

FROM THE
AMARANTHINE UNIVERSE

AMARANTHINE:
Shades of Gray

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You never know what you'll find in the shadows.....



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Amaranthine:

- 0: Brothers of Darkness
- 1: Shades of Gray
- 2: Legacy of Ghosts
- 3: Ties of Blood
- 4: Ashes of Deceit
- 5: Heart of the Raven
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- 7: Clash of Legends
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Shades of Gray. The first in the Amaranthine Series

When Patrick is found dead in his apartment, Katelina is left in a vacuum of uncertainty with no leads. Then the enigmatic Jorick appears. In a single sweep he turns over the rocks of reality to reveal what hides underneath in the shadows; monsters that she thought only existed in horror movies.

Trapped in a nightmare, Katelina is forced to accept the truth of vampires; vampires who want her dead for her association with Patrick. Jorick saves the day, but what should she do when her hero turns out to be one of the monsters? Can she really trust – and even love – someone who isn't human?

Caught between light and dark, Katelina and Jorick must travel down a path of mystery and terror as their pasts are slowly revealed and their passions ignite, in a world that smells like blood and tastes like fear.

Look for the action-packed sequel, *Legacy of Ghosts!*



Dedicated to Carolyn - the mighty Ed - Cason, the one for whom this book was actually finished.



Second Edition Notes:

I hate authors who rewrite their books, don't you? That's a little bit of ironic sarcasm, since I've done just that, though this isn't a complete re-write. The original goal was to add some information and (hopefully) clear up some questions, but once I started I tidied up a few conversations, cut some words here, added some words there, and, well, now it's a second edition. For the most part it's the same; the same things happen in the same places (sorry, the scene at Claudius' is what it is), the same people die, and Senya still smirks evilly. But in some instances what the characters say has changed. I've tried to make a couple of incidents more obvious, for instance *how* Katelina is able to recover after Claudius' lair and why Troy does what he does, and updated Katelina's answering machine (who has those nowadays?). If, in the process, I ended up chopping out a couple thousand words, know that they must have been superfluous and that you're not missing anything. It just means you can get to book two faster, and that's always a good thing. Right?



Chapter One

The door was locked. Katelina knocked and rattled the knob, but the only answer was silence. This was just like him. Their relationship might not be committed, but it should involve basic respect.

She moved the grocery bag to her other arm and struggled the key out of her purse and into the lock. The door clicked and, with a gentle push, swung inwards.

The small apartment was dark except for the bright swath of light let in by the opened door. It was like a glowing path that beckoned her forward; a yellow brick road bound for hell.

She followed it.

The light switch felt loose as she clicked it. Part of her was screaming, “Don’t turn around! Just walk away!” but she didn’t listen to it. She couldn’t. The past couldn’t be changed by shouting at it.

She turned around and a strangled cry escaped her lips. He lay on the floor in a heap. A puddle of congealing gore, so dark it looked black, spread out around him and made the carpet fibers stiff. The flesh of his throat was torn away. Muscles were stripped to reveal the gleam of his spine shining through the gelatinous, clotted blood.

“Patrick.”

Her knees gave in and she fell to the floor. Oh God, she needed to call someone – the police, an ambulance, but she couldn’t even stand-

“Katelina?”

The voice tore through her thoughts and brought her back to the newspaper office. She sat on a stool in the break area, her elbows planted on the counter top. A forgotten mug of coffee steamed next to her, untouched.

“Katelina?”

She swung her eyes to see Sarah standing next to her. Her friend was the picture of independent feminism; soft brown curls framed her face and her khaki dress clung in just the right places. Though she usually wore a smile, her eyes made it clear that nonsense was not acceptable; she had things to do, places to go and people to see. At the moment, though, those eyes reflected uncertainty.

“Are you all right?”

Katelina shook her head to chase away the tattered remnants of a nightmare become reality. “Yeah,” she answered flatly. “I’m great.”

“You don’t look great.” Sarah’s lips clamped together as she scrutinized her. Though Katelina’s blonde hair fell down her back in a tight ponytail, and long bangs carefully framed her pale face, her blue eyes were rimmed with lack of sleep and a month’s worth of depression. She’d tried to look “okay”, but it wasn’t enough.

“Are you thinking about Patrick again?” Sarah asked softly.

Katelina waved her hand as if she could make Sarah’s concerns drift away like smoke. “No. I’m fine. What did you need?”

“You have a phone call.” Sarah sighed and then added softly, “If you decide you want to talk about it...”

“I’m fine, I told you. So who’s on the phone?”

“I don’t know.” Sarah turned teasing. “It’s a man. He asked for you by name, said it was personal.”

“Personal? I bet it’s just the police again.” In the last month they’d called more times than she could count. Always the same questions and the same answers. “No, I don’t know who might have wanted to kill Patrick. No, I don’t know who he was last with. No, I wasn’t really his girlfriend; we just had an arrangement...”

She wound her way through the office, her shoulders slumped, and cautiously approached the secretary’s desk.

“I have a call?” It was more a question than a statement.

The secretary glanced up, her eyes narrowed and her tone acidic. “Make it fast. You know the rule about personal calls.”

“Of course.” Katelina wanted to say that there was no need to be so impatient. She hadn’t asked for any of this. But she kept the thoughts to herself and pressed the receiver to her ear. “Hello?”

“Katelina?”

The voice was deep, warm and, despite the fact that very few people had her work number, unfamiliar. “This is she. Who is this?”

“I know who killed your lover.”

She blinked and lifted a hand to her throat. A flash of Patrick’s mutilated form appeared behind her eyes. “Excuse me?”

“I know who killed your lover. Meet me tonight just as the sun sets. I’ll be at a house on Farm Mill road; it’s the only house, the road is a dead end. Come alone.”

The phone clicked loudly and she called, “Wait – I . . .” but there was no point. Her only answer was the quiet buzz of disconnected line. She clutched the receiver to her ear, as if it would bring the stranger back.

Sarah appeared in front of her. “Who was it?” At Katelina’s expression, the smile died on her lips. “What?”

“I – I don’t know,” Katelina whispered. Her shock was replaced by sharp anger. “Some kind of joke.” She slammed the receiver into its cradle and ignored the dirty look from the secretary. “I need to go home.”

“We only have an hour left.” Sarah softened in sympathy. “I’ll take you.”

“No thanks. I didn’t feel like walking, so I brought my car today.”

“At least tell me what it was about.” Sarah followed her to retrieve her purse and then to the time clock. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know who it was. They said they knew who killed Patrick.”

Sarah’s green eyes went wide and her voice came out low and strangled. “They know who did it? Who?”

“They didn’t say. They want to meet tonight.” She stuck her badge in her pocket and stopped to run distracted fingers through her bangs. “I’m sure it’s a joke.”

“A cruel one.” Sarah’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not going? That’s how people get killed!”

“To meet some stranger by myself? Are you kidding? Give me some credit!”

Katelina headed for the door and Sarah followed her out and down the sidewalk to the parking lot. Katelina stopped to dig through her purse, searching for the familiar pack of cigarettes, when her friend gently reminded her, “You quit.”

“Oh, right.” She managed a sick smile and resigned herself.

“I’m proud of you, you know. For not smoking. Even with all of this.”

Katelina nodded, but didn’t tell her how bad the cravings were. It wasn’t the nicotine she wanted, just something to hold on to – something to make the world normal again.

The pair made their way to Katelina’s red car. It waited for her under the late autumn sun, dead leaves sticking out from beneath the wipers. Katelina plucked at them absently before she unlocked the door and climbed into the driver’s seat. She gripped the steering wheel as if she could strangle it.

Sarah stood stubbornly next to the car like a guarding sentinel, worry on her face, until Katelina said, “I’m not going to meet ‘him’, so you don’t need to worry. And I’m not buying a pack of cigarettes either, though I wouldn’t rule out a bottle of brandy.”

“Alcohol won’t help,” her friend said sagely, eyes still locked on her. “Maybe you should see someone. My therapist . . .”

Katelina cut her off, tired of the never ending suggestion. “I don’t need to see anyone. I’m fine.” She shook her head and stuck the key in the ignition. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll stop by after dinner. Unless you want me to cancel with Brad?”

“No, you’ve already moved this date twice. You two go and have a nice time. He may never get another night off.” She forced a tight smile. Sarah deserved an evening out with the sexy bartender. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Sarah mumbled an appropriate goodbye while Katelina started the car and backed out of the parking lot. She glanced back in her rearview to see her friend standing next to the empty parking stall alone. The breeze played with her soft brown hair and whipped the khaki dress around her knees. An eerie feeling crept over Katelina, but she shook it off and turned the radio on. She let the blaring music drown out her thoughts and memories.

Whoever made that phone call deserved to be tortured to death.

She welcomed the comforting familiarity of her apartment above the book store. After double locking the front door, she dropped onto the couch and stared past the pink curtains. The view from her windows wasn’t spectacular, but it was comforting. Situated on what was once Main Street, the building across from her was a dance studio downstairs and an apartment with tightly drawn curtains upstairs. Until recently it had been empty, but someone had moved in a few months ago. During the sleepless nights since Patrick’s murder, she’d taken comfort in the glow of the windows. It reminded her that, despite her nightmares, she wasn’t really alone in the world.

She turned back to her own small apartment looked over the living room as if she’d never seen it before. Two book cases dominated the furnishings while her couch and chair sat pressed against the wall, both splattered with creamy colored flowers. A coffee table was stacked with various items including books, knickknacks, a bottle of nail polish and a disused ashtray that had been a gift.

She scooped up the delicate glass piece and balanced its weight in her palm. With a smile, she thought how impossible it would be to wash ashes from the cut glass pattern. It had been something trivial and odd, a strange present from a strange person.

Closing her eyes, she pictured Patrick and just as quickly she pushed that image away. He'd been so delighted when he'd presented her with the stupid ashtray, proud that it matched the candy dish that sat on top of her television. He'd grinned, his breath scented sweet with alcohol, while his deep blue eyes laughed at some private joke.

Patrick, with his blonde hair, easy smile, and dark moods...

Six weeks ago she'd found him in his apartment, the doors and windows locked, his throat torn out in a mess of gleaming gore. At first she'd thought a wild animal had gotten him, but an animal would leave behind hair or saliva and the police didn't find any. Neither had they discovered any fingerprints or footprints out of the ordinary; not even a stray hair or a flake of skin. Because of that, she'd been grilled relentlessly. They'd called her home, her job, even her mother, always wanting to know if her boyfriend had told her anything that might be some kind of clue.

A strange smile flitted across her face. Boyfriend. Lover. Everyone had a label for him – except her. In the year she'd known him they'd slept together off and on, called one another now and again, and went out sometimes. When they'd exchanged Christmas presents, her mother had gotten excited and started calling him her boyfriend too, no matter how many times Katelina had denied it. Patrick was a lot of things: he was sweet, charming, special, moody, and temperamental; most of all, deep down, he was as fragile as spun glass. But he was not her boyfriend.

However, there was no denying that she had feelings for him. She'd been very careful never to scratch their surface to find out how deep they really ran. She preferred to think they were shallow but, sometimes, late at night, she wondered if that was true.

She dropped the ashtray to the table and sagged as the deep warm voice replayed in her mind, "I know who killed your lover." It sounded like some cruel trick designed to embarrass her or worse lure her, alone, to the middle of nowhere. Maybe so the murderer could kill her, too?

She grabbed the bottle of blue nail polish and repeated the ritual of touching up her chipped nails. The sharp smell brought her back to the present and shoved away unhappy thoughts and feelings. It left room for nothing but here and now - and right now she'd left work an hour early. They'd dock her pay for it, and tomorrow she'd have to face the wrath of Mr. Fordrent. More fun.

When the polish was dry she turned on her phone – "turn it off when you come in the door" was Fordrent's policy. The screen blinked notifications; voice mail. She started to check it, but the minute her mother's voice greeted her ears she hung up. She didn't need another lecture. "When are you going to find a nice man? When are you going to settle down? When are you going to get married?" Marriage was the last thing Katelina was interested in at the moment, or so she told herself. She had plenty of time left.

She padded towards the kitchen and realized that the call might be about Grave Day, as she called it. Every year, on the anniversary of her Father's death, she and her mother took flowers to her father's tombstone, despite the fact that he'd died when Katelina was a toddler. It was a day filled with her mother's memories and tears. Good times.

Katelina stared blankly into the refrigerator. Half empty drink cartons and condiment jars dotted the back of the shelves. She needed to go shopping, but she'd been so busy she hadn't had a chance to think about the mundane parts of life.

Her stomach rumbled and she checked the cupboards. They were equally bare. With a final resigned sigh, she ducked into the bedroom, changed into jeans and a dark blue sweater, then grabbed her keys and headed out the door. She told herself that she'd make a quick trip to the

store for something to eat, then come back and spend a relaxing evening at home; just her and her television, lost together in mindless entertainment.

As she locked the door behind her, a strange sense of foreboding swept over her, as though a dark cloud had crossed the sun and left her in shadow. She looked back at her apartment door; at the tiny gold numbers and the little wooden name plaque Sarah had made for her. She laughed at herself and her melodramatic mood.

“Don’t worry,” she assured the empty hallway. “I’ll be right back.”



Chapter Two

The small house sat alone on a dead end road. Paint peeled from the weathered siding and golden weeds sighed against the foundation. A porch sagged in front of a rusty screen door that swung and squeaked in the breeze. Blank windows stared out, reflecting the line of fire that was the horizon.

Katelina pulled her little red car off the road into the weeds and stared at her final destination. This had to be one of the dumbest things she'd ever done – second only to the night she'd picked Patrick up in the bar and taken him home.

“What am I doing?”

She'd gone for food. She'd made a mental list in her head that included ice cream and hot fudge, but then she'd driven right past the store. She supposed it was curiosity and a desire to have the entire disaster over and done with. She desperately needed to move on.

She shut the car off but stopped short of getting out. Should she take all of her stuff with her? Her purse, her ID's – her money? What if someone really was there, waiting to mug her? Wouldn't that be a stupid thing to do?

“Not any stupider than coming in the first place,” she mumbled as she dug out her phone. She cast about for a suitable hiding place for her purse, and finally jammed the thing under the seat.

The evening air was chilly, but it wasn't yet night. She checked to make sure her doors were locked, then gave her car a final look. It would be okay. Everything would be okay.

She circled the house. Through an open back door she could see a swath of old empty kitchen. Dead leaves littered the floor and cobwebs hung in profusion. It only took her a second to decide she didn't want to go inside.

With nothing else to do, she made her way back to the front of the house and dropped to the ground.

She could feel the comforting weight of her cell phone in her pocket. A connection to civilization; a lifeline. Still, the sun was dropping rapidly and soon she'd be lost in darkness. She shivered, whether from chill or anxiety, and Sarah's words played through her mind, “*That's how people get killed!*” The night was getting nearer and those words seemed wiser and wiser with each second. She should have just called the police and stayed home; safe and secure in her contented shoe box of plasterboard and wood.

Something crunched and her head snapped up in response. A lone figure walked slowly towards her from around the house. His hair and clothing were all black, as if he was a part of the night; a shadow wraith formed from her fears, with only his pale face to give him the illusion of reality.

He came to a stop in front of her and gazed down. He was tall and broad shouldered with a slim waist. His long hair fell down his back to blend into the long sleeved pullover. His mouth remained a tight-lipped line, though his eyes, dark and warm, seemed to be smiling at her.

She scrambled to her feet and brushed uselessly at her clothes. Her eyes hurried to meet his and assure him she was as much in control as he was, though she felt anything but.

When he spoke, it was the same voice she'd heard over the phone, deep and lyrical. "So you came?"

She didn't trust herself to say more than one word. "Yes."

"And you are alone?" His matter-of-fact tone seemed polite, almost friendly, as if he was trying to assure her he wasn't a villain.

Despite his effort, a vision swam behind her eyes of black garbage bags in a ditch, filled with her own dismembered body parts and she wondered if it was too late to go home. Maybe she should lie and say she had a friend somewhere? But what if that blew the deal?

"Yes." She took a steadying breath and prepared to gauge his reaction. "I'm alone, like you said."

"Good." She noticed that he spoke low, and that his mouth barely moved, as if he was afraid someone might overhear him. "Follow me." Then he turned and walked towards the house.

Katelina stared at the old house and the blank windows stared back at her. Though he hadn't cackled like a villain, she still wasn't sure about him. He knew she was alone and now he wanted her to go with him into an empty house that might have anyone or anything hiding inside – waiting, as she had been waiting?

No.

He paused at the porch and turned back. "You think I'll hurt you?" In the dusky light she wasn't sure if his half smile was sinister or appealing.

"You might," she said quietly, half afraid to voice the possibility, as though saying it might make it happen. "I don't know you – I don't even know your name."

"It's Jorick. Does that make you feel better?"

She could sense his amusement and waited for him to laugh. When he didn't she answered truthfully, "Not really." His smile was almost a smirk, and in another desperate attempt to control the situation she added quickly, "People know I'm here." She realized in a rush of heart hammering fear that no one really did. She'd told Sarah about the call, but not the location. Great.

Jorick raised his eyebrows in mock surprise and the smile deepened at the corners of his mouth. "Good. I'd hate to think you take such chances, Katelina."

"How do you know my name? And how did you get my work number?"

His smile faded. "If you want to know who killed your lover, you'll have to follow me inside. If you don't, then you can leave." He shrugged as though it was of no consequence either way, then he opened the doors. "It's your choice." With those words, he stepped over the threshold and disappeared inside.

Katelina bit her lip and kicked the foundation for good measure, cursing silently. Thanks to her stupidity, she was sure she'd end up dead before the night was over. Why hadn't she stayed home? And why didn't she leave now?

Because I want to know.

Her mind echoed a question, "Are you willing to die for this?" but she ignored it. Maybe she could get this Jorick guy to come back outside? He seemed reasonable, and maybe if she pointed out how sinister it appeared... The only thing she could do was try.

She took a deep breath and forced herself onto the porch. He appeared in the doorway holding a candle. The light gleamed on his skin and turned his impassive face to marble. "Are you coming in or not?"

Her heart pounded and a thought, unbidden, appeared in her mind: he was beautiful. His eyes were the color of dark wood, fringed in heavy lashes and framed by thick, dramatic

eyebrows that arched ever so slightly. His lips were full and his skin was flawless and pale; perfect.

Katelina couldn't explain what happened next. One minute she stood on the porch, her mind tumbling in confusion. The next, she was inside the sad house, the door closing behind her.

The sound of the chirping crickets cut through her uncertainty and slowly the world came into focus. She looked around the small room quickly. Water-stained wallpaper sagged from the walls, a non-descript color. A mass of footprints marked the dust covered floor. There was no furniture, only two grimy windows and a yawning doorway

"This way." He beckoned to her and ducked through the low doorframe – an elegant shadow cutting through the gloom.

She still felt dazed, but as he drew further away the darkness thickened. She tugged out her cell and flashed the light around, but it was a poor imitation of the warm candlelight. Imagined monsters lurked in the shadowy corners and suddenly Jorick seemed more appealing company – he might be a psychopath but at least he was a real person.

She hurried to catch up to him. The next room was as abandoned as the first. The only contents were a large empty trunk and copious amounts of cobwebs that traced along the stained peeling walls and the dirty windows. There was no way Jorick could live in that house.

So what is he doing here?

When they came at last to a padlocked door, Jorick fished a key from his pocket that slid neatly into the lock. The tiny click echoed, magnified by the heavy stillness.

"I don't often entertain company," he said in lieu of an apology as he swung the door open and headed down a set of wooden stairs.

Katelina hesitated. She'd seen enough horror movies to know what the basement represented. There was probably a torture chamber down there, and she wasn't going to walk glibly into it! She imagined Sarah's eye roll. *"That's just a movie, Katelina! This is real life, not TV."* The imagined Sarah was probably right. This Jorick, whoever he was, knew Patrick, so chances were he was just squatting in an abandoned house. That was the kind of company Patrick had kept. Not really dangerous, just... weird.

She clutched the cell, her finger on the emergency button, and forced herself down the stairs. Jorick waited for her at the bottom, and when she reached him he offered her another tight smile, no doubt meant to be soothing. Her eyes snapped from his face to a nearby pile of wooden crates. The rest of the basement was lost to thick shadows with no discernable furniture. If he was staying there where was he sleeping? Where was his bedroll and all the flotsam and jetsam that squatters piled up?

Apparently impervious to her turmoil, he said slowly, "I believe that now is the time to ask how much you knew – or think you knew – about your lover?"

Lover. She wished he'd quit using that word, though she supposed it was better than fuck buddy. As to what she knew about Patrick, she didn't know much. They had a deal limiting how much they shared; how involved they were. It had never sat well with her, but there it was.

"I knew enough," she answered evasively.

Jorick's expression was serious. "Do you know where he spent his Friday nights?"

She shrugged. "He said he played poker. Look, I just want to know –"

He cut her off mid-sentence. "Before we begin, I think you need to be sure that you *really* want to know. The things you'll find out... well, at the very least, they'll change your perception of your lover. At the most they'll change your perception of the world. Do you understand? You probably won't believe me at first, not because it's impossible, but because you won't want to

believe me. Then will come the moment when it all becomes clear for you, when the truth stands out glaringly from the rest of the mess that we call life and reality. Then you may not like it anymore.”

His speech was ridiculously overdramatic, like something from a late night TV drama. But, the serious expression on his face scared her just a little. What kind of secret did Patrick have? Did she want to know? Would it change anything, or make anything better? He’d still be dead, and the police wouldn’t arrest the murderer on her word alone – and probably not on Jorick’s, either. Still...

She surveyed him coolly. There were only a couple of things she could think of that would radically change her opinion of Patrick, and none of them were pretty. But, if Patrick had been a monster of some kind, then so be it.

“I think I can handle it.” She crossed her arms over her chest and dared him to argue.

“Are you sure? I’m not trying to frighten you or mislead you, but it may be a lot to take in at one time.”

Katelina met his gaze head on, her face stubborn. “I’m sure. Go ahead and tell me.”



Chapter Three

Jorick gestured to the dusty stairs. “You might want to sit down first.”

“No, thank you. I think I’m okay where I am.”

“All right.” He set the candle on the floor, then leaned casually back against the wooden crates, his expression thoughtful. “I wonder if you’ve ever met Patrick’s brother, Michael?”

Patrick had only spoken of his brother on a handful of occasions, and always with pity and regret. They’d technically gone to school together, but he’d been a year or two younger and she couldn’t remember having ever interacted with him. “No.”

“Michael is the younger of the brothers, and not the smarter. He was too inquisitive for his own good and discovered the secret of someone... someone very powerful.” He grimaced and then relented, as though being completely vague would be too hard. “His name was Claudius. Michael confronted him and, needless to say, it wasn’t well received. In order to guarantee that Michael stayed quiet, he was forced into. . .” Jorick hesitated, “. . . servitude, and in a sense Michael dragged Patrick into it as well. Every Friday night, Claudius would throw very exclusive, very expensive parties and Patrick and Michael were little more than his servants at them.”

Katelina felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. So much for earth shattering revelations “So? He got involved with some kind of gang.”

A partial laugh escaped Jorick’s tight lips. “So he really did tell you nothing. No, it wasn’t a gang. I believe the word you want is coven.”

“A coven? You mean like witchcraft? Freaky cults and stuff?” That was a surprise. Though it made sense. Patrick had held some weird ideas and had often had a paranoid, haunted look in his eyes. She’d had no idea that there were any cults around there.

“Not exactly a cult, but that definition will work for now.” He waved her to silence before she could ask what he meant. “At one of these parties, Michael started talking about things he shouldn’t; specifically, people he should never have mentioned. Claudius likes to control people through fear, and the fear of harm befalling your loved ones is a very, very good motivator. Michael mentioned to the wrong people that Patrick was in love with you and – ”

“Excuse me?” Why was Patrick’s brother discussing her in the first place, and why did he say... Patrick didn’t *love* her. They were casual! They’d agreed. Time and again they’d promised each other that it meant nothing. No commitment, no feelings, no attachment. That had been the deal – *his* deal. He’d insisted on it, made it clear it was that or nothing. And she’d agreed; not only agreed but kept her half of the bargain. Any time she’d felt close to him she’d reminded herself that he wasn’t the kind of guy she could love. He had too much past and no future. The only way he was going was down; he just wasn’t “boyfriend” material. He was made for casual affairs. He was... he was...

“Love?”

Her brain stuttered and she glanced at Jorick. His gaze seemed to ask if she was all right. It was an answer she wasn’t sure about, so she looked away and jammed her phone in her pocket for something to do. “And?”

He seemed uncertain how to continue. “I’m sorry. I assumed, since you were lovers, that such attachment would be obvious, that some amount of... feeling was indicated...”

She opened her mouth to correct him and then decided to leave it alone.

With a final look of concern, Jorick continued. “Once Claudius knew you existed, he started using you to threaten Michael. Patrick didn’t know that his brother had spoken of you, and believed your existence to be a secret from the coven. That was Claudius’ new weapon, his way to control Michael. I’m sure you can imagine the consequences if Claudius hurt you, then told Patrick he’d discovered you through Michael’s indiscretion.” When she only blinked, he sighed and specified, “I’m certain Patrick would have wanted blood, brother or not, and Michael knew it. Because of that, it worked for a while, but Michael finally told his brother about his mistake and the threats Claudius had made. Patrick,” Jorick paused again. “Patrick didn’t take it well. He and Michael worked together to steal something that Claudius considers very precious, something he would kill for. They hoped to use it as a bargaining chip, but, as you know, it didn’t work.”

Katelina wasn’t sure what to feel. She tried to reason out the crazy story in her mind. If what Jorick said was true, then Patrick had been in love with her and had stolen something trying to... what? Protect her from Claudius and his cult?

She cast her thoughts backwards, searching for a hint of what sounded like insanity. She went as far back as the night she’d met Patrick in the bar. She could see it clearly: his black leather pants looked uncomfortably hot in the humidity and his tank top barely covered him. He’d been all blonde hair and smeared eyeliner, smelling of stale cigarettes and Captain Morgan, an easy smile on his lips and a twinkle in blue eyes that spoke of mischief.

The image was a punch in the stomach. She’d spent the last six weeks trying not to think about him, not to picture him. Now, there he was before her eyes, laughing, inviting her for a drink, and promising not to take advantage of her.

Defeated, she dropped onto the stairs and let her elbows rest on her knees. “So I suppose Claudius killed him over this... ‘thing’?”

Jorick seemed surprised at her assumption. “Claudius? No, it was Michael.”

“His brother?” Michael was gone – had been gone, or so Patrick and the police said. He’d left months ago and never came back. If Jorick’s story was true, then that was probably when they’d stolen the “thing”, and no doubt Michael had taken it somewhere and hidden it. But if he was guarding it, why had he come back? Why would he...

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Why would he do that?”

“Because Patrick wanted to give ‘the thing’ back to Claudius in exchange for a promise that you wouldn’t be harmed, but Michael wanted to be released from Claudius’ service – only it doesn’t work that way. Once you belong to Claudius, you belong to him forever. Patrick knew that; he knew there would be no deal unless they were willing to suffer for their misdeeds.” Jorick sighed almost sadly. “And so – as has happened since the dawn of humanity – brother killed brother; Cain killing Abel all over again.”

Katelina struggled for words. “He couldn’t have...” She thought of Patrick’s mangled body, lying pale and mutilated in a pool of sticky congealed blood, his spinal column showing through where his throat should have been. “How did he do it? I saw the body. His throat was ripped out! No human could have done that.”

“I didn’t say his brother was human, did I?”

“What?” As if there was something else to be! “If he wasn’t human then what was he?”

Jorick seemed to hesitate and then a smile flickered at the edges of his mouth. “Would you like to see?”

Katelina leapt to her feet and looked around wildly. “What? He’s here?”

“Yes.” Jorick retrieved the candle. “I have him locked up right now. It’s perfectly safe. Come.” Though spoken softly, the last word held the essence of a command.

Though part of her struggled with the idea, she followed Jorick, almost against her will. Even as her feet moved, she didn’t know why she wasn’t running away. It was as if some outside force stopped her escape and propelled her forward through the darkness.

They crossed the room and stopped before a door set into the farthest wall. As Jorick carefully unlocked it with yet another key, she noticed other doors along the walls, leading to who knew how many secret passages and storerooms.

“Through here.” He ducked inside and she followed into a narrow corridor. Dark damp walls seemed to close in around her. The spark of fear pushed away the last of the overwhelming desire to comply, and she stepped back towards the doorway. Her hand snaked to her pocket and her phone; a lifeline to safety.

All she wanted to do was run out of the God forsaken house, climb in her car and drive back to a gas station where she’d be surrounded by electric lights and Twinkies and motor oil and all of the mundane things that proved the difference between reality and fantasy; between waking and nightmares. Either Jorick was insane and there was no one there, or else he had Patrick’s murderous brother held prisoner in a dark basement. Neither option was good, and she knew it was time to run.

“It’s all right,” Jorick assured her. “He’s restrained.”

If he even exists, she thought. For all she knew, Jorick was high and hallucinating. *High*. She imagined turning and running, tripping up the wooden stairs while a junkie, high on god-knew-what, chased her down. He looked strong, and fast. Could she really escape? So far she’d cooperated with him and he hadn’t tried to hurt her; hadn’t even touched her. If he planned to kill her or rape her, he’d have probably gotten it over with already. Maybe, if she just played along she’d live to get through this.

She’d hoped to sound brave and in control, but her stutter betrayed her, “R-right.”

Jorick led her maybe twenty feet down the corridor, to another locked door. Something moved inside and terror sliced through her. What if Jorick was only slightly delusional and Michael was really there? What if they were partners? What if he was the one who was going to kill her? Visions of her dismembered body wrapped in garbage bags flashed through her mind as Jorick unlocked the door and pushed it open.

“Let me out of here!” a voice roared.

The candle’s feeble light revealed a single occupant chained to the wall with shackles on its wrists and ankles. Pictures of concentration camp victims or the starving in Ethiopia didn’t compare to the twisted, skin and bones figure. Discolored flesh cleaved tightly to its frame and left it a living skeleton; a monster who snarled and pulled the heavy chains taut with his struggles.

Despite his appearance, there were vestiges of a human being. The thing’s eyes were wide and blue – blue like Patrick’s. Its hair was also a lot like Patrick’s: thick and blonde. It hung in snarled tendrils nearly to his shoulders.

Jorick leaned against the doorjamb and stared critically at the monster. Katelina stayed in the corridor, unwilling to cross the threshold, the bitter taste of disbelief and fear in her mouth.

“Let me go,” the thing bellowed, his hollow face contorted in rage. “Claudius –” He stopped as his eyes, so like Patrick’s, landed on Katelina. He hissed and bared his teeth, long inhuman fangs that shone in the candlelight.

A strangled cry escaped her lips and she hid behind Jorick. This could not be real!

Jorick seemed oblivious to the horror of the ghoul – unaware of the monstrosity of it all as he introduced them like dinner guests. “Katelina, this is Michael, and Michael, I assume you know who Katelina is?”

Michael. How could it be Michael? Patrick’s brother had been missing for months, not years, and it would have taken years for a person to turn into the walking skeleton before her. No, this had to be someone else.

Michael snarled a reply, his voice dry and raspy, “What are you up to now, Jorick? Damn Patrick for saying we could trust you!”

“I’m not up to anything, Michael,” Jorick said. “She’s come to see her lover’s killer.”

“Then tell her to take a good look. I’ll kill her next! If it weren’t for her and for you—”

Jorick cut him off. “I’ll never free you, Michael, and you know it.”

The thing’s words left her uncertain. If he wasn’t Michael then why did he mention Patrick? Why did he as much as admit to killing him? In the shape he was in, how could he even still talk, let alone pull on the chains with such inhuman strength?

“I didn’t say his brother was human, did I?”

But if not human then what?

Jorick went on, “Even if I did release you, what would Claudius do with you?”

“He’ll come for me,” the demon hissed, a malevolent smile on his face, his thin lips pulled back from fangs.

“We shall see.” Jorick looked over his shoulder at her. “Have you seen enough?”

She nodded, unable to speak. The thought of a brightly lit gas station full of reality seemed very far away.

They stepped out into the hallway and Jorick pulled the door after them. “I apologize for the shocking introduction, but it seemed the best way to make you believe me.” He stopped suddenly, his body rigid, as if he was listening.

Katelina strained, but she couldn’t hear anything except Michael’s sudden coarse laughter.

“I told you they’d come for me!”

“God damn it,” Jorick cursed. “Shut up, you foul creature!” He pulled Katelina close enough to hiss into her ear, “There is someone here. It may be nothing, but it could be Claudius come to find his servant. You must stay here, do you understand?”

“No!” she cried helplessly. The insane scenario had descended into the depths of madness. If a coven of witches was really attacking the house, how did Jorick and Michael know? She hadn’t heard anything. Maybe Jorick was a lunatic, but, she’d rather be with him than alone in the damp corridor with that thing on the other side of the door.

She tried to explain that as Jorick shoved what was left of the candle into her hand and pulled away from her to hurry towards the main room of the basement. She tried to follow, but as she reached the door he slammed it in her face and locked it loudly.

The hallway seemed to shrink in on her. The darkness became a tangible object that might reach out and strangle her at any moment. Fear choked her and sweat ran down her spine in a thin, chilling trickle. She backed against the stone wall and stared into the blackness, trying to ignore Michael’s muffled cries.

She shuddered. If that thing had once been Patrick's brother, then something had happened to him; something to make him not human, because he wasn't human anymore. She could feel that in the very depths of her soul with a sickening certainty. Her skin crawled at the thought of his nearness and her whole being cried out that he was something no one was ever meant to see, something never meant to walk the earth at all.

"Not real, not real, not real," she whispered to herself, screwing her eyes shut. She was an assistant to a newspaper editor in the world of paper and glass and plastic; a glorified gopher that made coffee and fetched things and talked on the phone! She was not the heroine in some horror movie! The newspaper, that was real. Her boss, Mr. Fordrent, he was real. Her apartment with the pink flowered curtains, that was also real. Jorick and this tunnel, that thing in the room and the smell of damp and earth and fear... none of those things were real.

She opened her eyes, but the darkness was still there, held back by the trembling rays of light from her nub of a candle. She looked desperately for some crack in the façade of dream she was trapped in. She thought of Sarah and her warning. Yes, this was how people died.

Suddenly she remembered her phone. Sure, she shouldn't mention to the operator that there was a monster locked up not ten feet away from her, but that was okay. It really didn't matter what she said. She'd heard enough 9-1-1 tapes on the news to know that she just needed to gurgle something that sounded like, "help."

She dug the phone from her pocket and mashed the button. She waited for the ringing to start, but nothing happened; there was only silence. Panic filled her and she hung up and redialed. Nothing. And then she saw the symbol on the screen. She had no signal.

"You have to joking," she nearly cried. "This cannot be happening. Oh my God. This cannot be –"

A scraping sound interrupted the flow of her terrified words. She snapped her phone shut and bit her lip until she tasted blood. Some instinct told her that she must remain quiet. Even though it seemed impossible, this was real. The hallway, the creature, the sound; it was all terribly, incredibly real.

The scraping noise grew louder, and was soon followed by a crash as something heavy struck the floor. She slid down the corridor, her back pressed against the wall to keep as much distance between her and Michael's door as possible. She stopped, raised the candle, and peered down the tunnel. A section of the ceiling had fallen in and, as she watched, a figure dropped down from the newly formed hole. She caught her breath and dashed the candle against the damp stone.

Michael's horse cries grew louder as he called the newcomers to him. She pressed herself tighter against the wall, trying to be invisible as the footsteps drew nearer.

Someone grabbed her and pulled her into the open. In her panic she let go of the candle nub and scrambled to free herself one handed. A thick masculine voice spoke over Michael's cries, "Well, well, it seems Jorick's trying to hide a little treat from us! Wants it all to himself, does he?" The laughter that followed made her blood run cold.

A cool hand touched her face and slid towards her lips. Thoughtlessly she sank her teeth into it. As he cried out, she jerked her knee upwards and caught him in either the groin or the stomach.

When he released her she did the only thing she could think of – she ran towards the locked door, and hopefully Jorick.

She slid to a stop and banged on it with a clenched fist, shouting for the man who'd invited her into this nightmare. She didn't know anything else to do and her panic screamed too loudly to come up with a plan.

A cold hand closed around her throat and pulled her backwards with almost inhuman strength. She heard herself scream, but it sounded foreign and far away. She gripped her cell phone tightly in her hand and tried to use it like a rock to hit her attacker about the head. He caught her hand and squeezed it until she cried out and the phone slipped from her fingers. She heard it hit the floor, followed by a sickening crunch as he stomped on it.

Before she was able to wail a sorrowful, "Noooooo!", he stabbed her in the shoulder with something sharp. A burning sensation shot down her arm and she cried out both in surprise and pain.

The door jerked open and Jorick stood in the doorway, framed in a glaring blaze of light. His black hair was wild about his face. Blood splattered across his pale features and his dark eyes were filled with anger. As if to make the scene more surreal, he brandished a bloodstained sword.

Without a word, he pulled her from her attacker and threw her behind himself. The intruder lunged and Jorick lashed out at him with the blade.

Katelina's screams had stopped, replaced by someone else's. She looked around to find the basement bathed in the brilliant light of flames. The pile of wooden crates looked like a miniature bonfire, as did a screaming man. He danced around and tried to beat out the fire that engulfed him. Two bodies lay slumped some distance from him, face down on the basement floor. Dark puddles spread beneath them.

A new cry sounded and Katelina looked in time to see the attacker in the corridor fall. Jorick paused indecisively over his body, and then quickly turned away.

"Come on!" He grabbed Katelina's arm and tugged her after him. The wooden beams above their heads began to catch fire and the thick smoke rolled against the ceiling.

"The stairs," she cried and pointed desperately to their only escape.

"No. There are more of them upstairs. This way."

He pulled her to another padlocked door. Though he didn't bother with his keys, he only kicked the door to shreds in one smooth motion and dashed through it. The darkness quickly swallowed them as the tunnel twisted and turned, going ever upwards. Katelina glanced over her shoulder time and again, eyes scratching the darkness for signs of pursuers, but she saw nothing.

At last Jorick stopped. He released her hand and threw open a trap door above them. Cool moonlight spilled down into the corridor and she shrank back from it.

Jorick pulled himself through the opening. He motioned for her to stay where she was, then disappeared from her sight. He was back in a moment, crouched at the edge of the opening. "It's clear, come on." He held his blood stained hand to her and she took it, too numb to care. He pulled her up into the night where she collapsed on the dewy grass and gasped mouthfuls of fresh air.

"We must not linger; we may yet be followed." He slammed the trapdoor shut and busied himself locking it from the outside.

Katelina sat up and nodded mutely, all of her limbs shaking. She tried desperately to catch her breath and gasped out the question, "Who... who were they?"

Jorick sighed. The moonlight made his skin gleam white and turned the blood splatters into splotches of black. "Vampires," he said quietly. "They were Vampires. Just like Michael."

Katelina stared at him for a moment, waiting for the punch line. When one didn't come she threw back her head and laughed. "Of course they were!" In that moment it seemed the slender thread that separated waking from nightmares had snapped, and she suspected she'd never see a Twinkie again.



Chapter Four

When her laughter had subsided, Katelina stood wearily and touched her burning shoulder. She pulled her hand back in surprise and eyed the scarlet on her palm. She was bleeding.

“Shit.”

After everything that had happened, she knew she was lucky to be alive, unlike her poor phone. Still, it was sarcasm, not gratitude that bubbled out, “So, let me guess, Claudius is a vampire too?”

Jorick kicked the bloody sword into a stand of weedy grass. Without asking permission, he placed his hand on her neck and tilted her to one side to examine her wound. “Yes, he is. They all were, except Patrick, of course.”

“It’s too dark out here to see anything,” she objected quietly, preferring to ignore what he’d said.

“I can see well enough to say that you’ve gotten quite a bite.” He sounded calm – too calm – like this was an ordinary thing.

“Bite? You’ve *got* to be kidding...” her voice faded as she recalled the vampire movies she’d seen. She didn’t know that she’d accepted his explanation yet, in fact she wasn’t even sure what she’d really seen or heard. But what if it was true? What if they were vampires? A lump of cold dread formed in her throat and forced her silent.

“Yes, you’ve been bitten.” He peered so closely at the wound that his breath tickled her skin. “It doesn’t look like he tore any muscles,” he murmured absently. “You’ll have a scar of course, but you shouldn’t need stitches.” He released her and took a step back. His eyes strayed to the dark trees surrounding them; the trunks close together to form a wall of blackness. “We should get moving.”

Jorick started to move away, but Katelina hung back, her mind spinning. If those were vampires – if – and she’d been bitten...

“Does that mean I’ll be a...a...”

Jorick turned back to her. “A vampire?” he sounded amused. “No, that’s only myth. It takes a lot more than that to become a vampire.”

“Oh.” She felt an odd relief. “He doesn’t have any power over me or anything, right? I read that in a book once.”

Jorick shook his head to the negative. “The one who bit you is dead, but even if he wasn’t he wouldn’t have control over you, it doesn’t work like that.” He glanced from the trees to her immobile form. His dark eyes seemed to see past her brave front, to the scared little girl inside. “We need to get moving.”

She flushed at the imagined intrusion and moved quickly to join him. “Of course, sorry.”

Nighttime noises sounded around them. They made Katelina uncomfortable, so she talked over them “How does someone become a –” she hesitated, “– a vampire?” She whispered the word, afraid that saying the name would conjure one of the monsters from thin air. Despite her logical disbelief, she still wasn’t sure what was real and what wasn’t. Though she’d seen Michael and felt the inhuman strength of the man who attacked her, it seemed so absurd.

“It’s complicated,” Jorick answered. He shrugged his shoulders casually, but his tone made it clear that the conversation was over.

They reached the trees and plunged into them. Katelina shivered as the word replayed in her mind.

Vampires.

She glanced around at the darkened land and thought to herself that at *this* moment there was a good possibility that vampires existed. Somehow, the night made everything a little less real and a little more fictional. It turned everything to muted shades of gray, like an old Boris Karloff film, and cast shadows that hid unspeakable things in their black depths. Tomorrow, when she returned to the world of sunshine and plastic and shiny chrome, it would be a ridiculous impossibility, but at that moment why wouldn’t there be vampires stalking the earth?

“Maybe you should have brought the sword.” Her trembling voice betrayed her fear.

“It wouldn’t do a lot of good here in the open. Besides, it would be hard to explain should we be observed.”

“Of course.” Yeah, a guy running around with a sword would look a little out of place, to say the least. In fact, a guy who lived in an abandoned basement and owned a sword was weird enough. It was all weird. Weird and creepy.

With nothing else to say, they walked in silence for some time, until she suddenly drew short and cried out, “My car!”

Jorick stopped and looked at her as though she was having a fit. “What?”

“My car! It’s still back there! I have to get it! I can’t just leave it abandoned in the middle of the country over night! What if they steal it or, worse, vandalize it?” She imagined explaining to the insurance company what had happened and trying to reason with them that the damage should be covered by her insurance plan. After all, vampires were not an act of God.

“If you want to,” Jorick said nonchalantly. He put his back to her and continued walking. “But I’m not going back.”

“Damn it.” She stomped her foot childishly. The thought of walking back through the trees alone was out of the question. She’d done enough stupid things for one night. “What about my car?”

But he didn’t look back. She scowled and hurried to fall into step beside him. “What am I going to do if they trash it?”

“Get another car,” he answered. “There are a lot of cars in the world.”

“I’m sure that’s easy for you to say. I mean, you’re living out there in the middle of nowhere – you don’t even have electricity. Why would you understand?”

“Yes, it is easy for me.” He stared straight ahead and didn’t bother to glance at her as he spoke. “I’ve owned cars and I’ve been without cars, and either way I always manage. I’ve lived in houses filled with obscene amounts of wealth, and hovels without even the comfort of a wooden door. That house back there will burn to the ground and I will have to find another. None of it is important. There are only a few things that one needs to survive in this world.”

“Well, yes, but how am I going to get home without a car?”

His eyes flicked to her. “I would suggest that you don’t go home.” She opened her mouth to argue, but he continued, “At least not until the sun has been up for an hour or more, and then, if I were you, I would go only to save my possessions before I moved.”

She stopped dead in her tracks and exploded, “Move? I’m not moving! I’ve lived in that apartment for three years. I like it!”

“All the more reason. A change of scenery does one good, you know.” His voice was steady and reasonable, and he glanced back at her. “Besides, if they knew where Patrick lived, and Patrick knew where you lived, then ‘they’ know where you live. That’s something that you don’t want to happen – you never want ‘them’ to know where you live.”

“You don’t really think they’d...” she didn’t want to say the next words, though she wasn’t even sure what they’d be. *Kill me? Maim me? Hurt me?* All of them were viable possibilities, especially right now when she almost believed it all. “They wouldn’t really?”

Jorick nodded calmly. “Yes, I think they would. You were Patrick’s lover, Patrick is now dead. It makes sense you would get involved to seek revenge. You’ve seen the things they’re capable of. If they find you it won’t be pretty, I can guarantee it. Patrick’s death will be tidy compared to what they will do to you.”

Her hand unconsciously went to her throat. “I thought you said that your house would burn to the ground? Surely they can’t survive fire?”

“Yes, it will burn, and no, they cannot survive fire, but some of them will undoubtedly escape.” He seemed almost resigned. “They’ll get out and take Michael with them and go before Claudius with their story. Maybe Michael will be pardoned, if he happens to know where they can find you.”

She had nothing left to say. Her feet were already aching but she forced herself to trudge onwards with the reminder that bloodthirsty vampires might be following them.

She checked her watch to find it was nearly midnight. She sighed deeply and wondered if the night would ever end or just continue forever in a world of darkness and absurdity.

They walked on in silence, out of the trees, across farmland, and down gravel roads, until nearly four a.m. Many times she would open her mouth to speak, but the silence had stretched so long that she couldn’t think of anything suitable enough to break it. Her mind was far too occupied with the cramps in her aching legs, the pain in her shoulder, and the constant barrage of nightmare fears that assailed her from every shadow.

They topped a steep hill. Katelina gasped for air, and saw lights ahead, tiny beacons in the night that proclaimed safety and comfort.

“A town!” She called and stopped walking to catch her breath. A smile flitted across her soot smeared features and relief flooded through her. There was civilization and reality straight ahead!

Jorick paused too, his hands on his hips as he surveyed the twinkling lights spread in the valley below them. “Yes, I believe it’s called Dunwick? It has a motel, so it will serve us nicely. It’s not much, but better than trying to sleep in the street.”

Katelina was so grateful at the idea of a bed that she didn’t bother to think about what would happen when she didn’t go to work the next morning, she didn’t even bother to talk. Her only thoughts were bent towards comfort and safety – the vampires would never look for them in Dunwick!

Jorick allowed her a few minutes to catch her breath. She sprawled on the ground while he rubbed his hands in the dewy grass, and attempted to clean the blood and dirt from his face and hands. As he worked, he eyed her critically. “You might do the same,” he suggested.

She nodded vaguely and spit into her hand. She rubbed her palms together and wiped them on her jeans. He winced in disgust, but said nothing as she concentrated her efforts on her face.

They found their way into the town: an old, rundown village gasping out its final breath. As they walked down quiet streets, the windows of abandoned buildings stared dully at them like the eyes of something dead and sorrowful, chipped paint and weedy parking lots reflected in their

dingy panes. Katelina had been there before, but she wasn't sure that it had ever looked as morose – or beautiful – as it did now.

They made their weary way to the main highway where they found what they were seeking. The motel was a pink, ranch style affair with individual doors to each room, all numbered in faded gold.

Jorick left her to check in, promising he'd be right back and telling her not to move. She assured him she had no intention of going anywhere, except to sleep. He turned to go and she almost stopped him. Despite his earlier efforts, traces of blood shone dark against his skin. But she decided it was pointless and sank to the concrete curb to wait.

Jorick returned, a key jingling in his hand and a smile on his face. Apparently they hadn't held his appearance against his money.

She stood as he unlocked the door and followed him into the room. The warmth felt almost too warm for a moment, but she shut the door. She glanced from the hideous carpeting, to the warped television stand, to the table and chair, and then to orange covers of the bed. The one and only bed. She opened her mouth to complain, but he was already gone to the tiny adjoining bathroom, muttering to himself, "Oh yes, this will be just fine."

"Oh will it?" Katelina demanded as she glared in the direction of his disembodied voice. They'd been nearly killed by someone or something, and he had saved her, in a manner of speaking, but that didn't mean she was going to sleep with him!

He reemerged from the bathroom, looking satisfied, and she snapped, "There's only one bed." It wasn't too late to go to the police, though she doubted they'd believe a word she said. How could they? She knew that no sane, rational person would.

"Yes, and there's only one person to sleep in it."

"Oh! You got separate rooms!" She felt remorse trickle through her. He'd been perfectly thoughtful and she'd sounded like a bitch, practically accusing him of trying to force himself on her. Her blush deepened as she realized where her mind had been.

"Nooooo," Jorick answered slowly. He looked at her blank face and added quickly, "The beds give me a stiff neck."

"Oh." She wasn't sure how to react. "Are you going to sleep on the floor or..." She had no other suggestions.

"Most likely." He glanced towards the tiny bathroom. "Do you want to take a shower?"

She started to nod; a shower sounded like a wonderful idea. But she was so exhausted she just wanted to drop into bed. It was nearing six a.m. and she'd been up over twenty-four hours. Besides, she wasn't entirely comfortable taking her clothes off with Jorick in the next room. She didn't know him. In fact, if she thought about it, she wasn't sure why she was there with him, or why she seemed to trust him when she shouldn't. He could still be a lying psychotic killer.

But she didn't say that, only, "No. I'll take one when I get up tomorrow – today, whatever."

"Well, I'm going to take one. I suggest you try to go to sleep." He disappeared into the tiny room and shut the door firmly behind him.

She flopped on the bed without bothering to climb beneath the blankets. She let her head sink back into the pillows, closed her eyes, and listened to the sound of the shower running. Birds began to chirp outside, heralding the sun's impending arrival.

What a night it had been! She could scarcely get her mind wrapped around it. There was too much for her to comprehend and it was all too strange and confusing.

Patrick's face swam before her eyes, pale and haunted. That's how he'd appeared the last time she'd seen him alive.

'What's wrong Patrick, you seem... I don't know, weird tonight.'
He'd faked a smile but the worry stayed in his blue eyes and refused to leave, 'Nothing, I'm just tired.'
'Do you want me to go?' she'd started to sit up, to leave the bed.
'No.' He'd looked like a lost little boy. 'I don't want you to leave, not yet.'
'Then I won't.' She'd laughed, and slid back beneath the blankets, wrapping herself around him, wishing she'd known how to make him feel better.

Katelina opened her eyes and wiped tears out of them. Damn! She'd been doing such a good job of ignoring the ache in her chest until tonight! She'd tried so hard not to cry for him, not to care, but now it wasn't working very well.

Love. Jorick had said Patrick loved her. The idea still tortured her. Patrick hadn't loved her, no matter what Jorick said. They'd discussed it so many times. Patrick had wanted her assurances that she didn't want a real relationship with him. He'd explained that he couldn't give her one and that he didn't want to. What was she supposed to feel about that? What was she supposed to say? She'd agreed, and from that moment on she'd suppressed any burgeoning emotion where Patrick was concerned, squashing it before it even began.

Jorick had no right to go around saying things like that about Patrick! No right at all!

She raised her fist and slammed it into the bed, wincing as pain reverberated through her damaged shoulder. She should clean it, but Jorick was in the bathroom. A flush crept across her cheeks as the unbidden thought of him naked behind the shower curtain entered her consciousness.

She quickly berated herself. She didn't understand how she could even contemplate such a thing, not after the night she'd had!

She closed her eyes again and yawned. What she needed was some sleep and then a good strong cup of coffee when she woke up. After that, everything would be just fine. She was sure that once the sun was up all this weirdness would disappear and everything would be back to normal. Yet, as she drifted into darkness, she wished longingly that she could really believe that.



Chapter Five

Katelina woke the following day to filtered sunlight splashed across her face. Faint impressions of a dream lingered, like half formed fingerprints in warm clay. Yes, it had been a warm dream – very, very warm. He'd been beautiful and smooth with dark eyes and strong hands. It was the kind of dream she wanted to stay in.

But, she couldn't, so she slowly opened her eyes, feeling disoriented and sore. Her head ached and her throat felt thick and raw. Her mind was mushy as it tried vainly to process why she felt so bad, and finally concluded that she must have a hangover.

She rolled over and found herself staring at a set of heavy orange drapes. A single thought drifted though her consciousness: *Orange? Who in the hell has orange drapes?*

Her muscles complained as she sat up too quickly and her eyes darted around the shabby motel room. She scrabbled through a tumble of memories, but the replay stuttered to a stop when a sharp pain erupted in her shoulder. Her hand went to it unconsciously. The hardened blood felt crisp beneath her fingers, a stiff reminder of last night's events. A strange horror gripped her as she gingerly fingered the wound and remembered it all – blood, fear, fire and... vampires?

Still reeling from the memories, she climbed out of the bed. Miniature clips flashed behind her eyes, encapsulated events in slow motion: A monster chained to a wall, bodies burning, something attacking her...

She forced the thoughts away and moved to the window, her mind in disarray. She jerked the drapes back and stared through the grimy glass to the world beyond.

The sun, in the last throes of the day, drenched the scene in blood-colored light. Cigarette butts littered a dingy sidewalk like crumpled pieces of reality. A random smattering of cars were scattered around the cracked parking lot. Weeds grew at the farthest edges of the pavement where the civilized world dissolved into a dry muttering cornfield. There was simply no room for vampires here.

She pulled the drapes closed and clicked the light on. The only thing that really mattered to her was what she was going to do. First, she needed to talk to Jorick and then everything else would fall neatly into place. Unfortunately, as her eyes skipped around the room, she realized that Jorick wasn't there.

Her first reaction was a string of obscenities, but she forced herself to relax. The room was already paid for, so even if he'd left that was okay. Still, she'd need some food and a ride. She hated the thought of having no money and being completely dependent on someone else, even if that someone was Sarah. That might be what best friends were for, but still.

She fished through her pockets and gave a small cry of triumph when she discovered a wrinkled twenty-dollar bill. Everything was going to be all right after all. It might not be much, but money was money – a real, useful, tangible object she could hold in her fingers.

She stuffed the money in her pocket and decided to take a shower before she called anyone. She paused at the bathroom door, in case Jorick was inside. She cleared her throat loudly and, that failing, she called his name. There was no answer, so she cautiously stuck her head inside. The room was tiny and painted the same boring shade that most of the commercial world used:

white enough to be sterile and unimaginative, yet off-white in a failed effort of homey-ness. The place was tidy; the shower curtain was even pulled shut, but there was no Jorick.

She decided it was just as well that he was gone. She didn't need him, after all, and she'd begun to suspect that the man in her dream looked a lot like him. She wasn't sure she could look him in the eye with that still clinging to her memory.

She paused by the sink and looked in the mirror. Her pale skin was streaked with dirt and traces of blood. Her sweater was torn at the shoulder, with threads of frayed yarn slowly unraveling around the edges. Her blonde mane was still pulled back in a ponytail. The memory of her bathroom and yesterday's scramble to get to work seemed a world away.

She peeled her sweater off and washed the heavy scab from her shoulder to uncover two slits about an inch apart. Jorick's words returned to her mind yet again: "...you've gotten quite a bite".

Pushing away the macabre thoughts, she kicked her shoes off, then moved to the bathtub. She jerked the shower curtain open and reached inside to turn the water on. Her fingers brushed the knob just as her eyes landed on the contents.

She screamed.

Jorick lay in the bathtub. His skin had the ashen, bloodless color of a corpse. Both his eyes and mouth were closed. His hands rested on his chest and stomach, perfectly still. His black hair fell over his shoulders and spread out to fill the space between his head and the chipped white porcelain. He was clearly dead.

Katelina stared helplessly. She knew she should call the police – but she had no idea what she'd tell them.

Fighting to maintain logic, she chewed her lip thoughtfully and began to pace the tiny room in circles. She had to do something. She couldn't just ignore this – or could she? She reasoned it out logically. What if she just got dressed and left? Could they find her? Would they try to pin his death on her? Would anyone believe that she didn't know what had happened to him, or that she didn't even know him? Would they say she'd done something to him? Would they find a way to blame her for his house burning down? And there would be bodies in the ruins, wouldn't there? After all, with the stress of Patrick's murder investigation, the detective didn't like her very much. They'd be happy to get her for something.

The questions ceased and she came to a single conclusion: this was a very, very bad situation.

She made two more circuits of the room, then knelt by the bathtub and studied Jorick again. As she stared at him, a strange thought flitted through the chaos in her mind: He was very good looking – maybe even beautiful – and dead as a doornail. A beautiful corpse in a chipped bathtub. Just her luck.

She leaned over him and tentatively reached a trembling hand towards him. She'd never touched a dead person before. Reluctantly, she pressed her fingertips to his neck, imitating what she'd seen on television. His skin was ice cold and she winced as she searched for the faintest hint of a pulse. Her brows furrowed in concentration and she was forced to admit that she didn't even know what she was feeling for, but, she decided, it hardly mattered. One look was enough to pronounce the man beyond aid of medical help.

She took her hand back and studied him, wondering what had killed him. She didn't think people just died sporadically, unless there was something seriously wrong with them to begin with. Maybe he'd had a heart attack, or died of a drug overdose. That sounded like something that would happen to one of Patrick's friends.

She poked him again. If he had drugs on him would they arrest her, too? She'd just decided to search his pockets when his eyes popped open; dark orbs that stared straight through her.

With a horrified scream, she fell over backwards and sprawled across the floor on her butt. She propped herself up with her elbows and stared in disbelief at the bathtub.

He drew in a shuddering gasp, like he'd been drowning and had only just escaped. Then, slowly, he sat up and turned to face her. He stared at her, a lack of comprehension on his face. They gazed at one another, their eyes locked, his confused and hers wide with fear.

The silence stretched. His dark eyes pulled her in until she was drowning; she couldn't move, couldn't speak. Time ceased to exist as the silky depths captured her attention, warm and whispering about things that her primitive subconscious seemed to understand. She started to feel lightheaded but, before she could actually humiliate herself, he broke the spell by murmuring, "Hello."

She fought to regain control of her faculties and banished the strange feeling to the back of her mind where it belonged.

"Hello?" she repeated sarcastically, glaring at him. "You scare me half to death and all you can say is hello? I thought you were dead!" As she stood she scooped up her ruined sweater and pressed it to her chest like a shield.

As if just realizing she wasn't fully dressed, he looked away politely, the hint of a smile on his lips. "No, I'm not dead." He glanced back to her he added, "I just feel like I should be."

"Yes. You—" but she stopped herself from telling him how truly dead he'd looked; he'd only argue. Besides, there were more important questions, and she started with the most obvious. "Why are you sleeping in the bathtub?"

"Oh, probably sleep walking." He shrugged casually. "It happens quite often."

She stared at him incredulously. "You sleep walked into the bathroom, climbed into the bathtub and laid down?" In order for them to be having this conversation one of them had to be crazy and it wasn't her.

"I don't know, I was asleep." He hoisted himself to his feet and tugged his shirt smooth. He rolled his neck, stretched his back and arms and then moved to stand close to her, a look of amusement on his face.

Her reply disappeared as she stared into his face and her skin flushed at his nearness. She couldn't help but notice he was just as attractive alive as he'd been dead, maybe more so.

"It doesn't matter, does it?" His eyes, so dark they almost seemed black, stared into hers, suffocating her with their gaze.

"Uh... No... I guess not," she stuttered. Once again the world tilted dangerously, threatening to spin away from her.

"You're probably hungry." He tore his gaze from hers and checked himself in the mirror.

It took all of her conscious effort to not follow his eyes into the shiny silver surface. She forced herself to look into the empty bathtub instead and tried to gather her scattered thoughts. "Yeah, I'm starving," she murmured and realized it was true.

Jorick nodded. "Take your shower, and when you're done we'll see about finding some food." He glanced at her once more. Her face burned as she imagined that he could see through not only the sweater she clutched against her chest but all of her clothing. The fact that it didn't give her the creeps made her feel even worse.

"Okay," she half whispered, looking at the floor and not daring to meet his eyes.

He slid smoothly past her; his body too close for an instant, and then left, leaving her flushed and shaken.

She exhaled and leaned back against the cool wall, her body feverish. A few moments ago she'd been terrified because she'd thought him dead and now she was nervous because he was alive!

Katelina took a fast shower, blushing furiously the whole time. She wondered if Jorick was sitting in the motel room, imagining her naked, or if he was indifferently flipping channels on the television and wishing she'd hurry up.

Dressed and washed, she walked into the room to find Jorick sprawled across the rumped bed, the television remote in his hand and his eyes trained on the glowing screen. At least she had the answer to her question, though somehow it disappointed her a little.

"All done?" he asked casually and clicked the television off.

"Yeah, I'm as clean as I'm going to get." She tried to smooth her wet, tangled hair. She couldn't help but wonder what he'd done to make his hair look so good, since neither of them had a hairbrush, but it seemed too personal a question to ask.

He swung himself into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. "Before we go, let me look at your shoulder."

She moved to stand in front of him, her mouth dry again. She berated herself. This had to stop – she wasn't a schoolgirl! She was an adult woman in full control of her faculties, facing a man who quite possibly was not in control of his – no matter what he looked like.

His hand caught her neck and pulled her forward, so that she bent into him. His fingers were cool, but not uncomfortable as he brushed her ruined sweater back from her shoulder and gazed at the bite. "Hmmmm... It seems to be healing as well as expected. I think a bandage wouldn't hurt."

She nodded and waited for him to release his hold on her neck, telling herself that he hadn't just been trying to get a free look at her cleavage.

As if reading her mind, he let go. His eyes dropped away from hers quickly and his head followed so that he stared at the floor. She'd sworn that for just a second she'd seen guilt in his eyes.

Katelina straightened up. She no longer had an excuse to be close to him. A faint feeling of regret shimmered through her but she mentally brushed it away.

"We should go get some food," Jorick said suddenly. He stood without looking up, and Katelina had to shuffle backwards quickly.

Wordlessly, he headed to the door and unlocked the requisite row of chains and bolts. He opened it wide then plunged through into the gathering darkness.

Quietly, she followed him out the door and wondered how they were going to get home when neither of them had a car, but she decided to wait until she'd eaten to worry about it.

Night had fallen since she'd woken up, and the garish outdoor lights gave the world a surreal quality. Her wet hair was ruffled by a cool breeze that was heavy with the smell of dead leaves, dying grass, and car exhaust. In the grip of darkness, the world was once more opened to the possibilities of monsters, despite the closeness of civilization, and she could no longer discern fact from fiction in her mind. Had she been attacked by vampires and saved by the man walking only a few feet in front of her? Were any of her memories real, or were they all fantasy?

Staring at Jorick's broad shouldered back, she wondered if she wanted to find out what was real and what wasn't. After all, what if she didn't like what she discovered?



Chapter Six

Katelina followed Jorick across the motel parking lot to the sidewalk. Under the odd colored streetlights, her skin glowed pasty white and the sidewalk seethed in a thick boiling black; a surreal scene after so much confusion.

The pair didn't speak as they headed towards the gas station. Only the eerie sound of the rustling cornfield broke the silence.

The convenience store was a typical concrete building, decorated with a grinning turtle. Taped to the large glass windows was an assortment of signs advertising hay rides, houses for lease, and a two for one sale on cigarettes. It was the arrangement beyond that caught her attention, though. There was a rack of maps and sunglasses, a stand of motor oil and anti-freeze, and an array of junk food in appealing multi-colored packaging.

The door chimed as they walked in, and the clerk behind the counter, a boy who might have been eighteen, gave them an alarmed look.

Jorick went to the drink coolers and Katelina headed straight for the Twinkies. The employee watched them suspiciously, and she wanted to glare at him. Though, to the boys' credit she supposed they made an interesting pair. She looked wet and wrinkled while Jorick looked brilliant - so brilliant that she found herself glancing towards him more than once.

She picked out a handful of junk food and dumped it on the counter in an unceremonious heap. However, the clerk was more interested in watching Jorick than ringing up her purchases.

She cleared her throat and he muttered, "Will that be all?"

A snappy reply rose to her lips, but her attention was drawn to the cigarette display behind him. Two for one was a good deal, and right now she could use something good. Just two packs and then she'd go back to not smoking. Or maybe not. Maybe she'd stick to it again. After all, now was as good a time as any to start back up. Mutilated fun buddies were one thing, but she needed nicotine to deal with vampires.

"Give me two packs of Marlboro Ultra-Light 100s."

"There's a, uh, special..." the clerk stuttered without looking at her.

"I know. That's why I asked for two." She pulled the crumpled bill out of her pocket and stared at the kid expectantly. When he didn't move she snapped, "He's not going to rob the place or date you, so get over it."

The kid gaped, but she'd finally gotten his attention. He blinked, no doubt working on a suitable reply, but she repeated her request and he reluctantly grabbed the cigarettes and tossed them on the counter with her collection.

Jorick reached her side, a bottle of fruit juice in his hand. He eyed the heap on the counter, one eyebrow raised disapprovingly. "A smoker?"

"I quit," she offered by way of explanation.

"Then maybe you should stay that way?"

She ignored him and directed the kid to ring up the juice and a lighter as well. With her paltry change in her pocket and the bag of goodies balanced on her hip, she followed Jorick outside.

She fished the juice out and offered it to him, but he shook his head and nodded towards a payphone near the corner of the building. "Let me make a call first." He took a couple of steps then added, "Wait here."

She started to ask why, but let it go. She didn't really want to stand there and watch him on the phone, anyway.

She plopped down on the curb and eyed the bag of food. It was weird that he'd just gotten juice, but then maybe he was out of money. He'd paid for the room, after all.

Her eyes strayed from the bag to Jorick. He leaned casually against the phone's rusty metal shroud, his face enveloped in darkness. Multiple shadows stretched out behind him, long and black. It reminded her of the multiple complications she was facing; shadowy wraiths of half memories and weird stories.

The idea was unsettling so she reached into her bag of treasures and soon had a smoking cigarette between her lips. A feeling of calm and peace spread through her as she inhaled and then exhaled slowly. Now she felt she could deal with anything that life threw at her, including monsters from her worst nightmares.

She took another puff and imagined Sarah's lecture. The guilt was instant, but she didn't put the cigarette out. Sure, Sarah would be disappointed, but maybe she'd understand. After all, it was vampires! God, could she even tell Sarah about all of this? Would she believe her or just think she'd cracked?

"She'll send me to the damn therapist for sure," Katelina muttered to herself. How would that look in her work file? That she was seeing a shrink – "Work!"

Jorick seemed to materialize in front of her, a questioning look on his face. "What?"

"I missed work. And I didn't even call in!" She looked at the payphone. "Maybe I could leave a message..."

Jorick shrugged. "We'll have a ride in a couple of hours."

She felt a small measure of relief at his words. "Good. I guess I can wait until I get home, though I don't know what I'm going to tell them."

"If you need to tell them anything then I suggest you do it now."

"It'll be easier from home—" she cut herself off. "Why?"

He spoke with exaggerated emphasis. "I told you last night, going home after dark isn't a good idea."

"I have to go home. I need to change and get things sorted out – I have a job! I have a life!"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I told you things would change once you found out the truth. I gave you a chance to turn and run from it, and you chose not to. You can't just go back to being what you were before; not now. You're involved. Claudius will want your blood as much as mine." He dropped to the curb next to her and leaned his elbows on his knees.

"But... I'll tell him it's a mistake! If I explain it..." she trailed off, sure it wasn't true. The kind of people that could make you tear out your brother's throat didn't understand the word 'mistake'. "Shit!"

"I'm sorry," Jorick said simply. He met her eyes and shrugged. "I did give you a chance, though." He plucked the cigarette from her fingers and took a long drag off of it, exhaling a thin stream of smoke that writhed towards the sky like a white, ethereal ladder to heaven.

He handed it back and she puffed on it numbly. Her mind worked overtime, trying to think of a way out of this. The best thing to do was assume Jorick was telling the truth and that he wasn't just deranged and insane. After all, she'd seen the thing in the basement and she had a

weird bite mark on her shoulder. Both of those things were real, so there had to be truth in his story. In that case his advice was probably sound, whether she wanted to follow it or not.

She sighed heavily and wished that the smoke truly was a ladder to some celestial utopia. But, even if it was, she wouldn't know how to climb it. No, she told herself, she needed to think about practical things. If 'they' knew where she lived, she'd have to get a new apartment. Okay, she could do that. She hated to, but she could. As for the job, if she didn't show up she'd find herself unemployed, and that would be a big problem.

While she sat there, trying to reason out a new life, all around her the world continued to exist. Humanity continued to carry on as if nothing was amiss. A car pulled in and parked. Six teenagers piled out and headed into the gas station. Katelina felt a deep isolation between herself and the happy kids, as though an invisible rift of nightmares separated her from their carefree world.

"All right, fine," she agreed reluctantly. "But, I need to go to work tomorrow."

"I wouldn't," he commented casually as he took the cigarette again.

She glared as he took another puff. "You know, for someone who thinks I should 'stay quit'..."

"Yeah, well." He handed it back. "As I was saying, I wouldn't go if I were you. I'm sure they know where you work, and they're not above recruiting humans when they need something done in the daytime."

"But what have I done?" Her eyes were drawn to one of the teenagers who came slamming out the door. That was her, she thought suddenly: The one alone and no longer smiling.

"Nothing, but try telling that to Claudius. They've been looking for Michael and I for quite some time, and when they found us you were there. Michael knows who you are, and I guarantee he's been rescued so Claudius can punish him. If you don't think Michael will sell you out, you're sadly mistaken."

Katelina turned her attention to Jorick. His eyes were on the unhappy teen, his expression filled with a passive curiosity, like a kid watching ants scurry around on the pavement.

"But..." she started and stopped. She had nothing to say.

He took a deep breath and forsook his amusement, his voice calm and over patient. "There is no 'but', no magic way out. It's cut and dried: Claudius has been interested in you for quite some time, first as a weapon to use against Michael and then Patrick. Even with Patrick dead you were still a suspect and, now that Michael can confirm your involvement, your capture can be guaranteed. They'll be sure that you know."

"Know what?" She was tired of these stupid half hints!

"Where 'it' is, of course." Jorick's posture radiated annoyance, as though he expected her to already know.

"Where what is?" she cried. A man pumping gas glanced towards them and she dropped her voice, though her eyes blazed and her hands balled into fists at her sides. "I'm getting tired of the runaround, so I suggest you just spit it out!"

Jorick's dark eyes snapped with annoyance, but he refused to yell. Instead his voice was weary. "His lover of course."

Katelina almost dropped the remainder of her cigarette. "They kidnapped someone?" she cried and then lowered her voice quickly. "Seriously?"

"Yes. They took Arowenia and have her hidden away. Claudius will kill anyone he has to in order to get her back."

Katelina didn't know what to say or how to feel. Patrick and Michael had kidnapped someone, someone this Claudius cared for deeply. The 'girl' part of her could even appreciate the situation and see the romance in it. Arowenia was kidnapped and her desperate lover Claudius would do anything to return her to his side. Still, the selfish part of her wanted them both to disappear.

She stared at her feet and wondered how Patrick could have agreed to such a thing. He hated commitment as much as she did, but at his core he was a romantic. Surely he'd have seen how wrong it was, or at least know that Claudius would hunt them down. Her whole vision of Claudius had changed; instead of the grinning mobster who killed men for fun, she imagined a broken, mourning man, desperate to save the only woman that mattered to him.

"Why would they do that, knowing he loved her that much?"

"Love?" Jorick chuckled, but the levity faded quickly. "No. She belongs to him and has for a long, long time. She's one of his possessions, and he doesn't like it when people steal his things."

"Oh." Katelina didn't understand that either, but then nothing in the situation seemed to make any sense.

She decided then that food came first and fished a Twinkie out of the bag. Once she'd eaten she'd worry about the things that hid under her bed waiting to frighten her.

"So, we have a ride coming?" she asked around a mouth full of golden cake.

Jorick cringed and looked away from her. "Yes." He climbed to his feet smoothly, his eyes on the ground. "I'll walk you back to the motel. He's going to meet us there."

She started to nod but noticed he still looked unnaturally pale, like he had in the bathtub. "Okay." She stood up, and held her paper sack of goodies out to him. "Don't you want something?"

"No, not right now." He waved the offer away and then gave her a small, tight smile. "Thank you, anyway."

"You should probably eat something..." she trailed off and bit her lip, not sure why she cared. She supposed it must be because she needed him until she could get moved and get things rearranged with her life. If Jorick was right, then she couldn't count on her mother and Sarah until this was over. She couldn't put them in danger from the vampires.

"I'm fine," he assured her quietly. "I'll eat later, all right?"

She nodded, embarrassed for her concern. He turned silently and she followed him back across the parking lot, her mind repeating the question it had asked so often: maybe she should just call the police? But she knew it was useless; they'd just lock her up for being crazy!

When they reached the motel, Jorick unlocked the door and hurriedly stuffed her into the room. He promised he'd be back soon and took off, leaving her alone.

She flopped onto the bed and flipped through the TV channels. She ran the gamut of the basic cable's offerings without finding anything to hold her interest. In desperation, she settled on the local news. She was just ready to change the channel again, when a report came on about an abandoned farmhouse that had burned to the ground. Authorities weren't certain yet what had happened, but there were human remains among the wreckage and they suspected that they'd been having a party when calamity struck.

Katelina's mouth dropped open like a cartoon character. It was Jorick's house – or the house he'd been in. The blonde anchorwoman, shiny nailed hands folded on the desk in front of her, said that they were still trying to contact the owner and ID the bodies at this time. So far they had no idea who anyone inside had been. A stripped, abandoned car had been found nearby and the

police were using the VIN numbers to find the owner, but so far the name had not been released to the media.

Katelina felt dizzy and strange. Seeing the skeletal remains of the house on television and listening to the reporter's neatly clipped voice made the whole thing real. It made it an event. It made it an inescapable truth that she didn't want to face.

A terrible voice in her head told her that the "stripped and abandoned car" was her car; her happy, shiny red car that she'd paid on for three years. She groaned silently, thinking about how much it was going to cost to repair the damage.

Despite her shock, she found one thing amusing: she could imagine the look on the coroner's face when they brought him a bag full of skulls with pointy teeth. How long would it take them to figure that out?

The news gave way to a sitcom, but the segment left her feeling unsettled. She found herself glancing at the door and wishing that Jorick would hurry up.

Another sitcom followed, just as ridiculous as the first. Katelina made it halfway through the second one before she gave up on it. She pressed the button on the remote and, in the second of silence as the television flipped from one channel to another, she heard a noise outside the door.

"At last," she muttered, grateful for company. She switched off the TV and started towards the door when it suddenly burst open.

The pale man who came striding into the room – teeth bared and hair cropped short – was obviously not Jorick. His shining fangs made the word "vampire" scream through her brain. There, before her, was a nasty reminder of last night and the truth the news had echoed.

"Where is he?" His eyes made quick, jerky movements as he surveyed the room.

"Wha– who?" she stuttered as another man came in the door behind him. His eyes were dark and a snarling smirk was pasted on his cruel, pointy face.

The shorthaired vampire drew closer to her. "You know who I mean; that conceited ass, Jorick."

Panic surged in her and she stammered, "I – I don't know where he is."

"Sure you don't. Perhaps some persuasion will jog your memory?" He took a step towards her. His long pale fingers stretched through the empty space between them, reaching for her.

She jerked away and tried to run for the door, but the second vampire blocked her path. She realized that she wasn't going to make it outside; not with the pair of them in the way. Her heart pounded through her body. Her hands were slick and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. What in the hell was she going to do?

Her eyes shot around the room wildly and landed on the bathroom door. It was the only hope she had. Maybe, if she could wedge herself against the door, she could keep them out long enough for Jorick to return – if he was going to return. Faced with these two, she seriously doubted he would.

She tried not to look in the direction she was planning to move. She said a quick prayer, threw herself on the bed, and rolled across it. Her feet had barely hit the carpet before she scrambled around the corner, flung herself into the tiled bathroom, and slammed the door behind her.

There was no lock, so she pressed her back against the door. She braced one foot on the pipes under the sink and the other foot on the baseboard. Deep down she knew she couldn't hold it for very long, but her instincts refused to surrender and let her die. Especially in a situation she couldn't even understand.

Maybe the bathroom was a bad idea.

Knuckles rapped against the door, followed by laughter. The first vampire's voice was sing-song, as though this was a game to him, "Open the door, little girl, and we might let you live,"

The one who kept their cool always won, she reminded herself, and tried to ignore the staccato beats of her heart throbbing in her ears. She tried to sound calm and brave. "Go away!"

They laughed again, throaty and harsh. "Did you hear that? She wants us to go away." The voice changed from amused to menacing. "Open the door or we'll come in anyway! It's your choice."

She pressed with all her might against the door, her legs taut with the effort. She wanted to cry and scream and demand that God to explain to her what she'd done to deserve this, but that felt weak. So she just shouted to the vampires, "I told you I don't know where he is!"

"And I told you that we'll extract the information from you!" The volume dropped as he spoke to his companion, "Forget it, we'll drag her out."

The doorknob turned against her side and made soft clicking noises. They pushed on the door. She pressed back. Beads of perspiration popped up all over her as she strained, using every ounce of strength she had. Where in the hell was Jorick?

The door began to crack with a loud, splintering sound. The vampires put more and more pressure on it and the sound grew. Katelina's feet began to slide dangerously. She locked her knees against it, but she knew there was no way to stop them. They were both stronger than she was, and if they hadn't enjoyed playing with her would already be inside her tiled sanctuary. She pushed back with the last of her strength; palms slipping with the lubricant of her sweat and screamed out for the only one who might save her, "Jorick!"

With a loud crack the door splintered apart. A chunk of wood and pressboard fell in on her, leaking needle sized splinters. A groping hand reached through the hole. Katelina threw herself from the searching fingers and into the chipped bathtub, her last bastion of hope. Her eyes wildly danced around for some kind of defense, but found nothing. She recalled a horror story she'd read and, like the heroin had, she grabbed the showerhead from its cradle and wrapped the hose around her wrist. She turned the hot water on full blast and aimed the steaming stream into the drain. Drops of hot water splashed on her jeans and shoes, but she ignored it and readied herself to soak them down even as the door came crashing open.

"Jorick!"

The vampires tried to squeeze into the tiny room in unison. The shorthaired vampire hissed at his companion and shoved his way through. He stood just inside the threshold, on top of the ruined door fragments. "Where is he?" He demanded and moved towards her.

She trembled as she turned the shower head on him. Hot water splattered him and bounced off to run down the walls. Thick steam billowed in transparent white clouds.

The vampire swore and jerked back, caught by surprise. Then, shaking his soaked arms, he chuckled ominously and gave her a stare that had her death written in it. "What the fuck? You think hot water can hurt me? This isn't the Wizard of Oz, girly!"

He started towards her and she aimed the jet of water at his face and screamed for Jorick one final time.

As if he'd finally been summoned, Jorick appeared. He threw the lurking companion against the wet tiled wall with a sickening crunch. The limp body slid to the floor where it lay like a broken doll in a pool of steaming water.

The remaining vampire spun around, abandoning Katelina and her feeble defenses to deal with Jorick. "There you are, you son of a bitch!"

Relief swept through Katelina and she bit back a shout of joy. She'd never been happier to see anyone in her whole life. Somehow she suddenly knew it would be all right. Jorick would deal with this and then it would be all over, like a terrible nightmare.

Jorick gave the broken body on the floor a final kick before he seized the other by the shoulders. "Claudius sent you?"

"Of course, why else would I bother with you?" He half twisted away and slammed his fist into Jorick's stomach. "Where is she?"

Jorick stumbled back a step, more from shock than pain. "As if I know." He regained his posture and closed the gap between them. His dark hair fell across his face and made him look almost as sinister as his inhuman attacker.

"Don't play stupid. We know you're involved in it – you and your friends." He grabbed Jorick and threw him through the door and against the bedroom wall, with a loud thud. He snickered as he stepped quickly through the ruined doorframe and out onto the bedroom carpet.

Jorick was on his feet in a movement so fast that Katelina almost didn't see it. "Says who?" He charged the vampire, throwing him back into the bathroom. His body struck the floor and nearly collided with the tub where Katelina stood, gripping the shower head and trembling.

Jorick bounded into the room, easily clearing the broken body in front of the door. The remaining opponent stood, but before he had reached his full height Jorick slammed him into the wall opposite the sink. "You're a pathetic slave."

"I'm not the one fighting for sloppy seconds," the vampire spat as he tried to free himself.

Those were the last words he spoke. Jorick spun and threw him head first into the mirror, showering the room with shining glass shards and blood.

Katelina dropped the shower head. Water sprayed up the wall as she shielded herself from the broken glass.

Slowly, she lowered her arms. Every detail flashed before her eyes in crystal clarity: the water dripping down the wall, the shimmering pieces of glass scattered around like giant raindrops, the steam curling into the humid, heavy air. An inch of water covered the floor, and dark splashes of blood were slowly mixing with it, turning it into a pale crimson pool.

The short haired vampire hung off the sink. His head was inside the porcelain bowl and his body trailed limply down to the floor. From the angle of his neck and back, she could tell that his spine was broken. Blood ran from the gouges in his head and collected in the sink to pool around his still snarling face. Strange, gurgling noises came from him, but it was only a matter of time until he died – wasn't it?

Jorick stood between her and the crumpled bodies of the vampires. He wiped a streak of splattered blood from his face, then gently took hold of her shoulder and gave her a tiny shake. She roused slightly, her mouth open and her eyes blinking rapidly as her mind fought to push away the onslaught of information.

A car horn sounded outside. The harsh noise jerked her back to reality. Her mouth began to work furiously and she thoughtlessly repeated "Oh God. Oh God. Oh God," over and over again.

"Our ride's here," Jorick said softly, giving her another light shake to stop the flow of useless words. He jerked his thumb towards the broken vampires. "I suggest we go before their friends show up."

Katelina nodded and allowed him to lead her out of the ruined bathroom. The glass crunched beneath her feet like snow from a terrifying fairytale and she had to bite back a wave of fear and disgust as she climbed over the crumpled bodies.

Jorick led her through the bedroom, and she glanced back at the trail of wet, bloody footprints she'd left behind. They were like the symbols on some macabre board game that led to hell; a hell she'd only barely escaped.



Chapter Seven

The car waiting outside for them was large and blue: a relic of an era when people were more interested in size than gas mileage.

Katelina found herself quickly bundled into the backseat. Jorick slipped back into the motel room to return with the ugly orange bedspread. He wrapped it tightly around her, and her soaked clothes, murmuring encouraging phrases to wipe away the horror that shone in her eyes. Her head bobbed in time to his words and she agreed to the nonsense he was saying. She wanted to believe that it was all okay. And then a strange calm feeling descended on her. She let herself go with it, floating away on the tide of safety it offered.

She relaxed back into the seat and Jorick said softly, "I'll be right back," before he disappeared into the motel room again.

With Jorick gone, she suddenly became aware of the driver's presence. He had broad shoulders and long tawny hair that hung in a ponytail down his back. He didn't bother to turn his head, only adjusted the rear view mirror so he could see her. She stared into it and saw a pair of strange golden colored eyes looking back. The amber orbs reminded her of a cat, but she didn't have long to contemplate them before he flipped the mirror back to the normal position, his curiosity satisfied.

Katelina wondered if she should say something, but she couldn't think of any suitable words. She wasn't sure what had just happened or why, and she didn't know who the driver was or how Jorick knew him, let alone if they could trust him. But hell, could she even trust Jorick? She barely knew him. Just because he'd saved her didn't mean they were any closer, and yet she had a sense of uneasy safety just being near him. She couldn't explain it, even to herself, but there was something comforting about him.

The calm feeling began to fade. Her eyes turned towards the gaping motel room door, and she wondered what was taking Jorick so long. Images flashed through her mind of the dead or dying vampires leaping to their feet and striking him down.

Despite her fears, he emerged only a moment later, bearing a bloody blanket. Its lumpy appearance and scarlet stains declared its grim contents.

"The keys?" Jorick asked, as he paused by the driver's side window and shifted the gory parcel in his arms. His eyes shifted around the dark parking lot in search of onlookers, not nervous, only aware.

With a disbelieving shake of his head, the driver climbed out and unlocked the trunk. Katelina cringed as she heard them stuff the bundle inside. She didn't want to think about the cargo that was separated from her by only a blanket and a seat. She shuddered as she imagined the hideous things reaching up and touching her.

The men returned and Jorick slid into the front passenger seat. He glanced over his shoulder to offer Katelina a tight but reassuring smile.

She wanted to ask him what was going on, but figured it was pointless. If she still cared she could ask later, when they were away from the horrible place; away from the pink motel and the ugly carpet and hideous orange drapes and bloody footprints.

The driver asked Jorick, "Are we ready?"

Jorick nodded and dropped back into the seat. He closed his eyes wearily as the car shuddered into gear and they pulled out of the parking lot.

“I take it they found you?” The driver glanced sideways for a moment and Katelina could see his perfect profile. His strange eyes and golden brown hair made him look like a lion. It wasn’t just his appearance, though. There was something very feline about him, the feeling of controlled power lurking beneath a peaceful exterior, like a cat coiled and ready to spring on its prey.

“Yes.” The street lights flashed past them and splashed dark, twisted shadows across Jorick’s weary face. “They found us.”

The car fell silent except for the sound of the motor and the wheels on the pavement. They soon left the small town of Dunwick behind them. As it shrunk in the darkness, Katelina began to relax. Her fingers twitched and she wished she’d at least grabbed the cigarettes. She knew smoking wouldn’t really make things better. How many times had Sarah lectured her about that? But at least things would seem saner. She wanted a cigarette and her own bed and her telephone. She wanted to curl up under the covers and call Sarah and tell her about this horrible nightmare she’d had, and then she wanted to call her mother and make arrangements for Grave Day like usual. She just wanted reality.

But, her reality wasn’t pretty. She’d just been attacked by two vampires and the two packs of cigarettes she’d bought had been abandoned in the motel room with the food; her last twenty dollars gone for nothing, after all.

She leaned her face against the cool glass and stared out into the night flying past them. The trees were illuminated and ghostly in the harsh brightness of the headlights. The rhythm of the tires on the pavement droned in her ears. She closed her eyes and tried to relax to the vibrations of the car. She hadn’t been awake for very long, but she was already as exhausted as Jorick looked. Her muscles were taut, and her left shoulder ached again.

The driver’s voice interrupted her thoughts, his tones low enough that he probably thought she couldn’t hear him.

“So this is the... erm... her?”

“Yes, this is Katelina,” Jorick answered.

“What are you planning to do with her?”

The question hung in the air and Katelina felt herself wanting to know what he’d say, her ears tensing for the sound of his answer. Finally, after what felt like uncountable minutes, Jorick cleared his throat. “I don’t know,” his voice was sad. “I admit I didn’t expect things to happen this way.”

“I told you it was a bad idea, Jorick.” His tone was flat, as though they’d discussed it too many times already.

“I know, I know.” Jorick seemed resigned to that fact. “I just hated to leave her never knowing what really happened to him. Besides, who’s to say that Claudius wouldn’t have gone after her sooner or later? She is a reasonable suspect, you know. Would it be better for it to come as a complete shock?”

“And I suppose *you* broke it to her gently?” The driver snorted. “I understand your reasoning, Jorick, your *true* reasoning, but I still stand by my original opinion.”

“I’m sure you do, Oren. I’m sure it wouldn’t have haunted your dreams, but we’re different.”

“We didn’t used to be, not before....” Oren trailed off.

“Yes, I know. I’ll bet you don’t even dream anymore, do you?”

There was silence and then very quietly he said, “No, Jorick. I don’t.”

With the danger past, a strange sense of safety settled over her. Boredom and the rhythm of the highway eventually lulled Katelina into the uneasy sleep of a passenger. She woke in the backseat, a scream trapped in her throat, her head swimming with dreams of blood and fanged vampires ripping her to shreds. She rubbed her head and then checked her watch to find that it was one-thirty in the morning.

She blinked the sleep from her eyes and glanced into the front seat. The pair of men were wrapped in silence, both staring through the windshield. The blonde’s hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, his knuckles white with the effort. A palpable disagreement hung in the air, but she couldn’t identify the cause.

Jorick seemed to sense her gaze and turned to look at her. His warm, rich voice rolled back to her through the darkness, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m... okay,” she lied. Truthfully she didn’t know how she felt. She didn’t think she was okay – how could she be? But for the moment she didn’t seem to be hysterical. Mostly she was numb.

“Good.” He nodded sharply and then jerked his head towards his companion. “I’m sorry I haven’t introduced you. This is Oren. We’re going to be staying with him and his wife for a little while.” He acted as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

“Okay,” she murmured. She couldn’t think of anything else to say. She had a few questions, such as where exactly did Oren live, but she supposed she’d find the answers soon enough. Right now she just wanted to relax and forget.

Jorick gave her another tight smile before he asked, “Did they say anything to you before I got there?”

She realized that he’d never asked her what was going on, almost like he’d already known and maybe even expected it. “They wanted to know where you were.”

His voice grew serious and his eyes bored into her. “Did they call you by name?”

She raced over the scene in her head; it was jumbled and confused and tasted like fear in her mouth. “I – I don’t think so....” How the hell was she supposed to remember that after everything else that had happened?

“Good.” He gave another quick, satisfied nod. “They aren’t aware who you are yet – which is an advantage.” He paused and rubbed his chin. “Perhaps Michael didn’t make it after all.”

“I can find out, if you want me to,” Oren offered unenthusiastically.

“Yes. I’d like to find out how much Claudius knows. I’m sure that someone made it out alive last night, at least one of them.” Jorick seemed to be musing aloud rather than actually conversing.

The talk ceased and the night flew by. Katelina had finally decided she was really being kidnapped, and hauled to a shadowy pier to be sacrificed, when they came to a wrought iron fence that stood open and waiting. They followed the curving driveway and came to a stop before a huge, red brick mansion. Electric light blazed from more than half the windows and Katelina suddenly wondered about who else lived with him. It seemed too big for just Oren and his wife – from the look of the car they obviously weren’t rich.

As the men climbed out, Katelina sat froze clutching the bedspread, her mind churning. The mansion was like a scene from a horror movie; the scene right before the girl died. There was room enough inside it for a whole “coven”, as Jorick had called it. What if the only reason Jorick had saved her was so he could bring her to Oren’s house and sacrifice her in some cult ritual?

Maybe the dead things in the trunk weren't really vampires, just warring cult members. The image of the lonely pier was now replaced with a picture of a shadowy basement and lots of candles.

When she didn't get out, Jorick opened the door and stuck his head inside. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head repeatedly and tried to keep the fear from her voice. "I want to go home. I want to go home now."

"Shhhhhh.... it's all right." He smiled tightly but reassuringly and laid his hand on her shoulder. "Let's go inside and you can get a bath and some fresh clothes."

"I can take a bath at home. Where it's safe."

Jorick looked at her, seemingly confused. Then he seemed to understand the effect the scene at the motel room had had on her. "Don't worry," he said gently as he crouched down, his eyes at the same level as hers. "You are safe. No one is going to come for us here."

"I'm not particularly worried about that." Her eyes went over Jorick's shoulder to the impatient blonde man.

"Oren will not harm you, either. He is no mass murderer or psychotic killer. Trust me, I won't let anything happen to you, I promise." His gaze held hers, his black eyes shining luminescent in the brightness from the yard light.

Something in his voice and his gaze made her believe him. It was almost like a soft, comforting blanket wrapped around her, though she couldn't have said why. He helped her out of the car and they followed Oren across the lawn. "All right."

The lion-like vampire opened the large front door and led them into a stone tiled foyer. Under the bright lights Katelina noticed that Jorick was covered in spots of blood. Her wet clothes had dried, but she realized now how stained and dirty they looked. Suddenly she felt stupid and filthy.

They left the foyer for a broad hallway with deep green walls. Polished tables stood beneath large painted portraits and a large staircase of gleaming wood rose to the second story.

Oren opened a nearby door and Jorick stepped into the room. Katelina followed to find a woman with long black hair and sad brown eyes sitting on a couch, rocking a baby. Beside her, a man with the same dark hair and eyes gazed inquiringly at them. On his other side lounged a redheaded woman. The slinky green dress barely covered her body, and her lips seemed to be in a permanent sexy pout. Though beautiful, all three were pale and there was something pinched and unhealthy about them.

Despite the fact it was nearly three in the morning, a small boy of about five sat in front of the fireplace, playing with a pile of colored wooden blocks. Next to him crouched a blonde girl whose tongue darted out to lick her lips. She wore a pale lavender dress and could have been anywhere from twelve to twenty, her features ageless but beautiful, like Katelina had always imagined a wood sprite.

Another man, his hair a mixture of black and grey, sat in the corner holding a worn book. He didn't bother to look up from the pages, but absently stroked his long gray beard, lost to the story.

Oren's eyes went to the black-haired beauty on the couch. "Jesslynn, they're here. I'm going to see them to their rooms."

Jesslynn looked up, dark eyes flicking from her husband to the other two, but she made no comment. The redhead moved ever so slightly, oozing sensuality from every pore. She started to open her mouth but Oren cut her off.

“We’ll do the introductions tomorrow, it’s very late. Besides, not everyone is here.” He gave the redhead a stern look, his lips still tight. Now that Katelina could see him in the light, he seemed unnaturally pale, too, like the others.

The redhead stuck out her bottom lip in an exaggerated pout and crossed her arms over her ample chest like a spoiled child. Oren ignored her and led them back to the hallway. Even as the door swung closed, she could feel the eyes of the strangers trying to stare through her, picking her bones like vultures. As if sensing her worries, Jorick squeezed her hand.

They followed their host up the carved wooden staircase, then down a long hallway, past ornately carved doors. Oren stopped in front of one near the end of the corridor and opened it to reveal a lilac scented room.

“This will be your room, Katelina.” Oren paused and cleared his throat. He gave Jorick a sharp look. “I assume you know the way to yours?”

“Yes, I do. Thank you, Oren.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied stiffly. “We may have our differences, but I can never forget our... relationship,” and with that Oren turned and strode off down the hall.

Katelina pondered what their “relationship” could possibly be, and suddenly wondered if maybe he and Jorick were.... lovers?

“No, nothing like that.” Amusement twinkled in the depths of Jorick’s dark eyes.

She stared up at him, unguarded surprise on her face. How had he known her thoughts?

“Come.” He smiled slightly, almost as if enjoying a secret.

Inside, the walls were painted pale soothing lavender. In the center stood a massive bed of carved wood. Its white bedspread and lace canopy looked sweet and old fashioned. A wardrobe sat against the farthest wall, and next it was a stand with a pitcher and basin on it. Tiny violets decorated the porcelain in a delicate pattern that gave the room a quaint, charming look and made Katelina feel like she’d stumbled into another time, despite the polished chrome of the bathroom that peeked from the opened door to her right. The only other furnishings were a heavily carved nightstand next to the bed, that bore a table lamp, and a trash can. Draped over the foot of the bed, as if waiting for her, lay a filmy, lacey nightgown.

Jorick caught Katelina’s other hand and pulled her closer. “Take a bath, change your clothes, get some sleep. But – ” he stared into her eyes, “No matter what time you wake, do *not* wander the house. Do *not* leave this room until I come for you – no matter what. It is important that you listen to me. If you don’t... well...” He let it trail off as a vague threat of something evil.

He gripped her arms just below her shoulders and she half expected him to shake her for emphasis, but he didn’t. She opened her mouth to ask him what was wrong with the people living in the house, but stopped. Beneath the soothing lights she saw for the first time that there was something not quite right about him, either. It was as if he had the same mysterious malady. Her mind whispered something to her, but she couldn’t catch the words and half phrases it said; the truths it already knew but she refused to accept.

“You must promise me that you will remain in here, no matter what happens,” Jorick pressed, obviously taking her silence for disagreement. He stared at her harder, and she could almost feel him willing her to agree.

She nodded. She didn’t want to go meandering through any part of the house. Something was very wrong and she didn’t want to find out what it was. “I promise.” She looked away from his intense gaze, her heart pounding in her chest at his nearness.

Jorick's smile was small but warm. "All right, then get some rest and I'll see you tomorrow." He gazed into her face as if he might kiss her, but to her disappointment he only released her arms and moved away.

He left quickly and she berated herself as she ran a hot bath. She'd just decided that something was wrong with all of them, so how could she want him to kiss her? He might have a contagious disease!

She scrubbed herself clean and then ran a second bath to soak in until she felt sane again. Her mind tried to replay the day's events but she refused to let it. She needed a few moments of quiet peace where she thought of nothing.

When her eyelids grew heavy, she climbed from the bath and dried herself off with large soft towels. The nightgown provided for her was the color of cream and she slid it over her head. The feel of the material against her skin was almost exciting as it settled into place. The neckline dipped low, with just a swag of lace covering her breasts.

She examined herself in the full-length mirror on the bathroom wall. She moved her hips, admiring the way the silky material clung to her curves. It seemed to shimmer, almost see-through yet opaque. If it wasn't for the wound on her shoulder she'd look hot. Damn, she needed to buy a nightgown like this!

She rolled back the blankets on the bed, then yawned as she settled down into the soft mattress. She'd slept much of the trip, yet strangely she was still so tired. She supposed it was probably shock.

Outside the wide windows, the sun hadn't come up yet. The predawn left the world in a moment where anything in the universe was possible; the strange stillness when nightmares and reality mix to form something new and twice as frightening, where everything is wrapped in shades of gray and purple, frozen expectantly in the dimension of dreams.

Without another thought she rolled over and closed her eyes, too tired to wait breathlessly with the rest of Mother Nature for the sun's cleansing appearance.



Chapter Eight

Katelina woke with a start, covered in a fine layer of sweat. The last of the sun's golden light fell through the window and illuminated the old fashioned bedroom. It brought with it a measure of comfort after the nightmares of her sleep.

She wiped absently at her face and tried to forget her dreams. Blood, so very much blood! The red liquid filled the sink and spilled onto the floor and, no matter how far she'd climbed, the tide had crept higher and higher, until she knew there was no escape from the dark, sucking liquid.

She repeated aloud the mantra her mother had so often used when she was a child, "They're only dreams; they're not real. They can't hurt you." Her voice sounded small in the large room and, rather than comforting her, it made her feel more alone.

She wondered about her mother. How was she doing? Had she discovered her daughter was missing? It had only been two days, so maybe she didn't know yet, but "Grave Day" was quickly approaching. If she didn't meet her mother at the cemetery she'd certainly notice, and then she would be hysterical.

And what if she was? What difference would it make? It wasn't as if there was anything Katelina could do about it without putting her mother in danger. If she'd had any doubts about the peril facing them, last night's attack at the motel had fixed that.

Whether a throwback to childish desires, or simply because she knew she shouldn't, she wanted to see her mother. She just wanted to hug her and tell her that, despite their differences, she loved her.

Katelina shook her head in disgust at the sentimentality she was indulging in, then slid out of bed and headed toward the bathroom. It was time she faced the truth: she was mixed up in something far beyond her normal sphere of understanding. No amount of her mother's advice would help. Even Sarah couldn't do anything at this point. For better or for worse, her only hope was a dark haired stranger who called himself Jorick.

She checked the bedroom door to find it was locked from the outside. She rattled the handle uselessly and cursed. He'd told her to stay in the room, and she'd agreed, so why had he locked her in? Or had someone else done it? Were they holding her prisoner?

She forced herself to calm down but, when she reached the bathroom, she discovered that the clothes she'd left abandoned on the floor were gone, as was the ugly orange bedspread. She was locked in a room with nothing to wear but a filmy nightgown and no food. She wanted to scream, though she knew it wouldn't accomplish anything. Instead she turned to going through the rooms in search of clothes, a phone, or anything that might be of use.

In the bathroom she found a hairbrush, as well as a bottle of sweet smelling perfume which she used as a morale booster. In the bedroom she turned up several worn books in the top drawer of the wardrobe and some dust bunnies.

In defeat, she flopped onto the bed and flipped through the old books. They appeared to be romance novels from the mid-eighteen-hundreds. She inhaled the faint musty odor from their yellowed pages and wondered how long they'd lain in the drawer, forgotten. Despite the renovations of modern conveniences, the house was likely a couple of hundred years old and she

couldn't help but entertain the romantic notion that the books belonged to some previous owner who left them when she went away to get married, or died some tragic death. The latter option made Katelina shiver, and she decided to abandon it. Her situation was scary enough without adding imagined ghosts.

She dropped the books on the bed and stared through the window at the deep purple sky. It would be full night soon, time for all the monsters to come creeping out of the shadows.

The door rattled, then opened to reveal a tired looking woman in an almost sarcastic rendering of a maid's uniform. The dress was reminiscent of a too large Halloween costume. The skirt hung down to her bony knees, the neckline sagged too low and the sleeves draped down to nearly her elbows. The effect was like one imagined a sack dress. Her lank blonde hair was pulled up into a sad attempt at a bun. Long thin wisps had escaped it to fall all around her pale, almost sickly colored face. To complete the picture of surreal oddity, the woman's arms and legs were covered in white gauze bandages at strange intervals.

She clutched an armload of pink cloth to her chest and approached Katelina without looking up. When she spoke, her voice sounded as weary and strung out as she looked. "The mistress sends you this, with her compliments."

Katelina stood quickly and blinked in surprise as she realized this must be a real servant and not a joke. Reluctantly, she took the clothes and noted with an almost abhorrent disgust that bandages were also on the woman's neck and chest, peeping out from beneath the dress, and held on by large quantities of white medical tape. She looked like she'd been mugged by thieves wielding a letter opener as a weapon.

Katelina turned her attention to the dress she'd been given. It was a light, creamy pink with no sleeves and a knee length skirt. A swath of pink lace decorated the bodice, along with a broach set with pink stones that caught the light. The dress probably cost more than she made in a week! The thought both delighted and horrified her.

Unsure what else to do, she gave the maid a wan smile and murmured, "Thank you."

The maid continued to stare at the ground, her eyes unwilling to meet Katelina's. "When you've dressed, the mistress wishes to see you, to welcome you properly."

"All right." Katelina stopped herself from saying "thank you" again, but it left her standing mute in the middle of the rug, the dress dangling from her fingers.

The servant woman shuffled out of the room quickly and shut the heavy door behind her.

A few minutes later, Katelina stood before the mirror, examining the new outfit. As she turned this way and that, she whistled softly to herself. If Oren could afford to buy his wife dresses like this, he wasn't doing bad at all; especially when she just handed them out to strangers. So what was up with the old car? Was he a collector of some sort? And where did his money come from? Before she could form a theory, door opened again to reveal the maid.

"If you'd like to come to the kitchen for something to eat?" It was really more a request than a question.

Katelina hesitated. Jorick had said to stay in the room until he came for her, "no matter what," but she was hungry. Besides, she didn't think following someone as brow beaten as the maid could lead to any serious trouble.

"Okay," she answered at last and abandoned the mirror to make her way through the door.

The maid shuffled down the dimly lit hallway and Katelina followed her. Her eyes roamed to the paneled walls set with heavy doors. She couldn't help but wonder what lay behind them. Were there more bedrooms? Perhaps one of the doors led to the bedroom Jorick was staying in?

Her questions remained unanswered as they turned and descended the beautifully carved staircase to the green hallway, then past intricately painted portraits whose eyes stared uncomfortably from their gilt frames.

The kitchen was towards the back of the house. It was large and tiled, the furnishings mostly wood and ceramic; old fashioned appearance with all the modern conveniences. The gleaming overhead lights made the white counters glitter and the polished wood shine.

Katelina sat at the table where the maid indicated and a plate was set in front of her by a worn out looking brunette wearing a knee-length dress and a cardigan. Her sleeve rode up a little as she stretched to set down the plate, revealing a white gauze bandage on her wrist, just like the maid's. She noticed Katelina staring and pulled her arm away hastily, then hurried back to vigorously scrubbing the cutting block.

The plate contained spaghetti and meatballs, and the smell told Katelina that it came from a microwaveable container. She'd eaten the same meal for lunch before. Peel back the corner of the carton, pop it in the microwave and five minutes later – PRESTO! – spaghetti and meatballs that tasted like cardboard.

As she chewed the instant food, she realized how hungry she was, and mentally calculated how little food she'd had in the last twenty-four hours. It took all of her will power, but she forced herself to eat casually instead of wolfing it down. She needn't have bothered because the three servants were too busy scrubbing the already gleaming surfaces to pay attention to her.

At the clinking of the fork on the empty plate, the maid who'd led her there looked up from her polishing. Her eyes met Katelina's and dropped away quickly, almost fearfully. She folded the wash cloth and discarded it before she hurried to the table. "Please follow me."

Katelina nodded curiously and followed the maid out of the kitchen and back into the dark green hallway. Her skin crawled as they reached the stairs and ascended them. She glanced around nervously, feeling like evil eyes were watching her. Deep inside, she knew there was something wrong with the house. An urgent voice in her mind told her to dash to the front door and escape, but Jorick's promise of safety stopped her. He'd kept his word and so far she had no reason to doubt him.

The maid led her down the second floor hallway, in the opposite direction of Katelina's room. A door stood open and Katelina stepped through it to find herself in a large nursery. A crib sat in the middle of the room, painted white and surrounded by bright happy colors. Despite the reds, blues and yellows smiling at her; the room made her feel queasy. Even the happy clown painted on the wall seemed to leer menacingly and the stuffed toys on the shelves bore malice in their shiny eyes.

The dark haired woman she'd seen last night sat in a white rocking chair, clutching the baby to her. Katelina recalled Oren addressing her as Jesslynn, and imagined that they made quite a contrasting pair with his blonde mane and her raven colored tresses. The woman was actually quite beautiful: her large, sorrowful eyes held both misery and haughtiness, a combination that made Katelina look away.

The bandaged maid moved from Katelina's side and took the baby from her mistress, murmuring softly about a bath before feeding time. Jesslynn nodded, like a queen on her throne.

Before anyone had bothered to explain why Katelina had been summoned, the small boy she'd seen last night came dashing into the room, pulling along a wooden duck on wheels. He was followed by the blonde girl he'd been playing with, the one who was neither young nor old. He hurried past Katelina as though she wasn't there and climbed into Jesslynn's lap. He whispered in her ear, then settled himself comfortably.

Jesslynn's lips curled in a smug smile. "Alexander says that you look very pretty in my dress."

Trying to ignore the sensations creeping up her spine, Katelina forced a smile for the little boy. "Is this Alexander?" He didn't reply, but stared back at her, nodding solemnly.

She was usually good with children, so she tried again, her smile larger this time. "Thank you, Alexander."

He made no reply and his mother said smugly, "Oh, he won't answer you." Her lips curled tightly in a smile as she stroked his head, the same way someone might pet a cat. "Alexander will only speak to certain people."

"Oh." She couldn't think of anything else to say besides the obvious, "Gee, sorry your son is mentally challenged", but that seemed like a bad idea. Maybe whatever was wrong with the child had something to do with the mysterious illness the whole household had? She found herself wondering if they weren't inbred, though Oren and Jesslynn looked nothing alike.

She studied the woman, looking for some hint at the malady, but found herself distracted. Jesslynn's eyes seemed to smolder with something... Katelina thought it might have been power, though that undeniable sorrow seemed to hold them. The combination made them spellbinding.

Jesslynn continued to pet the boy, her eyes fixed steadily on her guest. "He is a delicate child with a very complex mind."

Katelina simply nodded and Jesslynn turned her attention to Alexander, bending so close to him that her dark tresses hid her face. "Have you fed yet, my darling?"

The child shook his head no, and she told him to find Margaret, the secretive smile still clinging to her ruby lips.

He climbed down and scampered past Katelina. His wooden duck jogged along behind him as he disappeared through the door, leaving the blonde woman-child behind.

Jesslynn's voice floated around the evil nursery like music, commanding Katelina's attention, "Children can be so.... impetuous."

"Mmmm-hmmm." Katelina fought the desire to look at the dark woman. Her heart hammered in her chest with the exertion. All she wanted was to get away from Jesslynn's probing eyes and the thick, suffocating feeling of evil. Every nerve in her body jangled expectantly, waiting for something terrible to happen, some scene from a horror movie to unfold. She found her attention drawn momentarily to the crib and, even though she'd seen Margaret take the baby, she still expected to peer into it and find a demon grinning back at her.

Her eyes flicked away from the crib nervously and landed on the ageless girl. She stood like a sentinel next to a shelf of toys and looked them over, one after another. When she finished she started over again, her pale hands clasped in front of her. Her skin was almost translucent, and her hair spilled down like curling rivers of molten gold, pale against the soft lilac dress she wore.

"Have you eaten?" Jesslynn's dark eyes stared into Katelina's blue ones. They mesmerized her until she forgot that there was anyone else in the world.

Katelina found herself walking forward, closer and closer to the great queen on her white throne. The dark hair flowed over her shoulders, shimmering like the wings of a raven. Her dark lips were full and soft, her skin flawless, her eyes commanding, calling her forward... Yes... Whatever the great queen wanted... Nothing was too much to offer her...

"Jesslynn!"

The shout jerked Katelina back into the real world. Her head felt heavy and fuzzy. She blinked and found herself kneeling on the floor at Jesslynn's feet. She looked up to find the crazy

blonde girl next to her on all fours, peering expectantly into her face. Her mouth opened, revealing a quick pink tongue and long, white fangs...

Katelina leapt to her feet quickly. She raised her hand to the throbbing pinpoints of pain on her neck, but pulled it away when she felt something damp. Two pin sized dots of blood glistened on her palm, the echo of a new wound.

Her stomach turned. She finally understood what was wrong with the occupants of the house: they were vampires. For the love of God, they were vampires!

Jesslynn wiped her mouth. A strange smile flickered on her lips. "What?" she asked innocently, looking at the newcomer. "I only tasted her."

Katelina stumbled as she backed away, but strong hands caught her shoulders and kept her from falling to the floor. Panicked, she twisted her head around and found herself looking into Jorick's face. Relief swept over her, but it was short lived as she realized that, though these people were vampires, Jorick had brought her here. He'd said that vampires were evil, that they were working with Claudius.

She tried to make her mouth work, tried to ask Jorick what he was thinking, but the redheaded strolled through the door before she could. She crossed the room slowly, her hips swaying sensually beneath a sultry black dress. Her eyes glittered, but when she reached Jorick she pouted out her lip as she touched his shoulder. "Ah, Jorick, you have to share. No fair bringing fresh blood into the house just for yourself."

Katelina tried to understand the implications. Was she implying that he was... But no, he couldn't be like them... like Jesslynn and the blonde and those who had attacked them... In a sickening moment, she knew it was true. He was a vampire! Jorick – her savior, the one who had promised to protect her from the monsters – was one of them! She'd trusted him! She'd believed in him!

Her knees trembled as the full impact hit her. Oh God! She was trapped in a house full of vampires!

"You should share," the redhead insisted again. "She has plenty, after all."

"Her blood is not for anyone to drink!" Jorick raged. "I made that clear to Oren!"

The redhead rubbed her body against him, purring as she pressed her breasts into his arm. "Maybe you did, but do you really think Oren can control me?"

Jorick stiffened at the contact and pulled away from her. "I expect him to be able to control his own offspring." He drew his lips back and snarled at her.

Katelina whimpered and looked away from him; away from the vampire fangs. She had to be trapped in a nightmare!

Jesslynn cut into the conversation, her tone amused. "Why should he control us? Why should he even listen to you? You've never controlled him! You couldn't even stop him from making us!"

"And look what he made," sneered Jorick. He nodded towards the blonde woman-child, who was still on all fours licking her lips and staring at Katelina like she was a pork chop. "Her mind was lost."

Jesslynn stood quickly; the great queen angered. "She is mine! How dare you!"

Margaret chose that moment to return, interrupting what could have been an explosive argument. She carried the baby in her arms and the little boy followed behind her, still tugging his wheeled duck. Katelina wanted to grab the children and run. She wanted to save them from the demoness with her pale skin and sorrowful eyes, save them from madness, but Jorick held her firmly.

Alexander and Margaret reached Jesslynn. The vampiress looked at them and her face caught between expressions of anger and doting. She settled on the latter as the servant held the baby out, offering him freely.

“Would you like to feed him today, or do you wish me to, Mistress?” Margaret’s voice was hollow and emotionless.

Jesslynn’s eyes glowed. “Oh, I think that you can manage it for today. I haven’t fed nearly enough.” She smiled evilly and pulled the woman’s dress open, exposing her bare breasts to the cool air.

Jesslynn used a single, long nailed finger to cut a line across the maid’s tender flesh. Crimson blood rose quickly to the surface. Margaret, expressionless throughout, lifted the baby and pressed its eager mouth against the bleeding wound.

Katelina’s head swam as she stared at the spectacle before her – trying to figure out what they were doing to the baby. She twisted in Jorick’s grip and saw Alexander standing next to the blonde. His own small set of fangs gleamed in the light as he made some comment to his companion.

Katelina jerked her gaze to Margaret and saw two brand new puncture marks in the woman’s neck, too small for any adult to make.

Jesslynn caught Katelina’s horrified gaze and smiled.



Chapter Nine

Katelina's head swam with the realization of what she was witnessing, and she'd have fallen if Jorick hadn't held her up. Jesslynn seemed to enjoy Katelina's horror. Her cold, cruel laughter echoed through the evil nursery.

"Enough, Jesslynn," Jorick snapped. "I don't know if you're trying to impress me or intimidate Katelina, but either way it's pointless."

"Impress you?" she asked mockingly and took a step forward. "Hardly. And as for your snack..." she smiled cruelly and added, "She should already be properly intimidated, if you've done your job correctly."

Katelina whimpered, and Jorick bit back, "I don't require kowtowing servants like you." His eyes moved to Margaret and her peculiar outfit. "A creative punishment, I suppose, if you find holding power over the weak so interesting." His eyes moved back to Jesslynn. "But it's of no concern to me. What matters is what you've done. I've granted this woman my protection, and by doing this, you have violated it." He took a step forward and shuffled Katelina behind himself, still holding her firmly. "You know the penalties for such an act!"

"You are in my house –" Jesslynn began but Jorick cut her off.

"No!" His voice quivered with barely contained rage, "I am in the house of your master, Oren, and I am *his* master. If The Guild—"

The redhead moved to Jorick's side again and laid her hand on his arm. Her voice was liquid velvet. "Would you sic The Guild on us, Jorick?"

"I rather doubt it." Jesslynn sneered. "It's unlikely they'd be happy to see him."

"I don't need to go to The Guild," Jorick snapped.

Jesslynn ignored him and moved to Margaret, who was still feeding the tiny vampire baby. A thick silence descended, broken only by the small, sucking noises issuing from the babies tiny lips, a sick mimicry of more wholesome things.

When she made no answer he continued. "Anything I wish to do, I will do myself. I don't need to hide behind them." He took a deep breath, but it failed to calm him. "I say only that if The Guild were to hear of this – all of this – you'd be severely punished, and you know it!"

Jesslynn sniffed disdainfully. Her eyes challenged him and held his gaze with a haughty gleam. "I do not fear them, and I do not fear *you*."

Oren's voice sounded from the doorway. His tone inflected with cautious curiosity. "What is this?"

Katelina's attention shot to the newcomer and she thought sarcastically how lovely it was to have another vampire crammed into the room. Just the way she intended to spend her day, surrounded by a bunch of blood drinking monsters! She twisted in Jorick's grip, but he held her tightly and she surrendered. She wasn't going to get loose, and even if she did, where would she go?

"Nothing, Oren," Jorick answered. "Yet. If Jesslynn persists, though..." he trailed off, his voice cold.

“I have done nothing wrong!” Jesslynn insisted, taking several steps toward Jorick. “Your human came to me willingly enough! Didn’t she, Bethina?” She flashed a fanged smile and the crazy blonde vampiress nodded agreement.

Katelina balked at being called Jorick’s human, but no one seemed to notice.

“Jesslynn!” Oren yelled. “You knew the conditions!” He strode forward, and stopped in front of Jorick, his muscles tense. His hands were clenched into white knuckled fists at his sides and his amber eyes glared dangerously at his wife.

Jesslynn scowled and tossed her head. “You speak of conditions as though he does us a favor by coming to us in his hour of need! Bah! I have no need for such favors.”

At her words, Oren’s temper flared. He jabbed an accusing finger at her, his words choppy with fury, “You forget all that he has done for us – for me! For our fight! He is here because of it!”

She scoffed. “He is here because he was a sentimental fool.”

“And it’s good he is or he would kill you where you stand!”

The redhead moved to Oren and caught his shoulder. “Why don’t you see what Bethina has to say?”

“I care not for what she will say!” Oren snapped angrily, pulling away from her. “Jesslynn has used her as a puppet before, and might do so again. I sense nothing but fear from this human.” Oren turned and met Jorick’s gaze. The black haired vampire nodded slowly and gently pulled Katelina in front of him again.

Oren looked into Katelina’s eyes. His amber gaze was penetrating and probing, and, though she tried, she found she couldn’t look away from him; held by invisible hands that forced her to remain still. And then, as quickly as he had ensnared her, he released her – dismissing something that was no longer useful.

He turned back to Jesslynn, his face and voice cold. “I know that she did not come to you willingly, my wife. Why do you lie?”

“You take Jorick’s side because you fear him.” Anger and mockery dripped from her words and her eyes challenged him to deny the accusation.

He looked at her severely. “I do not fear him, I only show the proper respect for the one who made me.”

Jesslynn shook her head in disgust and hissed between her pointed teeth, “You’re a coward.”

Jorick’s grip tightened on Katelina, though she didn’t bother to resist. It wasn’t as if she could get away when she was surrounded by the creatures. Margaret was the only other human in the room, and she was busy pulling the baby vampire from her naked breasts and would be of no help. Katelina knew that she was alone now, more alone than she’d ever been in her life, and there was a chance she might not live to look back on it.

Jorick interrupted the dispute. “I’ll leave you to deal with this as you see fit, Oren. I expect it won’t happen again.” An intense look passed between the two men, then he turned for the door, still holding Katelina in front of him. Though her legs wobbled, she made it back to her room. At least there she could lock the door – and lock them out.

Except, Jorick went inside with her. Panic flared in her chest. What would happen now? Would he kill her?

He released with a suddenness that left her lurching for the bed. She missed and landed on the floor in a heap.

Anger danced behind his words, “I told you not to leave the room until I came for you!”

She folded herself into a sitting position, as if that might protect her. “You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?” Her voice shook with unshed tears and she buried her face in her hands. “Oh God!”

Jorick took a deep breath, and when he spoke again his voice was even and soft. “No, I am not going to kill you.” He crouched down beside her and met her gaze. “If I wished you dead, would I not have killed you already?”

“I don’t know,” she sobbed in reply, her voice muffled by her hands. “Maybe you and... the rest of them are going to sacrifice me or something.” She was too afraid and embarrassed to look up. “Maybe... maybe you don’t really know anything about Patrick. Maybe it was a lie to get a new victim...”

“An elaborate hoax for so little reward.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “If I wanted a victim, why not go out on the street and catch the first one I saw? Why go to so much trouble simply for the thrill of a kill?”

She hated his logic as much as she hated him. She dropped her hands and violently pulled away from his touch. “Damn it! You said that ‘they’ were the bad guys! You said ‘they’ worked for Claudius!”

“Who?” Jorick’s hand hung in midair and his tone was confused. “Oren?”

“No! The vampires! You said they were evil!”

“Evil? I never said that.”

“Yes you did! You said they were evil and they worked for Claudius and that they wanted to kill me and – ”

He cut her off impatiently. “No, I did not. I said only that Claudius and his underlings were vampires and that they might try to kill you.”

“No, you didn’t,” she seethed. “You said – ”

“I know very well what I said. I would never have used such a generality. Not all vampires are evil any more than all humans are good or stupid. Each creature has its own merits, both good and bad. There is no catch-all to describe any group or species, and to try to do so would be ridiculous at best. Even among Claudius’ followers there are undoubtedly some you would call ‘good’. Good and bad aren’t easily discernible conditions set in stone like black and white. It’s a matter of perception.”

“If that’s true, why didn’t you tell me you were one of them?”

He shrugged his shoulders, his brow furrowed. “Does it matter?”

Her mouth dropped open in disbelief. “Of course it matters! Do you think I would’ve come with you if I’d known? That I’d have been thinking...” She cut herself off before she could finish the sentence and say... what? Say that she’d been thinking he was attractive? Or that she’d been thinking that she needed him and had even come to trust him? Or that when she looked at him her heart pounded and her thoughts betrayed her? And for what? To be lied to! Everything was a lie. All of the things she’d allowed herself to believe, they’d all been pretty wrapping paper hiding the truth. He was a monster like the others. A beautiful monster who’d lied from the very beginning.

He crossed his arms over his chest and his eyes glittered dangerously, as if he were privy to the seething thoughts scrolling through her mind. “Well, it no longer matters, does it? You’re here, and if you want to get out alive then you’re going to have to trust me, Katelina. You have no choice.”

She looked away and stared at her hands, the fingers clenched so tightly that the knuckles were white. She wanted to scream at him that she did have a choice. She wanted to attack him,

scratch his face, destroy those beautiful features that had crept into her dreams, but she didn't have the strength. Instead she half lay on the floor, legs tucked beneath her, and cried bitterly. There was nothing else for her to do; at least not as long as the sun was down. Until dawn, she was trapped and he was all she had.

He relented. "I'm sorry Katelina. I should have told you – though you admit yourself, that you wouldn't have come with me if you'd known." He closed his eyes, as if choosing his words carefully. "You may not wish to believe, but not all of us are in league with Claudius. However, there are enough who are. They'd have hunted you down and taken you to him, and he would have broken you and then drained your blood, leaving you an empty shell. If you were lucky, he would let you die. If not, you'd have become one of his countless possessions, a trophy to look at on cold winter nights." He caught her chin and forced her to look at him. "Would that have been better?"

"No." Her eyes skipped away and then back again, narrowed in defiance. "But how do I know you're telling the truth? Maybe you're lying to me again."

"I have never lied to you," he released her chin and gently wiped away her tears with his soft, pale hand. His touch made her shiver in spite of herself.

"Yes, you did," she insisted though her shoulders sagged as she lost what fight was left in her. "You didn't tell me you were a vampire or that we were going to stay in a vampire mansion." She stared up at him, lost and frightened, her voice barely a whisper.

Jorick offered her a patient smile and continued to stroke her cheek with his thumb. "I didn't say that I wasn't one, or that they weren't. You didn't ask, and I didn't volunteer the information. Omission, fine, I'm guilty of that; but a lie?" He shook his head. "No, I did not lie."

Her thoughts became distracted at his touch, like they always did. This time she refused to allow it. She shook him off and pulled away. "No, you're not going to confuse me with this."

He smiled so that his glistening teeth showed and his eyes sparkled with secret amusement. "I wasn't trying to confuse you, but it's nice to know I have that effect." In one fluid motion he moved to sit next to her on the floor.

She flushed quickly and looked at her lap, unsure what she was feeling anymore. "So," she began uncertainly. "Oren, he's your... What?"

"Fledgling?" Jorick asked with some amusement. "Yes, he is. And don't ask me why. I often wonder that myself. At the time it seemed like the thing to do." He gave a half shrug. "He wished for it and I saw no reason to deny it."

She wasn't sure how much of this she wanted to discuss or acknowledge. "You were friends?"

"Neighbors. But back then neighbors were different than they are now, so I suppose you would consider us friends after a fashion. Truthfully, he was far too wrapped up in his wife and his children to see much beyond himself. I believe it was Jesslynn who actually figured out what I was and after that it was only a matter of time. Mortals have only two reactions, either horror or a longing to join us. Once I turned him, he of course changed her. Though he's the man of the family, she's the one in control."

"And she turned the children into..." she paused, searching for the right word. Somehow "vampire" seemed distasteful, as though it were something dirty, and her lips refused to pronounce it. "...into what they are?" she finished lamely.

"Yes, she did. The same night that Oren turned her, she turned the children, not thinking to the future and the hundreds – perhaps thousands – of years that would pass while neither child

ever aged or fully matured. She wanted them to need her, to always depend upon her.” He shook his head sorrowfully and sighed. “It was foolish at best and cruel at worst.”

“Why would anyone want that?”

Jorick cocked his head to one side. “Children who cannot die and are forever frozen in time, completely controllable? Because she is overbearing, perhaps. Overbearing and broken. She and Oren buried two children in the time I knew them. The family cemetery holds others.”

“Oh.” Katelina’s gaze shied from his face. She took a deep breath and then asked hesitantly, “What about the blonde girl?”

He frowned. “She was evidently weak. Her mind broke during the process. It can happen if they’re flawed, or if the turning is botched. I don’t know who she is, though. I haven’t spent time with them as a group in... fifty years?” He paused, calculating. “No... Seventy, maybe?” He waved it away as unimportant. “I don’t know; it’s been a long time, anyway.”

Katelina tried not to think about the astronomical numbers involved, or about the fangs that glittered when he smiled. How was she going to do this? How was she going to talk to him and think of him as she had now that she knew?

But Jorick was oblivious to her thoughts and continued speaking. “And before you ask, the redhead is Torina, Oren’s sister. I told him to leave her mortal – she was dangerous enough as it was – but he didn’t listen. He rarely does.”

She stopped from giving her opinion and instead asked, “And the man on the couch last night? Who looked like Jesslynn?”

“Her brother Fabian,” he answered with a touch of a scowl. “Another who could have stayed as he was.”

“There was also a man dressed in weird clothes, with a beard.”

“Balthair, I believe his name is, though I’m not sure where he came from. This is what is known as a den. Oren’s the master here, the oldest. He controls who can stay and who can’t, who can join their coven. There may be a dozen or more of them here, depending on how many each one has turned.” He shrugged casually, as though it were common knowledge. “And then, of course, a den may not hold all of a coven, or it may hold more than one. It all depends on the individual arrangements.”

“Oh.” She felt like a lost child rescued by an angel and taken to the valley of monsters.

“From now on, as long as we’re here, stay in this room unless I come for you. If anyone else sends for you or comes for you, say no and stay here.”

“If you’d mentioned they were vampires I would have stayed here!”

“I thought that my instructions would be sufficient.” He replied sharply. He climbed to his feet and crossed to the window. He stared at the moon in silence while she pulled her knees to her chest and laid her head on them. After a moment he turned and spoke, his voice almost mournful. “You must listen to me, even if you don’t like me, do you understand? It could mean the difference between life and death. Though I’d like to think you, at least, did not hate me.”

“I don’t think I hate you,” she replied with a hint of bitterness. She wasn’t sure that she wanted to concede the point to him; by all rights she should despise him.

“Well, then, that’s something.” He cleared his throat and took a step towards her. “Have you eaten?”

She nodded and snuffled her nose. Her thoughts drifted to how terrible she must look. Movies and books portrayed the softly sobbing female lead as something fragile and romantic, but in reality crying was all runny noses and puffy eyes. It was anything but romantic and beautiful.

“Good.” He nodded firmly and added, “It might not hurt to eat again; I don’t know how much blood she took from you.” Anger flashed in his eyes, but it was gone as quickly as it had appeared and his voice was again controlled and even. “You must not look into her eyes, Katelina. She uses her will to weave a spell around you, to make you bend to her whims. In fact, to be safe avoid eye contact with all of them.”

“Should I avoid eye contact with you, too?”

“No, I won’t try to trick you. Have I yet?”

She leveled her gaze with his, demanding the truth. “Would I know if you had?”

He smiled, and again she tried to ignore what she was seeing; it was easier that way. “I don’t know. Perhaps. Do you know she tricked you?”

“Sort of,” she answered slowly. “I mean, I do because you both said it, but... I don’t know.” The thought that they could do that, and she might not even know, scared her.

“Well, I haven’t, anyway,” he assured her. “I’ll go find you some food. Stay here.”

He left before she could reply, shutting the door behind him.

She sat on the floor and stared at the door he’d just disappeared through. Slowly, she gathered the strength to stand and moved to the bed where she curled into a ball. She wanted to go home, to go anywhere but this nightmare house with its hellish nursery and horrifying occupants – somewhere where little boys didn’t drink the blood of their nursemaids and nightmares didn’t roam the hallways.



Chapter Ten

Katelina lay on the bed and tried to calm herself until Jorick returned with another microwaveable dinner. She greeted it enthusiastically, despite the fact that it tasted like cardboard. She'd had less to eat in the last few days than her last diet had allowed. A sick smile flickered across her face as she thought of a way to make a fortune: "the all new Vampire diet! Guaranteed to lose pounds in only a few weeks by spending your time with the undead. In fact, you'll be lucky to get any food at all. And, as a limited time offer, it's free, so long as you're willing to give up your entire life."

As she ate, she snuck quick glances at Jorick from under her eyelids. He was a vampire. The statement seemed detached and unreal, no matter how many times she repeated it to herself. He, Jorick, was a vampire. He was not human. He did not need to eat as she was eating. He was immortal. He was not human... He glanced up sharply and her thoughts stopped abruptly. His dark eyes glittered as he studied her and then he sank back into his own world again.

When she'd finished eating, he stood and told her stiffly that he had business to discuss with Oren and he'd see her later. He took great pains to emphasize that she was not to leave the room, though he needn't have bothered. She had no intention of putting so much as a toe over the threshold as long as the sun was down.

Alone, she picked up one of the musty old romance books from the wardrobe and flopped on the bed. She hoped that immersing herself in the problems of 1800's debutantes would help to clear the scene she'd just witnessed from her mind, though she found it hard to concentrate. Her brain kept replaying visions of leering clowns and children with fangs. Her heart pounded in her ears each time she thought about the truth, and yet she found somewhere within her a strange acceptance. She half suspected that she'd known all along. Jorick was too beautiful, wasn't he? Too perfect to be real.

She wasn't sure how she felt about being in the company of a vampire, or vampires as the case may be. It didn't take a lot of soul searching to decide she was very uncomfortable with the plural sense of that word. Jesslynn had proven herself untrustworthy, and the others seemed equally threatening. No, she was not happy about her situation in the least and she wanted to leave as soon as possible. *I'll tell Jorick that we need to go –*

Her flow of thoughts came to an abrupt stop. "Tell Jorick that we need to go," she mused aloud. That had been a revealing sentence, hadn't it? If nothing else it showed that, despite everything, she still trusted him. That, or she knew instinctively that he was her best option. The second explanation was far more comfortable and the one she decided to tell herself was the truth.

Though she read in fits of boredom, broken by bouts of thought, she was halfway done with the book when Jorick returned. She peered at him through heavy eyelids as he shut the door and held out another microwaveable box.

She set the book aside and stifled a yawn. He gave her an amused smile and she defended herself, "I'm not used to being up all night."

“I’m sorry,” he replied in mock sincerity. “But I think that conducting any operations in the daylight is a bit out of the question for me. I would suggest a compromise but....” he spread out his hands helplessly so that the meal-in-a-box tilted dangerously. “I’m sure you understand.”

“Yeah.” She took that cardboard carton from him before he made a mess. “So?”

“So, what?” he asked innocently. “I see you found yourself some amusement?” He nodded towards the book that lay next to her.

“Yes.” He’d skirted enough issues with her already. She wasn’t letting him out of this one. “What did Oren say?”

“About what?” He shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned against the canopy post, feigning ignorance.

“You know very well about what! Your meeting with him – what did he say? I have a right to know, since I’m sure I’m involved in it.”

“Well... yes,” he said hesitantly. “You are, I suppose.” He sat on the foot of the bed and stared at his lap before he looked up at her.

She flushed as his eyes traced the length of her body. Unconsciously she crossed her arms over her chest and tried to sound firm. “Well?” He stared back and her eyes dropped away to study the intricacies of the bedspread.

“Tomorrow Oren is going to find out what he can about Michael. He has a meeting with one of Claudius’ men. Once he’s gotten some information, we’ll act on it. He’s also going to get us a car, one with a clean title; nothing suspicious. It won’t do to have the police pulling us over every three feet.” He sneered with unhidden disgust. “It might take a couple of days to get the car arranged, but then we’ll leave.”

The words popped out before she even thought about them, “You know where Claudius’ lover is, don’t you? It wasn’t just Patrick and Michael. You were involved, too.”

He kept his voice light as he ran his hands over the bedspread. “What makes you think I know where Arowenia is?”

“You do, don’t you?” She needed to know what she was dealing with. She’d had enough surprises to last a lifetime.

“You should eat.” He nodded to the discarded box of food.

Her eyes narrowed stubbornly. “I’ll eat when you tell me the truth.”

“Fine.” He waited until she’d picked up the box and forked a bite into her mouth. “Yes, I know where she’s being kept. And Patrick and Michael weren’t the only ones involved; they weren’t even the ones who did the actual kidnapping. Do you really think they could have taken her by themselves? We had to help them, of course.”

“And who is we?”

He sighed. “Oren, for one.”

“But why were you and Oren involved at all?”

Jorick shifted uncomfortably. “It was Oren’s war, or more correctly his sister’s. Torina has the tendency to choose lovers who have mates. This particular man’s wife didn’t appreciate it and they got into a fight. Torina killed her fairly, but she was one of Claudius’ favorites. Claudius retaliated and for a while the two covens were quite violent. Things had tapered down to a cold war over the last few years. It might have died out completely if Jesslynn wasn’t determined to keep it going.”

“Why would she want it to keep going?”

“Power probably. Claudius has a large coven and she’d surely like to get her hands on it. Or perhaps it’s just pride that motivates her.”

Katelina thought of Jesslynn's dark eyes and leaned towards the latter option. "Why are you involved?"

Jorick frowned. "Because Oren asked me until I couldn't say no any longer. Neither of them are strategists and they needed someone who could plan things properly."

He sighed and ran a restless hand through his hair. "Oren was walking a delicate line, he didn't want to do anything obviously hostile and we were only supposed to be gathering intelligence on Claudius and his coven, but then I found Michael – quite by accident. I don't remember whose plan it was, but they decided to try to force Claudius' coven to collapse from the inside out. There were some unhappy members, and Michael tried to incite a revolt. He almost succeeded, but then he started talking too much and Claudius threatened to kill you if he didn't stop."

"Of course, Michael didn't bother to tell anyone, and pretended he was still doing what he'd agreed to. There was already a plan to kidnap Arowenia in the works, Oren and the others hoped that the suspicions about who had done it would tear the coven apart, but then Michael and Patrick came forward, desperate for something to use against Claudius. It was agreed that if they openly took her it might be enough to cause dissention in the ranks and those that had been contemplating revolt might take the opportunity. Of course, it didn't work the way Oren planned. The only thing that went right is that Claudius doesn't know that Oren is involved, though thanks to an unfortunate incident he knows I am."

She tried to digest it all. "What unfortunate incident?"

Jorick's eyes danced away and he tried to look casual. "Just a run in with Troy, one of Claudius' henchmen. Of course Troy reported it to him and then he knew I was tied into it."

Her mind raced down dark paths and she recalled Oren's words from the car ride yesterday: "*Your true reason*". Suspicions clouded her mind and she voiced them. "If you were openly involved, then I doubt you were happy when Patrick wanted to call it all off?"

He hesitated. "To be honest, no, I wasn't happy. But I thought that talking to Patrick might be enough. If I had known what Michael was planning..."

"So this is all out of guilt? You feel guilty because you encouraged them, helped them even; not because you cared about Patrick or me." Her mouth set into a hard, unbending line. She gave Jorick a nasty glare and viciously tossed the empty meal box onto the nightstand.

He shifted uncomfortably. His hands clenched and then dropped uselessly to his lap. "Perhaps I do feel some... guilt," he said slowly. "But that's not the reason I contacted you."

"Then why did you?" Though she asked, part of her didn't want an answer. How much could a person deal with in one night? Could people take this many revelations in three successive days without cracking up? Yes, insanity was a risk, but she needed to know. She was sick of secrets and omissions. He wanted her to trust him but gave her very little to base it on.

"I told you why already. I felt you had a right to know." His shifting gaze gave her the distinct feeling that he was lying, but it also said that he wasn't going to tell her the truth no matter what she did.

"HMMMMMM..." Her temporary defeat was signaled as her eyes dropped away. She told herself that she wasn't really giving up. She'd force the information from him later when he was more pliant.

As if to prove her dominance of the situation, she demanded, "So, where is she?"

He stiffened and shook his head. "That, I won't tell you."

"Why? Afraid that I'll snitch?" she mocked sarcastically.

“No, I’m afraid if Claudius gets his hands on you and wrecks your mind that he’d extract the information from you.” He dismissed it as though it were a normal, everyday occurrence.

“Oh.” The single syllable was the only thing she could think of to say. She tried but failed to come up with a plausible argument against his logic and lapsed into silence with her efforts.

Her quiet punctuated the end of the discussion, so Jorick began a new one. “What are you reading?”

He managed to get her to talk about the book until five a.m. At that point he announced that he must depart for his bed – which, when pressed, he said was in the cellar with the others’ and that, yes, it was a coffin.

“So, you do have to sleep in a coffin?” she asked in surprise. In some sick, twisted way she found it interesting; like a documentary on Chinese torture camps.

“No.” He stood up and absently smoothed the bedspread he’d wrinkled. “I slept in a bathtub the other day, remember? We can sleep anywhere. It’s just that a coffin with a tight fitting lid is one of the best lightproof environments possible.” He sounded like a salesman. “Besides, it’s sort of a tradition, you know.” He gave her an impish grin, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

His attempt at humor made her shake her head sadly. “Yeah, I’ll bet.” Before he could give her his warning she added, “I won’t leave until you come for me tomorrow.”

“Very good. Goodnight.” He left, closing the heavy wooden door behind him. The lock clicked loudly and she wondered what the point of his admonishments were if he was sealing her in.

She’d initially been tempted to stay awake until dawn and explore the house in search of a telephone – she needed to phone work, and her mother. But with the lock on the outside of the door she had no chance of going anywhere, daylight or not. She wasn’t really comfortable with the idea of being locked in and would have preferred the lock be on her side. A discussion with Jorick was certainly in order, though she suddenly wondered if she was being locked in for her protection or theirs. Were the vampires concerned that they might open their eyes to see her standing over them with a stake in her hand?

She grinned at the picture of herself slaying a basement full of vampires. When the passing fancy had evaporated, she took a long bath, then slid into the beautiful, whispery nightgown and headed back to bed.

She stopped at one of the windows and watched the sun beginning to rise. It turned the sky into an iridescent flaming scarlet that reminded her of blood – the blood that had filled her dreams last night, and which would undoubtedly do so again. Looking away, she shuddered and climbed into bed. She pulled the blankets over her head to shut out the world and the harsh realities she’d discovered.



Chapter Eleven

When Katelina opened her eyes she saw only darkness. Her initial response was panic, but a soothing numbness flowed over it and left her in a strange vacuum of calm.

She climbed out of bed and turned the lights on. Once safe in the electric glow, she headed to the bathroom and examined the puncture marks on her shoulder. They were tightly closed, but still hurt when she rubbed her hand across them. The marks on her neck, from Jesslynn's bite, were tiny dots and could have passed for disappearing blemishes.

She changed from her nightgown into the pink dress she'd worn yesterday. Her clothes and the ugly orange quilt were still missing. Not that she missed the blanket, it was a reminder of terrible things.

The bedroom door was locked from the outside, but with the sun gone she wouldn't have left anyway. Not only had she promised Jorick she'd stay, but she didn't want to run into any of the house's occupants. She wasn't even sure she even wanted to see Jorick, except that he was her only lifeline.

She made the bed and tidied the room, but it only took a few minutes. With nothing else to do, she flopped on the bed and picked up the musty book she'd started yesterday. She hoped to lose herself in the Victorian romance where the hero left the young virginal heroine flowers in the moonlight. It beat the reality she was living in. She found that she had a lot more sympathy for the insane than she used to. When real life was unbearable, why stay there?

She was just starting to enjoy the book when she heard the door click. She looked up to see Jorick carrying a wad of white cloth and something small wrapped in plastic.

"Hello," he said with no enthusiasm. His face gave the impression that he was thinking of something unpleasant.

"Hello," she replied as she swung into a sitting position. Her first impulse was to ask what was wrong, but she knew he'd just dismiss her question, or take it to mean something beyond casual concern.

"Here, they left this for you outside the door." He held up the white cloth with one hand. "And I took the liberty of fetching you something to eat." He held out a gas station sandwich wrapped in plastic, two halves of potential food poisoning between bread.

"Thank you," she mumbled unenthusiastically. She took the clothing first. The dress' cut was similar to the one she wore, though the skirt was longer and it bore no broach.

"Let me go change," she said, a nod from him the only indication he'd heard her. As she crossed the room she was conscious of his gaze following her. She shut the bathroom door firmly, though part of her felt as if he could see through it, anyway.

Changed, she emerged to find Jorick leaning on one of the bedposts, a grin of approval on his face. "Yes?" She unconsciously smoothed the skirt and waited for his sarcastic comment.

"I have to say that I prefer white." His grin turned into a full smirk.

"Interesting, since you only wear black." She stopped next to him, her eyes narrowed inquiringly. "Do you even change clothes? Or is there a closet somewhere with no color in it?"

He shrugged and his eyes danced with mischief. "I like to wear black, but I always appreciate a woman in a white dress." His grin grew, revealing the pointed teeth that made her so uncomfortable. "Or at least who *was* wearing a white dress."

She brushed aside his innuendo, and took the sandwich from him. His fingers lingered against her hand for a moment longer than necessary, but she made herself ignore it.

She willed the sandwich to turn into something edible, but it refused, so she gave it a try. Jorick stared at her while she ate, and finally she exploded testily, "What?"

"Nothing," he answered quickly and crossed his arms over his chest.

Her eyebrows arched inquiringly. "You're staring."

"So? You forget I haven't eaten in a long, long time." He continued to watch her, a sort of morbid fascination on his face.

His comment made her wonder how old he really was. He appeared to be in his early to mid-thirties at the most, but if he was immortal he might be any age.

"How long?"

"Too long." The words sounded like a sad sigh. He straightened up and quietly changed the subject, "Oren is getting ready to go to the meeting. We should know something by the end of the night."

"Are you going with him?"

Jorick shifted. "Yes and no. I'll leave with him, but..." She waited expectantly and he finished, "Oren's contact is not my contact. I won't be at the actual meeting."

"Ah. Are you sure that's a good idea?"

He gave her a puzzled expression. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Her stare said, "duh!" but he didn't seem to get it. "Um, haven't you ever watched a spy movie? The one with the enemy contacts has them for a reason."

"Are you suggesting that Oren..."

"Is planning to betray you? Yeah, I am." She finished her sandwich and tossed the wrapper in the trash.

"Why on earth would he do that? It's his war."

"I thought you said it was his wife's. If I had a wife like that I'd play the enemy camp, too."

Jorick chuckled. "Jesslynn is... not what I would choose in a mate, but to suggest that..." He laughed again. "I think you've watched too many movies."

She shrugged it off, but she wasn't convinced. There was something about Oren that put her on guard, and her instincts were usually right.

Sure they are. That's how I ended up here with a vampire.

Jorick stayed and talked to her about nothing in particular; the weather, the book she was reading, whether Jesslynn would really look good in the white dress. He was just getting ready to leave for Oren's meeting, when the door opened and Jesslynn's son poked his head in.

"Alexander," Jorick greeted the child.

He took the acknowledgement as an invitation and came in, the crazy woman-child right behind him, though Katelina wasn't sure if she was a protector or a pet. The pink corduroy overalls and pastel striped shirt made her look more a child than ever, as did the vacant smile on her face. Alexander climbed onto the bed and, as if taking a silent order, she dropped to the floor at his feet.

“What do you want?” Jorick met the boy’s eyes, but Alexander refused to look away, his face stubbornly set. Katelina didn’t know if there was some psychic battle of wills going on between the two, or if it was just a common stare down, but in the end the child surrendered.

“I have come to see the human,” he said simply, his eyes on his lap.

“Why?” Jorick continued to stare at him as if trying to silently communicate his authority. His spine was straight and his stance was one of a wary warrior expecting an attack.

“I wish to speak to her,” Alexander replied quietly. His lack of information made Katelina nervous, especially with the blonde woman-child seated so close.

“The human belongs to me,” Jorick said sternly, which drew an incensed look from Katelina. “You must ask my permission first.”

“Fine. May I have your permission?” His voice was tight, annoyed, like a whiny child who’s been told he can’t have an ice cream cone unless he asks nicely. Katelina shuddered, realizing she’d just compared herself to food. Somehow, given the nature of the house’s occupants, it was an unsettling thought.

“It depends,” Jorick replied. “Do either of you – ” he glanced at Bethina for the first time since she’d entered the room “ – intend to spill any blood?” His glare seemed sufficient to see through to their souls, let alone what they were thinking.

Alexander looked perturbed by the insinuation. “If you mean do we intend to bite her the way mother did, then the answer is no.”

“I suggest that you don’t.” Jorick glanced toward the door uncomfortably.

Katelina tried to communicate her silent thoughts to Jorick. She didn’t want to be left alone with *them*, not under any circumstances. She fought the urge to cling to Jorick and beg him to take her with him, despite the fact she knew he was one of them.

The thought unsettled her further, so she dismissed it by telling herself that he’d never tried to drink her blood. That made him safe - a lot safer than these two. Alexander might be a child, but she was sure that in his nonhuman state he’d be stronger than she was.

However, she refused to actually throw herself at Jorick, and his obsession with the door made it clear he didn’t have time for a discussion. He made Alexander swear oaths against causing her any harm and, after threatening both the vampires’ lives, he left hurriedly.

Alexander waited, then stole quietly across the room and peeked out into the hallway. Satisfied, he closed the door and nodded to Bethina. She stood obediently and took up a guard post in front of it, which made Katelina all the more uneasy.

Alexander climbed back on the bed and studied Katelina. His scrutiny made her feel even more uncomfortable, but he broke it by asking gravely, “Do you want to play with us?”

She stared at his small, pointed face in surprise. She found it hard to believe that the pale strange vampire child, who only spoke to certain people, had gone to all that trouble *just to ask her to play?*

“What?”

“I asked if you would like to play with Bethina and me,” he repeated patiently. The woman child smiled at the mention of her name. “It’s been awhile since we’ve had anyone new to play with. I like playing with humans. You always have such interesting ideas.” He smiled so that his miniature fangs gleamed.

“Oh?” Katelina swallowed. She found herself wondering if Bethina’s position was to guard anyone coming in or to keep her from getting out, which was what the logical portion of her brain told her to do.

“Oh yes!” he enthused, oblivious to her discomfort. “In fact, our newest game came from a human – it’s called dungeon. It’s a lot of fun, I promise! We haven’t gotten to play it in a long time,” he added sadly but then perked up instantly. “Do you want to play?”

“How do you play this game... dungeon?” she tried to keep her voice calm, though she wanted to scream. My God, how had she ended up practically babysitting child vampires?

“Oh, it’s simple. We go down to the dungeon and torture the prisoner.”

The premise sounded horrible and she could guess which of them would be the prisoner. “I’m not supposed to leave the room,” she said quickly. She hoped that would be sufficient, but she doubted it. The excuse that an adult “wasn’t allowed” to do something rarely held any water with children.

“Oh. All right,” he sounded disappointed, but the expected wheedling didn’t come, as if Jorick forbidding her from something was perfectly normal. “It’s just as well,” he added morosely. “I saw the dark woman leave the day before yesterday, and I think she took it with her. They were all talking about moving it.”

“Moving what?”

“The prisoner,” Alexander mumbled, more to himself than her. “We need Patrick – ”

He got no further before Katelina gasped, “Patrick?”

“Yes, he’s the one who made the game up. He had some other good ones, didn’t he Bethina?” The vampiress nodded and Alexander asked almost sadly, “I wonder when he’s coming back?”

Words escaped Katelina. He couldn’t possibly mean *her* Patrick, could he? What would he have been doing there? *No*, she told herself firmly. *It couldn’t be the same Patrick. It had to be a coincidence.*

“Blocks,” Bethina said suddenly, and the single word brought Katelina back to the present.

Alexander looked thoughtful and then nodded his agreement. As if by silent order, Bethina hurried out of the room, presumably to fetch the toys.

Left alone with the boy, Katelina fought the urge to ask him about Patrick. It would do her no good to delve into it, and she knew it. As a distraction she chose another topic of conversation. “Who is she?”

Alexander looked confused and then seemed to realize what she meant. “That’s Bethina,” he answered and shrugged his small shoulders.

“No, I mean is she related to you? Before she became...” she still couldn’t say it. She wondered if she had a mental block?

“Oh. She was my friend.” He sighed sadly. “She used to make up the cleverest little songs and she was so funny.” He smiled wanly. “She used to come babysit us sometimes, and then she got a permanent job here. Mother liked her because she didn’t ‘cause trouble’. Of course, I just thought she was fun.” His voice dropped to a serious whisper, “I’ll tell you a secret if you promise not to tell anyone. Especially not Jorick.”

“All right,” Katelina replied slowly. She wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the secrets of a vampire child.

“It’s my fault. What happened to Bethina.” He sighed and his small shoulders sagged under the weight of some burden, his eyes turned sorrowful; eyes far too old for the cherub face they were set in. “I tried to turn her myself. She agreed, of course. I thought it would be wonderful to have Bethina and her funny songs forever and ever, and she was so sick! But I couldn’t do it - I’m not strong enough.” His voice took a bitter tone. “Mother heard her screams and came to find me bent over her, crying. She finished it for me, but she said it was too late and that it ruined

her. Mother said it locked her mind away because she stood on the threshold of death for too long, and that she will always be the way she is now. That's why I try to take care of her, because I know it's my fault."

He looked so sad and, for a moment, in her pity, Katelina almost forgot he wasn't a mortal child. She could see the scene in her mind: the blonde girl laying on the floor, screaming in her death agony, red blood running down from the puncture wounds to stain her light hair. The terrified face of Alexander looming above her like a ghost, tears streaking his face. The dark Jesslynn coming in, her face filled with terror and then fury when she saw what was happening...

"I see," Katelina finally managed to say as she banished the disturbing pictures from her mind.

"I know it's my fault. And I'm being punished for it. I have eternity to be with Bethina but never hear one of her songs or stories again." He looked at his lap, his adult eyes bright with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry." She didn't know what else to say to this confession, or why he'd chosen to share it with her.

"This used to be her room," he added. "When she was still human. That's why it has a bathroom." He gazed around it sadly. "Purple is Bethina's favorite color."

"It is pretty," she said for lack of anything else. An uncomfortable silence fell and she tried to think of something to say. He was just a kid, but children usually knew things, and it wasn't like she had anyone else to ask. "Jorick's very grim?"

Alexander nodded his agreement. "He seems that way. I don't know him very well. He used to come around all of the time, but then he moved away. He still came now and then until one day he stopped altogether. It's been a long time since I've seen him."

"Was he always so serious and closed lipped?"

The boy looked thoughtful. "I think so," he answered thoughtfully and then he smirked. "Last night Father told Mother that Jorick comes from a different time, one where men handled everything and that he forgets that other people don't do that. He also said that Jorick is trying too hard to protect you by keeping you ignorant and that he thinks if he really wanted to do that then he should have left you alone altogether instead of telling you some of it. Mother said she can't figure out what he's thinking anyway, and that he's only interested because he likes to take care of the weak—" He stopped midsentence and looked suddenly uncomfortable.

Katelina sighed heavily. "It's all right."

Alexander relaxed. "She said you remind her of 'her'."

A strange look crossed Katelina's face. "Who?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. But whoever 'her' is, she's someone mother disapproved of."

Katelina started to ask why he thought that, but, as if on cue, Bethina reappeared. She lugged a large box of multi-colored blocks - the same ones Katelina had seen them playing with in front of the fire the first night.

Though she wasn't sure she wanted to let the conversation end, Alexander considered it over. They dumped the blocks out on the floor. As time moved past, Katelina's discomfort slowly diminished. The pair reminded her of her cousin's kids, and she almost enjoyed herself. It had been years since she'd sat on the floor to play silly games. She nearly forgot that Alexander wasn't a normal child, that he and his companion were really immortal monsters.

Jorick returned hours later. He was clearly surprised by what he found but, like Father coming home after a day at work, he made them dismantle their latest creation. Then he shoed Alexander and Bethina out of the room, blocks in tow. As soon as the door was shut, he dropped

onto the bed and lay back with his hands beneath his head and his ankles crossed. His expression was decidedly grim.

Katelina stood next to the bed and waited for him to explain his mood. Apparently the meeting hadn't gone as he'd hoped, or maybe Oren really had betrayed them. When he didn't speak, she prompted, "Well?"

He stared at the underside of the canopy. His voice was flat, emotionless, "Michael is dead. As I suspected, he made it out of the basement. He was kept alive until he could tell Claudius what he wanted to know, and then he was slaughtered – burned to death." Jorick shuddered involuntarily.

"Oh." Given what Jorick had said of Claudius she wasn't really surprised, and she didn't feel any sympathy for the thing she'd seen hanging in the basement. It wasn't just the memory of his threats, but what he'd done to Patrick. Her chest tightened as a vision of Patrick came to her; his smile broad, his blue eyes twinkling as he asked her if she was planning to stay the night.

She shook the memories away as Jorick went on. "Michael told them about my involvement, but they already knew that. Then he told them you were there." He hesitated as though he had a hard time finding words. "They went to your house, seeking you, but you weren't there. While they tore things apart for clues, someone else came; a dark haired woman with pale eyes."

"Who?" She tried to figure out who would have been at her house and mused over the description; a woman with dark hair and pale eyes... A name popped up, but she tried to ignore it. Not Sarah. No. She refused to even think it. They couldn't have done anything to Sarah. She was like a rock, old reliable Sarah who nagged her about quitting smoking. Sarah, who had been willing to cancel her date with Brad to make sure she was all right, possibly the last date she ever had.

Her voice was barely a whisper and, though she didn't want to, she had to ask. "Sarah?"

"They took her with them," he explained without really answering. "They thought they'd found you. Once they brought her before Claudius, of course, they found out that it wasn't you."

Katelina's breath stuck in her throat and her hands trembled. "Was it Sarah? Is she all right?"

"They aren't torturing her anymore."

Her mind whirled as it tried to deny what she knew to be true. He couldn't really mean that Sarah was... she couldn't be... "Dead? She is, isn't she?"

"Yes, she's dead." He sighed heavily and made the sign of the cross.

"Oh, God," she muttered numbly. She dropped to the floor and stared up at Jorick's face – at the light reflecting from his perfect hair and his pale skin, so smooth and flawless – and all she could feel was pain. First Patrick and now Sarah. How much more did she have to lose because of something she'd never been involved in? How many people had to die so Claudius could recover someone he considered nothing more than a possession?

Jorick rolled his head to the side and his dark eyes fell to her folded form. "I'm sorry, but at least it wasn't you." Though he meant his words to be comforting, they fell short.

Tears slipped from her eyes as the full impact crushed her. "I should have been there!" She violently slammed her fists into her legs. "I could have stopped it!"

"How? Can you defeat vampires now?"

"I could have at least warned her! If only you'd let me use the phone at the gas station!" Her shoulders shook with silent sobs.

He swung into a sitting position, his hands in his lap. "I didn't stop you. In fact, I told you to use it. But even if you had, what would you have said?" His voice rose an octave as he imitated her, "'Oh, hey, there are some vampires after me, so watch out?'" He ran a frustrated hand through his long, dark tresses "Did it occur to you to warn her?"

"Well... no, but..." She stopped mid-sentence, still angry. He was right, what could she have done? She couldn't have fought them and she wouldn't have warned Sarah if she'd gotten to call. She dug her fingernails into her palms. "I'm glad he's dead."

"Who?" Jorick's head came up in surprise.

"Michael," her voice was venomous. "If he weren't already dead, I'd kill him myself! This is all his fault! He killed Patrick. He got me dragged into this. Now Sarah's dead, I can't go home..." Sobs choked out the rest of her sentence. Tears of rage and pain spilled out of her eyes and fell down her pale cheeks.

Jorick's hesitation was palpable, as if he was afraid to touch her, but he finally laid an uneasy hand on her shoulder. "It's all right."

"Is it?" she demanded between tears. She was waiting, begging, for that sanitizing numbness to come and swallow the pain. It had been doing so ever since she'd walked into Patrick's apartment and found his mangled body, torn and bleeding on the living room carpet, and it didn't fail her now.

"How did they know it wasn't me?" Her voice sounded hollow and foreign to her own ears. "How did they know what they were looking for?"

"Troy said it wasn't you," he answered carefully. He let his hand drop back into his lap.

"Who's Troy? And how did he know what I look like?" Goose bumps crawled up her spine as she thought about the implications.

"He's one of the few Claudius still trusts."

Jorick's refusal to meet her eyes set alarm bells off in her head. "How does he know what I look like? How did they know where I lived?"

"I already told you once, if Patrick knew then they knew." He let out an unhappy breath. "Besides, Troy has been there." He closed his eyes and absently massaged his forehead. "He's seen you."

"What? How could he... He was at my house?" She didn't like where this was going. The thought made her feel sick and violated. She took a steadying breath, and then she remembered Jorick mentioning Troy last night. Something to do with an "unfortunate incident" where they discovered Jorick's involvement. No.

"And how do you know?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he pressed his fingers silently between his closed eyes. When he did speak, his voice was slow and resigned, "Because, I was there, too."

"What? You were at my house? When? What were you doing there?"

"I was keeping an eye on you." He finally met her gaze.

"You mean you were spying on me? Why?"

"Patrick asked me to. He suspected something was up even before Michael admitted that Claudius knew about you, so I spent a couple months keeping an eye on things." He shrugged, but his fidgeting hands belied the nonchalant attitude. "Troy showed up one night and we had a bit of a tussle... he never came back again."

"That was the unfortunate incident you mentioned last night? That Troy caught you spying on me? God! You spied on me! For 'a couple of months?'" She couldn't believe the

conversation. How could he think she'd trust him when he'd spied on her? "When were you planning on telling me?"

"I wasn't, particularly." His eyes flicked to her and then away again. "I didn't think it pertained to our current situation."

"Well, it does!" She pointed to the door. "Out!" Horrific thoughts of what he might have witnessed during those months flashed through her mind. Had he watched her dress? Watched her sleep, shower? Watched her and Patrick together?

"Look, what I'm trying to say –"

"I said get out!" she roared. "I don't want to talk to you right now!"

He stood up, surprised and angry. "I only did it because Patrick asked me to!" he shouted back. "Don't you think I would have rather been somewhere more exciting than the damned apartment across the street?"

"You were across the street?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I had to sleep somewhere nearby, after all. There was little risk in the daytime of them harming you, but—"

She cut him off. "But what? Were you sitting over there with binoculars like a regular stalker?" She shivered as she thought of all the times her eyes had been drawn to that apartment opposite hers, all the times she'd wondered who lived there and what they were doing; the lonely nights when she'd taken comfort in the light burning in the windows just across the street.

"Of course not," he replied impatiently. "I had to be closer than that in case something happened."

"How close? Were you sitting perched outside my window like a vulture?"

"Sometimes," he conceded reluctantly and she gaped.

"My God! And what about when I wasn't home?"

He didn't sound especially apologetic, "Some of the time I followed you."

"Some of the time? Holy – and what did you do when you didn't? Hang out in my living room? Try on my clothes?"

He rolled his eyes and snapped, "No! Why would I do that?" He took a deep breath and calmed himself quickly. "I didn't like invading your privacy any more than you like having it invaded. I only needed phone numbers and –"

Her eyes narrowed to tiny slits. "Phone numbers? So you *were* in my house to get – Is that how you got my work number?"

"Yes," he said dismissively. "I –"

"You were in my fucking house, watching me through my fucking windows, following me around! My God! It's like something from the Lifetime Channel! You're like a professional stalker!"

He muttered something unintelligible before adding loudly, "I am not a professional stalker."

"No, of course not," she sneered. "You'd have to be up in the daytime for that –" she broke off. "You were! You called me in the daytime!"

"Yes," he said tightly, fighting for patience. "We can be awake in the daytime, but it drains a lot of energy, not to mention it can be dangerous. We have to compensate –"

"And what does that mean?"

"It means that it takes a good deal of blood to make up for it, especially if we don't sleep at all."

Her voice was high and hysterical. "And how much is that? A whole colony maybe?"

“No.” He scowled darkly. “One or two people’s worth for the entire day, less for a few hours...”

Her lip curled in disgust. “And what did you do? Turn into a bat and fly out there to meet me?”

“You’re being obstreperous,” he said impatiently. “I can’t turn into a bat. I had to get a ride like everyone else.”

“With who? Huh?”

“Anthony,” Jorick answered coldly. “I doubt you know him.”

“Patrick’s friend?” she gaped. “He knew?”

Jorick hesitated. “No. He thought I was luggage.”

“Luggage?” she repeated angrily. “Luggage?”

Jorick took another deep breath. “Yes, I was in a rather large trunk. I called him and asked him to take it to the house on Farm Mill Road. He and some of his friends showed up and did as I requested.”

“I can’t believe this,” she muttered. “All of this just to spy on me!”

Jorick lost his patience. “I wasn’t spying! Don’t you think I had better things to do with my time?”

“Evidently not,” she said coldly. She pulled her knees up and hugged them to her chest, refusing to look at him. “You obviously had a pretty free schedule – or else you thought it would be amusing.”

He knelt down in front of her, trying to control the anger dancing in his eyes. “I didn’t find it amusing.”

“Oh really?” She pulled away from him. “Then what? Thrilling? A bit of a voyeur are you?”

With a growl he jerked to his feet. He started for the door and stopped to turn back and shout, “Fine, you know what – fine! Just sit in here and starve for all I care!” He stormed out and slammed the door. The lock clicked loudly and then she heard his angry footsteps pound away.

Alone, grief clutched her and refused to let go. She buried her face against her knees. She couldn’t believe how terribly wrong everything had gone. Sarah was dead and the only person she had at the moment had spied on her and then lied many times over. As sobs shook her, she was pretty sure she’d found the limit that a person could take.



Chapter Twelve

Katelina had a terrible night, and a terrible day. Her emotions ranged from fury to sorrow and back again. Her mind refused to settle on a single topic or emotion. It was too much information in too short a time: Sarah was dead, Jorick had betrayed her, and she was surrounded by vampires. Vampires! What was next? Maybe she was really a fairy. Or perhaps they'd kill her mother and put her head on a spike in the front yard. At the moment nothing seemed impossible.

Even the golden sunlight that fell through the window couldn't stop the swirl of horrible thoughts. She tried to sleep, but every time her eyelids closed Sarah would appear behind them; sometimes as she'd last seen her, standing in the parking lot, and sometimes as a bloody, fanged monster with mangled skin. Finally, near sundown, Katelina managed to slip into an exhausted slumber, punctuated with dreams that left her blushing and even angrier at Jorick, as if it was his fault she'd had them. She wanted to beat him, not dream about kissing him!

Jorick woke her late in the evening, a box of microwave food in his hand and a look of penance on his face. She sat up too quickly, and then glanced down to notice the revealing nightgown. With a little gasp she pulled the blankets up to her chest.

"What time is it?" She demanded, not sure if she'd forgiven him or not.

"Ten o'clock," he answered quietly. "I'd have come sooner but I was detained." He handed her the cardboard tray of food. She looked at the rice and chicken mixture and felt like throwing up. It all tasted the same, only the shapes changed.

"I thought you might be hungry," he explained, nodding towards the carton in her hand.

She looked from the food to him, speculating. She wondered if this was his way of apologizing for his parting remark. If so, she'd have rather he apologized for lying, for keeping things from her, and most of all for spying on her..

Wordlessly, she ate the disgusting dish and tried not to let it linger on her taste buds any longer than she had to. When she'd finished she met his gaze. His dark eyes asked if he was absolved of his sins, and her blue ones refused to give an answer. He shifted from one foot to the other and then leaned against the canopy pole. His hands nervously wrapped around the smooth wood. "How was your night?"

She replied sharply, "How do you think it was?"

He studied her, his head cocked to the side.

"Yes?" she asked and clutched the blanket tighter to her chest.

"If you want to get dressed... unless of course you prefer to spend the night in that." The corners of his mouth turned up, the hint of a joke in his eyes.

She blinked at him, incredulous that he would try to be humorous. "No, I'll get dressed." She reluctantly threw the blankets off herself, and tossed the empty cardboard box into the trash can.

He watched her slide out of bed, her arms crossed over her chest. "You don't have to get dressed," he teased as she started across the room. "Really, I don't mind."

"Very funny," she threw over her shoulder. She shut herself in the bathroom and quickly changed into the white dress he'd brought her yesterday – or, she thought to herself, last night. Day or night, she was glad that it was over.

She gazed at her reflection in the small mirror above the sink. Her thoughts skipped to the dark haired vampire on the other side of the door. What did Jorick think he was doing? He woke her up and acted like everything was fine, like nothing had happened. It was as if he wanted her to believe that she'd dreamed it all and that he hadn't lied to her – or omitted facts– or whatever damn term he wanted to use! Did he really think she was just going to forget?

She used the hairbrush to take her anger out on her unruly hair, then she strode into the bedroom and found Jorick where she'd left him.

“You really need some chairs,” he commented.

She ignored his attempt at friendly conversation and went straight to business. “Are we leaving today?”

“Tomorrow. I have the car, but there are some other arrangements – ” he stopped suddenly, his hand held up to signal her to silence. He stiffened and stood perfectly still, like a statue.

“What?” She squinted and strained her ears, but heard nothing. Was this supposed to be another joke? “Look, this isn't – ”

“Shhhhhhh,” he hissed and motioned her to be still, listening intently. He sniffed the air and then growled low in his throat. “No! God damn it!” He hurried out the door and shouted back to her, “Stay here unless I come for you!”

The panic in his voice left her wide eyed and terrified. She held her breath, but she still couldn't hear anything except the buzz of blood in her ears and her heart beating. What was going on?

She paced the room, wringing her hands for something to do. Minutes passed like hours and silent fears assailed her. She peered through the window but saw only a wall of blackness outside, while inside she was alone; waiting and scared. Her fingers fluttered to her lips, but she stopped herself from actually biting her nails.

Her head snapped up as the door opened to a disheveled Jesslynn. She was desperately clutching the vampire baby in one arm and hanging on to Alexander's small hand with the other. Her dark hair had fallen from its dramatic up do, so that long, loose tendrils fell around her pale, scared face. Her dark eyes were wide and terror shimmered in their once mesmerizing depths.

“What's – ” Katelina began, but Jesslynn cut her off.

“Come human.” Her eyes lingered for only a moment before she glanced down the hallway. “We must hurry.”

Katelina started to object, but again her sentence was left unfinished. “Jorick said – ”

“If you don't come with me now, you'll die when they find you.” Jesslynn looked back down the corridor impatiently, and then to Alexander.

Katelina only stared, opened mouthed. The sound of footsteps from somewhere else in the house reached her ears. “When who finds me? What's happening?”

“The Guild.” As the words left Jesslynn's lips her whole frame shuddered in fear. “Come quickly,” she added and disappeared into the gloomy hallway, tugging the frightened child after her.

Katelina decided she didn't need to see that performance twice to believe it. She plunged after the vampiress and tried to keep up with her as they raced down the corridors. They forsook the main staircase for a back set of stairs. Noises from the ground floor floated up to them and Katelina could see an occasional flash of light through the windows. As they ran down the stairs she tried to remember where she'd heard The Guild mentioned before. Who were they and why were they here? Did they have something to do with Claudius?

Torina came barreling through a doorway as they reached the ground floor. Terror twisted her sultry features. “Jesslynn, they’re here!”

“I know.” Jesslynn answered breathlessly. “I am hiding the children – if they get in, stall them until I return.”

Torina nodded, and hurried off toward the sound of a bone chilling scream. It was the kind of scream that made Katelina think of blood and horrible ways to die. Though Jesslynn looked in the direction the sound had come from, she didn’t let it distract her for long.

They bolted through the kitchen doorway, and Katelina choked back a shriek as Bethina stepped from the shadows, her face a mask of calm. Jesslynn nodded at her without slowing and wordlessly the mad woman-child turned and followed them as they ran.

They wound through the house quickly, then down to the cellar where two lines of empty coffins sat waiting for their occupants to return. Despite her efforts not to acknowledge the tiniest coffin, which she assumed housed the baby, Katelina found herself shuddering as they hurried past.

Jesslynn lead them to the back wall of the cellar. Her hands shook in fear and haste as she quickly pressed a series of stones. A door sprang open from nowhere to reveal a tiny, dark room. She shoved the blanket wrapped baby into Katelina’s arms and pushed her through the door, then forced Alexander and Bethina to follow. As the door swung shut she whispered urgently, “Protect them.”

Katelina stood in the black, gripping the baby tightly, torn between terror and confusion. What was going on? Obviously they were under some kind of attack. But from who? Was The Guild another coven?

The baby grew heavier in her arms. Afraid she’d drop it, she sat on the cold floor and leaned against the wall. She shifted the baby gently, rocking it unconsciously, unsure which of them she was trying to calm. The darkness pressed in on them as heavy as death itself, but she chanced speaking, “Alexander?”

“Yes?” His voice seemed small, but very close.

“Just seeing that you’re here,” she responded. “I suppose we should be quiet.”

“Uh–huh.”

Suddenly the door swung open and light flooded the tiny enclosure, temporarily blinding her. She cried out as hands grabbed her and pulled her roughly to her feet. Only her instinctual reaction kept her from dropping the baby and trying to free herself.

“Shhhhhhh,” hissed Jorick’s voice, very close to her ear. He moved like lightning. Before she could answer, his fingers dug into the backs of her arms and crushed her against his firm body. A sharp pain blossomed on the left side of her neck, just above her collar bone, as his teeth sunk into her for only a second.

She flinched as something else cut into her soft skin and Jorick explained hurriedly, “I am marking you. If they find you they’ll know you belong to me. I’m sorry, but it’s the only thing I can do to save you.”

“Who are ‘they’?” she asked, one hand pressed against the new injury, the warm moisture of blood on her palm.

Jorick released her and drew away. He looked down into her face, offering silent reassurance. “‘They’ are The Guild.” He glanced urgently to the basement. “I must go. Stay here, make no sound,” and then he was gone. The door swung shut behind him and the darkness was back, only it seemed even more suffocating after the few moments of light.

She leaned against the cold stone and slid down the wall until she was seated on the floor again, the silent baby cradled in her lap. He hadn't told her anything she didn't already know. "The Guild," she whispered out loud. That was what Jesslynn had said too. But who were they, and what did they want?

"The Vampire Guild," Alexander said from the darkness, answering her unspoken question. "They control everything and oversee everyone. When someone breaks a law, they come for you." She felt his small body shudder against her leg.

She took a deep breath to steady her voice and asked softly, "What do they do if someone breaks the law?" She suspected she already knew the answer, given what she'd witnessed of vampire nature.

"They kill them," he whispered.

She nodded, signaling that she understood, though no one could see her. Or maybe they could. She had no idea what they could see, but she did understand who was now waging a small war in the house. A vampire assassination squad had come here tonight looking for someone who'd broken the law.

The Guild.

She suddenly remembered where she'd heard those words before. It was in the nursery, and from the way Jorick and Oren had spoken she was sure that the children were considered illegal. Had they come because of them, or was it something else?

She couldn't hardly ask Alexander if he was against the law, so she settled for, "What did Jorick mean by saying he marked me?" She felt stupid asking a child questions, but he was probably hundreds of years older than she was, no matter how macabre and impossible it seemed.

"He marked your neck." Alexander's voice sounded tired and defeated. "Each vampire has their own mark. It's like a symbol. By putting it on you, he's claimed you so that everyone who sees it will know that you're his human."

She didn't like the sound of that. "What does that mean?"

"It means he owns you. I thought you already had one since father said you belonged to him."

"Oh," That single syllable surfaced again to fill in a silence that she had no words for. Jorick had marked her as a sign of ownership, like Claudius and Arowenia. Without so much as asking he'd turned her into nothing more than a pet iguana!

"They're supposed to do it to all their humans," Alexander continued. "Though Father doesn't bother with it anymore. He says that as long as they've been fed on it should be good enough."

Katelina shuddered at the boy's words. Fed. Was that what they would do to her? Her life flashed behind her eyes; snapshots of her memories, stupid moments encapsulated forever for no apparent reason. *A field trip. When she'd fallen down the stairs in seventh grade. Rain falling as she peered from beneath bleachers on the football field. The funeral for Sarah's cat. Patrick holding that stupid glass ash tray and beaming so proudly.*

She reached up with one hand and wiped tears from her face. She tried to assure herself that they were going to survive, and that each minute crawling past made their situation better and better. At any moment Jorick would open the door and announce they were safe.

But the minutes ticked past and Jorick didn't appear. There was nothing but blackness and cold and the faint smell of mold. The baby lay perfectly still and silent across Katelina's knee. Neither Bethina nor Alexander made the slightest noise – the ability of the undead not to move,

not to breathe. In the silence, her rasping breath was the only sound to discern living from death. She wanted to scream just to prove she was alive, but she stopped herself and bit her lip until she tasted the coppery sting of her own blood.

The fear in the room thickened until her every breath was laced with it. She asked herself silently how she'd come to be there, crouching in a hidden room with vampire children, waiting in terror to be killed. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed that when she opened them she'd be back in the real world with Twinkies and sunglasses and motor oil.

She opened her eyes to darkness. It hadn't worked. Maybe reality was nothing more than her imagination, maybe it had never existed, would never exist. Maybe this darkness was the only real thing she would ever know again. Even Jorick's omission didn't seem to matter anymore; nothing mattered except for the raspy feeling of fear rattling in her every breath and the slow minutes sliding past, a silent countdown to her impending death.



Chapter Thirteen

Seconds became minutes, and minutes became hours as they sat in the impenetrable darkness. Suddenly, scraping noises from outside the secret room broke the silence. At first they were low, almost indistinguishable from the buzzing in Katelina's ears. Then they grew louder and louder, until she couldn't deny their existence.

Katelina's body tensed and she reached out in the darkness to touch Alexander. "Come here," she whispered. He obeyed by curling over her lap and covering the baby. Bethina moved closer too, using her body to shield the boy, so that he was completely hidden from view.

The scraping grew in volume until it echoed, a steady rhythm that Katelina's heart pounded in time with; the sound of their demise. She wrapped her arms around Bethina and, by contact, the children. Fearfully, she tucked her chin down to hide her face, and squeezed her eyes closed in an effort to shut out the terrible reality of what was coming.

The noise stopped. Before she could breathe a sigh of relief, the small room was flooded with light that dazzled her eyes. She tightened her grip on the pile of people in her lap. The ever-silent baby stiffened against her. Though only an infant, even he could sense the danger.

Hands grabbed Bethina and pulled her away from Katelina and the children. The woman-child hissed and struck out at her captor. She bit and scratched, but they took her anyway.

Katelina's hands scrambled to clutch at Alexander, but they pried him away and then they grabbed her. Her free arm attempted to bat them away while the other held the baby close to her. Despite her struggles, she was dragged from the tiny room and into the cellar, as though she weighed nothing.

When they released her, she jerked away ferociously. Five pale vampires were gathered around, an identically evil smile pasted on each of their faces. One was dressed all in black leather, another in red. They both had long matching coats of black and around their necks hung amulets made of three silver bands twisted together in an intricate knot.

The other three vampires wore a mixture of dark colors. Two of them were struggling to maintain their grasp on Bethina while the third bore a flickering torch that lit the basement and threw harsh shadows against the musty stone walls and floor.

The male dressed all in black stepped forward and examined Katelina. "Well, well, what is this? Another human slave left as a final defense? Some good you'll be!" He grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head back to expose her throat.

Completely disconnected from her conscious thought, Katelina's leg shot out and caught him in the stomach. He cried out in surprise rather than pain and in his momentary shock released her. She grabbed Alexander by the arm and ran as fast as she could past the rows of coffins, but the vampires didn't bother to chase her. She reached the stairs as a sixth vampire descended them. She was dressed in all black with dark bobbed hair and another long coat. Her eyes were crinkled with amusement but they held a cold cruelty that made Katelina's insides shrivel.

"I don't think so." She tried to pry the baby from Katelina's arms.

It wasn't Katelina's child. She wasn't even fond of the tiny demon, but she was running on pure instinct and the subliminally ingrained impulse to protect the young was very strong. She tightened her hold and twisted away from the she-devil.

"It won't do you any good, human." The vampiress tackled Katelina to the cold stone floor before her eyes had registered the movement. As she fell she released Alexander and prayed the boy ran as fast as he could.

The floor slammed into the back of her head and she blinked away the bright stars that blossomed in her eyes, a hulking coffin mere inches from her head.

The vampiress's teeth glittered in the torchlight as she straddled Katelina's prostrate body and snapped her jaws playfully.

"Let me go!" Katelina shouted. She hugged the baby tighter. "Get off of me!"

The woman stood up and jerked the baby from Katelina's grasp then held it out for examination. With a look of disgust she dumped it into the arms of one of the other coat clad vampires and turned her eyes to Alexander. He'd curled himself into a ball against the same coffin that Katelina had been close to landing on. "Take them to the council to be discussed," the vampiress ordered.

"No! Leave them alone!" Katelina cried, but the woman kicked her in the stomach. The blow took the air from her lungs and rendered her silent.

"This one is mine." The woman laughed – cold, cruel and hollow.

"No!" Alexander shouted as he struggled against the man in black leather. "She belongs to Jorick! He's marked her neck! You can't hurt her!"

The woman sneered in disbelief and crouched down next to Katelina. She grabbed a fistful of Katelina's long hair and pulled her head back. Her eyes raked the fresh mark above her collar bone. "Well, well," she said sarcastically. "The boy tells the truth. It seems Jorick's got himself a pet." Katelina's head was dropped painfully to the stone floor. "Take her upstairs and see what is to be done with her."

Katelina was jerked roughly to her feet and dragged up the stairs, followed by two vampires who tried to control Bethina between them.

The prisoners were pulled through the ransacked house. Katelina's eyes caught overturned furniture and bits of smashed glass glittering under the electric lights. She tried not to scream as her captor hauled her through the front door and out onto the lawn. The cold wind slapped into her. It beat her bare legs and feet mercilessly. The scent of early autumn frost hung in the air, overshadowed by the smell of a large bonfire that burned in the center of the front lawn. The firelight cast eerie shadows that stretched out to the pressing blackness; darkness that threatened to swallow them except for the snapping flames.

There were several people grouped around the fire, at least half held against their will. The air echoed with shouts, growls, and laughter mixed into a symphony of horror. Katelina's gaze swept hopelessly over the captives, recognizing some. Fabian, the dark man who so resembled Jesslynn was on the ground, his wrists bound behind his back, his mouth open and snarling. Near him was Jesslynn herself. Her hair had fallen completely and cascaded around her shoulders like liquid night, her face was pale and her eyes large as she saw Katelina and the children being led into the circle of firelight. A vampire held her. His claw-like hands dug into her naked arms.

Torina was sprawled on the ground, not far from Jesslynn. Her hands were also tied behind her back. Her dress was torn and her arms were bleeding. Her eyes were filled with fear and anger, but she watched everything with a keen alertness. Next to her lay the unconscious form of

Baltheir, the bearded man Katelina had seen on the night of their arrival. A vampire in black prodded him uselessly with the toe of his boot.

Katelina and the children were led past Oren. He fought against a pair of vampires who held his arms behind his back. His fangs flashed dangerously in the firelight and he made guttural growling sounds. He'd never resembled a fierce lion more than he did at that moment.

"Come to join the fun, Senya?" one of Oren's guards called.

The vampiress with the bobbed hair smiled in acknowledgement. "I wouldn't miss my favorite part of all this," she called to him. "I've brought the last of them." She nodded a command to the guards who held the new arrivals. Wordlessly they threw Katelina and the others to the ground. Bethina's captors stooped and bound her hands before they moved away.

Katelina's face landed in damp, dead grass, and she pulled herself up. The first thing she saw made her heart sink. Directly across from her was Jorick, held like Oren was; both hands trapped behind his back by a pair of guards. His dark eyes were trained on Katelina and his lips were drawn back in a sneer of outrage as he struggled to free himself. He shouted loudly, though the individual words were lost to her, just more noise added to the general clamor.

She pulled into a sitting position and rubbed the vampire's fingerprint from her arms. She looked to her right where Bethina lay on her back. Alexander crawled across the wet grass to the mad vampiress and buried his head in her lap. Tears ran down his pale face. Bethina roared loudly and pulled at her bonds to try and comfort him.

The vampire in black stood to Katelina's left and held the baby out like a contaminated object. The child's shrill screams rent the air and drew Jesslyn's anguished attention.

"Is anyone else hiding inside?" Senya shouted over the noise.

But Jesslynn only cried, "Let them go!"

The vampire in black shook his head "That didn't answer the question. I guess we'll have to take precautions against any surprises." He nodded to another vampire who walked towards the manor and called loudly, "All right!"

Something exploded inside the house. It shook the ground and sent up a shower of bricks and cinders. Katelina cried out in surprise and ducked her head. She used her arms to shield her face from the raining debris; falling stars that glowed orange as they landed in the yard.

The echoes died away and she looked up to see fire licking through the giant hole in the front of the house. What was left of the walls were blackened and badly damaged by the explosion. Pieces of furniture and glass were scattered across the yard; bits of what had been Oren and Jesslynn's life.

A blood curdling scream rent the air, and Katelina quickly looked to see one of the vampires forcing Margaret, the maid, into the roaring fire. Her too big dress hung off her naked shoulders and the flames licked at her legs as the vampire prodded her forward.

Katelina cried out and tried to climb to her feet. But, another vampire in a long coat kicked her from behind. She went sprawling in the grass and Jorick shouted something, a message lost beneath Margaret's screams.

"You'll get yours in a minute!" the vampire said as Katelina pulled herself up onto her arms. "Do you rush to meet death, servant of abominations?"

Senya, who had been strolling from prisoner to prisoner, stopped before Katelina and looked down her nose at her. Her eyes flicked to the vampire who'd kicked her. "She is Jorick's toy, Bren, not one of the others."

"Jorick's?" Bren asked, a note of disbelief in his voice. "How interesting, I had no idea! I thought she was the nanny."

His laughter made Katelina's stomach churn, but she couldn't look away from the flames. Margaret fought as the fire licked her legs and touched the hem of the too long skirt. The vampire shoved her harder and she stumbled forward and landed in the midst of the bonfire on her knees. Her screams grew louder and harsher as she was enveloped by the blaze. Katelina could see her writhing from inside the knot of flame, trying to escape.

The other prisoners howled and screamed in terror. Katelina's hands flew to her ears to drown out the sound and her face dropped into the damp autumn grass. The stench of burning flesh rolled past her and was carried away by the wind.

Margaret's screams died and Katelina dared to look up again. Her eyes caught a pair of men standing off to the side, their faces and bodies cloaked in shadow so that they seemed part of the darkness. Senya stood in front of them, motioning with her hands and pointing back to the circle of prisoners. The men looked past her and then nodded slowly.

Senya's face lit with joy and she turned back and started towards the bonfire. The cloaked men melted away into the night as she gave Bren a single, satisfied nod. He smiled almost gleefully then stepped forward. He held the baby up with one hand and with the other he pointed to where Alexander lay, his head still buried against Bethina.

Bren called loudly, "Who will speak for these abominations? Who will mourn their destruction?"

Jesslynn writhed in her captor's hands. "No!"

A smile curved Bren's thin lips and he commented to Senya, "She must be their mother." Then he turned to Jesslynn, his face stony and pompous. "You know the laws! Whoever created these monsters shall be punished!"

He walked towards her, swinging the baby, and Oren roared, "Leave them alone!"

"Tut, tut," Bren chastised. "You know the Laws. This is an abomination and must be destroyed!" He raised his arm as if to pitch the screaming infant into the fire, but Jesslynn broke free and lunged for him.

She caught the child in her arms and pressed its face against her breasts. She stumbled and fell to her knees. "No! You can't! He's my child! You can't!"

Bren snickered. "You should have thought about that." Then he grabbed the baby by one arm and ripped it from her grasp. Wordlessly, he swung it backwards and slammed its tiny head into the nearby tree. Its skull shattered, showering blood and brains over everyone within range.

Jesslynn fell to the ground. Only her elbows kept her from landing face down in the grass. A scream of agony tore from her lips, "No!"

Bren's long tongue snaked out to lick a clot of gore from his face as he tossed the remains into the fire. "Bring me the other one!" He signaled to Jesslynn's guard to rein her in. The vampire obeyed and quickly pulled her arms behind her back.

Katelina lay in the grass, forgotten. Her dew soaked dress clung cold against her body. Splatters of blood decorated it like sick flowers. She blinked at the scene in unfathomable, numb terror.

On Bren's command, the vampire nearest to Alexander grabbed his tiny arm and tugged him to his feet. Bethina roared and broke her bonds. She launched herself at the startled vampire guard before he could react. Her fangs ripped out his throat in one motion and they fell to the ground in a struggling heap. Blood sprayed from his gaping neck and soaked Bethina's clothes and hair.

The vampire gurgled and fought as she pinned him down and ripped at his chest with claw like hands. Her fingers tore through his clothes and skin, while she growled unintelligible threats.

Alexander whimpered and clutched at Katelina. His large eyes were glued to Bethina. "They'll kill her," he whispered.

Katelina wanted to reassure him, but she had no words of comfort. He was right; they were going to kill them all.

With a roar and a snap Bethina broke through the vampire's ribcage and ripped his heart from his chest. Several of the other vampires hurried towards her, so she abandoned the motionless body and tackled the nearest of them. She pinned him down and tore at him like she had the first. One of the other guards caught her arms, but she flung him away and returned to her victim. She tore his heart from his chest but, before she could attack someone else, Senya shoved a dagger through her back.

Bethina didn't scream. Instead, she laughed. Angry red blood ran down the front of her clothing from where the tip of the dagger protruded. She made a gurgling noise and spit out a mouthful of the crimson liquid, then spun and snatched at Senya. The vampiress stepped deftly out of the way. Rather than chase her, Bethina grabbed the nearest vampire – one who'd been in the basement – and hurled him towards the tree. He slammed into the trunk with a crunching sound, but climbed to his feet easily enough, his left arm hanging at an odd angle.

Before Bethina could find a new victim, Bren stabbed another long dagger into her back. The blade missed her heart and she pulled herself off of it. She spun around and lunged towards him, her fangs bared and her hands held like claws.

Bren didn't flinch. He drove the dagger into her chest, stopping her only inches from him. She stood still, like something from a comic book. Her wide eyes looked past him to the sobbing Alexander. As they landed on him they cleared of madness. A strange smile flickered over her lips and then she crumpled to the ground. Dispassionately, Bren pulled his dagger free from her as she fell.

Alexander tore from Katelina's hold and flung himself over Bethina's lifeless body. He screamed words of misery that no one could understand. He clenched handfuls of her hair and sobbed while her blood soaked into his clothes and smeared on his pale skin.

Katelina tried to pull him away. She dug her fingers into the folds of his blood spotted clothing, but he was ripped from her grasp. Senya kicked Katelina and knocked her to the ground, where she lay, stunned. Her eyes sought out Jorick, who was still struggling against his two guards. She silently willed him to save them as he'd saved her at the motel.

"This is an abomination!" Bren shouted. He hauled the struggling Alexander towards Jesslynn with one hand. "This should never have been created – and it will be destroyed!" He held the kicking boy up in the air as he moved towards the roaring flames.

"No!" Jesslynn howled, fighting to get free. "Oren! Save him! Save our son!"

"Let him go!" Oren roared.

"If you wanted to save him then you shouldn't have changed him." Bren shook Alexander in midair so that his limbs flopped like a marionette. He leveled his gaze with Oren's and took a step towards the flames. The heat made Alexander squirm even more. "You know the laws."

"You twist the laws to suit your purpose!" Oren roared.

Bren only snickered. "Such is the prerogative of those with power."

Jesslynn sagged to the ground, all the fight gone from her. Her captor's hold was the only thing that kept her from falling face down in the grass. "God, no."

Bren's head snapped towards her. A wry smile danced on his lips. "Why do you call on God? You know he has abandoned us all." He broke into cold laughter and tossed the shrieking Alexander into the flames.

Katelina's eyes closed involuntarily and her hands went to her ears. She tried to drown out the boy's screams and held her breath against the stench as his body caught fire.

Oren bellowed unintelligibly. It was the anger of a man watching all he loved destroyed in an instant, helpless to prevent it.

Katelina opened her eyes in time to see Jesslynn's guards haul her upright. Bren wrinkled his nose in disgust and, without warning, shoved his dagger into her chest. She only screamed for a second and then her body sagged.

Oren tried to break free and roared in wordless fury.

Bren glanced at him and called, "She died for what she did, what she created! She broke the laws!" He seemed to savor Oren's fury as he traced his finger over Jesslynn's lifeless lips. With a smirk, he licked the blood from his hand while Oren shouted. Then, he picked her lifeless body up and flung it into the flames after her son. Bethina's body followed.

The vampires who'd been guarding the other human servants shoved them into the fire one by one. They ignored their screams and attempts to fight. Some of them even laughed as they carried out their grim work.

Katelina sought comfort from Jorick, but he wasn't looking at her. His attention was focused on Oren, who now had three vampires holding him back. He raged and struggled against them, screaming threats, his eyes locked on the bonfire. Thick smoke billowed from it and the flames leapt higher into the crisp black night as the stench of burning flesh grew stronger. The smell filled Katelina's nostrils and she gagged and retched. Her brain refused to process the images and sounds. Everything was a blur of blood and death and screams that echoed against the darkness.

Bren wiped his palms on his pants then moved to stand next to the fire, his hands on his hips. "And now, I will ask once more, where is she? Where is the one you hid here?" He looked around at the remaining vampires. His eyes skipped to each of their faces. "Do more need to die before you'll speak?"

"I swear, I'll kill you!" Oren shouted as he strained against his guards.

"I rather doubt it," Bren replied lightly. "You're in no position to do anything to me. Where is she? Where is Arowenia?"

"She isn't here!" Oren shouted back. "I've told you before: I don't have her, nor would I want her!"

"You lie!"

Bren took a step towards Oren and Jorick shouted furiously, "He tells the truth, she is not here!" His eyes narrowed and grew cold as Bren turned from Oren and came to a stop directly in front of him.

"Then where is she? I know she was here!" He stuck his face into Jorick's, their eyes only inches apart.

"Was' is the key word," Jorick snapped as he glared unflinchingly at Bren. "She was moved long ago."

"Where has she been moved to?" Bren leaned closer, his nose almost touching Jorick's.

"I don't know. Her keepers came and took her, disappearing into the night. I don't ask questions." He continued to be unmovable, his eyes cold and dancing with fury.

"So you say, but I don't believe you."

"I don't care what you believe! You're so inept that a routine inquiry required no less than five Executioners and twelve guards?"

"We were expecting trouble!" Bren snapped. "And the suspicion was well warranted."

Jorick smirked. "Pathetic."

Bren's face twisted in fury. "Fuck you!" He pulled away and glared back. "I have orders to let you live, Jorick. You and those you protect." He started to walk away, then stopped and turned back around to deliver a warning. "But only this time. If you interfere in The Guild's business again, there will be no such orders. Do you understand?"

Jorick's tone was cold. "I understand perfectly."

"Let them go." Bren signaled with his hand. The guards obeyed and released both Oren and Jorick.

The blonde vampire lunged forward, fangs bared, but Jorick caught him. He wrapped his arms around his friend to stop him. "No! I have bought your life, but if you attack them there's nothing I can do!"

"And what good is this life?" Oren cried with anguish as he struggled in Jorick's grasp.

"Revenge," Jorick said quietly. He slowly released Oren, until only his hand remained on his friend's shoulder. "Revenge."

Oren relaxed and their eyes met briefly. Jorick let go of him completely and, with a nod, hurried to where Katelina lay. Her blonde hair tumbled around her pale dirty face. Blood spotted her dress and covered her hands. Her large eyes were luminous and out of focus as she stared up at him.

He scooped her into his arms and carried her towards a car parked in the driveway. Katelina clutched him and looked around wildly. Her eyes skipped from one vampire to the next. Only a handful were left. A couple of them argued with the death squad, but most were moving away to fade into the darkness and disassociate themselves from everything that had happened.

The great brick house stood ruined and burning. Flames filled the remaining windows and licked at the black ruined walls. The gaping hole in the front stood out like a gouged wound. Fire leapt from it, crackling against the black sky as it fought to destroy all it could.

When they reached the car Jorick slid her into the passenger seat, then quickly climbed in behind the wheel. The keys hung from the ignition and in a moment the car sputtered to life.

"You're all right?"

Katelina nodded numbly to Jorick's question, though she wasn't sure the definition really fit her.

As they sped down the driveway Katelina peered through the passenger window. Oren stood alone, in the circle of light from the bonfire. His blonde hair blew in a stray breeze and his tattered clothes were blackened with soot. He stared at the dancing flames with hardened features; devoid of emotion as he watched the fire consume the bodies of those he loved.



Chapter Fourteen

Katelina woke from darkness. She found herself in a cheap motel room, a light shining in her eyes. She raised her hands and saw gore caked in the lines of her palms and the subtle patterns of her fingerprints. She looked down the length of herself to see that was still dressed in the tattered white dress. It was flecked and smeared with blood, and in the center of her skirt was one small, perfect handprint: the reminder of a bloody child.

Screams echoed through her mind and the smell of burning flesh lingered in her nose. She shuddered.

“It’s all right,” a soothing voice whispered. She looked up quickly to see Jorick. He stood next to the bed shirtless, his longhair wet and a towel thrown over his naked shoulder. He gave her an encouraging nod and brushed loose strands of hair back from her face. “It’s all right.”

“No,” she murmured. “No, it’s not all right.”

“Your bath is ready.” He gently tugged her to her feet. Her legs shook beneath her and she swayed and fell against him.

“No,” she murmured into his bare chest. “No...”

“Shhhhhhhhh.” His fingers tangled in her long hair as he stroked her head. “Come on.”

She allowed him to step back from her and peel the ruined white dress away. He dropped it to the floor where it lay like a symbol of ruined innocence – white and red, purity stained by darkening blood, reality stained by nightmares.

He stripped her naked, but she didn’t fight him. She was too distraught to focus, and only threw one thin arm over her breasts by instinct. Jorick gently led her to the bathroom and maneuvered her into a blue chipped bathtub where he lowered her slowly into the warm water.

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the porcelain. Her mind was still swirling and raging with what she’d seen, but it was swirling and raging without her. She was there, floating above it all, uncomprehending and numb. She tried to drown the memories out with thoughts of the dark car trip that had followed, but she’d fallen asleep, soothed into dreamless slumber by Jorick in an effort to end her hysterics.

Warm water splashed across her stomach and she looked up to see Jorick hovering over her like a concerned mother. He quickly washed the blood from her hands and her face. His touch was soft and smooth; comforting.

“Dip your head forward, keep your eyes closed.” His words interrupted her thoughts, but she did as he said. She felt the water run over her hair and then his long fingers worked in the shampoo and rinsed it out again. The water trickled over her face and she squeezed her eyes shut until she could see little stars exploding behind them. She let him wash her arms, her shoulders, her neck. The wet washrag was warm against her bare skin as it swiped away all the gore and memories.

When she was clean, she opened her eyes and stared at the water around her. It was red with the mess that had been washed from her and looked like a pool of pale blood.

“Stand up,” Jorick said quietly, and she stood. He held her steady and pulled the drain plug to let the hateful red water swirl away, then he rinsed her clean under the showerhead.

He wrapped a fluffy white towel around her, then gently scooped her up and carried her into the bedroom. She stared dully at the bedspread as he laid her on it. It was red like blood – red like her nightmares.

“Close your eyes,” he murmured softly as he leaned over her and stroked her wet hair. “Rest now.”

He started to go but she grabbed his bare arm. Fear had taken over and destroyed any hope she had of pride. “No, don’t leave me alone.”

“You’ll be fine,” he assured her. “The sun will come soon.” He looked pale and in desperate need of rest.

“Please,” she half whimpered, pleading.

He sighed in defeat and looked around the room. Gently, he tugged his arm free. With very little effort he moved the pressboard desk in front of the window, and then heaved the dresser on top of it. He reached around them and pulled the flowered drapes over the mound, effectively blocking most of the window.

He slipped off his shoes and, as he climbed onto the bed, he reached for her. She rolled towards him and buried her face in his naked chest. With a sigh, he curled around her and tightened his arms until he nearly crushed her against him. “It’s all right, Katelina,” he whispered. His hands tangled in her wet hair. “It’s going to be all right.”

She closed her eyes and whimpered softly as tears fell from her eyes. She listened to his heart beat and thought that nothing would ever be all right again.

When Katelina woke the room was shrouded in darkness. The clock on the nightstand read 7:45 pm in electric red numbers. She closed her eyes and opened them again, half hoping she’d be somewhere different, but she wasn’t.

She rolled over, and found herself staring into the dark, unblinking eyes of Jorick. A memory flashed through her mind: Jorick’s black hair laying against the smooth, white porcelain of the bathtub, his eyes closed, his features so still that she’d thought he was dead. The memory pressed an odd expression onto her face.

“Are you all right?” he asked softly.

His question played through her mind, but no answer presented itself. Her head ached as the events of the previous night came back in a screaming rush. Though most of it was a hazy red blur set to a soundtrack of screams, she still wished she hadn’t remembered. “I guess,” she answered at last.

“I thought you might be feeling better tonight.” He held her eyes. His body lay mere inches from hers, the back of his hand against her hip.

She looked away first, to discover and remember at the same moment that she was wearing nothing but a towel. “Oh! My clothes...” she began, but stopped. Memories of the bath began to surface. They stained her cheeks scarlet and left her speechless.

“I’ll have to get you some,” he said quietly, though he made no effort to move. “The ones you were wearing...” he trailed off but she knew what he was going to say: they were ruined.

She felt his fingers flex through the towel and swallowed hard. A strange buzzing of blood pounded in her ears. She tried to collect her thoughts but failed, so she just said, “Okay.” His nearness was too distracting for any other words, and it made her body tingle. Her cheeks grew an even deeper shade of red as she thought about how thin the towel was, and that it was the only thing that kept his knuckles from grazing her naked hip. Once more the certainty whispered

through her brain that he'd seen her naked last night. In fact, he'd touched her. Just thinking about it, even filtered through dim, sleepy memories, made her heart pound.

"I'll find you something to eat, too," he added. "You're probably hungry." He closed his eyes for a moment, and drew a reluctant breath.

She waited, uncertain if she should say something or not. Before she could decide, he pulled away to stand, seeking his cast off shirt.

She lay still and clutched at her towel. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared at his naked back. Thoughts and images rose unbidden, most notably a vision of his hand on her stomach while his warm voiced soothed her. The memory left her insides fluttering.

Jorick disappeared into the bathroom and returned, tugging his black shirt over his head. He glanced at her as he deftly slid his shoes on. "I'll be back." He started toward the door, but stopped suddenly and turned back to her. "When I leave, fasten all the locks, and don't answer the door unless I say it's me."

Worry overrode her raging, hormonal thoughts. The fear of death seemed more important than lustful, half-formed ideas. "Do you think someone will come here?" she asked, though she didn't know where "here" was.

"I don't know, but it's always better to be safe than dead." With those words he left and closed the door behind him.

Katelina hurried to do as Jorick had instructed. The brass locks were all neatly in place before she flipped on the light. Her eyes roamed the room and she suddenly wondered how Jorick paid for all of the motel rooms? Did he have a wad of cash stuffed in his pockets? Or maybe he had a book of traveler's checks? She snickered at her own ridiculous thoughts; a vampire with traveler's checks!

She shook her head in amusement, then made her way across the 70's style carpeting. Her feet stopped next to the heap of white material. For a moment she imagined picking the dress up, to see if what she remembered was true, but she resisted. She didn't really want to know.

The bathroom was a normal motel bathroom, small and functional. The mirror above the chipped blue sink showed a reflection she hardly recognized: large blue eyes with black rings stared back at her from a pale, haggard face that was framed in tousled blonde hair.

She examined the new mark on her neck, just above her collar bone. It was still pink, but already tightly closed. Closer inspection revealed that it was a perfect set of bite marks with a very small cross cut directly beneath them – evidently Jorick's symbol.

The only thing she could think as she stared at it was *fantastic*. This was just what she needed. It was going to be hard to explain to people later. Then again, she reminded herself, who would she have to explain it to? Sarah was dead and her mother would assume it was something to do with Patrick.

That was really kind of ironic, when she thought about it. Technically, it was something to do with Patrick, depending on how she looked at it. But thinking about Patrick - particularly after what she'd been through last night - made her feel weird. She banished the thoughts and forced herself to check her shoulder over, even though the wound was almost healed.

When she was done, she cinched the towel tight and headed back into the room. She sat carefully on the edge of the bed, with her knees pressed tightly together, and flipped the TV on to drown out the silence. She was half way through a bad cartoon when Jorick knocked on the door and called to her.

She checked that the towel covered all her important bits, then she hurried to the door and unbolted the locks.

Jorick strode in carrying a soda cup and two sacks; one from a fast food place and the other bearing the familiar yellow smiley face of a national chain store – guaranteed happiness in a bag.

“I didn’t know what you wanted,” he commented as he set the drink on the nightstand and deposited the bags on the bed. The crinkle of plastic and paper was a delicious sound to Katelina’s ears.

She meant to dress first, but the smell of food was overwhelming. She decided her towel was good enough and sat primly on the edge of the bed, her knees together and the paper bag in her lap. As she ate, Jorick perched on the other corner of the bed and stared at the TV. He chanced a glance towards her but his nose wrinkled involuntarily, and he looked away again.

She licked the salt from her fingers with delight. The empty bag was soon wadded up and thrown in the garbage can, forsaken for the plastic sack. Jorick had gotten her a pair of jeans and a t-shirt with Tweety bird across the chest. Even odder was a package of flowered panties. She imagined him in the underwear section trying to decide on a style, and had to physically bite her lip to keep from laughing.

Aside from those items there was a pink flannel nightgown that was going to be more comfortable than form flattering, a hairbrush, a stick of deodorant and a bottle of blue nail polish.

She held the tiny glass bottle in her hand and looked at his back questioningly. Without turning around he murmured, “I noticed you liked it.” He made an attempt at a casual shrug that came off slightly stiff.

She bit the inside of her lip and narrowed her eyes. How did he know – but the thought ended mid-sentence when she recalled his admission of “keeping an eye on her”. She’d tried to pretend that it meant a very causal observation, though she knew better. This completely ruined her illusions.

The familiar anger returned, and she sarcastically wondered if he’d seen her naked back then. Maybe that was why he was acting like it was no big deal today. Automatically, she gripped the bottle with a white knuckled hand and opened her mouth to reprimand him – then stopped. Undoubtedly, he’d tried to be nice in his own twisted way. If she thought about it, he’d been nothing but kind since last night’s horrors. She couldn’t imagine him sporadically doing something to ruin that. Still, the idea that he’d spied on her left her uncomfortable. She dreaded it, but one day they were going to have to discuss it.

Avoiding the subject now, she walked silently to the bathroom. Once she was in the new clothes her anger was replaced by a warm rush of gratitude.

When she’d composed herself, she emerged from the bathroom to find Jorick lying on the bed, his hands beneath his head and his eyes glued to re-runs of Yogi Bear. She settled on the bed next to him with her legs crossed and cracked open the bottle of nail polish.

By the time one hand was finished she felt nearly restored. Nothing bad could happen so long as the sharp, chemical smell of nail polish was biting her nose. She couldn’t help but think, for a moment, how strange the things were that people clung to; the odd little bits that meant safety and comfort to them.

Pushing off the strange thoughts she turned to Jorick and kept her voice casual. “So, what are we doing now?”

“Going to New Hampshire.” A smile flickered across his face at the animated Yogi and his attempts to trick the Ranger. “This is actually quite amusing.”

“New Hampshire? Isn’t that a little far? How long will it take to get there?” Her world might be shattered and her life irrevocably changed, but she wanted to stay near her home – or what had been her home.

“A night, maybe.” His words were interrupted by laughter, his dark eyes still riveted to the television screen. “We’re closer than you think,” he added.

She tried to keep her growing unhappiness out of her voice, but couldn’t stop the sarcastic comment from slipping out. “Evidently.” She went back to her nail polish, the brush painting each nail blue; painting over everything bad that had happened; painting over all of her anger. “Why New Hampshire?”

“Because that’s where we need to go,” he broke off as Boo Boo the bear protested against stealing picnic baskets. “Have you seen this before? It’s really funny for television.”

“Yes,” she snapped impatiently. “It was made before I was born.” She glared at him, but he seemed undeterred. “Is New Hampshire where Arowenia is?”

“It’s where we’re going.”

She growled in frustration. Why couldn’t he ever give her a straight answer? His excuses about Claudius getting a hold of her sounded feeble at best, and she wanted the truth for once. “Why won’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“What do you want to know?” he asked, though he didn’t give her his full attention.

“What do I want to know? How about ‘Is New Hampshire where Arowenia is?’”

He tore his gaze away from the TV. “I won’t tell you, and I’ve already explained why. It’s safer for everyone that way.”

“Fine,” she snapped and savagely screwed the lid back on the bottle of nail polish. “Maybe you can tell me what happened last night? Or is that privileged information?”

He rolled his eyes. “No, it’s not.”

“That’s a change,” she bit back sarcastically. “Then who is The Guild and why were they there? Were they looking for Arowenia?”

His answer was a dark monosyllable, a contrast to the bright too-happy commercials on the screen. “Yes.”

“So, they work for Claudius?”

“No.”

She ground her teeth together and resisted the temptation to make a fist and bash him. After all, it would ruin the coat of polish. “Then why are they looking for her? Who do they work for?”

He sighed and turned his head to look at her. Finally she had his complete attention. “They work for themselves. The Guild is a group of vampires – mostly old, ancient vampires – who’ve made The Laws. When someone breaks The Laws, they’re punished by The Guild’s death squad.”

“Laws? You have laws?” she raised her brows incredulously. “And a government? Why not?” She waved her hand, dismissing the question before he could answer it. “So these ‘Guild’ people – ”

“Executioners,” he interrupted. “And guards.”

“Executioners?” she repeated disbelievingly. “That’s what they’re called?”

“Yes, the ones with the medallions. The others were just guards. They sometimes augment the Executioners when they think they need a large force. Though the numbers they sent were extreme and unnecessary.” He scowled darkly. “Probably Senya or Bren’s doing.”

“But what were they doing there? Why were they looking for Arowenia?”

“Because The Laws were broken when she was kidnapped. You may not harm nor take the possessions of others. Though Arowenia is a vampire herself, and thus should have certain rights, she was made in the old days, when the Master could claim ownership over his

Fledglings.” He was very cavalier about the whole thing. “The old Laws are still upheld in those cases.”

“So Vamp—” she stumbled on the word, amending herself. “So they own you if they,” she hesitated, “make you one?”

“No.” He shook his head. “New Fledglings can’t be owned anymore.”

She ignored the intricacies of vampire ownership. “So the Executioners and the guards, they just, what? Go around policing people? I mean who’s in charge?”

“The Guild,” Jorick murmured with minimal impatience. “It’s more than just the guards and Executioners. Think of it as a government. There’s a High and Low council, among other committees. It’s The Guild that tells the Executioners and the guards where to go and what to do. Claudius obviously complained to them, so they dispatched a squad.”

“You can just complain to them?”

“Of course. You can complain to your police, can’t you?”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s different. The Police are there to ‘protect the people’, not butcher them!”

“I won’t argue the point,” he said quietly. “I have no love for them, though I realize that there has to be someone in charge, to keep everyone in line. In that respect The Guild is necessary.”

“Necessary? You have to be joking! They murdered Alexander! And what about Jesslynn and all the servants? Sure, she was a bitch and she scared me to death, but why did she need kept in line?”

Jorick sighed and then his voice grew remote and detached, as though he were reciting something he’d learned by rote. “Jesslynn broke The Laws when she created those children. You must never make a vampire that cannot care for itself; that isn’t fully grown. It’s against The Laws to trap a spirit into eternal childhood. If you do, you are punished, and the children are killed, freeing the spirit.

“The humans were killed because no vampire may have a human servant unless they are marked property; it’s against The Laws for fear that the vampire will become careless with the number of humans they have and let some slip through their fingers. If the humans left without the Master’s knowledge, whether in anger or no, they could spread word to the general population. Because his servants weren’t marked and had seen what Jesslynn, Oren, and the others were, this meant they knew about us and they had to die.”

Her hand went unconsciously to the still tender spot above her collar bone, fingering it gingerly. “Why does marking them make any difference?”

Jorick snorted. “Truthfully? I doubt it does any more. But when cities were smaller and population less dense it made it easier to track them.” He mused silently for a moment and then amended, “Though I suppose The Guild could track missing humans through the medical system or the legal system. Whichever documents your scars and such.”

Katelina wasn’t sure who did that, if anyone did. But she’d heard a lot of “big brother” conspiracies, so it was hard to tell. With nothing to add, silence fell on the small room and it was several moments before she could bring herself to break it. “Why did they spare us?”

“Because Malick ordered them to.” He turned back towards the television as Yogi reappeared, though he no longer smiled at the cartoon bear.

“Who is Malick?”

“He’s the leader of The Guild.”

The words hung in the air between them and left Katelina confused. She cocked her head at him curiously and tried to keep her voice light and not let her half-formed suspicions sneak into the tones. “Why would he give them orders to spare you?”

“Because Malick is my Master.” His voice was flat and held no feeling as he stared through the television at some unseen memory. “My Maker.”

She bit her lip and found herself using the non-word she always did when others failed her. “Oh.”

He continued to stare straight ahead. The muscle in his jaw twitched and his voice was grim. “I served The Guild for many, many years. I was Malick’s right hand, his avenging angel of death. Then one day I sickened of it.”

The tone in his voice made something tighten in her chest. Her hand reached towards him, but she stopped and dropped it back to her lap, unsure. “I’m sorry,” she said softly, though she didn’t know what she was sorry for.

“Do not be sorry, little one,” his voice lightened as he turned to her. He studied her for a moment, then he rolled over on his side and pulled her towards him. She slid down in the bed until she was stretched out and pressed tightly against him. “It’s the way it is,” he continued reasonably. “What’s happened has happened, and there’s nothing that can undo it.”

She lay in the warm circle of his arms. Her heart pounded in her chest, even as she wanted to comfort him. She fought to keep the conversation going; to keep it safe. “They said that next time there’d be no such order?”

His voice caught, “Yes. Malick won’t spare me twice.” He buried his face in her hair, his breath warm against her neck. He inhaled deeply, as though hiding from ghosts that had come creeping upon him unbidden. “We should leave soon,” he murmured. “We might make it before dawn.”

She nodded, unable to make her mouth work. Her arms were folded between them, palms pressed against his strong chest. His breath tickled her neck, and she could feel the warmth of his hand through her shirt. She took a deep breath and forced words through her suddenly dry throat, “All right. Let’s go.”

“In a minute or two.” He pulled her closer to him, the length of his muscular body solid against her.

“All right,” she repeated. She swallowed hard and tried to calm her racing heart. A vision of his pale hands moving across her naked skin flickered behind her eyelids and repeated itself until her breath sounded strange in her own ears.

He loosened his hold on her and pulled back. His dark eyes studied her face; pools of deep silk that caressed her with their gaze. She felt herself drowning in their depths, like she had so many times before, and she caught her breath. Nervous tremors ran just beneath her skin and she unconsciously bit her lower lip.

He leaned towards her and his lips captured hers. Soft and warm, they silenced the small voice in her mind that tried to remind her he wasn’t human.

She responded to him. Her body rose to meet his, unwilling to break the contact. She wanted to lose herself in him and forget everything else. Their kiss deepened. His mouth tasted tangy and coppery, like sucking on a penny. She slipped one arm around him and wadded his shirt tightly in her hand. This moment had happened in her secret dreams already, but finding it in reality was something she hadn’t expected. Something she’d told herself she shouldn’t look for, let alone want. But here she was on the motel bed, betraying her conscience and enjoying it.

He pulled away reluctantly, and she let him go, her breathing ragged. A smile danced across his lips. His eyes, dark and suggestive roamed her face and moved lower before they snapped back up to look at the clock. He cleared his throat and said quietly, "We'd better go." And though he didn't say it, somehow she knew he meant they'd better go before anything else happened – before they did something she might regret later, something that the other half of her mind was already whispering about.

She managed to nod her agreement, but secretly, she wondered what she was really agreeing with.



Chapter Fifteen

The highway sped beneath them, illuminated by the bright headlights. The scenery flew past, lost in the darkness. Katelina's lips still burned from Jorick's kiss, though it had been hours ago. She closed her eyes and savored the memory in a way she never thought she would.

Opening her eyes, she glanced sideways at him as he drove. There was no denying it, he was male beauty perfected; dark male beauty. *Dark and dangerous*, she reminded herself. He wasn't human: he was a vampire, a creature of legend, a myth from the darkness come to life.

The radio played a trendy pop song that grated on her nerves. She impatiently pressed the radio's seek button. Snatches of country, chat, and cheerful pop blipped by, mingled with static.

"You could pick one and stay on it," Jorick suggested.

She didn't look at him as she stopped the radio's station on a familiar sounding song. "I would if it weren't for commercials and crappy songs."

"I don't turn the radio on so I don't have the problem."

"Yes," she said dismissively. It wasn't the song she'd thought it was and she pressed the button again. "But you like silence and I can't stand it."

"I know," he rolled his eyes. "God forbid if any of you spent a moment with your own thoughts. Better to drown them out with someone else's."

She gave him a sideways glare and bit back a retort. He didn't need to act like he was so much wiser than she was. At the moment she'd pay to have her thoughts permanently silenced. They were full of bad memories and confusion – all of which were his fault. As far as she was concerned he could deal with the radio and if she wanted to put it on scan all night he could deal with that as well. She was tempted to tell him so, but instead asked "Aren't we almost there?"

"Forty more miles," he said without hesitation. "An hour and a half, two hours till sunrise," he added cheerfully. "We should make it just in time."

"Ah." She gave the radio a dirty look, as if that would make it play something she liked. "Good, I need to pee." Jorick grimaced and she snapped, "What? I can't help it. We're not all perfect like you!" She jabbed an aggravated finger into the seek button and ignored the noise he made in his throat.

Their destination was a small, dark town that looked as if everyone had gone to bed long ago and never woken up. Many of the small yards were choked with weeds. The houses themselves looked as though they'd been forgotten and left to rot in the weather, the years passing over them in an unending sea of destruction. An old tourist trap now alone and neglected.

Jorick seemed to know where he was going. He steered the small red car through silent streets and around dilapidated corners until they reached a low green ranch-style motel whose blinking neon sign proclaimed it was The Rookwood Inn and had a vacancy. Katelina couldn't help but think that, judging by the look of the place, it probably had a lot of vacancies.

He parked the small car in front of the door marked "Office" and, made a sign for her to stay put before he climbed out into the night. He shut the door loudly and again motioned her to stay. She imitated a puppy, but the gesture was wasted on him so she flipped him off as he

disappeared inside. The brass bell above the door jangled harshly and the echoes that cut through the thick silence made her shiver.

She craned her neck and peered through the car window. She tried to see inside the office but all the windows had yellowing Venetian blinds covering them. With a sigh of defeat, she flipped the static filled radio station to the only one that came in clearly – country music.

While a squeaky-voiced woman on the radio sobbed to twangy guitars, Katelina leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. She felt exceedingly bad humored, though she couldn't say why. She was too busy, as Jorick had so politely put it, drowning her thoughts in someone else's to worry about it.

Jorick returned with two sets of keys in his hand. He didn't comment on her sour expression as he put the car into gear and drove wordlessly towards their room.

They parked next to the usual swath of sidewalk that ran along the room's individual doors. Yellow lights on the side of the building sliced the night into pools and illuminated the frosty October air. The smell of leaves and weeds was carried on the wind, along with the sharp scent of early frost. Katelina shivered as she climbed out of the car. Despite the chill, she was thankful to stretch her cramped legs and she paused to kick at an abandoned cigarette butt.

Jorick joined her. "Here," he said as he handed her one of the motel keys. "Go on in. I have something to attend to but then I'll be along."

She opened her mouth to ask him what pressing errand waited for him elsewhere, but thought better of it. She didn't see anyone in the gloomy shadows, but how did she know that some creature of the night wasn't camouflaged in the darkness? If vampires were real, then what other monsters from the nightmares of humanity were lurking and listening to them?

He walked down the sidewalk and she watched him until he turned sharply, and disappeared around the far side of the building. Her curiosity piqued, she thought about following him, but resisted the urge. The memories of the vampire manor were still too fresh in her mind.

The key didn't want to fit into the scarred lock, but finally it surrendered with a groaning click, and she opened the door and was met by the smell of stale cigarette smoke. She wished she had some of her own. Nicotine would be just the thing to make the world sane again.

Inside was yet another motel room. She was growing tired of them already. Despite the respite in the hall of horrors, it felt like she'd been sleeping in motels for years. What she wouldn't give for her comfortable bed at home with its feather pillow and unraveling bedspread!

The room was as shabby as she'd expected from the exterior. The bed sagged in the corner like a crippled dog, covered in a green bedspread that reminded her instantly of moldy cheese. There was a dresser along one wall, and of course the requisite stand holding the television. A laminated sticker glued to the front of it declared that it had cable channels.

The bathroom was no better. It was small and grubby looking, with off-white walls and a chipped sink and tub; the once white porcelain had faded to a dull color from years of use.

She wandered back into the room and threw her sack of clothing on the bed. The clock said 5:45 and she thought to herself that the sun would come up soon.

She changed into the pink flowered nightgown, and studied her reflection in a grubby full length mirror. No woman looked good in a flannel nightgown, and she was no exception. The shapeless garment made her look like a dowdy grandmother, though the soft material was a comforting change that made her think of childhood winters.

Her stomach grumbled as she flopped on the bed. She thought about turning down the bedspread, but she wasn't sure if it was safe to touch the bedding. The ashtray on the bed stand

was empty, which meant someone cleaned occasionally. Still, that didn't mean they changed the sheets.

Jorick came in just then, looking grim, his dark eyes clouded with troubles.

She waited until he'd closed and locked the door before speaking. "Well?"

"Well what?" He glanced at the clock, then began to survey the room, his hands on his hips.

She watched his face and waited for some hint of his thoughts, but his expression didn't change. She wondered if appearing emotionless was an attribute peculiar to him or if it was a "vampire ability". When she decided his features were going to reveal nothing she asked more specifically, "What's in the other room?"

"Nothing." He uprooted himself from the spot he'd been standing and dropped the extra key on the desk with a small metallic clink. Then, he walked around the room. His eyes snapped to each piece of furniture calculatingly. "Benjamin just wanted me to look in on something for him." He stuck his head into the small bathroom in further examination.

She tried to figure out what he was up to, but refused to be detoured. "Who's Benjamin?"

"The landlord," Jorick answered casually as he walked towards the window and pulled back the drapes to reveal an aged blind.

"You know him?" How many people were in on this?

His face was thoughtful as he dropped the drapes and placed his hands on his hips. "Not personally. Oren knows him."

"Checking on Arowenia, were you?" She couldn't believe he thought she was that stupid. It wasn't hard to figure out. When he didn't reply she added, "This is where they're keeping her? In a rundown motel?"

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, but you didn't say she wasn't." She watched his actions, annoyed that he wouldn't just admit it to her. When the silence began to stretch she asked sarcastically, "Missing your coffin?"

"As a matter of fact, I am." He crossed his arms over his chest and his nose wrinkled. "When the sun rises the room should be well lit."

"Another night in the bathtub, then?" She felt a touch of disappointment that made her blush.

"It looks like it." He shook his head in annoyance. "Had I known I'd have requested a different room, I only accepted this one because I thought you'd prefer one close to the office in case I was gone tomorrow." He looked genuinely annoyed. "Really, he should have mentioned how much light there'd be, all things considered." He looked thoughtful. "Though I suppose he probably doesn't know. I doubt he's in the rooms in the daytime."

Katelina tried to sound casual. "So he's a – a vampire?"

Jorick nodded. "And a notoriously cheap one at that." He yawned and Katelina blinked back in surprise. She hadn't known that vampires got sleepy. Rather, she'd thought they just sort of passed out against their will. But, she supposed if they could be awake in the daytime they must have some sort of control. *Interesting.*

"Well, I'm going to go get comfortable," he said with an edge of sarcasm to his voice. "I suggest you do the same. We'll have a chat with Benjamin tomorrow about changing rooms, but in the meantime, try to get some rest."

She nodded and suppressed a gasp of surprise as he brushed a kiss against her forehead, then shut himself in the bathroom.

Once she was alone, Katelina stared up at the water-stained ceiling and thought quietly to herself. So Arowenia was being held in a junky little motel in the middle of Nowhere, New Hampshire? The complete irony of it wasn't wasted on her. Given Claudius' power, he'd be accustomed to nice things, and here his "property" was in the shabbiest of shabby motels.

She closed her eyes against the remaining darkness and let her mind slip away to forbidden places and thoughts until she drifted to sleep, where dreams of vampires and blood replaced her more pleasant ideas.

When she woke in the late afternoon she stared groggily around. Her first thought of the day was that Jorick had been right – warm sunlight shone through the yellowing blind and splashed on every surface. She wondered vaguely if sunlight would fry him like it did the Hollywood vampires, but decided she didn't want to know. Besides, how could she ask a question like that?

She filled the time by flipping through all thirteen channels of "cable" and enjoying the natural light for a change, but it was short lived. The darkness soon began to steal over her surroundings and the sun had just disappeared when Jorick finally emerged, looking perfectly rested.

"I suppose you're hungry?" he asked as he straightened his shirt and flipped his long black hair over his shoulder.

"Yes, I am." She glanced at his pale skin and wondered if he sucked the blood out of some unwary person when he went to fetch her meals. But that was something else she didn't want to know. Her brain couldn't cope with it yet, couldn't reconcile Jorick as really being one of those creatures, despite the fact that his gleaming fangs constantly tried to remind her.

"All right." He nodded as if to himself. "I'll be right back –"

"So stay here," she finished for him. She was starting to believe that the real world didn't exist anymore; that she was the only normal person left, and that maybe she'd dreamed fluorescent lights and linoleum floored restaurants. Motels and strange houses full of monsters were the only things she'd seen in a week.

"Right," he agreed. "I'll be back soon." Without another word he was gone into the gathering darkness.

She went back to her television reruns and bit back the urge to laugh hysterically for no reason that she could name.

True to his word, Jorick returned quickly. He looked less pale and carried a brown paper bag of gas station junk food. He gave her a quick apology because nothing else was open, then left to have a chat with Benjamin about getting a new room.

She'd made it through the ding-dongs and had started on the Nacho Cheese Doritos, when he triumphantly came back with a new key. She abandoned her meal to gather up her bags and follow him outside where the yellowish lights attracted the last of the year's bugs and the chill air cut through her clothes.

He led her along the back of the building. A row of numbered doors was set in the wall, but no windows graced the spaces between them. As they walked down the small sidewalk, devoid of any real parking area, Katelina wondered if Benjamin got enough vampire guests to warrant this many windowless rooms. The thought that an unknown number of vampires might be hiding behind the peeling doors made her stomach lurch.

Jorick found their door and quickly unlocked and opened it to reveal a room much like the last, except for its lack of a window. Even the ugly carpet was the same.

After she'd deposited her bags on the bed, Jorick smiled in an obviously nonchalant way. "Well, I've got some business to take care of. If you want to just –" but she cut him off.

"HmMMM, no, I don't think so." She crossed her arms over her chest and tried to look stubborn.

"You're not going to be difficult, are you?" He sighed almost sadly.

"Yes, I was planning on it. I let you keep me completely ignorant there at the little mansion of the living dead, and look how *that* ended. I think you can just be honest with me this time." Her voice was firm. "If I'm in this as much as you are, then it only seems fair."

"But that's the point. You aren't in this as much as I am. In fact, I'm trying quite hard to keep you as uninvolved as possible. You can thank Michael and Patrick for any involvement you have." He held the door open in one hand to reveal the dark sky, a strong contrast to the shabby, lighted room.

"Hardly," she responded sarcastically. "Who called me and wanted a meeting? If you hadn't done that, I'd still be blissfully ignorant of all of this!" She waved her hands around to demonstrate what she meant.

"No, actually, you'd be dead. Instead, Sandra... Susie..." he paused and frowned. "What did you say her name was?"

"Sarah," the name came out in an almost-whisper and a strange ache sprouted in Katelina's chest.

"Right." He ignored the sudden shift in her mood and kept his tone serious. "Sarah died in your place. If you'd still been there, Claudius' men would have taken you. You would have been tortured and finally killed – or worse, turned against your will and made to serve him. You would've had no warning and died in a pool of your worst nightmares. If you prefer that, then I'm sorry."

"No, I wouldn't," she said quietly. She felt almost penitent, but she admonished herself. She wasn't going to let him put her in that frame of mind. "I'm just saying I am involved, and I'm tired of just staying put and being surprised by attacking vampires, not knowing if you're coming back!"

He smiled so that his fangs glittered in the electric light. "You worry? How touching."

Something in her chest jangled at his apparent amusement. Her hands wadded into fists at her side and she snarled, "Don't mock me! It isn't funny!"

He laughed; a rich ripple of sound. "I'm not mocking you, little one. You need not fear; unless I've been murdered, I'll return for you."

The words slid out before she could stop them, "That's what I'm afraid of."

He released the door, and stepped nearer to her. He was so close that she could feel the heat that radiated from his body.

He pulled her close with one arm, until only her hand on his chest kept them from being pressed against each other. His voice was soft and his eyes caressed her. "I won't leave you, don't worry about that. It will take more than what Claudius has to kill me."

She found herself sinking into his dark eyes, surrounded by a thick, soft warmth, like being wrapped in silky fur; drowning in it, and not caring.

"All right." His voice held a note of defeat. "You can come. But you must do exactly what I say when I say it, do you understand?"

She nodded and tried to escape his gaze and bring herself back to the surface.

"Good. Come on then." He released her and took a step towards the door, then stopped to wait for her.

She mentally shook herself and berated her weakness. That couldn't happen again, she told herself. She needed to remember how dangerous he was; dangerous and beautiful. And that was what made him twice as dangerous.



Chapter Sixteen

Katelina followed Jorick through the door and into the darkness. They took the small car through the silent dead streets until they came to what looked like an abandoned warehouse. The rusted aluminum monster squatted among weeds. Its broken windows were like shiny teeth that gleamed in the streetlights.

Jorick parked the vehicle and Katelina followed him across the ruined parking lot. He moved as a shadow, swift and silent, as he slipped towards the building. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't imitate his quiet tread as she picked her way through the undergrowth and broken beer bottles.

They reached the door to the warehouse and she nervously traced the peeling paint with her eyes. Jorick glanced around once to make sure they were alone and then tugged the door open. It stood like a yawning black mouth and Katelina suddenly wondered if maybe she should have stayed behind, but she didn't have long to contemplate it. Jorick plunged inside and she had to follow him hurriedly or risk being left behind.

Her eyes didn't adjust to the blackness as quickly as his so she caught his sleeve and held on tightly as he navigated through the ruined building. He glanced back at her and nodded.

The silence was so thick she felt she would choke on it. Her ears strained for every tiny sound: a rat scampering across the floor, the breeze whistling softly through the broken windows, the flap of a sheet of plastic that hung against the wall. Her eyes searched the gloom and she tried not to jump at every shadow. Really, she didn't understand why Jorick's business couldn't have been in a nice restaurant, or at least somewhere with electricity!

She was so busy eyeing a pile of mysterious refuse that she didn't notice Jorick stop suddenly and ended up bumping into him. He held his body rigid, so completely still that Katelina swore his heart had even stopped beating.

Her search of the gloom revealed nothing, but her clutch on his sleeve grew tighter. She opened her mouth to ask what was going on when he broke the silence with a single word, "Kateesha."

The woman seemed to appear from nothing. Her dark skin gleamed in the pale light, and her black hair flowed behind her as she came across the dusty room. Her long dress was low cut and barely contained her ample breasts. The fleshy mounds threatened to break loose at any moment.

She walked towards them slowly, with an almost liquid motion. Her eyes landed on Katelina and she licked her lips delightedly. "Jorick, you brought some entertainment? A gift, perhaps?" Her full lips curved in a savage smile at the idea.

"She's with me." His eyes flicked towards Katelina then back to Kateesha.

"A human? I had no idea you were looking for a pet." Her laughter was as smooth as silk and as rich as imported wine. It made Katelina want to laugh along with it, though she knew she really didn't want to.

"She is no pet." His voice was firm and his gaze unwavering.

"Interesting." Kateesha came to a stop before them and her eyes narrowed in scrutiny. She caught Katelina beneath the chin and lifted her face into a shaft of light. "I've seen much prettier, Jorick."

“Perhaps,” was all he said while Katelina scowled at the insult.

Disappointed, Kateesha dropped her hand and studied him. “I didn’t intend to discuss our business with company.” Her eyes glittered dangerously and her tone indicated a subtle, sinister meaning as she glared at him.

“It’s her business, too. She was Patrick’s.”

Comprehension dawned on Kateesha’s face. “Ah, the human’s little lover!” She nearly clapped her hands in amusement and her smile grew wider. “How intriguing! I had no idea you found such an interest in them anymore, all things considered.” She eyed him meaningfully. “Still, I don’t think...”

Jorick cut her off. “She is here. We will either discuss it now or we won’t. It makes no difference to me.”

Her musical laughter echoed off the walls. “Very well, Jorick. You always were the grim one, weren’t you? All work and no play,” her voice gave suggestions of the games she’d like to play with him before she switched to a more business like demeanor. “I assume you’ve seen,” she paused and glanced warily at Katelina. “– it?”

He nodded, but gave no other sign of what he was thinking. “Yes, I have. The move could not have happened any later. The Guild came.”

Kateesha caught her breath and released it slowly before she echoed, “The Guild?”

“Yes. Jesslynn and the children were killed, along with the mad one.” He leveled his gaze with the vampiress, gauging her reaction.

“How did they know to look there?” her voice rose slightly, high with a touch of either panic or outrage. “Yes, they’d been fighting off and on, but he hadn’t made a public move against Claudius in ages. They knew you were helping them, but Michael told Claudius that he and his brother were responsible.” Her eyes flashed. “Why should they think it was at Oren’s den?”

Jorick’s expression revealed his suspicion. “I don’t know. I believe someone told them.”

Offence flared on her features. “Well, it wasn’t me, if that’s what you’re implying.” She looked thoughtful, apparently mulling the news over, and her voice was regretful when she spoke again. “Damn, Jesslynn.” She shook her head in disbelief, so that her long hair rippled. “She was crazy, but strong.”

“Yes. But if it wasn’t you, then I fear who it might have been.” He shifted his arms and inadvertently dislodged Katelina’s hand from his sleeve. She gave him a startled look and wordlessly he laced his fingers with hers in an effort to comfort her.

“What about Michael?” Kateesha asked. “I heard that he escaped. Oren was right, you should have had a guard on him.”

“It had nothing to do with a guard,” Jorick muttered. “Besides, Michael didn’t know the location. We were careful to keep it from him, unless you told him.”

“No, I didn’t, but he knew Oren was involved, so if he told them that – ”

“They still wouldn’t have known the location, and they did. It wasn’t just Bren blustering. He knew for a fact that she’d been there. Claudius told them that she was there. He had to find that out from someone.”

She ignored his insinuation and made one of her own. “I see that you survived unscathed.”

“Yes. Malick’s goodwill saved me – ” He glanced at Katelina. “– us – this time, but he’s already sent word that it will not do so again.”

“Ah, Malick.” The name rolled off Kateesha’s tongue like imported chocolate. “He always did have a soft spot for you, didn’t he?” She trailed her fingers over Jorick’s face. “Of course, he’s not the only one.”

Jorick pulled back enough to let her know that her touch was unwanted. “Either way, we still need to decide what to do now.”

Kateesha glanced towards Katelina again and sniffed disdainfully. “It’s safe where it is, I think. He doesn’t suspect Benjamin – who could? He is too new and too... human.”

“I fear that if someone has betrayed its hiding place once, they may do so again. Oren is in danger from Claudius now, as is his coven.”

“You must let Oren stand on his own. Always has he refused your advice – he made Torina did he not? If he’d left her alone or even refused to stand behind her he wouldn’t be in this position, and neither would you. You’ve always tried to save him from his own destruction, but your advice falls on deaf ears. There comes a time when you must let them go.” She tilted her head at him and stared into his dark eyes.

“Yes. I’m afraid I have other things to tend to now. Oren must stand alone,” there was an edge of sorrow in his voice, and more than a touch of guilt.

Kateesha reached out and patted his shoulder comfortingly. He didn’t flinch from her this time. “It is as it should be, though I wonder if these things you speak of are for the cause or more for yourself?” She glanced at Katelina, who was still lost between feelings of loathing and admiration for the dark skinned woman.

Jorick’s eyes narrowed dangerously and his voice was hard. “And who said that it was my cause?”

“I believe Oren was under that impression, but perhaps you have something more important in mind?”

His scowl darkened. “Do you question me?”

“No, Jorick, my brother, I do not question you. I question your new obsession – you forget I can read your very thoughts if I choose.” She laughed again and patted his shoulder before she stepped away. Her face grew thoughtful and she paced in a slow circle, her hands behind her back.

Jorick watched her with detached curiosity and she ceased her circuit to stare back. Her eyes moved to Katelina but as quickly went back to Jorick, as though the human wasn’t worth recognizing. “I question whether any of it is wise. Perhaps it would be easier – safer, even – to simply –” she finished the sentence by mimicking the motion of a dagger slicing across her throat.

“No!” His sudden outburst caused Katelina to flinch back. He looked at her; her wide eyes reflected her inner fear, and he quickly regained his composure, though his voice still shook with rage. “No one will harm her, or they will answer to me!”

Katelina thought again of the green motel and what a pleasant place it seemed now by comparison, so much better than being threatened by vampires in an abandoned warehouse!

“I didn’t mean it as a threat,” Kateesha said mildly. The hint of a smile played at her full red lips. “I simply meant it would be safer. Claudius is hunting her now, and if he finds her, then he finds you as well. And if he finds you, who else will he find?”

She stepped closer and put her hands on his shoulders. She leaned close to him and her voice took on the tone of a concerned friend. “Listen to yourself, Jorick! When did this take such a strong hold on you?” She stared into his eyes and then smiled slowly, as though a silent

conversation had taken place. “Of course. You always were a sucker for the weak and helpless, weren’t you? But a human? After what they did—”

Jorick cut her off with a gesture. “Enough of this, Kateesha! I did not come to discuss my life choices with you. I think that she should be moved. We’ll no longer have Oren’s inside information. Elsa won’t risk telling him anything now. She may have had a soft spot for Michael, but in the end she’s loyal to Claudius.” He leveled his gaze with her and squeezed Katelina’s hand reassuringly.

“Yes,” Kateesha murmured. “Had she chosen to turn him herself then perhaps she’d have more loyalty, but we must do the best with what we have now.” Amusement shimmered in her eyes. “It’s ironic though, is it not? Had Claudius not forced her to make Michael her fledgling she’d have never helped us at all.”

“Yes,” Jorick agreed. “But she’s made it clear she’s done. Michael is dead now and though she swore not to betray Oren’s involvement, she won’t give him any more information. I’d have suspected that she changed her mind, except the Executioners came too quickly. Oren met with her the night before their arrival and as of that time she had not betrayed him. They aren’t mobilized that quickly.”

Kateesha nodded. “She has always been truthful with us, for the most part. I assume she didn’t say who told Claudius?”

“No,” Jorick answered. “She obviously didn’t know about it or I believe she’d have mentioned it.”

“If Claudius knows of your involvement and Oren’s, then I wonder who else’s he knows about?”

“Are you suddenly afraid of him?”

Kateesha laughed. “Hardly. You misunderstand, my brother. I only wonder whose names he gave to The Guild.”

The dark skinned Goddess fell silent and began pacing again while Katelina took some time to clear her head and make sense of all she’d just heard. Her mind whirled, trying to figure out who Kateesha even was and how she and Jorick knew one another.

Kateesha spoke suddenly, “No, I think it’s fine where it is.” She stopped pacing and stood with her hands clasped behind her back. “There’s no way anyone can know its location – not yet.”

Jorick’s dark brows drew together impatiently. “What’s to stop me from moving it myself?”

“If you were to do that, it would make things look very, very bad for you, Jorick.” She smiled, but there was no warmth in it. “Someone betrayed Oren to Claudius, after all. If you were to do that he might think it was you. And since he lost his wife in the deal, I don’t doubt he’d be happy to help with a little eye-for-an-eye retribution, if you take my meaning.” As if to be absolutely sure her point was made she let her eyes linger on Katelina.

“Mmmmmmm,” Jorick murmured. “Then we have nothing more to discuss.”

She cocked her head to one side. “That’s a shame, but if you prefer imperfect flesh for your pleasure, who am I to question you?” She came closer and stopped near enough to touch him. “If you change your mind, you always know where to find me.”

“Of course, but my mind hasn’t changed in all these slow centuries, and I don’t think it will anytime soon.” Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel and dragged Katelina after him, leaving Kateesha behind. Her answer came regardless, in the form of cold laughter that echoed all around them as they retreated through the darkness.

After the strange silence in the warehouse, the car seemed too loud. Jorick's anger was palpable; the air seemed to pulse with it. Katelina didn't know what to say to make it better. She stuttered a question, "Oren wouldn't really..." but couldn't bring herself to finish it. Would Oren really kill her because his wife had been killed? As if it was all Jorick's fault.

"No," Jorick said the word with force. "He wouldn't dare."

She nodded but found no more words for fear of enraging him more. She wasn't afraid that he'd hurt her, or even be mean to her. In truth she wasn't sure what she was afraid of, but she didn't want to make him any angrier.

They pulled into the motel and, after parking the car, walked around behind the building to their windowless room. Once they were inside, Jorick shut the door and clicked all of the locks into place. He absently ran his fingers through his long, dark hair before he threw himself on the bed where he crossed his arms beneath his head and stared at the ceiling.

Katelina stood uncomfortably near the foot of the bed, unsure what to say. There were questions she wanted answers to, but she wasn't sure how to ask them.

He sighed heavily and his eyes moved from the stained ceiling above his head to her anxious face. He studied her pale features and pulled one arm loose to pat the bed beside him. "Come here."

She hesitated for a moment and then mentally gave herself a shove and walked towards him slowly. "Yes?" She swallowed, and reminded herself quickly of her earlier resolve not to fall into those eyes again.

"Here," he whispered the word, so that it seem almost like a caress, and patted the bed again.

She forced a ball of nervous air down her throat and climbed slowly onto the bed until she was sitting next to him. Her hands suddenly absorbed her interest as she tried to force all thoughts from her mind, especially the ones about how close he was to her.

He gently cupped her face and turned it towards him. "You don't need to be afraid," he said gently. "My anger isn't with you."

His raven hair fanned out on the pillow, thick and shimmery like some exotic silk. His dark eyes were trained on her, his smooth skin as flawless as marble. She nodded, like a child confronted with their first glamorous idol; lost and star gazing at something more beautiful than she could ever hope to be.

He raised himself up on one elbow. "Even if it were, I wouldn't hurt you." His face was suddenly very close to hers so that his breath brushed her skin.

She managed a nod in return and tried desperately not to notice him; not to notice the feel of his hands or the warmth of his breath or the nearness of his well-muscled body. But her attempts at ignoring him failed and she found herself staring into the dark pools of his eyes, lost in endless lakes of onyx. He leaned closer, though she was unaware of it until she felt his lips against hers, soft like warm rose petals. What little resolve she had vaporized, and she leaned towards him. She slid her arms around the base of his neck and opened her mouth to deepen the kiss as a low moan slipped from her throat.

He gently caressed the back of her neck and made goose bumps race along her spine. His other hand slid gently down her arm and her flesh responded as though her shirt didn't separate his touch from her. He seemed to flow against her – his hands caressing her, his lips tasting her, his body a warm blanket pressing her down into the bed, where she went willingly. She snaked

her arms around his back and slid her hands under his shirt to find his smooth skin hot to her touch.

Her heart hammered in her chest and the memory of her dreams came back to her; fresh and hot like the moment she found herself enveloped in. A tiny part of her mind was telling her to stop. It tried to remind her of the horrible things she'd seen and the dark secrets she'd already learned and yearned to hide from, but somehow its persistent buzz was nothing more than the sound of a fly in her ear.

His lips left hers and slid down in a soft, moist trail across her face to her neck. He stopped to taste the hollow beneath her jaw and she moaned. Her body rose to meet his. She pressed herself against his warmth and felt his strength pressing back.

She slid her hands and down the length of his back, then over his torso, and delighted in the moan that escaped his lips.

He leaned up, and pulled at her shirt until she had no choice but to let him slide it over her head. He dropped it to the floor. Her eyes followed it and the nagging voice in her head grew loud and clear as she studied the garment puddled against the ugly carpet. *Don't you know what he is? What do you think you're doing?*

The voice was silenced when his hands moved across her naked stomach. She met his dark eyes as he cupped her breasts. A soft smile played on his lips as he gently kneaded them. His intense gaze made her blush, so she closed her eyes and let herself drift away, enjoying his touch. It had been so long since anyone had touched her like this, or at least it seemed so long.

The thoughts disappeared as he brushed his lips across her tender skin. She gasped and held his head in place, her fingers twining in the long dark silk of his hair as he teased her. She arched her back to press herself deeper into the recesses of his mouth, taken over by the burning need to feel him.

She untwined her hands and tugged at his shirt. She needed to feel his naked flesh against her; to touch him. He stopped, and leaned back again to quickly peel the clothing off and toss it to the floor where it landed in a tangle with hers.

He quickly returned to her open arms. She pulled him tightly to her. His hot, muscular chest pressed against her. A shudder of delight ran through her as his mouth sought her naked shoulders and traced a trail of kisses along them.

He soon peeled away all her clothes so she lay beneath him completely naked. His hands seemed to be everywhere at the same time, liquid pleasure drowning out her thoughts until there was nothing but her longing for him, her ache to have him, to feel him surrounding her until there was nothing left in the world but him. No nightmares, no fear, no death. Just him, and her and waves of pleasure.

She forced him back, and tugged at his pants. He helped her and leaned back on his knees to discard the last of his raiment. Her eyes raked his naked body and she found herself staring at a pale expanse of male perfection that made her chest ache.

He didn't give her long to contemplate his well sculpted form before he was back, his lips on her skin, his body gently pressing between her thighs. She opened herself to him willingly. Her knees gripped his waist and her hands found his broad shoulders. She gasped and tightened her hold on him as he slid into position. The tiny part of her brain that had been buzzing earlier gave a single shout, trying to get her attention, to tell her that it was almost too late, but it was drowned out as he entered her, possessing her and filling her.

She moved beneath him, her body rocking in time to his, her eyes half closed. Waves of pleasure radiated through her. She gripped him tightly and could feel his muscles moving

beneath his skin as he thrust again and again. He lay flat against her, his lips suckled her neck and his tongue licked her smooth skin. She moaned and tilted her head back, letting him have more. Then the pain came for just an instant; almost like a pin prick. As it faded, it was replaced by something she'd never felt before. It was as though he was everywhere at once, both inside and out, surrounding her in rapture until she could only make tiny whimpering sounds. Images flashed behind her closed eyelids, too fast to comprehend or understand, and feeling after feeling rolled over her, all wrapped beneath a thick blanket of ecstasy. She started to think that her brain might not be able to handle it, that she would die from the pure pleasure.

She could never say how long it lasted. It might have been a moment or an hour, but in a sudden heated rush it was over, and she lay panting, her mind wrapped in a fog of endorphins.

He released her but he stayed where he was, his head bowed. Finally, he slid off, and dropped next to her in the bed. Wordlessly, he gathered her up in his arms and pulled her to him. He buried his face in her hair. The long blonde strands mingled with his raven tresses as he nuzzled her neck, and murmured things too quiet for her to really hear. He gently brushed her hair away from her face and traced the contour of her cheek with his fingertips, his breath still heavy and ragged.

She turned her head toward him, seeking his face, but found only his dark hair. He held her so tightly that she could feel his heart pounding in her chest. It left her unable to distinguish which beats of the intertwined rhythm belonged to her. She swallowed and closed her eyes, trying to calm her erratic breaths. The quiet buzzing in her mind was muttering the word regret, but it didn't register. Did she regret what had just happened? Would she regret it tomorrow?

He loosened his hold on her and pulled back to study her, a soft smile on his perfect lips. As she gazed into his black eyes she decided that nothing mattered but the warmth reflected in their depths and that regret was something to think about in the morning.



Chapter Seventeen

Katelina woke. She blinked in the dimness, her eyes drawn to the open bathroom door. Light flooded out of it and gave shape and depth to the small motel room.

Jorick was still next to her on his back, his arm under her head. His dark lashes lay on his pale cheeks and his raven hair pooled against the crisp white pillowcase. He was covered from the waist down in the ugly bedspread and the bathroom light gleamed on the smooth expanse of his chest.

She looked away from him to the water stained ceiling. She closed her eyes tightly to blot out the world and asked herself the requisite “what have I done?” morning-after question, only she truthfully felt no regret. It was simply a game she played out of habit, a society imposed guilt complex that failed to actually make her feel guilty. No, she knew what she’d done and she wasn’t even slightly sorry, only vaguely excited at the warm memories.

She rolled towards him and tentatively brushed his naked flesh with her fingertips. His skin was cold to the touch, like it had been in the bathtub, and she pulled her hand away quickly as if it burned. Implications rose in her head, but she forced them away and slid out of the bed. She paused to gather up her clothes and her sack before she hurried to the bathroom, the parcels held like a shield against the chilly air.

She remained tense until the door was shut, and only then did she drop the clothes to the floor. Her flight might seem stupid, but she’d never been comfortable with anyone seeing her naked. Most of her ex-boyfriends had laughed at her over her modesty, but there was nothing she could do about it.

She turned the shower on and, as the steam began to billow, she glanced in the mirror. Her eyes caught something above her collar bone and she leaned closer to examine it. Sure enough, in the curve of her neck where Jorick had marked her was a fresh set of neat bite marks, exactly over the top of the old ones.

Her hand went to it unconsciously and she wondered if that was the point of the mark. Was it proof that you’d shared their most intimate embrace? Is that why you belonged to them; their human “property”? Was that why Oren found it distasteful? She wasn’t sure how she felt about the idea. And she wondered, if he’d bitten her, had he also taken blood from her? She recalled the overwhelming sensations: the images, the feelings, the waves of intoxicating pleasure that had been like no other. Was that what had caused it? Was it like something from a low budget, R rated movie where vampire bites were so orgasmic that girls would strip naked for no reason? But, she argued with herself, Jesslynn had bitten her, as had that vampire in the cellar, and there was no pleasure, just pain.

She dismissed her query and climbed into the shower. She let the hot water run over her and wash away her fears and doubts. She reminded herself that Jorick had never done anything to hurt her. His only fault had been the omission of a few facts, and though that angered her it hadn’t *really* put her in danger. Well, not completely. Then again, memories of the vampire manor made her question her theory.

Katelina finished her shower and dressed quickly. With relish, she retrieved her hair brush from the bag and ran the bristles through her wet, tangled hair. Things were almost normal. Almost.

The door opened and she looked up quickly to see Jorick. He leaned casually against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest and gazed at her lazily from half closed eyes. When he offered no explanation she asked, “Yes?”

“Nothing.” He smiled broadly so that his fangs glimmered in the bright light. “Just looking at you.” He continued to gaze in silence until her raised brows prompted him to laugh. “All right, all right. I’m going to go get you some food, but I have a meeting, so it’ll take a little longer than usual.”

She kept her voice casual. “A meeting with who?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he answered airily. Then, his face hardened. “I’m not taking you with me today.”

She snapped her head around to face him and began her argument, “But –”

“No,” he cut her off and shook his head firmly. “Not today. I want you to stay here,” he paused before specifying, “– in this room. Do you understand?”

An unreasonable rage flared up in her and a voice inside her head hissed: *He’s going to meet Kateesha alone to take her up on her offer, because now that he’s had you he’s disappointed.*

“Oh, I understand perfectly,” she snapped. The fury nearly blinded her, but she kept it in check as he kissed her deeply then left, calling back for her to lock the door.

Her hands shook with rage as she exited the bathroom and did as he requested. She dropped on the foot of the unmade bed and turned on the TV. Brightly colored images flashed past but she couldn’t comprehend or concentrate on them. The hissing tones in her head were growing louder, drowning out the too-happy voices on the television. They told her again that Jorick was going to see *her*. He’d pretended not to want her yesterday because Katelina had been there, but today he’d be alone with her. *He’s left the key to the other room on the dresser.*

Shocked, she looked up as this last thought bellowed through her mind, completely unbidden and unlooked for. Her eyes snapped to the dresser and sure enough, the key lay there. Its yellow plastic tag bore the room number 622.

Before she knew what she was doing, she had the key in her hand. “No,” she told herself and started to put it back. This wasn’t a good idea. What if Arowenia wasn’t restrained? How could she possibly hope to defeat a vampiress? She was no match for their strength. Besides, why would she want to go there? Jorick was meeting someone; he wasn’t in Arowenia’s room.

But the voice had an answer for her: *maybe that’s where he’s really gone, maybe Arowenia is his lover.* The words shocked her, but she mulled them over. Perhaps Arowenia had run away with Jorick. After all, Oren had spoken of some secret motive behind everything. Maybe Jorick was in that room right now, making love to Arowenia and laughing at the stupid human.

The burning anger washed over her again and drowned her senses until she could think of nothing else. She turned from the dresser and marched towards the door. The key was clenched tightly in her fist as she unsnapped the locks, one after another.

She marched outside and stormed along the building, oblivious to the world around her.

The door was suddenly in front of her; painted a dingy white. She stared at it in confusion, taking in the minute details. The metal numbers 622 were chipped and most of the gold coating had flaked off years ago. The silver screws that held them on had also turned a dingy color from the years of weather and elements.

No light seeped out from under the door, so she pressed her ear to it. Nothing. There was only the last of the crickets chirping in the shadows. Jorick wasn't there.

Katelina shook herself back to the present. She didn't even know what she was doing. Why was she there with the room key in her hand? To see Arowenia? She wasn't even sure that Arowenia was being held there. This was stupid.

She turned and started back to her room when unbidden thoughts pulsed in her ears to a rhythm of anger and betrayal. *Maybe Arowenia isn't there, but maybe Kateesha is! She's in there with Jorick and you know what they're doing!*

Katelina snapped back around and jammed the key in the lock with shaking hands. The door swung inward with a push, but she hesitated in the doorway.

The room was dark except for a bright swath of light thrown in by the door. Her silhouette was a black blot in the middle of it.

It was too familiar. She'd seen this before; a golden path of light that stretched into the darkness and lead her to something terrible. It was like standing in a memory and she knew she should leave – but she couldn't. She had to see. She had to know. She always had to know.

She reached for the light switch and stopped. A strip of light spilled out beneath the bathroom door, betraying his presence. *He's in there. He's with her!*

She moved across the floor slowly and stopped in front of the door. A subtle rustling noise came from inside, followed by a soft slurping. *He's in there! He's with her!*

Katelina was aware of her hand on the doorknob, the metal cool to her touch, but she was really beyond the entire scene. Her consciousness was floating somewhere high above the reality of the situation and above the voice in her head.

The door swung open and her awareness came slamming back to earth. The world suddenly rushed into confused focus and she found herself in the middle of a nightmare. Kateesha sat on the edge of the white bathtub, smiling obscenely, a limp body in her arms. Blood covered Kateesha's perfect face and ran down her chin in rivulets. It stained her green dress in long crimson ribbons and dripped onto the dead woman; if the creature could be called a woman. She looked barely over sixteen, with porcelain cheeks and long lashes. She wore a white, tattered dress of some filmy material and her long blonde hair hung down nearly to the floor. Her throat gaped, red and gushing.

Questions echoed in Katelina's mind. Where was she? Why was she there? What was happening around her? Her mouth hung open like a lost tourist, and Kateesha laughed obscenely. She licked the scarlet liquid from her lips and savored it like a fine wine. "So you came, you little fool!" She broke into laughter and then added, "How easy it was to trick you! Your mind is so open that any idiot could manipulate it!"

Katelina's eyes darted around the tiny room. Blood streaked the white walls and floor, dark red against the chipped tiles and porcelain. Katelina blinked to try to make the horror she was seeing go away, to block out the thick pool of blood collecting at Kateesha's feet.

The vampiress smiled. "Don't worry, our company should be arriving any moment." She dropped the dead girl to the floor, then looked from the splayed and ruined body to the gaping woman in the doorway. "Oh, should I introduce you? This is Arowenia. Maybe you haven't met?"

Arowenia? Did she mean the Arowenia – Claudius' lover that had been kidnapped? But she was dead... And then all the answers snapped into place. Kateesha had killed Arowenia and by her own admission had manipulated Katelina.

Kateesha was suddenly in front of her, grinning evilly. Katelina dashed for the door, but she wasn't fast enough. Kateesha caught her around the throat and lifted her into the air, so that her feet just barely dangled above the floor.

"Where do you think you're going? I thought I told you we were expecting a few friends?"

"Let me go," Katelina rasped. She kicked her legs uselessly and tried to pry Kateesha's crushing fingers away.

"Don't bother. By the time Claudius has finished with you, there won't be anything left – or at least not enough left to tell Jorick who helped them catch you." She spoke with mock sympathy. "Poor Jorick! He'll be so bereaved to have lost his new favorite pet, won't he? And when he grieves over your gruesome death, who will be there for him? Faithful Kateesha, who he's overlooked all these long, long years!"

She dropped Katelina to the floor and made a slow, half circle around her prostrate form, smirking.

Katelina pulled herself to her knees and massaged her bruised throat, coughing for air. When she had her voice back she asked sarcastically, "Don't you think Claudius is going to be angry you've killed her?"

Kateesha crouched down next to her and stroked her head like a cat. "There, there," she murmured. "Don't you worry your little head about it." She suddenly grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head back. "Of course Claudius won't know I had anything to do with it! I've made a deal already. They'll take you and tell Claudius that when they arrived it was too late to save the poor, unfortunate Arowenia, and that Jorick escaped, leaving you to their mercy." Her eyes gleamed with superiority. "And what do you think Claudius will do to the human lover of one who killed his property?" She snickered at Katelina's terrified expression. "If I were you, I'd try not to think about it too much – and pray he kills you quickly!"

"Why?" Katelina croaked, and then comprehension dawned. "You're the one who told Claudius about Oren–"

"Hardly. Not that it's any concern of yours, but until yesterday I was happy to hold the little bitch captive. After Jorick told me The Guild is involved... well, now I think my purposes would be better served this way. And I can get rid of you in the process. Two birds with one stone, I believe is what they call it."

A noise sounded in the bedroom. Kateesha stiffened and sniffed the air. Recognition dawned on her features and she broke into a grin and called out, "We're in here!"

Footsteps clomped through the bedroom and then a tall, broad shouldered man filled the doorway. His shaved head gleamed in the bathroom's light and his cold eyes stared at them from beneath sarcastically arched brows. He nodded to Katelina and smirked. "Not real impressive, is it?"

"No." Kateesha threw Katelina away from her, like something contaminated. "I was surprised, especially after all the rumors." She made a snorting noise as she stood and wiped her hands off on the soiled dress.

"I could have told you she wasn't much," the bald vampire remarked. "That's why I thought Michael was full of shit."

"Surprise," Kateesha sniffed. "He wasn't. Jesslynn told me that Jorick was taking her with him, but I'd assumed it was something more platonic than this." She wrinkled her nose. "His taste hasn't improved since the last one."

"Whatever. I'm just here to get them and go." He gave Kateesha a fanged grin. "So let's get this over with, huh?"

“Yes, Troy,” Kateesha drawled. “Hurry up before Jorick returns.”

Katelina sought for a nonexistent escape and tried to figure out what she was going to do. Despite Kateesha’s concern, she doubted Jorick would return in time to save her. He’d always come before, just when she had no hope left, but somehow she could feel that he wasn’t going to this time. And when he didn’t what would happen? Would they really take her to Claudius? Would he kill her? Was this really how her life was going to end, to die in a pool of blood and terror?

Kateesha stood over her looking thoughtful, then suggested casually, “She has enough blood on her to look like a battle, but you should rough her up a little to make it more convincing.”

Troy nodded in the affirmative and grinned. “Don’t worry. I’m sure she’ll be plenty roughed up by the time we get there.” He turned his head and called over his shoulder, “Won’t she boys?” Two voices agreed with him from the obstructed depths of the motel room.

Katelina’s stomach dropped at the sound of his unseen accomplices. She might have been able to escape from one vampire, but not from three.

Troy grabbed her arm and pulled her to her knees. He slammed her face into the door and laughed when she cried out. As she wiped away the thin stream of blood trickling from her nose a sick certainty settled through her. Yes, they would kill her, and they would laugh while they did it.

He shouted directions and another vampire came in to collect the remains of the child bride. He slung her ruined body over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Troy looked once more around the room. “You are gonna clean this mess up, right? I mean Jorick’s dumb, but he’s not gonna believe your story.”

Kateesha cut him off. “I’m well aware of my ‘story’ and what I need to do. Not that it’s your concern, but yes, it will be clean.”

Troy couldn’t let it go. “I don’t know why you made such a fucking mess in the first place. It won’t look like Arowenia escaped.”

Kateesha was nearly out of patience. “I have no intention of saying Arowenia escaped. As far as Jorick will know you came and took her back and took this stupid human while you were at it.”

Troy paused uncertainly, “And that’s going to do what? Send him right for our door. That wasn’t the deal.”

“What, are you really that scared of him?” Kateesha laughed. “He doesn’t have his inside informant anymore, so how will he know where you took her? Claudius has a dozen dens, doesn’t he? Besides, if things go as planned he’ll believe that she’s dead.”

Troy seemed to catch on. “He’ll smell all the blood – ”

“But there won’t be any left. Exactly. The obvious conclusion is that you and your little friends drank it all. Since you wouldn’t have killed Arowenia yourself, obviously it was his pet.”

“Right. And when he hears that Arowenia is dead? Won’t he find that a touch confusing?”

“Oh for the love of – Perhaps it would be easier if I just took down my barriers and let you pull it from my mind?” Troy looked a little too eager and Kateesha laughed. “Hardly. Let him hear it and make whatever inference he wants. You’re the one who wanted the war to escalate, remember, not me. I could ask why that is.”

“You could, but who says I’ll answer?” He gave her a wide, fanged grin. “Come on, sweetheart, this isn’t a movie motive–swap.”

Kateesha sucked the blood from her fingernails thoughtfully. “I’m just saying, you’re afraid of Jorick storming the keep and yet – ”

“Not afraid. I just think we should be the ones on the offensive, not the other way around, and after this – ” he nodded toward the vampire holding Arowenia’s mangled body “ – we will be. Finally. No more of this slinking shit.”

“And you can earn the glory you think you deserve?” Kateesha asked with a flash of amusement. “And... get your own revenge. How interesting. I had no idea that you had a thing for...”

Troy snarled and Kateesha laughed again. “Relax, your secret is safe with me. For now. Take your little prize before I kill her too and leave you with nothing to give your boss.”

It was a confusing tangle, but Katelina had gathered enough of it to understand. If only the knowledge would do anything to help her!

Troy growled low. “We’ll be leaving now.”

“Good,” Kateesha purred. “Don’t forget your part of this arrangement.”

“What? Making sure The Guild doesn’t know about your involvement? Daddy refuse to save you again?”

Kateesha’s smugness disappeared and she looked as angry as Troy. “At least I don’t enjoy screwing little boys!”

“Patrick wasn’t little, darling. He was of age and then some.”

Patrick? Katelina’s eyes bulged. What in the hell?

Before she could think any further, Troy hauled her through the bedroom door, then stopped on the other side of it. “Lose my number after this, huh?”

Kateesha’s answer was cold. “Gladly.”

He snorted in reply and dragged Katelina towards the still gaping door, leaving a smear of Arowenia’s blood on the ugly carpet behind them.

Katelina tried desperately to think of a way to save herself. She struggled as she was heaved out the door and through the damp grass, but it accomplished nothing. He dragged her around the building to the front parking lot where a white panel van sat open and waiting. When they reached it, Troy tried to force her into the back, but she twisted in his grip and sunk her teeth into his hand. The bitter taste of his blood filled her mouth.

He swore in surprise and loosened his hold just enough to allow her to break free. She ran as fast as she could toward the office of the motel, screaming loudly. Her only hope was Benjamin.

The office door opened and a fat, balding man with whiskers on his flabby neck stuck his head out. He stared from Katelina to the bald vampire on her heels. “What in the hell?”

“Help me!” she cried as she closed the gap between them. She’d almost reached him, almost made it to the safety of the dingy motel office, when the weight of her pursuer slammed her to the ground. She struggled beneath him, but he grabbed a fist full of her hair and banged her face into the cement until she stopped.

She was pulled roughly to her feet, and she saw through blood and tears that the fat man was now brandishing a shotgun and shouting. “I won’t stand for this! You clear on out of here now and quit harassing my customers! I mean it! I’m not scared of you! You get on out of here!”

Troy jerked his head towards Benjamin, and the other two moved in with evil smiles on their faces. Katelina was dragged away towards the van so that she didn’t have to watch what they did to him. She was thankful to be spared the sight; his echoing screams were horrific enough.

Troy heaved her up by both arms and threw her into the van. “Now then, you stupid bitch, if I didn’t need you, you’d already be dead.” He slid the panel closed and climbed into the passenger seat. With a glance over his shoulder he added, “Claudius is going to be delighted

to know Jorick abandoned you, and don't waste your breath saying different. Or maybe you should, it might be fun watching him torture you for 'lying'."

The two who had gone to deal with Benjamin returned, the leader licking blood from his fingers and smiling wickedly. He slid between the seats and crouched next to Katelina, while the other took up his post as driver.

Katelina glanced warily at her new companion. He made a show of cleaning his hands with his long tongue. When she shuddered he asked, "You like that, stupid bitch? I had other things to do today besides this!" He grabbed a fistful of her hair as the van roared to life and slammed her head into the floor. Dark flowers blossomed in her vision as she fought for consciousness.

"Let's get going, boys," Troy commanded. He jerked his head towards Katelina. "And shut her up, would you?"

The vehicle jerked forward into the deserted street, headed for God only knew where, and the last thing Katelina heard were the words, "With pleasure," before her head was slammed into the floor and darkness took her.



Chapter Eighteen

Katelina opened her eyes and rolled over to find herself face to face with the corpse of Arowenia. Her throat was red and gaping and the blood had become a congealed jelly that made Katelina's stomach heave. She coughed and tried not to throw up. As she struggled, she discovered her arms were bound behind her back and that rope bit painfully into her naked ankles.

"Awake, are you?" the vampire hissed near her ear. She shuddered as she smelled his breath – the scent of blood and death.

"You know," he commented as he stroked her head sarcastically. "Claudius is going to be so happy to see you. His favorite little pet is dead, and here you are, another golden haired thing with terrified eyes."

She winced, but didn't say anything. She had nothing to say, and even if she did, she knew it would only make them bash her bruised face into something else. She could feel the tightness of her swollen nose – was it broken? Her eyes felt strange, too – puffy – and a soft ringing played in her ears like the echoes of her screams. There was no way she was going to survive this.

The driver's voice called back to them loudly, "Won't be long now."

The vampire next to her snorted and she squeezed her swollen eyes shut, as if that would make the world disappear. Questions poured through her mind; what had Kateesha meant about Troy and Patrick? Who was Kateesha's daddy? Obviously Troy wanted to escalate the war with Oren but... But why did he need her? Kateesha had said she'd kill her and leave him with nothing to give to the boss. Was she supposed to be some kind of present? Like a consolation prize? "Sorry, your girlfriend is dead, but have this to torture instead?"

Torture. That was what Jorick had said would happen to her, and he was probably right. She was either going to die painfully or be turned into a slave for Claudius.

Terror replaced her questions. The acrid stench of blood and fear filled her nostrils. Arowenia's body bounced around as they drove over bumps. Katelina tried not to look at it, but as soon as her eyes closed, they'd pop open again, determined to see where she was and what was happening – as if seeing could somehow help her.

The vampires in the front seat talked softly between themselves, indistinguishable words in deep tones. She thought again and again that she'd tell Claudius everything; tell him how Kateesha had made her bargain and murdered his mate, but she knew that it would do no good. Troy was right, he'd never believe her. She was sure he'd rather believe his enemy had done it than that his own men were involved. People were that way. They liked to pick and choose which truths they accepted.

The van crunched across gravel and came to a stop. She heard the door swoosh open, and looked up in time to see Troy reaching for her. He grabbed her waist roughly and pulled her out of the van, despite her struggles, then heaved her over his shoulder. She hung down his back, upside down, with only glimpses of scenery beneath his arm.

The air stroked her cheeks, cool and charged with the energy that predawn hours always brought; the feeling of promise and hope. But as she was bumped along she knew there was no hope left. Tears welled in her eyes and she tried to blink them back. For the second time in so

many days, images of her life danced behind her eyes. *She could see her mother standing next to the large tombstone of her father, flowers in her hands and jewel like tears on her cheeks. A large green tree grew behind the house and she sat in its branches eating a banana, her six year old legs swinging in the air. Music played softly and balloons shone with a kaleidoscope of colors as she stood next to the gym wall, her hands sweating as she watched her first real crush dancing with another girl.*

She choked back a sob and tried to banish the memories, though she knew she'd never relive them again.

The gravel lot gave way to a set of cement steps. She heard a metal door scrape open loudly and then they plunged inside. She fought to lift her head and saw a half-naked woman staring at her curiously as they moved away from her and down a brick hallway.

They started down another flight of stairs. The vampire's footfalls fell in rhythm with her pounding heart. Fear tasted bitter in her mouth, but she forced herself to swallow it. She was going to die, but she wouldn't die as a coward.

This final thought gave her a strange sense of calm. The finality of accepting her situation and surrendering to it made things seem somehow clearer. She took a deep breath and resolved to be brave no matter what.

The stairs ended and more concrete flashed beneath her, as well as several pairs of feet. She was carried into a well-lit room and unceremoniously thrown to the floor. Tears of pain filled her eyes, but she forced them away and struggled to lift her head.

The room was a large one, like an open basement complete with cement floor. A glowing chandelier hung above her and in front of her sat a large wicker chair. Draped lazily in it was a young man who might have been sixteen. He had blonde hair, cold green eyes and a face made for boredom, snobbery, and cruelty. He was flanked by two large men. A host of others were visible outside the ring of light, all moving closer and gazing curiously at the new prisoner.

"Who is she?" the boy in the chair drawled. His voice was bored and peevish.

Troy answered from behind Katelina's prone body, "It's Patrick's human, the one Jorick's claimed now." He snickered and prodded her in the side with the toe of his boot.

"Interesting." The blonde stood from the chair and walked towards her languidly. "What's so special about her that two men would go to such effort?" He walked around her in an ever-tightening circle and finally bent down to examine her face closely. He sneered in distaste and stood. "I'm disappointed. I find her distinctly mediocre. Though perhaps she's more appealing without the bruises."

She bit her lip to keep from saying anything as he strode back to his chair and draped himself across it. He asked disinterestedly, "Where did you find her, Troy?"

"She was in a motel room with Jorick and Arowenia." He nudged her in the side as a warning, as if he sensed her desire to scream what a liar he was.

The blonde's whole demeanor changed. His face was suddenly alert as he swung into a sitting position. "Arowenia!" he cried. "So you've found her at last?"

"Yes, Claudius, we did," Troy answered. A set of footsteps echoed in the large chamber. Katelina twisted to see one of the other vampires from the van carrying the limp, white clad girl.

Claudius leapt to his feet, his eyes glued to the lifeless body that was borne towards him. The vampire stopped before him and held her out. Claudius stared furiously from the body to his servants. "What is this?"

Troy sounded almost sorrowful, "We were too late, Jorick had already killed her. He ran," he added and nudged Katelina in the ribs. "Leaving this behind."

Claudius bent over the dead girl, his face hidden from Katelina's view. "My Arowenia," he whispered, his voice filled with pain. He stroked her lifeless cheek gently, and then his head snapped up and his eyes narrowed as he snarled. "He will die for this!"

Turning from the body of his lover, he sighed deeply. "Dispose of it as is proper." He was obeyed instantly. The vampire bowed his head and withdrew from the chamber.

Claudius dropped into the chair again. He quickly composed himself, though he looked sulkier. He gazed at Katelina as though she was something distasteful. His eyes were calculating as he asked, "So, Jorick abandoned his pet?"

"Yes," Troy replied without hesitation. "She slowed him down."

"All that effort only to abandon her? No, I don't think so. Something is wrong with that." He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair thoughtfully.

Troy rushed to fill in the silence, a hint of concern in his voice. "I assure you that is what –"

Claudius held up his hand, signaling for silence. "No, that isn't it at all." He stood and walked towards Katelina, tapping his chin. "No, I think he had another motive for leaving her. He knew we would take her. He knew we would bring her here and how angry I would be. He had a reason for what he did. The question is," he caught her chin with the toe of his shoe and lifted her face to look up at him. "The question is why?"

Troy hurried to answer, "Perhaps he was tired of her –"

Claudius narrowed his eyes disapprovingly. "I did not ask you, I asked her. Why did he leave you behind?"

His shoe pressed into her throat and she fought to swallow the lump of bitter fear that had formed just above it. Though he looked young, the fangs that glittered in his mouth said he could be any age, and if he was someone the others feared, no doubt he was old; very old. With age was supposed to come wisdom, and it was obvious that he could see through Troy's story. But would he believe the truth?

"Well?" he demanded. "I don't want to ask again. What was Jorick up to?"

No, she decided. He wouldn't. But maybe he'd leave her alive while he tried to puzzle it out. A little time was better than no time, which was what she'd have if he decided she was lying.

"I don't know."

"Oh, you don't know? Perhaps he's using you to find me, hmmmmmm?" His eyes glittered at the new thought that entered his mind. "Perhaps you have some sort of tracking device on you?"

She tried to shake her head, but it wasn't very effective. "No."

He rolled his eyes. "Like I'm going to take your word for it." He let her chin drop to the floor and stepped back. "Check her over."

Hands gripped her roughly and hauled her upright. She struggled, but with her wrists and feet bound she had no chance.

Troy approached her. An evil smile played across his lips. He stood before her and grabbed a handful of her t-shirt, leering at the distorted Tweety Bird decal. In a single motion he ripped it and pulled the ruined cloth away to leave her naked torso exposed to the cold eyes of the onlookers.

A whimpering noise escaped her throat and his smile broadened as she tried to find a way to cover her bare breasts. He gripped her jeans and the sound of tearing denim echoed through the chamber as he tore them from her body and flung them to the floor, chortling at her cries of pain.

"Isn't this fun?" he asked. His thumb caught the edge of her underwear elastic and slid around the waist band. "Shame it has to be so quick."

“Get on with it.” Claudius crossed his arms over his chest and tapped his foot impatiently. “This isn’t to amuse you.”

“Of course, as you command.” Troy grasped the delicate flowered undergarment and ripped it away to elicit another cry from Katelina. He leered down at her pale body as she stood before them all, naked and helpless. The cold air touched her bruised skin like obscene hands.

“Check her,” Claudius ordered. His gaze flicked over her lazily and he added meaningfully, “Everywhere.”

“As you command.”

She tried to draw away from Troy, but the rope and restraining hands prevented any escape.

He snickered at her feeble attempts. “That won’t do you any good.” He grabbed her shoulders roughly and ran his hands over every inch of her. She shuddered in disgust and closed her eyes against the humiliation while her face burned with embarrassment and rage. A whimper escaped her lips as he jammed his hand between her thighs. His breath was foul as he pressed his face close to hers, his hands fumbling in her most private areas. Snickering, he withdrew his probing fingers and stood back, leaving her with her face bowed and her eyes full of tears.

“Nothing,” he said simply.

Claudius looked coolly from his servant to the humiliated Katelina. “HMMMMM...” He stood before her, hands clasped behind his back as he studied her flushed form. “If there is no tracking device then how is he following her here?”

“Maybe he isn’t?” Troy offered, while his counterparts continued to remain conspicuously silent.

Claudius ignored his opinion completely. Suddenly a little flame flared in the depths of his green eyes and his head snapped around to his servant. “They’re not linked, are they?”

Troy balked visibly. “Linked?” He swallowed quickly. “No, I don’t think so. No one does that anymore—”

“Says who?” Claudius grabbed a handful of Katelina’s hair and jerked her head roughly to the side. His eyes raked over the mark Jorick had left. “It looks normal...” he trailed off, and ran a finger lightly over the tidy puncture marks. “No,” he repeated as he released her. “It looks like a normal mark to me.” He began to pace in circles again, his forehead wrinkled. “No. He expects me to do something... but what? Does he think I’ll let her live? In that case I should kill her. Or does he think that I’ll turn her and she can somehow infiltrate the coven? Or maybe he thinks I’ll kill her and he can complain to the Guild about it? Would that give him an advantage? Last I heard they were none too happy with him.”

He took his thoughtful walk up again, signaling to the vampires who held her arms. They released her and she crashed to the cold cement floor. Unable to catch herself, her shoulder jarred painfully as it hit the cement. Hot tears dripped down her burning face as she struggled to remain brave like she’d promised herself.

Claudius surrendered and threw himself into the large chair. He gazed petulantly at the assembled vampires, expecting one of them to have a revelation. “Did he say anything? Maybe there was a clue?”

“No,” Troy answered quickly. “He just ran, not a word.”

“Damn!” Claudius slammed his fist into the arm of the chair. “I don’t know what to do with her! I hate this!”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Take her back and lock her up somewhere while I think – no wait.” A sinister smile spread across his face. “On second thought bring in the cage, and put her in it. Maybe looking at her will inspire me.”

The vampires laughed at his apparently amusing idea, but quieted down at a look from their baby faced master. “No one is to kill her – yet. If Jorick thinks that her death would get me into trouble, then perhaps there’s something to it. Summon that Guild buffoon and we’ll find out whether Jorick holds enough favor to make it a problem. Last I knew the laws were very loose concerning human property, but they may have changed.” His features fell back into their permanent sulk as he tapped the arm of the chair. “If he thinks my killing her will make The Guild absolve him of Arowenia’s death and call it even... No! I won’t allow that.”

A loud scraping noise filled the chamber; the sound of something heavy and metal being dragged across the floor. Katelina didn’t have long to wonder about it, before she was hauled to her feet. A large rusty metal cage appeared, moved by a lone vampire with short cropped red hair. Without looking at her, he stopped the metal monstrosity near Claudius’ chair.

“Come on,” Troy hissed in her ear. He dragged her towards the waiting cage and threw her into it. She fell forward with a cry, unable to stop herself, and her face slammed into the metal grillwork floor. Blood drooled from her nose to land in dots.

Claudius looked up at the sound. “Oh,” he commented, disinterested. “You can untie her now. She won’t be able to escape.”

“Of course.” Troy roughly jerked the rope from around her ankles and wrists. He grabbed a fist full of her hair and leaned close to her ear to hiss between his teeth. “Smart girl. Just keep quiet and maybe he’ll let you live.”

She pulled away and spit at him. He growled and wiped his face. “Fucking bitch,” he murmured. He stepped out of the cage and slammed the door with a resounding clang. She heard a padlock slide into it and tried to roll over, but her body refused to move. Her limbs had been immobilized too long and she could barely wipe the blood from her nose.

Tears of fear slid from her eyes and she bunched herself into a ball in the corner of the cage. She forced her arms and knees to bend enough to cover herself and gazed out between the rusty bars.

Claudius demanded someone bring him some refreshment. They obeyed quickly and brought back a limp drugged boy who might have been twelve or thirteen. Claudius wrinkled his nose as he took the child on his lap, but after sniffing him he smiled. Katelina winced and closed her eyes as Claudius’ fanged mouth closed around the child’s throat. A single scream echoed through the air and then there was only the sickening slurping noise of the boy’s blood.

When the sounds ceased she dared to open her eyes again, retching but unheeded. Claudius dumped the bleeding body on the floor, the throat mangled and destroyed. Blood coated his face and shirt and he licked his lips. He signaled for the others to take the body away and clean the mess. As the boy’s remains were removed, a vampiress in a dark blue dress handed Claudius a cloth with which he cleaned his face. When he’d finished, another woman unbuttoned his soiled shirt and a third, the one who had stood at the door when Katelina first arrived, slipped a new one around his naked torso and fastened it.

He waved the three women away and they bowed their heads before they disappeared from Katelina’s view. They were quickly replaced by four males, Troy among them.

Claudius straightened his shirt and glanced towards Katelina’s cage and then back to Troy. “Was Oren there?”

“No,” the bald vampire said quickly. “Only Jorick. There’s no proof he has any accomplices.”

“You think Michael lied?” Claudius demanded. “To me? No, he told the truth. This is all Oren’s work, his attack, so to speak. No doubt he believed that I would be as crippled without Arowenia as he is without Jesslynn.”

“I heard the Executioners killed her,” one of the others said.

“So I hear,” Claudius murmured disinterestedly. He tapped impatient fingers on the arm of his chair. “If the idiots had gotten there sooner they could have retrieved Arowenia alive! I have half a mind to send her corpse to them! Of all the bumbling, inept, stupid...” he trailed off into dark mutters.

The vampire who’d spoken a moment ago asked, “How do you know she was ever at his den? Surely Oren is smart enough to keep her in a less incriminating place?”

“Now *you’re* suggesting Michael lied?” Claudius asked lightly. “Or do you suggest his brother lied to him? Do you think he made up a false location, intending to go and retrieve her himself and return her for his freedom? Are you implying he intended to let his brother die for his sins?”

The vampire looked exasperated. “I don’t know what I’m implying. I wasn’t here when you interrogated Michael.”

“You’d be sorry you missed it,” Troy commented, snickering. “He screamed and begged—”

“Enough.” Claudius motioned him to silence. “Michael informed me that the plan was Oren’s from the beginning, as part of our little war. He and Patrick were brought into it, so to speak.”

Katelina tensed at the mention of Patrick’s name, but she tried hard not to make her interest obvious. Did this have something to do with what Kateesha had said?

“Rather they brought Oren into it,” Troy said. “Michael said they were looking for a way out and bumped into Jorick and —”

“That will suffice,” Claudius snapped impatiently. “The more direct version is that Patrick came to his senses and wished to return Arowenia to me, however, Michael refused.” He snorted. “Amusing since he presented himself to me as a humbled, repentant thrall. Regardless, he caught his brother in the act of leaving to carry out his plan of redemption. Whether by accident or force, Patrick named Oren’s manor house as Arowenia’s prison. But, when Patrick refused to abandon his quest, Michael killed him.” He paused. “Or perhaps Jorick did. I hardly care. He was a toy I used to torture Michael with, nothing more.”

Something strange moved across Troy’s face for a millisecond, then disappeared. Katelina cringed back into the corner as all of the implications crashed on her. Troy and Patrick was too much to think about, let alone Claudius’ suggestion that Jorick had... No, Michael had admitted to killing his brother when she saw him in the basement. Hadn’t he?

“And you’ve contacted The Guild?” the questioning vampire demanded. “You risked suffering your own consequences?”

Claudius looked bored. “Hardly. It was all above board. The human, Patrick, was plainly marked. I have done nothing illegal. I’m allowed to take anyone I deem worthy into my coven and as my slave, so long as all the details are followed, and they were. Even Michael was a legitimate fledgling.”

“Against his will,” the other vampire muttered.

Claudius dismissed the comment with a roll of his eyes. “That’s what happens to those who try to blackmail me.” A satisfied smile flitted over his lips. “It was his own fault. If he’d simply taken care of the lawn as I hired him to do —”

“Instead of nosing around, eh?” Troy asked, grinning. “But you’re right, it was when he demanded you pay him to be quiet – ”

“Yes, quite,” Claudius said impatiently. “He got everything he deserved, and so will those who aided him.” He glanced towards the cage. “The question now, is what to do with Jorick’s human.” He smiled. “Or perhaps I should call her Patrick’s? It is a curious situation. I wonder if they shared her?”

Troy and a couple of the others gave an obligatory chuckle, but offered no suggestions.

“Kill her? Turn her? Keep her as a pet? She’s not beautiful by any means, but she is amusing.” He glanced towards her again. “She’s very determined to keep her secrets to herself. That has to be worth some enjoyment?”

“I say kill her,” Troy declared. “She’s too big of a pain in the ass to be any fun.” He grinned at a sudden idea. “Though killing her might be fun.”

“You’re blood thirsty,” the other vampire commented. “If I didn’t know, I’d say you were in a hurry to see her dead. Why is that?”

Troy balked and Katelina felt a moment of hopeful satisfaction. Maybe they’d kill him!

“It’s his way,” Claudius said dismissively. “He enjoys the kill. As for her, I believe I’ll wait until I’ve spoken to that idiot from The Guild to make a decision.”

They all nodded and then their voices dropped as the five began making plans for something that Claudius deemed “important.”

Katelina listened intently at first, but their voices were quiet and hard to distinguish from one another, not to mention that they talked over each other frequently. What she could discern still meant nothing because it was full of unfamiliar names.

She tried to digest what she’d been able to overhear, but her mind was too jittery to concentrate. All of her nerves jangled inside as though ready to leap through her skin and run away. If only it was that easy!

Silence fell and she opened her eyes in time to see Claudius leaving through a low door on the side wall, followed closely by the others. She looked around wildly, but there was no one else that she could see. The large chandelier went out, and the room fell into darkness.

She shivered from fear and cold. Her body ached and her face was bruised and painful. She gingerly ran her hands over its swollen surface to ascertain the extent of the damage. She had at least one black eye and a large lump on her the right side of her head. Her lips felt swollen and her nose was twice its size.

She stretched her arms and legs slowly, biting into her lips to keep from exclaiming. When the pain began to subside she slowly stood. Once she had her balance, she threw one arm over her exposed breasts and held tightly to the bars with the other. She made a circuit of her confinement, rattling the bars quietly as she tried to find some weak point to exploit, but nothing presented itself. She sunk to the floor, defeated and blinking back tears. Her hand wiped cruelly at her eyes while she berated herself for her weakness and stupidity. Her angry internal tone couldn’t stop the sobs that wracked her body. All of the pain, anger, and humiliation of the last hours poured from her in a liquid shower of tears. She squeezed her eyes shut and a vision of the twelve year old boy swam behind them. His eyes fluttered open and closed as he fought for consciousness against whatever they’d done to him.

When the tears began to subside, she slumped into the farthest corner again, physically and emotionally exhausted. She curled into a tight ball and leaned her head against the bars. Waves of sleep washed over her but she fought them off and told herself that she needed to be alert and awake if she had any hope of living.

Her thoughts ran in circles and she came to the sickening conclusion that Jorick was not going to save her this time. She'd told herself this before, but hadn't really believed it. All night she'd waited, half expecting the door to burst open and reveal him like a shining knight, but now she knew it wasn't going to happen. Cold disappointment slid through her stomach, greasy and bitter.

Jorick. He'd gone to get her food and go to some mysterious meeting. The last he knew she was waiting for him to return. Would he even know what had happened to her? Why hadn't she done what he'd told her? Why hadn't she stayed in the room? How could she have been so stupid as to fall for Kateesha's self-confessed trick?

Katelina still didn't understand exactly what had happened. She decided that Kateesha had obviously implanted ideas, or thoughts, into her head, but she didn't know how she'd done it. Jorick had said not to look into their eyes or else they could trick her – and she hadn't. She hadn't even seen Kateesha until the fog had begun to lift. How had she been able to do that to her?

Her stomach rumbled, but she ignored it. She pressed her eyes closed and fought both fatigue and another round of tears. How she wished that she'd never gone to that small dilapidated house, never gotten that phone call, and never met Patrick. Tears broke loose and she surrendered, letting sobs take her again.



Chapter Nineteen

Katelina wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep when the light and noise woke her. With a trembling hand she wiped away the crust of the previous night's tears and then tried to focus on her surroundings. The room, which had been dark and empty the last time she'd looked, was now filled with light and vampires running around in a mad dash of activity.

She covered herself as best she could and stared through the bars. Her vision was blurry, but she made out Claudius seated in his large chair, his sulky face contorted with rage. He waved his arms furiously as he gave instructions to Troy and a group of vampires. She pressed her face against the cold metal cage and strained her ears to catch his voice over the sounds of the others, but she failed to discern much of what he was saying.

Around them, other vampires scurried. Some hurried through the room and up the stairs, while others disappeared through the door on the far wall, only to reemerge and then head up the stairs as well. Claudius was emptying the place and, as the population of vampires dwindled, Claudius' voice became clearer. One phrase in particular struck her ears, "Go to Sorem, I will meet you there later."

She gripped the bars tightly, uncertain what her fate would be. The last group of vampires made a sign of allegiance to Claudius and then turned and hurried to the stairs, leaving him and Troy alone. His attention no longer diverted, Claudius turned his face towards Katelina. His green eyes glittered with cold malice and his features were twisted in a black fury that made her heart pound. In a single, graceful motion he stood and moved purposely towards the cage like a cat stalking prey. Troy shadowed his steps, wearing a cruel and expectant smile.

A whimpering noise escaped Katelina's lips as she backed against the far end of the cage. Moving made the world tip dangerously and gave a surreal quality to it, like a nightmare. Even as Claudius reached into his pocket and produced a key, she tried to tell herself this wasn't happening. But as Troy took the key and jammed it into the padlock, the echo of the click forced her to face the facts before her.

The metal door groaned in protest as Claudius forced it open. He stepped inside and grabbed her arm. His lips curled back in a snarl to reveal dangerous white fangs; a warning against any resistance. Though she drug her feet in fear, he tugged her out of the cage with seemingly no effort.

Troy looked her up and down as crude laughter slid past his sneering lips. Katelina felt her cheeks turn red under his prying gaze and tried to cover her naked body with her free arm, but Claudius jerked her to him and snarled in her face, "Evidently we weren't thorough enough in our search!"

She swayed, too dizzy to stand on her own. Terror and confusion shone in her eyes and her voice was lost to fear.

He shook her violently so that her teeth clacked together. "What do you have to say to that? Do you still want to insist your innocence? Where is that device?" He clawed at her body with his free hand.

"I don't have any ... device!" she cried. Tears stabbed her swollen eyes and the room swam. She didn't understand why he was doing this again.

“Liar!” He threw her to the floor. Her elbows locked painfully, but she saved her face from slamming into the concrete. She tried to roll away, but he knelt down quickly and grabbed a handful of her hair in his fist. He used it to pull her head back and force her to look at him.

“Where is it?”

“There isn’t one! I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Troy stood behind them, his arms crossed over his chest and a sneer on his face. “Then how did he find us?”

He? Could they mean...? A white hot spark of hope flamed inside her. “He’s here?” she asked, unable to stop herself. “Jorick’s here?”

“Not yet, but almost,” Troy replied. “Too bad he’ll be too late.”

Claudius’ face contorted with rage, until he looked more like a beast than anything that had been human. He shook her like a ragdoll and bellowed, “This was his plan, wasn’t it? To use you to find us? To play me as a fool? I am no fool!”

She tried to get away from him and her hair pulled until she thought her scalp would rip loose from her head. He forced her head back and leaned over her, his fangs bared, ready to strike her exposed throat.

She screamed and struck out, pummeling his face and chest. In surprise, he released her and she fell back against the cold cement floor. Crab like, she tried to crawl away on her back, but he grabbed her wrists and pinned her down.

He loomed above her, a terrifying figure with savage teeth. His breath was hot on her face, scented like blood and death as he hissed coldly, “Guild or no Guild, there will be nothing left of you when he gets here.”

“He’ll kill you,” she threatened weakly, her voice hoarse.

“He won’t make it this far before my coven beats him back and leaves him with no option but to run! I’m not afraid of him, and it’s time he understood that!”

She struggled and thrashed her head from side to side as she searched for an escape. All she saw was the deserted basement and Troy. The bald vampire stood some paces off from them, a sick smile on his lips.

Her heart roared in her ears. Sweat beaded on her skin. It made her wrists slick in Claudius’ hands, but still she couldn’t get away from the weight of his cold body pressing her into the floor.

She tried to fight him off, but her efforts were futile. She was no match for his strength, still she refused to surrender without a fight. Horrified thoughts flashed through her mind; terrible images of different things he could do to her.

Troy looked amused. “How like a human to fear that more than anything.”

Claudius’ head snapped up. Intelligence returned to his eyes as he stared at his underling. “You can hear her thoughts? What is it? What does she fear?” He turned back and sneered into her face “All her fears will be realized before I am finished with her!”

Troy’s face went white and he shifted uncomfortably. “Yes,” he answered hesitantly. “It comes and goes. I can’t always – ”

“I don’t care right now!” Claudius shouted. “What does she fear most?”

He hesitated again before answering. “She fears what all women fear, my lord.”

“Does she?” His voice was low and snake like. “How pathetic and primitive! Does she not realize the things I can do to her?” He leaned his face close to hers. “Do you?”

She whimpered in reply and looked over his shoulder at Troy's leering face. She could almost feel him inside her head, scraping against her mind and violating her most secret thoughts.

"I will take that as a no. When I have finished I will peel the skin from your bones and drink from your entrails while you beg for death!"

He released her wrists and raised himself up to unfasten his pants. Panic consumed her and she swung her fist. The blow connected with his jaw but she cried out as pain erupted in her knuckles. He jerked back and then snarled, "You will pay for that!" Before she could make another attempt to fight back he slammed her against the floor by her shoulders.

Her head bounced with the impact and dark spots erupted behind her eyes. Her limbs went limp and she thought she might pass out. He took the opportunity to force her thighs apart and wedge his body between them. The pressure of his hips pulled her away from the brink of unconsciousness, and she stiffened fearfully. Her hands balled into fists that pounded uselessly against his back and shoulders.

"Taste your fear," he whispered to her and then drew a deep breath. "Taste it! The way Arowenia did before he murdered her!" He thrust himself inside her. Her screams echoed through the room as her delicate flesh gave way. Troy stood behind them, watching. His sick, evil laughter was an accompaniment to the symphony of her shame.

She choked on her sobs. The tearing pain radiated through her from between her thighs as he thrust into her again and again. Her mind went blank; there was nothing but the pain and the need to make it stop. Her hands continued to claw and beat at him, though her efforts were unheeded. He hung above her, his face suspended inches from her own. What little humanity had been left in his eyes was gone, leaving them empty. There was nothing but an animal staring down at her. His mouth opened wide and he sunk his gleaming fangs into her shoulder. She screamed as the wound from the cellar was ripped open. Pain raced down her arm and into her hand, crippling it, so that the fingers curled uselessly.

He tore at her like a dog, growling low in his throat. She felt the gush of blood; wet against her skin as it trickled over her shoulder. He pressed his face to the wound and sickening lapping sounds reached her ears. Her stomach clenched and visions of the boy from last night filled her head; the ruined child discarded so casually. His lips sealed around her shoulder as he continued to draw blood from her.

His presence suddenly filled her mind and made her shudder. He was inside her thoughts, ripping and shredding her. Liquid fire coursed through her veins, and her arms and legs spasmed, no longer under her control. Screams tore from her bruised and aching throat. Her eyelids fluttered uncontrollably and the spasms grew worse until she was almost in a seizure state, both inside and out. Pain, and colors, and images flashed behind her eyes too fast to comprehend. Old voices and older agony tore at her as he drank her blood and continued to thrust into her.

Somewhere there was a crashing sound and a scream, but whether it was in the fog filled hell into which she'd fallen or outside of it she couldn't tell. Everything was pain and screams and horror. There was nothing but heartache and betrayal and death. The smell of something burning assailed her senses. The thick fumes filled her lungs and nose. She choked and gagged, strangled by the heavy smell, suffocated by fear and pain – and then it stopped.

Claudius' head jerked up from his meal. The lower half of his face dripped with her blood so that tiny drops fell and splattered on her skin. He sniffed the air and growled low in his throat. Troy met his eyes and he barked, "Go see what it is!"

Troy made a sign of obedience, and hurried up the stairs. More screams floated down into the basement from above and the smell of burnt flesh grew stronger.

Katelina choked and it drew Claudius' attention back to her. "So he made it past them. No matter. He won't save you but he will see you die." He reared back his head and struck below the mess he'd already made, ripping open a new wound.

She felt his lips lock and the searing pain began again. Her body shook, too weak from shock and loss of blood to fight anymore. She felt herself sinking into the realm of nightmare and darkness again, slipping beneath the pounding surface and into the black depths of inevitable death.

The air reverberated with a strangled cry and the burning world of hell evaporated as Claudius released her. His attention was drawn to a figure that came crashing down the stairs and landed in a heap at the foot. It lay dead, the limbs at impossible angles and a slow puddle of blood spreading out from it.

Footsteps pounded down the stairs, skipping most of them in their haste. A deep voice roared a single word, "Claudius!"

A smile spread across the blonde vampire's lips and he raised a hand to wipe his face. His assailant appeared and raced towards them. He was only a blurry swath of colored motion to Katelina's burning, tear filled eyes.

"You will die!" he bellowed as he grabbed Claudius and ripped him from Katelina. She screamed in pain and rolled into a ball. She tried to use her trembling hand to stem the flow of blood gushing from her shoulder. There was so much blood – too much. As she writhed in agony, her face came to rest in a crimson puddle of it. The liquid was already cooled from its contact with the cold cement.

She blinked back burning tears and tried to make sense of the images flashing in front of her. Claudius was on his feet, an arrogant smile on his face, his pale hands held before him like claws. This new vampire drew close and she forced her eyes to focus on his black, disheveled hair and torn clothing. His pale face was a mask of fury, his black eyes snapping....

"Jorick," she whispered in a hoarse voice as she came to realize who it was. "Jorick."
He had come.

Claudius was tackled to the floor. His hands scrabbled for Jorick's throat and cold laughter hissed through his pale lips. He threw Jorick off of him and climbed to his feet. "You fought your way through to retrieve your pet, how touching. What a shame the effort was wasted."

Jorick stood quickly and slammed Claudius back into the cold stone wall. "Hardly."

"If your goal was to fight a losing battle, then you're right, you were a success, but if it was to kill me, and rescue her, you'll fail at both. She's mine now, and unless someone stops the blood she'll soon be dead, like Arowenia. A just fate, don't you think?"

Jorick hesitated for a moment as his eyes skipped to her bleeding figure. Claudius took advantage of the distraction to grab Jorick by the shoulders and throw him away. He crashed into the empty metal cage, and both vampire and cage sprawled loudly across the floor.

Jorick rose into a crouch, growling. "Then I'll have to kill you quickly." He sprang, catching the side of Claudius and taking them both down into a heap on the floor.

Claudius looked surprised as his struggles came to nothing, then he called for his underlings. "Fools! He's down here! Down Here!"

Jorick snorted sarcastically. "I'm afraid they've been detained – permanently."

Claudius faltered. His mouth worked, but no sound came out. "You killed them all?" he asked in disbelief. And then, as realization hit him, his fury swelled and crashed through the room

like a dark wave. He fought back with renewed vigor so that they rolled across the cement, hands flailing, and blood splattering. They ripped and tore at one another like two male lions fighting to the death.

Katelina struggled to follow the fight, but her eyes were so heavy and they both moved so fast that part of the time she couldn't even see them. They'd be locked together in combat and then suddenly one of them would be across the room, picking himself up and charging while she'd missed the part in between.

She fought a wave of blackness and her eyes fluttered closed. Her breathing was shallow, and she had a hard time concentrating. She forced her eyes open again and saw Jorick circling Claudius, both of them bloody and furious. Her hand shook and fell away from her bleeding wound to drop numbly to the cold cement.

Her eyes closed again. "Jorick," she whispered, softly, willing him to save her from the sucking blackness. "Jorick..." But the darkness was faster than he was, and she was lost in it.

"Katelina? Katelina?"

She heard a voice calling her, and yet she didn't want to open her eyes; didn't want to see where she was or who the voice belonged to. Better to stay here where it was safe, where there was no pain and no fear.

"Katelina? Wake up."

The words were a command; an order she didn't want to obey. She fought against it, but she weakened under the crushing pressure to do as she was ordered. Her eyes opened against her will, and she winced immediately at the light. Slowly, the world came into focus. Above her loomed a pale face framed in flowing black hair. Dark liquid eyes stared down at her, filled with worry.

"Jorick," she whispered and reached a trembling hand up to touch his cheek. His smooth skin was warm beneath her fingers.

He caught her hand in his and brought it gently to his lips where he brushed a kiss across the back of it. "Shhhhhh, it's all right. I'm here."

"Yes." She murmured and leaned her head back into his other hand. "You came."

His voice was husky and tight with anger, "Of course. I came, as soon as I could." He released her hand and gently stroked her bruised face. His eyes snapped with a dark fury as he took in the details of her injuries.

She licked her lips and tasted blood; somehow spicy and enticing. She swallowed it and sought for more, but there was nothing.

I'm just thirsty, she thought, and she was thirsty, and tired, and in too much pain. But Jorick was there now, and it would be okay. That is, if he could forgive her. He'd warned her, but she hadn't listened – hadn't taken it seriously.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone could do that. I didn't know she could use mind tricks that way."

Confusion creased his brow, but he shook his head to dismiss the statement. "It doesn't matter now."

She nodded, though the motion caused her pain. "Is Claudius dead?" She hoped Jorick had ripped him into bloody, unrecognizable shreds.

"No," Jorick replied sadly. "I had to let him go to save you in time." The ghost of a smile played on his lips. "We killed many of his followers, though."

Disappointment filled her. “What about the big bald one?” If anyone was dead then let it be him. This was his fault - his and Kateesha’s.

“Troy?” Jorick asked in surprise. “Yes, he’s dead. I ripped his heart out myself.”

“Good.” She tried to smile but it hurt too much.

Jorick mirrored her attempt and managed it better than she had. He wrapped his arm around her and brought her against him, holding her tightly. She clutched at him as she closed her eyes and fought off the sobs that threatened to tear through her.

A familiar voice sounded from behind Jorick, “We need to get going.” Katelina’s eyes flew open in surprise to find Oren standing a few feet away. His clothes were torn and coated in blood and his face was grim and empty.

As Katelina fought off a scream, Kateesha appeared behind Oren and laid a hand on his shoulder. Her red lips curved into a smile and her dark eyes gleamed. “Yes. We do.”



Chapter Twenty

Katelina's shuddered with fear as the dark demoness stepped forward. "Aren't you happy to see me?" Kateesha asked in mock innocence.

Jorick glanced over his shoulder at Oren and Kateesha, and gently laid Katelina on the floor. He pulled his long black coat off and carefully wrapped her in it before he scooped her up.

Katelina tried to ignore her throbbing body as he stood and shifted her in his arms. The pain from everything Claudius had done to her was still fresh, though not as sharp as it should have been. Her shoulder screamed when she was jostled, but it was the "inner" pain that hurt most. All of her blood vessels ached, and the underside of her skin trembled from the seizure-like state and the burning sensation that had coursed through her. Her mind still reeled from Claudius' invasion, and she was so weak. Somehow what he'd done to her body paled in comparison to the rest of it. She remembered him laughing at her "primitive fears" and saying that he could do something much more terrible to her. He'd been right, the mental assault had been far worse than the physical.

She licked her lips and found a small smear of blood. The salty tang tasted almost good, and again she wanted more. She thought vaguely that it must have to do with having lost so much.

Jorick interrupted her thoughts as he glanced towards Oren and Kateesha, his face impossible to read. "As you said, we'd best be going."

Oren took a step towards the stairs and then paused to warn them, "There may be others coming, Claudius had more than that in his entourage."

Jorick nodded his understanding and the three climbed the stairs. Katelina buried her face against his chest to blot Kateesha from her sight. She couldn't understand what the bitch was doing there.

They reached the top of the stairs and entered the corridor Katelina remembered from the night before. Instead of a hallway, it was really a long room that ran the length of a small building. The walls were exposed brick and the floor was the same cement as the basement. The wooden stairs that ran down to the basement were at one end, and the large metal door that led outside was at the other. In the middle was an open doorway that poured black smoke. The dark mist blocked out the ceiling's electric lights and filled the room with a suffocating stench that made Katelina gag.

As they drew near the smoking doorway Oren's redheaded sister stepped out of it. Her dress was splattered with gore and she licked blood from her fingers like honey. Her eyes flicked to the three vampires and she stated in a pout, "I can't find any more."

Oren looked around uncertainly. Worry crept over his features as his eyes swept the vacant room. "It's not right."

"I know," Jorick agreed and squeezed Katelina tighter. The four exchanged uneasy looks and then continued their way through the room and out the door. Once outside, the shining yard light bathed them in its strange glow that made everything look surreal. The blood that stained their clothing became deep black splotches. It somehow made it look cleaner and more sanitized.

Their feet crunched over the gravel parking area and stopped in front of the white panel van. Katelina's eyes grew wide with fear as memories slid over one another: the stench of blood, Arowenia's ruined throat, Troy's threats.

Oren slid the door open so that it gaped like the mouth of a beast. Jorick took a step towards it, but Katelina's body stiffened and she clutched at him. "No," she whimpered and gave him a pleading look. "Not in there again."

Jorick's brows drew together. "I thought you might like.." he trailed off and glanced at their companions. "To be alone?"

Katelina followed his gaze to see Kateesha and her evil, gloating smile. She shuddered and looked back to the van. Which was worse?

"Well?" Oren asked with impatience. "Are you taking the van or not?"

Jorick glanced at Katelina then shook his head. "No, we'll ride with you."

Oren's nose wrinkled. "You'll have to ride in the backseat with one of them."

Torina half draped herself over Jorick. Her voice was like warm oil. "You act like that's a bad thing." She looked up into Jorick's face, batted her eyes and pouted her full lips. "I'm sure that Jorick wouldn't mind sitting next to me."

He gave an annoyed grunt and pulled away from her. "You can sit in the front seat Torina – Katelina and I will take our chances with Kateesha."

Katelina's mouth opened and she tried to signal him that she'd rather sit near the slut than the bitch who'd tried to kill her, but as she turned her head she found herself staring in Kateesha's smirking face. The vampiress smiled and reached a hand up to stroke Jorick's face. "I'm sure you won't regret it, brother."

He gave her a warning look before he stepped away and walked towards the car.

A sick panic ran through Katelina. She whispered into Jorick's chest as softly as she could, hoping he could hear her, "Not Kateesha. She –"

He cut her off, his voice so quiet she wasn't sure if he was actually speaking out loud or if she only imagined it. "Later. She won't harm you with the rest of us present."

Katelina made a small whimpering noise in disagreement, but forced herself to relax a little. Jorick would be right there with her, and he'd protect her.

Thoughts pressed in on her, unbidden. She tried to force them away, but she couldn't silence the voice that whispered in her mind, "*Did he protect you last night?*"

Her head jerked up to see Kateesha's malicious smile. She narrowed her eyes and thought as loudly as she could, "*Shut up!*"

Oren opened the car door, then gently took her from Jorick's arms so that the dark vampire could climb inside. Katelina stiffened, both in pain and the sudden realization that she didn't want to be touched by anyone but Jorick. Somehow he was all right; safe. No one else was. Not now.

But Oren didn't do anything more than slide her into the car and settle her on Jorick's lap. The dark vampire nodded as soon as he had her arranged and Oren shut the door. Katelina gave Jorick one more pleading look before Kateesha climbed inside and seated herself next to him, the smile still plastered across her too-beautiful face.

Katelina resisted the urge to scream as she felt Kateesha's eyes on her. The vampiress whispered inside her head, using her own thoughts to form the words, "*He'll never believe you. He doesn't care or he'd have been here sooner.*" For a sickening moment she found herself believing it, but as she looked at Jorick a soothing, calm descended on her, like being wrapped in

a warm, dry blanket after coming in out of a cold rain. She turned her head and glared at Kateesha. "Leave me alone," she muttered angrily.

Kateesha blinked innocently as Oren and his sister climbed in. "What?" she asked, but Katelina didn't answer her. She just glared at the vampiress. After everything she'd been through she didn't need this. There had to be a way to keep Kateesha out of her head!

Oren started the car and they pulled out of the parking lot. Katelina settled against Jorick and closed her eyes. Her body relaxed as the warm, calm feeling continued to spread through her. She felt as if she was drifting on the edge of sweet dreams, and found herself absently wondering where Oren and Torina had come from. The last time she'd seen them, the house had been burning and everyone had been dying.

"They're the ones I had to meet," Jorick half whispered to her. "What was left of the coven scattered after that night and they've decided to help me kill Claudius." His words caught her attention and brought her back from her slumber like world.

"I wish you'd killed Claudius," she whispered and then added silently, "*And Kateesha.*"

"So do I," Jorick whispered with an edge of sorrow in his voice. "But, don't worry, he'll die soon. I'll kill him myself."

A thick silence descended and left them lost to their own thoughts. Katelina fought against terrifying memories and fears. Before she got too lost in them, Jorick spoke, "I think we should take her to a hospital."

Torina turned around in her seat, surprised. "Do you really think so? Can't you just take care of it?"

Jorick shook his head, his voice firm, "Not that way."

"I thought you already had," Oren said without looking back.

Jorick cleared his throat uncomfortably. "No."

Before Katelina could ask what they meant, Torina asked peevishly, "How long will that take? Wouldn't it be easier to just give her some blood or else turn her and –" she broke off when she noticed Jorick's hard stare at the back of Oren's head. "Are you listening?"

The lion-maned vampire suddenly made a small noise of understanding. "But do you know where a hospital is?"

"There's likely to be one in any of towns we're already going to go through," Jorick replied matter-of-factly. "They're everywhere now. Most towns have their own."

Kateesha made a scoffing noise in her throat. "That sounds like a wonderful idea – and when they want to know what happened to her?" Her eyes glittered hard and mean in the dark and the reflection from the dash lights made her look more evil than usual.

"A dog, of course," Jorick answered. His words stirred something buried in Katelina's brain, but she couldn't grasp it.

"And when they want to call their police to come in and take statements?" Torina demanded. "They don't allow wild dogs to just run loose, you know. Humans are all paperwork and red tape and keeping track. You may have been hiding from their world, Jorick but –"

He interrupted her angrily, "I am well aware what they are." He took a deep breath, and thought for a moment. "A wolf then. Some large canine animal – does it matter?"

"It matters," Oren said quietly. "You know the rules."

"Then what do you propose?" Jorick demanded. "Have you got a better idea?"

"You know my opinion," Oren said flatly. "But what's done is done."

Kateesha laughed delightedly. "Still arguing like children."

“If you won’t just give her some blood, then can’t we sew her up ourselves?” Torina asked sulkily. “It can’t be that hard!”

Jorick’s tone remained cold. “Are you volunteering?”

Kateesha chuckled again while Torina’s nose wrinkled. “No.”

“How about you, Oren?” Jorick asked sarcastically. “Kateesha?”

The vampiress next to him purred in response, “Oh, I’d be happy to try it.”

Again Jorick ignored her. “Unless one of you happens to be a doctor of medicine then she needs a hospital. She’s sustained damage to her shoulder and despite my best efforts it’s still bleeding.”

“Try a hot knife,” Kateesha suggested smugly.

Torina rolled her eyes and made a dismissive gesture. “I still say give her enough blood to heal her or turn her.”

Oren interrupted before Jorick could reply, “Fine. We’ll take her to a hospital. But if it goes wrong, Jorick, then we’ll leave and may the consequences be on your head.”

“So be it,” Jorick agreed.

Katelina leaned back and stared at the car’s headliner. She still felt floaty, as though she was above it all. But the word dog... Patrick. Yes, she remembered now. Patrick always had bad luck with dogs. At least that was what he’d claimed.

She closed her eyes and searched her memories.

Her fingers trailed over a freshly knotted scar on his shoulder. “You disappear for weeks and come back with this. What happened?”

“My brother’s dog,” he laughed. “He has it in for me. It’s nothing serious.”

A new voice interrupted the scene. It was Claudius arguing with his underlings. *“The human, Patrick, was plainly marked.”*

And so he was, she thought wearily. Marked again and again, no doubt by Claudius himself. Or was it Troy who’d done it? Was that what Kateesha meant? Had it been the same for him as it was for her? Had they tortured Patrick with it? But just thinking about that monster and his bloody, leering face made her sick, so she closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the soothing feeling that wanted so desperately to consume her.

They soon found a decent sized town. Blue hospital signs led them down dark winding streets until they reached a group of large, modern buildings. Oren parked the car in the section marked “Emergency Room Patients Only.” As the motor fell away into silence he said, “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Oren climbed out and opened the door, gingerly taking Katelina again. He lifted her as though she weighed nothing, and held onto her while Jorick climbed out. Katelina’s eyes strayed to the large building. Like so many hospitals it was all brick and green glass. Electric flood lights made the space around the building a pocket of strangely colored daylight, though the darkness clawed at the edges. She shivered as she stared at the glass doors marked “Emergency Room”. The world was suddenly becoming too real, nightmares and reality crashing together in a terrible mix that made her chest tighten.

Jorick climbed from the car and took her gently in his arms. As he caught her gaze an inexplicable feeling of wellbeing rippled through her. It would be all right, after all.

He carried her towards the shiny building. The glass doors swooshed automatically out of their way as they entered, leading into a lobby done in white and blue with ugly geometric paintings on the walls. He carried her past rows of empty chairs to the counter where a woman

sat sipping from a mug and staring at a computer screen. At their approach she looked up, her face shocked.

“What happened?” she asked, clicking the computer mouse but staring at them rather than the screen.

A chair patterned in ugly blue sat before the counter and Jorick carefully deposited Katelina in it, mindful of her whimper as she was jostled. He looked at the woman and muttered so that his teeth stayed hidden, “She was attacked by something, a dog or a wolf maybe – I saw it from a distance, and when I got there it ran off.” He turned to Katelina and opened the coat enough to reveal the mess that had been her shoulder. “It tore her up before I got there.”

“It sure did,” the woman agreed, sucking her teeth. “All right,” she placed her fingers on the keyboard. “I just need a little information first.”

Katelina sagged against the chair as exhaustion washed over her. She forced her mouth to give her name, address, and social security number. The woman’s eyebrows shot up at the distance between the hospital and her home address, but Jorick quickly explained that they were on vacation. The woman accepted it, though she didn’t look like she believed it. Jorick had to help Katelina sign the paperwork granting them permission to treat her. As the demands for information dragged on, his fingers tapped rhythmically on the counter and his brows drew closer and closer together. He seemed on the point of saying something when an attendant appeared with a wheelchair. Jorick scooped her up carefully and set her in it, following as the attendant wheeled her back to a room.

The attendant helped her onto a hard cold bed. He promised someone would be in soon, and disappeared. Katelina looked at Jorick, worry in her eyes, but he offered her a tight reassuring smile. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, the nurse came in to take her vitals and get the story of what had supposedly happened once again.

“If you’ll remove your coat,” she said cheerfully as she got the blood pressure cuff ready.

Katelina cleared her throat painfully. This was one of the moments she’d been dreading. “I can’t.”

The nurse raised her eyebrows. “What do you mean, hon?”

Her cheeks turned pink and she stared at her naked legs sticking out from beneath the dark coat. “I can’t,” she repeated. “I—I don’t have any clothes on under it.”

The nurse’s eyebrows shot up higher and she glanced sharply to Jorick who only shrugged. “I see. Then let’s get you into a gown.” She looked at Jorick again. “You are?”

“Her boyfriend,” he said simply. “I’m staying.”

The nurse looked at Katelina and she nodded numbly in agreement, though she wasn’t sure he was her actual boyfriend. Still, she supposed it was easier than trying to explain the truth.

Without asking any more questions, the nurse got a pink printed gown from a cupboard and laid it on the bed. “Put this on and I’ll be back.”

When she disappeared Jorick moved to the side of the bed and wordlessly helped her out of the bulky coat and into the gown. He gathered the coat up and stood awkwardly next to the bed, his eyes on the door.

“They’re suspicious,” she murmured. She lay back on the pillow and stared at the television bolted to the wall.

“It’s fine,” Jorick said softly and patted her arm. The nurse reentered and gave Jorick a sharp look as she tightened the blood pressure cuff around Katelina’s arm and clipped the oxygen monitor to her finger. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?” she asked Katelina pointedly.

She struggled through a sketchy story about being attacked by some kind of big animal and Jorick saving her. As she finished, the nurse gazed at her with narrowed eyes. “And how did you get the black eye?”

Katelina was shocked into silence. She’d forgotten about the condition of her face. Oddly enough, none of it really hurt, though she didn’t have time to figure out why. “I, um, I fell down the stairs the other day,” she said lamely.

“And what happened to your neck, here?” the woman asked, pointing to the mark Jorick had left.

Panic blossomed in Katelina’s chest and she looked to Jorick for help, but he remained stonily silent. “Oh, that. Um... it’s um...” she swallowed hard. “I mean I was at a party....”

“Are you on drugs?” the nurse asked coldly.

“No, no,” Katelina said quickly. “It’s . . . just a little joke. We all got one, to look like, um, like vampire bites. It’s almost Halloween,” she added as an afterthought. “It was a Halloween party.”

The nurse clicked her tongue. “And this?” she poked the two small scabs that were left from Jesslynn’s bite. “An older joke maybe?”

Katelina stared at her feet, sick inside. She couldn’t think of anything to say except that Torina and Oren had been right. This was a bad idea.

“Is this necessary?” Jorick asked, breaking his silence.

“Excuse me?” the nurse looked up at him sharply.

“She isn’t here to have that treated so it’s none of your business,” he said firmly. “She’s told you what happened to her shoulder.”

The nurse gave him a cold look and scribbled something on her clipboard before she left. Katelina watched her go, relieved that the cross examination had ceased. Absently, she touched her face, but the swelling was gone, and the lump on the side of her head was little more than a bump. Maybe she hadn’t been hurt as badly as she thought.

Jorick cleared his throat and walked to the TV. He flipped the channels until he found something watchable, then he pulled the wheeled stool next to the bed and sat down. He heaped the coat in his lap and gently stroked her hair as they watched a cartoon about a claymation koala bear and his friends. Katelina stared at it absently. After everything that had happened, the bright colors and cheerful voices seemed somehow macabre; reminders of a world she no longer believed existed. When she closed her eyes all she saw was Claudius’ twisted face looming above her, snarling fangs gleaming to a soundtrack of Troy’s crude laughter.

Tears pricked her eyes, then the strange calm descended again. She glanced at Jorick, but he seemed engrossed in the television show.

They didn’t get to watch very much of it before a tall thin man dressed in blue came in and drew her blood. He didn’t make any comments other than those absolutely necessary and then left again. He’d been gone for only a moment when the doctor came in, looking grim and suspicious. Jorick gave up the stool and moved along the wall, watching as the doctor poked and prodded at her. He asked no questions other than for her to recount the story about the dog. He listened to her heart and her breathing, and examined her shoulder. When he’d finished he nodded to himself. “It looks like a dog, all right, but a big one.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “You’ll need some blood. You’re also badly dehydrated. I’m going to sew this up and have them give you an IV.” He gazed at her levelly. “You’re lucky. Although it looks bad, it’s mainly surface damage. None of the muscles were affected very badly. It’s going to be a scar, but it

shouldn't impede your arm movement." He cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. "You've sustained a good deal of bruises. You said you fell down the stairs?"

She nodded her head and he took a small light from his pocket and shone it in her eyes. "You don't have a concussion," he announced as he pocketed it again and peeled off his gloves. "They'll be in to hook you up and I'll be back to sew that up."

He left and she looked at Jorick again, her eyes wide. His gaze was reassuring, though she suspected he was just as nervous as she was. He had a lot more to lose than she did if something happened.

The lab guy returned and did her IV, again saying almost nothing. Then she and Jorick were left alone in silence. They watched the television while the bags ran dry. The doctor returned with a different nurse and gave her a tetanus shot before he numbed her shoulder and stitched it up. She squeezed Jorick's hand tightly and swore to herself that despite the Lidocain she could still feel the needle slipping through her skin. Even so, it wasn't as terrible as she thought it would be.

When the doctor finished the stitches, he cleaned the scrapes on her arms and face with alcohol pads and took a moment to examine the two different marks she bore. He clicked his tongue but made no comment. "I'll write you a prescription for some pain pills and some antibiotics. It's not infected, but better to be on the safe side." He peeled off his gloves and threw them in the biohazard bin as he glanced at Jorick. "Could I have a word with you?"

Katelina stiffened, but Jorick only nodded calmly. He paused next to the bed, brushed a kiss over her forehead, and murmured, "I'll be right back."

The door had barely shut when the nurse was at her side; a short, pudgy woman with kind eyes and short hair. She leaned close and asked softly, "Do you need some help honey?"

Katelina blinked at her stupidly. "With what?"

The older woman looked at her sympathetically and laid a hand on her arm. "Getting away from him."

"What?"

"It's all right," the nurse said gently. "You don't have to be ashamed, honey. It's not your fault what he's done, it's his fault."

"What who's done? Jorick?" The woman nodded and then, in a rush, Katelina realized what she meant. "He didn't do anything." She'd been so worried about them guessing the truth that she hadn't thought they'd come up with an idea like domestic abuse. Strangely, it was almost a relief to have the woman asking her about something as common place and mundane as that. She suddenly realized how strange her world had become when she considered something horrible like domestic abuse mundane. "It's nothing like that."

"It never is, is it?" the nurse asked. Her eyes attempted to penetrate Katelina's mind but failed. "We can help you, if you want us to. There are ways."

"No, seriously it isn't – it wasn't him." She shook her head and wondered what would happen if they tried to arrest Jorick.

"You fell down the stairs?" The nurse looked disbelievingly at her. "And a dog attacked you? And you were at a party and now have two sets of puncture marks?"

Katelina nodded dumbly, panicking inside. For one crazed moment she was tempted to break into maniacal laughter and tell them the truth, but she was pretty sure that they'd send her to a mental institution if she did.

The nurse shook her head, increasing the pressure on her arm. "Let us help you. We can get you free from him and send you home."

“Send me home?” Katelina asked, catching her breath.

The woman looked her in the eyes. “Honey, you’re listed as a missing person, as a probable kidnapping – ”

Katelina’s mouth dropped open and her eyes bulged. “Kidnapping? I’m not kidnapped!”

“You can tell that to the police,” she said crisply. “We can help you, but you have to let us. We can’t make you accept help – ”

“Police?”

The nurse gave her a pitying look. “Of course. We called them after you were checked in. They’re talking with *him* right now and – ”

Katelina fought panic and fury. “I don’t need any help! I’m not kidnapped! And I don’t need anyone calling the police! I’m an adult, I can do what I want. They can leave us both alone. The last time I looked I had the freedom to go anywhere I wanted to, and do whatever I wanted to, after I turned eighteen.”

When the nurse continued to press her, Katelina got angry and loudly demanded to see her superiors and be released. Just then, the door opened and Jorick came in quietly – sans the police escort she expected to see. His eyes flicked from her to the nurse as he walked to the bed. He handed her the coat and then nodded to the IV and addressed the nurse. “You can take this out now or I will.”

“You can’t just take her!” the woman spat, outraged. “Where are the police at?”

“I can leave if I want to,” Katelina said angrily. “I’ll sign the waiver of treatment.”

“That won’t be necessary,” a voice said from the doorway and they looked to see the doctor and a police officer. Fear shot through Katelina, but the doctor simply said, “You can go.” He glanced at the angry nurse. “Unhook her.”

The nurse stared, open mouthed, “But sir –” she stopped mid-sentence as Jorick turned and looked at her. “Yes sir,” she said meekly and then hurried to complete the task.

When Katelina was unhooked, they passed the doctor and the officer – neither of which tried to stop them – and made their way through the emergency section. Katelina kept staring back at the policeman, but Jorick walked casually to the nurses’ station to get her prescription slips, care instructions, and a packet of pain pills to last her through the night. Katelina didn’t understand how he could be so calm, or what he could have said to the police and the doctor. It had to be something other than just suave words for them to allow her to go! She suddenly wondered if he was doing what Kateesha had done to her and, though she was grateful for it at the moment, a shiver went down her spine at the idea that he could control people.

She signed the release papers and Jorick scooped her up. The hospital gown peeped through the opening of the coat, but the woman at the counter didn’t notice it.

They started towards the doors, but she squeezed his shoulder sharply to make him stop. “She said I’m reported as a missing person,” she hissed fearfully. “A probable kidnapping!”

He nodded quickly, and pretended to be staring up at the news running across the TV screen in the corner. “Yes, I know. I’m not surprised. Your friend was taken a day or two after you left and Claudius’ men destroyed your apartment. It undoubtedly looks like a kidnapping.”

“But...” she began, and he cut her off.

“It’s fine,” he assured her. “We need to get going, the others are waiting.”

His words, “the others”, made her think of Kateesha and she quickly caught her breath, squeezing his shoulder again. “No, wait. Kateesha.”

“What about Kateesha?” he asked patiently, eyes still on the television.

She answered quickly, her voice low, “She killed Arowenia, and was waiting for them – for Troy and his friends. She turned me over to them – they had some sort of deal –”

“I know,” he whispered back. He shifted her weight in his arms started for the door again. “I’ll deal with her later.”

Not content, she had to ask, “How? And how are you doing this? Are you –”

“We need to go,” he murmured and then, as if in confession he added, “My influence won’t last forever.”

The night air was cool against her exposed skin, and she huddled farther under the coat. She thought about the painkillers in Jorick’s pocket and about the prescriptions. She wasn’t sure how she was going to get them filled.

As they approached the car, Oren climbed out and assisted them while Torina hung out the front passenger window looking annoyed. “Can we go now, or would you rather spend more time amongst the humans?”

“Yes, Torina, we can go now,” Jorick replied. “Perhaps if you’d gotten the information faster we wouldn’t have been so late and then this little trip wouldn’t have been necessary.” He gave her a dirty look as he climbed into the backseat. He got settled and then reached for Katelina.

“I got the information as fast as I could,” the sexpot retorted angrily. “It wasn’t easy since Elsa’s quit helping us! Do you know I had to sleep with that guy to get the location of the den? You haven’t even shown me any appreciation! I went to a lot of trouble for that stupid little human–”

“Enough of this,” Oren snapped. He shut the door loudly and then climbed into the driver’s seat. He looked at his sister as he turned the key in the ignition. “Be quiet Torina, we’re leaving now.”

“Yes, but–”

“This is no longer my coven, Torina,” Oren’s voice was emotionless. “Jorick is older than us, and as long as we travel with him he is the master.”

The redhead started to say something, but snapped her mouth closed and turned in her seat huffily, her eyes fixed on the window.

Kateesha laughed softly from her corner of the backseat. The sound made Katelina shiver. The dark woman gave Jorick a knowing look. “Yes, let us go before the pathetic human police come to their senses and try to arrest our new coven master.”

Katelina shot her a dirty look. She suspected that she’d been prying in her mind again, and so she purposefully imagined Kateesha’s mangled corpse. Kateesha’s only response to the mental image was another bout of silvery laughter.



Chapter Twenty-One

While Katelina and Jorick had been in the hospital, the other three vampires had cleaned up and changed their clothes. Jorick wore all black so the splatters of blood were nearly invisible, but Kateesha happily handed him a packet of handi-wipes to clean himself with anyway. He wrinkled his nose at the false “fresh scent” but dutifully swiped off the remaining blood from his exposed skin.

“You’re sleeve’s torn,” Torina commented. “You should roll it up. And you have a hole in your slacks, though considering modern styles, I think you can get away with that.”

Jorick rolled his eyes and turned his attention to helping Katelina clean what was left of the blood from herself.

On the outskirts of town, Oren pulled into a brightly lit gas station and by the time the car engine cut out, a stranger wouldn’t have been able to guess that only hours earlier the vampires had been butchering their kin.

Torina had fallen into a sulky silence, but she broke it to demand, “What are we doing?”

“We need gas,” Oren said. He glanced uneasily back at Jorick. “Does she... need... anything?”

Jorick looked questioningly at Katelina and she nodded reluctantly against his chest. Traveling with these four, she felt embarrassed to need anything. It was as though they were staring at her with condemnation for being so weak. Still, the hospital hadn’t given her anything to drink despite their concerns about dehydration. “A soda– something to drink.”

Jorick looked up and unabashedly repeated for Oren, “Yes. Something to drink.”

“Such as?” Oren asked.

“Um...” They said soda caused dehydration, but she couldn’t stand gator aid or plain water.

“Juice?” Jorick suggested.

Torina gave a huff. “And what kind of juice? I don’t want to have to guess!”

Oren scoffed. “You’re not going anywhere. Jorick can handle his own human.”

Torina crossed her arms over her ample chest. “I don’t care about handling his human, I just wanted to get out.”

“Well you don’t need to,” Oren replied and then slammed the door.

Katelina clung to Jorick. If it meant going thirsty then fine, she’d stay thirsty, just as long as he didn’t-

“I’ll be right back,” he said soothingly. He started to slide her into the empty space between himself and Kateesha, but she clutched his arm, and shook her head. She didn’t want left alone with them.

He met her eyes squarely. “I’ll be right back.” He quickly opened the door with one hand while he gently moved her off of his lap with the other.

Kateesha smiled broadly and laid a hand on Katelina’s leg. “Isn’t this cozy?”

Katelina jerked away and plastered herself against the window. She gave Jorick a last pleading look, but he only nodded to her and headed for the convenience store.

“Awww,” Kateesha mock pouted. “I get the feeling she doesn’t like me.”

Torina popped down the sun visor and examined herself in the vanity mirror. “That’s not a surprise.” She produced a tube of red lipstick and applied it slowly to her lips. She smacked them together and glanced over her shoulder. “No one likes you.”

“That isn’t true.” Kateesha’s voice got sweeter with every word. “I seem to recall at least one person who was especially fond of me, that is until...”

Torina growled low in her throat and her lips curled back dangerously from long fangs.

Kateesha laughed and added, “Jorick likes me.”

The redhead studied her adversary before she said forcefully, “No he doesn’t.” She turned back to the mirror and applied another layer of lipstick. “He doesn’t like anyone anymore.”

“Think what you will,” Kateesha said lightly as she looked smugly at Katelina.

Katelina glanced from one to the other nervously, and then through the window at Oren. He stood next to the car, dutifully pumping gas. He wore a pair of faded jeans and a blue, long sleeved, button up shirt, the cuffs rolled up. His long blonde hair had been tamed into a pony tail and his amber eyes stared absently past the numbers flipping by on the pump, as if he were looking into a realm only he could see. But Torina, still in the midst of making herself presentable, interrupted his reverie when she opened the car door and shouted to him, “I need a different pair of shoes after all!”

Oren’s head snapped up and, though he didn’t answer and went back to staring at the pump again, it was obvious that the doorway to his far away world had closed and he was now focused his task.

He finished pumping the gas and opened the trunk. It slammed shut moments later and he appeared with a pair of spiky high-heeled shoes dangling from his fingers. Torina took the shoes and handed him the old pair.

He stared at them as though they were a foreign object. “What am I supposed to do with these?”

She rolled her eyes and stretched her legs to examine the effect of the new shoes. “Put them in the trunk, of course!”

“I already closed it,” he said flatly and handed them back. “Hang on to them.”

“What?” she cried as he started to walk towards the building, ignoring her. “Oren! Come put these in the trunk!” He continued to walk and she amended, “Or give me the keys! I suppose I can do it—”

Oren reached the glass door to the building and glanced back, his finger to his lips. Then, he disappeared inside.

“Of all the – selfish, asinine...” Torina broke off and hefted the shoes up distastefully. “Hang on to them” she repeated and dropped them into the floorboard. She slammed the door and growled, “I’ll show him how to hang on to things!”

Kateesha laughed again and Katelina didn’t comment.

Oren and Jorick returned together. Oren climbed in the driver’s seat wordlessly, and Jorick handed Katelina a fountain cup of tea and the baggy of pain pills the nurse had given him. “Better take it now,” he advised. “Before the other stuff wears off.”

Her fingers shook as she opened the bag and popped one of the pills from the blister seal. She stuffed the round white object clumsily in her mouth and took a drink through the straw. She tried to swallow and choked loudly, which drew a look of amusement from Kateesha.

“Careful,” Jorick said quietly. When her coughing fit subsided he held out a large blue bag of pretzels. “I got you something to eat.” She took the shiny bag and cradled it in her lap

uncertainly. Her stomach clenched and heaved at the thought of food. With some of the images from her ordeal still fresh, she wasn't ready to eat yet.

Jorick handed her a small white box that rattled noisily. "And I also got you some other pain medication, in case you need it."

She nodded in acknowledgment and he stuffed the box back in his pocket before he slid into the backseat, and settled in between the two women.

Torina glared over her shoulder. "There, your little human's all taken care of. Can we go now?" Before he could answer she swiveled her gaze to Katelina and her pretzels. "And don't eat those in here," she added fiercely.

Katelina didn't answer. Instead she turned her face to the window.

They left the town behind, and spent the last few hours of darkness driving towards their unnamed destination. Katelina dozed against Jorick's shoulder, the pretzels clutched tightly like a teddy bear. When they parked next to a sagging motel, Jorick woke her gently. For once, he stayed in the car and let Oren and Torina procure the rooms – one for Oren and the two women and one for himself and Katelina.

The room was like any other and Katelina curled up on the bed while Jorick began his sunlight calculations. Her stomach growled and she unconsciously opened the bag of pretzels. She stuffed the crunchy snacks one after another into her mouth without thought. She watched him stack the furniture with only half interest, her mind fogged by pain pills.

When he had all the furniture piled before the window, he threw the heavy flowered bedspread over the heap for good measure. Then, he stood back, satisfied, and said smoothly, "I'm going to go take a shower?" It was really more a question than a statement, as if he expected her to object.

She nodded absently and he disappeared to the bathroom. He returned a few minutes later with only a towel swathed about his narrow hips. He motioned to her and she stood so he could turn down the sheet and slip beneath it. She peeled off the large coat and dropped it to the floor. She was surprised to find the hospital gown still beneath it. It would have to do in place of anything else.

Jorick settled into bed and held out his arm for her. She climbed in next to him and he pulled her close. In the darkness and silence of predawn she slowly relaxed against him and all her tightened muscles began to uncoil. She closed her eyes and nuzzled her face against his clean smelling skin. Unshed tears built up behind her eyelids. Last night she'd been so certain she was going to die; that she'd never see him –or anything– again. Now, the experience seemed like a bad nightmare that hadn't really happened.

Tentatively she raised a hand to her shoulder to find the bunched up skin and stitches beneath her fingers. She shivered in revulsion and told herself that it had been real, despite how it seemed now.

"Are you all right?" Jorick asked her as he ran an absent hand over her back.

She drew in a deep, cleansing breath. "Yes." Despite the answer, she wasn't sure it was true. There was too much crowded inside her head; too many questions. "Kateesha..." Words failed and she trailed off. "She and Troy were in it together, but I—I don't understand. He – why would he betray Claudius? I mean, Kateesha, she said..." She stopped again.

Jorick drew a tight breath. "Yes?"

"She—she said something to Troy about Patrick."

Jorick tensed. “There are some things you should leave alone, little one. Some answers you don’t want.”

She struggled with his answer. “You—you mean?”

Jorick sighed. “Troy had a... soft spot for Patrick, in his own twisted way. He was no doubt displeased when Patrick was killed.”

The words made her stomach feel slippery and sick. “Are you saying...” She couldn’t finish it.

“No. For his part Patrick intended to be... monogamous. Troy was not his choice.” Jorick cleared his throat noisily. “There are some things you don’t want to know, particularly when it comes to slaves and masters.”

She suddenly understood, and it made her even sicker. Right now, after everything she’d been through, it was too much to deal with. She squeezed her eyes closed and wished she hadn’t asked.

Jorick shifted and pressed his lips against her ear for a moment; a fluttery kiss. Then he asked, . “You said Kateesha tricked you. How?”

“I thought you knew? She said it was a mind trick.” She closed her eyes again. A deep pool of nothingness sucked at her consciousness and tried to pull her down. It was better than the real world and she mentally moved towards it.

“What mind trick?” he asked sharply.

“She...” Katelina searched for words. “There were... words in my head; thoughts. I thought they were mine, but they weren’t, they were things she was saying.” She was too ashamed to tell him what those thoughts had been. “But I didn’t look her in the eyes. She wasn’t even in the room with me.”

His answer was slow in coming. “I see. I didn’t know she was that powerful.” He tightened his arm around her. “We need to be careful of her.”

Katelina nodded against him and found words slipping uncontrolled from her lips. Even as she said them, they sounded foreign to her ears, as though they had nothing to do with her. “She killed Arowenia and blamed it on you. She had a deal with them. They were supposed to make sure Claudius killed me. She said you’d be upset and have only her to turn to.” She thought for a moment that she’d already told him this, but she couldn’t concentrate long enough to be sure.

He sighed heavily. “I’m eventually going to have to kill her. I’ve tried to avoid it for many years.” He paused before uncharacteristically explaining, “We have the same maker. He made her shortly after me. He thought she’d be a good companion.”

Katelina murmured but was unable to say anything. Her heart beat a steady lullaby rhythm in her ears and the memory of Kateesha had faded away in favor of cool darkness.

“I’ve always disliked her,” Jorick continued. “She’s too cruel. Malick was always trying to encourage me to be more like her.” He gave a soft, hollow laugh. “She enjoys killing so much; she was quite an asset to The Guild.”

Katelina roused herself and tried to concentrate on his words. “She was in The Guild?” She half imagined Kateesha standing by the bonfire, her skin glowing as she smashed in the baby’s skull and laughed that cold musical laughter.

“Yes. She was under me – one of the Executioners. She left for the final time several years after I did in a bid to overthrow The Guild, which she expected my help with. Needless to say she was disappointed.”

“Oh?” Katelina was so tired that all she wanted to do was go to sleep and forget everything that had ever happened to her. She couldn’t understand why Jorick was suddenly talking to her when all she wished for was sweet oblivion. “Then why is she helping you?”

Jorick laughed scornfully. “She’s hoping to overthrow Claudius now. She wants power and intends to take his place once he’s dead and then, I think, she still intends to rival The Guild. But, I’ve already told her that I won’t help her.” He stopped his narrative. “I’m sorry.” Some unspoken emotion hung on the edges of his voice. “You’re tired.”

“A little,” she murmured. Somewhere, beneath the haze of medication, she was just glad to be alive and away from that nightmare.

“Go to sleep, little one,” he whispered softly and brushed her hair back from her face. “Tomorrow we’ll need to regroup and try to discover where Claudius has gone. That wasn’t even half of his coven, so they must have moved to a new location, already.”

“Sorem.”

His hand stopped mid motion. “What?”

“Sorem,” she repeated. “He sent them to Sorem and he’s meeting them there later. I heard them talking,” she finished in explanation as she began to drift into purple shaded dreams.

She heard him muse, “Sorem,” and then she knew no more.

“*Liar!!*” Claudius’ voice echoed through the stone chamber. His face pressed close to hers and his lips snarled back from his shining teeth.

Katelina stifled a sob, and tried to free herself. He threw her to the floor again and she felt her body break beneath him. His voice was in her mind screaming shrilly; a sound to make her ears bleed. And then the pain came. Her body was enveloped in invisible fire and, her terrified screams filled her ears—

“Katelina!” a voice shouted her name, but she struggled against the hands that held her. “Katelina!” the voice shouted again, and she felt herself being shaken.

She jerked up and slashed at Claudius, her fingers like claws. But, as her eyes snapped open, she saw only milky darkness and a pair of large hands holding her wrists. Her head jerked around, and she found herself staring at Jorick. His dark eyes were filled with alarm.

“Katelina! Stop!” he insisted. He lowered his voice, but his words were still forceful, “Stop!”

She blinked at him and her pounding heart began to slow. He released her arms and she let them fall to her lap. The skin was scraped and bruised – such a contrast to the clean white sheet. Tears slipped down her face. They came slowly at first, and then in torrents until her whole body shook with sobs.

Jorick hesitated and finally wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him, “Shhhhh,” he murmured in her ear. “It’s all right, you’re safe. Shhhhh....”

She buried her face in his cold chest and shook her head, “No,” she whispered hoarsely. “No, it’s not.”

He stroked her hair gently and assured her. “Yes, you’re here with me. I won’t let Claudius hurt you again.”

“But you let him. You already let him.”

He sighed deeply and cradled her tighter. His voice was husky, heavy with his own guilt. “It’s my fault. I should never have trusted Kateesha. I should have known she would betray us.”

At the mention of Kateesha's name she became enraged. *God dammit*, she cursed inwardly. *It was his fault!* What the hell had he been thinking? She clenched her hand into a tight fist and, unable to stop herself, she slammed it into his naked shoulder as she shouted, "Yes, it is!" She jerked away from his embrace and pummeled him as tears poured down her face. He made no move to restrain her, or to deny her accusation, and this made her even angrier. She wanted him to yell back. She needed him to feel something for once – just for once!

"You made me stay behind!" she yelled, trying to provoke him. "You made me stay alone! How the hell am I supposed to know about all of this shit? How the hell am I supposed to do anything to them?" She hit him harder, though her fists bounced off of him, completely ineffective. "You let them take me, god dammit! You let them!"

A sharp pain lanced through her shoulder and her fury evaporated in defeat. She hung her head and sobbed. "You let them," she choked out. "You let them."

Jorick gathered her up again, and she lay against him, limp and choking for air. "Shhhhh," he soothed. "You need to calm down and breathe." He rocked her gently. "Breathe slowly—"

"That's fucking easy for you to say!" She jerked away and glared at him. "It wasn't you in that fucking cage! You weren't the one that he... did... that to." Even in her anger she couldn't say the words, the unspeakable phrases that meant dark, violating acts. It was as if voicing any of them would summon the pain again. "You weren't the one that he... God! He was in my fucking head! Do you understand that? Do you have any idea?"

"Yes," Jorick said quietly. "Yes, I know."

"You know?" she shrieked. "You know and yet you let him fucking do it! You let him - God! What? What was it? I don't even know, do you realize that? I don't even know what the fuck—"

"He drank from you," Jorick said softly, his eyes on the bed.

"Really?" she snapped sarcastically. "I hadn't noticed!" She swung her fist again. "Of course he fucking drank from me! He drank my fucking blood, Jorick and he - he—"

"There's a connection," Jorick murmured. "When a vampire bites someone. It's a mental connection, and he can do with it what he wants. He can make it pleasurable or he can make it torture."

"And we know what Claudius chose, don't we? Or do you? Should I tell you what it was like? Should I tell you how it was worse than anything else he did? Should I?"

She raised her fists to pummel him again, but he caught her wrists. He gazed into her eyes, his voice sorrowful, "I know. I know and I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" she shouted in disbelief. "Do you think that does anything?"

His voice rose until he was shouting. "What do you want from me? What do you want me to do? Tell me and I'll do it, all right? What?"

She gaped at him and tried to find words. She wanted him to... to... She didn't know what, but something. He had to do something to make this go away!

As if he knew her thoughts he yelled, "I can't turn back time, Katelina. I can't erase what happened! I would if I could, but I can't!" He released her wrists and held his arms out wide. "You want to hit me? Hit me! You want to scream at me? Then scream! You want to hate me, then fine, hate me, Katelina! But know I'd have given anything to have spared you from that! I got there as fast as I could!" His voice dropped, begging her to understand. "I got there as fast as I could!"

She opened her mouth to shout at him again, but couldn't find a point to it. There was nothing more for her to say. He was right. He had come for her. He'd come and he'd fought

Claudius, and he'd saved her from whatever other tortures the twisted vampire had had in mind. He'd taken her to the hospital, against the wishes of the others, and he'd stayed there beside her as they'd sewn up her shoulder, even though the staff thought he had abused her and the police had tried to arrest him.

But she wanted to shout, she wanted to scream and she wanted to rage! Rage was better than the other feeling that was gnawing at her. Better than the darkness of despair and terror that was threatening to swallow her. Only in her anger was she safe from it, safe from being eaten alive and drowning forever in blackness.

Yet, what good would shouting at him do? What would it accomplish? His sorrow was etched across his perfect face in easy-to-read lines. His guilt and darkness was there, just behind his eyes.

She sagged against him. He waited, as if to make sure she wasn't going to hit him, then slid his arms around her again.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her hair. "I'm sorry."

Her voice shook. "I know. It's all right. It wasn't really your fault. I just—" she broke off, unsure what she wanted to say. "I just need to... I don't know." She took a ragged breath. "I don't know what I need . . . to forget."

"Nothing is ever forgotten," Jorick whispered. "You only quit thinking about it."

"Then I need to quit thinking about it," she murmured. She pulled back and looked at Jorick hopefully. "You said you had influence. Can you—"

"No," he cut her off. "I can't make it go away. I can hold it at bay, but I can't erase it."

She sagged against him and buried her face against his chest. "Then what good is it? What good is any of it? What was the point?"

He didn't reply immediately, but when he did his voice was low. "You're alive, that's the point. I was too late to stop him completely, but I wasn't too late for that."

She supposed he was right. She was alive. Though he'd said nothing was forgotten, still the memories would fade. Right now this was the most devastating thing ever, but she supposed she'd eventually move on and have new things to worry about. After all, terrible things happened to people all over the world every day, and yet they kept on living. If they could do it so could she, couldn't she? Wasn't she as strong as anyone else? Bad things had happened to Sarah when she was a child, and she'd gone on to live a perfectly wonderful life – until it was taken away by Claudius.

The thought caused a fresh bought of sobs. Jorick held her while she cried for herself and her friend. He stroked her hair and murmured soft reassurances until her tears had dried. She felt drained, empty, and hopeless, like the dying beams of sunlight that were merging with the evening's coming darkness.

"Why did you call me?" she whispered suddenly. "Why am I in the middle of all of this?"

Jorick drew a slow breath and then answered in a quiet voice, "Because it was over."

She stirred enough to lift her head. "Over? What was over?"

"All of it. We were... finished. Patrick was dead, Claudius had abandoned his mansion for the time being, Arowenia was safely at Oren's and they wanted me to bring Michael there too, or just kill him. That house on the dead end road was our base of operations, but there were no operations anymore, not there anyway. I didn't have any reason to stay."

"So?"

He was slow in answering. "So, I had to go. I didn't – I didn't..." he cleared his throat in frustration. "I didn't mean for it to happen this way. I never meant for you to get trapped into

anything. How was I supposed to know that Claudius had tracked Michael down? I never expected him to find us, or to send anyone. If I'd known I'd have never asked you there." His voice took on a pleading tone. "You have to believe that. I never wanted to put you in danger. I never wanted anything to happen..."

She nodded drowsily and laid her head against him. "I know," she murmured. "I know."

He stroked her hair and pressed his lips to the top of her head. "Oren's probably right. I should have just left it alone. You'd have been better off."

She shook her head. "No I wouldn't. He took Sarah. You said—"

"Yes, he took Sarah. Because Michael told him he saw you there, in the basement. If you'd never been there..." he trailed off into a heavy sigh.

"But—"

"There's no but. It's my fault, all right? I was being... selfish," he spat the word as if it were something infectious. "There was nothing else for me to do and no reason for me to stay there anymore. I only thought that if you met with me..." he broke off and ran a frustrated hand through his dark hair. "I don't know what I thought!"

Katelina closed her eyes and listened to the quiet rhythm of his heart beating. Part of her still wanted to be angry and scream at him, and he was giving her new material. But she was too tired. Not just tired physically, but tired in her mind and her soul. She just needed a break, just a few hours of quiet and peace. She'd had too many weeks of nauseating tension; ever since she'd found Patrick dead. Right now she just needed a moment.

Neither of them spoke for several minutes until she finally said softly, "It doesn't matter."

Jorick sighed and tightened his arm around her. "What's done is done," he agreed quietly. "The past cannot be changed."

"If you could, though, would you really not call me?"

She expected him to take some time to think, but he answered right away. "Truthfully? No, I'd still call you. I'm no saint, Katelina. I may have good intentions but I'm not really a martyr."

She nodded to herself, satisfied. "I didn't think so." They were both quiet a moment and then she asked, "But why me?"

"What?" he asked with surprise.

"Why me? I mean I'm nothing great. Everyone tells me how mediocre I am and how disappointed they are – and they're right. I'm not that pretty or brave or—"

He cut her off. "Yes you are. And I've already told you, it was because I wanted to. Period."

"But—"

"Shhhhhhh," he soothed. "Go back to sleep."

She shook her head. For some reason she needed him to say – what? She didn't know but something. She just needed some compliment from him, some affirmation. "Jorick?"

He sighed heavily. "Yes?"

"Do you think I'm..." she winced at the cliché woman questions that came to mind and tried to choose the least embarrassing. "Pretty?"

He gently laid her back in the bed and pressed his lips to her forehead. "Yes, Katelina. I think you're very pretty. And I also think you're very brave. Now go back to sleep. You need the rest."

She closed her heavy eyes, but opened them again, another question on her lips. "But no one else thinks so. Why do you?"

He rested his palm on her forehead. "Because I have better taste than they do. Now, go back to sleep, and don't dream this time. When you wake everything will be better."



Chapter Twenty-Two

When Katelina woke again, the room was filled with inky darkness. She shivered and reached instinctively for Jorick, but her hand clutched only empty sheet. She blinked at it in confusion, then glanced towards the bathroom where she saw the door ajar, light leaking out of it into the darkened room. Her limbs were stiff, but she climbed out of bed and quickly retrieved the black coat from the floor. She wrapped it around herself and then crept softly across the room. The bathroom door opened easily to reveal Jorick and Oren with their heads together, their expressions akin to children caught with a cookie jar.

Oren, still dressed in the clothes he'd worn late last night, stepped away from his co-conspirator quickly. Jorick, however, continued to lean against the sink. His tattered black clothes were gone, replaced by a pair of faded blue jeans and a white button up shirt that he hadn't bothered to tuck in. His bare feet were a sharp contrast against the dark colored linoleum, and that was what Katelina found herself staring at, unable to meet his gaze. She remembered last night; weeping and screaming, saying things she never wanted to. Her face flushed scarlet and she felt humiliation wash over her. She berated herself for being so weak and pathetic. The modern mantra might be "embrace your emotions and tell the world", but to her there was a wall between private and public – and she had blown a hole in it with her breakdown. Jorick and the others were always so calm and cool, so self-reliant and able to handle anything. She was afraid of what he must think of her after her fit.

"You're awake," Jorick's voice was warm, and she looked up to see him smiling at her.

She nodded, and relief flooded her. There was no condemnation in the depths of his eyes; no pity or disappointment with her and, though perhaps she imagined it, she got the sense from him that he didn't intend to discuss it at a later date, either – that there was no need to talk about what had happened ever again, unless she wanted to. The ghost of a smile flickered on her lips in response to this silent revelation, but she couldn't find any words to say, especially not in front of Oren.

The blonde vampire shifted uncomfortably. He looked from Jorick to Katelina, then cleared his throat loudly and muttered, "Well, I'll find Torina, I'm sure she's tired of keeping Kateesha entertained."

Jorick nodded and Oren exited. When they were alone, Jorick pushed himself off of the sink and came to a stop before her. He took her hands in his and gently ran his thumbs over her fingers.

Her eyes wandered over the unbuttoned collar of his shirt, and the glimpse of pale chest it afforded, to his face where dark eyes shimmered with concern.

"You're... all right?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes." It was only one word, but she tried to pack a world's worth of inflection into it; her desire not to discuss her weakness, her appreciation of his not thinking less of her, and her thanks for how well he'd handled things when she'd been at her worst.

He exhaled deeply and his shoulders relaxed. "Good." He offered her another smile, and she wondered if he was relieved that they weren't going to have a touchy-feely discussion, or if he

was just glad that she wasn't hitting him or recoiling from him. "I'll go see if I can borrow some clothes for you."

She nodded to his attire. "Those are from Oren?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I didn't have any more with me. Thanks to the Executioners, I didn't leave the manor very well supplied."

"It looks nice," she offered shyly and looked away from him as she blushed.

He wrinkled his brow unenthusiastically and frowned down at the shirt. "I suppose so. The color's all wrong, and it's a little small. But then you're easily pleased," he teased.

When she made no reply, he took the opportunity to draw her against him and catch her in a deep kiss. Though it hurt her swollen lips, she didn't pull away. She was willing to take the pain to get what she wanted; what she needed. And she needed to know that he could still want to do this even after what had happened.

The kiss ended, but he didn't pull away. His breath was warm against her face as he stared into her eyes. "You're beautiful, do you know that?"

She looked down to hide the flush of pleasure. She'd been terrified that after everything that had happened he'd now find her ruined, unworthy, and repulsive.

"You're far from repulsive," he stated, and her head snapped up, eyes wide. She wondered if he was reading her mind or had it been so obviously written on her face? Troy, the bald vampire, had heard her thoughts, as could Kateesha, but could he? She blushed at the idea that he'd listened to her secret admirations of him, among other private things.

"Clothes. I'm sure that Torina has something she'd gladly donate," he said suddenly, as if to change the subject. "She has a few dresses in the trunk – she'd have brought more, but the rest of her ridiculously extensive wardrobe burned in the fire. Personally, I think she's more upset by the loss of her clothes than anything else." He offered her a weak smile, so she knew he was trying to make a joke, however sad it might be.

But sad or not, the mood lightened considerably, and a weight was lifted from her shoulders. "Maybe you should go ask her?" she suggested and pulled back from him. "I'm going to take a shower - if I have time." She wanted desperately to wash the evidence of the last two days off of her skin and watch it swirl down the drain to disappear forever.

He nodded his head and said almost sadly, "All right, I'll go ask her." He leaned down and kissed her deeply again, ending it reluctantly. "I'd much rather wrap you up and hide somewhere far from all of this," he murmured as he pulled her to him.

"Me too," she agreed softly and buried her face in his chest. She tried not to think about anything: not about what had happened, not about all the blood and death she'd seen, and not about the fact two weeks ago she'd have run screaming from him because he was a vampire.

"Take your shower, I'll be right back." He looked at her, a mixture of longing and guilt in his eyes, but it was quickly veiled and he moved past her and out of the room.

She closed the bathroom door and dropped the black coat and the hospital gown to the floor. Her glance in the mirror was only cursory. Her revulsion at her bruised face was so complete that she had no desire to actually examine it. She turned the shower on and wondered how Jorick could say she was beautiful when she had a black eye and abrasions all over.

She used the miniature shampoo and soap provided and, when finished, wrapped herself in a fluffy towel. The curiosity was getting the better of her and she had almost relented and wiped the steam from the mirror when the door opened. She clutched at her towel, but it was only Jorick bearing a slinky green dress and a pair of panties that dripped white lace. She held the

undergarment up and stared at it, incredulous. “Tell me, what’s the point?” she asked rhetorically.

He shrugged his shoulders in reply, but his eyes twinkled. “Don’t ask me, I’m not a connoisseur of lady’s undergarments.”

He leaned casually against the wall and looked at her until she cleared her throat loudly, then he asked innocently, “Yes?”

“I’d like to get dressed.”

He grinned and gestured with his hand. “Be my guest.”

“Alone?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

Jorick laughed; a warm rich sound that made her feel better. “All right, if you insist.” He was still laughing as he disappeared into the bedroom and shut the door.

She dressed quickly but took extra time to find the front of the lacey stretch underwear. They were uncomfortable and it felt like she wasn’t wearing anything at all. The thin dress did nothing to combat the feeling of nakedness; it had no sleeves and a plunging neckline that was held up by two thin, copper colored spaghetti straps. Even the clingy, knee length skirt didn’t feel like any kind of protection, not like her usual jeans and t-shirts.

She glanced in the un-fogged mirror and let her eyes travel from her ruined face, down to her exposed cleavage. She crossed her arms over it and wondered why Jorick seemed to have a mental block against bras.

When she exited the bathroom she found him seated on the corner of the bed. He studied her appraisingly and nodded his head in apparent satisfaction. “That looks better on you than her.”

“I doubt it.” She couldn’t help enjoying the flattery, even though she felt embarrassed and silly. She tugged at the skirt and changed the topic. “So, what are we doing?”

“Oren’s gone to fetch food for you, and when he returns we’ll be leaving for Sorem.”

“Sorem?” The word rolled on her tongue like a piece of poisoned candy. “But that’s where Claudius is.”

Jorick nodded. “We have unfinished business—”

“Like what? Like the fact that I actually lived! Let’s go back and see if he can finish me off this time? Is that the idea?”

Jorick stood and quickly caught her waving arms. “No,” he soothed. “I promise I won’t let him hurt you.”

“Really?” she snapped sarcastically, but the look on his face made her anger evaporate. Her shoulders sagged. “I don’t want to be near him,” she whispered.

“I know,” he murmured softly. “But so long as he lives this won’t be over.”

“I thought Oren didn’t want to appear to be too ‘obviously hostile’? Won’t The Guild punish him again?”

“No. Not as long as the war is conducted properly.” Jorick sighed. “As long as it doesn’t create any complications and no one complains, they don’t care. And in case you’ve forgotten, Oren already ‘appeared hostile’ when we rescued you.” She wondered if Oren expected some sort of apology and scowled at the idea, but Jorick continued. “Kateesha has pushed our hands, undoubtedly just as she wanted to. She’s had her eye on Claudius’ coven since she first agreed to help Oren, and I imagine she’s been waiting for this opportunity for some time. Oren hasn’t seemed interested in really finishing Claudius off, and Claudius wasn’t really interested in finishing Oren. Now they’ll have to settle it, and she assumes we’ll win and then she can have it.”

Katelina blinked at him in confusion. “But if you and Oren defeat him isn’t it yours? Victor and spoils and all that?”

He shook his head “The coven has been promised to Kateesha. It was her price to assist in your rescue.”

“But-”

“It’s of no importance,” Jorick said quickly. “Neither I nor Oren want it, not anymore. That was Jesslynn, not him. What use will a straggling handful of unhappy vampires be? But, if Kateesha wishes to think she’s manipulated us, it matters not to me. Let her have what is left of Claudius’ coven when we’ve finished and may it keep her busy for many years to come. So long as she leaves me in peace I don’t care what she does.”

“So Kateesha is going, too?” Katelina asked weakly. “Even though she...”

Jorick sighed heavily. “Yes, she is. I didn’t know she’d set it up, not until Torina got the information from one of Claudius’ men. Kateesha volunteered to go, and if I’d been thinking straight I’d have realized how unusual that was. Kateesha only does what benefits Kateesha. I should have seen that she had some vested interest in it, but I had other things on my mind.” He touched her cheek softly and then gave her a reassuring smile. “She won’t be able to do anything to you as long as I’m with you. And besides, I doubt that she would.”

Katelina’s eyes bulged. “What? You’re not defending her?”

“No, no!” He rushed to explain himself. “She only does things that are of benefit to herself. What benefit could she possibly gain from hurting you?” Katelina’s mouth opened, but he kept talking. “She killed Arowenia and sent you to Claudius because she knew we’d rescue you. She just wanted to advance the war.”

“And can you read her mind?” Katelina demanded angrily. “Because that’s not what she told me! She said—”

“Yes, I know what she said. And no, I can’t read her mind. But this isn’t a music hall production. The villain isn’t going to reveal their master plot to the victim. I know her well enough to say she’s got what she wants, or will have as soon as she’s taken what’s left of the coven.” He met Katelina’s gaze. “Trust me.”

“I do trust you! It’s just... what if you’re wrong?”

He rubbed her chin with his thumb. “I’m not.”

“But...” she trailed off with a sigh. How could she say “It’s just that I have this nagging feeling” without sounding stupid? Maybe Jorick was right. Maybe Kateesha had only told her that because she thought it would upset her. Hell, none of the vampires made much sense anyway. Still, the sense of foreboding refused to go away.

She let it go and asked weakly, “You’re sure we have to go?”

His face grew grim, and he tightened his arms around her. “Yes. I’m sorry, but I owe Claudius now, and I always repay my debts.” He opened his mouth to say something further when a knock stopped him.

“It’s me,” Oren’s voice floated through the door before it opened and the golden-haired vampire came in, a fast food bag clutched in one hand, and a soda in the other. “I have no idea what you humans eat.”

She took the offered bag and sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. The scent of French fries and cheeseburger wafted up into her face and she savored the smell. Last night she hadn’t been hungry but today she was ravenous, and so without any shame she stuffed several fries in her mouth at once.

Oren’s nose wrinkled in repulsion. “And they say we’re disgusting when we feed.”

She glanced at him sharply and thought about mentioning that she hadn't invited him to watch in the first place. Instead, she settled on saying, "I'm starving."

"Obviously." He turned to his friend. "I'm not staying to watch this, Jorick. When it's finished, we'll be waiting." He shuddered and moved quickly out of the room.

She swallowed and looked up at Jorick. "What? It's not that bad?"

His only answer was laughter.

When she'd finished, Jorick rounded up the others and they climbed into the giant car. Torina and Oren sat up front, and the other three were in the back as it had been before. The tension inside the vehicle was thicker than the fog gathering outside, and they all gave in to it. The uncomfortable silence seemed almost like a sixth passenger that was hogging the conversation. The only things that kept it from being unbearable was the muttering of the engine and the swish of the windshield wipers cutting back and forth in their fight with the ever gathering condensation.

Katelina's watch said that only a couple of hours had passed, but the trip to Sorem felt interminably long, and if she thought she'd be happy to see the place she was wrong. It was another small dingy town that looked as if it had been abandoned a few years ago and left to squalor and decay. She stared in disbelief through the window and wondered why vampires never lived in modern metropolises. Wouldn't they fit in better in a bustling city than a decaying little village? She turned to Jorick, tempted to ask him, but the impenetrable silence was too hard for her to break. Oren, on the other hand, had no problem.

"We probably have seven hours until dawn." His voice seemed too loud against the quiet.

Jorick nodded and patted Katelina's leg reassuringly. "That's plenty of time – assuming we can find them."

Torina wrinkled her nose at the dilapidated houses that slid past them. The pink streetlights reflected in the misty fog and gave the whole place a nightmarish quality. "Considering the size, it shouldn't be too hard."

"You'd think that," Oren murmured.

They drove in circles around the wet little town, all of them peering through the windows at fog that refused to lift. A single gas station was open. Its neon lights were like an oasis in the dense, dark place, but by the car's third circuit of the town it had closed. The large green glowing sign shut off as they passed and plunged the parking lot into darkness that made the night seem bleaker.

It was the fourth circuit when Jorick suddenly whispered, "Wait." The brakes squealed as Oren stopped the car. The raven-haired vampire stared out the window at a squat blue house. "Yes. I think we've found it."

Kateesha wound down the window and stuck her head out. She inhaled deeply and, for the first time since they'd gotten in the car, she smiled. "I can smell Claudius from here."

Katelina looked at the sad little house and the windows stared back at her, blank, dark and empty. Weeds grew around the base of the structure, and the yard looked unkempt with brown grass at various lengths; heaps of autumn leaves gathered in every little hollow. She wondered how he could have known. Had he smelled Claudius, as Kateesha claimed she did?

Oren met Jorick's eyes. The two men nodded at one another, then Oren slowly edged the car forward. They moved three blocks down and pulled into the parking lot of the gas station, where they parked next to a large green dumpster.

The doors opened and the car's occupants disembarked into the mist. Katelina stood next to the vehicle uncertainly. She rubbed her naked arms and wished for one of Oren's long sleeved shirts. The smell of frost was in the air and she had to concentrate to keep her teeth from chattering as she watched the four vampires stretching and preparing themselves for what lay ahead.

Oren reached back into the car and pulled several cloth wrapped parcels from between the seats. He handed them out, keeping the longest one for himself. Katelina watched as he unwrapped it to reveal a long machete with a carved wooden handle. She glanced to see Kateesha and Torina each holding short shiny daggers.

Jorick opened his to find a long, thin dagger. He gave it a satisfied nod and stuffed the cloth wrapping in his pocket.

"This should be adequate," Kateesha agreed and Torina gave a silent nod.

"Good," Oren slammed the car door. "I'm afraid I left most of my weapons stash elsewhere." He gave Jorick a pointed look. "I believe someone burned the house down on top of it?"

"Yes, well." Jorick brushed his comment aside. "I'm sure these will do." He narrowed his eyes and looked at the other three. "Claudius is mine."

"Yes," Kateesha purred. "So you've said. Only don't forget our arrangement."

"I'm sure we won't," Oren replied. "I doubt you'd let us."

"Someone has to keep you focused," Kateesha said pointedly, looking straight at Jorick. "Otherwise some of you are likely to forget their promises altogether and just disappear."

Jorick growled low and Kateesha laughed. "Oh come now, you know I'm right. It's so much easier to do when things get... complicated."

Oren kept his face expressionless. "Enough, Kateesha. We need to discuss our plans."

"What plans?" Torina asked, brandishing the dagger menacingly. "We just kill everyone we find."

"Yes," Oren responded impatiently. "But we need more than that. For instance, what about the human—" he cleared his throat and amended it. "Katelina? Is she going with us or staying in the car?"

Torina gave her a quick once over. "She should stay with the car."

Kateesha walked around to stand next to them, smiling. "Oh, I agree." She ran a hand over Katelina's arm that made her shudder. "She'll be a burden once we're inside"

Jorick narrowed his eyes at the dark temptress and she removed her hand. "And should they attack the car, who will defend her? Who's going to stay behind?"

"Why would they attack the car?" Kateesha purred.

Jorick wrapped his arm around Katelina and continued to eye Kateesha meaningfully. "You can never tell. I thought she'd be safe the other night, didn't I?"

Annoyance crept over Kateesha's features. "You should never have agreed to do that favor for Patrick. Look at what it's gotten you in to."

Katelina flinched at the name and Jorick scowled. "I'm not 'into' anything I don't wish to be – you're the only one who wants things differently."

Kateesha sneered haughtily. "You let protecting the human go to your head! You were only supposed to guard her, not fall in love with her. Did Patrick know?"

Katelina looked at her feet, her heart sick. She didn't want to hear this right now. She needed to believe in Jorick; to trust him, and how could she with half formed suspicions running rampant through her mind?

But Jorick didn't answer, and Kateesha's eyes lit up at his silence. "He knew, didn't he?" she laughed and licked her lips delightedly. "How positively delicious! What a conversation that must have been! I'll bet you didn't shed any tears when you discovered he was dead, did you? Freed up his little human lover for you to..."

"Enough!" Jorick roared. "You might as well get over your pathetic dreams, Kateesha. Nothing in this world will ever make me want you."

Her eyes popped in outrage and then narrowed to slits. Her lips curled back until she was no longer beautiful, but ghastly. "You probably killed him yourself so you could have her! Why? Look at her! Look at her!" She jabbed a long nailed finger in Katelina's good shoulder. "She's nothing extraordinary! She isn't even pretty! It's just because you crave a lost soul to look after! You have to have some pathetic powerless creature to take care of in order to feel strong!"

"I did not kill him Kateesha," Jorick hissed coldly. "But if you do not keep your thoughts to yourself, I may kill you."

"I do not fear you, brother. You're far too busy picking up stray animals to be any real threat."

Oren stepped between the pair, his hands up. "Stop this! We have allied ourselves and, no matter what the reason, we have taken oaths. Let us now fulfill them. There will be time to kill one another when Claudius is dead."

Kateesha laughed hollowly. "You're just hoping for help in your new war against The Guild, Oren. But if you think Jorick will assist you, you're mistaken. He cares only for himself – and his new obsession."

Jorick growled, but Oren answered her, "My reason does not concern you, Kateesha." Though his voice was controlled, it was obvious he found it difficult not to shout. "Enough of this squabbling, we need to move out."

"What about her?" Torina asked and nodded to Katelina.

"She comes with me," Jorick said firmly. "And that's final."

Oren nodded. "Then let us go."

With those words hanging in the thick air, the five of them headed off towards the small, dirty house.



Chapter Twenty-Three

The lot was overgrown and water droplets clung to the dry weeds like fragile jewels, pearlescent in the street light's gleam. The house was small and squat, and the siding peeled loose in places. Stains ran down the walls from the windows; empty eyes that had been weeping from loneliness, leaving trails of rusty tears.

The world was wrapped in the thick cloak of fog. Three old, bare trees stood as lonely sentinels, their leaves heaped at their feet and branches barely stirring in the heavy air. Katelina could almost hear her own heart beating in the oppressive gloom.

The vampires moved soundlessly while Katelina fought her way through the tall wet grass, and tried to be quiet. Now and then, her movements would jolt some injury and remind her of last night's terror. Each time it happened, her heart fluttered like a trapped bird in her chest. Again, she wondered what she was doing walking back towards Claudius after she'd barely escaped him, but stolen glances at Jorick fortified her.

The thick quiet of night was broken by the sound of shattering glass as two vampires crashed through one of the darkened windows. They landed on the damp grass in a spray of glittering shards, their fangs bared and knives shining in their hands. At the sudden noise, a dog in the distance started a threatening guttural yap, interspersed with growls.

Jorick pulled Katelina towards him, while Oren took one of the vampires. Torina pounced on the second. Jorick dragged Katelina with him and hurried around the other side of the house. Kateesha followed them like a wraith as they left Torina and Oren behind, amidst grunts and animalistic growls.

No one challenged them as they walked swiftly to the back of the house. There they found a weathered cellar door resting a thin lip of crumbling concrete. Jorick caught Katelina's arm and shoved the long thin dagger into her hand. "Stay away from the fighting if you can," he whispered urgently. "But if you cannot, then go for their hearts. Their skin is tougher than yours and harder to pierce, but perhaps you can manage to hold them off at the very least."

"Don't you need this?" she asked with concern.

"No, I'll be fine." He offered her a reassuring smile. "I'm strong enough I can make do without it."

"You're sure?" He nodded and Katelina tried to believe him. She looked at the weapon in her hand with confused uncertainty. She'd never used a dagger before. Her heart lodged itself in her tight throat as she contemplated having to do so.

Jorick squeezed her tightly and met Kateesha's eyes. After a series of short signals between the two, Kateesha swung the heavy cellar door open. It had barely cleared Jorick's head before he flung himself down the set of dirty stone stairs, his face twisted in a snarl.

Kateesha laughed. "He is stupid!" She lowered her gaze to Katelina, her voice still filled with delight. "You will die before this night is over." Katelina tried to hide her shock and Kateesha quickly followed the raven-haired vampire down the stairs into the dankness below.

Katelina stared after her and her stomach twisted painfully. Jorick was wrong. Her betrayal hadn't been just to push the war forward. Kateesha had had a much darker purpose.

Noises drifted up the stairs; grunts, hisses, and clangs. A window shattered on the other side of the house, doubtless more vampires coming outside to fight Oren and Torina. Katelina rubbed her naked arms against the cold, uncertain what she was supposed to do. She'd come to decide that basements were bad places. They held things like Michael, baby-sized coffins, and torture chambers complete with giant cages. Regardless, she didn't want to stand in the open waiting for a vampire to come crashing through a widow, out of a bush, or from behind a stand of matted grass to tackle her.

She gave the eerie yard a last glance before she started down the stone steps. A half wall bordered the top of the stairs, and she pressed herself against it. She could only see a small swath of basement, but vampires moved over the smooth cement floor, snarling and growling.

Jorick was fighting hand to hand with two vampires dressed in black, flinging first one to the ground and then the other. His fresh white shirt was already stained with blood, and a splatter of crimson decorated his pale face. Meanwhile, Kateesha was locked in battle with a woman in a mini skirt who had two small knives gartered to her upper thighs. Two dead vampires lay on the floor, blood pooling beneath them in sickening puddles, their chests savagely ripped out, leaving only an empty, jelly-filled cavity. Katelina shuddered as she remembered Jorick telling her to go for the heart. Apparently he took that very seriously. She closed her eyes to banish the sight and wondered why Jorick had brought her there.

She tried to disappear into the wall among the cement and shadows. Despite her efforts, a slender woman in pants and a crop top spied her. She snarled and charged towards the stairs with her hands clenched and her bright red nails ready to attack.

The world around Katelina froze for the few seconds it took her to understand what was happening. She gripped the hilt of the dagger in her white knuckled hand and tried to ready herself.

Jorick saw the woman and quickly plunged one hand into the chest of the vampire he was fighting while he slammed her in the back with his other arm. She went sprawling and landed on her stomach, skidding to a stop a few feet with a cry of surprise and anger.

She stood and, with a snarl, threw herself towards Jorick. They crashed into each other and her painted talons raked his perfect face. The distraction allowed his remaining assailant to grab him from behind and throw him into one of the stone walls.

Katelina cried out as Jorick fell to the floor. She waited for Kateesha to interfere, but the vampiress paid no mind to his struggle. Determined to help, Katelina hurried thoughtlessly down the rest of the stairs, her dagger held aloft in her shaking hands. Jorick stood and his eyes grew wide as he saw her and what she intended to do. He opened his mouth to shout, but Katelina didn't see it. Her attention was focused on her target.

The woman in the crop top stood with her back to Katelina, so she took the opportunity to leap on her. The woman tried to spin around, but Katelina hung on, one arm wrapped around her neck. The vampiress roared in anger, and Katelina thrust the dagger into her back like she'd seen Bren and Senya do to Bethina, but the dagger didn't go in all the way. She froze in surprise, and the woman easily shook her off and let her fall to the floor.

"What in the hell?" She grabbed Katelina by her hair and easily dodged the flailing dagger.

Jorick furiously wrenched the vampiress loose from Katelina. She fell to the floor again and looked up in time to see Jorick tossing the woman's limp body aside.

"You'll have to do better than that."

Katelina's head snapped around to see Kateesha standing over her. She jerked Katelina roughly to her feet. "You're too weak human, but if you crave blood so deeply, go after the fresh

ones.” She shoved Katelina towards a young man who might have been 15 or 16. “He is not so tough,” she called, laughing loudly.

Katelina stared at the boy dumbly, though she understood what Kateesha meant. He wasn’t human, but he didn’t look as inhuman as the others did. He was beautiful, but he lacked the glossy perfection that Jorick or Kateesha had, and his movements weren’t as smooth.

He saw her and reacted by grabbing her arm and reaching for her throat. Kateesha’s voice shouted above the din, “Stab him, you fool!” and Katelina did as commanded, thrusting the dagger between his ribs by sheer luck.

His eyes grew wide with panic and he cried out. He released her automatically, while he reached for the dagger in his chest, but Katelina’s hands worked instinctively and twisted it to force it deeper. Cold blood ran over her fingers as he screamed.

Kateesha laughed as the boy crumpled to the floor. Katelina stared at her bloody shaking hands. The implications of what she’d done crashed over her. But, before she could dwell on them, Kateesha clapped a hand on her shoulder, her mouth close to her ear. “Wasn’t that delicious?” she purred and then her voice hardened and she barked, “Get your dagger!”

Katelina obediently knelt to the floor, her body running on autopilot. She gingerly avoided the slowly spreading puddle of blood and pulled the dagger free with a sickening squelching sound.

“Wipe it off,” Kateesha ordered impatiently, and Katelina stared at the blade helplessly. “On your dress!” Katelina again followed the instructions.

“Good.” Kateesha smiled evilly. “I don’t have time to babysit you, so you’re on your own now.” She moved away to grapple with another vampire and sent him crashing noisily into a set of shelves.

Katelina stood shakily. Though she clutched the dagger, Jorick and Kateesha quickly made short work of the remaining vampires without her help. When it was over they stood amidst the carnage, gazing around at the dead.

Kateesha brought a hand to her mouth and slowly licked the blood from it, a smile of ecstasy on her face. Jorick moved quickly to Katelina. “Are you all right?”

She nodded her head dumbly, unable to trust her voice. She was afraid it would crack and betray how her insides quivered.

He pulled her against him as he glared at Kateesha. “She didn’t need to get involved.”

“I could have let her die,” the vampiress replied, her voice demonstrating that both options had held equal appeal. “But she was a willing pupil. Regardless, someone is missing. I would say Claudius is hiding like the rat he is.”

Jorick squeezed Katelina tightly and then released her as he addressed Kateesha. “He’ll be here somewhere. Come, we’ll find him.” He gave Katelina a reassuring smile and then carefully guided her up the stairs.

Kateesha followed them closely, still licking the blood from her fingers like a cat cleaning mouse from its paws. When Katelina glanced back, Kateesha only laughed and snapped her teeth together. Katelina looked away and tried not to think about the reality of her situation. These were monsters that walked with her and, outside in the darkness, more of them undoubtedly waited.

The smell of frost and dead leaves filled her nose as they stepped out of the protection of the cellar. She shivered as the cold breeze skimmed her damp body. Jorick seemed completely unaffected by the temperature, as did Kateesha. She wondered if they were even aware of how cold it was, but she doubted it.

The three of them went unmolested as they walked around the small house. When they reached the front they found the door hanging open on sagging hinges. Light spilled out onto the small concrete porch in a pool of electric yellow, while inside creatures moved, twisted, fought.

Jorick tightened his grip on Katelina. “Stay out of trouble.” He nodded to Kateesha who grinned broadly, then, wordlessly, they plunged through the door and into the fray.

Katelina hung back on the porch and tried to follow the fight raging inside. Oren and Torina were already engaged in battle. Oren’s face was grim and Torina’s was alight with joy. Meanwhile, Jorick and Kateesha wasted no time in finding opponents.

Katelina drew closer to the door. Her eyes flicked from the fighting vampires to the faded walls and the bare wooden floor. Overturned furniture littered the corners of the room, smashed until it was no longer recognizable.

“Who are you?” a gruff voice demanded and she found herself staring into a set of dark bloodshot eyes. She faltered, and when she didn’t answer he grabbed her with one hand and dragged her into the light. “I know you!”

Katelina panicked, and pulled back. The dagger flashed as she swung it towards him. She felt it connect and she heard him cry out in surprise, but his hold didn’t lessen.

“You bitch!” With a hand on his face to catch the blood she’d spilled, he snarled and pulled her towards him, his teeth flashing. She twisted away so that all he could get was the fleshy part of her left forearm. It was enough.

She shouted at the pain and slashed the dagger again, but he was ready for it. He pulled her into the room, and pinned her against the wall, his face snarling into hers. Horrified, Katelina stared into the depths of his angry eyes – and then his head was gone and she was staring at a bloody stump.

She screamed.

Despite losing his head, the vampire continued to hold her in place. She screamed again and her eyes landed on Oren, who stood behind the headless body with the bloody machete in his hand. Coolly, he rammed the weapon through the vampire’s back. He jerked it straight up so that it split the torso in half. Blood spurted, but the hands let go of her and the body fell to the floor to land near the wide-eyed head.

Oren met her eyes and then hurried to his sister, who was surrounded by three snarling attackers. Katelina stayed against the wall, the dagger still in her hand, and her left arm throbbing from both the shoulder wound and the new bite. Despite the pain, she couldn’t take her eyes off of the severed head at her feet. His lips were still curled back in a snarl, and his blood-shot eyes stared, cold and empty but no less menacing.

She managed to stay out of the battle as blood splattered amidst screams and howls. She wanted to close her eyes and block it all out, but she knew better and forced herself to stay alert, though her mind tried not to process the carnage around her.

When Oren finally hacked the last vampire down, the four stood gazing towards a gaping doorway. As if on cue, Claudius strode through it, an ornate axe in his hand. His wounds from the previous night were completely healed, and he was restored to his perfect, sneering self.

A wave of power rolled through the room at his entrance and smashed against them like the stormy sea breaking against rocks. Katelina made a noise of fear in her throat. She couldn’t move, held in place by the sheer will of Claudius.

As if in answer, the space around Jorick seemed to crackle with his overwhelming presence. Between the two of them, the air was so thick with energy Katelina could barely breathe.

“So you’ve come back, Jorick?” Claudius’ sulky face took on a superior air as he came to a stop. His eyes flicked to the dead and his face grew sulkier. “You saw fit to kill everyone, I see.” Then he saw Katelina and smirked. “But you brought me a present. How nice. I can finish what I started.”

“You won’t touch her,” Jorick stated flatly. His dark eyes burned in his grim blood-splattered face.

“I already have,” Claudius replied and laughed. Cold and cruel, it was a sound that made Katelina’s knees tremble. Jorick growled and leapt at the haughty blonde.

Claudius stepped out of the way. Jorick hit the ground rolling and came to a stop, crouching, next to a fallen body. Snarling, he jerked a jagged shuriken from the corpse’s back and with the other hand grabbed the spiked tonfa from the vampire’s dead fingers.

Jorick leapt to his feet and hurled the shuriken at Claudius. He easily deflected it with the axe, but it gave Jorick time to cover the distance between them.

Claudius swung his weapon. Jorick dodged, but the blade caught his arm and sliced through his shirt to leave a shallow gash in his skin.

Claudius swung again, but Jorick stopped the blow with the tonfa. Jorick ducked to the left, and when Claudius spun to follow him, he kicked his legs out from under him. The blonde crashed to the floor, but rolled away before Jorick could slam his weapon into him.

Katelina watched the fight, horrified. Jorick and Claudius crashed into one another again and again, but the other three vampires made no move to intercede. They only watched from the edges of what had become the gory arena, their expressions cool and their eyes interested but dispassionate.

Claudius took a swipe at Jorick, but he slammed the tonfa into his knuckles and jammed his elbow into his face. Claudius cried out and the axe fell to the floor with a clatter. He stumbled backwards, his hand to his bleeding nose, and screamed, “Dover!”

A short, squat vampire ducked through the door, holding a whip with shiny bits of metal braided into it. With a snap, he cracked it at Jorick, slashing him across the back. Jorick dropped the tonfa in surprise and spun towards the new threat. Taking advantage of the distraction, Claudius leapt away from him and sought a weapon among the fallen bodies.

Dover made to whip Jorick again, but he didn’t get the chance. Jorick crashed into him and slammed him to the gory floor. He struggled, but his weapon was useless at such close quarters. It took Jorick only a moment to snap his neck and shove a well-aimed fist into his chest.

Jorick was back on his feet quickly, his hand clotted with gore and dripping blood. Claudius was ready for him, a nasty curved dagger in his hand.

“How many more do you have hiding back there, waiting to save you?” Jorick asked with sarcasm.

Claudius’ eyes shifted towards the empty doorway and then back to his opponent. “Enough.”

Jorick smirked. “There’s no one left, is there?”

“Why don’t you find out.” Claudius sneered.

Jorick advanced on him slowly. Claudius shuffled backwards, waving the jagged dagger menacingly. Seconds became aching hours as Jorick crossed the floor.

When he was near enough, Claudius lunged for him, but Jorick spun out of the way and kicked the dagger from his hand. Claudius stumbled and Jorick slammed him into the wall.

As if by some silent signal, Kateesha sprang forward. Jorick stepped to the side quickly so that she collided with Claudius. As he struggled against her, Jorick held his hand out and Oren

tossed him the machete. Kateesha barely had time to duck before the bloody blade bit into Claudius' neck. His severed head flew across the room from the force of the blow. It hit the floor in a spray of blood, bouncing and rolling until it stopped against one of the fallen bodies.

Headless, Claudius raised his hands to continue the fight, but Kateesha thrust her hand through his chest and pulled out his heart in her fist. She smiled as his body slid down the wall, then she deliberately turned to face the others before she sank her fangs into the organ.

"It's done," Oren said unemotionally as he wiped his hands on his jeans.

Jorick nodded and then his eyes snapped to the front door. Four vampires stepped through, various weapons still clenched in their hands. They stopped just inside the door and stared at the aftermath in confusion.

"Your master is dead," Kateesha said silkily as she stepped forward, the ruined heart still in her hand. "Swear your allegiance to me and live."

They stood motionless as their eyes flicked from ruined body to ruined body. Claudius' head had landed face down, and Torina kicked it so that the face rolled around and stared at them.

Slowly, they lowered their weapons and the tallest one said quietly, "You have it."

The remaining three nodded their heads in agreement.

Kateesha's laughter rang through the room and something broke inside Katelina. Whatever had been holding her up gave way, and she slipped down the wall until she was sitting on the floor with her knees folded against her chest. Her fingers went limp and the dagger slipped from her grip and landed on the floor with a clatter. She closed her eyes and images flashed behind them of snarling faces and spurting blood. She opened them quickly, but what she saw was no better: the dead lying in heaps, their chests hollow, blood and gore eking onto the floor until the wooden boards were slick with it.

A hand touched her and she looked up into Jorick's battle smeared face. He crouched down before her and met her eyes. "You're unhurt?"

She nodded numbly, and his gaze swung toward Kateesha, who was leading her four new underlings from the room. "She has drunk from the heart of Claudius," Jorick explained in a half whisper. "So she will be their new coven leader – those who do not accept her will die."

Katelina reached up and softly traced the long scratch the vampiress with the red nails had left across his perfect cheek. "I suppose that's the law?" she asked hollowly.

"Yes." He caught her fingers with one of his hands and gently pressed them to his lips before he spoke again. "I'm under no obligation to any of them." His eyes took a faraway gaze. "I broke with all covens long ago – including Malick's. He may be my master in blood, but I owe him no allegiance."

"You said if the others don't accept her they'll die?" she questioned. "But, aren't they all dead?"

He shook himself to the present. "Maybe, maybe not. Who can say if all of them were even here. He may have had some running errands or guarding his other properties. But it's Kateesha's problem to find them all."

He released her hands and examined the deep fang marks in her arm, his brow furrowed. "It isn't bad. Still, perhaps Kateesha was right. You may have been safer in the car."

Oren crouched down next to him, his eyes on the door Kateesha had disappeared through. "And where do you think those four were? You know as well as I that they were sent to the car to find the human."

Jorick ignored his description of Katelina and ran a weary hand through his dark hair. “I know.”

“*She* will be no better than Claudius was,” Oren continued, his voice urgent. His golden eyes met Jorick’s dark gaze. “She thirsts for power – and for you. She won’t stop until she gets what she wants.”

Jorick started to agree, but shook his head. “She is The Guild’s problem now. Malick can deal with her.”

“We should never have agreed to let her have his heart,” Oren whispered. “She’ll just create more problems and Malick will leave you to deal with them.”

“That may be, but we needed a fourth,” Jorick responded firmly. “What’s done is done. How much trouble can she cause?”

Oren’s laugh was mirthless. “You won’t think that when she comes after your human.”

Jorick scowled. “She has no need.”

“Of course she does. Or are you completely blind?”

Jorick opened his mouth to reply, but Kateesha swept into the room, the four vampires on her heels. Without a word she quickly combed through the bodies until she found one to her liking. She bit into it and drank, a trickle of liquid crimson leaking from the corner of her mouth.

Oren looked at her and then at Jorick. An appeal flashed in his eyes so quickly that Katelina thought she might have imagined it. Jorick made no sound but broke eye contact with him as a reply.

He stood in an elegant sweeping motion, then held his hand out to Katelina. She took it and allowed him to tug her gently to her feet. Her legs shook, but they were sturdier than they’d been moments before. Once she was standing, Jorick held her to him with one arm. Though she leaned against his chest, her eyes were on Kateesha. She watched the monster at her meal and shuddered in disgust and fear, more afraid of the memory that would haunt her than anything else.



Chapter Twenty-Four

Katelina opened her eyes. The darkness that greeted them was very like the blackness that she saw with her eyes closed. She blinked just to feel her eyelashes brush her cheek and be sure she was really awake, though the throbbing in her legs told her she was.

She and Jorick were jammed inside a wooden box like a couple trying to spoon on a too small couch. Jorick lay half beside her and half beneath her. His legs were tangled with hers, and his long hair tickled her face. She thought again how roomy the large box had appeared last night when she'd agreed to this situation. The illusion of size had apparently been a trick because, after having slept in it, she found it too small and too confining.

After the fight last night, Kateesha's new henchmen had been charged with getting rid of all the bodies. While they'd been busy, Katelina had taken a sponge bath to mop off the worst of the blood and dirt. She'd told herself that it was enough, even though it really wasn't. Jorick and Oren had changed their clothes and gone to a gas station in a neighboring town where they'd bought her some food, antiseptic ointment, and a roll of gauze. Though she'd had nothing else to wear, they'd made her ride along, and when they got back Jorick had bandaged her wound, ignoring taunts from Torina all the while. Before dawn, Kateesha had invited them to stay the day. The coven's coffin stash was in the back rooms of the house, and she'd grandly allowed them to each choose their own.

Katelina thought bitterly about Kateesha and her motives. Oren's words were still fresh in her memory, "...she thirsts for power and for you." The idea of Kateesha "thirsting" for Jorick made her chest tighten and her stomach flip. A sliver of cold fear pierced her heart as she wondered what he thought about it. Did he want Kateesha too? She'd been made as his mate, but she was "too cruel". Did that mean that they'd been a pair until Jorick couldn't stand her cruelty anymore? What if she reformed? Would he give her another chance?

Jorick stirred next to her, interrupting her thoughts. Though she couldn't see him, she could hear the smile in his voice. "Good morning."

"It's hardly morning," she remarked sarcastically, though she tried to mask the bitterness she felt.

He gave a soft laugh. "It's morning for us, little one."

She grimaced at the nightmarish thought: to wake every day to a cold black sky; a literal dawn of darkness, devoid of sunlight. It sounded cheerless and bleak.

She tried to move again and her shoulder scraped the wall of the box. Pain shot down her arm and she drew a sharp hiss of air through her teeth. His concern was almost tangible so she quickly assured him. "I'm all right."

He murmured in acknowledgement and nuzzled his face against her neck. His cold lips slid over her skin and made her sigh. "Maybe we should stay in here all night," he whispered suggestively in her ear.

Her cheeks turned an unseen pink as imagined images played through her consciousness. "There isn't enough room for that."

"HMMMMM... You might be right." He nibbled on her ear, sending shivers down her spine. Despite her desire for him, she wasn't sure how she'd feel if they were actually intimate; whether

it would throw back to the terror she'd suffered at the hands of Claudius or not. And though she'd never admit it, even to herself, she was afraid of finding out.

A loud rap sounded on the lid above them and Oren's voice reverberated through the box, "Jorick, the sun is down. It is time to rise."

Jorick stayed silent, his lips still against her neck, but Oren pounded on the lid again. Jorick sighed heavily in resignation and called back grudgingly, "All right." He gave her neck a final kiss before he reached up and slid the lid to the side so that it clattered to the floor.

Katelina blinked in the bright light, her eyes used to the pitch black of the box. As she blinked, Oren slowly came into focus. He stood impatiently next to the box, looking down at them. His wounds from the previous night's battle were fully healed and his long golden hair was tamed back into a ponytail.

Jorick slid neatly from beneath her. He stood and stretched his sinewy body. Like Oren, his hurts were also healed; his face again flawless.

Katelina moved slowly and her stiff muscles complained. Jorick stood next to the box, his head cocked to one side as he watched her, a half grin on his face. She followed his gaze and jerked the neckline of her dress up to cover her exposed cleavage.

"You didn't have to do that," he teased and held a hand out to help her up.

She scowled, but accepted his offer. "I doubt Oren wants to see that."

"One never knows." He smirked as Katelina looked horrified and Oren muttered in annoyance. With a chuckle, he tugged her to her feet. "You need more practice at coffins."

She glared at him, but refrained from commenting.

Torina sashayed through the door, freshly dressed in a revealing dress of gold and robin's egg blue, her long red hair swept back from her face. She had a mound of deep red cloth draped over one arm and a tight smile on her lips. She held the dress out to Katelina. "I brought this for you - though," she glanced at Oren to make sure he was listening. "- we're going to have to get some more clothes. I'm nearly out."

Katelina took the clothing and unenthusiastically mumbled, "Thanks."

Torina nodded and took her brother's arm. "Come along, I'm sure she'd like her privacy." She led him out of the room and he obeyed willingly. Katelina watched them, amused at the sight of the fearsome vampire being led along like a child.

Once they were gone, Jorick slid the straps of the ruined green dress from her shoulders and let it drop carelessly to the wooden floor. He leaned down and kissed her; gently at first and then deepened it as he pressed her against him. She winced in pain and he released her quickly. His eyes danced away from hers and he murmured softly, "I'm sorry."

"That's okay." She offered him a smile as he let his gaze settle on her face.

"No. It isn't. I tend to forget that you don't heal as we do." His eyes reflected some unfathomable guilt.

"I almost wish I did - sort of," she added quickly, lest he take it as an invitation to make her one of the living dead.

"Do you really? Somehow I doubt that."

She shrugged her shoulders and left the rhetorical question unanswered.

He offered her another smile, though this one was tighter. "Come, get dressed, and then we will join the others. Kateesha will be setting up her new coven's order, and I have no desire to enjoy that spectacle."

"Me either." Thinking of Kateesha made her scowl darkly. "The only thing I want to see her do is find the pointy end of a stake."

“You are not alone in that opinion, little one.” He ruffled her hair before he stepped away. “Hurry and get dressed.”

She quickly put on the red dress and tried to stretch the material away from her skin. It was knee length and clingy with a flared skirt. Instead of straps it thankfully had sleeves, though they were only three-quarter length.

Jorick tilted his head. “Well, I have to admit it’s not as fetching as the last one, but it will suffice. Let’s join the others and leave this place.”

He’d said the words she’d been waiting to hear. She placed her hand in his and an eager smile broke over her face. “Anywhere but here,” she said emphatically and allowed him to lead her through the house and out the newly repaired front door.

The sky was a deep, royal purple. Streaks of red were still visible in the west, while diamond studded stars were already appearing in the east. It was late dusk, the magical time that is neither night nor day, when all of the monsters of one’s imagination began to creep from under the bed, preparing for the darkness. But she knew now that monsters didn’t always look like monsters.

They walked through the overgrown yard to the sidewalk where Oren stood. He leaned against the giant blue car with his arms crossed over his chest, the last of the dying day reflected in his strange golden eyes. His sister was half draped over the hood next to him. She stared past Jorick and Katelina as Kateesha swept out of the house and followed them.

“I see the human survived the night,” Kateesha commented lightly as she joined them. All eyes turned to her and everyone looked equally unenthusiastic to see the vampiress.

“Yes, Kateesha,” Jorick replied shortly. “Did you expect her to die in the coffin?”

“Well, one never knows with the frailty of mortals.” A cruel smile graced her lips.

“They are not that frail,” Jorick replied nastily. “What did you plan to do? Kill her while I slept? Even you can’t be foolish enough to murder a human who is under another’s protection?”

“Oh yes, I know that you’ve claimed her,” Kateesha scoffed, dismissing it in the same breath. “I was unaware that you held with such antiquated ideals. I assumed that since you refuse to follow the other Laws this one would be beneath you as well. Still, I suppose that not everyone can resist the temptation to claim a human slave.”

Oren pushed himself up from the car and strode to stand before her. “The oaths have been fulfilled, our time here is done.”

The dark vampiress turned her eyes back on Jorick. “Will you leave so easily?”

His voice was cold. “Yes, Kateesha. I owe you nothing more, nor do I want anything more from you.” He gazed at her meaningfully as he wrapped his arm around Katelina’s waist.

“That is such a shame, Jorick.” She closed the gap between them and trailed her fingers over his chest lustfully. “Think what we could accomplish together! You choose to fight it, but Malick made me for you. We are destined to be together.”

Jorick caught her hand and threw it away as though he’d been burned. “We share no destiny.”

Her eyes grew hard and brittle like sharp glass. “You would choose a mortal over me? And one who is substandard, no less?”

“I would choose death over you, Kateesha.” He squeezed Katelina even tighter, a wad of her red dress clenched tightly in his angry fist.

Kateesha’s perfect face twisted in fury. “Then so be it, Jorick. Our alliance ends here. When next we meet, you’ll get your wish!”

“I doubt that. Never forget who is the elder.” His hard features softened as he turned his attention to Katelina. “Come, little one,” he said and steered her towards the car.

She followed blindly; happy to go anywhere that took her away from the dark woman. Oren swung the door open and waited for them to climb in. She laid her hand on the metal frame and ducked her head to do just that, when a voice hissed inside her head, *“You will die, pathetic mortal. I will feast on your blood and your flesh, and when Jorick has forgotten that you ever lived I will have him as my willing slave.”*

Katelina spun around and glared at the gloating vampiress. “Fuck you,” she spat and then turned back and climbed into the backseat. Jorick gave her a curious glance, but chose not to comment as he slid in next to her. Torina and Oren were equally silent as they took their places, neither looking at the other as the car rumbled to life.

They drove down the road and Katelina stared out the window. Her eyes were locked on the tiny, dilapidated house where Kateesha still stood, surrounded by her four new followers. Under the flickering street lights, their shadows stretched long across the lawn, like clawing hands ever reaching.

Only when they made it to the highway did Oren speak. “She will pose a threat now.”

Jorick sighed. “She always has.”

“But, she will be more of a threat than ever. Once she has taken complete control of Claudius’ coven—”

“Let Kateesha go, she is not your battle. As you said, oaths have been fulfilled.” His eyes flicked to Torina. “One day she will be forced to pay for her transgressions.”

“That day will not come soon enough,” the redhead muttered under her breath before falling silent.

Raindrops soon pelted the windshield. Katelina closed her eyes and saw a half formed vision of Patrick; his blue eyes dancing with laughter, his shock of blonde hair an untidy mess. Kateesha’s voice echoed in her head, repeating words she’d spoken last night, *“You were only supposed to guard her, not fall in love with her! Did Patrick know?”*

She burrowed her head into Jorick’s side and willed the evil thoughts to leave her in peace. She wondered for the umpteenth time how she had come to be there. Why had she listened to that mysterious voice on the phone? Why hadn’t she stayed home where she belonged, away from walking nightmares and death? But she knew the answer, and it was no more comforting than the questions were.

They drove to yet another cheap ranch-style motel. A neon moon that read Star Dust Inn flickered off and on in the parking lot. As usual, they got rooms with no trouble, though Katelina began to wonder exactly what went on inside the motel offices. Jorick had been able to bend the staff of the hospital to his will. Was he applying the same trick to the motel management?

The bed was only slightly more sanitary than usual, but after the coffin and the long car ride it was a welcome sight. Katelina took a shower and emerged to find Jorick in the middle of rearranging the furniture.

She dropped onto the bed and cocked her head at him. “You never put it back, do you? I wonder what the staff thinks about it?”

“I don’t know.” He grinned teasingly. “Perhaps we should ask them?”

She rolled her eyes in reply and settled in. Jorick continued to eye the stack critically and then rearrange it, only to repeat the procedure again. He dropped his hands in surrender and

muttered dark obscenities to himself before he announced, "I don't think it's going to work. There isn't enough furniture."

"The bathtub?" she asked sorrowfully, but he shook his head to the negative.

"The floor should be all right. I think."

"You think?" she echoed. She wanted very much to ask him what would happen if it wasn't "all right", but she decided she didn't want to know. She still wasn't ready to accept that he was one of *them*.

Jorick stretched out on the floor on the far side of the bed. He gallantly declined both pillows and blankets. Katelina looked from Jorick's position to the jumbled pile before the window and hoped he was right. She didn't think she could deal with waking up to a pile of ashes.

"If not, I'll wake up and move. It won't kill me instantly," he assured her and she wondered at his too perfect perception. How many times had he answered her unspoken thoughts? For the second time in as many days, she worried that he could read her mind as Troy could.

Jorick's cheerful voice cut into her fears. "Best get some sleep."

She nodded in the darkness, but his words caused a fearful suspicion to fill her. "Why? What are we doing tomorrow?"

"Driving."

He gave no more details and she quickly made assumptions that involved more blood and death. "Driving where?"

She could almost hear the smile in his voice, but whether the mirth was at her trepidation or at the answer she didn't know. "Home."

The breath she'd been holding escaped in a sigh of relief. "So, no more battles?"

"No. Oren wants to wage a war on The Guild, and I've told him repeatedly that I won't be a part of it." His words were too good to be true.

"Really?"

Soft laughter filled the room. "Yes, really."

Katelina fell into a thoughtful silence and then asked, "Your home or mine?"

Jorick rolled his head to the side and studied her. "Which one do you prefer?"

She looked at her feet, uncertain. All she'd wanted was to go home and see her mother and pick up her life, but would that be a life that Jorick didn't follow her into? How would he fit into it? And, what about the police and all her injuries? If she showed up at home like this they'd certainly arrest him.

Though two weeks ago she'd have never imagined it, she found herself asking slowly, "Where's your home at?"

"Not far," he answered vaguely. "It's near the beach."

"The beach." Pictures rose to her mind of sand and palm trees, but she knew they were too far north for that.

She drew a deep breath and made up her mind. "The beach sounds like a good place to go while I wait for all of this to heal."

His smile seemed strange, but he nodded. "Then the beach it is."

She intended to go to sleep, but when she closed her eyes horrific memories played behind them. Last night she'd been too terrified of Kateesha to concentrate on anything else, but tonight the aftermath of the battle was upon her. The twisted face of a teenage boy swam before her, and his scream echoed through her ears. She fought to escape it, but was unable. Seeking comfort or distraction she asked softly, "Jorick?"

“Yes?”

The words were hard to find. “Last night... during the fight. That-that boy...” She was unable to finish, to say “that boy I killed.”

Jorick’s tone betrayed no emotion. “What about him?”

It was a good question and one she didn’t have an answer for. “I-I don’t know,” she confessed.

He sat up and gazed at her with weary eyes. “It’s all right. I know the first time you might feel-” he faltered.

“Guilty?” she suggested bitterly. “I killed someone. I mean – I don’t know. I can’t explain it.” She broke off, frustrated at her inability to express her thoughts. “Watching you, it’s different. It’s like it isn’t real – like a movie, you know? But that boy, it was like he was real. I could see his eyes. His blood was cold-”

Jorick interrupted her. “Had you not killed him, then I would have in order to keep him from killing you, so he’d have died either way. It makes no difference who delivered the blow.”

“But it does!” she exclaimed passionately. “At least to me.”

He laid a hand on her arm and squeezed it gently, then gave a resigned sigh and cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I understand. I was young the first time I killed someone and the guilt weighed on me heavily. But, in time it fades. You’ll soon forget.”

Her voice was a whisper. “I thought you said that nothing is forgotten?”

“Perhaps I exaggerated,” he admitted. “In time you’ll forget.”

“Will I?” she met his eyes and held them. “Have you?”

His answer was slow to come. “Yes and no. Over time I’ve become desensitized to death and to fighting. But I won’t lie to you. There are some wounds that never heal, no matter the years that pass.”

Though she gazed at him questioningly, the conversation was over. As if to prove it, he patted her arm and said firmly, “Don’t let it bother you anymore. Go to sleep. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

He settled back down on the floor, but she didn’t close her eyes. Instead she softly murmured, “Jorick?”

Though he didn’t sigh impatiently, she felt like he wanted to. “Yes?”

“Kateesha-”

He sat up again. “What about her?”

She found it hard to ask what she wanted to know. It seemed stupid and somehow possessive. “You and her... were you ever... you know...” she trailed off lamely and hoped he knew what she meant.

“Were we a couple?” he asked with amusement. “No, never. I told you, she doesn’t interest me. She’s too cruel.”

“Oh.”

When nothing else followed he asked quietly, “Anything else?”

She shook her head to the negative and Jorick lay back down, a small smile still on his lips. “Go to sleep, little one. Tomorrow everything will be better.”

“I hope so,” she muttered. Though her voice held no conviction, she was really clinging to the slender hope that he was right.

She closed her eyes and tried to go to sleep, but the scene in her mind refused to change. The battle raged. The boy died. Claudius was beheaded. Kateesha dug through the pile of corpses for her meal. As Katelina re-witnessed the last scene, she could hear Oren’s words: “She won’t

stop until she gets what she wants.” Suddenly, Katelina was sure that Jorick was wrong and Oren was right. No matter how much they wanted it to be over it wasn’t the end; only the beginning.



**LOOK FOR LEGACY OF GHOSTS, THE EXCITING CONTINUATION OF THE
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About the Author

Joleene Naylor is the author of the glitter-less *Amaranthine* series, a world where vampires aren't for children. As a compliment to the novel series, she has also written several short story collections and the *Amaranthine Files* encyclopedia..

In what little time is left she watches anime and updates her blogs, all from a crooked Victorian house in Villisca, Iowa. Between her husband and her pets, she is never lonely, and should she ever disappear one might look for her on a beach in Tahiti, sipping a tropical drink and wearing a disguise.

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PREVIEW OF BOOK 2: LEGACY OF GHOSTS:



Chapter One

Katelina woke with the taste of a bad dream in her mouth. She shivered in the slowly deepening darkness and looked around the motel room. All of the furniture, save the bed, was stacked in front of the window to block out the sun. But the pile was too small and the last light of a November day splashed around it and onto the bed.

Katelina glanced over to the figure stretched out on the floor, safely out of the way of the sunlight. His long dark hair was fanned out against the ugly carpet and his usually warm eyes were closed in sleep. His lashes rested on his pale, flawless cheeks. He was beautiful; too beautiful, really. She guessed that should've been her first clue to his true identity. When she'd met him, she'd stupidly thought he was human, like she was, but she'd been wrong. Jorick was one of them.

A vampire.

It had been almost two weeks since Katelina's world had been turned upside down by a single phone call. In the days since, she'd learned a lot. Not only were vampires real, but her friend Patrick had been involved with them. In fact his brother, who'd murdered him, had been a vampire.

They were lessons that came at a heavy price. Her best friend Sarah had been killed, and Katelina had barely escaped death herself. Now, she and Jorick were staying in a cheap motel and waiting for the sun to go down so they could travel to his home. Not that she was sure where that was, beyond the description "near the beach". As long as it was quiet, she didn't care.

She slipped from the bed and stole quietly to the bathroom where she shed her clothes and climbed into the shower. As she washed herself, her mind replayed scenes behind her eyelids. Arowenia; the dead child bride. Claudius's den; the torture she'd endured, her rescue, and then the final battle at the dilapidated house where Claudius had been beheaded and Kateesha, an evil vampiress, had claimed his coven.

It had been Claudius who'd hunted Katelina. Claudius who'd killed Sarah and ransacked her house. Claudius who'd ruined everything. Now that he was dead she should have been safe. Instead, she had to fear Kateesha and her jealous lust for Jorick, despite his assurances that they would be all right.

She dried off and examined herself in the mirror. As she thought about Jorick, her eyes went straight to the spot above her collar bone that bore his "mark"; a set of fang marks with a lopsided cross scratched beneath it. When it healed it would leave a scar, but she supposed that was the point: a vampire mark to claim her as his property, or his human slave as Kateesha called it. It was funny, in an ironic way, that the claiming was one of the things that made Kateesha so angry, and yet he'd only done it to make Katelina "legal" and save her from a vampire execution squad.

Katelina dismissed the bad memories and swept her gaze over what was left of her injuries from Claudius and his men. Her black eye was faded and the lump on her head was almost gone.

The other bruises were colored in greens and yellows, like a finger-painting gone bad. The worst was her shoulder. The skin was pink and puckered around the stitches and itched – a sign it was healing, or so her mother always said. If only the uneasiness would heal, as well.

Katelina brushed out her long, blonde hair and put on her clothes. The red dress, borrowed from another vampiress, clung to her. She tugged uselessly at it as she walked back into the bedroom. There, she found the sunlight gone and Jorick awake. He'd partially disassembled the stack of furniture and now sat in a wicker chair, wearing nothing but a pair of faded blue jeans.

“Good morning.” He gave her a warm smile that flashed his shining fangs. “Did you sleep well?”

She answered with a halfhearted shrug and noticed that he had the gauze and ointment laid out on the small table. “You’re playing doctor again?”

“At every opportunity,” he murmured meaningfully. He smirked as she blushed, and indicated the empty chair opposite him. “Sit down and we’ll get started.”

With her cheeks still pink, she did as he asked. Gently, he treated and bandaged her hurts. His lingering fingers did little to calm her pounding heart, but something in the way he watched her made her cautious. He peered at her from underneath his eyelids expectantly, but she didn’t know what he was waiting for.

He finished in silence and leaned back in his chair. She cleared her throat noisily, just for the sound, and he finally relented. “I just wondered if you hadn’t changed your mind about going home.”

She shook her head no and held up her bandaged arms. “I can’t go home like this. What would my mom say? I may be an adult, but can you imagine the hysterical fit she’d have, anyway?”

Jorick nodded and commented casually, “Yes, but someone’s listed you as a missing person. Perhaps…” he broke off and gestured with his hand to dismiss the conversation. “If you’re sure, then it’s fine with me.” He flashed a tight smile. “How long do you plan to stay away from home?”

“Until I’m healed up, I expect.” She frowned as she tried to figure up the date. “It’s almost Halloween now, isn’t it?”

Jorick shrugged his shoulders. “The last time I noticed the date was August.”

“August?” she demanded incredulously, then rolled her eyes. “Never mind. There should be something.” She stared uselessly around the motel room, then noticed the room receipt crumpled on floor. She scooped it up, and smoothed the yellow paper. “It’s-” a pause. “November first?”

She added dates up in her head, but came to no conclusion before a knock sounded on the door, followed by the call, “It’s Oren.”

Jorick shrugged his shoulders and stood. “November sounds right.” He moved to the door and flipped the row of locks. “Come in.”

Jorick’s fledgling, a tall vampire with tawny hair and amber eyes, strolled into the room. It wasn’t just his coloring, but his mannerisms that made Katelina think of a lion. Though his long hair was tamed back in a ponytail and he wore a button down shirt tucked into jeans, there always seemed to be something just barely contained about the man. She wasn’t sure she liked that.

Oren strolled to the middle of the room and glanced from Katelina to Jorick, his face serious. “I think we soon come to a parting.” He held Jorick’s gaze. “Unless you wish to join my sister and me?”

Jorick shook his head. “No, Oren.” His eyes flicked to Katelina and then back. “My fight was with Claudius, and it’s over now. I have no reason to war against The Guild.”

Oren’s jaw tightened at the mention of the vampire government. “Yes, I know. It wasn’t your wife and children that they burned.” He quickly composed himself. “I apologize. The fault isn’t yours, and I don’t seek to change your mind. I cannot deny, however, that you’d be an asset. A former Executioner; one whose blood is older than any who currently hold that title.”

Jorick held up a hand to stop him. “Perhaps. But this isn’t my fight - at least, not yet.” He motioned to Katelina. “She’s injured and needs time to heal both her body and mind and digest all that’s happened. I’m sorry, but that must be my priority, right now.” He added, wryly, “After all, I’m the one who brought her into this, as you’ve so eloquently reminded me many times.”

Oren didn’t look defeated or disappointed, only unhappily satisfied. “I feared you’d say that.” He met Jorick’s gaze, his spine straight. “I will not try to dissuade you from the path you’ve chosen. You’ve rarely done so to me, and I’ll return the favor.” He turned and started towards the door, but stopped just before it. “If ever you wish to join us, there will be a place of honor for you.” The invitation hung in that air like a tangible object that Katelina wanted to reach up and brush away.

“I know, Oren,” Jorick replied, looking past the offer with another tight smile.

Oren nodded crisply. “I’ll take you as far as your den, but then I have other things I need to see to.”

“I appreciate it.” Jorick moved next to Katelina and placed a hand on her shoulder. “And I wish you luck.”

Oren nodded to himself. “We will need more than luck.” Then he added, “We can feed your human on the way.”

Before either of them could reply, he was gone and the door closed behind him. Katelina let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She’d been afraid that Jorick would change his mind and agree to go with them into another battle. She was sick of fighting and killing and blood. If he’d said he’d go then – then what? Would she turn and run home, leaving him alone? She didn’t know, but luckily she didn’t have to find out.

Jorick packed what little they had with them in a wrinkled shopping bag. He double checked the room over and, without bothering to unstack the rest of the furniture, they headed out into the night. The air was damp and cold. It cut through Katelina’s borrowed dress as if it was made of tissue paper. Oren’s giant blue car was almost a welcome sight and Katelina slipped into the backseat without comment.

She settled back and wrapped her arms around herself, shivering. Jorick climbed in, but she didn’t bother to lean against him for warmth. Until a vampire fed their skin was icy cold. It was only the heat of someone else’s blood that gave them warmth.

Fed.

The word made her shudder instinctively. She’d accepted the reality of vampires because she had no choice. All she had to do was look around and the proof was staring at her with glittering too-beautiful eyes. But somewhere, deep inside, was a Katelina who believed in computers, fast food, Twinkies, and concrete, and that Katelina didn’t like to think about anyone “feeding” on blood. In fact, that Katelina didn’t like to think about anything that had happened since she’d last been at work, two weeks ago.

She looked towards the motel to see Oren accompanied by his sister, a curvy red headed vampiress. Torina’s long wavy hair bounced freely around her shoulders and her hips swayed under a slinky dress. Her full lips were moving, but Katelina couldn’t hear the words.

The pair climbed into the front seat and Torina glanced back over her shoulder. She gave Jorick a once over, pointedly ignoring Katelina. “You’re all ready?”

Jorick made a noise in his throat. “Yes. We’re ready.”

Torina dismissed them both and turned back to her brother. “As I was saying, we should move quickly.”

Katelina cringed, but Jorick laid his arm casually over her shoulders and he gave her a smile, as if to say, “Don’t worry.”

Oren started the car and dropped it into gear. “We’ll make our plans later, Torina.”

“There shouldn’t be too many plans to make. We kill whoever gets in our way and then I’ll rip out Kateesha’s throat.”

“Kateesha?” Oren asked, surprised. “Our war is with The Guild. She isn’t a part of the plan.”

“She’s part of my plan,” Torina growled. “I owe her a debt, and it’s long overdue.”

Oren sighed heavily. “His blood is cold, leave it that way.”

Katelina looked at Jorick questioningly, but he made no sign he’d heard the conversation. She poked him in the ribs, but he ignored that, too.

Torina’s green eyes flashed and she snarled, “I could say the same of you, brother!”

With those words the car fell into a sickeningly tense silence. Jorick gave Katelina a halfhearted smile before he turned to stare through the window at the town that slipped past. She wished they’d at least turn on the radio, but couldn’t bring herself to suggest it. There were too many memories running around her head for her to feel any kind of peace.

Though the vampires returned from an early gas station break, looking warmed and fed, it was nearly eight o’clock before Oren remembered his promise to “feed the human” and stopped at a fast food place. It was after they parked that Oren mentioned drive through, but Jorick assured him it was fine.

“I don’t mind going in.” He swung the heavy car door open. “I’ll be right back.”

Katelina thought about going with him, but she didn’t want anyone to see her all banged up, so she tried to pretend that she was comfortable being left alone with Oren and Torina. Not that she thought they’d kill her, particularly, but she didn’t know what to say.

She watched Jorick lope across the parking lot, his hands in his pockets, and disappear inside the building. The door was decidedly uninteresting on its own, so she stared down at her folded hands and willed Jorick to hurry.

Oren was equally stiff. He stared through the windshield at his own secret world. Silence settled over the three of them in a deep mantle, and only Torina was brash enough to break it. She turned around, glared at Katelina, and said pointedly, “Jorick has done much on your behalf. I hope that you appreciate it.”

Katelina’s mouth opened, but no reply came. It was like a scene from a bad date movie, only the characters were all wrong.

Oren cut in, “Leave it.”

“I only think someone should mention it,” Torina purred softly. “It isn’t every day that one of the old Executioners – and Jorick, no less - sacrifices anything for a...” she paused. “Mortal. He hasn’t had a lover in many years. And *she* wasn’t of the mortal variety.”

“I said leave it!” Oren snapped firmly.

“Think about it! The way that ended, who would think he’d ever look to a mortal for companionship?”

“Torina,” Oren hissed without looking at her. “Stop.”

“Why?” Torina demanded. “You didn’t tell Kateesha what not to say!”

“Because I’m not responsible for Kateesha or the foolish things she says.”

Katelina tried to disappear into the upholstery of the backseat, and it seemed to work as they continued their battle.

Torina snorted sarcastically “The same as you were responsible for Jesslynn?”

Oren’s eyes grew hard and skipped away from her and back to the windshield. “Yes, Torina,” he replied, his tone as cold as his eyes. “The same.”

Torina’s voice softened, though her words didn’t. “You have no one to blame but yourself, and you know it. You should never have allowed her to turn the children.”

“Enough! We’re finished!” He turned his head and stared through the driver’s side window, his face white with fury.

Torina growled low, and muttered something under her breath before she turned to face the front. She sat with her back rigid and her arms crossed over her chest, glaring at the night outside.

Katelina tried not to think about Torina’s words. A pang of jealousy tore through her chest at the word “lover”. She tried to talk herself out of it, but it made the gnawing in her stomach worse, so she turned to logic. “*Jorick is obviously...*” she paused as she tried to find a description that didn’t bother her, and settled on “old”. Yes, Jorick was old, and it was stupid of her to assume he’d always been single. Still, the thought of him with another woman made her feel... what? Uncomfortable? And Torina’s other words didn’t help. Actually, it wasn’t just Torina, but everyone. Their surprise when they saw her, the sneer in their voices when they remarked that Jorick had a “human”, like she was a diseased house pet that shouldn’t be taken in public. And then Kateesha had gone out of her way to remind her that, even as humans went, she was pretty much just a garden variety woman. It made her wonder what Jorick saw in her; if, in fact, he saw anything.

She was still musing on dark thoughts when Jorick returned with a “to go” bag in his hand that smelled of hamburger and soggy French fries. She took it gratefully, and started eating before the car was even in gear. She’d never been so tired of being hungry before in her life! It was like the near starvation diet she’d gone on right after high school, except there didn’t seem to be a way to give up and eat a whole carton of ice cream. Jorick was the only one that remembered she needed food, and he seemed to think she only needed it once a night. Feeding once nightly seemed to be the vampire standard; but she wasn’t a vampire.

Time disappeared into the primordial vacuum that was a car trip. Katelina’s mind turned to jelly as she gazed out the window, ready to weep from the complete lack of stimulus. Her companions had all fallen into strange worlds of their own: Jorick had lapsed into one of the dark, brooding silences that so punctuated her time with him. Torina stared through the windshield, a smile curving her full, pouty lips and Oren scowled at the road as if it had angered him. Katelina couldn’t help but think that as far as “road trip” companions went, these three ranked only slightly higher than dead hamsters and moldy socks.

When they passed the “Welcome to Maine” sign it gave her a chance to comment, but no one really cared, and the conversation died quickly. Just when she contemplated screaming for the shock value, they turned onto a well worn side road. The hope of a journey’s end made her suddenly alert, and she was too busy trying to pick details out of the darkness to worry about the others anymore.

The headlights landed on a rusty mailbox that leaned crookedly at the end of a long driveway. The sight did little for Katelina’s optimism, and then she saw the back side of the

small weathered house and her heart sank. The house sat in the middle of an untidy yard and some distance in front of it was a thick stand of unruly trees, almost like a miniature forest that she couldn't see beyond. If she'd been hoping for something modern and nice, then she was disappointed.

The car came to a stop where the gravel driveway faded into a tangle of weeds. Oren spoke quietly without looking back at them, "Here you are, Jorick." He took a tense breath and exhaled slowly. "I'd ask you to reconsider, but I know it's pointless."

"Yes," Jorick agreed. "It is." He collected the plastic bag of belongings and motioned Katelina to get out. "I appreciate the ride, and if you wish, you and Torina may pass the day here."

Oren tried to smile, but it was a poor imitation. "No, I'm afraid we must use the hours remaining us to reach our destination. I thank you for the offer, none the less."

"Then it is as it is," Jorick said simply. He opened the door and a blast of icy air rushed in. "I wish you well, and when we meet again I hope there is an end to this."

"As do I."

Without a reply, Jorick climbed out of the car and Katelina made to follow him when Torina cried vehemently, "It wouldn't hurt you to help!"

"Torina," Oren said softly. "Let him go."

"But look at all you've done for him!" she insisted. "The least he could do is--"

Oren interrupted her, but spoke calmly. "What I have done, I have done for myself." He looked over his shoulder at Katelina and commented without any real conviction, "May we meet again."

Katelina climbed out, feeling both cold and uncomfortable. She took her place next to Jorick and they watched the car reverse to the road. As it turned around, Torina wound down her window and called back, "When you've gotten your fill of your new pet, Jorick, you can join us."

He grunted in reply as the car found the road and disappeared. Soon, even the sound of the motor faded, as if it had never been there at all.

An icy blast of wind shook the trees and rattled the dry grass eerily. Katelina shivered, and it seemed to draw Jorick back to the present. With another wordless grunt he took her hand and led her slowly to the front of the house. "Look at this," he muttered. "Look at the state of this place."

Katelina didn't reply, only followed him onto the small porch and waited as he fished a ring of keys out of his pocket. She marveled at his "magic" pockets. He always seemed to be pulling something out of them, and yet she never saw the telltale pile of belongings that men left on the dresser tops when they went to bed. What did he do? Just leave the stuff in there and transfer it from one pair of jeans to the next?

The door opened and she hurried inside to find that it was nearly as cold as it had been outdoors.

Jorick sniffed the air and muttered darkly, "Stale." He flipped the light switch and exclaimed with grudging surprise, "At least the electricity is still on."

Katelina's eyes swept the room. It was stuffed with antique furniture: a sideboard, a curio cabinet, a collection of stands, a secretary, a set of slender wing backed chairs, and a low couch that sat under the front window. The floor was wooden, but two large rugs in mismatched patterns covered most of it. A stone fireplace stood black and waiting in the corner and gave Katelina some hope that heat was coming, however, it was not the most prominent feature of the room. The thing that stood out the most was the books. They were piled everywhere; on the

stands, in towering heaps on the floor, even in one of the chairs. Their jackets ranged from shiny and new to old and worn, with no discernible rhyme or reason to their locations.

Jorick continued to mutter unintelligibly as he walked through a wide doorway and into the rest of the house, switching on the lights as he went. Katelina followed close on his heels as each room was revealed: a dining room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. All were overrun with dusty books stacked at odd angles. It was almost as if they'd been discarded randomly as they were finished.

The house looped around on itself so that, as they walked down a narrow hallway, they were facing the front again. The small hall ended at two doors; one literally at the end and a white painted one to the left. They came to a stop and Jorick fell silent. He stared at the white door as if it might eat them both. When nothing happened, he cleared his throat noisily and glanced back at her. "You should go make yourself comfortable."

"Make myself comfortable?" she echoed uncertainly.

He nodded absently and fished the ring of keys from his pocket. He slid the appropriate one into the door's lock and addressed her without meeting her eyes. "Yes. Start a fire or something. I suppose it's probably cold in here."

"Well, now that you mention it-" she got no further before he swung the door inward and disappeared through it. "Hey! I don't really know how to-" but the door closed after him, effectively shutting her out.

"Jorick?"

The only answer was a loud click as the door was locked from the inside.

"What in the hell?" She stared at the white door, her brow creased in anger. Not only was his behavior odd, but it was insulting! She couldn't imagine what he'd be doing in the room that required such secrecy, and the idea that he'd go to the bother of locking her out made it worse. Did he think she'd bust in on him?

She marched to the front room and stood uselessly in the middle of the floor. How long was he going to be in there? She was cold and didn't know how to start a fire. Then again, how hard could it really be? All she needed was wood and matches, right?

Three logs lay in a basket next to the hearth and a book of matches was discarded on the mantle. With angry determination, she knelt next to the fireplace and carefully lifted the logs inside. She ripped a match from the book, struck it, and held it to the crumbling bark of one of the logs.

It took four matches, but soon infant flames licked the dry wood. She leaned back on her haunches with a feeling of pride as the fire slowly grew. "Ha, Jorick! Take that!"

She took turns warming different parts of her body, then curled up on the rug before the hearth and watched the flames. Her mind wandered, unbidden, to another fire she'd seen recently. The memories of painful screams echoed in her ears and she unconsciously put her hands to her head, as if to silence them.

Desperate for distraction, she grabbed a book from the stack that leaned precariously against the coffee table. The title was faded from the worn cover and the peeling spine. She wondered if it had been read too many times or simply neglected.

Restlessly, she flipped the yellowed pages, back to front. When she reached the inside of the front cover she found smeared, spidery writing. Further examination revealed the name "Jorick" and the date "December, 1875".

With a soft shudder she snapped the book closed and put it back where she'd gotten it. The last thing she wanted right now was a reminder of what he really was, so she turned to the puzzle of their location. The matchbook on the fireplace said "Stop N Shop – open 24 hours, Venice

Maryland”, but they were most certainly in Maine. Her brow furrowed as she tried to organize the jumble of states in her mind. She remembered that they’d been in New Hampshire at some point, though she didn’t know where Maine, or even Maryland, was in relationship to it. She should have paid more attention back when she’d been in school, but why should she when there was always a map; in the glove box, or on the computer, or in a book, or even on her cell phone. Only- surprise! - there wasn’t a map now. Why had no one ever mentioned the possibility of being cut off?

She waited impatiently for Jorick, and when he didn’t come she went back to the books. When that got boring she stretched out on the rug and closed her eyes. She banished everything from her mind except a repeating cycle of song lyrics, and let herself drift on warm tides towards a drowsy sleep.

When Jorick woke her, the fire had all but burned itself to smoldering coals and the chill was back. “Come, little one,” he said softly, his hand on her arm. “The sun will be upon us soon.”

Katelina sat up and glared at him. Irritatingly, his attitude said that he saw nothing wrong with shutting her out of his little “secret room” earlier. “Let me guess,” she bit off sarcastically. “You have a coffin in the basement?”

He laughed for the first time since they’d arrived, and she wasn’t sure if it annoyed her or made her feel better. “As a matter of fact I do, but it’s for company. I have a bedroom down there as well, and that’s where I’m going to sleep.” He offered her a grin. “If you’d rather try the coffin though, be my guest.”

“No, thank you.” She let him help her to her feet and automatically straightened the red dress.

He ignored her frosty tone and gave her a wink. “Don’t worry. You can take that off soon enough.”

A plethora of sarcastic replies rose up in her, but before she could choose one they were already walking through the house, leaving a trail of darkness behind them as Jorick turned the lights out.

She followed him to the door at the very end of the narrow hallway. It opened to reveal a landing and a set of stairs that led down to a semi-finished basement. The walls were painted white, but the floor was still cold concrete. A large, cobwebbed furnace squatted in one corner near a sagging shelving unit. Boxes and bits of broken furniture were gathered in random pockets, and, just as Jorick had said, a large black coffin sat off to the right, near two doors.

It was to one of the doors that Jorick led her. Inside was a bedroom stuffed with a heavy wardrobe and a large carved four-poster bed hung with blood red curtains. Katelina stared at it and her lip curled in disbelief. “Someone has flamboyant taste. Could you get any more textbook cliché?” Even as she spoke, she wondered how he could have gotten the thing down stairs and into the room.

“A souvenir from years long gone.” He ran his hand over the footboard as if it were a lover he hadn’t seen in months. “The only piece of furniture I’ve had since before.”

He stripped off his clothes, distracting her from a sarcastic remark about the nature of his relationship with his bed. Each piece of clothing fell to the floor to reveal an expanse of perfect, pale skin that made her heart catch in her chest, despite her anger.

He didn’t bother with pajamas, only turned back the covers on the bed. He frowned down at the sheets and muttered something that sounded like, “He didn’t even change the bedding!”

“What?”

Jorick dismissed it as unimportant and lay down. He settled himself and then looked to Katelina, who still stood just inside the door. “Are you coming?” His tone was amused. “Or would you rather watch me sleep?”

“Maybe,” she muttered, but her false bravado did nothing for the blush that crept into her cheeks. The idea of him watching her strip off, like she’d just watched him, made her stomach churn nervously. Maybe it made her a prude, or just shy, but she didn’t like anyone to see her naked. “No, I’m coming.”

“Good.” His voice switched to an almost false innocence, “Then get the light, would you?”

She gratefully found the light switch and flicked it off before she removed her dress. She crossed the pitch black room slowly, until her seeking fingers found the bed, then she slipped under the covers.

When she was settled, Jorick pulled her against him, and kissed her neck softly. “Sleep well.”

Another snappy reply came to mind, but she dismissed it. They could fight tomorrow, if that’s how it was going to be. For now, she could let it go.

“You too,” she said quietly and snuggled closer to him. Yes, tomorrow they could deal with everything. Tonight, in a real bed at last, she could just pretend it didn’t matter.

