lips and bent to retrieve the sword. With a false sense of bravado, she lifted it and faced him. “I’m rea—” Before she had finished speaking, he thrust forward with his sword. She barely deflected it in time, and didn’t get a chance to counter his cut. He sliced through her shoulder in the blink of an eye, causing tears to well in her eyes.

Emily retaliated by thrusting the sword at him, but he parried easily and countered with a hard swing. Her hand broke under the stress of the blow, and she dropped the sword, cradling her hand against her chest. She could feel the bone reforming, and the pain brought tears to her eyes. Before she could surrender, he sliced her leg with his sword. She cried out and fell to her knees.

“That’s how fast it would be over for you. Look at you.” His tone was scathing, as was his gaze when it raked her. “You’re bleeding and two seconds from collapsing. I haven’t even broken into a sweat.”



“Yeah, you’re amazing,” she said, maintaining her front of courage as her hand finished healing, and the pain faded. She tossed her head, sending waves of chestnut hair cascading down her back. Her eyes widened when he brought the tip of the sword against her throat. She leaned back automatically as he pressed closer. Even when she fell backwards onto the stone floor, he didn’t let up. Instead, he pressed the tip in deeper. She raked her fangs over her lips when she drew in a breath as hot pain flared in her neck. “Please.”

“If I were Koss, you’d already be dead.” He kept the sword steady against her throat. “He has no pity. Don’t you understand? If he gets past Brannon or me, you’re as good as dead.”

She swallowed as he jabbed her once more before withdrawing the sword. She touched her throat and found a wound oozing blood. “You want me to be defenseless?”

He held out a hand to help her up.

She accepted it warily, wondering if he would attack her again. Instead, he pulled her to her feet, and she stood beside him. She was so close she could smell the trace of copper on his breath, indicating he had fed recently. She licked her lips without thought as she stared at the artery pounding in his throat.

“You are helpless against him.”

She wrenched her gaze from his neck to meet his eyes, not missing the dart of desire in his eyes when she stepped closer. “Show me something. Anything. I want to be able to defend myself.”

He cleared his throat as he stepped away. He stopped to lift her sword and Brannon’s before carrying all three to the wall and returning them to their positions. Then he moved to a rack of daggers, studying them for a moment before lifting a short one with a thin blade. He returned to her and held it out.

Emily looked down at the dagger doubtfully. She lifted it from his hand. “A dagger didn’t help Erin.”

He looked startled. “What dagger?”

She turned over the dagger, examining the intricate design of the handle as she spoke. “She’d had a witch put a spell on the dagger, but it made no difference. Koss took it through the heart and pulled it out easily enough.” She looked up when Nicholas’s hand fastened on her arm.

“Why? Why would she do that?”

She licked her lips, remembering Nicholas hadn’t known about Erin’s gifts. “She had a vision about Koss. She knew he would come that night and tried to be ready. She didn’t tell you about her abilities because she knew she would have to tell you about her fate.” She couldn’t keep the pleading from her voice when she said, “Don’t leave me as vulnerable as she was. I don’t want to die that way.”

He looked stricken as he reeled away from her. “She knew he was coming. Why didn’t she tell me?”

“She thought you would be killed as well if you stayed at Vallsade Manor.” Emily bowed her head. “She didn’t know they would stay around to torture you after her death.”

He shook his head. “How could she keep it from me all those years? I had no idea. I was surprised when she didn’t develop even an iota of psychic ability, but she said she must not be suited for it.” A harsh laugh escaped him. “She lied to me for eighteen years.”

Emily took a step toward him. “She was protecting you.”

“She didn’t even give me the chance to save her or our daughter,” he said with a snarl as he turned on her, gathering her in his arms. “She was a blind fool. She should have known she didn’t stand a chance—”

“She did,” Emily interrupted. “That’s why she made you promise to change me, before she even came to Vallsade Manor. She knew how she would die. Erin knew things...things I can’t begin to remember.”

He sagged against her, and his chin rested on the top of her head. “How could she have made that decision without me? She chose her fate and our daughter’s.”

“She thought she was making the right choice.”

“She was wrong.” His tone lacked the anger of before. In its place was weary acceptance. “She had no right.”

“So you’re saying it was wrong of her to make choices without consulting you, even if she thought they were for the best?” Emily tried to be gentle with her prodding.

He lifted his head to meet her eyes. “What are you getting at?”

“I know you think you’re doing what’s best for me, but it should be my decision whether I want to go back to New York, or if I want to stay here with you.” She touched his cheek, waiting to see if he would push her away. “Your pretense won’t fool Koss. All it will do is hurt both of us.”

He flinched. “What pretense?”

She pressed herself closer to him. “I know you’re trying to convince yourself you don’t love me so Koss won’t hurt me, but it’s too late. He’ll kill me anyway, even if you make yourself believe our love is dead.” She wrapped her arms around his waist, taking a chance. “I don’t want to spend my last few days fighting with you or hurting because of you. I want to be with you.”

He remained stiff in her embrace. “Emily, we can’t do this. You have to go home. I can’t lose you again.”

She pressed her cheek against his chest, clinging to him when he tried to push her away. “What do I have to go home to? My place is with you now. It took me a long time to realize that, but now I know who I am and who I was.” She lifted her head to meet his gaze. “I know how I felt about you, and I know how I feel now, although you’ve done your best to dissuade me the last few days.”

“Emily—”

“I love—”

He pressed his fingers to her lips. “No, don’t say it. You’ll seal your fate.”

She turned her head to free her lips. “I love you. I’d rather spend a week in your arms than an eternity away from you. If my love for you means my death, I can accept that.”

He shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re saying. Your life’s been turned around. You’ve gone from hating me to loving me in a few days?” he asked with more than a hint of skepticism in his tone. “I don’t think so.”

She nodded forcefully. “I know how I feel. Once the pieces fell into place, it all made sense. I just needed to regain my memory.”

He shook his head more emphatically. “It’s fear, that’s all. You’ve realized there is more evil in the world than just me. I seem safe in comparison to Koss, so you think you have to align with me. You don’t. I’m prepared to let you go if we defeat Koss. You don’t have to buy my protection. After what I did to you, I owe you—”

She sighed at his stubbornness. “Answer one question for me.”

He eyed her with obvious trepidation. “What?”

“Do you love me? Or did you mean it when you said you wanted to move on? I can’t ever replace Erin, because though I have her soul, I’m not her. I’m not Emma, Erukán, or Elspeth either. I’m just me. Emily. If you can’t love me as me, then I’ll leave. But if you do love me, tell me, for God’s sake. Don’t waste what may be our last few days together.” She tightened her hold on him. “Am I enough for you?” She held her breath, awaiting his answer.

## Chapter Seventeen

He cupped her face in his hands. “Do you know what you’re doing to me?”

Emily nodded. “Yes. At least, I hope I do.” She pressed her body closer to his, feeling proof of his arousal against her hip. “Do you want me?”

He groaned, but didn’t answer.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Do you love me?”

“You know I do.” Nicholas sounded as if the admission hurt as it was wrenched from him. “Jesus, Emily, you know I love you.”

She sagged against him, so relieved by his admission that tears came to her eyes. She began sobbing, and he patted her back in an awkward display of comfort. Burrowing closer, she inhaled, enjoying the smell and feel of him.

“Why are you crying? Are you upset? Isn’t this what you wanted?” There was a note of confusion mingled with distress in his voice.

She shook her head, unable to speak. Instead, she clung to him until she was able to stem the flow of tears and catch her breath. She lifted her head and gazed into his eyes, seeing his concern, but more importantly, feeling it. Their minds were bonding as they had the night his father died, but this time their common link was pleasure, not grief. She stretched on her toes to press her lips to his as she saw him picturing her do that. He didn’t pretend to resist, she noted with satisfaction, as her mouth moved over

his. Emily softened her lips against his at the same time as she brought up her hands to tangle them in his hair.

His lips seemed determined to mold themselves to hers as he crushed his mouth on hers. Emily moaned under the onslaught, as she pressed closer still. Warmth spread through her stomach and moved to her pussy. Her nipples hardened as his tongue stroked hers, and she responded in kind.

She lowered her hands to his shirt, tearing at the cotton pullover to pull it free from the waist of his jeans. She pushed up the red material and stroked his firm skin, pausing to trace his abs with her fingertips. Emily broke the kiss to lower her head to taste him, licking his stomach and up his lightly furred chest, to the vein above his heart.

With more leisure than hunger, her fangs penetrated his skin. Nicholas's blood flowed into her mouth, and she lapped it away as each drop beaded on her tongue. His hands were at the hem of her sweater, pushing it up. As his nails dug into the flesh of her back, she arched against him, lifting her head to meet his gaze, seeing the red burning in his eyes. She knew hers must reflect the same thing, and reveled in her lack of control.

"My room," he said in a husky tone as he pushed the sweater over her head, snagging her arms in the sleeves for a moment before he was able to work it free. He threw it away from them.

She shook her head. "It's too far away. I want you now, Nicholas." Emily pulled off his shirt and tossed it into the corner to join hers. A line of blood oozed down his chest from the wound she had made, and she caught it at his nipple, licking it away before pausing to lave the rigid peak. He gasped, and her pussy tingled with spreading warmth.

With an impatient growl, Nicholas unhooked her bra and ripped it away, breaking the straps in the process. She winced at the brief pain, but he soon distracted her by lifting her into his arms, and Emily locked her legs around his waist as he walked. She jerked with surprise when her back touched the cool stone of the weapons' room, having thought he was taking her to his room. She kept her legs locked around his waist as his mouth dipped down to taste her nipple. The bud tightened under his tongue, and she groaned when his incisor raked across her sensitive flesh, leaving a shallow furrow. The tang of her blood on his tongue flooded her mouth, increasing her arousal even more, and she rotated her hips against his hard cock.

Emily pressed her back against the wall and splayed her arms, offering her breasts for his consumption. As he continued suckling, one of his hands cupped the neglected breast, and his fingers lightly pinched that nipple. Emily ground her pussy against his cock, feeling it spasm against the confines of his jeans.

She brought her hands to his waistband to unsnap the jeans before undoing the zipper. His cock pressed against the cotton barrier of his briefs, and she stroked him, feeling him harden even more under her fingers. A cry escaped her when Nicholas lifted his head from her breast as he pushed her against the wall, holding her against it with his lower body pinned against hers. Her pussy fluttered when he pushed his cock against her.

Emily wanted to feel his skin against hers, and she wiggled her fingers. Her hands had been trapped between their bodies, and she eased them out. Immediately, she ventured to the elastic band of his briefs to slip her fingers inside, caressing his smooth cock. Stroking his cock was as familiar to her as breathing. She closed her eyes, remembering how it was to have his cock thrusting inside her pussy. In her mind, his pleasure mingled with hers, causing her clitoris to swell as her arousal increased.

“Emily?” Her name on his lips was more of a rasp than an actual word.

She opened her dragging eyelids to meet his gaze. “Yes?”

“Are you sure this is what you want?” A frown marred his lips. “I won’t be able to let you go if you give yourself to me.”

“I know.” She fondled his cock, grinning when he moaned. “I’m not giving myself to you.”

Sweat beaded his brow, and he looked to be in pain as he started to ease her away. He nodded, and his bland expression almost succeeded in hiding his discomfort and disappointment. “I understand.”

Emily pushed more firmly against him and leaned forward to brush her lips against his ear while pressing her finger to his lips. “I’m taking you inside me. This is my choice.”

In seconds, she was lying on the floor, not even noticing the hard stone under her. She focused solely on assisting Nicholas to remove her pants and his. When he returned to her, she held out her arms, drawing his skin against hers. She parted her thighs and nestled his cock with her pussy, waiting for him to enter her, but he didn’t move. She frowned. “I’m sure. You don’t have to worry—”

“It’s not that.” He pushed back long strands of his hair that had escaped his ponytail during their passionate embrace. “I don’t have any protection.”

The lessons she had learned in Sex Ed flashed through her mind, but they weren’t compelling enough to make her stop. She couldn’t focus on trivial things like STIs and pregnancy when she was this close to joining with Nicholas. Now she knew how people could be so irresponsible. “I don’t care.” She lifted her hips, taking his cock inside her. A burning sensation caused her pussy to contract, but it faded as quickly as it came. As Nicholas thrust into her, all she felt was pleasure. His and hers, whirling together inside her mind, so real she could almost see it. She arched her back and matched his rhythm, not caring about anything in the world at that moment besides belonging to Nicholas.

He sought out her clit between their fused bodies, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. Emily’s passion escaped in a loud cry, uncaring right then if anyone heard her. She arched her hips, frantic to match his movement and get more of his touch. Nicholas surged inside her with equal fervor, also voicing his pleasure. As his cock spasmed inside her, her pussy contracted around him, and the orgasm swept over her, stealing her breath and all ability to think.

As he came inside her, Emily held tightly to him, feeling complete for the first time in this incarnation. Now, she knew how their love had endured eight hundred years for him, how it had become an obsession he couldn’t break free from.

His entire body trembled as he braced himself on his arms and bent his head to kiss her on the mouth. “Thank you.”

She looked up at him with dazed eyes. “Why?”

“For making this choice, for coming back to me.” He closed his eyes. “I can’t lose you again.”

“You won’t.” She uttered the assurance automatically, while wrapping her arms around Nicholas to pull him down into her embrace. As he lay with his head buried against her chest, she struggled to fight back tears, not wanting to reveal the sadness overtaking her. In all her other lives, their moments of happiness

had been all too brief, despite their earth-shattering intensity. Would this time be any different?

\* \* \* \* \*

Emily awoke with her heart pounding in her ears. For the first time in the six days since she had moved into Nicholas's room, she had a sense of disorientation at waking so abruptly, and it took several seconds for her to realize where she was. She pulled the covers higher across her shoulders and turned her head to look at Nicholas. He slept on his side, turned away from her, snoring softly. What had awakened her?

"Emily." Her name was a soft whisper, but the voice held a note of menace.

She sat up in bed, looking around, searching for the voice. It hadn't been Nicholas's. "Brannon?" she asked, although she knew it wasn't his voice either.

"Emily, my love, let us come in to play."

She shivered as the voice spoke again, realizing she didn't hear it from an external source, but rather from inside her head. She clapped her hands to her ears, shaking her head, wanting to deny what was happening.

"We want to have fun, Emily. Won't you let us in?"

"No," she screamed. Nicholas didn't even flinch at her raised voice. She turned to him and shook his shoulder. "Wake up. He's in my mind. Nicholas? Nicholas!" She shook him frantically, but he slept on.

"He can't hear you, Emily. It's just you and I, dearest. Open for me."

Koss's voice slithered through her mind like a snake. The way he kept saying her name was almost as creepy as just having him in her thoughts. "No," she said again, but with less force.

"Emily, let me in." He spoke more forcefully.

She shook her head, whimpering when she realized her feet were out of the bed, touching the cold stone floor. "I won't do it. You can't come in." She tried shouting, hoping to drown him out.

"Let me in, Emily. Do it. Now!" His voice reverberated through her skull.

Emily cradled her head as she got to her feet. A blinding light flashed behind her eyes, and blood poured from her nose. She fumbled on a robe without thought as she shuffled to the window, pressing the sleeve to her leaking nose. She tried to turn around, but her feet wouldn't cooperate. When she reached out to touch the steel lock on the shutters, she screamed again. "Help me, Nicholas." She closed her eyes, struggling to reach his mind and wake him. "Please," she said with a whimper as her fingers lifted the bolt. She tried to stop herself, but her hand moved independent of her brain in loosening the lock. With a light push from her, the shutters opened.

"Look down, Emily."

She leaned out the window at the voice's command, looking down at the courtyard. She saw Koss and Nina standing there. Tears flowed down her cheeks, and she tried to lift her arm to close the shutter again.

“No, no, dearest. Invite us up.” His voice had changed to a tender croon. “*You need to break the shield Nicholas and Brannon put on Vallsade Manor. Tell us to come up, and we can play.*”

“No,” she said under her breath, struggling to force her arm out to grab the shutters. Pain seared through her, and her hands dripped blood from thousands of tiny cuts that spontaneously appeared. With a cry of shock, she fell away from the window, stuffing her bleeding hands in the pockets of the robe.

“Emily, don’t displease me. Say the word. It’s so simple.” He sounded like her piano teacher, who had been frustrated when she couldn’t grasp scales. “*Open your mouth, Emily.*”

Unseen hands pried open her jaws. She bit down hard on her tongue, trying to keep in the word. Though blood flooded her mouth, the word emerged anyway. “Enter.” The hands released her, and she collapsed on the floor, sobbing. “Nicholas,” she screamed with all her strength.

The door to their room burst open, and Brannon stepped inside. His hair was disheveled, and he wore pajamas. The sword in his hands meshed incongruously with his nightwear. He turned pale and swayed when he saw the open window. “Did you invite him in?”

She nodded. “I tried to stop—”

He waved his hand as he rushed toward the window. “Help me.”

Even as he spoke, Koss and Nina appeared at the glass, seemingly hovering in midair. Nina waved, and a cold smile twisted her lips, giving her countenance a predatory appearance.

They didn’t seem bothered by Brannon closing the shutters and engaging the lock. He didn’t seem reassured by placing a barrier between them and the chamber as he rushed to Nicholas’s side, touching his forehead with a scowl. “Koss has him in a deep sleep.” He closed his eyes, seeming to be focusing all his thoughts on his uncle. He didn’t even look up when the shutters rattled in their frame.

Nicholas’s eyes opened with a gasp, and he sat up in bed. His eyes darted between Brannon and Emily. She made it to her feet and backed away from the clattering shutters. As she gained her footing, she broke into a run and rushed to his side, touching his face, unaware of smearing her blood on his skin, to reassure herself he was whole. “Darling? Can you hear me?”

He nodded, still looking dazed, but his eyes were alert. They fastened unerringly on the shutters, and he hurried from the bed, trading looks with Brannon as he slid on jeans before reaching for his sword. He didn’t bother with a shirt as he turned to her and pulled her into his arms for a long kiss.

She resisted the urge to cling to him when he pulled away. “I’m sorry. I tried to stop myself...”

He brushed his lips against hers once more. “It’s not your fault. I should have realized he would use you.” He met her eyes. “I love you, Emily.”

She swallowed the thick lump of moisture in her throat. “I love you too, Nicholas.”

“Whatever happens...” He trailed off, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “If something happens to you, I’ll find you if I can.”

“If something happens to you...” She swallowed. “I’ll find you if...if I can.”

“Nicholas.” Brannon’s frantic tone drew their attention back to the window as the shutters tore free to go spinning into the night, followed by the pane of glass ripping from the stone casement intact, to join the shutters wherever they might land.

Koss and Nina stepped inside, seemingly not at all bothered by their hostile reception. They didn’t speak, and neither Nicholas nor Brannon seemed anxious to break the eerie silence that accompanied them.

Emily stuffed her hand against her mouth, discovering the cuts had healed, but traces of blood remained on her hands. She touched her nose, relieved to find it was no longer bleeding. Unconsciously, she wiped her hands against the front of the robe as she fell back into the shadows. She didn’t want to appear timid, but knew Nicholas and Brannon would do better if they didn’t have to worry about her being in the way. She slipped her hand into the pocket of her robe and clutched the handle of the silver dagger Brannon had given her, glazed with the venom of the beaked sea snake. She would have just one chance, and only if Koss got near enough for her to seize it.

Nina made the first move, lunging toward Brannon after she removed a sword from the sheath in her coat’s lining. Brannon blocked her swing, and their swords sang to each other at first contact. He moved warily, seeming to wait for her to attack.

Emily held her breath as Nina’s sword came within a hairsbreadth of Brannon’s neck before he sidestepped her. She bit her lip when he swung his sword at the woman, slicing through the thick leather of her coat and into her stomach.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Nina.” He spoke calmly, but his hand seemed slightly unsteady on the hilt of his sword. “That doesn’t mean I won’t.”

“Oh, good.” She touched her arm and then brought her hand to her lips, licking it clean. “Because I want to hurt you, *husband*. I want you to die. You’ve been an albatross around my neck for far too long.”

Brannon stepped back and parried as she thrust her sword at him, not bothering to speak again as he continued to defend himself, without taking the offensive. He seemed to do just enough to keep her at bay, without trying to hurt her.

Emily had gotten so caught up in watching Brannon and Nina spar that she jumped with surprise when she heard Nicholas’s blade clang against Koss’s. Her eyes instantly settled on them, and she watched as they took turns swinging at each other. Their movements were graceful and precise. If she hadn’t known better, she might have assumed they were fencers in an exhibition match.

She couldn’t hold back a cry when Koss made the first cut on Nicholas, slicing halfway through his bare stomach before withdrawing his sword. She wanted to rush to him, but held herself back, knowing she couldn’t help him. She balled her hands into fists and pressed her back against the wall, watching as Nicholas struggled to stay on his feet and hold his sword.

The stifled cry escaped her when Koss lifted his sword and swung down on Nicholas’s with all his strength. In his weakened condition, Nicholas couldn’t hold the sword, and it fell from his hand. Pressing his advantage, Koss cut the side of Nicholas’s leg, shredding his jeans, and causing him to fall to his knees.

She heard Brannon grunt and turned to glance at him, finding Nina had disarmed him. Brannon was



pushing against her wrist, but wasn't making much headway in inching away the knife she held at his throat. Her strange eyes gleamed when she pressed the blade deeper, causing a ribbon of blood to stream down his neck. She held the sword in the parry position at her side.

"Nina, love," Koss said in a warning tone.

With a glare in his direction, she pulled back slightly. "On your knees."

"No way." Brannon reached for the knife, but in doing so, he exposed his torso. A hiss of air escaped him as she plunged her sword through his upper body, narrowly missing his heart, and lodging the sword between his ribs. His complexion paled, and he collapsed onto the floor, hugging his stomach as he curled into a ball.

"Brannon," Emily shouted, rushing forward.

"Stop, dearest."

Koss's voice drew her up short, and she turned to gaze at him with frightened eyes, unable to hold in a whimper when she saw Nina pull her sword from Brannon's chest and approach Nicholas.

She brought the tip against the back of his neck with more force than was necessary, causing Nicholas to grunt, but he didn't cry out. Nina licked her lips, and her eyes shone with anticipation.

Koss withdrew the sword he had held against Nicholas's chest and crooked his finger at Emily. "Come to me, Emily."

"Don't do it," Nicholas said. Nina gouged the sword deeper into his flesh when he spoke.

Emily couldn't make her feet move. She glanced at Brannon, surprised to see he was sitting up slowly. Her gaze swung back to Nicholas, taking in the lines of pain on his face as he maintained his strong façade in the face of Nina's knife and sword. Her heart wrenched as she moved her eyes to Koss. He caught her gaze, and her feet were suddenly moving. She tried to resist, and a blinding light flashed behind her eyes again.

"If you come willingly, I'll let him live."

"Don't," Brannon managed to say as he bent forward, clutching his middle. "He'll kill you."

She swallowed down her fear and let her feet take over. Too quickly, they carried her to Koss, pausing only once as Nicholas reached for her ankle before Nina's sword caused him to stop.

When she stood before Koss, she tilted up her chin, determined to meet him on her terms, not cowering at his feet.

He chuckled as he brought his sword to his side and used his other arm to draw her against him. "You're very brave and very foolish to come so willingly. You must be imagining all the terrible things I'll do to you." His mouth twisted into a patronizing smile. "You think I'm going to kill you."

"You're going to try." She was proud of the way her voice remained steady. Inside, she was a mass of quivering nerves, but knew she appeared fearless—as long as he couldn't smell her fear.

Koss shook his head. “No, not this time. I’ve thought of something better. I’m going to keep you, dear Emily. You see, each time I do away with you, Nicholas always manages to find you once more.” He dropped his sword on the floor so he could still hold her against him while caressing her cheek. “This time, he won’t be able to find you again—not if I keep you alive.”

“I’ll never let you take her,” Nicholas bit out through clenched teeth, with obvious difficulty, as Nina used her knife to draw designs on his back. “You’ll have to kill us all first.”

He made a clicking sound with his tongue. “You were always so stubborn, Nicholas. That’s unbecoming in a companion. You could have been my partner, my lover, but you threw away that chance when you crept out of my apartments like a rat in the shadows. You had me convinced of your love and loyalty before you betrayed me.”

Nicholas glared up at him. “I never loved you. Everything I did was with the goal in mind of getting back to Emma.”

Emily frowned as she saw a hint of pain darken Koss’s eyes. Could it be he truly loved Nicholas, or had at one point in the past? Had more than a desire to punish Nicholas for daring to leave him prompted his campaign of vengeance?

“Very perceptive.” He pulled her into his arms, bringing his mouth close to her ear. “I’ve searched through nearly five millennia to find my soul mate. I thought Nicholas was the one for a time, but now I know he isn’t. I was confused, you see. He’s just a piece of the puzzle…” He trailed off, seemingly lost in thought. “It’s up to me to bring it all together.”

She shook her head, confused by his statement. “Why can’t you just let him go?” She despised the note of pleading in her voice and forced her spine to stiffen. “Can’t you let us be happy?”

A strange expression flashed across his face. “Why should you be happy when I’m alone?”

She closed her eyes, seeing the futility of trying to reason with him. Emily slipped her hand into the pocket of the robe to grasp the dagger and steeled herself to plunge it through his chest. She tightened her hold on the handle as she pulled it from the robe and aimed for his heart.

He captured her arm halfway through her thrust. He didn’t seem upset. Only mildly amused. “You must learn to hide your thoughts, dear one.” He kept his tone light as he applied bone-breaking pressure to her hand, forcing her to drop the dagger. He didn’t stop until she was on her knees before him.

When he released her hand, Emily cradled it against her chest, fighting back the tears swimming in her eyes. She forced herself to meet his eyes. “I’d rather die than be your captive. Just kill me.”

He patted her head. “I think you’ll learn to love me. I know I look forward to loving you.” He flashed a look at Nicholas. “Share and share alike, right, Nicholas?”

Nicholas tried to get to his feet, but Nina pressed the sword deeper. “Go ahead,” she invited. “I would love to plunge this through your neck and be rid of you forever, Vallsade.”

“Don’t,” Emily cried. “Please don’t hurt him. I’ll do anything you want,” she said as she turned back to Koss.

Koss’s arrogant expression had changed to one of confusion. He stared at her intently, making an

ambiguous sound low in his throat as he looked down at her. Finally, he knelt beside her, but didn't reach out for her, other than to take her hand. "Close your eyes."

"I want to watch death coming," she said with false bravado, fearing the tremor in her voice betrayed her true emotions.

"Close your eyes, or I'll cut them out." His tone was cool, but his eyes reflected his determination. "Brannon can tell you the process is painful, especially if you don't heal as quickly as a vampire. Since you're one of us, your eyes will grow back, but it will hurt more than anything you've ever endured." He brushed a finger against her lid.

Emily closed her eyes, preparing herself to feel a sword at the back of her neck. She whimpered when Koss's hands dropped on her shoulders, then slid down her body, pausing to lightly caress her breasts before moving lower. His hand lingered on her stomach, pressing gently, and she fought to leave her pleas for mercy unvoiced. If he planned to defile her in front of Nicholas, she wouldn't show her torment. She would be strong for his sake.

To her surprise, he withdrew his hands and stood up. She cautiously opened her eyes to stare up at him, finding him facing away from her with his eyes closed.

"After all this time, it all becomes clear," he murmured under his breath, still not turning toward her.

Emily's gaze swept across the floor of the chamber, alighting on Koss's sword, lying just a few feet from her reach. She closed her eyes, concentrating on it with all her might. She didn't know if she had any telekinetic abilities, but needed that blade. She pictured it gliding through the air to the hand she extended.

A rattling sound had her opening her eyes just in time to see the weapon knock against the stones on the floor before it propelled itself through the air, straight at her. She cried out as she caught the blade, rather than the hilt, absorbing the pain of the cut as she leapt to her feet and turned the sword to grasp the hilt.

As Koss whirled around to face her, Emily plunged the sword through his heart and twisted with all her strength. He screamed as he fell to his knees, with blood streaming from the wound and trickling down his mouth. She continued twisting, until she heard Nicholas cry out.

She turned at the sound and saw Nina shoving the knife through his neck. "Let him go, or I'll kill Koss."

Nina's scream echoed through the room. It wasn't one of fear, but rather one of rage. She let go of the knife and kicked against Nicholas's back with her thick boot, causing him to slump to his side. She stormed at Emily, but froze when the sword twisted another inch.

"I'm close to cutting out his heart. If you want him to live, you'll both leave now."

Nina's eyes darted between her and Koss as she made her way to her lover. She knelt beside him. "What do I do?"

"Leave," Koss said in a raspy voice.

Emily pushed the sword in another inch. "I want your word you won't return. Swear to me you'll leave us alone."

With what seemed like a huge effort, Koss, managed to get to his feet, though the sword remained in his

chest with Emily grasping it in her trembling hands. "I release you, Nicholas. It was never you. I see that now," he added with marked ambiguousness.

Nicholas had gotten to his feet, and was now kneeling beside Brannon. He didn't acknowledge Koss's words with so much of a flicker of his eyelashes, concentrating instead on Emily. She met his eyes and smiled before turning back to Koss. Still feeling Nicholas's gaze on her, she drew strength from it. "I'll release you now. You're bound by your pledge."

"Can you trust me, sweet Emily? I may have no honor." He still sounded weak, but not as drained as he had a moment ago.

She nodded. "I know that, but I remember you forcing Nicholas to bind himself to you with his declaration. I assume your word is your bond." Hesitantly, she withdrew the sword, but didn't drop it. Instead, she kept it pointed at them as Koss lost his strength and leaned against Nina. "Get out."

"We will meet again," Koss said, seeming to muster his strength. "Different circumstances..." He trailed off, eyeing her with a strange glint in his eye. "Take care of your daughter. She will be precious to me."

"What?" Emily took a step forward, but Nicholas's hands on her shoulders restrained her as he drew her against his chest. "You swore—"

Koss walked with Nina to the window, pausing once to look back. Already, he appeared to have regained most of his strength. "I will honor my promise. Nicholas has been released from his vow." Then he turned away, and they stepped through the window, hovering in midair for a moment before beginning to float down with the speed of a feather.

Brannon was on his feet and stumbled to the window to watch them leave. He seemed to have trouble moving, but had survived the slash of Nina's sword.

Emily turned and buried her face against Nicholas's chest, sobbing. Now that she didn't have to be strong, she wanted nothing more than to curl up in his arms and have him hold her for a hundred years.

When Brannon limped over to them, Emily turned from Nicholas to embrace him too. After she wept into his bloody pajama shirt for a moment, she lifted her head. "How can you live through that?"

"I'm a dhampir, Emily. Part of my strength comes from the foul blood in my veins." His eyes softened. "You were amazing. So strong and confident."

"Foolish," Nicholas said in a growl. "He could have killed you. I told you—"

"Hush, darling," Emily interrupted, turning back to him to put her arm around his waist. She touched the cuts on his back, finding most already scabbed over or healed completely. She glanced up at him. "Did he mean it? Are you free?"

Nicholas hesitated before nodding. "I think so. I've never known Koss to break his word. He places a high value on honor, which was part of the reason he's nurtured his anger with me for eight hundred years. I seduced him and left him when he didn't expect it. I broke my word, and he's felt the need to punish me ever since." He frowned. "I don't know what's changed."

"He said something about it all coming together..." Fear surged through. "And what was that about our daughter? What did he mean?"

Nicholas appeared equally puzzled. “I don’t know.”

Brannon sighed. “I keep forgetting how inexperienced you are, Emily. How attuned you still need to become to your powers. I’m surprised you haven’t realized it yourself yet.”

She turned to frown at him. “Realized what?”

“Can’t you feel the new life forming in you?” He gave her a smile. “You’re expecting a little girl.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Emily eyed Brannon with sad eyes several weeks later. “Are you sure you feel strong enough?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m healing well. It’s hardly more than a scratch now, and I have business to take care of.” He gave her a crooked smile. “After all, you’ll want to visit your folks soon. After they yell at you for eloping, they’ll be thrilled by the news of the baby.”

She couldn’t hide the sadness from her expression. “They’ll have the sad duty of telling me about Sara, thinking I didn’t hear about it before running away.”

He nodded. “It’s the best I can do to fix things for you.”

She nodded. “I know.” Emily turned to Nicholas, clutching a handful of his shirt. “Can’t you make him stay awhile longer? We can visit my parents later in the summer.”

He shook his head. “Brannon needs to go, love. After he deals with the situation in Huxley, he has to find the answers he seeks.”

She bit her lip. “But if Koss hurts him—”

“Right here, remember?” Brannon teased. His tone grew more serious when she turned back to him. “I’ll stay in touch, and I’ll be home in time for her birth.” He patted her still-flat stomach. “She has to meet the only normal family she has on the Vallsade side.”

She wasn’t able to muster even a wan smile for his comment, but tried to keep the concern from her eyes as she hugged him. “Come back safely to us. Our daughter needs a protector.”

“She has two,” he said against her hair before drawing away. “You and Nicholas are a formidable pair.” Sadness shadowed his expression. “You’ll keep her safe, with or without me. I’ll help keep her out of harm’s way when the time comes, if you need me, but there’s something I need to settle first.”

She nodded, knowing how she would feel if her daughter disappeared. She wouldn’t stop until she found out what had happened. “I hope you find what you’re looking for this time.”

“So do I.” He pressed a kiss to her cheek before turning to embrace Nicholas. Then, with a jaunty wave, he slid into the backseat of the taxi waiting in the courtyard. As it drove away, he didn’t turn back in their direction.

They watched him go until his hire car disappeared from sight. Emily turned to Nicholas. “Do you think he’ll find what he’s looking for?”

“I don’t know.” He pulled her against him. “I only hope he’s as lucky as me.”

She lifted a brow. “What?”

He kissed her forehead. “After all these years, I finally found you again. This time, I’m keeping you forever.”

She walked with him into Vallsade Manor, where they had decided to settle for the next few years. She tried to block out her worried thoughts, but her mind kept circling back to Koss’s words and the memory of Erin’s concerns. She hadn’t told Nicholas about Erin fearing their daughter’s future lay with Koss, but knew she would have to soon. They would have to always be vigilant if Koss wanted their daughter. Emily couldn’t even begin to imagine what he would do with her if she fell under his power.

She shook her head, struggling to cast off her bleak thoughts. Now wasn’t the time for worry, but for joy. Regardless of what the future held, they had this happy moment to themselves, and she intended to enjoy it. She only hoped their eternity was filled with more happiness than sadness. They’d had enough sorrow to last a hundred lifetimes, but this time would be different.

About the author:

Kit Tunstall lives in Idaho with her husband and dog-son. She started reading at the age of three and hasn’t stopped since. Love of the written word, and a smart marriage to a supportive man, led her to a full-time career in writing. Romances have always intrigued her, and erotic romance is a natural extension because it more completely explores the emotions between the hero and heroine. That, and it sure is fun to write.

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