

D. S. WILLIAMS



KNOWLEDGE REVEALED

THE NEMEMIAH CHRONICLES
BOOK ONE

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CONTENTS

Prologue

1. Endings
2. Questions
3. The Falls
4. Introductions
5. Decision Time
6. Dreams, or Nightmares?
7. Rowena
8. Visions
9. Secrets Revealed
10. Recovery
11. Generosity
12. Ghosts from the Past
13. Cravings
14. Cooking 101
15. Imprinting
16. Warnings
17. Waiting Game
18. The Minutes Tick by Slowly
19. Options
20. Exile
21. Thirst
22. Reunion
23. Surgery
24. Spirits Released
25. The Bet
26. Billings
27. Options
28. Wedding Preparations
29. Puckhaber Falls
30. Jealousies
31. Considerations of Murder
32. Gerard DuBonet

33. [Danger](#)

[Next in the Series](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by the Author](#)

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*To my husband, Steve.
You've believed in me, encouraged me and supported me through
this entire adventure.
Without your unconditional love and confidence in my abilities, I
would never have been brave enough to take this step.
Thank you.*

PROLOGUE

I took one last glance around the minuscule living room of the stone cottage, making up my mind on the spot. I was aware of the realtor behind me, her eyes focused on my back as I deliberated. She'd no doubt struggled to rent this place for months; it was unkempt, old-fashioned, and tiny. And perfect for my needs.

When I turned around her eyes were fixed on me, her countenance hopeful. She looked faintly ridiculous in a claret skirt, tailored white shirt, and sky-high heels – which had dug into the muddy ground as we made our way inside just a few minutes ago. I mentally reprimanded myself for being so judgmental, the realtor had been friendly and polite from the outset, introducing herself as Maude Yeardley – and it wasn't her fault I'd chosen to view a house in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by dirt and mud. "I'll take it."

Was that relief on her face? I wondered idly. It seemed my assumption had been correct and she'd had this one on her books for a considerable period.

On the drive back to the tiny township of Puckhaber Falls, Maude made small talk, giving me information about the locality, advice about the residents and gossip. Mainly gossip. Besides being the town's lone realtor, she apparently knew the personal business of

every single inhabitant. It didn't matter to me. My stay here wouldn't be a social event, so to be honest; I didn't really care one way or the other. I would see as little as possible of the other nine hundred and forty two inhabitants and my stay would be as brief as I could manage.

My only intention in Puckhaber Falls was to work up the courage to kill myself, and release my soul from the never-ending pain I'd endured for the past two years.

CHAPTER I

ENDINGS

Moving into my new residence took a remarkably short period – my needs were few, my possession crammed in the back of my '68 Volkswagen Beetle. A duffel bag contained my wardrobe in its entirety, consisting of faded denim jeans, t-shirts, and sweaters. I'd never been particularly fashion conscious and this lack of awareness had increased exponentially in recent months; to the point where I threw on clothes each day with little regard for what I was wearing. I hadn't glanced at a mirror for months – I didn't care what I looked like or how other people perceived me.

A second bag contained my meager linen supplies; a couple of tea towels, two bath towels, a mat for the bathroom floor. There were no sheets, my only bedding requirements being a sleeping bag and a pillow. I never slept a lot anyway.

One box was unpacked in the kitchen – containing a saucepan, a skillet, and a battered old kettle. My eating utensils – a fork, a spoon, and a knife. And of course, a can opener. My meals consisted mainly of cans, which could be opened, contents thrown into a saucepan, and heated. I owned one plate, one bowl and a mug. There'd never been a need for more than that in my travels, as I didn't entertain and never invited visitors to my latest residence.

The bedroom took minutes to arrange – by the time I'd assembled the camp stretcher, thrown a sleeping bag and pillow on top of it, and tipped the empty box from the kitchen upside down to perform as a bedside table, I was done. My favorite books – *Wuthering Heights*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Jane Eyre* and a compendium of William Shakespeare – were placed on top of the box for the nights when sleep too often eluded me.

In the living room, I unpacked my most treasured possessions – a foldable easel, tubes of paint in many colors, a palette, and my brushes – all the assorted paraphernalia I needed to earn a small income. Later in the week, I would locate the nearest Goodwill and seek out a cheap armchair to complete my furnishings.

Once I'd finished unpacking and arranging the little cottage, I stood back to admire my handiwork, satisfied that everything had a place. Not that there was a lot of room, the cottage consisted of one miniscule bedroom, a tiny living area, a small kitchen and a bathroom. The inside was reasonably clean, the outside remarkably overgrown. Located on the outskirts of Puckhaber Falls, the cottage stood at the northernmost end of town, located off the interstate and hidden down a short gravel drive. There were three quarters of a mile between the nearest neighbor and myself – exactly the way I liked it. Alone was my preferred place to be. My last stop had been in North Dakota and I'd stayed three months, in another small town. I'd stayed until the locals got too friendly – when people began to know my name, it was time to get out of Dodge.

The goodbyes were always the same – people who considered themselves my friends, waving farewell. I went through the motions each time, saying and doing all the right things, to let them believe I was sorry to be leaving. It was a lie. The only emotion I felt as I

promised to write, or email or call was relief. Relief to be escaping sentiments I was no longer capable of feeling.

I was drawn to the peace and quiet of small towns; the isolation helped me to stay aloof, and I preferred the ambiance. I would invariably do as I'd done here in Puckhaber Falls – drive into town, locate a realtor, lease something small and out of the way. I didn't want neighbors, didn't need people peeking at me from across the road, or trying to strike up a conversation by the mailbox. I didn't want people to know me. I would only lease something if I could take it on a monthly basis, avoiding a long-term commitment. In the back of my mind was the conviction that I wouldn't be on this earth long, and why complicate matters by letting a realtor think she had a long-term tenant? I preferred a four-week window of opportunity to escape, should my plans to depart this life not come to fruition as soon as I would like.

I avoided friendliness, couldn't permit people to know my inner character. The outer shell of my psyche remained firm, castle walls and battalions holding strong against the possibility of a breach. Behind the castle walls was somewhere no one was permitted. How could I allow it? Behind my strong borders was a tumult of ferocious emotions, flowing like a vortex around my crushed heart. Nobody was allowed to peek behind the walls to discover the inner agony. I couldn't allow anyone in, wouldn't consider loving someone, caring for anyone. I had no heart left to care. My heart had been destroyed two years ago and now I wandered the country, a fragile shell of humanity, seeking a way to end my life.

I prepared dinner – a can of beef ravioli, heated on the dilapidated stovetop which was probably older than I was. My needs in the last months of my life were simple, although I did use my manners and tipped the saucepan's contents into a bowl before I

perched on the porch steps outside to eat. I reminded myself again about the need for a chair.

Darkness was already falling in this northern area, abetted by the canopy of ancient trees surrounding my new home, casting deep shadows around the cottage. The porch light wasn't working, but a cheery pool of light flowed from inside, allowing me to see my meal.

Tomorrow I would drive into town, pick up some supplies, and approach the small craft store to see if they'd be willing to sell my paintings. This had been my approach in numerous moves over the past two years, usually affording a small income to supplement the meager funds in my bank account. If things appeared promising, I'd find that Goodwill and buy an armchair. If things didn't seem promising, there was always the little porch to sit on until I figured something out. My grandmother used to say something would turn up when you least expected it and I heard her voice, using the idiom I'd heard repeatedly before she died. For a split second I dwelled on the memory, then pushed it back into the tidy box where I stored all the things I didn't want to think about.

A deep sigh escaped my lips as the last light disappeared on the horizon. It was peaceful and as the darkness deepened, sounds from the forest caught my attention. Small animals had crept from their daylight hiding places to forage and a wolf bayed in the velvety night. The air was heavy with the scent of pine and the musty rich scent of damp earth.

It was so quiet, I could hear the gentle splash of water from a nearby river. I wondered idly if this was the water source, leading to the falls for which the town had presumably been named. The forest seemed the ideal place to hike, somewhere to go and think in peace. As peaceful as my chaotic mind ever allowed, at least.

I stood up and yawned before walking inside, letting the screen door bang behind me. It had been a long day and I hoped the extreme weariness consuming me was a promising sign. I'd fought insomnia for so long now, exhaustion had become second nature; but I hoped the long drive from North Dakota might aid in achieving at least a couple of hours of unbroken sleep.

I washed up the dishes, brushed my teeth, and slipped into the cold sleeping bag, rubbing my feet back and forth to create a warm patch. For a long time I lay curled on my side, listening to the strange sounds from the forest outside and trying to distinguish one creature from another. I heard a wolf again, and then a second, and it seemed they were calling to each other across the darkened forest, seeking one another in the inky blackness.

Close to the window came scuffling sounds, as though some woodland inhabitant was investigating my arrival. I wondered what it was. Perhaps a squirrel or maybe a skunk. Whichever it turned out to be didn't matter; I had no fear of the forest or what lay within its boundaries. I was happy to share my world with the animals. They asked no questions, sought no responses, and didn't give a damn for what I was thinking.

When I eventually fell into a restless sleep, my nightmares were filled with memories that could be suppressed during the day, but not in the long hours of night.



"You must be the new girl." It was issued as a statement rather than question and she was openly curious as she smiled from behind the counter in the local grocery store. "I'm Lonnie Stewart."

I smiled weakly. "Charlotte Duncan." I didn't bother adding that people more often than not called me Lottie. For starters, I wasn't planning on being any friendlier than I needed to be and secondly – well, 'Lottie and Lonnie' just sounded like some lame television program for preschoolers.

Lonnie was about my age, with silky auburn hair drawn into a ponytail, clear brown eyes, and a trim figure beneath a navy smock. 'Puckhaber Quikmart' was embroidered on the left lapel. She had a smattering of golden freckles across the bridge of her nose and long dark eyelashes which would never need the artificial assistance of mascara.

"That's a real pretty name; Scottish, isn't it? Maude told us you were new here; you're renting the old Maccock place." Apparently, this didn't require a response as she went on without pause. "We live a couple of miles away in Cyprus View – you're pretty isolated out there." I nodded, packing my groceries into a canvas bag as she continued chatting. "You look about the same age as me; I'm going to be twenty in January. How old are you?"

"I turned twenty last month." Alarm bells were clanging a dire warning inside my head – Lonnie Stewart was looking for a new friend. In all the wrong places.

"Are you going to attend the community college? I'm studying veterinary science and I work here part time to help out with tuition," she announced brightly.

"No, I'm not."

Lonnie appeared disappointed. "Oh, that's too bad; I could have introduced you around." A frown creased her pretty features for a moment, disappearing as quickly as it had emerged when her eyes brightened with sudden enthusiasm. "I know! You can come to Jim's party on Friday night!"

Her unexpected invitation caught me on the hop. I hadn't anticipated it and didn't have a ready excuse on the tip of my tongue. I stood there, utterly tongue-tied – staring blankly as I tried to compose a response. Lonnie appeared not to notice, and began to load my now-forgotten groceries into the other canvas bag.

“It'll be great, give you a chance to meet everyone. It's nothing fancy, just a cookout and some fun. I'll pick you up if you like?” She stopped speaking, glancing up at me expectantly.

“Um,” I began to fumble an excuse, but her enthusiasm defeated me. It was such an open and friendly invitation; I didn't like to hurt her feelings by rejecting it out of hand. “Okay,” I agreed cautiously, already scrambling for a feasible excuse. I'd only been in town for three days and already I'd become mired in a complication. It was swiftly becoming apparent that Puckhaber Falls was *too* small, *too* friendly. It was half the size of the previous towns I'd stayed in and the size decrease apparently equated to the locals being more friendly and inquisitive about a new person in their midst. I was annoyed by my own foolishness – at month's end I would get back on the road – if I hadn't succeeded with the suicide plan. I didn't intend to make new friendships.

Picking up the bags, I forced a grim smile for Lonnie and escaped out the door, her words ringing in my ears. “I'll pick you up at seven on Friday night!” The doors closed with a hushed swoosh and my anxiety began to creep upwards. How could I get out of this mess? Worse still, it would have to be done face to face – other than at the Quikmart, I had no way of contacting Lonnie. Lying was one of my weakest traits; I tended to flush to the color of an overripe tomato and couldn't maintain eye contact when I attempted it. It had always been simpler to tell the truth, even as a child I'd found it excruciating to lie to anyone. Given the circumstances of my

lifestyle, it would be convenient if I *could* lie successfully, considering I was constantly trying to keep my distance from people.

The light rain continued to fall, pooling in shallow puddles along the sidewalk

. I shivered a little, hunching my shoulders against the cold. Main Street consisted of barely two dozen stores and one set of traffic lights, which were scarcely needed for the light traffic in town. I glanced down the street towards the craft store I'd visited a few days ago – the owner had been delighted with my paintings and one stood on display in the window. I glanced at the ominous dark clouds overhead, fervently hoping a piece would sell before too long, as I would need money for snow chains.

Head down against the incessant rain, I located my car on the other side of the road, my thoughts returning to Friday night. It would be difficult to wangle a way out of the invitation, particularly as Lonnie was insistent on collecting me. I sighed heartily, dismayed all over again. There was nothing for it, I would just have to visit her at the store tomorrow and make an excuse. Once I'd thought of a valid justification for not attending. That could be my project for the rest of the day – and probably most of the night. I was abysmal at lying to someone face to face...

I stepped out between two parked cars and onto the road, my thoughts a million miles away. A shrill horn blast interrupted my deliberations and I glanced up, eyes wide in alarm. A flash of navy blue – a car going too fast for me to react, even if I could compel my legs to move. My brain was operating in slow motion, something I'd experienced in another stressful moment in the past. I guessed this would be classified as one of those moments.

I did the only sensible thing that came to mind and closed my eyes. I wanted to die and this seemed to be as good a way as any

I'd considered to date. Being hit by a car should do the trick, although I did feel somewhat sorry for the driver, who would live with my death for the rest of his life. Not to mention what the impact would do to his vehicle. Waiting for the collision to occur, I wondered if he had accident insurance...

The screeching of tires and the acrid smell of the burning rubber penetrated my senses as I waited patiently for the car to hit me. When it came, the blow wasn't nearly as painful as I'd anticipated – in fact; it seemed more a gentle nudge. A nudge, which threw me backwards onto the dark asphalt and the air left my chest in a sharp whoosh when my skull smacked painfully against the blacktop. For a second or two my eyelids fluttered wildly, before the world retreated into blackness.

“Charlotte? *Charlotte!* Can you hear me?”

The world remained dark, an inky blackness I couldn't fathom, the pain in my head excruciating. The voice was deep, with a husky tone which made me think of whisky and cigarettes. Cool hands touched my skin, brushing across my fingers and cheeks in the gentlest of caresses. And the smell... well, I didn't rightly know what it was, but the scent was... divine. A potent mix of my favorite aromas enveloped me; the tang of salt on an ocean breeze, the sweetness of peppermint candy, the scent of evergreen trees in the forest – all wrapped up together. With considerable effort, I opened my eyes and discovered a face hovering inches from mine. He looked like an angel, or at least, how I imagined one might look. Extremely pale skin caught my attention initially, his brown hair exceptionally dark in comparison. His jaw was strong and square and he possessed cheekbones that could make a girl cry for what she craved, but didn't have. His nose was perfect, neither too small nor too large in a face that was classically handsome and charmingly

rugged. He frowned as I watched and the dark slashes of his eyebrows almost met, his eyes filling with concern and— I'd never seen anything like them before. Too dark to be called truly blue, they were nearly navy in color with radiating swirls of silver, which reflected my ghostly face back at me.

As much as I wanted to try to understand why this fallen angel was beside me, I lost the battle and drifted back into a soothing nothingness.

CHAPTER 2

QUESTIONS

The first thing I became aware of was the acute pain in my head; a pounding that gave the impression there was an ice pick wedged in the back of my skull. I groaned, trying to forge a pathway through thought patterns that seemed padded by copious amounts of cotton wool. I'd assumed being dead would be less painful. I'd seen a vision of an angel; surely that meant I'd finally succeeded and left the mortal world? Raising a shaky hand to my head, I discovered a huge lump on the back of my skull. Rubbing my fingers across it thoughtfully, I considered why it would be there in the afterlife. I'd always believed life after death existed, but I figured I would arrive without injuries. Something didn't seem quite right here. A tiny moan escaped my lips when my skull pulsated with another burst of throbbing pain.

"Charlotte? Can you hear me?" The deep voice was composed and gravelly and I recognized it. This was the angel who'd leaned over me after I was hit by the car. Hesitantly opening one eye, followed by the other, I flinched at the brightness of the fluorescent lights overhead until my sight adjusted in slow increments.

My breath caught in my throat – it *was* the angel. He stood a few feet from the bed, his stance relaxed as he leaned against the wall

with his arms crossed, his gaze focused on mine. He was the most handsome man I'd ever seen, although clearly not a real angel, as I assumed they didn't wear snug black jeans and casual grey sweaters which stretched across nicely muscular chests. I didn't know whether I was disappointed over this sudden comprehension of his humanity. His eyes were still mesmerizing, even from a distance I could see those unique silver streaks, flashing like lightning in a darkened sky.

"Charlotte?" He repeated my name patiently, and I heard a hint of some emotion in his tone. Concern?

"Am I dead?"

He raised an eyebrow in question as his full lips curled into an easy smile, and my heart skipped a beat, something I'd thought it was well beyond managing. "No, of course not. You're very much alive."

"Oh." Shutting my eyes, I ran my fingers over the bump on my head as I considered this revelation. Obviously, the pain was explained. I'd failed – again.

"You sound disappointed." While his voice remained composed, I heard the curiosity in his tone. His gaze was piercing as he appraised me thoughtfully.

I shook my head, attempting to gather my thoughts. "Where am I?" I queried.

"Puckhaber Hospital."

I struggled to sit up, trying to get off the bed. "*What?* I've got to get out of here." The last thing I needed was a massive medical bill when I had no insurance. My head pounded with the sudden movement and a firm hand pushed me back against the pillows, despite my best efforts to fight it.

"You are not capable of going anywhere. You have a nasty concussion."

"You don't understand! I can't afford to stay here! I don't have insurance!"

He shook his head, clearly bemused. "You cannot possibly think that's important right now. Besides, I ran you over. The very least I can do is cover your medical expenses."

I slumped against the pillows, staring at him in open confusion. "*You* were driving the car?" Somewhere in my befuddled mind, the man and the angel were still hopelessly intermingled.

An amused smile curled the corners of his lips. "Yes, I was. It seems an introduction would be in order. My name is Lucas Tine."

"Charlotte Duncan..." Comprehension dawned, and I eyed him suspiciously, wondering who this man really was and what he was doing here. Living alone for so long, fending for myself, made me naturally cautious with strangers. Particularly strange men – even extremely handsome ones like this guy. "Wait a second. You already knew my name."

Those sparkling navy-blue eyes narrowed and he glanced away for a split-second before he regained his composure. "Of course," he responded smoothly, "you told me after the accident."

I shook my head firmly, the painful pounding amplified by the small motion. "I know I didn't."

"Of course you told me your name, Charlotte. You have concussion, you're confused right now." Lucas's voice was gently reassuring, but I didn't believe him. I was positive I hadn't told him anything. I stared at him suspiciously, and he returned the stare, his expression impassive and revealing nothing. I finally blinked, wondering whether the concussion could have confused me to such

an extent. I was stubborn enough to think it hadn't, but my head hurt so badly, I couldn't put up much of an argument.

"Where's my car?" I demanded, changing the subject. I'd left it parked in Main Street and while Puckhaber Falls was hardly the car-jacking capital of the world, I didn't like the idea of my car being left out there. I loved my Volkswagen dearly, and it was my only form of transport, as tragic as it was. The last thing I needed was for it to be stolen, even if the possibility was remote.

"Relax. Hank from the art store heard about the accident and recognized your... vehicle in the street." I detected a trace of derision in his voice as he spoke, caught the tiny hesitation. "He arranged to bring it to the hospital, it is parked right outside, and the keys are in the drawer beside you."

"What's wrong with my car?" I demanded irritably, annoyed by his tone. To an outsider, my car probably looked like crap with the faded red paint, the splits in the upholstery, the rust in the hood. But it was mine, and I loved it.

"Nothing. It does look a little worn out though."

"That car has gotten me halfway around the country," I replied curtly. "They built them to last in the sixties."

He had the audacity to look amused and his eyes twinkled. "If I have offended you, I apologize sincerely."

My heart did a little flip-flop in my chest, even as I glared at him. It was a peculiar feeling, given that my heart had been lying lifeless for two years. He was clearly the most handsome man I'd ever seen in my life. No – more than handsome – he was striking. Impossibly gorgeous. Perfect pale skin, immaculate dark brown hair, a body suited to a model – everything about him was incredibly attractive. And even from across the room, I could smell that aroma, which was reminiscent of every favorite scent I'd ever savored—

He glanced at the door. "You have visitors," he announced quietly. "I must go. It was a pleasure to meet you, Charlotte. Goodbye."

He vanished through the doorway and I stared after his retreating back, stunned by his sudden declaration and rapid departure. The lingering scent was the only sign he'd been here, and in my pain-induced confusion, the question of whether he was an angel crossed my mind again.

The door opened again, seconds after Lucas's departure and I struggled to reclaim my composure as visitors arrived. Lonnie Stewart, Maude Yeardley, and Hank Lucas from the art store trooped in, Maude carrying a bouquet of bright flowers, which she deposited on the bedside cabinet. She leaned over and kissed my cheek, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze as she straightened up. "You gave us quite a scare, honey."

"Was that Lucas Tine I saw in the corridor?" Lonnie queried cheerfully. Her eyes were filled with curiosity – and shining admiration. "Wow, I wish he'd hit me with his car, if that's what it takes to get his attention." Away from the Quikmart, Lonnie was wearing black jeans and a snug blue t-shirt, her hair loose around her shoulders and held back from her face by a delicate silver headband.

"Now, Lonnie, Lucas feels just terrible about what happened," Hank scolded her gruffly. His brown eyes were intense as he carefully studied my head, before giving my arm an awkward pat. "The girls in this town are all crazy about that young man, and they all get 'ornery because he doesn't show the slightest interest in 'em."

"Mike reckons he's gay," Lonnie muttered, pouting at Hank's gentle rebuke.

"Mike Young ought to keep his opinions to himself," Maude responded tartly. "For goodness sake, the rumors I hear about that young man, and he's never anything but respectful to everyone. Keeps to himself, too. Not like some of the other young men around here, drinking and getting wild, causing trouble for Sheriff Davis and his men."

"So, how're you feeling?" Lonnie asked, hastily changing the subject. "You know, if you didn't want to come to the cookout, you could have just said so. You didn't need to go get yourself run over to get out of it." Her eyes sparkled with humor, her smile friendly.

"I'm okay." I smiled bashfully, aware that Lonnie didn't know how close to the truth she was. "A bit of a headache, but I'm fine."

"It's a good thing Lucas was driving so slow; reckons he was only doing about twenty miles an hour. Even at that speed, you're lucky he's such an excellent driver and can stop that fancy car of his on a dime," Hank announced. He leaned against the bed and crossed his arms over his chest.

Shutting my eyes briefly, I replayed the accident in my mind. There was no doubt Lucas Tine had been driving much faster than twenty miles an hour, probably closer to fifty. Why did he lie about it, and how had he stopped so quickly? I should definitely be dead, or at the very least, badly maimed. Yet I only had a bump on my head. It didn't make sense.

"You should come to my house and stay a few days when you get out of hospital, honey. I saw Doctor Harding when you were admitted; he says you'll have a headache for a few days yet. I'm not working over the weekend, and I'd love you to stay with me," Maude suggested, settling on the chair beside the bed. She was dressed informally, in black trousers and a dark red cowl-necked sweater, a heavy gold pendant around her throat. She looked youthful without

the realtor uniform and I mentally adjusted my perception of her age. When we first met, I'd thought she was in her late fifties, but with her hair loose around her face and the less structured clothing, I estimated she was a decade younger.

Struggling with still-fuzzy thoughts, I took a moment to compose a response, which would be polite, but still firmly decline her offer. This was another complication; one I didn't need. "Um, thanks, Maude. I'll think about it, see how I'm feeling when I'm released," I mumbled. The last thing I wanted was to stay at Maude's home and get to know her any better than I already did. "Thank you for the offer though," I added, not wanting to hurt her feelings.

"I've got good news for you, Lott – your painting sold yesterday." Hank handed me an envelope, with my name scrawled across the flap. He was grinning, the skin around his eyes crinkled. "Got the full asking price, two hundred dollars. The guy who bought it was super keen, thought it was a wonderful piece and he was blown away by your talent. I've put the landscape on display in the window and we'll see how that goes."

I peeked into the envelope, both relieved and happy to have some cash flowing in. Two hundred dollars would be a good start towards getting an armchair and snow chains. I smiled at Hank, still clenching the envelope in my fist. "Thank you."

"No – thank *you*. You really are a talented artist, Lottie. I was talking to Lonnie on the way in tonight, and she says you aren't planning to attend college. Maybe you should though, they have an excellent arts program up there," Hank urged.

I was saved from composing another awkward reply when a nurse walked in, her voice crisp and business-like. "Sorry folks, but visiting hours are just about over for tonight."

My new friends said their goodbyes, and when they'd left the room, the nurse checked my blood pressure, pulse, and temperature. She was a few years older than me, with blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail and a bright smile. "How's the head?"

"Aching," I admitted. It was somewhat of an understatement, as it was currently pounding.

"You sustained an awfully hard knock. Split the back of your head open, there's a dozen stitches in there." She poured a glass of water and handed it over, along with a small paper cup. "I have painkillers and sleeping tablets. A good night's rest and you should feel much better. Doctor Harding will be in to see you in the morning." She adjusted the covers, pulling them up and tucking them in before she left the room, flicking off the overhead lights and leaving me in the relatively soft glow of a night light over the back of the bed.

I lay awake for a long time, replaying the accident repeatedly. I was drifting towards sleep when I opened my eyes, staring into the darkened room in sheer disbelief. Lucas Tine had announced I had visitors, even before they came into the room. How had he known they were there? I thought over the conversation with him, trying to find any clue to suggest he could have heard them out in the hallway, but there was nothing. It didn't make any sense.

When sleep eventually overwhelmed me, my dreams were filled with a pale, breathtaking man with unusually dark blue eyes.

CHAPTER 3

THE FALLS

The forest was green and lush. With a canopy of massive old trees overhead and thick moss underfoot, it created the illusion that I was the only person on earth. I'd been wandering through the woods for an hour or so, enjoying the peace and solitude the surroundings provided. The area encircling Puckhaber Falls was magnificent, with old growth forests which had covered this area of the country for hundreds of years.

Over the past three weeks, I'd spent a little time each day enjoying the wilderness. Since being released from hospital, I was going from strength to strength in gathering friends I'd had no intention of making. The thought had initially filled me with horror, and I'd considered packing up and moving on at the end of the month's lease, returning to anonymity somewhere else. Only one thing had stopped me.

Lucas Tine.

The crazy thing being, he was the *one* person I hadn't seen in the past three weeks. I'd naively thought he might come and visit again, but I'd been discharged the following morning. I'd managed to drive home despite the throbbing headache, determined to remain self-sufficient. I'd rather deal with the headache than

consider staying at Maude's – the idea of accepting her offer was more than I could tolerate. Although she meant well and wanted to lend a hand, I didn't want any help.

True to his word, Lucas had paid the medical bills – when I checked out of hospital, the receptionist told me there was nothing to pay and I was grateful for his generosity. I'd wanted to thank him personally, but he'd disappeared off the face of the planet.

Casual enquiries with Lonnie yielded some information. Lucas Tine was about twenty-eight years old and she thought he worked in Billings. Rumors suggested he was a lawyer, but like most things with Lucas Tine, details were remarkably sketchy. Lonnie wasn't aware of any family; he lived outside of town and only came in to pick up supplies. He didn't socialize, wasn't married, but apparently didn't date. According to Lonnie, every woman in town thought he was hot and had tried unsuccessfully at one stage or another, to get him to go out on a date. He steadfastly and politely refused every single offer.

I repeatedly questioned why I was interested in knowing *anything* about him. My plans had been prepared and didn't include a time beyond the next month or two, yet he invaded my thoughts, day and night. While painting, I would catch myself musing over our brief conversations, replaying every millisecond as I attempted to solve the puzzle of how he'd known my name, what clue he'd had to my visitors' arrival. Strolling through the woods, I found myself remembering the addictive aroma he'd exuded. It was nothing I'd ever smelt before; heady, intoxicating and I couldn't recall anything which compared. During brief snatches of sleep, he invaded my mind and the dreams were so vivid, so breathtakingly realistic that I woke from them disorientated and unsettled by his complete invasion of my thoughts. Where my sleep was normally troubled by

nightmares, it was now filled with a man who'd completely overwhelmed my senses and occupied more of my thoughts than should be feasible after only two brief meetings. I resented his intrusion on my thoughts, willed myself daily to discontinue what was bordering on an unhealthy obsession. What the hell was wrong with me?

I continued my silent trek through the woods in deep thought. I heard water crashing down onto rocks somewhere nearby and altered my route impulsively towards the sound.

I knew I hadn't told him my name. I knew he'd been driving much faster than twenty miles an hour. How had he stopped the car so quickly if he *had* been driving faster? How had he known my visitors were coming before there'd been any evidence of them? The questions had gone around and around in my head and I still didn't have any answers. I'd mentioned my concerns to Lonnie, hoping for some insight, but she'd grinned like a fool and said the only thing she concentrated on when she saw Lucas was keeping her legs from turning to jelly. Which I could understand. I'd only met him twice and both times, I'd been suffering from a reasonably severe head injury. Yet I could clearly visualize him, remembering the pale skin, the strong jawline, and chestnut brown hair that only served to accentuate the amazing color of his eyes. His face, his sculpted body – everything about him was ideal.

Most bizarrely of all, when I'd mentioned the remarkable aspects of Lucas's eyes to Lonnie she'd been nonplussed, reassuring me his eyes were a standard, everyday blue. How could she not have seen how unusual they were? I'd never seen anybody with eyes that darker shade of blue before. Regardless of the color, nobody could possibly miss those streaks of silver, which seemed to dance in his irises.

It was easy to see why all the women in town lusted after him. What I couldn't understand was why he wasn't interested in any of them. I'd met several of Lonnie's friends (against my better judgment, as I was still desperately trying to avoid relationships of any kind) and they ranged from averagely pretty through to flat-out beautiful. Lonnie's silly remark about him being gay had been dismissed out of hand, surely, it was some snide remark, made by a person with a jealous nature, and not based in fact. Of course, what did I know? I'd never had a relationship with a man in my life.

And that led to another thought, one that nagged at me incessantly and reduced an already wretched sleeping pattern to continuous insomnia in recent days. How could I care when my heart was no longer capable of caring for anyone? What was the point? My path was laid out, my decision made and mooning over a man was stupid. It was ridiculous to obsess like this about Lucas Tine – if he wasn't interested in the prettiest girls in Puckhaber Falls, he certainly wasn't going to be interested in me.

The sound of rushing water increased in volume and between two ancient firs a fine mist rose over the water, creating a mini rainbow in the dappled sunlight. I slowed down, cautiously picking a safe route towards the river's edge. The water was crystal clear – every rock, every pebble was visible on the sandy riverbed, and the flow of water was smooth and languorous. Thick foliage drooped along the steep banks, trailing into the water. It was a joyous montage of reds and yellows as the trees turned in the cool autumn weather, preparing for winter ahead. There was a steep plunge in the direction of the falls and the water flowed and eddied as the river sped towards the drop. It must have been forty feet from the top of the falls to the river below, the water rushing down the sheer drop and crashing onto the heavy boulders at the base. I stepped

steadily closer, my breathing calm as I watched the water roaring across the edge.

This was where I would end my life.

It would be easy this way, quick and leaving no room for uncertainty. One single step and I'd be beyond failing, as I'd done so many times before. It was isolated; nobody was likely to discover my remains and that would solve one issue which had stopped me in the past – the prospect of someone finding me. I wanted nobody in that situation, forced to deal with the trauma of coming across a dead body.

And it would be fast, taking only a few seconds to hit the boulders below. If the fall didn't kill me, death would come swiftly in the icy water. I picked up a small branch and threw it into the water experimentally, watching it spin and twirl towards the edge of the waterfall before plummeting to the rocks below, vanishing under swirling foam and mist.

Satisfied with my plan, I smiled grimly. I was calm and confident, totally at peace with my decision.

Almost intuitively, I took a small step forward, out onto the slimy, moss-covered boulders at the lip of the waterfall. And another. My teeth started to chatter. Only two more steps and my life would be over, two more steps would lead to a serenity that had been missing from my life for so long.

I took one tiny step, mesmerized by the water thundering down the cliff. I was vaguely aware of being wet, the spray wafting up from the falls and landing in fine droplets on my face, running down my neck.

Just one more step.

I lifted my foot, but something hooked firmly around my waist in the same second, snatching me backwards from the falls. I lost my

footing on the slippery rocks and tumbled backwards, plunging headfirst into the freezing river. The shockingly cold water took my breath away and I swallowed a large mouthful, my throat and lungs burning. It felt like a thousand needles plunged into my skin as I struggled underwater. Before I had a chance to panic, I was wrenched upwards and found myself facing an infuriated Lucas Tine.

"Are you *trying* to kill yourself?" he demanded, his eyebrows furrowed together while he glared at me with undisguised fury. His shoulders were stiff with tension, his hands gripped firmly around my upper arms.

Though distracted by the abrupt dunking, I saw the flare of silver in his dark blue eyes, pulsating with energy as he continued to stare down at me. He was waiting for a response and I cowered beneath his angry gaze, feeling like a complete and utter fool. I was soaked through – my jeans, sweater, and the heavy coat I'd been wearing were all wringing wet, and my teeth chattered incessantly. Even if I wasn't freezing, I couldn't answer – what was I going to say? How could I tell this stranger that his guess was correct, and he'd just stopped me from achieving my desire? I did the only possible thing in the ridiculous circumstances. I burst into tears.

Lucas stared in disbelief for a moment before I heard him sigh, then take a deep breath, his stiff shoulders slumping. "You crazy girl," he muttered. He glanced around; apparently hoping someone would magically come along and help him with the blubbering mess he'd rescued. Emotions flickered clearly across his expression, suggesting he was making up his mind what to do next. He was as wet as I was but showed no physical effects from the cold. Which seemed peculiar, even in my currently frozen and distraught state. He *should* be frozen, *should* be shivering as I was. Even as I stood in

the middle of the river, up to my thighs in water, I could feel my toes swiftly going numb inside my sneakers.

It seemed Lucas made up his mind, because without warning he scooped me into his arms and strode towards the edge of the river. He managed to climb up onto the bank with minimal effort, even with the added weight of carrying me. Once on the riverbank, he turned northwards and began to run, cradling me against him. I nestled against his shoulder, shaking uncontrollably and rapidly losing sensation throughout my body. I couldn't speak if I wanted to, focusing instead on trying to understand how any man could carry someone the way Lucas was holding me, and run. Not only was he running, but his movements were fluid, suggesting he wasn't putting in any effort. No human could do this – surely, it was impossible?

I couldn't guess how far he ran or where we were headed, but from the limited amount of sky visible over the river, it was rapidly growing dark. Lucas's pace remained steady and I tried to estimate how far we'd come. Three miles? Four? He was the most extraordinarily fit man I'd ever met. He hadn't broken a sweat and his breathing remained as steady as if he were strolling down a street. There was something very weird going on; what he was doing just wasn't possible. *'You just tried to kill yourself,'* my head reminded me. *'That's probably given him an exceptional adrenaline boost'.* Despite my chilled condition, I knew it wasn't adrenaline giving Lucas these – unbelievable abilities. There was something else going on, entirely. But what?

It was pitch black by the time Lucas's pace slowed and I opened my eyes, glancing around to try to establish where we were. My entire body was freezing and where areas rested against Lucas, they seemed even colder. Everything seemed to be back to front, tipped on its head and I shivered wildly. I was beyond caring about where

he was taking me; if it didn't involve getting warmer, I was going to freeze to death.

He'd slowed near a vast house, constructed right on the riverfront. Built of rough-hewn blocks of gray granite, it comprised two stories with gracefully arched windows and white wooden shutters. The porch lights were on, welcoming in the freezing night air.

"Wh— whe— where a—are... w—w—we?" I stuttered.

"My home," Lucas growled. His voice was filled with irritation and I cringed, knowing it was my fault he was so furious. Had he guessed what I was doing at the falls? It was highly likely – what other idiot would be standing at the edge of a waterfall and stepping closer?

He pushed open the front door and strode purposefully through the house, walking down a hallway to a large bathroom. Only then did he carefully drop me onto the floor, leaning my shivering form against the vanity to ensure I wasn't going to fall. He turned on a shower on the opposite wall, avoiding my gaze and holding his hand under the water as he waited for it to heat up. When steam was wafting towards the ceiling, he beckoned me with a curl of his finger. "Get in."

I stared up at him in disbelief, my teeth chattering. "With you in here?"

He flashed a grim smile. "Leave your clothes on. If you can promise not to get into any more trouble, I'll get you some dry clothes."

I nodded and tried to walk across the room, but my frozen legs wouldn't co-operate. In a split-second, he was at my side, supporting me until I got to the shower and helping me step inside

the large cubicle. I sank to the floor, letting the steaming hot water fall over my head and onto my icy limbs.

Without a word, Lucas turned and strode from the room, shutting the door behind him. His anger was palpable, his frustration evident and I cringed, knowing I was the cause.

I didn't know how long I sat hunched on the shower floor, but sensation eventually returned to my limbs and I felt almost human again. I slowly got to my feet and considered the bizarre situation. With steaming hot water running over my shoulders, I glanced around the room, admiring its opulence. It was a stunning bathroom, with large, sage green granite tiles on the walls and floors. Warm and inviting, there was an enormous spa next to the shower and the vanity stretched from one end of the opposite wall to the door, ornately framed mirrors placed over the double basins. As I started to thaw out, I considered what to do next. Should I undress and shower properly, or remain clothed and wait for Lucas to return? As if this afternoon's fiasco hadn't been bad enough, I certainly didn't want him walking in and discovering me naked. I was self-conscious, not exactly sure what to do. My gaze flickered around the room again and I noticed a neat pile of clothes sitting on the vanity. I wasn't sure when Lucas had brought them in, or how he'd snuck in without my knowledge, but the opportunity to wallow in this fabulous shower was too tempting to refuse. I tugged off my clothes, squeezing the water out of each item and hanging it neatly over the glass block wall.

Reluctantly dragging myself from the shower, I found a plush bath sheet hanging on a heated towel rail. After drying off, I perused the clothes Lucas had delivered, astounded to find they were mine – fresh underwear, jeans, and a sweater. How had he known where I lived, and how had he gotten inside my house? Just another couple

of questions to which I had no answers, and while I was uneasy about this turn of events, I was grateful to be dry and warm. I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to neaten up the tangled mess and glanced at the mirror, to see how much of a disaster it was.

A stranger stared back, and I realized with a jolt how long it had been since I'd looked at a mirror. I barely recognized the girl in the reflection, she was thinner than I recalled, with longer hair, and eyes with dark smudges around them. There was a haunted, fragile look to her face. Where once she'd had rounded cheeks, now there were sharply etched cheekbones. Her hair had once been shoulder-length, perpetually straightened – now she had a mass of dark curls which fell to the top of her hips. I turned away, not wanting to see the haunted look in those green eyes. Once they'd been vibrant, full of excitement about life. That time was long ago.

I noticed a brush on the vanity and recognized it as my own, impressed by how thoughtful Lucas was, even if he had broken into my house. I picked up the brush and dragged it through my tangled curls, trying to release some of the knots. A second cautious glance in the mirror confirmed I'd done the best I could.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the bathroom door and stepped out.



I crept down the hallway cautiously; uncomfortably aware that Lucas was undoubtedly waiting for an explanation as to why he'd ended up with a lunatic in his home.

The house was spectacular, affluent, but understated with top quality furnishings and fittings. From the bathroom, I wandered in what I hoped was the general direction we'd taken, hesitant to be

walking through his home like an intruder. The hallway led to another, wider passage with closed doors on either side and thankfully, I saw what looked like the living room at the end of the hall. A cheery fire was burning in the open hearth and the curtains at each side of the fireplace had been drawn against the night. White leather couches faced each other on either side of the fireplace with a large mahogany coffee table between, stacked with artistically placed magazines. Armchairs in latte-colored leather were placed in other parts of the massive room, set in groups of two or three. The walls held numerous paintings, I recognized some of them as having been created by the great artists of Europe. A grand piano stood on a raised dais in an alcove and to my left was a doorway, which revealed a modern kitchen with stainless steel appliances and dark wooden counter tops.

Lucas appeared from a doorway beside the piano and offered me a forced smile, one that didn't quite reach his eyes. "How do you feel?"

I nodded uncomfortably, squirming on the spot. "Much better. Thank you."

"Are you hungry? Can I get you anything?" He strode into the room, spectacular in snug blue jeans and a white sweater, which stretched across broad shoulders and a well-muscled chest.

I shook my head quickly and tugged anxiously at the hem of my sweater. "Um, no. Thanks." I glanced down at my watch, recalling too late that after a very thorough dunking in the river it was no longer working. "I should be getting home."

Lucas ignored my suggestion as if I hadn't spoken. "Come sit down by the fire. You still look a little cold." He inclined his head towards one of the couches and I took him up on the offer, sitting hesitantly on the edge, from where I could enjoy the heat radiating

from the burning logs. Lucas opened an expansively stocked liquor cabinet and poured a measure of brandy into a balloon, swirling the liquid gently before giving it to me. "Drink this; it will help to warm you."

I took the proffered glass and sipped from it, the warm liquid trickling down my throat and creating a burning sensation in the pit of my stomach. It made me feel a little better and I watched as Lucas sat down opposite me, his eyes never leaving my face. He sat wordlessly for quite a while, staring at me with those startling blue eyes. I noticed the dark smudges under his eyes, realized with a wave of guilt that rescuing me from the river had probably exhausted him. He looked pale – at least, paler than he normally did and I squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze, knowing I was entirely responsible for putting him in this position.

He must have noticed my discomfort. "What is the matter, Charlotte?" He had an unusual way of speaking, very articulate, extremely polite and he didn't use contractions very often. It was both disarming and... kind of charming, as if he came from a different era, when people were far more eloquent and polite.

"Your eyes. I've never seen anything like them—" I began, my embarrassment at studying him so blatantly bringing me to an indecisive halt.

"What about them?" His eyes never left mine and I wondered for the millionth time, how he could possibly be so striking. It simply wasn't natural.

"They're... they're such an unusual shade of blue and they have flashes of—" I stopped for a second time, feeling utterly ridiculous. He would no doubt think I was even more moronic than I already appeared if I started rambling about his eyes. Sheesh. What on earth was wrong with me?

A multitude of emotions flickered across those same unusual eyes before he visibly shut himself down, his expression becoming an impassive mask. "Were you trying to commit suicide at the waterfall today?" he questioned abruptly, his voice cold.

My eyes widened at the sudden question and I lowered my gaze to my hands, unwilling to discuss the subject and unable to meet his piercing stare. Of course, he wanted an explanation, the man had leapt into a river because of me – he deserved an answer, but I had nothing to give him.

"Charlotte, tell me the truth," he pressed.

I stood up abruptly, determined to get out of this house and away from his prying. What right did he have to question me like this? He didn't even know me. If he hadn't turned up when he did, I'd have accomplished my goal—

Hang on a minute. "Where you *following* me?" I voiced the question without thought, incredulous at the idea he might have been trailing me. Why else would he have been right there? Out of all the areas in the forest where he could have taken a stroll, how did he happen to be right near the falls, close enough to stop me from achieving my goal? It was the only explanation and now I was angry, trying to figure out why he would be following me. What game was he playing? There was also the question of how he knew where my house was – was he some sort of crazed stalker?

For a full minute Lucas watched me and I stared back defiantly, waiting for a response. I'd diverted him from his question with one of my own, and by the look on his face, he was wrestling with how to react. While I should probably be sprinting for the door, I was frozen to the spot. He just didn't *seem* like a stalker, although I had no point of reference for such a ridiculous –and almost certainly – dangerous assumption. And the man had put me in a shower

without attempting to attack me, so in some wacky way I felt this explained my vacillation. Or maybe I'd frozen the last of my functioning brain cells in the river. Finally, he spoke. "I see we have an impasse. You don't want to answer my question and I don't believe I'm ready to answer yours. How about we start with something easier?"

Eyeing him suspiciously, I tried to decide whether his lack of answer was confirmation that he had, in fact, been following me. "Such as?" I asked quietly, letting my gaze drop to the floor.

"Oh, I don't know." His attention flickered to the fireplace for a moment, then back to me. "Please, sit down."

Wrestling with my suspicions, I wavered for a few seconds as I tried to decide whether to stay or run. I had no idea who this man was, didn't have a single reason to trust him and yet, he had saved me today. Or at least, he'd thought he was saving me. A glance at Lucas showed his expression to be much calmer, his body language displaying none of the anger he'd been directing at me until now. I slumped back down onto the couch.

"How about we get to know each other a little better? How old are you, Charlotte?"

I smiled softly at the deliberately simple question. He seemed to be trying to put me at ease and I appreciated it. "I'm twenty."

"Okay, now it is your turn. Remember, we're sticking with easy questions for now," he instructed gently and the corner of his mouth curled into a lopsided smile as he settled back more comfortably on the couch.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"Oh."

"You seem surprised," he pointed out.

"Lonnie from the grocery store told me you were twenty-eight." I spoke without thinking (again), and instantly regretted it, realizing he would know I'd been discussing him. I could feel heat spreading across my cheeks at the faux pas.

"Did she now? What else did Lonnie from the grocery store tell you?" he asked with an impish grin. He lifted his arm, laying it across the back of the couch as he watched me with blatant amusement.

"She told me you work in Billings," I admitted. I certainly wasn't going to tell him about her discussions regarding his sexuality and dating preferences, but he seemed to guess there was more.

"Anything else?"

"Um, no." I was lousy at lying and was sure he'd guessed I was hesitant, but he didn't push the subject further. I gathered my rapidly drying hair in my fingers, fashioning it into a loose knot at the nape of my neck.

Lucas stood abruptly and walked across to the fireplace; his attention fixed on the flickering yellow-red flames in the grate. His shoulders were stiff with tension and he clenched and unclenched his fists before he spoke again. "My turn," he announced. "Why does a lovely girl like you choose to live such a minimalistic lifestyle?"

Inhaling sharply, I took a moment to select my words carefully. He'd been to the cottage, had obviously seen the pathetic belongings I owned. There was no point trying to deny it. "I don't feel the need to have a lot of stuff. I travel... a lot, and I just pack up my car and move on when— when I'm ready."

He thought over my words before responding. "You're not attending college?"

Relaxing by increments, I grinned wryly. "I thought we were taking turns, so isn't it my turn again?"

"Indeed it is. Go right ahead." He sat down on the couch and clasped his hands between his knees, leaning forward to watch me with interest.

I deliberated over the next question. "Do you live here alone?" It seemed like a polite, but roundabout way of discovering whether he was in a relationship with anyone, without asking the question outright.

"I have friends who live with me, we share the house," he announced promptly. "What about you? Do you have family or friends living in this area? I hear you only moved here a month ago."

"No family, no friends," I stated cautiously, wondering where his friends were. Would they be home soon? It would be awkward trying to explain my appearance in their home, and I thought again about leaving. "Only the new ones, which I seem to be making at an alarming rate," I muttered as an afterthought.

Lucas's eyebrows rose and he studied my face for a few seconds before he spoke again. "You don't want to make friends?"

I drained the brandy glass and placed it on the coffee table. "I believe it's my turn," I said, glancing around the room while I considered my next question and hoping he wouldn't pursue my aversion to friendships. "Are those paintings genuine?" I gestured toward the wall near the kitchen doorway, where I'd recognized what appeared to be a Picasso, or at least, a remarkably good counterfeit.

"Yes."

"Wow," I breathed. "May I take a closer look?"

"Of course."

I walked from painting to painting, admiring the pieces, studying the work of some of the most famous painters in history. I'd only

ever seen works like these in books, to see them in real life was extraordinary.

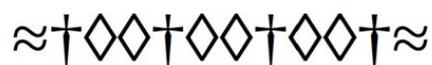
"My turn." I was startled by the sound of his deep voice and discovered him standing beside me. Only a couple of feet separated us, and his aroma washed over me. It took a second to recognize it was different today, the subtle scent of freshly baked cookies and mellow strains of coffee overwhelming my senses. The impression was one of safety and comfort and some of the tension eased out of my shoulders. "What is your favorite color?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure I have a favorite. I love all color," I admitted.

"The words of a true artist." He smiled easily, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest. "I saw your painting equipment at your house."

I nodded, somehow relaxed by his easy admission about the cottage. He was not attempting to deny he'd been there, and it somehow made it less perturbing. "What's your favorite color?"

He looked deeply into my eyes for a couple of seconds before answering. "Green."



I'm not sure how long our question-and-answer session lasted, but after a second brandy and with the radiant heat from the roaring fire, I was beginning to feel exceptionally drowsy. Lucas had asked about many aspects of my life, even down to minute details, such as my favorite foods, but seemed to intuitively stay away from questions which would cause me discomfort. In turn, I learned he'd attended Yale, was born in Chicago, and he had lived here in Puckhaber Falls for two years. He gave no information about his

family, only saying his parents had died some years ago and he had no siblings. He could play piano, guitar, and the violin and enjoyed a wide range of music. He wasn't particularly interested in sports but ran to keep fit. He worked as a lawyer in Billings, but chose to live out here, because he enjoyed the peace and quiet. He was extremely interested in my artistic endeavors and we spoke at length about favorite artists, finding we shared a number, including Matisse, Monet, and Renoir.

I'd asked him about the piano and in response, he offered to play something. I agreed and snuggled back against the couch to listen, impressed by his skill, and enjoying the selection of songs he chose. The combination of two brandies and the dramas of the day began to have their effect and regrettably, I awoke to find myself once again in Lucas's arms as he walked down a darkened hallway.

"Where are we going?" I questioned groggily. The same exhilarating aroma was assaulting me again and I snuggled against his shoulder like a contented kitten.

"You fell asleep," he whispered huskily. "Having seen what you are sleeping on at your house, I'm going to put you to bed here, and I'll drive you home in the morning."

Alarmed, I struggled to wriggle free of his hold. "I think I should go home now."

"No, I insist. I will be a complete gentleman, I assure you. You will come to no harm."

Either the sincerity of his words convinced me, or the enticing aroma wafting around us was making me crazy, because I snuggled up against his cold hard chest and argued no more.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTIONS

I had no idea what time it was when I woke, there was no clock in the bedroom and it was hard to judge by the light outside. One of the challenges of living in the north of the United States; as winter approached it was perpetually overcast and difficult to estimate time without sunlight for guidance.

It took a minute or two to figure out where I was – laying in the soft cotton sheets with my head cradled against downy pillows was enormously comfortable – and definitely not my own hard cot and sleeping bag. I drew myself into a sitting position, surveying the room I'd been too drowsy to notice last night. This wasn't the cottage, that fact was indisputable. This room was roughly the same size as the entire cottage, the walls painted a sumptuous shade of claret with oak wainscoting covering the lower half. The bed was ornate, an oak four-poster which seemed almost medieval in appearance, carved motifs decorating the frame. Matching side tables stood on either side. Fresh roses in the deepest shade of crimson sat on the oak dresser opposite the bed and their heady fragrance permeated the room.

Comprehension filtered into my sleep-addled brain, my cheeks heating with humiliation. Lucas must think I was an absolute lunatic.

First – I walk in front of his car and get myself hit. Then, he had to stop me from plunging over a waterfall. And to add insult to injury, he brings me to his home and I fall asleep on the couch. I scored a perfect ten in the crazy stakes; there was no doubt about it. If there were a gold, silver, and bronze medal for making a complete fool of myself, I would take the trifecta.

I dragged myself out of bed, standing beside it uncertainly. Should I try to sneak out? It was Friday and perhaps he'd already left for work, but I dismissed the notion immediately. I couldn't be that lucky. Besides which, he probably wasn't thrilled about leaving a nutcase alone in his house. *His very impressive house*, I reflected, studying the room distractedly while I figured out what to do. In my whole life I'd never seen a house like this. I cringed as I imagined Lucas in the tiny cottage, seeing my shabby furniture and side table made from a cardboard box. And that reminded me – how had he gotten *into* the cottage? I hadn't asked. How did he know where I lived? Another question I'd failed to ask. It seemed that concerning Lucas Tine I only had questions and no significant answers.

I raked my fingers through my hair, attempting to tame the wild curls into some semblance of order. I really should consider a haircut, I hadn't had one since... well, to be honest, I couldn't remember when. It had been a while.

I'd left my personal grooming behind quite some time ago. Which led to another humiliated flush, as I thought of Lucas's casually stylish look. *He* looked like an advertisement from some fancy fashion magazine – I glanced down ruefully at my faded sweater and too-loose jeans – *I* looked like a homeless person.

I scouted around for my sneakers, groaning aloud when I recalled leaving them in Lucas's bathroom. They were still probably soaking wet. The day was deteriorating rapidly. Squaring my

shoulders resolutely, I decided to just march out and deal with whatever lay ahead.

I opened the bedroom door noiselessly and walked down the long hall. I'd almost stepped into the living room when I realized Lucas was there and he wasn't alone. He was talking quietly with another man who had his back to me. I turned to slip back down the hall, figuring I'd keep out of their way.

"Good morning Charlotte." Lucas's voice caught me unawares and I stopped in my tracks, uncertain what to do next.

"Um, hi," I responded cautiously, clutching my hands together nervously behind my back.

The second man turned and offered me a relaxed smile and I smiled back self-consciously, aware of my disheveled appearance.

"Charlotte, this is a friend of mine, Ben Becket."

I nodded hesitantly, wishing the ground would open up and swallow me.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Charlotte," Ben said, scrutinizing me carefully. He was almost as striking as Lucas was, with ebony hair that fell appealingly across his forehead and touched the top of his collar. It was the true black, which was so rare – the kind with blue highlights through it. His skin was like alabaster, similar to Lucas's, and his eyes a deep brown. He was wearing tailored linen trousers in dark grey and a shirt of the deepest green. "How is your head?"

I touched the back of my head automatically, running my fingers across the small bump that remained from the accident. "Fine, thanks. Wait, how did you know about that?"

Ben grinned, glancing at Lucas with a bemused expression. "Lucas told me what happened when he got home that day."

I glanced from Ben to Lucas and saw Lucas shrug. "Ben and his wife live here with me. The house is too big for one person. We've

been friends for many years.”

“Oh.” From the corner of my eye, I noticed Ben was still watching me carefully, his focus intent. Was it my imagination, or was he making some judgment about me?

Good grief, I really am turning into a lunatic.

“Would you like some breakfast? I have a pot of coffee on, and there is a box of donuts on the counter,” Lucas announced politely. He offered me a reassuring grin and I returned the smile feebly, clutching my fingers together to stop them shaking. “You must be hungry by now.”

I was ravenous, in fact. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten, certainly not since the previous morning. I took his offer as a dismissal and stepped past him and Ben, heading towards the kitchen and leaving them to continue their conversation. As promised, I discovered a coffee pot and he'd laid out a cup, spoon, sugar, and cream on the counter. On the breakfast bar was a box of Krispy Kremes. I wondered where he'd gotten them from, there wasn't a store in Puckhaber Falls, and the nearest one was on the outskirts of Billings, over forty miles away. Had he driven through to the city this morning? I glanced around the room, noting the clock on the stovetop read nine-thirty. It was still early, how had he gotten to Billings and back? *You're being ridiculous, he probably had them in a cabinet or freezer.* I poured a coffee, flipped the lid on the box, and selected a donut from the dozen inside. Taking a bite, I was instantly aware the donuts were fresh and could only have been baked this morning. Another mystery to ponder, something else Lucas had done which created unanswered questions.

“I must be leaving, I have to get to work,” I heard Ben announce from the living room.

“See you tonight.”

"You'll be home?"

"Yes."

Ben said something else, too low and too rapidly for me to distinguish.

"If you hear from Marianne, tell her not to worry. I have it under control." Lucas's voice was stiff, his tone determined.

"You can tell her yourself. She and Striker arrive back from New York this afternoon," Ben announced. "She cut short their trip. Which at least saves me from fielding half a dozen calls a day – she can nag you in person."

Ben said his goodbyes and Lucas appeared in the kitchen a second later, striding over to where I stood munching through a second donut. He grinned when he saw the open box and the empty spaces. "You must have been hungry."

I nodded, swallowing down a mouthful. "They're delicious. Thank you."

"How are you feeling this morning?" He stood quite close, near enough for me to distinguish the flashes of silver in his midnight blue eyes. And to take a deep breath of the aroma that continually turned my brain to mush.

"I'm fine. Thank you." I swallowed heavily and clutched the coffee cup between my hands. "I should get home. I've taken up enough of your time."

"On the contrary, I've enjoyed your company," he said. He gazed down at me for a second or two, and then took a deliberate step away. The muscle in his jaw clenched before he smiled again, although this smile seemed strained. "I've collected your belongings; they are in a plastic bag by the door. I'll drive you home now."

"I could probably walk from here, it can't be far," I suggested hastily, tipping the last of the coffee into the sink and rinsing the

cup. I'd already caused him enough trouble in the past twenty-four hours and his abrupt announcement about taking me home clearly implied that I'd worn out my welcome.

He glanced at my bare feet and the corners of his mouth curled into an amused smirk. "I don't think the weather is suitable for bare feet, and I believe your sneakers are still rather wet."

I frowned gloomily. "I forgot about that."

"It's fine, Charlotte, I'm happy to drive you home. Have you had enough to eat?"

Seeing my nod of agreement, he shut the lid on the donut box and picked it up, handing them to me. "Here, you take these. I don't like donuts."

I followed him out to the driveway, where his very fancy car was sitting on the gravel. He drove swiftly, his reactions assured and controlled, following a barely discernible driveway which wound amongst the trees. I was too anxious to look at the dashboard and see how fast he was driving.

My heart hammered in my chest when I stole a discreet glance in his direction, a reaction I'd thought completely impossible. I'd been utterly numb for so long, the idea of being physically attracted to a man now was disquieting. I didn't want to feel like this, not here and certainly not now. And not about *this* man – who was so obviously out of my league.

"What are you thinking, Charlotte?"

I blushed yet again, an infuriating habit. Once more, he'd caught me by surprise. "Nothing, really."

He studied me for a split-second, before his gaze returned to the road. He didn't pursue the subject, much to my relief and I turned to gaze out the window, resting my fist against my chin as the countryside passed in an indistinguishable blur. After last night, I

was certain he would never want to see me again and I realized with uncomfortable clarity that I would be disappointed if he didn't. Why did I feel this way? Refusing to consider the implications, I straightened in the seat, determined to get back to the cottage and do my level best to forget about Lucas Tine.

He pulled the car to a stop outside the cottage a few minutes later, and reached across to the back seat, handing me the bag containing my soggy belongings. I pulled the bag onto my lap and reached for the door handle. "Thank you, for everything."

He smiled hesitantly, immediately breaking eye contact and staring resolutely out through the windshield, tapping his thumbs against the steering wheel. "You're welcome."

"Okay, then. Well... bye." Although it was completely irrational, I was saddened to think I might never see him again, and I couldn't help feeling hurt by his suddenly chilly attitude. What had I expected?

Cursing my own stupidity, I shoved the door open and stepped out. Lucas had been right – the ground was freezing beneath my bare feet. I pushed the door shut and turned to walk up the steps, but he called me back, leaning across the car to look through the open window.

I leaned down and saw his face had grown paler during the short trip in the car and the circles around his eyes had darkened, as if he were abruptly exhausted again. His expression was solemn. "Promise me, you'll be careful. Don't go wandering through the forest on your own, Charlotte. There are... dangers out there."

I nodded in agreement, a tiny frown creasing my forehead. With the tires spinning, he sped down the drive, leaving me to speculate as to precisely what he was warning me to avoid.

CHAPTER 5

DECISION TIME

I stepped out of the bitter winter weather and carefully wiped my boots on the mat, before stepping onto the carpet. December had arrived, and with it, the first snowfalls of winter.

“Hiya, Charlotte. Getting mighty chilly out there, isn't it?” Hank greeted me genially, stepping out from behind the counter. “Wanna cup of coffee?”

I nodded, tugging at the scarf I'd wrapped around my head to keep out the bitter cold. “Thanks, Hank.”

“Did you get the snow chains?” Hank had paid me for another sold painting and he'd organized a deal with Denzel Stone, the proud owner of Puckhaber Falls one and only car dealership, to have snow chains fitted to my tires.

“Yep, thanks.”

“You'll need them, what with the roads so icy now. You should have had new tires too, I looked at yours a couple of days ago, and they're looking worn.” Hank handed me a mug of steaming hot coffee and pulled up a stool for me to sit beside the shop counter.

This had become a weekly routine, stopping into Hank's for coffee and a chat. Like it or not, I'd made friends in Puckhaber Falls – somehow my guard had been lowered by the sheer honest

friendship these people offered. It hadn't changed my resolve, just... confused it. The whole situation had gotten messy when I'd met Lucas. It was *his* fault I'd delayed my plans, *his* fault I hadn't worked up the courage to follow through with my decision. Or at least, that's what I'd been telling myself, to explain my failure to fulfill the fate I'd chosen for myself.

After the waterfall fiasco, Lucas disappeared from my life, as completely as he'd done after the car accident. You would think I'd have gotten the message, but foolishly, I'd hung around, thinking he might contact me again. And was deeply disappointed when he didn't. Of course, the rational part of my brain explained it very clearly, even though I didn't want to hear it. He was out of my league, what would he find interesting in me? Hell, what did it matter, anyway? It wasn't as if I was going to be around for much longer.

The week after my brief stay at Lucas's, I decided some effort was required on my part. I'd spent some of my meager funds on getting a haircut. I'd had my hair styled and as a result, my hair sat in tight ringlets, framing my face in a halo of curls that fell just below my shoulders. I'd wasted even more money, buying new items of clothing; some jeans, which fitted my slenderer shape and a couple of new sweaters. My old clothes were practically disintegrating before my eyes and I really did need the items, but I knew the real motivation and loathed myself for it. I wanted to look pretty for Lucas, hoped to see him again and have him appreciate the effort I'd made.

It was a shock when I did finally see him – a couple of weeks ago, I'd come into town for supplies and was standing in the Quikmart, deciding over which cereal to purchase. I heard a deep growl and turned towards the sound, catching sight of Lucas at the

end of the aisle and he'd positively glowered at me. His eyes glittered with unconcealed fury and he'd shaken his head, turning abruptly on his heels and stalking away. I'd lost nights of sleep over it, wondering why he'd acted that way and what I could possibly have done to cause such a hostile reaction.

As time went on I folded in on myself, like a house of collapsing cards. I still spent time with the people in town because it was hard to avoid when the population was so small. But my plans for my demise had accelerated back to being my top priority. December was a traditionally bad month, a time when my demons haunted me even more than usual. This year was proving harder to cope with than the previous two.

There was nothing left to do but follow through with the decision. I'd tried a week or so ago with an attempt to slit my wrists, but once again I'd failed miserably. I was frightened of pain and the first tentative cuts with a razor blade stopped me in my tracks before I'd managed to do any major damage. The thought of the falls was enticing; I'd tried once before and almost succeeded. Watching the water crash over the rocks had been mesmerizing and I believed it was the one way I could end my miserable existence, once and for all. Which was why I found myself at the art store, visiting with Hank for the last time. Christmas was just a week away, and I had no intentions of living to see it. I didn't want to be overwhelmed by memories, as I'd been last year and the year before that. I'd made up my mind this time and refused to be dissuaded from achieving my goal.

Hank caught my attention by waving a hand in front of my face and I glanced up, startled to discover I was still sitting in the art store. I'd become so engrossed in my plans; I'd completely forgotten everything around me.

"Golly, when you get to thinking you just shut down completely, don't you?" Hank said with a grin. Despite the subtle teasing in his voice, his eyes narrowed shrewdly, watching me with concern.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" I smiled weakly, trying to pull myself together. It wouldn't be a great idea to make Hank suspicious, I certainly didn't need anyone guessing what I'd planned and trying to stop me.

"I was asking if you'd come to our place for Christmas dinner. Mary would be more than happy to have the extra company and I thought you could drive over Christmas Eve and stay the night. You'd be more than welcome."

I grimaced uneasily, fiddling with the fingers of my gloves which lay on the countertop. "Thanks for the offer Hank, but I wouldn't be good company. I kind of prefer having Christmas on my own."

"Just what makes you so blue at this time of the year?" Hank asked quietly. He stared avidly at his coffee, plainly uncomfortable to be asking such an intrusive question. Hank was down to earth and endearing, but completely out of his depth when it came to discussing anything which remotely touched on emotional issues.

"I don't like Christmas much. It's... complicated," I explained, chewing at my bottom lip anxiously.

"Well, if you change your mind..."

"Thank you. I really do appreciate the offer." I put down the coffee mug and stood up abruptly. "I'd better be going." I needed to get out of this store, out of this town – away from these caring, hospitable people.

"Wait a minute; I've got some money for you. I sold that watercolor you brought in last week." He opened the till and drew out an envelope. "Three hundred dollars. Why don't you buy yourself somethin' nice for Christmas?"

I stared at the envelope in his outstretched hand. "Three hundred dollars? I thought you were trying to sell it for one hundred and fifty?"

His look was innocent - entirely *too* innocent - and I eyed him skeptically when he muttered an answer. "A buyer came in and loved it. Insisted on paying three hundred."

I took the envelope from him and shoved it into my purse. "Thanks, Hank." I was certain the watercolor had sold for the asking price, and the other money came from Hank himself. It was something I would have argued, if I hadn't been so utterly desperate to escape. His kindness only made me feel worse.

I stumbled to the door, barely aware of my surroundings. I took one last look at Hank's kindly face, uneasiness evident in his eyes. "Merry Christmas," I offered quietly.

"You too, honey."

I thrust through the door, stalking to the car with tears burning in my eyes. For a long time I sat behind the wheel, desperately trying to get my thoughts into order, but it was hopeless. For weeks, I'd been out of control, not sleeping, not painting, not doing anything that made sense. I'd even considered driving to Lucas's house at one stage and asking him... no, *demanding* he tell me why he was avoiding me. But in my heart, I knew why he was steering clear.

I wasn't what a man like Lucas Tine would find interesting. He obviously wasn't attracted to me and had only ever been polite because of the circumstances that had thrown us together for a few brief moments. There had been nothing romantic – no hint from him to suggest otherwise and I was an idiot to crave something that just didn't exist.

Against him – the man, his life, and his world – I was plain. Plain, uninteresting, and ever so slightly insane. If I wasn't already

demented, I was going to drive myself crazy thinking about him – what could he possibly find appealing in me? He was obviously only being courteous when we'd met. But then I remembered the way he gazed at me and started thinking fanatically, all over again. He'd looked at me sometimes as though he cared. On the other hand, he'd also looked at me as though I was something frightening. And sometimes, he'd looked as if he was furious he'd met me, angry that my life had crossed paths with his.

To all intents and purposes, I *had* only crossed his path. I couldn't understand my intense emotions – why was I obsessed with someone I'd only met three times? None of it made any sense and thinking about it only had me spiraling further into depression.

While I sat ruminating in the cold car, I made up my mind. Today was the day. I didn't want to go on, didn't want to watch my tentative grip on sanity slip any further.

Since Lucas's warning, I hadn't returned to the falls and I'd done exactly as he told me and stayed out of the forest. It wasn't going to happen anymore. I would go to the falls, and I would end the perpetual nightmare in which I was trapped. What did it matter if Lucas suggested there was danger out there? That was exactly what I needed now – some danger, a way of killing myself. The woods were exactly where I should be going, and to hell with what Lucas said or thought.

And it was going to happen this afternoon.

The tumult of emotions that kept my mind in a state of constant activity abruptly lulled and serenity crept over my exhausted mind. I was more at peace than I'd been in weeks, perhaps even longer. The tranquility certainly equaled what I'd felt the last time I visited the falls, and I craved the sensation like a drug. My previous attempts had been failures, but this one would succeed. I knew it would work

and I was composed. I'd been to the falls before and I'd gotten so close last time. Just one more step, and it would have been over. This time I would take that last step and Lucas wouldn't be there to stop me.

I started my car and executed a careful U-turn on the icy road, heading back towards the cottage.



The forest was different now, with the arrival of winter many of the trees had dropped their leaves, leaving stark grey branches reaching towards the darkened sky. It was beautiful.

I walked through the trees, relishing the thought of being here again. I hadn't been aware of how much I'd missed it, how much I had come to love these hikes in the wilderness which called to my heart and soothed my battered psyche.

It took a little while to get my bearings, I'd stumbled across the falls last time, and the landscape had changed dramatically, making it much more difficult to find what I was searching for. All the trees looked much the same as each other and just as I was beginning to doubt I'd ever find it, I heard the sound of the water dashing over the falls. Relief flooded through me - I'd half expected the river to be iced over, but it seemed I was in luck and the water still flowed.

Accelerating my pace, I walked towards the sound, calm and at peace with my decision. Some people in Puckhaber Falls would wonder what happened to me, of course, but I hadn't been here long – it wouldn't take much time for them to forget. I could envisage their initial concerns and they might assume I'd gotten lost in the woods. It was doubtful they would ever find my body and that was exactly the way I wanted it. Besides, they were virtually

strangers. It would have been different if they were family. I had no one to mourn me, no one to cry over my loss. I'd never felt more alone than I did now.

I reached the river and turned to the right, following the familiar path Lucas had carried me along weeks ago. Clenching my fists tightly, I dismissed thoughts of that day. I wouldn't allow the thought of him to interfere with my plan, couldn't allow complications to get in the way. Despite my resolve, I glanced behind me – with a mixture of hope and dread – to see if Lucas was on the path following me. Coming to the rescue again.

There was no one there.

About twenty feet from the falls, I heard an unexpected noise and twisted around hurriedly. On the path, a man stood a few feet away. I stumbled backwards, shaken by his abrupt appearance and instantly wary.

“Good afternoon,” he said politely, his mouth lifting into a cold smile which didn't reach his eyes. He was tall and powerfully built, wearing a black trench coat, faded blue denims and shabby leather boots. Despite the frigid weather, his trench coat was unbuttoned and his chest was naked underneath. His skin was pale, and long black hair hung unkempt and wild around his hard face. Looking into his eyes, I realized they were extraordinary. Dark brown and streaked with sparkling shards of silver, they glittered as he stared down at me, seeming amused by my bewilderment. Warning bells sounded in my head and I took another step back, glancing around for something, *anything* I might be able to use as a weapon. Beads of sweat broke out against my upper lip and my hands were clammy as I glanced around a second time, searching for a way to escape.

“I didn't think you would come back here again,” he remarked, his voice low and intimidating.

Startled by the comment, my eyes grew wide – how did he know I'd been here before? “Do I know you?” I questioned anxiously, my voice high-pitched and panicky to my own ears.

He threw his head back and laughed mirthlessly. “No, you don't. But I've seen you before - many times before, in fact. It's extremely dangerous out here for a little human like you. Particularly now the other vampire has lost interest in trailing after his pet. He made it extremely difficult to get to you, always following you around, never letting you out of his sight. The funny thing is, you weren't even aware he was there; you didn't have a fucking clue that he was following you. Only that once, when you made that dismal attempt at killing yourself, and he raced in like a gallant fool to stop you.” He sighed melodramatically. “I'm so pleased he lost interest in you, but when you didn't return to the forest, I thought he'd snacked on you himself and I'd missed my opportunity.”

My mind was playing tricks on me – I was sure I'd misunderstood what he said. “Vampire?” I repeated blankly.

He stared at me for a split-second before throwing his head back, roaring with laughter again. “You didn't know? How could you have not known?” His eyes filled with contempt and he took a swaggering step closer. “You humans are even more stupid than I could have believed possible. I saw him running with you in his arms – didn't that strike you as odd? I'll grant you, he did run far more slowly than he is capable of, but most humans can't run like that, even when they aren't carrying a load.” He looked skeptical, smirking viciously. “Surely you can't be that dull-witted?”

I couldn't comprehend what I was hearing and my brain refused to work. He must be out of his mind, maybe he was a patient who'd escaped from a mental hospital somewhere. What he was saying

was completely impossible, an unbelievable concept which couldn't possibly be true.

He watched me curiously, observing the manifold emotions I knew must be crossing my face. "What do you want?" I finally demanded, wrapping my arms across my chest.

That appalling smirk appeared again, followed by a chortle that sent chills down my spine. "I could kill you right now, right this second, if I so desired. Candidly speaking however, I'm afraid easy kills have begun to bore me. I prefer giving my prey a fair chance." He stepped forward, the movement so rapid I didn't see him shift, and abruptly he was in front of me, his face mere inches from my own. "*Run,*" he commanded in a low voice. "Run, little human, and see if you can save your own life."

I didn't need to hear it twice. Without pause, I twisted around and stumbled along the path towards the falls, bile rising in my throat. I wanted to die, but this wasn't the way I intended for it to happen. I wanted to be on my own, be in control of my own death. I didn't want to be murdered by this... *freak*. I didn't believe – *couldn't* believe what he'd told me. Vampires were a myth, a fantasy, something in horror stories and the stuff of legend. Terror overwhelmed me as I sprinted along the pathway, stumbling on the snow-covered ground as I ran to escape him. My heart pounded in my chest, my blood pumped with adrenaline and sheer unadulterated terror set my limbs to trembling as I sprinted as quickly as I could, lifting my knees high to get through the heavy snowfall without falling.

I'd struggled across about seventy feet of ground when he appeared in front of me, grinning savagely. I'd neither seen nor heard him approach. Whilst I was breathless, gasping icy air into my lungs in painful bursts, he didn't appear to be winded at all. "What

did he see in you? So pitifully slow, so pathetically, fucking weak. Its little wonder he lost interest so quickly. Although," he reached forward and rubbed icy fingers across my throat, "you do smell absolutely delicious." With a laugh, he opened his mouth wide and long fangs extended from where his incisors should be. He grabbed my left arm, one hand on my wrist and the other below my elbow. "I do believe I should make this more fun. For me, at least." With a rapid motion he bent my forearm between his hands and I screamed in agony when the bones snapped. Falling to my knees, I was blinded by the intensity of the pain pulsating through my arm and gripped the limb to my chest, nauseous when I felt shards of broken bone underneath my fingers.

He dropped on one knee beside me, whispering in my ear. "*Run. If you really want to get away from me, little human, run. Now.*"

I scrambled to my feet, cradling the arm against my chest as I ran for a second time. I didn't know which way to go – there was no safety in the woods, nobody to hear me scream for help, nowhere to run that would get me away from this— this *creature*. Anxiety screamed through every nerve ending and my head refused to cooperate. It seemed all I could focus on was the excruciating pain in my arm and the disbelief of seeing those fangs extend in his mouth. It had to be a joke, an elaborate ruse. I searched from one side of the path to the other for an escape route, making a split-second decision to head off the path and through the trees, in the hope of finding somewhere to hide. The thought of him kept me moving, lurching through the heavily wooded forest searching for salvation, glancing back every few seconds to see where he was. *Not fast enough, not fast enough! Go faster!* The words ran repeatedly in my mind as I twisted and turned between the trees, the only sound the ragged staccato beat of my breathing and my heart. I caught my

foot on a tree root and fell to the ground, wrenching my ankle so badly I feared it was broken. I lay on the snowy ground, gasping for air, my lungs on fire and panic filling my chest to the point where I could hardly draw breath.

"You aren't making much sport out of this."

He stood a few feet away, leaning casually against a tree with his arms crossed over his chest. The look in his eyes was terrifying – he was *enjoying* this – much the way I imagined a lion enjoyed chasing a deer. This was entertainment to him, and the knowledge had bile rushing up my throat. Dragging myself up onto my hands and knees, I retched against the snowy ground, seeing black spots in my field of vision as my oxygen-starved body fought against losing consciousness.

He appeared beside me, pulling me from the ground by my undamaged arm and dropping me onto my feet before him. Disorientated and faint, I tried to balance one-legged in the heavy snow. I gingerly placed my other foot down, but the stabbing pain that shot through my leg seemed to be confirmation I'd broken my ankle.

"I'm wasting my time, you're not making this pleasurable at all," he growled furiously, glancing with distaste at the spot where I'd emptied the meager contents of my stomach. In a blur, his arm swung forwards, smashing into my chest with incredible force. I flew backwards through the air and landed some twenty feet away, hitting my head heavily against a fallen tree. Battling to stay conscious and struggling against crippling pain, I tried to formulate a plan, something that would let me escape from this— I shuddered as the word penetrated my throbbing head— *vampire*. I understood too late what Lucas had been warning me about when he'd told me to stay out of the woods.

He stood over me, disappointment clear in his dark eyes. "Too easy. I must find prey that can put up a fight. This was ridiculously simple." He paused, his eyes narrowing. "Of course, there are other ways I can amuse myself..."

He bent over my crumpled form, grabbing the waistband of my jeans with both hands. In one savage movement, he tore them from my body as if they were made of tissue paper. I knew what he intended and was helpless to do anything to stop it. My head was spinning, the pain throughout my body overwhelming and the knowledge there was no escaping from this animal hit me with a finality that was horrifying. Every breath was torture, the pain emanating from my ribs felt as if daggers were being plunged into my lungs.

He shrugged off the long coat, throwing it to the ground. "If I enjoy this, I might let you live. Or perhaps fucking you will bore me, and I'll kill you anyway." He pinched my jaw between his thumb and forefinger in an acutely painful grip, forcing me to look into his eyes. "Which would you prefer?" He straightened up and I sobbed as he reached for the button on his jeans.

A monstrous growl echoed through the woods and I thought it had come from him. Through the hazy fog of pain, I forced myself to look up into his cruel face. If this was how I was going to die, I wanted it to be over.

His expression changed and he looked almost... scared? No, he was more than scared – he seemed *terrified*.

I couldn't imagine what caused his fear, until something sprang from the trees and slammed into the creature. The sound of the bodies hitting together reverberated like a heavy clap of thunder and I cringed away from the noise. They battled together – their movements so abnormally swift, so rapid – they appeared to be

shimmering. I grasped what it was that had come to my rescue with stunning clarity. Or rather, *who* had come to my rescue.

Relief flooded through my battered body when I knew it was Lucas. Which seemed a strange emotion, considering I'd been told he was a vampire. I watched the two creatures grappling together, spinning, and soaring through the woods as they clashed repeatedly. My eyes wanted to close so badly, but I needed to be certain Lucas was safe, that the creature didn't harm him...

"Charlotte? Can you hear me?"

With difficulty, I turned my head and looked at the man kneeling beside me, recognized him as Lucas's friend, Ben. His dark brown eyes narrowed when he caught my face between his hands. Icy cold hands. Which struck me as odd – why did he have such cold hands? I guessed it was freezing out here and I couldn't feel my own feet or legs, but it seemed strange that his hands were so icy. Didn't he have gloves? Ben wrenched off his jacket and threw it over my torso and when I looked at his eyes again, I shrank back in fear. The brown of his eyes had morphed, they were still a rich chocolate brown, but as I stared, I saw the flicker of golden streaks through them. Maybe this was a nightmare – it couldn't be real. I closed my eyes, wanting to drift into sleep, to forget the pain that was superseding everything else.

"Charlotte, look at me! Keep your eyes open. Charlotte!" I forced my eyelids open, discovering Ben had been joined by someone else. A petite woman, perhaps my age or a little older. With pale skin and hazel eyes which sparkled with silver streaks. I almost smiled, despite everything that was happening. Another vampire? Good grief – I was *surrounded* by them – that must be what they all were. This one was striking, her silky dark hair piled into a ponytail high on her head. Ben spoke to her, in words so low and rapid; I couldn't

understand what he said. The woman leapt to her feet and disappeared in the blink of an eye, as if she'd never been by my side in the first place.

Lucas. Try to locate Lucas. I wanted to see him once more before I died, and that was, undoubtedly, what was going to happen. I lolled my head to the right, watching through half open eyelids and struggling to stay conscious. Lucas stood behind the creature which was being held between two other men, their grip tight on his arms. One of the men was heavily built, a mountain of muscle with long blonde hair and rippling biceps. The second man had closely cropped dark hair, and he was slender and tall. More vampires, if I was buying into the preposterous story I'd heard.

Lucas nodded to the two men and they forced the creature onto his knees, pressuring him until he was bent forward from the waist. Lucas stepped in front of him and I saw he was carrying a sword - a huge, heavy-bladed weapon which appeared to have come from a medieval movie set. In a quick movement he raised it high over his head and a deep growl erupted from low in his chest when he slashed it downwards towards the vampire's neck. Blood spurted across Lucas's face and shirt as the vampire's head was lopped from its shoulders, rolling across the snowy ground until it stopped a few feet away from where I lay, the glassy eyes staring directly at me, the mouth open in a deathly yaw, the fangs still readily visible. As I watched in horrified fascination, a drop of saliva ran down one of the glistening fangs, falling to the blood-soaked ground beneath the head.

I heard screaming – loud, primal screaming, and realized with shock that it was my own voice. I couldn't seem to stop the noise issuing from my throat and I continued to scream until I sank into a blessed darkness where the pain and terror faded away.

CHAPTER 6

DREAMS, OR NIGHTMARES?

"Are you sure she will wake up?" *I recognized Lucas's voice, heard anxiety in his worried tone.*

"Yes, she will wake up. She has sustained grave injuries and she's suffering severe shock." *This was Ben's voice, soothing and reassuring.* "Jerome has her sedated with a significant amount of morphine; he says she'll wake when she's ready."

"We should have taken her to the hospital." *Lucas's voice again.*

"Lucas, you know it's better to keep her here with us. We don't know what Ambrose told her, how much she knows. It would be dangerous for us all, if she's aware of everything and speaks to hospital staff. What if she tells them our secret? We would have to run immediately and none of us is ready to leave yet. Besides, Jerome can access all the medical equipment we need and bring it here." *This was a woman's voice, calm, light and lilting.*

"Marianne, you think she's better here with us. Gwynn has made her attitude about Charlotte very clear." *Lucas's voice again and I thought I detected annoyance in his tone.*

"You know what Gwynn is like. She'll come around," *the calm and reassuring voice said. This must be Marianne.* "William will calm her down, he always does."

"I don't believe Gwynn is our primary concern at present." *Ben again, his voice low, composed. They all spoke so swiftly, I had to concentrate carefully to pick up everything that was said.* "Charlotte may or may not know what we are and we must ascertain how much she knows before we can make further decisions." *I felt the sheets being drawn up over my chest, and the weight of a blanket being adjusted.* "Right now, I'm more concerned with her injuries and Jerome says further damage could be done if we attempt to move her."

Holy shit, I think I'm still alive. How strange. I was certain I should be in pain, but there was nothing tangible, only the sensation of being warm and comfortable. Perhaps I was dead. Maybe I was dead and this was all some bizarre hallucination, some final quest before I entered the afterlife.

No. Not possible. No hallucination could possibly be this bizarre.

There should at least be some discomfort, after the injuries I'd received at the hands of that... *thing*. There was no physical suggestion of pain, however, only the softness of the bed and the weight of warm blankets lying across my torso. Why was it so dark? As my senses returned in increments, I figured out my eyes were still closed and I decided I rather liked it that way. For the moment, I'd lay here with my eyes shut, keep still, and silent. I still had no idea what I was really dealing with. If these people were vampires – keeping in mind that it was a completely preposterous idea – why hadn't they killed me? A sudden, chilling thought entered my mind. Was this another sick game, did they want to nurse me back to health so they could chase me as the other one had?

"I warned her to stay out of the forest, I told her not to go back in there. I thought they had moved on. I would never have stopped

trailing her, if I'd known there was still danger from Ambrose and his Kiss."

"We're fortunate Marianne had the vision and we got there in time. Acenith and Ripley have investigated the surrounding forest and it seems the other three had moved on, only Ambrose stayed behind." *Ben spoke again, and his voice was composed and gentle.* "They are still searching for the body of his last victim. It must be close by; he'd fed very recently to bleed out as he did."

"Can you see anything, Marianne? Can you see what her future holds now?" *This was Lucas again, his tone pleading.*

"I've told you, this isn't an exact science, and I'm not brilliant at it in the first place. You know I don't see exactly what will happen, only glimpses of possible future events, which I must try to decipher. She's extremely difficult to read and what I'm getting seems to be centered on events that will happen soon, not occurrences that are often months away, as I see with members of our Kiss. Quite often, she plunges into blackness, as if she has no future. It makes my head ache." *It was the lilting voice again. She didn't sound evil, although I heard frustration in her voice when she answered Lucas. I couldn't comprehend what she was talking about, but in my peaceful state of mind, I dismissed it as part of the strange dream I was experiencing.*

"I wish we knew how much she knows. It would help if we could get some insight into these..." *I heard Ben's voice and he grasped my wrist gently, running his thumb across the skin.* I knew what he was seeing – the scars from my previous suicide attempts, the most recent only a week or so ago. They were tentative cuts and although I'd opened the skin, I'd failed to cut deeply enough to complete the job. The scars left behind were still red and angry.

"I wish I knew why she is so desperately unhappy and I wish I hadn't been the cause of her melancholy increasing." *Lucas's voice was edgy, and I was stunned by the intensity of his words. What did he mean?*

"You did what you thought best, Lucas. Nobody is blaming you for the decisions you've made." *I felt a cool hand against my forehead. "She's deeply conflicted. There's a great deal of pain in her thoughts, her emotions." This was another woman speaking, her voice holding a trace of an accent, perhaps Irish or Scots, though I couldn't figure out which. By the proximity of her voice, I figured she was the one touching me, her fingertips brushing my hair gently away from my face. It took every ounce of willpower not to cringe away from her touch, but I was determined to keep my return to consciousness a secret.*

"If you had listened to me in the first place, none of this would have happened." *The one called Marianne spoke, her voice smug. "I told you Charlotte was coming into your life. What I don't understand is why you fought against it so vehemently."*

Lucas swore. "There is the tiny complication of her being human. There is also the fact that you said I would meet her – you never mentioned anything about me nearly killing her." I could hear amusement in his voice when he spoke again. "And Marianne, as much as I adore you – we all know your ability is haphazard, to say the least."

"Well, thank you for that vote of confidence! I happened to be remarkably accurate this time, but if I'd told you the meeting would take place when you hit her with your car, you would never have driven anywhere again," *Marianne responded sweetly.*

"You're possibly right, but I wouldn't necessarily have believed you," *Lucas admitted, his voice rueful and I could imagine him*

smiling when he spoke. "I nearly killed her. Thank God there wasn't any traffic around; I could never have pulled off that maneuver on a busy road." *There was no trace of bragging, his voice was calm, filled with quiet confidence.* "I knew when I spun the car ninety degrees that it would be her. I thought I had missed her, but that tiny nudge was enough to give her a serious concussion and stitches." *He sighed heavily.* "Humans are so fragile."

They lapsed into silence and I contemplated his last sentence, turning it over in my mind endlessly. 'Humans are so fragile'. That meant there was undeniably something strange about him. There seemed to be much I didn't understand about what was occurring here and my mind sought to dismiss the whole vampire story as ludicrous. Yet what other explanation did I have? At least I had answers to a couple of questions – Lucas *had* known my name before I told him, and he had definitely been driving more than twenty miles an hour when he hit me. Despite this, I seemed to have more unanswered questions now than before.

"We aren't going to get any answers yet. We should leave her to sleep." *Ben's voice was calm, his tone filled with authority.* "Lucas, you must go and feed."

"I don't want to leave her."

"You need to go. You don't want to lose control." *The as-yet unidentified woman spoke.* "I'm sure Striker would love to keep you company."

Lucas sighed. "Alright. I'm not going far and I'll be back as soon as I've fed. I want to be here when she wakes up."

"We'll look after her. I promise you," *Ben said sincerely.*

There was the sound of a door opening and closing quietly, then the room fell into silence and I mulled over what they'd said. I didn't have a clue what it meant, but my heart fluttered at the idea of

Lucas not wanting to leave me. It was flattering, even if he was a vampire. The insanity of it crossed my mind again and I still wasn't entirely convinced as to whether I was alive or dead. The question was – what did I want the answer to be? My whole world had tilted on its axis and I didn't know which way was up, or what the hell was going on.

I considered opening my eyes now that I was apparently alone. If I opened them, I could conclusively answer the question of if I was alive or dead. Possibly. Dependent on what I saw, of course.

I pondered for a few minutes, trying to decide. I was honestly terrified about both options and wasn't confident I truly wanted to know. At this moment I felt safe and secure, exactly the way I was. While they thought I was asleep, it appeared I was safe. What happened when I opened my eyes? If they did have a secret, if they really were vampires... I dismissed the thought instantly. Vampires were a myth, a legend. Yet what other explanation did I have for what I'd witnessed in the woods? And so many questions remained unanswered about Lucas and his friends.

Without a doubt, opening my eyes would be a very bad thing. I didn't know what the situation would be when I did, and I found it remarkable to discover that after weeks of almost continuous insomnia, I did feel rather sleepy...



The second time I drifted into consciousness, I decided immediately that I was still alive – being dead couldn't possibly be this excruciating. Every nerve ending throbbed and I knew from experience that I'd been alive when I'd woken from a serious injury with severe throbbing pain. I couldn't decide what hurt most – my

arm ached, my foot pounded and my ribs – they felt as if they'd been smashed into a thousand pieces. To add insult to injury, my head was hammering. Nope, I decided glumly – not dead.

I lay stock-still, listening vigilantly for sounds of people in the room, but there was nothing to be heard, other than the steady beep of something nearby. I assumed it was medical equipment and could feel the pressure of a monitoring device on my finger, which seemed to confirm my speculation. It occurred to me that perhaps I was in a hospital and I wondered if they'd brought me here. I fleetingly pondered how they could have explained my injuries. A car accident, perhaps, or a drastic and near-fatal fall from the top of a tall building?

For another couple of minutes I listened cautiously for sounds in the room, but the only thing I could hear was the steady beeping of the monitor. With effort I blinked opened my eyes, attempting to establish my bearings.

The room was darkened, a small shaft of light coming from somewhere on my right. A magnificent pendant lamp hung from the ceiling; the crystals illuminated in the reflections from the soft light. Within my line of sight, the walls were richly decorated with brocade wallpaper in the palest blue, confirming this was certainly not a hospital. No medical facility had ever been decorated this lavishly, from my limited experience. I turned my head incrementally to investigate further and moaned, squeezing my eyes shut as an avalanche of pain swamped my senses.

“Charlotte? Charlotte, can you hear me?”

I was terrified when I heard his voice, and kept my eyes squeezed shut. A mental picture of how I'd last seen him, physically decapitating another person assaulted my mind and my ears rang

from the sub-human growl that had erupted from deep within his chest. It was a terrifying image, and one I was unlikely to forget.

"Charlotte, please? Please, open your eyes. I'm begging you. Charlotte?" His voice was gentle, no indication of anything evil or fearsome lurking in his tone. There was a long pause. A sigh. And then his fingertips touched my cheek tenderly, icy cold but incredibly gentle as he ran them from my temple to my chin. The stroke made me shiver and I warily forced my eyes open.

He was inches away, watching me intently and I could see the tension in his expression. It rapidly turned to relief and he smiled warmly when he saw my eyes open. "I can't tell you how happy I am that you are awake." Then he must have seen something in my eyes that made him scowl and he moved away, the smile swiftly fading.

I watched him cautiously, unable to tear my gaze away from his face. A tumult of emotions washed over his features and I saw nothing threatening – only pain, conflict... and distress. As though something wounded him more than he could bear. When he spoke, his voice was hushed. "Ambrose told you. You think I am a monster."

I was speechless. Even if I could have forced any words out, what was I going to say? Lucas turned and strode to the door, wrenching it open and letting it slam shut behind him.

Terror gripped my limbs and adrenaline pounded through my bloodstream as I started to panic, believing he would tell the others and they would come to kill me. The rapid pace of my breathing caused pain to burn in my chest and I took a deep gulp of air, hoping to soothe the terrible ache. It was a dreadful mistake, as a sharper pain rippled through my sides, as if a dozen knives were repeatedly stabbing my torso. Tears slid down my cheeks and I lifted my hand to wipe them away, only to discover my left arm was in a

plaster cast and from the weight around my foot, so was my right ankle. I was trapped here, with no way of escaping.

"Charlotte." Ben appeared beside the bed, wearing a crisp white button-down shirt and black trousers. He smiled compassionately, holding his hands out with his palms facing me. "Please try to relax, hyperventilating will not help. Try to breathe slowly and shallowly. If it will make you feel more at ease, we will arrange to transport you to hospital immediately. I assure you, we have absolutely no intentions of harming you in any way. Take slow and steady breaths, please, that's right, good girl." His baritone voice was soothing as he coached me quietly. When I had settled a little, he reached for a Kleenex from the box on the table, dropping it into my hand and I wiped my eyes and sniffled, clutching the tissue in my fist.

"Is it true?" I demanded. My voice was rasping, my throat parched and it was hard to swallow. "Are you... vampires?" The word sounded unbelievable, even as it left my lips.

Ben poured a cup of water from a plastic jug and dropped a straw into it before handing it to me. I sipped the water, eyeing him distrustfully.

"Yes. It's true," he stated quietly. His posture remained relaxed; he was loose-limbed and calm, watching me with nothing in his expression to suggest any animosity or threat.

"Why are you keeping me alive then?" I yelled angrily. "You could have let that— that *thing*, kill me!" In contrast to Ben's relaxed manner, every muscle in my body was stiff and unyielding and I wasn't certain it had anything to do with the injuries I'd sustained. Eyeing the tall man standing beside me, I waited for him to leap, to bare a set of fangs as the other one had done and kill me.

"Neither Lucas nor I would have allowed that to happen," he interjected hurriedly. "We're different from others... like us." Again,

he held his hands out before him, attempting to diffuse my temper.

I eyed him distrustfully. "Different? How?"

"I think Lucas should explain the specifics of our lifestyle to you. I give you my word that Lucas, myself and our friends will do nothing to harm you if we can possibly avoid it."

"Why keep me here then? Why didn't you take me to a hospital?" I was skeptical and couldn't hide it, even if I'd possessed the energy to attempt a ruse. His expression remained passive, but I didn't know him and couldn't imagine trusting him. If he really was a vampire... they *killed* people. Murdered humans, for their blood.

"We can only stay in an area whilst our true nature is kept secret. As you can imagine," he smiled weakly and shrugged, "humans find us frightening. We weren't certain if Ambrose exposed our circumstances to you. As a precaution, we decided it would be best to care for you here, until we ascertained what you knew, and then we could make decisions from that point—"

"Whether or not to kill me?" I shrieked angrily.

Ben shook his head. "No, Charlotte. We will not harm you." He placed his hand on my arm and I flinched, causing a further round of agony through my bruised and battered body. Ben swiftly removed his hand and sighed heavily, brushing his fingers across his forehead as he watched me silently.

"Why are you so cold?"

"We don't have blood flowing through our bodies as you do."

"You're... *dead*?"

Ben pursed his lips together, shaking his head. "Not exactly."

"I don't understand," I eyed him distrustfully, "and I don't want to." I needed to get out of here, away from these people before they harmed me. Would they really take me to a hospital if I asked them to? Even if they agreed to such a demand, could they be believed?

"I can understand why you don't trust us. Our reputation precedes us, but I wanted the opportunity to explain our situation to you, to ask you to keep our real identity a secret and not mention to others what we are. Regardless of whether you agree to the request or not, we'll take you to the hospital immediately if that's what you want and absolutely nothing will happen to harm you. I give you my word."

I pondered on what he'd said for a good while, wondering if it was possible to believe him. To trust them. He remained beside the bed, waiting patiently for me to speak. He made no further attempt to convince me, and his silence was welcome as I struggled to come to a decision. My arms were wrapped across my chest defensively, the tissue still clutched in my fingers as I tapped against the plaster cast. "Who did this?"

"A friend of ours, who happens to be a Doctor," he responded quietly.

"*Another vampire?*" Panic edged my voice, along with a healthy dose of hysteria.

Ben's eyes twinkled and he smiled. "Relax, Charlotte. No, he isn't vampire." For a long moment, he watched me carefully, his expression growing serious again. "As you can probably imagine, vampires don't make good medical practitioners; the access to blood is far too tempting."

I glanced again at the neat cast on my arm and the plethora of medical equipment they'd been using to keep me alive and comfortable. None of this made any sense. If they were intending to kill me, why would they bother treating my injuries? When that other vampire, Ambrose... had broken my arm, the bone had pierced my skin. I hadn't noticed at the time, but there would surely have been blood involved and yet here I was, alive and breathing. They hadn't

attacked me when it would have been easy to do so – instead they'd tried to save me. Lucas had killed Ambrose to protect me.

“So you really are,” I swallowed deeply, “a vampire?” Even as I voiced the word aloud, I expected Ben to laugh and shake his head, tell me this was all some sort of outrageous prank. For a little while, I'd been under the misguided illusion that Lucas was an angel – the possibility of him being a vampire was even more absurd.

Ben nodded, his face somber.

“Oh.” What else could I say? Even as my mind pushed the idea away as fantasy, the reality of what I'd seen was inarguable. The vampire in the forest had fangs; I'd seen them extend from his gums as I'd watched. The incredible speed and fighting ability Lucas had displayed – there was no way to explain it away as normal human behavior. And their eyes... they were not typically human attributes.

“Charlotte, I promise we won't hurt you. The only thing I'm asking is that you don't disclose what we are to anybody. It would cause us no end of problems; we have to move regularly as it is, but we would prefer to stay here for a little longer if we could.”

I considered his request for only seconds. What point would there be in telling anybody? Who would believe such a fantastic story? Despite my suspicions and fears, Ben struck me as being truthful. Something in his voice reassured me of his sincerity and I looked up at him, some of the trepidation beginning to subside. He radiated a reassuring calmness that suggested he would keep his word. I managed a faint smile. “I'll keep your secret.”

The relief in his expression was tangible. “Thank you. We appreciate it greatly. Will I organize transport to hospital, or would you be willing to stay here for a while? Your recovery is our top priority, no matter which choice you make. I should warn you, with

the injuries you've sustained; the transport to hospital would be quite arduous."

"Can I— I think—" I grimaced, tongue-tied by abject nervousness, which was still flooding my body. "I need to think about it."

Ben grinned and nodded. "Of course."

There was a soft knock at the door and Ben turned towards it. "Come in, Jerome."

Before I had a chance to ask how he knew who was standing behind a closed door, Doctor Harding from the hospital walked in, smiling broadly. "I hear our patient is awake." He limped across to the bed, glancing over my plastered arm with a practiced eye. "You really do have knack for getting into enormous amounts of trouble, young lady." He was carrying a bag, which he placed on the table beside the bed and proceeded to open, drawing out a stethoscope and placing it around his neck.

I watched him doubtfully, my brain still struggling to catch-up. How could the same Doctor who'd treated me in hospital after the concussion now be walking into a vampire's house, seemingly without a care in the world? "Doctor Harding?" I muttered incredulously. He was in his late forties, a little less than six feet tall with a portly figure and sharply definrally amiable personality. He walked with a pronounced limp that made his gait appear extremely awkward, but in the few times I'd met him, he'd never used a cane for support.

"At your service." He paused for a second, glancing across at Ben questioningly.

"She's only been awake for minutes," Ben said, as if answering some unspoken question.

"My timing is perfect then," Doctor Harding announced agreeably. He turned back to me, his gray eyes sparkling. "There's nothing to worry about, young Charlotte, you're safe now. Lucas will look after you, he's a good man."

I raised my eyebrows, finding it hard to believe he was suggesting I could be safe in the situation I'd found myself in. Surely he knew these people were vampires?

Doctor Harding settled on the edge of the bed, patting my plastered arm. "These people are my friends, Charlotte. I trust them to keep you safe while you recover from your injuries."

"You're not... one of them?"

He ran a hand through his receding gray hair before he responded. "No, I'm not vampire. I'm a doctor and at present, I'm your doctor. Lucas and Ben requested my assistance when you were attacked and I treated your injuries. I've given Ben some instructions, so he can provide you with pain relief and keep an eye on you in my absence, but I'll visit twice a day to ensure your recovery progresses smoothly." He stood up again, giving my arm another brisk pat. "I'd like to examine you, if that's okay."

I glanced at Ben who smiled reassuringly. "I'll leave you in Jerome's very capable hands. Rowena has been waiting for you to wake up, she would dearly love to be caring for you, and I'm certain she's organizing a meal as we speak. Are you hungry?"

I nodded, and my eyes grew wide as I repeated his words to myself. Rowena? Another vampire? She wanted to look after me? Was that even possible?

Ben seemed to sense my bewilderment and spoke softly. "Rowena is my wife, in every sense of the word, but she is also vampire. Being vampire doesn't make her evil, Charlotte – just as humans do, we have the capacity to love, to share our lives, to care

for others even if it's not something that is practiced by all our brethren. Rowena is a very loving and compassionate woman and she wants to care for you, to help nurse you to good health." He offered me another comforting smile, his brown eyes filled with warmth. "I'll be back shortly."

Doctor Harding reached for my wrist and I cringed, yanking away from him. He immediately dropped his hand to his side and eyed me with sympathy. "I'm sorry about that," he murmured, "you're obviously nervous, and rightly so. It's not everyone who survives such a brutal vampire attack." He motioned towards my wrist. "May I?"

I nodded curtly and he again took hold of my wrist and checked my pulse, his eyes focused on his wristwatch. "Very good," he murmured before he let go and picked up a thermometer from the bedside table, popping it into my mouth. "May I check your ribs?"

I nodded again and he pulled the covers down from my torso, lifting the medical gown, to check my chest. "I'll try not to hurt you," he murmured, carefully probing my ribs and I bit my lip at the throbbing even his gentlest touch created. "I'm so sorry," he apologized, pulling the gown down and carefully tucking the sheets back up around my chest. "You have seven broken ribs; there will be a great deal of pain for some time to come. Fortunately, there's no evidence of any punctures to your lungs, which is a miracle in itself." He settled on the side of the bed again, watching me observantly. "On top of the ribs, you have a broken ankle and a compound fracture to the radius and ulna in your right forearm. I had to use a plate to secure the bone, but it should heal just fine."

Ben appeared in the doorway and knocked on the wall, announcing his presence.

"Ah, Ben. Everything is looking good. No sign of edema, so the swelling may be under control, but keep an eye on her fingers and toes for a few more days. I've given you plenty of morphine and you know how to administer it, keep to fifteen milligrams every three to four hours, but overnight you can give her thirty milligrams before she settles down to sleep. I'll pop in tomorrow morning on my way to work, see how she's doing. Any signs of problems, call my cell and I'll get out here sooner." With another bright smile, Doctor Harding collected his bag, dropped his stethoscope into it, and departed.

"I hope that wasn't too uncomfortable for you," Ben said quietly, as he approached the bed.

"Not as bad as what preceded it." Flashes of memory were beginning to assault me and I trembled as I recalled the creature ripping my jeans away, the look in his eyes when he'd announced he was about to rape me. "I thought he was going to kill me," I admitted hoarsely. The horror of what had happened suddenly hit me with full force and I started to shiver, my teeth chattering together.

"He very nearly did." Ben sat down abruptly, his eyes filled with fury. "Charlotte, I want you to understand that Ambrose is the most evil of our kind. We abhor that type of violence." He took a deep breath and looked into my eyes, his own softening. "In fact, my friends and I abhor any type of violence. We took the only course of action available to stop him. I know you must be deeply revolted by what you saw last night, but it is not a true example of *who we are*. Vampires overall deserve every ounce of bad publicity they've ever had, but our small Kiss is not like that, Charlotte. We had to stop him from doing that to any human again."

Considering his words, I believed he was heartfelt in what he was saying. "I think I believe you."

"Thank you," he responded. I watched him quietly for a few seconds as the pain subsided again and he seemed happy to sit quietly and wait for me to speak.

"What's a Kiss?" I questioned.

"It's the term used for a grouping of our kind. A Kiss is a group of vampires who live together."

"Like a flock of seagulls?"

Ben laughed, and the sound was deep and joyful in the quiet room. It made me smile sheepishly. "Yes, like a flock of seagulls, or a gaggle of geese – even a herd of cows." He settled back in the chair, his posture relaxed as he watched me with mild amusement.

"I guess that was a stupid question," I admitted shyly.

"No question is a stupid question, Charlotte. You have elected to stay with us, for now, and I would be concerned if you didn't have things you wanted to know."

"How many of you are there?"

"Our Kiss has nine members currently living here. There is one other, but he's been travelling for a number of months."

"Nine?" I felt my eyes grow round. "There are *nine* vampires here?" Perhaps staying wasn't such a great idea.

Ben smiled encouragingly. "None of us will hurt you, Charlotte. Lucas will not allow it."

"And he's... in charge?"

"He is our leader, yes." Ben glanced at his watch and stood up. "Speaking of Lucas, I must go and find him."

"He's angry with me." I'd caused his abrupt departure from the room earlier, without saying a word I'd obviously made my terror and revulsion patently obvious.

Ben shook his head and patted my arm, and I was calm enough not to flinch. "No, not angry. He's hurt and confused. He's sure you think he's a fiend and he's gone out into the woods to think. I believe if I explain what you and I have been talking about; it might help him to see that things aren't so bad."

"Would you tell him I'd like to see him?" I paused, considering this unusual turn of events. "Could you tell him— I'm very sorry — about how I reacted."

"Of course. In the meantime, Rowena is on her way up, she's bringing a meal for you." He leaned over and whispered. "Please try and be patient with her, she's desperate to care for you and I would very much appreciate you letting her have her way for a little bit. She does love having someone to care for, and we vampires don't need a lot of mothering."

I nodded cautiously, wide-eyed as he flashed me another brilliant smile.

CHAPTER 7
ROWENA

True to Ben's word, Rowena went out of her way to mother me. When she entered the room carrying a tray of food, I recognized her as the woman who'd knelt by Ben when they'd rescued me in the woods. She was extremely attractive, petite and stylishly dressed in a pale green silk shirt and a dark gray skirt, which skimmed her slender hips. Her hair was pulled into a neat bun at the nape of her neck and her hazel eyes glowed with flashes of silver when she approached.

"Jerome tells me you need something light, so I thought some chicken soup and then jello and ice-cream. Is that alright?" Her accent was the one I'd heard when the others were speaking earlier; there was a slight foreign lilt to her voice which was both lyrical and charming. She graced me with a generous smile as she settled the tray on a hospital-style trolley and rolled it towards me.

I nodded, smiling shyly before Rowena assisted me to sit up in bed. Her eyes were troubled when she assessed how much pain I was enduring, fussing and adjusting the pillows until I was reasonably comfortable. "I'll leave you to eat."

"No, please, I'd like you to stay – if you wouldn't mind." It had been a long time since any person had mothered me and Rowena

made me feel at ease, despite the knowledge of what she was.

She settled in the chair Ben had vacated, watching as I picked up the spoon and tasted the soup. It was delicious and I commented on it.

She beamed with delight. "I'm so pleased. Cooking doesn't come naturally to me."

"Really, it's great," I reassured her. I spooned some more soup into my mouth, savoring the rich creamy taste. "You don't like to cook?"

She settled back in the chair, crossing her legs gracefully. "I've never had much opportunity to try, my family had kitchen staff to do that sort of thing, and of course, food is obsolete now, so I've never really had the opportunity to learn." She glanced up, caught my blank expression, and continued with an ironic smile. "We don't eat as humans do."

I blushed, realizing exactly what she was alluding to. "Of course. I mean, I— Yes. Of course." I didn't know what else to say and returned my attention to the soup. After a few more spoonful's, another thought crossed my mind and I spoke again, curious about the elegant woman sitting beside me. "I hope this isn't a rude question, but I'm wondering why you said you hadn't eaten in many years? How can that be? You don't look any older than me."

Rowena glanced across at the window, a tiny smile playing against her lips. "I was born in 1852, Charlotte. If I celebrated human birthdays, I would be one hundred and fifty-six."

My mouth dropped open and I knew I was staring but couldn't seem to prevent it. The enormity of what she was suggesting was difficult to comprehend. At most, she couldn't possibly be a day over twenty-five.

"I was made vampire in 1873. Once you are raised as vampire, you no longer age – I was twenty-one when I was bitten and I've remained the same age physically since then," Rowena explained calmly.

My knowledge of vampires was rudimentary, but I couldn't begin to grasp how someone could remain twenty-one for decades. My head had been throbbing since I woke up, but now it felt closer to exploding as I endeavored to process this glut of new information.

Rowena smoothly steered the conversation towards more trivial subjects while I finished the meal, and I enjoyed the pleasant company she offered. She helped settle me back in bed – another round of agony for me, a second round of apologies from her – and collected the tray before quietly leaving the room.

Staring at the pendant lamp overhead, I tried to absorb the information I'd been inundated with during the past hour. I had a million questions, thousands of thoughts pouring into my mind until I seriously questioned if my head *could* explode from the overload. Tapping my fingers anxiously against the plaster cast on my arm, I watched the sparkling facets of the lamp while I thought over what I'd learned.

There was another soft knock at the door and I turned towards the sound cautiously. Lucas stood in the doorway; his expression solemn. He was dressed in dark blue jeans and a black sweater, the sleeves pushed up around his elbows. "May I come in?"

"Of course." I made an effort to sit up and groaned, giving up the idea as a bad joke.

Lucas reached my side in a second, faster than was possible for a normal man. Alarm was evident in his expression. "Is there anything I can do? Should I get help?"

"No," I reassured him, shaking my head while I breathed through the pain. "I'm okay."

"You most certainly are not okay," he replied gruffly. "If you had died..." He left the sentence unfinished and his dark blue eyes filled with torment. There were bruise-like rings around his eyes and he seemed deeply troubled by the predicament I found myself in.

I reached out to touch his hand, which rested on the metal rail surrounding the bed. I wanted to reassure him that he wasn't at fault, but he dropped his hand to his side immediately. His aroma drifted over me, making my heart beat unevenly. The thumping in my chest reminded me that when Lucas was nearby, I felt more alive than I had in a very long time and yet, he could kill me. It was quite the conundrum to deal with.

"I know your hands are cold," I said quietly. "Ben told me why. Please, don't be afraid to let me touch you."

For a second he stared at me, before his mouth twisted into an incredulous grin. "You want *me* – to not be frightened of *you*?"

I grinned sheepishly. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Extremely ironic. And here I was, thinking you should be frightened of me." His expression sobered and he lifted his arm, running his fingertips lightly over my cheek before taking my hand. His skin was cold and yet deeply comforting against my own warm fingers.

"I'm not frightened of you." I paused, considering my words carefully. I never lied convincingly and a peek at his impassive face had me admitting the truth. "Well, maybe I am. A little. But I understand more after speaking to Ben and Rowena. I have a *lot* of questions," I admitted bashfully.

"I'm sure you do," Lucas agreed. "I believe there is nothing I cannot answer; now you know the truth. I couldn't tell you what I

was, it's information we never divulge to humans. Now that you have discovered for yourself what I am, I will happily answer your questions. Nevertheless," he warned softly, "keep in mind that I have some questions of my own." He studied my face, seeing the troubled look in my eyes and hastened to reassure me. "I think we could leave mine for now though, I'm sure yours are far more important after yesterday's events." He settled on the chair beside the bed, leaning forward so he could retain his grip on my hand. "Okay, I'm ready. Fire away."

Given the opportunity to seek answers, I struggled with where to start. There were so many things I wanted to know, and so many things to understand. It seemed the best place to start was the beginning.

"How did you know my name? Is it something to do with—Marianne?"

He frowned, eyeing me speculatively. "How do you know about Marianne?"

I was positive it was better to be candid. "I woke earlier, when you were talking. I didn't open my eyes because I was scared. I heard you say Marianne knew you were going to meet me."

His expression relaxed and my heart stumbled as I gazed at him. He smiled knowingly and I attempted to drag my eyes away, to concentrate on something other than the brilliant blue of his eyes. The effort was a complete failure. "Marianne has the ability to see some future events. She told me about you some months ago, knew your name was Charlotte and she thought you were someone who would be very important in my existence." He shook his head ruefully. "Of course, she never mentioned I was going to knock you down with my car."

"Can she predict everybody's future?"

"No. She can't read humans; she saw you because you were destined to come into my existence. It's a useful talent, but certainly not perfect. In Marianne's case, it is completely haphazard most of the time, there's neither rhyme nor reason to her visions, sometimes she goes weeks without anything, at other times she gets a number of visions together. What she sees are distorted images, which she interprets to try to comprehend their meaning. So you can't ever be certain that what Marianne foresees will actually eventuate. And," he added deliberately, "if people contemplate ending their lives, it makes it difficult to read their future."

I looked away, uncomfortable with his gentle probing. "I'm not thinking about ending my life right now."

"But you have," he pointed out. "I knew what you were doing at the falls, Charlotte. Marianne warned me."

I lapsed into silence and he didn't press the subject further, squeezing my hand instead. "I'm sure you have more questions," he coaxed.

"How can you run so fast? When you brought me to your house, you ran so far and you didn't even work up a sweat."

He contemplated my question for just a moment. "You noticed then. Damn, and I was trying so hard to keep my movement human." He smiled again and my heart did a crazy flip-flop in my chest. "We have some special talents, Charlotte. Part of what we are gives us abilities far beyond normal human capabilities. Perhaps it would be better to wait until you recover and I can show you."

"Tell me and I'll try to understand." I didn't want to wait, was eager to comprehend as much as I could now I'd been introduced to his world.

He sighed heavily and glanced away, a shadow of discontent crossing his face. "I don't want to frighten you," he admitted, his

voice bleak.

"I think I trust you. Ben told me you won't hurt me."

He glanced up and I noticed the shadows around his eyes had darkened considerably. "Ben has great faith in my self-control. Probably far too much," he responded bitterly.

I shivered, but continued to hold his hand. "Explain it to me. Please."

Lucas lifted his other hand, enclosing mine between both of his. He gazed at me and I could see how he battled against himself. He seemed to want to tell me the truth but was clearly anxious about my reaction. I steeled myself, determined to retain my equanimity.

He started talking, keeping his voice level and calm but there was shame behind his confession. "We are designed to be hunters, everything about us is intended to catch and kill our victims." I shuddered inwardly, but kept my composure when he continued, choosing his words carefully. "Part of what I am gives me extraordinary abilities, far beyond normal human capability. I can run faster than almost any creature on earth. My sense of smell, eyesight, and hearing – all are significantly heightened and designed to hunt. I have more strength than ten human men, enough power to incapacitate and kill any victim I choose."

This time I couldn't hide the tremble which shuddered through my limbs, recalling how easily Ambrose had broken my arm, snapping the bones like matchsticks.

Lucas stopped for a minute, giving me time to compose myself and when he began again, he seemed reconciled to telling me everything. "I can trail prey over great distances, pick up their scent, and stalk them. I can chase a victim for miles, sneak up on them silently and give no clue of my position. My ability to run is limitless and most prey is incapable of outrunning me. By the time they are

aware of impending danger, they're already dead or dying." He stopped speaking, his body rigid with tension as he waited for my response.

I knew he'd just explained how easily he could kill me. Despite this knowledge, I wanted to trust him, felt a smidgeon of confidence that he wouldn't harm me. He certainly had shown no desire to hurt me up until now. But there were questions which remained unanswered and I verbalized my thoughts.

"Have you— do you— how many—" I faltered. I'd intended to ask the question concisely and couldn't seem to find the right words to voice what I needed to know. Lucas seemed aware of what I was trying to ask, but I was terrified of the reply.

"Charlotte, you must understand – this is what I am, this is what I was intended to do. For many years, I had no way to stop myself from doing what came naturally. Killing humans, draining their blood, it was what I was designed to do, my only choice in this existence. I did kill, murdered many innocent people in cold blood. The only thing I considered in those years was my own needs, my own desires, and the desperate craving for blood. As time passed, my humanity began to reassert itself and I suffered intense guilt over what I'd inflicted upon others. There was no way to stop it, but I was determined to learn how to control it, choose my victims with more deliberation."

He was choosing his words with less caution now, seeming intent on ensuring I knew every unsavory thing about his past. "I hunted at night, stalking the dregs of humanity – rapists, murderers – humans whom I decided didn't deserve to live." He laughed dryly, the sound harsh and hollow in the quiet room. "I made myself judge, jury and executioner, Charlotte. I became a vigilante and decided who lived and who died, based on my own questionable

morals and the crushing guilt, which overwhelmed my every step. And of course, my own frantic craving for human blood, which negated every damn excuse for the choices I made. Still I wasn't happy. As much as these people were the lowest common denominator of humanity, they were people with family and friends. Loved ones who cared for them, no matter what they had done in their lives. And I was murdering them, leaving their friends and family to mourn." He rubbed my hand tenderly between his and I could sense his despair, as if it were a physical entity in the room with us.

"Couldn't you just drink a little? Leave them alive?" I couldn't believe I was having this conversation, the whole exchange seemed surreal.

He shook his head mournfully. "The desire for blood is a feeding frenzy, Charlotte. Whilst we feed, our only focus is the blood and the almost orgasmic pleasure that comes from drinking it. To leave someone alive is a miracle. Some can do it. Most can't."

"Then how do people become vampires?" I thought of the few vampire movies I'd seen, which portrayed vampires as being created through the bite of another vampire. You were bitten, and you got the vampirism. Surely, not every victim died? How did you get more vampires that way? For one brief and bizarre moment, I realized I was using the imaginary aspects of filmmaking to try to understand something mythological, which I hadn't believed existed in the first place. Until now.

"Vampires are created when a victim is drained to the point of death, then force fed blood from the vampire's own body."

"You can bleed?" I questioned. *That* wasn't in the movies. Then I remembered Ambrose and how the blood had sprayed from his neck

after Lucas decapitated him. Nausea welled in my stomach as I realized the movies didn't have it right at all.

Lucas smirked. "Not exactly. After we have fed, blood is accessible in our bodies for a few days. To create a new vampire, you must drain them to the point of death, then bite into your own body and allow them to drink from you. The blood is changed after it has been in our bodies; the simplest explanation is that it has been contaminated with vampirism."

"You feed their blood back to them, but it's different after you've ingested it?"

"Yes."

"And then they're a vampire?"

Lucas sighed. "Not exactly. The transformation takes three days. The body of the victim must be buried and on the third night, they will rise as vampire. If they have survived the transformation process."

I was getting off-track here, dealing with things I neither wanted to know, nor needed to know now. "So what did you do?"

"I began to experiment on both myself and victims, I'm afraid. Trying to discover a way of feeding without murdering, testing theories and building on my determination to live a more peaceful life. As I mentioned, drinking blood is comparable to sexual orgasm. I began to wonder if I could use sex as a diversion, if I could divert my attention with sexual release, then feed from my victim and perhaps my need to drain completely could be avoided. Of course, it was a double-edged sword because I needed to feed more regularly to ensure my thirst wasn't at its worst point when I approached a woman."

He glanced up, no doubt seeing the flush of embarrassment which covered my exposed skin. "My apologies, Charlotte, I'm

embarrassing you." He brushed his fingers across my cheek. "You blush so beautifully."

Swallowing deeply I looked away, cursing the blush which had been the bane of my life. "Did it work?" I couldn't prevent a rush of jealousy, knowing Lucas had slept with other women. Probably a lot of other women.

"It was not a viable solution. The desire for sex and blood are deeply intertwined and after a couple of attempts, I dismissed it." He squeezed my fingers gently and I regained enough composure to face him again.

"What about bagged blood?" It seemed like a feasible theory; drinking bagged blood wouldn't hurt anyone.

Lucas shook his head immediately. "Unfortunately it isn't practical. The blood banks already have severe shortages of blood and the average human male has about eight pints of blood in his body, which we can deplete in one feeding. The practice is just not sustainable. Not without denying those who are seriously ill or injured and I couldn't contemplate that."

His response made me somewhat calmer. Surely it was testament to his character for him to be concerned about sick people? Then again, he'd just finished telling me how many people he'd murdered, so maybe my perception was somewhat skewed.

Lucas continued. "I began to consider other, more extreme measures to eliminate the need to kill. Whilst I require blood to exist, I questioned whether it must be human blood, if we could perhaps survive on animal blood." He unclasped his left hand from mine and reached forward, touching my cheek gently. "I must have blood to survive, Charlotte," he explained quietly, "but I found it was possible to hunt animals and live on their blood. I don't kill humans any longer."

Relief crept over my body like a drug. I hadn't realized how tightly I'd been holding myself, like a wind-up toy which had been tightened to the point of the spring snapping. "Oh," I managed faintly. He waited while I absorbed his explanation, allowing me to think in silence.

"So," I remarked slowly, "do you get all the, uh, vitamins you need that way?" It was the first thought to cross my mind.

He stared at me with a bemused look, before bursting into laughter. When he managed to control his amusement, he shook his head. "Charlotte, I tell you I drink blood and you are worried about my vitamin intake. You really are a funny girl." The silver embers in his eyes sparkled with life, drawing my attention to them.

"Your eyes – they're different to anything I've ever seen in a normal human."

"They mark me as what I am, Charlotte."

I glanced away and thought for a long moment. "When I met Ben, his eyes looked normal, but when he was helping me out in the woods, his eyes had golden streaks."

"We can disguise what we are, Charlotte. It's a mind trick."

"A mind trick?" I repeated blankly.

"My eyes as you see them are what they truly are. Some of us have silver streaks, others have gold, some bronze and as you've already discovered, my eyes are an unusually dark blue. We use a mind trick to make our eyes appear more normal when humans see us. I imagine Ben didn't think to hide it out in the forest, because we were so worried about saving you."

"You never used a mind trick on me," I pointed out. "I saw your eyes like this from the very beginning."

Lucas's eyes twinkled, the silver sparks flaring like miniature fireworks. "I can't hide them from you. For some reason, you are not

influenced by my mind tricks.”

“But Ben could do it?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder why,” I mused aloud.

“That is one question I can't answer.” Lucas squeezed my fingers and I noticed that the skin around his eyes had darkened, even during the short period we'd been talking. He looked as if he hadn't slept in weeks.

“Are you tired?” I queried.

Lucas shook his head. “Not tired, Charlotte.”

Like an epiphany, I realized what he was alluding to, putting the connection together in my head. “You're hungry.” The skin around his eyes had darkened like this before, when he'd been near me. At the hospital, I'd seen it happen and at his house, which was where I assumed I was now. Why hadn't I thought before now to ask where I was? It didn't matter, I decided, turning my attention and fears back to the matter at hand. “Why do the shadows around your eyes darken when you're with me?” I demanded. I knew the answer but needed to hear it from him. I needed to confirm my suspicions of exactly what it meant, why he avoided contact with me, why he'd kept away from me in the past. I searched his eyes, waiting for the answer.

He stiffened visibly and frowned heavily while he considered the question. “I think you know why, Charlotte,” he responded huskily.

My voice was barely a whisper when I responded. “You want to kill me.”

His reaction was startling. “No!” he shouted furiously.

I snatched my hand from his, the swift movement setting off a round of painful throbbing throughout my broken body.

He was instantly contrite. "Charlotte." When I didn't respond he uttered a string of expletives, then immediately apologized. "Please, forgive me. That was completely uncalled for."

I watched him cautiously, frightened by his aggressive response. He stood up and walked a few steps away, turning his back to me before he spoke. "I don't want to kill you. I will do everything – *everything* within my power to keep that from happening. That's what I have been doing for the past few months, keeping away from you, trying to get my craving under control." He turned to face me again, his eyes filled with sadness. "That day when I saw you at the Quikmart – I was stunned when I ran into you unexpectedly. You were so close and I could smell your wonderful scent. It immediately drove me wild and my baser instincts kicked in. I'm sorry I was so impolite – I had to get out, had to get away from you before I did something I would spend an eternity regretting. I care about you, far more than I rightly should given our circumstances. I don't want to hurt you, Charlotte. I thought by staying away, it was the best possible solution for both of us." He sighed heavily, shaking his head. "But no matter what I do, you are in my mind constantly, day and night and I can't get your scent out of my memory. It's nearly driven me mad."

"My scent?" I repeated blankly.

"I told you about our heightened senses. In my situation, where I do not drink human blood, I have become immune to the general scent of humans to a certain extent. I still smell human blood, of course, and have the underlying thirst for human blood, but it can be sated with animal blood. In this situation – with you – all the arrogant pride I had in my ability to abstain has proven to be nonsense. Since meeting you, I've discovered the allure of your

scent completely overwhelms me. It makes me desire the taste of your blood, more than I have ever desired anything before.”

He paused for a moment and I stared at him vacantly. “I see you still don't fully understand. Let me think.” I waited while he paced the bedroom floor, his brow furrowed in concentration. He stopped pacing suddenly and looked back at me. “Imagine the finest wine in the world. It has the most delicate, beautiful perfume you have ever experienced. The bouquet is beyond description. *You* are that wine to me. The temptation is great to sip the wine, to savor the wine; to sate my thirst with what I know would be the sweetest drink in the world.” He stepped towards me, his expression solemn. “But I know if I were to drink that wine, I would never get the opportunity to smell that sweet bouquet again. So I must keep the wine safe, learn to live with cherishing the bouquet, to control my own actions.”

I contemplated the explanation, understanding so much more. Probably more than I wanted to. It didn't change a thing though, I still felt my heart sing when I looked into his eyes, still wanted to know more about him and spend time with him. From what he'd said, however, it seemed impossible. How could we spend time together, if it was such torture for him to be close to me? A wave of despair gripped me and the wretchedness was suddenly overwhelming.

The door crashed open and a tall woman flew through it, looking deeply perturbed. She stopped abruptly, glancing from me to Lucas and back again. “Everything okay?” she inquired cheerfully.

I nodded, stunned by her outlandish appearance. She was both eye-catching and extraordinary – wearing no make-up, her skin was translucent, her eyes the blue of a calm ocean on a summer day. Swirls of silver twinkled and shifted in her eyes as she smiled cheerfully, her lips pouty and full, though I doubted collagen was

involved. Her lips were just perfectly formed and against the paleness of her skin, the color of crushed strawberries. Her hair was outrageous – gelled and styled into what I would probably describe as gothic punk – it was the darkest black imaginable with streaks of brilliant pink, which reminded me of vibrant flamingo feathers. She was wearing relatively normal black jeans, which skimmed her extra long legs, the denim artfully torn and ripped and she was barefoot, her nails painted the same shade of pink as her hair. Her shirt was tie-dyed, in iridescent blue, pink, and neon green. Somehow it all looked perfectly chic, if somewhat overpowering, to gaze at for any period.

“Cool. Okay. I'm Marianne, by the way. It's a pleasure to meet you.” She glanced back to Lucas and grimaced beneath the thunderous expression in his eyes. “Sorry for the interruption. I'll catch you both later. See ya!” She disappeared as quickly as she had arrived, slipping out the door with a happy grin.

“I wonder what that was about,” Lucas murmured. He took a few steps towards me and I reached out to him. He was at my side in an instant, clasping my hand in his. He continued to gaze at me for a minute before realization crept into his eyes. “What were you thinking, just before Marianne arrived?”

I looked away, blushing furiously. He caught my chin with his fingers, drawing my face up to meet his. “Please, tell me Charlotte. I need to know.”

“I was thinking that... despite you wanting to bite me, I still want to be here with you.” I flushed a deeper red and he waited for me to continue. “I was thinking it was an impossible situation, I couldn't allow you to struggle with your... *issue*, not if it was going to hurt you so much to be near me.” I looked down at his hand intertwined with mine, his skin so white against my own, which had seemed

quite pale until recently. It was difficult to speak about this, we barely knew one another, and yet I was drawn to him, as I had never been to another man. The very thought of admitting what I felt was enough to make me feel utterly pathetic. How needy was I?

"Go on, please Charlotte."

The next words came out in a rush, and I cringed in embarrassment. "When I thought about not seeing you any more, I felt depressed and unhappy." There. I'd said it. As pathetic as it was, I wanted to be with him. I felt certain he would laugh in my face and prepare to ship me off to the nearest hospital.

He nodded thoughtfully, instead. "That explains Marianne's panic. I assume that was the exact moment in which your future disappeared." He managed a grim smile. "She probably thought I'd lost the battle and bitten you."

I smiled weakly. "Is it so difficult? To be near me?"

Lucas's jaw clenched and the muscle was clearly visible beneath his skin. "More difficult than you can possibly imagine," he admitted huskily, squeezing my fingers. "It's a battle I intend to win, however. I will get used to it, I promise you. There is no other solution, I have tried staying away from you and couldn't bear it. That was almost more painful."

We sat wordlessly for a minute and I savored the words he'd spoken. Did they mean what I wanted them to? Did he care for me? Was it even possible, for a vampire and a human to like one another? I closed my eyes, thinking through everything we'd discussed and concentrated on his cool fingers rubbing the back of my hand, his thumb tracing circles against my skin.

There was another knock at the door and Ben entered the room. "My apologies for interrupting, but Marianne informs me Charlotte needs pain relief. Without it, she's going to endure a terrible night."

I raised an eyebrow at Lucas. "I thought you said Marianne couldn't read humans."

Lucas seemed intrigued. "Where you are concerned, she seems to be remarkably accurate. For what reason, I don't know."

Ben began to prepare a syringe of fluid and I eyed it anxiously. "I'm really okay," I muttered, but my face apparently gave me away. The pain had steadily increased while I talked with Lucas and I'd ignored it, wanting to continue our discussion. Now it hurt to take the smallest breath and aches were springing up all over my body.

Ben carefully inserted the needle into my arm, his technique so skillful that it was virtually painless. "Jerome will be furious if I don't follow his orders. I'm giving you some morphine, Charlotte. It will reduce the pain to a more tolerable level and allow you to rest."

I nodded sleepily, my eyes beginning to close of their own accord as the morphine entered my bloodstream.

Lucas patted my hand. "I'll leave you to rest."

"No, please stay here with me," I mumbled. I clutched at his hand and he sat down in the chair beside me.

"Alright. I'll stay here with you, I promise. I will be here for you, as long as you want," Lucas said huskily.

I smiled, then the morphine overwhelmed me and I slept.

CHAPTER 8

VISIONS

When I opened my eyes again, it was apparent Lucas's promise to stay had cost him greatly. I didn't know how long I'd slept, but judging by the strain in his face, it had been a long time.

His handsome features were tense, the skin around his eyes tinged purple and bruised-looking. Despite how terrible he appeared, he was still carefully holding my hand in his and I began to comprehend just how much it must torture him to be near me.

He was staring towards the window when I awoke, his entire body motionless. He looked like a carving, dressed in human clothes. I squeezed his fingers gently to let him know I was awake, and he turned towards me, managing a tender smile.

"How do you feel?" he questioned softly.

"Better than you look," I responded huskily. "I'm so sorry, I didn't think. I shouldn't have asked you to stay."

"I wanted to." His voice when he responded was louder, clear and determined.

"Go... and do what you need to do," I pressed. I couldn't bring myself to say the word 'hunt' – the thought of what he needed to do to survive troubled me.

"I'm okay," he insisted.

"Please, Lucas, I'll be fine," I pleaded.

He smiled and despite the torment he clearly suffered, he was incredibly attractive. He studied me for a second, his eyes growing somber before he leaned over, moving closer until his scent overwhelmed me. I was only aware of him being right above me, his face inches from mine. My heartbeat accelerated and I was caught between desire and panic as I wondered what he would do. His cool breath wafted across my skin, his breathing shallow as he came closer still. I closed my eyes, a split second before the cool pressure of his lips brushed against mine. When I opened my eyes again, he had straightened up and was grinning broadly.

I grinned back, knowing it had been a monumental trial for him to be so close to me and delighted that he'd kissed me.

"I will be back soon," he assured me with a wink, making my heart stumble over itself again. "I'll let Ben and Rowena know you are awake."

Gazing after him as he left the room, my heart still fluttered wildly in my chest. It took a minute or two to compose myself and I glanced around the room with interest, seeing it in daylight for the first time. The curtains had been drawn back and the view was superb, the windows revealing a view of the river and beyond it, the forest. It was striking, the trees covered in snow and weak sunlight filtering through the clouds. The river swirled and eddied as it passed by the house, bordered by ancient trees with gnarled and primeval branches.

I cautiously attempted to ease into a sitting position, discovering hastily that the pain in my chest was excruciating. My arm and foot didn't throb nearly as much as before and I was grateful for the small mercy.

Rowena and Ben walked through the open door, offering me a warm greeting. Rowena carried another tray and I could smell cinnamon. My mouth watered instantly, my stomach rumbling with hunger.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Ben questioned.

"Better," I agreed easily.

"That's excellent news. You've been sleeping for about twenty-eight hours. Jerome assures me sleep is the best treatment for recovery."

"Now I understand why Lucas looked terrible."

"He was determined to stay," Rowena said. "We offered to sit with you, but he was adamant he wouldn't leave." She placed the tray on the table and smiled warmly, her expression friendly. "Cinnamon Rolls and coffee this morning. I convinced Jerome you would need something more substantial when you woke next."

Ben glanced at me, rolling his eyes and I stifled a giggle that threatened to erupt from my throat. He popped a thermometer into my mouth and both he and Rowena assisted in helping me to sit upright. Admittedly, it was easier this time, but still left me gasping with pain. I waited patiently until Ben removed the thermometer from my mouth, then snatched up a cinnamon roll and took a big bite.

"You see, Ben, I knew she'd be hungry," Rowena scolded, but I could see the twinkle in her eye as their gazes connected. It was astounding to think they were vampires – to all intents and purposes; they looked like a happily married couple and certainly nothing like the movie versions of vampires I'd seen.

"Everything looks fine," Ben assured me, completely ignoring his wife's chiding. "Your temperature is exactly what Jerome said it should be. I'm sure you'd like a shower by now, and a change of

clothes. Why don't you finish your breakfast and Rowena and Marianne will help you? You won't be able to manage on your own."

I agreed to the suggestion, knowing there was no realistic way of showering without some support. Between the ankle and the ribs I doubted I'd be able to stand for long. Ben kissed Rowena tenderly before he left the room and she sat beside me, crossing her legs gracefully at the ankle. This morning she was wearing a tailored shirt in pale lemon, teamed with white woolen slacks and she'd left her hair down, letting it fall down her back in loose waves.

"It is lovely having someone to look after," Rowena admitted happily, watching me start on a second roll. "Having you stay here is quite delightful."

"Thank you," I responded shyly. I was really beginning to like this woman; she was so friendly and seemed genuinely caring. I hadn't had that in a very long time and it made me... *happy*. I marveled at the emotion, for happiness had eluded me for a few years now.

"Lucas says you have no family in the area – is there anyone we should contact on your behalf? Family who will wonder where you are?" Rowena queried.

I shook my head, trying to hide the sadness I was certain would show in my expression. "No. No-one."

Rowena seemed disturbed by this admission. "You have no family?"

Picking up the coffee cup I sipped slowly, giving myself time to compose an answer. "No. My— Mom died a couple of years back. I haven't seen my father since I was a child," I explained cautiously, not wanting to reveal too much. I didn't want to answer questions about my family, couldn't speak about what had happened to bring me to this point in my life.

Rowena's eyes filled with sympathy. "That's such a shame, Charlotte. I'm so sorry." She brightened a little. "I wondered if we might bring you downstairs for Christmas tomorrow? Lucas could carry you down easily. What do you think?"

I stared at her in dismay. "Tomorrow is Christmas?" It was shocking to discover four days had passed since the attack and I'd lost track of time. Sadness swamped me when I recalled my former life and the reasons for my many suicide attempts. I'd been so beleaguered with my current circumstances, I hadn't thought about it since the attack. A blanket of gloom descended over me as I thought about it now.

Rowena reached out, placing her cold hand on my arm. "Would you like to talk about it, Charlotte?"

Shaking my head, I tried to compose myself enough to speak. Tears were brimming against my eyelashes, threatening to fall and I couldn't allow it to happen. If I cried, I might never regain control. "I don't think I can." The words came out in a whisper, as if anything louder would break the fragile dam holding my tears at bay.

"It must be something dreadful, for you to feel this way," Rowena fretted. "We're all aware there is something difficult in your past. I can feel your pain, the wretchedness you're enduring when I touch your arm. It's overwhelming for you."

"You... can feel it?"

Rowena nodded. "I'm empathic, but only through touch. It allows me to tap into other's psyche, take their emotional temperature, if you will." She gave me a sympathetic smile. "Your emotional health is poorly, Charlotte. Whatever it is which hurts you so, it's killing you slowly, from the inside out."

I lay back on the pillows, feeling utterly miserable. I hated keeping secrets from Rowena when she'd been so compassionate

and asked for nothing in return. Except for the one thing I couldn't give, not without the possibility of destroying myself.

Marianne strolled into the room, settling gracefully onto the edge of the bed. "Charlotte, this really must stop," she announced nonchalantly, brushing her fingers through her bright pink spikes of hair. "Your future just disappeared again."

"I'm sorry," I muttered. The cinnamon roll had been discarded, my appetite disappearing along with my future, it seemed. I looked up, first at Rowena and then Marianne. My bottom lip trembled as I struggled to keep my emotions in check. "I know you don't understand why I'm like this. I wish it was something I could tell you about." I paused, considering my predicament and turning it over in my mind before I continued. "I'm terrified that if I let go and talk about it, I'll never recover. I'll lose myself entirely and not be able to stop myself from falling into the abyss."

Marianne reached across and caught my hand in hers. "I've worked out the connections in your future, if it's any help."

"How's that?" I questioned dully.

"It seems when you're with Lucas, you see yourself having a future. Every time you think about a future without him, it disappears." She smiled gleefully, silver sparkling mischievously in her eyes. "So all I have to do is ensure a happy ending with Lucas. Given the level of devotion he's demonstrating currently, that shouldn't be difficult."

"Marianne, you are utterly terrible. Do try to behave," Rowena chided gently.

I relaxed a little, the idea of a future with Lucas—tempting. Very tempting.

Marianne gazed into the distance, her eyes unfocused for a second as she seemed to concentrate on something that wasn't in

the room with us. Then she looked down at me and grinned. "There is it. Your future is back again."

I was tempted to ask her what the future included but decided against it. For now, I was content to live in a moment that included Lucas. Managing a weak smile, I decided I was hungry after all, and picked up the discarded cinnamon roll to munch on.



By the time Lucas returned, I'd been showered and was dressed in a pretty white negligee that Marianne provided. She and Rowena had made a run to my cottage earlier, collecting some of my belongings, and Marianne had been appalled by the tragic state of my normal bedroom attire of sweatpants and t-shirts, insisting her lingerie was much nicer. My hair had been washed and thoroughly brushed by Rowena and after cleaning my teeth, I felt like a new woman. Albeit an uncomfortable one, as the exercise made everything throb again. I smoothed my fingers across the negligee's lacy sleeve, wondering about the enigma of Marianne. It seemed so unlike anything I'd seen her wear so far, which at best could be described as chic grunge, and yet she apparently adored this sort of silky and elegant nightwear.

Lucas was in the doorway when I glanced up, his skin showing a hint of color and the dark circles under his eyes had vanished. He'd showered and changed, wearing faded blue jeans and a crisp blue shirt with white pinstripes, the sleeves rolled up to reveal his toned forearms. His hair was still damp, appearing darker than I'd seen it before and increasing the brilliance of his midnight blue eyes.

"Keep this up and I will have to hunt more often," he teased with a wicked smile and I flushed as he appraised the negligee with

undisguised admiration. "Do you feel up to visitors? I would like to introduce you to a couple of my friends."

I agreed eagerly, curious to meet others who lived here with Lucas. Would they accept me as readily as Ben, Rowena and Marianne had?

Lucas entered the room, closely followed by two other men. "Charlotte, I would like to introduce you to Ripley Wadworth and Striker."

Ripley Wadworth stepped forward and extended his hand. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Duncan." When I took his hand he didn't shake, instead he bowed and pressed a kiss against my knuckles, his lips cold against my skin. "I trust you are feeling better?" He spoke with an elegant drawl, his accent sounding distinctly British.

"Yes, thank you." I glanced at Lucas, saw him smile, and tried to loosen up the anxiety in my chest. If Lucas thought I was safe – I was safe. He wouldn't let these men hurt me. Ripley settled at one side of the bed. He was wearing a formal suit of dark grey with a waistcoat beneath the jacket and a crisp white shirt with a neat navy tie at his throat. He was perhaps a few inches taller than me and thin, but the subtle shift of muscle beneath the sleeves of his jacket assured me he was more powerful than he appeared. His face was slender, with a square jaw line and he had almond shaped eyes. I suspected he was possibly in his early thirties. His hair was golden brown, pulled back from his face in a short ponytail, which he'd tied with a leather strap at the nape of his neck.

The second man was exceptionally tall, with long blonde hair falling down over his shoulders and reaching halfway down his back. He was a mountain of muscle, the polo shirt he wore displaying the sleek ridges of sinew and muscle in his shoulders, chest, and abdomen. His thighs were ripped beneath faded blue jeans and I

recognized him as one of the men who'd restrained Ambrose. "I'm Striker," he growled.

"Striker, do try and show some degree of civility," Ripley suggested with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. "Don't frighten the girl."

I watched the heavysset man smile and found it more intimidating than comforting. He didn't look much more than my age, but the hardness in his eyes made him seem much older. "My name is Striker," he repeated. "Hello."

"Oh, that's *so* much better," Ripley said, with a sarcastic roll of his brown eyes. "We need to work on your people skills."

"My people skills are just fine," Striker protested with a growl.

"Your skills are terrible. It's no wonder we all cringe when you suggest going into town. It's hard to keep our secret, when you act like such a *vampire*."

"Gentlemen," Lucas said quietly.

Ripley sighed heavily and turned his attention back to me, any sign of humor disappearing. "Lucas says you will keep our secret; however, I need to reassure myself of your integrity. Can we trust you?"

I nodded, watching him wordlessly.

His expression was serious and he studied my face intently for a minute or two until I wanted to squirm beneath his penetrating gaze. "Are you certain we can trust you, Miss Duncan?"

Inhaling deeply, I met his eyes. "I guess you're as certain you can trust me to keep your secret, as I'm certain that I can trust you not to bite me."

For a moment, there was a charged silence and then, to my surprise, Striker chuckled. "Nice one, human girl."

"Striker, do try and behave," Lucas groaned.

Striker grinned, a more open smile than his first attempt and I wondered if he'd been deliberately trying to intimidate me. Not that he'd have to work too hard at it; the whole Striker package was intimidating. "I am behaving. I haven't tried to bite her yet, have I?" He glanced down at my shocked face and grimaced. "Just kidding. Hope you're feeling better soon."

I swallowed heavily, providing much-needed lubrication to my suddenly dry throat. "Thank you. I hope so too."

Striker turned and left the room, leaving me with Lucas and Ripley, who was still watching me with a slight frown. "I myself have little faith in humanity, but I will defer to Lucas's judgment for now. Adieu, Miss Duncan." With a small bow, Ripley strode from the room and Lucas sat down beside the bed.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I agreed.

"You handled that very well. You're not frightened?" he inquired mildly.

"No. Although if I met Striker in a dark alley, I might be a little intimidated."

A roar of laughter erupted from elsewhere in the house and I stared at Lucas, perplexed by the sudden sound.

"Our hearing is extremely acute," Lucas reminded me wryly.

"Oh." I flushed with embarrassment again, wondering if I could ever make sense of this.

"Don't worry. Most of the time we try to respect one another's privacy. You learn to tune out and not listen," Lucas explained. "Striker doesn't have as much control as the rest of us, in that regard."

I heard Striker yell out an apology and grinned despite myself. "Is Striker his real name?"

Lucas nodded. "It's his surname. He doesn't ever use his first name, absolutely loathes it."

I played with the sheet, rolling the edge between my thumb and forefinger. "I don't think Ripley likes me."

"Ripley doesn't understand you. He can't read you, and it is frustrating him."

I glanced up. "Excuse me?"

Lucas rubbed a hand across his chin. "Ripley has the ability to read minds. He can hear thoughts, get an idea of what people are thinking and planning. For reasons unknown, he is struggling to reach your thoughts."

"Seriously?" I raised my eyebrows in question. "He can read anybody's thoughts?"

"Only if he specifically chooses to tunes in, and the person is a good broadcaster. In your case, he can't get a good reading and it bothers him."

I thought for a minute or two. I didn't like the idea of anyone being able to read my thoughts, and certainly didn't want Ripley to gain access to them. My thoughts were my own, a private hell which I didn't want anyone knowing. I was relieved Ripley couldn't read me but could appreciate why he found it frustrating. "So he doesn't know whether he can trust me."

"That's correct."

"I don't want him to read my thoughts," I announced adamantly. The very thought of him having access to my mind was appalling.

"None of us particularly want our thoughts read, Charlotte. But it is Ripley's gift and something he treats with a great deal of respect. He deliberately avoids getting into other people's minds."

"But he'd like to deliberately get into mine?" I snapped.

Lucas exhaled heavily. "You can't blame him, Charlotte. We are placing our very existence in your hands. If you tell someone about what you've learned, it could destroy us."

"Nobody would believe me."

"But they might," Lucas countered.

Silence stretched between us as I considered their concern. They were taking a risk by letting me stay here – not knowing me, how could they be expected to believe I would keep my mouth shut? Of course, it was a two-way street; I was placing faith in their ability to control their need for blood. It seemed both sides had issues to overcome.

Lucas captured my hand in his and squeezed my fingers gently. "You look much better."

"I feel better." Lucas smiled warmly and I was confident *he* trusted me, even if the others didn't. But there were still many things I didn't understand, subjects we hadn't broached, which needed discussion.

"You have more questions?"

"How do you know?" I voiced my surprise aloud. "I haven't said anything."

Lucas leaned forward, pushing the curls away from my face. "I can tell by the look in your eyes. They are very expressive."

I was flummoxed and it took a few seconds to regain my composure. "I do have some questions."

"Go ahead." Lucas leaned back in the chair, holding my hand between his.

"When you... hunt... how often do you need to do that? Do you have to eat... or is it drink... every day?"

Lucas rubbed the pads of his thumbs over my hand, a little smile tugging at his lips. "No. Generally once every week or two is enough

to sustain us." He sighed heavily. "Right now, it is far more regularly for me. Being near you causes my craving for blood to intensify. Since I met you, I'm hunting at least two to three times a week. Sometimes more."

I pondered his response for a minute, keeping my face composed, although my heart was pounding a little faster. The extra hunting was needed to stop him from killing me, and although I had a measure of trust in him, his desire to drink my blood was deeply disturbing.

"Charlotte, it's okay to tell me what you are thinking. I hear your heart racing; I know you must find this alarming."

"You can hear my heart?"

"Constantly. I hear its tempo change when you are frightened by something I've said." He offered me a sultry smile and grazed his fingers across my cheek. "I heard it increase dramatically when I kissed you this morning."

Blushing furiously, I looked away, trying to regain my composure at his mention of our kiss. I knew he'd be able to hear the flutter of my heart as I recalled the touch of his lips against mine. It took a few seconds before I regained enough composure to speak. "How did you all come to live here?"

"We drifted together over the years. Ripley joined me first, then Ben and Rowena. Striker and Marianne arrived sometime after them, followed by Acenith, who was acquainted with Ripley in the past. Holden, who is away right now, joined us in the late seventies. Gwynn and her partner William were the last to join the group."

As Lucas explained, I recalled the conversation I'd overheard a few days ago, when I'd feigned unconsciousness. Gwynn was the one who didn't want me here. Did she want to kill me?

"Charlotte?" Lucas interrupted my thought process and I looked up, found him watching me intently. "What's the matter?"

Screwing up my nose, I knew I'd have to admit to eavesdropping again. "I heard you mention Gwynn once before. When I woke up... and pretended to still be—"

"Asleep." Lucas finished for me. He thought for a second, and then repeated the conversation I'd heard, word for word. "*Marianne, you think she's better here with us. Gwynn has made her attitude about Charlotte being here very clear.*"

"How did you do that?"

"One of my gifts. I recall every conversation I've ever had." He brought my fingers to his lips, kissing my knuckles. "Gwynn will come around, she's worried."

"That she's going to attack me?" I voiced the anxiety without thinking.

"What? No, not at all." He rubbed his hand over my arm, a reassuring gesture. "Gwynn is terrified you will reveal our secret. Probably more apprehensive than Ripley."

"I won't. I promised I won't, and I meant it," I reassured him. "I'll never tell anyone about you."

"I believe you. Gwynn is not easily convinced however, and she is quite jealous."

"Jealous," I repeated. What could possibly make her jealous? I was a suicidal, depressed scrap of humanity, who had, until recent days, only wished to die.

"She is jealous because you retain your humanity," Lucas stated quietly. "Gwynn chose to become vampire and it's a decision she has regretted many times in the ensuing years." He squeezed my fingers. "Don't worry about Gwynn. I want you to concentrate on regaining your health. What else would you like to know?"

"When you... bite. Does it hurt the animal you're biting?"

Lucas chewed his lip thoughtfully before he responded. "Our fangs contain a paralytic agent, to stop our prey moving when we feed. It keeps the pain they experience to a minimum."

"But they know," I persisted quietly. "They know what's happening to them?" My thoughts weren't entirely focused on the animals. It was the humans he'd admitted to killing who were uppermost in my mind. Had they been terrified when he'd attacked them, draining their lives through their veins? Had they known their deaths were imminent?

His expression hardened and he lifted his chin defiantly. "It's what I am, Charlotte. I cannot change what I've done in the past, nor can I seek redemption for it. I have murdered many people and it's not something I'm proud of, but you have a choice. You can either accept me, for who I am, or you can't and we stop this now." His voice was hard and cold and he watched me impassively, waiting for a response.

I took a deep breath, wincing from the effort and struggling to compose an answer.

"Let's leave this subject for now," Lucas said, and his deep voice softened as he took pity on me. "You need to rest and I will not be responsible for giving you nightmares about my past."

"You won't give me nightmares."

Lucas arched one eyebrow, eyeing me skeptically. "You astound me, Charlotte. I know you must be terrified, yet you chose to stay here. You listen to the appalling things I've done and don't scream at me to leave you alone."

"I trust you," I replied simply. For what reason, I couldn't say. Whether I was overly confident of his ability to control his actions – or if his compassion was clouding my judgment, I didn't know.

For a long time, I lay back against the pillows and Lucas traced lazy patterns on the back of my arm with his fingers. For the moment we didn't need words and it gave me a little time to mull over what we'd discussed. For every answer Lucas supplied, there were a dozen questions I suspected I should ask. I wondered why I wasn't scared. Was it because of the disbelief that stemmed from what he was? Would I be frightened when the reality sank in about the strange situation I'd found myself in? I knew the answer even as I thought about it – I already trusted Lucas to protect me, was certain he would do nothing to harm me. He'd done everything in his power to keep me alive.

When I opened my eyes I found Lucas watching me, his expression solemn. "You are so beautiful," he whispered softly.

I rolled my eyes at the compliment. "I'm not." I'd never considered myself anything remotely approaching beautiful, at most I could be considered pleasingly average. Nothing more, nothing less.

"You underestimate yourself, Charlotte," he chided softly. "To me, you are the most wondrous woman I've ever had the pleasure of meeting." He turned my hand over, brushing his fingertips over the scars on the back of my wrist. "Rowena said you were distressed this morning, when she talked about Christmas. I won't force you, but I'd certainly like you to join us for the festivities."

I scowled. "Christmas isn't my favorite time of the year. I'd rather not be involved."

Lucas's tone remained even; no trace of emotion evident when he spoke. "Alright. If you prefer, we'll spend the day here in your bedroom. I'm sure they'll understand. They will be disappointed of course; Rowena has been busy decorating to make it special for you."

I groaned. "Lucas, don't try and guilt me into this. I don't even like Christmas."

"Why?" he pressed quietly.

"I don't want to talk about it."

He studied my expression, a small frown creasing his forehead. "Okay. No Christmas."

Guilt overwhelmed me and I looked away pensively. Not liking Christmas was an understatement, I hated Christmas with a passion. I'd studiously ignored it for the past two years and would gladly avoid it forever. I peeked up at his face and found he was still watching me, expressionless. He was giving nothing away with his demeanor, but the guilt niggled at me. I hated that Rowena had gone to any trouble – it just made me feel worse.

"You don't understand, Lucas. Christmas is the worst time of the year for me," I announced abruptly. "I would spoil it for them."

"I won't force you." He brushed his fingers through my hair, pushing it back from my face. "But I would like to understand why you dislike Christmas so much."

I inhaled deeply, immediately regretting the action as pain pierced my ribcage. Lucas was on his feet at once, his concern obvious. "I'm alright," I gasped, gritting my teeth.

He settled back on the chair, taking my hand in his and watched me, his expression tranquil. I knew I owed him some sort of explanation. After all, he'd been completely open with me, now it was my turn to be truthful with him. No matter what it cost.

CHAPTER 9
SECRETS REVEALED

"I've spent the last two years trying to escape my past," I began. "Events happened which were... depressing and I've spent a long time searching for a reason to keep living." I stopped for a couple of seconds, wondering if I could admit the truth, wondering how he'd react. Despite my shame, I knew I should own up. "You were right – I've tried to kill myself numerous times, but I've failed every time."

"For which I will be eternally grateful," Lucas responded softly.

I managed a weak smile. "You asked me about my family, and I told you I had no-one. That's true, but it's only in the past two years I've been alone." Memories washed over me and tears brimmed against my eyelashes.

"Charlotte, you don't have to do this. If it causes you such intense pain, we don't need to discuss it," Lucas offered, discomfort visible in his expression. "It was wrong of me to press you on the subject."

"It's only fair that I tell you. You've been honest with me."

"I mean it Charlotte," he pointed out grimly. "I won't pressure you again; I won't bring up the subject. I promised I would do nothing to hurt you, and I intend to keep my word."

"I need to tell you." Working hard to center myself, I reached out to Lucas – the first time I'd done so. Keeping my movements slow and deliberate, I stroked his cheek and he placed his hand over mine, nuzzling against my palm. I shut my eyes, thinking it might be easier to explain when I couldn't see him studying me with so much compassion.

"Two years ago, my life was fairly ordinary. Mom was my best friend; she and Dad split up when I was two, and I haven't seen my father since – I couldn't tell you what he looks like. It didn't matter though, because Mom was always there and we were happy together. Mom and Dad were young when they got married, Mom was just seventeen when I was born, and I think my Dad was nineteen. I learned later on that Dad freaked out after I arrived and started drinking heavily, he couldn't cope with the responsibility of having a wife and kid, so he dumped us and left for who-knows-where. Mom and I never heard from him again. When I was fourteen, Mom met Pete Hurst." The trembling started up when I spoke his name aloud, and Lucas tightened his grip on my hand.

Biting my lip I forged on, needing to give Lucas the entire account before I lost my courage. "Mom was lonely, it had been me and her for twelve years and I couldn't blame her for falling for a guy, she was only thirty-one and had years ahead of her. I couldn't understand what she saw in *him*, but I accepted it because she loved him." I shrugged, shaking my head at the memory. "If I'd known how bad things could get, I would have made her see how wrong he was for her, for us."

"You couldn't have known, you were only a child," Lucas protested.

"I was only a child, but I should have trusted my instincts," I muttered fiercely. "There was something about him, the way he

treated Mom, his arrogance," I tugged at my lower lip with my teeth, wishing I could turn back time. "I knew there was something about him that I didn't like, but I couldn't put a finger on it."

"You can't blame yourself, Charlotte."

"Pete moved in and a couple of months later, Mom fell pregnant. We were so excited, and I couldn't wait to have a new little brother or sister. Mom had a little girl and they called her Alexis. Even while Mom was pregnant, her relationship with Pete began to deteriorate; he drank heavily and got abusive. Mom got the crap beaten out of her, more than once. She denied it was happening, tried to convince me she'd fallen over, or run into a door; but I knew the truth. Even though I was only fourteen or fifteen, I could see the signs, heard him yelling abuse at her." The muscle in Lucas's jaw tensed beneath my fingers. Uncertain if it was a reaction to my story, or my proximity, I tried to draw away from his face. He tightened his grip, keeping my hand pressed to his smooth cheek.

"It's okay, Charlotte," he murmured, "I like your touch."

I closed my eyes again. I didn't want to see his reaction – or worse – see pity in his eyes. "Alexis was eighteen months old when Mom gave birth to my second sister, Georgia. They were the cutest little girls and I loved them both dearly. I couldn't wait for them to grow up a little, so I could dress them up and introduce them to make-up and dolls. I loved playing with them, helping to care for them after school and on weekends. As time went on and Pete's abuse escalated, I became a surrogate mother to them because Mom found it difficult to cope. Half the time she was nursing one injury or another, injuries that he'd inflicted." The memories washed over me like a tidal wave; the rage and fear, the helplessness of a situation out of my control. It was painful to remember, and yet sharing it was surprisingly cathartic. I'd hidden the memories for so

long, kept them shut away – but now I allowed myself to remember my sisters, their innocence, and their sweet little faces. Pain stabbed into my chest like a knife, but I found I wanted to tell someone, unburden myself of the guilt which had overwhelmed me for such a long time.

Lucas patiently waited for me to continue, offering no comments, and asking no questions. He allowed me to choose my own pace, to choose how much I was willing to share. “Pete was drunk a lot, controlling of Mom, jealous of anyone she had contact with and continuously angry. A few months after Georgia was born, Mom discovered she was pregnant again.” Tears brimmed against my eyelashes. “It wasn't a happy pregnancy. She never admitted it, but I'm convinced Pete forced himself on her – by then they were barely on speaking terms. I know the pregnancy was an accident, Mom didn't want another baby – who would, given the circumstances?” I sighed heavily, wishing again that I'd handled things differently, convinced her to leave. “In the meantime, I graduated from high school. I did okay at school, despite the miserable home life and I was accepted at a couple of colleges. But I couldn't leave Mom, not when she was pregnant and would be alone with *him*.” I gritted my teeth as I recalled the memory. “So I stayed in South Carolina, got a job at one of the local department stores. I figured I'd go to college later; I was only eighteen, there was plenty of time. I deferred, thinking I'd find a way to get rid of Pete; that things would get better. I was a fool,” I admitted, shaking my head sadly. “Mom had the baby in September; he was the sweetest little thing, the brother I'd longed for. They named him Henry, and he had green eyes and dark curly hair, just like Mom and me.”

I stopped abruptly – the wave of memories was swamping my battered soul, like a tsunami crashing into shore, destroying

everything in its path. The tears I'd suppressed for so many months couldn't be held back any longer and I sobbed brokenly.

Lucas captured my face between his hands and pressed a kiss against my forehead. "It's alright, Charlotte. Stop now. Don't relive this when it causes you such intense pain. I can imagine what happened; don't hurt yourself more by continuing."

"I need to," I sobbed brokenly, gripping his shoulders, holding on to something tangible. "I want you to understand why I was so desperate to die."

He sat on the edge of the bed and held me against his chest while I cried. I felt other cool hands gripping my shoulder, and a sense of tranquility began to seep into my skin where the hands touched, giving the impression I was steadily being covered by a warm blanket. Glancing up, I discovered Striker standing at my side, his expression somber and beside him, a woman. She smiled softly, her gaze focused on mine and I was captivated by the unusually bright green of her eyes. I would have suspected she wore colored contacts, but bronze shards glowed and shifted within her irises. Both Striker and the woman were holding their fingers against my skin, their faces filled with concentration.

"Do you feel better?" Marianne was standing at the end of the bed, watching me sympathetically. "Striker and Acenith have the ability to calm people's emotions. They want to help."

My head did seem calmer and I nodded, capable of thinking clearly again. Lucas smiled compassionately, still holding me in his arms. "I meant what I said, Charlotte. You don't have to explain anything to us."

It took a second or two to find my voice again. "I want you to know." I sniffled, drawing a shallow breath before I continued. "The situation with Mom and Pete deteriorated rapidly after Henry's birth.

The violence escalated; Pete's temper worsened. I tried to get Mom to leave, but she wouldn't listen, wouldn't stop believing it was somehow her fault. I didn't understand at the time, but in hindsight, I realize she was suffering from Battered Wives Syndrome. She honestly believed she deserved what he did to her, thought *she* was responsible for his angry rages." I spat the last words out and Marianne nodded imperceptibly to Striker and Acenith. The blanket of calm instantly grew heavier and warmer, settling my shattered nerves to a tolerable level.

"I was eighteen – I didn't understand the complexities of what was going on. All I knew was that I couldn't live there any longer; I didn't want to stay and watch him destroy her. A week before Christmas, Mom and I had a massive argument – I told her she needed to leave him and she refused. I couldn't take it any longer, couldn't deal with the constant anxiety, the fights, the beatings. I did the only thing I could think of doing at the time." I gulped down air, ignoring the searing pain in my chest. "I walked out."

Images clarified behind my closed eyelids and I could see what happened, as clearly as if it was occurring as I spoke. "I packed my gear and left Mom alone with the babies and *him*. I didn't want to, but I couldn't stand it any longer, I couldn't stay and watch her destroying her life. I drove down to Georgia and spent a few days sleeping in my car, trying to figure out a way to get Mom to see sense and leave him. It only took a couple of days to decide I needed to go back. I couldn't understand why Mom wouldn't leave, but I knew she couldn't survive without my help."

My heart thumped and I tried to control my breathing, but it grew more erratic as I bordered on hyperventilating. "I drove home and went into the house, looking for Mom and the babies. It was so quiet, unnaturally so. I walked down the hall into Mom's bedroom—"

It became difficult to speak, recalling the event was almost like reliving it, all over again. "Mom was lying on the bed. Covered in blood – I've never seen so much blood – it was *everywhere*." Covering my eyes with my hands, I tried to escape the image I'd suppressed for so long. "I found out later he'd stabbed her forty-eight times."

"Oh dear God," Marianne breathed weakly. She slumped heavily on the edge of the bed, rubbing my leg beneath the blanket.

Tears began to fall in earnest and I breathed heavily, ignoring the wracking pain as I continued to talk more calmly, almost mechanically. "I thought he'd taken the babies, but I had to check to be certain." Drawing a shuddering lungful of air, I was aware that despite Striker and Acenith's strange ability, my descent into misery was spiraling out of control. "I found Alexis and Georgia in their beds. They were both dead, he'd slit their throats. The sheets were soaked in blood... so much blood. I think they were asleep when he did it – I don't know for sure, but I hope they were. And little Henry – he was only twelve weeks old – I thought he was still alive; he was lying so peacefully in his crib and there was no blood. Pete hadn't stabbed him and I prayed so hard for him to be okay." I shuddered. "Until I touched him, and his little face was cold. The police told me later that Pete smothered him with a pillow."

Staring up at the ceiling, agony washed over me in ever-increasing waves. I saw every aspect of those rooms in my mind, seeing everything as plainly as if I stood in them again. Lucas rubbed my arm in a soothing gesture but I couldn't look at him, couldn't bear to see my agony reflected in his eyes.

"I didn't know what to do next; I guess I was in shock because I just sat on the stoop until one of our neighbors came over to see what was wrong. She called the police and I was taken to the

precinct to make a statement. Not that it was much help; I couldn't string a worthwhile sentence together. I just sat in the interview room, trying to comprehend the enormity of what he'd done. They located *him*, and he told the police I'd murdered them. He said Mom and I had been fighting a lot lately, that I'd grown violent and regularly lost my temper. Told them some bullshit about how I'd always been unstable and he'd been worried about bruises he'd seen on Mom and how he thought I'd hurt her in the past—”

The grip around my shoulders tightened painfully and I stared at Lucas, alarmed by the sheer fury in his expression. I carried on hurriedly. “It turns out Pete was a bigger fool than even I'd imagined. The police questioned me – obviously they had to, once the accusation had been made – but the forensic evidence was already being collected and tested. And it all led straight back to Pete. I knew he was stupid, but he hadn't attempted to cover his tracks at all. The police could only speculate because Pete never did give his reasons, but they think after Mom and I fought, Mom finally got up the courage to tell him she was leaving. Pete was more than likely drunk, lost his temper and killing them, rather than let Mom leave.”

Marianne rubbed her hand across my leg, the touch soothing. “I'm so very sorry, Charlotte. What a horrifying nightmare for you to endure.”

“What. Happened. To. Him?” Lucas's eyes were filled with such intense fury; I could only imagine the murderous thoughts flowing through his mind.

The soothing blanket Striker and Acenith were somehow creating shifted and warmed again, allowing me to speak calmly. “He'd been released while they questioned me, but when the forensic evidence confirmed his guilt, the police put out a warrant to arrest him on

sight. I had the advantage in that regard. I already knew where he hung out, his favorite local haunts. I found him at one of the nearby bars he loved so much, perched on a barstool and clearly smug because he'd gotten away with murdering my family. Or so he thought." Despite their best efforts, it was becoming evident that Striker and Acenith were struggling to keep my emotions calm. The effort they were making was visible in their faces, almost as if they were drawing my anger, my sorrow and desolation into their own bodies. They remained focused on me, but pain was perceptible in their eyes as they battled to soothe me.

"I had Pete's gun, one he kept in a lock box in his bedroom. He didn't know I'd learned the combination, knew how to get into the gun and access the ammunition he'd supposedly secured. I went to the bar, walked straight up to him, and shot him. Six times. Two bullets in his chest, and four in his head. I wanted him dead before he hit the floor." I ground my teeth together, remembering the desperate rage I'd experienced, the grim satisfaction which followed the shooting, knowing I'd killed the man who'd taken everything from me.

"I thought I'd go to prison. I deserved to, for not protecting Mom and my siblings when they needed me most. I wanted to be sent to prison, find someone to provoke into killing me. I needed to end the misery; I didn't want to go on." I took another deep breath and didn't care when the pain ripped through my broken ribs. I wished my chest would collapse in on itself and let me escape the wretchedness that smothered me so completely.

"There was one thing I didn't allow for. The judge took the circumstances leading up to me murdering him into consideration. 'Justifiable Homicide' – that's what they call it. I received a two-year suspended sentence and a good behavior bond for five years. The

judge and my attorney thought they were doing me a favor – they couldn't see that I didn't *want* to live.”

Leaning back against the pillow, I squeezed my eyes shut.

“We can't control this for much longer,” Striker growled, his voice strained. “Marianne, go and find out if Ben's returned.”

Marianne patted my leg and disappeared; her movements barely visible to the human eye as she flashed from the room.

I looked up at Lucas, biting my lip before I spoke again. “So now you know. Why I didn't want to go on with living. Why I couldn't go on with my life. I've tried any number of ways to kill myself, but I'm a spectacular failure. I slit my wrists, but I couldn't cut deep enough because I'm scared of pain. I tried swallowing pills, but all they did was make me sleepy and vomit. I thought the day you hit me might be the end of the torture.” I grimaced at the futility of that hope. “Trust me to get hit by a vampire, who naturally has lightning-fast reflexes. And of course, you guessed about that day at the falls. If you hadn't turned up, I had every intention of jumping.”

Doctor Harding appeared at my side, Ben beside him. The Doctor's brow was deeply furrowed as he drew some liquid from a tiny bottle into a syringe. “This will help, Charlotte.” He inserted the needle into my arm, dropping the syringe onto the table before he grasped my fingers in his. “Try to relax, now. It's over. Relax, and sleep.”

“We're losing her,” Acenith warned. She was gripping Striker's shoulder with her free hand and they both continued to focus intently on my eyes.

I sighed deeply, completely spent. “It's okay. You can let go now.”

Striker and Acenith both battled for a second longer, then released their hands from my shoulder, apparently ending the

tenuous link they'd held to my mind. Acenith stumbled heavily and Striker steadied her slim body against his.

The colossal waves of sorrow and misery hit me, swallowing me up in an abyss in which I would surely drown. Struggling to suck air into my lungs, I suffered unbearable pressure against my ribs and tears flowed freely, pouring down my cheeks in silent streams.

The last thing I recalled was Doctor Harding slipping an oxygen mask over my face and the anguish in Lucas's eyes before I was swallowed by darkness.

CHAPTER 10

RECOVERY

I don't know how long I fought against the ocean, it seemed like an eternity, and I was so very tired. There was no land to be seen, water surrounded me as far as the eye could see and choppy waves beat against my body endlessly, leaving me barely able to catch my breath between them. The temptation to sink, to stop fighting against the forces and plunge to the depths was overwhelming. I could give up, allow the waves to take me and never have to think or feel again.

Two things stopped me. Mom appeared, as she had so often in the past, begging me to continue. Beseeking me to live, to move on and find happiness again. She pleaded with me to carry on. I argued with her, tried repeatedly to tell her I didn't want to be alone any longer. She smiled and replied that I didn't need to be on my own now. She told me to be happy; there would be time for us to be together again, once I'd lived my life – but not to give in now. She didn't want me to give up on my life because of what had happened to her and my siblings. She held Henry in her arms and my sisters stood beside her, holding hands. All of them were whole and perfect, floating just about the swirling currents that entrapped me.

I reached out for them, pleading that they take me with them. Mom shook her head.

She and my sisters glanced to their left as if they'd heard someone coming and I saw the second thing that would stop me. It was Lucas, but he was different. Like a movie incarnation of a vampire, he wore a black silk cape and when he smiled, I felt safe and comforted. His eyes were filled with kindness as he held his hands out to help me. I reached towards him but then hesitated, suddenly uncertain. He beckoned to me again, but when he smiled this time, his fangs glittered in the darkness. I screamed as he grew larger and took on a terrifying appearance, his face morphing and changing into something inhuman and his fangs plunged into my throat, tearing into my tender skin as he growled cruelly—

"*Lucas!*" I sat bolt upright, eyes wide with terror and immediately regretted the act as fiery pain throbbed incessantly through my chest.

"Charlotte! Oh, thank the Lord. You're awake! We've been frantic," Rowena cried. She clutched me to her chest, wrapping her arms around me and rubbing my back.

"What happened?" My throat was dry and scratchy, my tongue thick against the roof of my mouth.

Rowena released her grip and picked up a glass of water from the bedside table, holding it while I sucked gratefully at the straw. "You've been unconscious for five days. Jerome was alarmed; he couldn't snap you out of it. He said you were catatonic; he thinks it was your mind's way of coping with what you'd been through." She settled me back against the pillows, fussing with them before carefully covering me with the blankets.

Doctor Harding appeared in the doorway, closely followed by Marianne who greeted me with a delighted hug before Striker

walked in. "You gave us a scare, Charlotte," he announced nonchalantly.

Ripley came in, and behind him, Acenith, the one who'd helped calm me. She and Ripley stood to one side, allowing Doctor Harding to check me over, but Acenith smiled warmly. She was slender, with small breasts and slim hips, and wore a pale blue t-shirt and blue jeans. Her hair was honey golden, lying against her back and reached her waist. "Hello, Charlotte. We weren't introduced properly before. I'm Acenith De Bourgain. I've heard a lot about you."

"And none of it was good," Striker grunted.

Marianne swatted Striker, the sound reverberating like a small thunder strike. "Striker, will you ever learn to think before you speak?"

"What?" Striker protested. "Lottie knows I'm joking."

I wasn't certain I did but decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Ripley was watching me and I recalled Lucas saying he could read minds. It was unsettling to think he might be doing just that, and I glanced away, wary at the thought. Although in all honesty, my history was out in the open and there was nothing left to hide. Well, maybe there were a couple of things. "Where's Lucas?" I asked, suddenly aware of his absence.

"Hunting with Ben. We convinced him to go further afield when you remained unconscious for so long. They've been away since yesterday," Striker explained.

Doctor Harding was checking an IV drip which hung from a pole beside the bed, the line running from a bag and into a hypodermic needle inserted into the back of my hand. "I needed to keep your fluid intake up, it's a saline solution to keep you hydrated," he murmured softly.

"The only way to persuade Lucas to go was to assure him we would take turns sitting with you," Marianne added. She was dressed more demurely than I'd seen before, wearing pale grey woolen trousers and a pink cashmere twinset which matched the color in her hair perfectly.

"Which we have done," Ripley added. "By the way, Miss Duncan, you snore quite dreadfully." He winked at me, softening the comment.

I rolled my eyes and turned to Rowena. It seemed Ripley had put his concerns about me to one side for now. "Is Lucas okay?"

"Struggling a little," Rowena admitted.

"William has gone to find them," Marianne added helpfully.

"William?" I questioned vacantly. I didn't remember a William.

"Gwynn's husband," Marianne prompted, reminding me that Lucas had mentioned him. It seemed he and Gwynn were the only two I hadn't met, besides the other vampire who was overseas.

Doctor Harding turned towards the group that had congregated. "You've seen for yourselves that she's awake. Could I ask you to leave the room now, so I can examine my patient?"

He waited for them to leave and turned back to me. "I'd like to look at those ribs, if I may. You caused some damage when you got so distressed and your recovery has been delayed by a week or so. It's only fair to tell you that Lucas has told me the entire story. I insisted he do so when I arrived and saw the state you were in." He probed my ribs gently, satisfying himself that all was well before he pulled the covers back up.

"What happened?" I questioned when he'd finished his examination and seemed satisfied.

Doctor Harding sighed, running his fingers through his unruly grey hair. "I'm not a qualified psychiatrist, so I can't be quoted on

my observations. You weren't truly unconscious and yet, you weren't awake. I'm assuming the intense stress caused your brain to shut down, until it felt prepared to deal with the information you'd recalled. I've heard of people reacting in that way, but to see it happen myself was disturbing. I'm very pleased you're awake now – another twenty-four hours and I was going to have no choice, but to transfer you to hospital.”

“I imagine that would have been difficult to explain,” I suggested dryly.

Doctor Harding smirked. “We were struggling to come up with a suitable explanation, that's certainly true.” He paused, choosing his words carefully before he spoke again. “You should also know, Ripley and Striker checked into your story, to determine the full details. I seemed to remember hearing of the death of your mother and siblings in the news, they confirmed it through newspaper reports.” He watched me cautiously, waiting for a response.

“I guess that isn't surprising, they probably needed to know I was telling the truth.”

“Sadly, you were. The newspapers confirmed the story, how you were arrested and charged with the murder of your stepfather, after he murdered your family.” He squeezed my shoulder gently and offered me a compassionate smile. “You were very fortunate at the trial, it seems almost as many wanted you to be incarcerated as did those who insisted you should be freed.”

“One of the reasons I started moving around so much, to escape the gossip and people's opinions,” I admitted. “For every person who believed in me, there was another who thought I'd gotten away with murder.”

“Difficult to cope with, no doubt,” Dr. Harding suggested.

"Particularly as I was convinced of my own guilt," I agreed quietly. "I really thought I should be sent to prison. I failed Mom, my family. I deserved to spend the rest of my life in prison for what I did to them."

"I don't believe that, not for one minute." Rowena appeared unexpectedly and sat on the edge of the bed, her expression fierce. "You didn't kill your family, Peter Hurst did. You didn't destroy your mother's self-esteem. He did. All you are truly guilty of is the crime of loving your mother enough to want something better for her. Ridding the world of scum like Peter Hurst is not a crime in my books."

I smile halfheartedly, warmed by her obvious concern and determination to make me see things in a different light. In many ways, Rowena was right. I'd done everything in my power to try and convince Mom to leave, but in the end she'd so lacked in belief in herself she was rendered immobile by her own fears. In hindsight I'd done everything I could do to help Mom. It just hadn't been enough to save her or my siblings.

"I'm afraid I must make one more confession, Charlotte, to add to what Jerome has already told you. I have approached the local police chief and confirmed you are staying with us for the moment. You're on parole; it seemed prudent to confirm your residential address with him to ensure he wasn't likely to visit and arrest you for breaking your parole terms." Rowena had the good grace to appear uncomfortable as she made this confession.

"Sheriff Davis?" I'd met Clinton Davis when I first arrived in Puckhaber Falls, as was required by my probation. He was a laid-back man in his mid-forties and he'd treated me kindly and with great respect. We'd seen each other a few times since my first official visit to the Sheriff's office and he'd always been pleasant.

He'd made it patently clear with a few obtuse sentences that he believed I had a right to be free and had been supportive of my staying in Puckhaber. I'd even shared coffee with him a couple of times in Hank's store. "Clint's a nice guy."

Dr. Harding grinned, obviously amused. "Indeed, he is, a very pleasant man. He seemed genuinely pleased you were staying here with Lucas and sends his best wishes."

"He knows what happened to me?" I questioned doubtfully.

"No, not at all. But with a little tweak of his mind, he believes you had a skiing accident over the Christmas break, that you're dating Lucas, and naturally, Lucas and his friends wanted to look after you whilst you recover from your broken arm and ankle," Rowena explained, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

I couldn't stop myself from grinning back at her – an open, honest smile I would never have believed I was capable of after the past two years. "A little tweak?" I queried mildly.

Rowena chuckled. "Besides being able to convince people our eyes are exceedingly normal, we can tell them something and place a suggestion in their mind that they have no need to question what they've been told. Whilst I've never had to use it on Sheriff Davis before, I found he was extremely receptive."

The mention of Lucas reminded me of the last time I'd seen him – when he'd been deeply upset over what I'd revealed. "Are you sure Lucas is alright?"

Dr. Harding sighed, leaning heavily on his good leg. "I believe so, though certainly he's finding the situation difficult and blames himself for your breakdown. I've explained it was healthy for you to vocalize what you were feeling. Holding all those memories in was putting enormous strain on you, Charlotte."

"A problem shared is a problem halved," I agreed quietly. It was an analogy used by my grandmother regularly, and I could hear her calm voice in my mind, as soothing and loving as I remembered. It reminded me of oatmeal cookies and warm milk, listening to stories in bed as Gran lulled me to sleep when I stayed with her. She'd died about six years ago, and I missed her every day.

Doctor Harding nodded. "Exactly. Given what you've been through, I'm surprised you've survived for as long as you have. Holding it all inside wasn't healthy."

"I had no-one to share with."

"You've proven yourself to be a strong young woman," Doctor Harding remarked with a note of satisfaction in his voice. "You're recovering well. Your blood pressure is back to normal, after being elevated for the past few days." He sat on the chair beside my bed, studying my face astutely. "Did anyone suggest you seek help after your family died? There are a number of extremely good psychologists and therapists who may have helped you through the grieving process."

I frowned, shaking my head. "They offered, but I didn't want any help. When it happened I was so angry, so full of rage. It took over my every waking moment; all I could think about was vengeance. Afterwards, I—" I stopped, struggling to vocalize the fact that I'd murdered someone in cold blood. "When he was dead, the anger slipped away and was replaced by grief. My whole world was desolate, a wasteland with nothing and no one in it. I didn't want to think about Mom, or my siblings. I didn't want to think about anything except dying. I'm not sure anyone could have helped me through that."

Rowena watched me for a few seconds, her expression serene as she searched my eyes. "How do you feel now?"

I examined the memories, which had been carefully shut away for so long. It had become habit to avoid them – I had an imaginary box where the most horrendous of my thoughts were kept. Anything I couldn't – or wouldn't – think about was placed in the box and locked away. Imagining now that the box was open, memories inundated my mind. It was surprising to discover they didn't feel so intensely painful. Picking through them, examining each one, didn't make me feel I would collapse in agony. It still hurt, but somehow it was better. "I feel calmer than I have in a very long time."

Doctor Harding nodded thoughtfully and smiled; his eyes lit with satisfaction. "That's good to hear. You've been through an enormous ordeal, and there will be effects for considerable time to come. While you've faced your demons and handled them better than I would ever have expected, there will still be highs and lows, days when you'll feel unhappy and down in the dumps. I'd like to prescribe antidepressants for you, after I've consulted with an associate of mine who specializes in the field. Would you consider taking them?"

I nodded. "If you think they'll help."

He smiled approvingly. "Good girl. I'd like you to speak with both Rowena and Marianne about your feelings. You seem to be developing a good rapport with them both and they want to help as much as they possibly can. Use them as a sounding board for your emotional health; allow them to offer you friendship and a willing ear."

"Whenever you want to talk, Charlotte, I'll be more than happy to listen," Rowena urged.

The Doctor stood up and smoothed down the front of his shirt. "I'm sure Lucas will be relieved to hear you're feeling a little better. He's been beside himself with worry about you in the past few days."

"I'm sorry he's been worrying."

"Don't be." Rowena's tone was reassuring. "He cares about you, Charlotte. It was natural for him to be worried."

It was thrilling to hear Rowena suggest Lucas cared about me – although I suspected as much, hearing someone else say it was a validation that I wasn't just deluding myself.

"I'll leave you girls to it," Dr. Harding announced. "I'll be back to see you in the morning, Charlotte." Rowena walked him to the doorway and they stood for a few minutes in deep discussion before she made her way back to the side of the bed, dropping gracefully onto the chair.

"Can I ask you something?"

Rowena smiled, the silver in her hazel eyes sparkling. "Of course, I'll answer what I can."

"How difficult is it for Lucas to be near me? He says he's coping, but is it as difficult as I imagine?"

Rowena ran her fingers through her hair, considering my question for a few minutes. "I can't answer specifically for Lucas; I can only give you my perspective. All vampires thirst for human blood, Charlotte. Although I have learned to survive on animal blood, I can still *smell* human blood, but I make a conscious choice not to act on the scent. It's become second nature for me to do so."

"You can smell my blood?" The thought had never occurred to me. I'd assumed from what Lucas said, the sound of my blood created the temptation.

She smiled ruefully, clasping her hands together. "We can all smell your blood. Constantly. For myself, it isn't a huge issue; control came through many years of abstinence and taking care to ensure I feed regularly to keep the desire to a minimum." She leaned forward, her countenance solemn. "For some of the others, it's a temptation." She obviously caught the shocked expression that must

have appeared in my eyes and hurriedly continued. "It's nothing to worry about, if we had any doubts at all, we would never have agreed when Lucas requested you stay here. It would be a different matter if your blood were spilled, because obviously the scent is heightened. But I don't believe any one of us would deliberately hurt you."

"But Lucas finds it more difficult."

Rowena inhaled heavily, considering her answer. "This is uncharted territory, Charlotte. It is impossible to know exactly how difficult this is for Lucas."

"Uncharted?" I wasn't sure what she meant, why she'd chosen that description.

"Humans have only ever had a couple of values for vampires." Her gaze was disconcerting, the way she was watching me suggested she was waiting for me to figure out the implications for myself.

It wasn't hard to guess the first one and goose bumps rose against my skin. "Food."

"Humans are sustenance to vampires. Nothing more, nothing less. For most vampires, humans are treated as nothing more than blood on the hoof," Rowena explained matter-of-factly. "There are a number of reasons for it being that way, Charlotte. Not least of which is because human blood is the perfect sustenance for us. What the others and I are doing, while it is certainly a way to sustain our existence, it is not the norm for our kind. Most vampires feed from and kill humans without a second thought. But there are other reasons for my using the word 'uncharted' in regard to what is happening between you and Lucas."

Her gaze shifted towards the window and she was silent for a long time, contemplating the water running along the riverbed below

us. When she spoke again, her eyes remained on the window. "The second value is by far the more troubling. To my knowledge, no vampire has attempted a relationship with a human."

"Ever?" The idea came as a shock. Surely some vampire in the past had developed a romantic relationship with a human being. Were there that many vampires in the world, for them to participate only in vampire relationships?

As if she could read my thoughts, Rowena continued. "A relationship with a human has almost – and I hate to say it – insurmountable obstacles against it. Our strength is one. All of us must remain constantly vigilant to the fact that we can crush a human. With you, we must all be on alert and remember that what to us would be a gentle pat on the shoulder would be enough to kill you, at the very least, to break a bone. When you consider that in the perspective of a sexual relationship between a man and a woman, you can understand that the passions involved create a recipe for disaster. Sex involves any number of emotions and passions, all of which can too easily cause people to forget themselves, not concentrate on everything that is happening around them. Passion could lead to deadly consequences in the case of a vampire and a human."

I nodded, remembering the sound I'd heard when Marianne slapped Striker's arm earlier and the fight between Lucas and Ambrose out in the woods. The noise of their bodies colliding with one another had been incredible.

"So you're saying it's impossible?"

"No, not impossible. I can't suggest a situation is impossible if it has never been tried before – there are no parameters for knowing if it could succeed or not. What I'm saying is that it will be difficult." Rowena sighed heavily, her gaze focused on my face. "Charlotte,

vampires have had sexual intercourse with humans countless times over the centuries, but that's all it has ever been. Sex, without emotion or commitment."

I blushed furiously, alarmed by the sudden turn of our discussion. I'd never been involved with a man, had never had sex with anyone. To be talking about it now, with a relative stranger, was awkward at best, discomfoting at worst.

Rowena continued quietly, wisely deciding against mentioning my increasing discomfort. "Sex and feeding are closely intertwined for vampires. The physical orgasm is usually entangled with feeding and death for the human involved. I know Lucas tried at one stage to have sex with human women without being overcome by the urge to kill – when he was trying to conquer the need to drain our victims – but it wasn't successful."

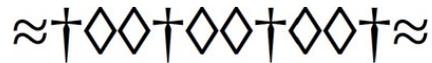
"He told me," I responded in a low voice, stricken by the idea that any relationship with Lucas couldn't progress to anything more meaningful. "It's always that way?"

"It's had to be, Charlotte, for many reasons. There are a number of issues, but many of them are things you and Lucas should discuss with one another." She patted my leg reassuringly and straightened up, seeming determined to end the conversation. "And many of them are things that can wait until you are better, and you and Lucas see where this attraction between you may be headed." She glanced towards the window. "William has found Ben and Lucas and they're on their way home." She drew herself onto her feet, her movements graceful and unhurried. "Try not to worry too much, Charlotte. All I can tell you is that Lucas will control this; he has incredible strength of will. He cares for you deeply and I'm certain you will both find a way of overcoming the problems involved."

She left the room and I lay back against the pillows. Instead of concentrating on the disturbing conversation I'd had with Rowena, I tried to reflect on how I felt now I'd opened up about my family. For the first time in nearly two years, I wasn't so convinced I wanted to die. I could see Mom again, examine her without the desire to shut her away and avoid the hurt. It was a joy to visualize her and see her in my mind, her beautiful green eyes so like my own. She wanted me to live, to be happy and move on from the horrors of the past and face the future.

A strange sensation blossomed in my chest and I realized it wasn't the complete desolation which had been part of my life for two years. I felt... peaceful. I could see my brother and my sisters, hear the girls' voices clamoring for attention and felt whole again. *No, not whole – that was the wrong word.* I lifted my hand to my chest, feeling the steady thump of my heart and knew that although I would never be the same person I was there was a chance for me to go on. My heart was no longer wasted with guilt and recriminations; instead, it was filled with love and memories of my family. And affection for my new friends. Rowena, Ben, and Marianne – they'd embraced me with open arms and I'd never forget their generosity, their willingness to accept me. Acenith, Striker, and Ripley – they seemed okay too. Their secret would remain safe with me.

And Lucas. He was in my heart and I loved him. I loved many things about him and couldn't imagine a future without him being a part of it. Despite knowing him for such a short period, it didn't seem wrong to feel such a powerful attachment. And yet – could it possibly work? He was vampire – I was a human. Was it impossible? No, not impossible. As Rowena said – nothing was impossible if it had never been attempted before. Just... difficult.



Lucas entered the room in an indistinguishable blur; no longer having to hide his abilities he ran to the side of the bed, only coming sharply into focus when he stopped beside me.

He gazed at me for a long time, his eyes raking my face, concern clear in his expression. I reached up to touch him and he closed his eyes, letting me run my fingers over his cheek and down to his jaw before he covered my hand with his. "Charlotte. I am so sorry—"

I placed a finger against his lips, silencing him. "There's nothing to be sorry about," I whispered. "I know now that I couldn't move forward without acknowledging the past. You've helped me do that. You've kept no secrets from me; it seems only fair for you to know my past."

He nodded thoughtfully, kissing my fingers before he curled them into his cool grasp. "No secrets," he repeated thoughtfully. He lifted my hand to his mouth, kissing the scars on my wrist. "Are you really okay?"

"I think so. I feel..." I probed my vocabulary for the right word, one which would explain the calmness of my thoughts, "relieved." It wasn't the perfect word but it would do. "I don't think life is going to be uncomplicated now, but it'll be more bearable. By holding it all in and refusing to acknowledge it, I guess I've allowed the hurt and pain to grow until it consumed me. Now there's a chance I can face the future, without constantly wanting to end my life." I flushed, embarrassed to admit my suicidal tendencies. It wasn't something I was proud to reveal.

"I'm glad. I want to thank you, from the bottom of my heart." He smiled tenderly, the silver streaks flaring in his eyes.

"What for?"

“For trusting me enough to tell me what happened. I understand how difficult it must have been for you.”

“It wasn't easy,” I admitted. “I'd never thought it would be possible to tell anyone, but somehow, I needed to tell you. Needed to lay everything on the line. You'd been candid with me and I needed to be truthful with you.” Plucking at the sheet with my fingers, I glanced furtively at Lucas from beneath my eyelashes. “Do they all know?”

Lucas nodded. “They were deeply concerned about what was happening. Jerome especially, needed to know what brought about your breakdown. It seemed impossible not to bring them all into the loop, and of course, they could all hear something was wrong. I hope you will forgive me for betraying your trust.”

“You didn't betray my trust; you're right. It's only fair they have an explanation for my behavior, after they've agreed to have me stay here.” I managed a faint smile. “I hope they don't think any worse of me, knowing I murdered my step-father.”

“That wasn't murder. He got no worse than he deserved,” Lucas responded curtly, his tone cold. “Probably far better than he deserved.”

We gazed at one another for a long time, Lucas still gently gripping my hand. He leaned over, bringing his face closer to mine, his scent making my head spin. He edged closer until our lips touched – the coldness of his at odds with the warmth of my own. The effect of his kiss was electrifying. I wanted to touch him, hold him, have him kiss me, and more. Much more. I wrestled my fingers from his grip, running them through his thick hair and pulling him closer. Lucas groaned softly deep in his chest, brushing his tongue over my lips and when I moaned, he swept his way into my mouth,

his tongue seeking my own and suckling against it gently. I dropped my hands from his hair, gripping his neck and holding him tightly.

He captured my hand in his and gently unclasped my fingers, moving away. "I have to be careful with you," he reminded me huskily. "I have to keep my desires in control."

The intense yearning was obvious in his eyes and it was apparent how difficult pulling back was for him, how hard he found it to release me. Lying back against the pillows, my heart raced and my nipples throbbed against the silky material covering them, leaving me wanting so much more.

Lucas slumped into the chair next to the bed, still holding my hand. He grinned and I returned his smile. We were both keenly aware of what a big achievement it had been for him to release me, how much self-control he'd needed to administer to keep his natural instincts in check.

To lighten the mood a little, I decided to distract him. "So, I have some more questions," I began.

"What would you like to know?"

"Why do you smell so good?"

"It's another aspect of being vampire; my scent is designed to entice my victims, to attract them."

"You don't always smell the same to me."

Lucas smiled. "Pheromones create the scent, something that will most appeal to the human I'm with at the time, dependent on what will lull them into relaxing."

"How do you know what will have the right effect?"

"Years of instinct."

"It certainly works," I pointed out.

"It's pleasant to know that at least one of my evil powers works on you," Lucas responded dryly.

"I've seen some vampire movies in my time," I continued, stealing a look at him to gauge his reaction. He remained impassive, although one dark eyebrow rose in question. "How come you don't wear the tuxedo and the black silk cape?"

To my delight it had exactly the effect I'd hoped it would. He burst into laughter, throwing his head back and chuckling. "It's a myth. Do I look like George Hamilton to you? It would be extremely ineffective when we are trying to remain incognito in the community, don't you think?"

His reaction encouraged me. "What happens to your fangs when you aren't using them?" Whenever he smiled, his teeth looked perfectly normal, there wasn't the slightest hint that they were in any way different to my own.

"Retractable. Again, it would be exceedingly difficult to remain incognito, if our fangs were perpetually on display for all to see."

"Do you need to breathe?"

"Not if I don't want to. We go through the motions, so we appear human."

"Really?"

He smiled again. "Really."

"What about things which are supposed to repel vampires? Garlic?" He shook his head. "Crosses?"

Another firm shake of his head followed, and he grinned at me, obviously amused by my naïve line of questioning. "All myths," he announced firmly.

"Silver?"

"Why the sudden interest? Are you planning on killing me?" he questioned with an easy smile. "Another myth. Silver has no effect on us. In fact, Rowena prefers silver jewelry over gold, and wears it

often." He squeezed my fingers. "And before you ask, wooden stakes are an urban legend as well."

"They're all legends? How did that come about?"

Lucas shrugged. "We needed ways to protect ourselves from humans. I have always assumed these myths were begun by vampires, thousands of years ago, a way to shield ourselves."

My curiosity was piqued and the next question I asked was no longer in jest. "What *can* kill you?"

Lucas evidently understood the questioning had grown serious and paused to consider his answer. "Almost nothing."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Nothing?"

"We are virtually indestructible. The only way to kill a vampire is to decapitate him, then destroy the head and body with fire. Probably a good thing, given we're immortal."

Ignoring the reminder of his killing Ambrose, I focused instead on the idea of immortality. This thought hadn't occurred to me before and I turned the idea around in my head, examining it from all sides. Recalling the conversation I'd had with Rowena, she'd told me she was born in 1852. I looked at Lucas. "How old are you – really?"

His expression didn't alter, but the grip against my fingers tightened imperceptibly, as if he feared my reaction. "I was born in 1842, ten years before Rowena."

The lungful of air I'd been holding exhaled with a quiet whoosh, tugging sharply at my ribcage. "1842," I repeated vacantly.

"Yes."

A dozen thoughts crossed my mind, one after the other, as I digested this answer. His gaze never left mine while he waited for a reaction.

"Okay." It was all I could manage, even though it didn't begin to cover the thoughts racing through my mind.

He raised his eyebrows at my lukewarm reaction, his expression unfathomable. "I was born in Chicago in 1842, to Irish immigrants named Patrick and Mary Tine. I had four brothers and five sisters. We lived in the slums of Chicago, and when I was twenty-four, my younger sister Margaret contracted cholera. There was a mini epidemic in the United States in 1866, and one by one, my family contracted the disease. We had no idea we had gotten the disease by drinking contaminated water from the water pump we relied on – those sorts of things weren't understood at the time." He paused briefly, the memory evidently troubling him. "It was a terrible disease, we suffered dismally from vomiting, and diarrhea and you got so dehydrated, all you wanted to do was drink; the thirst was terrible. Of course, we drank gallons of the water, which was contaminating us in the first place. My family died, every single one of them, until only I was left. I was alone and so very ill, there was no real treatment at the time and many people were sick. Dozens died across Chicago, every day."

"What happened?" I asked quietly.

"I knew I was going to die. I waited for it, wished for it – but it didn't happen. After a few days, I crawled from the slum and out into the street below, desperate to find help, but I collapsed in the alley. That's where Florian found me."

I grasped what he was saying. "Florien? He was a vampire?"

Lucas nodded and looked into my eyes, his expression soft. "He gave me a choice. He told me what he was and that he could attempt to save me, but only if he bit me. He couldn't guarantee he would be successful, warned me there was an extremely high chance he would lose control and drain me. I was weak, so incredibly desperate and I didn't want to die. So I agreed, despite how small the chances of survival."

I reached out to touch his face, wanting him to know I understood his decision. He captured my hand, kissing my fingers again. "Does it hurt?"

"The bite was excruciating, even when the paralytic agent we employ began to work, I could still feel the pain." He shuddered at the memory. "Then there was panic, as I felt my life slipping away. After that..." he shrugged, "there was nothing, until I woke beneath the ground and clawed my way out."

I lapsed into silence, considering what he'd told me, not wanting to hear what happened next. Trying to imagine what it had been like for him to be so alone and choose this life over dying. Wondering what it was like to live for so long.

"What are you thinking, Charlotte?" Lucas demanded, his voice low.

I shook my head. "I don't know, I guess I'm trying to get my head around the fact you're over one hundred and sixty years old."

"Does it bother you?"

"No!" The response came swiftly. "I don't care how old you are, it's only a number. It's so hard to comprehend though, when you look the way you do."

He ran his fingers through my hair; pulling at one dark curl and watching it spring back into shape. "My poor Charlotte. You've had a lot to comprehend in recent weeks."

"So you'll never get older?"

"I've been exactly like this since 1866," he admitted. "I'll never get any older. At least, not in physical appearance."

"What do you do? How do you fill in all that time?"

Lucas smiled warmly. "It hasn't been difficult. There's a whole world out there, Charlotte. I've visited many countries, learned new languages. I've served in wars, read books, learned to play musical

instruments, and studied. I've learned about philosophy, history, politics, law, genetics, and medicine."

"Do you really work in Billings?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't. It's a ruse, part of our multifaceted plan to keep people away. My main area of interest is law; I've worked as an attorney for many years in the past. Right now, I'm taking a sabbatical. When we move next, I may go back to college again."

"Again?" I repeated faintly. This sounded like a fantasy; nothing he was telling me seemed as if it could possibly be real. It felt as if I'd stepped into the twilight zone, or I'd become Alice and ended up in Wonderland.

He dropped a gentle kiss against my wrist, brushing his lips tenderly over the scars. "Being twenty-four for many years has its advantages. I have degrees in any number of study areas because I appear young enough to attend college repeatedly." Sensing my obvious confusion, he explained more fully. "We have a range of ages we pretend to be. For me, I range between twenty and twenty-eight. It permits us a time settled in one area, then we must move again before people notice we're not aging. Ben tends to work between twenty-two and thirty-four, although he pushes the end of the spectrum at thirty-four. His physical age when he became vampire was twenty-six."

"What about—" I blushed and stumbled over the words, wondering if I was being too forward with this line of questioning. "Relationships, people. Haven't you been lonely?"

"I've had Ben and the others. We've been friends for many years and have come together and lived as we do now, on occasion. Not always, of course, because we are all very individual people and sometimes one or all of us will decide we want our own space.

Particularly for those of us in relationships, sometimes they prefer to separate off as a couple and live that way for a while. Then when I am studying, I tend to embrace the college lifestyle, live on campus, and interact with the other students." He leaned towards me, and I soaked up the tantalizing aroma of his skin. "As for *relationships*, there have been some in the past. But there has been no one for a considerable period. Until now." He kissed me softly, but it was all too brief and he leaned back in the chair.

Relaxing against the pillows, I cherished his last words. I wasn't sure where this was headed, or how we could possibly make it work, but right here and right now – it didn't matter.

CHAPTER II

GENEROSITY

Another full week passed before Dr. Harding announced I'd recovered enough to leave the bedroom, and with great fanfare, Marianne and Rowena arrived in my room, smiling when they were finally given the go-ahead to bring me downstairs. Rowena assisted with showering and washing my hair, drying it carefully before Marianne helped me put on another pretty negligee, this time with the addition of a silk robe in the palest pink. I wondered where the luxurious sleepwear kept appearing from, but as it delighted Marianne to dress me up and I was enjoying a resurgence of desire to appear attractive, I didn't concern myself overly.

There was a knock on the bathroom door as I finished brushing my hair and Marianne winked knowingly at me in the mirror's reflection. "Come in, Lucas."

"I'll see you downstairs." Rowena pressed a kiss against my cheek and slipped out past Lucas, followed by Marianne who waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Sitting on a chair in front of the vanity, I blushed when Lucas appraised the elegant gown, his eyes tracing a burning path from my head to my toes. "You look stunning, Charlotte."

"Thanks." The blush grew more heated.

"Ready to come downstairs?"

With a nod, I prepared to pull myself onto my feet, but Lucas was at my side immediately, lifting me into his arms.

"I can walk, you know," I muttered mutinously.

"Of course you can, but I'm not taking any risks with the cast on your ankle," Lucas answered smoothly. I didn't argue, his scent was already sweeping me away and I settled contentedly against his firm chest.

Lucas carried me cautiously down the elegant wooden staircase and into his living room. He lowered me onto one of the couches and I was delighted when he sat beside me, placing an arm around my shoulders. I relaxed against his chest and looked around at his friends with undisguised interest while Marianne set pillows on the coffee table to rest my ankle on.

"Are you comfortable?" Lucas murmured against my hair.

"I'm fine. Are you comfortable?"

"I'm improving at having you close," he admitted. "In fact," he tightened his grip around my shoulders, "I'm beginning to like it, very much."

I smiled at him wordlessly and he pressed his lips against my forehead in a tender kiss.

The entire household was waiting to greet me and I was suddenly apprehensive. As used to being around them as I was, this was the first time I'd been with them en masse and it was a little daunting. Oddly enough, it wasn't because they were vampires, it was more because I felt shy and weird out of my normal surroundings. Spending time with one, or two of them was normal. This definitely wasn't.

There were new people too – a couple sat on the couch opposite Lucas and me. The woman was curvaceous; her heart shaped face

was accentuated by luminescent pale blue eyes, streaked with silver. Her hair was copper-red and fell in glossy waves halfway down her back. I could only imagine this was Gwynn, whom I'd heard so much about. A man sat beside her, his dark hair closely cropped and his clear grey eyes glittered with silver. Marianne made the introductions. "Lottie, this is William Blackheath and his wife, Gwynn."

"Hi," I greeted them with a nervous little smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lottie. Marianne has told us much about you." His voice was deep and melodious, his grey eyes serious as he gazed at me. "I'm sorry we haven't visited before now. My... capacity for control is not as... well developed. I haven't been vampire for very long."

"I understand." Whilst William seemed friendly enough, Gwynn barely looked at me and I worried she already disliked me.

Lucas squeezed my shoulder and I glanced up at him, thankful he was sitting so close. I wondered what constituted 'very long' for a vampire. Something I should ask Lucas when we were alone again, because I was certain it wouldn't be polite to question it now.

Ben strolled in with a little girl in his arms, startling me. She looked to be about five years old, with dark hair and grey eyes and she was shrieking with delight as Ben dropped her down onto Gwynn's lap. In contrast to her previous coolness, Gwynn smiled warmly at the little girl and cuddled her close. Ben smiled at William and Gwynn. "Have we made introductions?"

"Yes, we've met Charlotte," William said. "Charlotte, this is my sister, Katie. She's visiting for the day."

"Hi Katie." I was startled by this admission. If this little girl was William's sister, he hadn't been a vampire for very long at all. Her eyes were normal, no hint of the metallic streaks the others had

which marked them as vampires. Did that mean she was a human child? Surely, it was dangerous for her to be here with a bunch of vampires?

The little girl watched me with curiosity in her large gray eyes, and then wriggled on Gwynn's lap, wanting to be released. She scrambled down from the couch and came around the coffee table to stand beside me. "Hello." With a glance, she took in the plaster casts. "You got hurt?"

I nodded, enchanted by the little girl. She was such a sweet little thing and reminded me of my sisters. "I'm getting better now."

"You Lucas's girlfriend?"

Blushing, I glanced at Lucas, hesitant to answer her question. Was my status that of girlfriend? We hadn't exactly gotten that far yet, had we?

"Yes, Katie. Charlotte is my girlfriend," Lucas said.

Katie studied me for another minute, her keen gaze not missing a thing. "She's very pretty."

Lucas chuckled. "Yes, she is."

Seemingly, this discussion was enough for Katie to accept me; she climbed up on the couch beside us and curled her fingers around the cast on my left arm.

"You've made a friend," William announced with a warm smile.

I didn't miss the fact that Gwynn looked as if she'd just sucked a particularly bitter lemon.

"So, Lott. You managed to avoid Christmas altogether," Striker announced with a devilish grin, "but it seems that was your plan. Not to worry though, because we kept your presents until you were feeling better."

Blushing furiously, I started to protest. "You don't need to give me anything—"

"Nonsense," Rowena said. "Lucas is family, and you are with Lucas, which makes you family, too."

"We couldn't let Christmas go by without giving you a gift," William added. He reached across the coffee table, handing me a small rectangular box and I accepted it silently. "This is from Gwynn and myself."

"I— thank you." I pulled the lid from the box, discovering it held a gift voucher for an extravagant amount of money to be used at a clothing boutique in Billings. I looked at Gwynn and William, overwhelmed by such generosity when they barely knew me.

"Marianne seems to be appalled by the state of your wardrobe," Gwynn announced dryly. "She suggested a gift voucher."

"Thank you, Gwynn, William," I responded quietly.

Rowena stood up and handed me a large box, which had been sitting on the floor by her feet. "This is from Ben and me."

"Thank you."

Lucas took the box and balanced it on his lap while I pulled the lid off. It was filled with art supplies, new tubes of paints in every color and shade, new brushes made of the finest Kolinsky sable; all the equipment I often coveted in the stores but could rarely afford. Tears filled my eyes as I looked first to Rowena and then to Ben. "Thank you so much. I— I really don't know what to say."

Rowena leaned over and kissed my forehead, brushing her hand over my head. "You're very welcome. Lucas told us how much you love painting and he thought you could use some new supplies."

I peeked back into the box, absolutely delighted and itching to start using the paints. I hadn't painted since before the attack and my heart yearned to start a fresh canvas. I brushed my fingers over the shiny new tubes, practically drooled over the sable brushes. "I

can't tell you how much I appreciate your generosity. I'm so grateful."

"Can I paint?" Katie questioned.

I glanced at Gwynn and William before I answered, to ascertain their reaction to Katie's question. Gwynn's face looked pinched, while William was nodding amenably. "If your brother and Gwynn say you can, I'll be happy to let you paint with me."

Acenith stood up, handing me another package. "A little something from me."

I tore the paper and ribbon from the elegantly wrapped gift and discovered a book about the Louvre Museum in Paris, documenting the artwork in their exquisite collection and the history of each piece. "Thank you, Acenith. It's wonderful."

Acenith hugged me and I returned the embrace, wrapping my arms around her neck. "Perhaps one day you will be able to go there and see them in person," she suggested.

"I'd like that."

Ripley approached next, the gift in his hands wrapped in bright red wrapping decorated with garish cartoon characters. "A small gift from myself, Miss Duncan." I took it from him, swallowing a smile at the most un-Ripley-like wrapping paper. "My apologies for the atrocious wrapping," Ripley announced with a sniff, eyeing the offending paper with distaste. "I was delayed returning to the house this afternoon, and foolishly requested Striker prepare your gift. I didn't realize he would go out of his way to find the most appalling wrapping in the state of Montana."

A glance at Striker confirmed he sported a wicked grin and when he saw me watching him he offered a mischievous wink.

Holding back a giggle, I returned my attention to Ripley. "It's lovely, Ripley. Thank you."

"You are most welcome, Miss Duncan."

It didn't matter what I did, I couldn't convince Ripley to call me Lottie. Not even Charlotte. He was rigidly formal in his conduct and wouldn't be convinced otherwise. I lifted the lid from the box and was utterly delighted by the contents. Inside lay leatherbound editions of the most famous of the Brontë sisters' novels – Jane Eyre; Wuthering Heights; Agnes Gray and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. They were some of my favorite books and these made my old copies appear shabby in comparison. I traced across the spine of Jane Eyre and the fragrant scent of the leather bindings wafted up to my nostrils. "Thank you. They're just amazing."

Ripley bowed. "You are welcome, Miss Duncan. It was a pleasure to select them for you."

"Okay, it's our turn," Striker announced, ignoring the filthy look Ripley sent him. He stood up and in a blur took the dozen or so steps from where he'd been sitting to reach my side. "C'mon." He held out his hands, wagging his fingers at me.

I looked up at him in confusion, uncertain as to what he wanted me to do.

"Your gift from Marianne and me is outside, Lott."

"Be gentle with her," Lucas warned quietly. "Don't break any more of her ribs."

I looked at Lucas in alarm. Striker still intimidated me almost daily, although he was certainly trying to tone down his gruff exterior and doing his best to put me at ease.

"Of course I'll be gentle," Striker grumbled. He leaned over to pick me up and I squeezed my eyes shut. Any concerns were unfounded though, when Striker lifted me carefully into his arms as if I were a delicate flower and cradled me against his broad chest. It was like being carried by a lump of stone as he strode to the front

door, which Ripley pulled open for us. I noticed everyone was trailing along behind and wondered what my gift could possibly be, and why it was outside.

On the gravel beside the house was my Volkswagen – at least, it looked vaguely similar to my Volkswagen.

Blinking once or twice, I was certain I must be seeing things. This Volkswagen was shiny, with a bright red paint job and chromed wheel rims. It looked brand new, as though it had just been purchased from the showroom floor in 1968. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"We wanted to buy you a new car, but Lucas thinks you are rather attached to this one," Marianne announced from beside me.

"It's fantastic," I breathed.

Striker took the comment as a positive sign and carried me down the steps to the car. He opened the door and cautiously eased me onto the driver's seat, before sprinting around to the other side to join me. He proudly pointed out the improvement he'd made – the brand new leather upholstery, new carpets, a CD player and seatbelts.

"You've done an amazing job," I murmured, my attention flashing from one improvement to the next. I was thrilled, I'd always loved my Volkswagen but it was true, she'd seen much better days. In the past twelve months or so, I'd been aware she was only running on a wing and a prayer, with more weird and wonderful sounds being generated by the engine each week.

"Start her up, Lott." The keys hung in the ignition and I leaned forward to turn the key. The engine roared into life, purring smoothly and I traced my fingers over the dashboard, delighting by my rejuvenated car.

"Do you wanna take her for a spin?" Striker asked enthusiastically.

"I don't think Charlotte is quite ready for that," Ben interjected hurriedly. "A plaster cast and a stick shift hardly seem a good combination."

"Yeah, guess you're right, Ben," Striker said sulkily. He was clearly itching to go for a drive, almost as much as I was.

"Don't even think about it, young lady." Lucas leaned into the car and drew me into his arms. "You are not driving your car, despite how fabulous you may think it is. Not until those casts come off." His voice was a growl, but his blue eyes twinkled.

Reaching out to Marianne, I pulled her into an awkward hug, kissing her cheek. "Thank you, Marianne, it's wonderful, and I love it."

"I'd like to take all the praise, but Striker did the work," Marianne admitted with a grin.

Lucas carried me back into the house and settled me on the couch, taking up his position with his arm around my shoulder. Settling contentedly against his chest, I was gratified not only with my wonderful gifts, but by the thought that this amazing man liked me. It was overwhelming, and I still didn't understand what he could possibly see in me, but the emotion readily visible in his eyes confirmed he cared. My heart stumbled happily and he squeezed my shoulder. I knew he could hear my heart bursting with joy, the emotion fizzing through my bloodstream.

Glancing around each member of the group, I found it hard to believe my good fortune in meeting them. "I want to thank you so much," I finally managed quietly. "You've been so kind, shared your home with me and I can't tell you how much I appreciate all you've done." I paused, sorting my thoughts into order. "I wish I had

something for each of you, though I don't think anything would possibly make up for what you've given me in the past few weeks. I was lost and alone. More alone than most people ever feel in their lifetimes. I thought I had no hope and then Lucas came into my life and with him, all of you. I feel so blessed to have met you all."

Lucas kissed me tenderly. "It is I who was blessed in finding you, my Charlotte."

I looked at him, chewing my bottom lip before I glanced back at his friends seated around the living room. "There is one thing I can give you all." I glanced once more into Lucas's startled eyes and took a deep breath. "I have one more secret I haven't told you."

CHAPTER 12

GHOSTS FROM THE PAST

They were uniformly silent for a few seconds, digesting my announcement before Striker spoke up. "What sort of secret?" he growled, the tenor of his voice confirming he was suspicious.

"Now Striker, give her a chance," Rowena warned.

"I knew this was dangerous," Ripley groaned, eyeing me with unconcealed contempt. "It was dangerous to trust you."

Gwynn was enraged as she stood up, her eyes blazing fire when she glared at Lucas. "This is what I was concerned about! We don't even know this girl, and yet you've allowed her to come in here and threaten our existence!"

"*Enough!* Gwynn, remember whom you're speaking to! Sit down and give her a chance to explain," Lucas ordered coldly. His tone made it clear he would tolerate no arguments and I was reminded that he was their leader. There was a tangible anger in the room, the tension level ratcheting up considerably in the past few minutes. I could feel the rigidity in Lucas's body, as if he was teetering on the edge of physically attacking Gwynn.

For a long moment Gwynn stared furiously at me, before she allowed William to tug her down onto the couch beside him. She held her arms out to Katie. "Come here, Katie."

"I wanna stay with Charlotte and Lucas," Katie announced.

I suspected Gwynn was going to have apoplexy. With a gentle brush of my fingers across Katie's hair, I inclined my head towards William. "You should do as Gwynn asked, please Katie."

With a little huff of annoyance, Katie wriggled down off the couch and stomped across to William, letting him lift her onto his lap. She pointedly ignored Gwynn and I knew that if Gwynn hadn't hated me before, she most certainly did now. Ripley glared at me with barely concealed fury and Striker gripped his huge hands into fists. Even Acenith looked perturbed, her glorious green eyes filled with worry and I rushed to reassure them I meant no harm.

"I promise you, this has nothing to do with your secret. I would never tell anyone about you." I glanced at Katie, wondering how much she knew about her brother and the others. Did she know they were vampires? It seemed as if I was treading on eggshells and I silently cursed myself for even suggesting I could offer them a gift of my own. It had been a stupid mistake.

The words didn't have the effect I'd hoped for and they continued to watch me in silence. There was a tension among them which hadn't been there before and I took a deep breath, trying to weave my tangled thoughts into a flow of coherency. "This secret is something I've always kept to myself. Although my grandmother knew there was something, she didn't say anything, didn't approach me about it. I guess it could be a hereditary thing, but I've never had any proof. Mom couldn't do it." Flushing with embarrassment, I glanced around at them, wrinkling my nose when I realized what a mess I was making of this discussion. "Sorry – I know I'm not making any sense."

"It's okay, Charlotte. Take your time," Rowena urged. It seemed she was the only one willing to show any faith in me, the only one

willing to reserve judgment until I'd had an opportunity to explain. Even Ben appeared concerned; sitting back in an armchair he was holding his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose, as if expecting imminent disaster.

Taking a deep breath, I started again. "This is something I've kept to myself because people would probably think I was some sort of freak if they knew. I guess..." I peeked around at them, "given that I'm sitting in a room..." I glanced at Katie anxiously, found her watching me with big grey eyes and stumbled to a halt, glancing up at Lucas uncertainly.

"Katie knows what we are, Charlotte."

"They is vampires," Katie announced happily. "But I has to keep it secret."

Okay— something else I would need to discuss with Lucas later – if I survived this current situation. Inhaling heavily, I continued. "Given that I'm sitting in a room filled with vampires and some of you have such amazing... abilities, you probably won't think this is as freaky as most people would." I dropped my gaze to my hands, unable to bear the distrust in their eyes. While I'd thought I was building a friendly relationship with them, it seemed the level of trust we'd achieved wasn't high. "I have some sort of – psychic ability. It's been there all of my life, but I've ignored it most of the time. Dead people communicate with me – and some of them have messages to give to you." I looked around anxiously, expecting them to burst into laughter, or tell me I was crazy; but they remained quiet, watching me with collectively solemn expressions. Lucas's arm tightened imperceptibly around my shoulders and when I glanced up, I found his expression unreadable. It was apparent they were still distrustful, worried about what I was alluding to. I needed to show them, but how did I go about it? The voices were always in the background of

my consciousness, whispering and murmuring, but I'd spent the vast majority of my life ignoring them, wishing they'd just go away. I'd never willingly attempted to listen to them before.

Closing my eyes I took another steadying breath, ignoring the sharp tug on my ribs. The voices were dissonant and I responded to them, firmly and silently. *"If you want me to listen, you have to speak one at a time. I can't make sense of what you're saying if you all speak at once."*

Some of the hubbub died down and I was able to select one thread of conversation and concentrate on that alone. With it came an image –clear and well defined, I could see the speakers as if they stood before me. A man dressed in a formal suit of heavy grey serge, with a neatly buttoned waistcoat beneath the jacket and highly polished shoes on his feet. The neck of his crisp starched shirt was adorned with a black silk cravat, and a gold watch chain hung from the waistcoat. He sported a dark brown goatee and slicked back hair, parted with precision to one side. He had a woman at his side; dressed in a demure gown of pale green silk, her waist was tightly corseted and her back impossibly straight. Her long blonde hair was piled into an elaborate arrangement on the top of her head and she watched me with clear hazel eyes and an encouraging smile. The man and woman were holding hands, their fingers intertwined. Standing beside them was a younger man, perhaps in his late twenties. Whilst not classically handsome, his features were appealing and his body long and lean. His sky-blue eyes stood out in stark contrast against his dark brown hair, which fell across his collar in gentle waves. His dress suggested he was of a lower class than the couple; he wore a white shirt which lay open at the neckline to reveal heavily tanned skin, coarse woolen trousers, and heavily scuffed boots. Despite the obvious social differences between him

and the couple, it was evident they were a group who belonged with each other. Listening carefully to their words for a few minutes, I opened my eyes and located Rowena. She had settled onto the edge of the armchair Ben occupied, watching me inquisitively. I was comforted to find no sign of distrust in her gaze, but her curiosity was abundant.

"I can see your parents, Mungo and Elizabeth." I gave a brief description of each one, along with the second man, who had identified himself as Duncan Taylor. "Mungo wants you to know, he's deeply regretful about your enforced betrothal to Finchley. His decision was mandated by the times you lived in, when it was required that a daughter marry someone of her own class. He honestly believed the betrothal to be a good match, Finchley held his own estate near your father's in Auchintoul, and he came with the highest recommendations from London society. Mungo and your mother knew you were in love with Duncan, but he was a gardener on your Estate, making it impossible for you to marry him without causing a scandal which would have affected the entire family." I listened carefully for another minute or two as Rowena's mother spoke, her hands clasped together at her waist. "Elizabeth wants you to know she tried so hard to convince your father to call off the betrothal, but it was a situation which your father couldn't control without repercussions for both you and your family. He apologizes that he didn't have the courage to make that choice, he wishes he could change the decision he made and should have allowed you to marry for love."

Rowena intertwined her fingers, a multitude of emotions crossing her exquisite features. Ben placed his hand on her thigh and they shared a meaningful glance before Rowena turned back to me, her eyes filled with expectation.

“Duncan is sorry he couldn't protect you from Finchley. He'd suspected he was something— abnormal, even before you both tried to run away from Auchintoul. It wasn't until after Finchley murdered Duncan that he became aware of the truth of what happened. Your father's footman took a bribe from Finchley and told him the direction you were travelling. Duncan wishes he'd been strong enough to stop what happened. After his death, when he reached the... other side... he discovered Finchley was a vampire and it was only then he understood he could never have stopped him from taking you, from turning you to vampire. He says Finchley had an obsessive desire for you, which Duncan could never have overcome. Duncan has watched over you since his death – when you were trapped on the estate, Duncan was there with you. Every time you caught the scent of freesias wafting through the house; that was Duncan. He was delighted when Finchley was destroyed and you were finally free. He only wishes it hadn't taken a decade. He wants you to know he felt your desperation and sorrow when you were turned, and knew how sad you were because you were never able to contact your family again. Mungo and Elizabeth were stunned to discover what happened after they died, they'd mourned your loss for many years and wish there'd been some way for you to keep in touch with them. They've accepted what you've become and love you unconditionally. Duncan and your parents are so glad you met Ben; they know you're soul mates and trust Ben to love you always and keep you safe. Duncan is very happy you found love again, and wants you to know he will adore you always.”

The voices and images faded and I peeked at Rowena, anxious about how she would react. Her eyes were bright and she held her hands to her cheeks, her expression filled with wonder. “Charlotte, thank you. I've always wondered, but this is the most incredible gift

I've ever received." She gazed at Ben and he squeezed her fingers gently, then leaned forward to kiss her tenderly.

"*This* is your secret?" Striker questioned. The anger didn't simmer in his eyes now and his stance had relaxed.

"Yes."

"You can talk to our families?" Ben's voice was laced with incredulity. He rubbed his hand against Rowena's thigh, offering her comfort.

"Yes." Listening to the voices again, I needed to ask them to stop clamoring for attention a second time. It seemed every spirit was wrangling for an opportunity to speak after being ignored for so long. Pulling a second thread towards me, a new image appeared. Who this memory belonged to was instantly recognizable, the resemblance uncanny. I turned to Marianne. "I'm talking to your grandmother, who tells me her name is Margaret. She wants you to know how happy she was when she met your Grandpa again, after her death. She's so proud of the woman you've become. She and your parents missed you desperately when you disappeared. They'd always accepted that you were a free spirit and planned to travel the world, but when they didn't hear from you for so long, they were so worried. With the war going on, there was no way to get information, or have someone search for you in Europe. When Germany capitulated, your father and brother travelled to Europe to search, but things were so chaotic and there were no records to suggest what happened to you."

A couple walked into the mental picture and introduced themselves as Marianne's parents, Alexander and Ann Cooper. They were dressed in clothing that reminded me of films such as *The Maltese Falcon*, and *Casablanca*; her father was immaculately clad in military uniform, her mother wore a floral dress, her dark hair pulled

back from her pretty features with elaborately decorated combs. "Your parents are with me now. Your Mom, Ann, says she had a feeling," I smiled across at Marianne, "very much like the feelings you have about the future, and she knew almost from the beginning that you were gone forever."

Marianne's offered me a delighted smile, her entire face joyful. "My mother always had a sixth sense about future events."

Returning to Marianne's family, I listened to their words. "They thought you'd been killed in Europe. They were very worried when they discovered what had happened to you, how you'd become vampire after being attacked in Berlin. But they love you and see how you love your friends and they're delighted about your engagement to Striker." Marianne grinned; her eyes filled with pleasure as she turned to Striker and pressed a kiss against his mouth. "Your sister Annabeth, and your brother Philip, say hello. Annabeth thinks Striker is..." I almost laughed aloud and averted my gaze, unable to meet Striker's eyes, "... a real dish."

"Thanks, Charlotte," Marianne announced happily. "And Annabeth is right." She glanced up at Striker and leaned forward to kiss him in another unabashed show of adoration.

Staring down at my hands, I was pleased for the first time that I could do this. It had alarmed me in the past and I'd ignored the voices continually, often yelling for them to go away and leave me alone. For a long time, I'd been convinced I was going insane and the voices and visions had terrified me. Now, I could see there was some good to come from this strange talent. Lucas trailed his fingertips over my arm and I looked up, wondering what he was making of this. The soft expression in his eyes was wonderful and I knew he accepted me, exactly as I was. It was comforting, made

even more encouraging when he leaned down unexpectedly and brushed his lips across mine.

I returned to the voices, surprised when Marianne's mother spoke again. I listened carefully, nodding in response to her question, and then blushed when it occurred to me that I was nodding to someone only I could see. "Yes, I think I could do that. You'd have to appear for me again. Yes, I think Marianne would like it, very much."

"What did you see, Charlotte?" Rowena asked eagerly.

My eyes came to rest on Marianne. "Your mother asked if I would paint a portrait of them. She says money was tight before you left home, and they didn't have any family photos. I promised I would paint them for you."

Marianne leaped up from the couch and whooped with delight, before swamping me in a hug. "That would be outstanding!" she announced with a happy squeal.

"Remember to be gentle, Marianne," Lucas warned her. "If you break her other arm, how will she paint?"

"Good point," Marianne agreed, easing off on the bear hug.

"Do you— Is there a message for me?" Gwynn asked timidly. She was perched on the very edge of the couch, William claspng her shoulder and it was apparent she was desperate for anything I could tell her.

I shut my eyes, searching through the voices. If I concentrated hard enough, I discovered I was able to mute individual voices as I worked through them, lowering the clamor in my head. At last, I heard what I was searching for and an image appeared. A couple stood together, the woman very beautiful. Almost as beautiful as her daughter. The man standing beside her was formally dressed in a pinstriped suit, with a heavily-starched collar and neatly knotted tie.

The woman spoke rapidly, twisting her hands together as she related a story that had me cringing internally. The man beside her placed an arm around her shoulder, providing her with physical comfort.

"Your mom, Sarah, is speaking to me," I began, turning to Gwynn. "She is so very sorry... for what happened after she divorced your father. She wants you to know she fought as hard as she could, but your father was wealthy and she didn't have the funds to fight for custody after their divorce." I chewed my lip anxiously, listening to Gwynn's mother and trying to sanitize what I was hearing before I spoke. I knew so little about Gwynn and I didn't know how much the others in the room knew about her history. "She never stopped loving you, Gwynn. Two years after she left, she remarried and her new husband, Thomas Gregory, is with her now. As soon as they married, they tried to gain custody of you through the courts... but your father insisted you'd died, and provided them with a forged death certificate."

Gwynn covered her face with her hands and William drew her into his arms, hugging her against his chest. Katie placed her hand in Gwynn's, apparently over her little snit about being made to go and sit with William. "She says if she'd known you were still alive, she would never, ever, have stopped searching for you. She only discovered what had happened... after she passed away." I managed a wavering smile. "She's pleased you... finally escaped your father's home and made your way to San Francisco, and met Eugene. She believes you made the right choice in becoming a vampire, knows you thought it was the only way to keep yourself safe. She doesn't condemn the choices you made, and says she's glad you have such a good friend in Eugene... and knows he didn't made the decision to create you lightly. She wants me to thank William for loving you so deeply, she's happy you've made such a perfect match and found

happiness. She loves you deeply, as much as she did the day she left. She never abandoned you, Gwynn; she wants you to know that. She's been watching over you all these years and she's proud of how special you are." The image faded and I smiled encouragingly at Gwynn. She smiled back, an openly brilliant smile and I was encouraged that perhaps our relationship wasn't in complete tatters.

My head was beginning to ache mildly; I'd never realized how much concentration would be needed to do this, to communicate with the spirits. The emotional drain was huge – all those people, all those voices calling out to be heard.

Lucas drew me tighter against his chest and caught my chin, lifting my face to his. "Are you alright?" he asked huskily.

"I want to do this, Lucas. It's something I can repay, for everything you've given me."

"You haven't eaten in a while. Do you want anything?" They were all aware of my human weaknesses.

"No. I'm thirsty though, I would like a drink."

Marianne flew from her chair and an instant later was at my side, a can of Coke in her hand. I accepted it gratefully, sipping the icy cold liquid and enjoying the coolness on my throat. Marianne had quickly discovered Coca Cola was my addiction – I loved the stuff.

The tension in the room was tangible, everyone seemed hopeful of a message from their own loved ones. Taking another sip of soda I closed my eyes, searching the voices again. I picked out the loudest strand, recognizing a voice which was exceptionally dominant and determined that I listen. I looked directly at Ben and he blanched visibly, growing paler than normal. "Ben, your brother Galen is speaking. He wants me to tell you how apologetic he is for what your father asked you to do. He wishes he could have gone in your place, but he was destined for the church and you were always

stronger and braver than he was. When you were sent—" My eyes grew wide when I heard Galen's next words, struggling to believe what he'd said. "—to the Crusades, he prayed for your safety day and night. He knew you were a strong and noble knight and prayed to God for your safe deliverance from the holy war against the... Saracens?" The word was unfamiliar and I looked to Ben, seeking confirmation.

"The Muslims," he explained quietly. "That's what we called them in 1189, when we set out for the Holy Land under King Richard's leadership, to fight Saladin."

It took a minute to recover my composure. If what Ben and his brother said was true, the man sitting opposite me was born nearly nine hundred years ago. Shaking my head in disbelief I focused on his brother. "He wants you to know he's watched you over the years and he was wrong about vampires. He told you they were Satan's spawn, condemned by God and destined to walk the depths of Hell for all eternity. He knows now that was wrong. He understands you were created without your consent, that when you were injured and nearly killed in the Siege of Acre, you were in no position to stop... Bathbesa from taking you. He understands you intrigued her, a Christian knight in a foreign world, and he's grateful she cared for you when the transformation was complete." I frowned, mentally asking Galen to repeat his words. "Galen believes you have truly proven your worth, and believes God loves you and there is promise of an afterlife." The image faded and I frowned, uncertain if what I'd been asked to repeat made sense. It obviously made perfect sense to Ben – he'd leaned forward, hands clasped together in front of his face as if he was praying. Rowena rubbed his back and when she looked up at me, flashed a grateful smile that was stunningly beautiful in its intensity.

Lucas sensed my confusion and leaned forward to whisper against my ear. "Vampires throughout history have been unwavering in our belief that we have no soul. We are under the impression we are destined to wander through eternity, with no hope of heaven or an afterlife. What you have just shared with Ben has given him hope there is something else for us."

"Oh," I breathed.

"Striker, your Mom is with me," I grinned, "and about a dozen of your siblings." Striker returned the grin, his eyes lighting up and for the first time since we'd met he seemed completely friendly. "Your Mom's... *yelling* at me. She's asking why you insist on being known by your surname, when you have such a lovely given name, and don't you know how proud you should be? You were named after your Great-Granddaddy and he was responsible for bringing the family to America from Norway, and you should be... damned proud of your background, you fool boy." I chewed my lip, realizing that in repeating his mother's words, I was actually beginning to mimic her articulation. When she told me his given name, I couldn't stop a giggle escaping from my lips, although I chose not to repeat it aloud. Did the others know he'd been saddled with such an unfortunate name? He certainly didn't look like a *Hiram*.

"What?" *Hiram* growled suspiciously. Had he guessed what his mother had told me?

"Nothing." I concentrated on the woman whose rapid speech made my head spin. She said something so quickly, I didn't understand and had to ask her to repeat it. When she did, I burst into laughter, taking a full minute to recover my composure.

"What did she say?" Striker demanded.

"She says you won't take any notice, but she's watched you... hunt, sees you taking on full-grown grizzlies. She knows you're

immortal and all, but asks you to please stop giving your poor Momma kittens and maybe go after something a little less ferocious." I giggled again before I could finish relaying the message. "She wonders if you might consider hunting deer... or squirrels."

The room erupted in laughter, Striker included. "Ate enough god-damn squirrels when I was a kid, growing up in Arkansas," he muttered. He winked at me and I knew there was no way a man like him would hunt anything as mundane as a squirrel. I just hoped his Mom wasn't going to nag if he ignored her advice.

Sipping the soda, I picked through the voices again. Finding the one I sought, I listened cautiously for a minute or two. I'd been watching Acenith from the corner of my eye; caught the apprehension in her eyes. She seemed almost frightened of the memories I might have for her. I wasn't sure why and didn't want to hurt her by revealing anything upsetting. "Acenith, your family is here with me." I couldn't place the clothing they wore; only that it was old, possibly even medieval. "They are sorry you were treated so badly. They didn't understand your ability, your capacity to help people with medicinal herbs and the placing of your hands to soothe and calm those who were in poor health. Witchcraft was feared and they believed you were a witch. They were frightened both for you, and of you." Acenith watched me intently, her fingers gripped so tightly together I could see every tendon. "They understand now that your ability was innocuous and they're apologizing for the trials you were put through."

Acenith was trembling; she gripped her arms around her waist as if trying to hold herself together. Behind her, Ripley placed his hands on her shoulders and Rowena stood up hurriedly, walking across to wrap her arms around her friend.

"Your mother, Odette, is grateful Ripley had already noticed you and was aware of your talents. They thank the Lord every day that he was there to save you and help you escape when you were accused of witchcraft and sentenced to... trial by ordeal?"

"A barbaric practice," Ripley spat. "Medieval nonsense."

Inhaling a deep breath, I listened to Acenith's mother again. Behind her was a man who'd identified himself as Acenith's father, Alexandre, and Acenith's sister stood beside them. "Your sister... Marguerite," I glanced at Acenith, tears filling my eyes and running slowly down my cheeks, "your sister begs your forgiveness for accusing you of witchcraft. She never stopped loving you."

"Can they hear me?" Acenith sobbed, her turmoil evident.

I shook my head. "I'm not sure." I spoke to her family for a few seconds, trying to get a handle on what could and couldn't be done with this strange ability. "They can't hear you, but I can pass on your message."

Acenith closed her eyes for a long moment, as if physically drawing courage before she spoke. "Tell Marguerite she is forgiven. I love her, and she is forgiven."

I repeated her words to Marguerite, watching the young woman drop to her knees, sobbing hysterically.

"Did you tell her?" Acenith demanded.

"Yes." I squeezed my eyes shut, overwhelmed by the pain Acenith and her family had suffered. Once again the spirit forms disappeared into a grey haze and I sighed heavily, rubbing my temples to ease the sudden ache.

"I think you've had enough," Lucas warned.

"Not yet." The voices were diminishing, although a number of people still occupied my head. It was easier to locate the strands and I selected one, listening to the voice. I didn't have to close my

eyes, could do this with less concentration. "Ripley, I have your mother, Lady Caroline with me. She has the most beautiful grey eyes. She wants to thank Lucas for saving you." I lifted my gaze to Lucas, found he was watching me curiously. "Ripley's mother knew he was beginning to lose hope after so long trailing through the world with no sense of family, no sense of hope after becoming a vampire. He'd lost everyone he'd ever loved and she knew you would be Ripley's salvation, that you would accept him and offer him the support and love he needed. She thanks you for saving her son." I turned back to Ripley, catching the open inquisitiveness in his gaze. I wondered if he could read my mind as I did this, after he'd had so much trouble getting into my head.

"Yes, I can hear them," Ripley confirmed, glancing around at his friends. "It's the first time I've gotten a clear voice from Miss Duncan's head. I can hear our families, as she hears them. I can hear my mother speaking, as clearly as if she were standing in the room with me." He brought his gaze to me, his expression apologetic. "I was beginning to believe you were schizophrenic – your head seemed to be the equivalent of Grand Central Station in rush hour. So many voices, no way of searching your mind for your own thoughts amongst so much traffic. Now I can understand why. Please, go on."

"She wants you to know how much she and your father loved you. She knew they were going to die; after being accused of treason, you were all going to the gallows. When they heard you'd died in prison, she thought her heart had broken. It was only after —" I swallowed deeply. "After they'd been executed, they discovered Wallace had saved you, by creating you as a vampire within your cell. He made it seem as though you had died of natural causes, before the guards had the opportunity to execute you. Wallace

arranged for your body to be transported away from the prison and buried, allowing him to oversee your rising three days later.”

Ripley nodded. “Lord Stuyvesant saved my life that night.”

“Your mother and father couldn't be prouder of the man you've become, and what you've worked so hard to achieve. They're pleased with your decision to try and control your bloodlust, your willingness to make your existence a better thing.” The vision slowly faded and I leaned against Lucas's chest, my head aching in earnest. This was proving to be a drain, so much emotion and so many voices.

“Miss Duncan.” When Ripley spoke, his voice was filled with genuine emotion. “*Charlotte*. Thank you. I don't believe I can ever repay you for what you've shared with me this evening.”

I smiled. “You're welcome.”

“Charlotte?”

I turned to William, saw discomfort etched into his striking features, and he let his eyes flicker down to Katie before returning his gaze to mine. “I think I would prefer not to hear any memories.”

“Of course. But any time, if you should change your mind.”

He smiled grimly, the muscle in his jaw clenched. I couldn't imagine why he didn't want to contact his family, although if he'd only been a vampire for a short period, maybe they were still alive. Which still didn't explain why Katie was here with him. If a four-year-old child was being kept in the loop, what had happened to other members of his family? I decided to listen for his ancestors later, see if they were available to me, but for now, I was happy to abide by his wishes.

Lucas pressed a gentle kiss against my neck and I smiled up at him. Nothing would be a surprise here. I already knew what to expect, having met these particular spirits more than once in recent

weeks. I pulled the strand forward and saw their faces clearly in my mind. Lucas resembled his father, with the same dark hair and broad shoulders. "Your parents, Patrick and Mary are here, they're happy to have the opportunity to talk to me and they... like me, and think you and I are two halves that make a whole. They're very proud of the man you've become, and they were pleased Florien created you because it meant one member of the Tine family survived. They're all happy and together in the afterlife. Margaret apologizes for getting sick in the first place... she feels guilty because she brought the illness into your home. I don't think she understands that it was something she had no control over." I smiled. "I'll have to talk to her about it."

Lucas drew me closer, wrapping me in his arms and I gazed into his eyes. "And Charlotte is here, she wishes you could have stayed with her. She wants you to know she enjoyed a happy life, she married, and had four children, three boys and one girl, but she never forgot about you." I paused for a moment, watching surprise blossom in his eyes. "She's happy that you found me, and wishes us a very happy future together." I raised my hand to touch his cheek, brushing my fingers across his jaw. "She sends you her love, and she wants you to know that she lived a very long, very happy life."

The image faded and there was a stunned silence for a minute. Lucas continued to gaze at me, his focus intense.

Striker was the first to speak. "So I'm confused. What was the part about Charlotte? Who's Charlotte?"

Lost in my own thoughts, I was too drained to speak and it was Lucas who answered Striker's question.

"Charlotte was my fiancée, before my creation. When I met *this* Charlotte," he touched my cheek with exquisite gentleness, "I thought perhaps her sharing the same name was destiny in some

way. Now I'm quite sure of it." He looked down at me, his eyes softening. "How long have you known?"

"For the past few weeks," I admitted. "She's come to me quite a lot, it started when I moved into the cottage, but since I've been here, she's been talking to me regularly."

"Charlotte," Ben spoke. I hadn't heard movement, but he'd knelt beside us, taking my hands in his. "From every one of us, thank you for the gift you have given us. We have lived so long without our families; to have them express their thoughts through you is probably the most extraordinary gift we have ever received. On behalf of us all, I thank you."

CHAPTER 13

CRAVINGS

After my revelations everyone discussed the shared memories my visions inspired. I stayed silent, lying against Lucas's chest with immense satisfaction and extreme tiredness coursing through my body in equal proportions. Lucas held me close and I worried he might be uncomfortable when he'd been close to me for such an extended period, but when I attempted to wriggle away he kept me against him with an iron grip.

"I'm coping my Charlotte," he whispered against my ear, his cool breath making my skin break out in delicious goose bumps.

Shortly afterwards my stomach grumbled loud enough for everyone to hear. Rowena vanished into the kitchen and delicious smells started wafting through to the living room a short time later. My mouth was watering long before the food arrived, and by the time Rowena appeared and handed me the tray, I was ravenous. She'd fried a steak and there was a pile of freshly steamed vegetables on the plate along with a baked potato. I wolfed it down swiftly, despite the potato being undercooked and the steak probably a bit well done. Rowena was doing her best to cook and I wouldn't dream of hurting her feelings.

"We obviously aren't feeding the human often enough," Striker observed. "Maybe I should go and hunt up a whole cow for her."

I screwed up my nose in revulsion. "Thanks, Striker, but I'm full. If you're peckish though, why don't you go rustle up a squirrel?"

There was a moment of stunned silence before everyone burst into laughter. Striker looked non-plussed for a few seconds more, then grinned.

"It seems Charlotte has quite the sense of humor when her health is improved," Ben announced.

Marianne sped from the room and came back in seconds, handing me another can of Coke. I accepted it appreciatively, taking a long swig.

"You know, out of all the things we give up when we become vampire, that's one thing I wish I could taste again," William admitted quietly, eyeing the soda.

I was struggling to comprehend the eating thing. Ben had explained vampires didn't eat or drink normal food and fluids. They could swallow them down at a push, but there was no appeal. The only time they ate food was to keep their secret from being discovered and even then, they literally choked up whatever they'd eaten later as none of the normal human digestive tract worked after creation. While they viewed my love of human food as something to reminisce over, treating my need for nourishment with doting indulgence, I couldn't understand how drinking blood would appeal to anyone. But to each their own. I sucked Coke through the straw happily and snuggled against Lucas.

I was surprised how calm I was. I was sitting in a room filled with vampires and most people would be running for the hills right now, yet I felt no fear, no concern. Maybe I *was* insane.

From the corner of my eye I saw Ripley shake his head imperceptibly and I flushed. Of course – he was reading my mind. It seemed now he'd gotten inside my head he could do so more easily and that would take some getting used to. Some things weren't stuff I wanted anyone to know – my feelings for Lucas being one of them. I peeked at Ripley and a tiny smile played on his lips. Damn. I needed to get my thoughts under control when Ripley was around and that would be... problematic. Like most people, my mind tended to wander and thoughts popped up at any given minute of the day – it was human nature. Trying to control what I thought would be difficult.

I listened to the casual discussion around me, thinking they all seemed so normal. Striker and William were playing poker at the kitchen counter and Marianne was working on a laptop, her brow furrowed in concentration. Rowena was sitting on the floor in front of the couch, brushing her fingers through sleeping Katie's hair.

Gwynn was sitting at the piano playing soft tunes and Acenith sat beside Ripley on the couch, flicking through a magazine, her legs crossed delicately at the knee. Ripley was motionless, his focus on the windows overlooking the river and I wondered what he might be thinking about. I'd never seen people sit so perfectly still as they did; when they weren't doing something they resembled statues. Ben was sitting in an armchair, reading a book and occasionally adding something to the conversation which ebbed and flowed sporadically.

I woke abruptly when Lucas lifted me into his arms. I'd been so relaxed I hadn't realized I'd fallen asleep. "Time for bed, Charlotte," he murmured quietly against my hair.

He carried me upstairs, along the hall we'd passed through hours ago. I heard the others calling goodnight and called back to them. I

didn't have my bearings in this huge house, but I was certain he'd passed the blue room I'd been sleeping in. "Where are we going?"

"Jerome is of the opinion you have recovered enough to no longer need a hospital bed. I'm taking you to your new room." He strode along a wide hallway and I speculated over how big this house was. I'd only seen it from the front when we came up from the river and it looked big then, but appearances could be deceiving. From the little I'd seen even today, it was vast. Lucas turned and walked down yet another hall and coming to a door at the end he pushed it open, still cradling me in his arms. "This is it."

It was still a large room, but cozier than the others I'd seen. When my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness I noticed a large window looking out over the forest surrounding the house. The room was decorated with elegantly carved oak furniture, the bed draped in luxurious red silk with a draped canopy overhead. It was covered in an enticingly thick quilt and generously fluffy pillows graced the headboard. Every amenity was available; widescreen TV, a DVD player, an iPod with a docking station. The room looked lived in, and I mentioned this to Lucas.

"It's my room." He saw me about to argue and continued. "I will share a room with Ripley while you recover. I want you to be comfortable and I will accept no argument to the contrary." He pulled back the quilt and sheet masterfully with one hand, settling me down on the bed.

He sat beside me and I grinned sheepishly. "I need to brush my teeth."

A sigh. "Of course you do." Lucas picked me up again, carrying me carefully down the hallway and into a sumptuous bathroom. "Do you need any help?" he queried.

"Uh, no. I can handle this on my own."

"I'll wait outside." He closed the door silently and I stared at my reflection in the mirror. The haunted look was fading, replaced with an expression that seemed almost... blissful. My belongings had been moved in here and I picked up my toothbrush, brushed my teeth, and pulled the hairbrush through my hair. Returning to my reflection in the mirror, I sighed. I was never going to be gorgeous like them. I was plain. Boring, even. A trickle of doubt crept into my mind. What on earth would make Lucas *want* me?

I heard a soft knock at the door. "Is everything alright?"

I poked my tongue out at my reflection. "You can come in."

Lucas pushed open the door and stepped inside. "Ready now?"

Seeing my nod of agreement he lifted me into his arms again. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I kissed his cheek softly.

"What was that for?" he asked huskily and the intoxicating scent of his breath washed over me.

"Just because you're you and I'm grateful you accept me for me."

He shook his head a little, eyebrows lifting in amusement. "Of course I accept you. How could I not? You are the most wonderful thing in my existence."

I was thoughtful when he put me down on the bed again, allowing him to tuck me in before I spoke. "I don't understand."

"Understand what?" He sat beside me, his eyes intense.

"I don't understand why you'd be interested in me. I'm nothing special."

He leaned towards me, his face only inches from mine. "Charlotte, you are beautiful. Why can't you see that? You are my whole world now. There is nothing that I would not do for you." He kissed me and my warm lips molded to his cooler ones. Familiar tingling zapped through my body as desire smoldered through my entire being, centering in a point low in my groin. Snaking my arms

up to his head I ran my fingers through his silky dark hair, pulling him closer and pressing deeper into the kiss. He captured my hands in his, extricating them before pushing me away gently. "Easy, my love."

I pouted. "I don't want you to stop kissing me."

Another sigh greeted this announcement. "I don't want to stop kissing you either. Is that what you think? That I don't want this as much as you do?"

I nodded, feeling ridiculous about my insecurities but unable to stop them. He raised one eyebrow mockingly. "How can you think I don't want to keep kissing you? It's all I think of. The feel of your skin against mine, the feel of your lips on my own. But I cannot afford to lose concentration. My control when it comes to you is tenuous at best. Admittedly it is getting a little easier, having spent so much time with you in the past three weeks – it seems I am getting used to your aroma and the craving is easier to manage. That's all I'm doing though – managing it. I haven't mastered it."

"Do you think you ever will?"

He studied me for a minute. "I don't know," he admitted wearily. "Our emotions... are different to yours. More acute. We live so long with no change in our existence. When something comes along that turns our world upside down," he raised his hand and rubbed his fingers against my cheek, "it's harder to control, because the emotions are so overwhelming."

We sat in silence, staring into each other's eyes before Lucas spoke again. "Don't you want to know what my Christmas gift is?"

"The thought crossed my mind, then I realized all those gifts came from you." I smiled. The memory of the paints, the books, my car – only Lucas could know my favorite things so completely. "I've no doubt your suggestions were behind all the gifts I received."

Lucas smiled warmly. "You are easy to read, I will admit that." He reached into the pocket of his trousers and retrieved a small black velvet box which he held on the open palm of his hand. "They were only gifts I could recommend the others give you. This is a gift from me, a gift from my heart."

He extended his palm towards me and I stared at the box wordlessly. Looking up, I saw an array of emotions flickering in Lucas' blue eyes. I lifted the box hesitantly and opened it. Nestled against the black velvet was a gold ring, so delicate it took my breath away. The gold was twisted into a plaited design, the ends coming together to create a simple filigree heart.

"Lucas, it's beautiful." I fingered the gold, so strong and sturdy, yet looking impossibly fragile in this elegant ring.

Lucas took the box, removing the ring and lifted my right hand to place it on my ring finger. "It was my grandmother's. She wore this when she married my grandfather in the eighteen century. I know we haven't known each other long – in human years, the briefest of times. But I want you to have this, to wear and remember that wherever you go, whatever you choose to do in your life, you will always have my heart. I will never stop you from doing what you want to do. I will never stop you from leaving, if you choose to do so. I only want what makes you happy, which in turn will make me happy."

I stared at the delicate ring, watching the way the bedside lamp caught the gold, glancing across it so it shimmered. I'd never seen anything so stunning and couldn't believe he wanted to give it to me. It seemed like a promise of a future together and I knew in my heart this was what I wanted. This is what my endless travelling for the past two years had been bringing me to. I was home.

When I looked up I knew my feelings were reflected in my eyes. It was simple to say the words, effortless to say what my heart was bursting with. I reached up to touch his face and he shut his eyes. When I ran my fingers down the side of his face he captured my hand and kissed my fingers.

“I love you.”

His eyes snapped open and he gazed at me for the longest time, sheer delight in his expression as he absorbed those three words.

“As I do you, my Charlotte. I love you. You will have my heart for an eternity and beyond.” He leaned forward, cupping my face between his hands and lowered his lips to mine again with a cool hard pressure which made my head spin. I pressed my palms against his chest, savoring the hard muscle concealed beneath the thin cotton shirt. I wanted more, needed to feel him, hold him and let him make love to me. The material between us was too much and it frustrated. I ran my tongue across the seam of his lips and he groaned, giving me the opportunity to slip my tongue into his mouth. For a few brief seconds he allowed this exploration and I savored every facet, running my tongue over his teeth as my hands wandered down to rub tentatively across his broad chest and lower to his abdomen. I had no idea what I was doing but I knew I wanted him, all of him. He inhaled sharply and pulled away, catching my arms to shove me away.

In a split-second he was by the large window, wrenching it open. His eyes were wild and I was horrified when I noticed his fangs had extended, pressing sharply against his lower lip. “Charlotte, you are driving me out of my mind,” he snarled. He rubbed his hands over his face harshly and took a deep breath of the frosty air as I slumped back against the pillows, my heart pumping violently. I'd pushed too far and immediately swore to myself that I wouldn't put

him under this level of duress again. I had to learn to control my responses, as he was learning to control his primal response to my blood.

"I'm sorry, Lucas. I didn't mean to do that," I offered contritely.

He stood with his back to me, hands clutching the open window frame and took another deep breath of the icy cold air. I shivered a little, my thin negligee and robe inappropriate for the rush of arctic air flowing into the room. I pulled the quilt higher so it covered my shoulders and waited in silence for him to regain control.

He dropped one hand from the window frame and yanked it roughly through his hair, emitting a string of curses that made me cringe. I saw him take more deep breaths; one, two, and then three, before he dropped his other hand from the frame and his shoulders slumped. It was another full minute before he turned to face me and distress was apparent in his eyes, although I was relieved to see his fangs had retracted. "It is I who should apologize, Charlotte. I told you I was learning to manage my craving, but it seems I was ridiculously overconfident. I cope when we are sitting together but... kissing you is a different matter entirely." He dropped his gaze, shamefaced and I held my hand out, silently willing him to come back to the bed. He hesitated, his long thick eyelashes concealing his eyes from me.

"*Please.*" I didn't know what to do, what to say to make this better.

With a groan, he walked to the bed and dropped down on the edge, keeping his gaze averted from mine.

"Explain it to me. What happens when we kiss? I need to understand," I requested quietly.

He sighed unhappily, running his hand through his dark hair so it became even more disheveled. "I can hear your heart beating,

pumping your blood around your body. It's normal for me to hear that – but when I kiss you your heartbeat increases in tempo and the sound of your blood travelling through your veins is so much louder... far more tempting." He dropped his head into his hands, his remorse overwhelming. "I hear your pulse beating in your throat and I'm terrified of losing control."

It took maybe a full thirty seconds before I could respond. "I trust you, Lucas. I know you can manage this."

He spoke through gritted teeth. "You *shouldn't* trust me, Charlotte! You know what I am; you know what I am capable of!" He wrenched away, standing up and starting to pace backwards and forwards across the room, his movement jerky with anger he was barely able to suppress. "This is an impossible situation! I should have stayed far away from you – it was the *right* thing to do."

"No!" The thought of being without him was the worst thing I could imagine. Tears stung my eyes and ran down my cheeks and I swiped at them unhappily. The idea of losing what I'd only found a few weeks ago was unthinkable.

Lucas was repentant immediately and slumped back onto the bed, pulling me into his arms. He used the pads of his thumbs to wipe the tears from my cheeks and settled back against the bed head, settling me against his chest. I cried until there were no tears left, the front of his shirt soaked. He soothed me with soft words, rubbing my back in a reassuring gesture.

When I began to calm, he shuffled down on the bed and settled my head against his chest, the quilt providing a protective barrier between us.

"You won't leave me, will you?" I whispered hoarsely. "Promise me. I'm begging you, don't leave me." It didn't matter if I sounded pathetic. I didn't care if I was needy and desperate. The idea of

trying to continue without him was inconceivable and I didn't care who knew it.

He ran his fingers through my hair, pushing curls away from my tear-ravaged face. "I won't leave you," he finally agreed solemnly. "I promise."

I wanted to believe him, knew he meant what he said. But I could hear the despair in his voice.

CHAPTER 14

COOKING IOI

The following morning I woke suddenly, the events of the previous night coming into sharp focus. My heart jolted painfully until I realized Lucas was still lying with me and my cheek was cool where it lay against his chest.

Lucas tightened his arms around me and I savored knowing he'd slept beside me all night, albeit with a quilt between us.

"Good morning," he murmured against my hair, his voice deep in the early morning silence.

Raising my head to look into his handsome face I smiled bashfully. He looked calm now, his lips curled into a half-smile. "Hi," I muttered.

"How did you sleep?"

"Great." Lucas released his grip as I rolled onto my back cautiously, the ache from my healing ribs making my breath catch. It was the first time I'd slept on my side since the attack and my ribs were apparently unhappy with this turn of events. "How about you?"

He stared for a few seconds and then grinned, eyes filled with unconcealed amusement.

"What?" I demanded grumpily.

Lucas sat up and rolled his eyes. "I'm a vampire, Charlotte. I don't require sleep."

There was an excellent chance my mouth had dropped open. "You don't sleep?"

He shook his head and smiled wryly.

"Why not?" I demanded. "Vampires are supposed to be unconscious through the day."

"You've seen me in the daytime, more than once," he pointed out calmly.

"Then you must sleep at night," I countered. Everyone needed to sleep, it was what kept us functioning, able to think – without sleep, we couldn't survive.

"We're not human, Charlotte." He slipped off the bed and stood up, turning to face me while he straightened his shirt. "I thought you realized by now. When you asked me to stay with you in the other room, I assumed you knew I had no need to sleep. Humans sleep to replenish and recharge the body – vampires don't have that requirement. Our bodies work differently to humans."

"Why do you all have bedrooms then?"

His eyes twinkled. "There are other things to do in bed besides sleep."

Once again, he'd managed to astound me. I realized he enjoyed this constant element of surprise he had over me and I screwed my nose up at him, even as I blushed crimson. Although it was a childish response on my part he laughed and leaned over to kiss me, a fleeting brush of his lips against my own.

My stomach grumbled ominously and he chuckled. "You are so human. Hungry *again*?"

I nodded and eased the quilt from my legs, preparing to get out of bed. Before I'd managed to push the covers halfway down, Lucas

was lifting me up in his arms.

"I really think I could walk," I grumbled as he flipped open the door handle and headed towards the stairs. I was still feeling a little tender about my human stupidity.

Lucas inhaled a deep breath against the soft skin of my neck and I shivered. "And miss this?" he whispered. "I don't think so."

He stopped at the bathroom and dropped me onto my feet. "Call when you are ready." He seemed smug; obviously pleased he'd remembered my other human requirements this morning. I completed my morning toiletries with little delay, although I wasted some time trying to tame my wild curls into something vaguely decent. When I'd given up, I stepped slowly to the door and opened it. Lucas was waiting for me, leaning against the wall and lifted me easily into his arms again.

We descended the stairs and he carried me to the couch, dropping me down onto it. The room was quiet this morning with nobody to be seen.

"Where is everyone?"

Lucas spent a moment listening before he answered. "Marianne is talking to Gwynn upstairs. William is in the library. Striker is tinkering with your car again. Acenith and Ripley left a few minutes ago to hunt and Rowena said she was going into town to pick up supplies. And I would assume given you are so much better and his nursing duties are no longer required, Ben has gone to work.

He'd managed to astound me again and I honestly didn't think I would ever get used to this. "What does Ben do?"

"Social worker. He provides guidance to disadvantaged teens in Billings."

"A vampire social worker?"

Lucas smiled. "We all need something to fill in our endless time, Charlotte. Ben enjoys working with teenagers; he provides them with advice and assistance, finds places for them to live if they are homeless."

"You all have jobs?" The concept was a strange one, something else to comprehend.

"We have to appear ordinary, Charlotte. If we were to sit around and do nothing, people would wonder how we survived financially." He smiled ruefully. "We are tax-paying citizens and we all hold down jobs, at one stage or another."

I didn't get a chance to respond because my stomach did it for me, growling at an indecently loud level.

"You are hungry," Lucas stated the obvious. "What would you like for breakfast?"

I eyed him suspiciously. "Do you even know how to make breakfast?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "I have degrees in everything from philosophy to genetics – I'm sure I can figure out something."

I couldn't help rolling my eyes. "Philosophy and genetics have such a lot to do with cooking." I held up my arms, knowing it was useless to suggest walking anywhere. "Why don't you take me through to the kitchen and I'll give you a cooking lesson?"

Lucas did as I requested, settling me at the small breakfast nook and then he eyed me confidently, hands resting lightly on the countertop. "What would you like?"

I reluctantly drew my eyes away from the neck of his shirt, where I could see a glimpse of pale smooth skin and a smattering of dark hair. The man's entire body was a distraction. "How about we start with something simple? Have you ever made toast?"

"No. But I'm always willing to learn."

He located a toaster in one of the many cabinets and put slices of bread in it, then I watched him put a pot of coffee on. "Why do you even have a kitchen?"

Lucas shrugged, concentrating on spooning coffee into the machine. "It came with the house and besides, it would look odd if humans visited and we didn't have one."

"Do you get human visitors?"

"Of course. To integrate successfully into the human world we become associated with people. It's impossible not to." He flicked on the coffee machine and watched attentively as water began to drip through the filter.

It would explain how he could make coffee; he must have honed some basic skills so people would assume he was a normal man. Despite his obvious skills with a coffee maker, it seemed completely bizarre to be teaching a grown man how to make toast, one of the simplest things in the world. *Not a man*, I mentally reminded myself. *A vampire.*

This internal dialogue reminded me of another subject I wanted to discuss. "Is Katie really William's sister? She's human, isn't she?"

Lucas placed the toast on a plate and started to butter it carefully. He glanced up at me, his gaze curious. "Have you had contact with William's family?"

"No, I haven't tried. I wondered if they were still alive, given Katie can only be about four or five at most."

He turned back to the toast. "Katie is completely human and no, she's not William's sister. It's a cover story we agreed on to make it easier for Katie to understand. She would struggle with the reality. They are related, but William was created during the Vietnam War. He'd left a wife and child behind in the States when he went overseas to fight, and he was attacked by a vampire. When the

change was complete, William was alone, with no idea of what had happened to him. Usually the vampire responsible for creating the youngling stays by their side and teaches them our ways.”

“I assume that didn't happen with William?”

Lucas shook his head. “William found himself alone, deep within the Vietnam jungle. Without guidance, he was terrified and suffering from the extreme thirst which assaults us when we first rise.”

I sensed something terrible had happened and waited silently for Lucas to continue. He pushed the plate away, turning to the coffee pot and retrieving a mug from an overhead cabinet.

“Unfortunately, William killed indiscriminately when he first awoke. He stumbled through the jungle, coming across his own platoon, and slaughtered many of them before his thirst was sated. Horrified by what he'd done, William didn't care what happened to him. He stayed within the jungle for many months, slaughtering both Viet Cong and American military alike. By the time he began to gain some control over himself, finding a sense of the man he had once been, he believed he was beyond redemption.”

Lucas placed the buttered toast and mug of coffee on the table and sat down.

“What happened?” I questioned, the desire for breakfast forgotten. The knowledge of what happened to William; the agony he must have endured when he discovered what he'd done was breathtaking. How did he live with himself? How did he function each day with those memories?

“William had been listed as MIA for months without his knowledge. When he walked into a platoon camp he'd stumbled across and tried to confess to what happened, the Military Police wouldn't listen. They believed he'd been taken as a prisoner of war and tortured – and the stress had caused a psychotic episode. No

matter what he said, how many times he tried to make them believe him, they wouldn't. Instead he was classified as mentally ill and shipped back to the United States where he stayed in a military hospital for a number of months."

"How did he survive in a hospital? What about the need for blood?" The thought of William in a hospital surrounded by injured servicemen was horrifying. They would be easy pickings for a vampire and although I was curious about what Lucas would reveal, part of me cringed over the revelations and didn't want to know what happened.

Lucas linked his fingers together on the table. "I don't believe even William himself could answer how he managed to remain there without killing anyone. He relied on stealing from the hospital's blood bank to survive, and used sheer willpower to keep his desire for blood to a minimum."

"He said last night he didn't have his desire for blood under control," I pointed out quietly.

"He struggles with the need for blood, every day," Lucas admitted. "William battles a two-fold war, not only wanting human blood, but he suffers from PTSD since Vietnam. Everyday occurrences can trigger a reaction which he struggles to control and his response is generally violent and something else to add to his guilt."

"Not surprising," I muttered. How could he not suffer from stress after what he'd done? Killing your own compatriots in a war situation must be unspeakable to recall. "Does he still kill people?"

Lucas maintained eye contact with me, swallowing nervously before he spoke again. "He hasn't killed a human since 1972."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

I didn't understand the dark expression on Lucas's face, the sheer magnitude of pain in his eyes. What could have happened that was worse than what he'd already told me? The answer occurred and even before I asked, I feared I knew the answer. "What happened to his wife and child?"

"William was released from hospital in early 1974. His wife had been visiting him in hospital and William had learned to control the bloodlust. He thought he could manage it when he returned home."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I chewed my lip harshly enough to make it sting. "He killed them?"

"Not exactly."

"I don't understand."

"Jolene, William's wife, was working as a secretary. William wasn't stable enough to find a job and was still coming to terms with his condition. She came home from work early one day and discovered William drinking from a bag of blood. He'd been stealing from the local hospital ever since he'd returned home to keep his thirst under control."

"What happened?"

"Jolene was, quite naturally, horrified by what she saw. You can imagine what was going through her head – to come home and find her husband drinking human blood, his fangs extended. She fled before he could stop her, before he could try and explain."

"He hadn't told her what he'd become?"

Lucas threw me a disbelieving look. "Do you imagine she could have understood, even if he'd attempted to explain?"

"I did," I countered.

"You are the exception to the rule, Charlotte." He lifted my hand and kissed my knuckles. "I imagine Jolene couldn't believe what she was seeing when she caught William drinking blood and she took off."

William waited for her to return home, contacting her parents, family, and friends – anyone he could think of to ask if they'd seen her. Hours later, the police arrived to give him the bad news. Jolene had been speeding in her haste to escape from William and lost control of her vehicle, she crashed off a bridge near their home and she and their son both drowned in the river.”

Tears brimmed against my eyelashes. “How did he survive such a tragedy?”

The shrug he gave me said everything and nothing. “How do any of us survive a tragedy? For a long time, William didn't want to survive, didn't understand how he could. Despite everything he adored Jolene and his son and I'm quite certain he would never have physically hurt them. He wasn't given the chance to find out however and for many years afterwards he wandered aimlessly around the world, searching for salvation, searching for peace. He only started to believe in himself again when he met Gwynn. She has gradually put the pieces of William back together, made him whole, and created the man you see today. He is still filled with self-doubt and recrimination, but he's functioning and with Gwynn's assistance he has found a peace he hasn't known for many years.”

“So how does Katie fit in to the picture?”

“Ah, Katie. Where this conversation began in the first place.” He pushed the forgotten plate of toast towards me. “Eat, Charlotte.”

I picked up a slice of toast and diligently took a bite.

“William had avoided contact with his family after he lost Jolene and his son. He had realized – despite the lack of guidance from a mature vampire – that he would eventually have to leave because he couldn't hide the fact that he wasn't aging. For William, self-loathing made him leave his family and wander for many years. It was only after he'd settled with Gwynn that he expressed a desire to know

what had become of them. He tracked down descendants, discovered the majority of them had died and there were only a few left. His last remaining niece had problems with drugs and alcohol, had dabbled in prostitution to support her habits. She died about six months before William started looking for his family and Katie was already in the foster system – she was about eighteen months old at the time.”

“What happened?”

“William approached the Kiss, requested our assistance to retrieve Katie from the foster system and have her come live with Gwynn and him, here with us.” For a moment, Lucas's eyes clouded over and he looked deeply troubled. “As much as I wanted to give William his wish, it would be terribly dangerous for Katie to live with us permanently. Children are not mature enough to be constantly vigilant; they naturally fall over and scrape their knees and elbows, creating the risk of an accident because there is blood involved. I had to deny his request; it was a risk I couldn't take with a tiny child.”

“But she is here,” I pointed out, shivering inwardly at his casual mention of an 'accident'. An accident *was* falling over and scraping your knee, in my book. What he was eluding to was something else entirely, and the thought of little Katie being drained dry was too horrifying to contemplate.

Lucas shrugged. “William was deeply distressed, as we all were, at the idea of Katie growing up in foster homes. We all spent time pondering the various ways in which we could make her life better, without putting her at undue risk. Marianne came up with the solution. She is naturally outgoing, and has made friends here in Puckhaber. One of them is an elderly lady on the other side of town, Cecilia Field. She was willing to have Katie live with her on a

permanent basis. We provide for Katie financially and she is well loved and well looked after by Cecilia. We bring Katie over to visit with us regularly, for a few hours at a time, and of course, William and Gwynn visit with her."

"Does this Cecilia know what you are?"

Lucas looked distinctly uncomfortable for a moment and I had the feeling he was keeping something from me. "Yes, she does."

"Is she a vampire, too?"

Lucas shook his head. "No. She isn't vampire."

"But Katie knows? That you're vampires. How do you get a four year old to keep a secret like that?"

"Katie is bright for her age; she knows why it must remain secret." His voice was clipped. "It was the best option we had at the time and we take each day as it comes. It is all we can do for now." His blue eyes were blank, his entire expression neutral and I had the impression this was one subject he no longer wished to discuss.

I drained my coffee mug and sat back in the seat. "You did a good job of breakfast." I wanted time to consider what Lucas had told me, mull it over in private. I still had the impression he was keeping things from me. It seemed after learning he was a vampire, there was nothing else to withhold. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he had his reasons.

"I'm glad it met with your approval. Now," he leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table, "what would you like to do today?"

I studied him curiously. "I didn't think I'd be doing anything. You won't even let me walk around the house."

"You must be a little stir crazy by now. Would you like to go and sit outside, or we could go for a short drive somewhere?" He thought for a second. "We could go to the cottage, collect your art supplies and easel."

Mention of the cottage made me frown. "Damn."

Lucas lifted an eyebrow. "What's the matter?"

"I haven't thought about the cottage since I've been here. My rent will be late and Maude, Hank and Lonnie must be wondering where I am."

"The rent has been taken care of and I dropped in to see Hank. He thinks I've taken you skiing in Aspen as a Christmas gift."

"You paid my rent?" The knowledge made me uncomfortable – the rent was my responsibility.

"Yes, of course," Lucas replied quietly. "You weren't in any fit state to do anything about it."

"Hank knows about you and I?"

"He knows as much as he wants to know." He leaned across the table to place his hand over mine. "Unlike you, the majority of Puckhaber residents find me intimidating. They don't know what it is, but they recognize I'm different."

I lapsed into a fit of giggles and Lucas stared blankly at me. "I'm sorry, but if you think you're intimidating to everyone in Puckhaber Falls, you're sadly mistaken."

"Explain, please." Much to my amusement, he looked completely bewildered.

"Lucas, have you ever looked at yourself in a mirror?" Suddenly I remembered another myth. "Hang on a minute, a vampire can't—"

He sighed. Deeply. "Myth. What were you going to tell me?"

"Lucas, you're the most attractive man I've ever seen. No. Attractive isn't the right word." I thought for a few seconds, running through my vocabulary. "You are beyond beautiful. Devastatingly handsome – yes, that might just about cover it. I think every woman in Puckhaber Falls is in love with you."

He stared at me, a frown puckering his smooth forehead and drawing his eyebrows closer together. "You can't be serious."

I leaned forward to touch his face, smoothing out the frown creasing his perfect features. "I am serious. But it's okay, I'll pretend you're intimidating if you want."

It did the trick. He blinked and his features smoothed out as he looked into my eyes with amusement twinkling in his.

"Now, how about we do go for a drive to the cottage?"

CHAPTER 15

IMPRINTING

Lucas navigated the gravel drive cautiously, restricting his speed to a snail's pace to ensure my ribs weren't jarred.

Once on the highway it was a different story as he accelerated smoothly until the speedometer was reaching well over ninety. I gripped the seat edge and Lucas noticed, glancing across. "What is the matter?"

I was recalling the hair-raising drive the last time he took me to the cottage. "Do you always drive like a lunatic?"

He reached across and caught my hand in his. "I have never had an accident in over ninety years." His tone was soft, reproachful even, as if he couldn't believe I would suggest the possibility.

"I've no doubt that's true," I agreed. I couldn't dispute his driving skills; each turn and twist was navigated with perfect precision. "However, it's making me very nervous. Could you slow down a little? Please?"

He shook his head in disbelief. "Tell this girl I'm a vampire and she doesn't raise a sweat. Do a little bit of speed and she's ready to have a heart attack," he muttered. He eased the pressure on the accelerator and I watched the needle drop until we were cruising at a slightly more reasonable eighty.

“Thank you.” I squeezed his fingers gratefully and settled back in the seat, relaxing to some extent.

He slowed when we reached the gravel drive leading to the cottage, pulling to a gentle stop and making it around to my door before I'd had a chance to unclip the seatbelt. Lifting me into his arms, he strode up the steps, dropping me gently to my feet while he unlocked the door. He moved to pick me up again but this time I was prepared, holding up a hand in warning. “Lucas, I can walk; Jerome said the cast is fine to stand on. I think I can walk around here just fine, my place is barely the size of your kitchen.”

Not waiting for a response I slipped past him and limped into the living room. Glancing around in dismay, I wondered how I'd lived like this for so long. The room was sparse, only the tattered armchair from Goodwill and my precious easel breaking up the starkness. Wandering through the kitchen I ran my fingers across the countertop. Knowing Rowena and Marianne had been here made me shudder, it was horrible in comparison to their elaborate home.

I dragged a jar from the shelves, pulling out cash I routinely put aside for groceries each week. Counting through it there was eighty dollars and I hobbled back into the living room and retrieved my purse. It was exactly where I'd left it on the day I'd gone into the woods, and I rummaged for the envelope Hank had given me. Pulling the cash from the envelope, I bundled all the money together and offered it to Lucas. “This is what I owe you for rent.”

Lucas' eyes narrowed as he stared down at me and I realized how tall he actually was. I reached about five feet five inches – he was at least ten inches taller. “I'm not taking your money, Charlotte,” he announced.

“You can't pay my rent,” I argued. “That's my responsibility, not yours.”

I held the cash out but he continued to stare, his eyes filled with determination. "I'm not taking it."

"You have to," I insisted. "I'm not a charity case."

He folded his arms across his chest. "Nobody is suggesting you are. I won't take your money; this is completely ridiculous. I don't need the money." He glanced towards the door and I followed his gaze to the luxurious car parked outside. "Do you honestly think I need you to pay me back?" He surveyed the tiny room, his face expressionless. "Keep it and buy yourself some new furniture."

His words cut like a knife. I suddenly realized my current situation – staying with him – was tenuous at best. Eventually I would move back here and the thought was depressing.

It was abundantly clear I wasn't making headway – the tension in his jaw and the determined look in his eyes would bear no argument. With a sigh, I flung the crumpled notes into my purse and dropped it on the armchair before stomping through to the bedroom. Lucas followed, watching silently as I searched out extra clothing in the small wardrobe. He packed everything into a duffel bag he'd found in the living room.

The longer I stayed, the darker my mood grew. I'd been happy before we left Lucas's home, my mood buoyant and I silently analyzed what changed. Lucas suggesting I buy new furniture had been the catalyst; obviously he expected me to move back here – and why wouldn't he? We barely knew each other. Naturally he'd be assuming I would return to my own place, and then we'd get to know one another like normal couples. It was the obvious way to proceed so why was I so annoyed by the idea? The more I considered my situation, the more I began to understand what was happening. After the revelations to Lucas and the others I felt a connection to them, having opened up for the first time in years.

Living on my own again wasn't something I wanted to consider, the very idea left me lost and alone.

Lucas took the bag to the car, placing it in the trunk before he collected the box of painting equipment and my easel. When I was satisfied I had everything, I locked the door and stepped slowly down the stairs.

Lucas waited at the bottom and I didn't argue when he lifted me into his arms. Logic dictated a plaster cast and muddy ground wouldn't be good for one another. Lucas clipped my seatbelt and strode around to take his seat, starting the engine and gently pulling away from the cottage.

I focused on the side mirror, watching the cottage disappear behind the trees. Sorrow overwhelmed me – I missed my mom with a tangible ache in my chest and I bit my lip, trying to keep tears from falling. Lucas remained quiet as we pulled out onto the highway, allowing me to examine my mood in peace. Oblivious to what speed he was doing I slumped against the headrest, watching the diverse green shades pass the window in a blur. The heavy snowfalls from Christmas had thawed, leaving the ground heavy with moisture. Rain had fallen for most of the morning, the sky overhead steel gray and oppressive. It matched my disposition.

Perhaps I was suffering some form of post-traumatic stress – after all, only three weeks ago I'd nearly been murdered. Was I frightened to live on my own again? I dismissed the thought as hastily as it arrived. This wasn't fear; it was the cottage and what it represented. The thought of going back to that life, living on my own with no company, wandering aimlessly with no goals was depressing. It wasn't fear of what could happen to me on my own – it was fear of being alone and lonely. Something I'd accepted while thoughts of suicide dominated my every thought, now I wanted the

company of Lucas and his friends. I didn't want to go back to being alone; I feared it would be all too easy to fall back into thoughts of suicide.

"Charlotte."

I turned to find Lucas eyeing me, his brow puckered into a frown as he regarded me with undisguised concern. "Yes?"

"What are you worrying about? What's wrong?"

"It's nothing."

He glanced back to the road for a split second, before turning to me again. "Please, Charlotte. Tell me what's wrong. I'm going to come to all the wrong conclusions if you don't tell me."

It was my turn to frown. "Wrong conclusions?" I repeated the words blankly.

He ran his fingers through his hair. "You've been preoccupied since we arrived at the cottage and now you seem desperately worried about something."

"What?" Still sifting through my thoughts, I'd barely comprehended what he was saying.

He abruptly pulled the car to the side of the road, hitting the brake so hard that the car skidded along the gravel shoulder and I gripped the dashboard in genuine terror. He skillfully controlled the car until it came to rest and turned off the ignition, turning to face me.

"Charlotte. Please tell me if you want me to take you back to the cottage. If that's what you want, I will accept your wishes." His voice was calm but his eyes betrayed his emotions as he gazed at me.

I shook my head, suddenly grasping what he was saying. "I don't want to go back to the cottage. Why would you think that?"

His brow furrowed and his eyes filled with caution. "I got the distinct impression you were unhappy. I thought when you tried to

force me to take the money – and now when you look so sad – I assumed you were having second thoughts and were tidying up loose ends.” He stopped abruptly and clenched his hands on the steering wheel. “I completely understand if you decide against pursuing this, I have expected it. I keep waiting for when I say something that really does frighten you. It's not a matter of *if* it happens – it's *when*.”

I put one finger against his lips, stopping him. “Lucas, that won't happen. I love you.”

Lucas leaned back in the seat, closing his eyes with relief. “Then would you please explain why you are so unhappy?”

I wasn't sure how to explain. A glance at Lucas's troubled expression was enough to force an attempt. Thinking through my reactions, I tried to confirm exactly what prompted my suddenly glum mood. The sparseness of my cottage, the lack of homeliness – it was overwhelming when I compared it to the camaraderie amongst Lucas and his friends. I'd enjoyed the time I spent with them, watching their interactions with one another, the genuine warmth and affection they held for each other. The friendship they'd offered me, for the most part, was the first affection I'd accepted since Mom died and I craved it, more than I could ever have imagined.

Turning in the seat to face Lucas, I pulled a face when my ribs jarred. How could I explain this to him? Would he think I was pathetic? In my own head it sounded like the ramblings of a desperately lonely person. I didn't have an answer to my predicament though. Obviously I couldn't live with them forever and yet it was the closest thing I'd had to family in a long time. Ben and Rowena had been so welcoming, almost to the point of feeling like surrogate parents. This was a completely impossible state of affairs,

feeling at home with a group of vampires. Insane. Maybe *I* was suffering from PTSD and this was the way it was presenting – in a desire to latch on to something tangible, I'd decided to adopt vampires. Crazy.

“Charlotte, I swear I will get on my knees and beg...”

The struggle he was having with my silent ponderings was clear in Lucas's eyes. I smiled warmly, reaching over to caress his cheek. “It's alright. I'm just not sure how to explain how I feel without sounding like some kind of idiot.”

He captured my hand and held it tightly. “Try. Please.”

“I'm happy at your house. With all of you.”

“Yes?”

He searched my face and I knew he didn't understand. I sighed. “I'm really happy at your house. With you. Happier than I've been since my family were murdered. I feel... safe there.” I risked a glimpse into his eyes, frightened of what I would see. He continued gazing at me, no sign of concerns that I was losing my mind. “When I went back to the cottage I realized how sad and alone I've been. How much I've allowed my life to become a closed book. These past few weeks with you and your friends – I've felt alive again. When I started thinking about going back to the cottage, back to living by myself – it made me sad.”

Comprehension reached Lucas's eyes and his brow relaxed. “I see.”

“I'm sure I'll get over it,” I assured him hurriedly, blushing to the top of my hairline. “It's probably just a reaction to being alone for so long. Like a baby bird being born, I guess. I've cracked open the eggshell and imprinted on the first people I came across.”

He chuckled. “Interesting analogy. A baby bird that has imprinted on a Kiss of vampires.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead.

"I'm being pathetic."

"Your concerns are not pathetic, Charlotte," Lucas assured me quietly. "And you will never be asked to leave my home. I very much want you there, with me."

I glanced up, surprised by this admission. "Really?"

Lucas smiled warmly. "Really. Do you honestly think I want you to leave?" He brushed a kiss against my lips, pulling me into his arms as he whispered against my ear. "I have fallen in love with you, Charlotte. I want you with me, if that's what you want. You really are a crazy baby bird, if you think otherwise."

"A complete lunatic," I agreed.

With another soft kiss against my mouth, Lucas released me and turned the key in the ignition, pulling the car back onto the road to take me home.



Rowena greeted me with a warm hug when Lucas carried me through the front door and I grinned happily in return. "Did you have some lunch?" she questioned.

"No, but I can make something," I volunteered.

"No, let me. Would you like a sandwich? Or something more?"

Agreeing that a sandwich would be perfect, Rowena disappeared into the kitchen while Lucas carried me through to the living room, lowering me onto the couch. He kissed me and went out to collect my belongings. Sighing with pleasure, my heart bounced back to the level of happiness I'd grown accustomed to in recent times.

"How was the trip to your cottage? I had a vision of you smashing into a tree for a few seconds – presumably Lucas was

driving too fast?" Marianne announced, waltzing through the living room to settle daintily on the floor near my feet.

"I did see my life flash before my eyes," I admitted.

Lucas deposited my painting supplies beside the piano. "She was always completely safe." He quirked an eyebrow at Marianne, then his gaze fell back on me. "Don't let her fool you, Marianne drives as fast as I do." He leaned over and kissed my forehead. "I would never do anything to put you in harm's way," he whispered.

Rowena reappeared with a tuna salad sandwich and a soda, and I ate watching Lucas set up the easel and organize my equipment so it was in easy reach. He brought me the sketchpad I requested and when I finished lunch I started making preliminary sketches for Marianne's portrait.

While portraits were one of my favorite styles, the idea of painting from memory made me apprehensive. Usually the subject posed, or I painted from a photograph, transforming it into art. To paint from an image inside my head would be a challenge. It took only minutes to decide working from memory wasn't going to work. The images were too hazy to create an accurate representation, and there was no way to clarify what I'd seen the night before into something tangible to work with.

Marianne pottered around the room, rearranging the large vases of flowers which sat on every surface, removing wilting blooms and refreshing the water. Each time she passed I knew she was trying to steal a glance at the sketchpad and I frowned, knowing I wasn't giving her much to see.

Rowena sat quietly reading a book and Ripley stood by a window, to all intents and purposes resembling a marble sculpture. I wondered what he could be thinking about to have him standing so motionless, gazing sightlessly through the glass. This ability to

remain immobile fascinated me, vampires apparently had no need to fidget, didn't suffer the restlessness humans experienced.

Music filled the room. Lucas had settled at the piano and was playing softly. The music was soothing, one of the Beethoven pieces he'd played the night I'd spent here after the falls incident. I looked over to him and he glanced up from the keys, sensing my gaze. He smiled and my heart skidded in my chest.

Not helpful. Dragging my eyes away from the distraction I listened to the music, letting the soft notes soothe my mind. Working from memory was definitely unsuccessful.

I shut my eyes, searching the strands in my mind until I located Marianne's parents. It was surprising to find it wasn't difficult, once I started to listen their voices came through clearly and they stepped forward into my mind's eye. I realized they looked younger than they had last night, and I was struck by how much Marianne resembled her mother. It occurred to me that they wanted to be painted this way so Marianne would see them as they'd once been, before the strain of losing their daughter had prematurely aged them. Marianne's siblings, Philip and Annabeth appeared by their parents' side – they also appeared younger, as they'd probably been before Marianne's 'death'.

The most difficult part was talking to them. They could obviously hear me and initially I attempted to communicate soundlessly but it wasn't as constructive as I'd hoped. A glance around the room confirmed everyone was busy with their own projects and I decided talking aloud was the only way forward, despite how self-conscious it would make me. I closed my eyes again. "Could you step forward please, Mrs. Cooper?"

Marianne's mother promptly stepped closer so her features filled my mind. I studied her carefully, opened my eyes and started

sketching.

If anyone thought I was crazy, they were exceptionally polite and refrained from commenting. Now I'd come across a workable solution, I spent the rest of the afternoon poring over the group in my head, transferring their likenesses to the sketchpad. Marianne's family were genuinely delighted to have contact with their beloved daughter and sister and wanted to do anything to help. The sketches mounted up as I captured them from every angle, ensuring I captured the most accurate representations.

Once I had what I needed to make a good start, I thanked Marianne's family for their assistance and watched as they drifted back into the mist. I'd been concentrating so deeply I hadn't realized Marianne had come to sit beside me. She was on her knees, feet tucked neatly beneath her and hands clasped in her lap. There was a desperate look in her brilliant eyes as I handed her the sketchpad with a smile. "They're very rough, but you're welcome to take a look."

She took the sketchbook with trembling hands and Striker appeared behind her, crouching by her side and resting a hand on her back protectively. I'd been so engrossed in sketching I hadn't noticed him come into the room.

Marianne flicked through the sketches, lingering over each one and touching her family's faces, fingers shaking a little. When she came to the last page she looked up, her face aglow. "They're wonderful," she breathed.

Striker glanced at me and smiled warmly, seeming as delighted as Marianne.

Marianne handed the sketchpad back and I tore one of the first pages from it and handed it to her. "You keep that one. I have enough to work with."

She hugged the page to her chest and launched at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and kissing my cheek. "You are brilliant!"

I leaned back against the couch, suddenly tired. In combination with the trip to the cottage it had been a busy day, far busier than any I'd experienced in recent weeks. I woke to find Lucas hitching me into his arms and carrying me up the staircase, various people calling out their goodnights.

"I should shower," I muttered sleepily against Lucas's chest.

"It can wait until morning, Marianne will help you then." He took me into the bathroom, leaving me to complete my human requirements before taking me up to his bedroom.

Lucas set me down on the edge of the bed, where yet another new negligee lay across the covers. Marianne's work, no doubt – I was beginning to suspect she had an endless supply of nightwear she was passing on to me.

"I'll leave you to change," Lucas announced. "Can you manage, or should I ask Marianne to come and assist you?"

"I'll be okay." Lucas shut the bedroom door and I glanced down at my clothes. With Gwynn's morose assistance this morning I'd managed to get dressed – a shirt and skirt, as jeans proved impossible to get over the cast on my ankle. I'd had to borrow a skirt from Gwynn as I didn't own any and she and I were similar sizes. The skirt she'd lent me was beautiful, dark grey linen of the finest quality and tailored exquisitely. She'd volunteered the skirt begrudgingly – it seemed the truce from the day before was over and she was making sure I knew she was only tolerating my presence.

With a sigh, I shimmied until the button and zipper on the skirt were around the front and managed to undo it with my one functioning hand. This was more difficult than I'd anticipated. The

shirt was easier, undoing the buttons I wrestled it off, but I was left with a conundrum. I couldn't take off my bra.

"Is everything okay in there?" Lucas enquired from outside the door.

"I'm fine," I lied, slumping onto the bed in disgust.

The tone of my voice apparently confirmed something was wrong and I heard him call Marianne. She was at the door in seconds and I offered her a glum look when she came into the room. "Sorry."

Marianne quickly unhooked the bra, then picked up the negligee and slipped it over my head. She smiled cheekily as she collected the discarded clothing, slinging it over her arm. "You should have let Lucas help," she whispered. "I'm sure he would have enjoyed the opportunity."

Flushing with embarrassment I watched her open the door and slip out, laughter tinkling down the hallway. It didn't help to catch Lucas's little grin when he came in – confirming he'd heard Marianne's whispered aside – and when he looked at me, his eyes grazed over my skin in an open appraisal of the nightwear Marianne selected.

"I believe Marianne is trying to lead me into temptation," he announced in a low growl.

I glanced down at the nightgown. That wasn't the right description; this was a *negligee* in its truest form – white, sheer, and silky. It was tight across my chest and cinched at the waist, flaring out into a billowy skirt which reached my toes. The only thing saving me from appearing completely nude was the extravagant amount of gathering in the fine material. I cringed with mortification and limped towards the bed, thinking of all the things I would do to that girl – once my arm, ribs, and ankle were healed.

“Let me help,” Lucas reached my side in an instant and pulled back the bedding, allowing me to get into bed before he pulled the covers across my legs. I hitched them up further, so they covered my exposed chest.

Lucas stood uncomfortably at the side of the bed – unusual for a man who was always impossibly in control. The embarrassed flush faded from my cheeks and I peeked at him from beneath my eyelashes. The expression on his face was disconcerting; his eyes fixed on the window he appeared to be struggling internally with something.

“What's wrong?” I wondered if I'd done something to trigger the desire he tried so hard to control. Thinking back through the past few minutes, I tried to pinpoint any action that might have awakened his thirst for my blood.

The sound of my voice pulled him from his reverie and he walked around the bed, slowly in comparison to his usual speed. He lay beside me, pulling me into his arms. “It's nothing,” he responded quietly.

I turned to study his face, finding him staring up at the ceiling. Examining him I searched for some sign, a clue as to what was wrong. Why was he suddenly so distant? It was as though he wasn't aware I was there – instead studying something in the darkest recesses of his mind.

My alarm grew as the minutes passed until I couldn't stand it any longer. “Lucas, you have to explain what I did. I want to help keep temptation to a minimum, but if you don't explain what I did wrong I don't know how to fix it.”

He pushed me away gently, giving him room to roll onto his side. He propped himself up on the pillow, resting his head against his

fist. His blue eyes were incredulous. "You think this is about my thirst?"

I nodded, trying not to cringe at the terminology. "I want to help, but I need to know when I do something that makes the temptation worse."

To my surprise, he grinned and leaned forward to kiss my forehead. "I can assure you this has absolutely *nothing* to do with my desire for your blood." He dropped his eyes meaningfully towards my body, hidden underneath the thick eiderdown.

"I... *oh.*" Heat spread rapidly through my body, rising up my face like a glass filling with water and I knew I was red as a beetroot.

When I recovered enough to peek at him, Lucas was studying me with the same delighted smile ghosting over his lips. "I've been concentrating so hard on suppressing my thirst for your blood, I hadn't realized that other, more latent human desires were pushing their way to the forefront." He traced his fingertips across my face and down my throat. "Desires that I have been repressing for a number of years." He leaned down and kissed my lips fleetingly. "It seems I have more than one battle to fight."

I wasn't certain I wanted there to be a battle over the second desire, and I reddened for a second time.

"You are so very beautiful when you do that." He traced his fingers over the hot glow on my cheeks.

"I'm not sure I actually *do* anything," I grumbled. I was having trouble concentrating – the thought of his *latent* desires was causing a flurry of butterflies to well deep in my girly parts. I tried to control the rampant ideas running through my head, aware that Ripley was sitting downstairs and I wondered exactly how far his particular talent could reach. If he could read my thoughts from downstairs I'd never be able to look him in the eye again.

Lucas watched me, tracing patterns against my neck with his fingers. "What are you thinking?" he demanded.

"I was wondering if it's even possible. You know, the... intimacy, without the... feeding..." I trailed off self-consciously – talking about sex wasn't one of my strong points.

Lucas' expression was serious. "I don't know. Rowena told me she spoke to you briefly about our history. A vampire and a human have never attempted what we are doing now. I can't provide you with an answer, all I can tell you is that being around you requires my complete concentration at all times. I have to think carefully every time I touch you. If I was to lose concentration for a split-second I could snap one of your bones." He ran his fingers through my hair, considering his next words. "I personally believe a sexual relationship is possible between us, but there are any number of desires and emotions involved, which for me are extremely acute. I'm not certain I could maintain the concentration required to ensure your safety. And certainly not now," he added ruefully, "when I'm having enough trouble controlling the thirst around you."

"I'm not sure that your... desire in that regard, could be much stronger than mine," I admitted, blushing furiously again. "I've never felt like this with anyone before."

"Which would explain why you throw yourself at me with such abandon every time I kiss you?" Lucas teased. He watched the pink flush cover my cheeks and leaned over to kiss the tip of my nose. When I'd recovered my composure he spoke again. "I'm curious. Has there been someone else in your life, before me? I know things are very different nowadays to how they were when I was truly twenty four."

I shook my head bashfully.

"No boyfriends?" His tone was inquisitive, deep blue eyes studying me with calm composure.

"No." I wrinkled my nose delicately. "I've never been on a date."

"I find that difficult to believe, you're a beautiful girl."

"You seem to think so but you'd be the first," I responded. "I never got into dating – the situation with Mom was so difficult, I spent all my time at home with her. And then— after they were murdered—" I swallowed heavily, "starting a relationship was the last thing on my mind."

"I see." He played with my curls, lightly drawing his fingers through them.

We drifted into silence again and I mulled over the conversation. In some ways it was a relief to know Lucas considered it possible that our relationship might develop into something physical. It was clear from the discussion, and prior to that with Rowena, that vampires were intensely sexual beings. But that was the problem wasn't it? They were vampires, involved with other vampires. But Lucas and I – a human and a vampire? What would happen if I became pregnant? Was it something we could consider if our relationship developed? I daydreamed, wondering what it might be like to have Lucas close, his naked body against mine, without the quilt creating a barrier between us—

"What are you thinking about now?" Lucas's voice interrupted my explicit fantasy. "You're blushing and I haven't said a word."

It took a minute to recover my composure and Lucas waited, playing with the curls against my neck.

"I was thinking it was nice to know you desire me, too," I spluttered, blushing furiously yet again. "I thought perhaps it was only my blood you were interested in."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Silly girl, of course I desire you! How could I not, when you are so stunning? And what you're wearing tonight – if I'd had any uncertainty about my needs then that slip of material has ensured I am fully *aware* of what I want." He grinned, his blue eyes flashing with silver. "I may be vampire, but I react to a beautiful woman in *exactly* the same way as a human man does."

"You find me... physically attractive?"

"Yes," he growled softly. He brought his face over mine so our lips were only a breath apart. "I find you *extremely* physically attractive." His aroma made me dizzy, my heartbeat racing when I breathed it in. He leaned in and kissed me, a sensual, tender kiss and his cool lips pressed firmly against mine. He released my mouth and trailed a row of kisses across my cheek and neck, working his way across my collarbone. He licked the small indent above my collarbone and then blew cool air across it, making me shiver.

Rolling onto his back, he captured me in his arms and I rested my head against his muscular chest. "You should sleep now, my Charlotte."

Lying tranquilly against him I waited for sleep to come, but my heart still pounded against my breast and I could still taste his kiss on my lips.

"Lucas?"

"Yes?" He pressed another kiss against my hair.

"Which desire are you having more trouble coping with?"

He sighed heavily. "At this stage, it's a tie."

CHAPTER 16

WARNINGS

The portrait of Marianne's family was progressing well; I'd worked on it for nearly three weeks and I was pleased with the work I'd accomplished so far. Early each morning Lucas brought me downstairs – he still insisted on carrying me – and I enjoyed it. Being held in his arms was something I was getting *especially* used to. After breakfast, which I was capable of preparing myself, I settled to work at the easel.

Painting had been a lifelong love. From the time I could hold a pencil I'd developed a love of drawing which blossomed into a passion. My latent talents had been recognized by Mr. Tully, my sixth grade teacher, who'd suggested it was a talent worth developing.

Mom had been incredibly proud of my artistic talents. Although art classes were expensive, Mom insisted on enrolling me and my love of art developed into a passion. If I'd attended college, art would have been my major – there was no alternative. Despite the decision to skip college, I'd known some career allowing for artistic expression would be the only option I'd find satisfying. I'd managed to pay my own way for the past two years through commissions. While it didn't provide a substantial income, it was enough to buy food and pay rent, for which I was grateful. And happy. During the

difficult months on my own, painting had been a solace, an island of peace in the center of stormy seas. It didn't matter how depressed or isolated I'd become, painting provided an opportunity for moments of pure, unadulterated joy – it was probably the only thing which kept me sane during this turbulent period.

With my current level of contentment, painting was an even bigger passion. By confronting my personal demons and making steps towards making peace with them, painting had become a truly profound experience. For hours at a time I worked on Marianne's painting, watching her family coming to life beneath my brushstrokes.

Lucas was content to sit and watch – he'd quickly recognized how focused I got while painting and was happy to observe. Sometimes he played the piano, occasionally the violin – having an uncanny knack of selecting music that inspired me further. At other times he sat on the couch, perfectly still for hours on end whilst I worked.

Today he'd gone hunting with William and Striker. I was beginning to recognize the signs of a hunt being imminent – dark circles appeared beneath his eyes and darkened as the thirst took hold and his skin grew paler. When Lucas came back from hunting it was delightful to see him with just the tiniest hint of color on his skin. It faded quickly, but I was proud that I could read the signs when he needed to feed, knew when it was important to keep him away from undue pressure. I was even beginning to control my reaction to his kisses. Admittedly, I wasn't doing particularly well in that regard – he only had to brush a kiss against my lips and my heart started a crazy flip-flop in my chest, but I was *trying*.

Hunting was something I found complex to come to terms with. I accepted that Lucas and his Kiss were vampires and while my body

required food, their bodies required blood. What I couldn't get my head around was hunting and I found the idea abhorrent. Lucas sensed my difficulty in this regard, making efforts to keep his discussions about hunting to a minimum and only mentioning it when necessary. On the other hand, Striker delighted in giving me blow-by-blow accounts of his adventures when he went out. He knew it made me nauseous, which amused him immensely. He loved teasing me and knew I would screw up my nose and go pale when he spoke about his latest exploits with a bear, or whatever animal he'd been chasing. I'd tried to imagine the women hunting and couldn't even conceive of what it would be like – the whole concept was completely alien.

For most of the morning I'd been working on Marianne's father on the painting, his eyes were proving difficult to capture and I'd spent ages getting the coloring just right. I was alone – Ben had gone to work, Rowena was in Puckhaber searching for a book she wanted to purchase, Marianne and Acenith were shopping in Billings. Gwynn was visiting with Katie. Ripley was the only one in the immediate vicinity. I'd been astonished to learn he was an author of some renown amongst scholarly types, writing textbooks regarding key historical events from the past five hundred years. As he'd explained, who better to write historical text than someone who'd actually been there for the events? He was currently working on a project about the great fire of London in 1666, and given that he was in London at the time, he was more than qualified to write about the event. Ripley and Lucas had converted an old stable on the property into a writing studio and it was there that Ripley was currently ensconced.

These small periods of time on my own were enjoyable. Lucas worried about me being alone, concerned about the depression I still

struggled with but I'd assured him I was fine and loved the time to myself. Being alone had never been the problem; I enjoyed solitude and even more so when my thoughts were no longer suicidal. Mom was available now that I'd accepted my ability and the conversations I'd blocked for so long gave me great comfort. She seemed closer than she'd been at any time in the past two years. With the house empty I was comfortable having long conversations with her, not bothering with mental dialogue because I could talk aloud and hear her responses in my mind.

Painting was interrupted by a typically human problem – my stomach started growling. After washing up the brushes I headed into the kitchen to scrounge up some lunch. I'd be eternally grateful when Jerome removed the plaster casts – he'd promised it would only be another week or two before he could take them off. Having to rely on Marianne and Rowena for assistance in the shower was growing tedious, although I appreciated their help I was looking forward to showering in private. Not to mention the prospect of indulging in a good scratch – my skin was becoming unbearably itchy under the plaster.

I grabbed the makings of a sandwich from the refrigerator – pastrami, cheese, mayonnaise. Rowena kept the refrigerator remarkably well stocked considering she was only feeding one person and delighted in bringing home all sorts of delicacies to tempt my taste buds. She was improving at bringing home reasonable quantities for one person – initially she'd purchased vast amounts of food and I'd only consumed a fraction of it. Local charities received regular, anonymous donations of food until Ben stepped in; warning Rowena the volume of groceries she was donating each week was suspect.

I was putting the containers back in the refrigerator when Mom appeared in my mind. Having embraced this strange ability I found it easier to recognize the voices and the images were getting clearer. It was as if I'd fine-tuned my brain to get better reception, much like tuning in to a radio station or television channel.

Mom's forehead was creased with worry and alarm lit her green eyes. *"There's danger approaching, Lottie. You need to grab your keys and leave the house. Now!"*

Frowning, I wondered if I was losing my mind. These psychic flashes hadn't frightened me since I'd accepted them, but this was something new and strange. I'd never been given a warning about danger before. Standing frozen on the spot with the refrigerator door open, I heard Mom's voice again.

Mom's tone was filled with urgency. *"Get out of the house, there's danger approaching! Take your car and leave, get away from there!"*

I glanced out of the window, searching for anything untoward. The trees were still and silent and there was no sign of movement in the near vicinity, but the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. The day I was attacked in the woods I didn't hear or see anything and that vampire had been able to sneak up on me.

"You've got to leave, right now!"

Instinct took over and I threw the last of the food in the refrigerator, turning to leave the kitchen and locate my keys. I didn't have a clue where they were, didn't know where to look first. The last I'd seen them was when Striker had shown me my Christmas gift. Where would they be?

"Lottie, put your sandwich in the refrigerator. Don't leave any proof that you've been here."

I did as Mom said, throwing the plate with the freshly prepared sandwich into the refrigerator and ensuring no other food was visible. Mom's last words had confirmed what I'd already guessed – whatever danger was coming, was vampire. A vampire who hunted humans.

I hobbled into the living room, scanning the area. Shutting my eyes, I tried to picture the others when they went out to their cars. I'd seen them do it dozens of times and tried to recall where they kept the keys. With sudden clarity, I remembered they kept them in one of the small drawers in the console table by the entrance. Wrenching the drawer open, the contents spilled out onto the floor and I searched through the scattered items until I found my keys and snatched them up.

Hampered by the cast on my ankle I stumbled through the kitchen and followed the path to a large eight-car garage set away from the house, surrounded on three sides by trees. I slipped through the door and fumbled for the light switch, blinking against the sudden glare of overhead fluorescents.

Mom continued to urge me along as I made my way to where my car sat and wrenched the garage door open. My fingers shook as I unlocked the door to my Volkswagen, anxiety escalating as I watched for any signs of danger outside. The key finally slipped into the lock and I yanked the door open, flopping onto the seat. Slamming the door shut, I shoved the lock down firmly and stuck the key into the ignition. The car started smoothly and I silently thanked Striker for his recent efforts. Shoving the gearstick into reverse, I pushed my foot down on the accelerator.

The tires slipped on the wet gravel, sending a shower of pebbles rattling underneath the wheel rims. Glancing in the rearview mirror I spied three strangers standing on the driveway, eyes intent as they

watched me. Their pallid skin left no doubt this was what Mom had been warning me about and I slipped the car into first, slammed my foot down on the accelerator and slewed down the gravel driveway. Forcing my gaze away from the rearview mirror, I focused on driving at breakneck speed towards the highway.

When I turned onto the main road I risked a glance at the rearview mirror, terrified they might be following me. Lucas had told me how fast vampires could run and I'd seen the incredible speed of the creature that attacked me firsthand. I wasn't taking the risk of slowing down and drove swiftly down the highway, checking the mirrors every few seconds to ensure I wasn't followed.

I'd almost reached town before I started to relax and tried to figure out what to do next. Where should I go? My first instinct was to drive as far as possible from Lucas's house, away from those creatures. But where? Who could I turn to for help?

On the outskirts of Puckhaber I saw the sign for the hospital and slowed, realizing salvation was at hand. I would go to Jerome; he would know what to do.

Puckhaber Falls Hospital was located on the eastern side of town; a moderately sized brick building, surrounded by thick woodland on two sides and nestled next to the fire house.

Arriving at the car park I searched for the most unobtrusive place to park, not wanting to draw attention to myself if the vampires had followed. Turning off the ignition, relief flooded through my veins, knowing Jerome was close by. I unclipped my seatbelt, leaning my forehead against the cold steering wheel for a few seconds. My heart was racing and I took a steadying breath to settle my nerves.

Feeling a little calmer I scanned the surrounding area for danger before unlocking the door. I'd parked in such a way that the entrance doors were as close as I could manage, with a clear walk

between them and me. I wasn't certain I'd been followed, but I wasn't taking any chances.

I listened for another few minutes, observing everything and everyone around the car. It seemed safe, only a couple of people were walking through the car park, and two paramedics were closing up their vehicle in the emergency bay. Satisfied I hadn't been followed; I unlocked the door and slipped out, resisting the urge to run.

The reception was busy, a number of people were waiting to see the three doctors on duty. The hospital catered to the residents of Puckhaber Falls and the surrounding areas and was invariably busy. The queue at the desk was lengthy and I took my place at the end of the line, glancing around the waiting area nervously and checking individual faces. I hoped I'd done the right thing by coming here – of course, I could be worrying over nothing. They might be friends of Lucas – maybe I'd panicked needlessly. But I was sure Rowena would have mentioned expecting visitors before she left. And why the urgent warning from Mom? I doubted my mind had invented those messages.

Another thought occurred to me – why hadn't Marianne see them coming? She'd proven accurate to some extent regarding events involving me but there'd been no mention of visitors. Ripley didn't seem to have heard them either. That omission was understandable, Ripley readily admitted he struggled to hear minds surrounding me as the sheer number of voices inside my head disrupted his ability. He had a hard time hearing my thoughts through the hubbub of voices in my head – perhaps he'd deliberately tuned out because of it.

Guilt flared when I thought about Ripley – I'd abandoned him at the house with the three vampires. I hoped they weren't dangerous

but perhaps I'd done the wrong thing leaving him there without warning him. Rowena had told me they were perfectly capable of looking after themselves – but in that situation Ripley was alone with three of them. I started to feel faintly nauseous and perspiration broke out across my forehead as I fretted over the encounter.

I finally reached the information desk and spoke to the receptionist, a rotund, bureaucratic woman in her late forties. “I need to see Dr. Harding please.”

She glowered at me over tortoiseshell glasses. “Dr. Harding is busy right now.”

“It's important. I'll only take a minute of his time,” I pleaded quietly.

“I'm sorry; we're very busy this afternoon as you can see.”

“Please, it's important I see him right away—”

“Charlotte!” Jerome appeared at the desk, offering me a compassionate smile.

“She needs to wait her turn, Dr. Harding,” the receptionist announced, glaring daggers at me across the desk.

“I'll be the judge of that.” Jerome smiled, but his voice was cool when he spoke to the bossy receptionist. “Charlotte is a friend of mine. I requested she drop in today but I'm afraid I forgot to mention it this morning. I'll be a few minutes, then I'll see my next patient.” He linked my arm through his and drew me towards a corridor, away from prying eyes in the waiting area.

He spoke again once we were out of earshot. “Are you alright? They didn't hurt you?”

I stared up at him, bewildered by his knowledge of what had happened.

“Ripley and Marianne both called, they told me three vampires arrived unexpectedly this afternoon.” He pulled a cell phone from his

shirt pocket. "Excuse me for a moment; I'll let them know you're safe."

He dialed a number and it was answered almost immediately. "Ripley, it's Jerome. Charlotte's safe; she's here at the hospital. Yes, I think you should come and collect her and can you let Marianne know where she is. And tell her to stop panicking please."

He disconnected the call and glanced down at me, smiling warmly. "Let's find somewhere we can speak privately, shall we?" He took my arm, leading me further down the corridor. Opening a door on the right he led me into a small office. Jerome helped me into a chair and perched on the edge of the desk. "Now tell me what happened," he requested calmly.

I breathed deeply, more relaxed now. Jerome exuded calm, radiating a serenity which soothed me. "I was making lunch and Mom warned me there was danger coming. She told me to grab my car keys and leave immediately."

If Jerome was surprised by this admission he didn't let it show, he knew from his visits to the house what I could do and was fascinated. A smile played on his lips when he spoke. "It seems your abilities are more powerful than Lucas thought. Your mother was correct – you would have been in danger if you'd stayed. Ripley said those vampires are from Ambrose's Kiss."

"Would they have killed me?" I was aware of the tension in my voice and a wave of queasiness churned through my stomach.

"I can't answer with certainty, but it's likely they would have. Presuming they needed to feed, of course. It seems your mother is trying to protect you."

Slumping back in the chair, I thought I was going to be sick.

Jerome reached my side in an instant, pressing gently against the back of my neck. "Here now, you're okay. Put your head down

between your knees, that's a good girl."

I did as he said and stayed in that position until the dizziness and nausea passed. When I was calmer I sat up again and Jerome studied me carefully. "Better?"

I nodded and he hobbled across the room to a small refrigerator, taking out a can of Coke and a chocolate bar. "Some sugar will help," he announced. Seeing my startled glance, he grinned sheepishly. "I'm supposed to be watching my weight, but sometimes a man needs some comfort food."

I took the chocolate bar, tearing open the wrapper and Jerome opened the soda before handing it to me. I nibbled the chocolate, letting the tiny shard melt on my tongue before I swallowed. "Thanks."

"Lucas and his friends will keep you safe," Jerome announced quietly. "They're powerful vampires. They won't let anyone harm you."

"Why would those vampires have come back to Lucas' house?" I questioned, taking another bite of chocolate.

"I don't know. Perhaps they were just passing through. Lucas and the others will be able to tell you more, I'm sure."

"Do you think they came because of me? Did they come to kill me because of Ambrose?"

For a long moment, Jerome was silent, considering his response. "I really can't answer that."

I knew it wasn't fair to ask him, he had no way of knowing what their plans had been. "I know," I responded in a tiny voice.

He brushed a hand across the top of my head in a compassionate gesture. "I've known Lucas, Ben and the others for three years. It took some time to trust them, but I do believe in them, Charlotte. They will never, ever, let anything happen to you."

He glanced across to the window and smiled. "Ripley's here to collect you. I'll escort you out.

We walked down the corridor and into the waiting room where Ripley, Strider and Lucas waited. I couldn't miss the admiring glances of the nearby women who watched the three strikingly handsome men eagerly. Relief flooded through me when I saw Lucas and he strode over, pulling me into his arms. He kissed my forehead softly, his questioning gaze fixed on Jerome.

"She's fine, a little shaken up. Take her home."

Lucas slipped his arm around my waist and guided me towards the doors, Ripley and Striker following close behind. Striker placed a hand on my shoulder and the familiar blanket of calm descended over my fraught emotions. Stealing a glance at him I saw the little smile playing on his lips and he winked. Despite his overwhelming size, I was feeling more and more secure in his company and grateful for his ability to calm me.

"Where are your keys?" Ripley asked. I reached into my jeans pocket and handed them to him. We passed a couple of young women walking towards the hospital entrance and I saw them ogling my companions, so mesmerized they stopped walking and just stared. It wasn't hard to figure out why, the three men together were a devastating combination and with Lucas and Ripley's striking looks and Striker's magnificent strength the two women were quite obviously dazzled. I stole a glance at them as we passed and I knew what they were thinking. I was so plain in comparison to these people. The usual tendrils of doubt curled into my mind, making me wonder again what Lucas saw in me.

"That's not true you know," Ripley murmured quietly. The surprise registered on my face and he continued. "Sometimes your thoughts are much clearer than others."

Lucas exchanged a look with Ripley and pulled me a little closer before kissing my forehead. His gaze flickered across to the two young women and a little grin played over his lips before he pulled me into his arms and lowered his head to kiss me on the mouth. My heart pumped like crazy and when he released me, I caught the amusement in his eyes. "You did that on purpose," I accused, a blush creeping across my cheeks.

"Yes, I did," Lucas growled softly against my ear. "If they are going to stare, we might as well give them a show."

"They weren't staring at me," I grumbled.

Ripley threw the keys to his car to Striker, who caught them effortlessly. Striker unlocked the doors and Lucas helped me in, before settling beside me. He nestled me against his chest and Striker started the car, heading out of the car park and driving back through town.

"What happened?" Lucas demanded, almost as soon as the car started moving. I repeated the story I'd told Jerome, giving Lucas the details of Mom's warnings. Striker listened mutely from the front seat and once we'd left the outskirts of town he sped up. I wondered how Ripley was coping in my Volkswagen, with its top speed of about sixty miles an hour.

"They didn't touch you? Didn't hurt you in any way?" Lucas's voice was tight with anger.

I shook my head. "I left as soon as Mom warned me. I don't think they'd reached the front door yet." I paused, worrying my bottom lip with my teeth. "I feel terrible about leaving Ripley there, I shouldn't have run."

Lucas chuckled and in the front seat, Striker snorted. "I can assure you Ripley is more than a match for three vampires. You did exactly the right thing, it was better that you weren't there. It gave

Ripley the opportunity to talk to them, make them understand the situation." He looked down at me and traced his finger along the edge of my jaw. "I'm very pleased you did leave. Although I'm not certain that driving your car with plaster casts was the best idea you've had. You seem to have come through it unscathed, however."

"Why didn't Marianne know they were coming?"

Lucas regarded me seriously. "Marianne was telephoning the house at almost the exact minute you were leaving. It seems you and Marianne work on a similar time frame. She had a vision of visitors, but as you know Marianne's predictions are frustratingly unpredictable. In this case Marianne had seen the three men but they were destined to pass by, head further south. Their plans changed abruptly when they picked up your scent, intermingled with Ambrose's in the woods. They'd returned to search for Ambrose but they followed your scent back to the house."

My mouth dropped open. "I brought them to your home? This is my fault?"

Lucas smiled. "Other vampires will visit us from time to time. It can hardly be your fault they followed your scent."

I stared at the woods beyond the car window and shivered. "Are they like him? Are they vicious and cruel like he was?"

"Ambrose was in a league of his own in that regard. The other three do feed on humans, but not in the cruel way Ambrose did." Lucas's response was calm, his voice gentle. "I assure you, Charlotte, if I had known what Ambrose was like I would never have allowed him entry to our home."

I turned back to face him. "What happened at the house?"

"Marianne contacted Ripley and he went to meet them. Arrived only seconds after you left. They were curious about why Ambrose and your scent had gotten mixed together. Ripley has told them

what Ambrose did and why he was killed. He told them that you are part of our Kiss and must not be harmed."

Despite my unease, I was delighted to think Lucas included me as part of his family. It didn't serve to ease my concerns about the three vampires though. "Will they accept what Ripley said?"

Lucas's eyes narrowed. "I believe so."

"Will they really go away?"

Lucas frowned for a second or two before deliberately smoothing his expression. "I expect so. We will go out tonight and ensure they have continued their journey south."

I nodded, hoping Ambrose's Kiss had kept their word and left. The thought of them being somewhere out in the woods around Lucas's home was unnerving.

CHAPTER 17
WAITING GAME

The tension was palpable in the house that evening. Although everyone seemed involved in their usual activities, each of them was on guard. Ben sat with a book open in his lap, but never flipped the pages. Rowena worked on the computer, but every few minutes she scanned the windows anxiously.

Marianne and Gwynn studied wedding magazines. Marianne and Striker were getting married soon, and the girls were supposedly looking for Marianne's dress, but they flicked through the pages sporadically without studying a single design.

William was reading a book to Katie, who was on an overnight visit. Her caregiver, Cecilia, had a standing arrangement for one night a month when William and Gwynn kept Katie while Cecilia visited with her sister in Billings. Unfortunately the arrangement had coincided with the arrival of the visiting vampires.

Ripley and Acenith sat side by side on the couch, flicking through an endless array of channels on the huge television screen dominating the end wall. Striker was a mountain of nervous energy, pacing back and forth as I worked on Marianne's painting.

Lucas stood behind me, his hands resting softly on my shoulders while I painted. It was soothing to have him there, the touch of his

hands against my skin a pleasant distraction from the surrounding tension. I was completely calm, the voices in my mind were silent and I could concentrate on painting. Occasionally, I heard Marianne's mother and instinctively knew she was dropping by to see how the painting was progressing. It had originally been disturbing when I learned Marianne's family could see the canvas through my eyes. Having embraced my psychic ability now, I was discovering new aspects all the time as it continued to increase in strength. Mom had been silent tonight and there were no more warnings, so despite the tension in the house I was positive the three vampires had left the vicinity.

It was almost eleven when Lucas rubbed his hands over my upper arms. "I think you should head up to bed."

I glanced up, narrowing my eyes determinedly. "I'm not going to bed, not until you've been out and come back safely."

We'd had this discussion any number of times in the past few hours and Lucas was proving as stubborn as I was. When Ben returned home from work the group had gathered in the living room to discuss their plans. Lucas, Ben, and Striker intended to track the three vampires, following their scent to ensure they'd definitely left the area. Ripley and William were staying behind to ensure the safety of the women. Of course, all of the women, except me, were perfectly capable of looking after themselves. I knew the truth – Ripley and William were staying behind to look after *me*.

I'd argued against the men going in search of the other vampires – particularly Lucas – panicked at the thought of him being out there in the darkness. Ben and Lucas had both assured me that along with Striker they were the logical choice, as they had superior tracking skills. They'd also assured me Striker and Lucas were the strongest fighters if things *went wrong*. The idea of *anything* going wrong

filled me with dread, and I'd insisted on staying awake and waiting for them to come back. Lucas was adamant there was nothing to worry about and wanted me to go to bed, promising he'd be back by morning but I looked up at him now and stubbornly repeated my refusal.

Lucas sighed wearily and frowned. "Charlotte, there is nothing to worry about. You need your sleep."

"I'll sleep when you come back."

"Is there nothing I can say to change your mind?" he muttered.

"No. I'll be fine, right here with Rowena and the others."

"I give you my word – we'll be back in four, perhaps five hours at most. I'll come straight to you when I return."

"I'm going to be right here, waiting for you," I retorted.

Lucas ran his fingers through his hair, tousling it. It was a warning sign he was getting frustrated with me but I didn't care. "Charlotte, you are being completely unreasonable."

"No, I'm not. I won't go to bed. Anyway," I announced airily, "I'm positive they're long gone. Mom hasn't said anything in hours, not since this afternoon."

Lucas cursed under his breath. "Charlotte, your psychic abilities may not always be completely accurate! You've only recently accepted the voices – they might not give you a warning like you received this afternoon, not every time. You're still learning about this ability."

"Then stay here with me," I begged. "You'll know I'm safe and I'll know you're safe."

Lucas took a deep breath and released it in an impatient huff. "You are being impossible." His eyes met Ben's across the room. "We should go."

Ben stood up, joining Lucas and Striker who'd stopped his pacing and was bouncing from foot to foot in his impatience to leave. I looked away when Marianne and Rowena kissed their partners goodbye, the level of devotion they displayed to one another was so sincere it made my heart ache to think they could be heading into danger and it was my fault.

It was evident from Lucas' rigid stance he was angry and he turned to leave without another word. My heart twisted in my chest and I leaped up from the stool I'd been perched on to paint. "Lucas!"

He turned back, his expression hard.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I love you."

He drew me against his chest and for a brief moment pressed his mouth against mine. There was a level of desperation to his goodbye and it sent a cold chill racing up my spine. Although I was certain there was no danger to us at the house, I couldn't say the same for these three men, leaving the house to search the darkness. The guilt was overwhelming; this would never have happened if it weren't for me. I wrapped my arms around Lucas and held him tightly, fearing I might never see him again. A vision of what he'd done to Ambrose flashed into my mind and I was terrified of another vampire doing that to *him*.

Lucas gently pried my fingers from his waist and stepped away. "I'll be back soon, I promise my Charlotte." He leaned down for one more brief kiss and then he was gone with the other men.

The time passed at a snail's pace, so slowly I was convinced the clock had stopped. I went back to painting, knowing it was the only way to keep my worry to a minimum. I glanced at the clock periodically and was frustrated to find only minutes had passed since I'd last checked. I was attentive, listening for warnings but the spirits

remained silent. The usual hubbub of voices was curiously absent, which was worrying in itself. I glanced at Ripley, wondering if he'd detected the stony silence in my head.

He met my eyes and raised an eyebrow, indicating he was aware of the absence of voices and could probably hear my thoughts without disruption. He no doubt found it a relief, compared to the usual cacophony of sound. When I peeked at him again, he met my eyes and flashed a tiny smile.

"Do you think this means anything?" I thought.

He shrugged his shoulders imperceptibly. I assumed he didn't want to speculate until we established if there was any connection.

Another tiny nod greeted this thought.

Rowena had given up on the pretense of working at the computer and sat in an armchair, watching television blankly. Gwynn stood behind William, her arms around his waist and resting her head against his back. Marianne sat on the floor, arms wrapped around her legs, her eyes closed. Acenith still sat beside Ripley and Katie was settled on the couch, wrapped in a blanket and soundly asleep, her thumb in her mouth.

"Can Marianne see anything?"

Ripley looked casually to his right, then back to the left. I inhaled deeply, confident if Marianne couldn't see anything to worry about, it was a good thing. Although she'd assured me her ability wasn't perfect in any way, she'd been accurate about most things involving me and I had to hope that record continued.

I felt incredibly guilty, knowing I'd gotten them into this mess. If I hadn't gone into the woods when Lucas warned me against it, if I hadn't left my scent everywhere – they wouldn't be out there now. Lucas was right; it was an impossible situation for him and me to be together. Lucas would be safe if he hadn't met me. I'd caused

endless trouble for them and now they were out in the darkness because of the mistakes I'd made. I wasn't worth it – life would have been better for them if Ambrose had killed me. My stepfather's words pounded in my head, echoes of everything he'd ever said to me – *'You're a worthless piece of shit.'* *'No-one will ever want you, you fat, ugly bitch.'* *'You're a useless, good for nothin' cow, who doesn't have a lick of sense.'* *'You're nothin' but trouble; you won't ever amount to a hill of beans.'* *'Who'd love an ugly little thing like you?'* I inhaled sharply, aware that my memories were threatening to overwhelm me and Ripley was listening to all of it. Turning back to the painting, I doggedly pulled my thoughts under control.

The next hour dragged, more so than the previous one and I seriously doubted the clock was working. A sense of dread plagued me and yet the voices were taunting in their absence. Perhaps Lucas was right and my psychic abilities couldn't be trusted.

"Marianne? What is it?" Acenith had slipped down to the floor and knelt in front of Marianne, cupping her face with her hands. "Tell me what's wrong?"

Marianne's expression was alarming, she appeared to be utterly terrified. Her forehead creased and her eyes filled with agony. "Something's wrong, terribly wrong! There are four, not three and I see—" She covered her face with her hands and sobbed against Acenith's knee.

Rowena placed a hand on my shoulder. "Can you hear anything?" she questioned.

"I... no." Closing my eyes, I called to the spirits, searching for their voices.

They were mutinously silent at first and I pleaded for help. I couldn't understand why they weren't talking to me, wouldn't help. Mom finally appeared, shaking her head sadly.

"Why won't you help me? Lucas is in danger!"

"Others are not for us to warn," Mom stated quietly.

"I don't understand! Why won't you help?" I ground my teeth in frustration

"It is not our duty to help others. Only you."

"Damn it! Who made the rules?"

There was a deathly silence and Mom shook her head sadly before she spoke again. *"I wish we could help, Charlotte. It's against the rules."*

"What rules? You can help! You're in my head; you contact me whenever you want to! Now you can help me when I need you! Don't tell me you can't, I don't believe it!" My temper got the better of me. *"If you don't help me now, I swear I'll never speak to any of you again!"*

My childish rage evidently worked. With a sudden flurry of noise, a chorus of voices yelled in my head, shouting for attention simultaneously.

I chose the loudest one, listening intently to the frantic voice. It was Ben's brother and in the background, I could hear Striker's Mom and Lucas's father. They all wanted to speak at once and I had to urge them to quiet down. Finding Ben's brother, I paid careful attention to what he said, then listened to the other two voices to confirm what they knew. All reported similar stories, warning of imminent danger – and something else.

I opened my eyes and turned to Rowena, who'd been gripping my hand. "They're in trouble, they need you. They're in terrible danger." I shook my head impatiently, trying to get the facts into some sort of cohesive order. Now the spirits had seen my point of view, they were bombarding me with information. The others

gathered around, worry clearly etched in their faces and bodies bristling with tension.

Ripley and William stared at me, their expressions hard.

"They were ambushed by the three vampires and something else. The vampires have formed an alliance with something else."

"What is it?" William demanded.

"Ben's brother says it's a... werewolf." They'd think I'd lost my mind. A werewolf? They were myths. But then again, until recently I'd thought vampires were a myth, too. None of them seemed surprised by this announcement.

"What else did they tell you?" Ripley pressed.

"They were ambushed. The vampires lied to you this afternoon – they were here to take revenge for Ambrose's death, and they blame Lucas for killing him. Ambrose was the leader of their Kiss and they've joined forces with the werewolf to exact retribution. They'll kill Ben and Striker, too. Their agreement to leave the area was a setup; they knew you'd track them. They've been with the werewolf since they left the house this afternoon." When I looked at Ripley, his expression was chilling. "One of them has a shielding ability which stopped you from hearing their thoughts. The one called Michael, he can—" I didn't know how to explain the ability and thought for a few seconds. "He can think something, which isn't true, and project it into your mind, so you'll believe it."

Ripley nodded. "That explains quite a lot. I'd assumed the other two were shielding themselves, but what I got from Michael seemed completely genuine and I chose to accept he was speaking the truth." Ripley seemed disgusted with himself.

"They need you. The werewolf is extremely powerful and they're in danger." I paused, glancing at the anxious faces surrounding me. "It's the only way they'll survive. Ben is talking to them, but he can

only hold off a fight for so long with diplomacy. They aren't far away – the vampires took an indirect path, forging a trail which would be time consuming to follow.”

“Do you know where they are?” William asked.

Trying to get a pinpointed destination was difficult with all the voices yelling. “I'm not sure... wait, I think it's Harlow's Hill— no, Harlow's—”

“Harlow's Pass,” Marianne supplied.

Ripley took charge. “Acenith, you stay with Charlotte and Katie. The rest of us—”

“No!”

Ripley stared at me, hazel eyes stony.

“The spirits say you *all* have to go. It's the only way to ensure they survive.”

“We can't leave you alone,” Acenith protested.

“One of us must stay with you and Katie,” Rowena agreed.

I shook my head impatiently. “Please, *listen* to me. They don't want me, they want revenge for Ambrose's death, and they're blaming Lucas for it. I'm just a pathetic human to them; they're not coming back here. They want this finished out there.”

Gwynn spoke angrily. “I'm not leaving Katie with *her*. I will stay.”

“You can't! Don't you understand? The spirits say you have to go! All of you!” My own temper was fraying.

“And on your word, we should all rush out there? I don't think so,” Gwynn retorted.

“Gwynn, just a moment,” Ripley commanded. He stared down at me, his expression intense. “Are you absolutely sure they won't double back here?”

I nodded, relieved when he seemed to believe me.

"Alright." He glanced over at William. "I believe Charlotte. But Katie is your responsibility, will you go or stay?"

William didn't hesitate. "I believe Charlotte is correct. Katie should remain with her and I'll come to help the others." He glanced at Gwynn, his expression intense. "Gwynn, you must come with me."

"But Katie—"

"I trust Charlotte to keep her safe. We owe Lucas our existence. He took us in, kept us safe. He helped us to retrieve Katie. We owe him, Gwynn. You know that."

With a sulky look, Gwynn nodded stiffly.

Ripley nodded. "Rowena, close the security screens."

Rowena hurried off and with a deafening screech, enormous metal blinds began to lower over every window simultaneously.

Ripley turned his attention back to me. "Do not open the door for anyone. We will be back when this is over, and we will open the door ourselves. Do you understand me?"

I nodded mutely.

Ripley issued quiet orders and the others flitted around the room like lightning bolts, barely visible to the eye. In a matter of minutes they had prepared and I watched William and Gwynn gently kiss Katie goodbye.

I stood at the door and Ripley paused before he left. "You are wrong, you know. The best thing that ever happened to Lucas was meeting you. You are worth all this, if it means he can look forward to a future with you." He lowered his head to kiss me gently on the cheek and squeezed my shoulder. "Look after Katie."

I nodded, standing in silence as I watched him shut the heavy door and lock it.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

CHAPTER 18

THE MINUTES TICK BY SLOWLY

I paced across the living room, feeling distinctly claustrophobic. Other than the clock there were no visual indicators of time inside the house and I watched impatiently as the hands crept past three, four and then five. I was nauseous, worrying endlessly about what was happening outside. What if someone got killed? What if Lucas got killed? There was an ache in my heart and I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to ease the anxiety.

I couldn't stand this, couldn't bear losing anyone again. It was like Mom and my siblings all over again. I didn't think I could survive another loss like that.

Part of me wanted to wrench open the door and run after them. Not knowing was going to kill me. I couldn't stand being stuck in here without a clue about what was going on out there. One glimpse of Katie, sleeping like a tiny angel on the couch was enough to confirm following them wasn't an option. I'd promised William I'd look after her and she was my responsibility now. Pacing the floor, I listened for sounds from outside. What if Ripley and the others had been too late? What if they'd killed Lucas and the others?

I couldn't bear the thought of losing Lucas. I loved him with every fiber of my being, couldn't bear to think of a future without

him. Although I thought he'd be better off without me, I couldn't imagine being without him.

It was a little after six in the morning when Katie woke. She sat up on the couch, rubbing her fists over her eyes and I gave up pacing to sit beside her. "Where is William and Gwynn?"

"They'll be back soon; they went to help Uncle Ben, Uncle Striker, and Uncle Lucas with something. They won't be long." The use of the word 'promise' was beyond me – I wouldn't promise Katie anything, not when the situation was so tenuous.

Katie was still drowsy and nestled against my side. Covering her with the blanket, I wrapped my arm around her. "It's early, Katie. Why don't you go back to sleep?"

The little girl snuggled under the covers and I held her close, reluctant to leave her alone. I listened for the spirits, but there'd been nothing since our discussion earlier. I wondered vaguely about Mom's words – what had she meant about not being able to help others? And rules – what was that about? I pushed the thoughts to one side, too worried about Lucas and the others to think about anything else.

Laying my head against the back of the couch I closed my eyes, a headache pulsing behind my temples. It was impossible to keep my eyes closed though and I swiftly returned to staring at the clock as the second hand ticked out seconds that would surely lead to answers eventually. Every minute was interminable and the hands reached seven, then half past.

What if none of them came back? What if they were all killed and the vampires did come here? I filled in another few minutes working out a plan for escaping the house with Katie if I needed to. There were no weapons in the house to attack the vampires with, nothing strong enough to harm them. My best option would be to get Katie

to a car and drive. If the situation arose, I decided I'd choose the fastest car in the garage and leave. It wouldn't be safe to send Katie back to her elderly carer – what if the vampires tracked her back there? They'd followed my scent, I had no doubt they could follow Katie's too. Would they kill her? I'd have to keep her with me I decided.

I'd need money, we could hardly leave without access to cash. I made mental notes of what to do if another thirty minutes passed by and they still didn't return. There must be cash somewhere in the house. Maybe we shouldn't even stay in the United States; possibly, we'd have to leave the country to shake off those repulsive beings. Did Katie have a passport? I didn't. That would be problematic. With a criminal record, I had no likelihood of obtaining a passport legally. I distractedly wondered how you went about obtaining a passport *illegally*. It could be done, but I was certain there wasn't an illegal passport office on every street corner—

My ears picked up a tiny sound at the front door and I held my breath. Terror rapidly turned into relief as a key turned in the lock and the door swung open. My heart somersaulted as Ripley strode in, followed by Rowena and Acenith. Gwynn and William followed. They all looked a little worse for wear, their clothes torn and bloody – but they were alive. I waited anxiously, watching to see who else had survived.

“Where are the others?” I squeaked, when a few seconds passed with no further appearances.

Before Ripley could respond Ben stepped through the doorway, followed closely by Striker, Marianne, and finally, Lucas.

Katie ran to William and Gwynn and I launched myself from the couch, limping swiftly towards Lucas. I didn't care about being careful, didn't care how my scent affected him, at this stage, I

wasn't even worried if he bit me. The gap between us narrowed and I threw myself into his arms, sobbing with relief.

Lucas held me close, whispering soothing words against my ear as I cried. The relief outweighed everything else and I didn't need, or want, answers right now. It was enough that he was here, holding me, and everyone was safe.

"Take her upstairs to rest. It's been a difficult night," Ben suggested. "We can speak later."

Lucas swept me into his arms and headed towards the stairs, stopped by Rowena at the base of the stairwell. She kissed my cheek softly. "Charlotte, thank you. You saved us all tonight."

I stared at her in disbelief. Didn't she realize if it hadn't been for me, they wouldn't have been in danger in the first place?

Lucas carried me up to his bedroom, kissing my forehead repeatedly as I cried against his shoulder. "Shhhh, my love. It's all right, everything is alright now."

He placed me down beside the bed and Marianne appeared. Her pink-streaked hair was disheveled and her clothing was torn and covered in dirt, but she smiled radiantly as Lucas left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. "You did a wonderful thing tonight, Charlotte," she said, as she helped me undress. "Thank goodness you were here, or we wouldn't have known what was happening. My ability is such a hit and miss thing, I'm too young yet for it to have solidified into a reliable power." She smiled. "In another fifty years or so, Ben tells me my psychic ability will be firing on all cylinders. Until then, I'm just a baby vampire with a fairly imprecise power."

I groaned and squeezed my eyes shut. "If it wasn't for me, none of you would have been in that situation."

"That doesn't matter, Charlotte. You are safe, we are safe, and Lucas is happy," Marianne responded quietly. "Let's not worry about this for now – you look exhausted." She slipped a negligee over my head. "Let's get you into bed and you can sleep. You'll feel much better when you are rested."

She settled me into bed and when she opened the door Lucas stepped through, his eyes filled with warmth when he smiled. Marianne called a soft goodnight and disappeared soundlessly down the hall.

I leaned back against the pillows, relieved and exhausted now it was over. My eyelids were heavy and my eyes stung from lack of sleep.

"Are you feeling a little better now?" Lucas sounded concerned, his forehead creased with worry.

I nodded, glancing up at him. It was the first time I'd actually taken a good look at him since his arrival home and I realized what a mess he was after the fight. "Your shirt – it's all torn."

Lucas glanced down at his wrecked shirt and scowled. "I should go and change."

"No! Don't leave me please?"

Lucas stood uncertainly for a moment, and then shrugged. "As you wish, my Charlotte." He tugged at the buttons on his chambray shirt and shrugged it from his shoulders. The visual was overwhelming, it was the first time I'd seen him shirtless and I sucked in a steadying breath. Hard muscle ridged beneath his pale skin, creating solid pecs and an impressive six-pack, which made me want to drool. Small dusky pink nipples stood out on his chest, covered with a dusting of fine dark hair and I longed to run my fingers across his skin, to see if that hair was as soft as it looked.

Lucas watched me from beneath hooded eyes, a knowing grin curving his lips. "If I'd known it would have this effect on you, I'd have taken off my shirt long before now."

He dropped down onto the bed, pulling the quilt up to cover his chest before taking me in his arms. He held me close, kissing my forehead repeatedly. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet. "Charlotte, you don't need to worry about them anymore."

"What happened?" I wasn't sure I was ready to have this conversation but I needed to know, wanted confirmation we were safe.

Lucas's grip around my back tightened. "We were fortunate you had contact with the spirits and sent the others. Without them, we were in trouble. A werewolf is a vicious predator, the natural enemy of the vampire. Why he chose to align himself with vampires I cannot begin to guess. He was the most dangerous type of werewolf – young, easily led and not in full control of his abilities. It was a further stroke of good fortune that Ben accompanied Striker and me. Without his talent for diplomacy they would have attacked immediately. Ben is an excellent negotiator; he was able to keep them talking for far longer than I could. It bought enough time for Ripley and the others to catch up and their Kiss was then outnumbered, even with a werewolf in their group."

The memory of Lucas killing Ambrose was repeating in my mind, like a horror movie on replay. "They didn't hurt any of you?"

"We are unharmed." He smiled grimly. "It appears I was wrong about your psychic abilities – they are quite remarkable. Things would have ended badly without your intervention."

"The spirits didn't want to help me," I admitted.

Lucas frowned, cocking his head to one side to stare at me. "What?"

Biting my lip, I explained the circumstances of my conversation with Mom and the other spirits. "What do you think it means?"

Lucas shook his head thoughtfully. "I have no idea. You say your mother suggests it was not her duty to warn others?"

"Yes, that's what she said. Something about only warning me, it's the rules."

"And when you asked her who made the rules..."

"She didn't answer the question. She just apologized," I confirmed tiredly.

Lucas stared thoughtfully out the window for a few seconds, his fingers twisting through the curls on my shoulder. "I honestly have no idea," he finally admitted. "But it seems you convinced them to break these rules, whatever they are."

"I was terrified. I thought you were going to die." Tears welled in my eyes and I snuggled closer to his chest.

"I promised I would come home safely, love," he responded softly, the strain of the past hours evident in his voice.

"I thought I was going crazy, I imagined the others would think I was mad when I started getting messages about werewolves."

"Charlotte, it is understandable that you find difficulty in making sense of this. You are not out of your mind. Werewolves are as real as vampires are. Although we don't make ourselves obvious to humans, both vampires and werewolves have inhabited this planet for a millennium," Lucas responded mildly.

"Did you— did they—" I choked up, unable to complete the sentence. The image of Lucas killing Ambrose appeared unbidden in my mind, making my stomach churn.

Lucas sighed heavily. "We had to kill the werewolf; he was too wild, very young, and extremely dangerous. We also killed one

vampire. The other two capitulated and we allowed them to leave. They won't come back again."

"How can you be so sure?"

"They won't risk attacking the Tine Kiss again. We have proven our superiority and assured them we will not tolerate further reprisals."

I squirmed until I could look into Lucas's eyes. "This was my fault."

"Don't think that Charlotte," he responded softly. "From time to time these situations arise for vampires. One Kiss will attempt to take over another; there are fights over land, disagreements between groups. By nature, we are bloodthirsty and combative, what happened tonight is no different."

"This wouldn't have arisen," I pointed out. "You were only in danger because of me." I frowned pensively, forcing myself to voice the doubt. "Maybe you'd be better off without me."

Lucas brushed his fingers across my cheek. "You don't honestly believe that? How could you imagine that I would want to exist without you in my life, when I've come to love you so deeply?"

"I'm not worth it, Lucas."

Lucas gazed down at me, searching my face. "Why didn't you tell me about the psychological abuse your stepfather subjected you to?"

My eyes widened. "How did you know about that?"

"I spoke with Ripley on the way back tonight."

"Ripley should stay out of my head," I muttered.

"Ripley said you were broadcasting so loudly, he couldn't avoid it," Lucas countered smoothly. "How he found out is beside the point." He kissed my forehead softly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I shook my head. "It didn't matter."

"I think it mattered a great deal – it explains a lot about you."

"I never let it affect me," I bristled, angered by the implication. "He was a bully, he liked to heap abuse on everyone around him. They were just words."

"Words that have had a greatly detrimental effect on your self-esteem," Lucas pointed out. "You don't think they have affected you – I assure you they have and it makes me furious to think he did this to you." He caught the tip of my chin with his thumb and lifted my head until I was looking at him. "Charlotte, listen to me. I love you, I think you are beautiful and kind and sweet and generous. You are the stars in my sky, the light in a perpetual darkness. My existence would be pointless without you. Despite what you believe – what that bastard told you – I am in love with you and find you absolutely worthy of my attention, my love and my desire." He lowered his mouth to mine, kissing me tenderly as he whispered against my mouth. "If I could find a way to make it safe for you, I would be making love to you now – right this second – to try and prove to you how much I adore you and need you. I would fill your body with mine, join us as one, and worship you, as you deserve to be worshipped. I love you, you crazy girl." He deepened the kiss, his tongue flicking across my lips as he sought entrance and I moaned softly in my throat, lust slamming into every nerve in my body. For a few minutes, we lay in a tangle of arms and legs as I sought to get as close to him as I could possibly be with our clothes on still. I trailed my fingers across his chest, brushing a finger tentatively across one erect bud and Lucas broke away, cursing beneath his breath. "Charlotte, you have no idea how much I want to make you mine," he growled.

"I think I do," I whispered, flopping back down against his chest, breathing heavily. A quick glimpse down the lean form of his body

showed exactly how much he wanted it, if the tenting in his pants was anything to go by. I blushed and averted my eyes, snuggling against his shoulder. He made no move to get away from me, instead wrapping me up tighter against him and resting his chin against the top of my head.

We lay in silence for a long time and my eyelids started to droop with exhaustion. I heard Lucas inhale deeply against my hair and tilted my head so I could see his face. "I thought my scent was bad for you?"

Lucas grinned. "I never said your scent was bad for me. In fact," he breathed deeply again and closed his eyes, "your scent is the most wonderful thing I have ever experienced. I am merely enjoying the aroma."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Doesn't that lead to... biting?" His control had already been pushed to its limits in the past few minutes and I wasn't sure it was a good idea for him to tempt himself even further.

Lucas chuckled, his expression filled with delight. "I won't allow myself to taste the wine, as much as I crave it. I do believe I'm developing a good deal more control around the wine, however."

"What does it feel like? When you crave someone's blood?" He'd piqued my curiosity now, and bizarrely, I thought I would prefer this discussion to thinking about the night's events.

Lucas rolled me gently onto my back and turned on his side to gaze down at me, his expressions serious. "Are you sure you want to know, Charlotte? I know you find my appetite for blood... unappealing."

I flushed red and glanced away. I hadn't realized I'd made my aversion so obvious. I thought I'd been keeping those thoughts to myself. Thoughts... *Ripley*. Damn it. I was going to talk to him and

demand he stop reading my thoughts. I met Lucas's eyes and he smiled.

"Yes, Ripley told me you were struggling to understand our blood craving. And no, you can't keep him from your thoughts. As I told you, he does his best to avoid it, but if you are broadcasting clearly, he can't help what he hears."

"I'm sorry." I dropped my chin, ashamed of myself. I'd always accepted everyone, regardless of his or her personal choices, race, color, or creed. Why was I having so much trouble with this? *Because it involves drinking blood, of course.* No matter how many ways I tried to analyze it, the drinking of blood was disgusting and whether it was human or animal blood was irrelevant.

"Charlotte, look at me," Lucas demanded.

I lifted my head and knew my sorrow was visible on my face. I couldn't understand, but if I was pursuing this relationship, I had to try. It was a non-negotiable condition.

Lucas rubbed his fingers against my cheek, his touch soothing. "It's entirely reasonable for you to struggle with our need for blood. It's a natural response to be repulsed, relating back to the legends passed down from generation to generation. Vampires are evil, loathsome creatures who drink blood, the very concept of which is alien to the human population. Which is why we are the subject of horror stories and scary movies – we are supposed to be abhorrent to humans, we are meant to cause fear and trepidation."

"I'm not frightened of you," I responded hurriedly. "I know you won't bite me."

"As I have pointed out before, you have a great deal of faith in me. It might be misplaced confidence. Whilst I still win this battle, it is not an easy path to follow." Lucas frowned for a brief second, his eyes hard. "I'm learning to deal with my desire and whilst I find your

scent as delicious now as the day I met you, I'm beginning to control the urges which come naturally. But you must never forget – I am, and always will be, a danger to you.”

“Explain the desire. How does it make you feel, when you need blood?”

The frown reappeared, his eyebrows nearly meeting as he struggled with my request. “Once again, you bring up a subject which makes me fear you will run away screaming if I give you the answer.”

“I haven't run away yet,” I responded quietly. I brushed my fingers across his cheek and he caught them, pressing them to his lips for a kiss.

He drew a ragged breath and started to speak, his voice low. “The thirst for blood is as natural to us as your desire to eat and drink. Imagine you are in a desert and have walked for miles and miles, with no water, nothing available to quench your thirst. The sun is beating down on you from above, and your throat is dry, so parched that it burns with the need for water.”

I nodded, my eyes focused on his to try to prove he wasn't frightening me.

“A vampire's need for blood is similar in many ways, only much, much worse. The urge for blood when we need to feed, it creates a burning sensation in the throat that is like being caught in the flames of hell. The yearning is irresistible; the only thing in a vampire's mind in those circumstances is the hunt for blood. Nothing can dissuade us from the goal.”

“And... that's how you feel when you're with me?” I asked cautiously.

Lucas nodded slightly and a smile played around his lips. “That's *one* of the feelings I am dealing with when I am around you. For the

most part, it's the worst to control."

"But when you've been out and fed, it's okay then, isn't it?"

The shake of his head was infinitesimal, as if he didn't want to admit to his thoughts. "In normal circumstances – with anyone else – yes, the need for blood, the thirst is easily controlled. With you however..." He shrugged and shook his head. "The thirst remains almost insatiable, all the time."

"Why?"

Lucas traced a path along my arm with his fingers. "I have no idea. Something about you, your blood, is so powerful it makes me crave constantly." He sighed, laying back against the bed and staring at the ceiling. "When I first met you, all I wanted to do was bite you, taste your blood, drain your body of every last drop. It was insatiable, completely overwhelming. I could think of nothing else for weeks."

I thought about this for a minute or two and Lucas remained silent, letting me reflect in peace. "How close did you come? To killing me?"

Lucas squeezed his eyes shut and torment flashed across his face. "Very close. The first time I met you, I considered telling people I would take you to hospital and instead spirited you away to feast on your blood. The craving – it was... almost impossible to control. Then I found myself visiting you in the hospital, even though I knew it was a mistake, masochism at its very worst. Yet I couldn't stay away. I had to see you again, even while I was thinking of a hundred different ways in which I could draw you in, use my skills to capture you, taste your blood. I was constantly out of my mind." He smiled ruefully at the memory. "After that, I tried to avoid you, knowing it was the best thing for you. But then I discovered your

scent in the forest and took to following you each day. I couldn't stay away, couldn't stop myself."

I tried to lighten his mood. "So I guess you became a stalker?"

"You could say that," Lucas smirked. "As the days passed, although my desire was as strong as ever, you began to intrigue me. I wanted to know more about you, why you were always so sad. What caused your beautiful green eyes to be shadowed in perpetual pain? It came as quite a shock to realize I was falling in love with you." He leaned forward and kissed my lips fleetingly. "It wasn't until I rescued you at the falls, the day I took you to my home that I began to wonder if it was possible to control. If I could savor the wine, without drinking."

"But you went back to avoiding me again," I pointed out.

"Yes, I did. After I offered to drive you home. Until then I had been affected by your scent, but harbored hopes that I could control it. But having you in the car with me – it was sheer hell. Your scent was everywhere; I couldn't avoid it and couldn't escape it. In a ten-minute drive to your cottage I realized that as much as I loved you, I couldn't stop myself from hurting you. The thought was too much to bear, caused me agony. I stopped following you from that day onwards, refusing to go into the woods. I went to Europe to visit friends, hoping that being away from you would erase you from my mind."

"It didn't work out?" I guessed aloud.

"God, no. It didn't work out. Every moment was still filled with you, every thought and every minute of the day. It was a complete obsession – I decided to come back and face up to it, try and find some way of working through it so I could be around you. The day I saw you in the grocery store – I'd only arrived back in Puckhaber that day. Having been away from your scent – and then to

immediately meet it head on – it was unbearable. I wanted to kill you there and then. There were only a few people in the store, I could simply kill them and nobody would be any the wiser.”

A shiver of apprehension ran up my spine and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up at his confession.

“I knew I would frighten you,” Lucas groaned.

“Not so much for me,” I responded quickly, considering the thoughts churning through my mind. “I feel bad for the other people who were in the store. I still don't believe you would really harm me.”

Lucas stared, shaking his head slowly. “You know, I think you really could be crazy.”

I grinned, combing my fingers through his dark hair. “Probably. What happened, why did you change your mind?”

“I spent hours talking with Ben, trying to find a solution.” He screwed up his nose. “Striker and Ripley both suggested I kill you and get it over with, put myself out of my misery.”

“Remind me to slap them when I see them in the morning.”

“I wouldn't recommend it. You'll only break the other arm.” We shared a smile and I rolled my eyes.

“What made you decide to see me again?” I yawned heavily.

“Up until the day you were attacked, I still hadn't made a decision. Ben was supportive, but he knew what I wanted was practically impossible, particularly given my reaction every time I saw you. I was torn between my conscience and my desire. Then Marianne had the vision of what was happening to you and when I got there and saw what Ambrose was—” Lucas held his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut. “I knew then I could never allow anything to hurt you. The love I felt for you was the most important thing in my existence and I knew I would do

everything in my power to keep you safe." He looked up at me and the depth of his passion was clear in his eyes. "I knew then I would not be the one to hurt you, not if I could possibly help it. I couldn't bear to stop myself from seeing you any longer and although my thirst for you was all-consuming, my love for you was just as strong." He kissed my cheek tenderly. "So here we are. The vampire and his little baby bird."

I smiled sleepily and Lucas caught me in his arms, settling my head against his chest once again. "Sleep, my Charlotte. Sleep and have sweet dreams. I will be here when you wake up."

CHAPTER 19

OPTIONS

I wasn't sure how long I'd slept, but when I woke it was dark outside and moonlight shone through the open window. I lifted my head and smiled at Lucas who was lying with one hand behind his head, appearing relaxed and comfortable.

"I would say good morning, but it's almost midnight," he commented mildly.

I rolled onto my back, stretching. "It's a beautiful night."

Lucas glanced towards the window. "A full moon." He turned on his side and caught me in his arms, his face inches from mine. "And not nearly as beautiful as you." He captured my lips and kissed me with more insistence than he normally allowed himself. I kissed him back, wrapping my arms around his neck and holding him against me. My heartbeat sped up; blood pumping more rapidly through my veins and all too soon, Lucas gently extricated himself. I was breathing raggedly and Lucas dropped his head to my chest, listening to the pounding of my heart. "That is such a wonderful sound," he whispered softly. "And you are so wonderfully warm." He straightened up with a sigh. "I wish I could keep kissing you, without it becoming dangerous."

"I wish you could too," I admitted shyly.

"Perhaps with time," Lucas mused. "It is getting easier."

I pressed a fleeting kiss against his lips. "In the meantime, we need to keep trying. So it keeps getting easier."

He grinned, and delight filled his blue eyes. "I think it's time to feed the human. Rowena is preparing something for you; she looked in about fifteen minutes ago to see if you were close to waking."

I rolled over and pulled the quilt away from my legs, dragging myself out of bed. "Sounds great. I'm starved."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me?" Lucas questioned wryly. He appeared at my side, holding my bathrobe and I found myself captivated again by his bare chest. I took the bathrobe and reluctantly dragged my eyes away from his physique. Lucas crouched down beside me. "I think I will go take a shower and get some fresh clothes. The way you look at me without my shirt on is positively indecent."

I blushed furiously and Lucas laughed aloud, leaning forward to kiss me. "I love you. I'll see you downstairs."

He slipped out through the door and I stood up, pulling on the bathrobe and limping slowly down the hall to the bathroom. Freshening up a little, I brushed my teeth thoroughly and then dragged the brush through my hair with a frustrated scowl. It looked a mess and I pulled it into a ponytail out of desperation.

Padding silently down the hall my one bare foot and the plaster cast made little impact on the plush carpet. Reaching the head of the stairs I heard raised voices and paused, doubtful if I should go downstairs or allow the conversation to continue in privacy. I heard my name mentioned and gripped the banister tightly, reluctant to go downstairs after I recognized Gwynn's voice, obviously angry.

"Why can't we vote on whether she gets to keep living here? Doesn't my opinion mean anything?"

"Be reasonable, Gwynn. I think it's clear how we would vote if we took that step." Ben responded to her fury with a soothing tone. "Rowena and I both want to offer Charlotte the opportunity to remain with us if she desires. She has no-one else."

"So? How is that my problem? She's human; she doesn't belong in a Kiss! What happens if one of us loses control and she's killed? How will Lucas explain *that* to her friends in Puckhaber?"

"You know we are taking all precautions, just as we do to allow Katie to visit with us. There are inherent risks, but we can deal with them," Acenith said.

"Katie is a different situation! She's *related* to William! Charlotte is nothing to us, nothing at all!" Gwynn's fury was startling, her animosity palpable. "Ben, you and Rowena can't just adopt her like some little Orphan Annie you found on a street corner!"

"Aww, Gwynn, don't be like that," Striker said in his gravelly voice. "Charlotte's a good kid; we've all gotten to like her. Why can't she stay here with us?"

"It's dangerous, that's why!" Gwynn spat furiously. "She only has to slip up and tell someone and our existence is threatened! We'll have to run again."

"We're leaving after the wedding in any case. You know that's the plan, so don't use that as your argument," Acenith announced derisively. "You are being melodramatic, Gwynn."

"I am *not* being melodramatic! She poses a real danger to every one of us. To what end this insanity continues, I don't know! You know as well as I do, what Lucas is attempting with her is completely impossible. He can't possibly think this relationship can continue, when he can't even screw her without killing her!"

"That's a terrible thing to say!" Marianne protested.

"Oh shut up, Marianne, you know it's true. And why is everyone standing up for poor little Charlotte? Why is what she wants more important than what I want?"

"Sometimes what you want isn't the most important thing in the world," Ripley said, his tone mocking. "I wish you would remember that."

"Ripley, you were the one who didn't trust her in the first place! Are you honestly suggesting you want her to stay here? When she could betray us at any moment?"

There was a moment of silence, the air charged with tension. "I admit I do have my doubts, I worry that if things between her and Lucas don't work out she may betray us."

"You see? She *shouldn't* stay here!"

"Gwynn, that's enough!" Rowena's soft voice held determination I'd never heard before. "You've made your point. But we've gotten to know Charlotte and she's made Lucas happier than I have ever seen him. We have to consider his feelings."

"Why? He knows this is a fool's errand!"

Ben's voice was terse when he spoke. "Lucas is like a brother to me and I respect and love him. He gave us somewhere to live, every one of us, when we broke away from other groups because of our desire to live a better life. He has provided protection for us from those same groups, who treated us with derision for choosing this lifestyle. He has provided safe harbor to you and to all of us. You would do well to remember the kindness and loyalty he has offered to both you and William in the past."

"I love Charlotte," Marianne added quietly. "I want her to stay."

"Of course you do, Marianne. You can't bear the idea of not making yet another *friend*," Gwynn retorted. "The facts of the matter remain – we wouldn't have been placed in a dangerous situation last

night if it hadn't been for her. Ambrose's Kiss wouldn't have come if she hadn't been here. There would have been no need for them to seek revenge if Lucas hadn't killed Ambrose."

"Ambrose deserved to die. His kind are despicable," William announced, his voice husky. "I've killed many humans, but I've never treated any of them with the lack of respect he showed to Charlotte."

I trembled, remembering the attack and how close I'd come to being raped.

"But you still killed them, didn't you?" Gwynn argued. "Out of all of us I would think you'd understand where I'm coming from! Your control hovers on a hair trigger. Who's to say you won't lose control with a human living here permanently?"

"Gwynn..." Striker's voice carried a warning in that one word, but Gwynn sailed on regardless.

I don't understand why you all seem to adore her! She's nothing but a human – food on the hoof! Yet you've fallen over yourselves to become her friends, to worship her as if she's something special! She isn't, she's just a human girl who shouldn't be living with us! What happens if the Council learns of her? Has anyone considered that?"

"Gwynn, that is *enough*," Ben growled. "You've argued your point adequately. The chances of the Council finding out about Charlotte are minimal, we have little or no contact with them and they have no reason to investigate what our small Kiss does here in Montana. I consider Lucas family; he has made this choice and I accept it without any reservations and so should you. He is family and he loves Charlotte. As far as Rowena and I are concerned, Charlotte is family too. We look after what belongs to us and you know that."

There was an extended silence before Gwynn responded, her voice flat and all the fight gone from her words. "Fine. If you want her to live here I guess I have to accept it, but it doesn't mean I have to like it. William and I will leave after the wedding. We will find another Kiss to join."

"Hang on, Gwynn," William sounded annoyed, the first time I'd heard him sound anything but calm.

"No, William. I don't want this and I won't stay here with her. You either come with me... or I'll leave alone."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I fervently wished I hadn't eavesdropped. My hand was shaking violently on the banister and what I'd overheard confirmed what I'd known all along – Gwynn resented me staying here. More than that, she hated me. There were no options left after hearing her arguments and unhappily, I had to agree they were valid. What she'd said rung true and I could appreciate where she was coming from. As much as I was at risk with a Kiss of vampires, I put far greater risk on them.

But what should I do now? Going back to the bedroom wasn't an option, Lucas was expecting to meet me downstairs. I couldn't pack and leave now – how could I get out without a confrontation? The idea of facing them with what I'd learned was something I couldn't stomach. There was only one alternative which would give me time to digest what had been said and make some decisions about how to get out of the house with the least amount of conflict.

Taking a deep breath I cleared my head of the thoughts milling around, knowing Ripley would notice them. I needed to keep my thoughts about the future neutral, so Marianne wouldn't pick up on anything if she had one of her fortune-telling moments. This wasn't going to be easy. The only viable option was to open my mind to the spirits, allowing as many as possible to clamor at once. It would stop

Ripley reading my mind and might be enough to stop Marianne seeing my future – at least until I'd decided on one. I set myself the task of imagining Lucas in my future, despite the heartbreaking realization that it was impossible. Releasing the spirits, a cacophony of voices assaulted my head, the first tendrils of a headache working its way into my temples.

Gripping the banister, I walked carefully down the stairs.

They were seated around the living room, no discernible tension remaining from the argument they'd ended only seconds ago. Marianne met me at the bottom of the stairs and drew me into an affectionate embrace. "We thought you were going to sleep all night through!" She kissed my cheek, her affection both genuine and touching. "Come into the kitchen, Rowena's prepared a meal for you."

I followed her to the kitchen, the others drifting along behind us. Marianne ushered me to a chair and the rest of the group joined us around the table. This was unusual in itself, normally only Rowena and occasionally Marianne joined me in the kitchen. Tonight they all gathered, crammed around the small kitchen table with Gwynn and William sitting together on the counter. The only distinct sign of anything being wrong was Gwynn's pinched expression and the way she kept her arms stiffly crossed over her chest.

Rowena had made a pizza and I picked up a slice, forcing myself to bite and swallow. I listened to the conversation, astonished by how easily they communicated with no signs of the anger they'd revealed just moments ago. Lucas had explained they were adept at lying, creating illusions to deceive humans. It was as natural to them as breathing and even that was an illusion – vampires had no need to breathe.

I stole a glance at Ripley, speculating about whether he could hear my thoughts, but there nothing to suggest he was privy to what was going through my mind. The talk was happy and cheerful and I marveled again at what a cohesive group they were. I would miss them when I moved out and a sharp twinge of misery stabbed my chest.

"So did Lucas tell you the gruesome details about last night?" Striker inquired cheerfully.

I nearly choked on a mouthful of pizza, wondering how Striker could find so much enjoyment in something I found so disgusting. He seemed to have truly enjoyed the fight unlike the others, who considered it distasteful to kill their own.

"Striker, honestly. Can you not act like a gentleman for once in your life?" Ripley sniffed disdainfully.

"It's okay," I responded quickly. I'd caught the twinkle in Striker's eye, knew he wanted me to be horrified and I didn't intend to give him the satisfaction. "He told me all about it. Sounds like it was quite a fight."

"You bet it was, when we ripped—"

He was silenced by a howl of protest from the others and I dipped my head so he wouldn't see the revulsion in my eyes.

"I'm sure Charlotte heard all she wants to about last night," Ben said quietly. "It must have been distressing for you, left alone here with Katie."

"I was making contingency plans, if that's what you mean," I responded bleakly.

Rowena lifted an eyebrow. "Contingency plans?"

"In case none of you came back," I said, chewing on my lower lip. "I knew Katie had to be protected and I was worried they would come back here if none of you survived."

"What did you intend to do?" Acenith enquired. She was sitting beside Rowena, elegant in a flowing red silk shirt, her long hair braided.

"I figured there wasn't much I could do to fight them. I'd decided to search the house, find whatever cash I could gather." I smiled apologetically. "I was going to steal one of the cars, take Katie, and run."

"Where did you plan to go?" Rowena asked. "What did you intend to do, once you'd left?"

"Keep Katie safe. I thought I'd drive to Los Angeles and try to get a flight to Europe, somewhere far away. I figured Katie might have a passport but I don't, so I was working out how one goes about getting an fake passport." I paused for a few seconds, considering the plan I'd formulated. "I was going to take one of your cell phones, so if anyone did survive, I could contact you and let you know where Katie and I were hiding."

Marianne's look was admiring, her gaze warm. "We appreciate how much you were willing to do to keep Katie safe."

I offered her a tiny smile, but it was forced. Gwynn was Katie's mother to all intents and purposes and she certainly didn't appreciate a single thing about me.

"Why did you consider a fake passport?" Ben asked curiously, smoothly moving the conversation forward. "You could have applied for and received a passport within twenty four hours."

"I'm a convicted murder," I responded quietly. "I can't have a passport for another three years."

"Great thinking, Lott. I'm impressed," Striker grinned.

"I told you she was intelligent. It seems she's cunning, too." Lucas strode into the kitchen, his sudden appearance startling me. His hair was damp from the shower and he was dressed in navy blue

dockers and a cream sweater. He leaned across the table and handed me a can of Coke which I accepted silently, keeping my gaze averted. I couldn't face those blue eyes when I'd made the decision to leave and knew he would soon hate me.

"Don't know how you eat that crap, Charlotte. I think I'd *rather* eat a squirrel," Striker teased, eyeing the pizza with distaste.

"You don't know what you're missing."

I pushed the plate away, having eaten my fill and that appeared to be the cue for a change of subject. Marianne vacated the chair beside me, going to sit with William and Gwynn on the countertop. Lucas took her place, draping his arm around my shoulder and he leaned forward to kiss my cheek. It was all I could do not to burst into tears.

Ben leaned back in his chair, turning his attention to Lucas. "Would you prefer to speak?"

Lucas shook his head, a broad smile creasing his lips. "You go ahead."

Ben nodded his affirmation and smiled softly when his gaze returned to mine. "I have no doubt you're wondering why we have all gathered together."

"I guess it wasn't to watch the human eat," I replied quietly.

Striker snorted his amusement and Ben's smile broadened into a grin before he continued. "We wanted to thank you for your insight last night – what you accomplished saved Lucas, Striker and I from a very dangerous situation."

I cringed, guilt pouring through my veins like a virus. "If it wasn't for me, none of you would have been in that position."

"Yeah, that's true. But if it wasn't for meeting you, I'd never have had the chance to speak with Mom again," Striker announced.

"We all appreciate what you've done for us," Rowena added. "To discover what really happened that dreadful night – to have the joy of knowing Duncan continued to care for and watch over me – it was a blessing I never thought to receive."

Marianne smiled, her eyes twinkling. "You've given me the opportunity to see my family again. It was something I would never have believed possible."

"We have benefited from your appearance in our existence, Charlotte. Much more, I imagine, than you have from our appearance in yours," Ben agreed. "Which is why we are gathered here tonight. Lucas told us how you feel about staying with us and that you consider us family. We feel the same way about you and we'd like you to stay with us on a permanent basis. The Kiss has agreed and in Rowena's case, she would love nothing better than to have you here to mother." Ben smiled warmly. "Apparently, you are far more agreeable to being cared for than the rest of us."

Tears began to flow, silently running down my cheeks. I knew Ben was completely sincere, but I also knew not everyone had agreed to the idea and the knowledge was tearing me apart. Rowena left the table and appeared at my side with a box of Kleenex, which she'd purchased especially for me, the only person who could possibly need them. Vampires couldn't cry, never got colds. I pulled one from the box and dabbed my eyes, trying to gather the strength for what I was about to do.

Ben continued. "This isn't something you should enter into lightly. I know you enjoy living here, but our lifestyle is not for the faint-hearted – it's based on lies and deceit. People around us must be convinced we are human. There are many factors you need to consider before you make your decision. The fact that we don't age is an issue, we can only stay in an area for a limited period and then

move on. Sometimes our plans don't work out, if a human becomes suspicious of our true nature we must leave quickly, uproot and relocate. You would have to be prepared for that, know that friendships you make will be destroyed, any employment you undertook could be only a temporary measure. You know we'll be leaving Puckhaber soon, straight after Marianne and Striker's wedding. And for you, there are some unique dangers to living with us." He paused, glancing around the table. "For the most part we cope with your scent and with careful monitoring of our feeding, you will be safe. However, as a human you are particularly fragile. If you were to cut yourself and bleed, it becomes a serious issue. Something as simple as falling over and scraping your knee puts you in danger of one of us losing control and attacking you. The onus would be entirely on you to keep in mind the need for caution. You have to be prepared for that."

I nodded, unable to speak through the lump in my throat.

"There are other challenges," Ben added. "We have contact with vampires from around the world and very few rely on animal blood to survive – most feed on and kill humans. There will be a risk to you every time we encounter them. We will assess each situation and decide if it's safe for you to stay with us, or if we should separate until the danger passes." He met Lucas's eyes and smiled warmly. "Lucas would naturally stay with you, to ensure your safety."

Lucas drew me closer, kissing my forehead softly. "I will always keep you safe, my Charlotte."

Cringing at the devotion in Lucas's words, I knew how much I was about to hurt him. I took a deep breath, ignoring the tight pull against my ribcage as I wiped away more tears.

"So what do you think, Lott? Wanna live with the vampires on a permanent basis?" Striker's voice was filled with enthusiasm but I

caught the furious look which crossed Gwynn's face. I couldn't be part of this group being torn apart the way my family had been and I wouldn't be responsible for them fighting over me being here. Gwynn insisted she was leaving if I stayed – the situation was untenable.

“I appreciate the offer, I really do.” I focused on my hands, knowing if I looked at anyone I’d lose the courage to lie convincingly. “But I can't stay. I love you all, but— after last night, I've done a lot of thinking and I've decided I should leave. What happened made me realize how dangerous it is to stay. I know none of you would deliberately harm me, but I should be living with other humans. It's the sensible thing to do. I'm— I'm frightened of what could happen if I stay with you, and I don't want to meet any other vampires.”

“I don't believe you,” Lucas said, his voice raw.

I risked a glance at his face and my heart ached at the immense pain reflected in his blue eyes. With a shuddering breath, I turned away. “It's true. You've told me repeatedly that you don't know if you can win the struggle against your natural instincts. I don't want to take the risk. I'm feeling much better about my life now. I'm thinking about trying to find my real Dad, get to know him again. I belong with humans, not vampires.”

Lucas shook his head vehemently and reached for me, drawing my face up to meet his. “Tell me the truth, Charlotte! Why are you doing this to us?”

The anguish in his voice was almost more than I could bear but I had to continue, needed to make a clean break. I kept my gaze on his, using every ounce of willpower to do so. “I don't want to stay here with you. You told me you’d never stop me from leaving and now I want to. I want a normal life, a husband, a family. You can't give me that.”

Lucas's hands dropped away from my face as though the contact was painful. It was obvious how deeply he was wounded; I'd thrown everything about him back in his face. I'd used his promise to me against him, and I'd never forgive myself.

I reached for the beautiful ring he'd given me, intent on removing it to give it back. My fingers shook as I tried to pull it off.

Lucas saw what I was doing and gripped my hand tightly in his. "Keep it. I told you I wanted you to have it always." He dropped my hand, slumping in the chair with his head in his hands.

"I can't keep it, Lucas. It wouldn't be right."

"I will not take it back," he said decisively. He remained slumped forward, refusing to meet my eyes and my heart shattered.

"Will you at least wait until Jerome removes the plaster next week?" Ben asked. He and the others seemed shell-shocked, couldn't believe I really intended to leave. I glanced at Marianne and knew she would be crying if she was capable of doing so.

"No, I'm going now. Tonight. I'll drop by the hospital and get it removed. Don't misunderstand, I truly appreciate everything you've done for me, but I think this is for the best." I drew myself wearily to my feet. "I'll go and pack."

"At least let me help you," Rowena offered. Her shoulders were slumped and sorrow was noticeable in her voice.

"No thank you. I'd rather do it myself." I was cursing myself for this cruelty to the people I loved more than anything. Keeping my gaze lowered, I turned from the table and slowly made my way from the room. I needed to escape to somewhere that the torrents of pain could be released.

"Charlotte?" I turned at the doorway, forcing my gaze up to meet Ripley's eyes. He scrutinized me for a few seconds, clearly trying to force his way through the cacophony of voices in my mind. There

was no sense of triumph when he failed, only the desperate sadness which threatened to overwhelm me. "I'll get your car ready," he finally offered.

"Thank you." I turned and walked away, heading up the stairs and bracing myself for whatever the future might hold.

CHAPTER 20

EXILE

Day One:

Nothing. I removed the casts with a sharp knife, unwilling to visit the hospital next week and see Jerome.

Day Two:

Nothing. I spent the entire day wallowing in misery, drinking coffee and staring at the living room walls.

Day Three:

Nothing. I didn't bother to get off the cot, instead lying flat on my back, staring at ceiling. Trying hard not to think.

Day Four:

Nothing. The spirits have shut up at last, giving up their frustrating attempts to get through to me. I've given up too.

Day Five:

Nothing.

Day Six:

Sleep eluded me throughout the night and I lay on the cot listening to the sounds of the woods around me. Those same sounds had brought some comfort in the hours of darkness, before I'd gotten involved with Lucas. Now they were a continual reminder of how much I missed the Kiss. Solitude had been my haven, loneliness

my preference. Now I craved the chatter of Rowena, Marianne and the others. Longed for it, pined for it. The ache was unendurable, almost worse than the pain when my ribs were broken. I can't recover from this.

Day Seven:

A week has passed, a week since I lost my soul and had my heart torn out. The only reason I'd found to live. Although I try not to think of Lucas, he's in my every waking moment. I've tried to remember the happiness I enjoyed with him, but the look in his eyes on that last night is all I can recall with any clarity. The hurt, the sadness, and the betrayal. I spend most of my time trying to convince myself I can move on, but the desire is gone. Suicide creeps into my thoughts, despite the promise I made to Ben to continue taking the medication Jerome prescribed. It would do no good; I can't possibly recover from this misery. The ache in my chest is constant, as if someone has reached into my chest cavity, ripped out my heart and stomped on it.

Day Eight:

I lay on the cot, eyes wide open as I watched daylight creep into the room. I'd endured another wakeful night and I wondered idly how long a person could go without sleeping. Without eating. It had been eight days now, with minimal sleep and nothing to eat. Just endless cups of coffee – until today. Now I faced a dilemma – I'd run out of coffee. Milk had been finished for a day or two, but I'd chosen to drink black coffee rather than facing people. Now a difficult choice had to be made. Live without coffee, or go to the store.

I groaned, dragging myself into a sitting position. I could survive without food, didn't feel like eating. But coffee? Impossible to live without the caffeine. With a sigh I got to my feet and limped out into the living room.

My belongings were exactly where I'd left them eight days ago, jumbled in the middle of the floor. I hadn't bothered changing clothes, hadn't troubled to shower. In fact, I hadn't bothered with anything besides breathing and it was an intense struggle to work up the energy even for that. I searched through various bags and boxes looking for fresh clothes and underwear. I needed a shower before I went into town to make myself look remotely human.

Human. That was the root cause of my current predicament – I *was* human.

I stood under the steaming hot water, washing away a week worth of dirt. When I stepped out of the shower, I wrapped a towel around myself and studied my reflection in the cracked mirror over the sink. A stranger looked back – pale and hollow-cheeked, with haunted shadows ringed her eyes. The green eyes looked dead, unfocused and uncaring. This was a different person to the one I'd been eight days ago – the one with a flush of color in her cheeks and eyes filled with life.

I dragged on faded jeans and a sweater, hunting for a few minutes to find a belt among my belongings. My hipbones were protruding and I knew I'd lost weight. Pounds, by the look of it. It didn't matter. All I wanted to do was get through this. Go to the store, pick up coffee, come back to the cottage. I had two weeks left on the rent and then I'd depart for destinations unknown. I didn't care where I went, what I did, as long as I got far away from here. Nothing mattered any more; I could barely find the energy to plan the next five minutes of my existence.

I raked through my purse searching for my wallet, grabbed the car keys and hobbled out to the car. Even that tugged at my heart. It was another reminder of my friends, their generosity and kindness.

I cautiously eased my foot onto the clutch pedal, started the car, and eased out the gravel drive and onto the highway. My ankle was giving me considerable pain and I suffered a twinge of guilt over removing the plaster. No doubt Jerome would be horrified because I knew there was something wrong with it still, but the casts hindered me and I had no tolerance for them. And I missed being carried around by the strong man who'd become the center of my universe. I missed his cool skin against mine, the hard pressure of his lips when he'd kissed me.

I mentally shook away the daydream, cautioning myself against thinking about Lucas like this. It only created more heartache and pain. I wished there was some way to purge him from my mind, slice out the memories which were causing continual agony.

I drove down Main Street, deciding against the Quikmart. The idea of running into people I knew was more than I could tolerate and in the only supermarket in town the odds were high. I drove to the other end of Puckhaber instead, a couple of miles down the road to a gas station which stocked a small supply of groceries. It was more costly but what did it matter? I pulled into the gas station, purchasing two large jars of coffee and a supply of milk, then drove back towards the cottage. I was content, knowing I'd avoided anyone I knew, which saved the effort of speaking. I didn't want to discuss anything I had no inclination to explain.

Twenty minutes later I pulled into the gravel drive and only as I turned the last corner did I notice the two cars parked in front of the cottage. A shiny Landcruiser and a sleek black Prius. Pulling the car to a stop behind the four-wheel drive, I glanced up at the porch and discovered a small group of people waiting for me.

Not people. Vampires.

Sighing heavily, I yanked the keys from the ignition and slowly twisted in the seat to haul myself out of the car. I limped around the Landcruiser and stared up at the group waiting for me.

"Hi," I announced quietly.

"Charlotte." Ripley smiled from the stoop, leaning nonchalantly against the doorframe. Marianne sat cross-legged on the porch beside him and Striker was perched on the top step, his long denim-clad legs crossed at the ankle.

"You're wasting your time. I'm not coming back," I stated flatly.

"We just want to talk, Lott." Striker stood up and grinned. "Can we come in?"

I rolled my eyes. "I guess so."

"Gee, there's a hospitable invitation." Striker stood to one side while I walked up the stairs and Marianne got up when I reached the porch. Looking remarkably like a blooming flower, she uncurled herself and captured me in a warm hug. I hesitated for a split-second before I hugged her back. I'd missed her.

I unlocked the door and shoved it open, allowing them into the cottage. The living room looked disgraceful, but I really didn't care. Without pause I hobbled through to the kitchen, placing the coffee and milk on the countertop and flicking the kettle on. When I turned around they'd crowded into the kitchen behind me and I crossed my arms over my chest. "What do you want?" I demanded flatly.

"We want you to come home, everyone misses you. Especially Lucas," Marianne stated without preamble.

I stared at her shrewdly. "Does Lucas know you're here?"

Marianne had the grace to look chagrined, rubbing her fingers through her pink highlighted hair. "Not exactly. *He* told us to leave you alone, said he wouldn't stop you if you wanted to leave. Ben and Rowena agreed with him."

"We chose to ignore them," Striker added cheerfully.

"I've already told you I'm not coming back. I don't want to live with you."

"Charlotte, you know that's an untruth," Ripley said. He was leaning against the kitchen counter, immaculate in a dark grey suit, navy blue shirt, and red tie. "You may have kept me out of your mind by opening it up to *every* dead person you could find, but ultimately we saw through your plan. You heard our discussion last week, didn't you? Or more precisely, you heard Gwynn mouthing off."

"I also heard you announcing you didn't trust me," I retorted sharply. I didn't want to have this conversation, but it riled me to think Ripley was going to lay all the blame on Gwynn. He'd had a hand in my decision too.

Ripley looked embarrassed; I think if he was capable of blushing he would have. "My apologies, my dear. Whilst I was worried about what would happen if the relationship between you and Lucas failed, your decision to leave and our subsequent discovery of why you chose to do so has proven you should be trusted. You made a decision based on what you thought best for us, and I applaud you for it. You have earned my trust."

"It doesn't make any difference. I don't belong with you."

"You could if you really wanted to," Marianne said, regarding me seriously. "You know we won't hurt you, we love you. You and Lucas."

The sound of his name cut my heart like a knife and I sagged against the cabinet, wrapping my arms across my chest. "You don't understand," I moaned, tears brimming against my eyelashes.

"I think we do." Striker spoke quietly, more gently than I'd ever heard before. "Your own family was destroyed and you don't want to

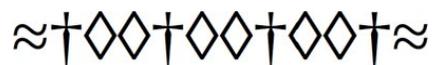
destroy ours. I get that. You thought Gwynn wouldn't come around and making us choose between you and her wouldn't be fair." He smiled warmly. "Gwynn can be a bit self-centered and she doesn't always think before she starts talking, but she knows William's decision is to stay with Lucas and the Kiss and he won't be swayed from that. He loves her, but she doesn't rule his life and he won't let her rule yours, either. She was being a bitch and she knows it. I know you think she hates you, but I've never seen her happier than she was when you spoke to her about her mother. She wants you to give her another chance."

A frown creased my forehead as I contemplated his words.

"We all want you back, Charlotte, even Gwynn. She can see what she did was wrong and she's deeply regretful. She didn't expect you to overhear that conversation." Marianne shrugged her slender shoulders. "I guess we were all relying on our enhanced senses, far more than we should have. We assumed we'd hear you coming downstairs but that being said, we should never have been having that conversation in the first place and Gwynn knows it."

"If Gwynn feels so badly about this, why didn't she come and see me?" I asked sharply. "Why send you three?"

Marianne smiled sheepishly. "Gwynn did come with us. We wanted a chance to try and convince you first, so she's waiting outside."



While they went out to collect Gwynn, I took the opportunity to make a fresh cup of coffee. A strong one. A confrontation was the last thing I wanted, but Ripley, Marianne and Striker had convinced me after a long hard argument.

What was there to lose? Nothing. There was little in my life without them. Glancing around the small kitchen I cringed at the thought of continuing as I'd done during the past eight days. A tiny tendril of hope had wound itself around my heart, holding the broken shards together and I stirred the coffee thoughtfully, wondering what Gwynn would say.

Even if she did convince me of her sincerity, what use was it? I'd betrayed Lucas in the worst possible way and I remembered the agony in his eyes during our final conversation. I was sure he couldn't forgive me for the deceit. The words I'd used, designed to destroy his feeling for me were something I didn't believe he'd ever forgive. I'd told him I wanted everything he couldn't give me.

"Charlotte?"

Gwynn stood behind me, immaculate in tailored jeans and a snug-fitting hound's tooth jacket, a scarf wrapped stylishly around her throat. I groaned internally, conscious of my baggy sweater and too-loose jeans but I stood my ground, watching Gwynn and waiting for her to speak.

"I'm here to apologize. What I said was uncalled for, I had no right to force my opinion on everyone and I had no right to speak behind your back, when you've been nothing but pleasant to me since we met." Gwynn rubbed her hands together, the first sign of weakness I'd ever seen from her. She was always so poised, so controlled. "Sometimes I speak out when I shouldn't," she admitted ruefully. "Perhaps if you knew a little more about my past, it would help you understand why I'm like this, why I'm so protective of the group I call family."

"I know about your past, Gwynn," I admitted.

Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a small 'o'. "Lucas... he *told* you what happened to me?"

"Of course not," I tapped my head and shrugged. "I have a direct line to your Mom and stepfather, remember?" I recalled the conversations we'd had very clearly and it was easy to pity Gwynn for what she'd suffered as a child. After her parents' divorce, six-year-old Gwynn lived with her father, Thomas Peabody, who'd been granted custody as was normal at the time. Her mother remarried two years later and when she tried to reclaim custody Thomas lied to the judge, telling him Gwynn had died of influenza. In fact, Gwynn was alive and stuck in a perpetual nightmare as her father sexually abused her in what should have been the safety of her home. The rapes continued throughout Gwynn's teenage years, culminating in an incestuous pregnancy in 1918, but Gwynn suffered a miscarriage in her fifth month, after being physical assaulted by her father. Gwynn escaped shortly after her nineteenth birthday, travelling across the country to put the maximum space possible between her and the father she loathed. The retelling of the events had been chilling and left me with abundant sympathy for this pretty girl with a tragically ugly past.

"I... Oh." Gwynn appeared nonplussed and shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her jacket. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't my place to do. Hearing these voices, spirits... whatever you want to call them," I shrugged weakly. "I hear lots of things I might be better off not knowing about. Or would prefer not to know. I'm only the messenger; I don't have much control over what I'm told. In fact, I don't have any control." I sipped the hot coffee, mulling over how to explain. "But I do get to decide whether to pass on what I'm told. I didn't think your circumstances were information I should repeat. It was private and you had the right to tell me if you chose to do so."

Gwynn regarded me seriously for a long time and I held her gaze, wondering what she would make of the admission. Eventually she smiled cautiously and had the good grace to look sheepish. "I need to apologize, Charlotte. I've treated you terribly and I want to make amends for my behavior. I see now the fears I had regarding you keeping our secrets are completely irrational. If you can keep what you knew about me secret, I believe you'll do the same with the knowledge of us being vampire. Can you forgive me?"

I shrugged offhandedly. "Sure."

She eyed me shrewdly. "How much do you know about my past?"

"I know what your father did to you. I know you ran away from home after you turned nineteen."

"So you know about Eugene?"

"Yeah." I offered her a little smile. "I know the name. He's the one who created you, according to your Mom."

She lapsed into silence, her eyes focused on the distance as if she was lost in memories. "Eugene offered me friendship when I was working as a waitress in San Francisco. He was such a nice man; he didn't want anything from me except friendship. It was such a pleasant change from all the other customers who saw a pretty girl and thought I would be easy." She leaned against the cabinet beside me. "Eugene was different, a perfect gentleman and always so solicitous and pleasant towards me. When I discovered he was vampire, I begged him to create me as one."

"Why?"

Gwynn focused on me, her eyes cold. "I wanted to be strong enough to destroy my father. I wanted to have the strength to kill him if I ever saw him again. I knew becoming vampire would give me that power."

It was chilling to hear her talk like this, such harsh words coming from such a beautiful young woman, but the determination in her eyes couldn't be ignored. She'd known what she was doing and how could I blame her for wanting to protect her own safety?

"Eugene argued for weeks over it, but when he understood how determined I was he agreed to do it. I knew there was risk, knew he might not be able to stop himself once he started drinking from me, but I trusted him and my trust was well placed. Eugene created me and cared for me during the change. When I first woke he helped me learn how to feed and we remained together for quite a long time afterwards." She brushed an imaginary speck of dirt from her jacket sleeve. "He was the one person I could trust in the world, at least, until I met William. Eugene taught me everything I needed to know and he helped me overcome the horrors of my past." She lapsed into silence for a minute. "I killed him, you know – my father."

"I didn't know that," I admitted quietly. "I've never had contact with your father."

"Lucky you." Gwynn smiled grimly. "He was a bastard. He deserved to die and I was more than happy to kill him. Eugene and I murdered him, probably a year or so after my creation." Seeing my startled look, she shook her head. "I didn't bite him, if that's what you think. God," she rolled her eyes, "the last thing I would have done was drink the tainted blood of that bastard. No, it was much more satisfying to choke the life from his sorry body. I was so much more powerful than him, you see – I could hold his neck and choke the breath out of him and there wasn't a thing he could do to stop it. Even now, I get delight in imagining him burning in hell." She laughed and the sound was bitter and brittle in the silent room. "Perhaps that's why you don't hear him, Charlotte. Maybe you can only contact the good and decent, like my Mom."

"I don't know," I responded quietly.

"I want you to come home with us, please Charlotte. Lucas deserves to have someone wonderful in his life. He deserves to have you."

"You were right, Gwynn. I don't belong with you. You were only doing what you thought was best and I can't blame you."

"No, I was doing what suited me best," Gwynn retorted. "I'm envious of humans. I'm envious of you."

I couldn't hide my surprise. "Why would you be envious of me?"

"Because you're still human. I chose this life for myself at a time when I was under a great deal of pressure and tremendously depressed. Thinking back, Eugene was right when he argued against creating me. If I'd known then what I know now..." She shrugged, her eyes growing distant. "I was so certain this was what I wanted, to have power and control over my life, to have the strength to stop anyone from abusing me ever again. Giving up my humanity seemed like such a small thing at the time. Yet now, I miss being human. I've struggled for decades over the loss of my baby. On the one hand I loathed the child, knowing it was his incestuous spawn, but on the other hand – it was my child and I've mourned for that baby every day for the rest of my existence." She smiled sadly, shaking her head. "I can never have a child; once you're vampire the female body stops ovulating and conceiving is impossible. I've spent many years longing for a baby to call my own. I adore Katie but it's not quite the same."

I found myself feeling desperately sorry for her, strange when I'd been trying for eight days to hate her. "I can understand how you feel now that you've explained. What you said last week though – it's still true. By having me living under your roof, I'm in danger and I'm putting you in danger."

"I would rather deal with that than have you leave us," Gwynn responded quietly. "William's talked to me a lot about my behavior and how it's affecting not only yourself, but everyone in our Kiss. What Ben said that night was true, I owe Lucas my loyalty and affection, he accepted me into his Kiss when I had nowhere else to go and he fought members of my last Kiss when they intended to destroy me. Please come back for Lucas's sake, if not for mine."

Hearing his name pierced another hole in my heart and I turned towards the cabinet, reluctant to let Gwynn see my tears. "Lucas will never forgive me for the lies I told him," I admitted sadly. "What I did, what I said, was unforgiveable."

"Lucas will forgive you, I know he will. I know how he feels about you, we can all see it. He'll forgive you because he loves you. What you said to him, what you said to us all – it was only because you wanted to protect us. I can see that now. Charlotte," she placed her hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently, "come back with us, please. Allow me to put to rights what I made wrong."

I drew in a shuddering breath and turned back to her, feeling tormented. "I'm not sure I can. What if something does go wrong? What if other vampires come and attack your family because of me? What if one of you loses control? I'll never forgive myself if something goes wrong, not after you've all been so good to me. I think you're right. A human isn't meant to live with vampires, it's not natural."

Gwynn stepped forward and gripped my hands. "Katie visits with us and she's human. We love her and we love you. The love you share with Lucas and our Kiss is the most natural thing in the world. We can protect you and care for you. As for anything else, let's deal with it as it comes. We've all had experience suppressing our desire

for human blood with Katie, what we'll be doing with you is no different. Once you're created—”

“What?” I let go of her hands abruptly, taking a step back. “Created?”

Gwynn took a moment to react. “I'm sorry; I just assumed that's what you would eventually want. It's one of the reasons I've had so much trouble accepting you, thinking you were willing to give up your humanity for Lucas. Thinking you would give up what I so desperately wish I had.”

I shut my eyes, trying to absorb the implications. I shook my head uneasily. “I haven't considered it. It's not something that— Lucas and I haven't spoken about it. Gwynn, I can't... I don't want— I've barely decided I want to be alive at all, let alone become immortal!” The thought of being created into a vampire was repugnant and the idea shocked me. Rather than feeling calmer about my future, now I was nauseated. Was this what Lucas expected? Was it what he wanted? Would it be something that was expected if I went back to live with them?

Ripley appeared in the doorway and took charge. “Charlotte, I heard your thoughts. Nobody would suggest or ask that you be created. If you wish to remain human, that is wholly and totally your decision. I promise you this isn't something we would force on anyone. Lucas loves you exactly as you are. I don't think it's something he's considered, when you've only known each other for such a short period of time.”

The panic ebbed a little. Behind Ripley, Marianne's face was pinched with concern and even Striker seemed apprehensive.

“Ripley's telling you the truth,” Marianne agreed. “We would never allow you to be created if you didn't want to be.”

I looked from Marianne to Ripley and then to Striker and finally Gwynn. Gwynn spoke, her voice firm. "I promise you, Charlotte. No creation. We will never allow it to happen unless you specifically request it."

My shoulders slumped as I relaxed, believing their words. The nausea gradually receded as panic began to subside. Marianne slipped lithely through the gap between Ripley and Gwynn, reaching to hug me. "My poor, poor Charlotte, you really have been through the mill, haven't you? So many things to deal with in such a short lifetime compared to ours. I promise you, we will make your life much happier if only you'll come back with us. We miss you, we love you, and we want you to come home." She pulled away and looked me squarely in the eye. "Lucas will forgive you for anything you said last week. He loves you, Charlotte. More than anything on this earth."

The tendril of hope flared in my chest, soothing and warm around the shattered remnants of my heart. I knew it was a risk to go back, knew Lucas might never forgive me. But if I didn't go, I would regret letting the opportunity pass by. I looked into Marianne's sea green eyes and nodded.

CHAPTER 21

THIRST

The day had been overcast since dawn; now though, the sun shone weakly between the clouds, feeble light playing on the trees and creating dappled patterns on the ground.

It took a little over twenty minutes for the cottage to be totally emptied. After agreeing to return with them Striker and Ripley had flown around the small rooms, collecting every one of my belongings and packing them into the back of Striker's Landcruiser. Marianne and Gwynn insisted on cleaning until the cottage was fresh and perfect to hand back to Maude. If I'd been doing the cleaning it would have taken a couple of hours. With their phenomenal speed, Marianne and Gwynn took roughly the same amount of time that Striker and Ripley took to completely empty the place. I sat on my old armchair, watching as they zipped around the cottage, blurred images to my average human eyesight.

The trip to Lucas's house was too short and exceptionally nerve-racking. Marianne lapsed into silence, giving me a little time to think and compose myself but I was terrified. What if Lucas told me to turn around and leave? Despite everyone's confidence in his ability to forgive me, I still had tangible doubts about the likelihood

of that happening. I'd hurt him so badly. If the situation was reversed, I wasn't certain I could forgive him.

Marianne pulled off the highway and onto the gravel drive and I knew my future was about to be decided. She pulled to a smooth stop outside the house and turned to face me, grinning. "I'm so pleased you agreed to come home, Charlotte. I promise you it's all going to be okay."

"I hope you're right," I agreed, unclipping the seatbelt.

"Oh, I'm quite certain I'm right," Marianne said lightly.

"Have you had a vision?" I questioned warily.

"Not a one. I told you this ability misfires sometimes, and at other times it doesn't work at all," she responded with a wink. "But I know Lucas loves you, and you love him."

Before I had a chance to reply, the front door was wrenched open and Rowena rushed down the stairs, followed closely by Acenith. Rowena reached my side and pulled me tenderly into her arms, swamping me in a hug. I embraced her happily, thrilled to be back with my 'mother'. "Charlotte, I've missed you! I'm so thrilled you're back!" Rowena released me and turned to Marianne, while Acenith drew me into her arms.

"Thank goodness you've returned, Charlotte. We've all missed you terribly." Acenith released me and offered a gentle smile.

Striker, Gwynn and Ripley got out of the four-wheel drive and walked towards us and realization swept over Rowena's expression. "Obviously you had difficulty obeying the request not to interfere in Lucas and Charlotte's business, but I am *so* pleased you did." Her eyes focused on Gwynn momentarily and the look which passed between them spoke volumes. A split-second later Rowena's eyes returned to me and a worried frown appeared on her forehead when she appraised me from top to bottom. It was obvious my gaunt

features and loose clothes gave her the information she needed. "My poor Charlotte, have you eaten *anything* this past week? Come inside and let me get you something."

I shook my head stubbornly. "I want to see Lucas." I needed to see him before I would do anything else. I needed to explain my actions and apologize for everything I'd said to hurt him.

"Lucas isn't here." I glanced up on hearing William's deep voice. He stood behind the others, his serious demeanor broken only by the tiny smile he offered, and the warm light in his eyes. "Hello, Charlotte. Welcome back."

"Where is he?"

"He's struggled since you left," Marianne offered softly. "He spends most of his time down by the river and prefers to be alone."

"William and I will go and find him," Striker announced.

"No, I need to see him, explain my behavior."

"That wouldn't be wise," William met my gaze, a worried expression in his. "Since you left Lucas hasn't fed. Seeing you again after eight days will be difficult for him. It would be wise for Striker and I to locate him, give him the opportunity to hunt before he comes into contact with your scent."

"No! I've got to see him, please! It can't wait."

William and Rowena's eyes met and for a few minutes, they stared at one another soundlessly. I looked from William to Rowena and then to Marianne, the question in my eyes.

"Some of us can converse telepathically over short distances."

I raised an eyebrow at this revelation but remained silent, waiting for them to finish their 'conversation'. Finally William spoke, his voice serious. "Alright. But Striker and I will come along as a precaution." Seeing the stubborn look in my eyes, he continued in a hurry. "We will stay at a distance to allow you privacy, but it's for your own

safety. Lucas might not be able to control his thirst when he first picks up your scent.”

I nodded, aware I was putting myself in the danger Gwynn had warned about, but it was something I needed to do.

The long walk along the riverbank made my ankle throb with pain but I walked on resolutely, politely declining the offers from the men to carry me. Striker walked silently beside me, matching his pace to mine. William stayed a few yards behind, keeping himself at a safe distance until he readjusted to my scent. I hoped Lucas wasn't too far away – my ankle was swollen and intensely painful every time I put my foot down. It would have been easier to let someone carry me, but walking gave me time to calm myself before I faced Lucas.

“Are you sure he's down here?” I questioned softly.

“It's not much further,” William replied.

We reached a bend in the river and Striker and William stopped. “He's just over there, on the other side of the trees,” Striker explained. He glanced down at me, his expression soft. “We'll stay here. If we sense any danger, we can be with you in a second.”

I nodded, fervently hoping that second would be enough.

“Walk slowly and don't make any sudden moves. Give him a little time to adjust to your scent. Don't get too close, until Striker and I can gauge his reaction,” William suggested.

I nodded again, anxious now I was so close. What if he told me to leave? Or attacked me? Despite my determination to go through with this, I was filled with apprehension.

With a last weak smile for Striker I stepped carefully between the trees, following a well-worn path I suspected was used by Lucas and the others when they went hunting. Although rough, the path was manageable and I passed the edge of the trees to see Lucas directly

in front of me. He stood stock-still by the river's edge with his back to me. Wearing faded Levi's and a white shirt, he had a jacket tied loosely at his waist. He still took my breath away.

His arms hung loosely by his sides and a mild breeze blew up, catching tendrils of my hair and blowing it around my face. Lucas arched his neck, lifting his face to the sky and sniffing the air before turning slowly to face me.

There was no threat in his handsome features, only the deepest melancholy in his blue eyes. He watched me silently, not attempting to close the distance between us. His eyes never left mine and I could see the agony he'd endured for the past eight days. His gaze mirrored my own sadness.

I limped cautiously towards him, coming to a stop a couple of feet away. His eyes never left mine. Now I was near enough to see his troubled expression and I reached with meticulous care to softly touch his cheek. He captured my hand with his own and held my fingers against his cool skin, closing his eyes as he groaned.

For perhaps a minute, maybe longer we stood in silence before I spoke. "I'm so sorry, Lucas. I shouldn't have left you. Those things I said... I lied. I didn't mean any of them."

Lucas released my hand and it dropped down to my side. "I knew you were lying." He opened his eyes and watched me seriously. "What I don't understand is why you wouldn't speak to me about it. Why you would leave without telling me what you had overheard?"

I lowered my gaze, studying the small pebbles which littered the edge of the riverbed. How could I explain I'd made a mistake? What could I say to right the wrong I'd committed? How did I explain the truth I'd heard in Gwynn's words, the realities which caused me to

leave so abruptly? And how was I going to explain my change of mind?

When I looked up again Lucas was staring at a fixed point across the river, his forehead creased in a deep frown and I suddenly realized how much he was struggling. There was hunger in his eyes and it unnerved me. I stumbled back.

"I won't hurt you. But I want – no, I *need* – an explanation for your actions," Lucas's voice was cold, his words clipped. "I offered you my heart, my trust! You took my trust and the honesty I'd given you and trampled them. You didn't even give me a chance to fix the problem!"

I shrugged miserably, anxiously pushing my hair back with my hand before letting it fall loose against my shoulders again.

Lucas visibly stiffened and stepped back. "Don't do that, Charlotte. I'm having enough trouble standing close to you without your scent enticing me further," he growled.

"I'm sorry... I should have listened to William, waited for him to come and find you." I felt utterly wretched, knowing this had been a monumental mistake and nothing was going the way I'd hoped. We lapsed into an awkward silence. I didn't know what to say, what to do, or how to build a bridge over the distance that had grown between us in eight days. I wasn't sure whether Lucas was angry, disappointed... or both. Tears fell down my cheeks and I wiped them away with my sleeve.

Lucas reached for me, putting a finger under my chin to lift my face up to meet his. "Don't cry, my Charlotte, I'm being too harsh. My thirst is desperate and I'm making this more difficult than it should be, because of it. Your scent... the aroma of you drives me wild because I haven't had it close in more than a week." He paused, watching me intently as I continued to silently cry. "I love you,

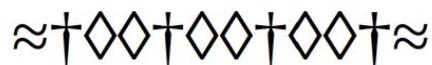
Charlotte. I love you with my entire being and will continue to do so. Hush, my love. I will forgive you everything. I want nothing more than to hold you in my arms and allow you to see that I forgive you and love you. But I dare not risk that now." He paused, glancing behind me towards the trees. "Striker will take you back to the house. I will be there as soon as I can. I can't be near you until my thirst is sated," he said gently.

William, Ripley, and Striker appeared soundlessly from between the trees, their faces somber. Lucas lifted his hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to his fingers, then touched his fingers to my lips.

Ripley and I will accompany you," William offered to Lucas, giving me a small tense smile as he passed.

"Take her back to the house," Lucas said to Striker. I could hear the strain in his voice, knew how much pressure he was under. His words had lifted me, filled me with a modicum of hope. We might be able to work out our issues. I sighed deeply and stepped back, stumbling on the rough terrain.

Striker lifted me effortlessly into his arms. "C'mon, Lott. Rowena'll want to get a good meal into you." He turned towards the forest and walked slowly through the trees. My gaze stayed on Lucas until he was swallowed by the woods surrounding us. All of a sudden I felt exhausted and I rested against Striker's broad chest, closing my eyes wearily as he began to run.



"Tell me – who took the casts off?" Jerome was probing my ankle, he'd arrived from the hospital minutes beforehand and Rowena had explained the circumstances of my return to the house. He greeted

me with a broad smile, then immediately started checking over my injuries, sitting on the edge of the coffee table opposite me.

Striker had deposited me onto the couch and Marianne and Acenith fussed around, appearing with pillows to elevate my swollen ankle. Rowena emerged from the kitchen with a plate of sandwiches and I steadily devoured them one after the other, pausing only to sip from the soda Acenith supplied.

I cried out when he probed a particularly painful spot. "Um. Well, I did."

Jerome sighed heavily. "As I suspected. When did you take it off? And how did you get it off, might I ask?"

I squirmed uncomfortably. "I took it off the day after I left. With a bread knife."

To give Jerome his due he kept a straight face, although one eyebrow lifted and the faintest hint of amusement played on his lips. "A bread knife," he repeated. "I suppose we should consider ourselves fortunate you didn't accidentally sever your own foot." He drew himself to his feet, hands resting on his hips. "Unfortunately you've removed the cast too early. I'll need to get some x-rays."

I nodded, stuffing another sandwich into my mouth. After a week subsisting on coffee, I was starving and couldn't get the food into my stomach fast enough.

Rowena sat at the end of the couch, her pretty features pensive as she watched me. "Charlotte, what have you been doing to yourself? You look like you've lost twenty pounds."

I swallowed, feeling like a guilty child as I confessed. "I didn't feel like eating."

"All week? You haven't eaten anything?"

Marianne settled down on the coffee table, perusing my baggy jeans and well-worn sweater. "Which probably explains why you look

like a hobo."

I ignored her and grabbed another sandwich. "About the only thing I've done this past eight days was drink coffee and feel sorry for myself." Jerome, Rowena, Marianne, and Acenith were in the living room with me while Gwynn had vanished upstairs. I wondered if Gwynn disappearing was a good sign or a bad one? Maybe she was giving me space to speak to everyone while she wasn't around.

"When did you last sleep?" Jerome questioned, eyeing the dark circles beneath my eyes.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Have you been taking your anti-depressants?"

"Yes." I was happy I could answer truthfully, the one thing I'd promised Ben as I left. "I've taken it every day."

"Good girl," Jerome smiled approvingly. Just then Ben appeared in the living room, his eyes flicking from where I sat on the couch to Rowena. They had another one of those silent conversations and I realized with a start that the couple also had the ability to speak telepathically. When they'd finished Ben came to my side, kissing my cheek tenderly and offering me a delighted smile. "I'm so pleased you've come back."

"Thank you," I smiled happily at him.

"What about the ribs? Any pain?" Jerome brought my attention back to him and Ben settled beside Rowena.

"One," I admitted. "There's a spot here," I pointed to my left side, about two inches below my breast. "It's still painful."

"A chest x-ray too, I believe," Jerome muttered. "I'll drive you to the hospital to have the x-rays done and when we get back I'll give you something to help you relax. I imagine a steady diet of caffeine has destroyed your natural ability to sleep."

I shook my head, eyes filling with tears. "I don't want to do anything until I've seen Lucas."

"It will be hours before he comes back," Acenith said, placing a hand on my knee. "It might be better for you to sleep and when he gets back you can talk." She patted my leg softly. "He loves you, Charlotte. He has already forgiven you, I know it."

"I need to explain myself," I responded quietly. "He needs to understand why I left."

"He does," Ben responded simply.

"Of course he does," Marianne agreed with a sympathetic smile. "He knows you were doing what you thought best for us all. You were trying to protect Lucas and all of us from any trouble you believed you might cause."

I dropped the sandwich on the almost empty plate and wiped the back of my hand across my face, brushing away tears which fell in earnest.

Jerome took control. "Let's get you down to the hospital and take some x-rays. Ben?" It was Ben's turn to lift me effortlessly into his arms and he strode towards the front door. "It'll only take half an hour and Lucas will be gone much longer than that. When we get home, a nice hot bath will be in order. Any further decisions can be made after that."

As he'd promised, Jerome had me back at the house within half an hour – he'd snuck us into the hospital, taken the x-rays and brought them back with him – without anyone being the wiser that we'd been there. As he'd predicted my ankle hadn't healed correctly. The break had been an awkward one and he would have x-rayed my foot before taking the cast off to ensure the bone was fully healed. Removing the cast allowed the bone to shift slightly, which accounted for the pain. I was dismayed to learn he intended to put

another cast on. Despite my pleas to give it more time Jerome was adamant and I found myself lying in the bath, enjoying a last night of freedom before he reset my ankle and plastered it again. A general anesthetic would be necessary and when I reacted with alarm at the idea of hospital, he'd calmed me by agreeing he'd do it here at Lucas's house.

Rowena drew the bath in her bathroom. The room was enormous and carried the same tasteful decorating as the rest of the house. The bath was decadently large, with air jets to create wonderfully relaxing bubbles which relieved my aching body. Scented bath salts soaked my skin and I leaned my head against the edge of the tub, eyes closed as I relaxed for the first time in a week.

I physically ached for Lucas to return and wondered for the hundredth time how long it would take him to quench the thirst he'd been denying. I speculated about why he hadn't been hunting – was his reaction similar to mine? Had he lost his appetite?

A little doubt niggled at me. What if he came back and still couldn't bear to be near me? On the drive back, I'd daydreamed about him pulling me into his arms, kissing me until I was lightheaded. Our reunion had been nothing like that and I wondered how long it would take him to get used to my scent again.

Worse still – what if he decided he didn't want me back? What if he was considering our situation even now and deciding I was too much trouble? What if he'd concluded I wasn't worth it? Despite the warmth of the water submerging me up to my neck, I was chilled by the prospect.

There was a soft tap at the door and it was pushed open. "It's me. Can I come in?" Marianne asked.

"Sure," I agreed easily. It wasn't as if Marianne hadn't seen me naked before, she'd spent five weeks showering me.

She sauntered gracefully into the room, a lithe figure in bright purple jeans and a lacy cotton shirt. In her hands, she held a pile of clothes and she smiled when she deposited them on the vanity. "I brought you fresh clothes; and this." She perched delicately on the edge of the bathtub and held out a disposable razor. "I thought you'd like to shave your legs before Ben covers you in plaster again. Try not to cut yourself," she finished with a cheeky smile.

"Thanks." I took the razor gratefully and reached for the soap, lifting my right leg out of the water and resting my ankle on the lip of the bath. "Is Lucas back yet?"

Marianne shook her head. "No, not yet. He'll come back as soon as he's able."

"I hope so," I said, disappointed he still hadn't returned. I didn't know whether it was a good sign, or a bad one.

"Try not to worry."

I nodded thoughtfully, turning my attention to my leg so Marianne wouldn't see the worry in my eyes. Darkness had fallen and still he hadn't come back.

Marianne watched me shaving. "Don't you get sick of doing that?"

It seemed like an odd question. "Don't you?"

Marianne laughed; the sound tinkling like a bell around the room. "I haven't had to shave my legs in a very long time.

"You haven't?"

Marianne shook her head, grinning. "No hair growth when you're a vampire."

I stared at her, momentarily forgetting about the razor. "None at all?"

"Nope. Which is an excellent thing for legs, underarms, and bikini lines." She screwed up her nose. "Unfortunately, it also means the

same hairstyle for the rest of eternity.”

“Wow.” I was stunned, having learned yet another remarkable piece of information about being a vampire. I returned to my leg. “I guess there are some benefits to being a vampire then. Other than the hairstyle thing.”

“It's like anything. For every benefit, there's a downside. Not much different to how it is for humans,” Marianne agreed.

“So... why do you have razors in the house if nobody needs to shave?”

“All part of the illusion. If we have human visitors we have the house stocked so it looks like everybody else's. Food in the kitchen, razors in the bathroom – it's all part of keeping our secret.”

Marianne chatted happily while I finished shaving my legs and the other parts of my body that required attention and helped me out of the deep bath before leaving me to get dressed. She'd provided a pair of black denim jeans and a close-fitting apricot sweater and I frowned when I caught my reflection in the mirror. I was painfully slim, thinner than I'd ever been in my life. It wasn't a good look.

Once dressed and satisfied I'd done the best I could with my unmanageable mop of curls, I hobbled down the hall on the crutches Jerome insisted I use. He wanted me to keep weight of my ankle until it was back in a cast. I figured I'd better do as I was told after making such a mess of things by removing the plaster early. A smile played on my lips as I recalled the look on his face, when he'd heard how I'd removed the plaster. It had almost been worth it.

CHAPTER 22
REUNION

I'd reached the top of the stairs when Striker appeared from nowhere. Grabbing the crutches, he rested them against the wall and lifted me into his arms in a single fluid movement. "No way are you going down the stairs with those things, Lott. You'll break your damn neck."

I protested most of the way down the stairs, grumbling about being treated like an invalid but Striker just grinned and ignored me. He was about to deposit me onto the couch when Marianne danced into the room. "They're on their way back."

My heart lurched, my pulse leaping at the thought of seeing Lucas. "Could you take me to meet them?" I pleaded.

"Jeez, Lott, can't you wait until they get back here?" he grumbled good-naturedly. "What's the hurry?"

"Please," I begged.

He shared a look with Marianne and she nodded imperceptibly. "It's fine. I can't see any danger." She closed her eyes for a couple of seconds, apparently receiving some information. "Lucas has fed; they're coming up along the river. If you leave now, you can meet them at the river's edge. Opening her eyes, she leaned across and kissed my cheek. "Good luck."

"Do you know what's going to happen?" I asked suspiciously. "Am I going to need luck?"

Marianne smiled sheepishly. "Can't tell you. All I saw is that you're safe and they're coming back."

"Great," I muttered mutinously. "A fortune teller who only gives you fragments of the fortune."

"Hey, I do my best!" she giggled.

Striker hitched me up more securely in his arms and walked to the front door. Opening it effortlessly with one hand, he slipped through the doorway and took off at a run, reaching almost breakneck speeds as he ran along the river, retracing our steps from earlier. Although his speed was phenomenal, I felt safe. Admittedly I did shut my eyes as we plunged into the trees, certain he was going to run into something. And I might have screamed when he sped up a few minutes later, heading straight towards the river. With an enormous leap, he launched smoothly into the air and we were abruptly airborne, soaring over the water below. I was convinced we were going to die but Striker dropped almost cat-like to the ground with minimal impact and continued to run.

He grinned and I saw the sheer glee in his eyes, highlighted by the glow of the moon above us. "Relax, Lott. Hasn't Lucas taken you for a run before?"

I shook my head, my heart pounding in my chest. The tempo of his running slowed and I glanced around with interest as he decelerated further to a steady walk. He came to a standstill on the banks of the river. "Here they come."

My eyes adjusted to the darkness slowly and I watched in the direction he'd indicated. Seconds later, I spied Lucas, Ripley and William emerging quietly from the thick trees surrounding us.

"She wouldn't wait," Striker told Lucas as he lowered me carefully onto the uneven ground, holding me until I was steady. "She's an impatient kid."

I slapped his shoulder, which I imagined was the equivalent of hitting a slab of concrete. Striker grinned as I rubbed my sore hand. "Let that be a lesson," he laughed. "Never hit a vampire."

"Thanks for the warning," I agreed grimly.

"Everything okay, Lucas?" Striker questioned.

Lucas nodded. He met my gaze and regarded me solemnly in the moonlight. "I'm fine. You can return to the house."

I watched as the three men turned simultaneously and leaped across the river, leaving me standing on the riverbank with Lucas. He shrugged out of his jacket and laid it over the smooth pebbles.

"Sit down, you look exhausted," he commanded gently. I hobbled towards the jacket and Lucas was instantly at my side, gripping my arm as he lowered me onto the jacket then crouched beside me. "You should have waited at the house."

"I've been waiting all day," I responded anxiously. "I couldn't wait any longer." I studied his eyes, searching for signs his thirst had been quenched. "Are you okay being close to me now?"

Lucas clasped his hands together, perfectly balanced on his toes on the rough pebbles. "I feel safer near you, the desire is more controlled." He smiled wryly, his expression softening. "Although I must admit, you do smell absolutely delectable. I'm sorry it took so long, I wanted to be sure I had the urges controlled before I came back."

I nodded, gazing into his eyes. He returned my gaze, his expression composed. "I'm so sorry, Lucas."

"I know," he responded simply. "There is no need for you to apologize, I understand why you left."

"You do?" I wrapped my arms around my knees and watched the water lapping against the riverbank.

"You were trying to protect us. Gwynn put the notion in your mind that you were putting us in danger, rather than the other way around. Once I discovered what you'd heard, I understood your decision to leave so abruptly. Gwynn had vocalized what was troubling you all the time you've been with us."

"What she said made sense; I am putting you in danger. She said something about a Council?"

"The Vampire Council." Lucas supplied.

"Yes, that's it. Who are they?"

"Very old, very strong vampires." He sighed and reached across to push the curls from my face, a small gesture that spoke volumes regarding his feelings. I wanted to grasp his hand and hold it against my cheek, but I stayed motionless, watching him drop his hand and clasp his own again as he watched me tenderly. "They live in Europe and rarely leave, unless there is something they feel is a threat to their power, or find something they want and try to take it by force."

"They could find out about me. Would that cause trouble for you?"

He inhaled sharply, his gaze turning towards the river. "Yes, they could. I can't promise you that they won't and they would not be pleased about my relationship with you. But for as much chance as they might find out about you, there's an equal chance they won't. It is a risk, but not something I'm expecting to happen." He returned his gaze to me, his eyes intense. "For that matter, there are a multitude of things which could happen to you without the Council's involvement. What Gwynn said was true. There are any number of things which could go wrong with a continuance of this relationship."

"Is that why you didn't stop me from leaving?"

Lucas shook his head. "No, I let you leave because I promised I'd accept whatever you chose to do. Because I wanted you to make up your own mind about a relationship with me." He glanced up, his eyes settling on mine. "And in all honesty, I thought it was better for you to leave."

My heart plunged and I searched his face, searching for an understanding of why he wanted me to leave. He continued to calmly gaze at me, waiting for a response.

"You don't want me," I muttered miserably. It was the worst possible scenario I'd imagined. He'd changed his mind.

He smiled softly, shaking his head. "Of course I want you – I love you. But I will always want what you decide is best for you. I only want your happiness, my Charlotte. I can understand why you would feel our situation is difficult, impossible even. I feel guilty every single day for falling in love with you."

"Guilty?" I echoed woodenly.

Lucas chewed the inside of his lip thoughtfully while he considered his words. "I should have kept as far away from you as possible, not involved you in our way of life. I have put you in constant danger, not least of which is the continual craving I fight for your blood. I'm painfully aware that one slip, one lapse of judgment on my part would be lethal for you. It has occurred to me more than once to tell you to leave." He frowned deeply, clenching his hands together more tightly. "It is my own selfishness which stops me. I want you with me, I love you so deeply and so completely that I cannot bear the thought of living an eternity without you."

"But you will live an eternity without me, there's nothing to stop that from happening." The words slipped out before I'd thought them through, but I knew it was true. I was painfully aware that even if we worked out our lives together, mine would last only sixty

or seventy years more. Lucas has already lived more than double that and would continue to exist long after I was forgotten. He would be young forever; I would grow older with each passing year.

Comprehension sparked in Lucas's eyes. "Obviously Gwynn's words aren't the only thing bothering you. You have more reasons of your own. Is that what this is about? The fact that I'm immortal and you are not?"

"It isn't only that this relationship is dangerous for both of us," I admitted. "I'm going to get old, and you'll remain exactly like this," I brushed my fingers from his forehead to his jaw and he closed his eyes, a soft moan escaping his lips, "forever. How can I expect you to want me still, when I'm old? What happens to me when you don't want me anymore?"

"That will never happen."

I shook my head. "I'm sure it will. I've seen how other women look at you, I've seen them compare me to you, and I know what they're thinking. They can't understand why you would be interested in me and neither do I."

Lucas sighed heavily, shaking his head. "I don't know how to convince you my love. Your stepfather has shattered your confidence; I don't know how to make you understand how I see you. I will love you for as long as I exist, there have been many women in my life but not one of them has made me feel as I do when I'm with you. I think I've been waiting for you, and only you for more than a hundred years – relationships in the past have not been as magical as what I've found with you. It doesn't matter that you will age, I will always love you. Despite your doubts, you are beautiful, so very beautiful. Your green eyes are breathtaking; your hair," he brushed his fingers through the curls framing my face, "is so pretty and despite everything you seem to think, you are the

most desirable woman I have ever met. And I'm certain I'm not the only man who thinks so. You say you are aware of women looking at me – you seem completely unaware of the way other men look at you.” He paused for a moment, considering his words carefully. “Has it occurred to you that perhaps you are being far too hard on yourself?”

I blinked owlishly, his words penetrating my mind. What he was saying was true. I looked like my mother and I'd always considered her beautiful – perhaps he really did see me differently to the way I saw myself. It didn't change anything though, it didn't matter that he found me attractive now. What about twenty years from now – when I was forty and he still appeared to be twenty-four?

“I don't care about your looks,” Lucas interrupted, obviously reading my thoughts from the emotions flitting across my face. “That is not to say that I don't find you extremely attractive, the very thought of kissing you and holding you is enough to drive me to distraction – but your looks are not the only thing I love. I adore every part of you and more importantly, I love your very soul.” He lowered his head and captured my lips against his, briefly overwhelming me. When he lifted his head, he gazed down at me with a sincere smile. “Do you believe me now?”

I nodded cautiously, my heart beating erratically in my chest. Lucas settled beside me, pulling me into his arms. I savored snuggling against his hard chest again and leaned on his shoulder, breathing in the aroma that had so entranced me from the very beginning. We sat together in companionable silence for a few minutes.

“Charlotte?”

“Yes?”

"I meant what I said – if you choose to leave, I will accept it. Although I'm more than happy to give you everything your heart desires, I can truly understand that given what I am, I might not be the right man for you." He heaved a deep sigh. "While I'm extremely grateful that they ignored my orders and brought you back to me, I don't want you to be here because you feel pressured to stay." His words were measured, evenly spoken in a calm voice, but I could distinguish the torment behind them.

I straightened up, curling my arms around my legs and tucking my chin onto my knees. "I don't think I can leave you," I whispered huskily.

Lucas watched me silently for a moment; reaching for my hand, he ran his thumb over the ring he'd given me. "Do you remember what I told you when I gave you this ring? I truly meant what I said, knowing that we may reach this situation. Wherever you go, whatever you choose to do with your life, you will always have my heart."

I smiled shakily. "I do remember your words, and I love you with all my heart." I gazed at the ring on my finger, rubbing my forefinger over the fine gold. "That's why I can't leave."

Lucas watched my eyes, a quizzical expression in his. "What are you saying?"

I caught his hands in mine. "My heart will be yours forever. It's been agony this past week, every single second, to be away from you. I couldn't eat, didn't sleep and I realized I don't want to be away from you. To leave now would be leaving my heart with you. I can't bear to be without you in my life." I took a deep shaky breath. "I want you in my life, for as long as that might be. I want to be with you and your friends for as long as you'll have me. I love you."

"Charlotte," Lucas breathed my name huskily as he captured me in his arms, his lips seeking mine. I wrapped my arms around him as he lowered me gently onto the ground and kissed me with as much abandon as I normally showed when kissing him. His aroma and sweet breath combined surrounded me and I inhaled heavily wanting so much more. I ran my hands down his back, tracing the taut muscles, which flexed underneath his skin. Lucas raked his fingers through my hair and I wrapped one leg around his, overwhelmed by the rightness of having his hard body against mine. I ran my tongue tentatively across the edge of his lip and was delighted when he opened his mouth, his tongue meeting mine in an erotic duel.

A low growl erupted from deep within Lucas's chest and he yanked away, wild-eyed and breathing heavily. For a few seconds he watched me, his eyes hooded and rather than being angry about my lack of control his blue eyes were filled with love and desire. He grinned broadly. "I believe you are attempting to seduce me, my love."

I shut my eyes, waiting for my heart rate to settle before I spoke again. "I think I might have been." A giggle erupted from my lips. "Apparently it didn't work."

"Oh, it worked alright," Lucas growled. "For the first time, the desires that come naturally to a man were the ones I was fighting the hardest."

It was my turn to grin like a Cheshire cat. "Wow."

"Wow, indeed." Lucas got to his feet and reached down to help me up. "We should go home, before things get out of control here on the riverbank." He caught me in a hug, holding me close as he took a deep breath against the soft skin on my neck. When he pulled away he offered me a delighted smile, his blue eyes softened with

emotion and he kissed my lips again. "I'm definitely increasing my self-control." He turned so his back faced me. "Hop on. I'll take you home."

I got onto his back awkwardly, wrapping my arms around his neck and crossing my legs around his waist. Once I was settled in position Lucas brushed his fingers across my cheek. "Hold on tight."

It was exhilarating, comparable with being on a rollercoaster and having the wind rush over your face and make your hair stream out behind you. This was much better than being held as Striker had done and I could see now that he'd been practically strolling when he ran with me in comparison to this. Lucas ran through the trees and crossed the river in another extended flying swoop, which had me whooping with delight. He darted and dashed through the trees, moving so quickly the vista around us was reduced to a blur. Within seconds we were back at the house and Lucas placed me carefully on the ground, holding on to my arm while I regained my equilibrium. When I'd recovered enough from the experience to speak, I giggled happily. "There are some advantages to being a vampire."

He looked amused. "You are tougher than I imagined. I thought you might be frightened."

"No, it was amazing!" I laughed again, recalling the speed at which we'd zipped past the trees. "I think you might be faster than my Volkswagen."

Lucas chuckled and lifted me into his capable arms, carrying me towards the house. "Charlotte, *most* things are faster than your Volkswagen."

CHAPTER 23

SURGERY

“Charlotte.”

I rolled over and stretched like a cat, relaxed after a night of blissfully deep sleep. It had been days since I'd slept properly and with Lucas by my side, arms wrapped around me possessively, I'd slept soundly. It had taken ages to fall asleep – nights of insomnia and ridiculous amounts of caffeine had taken a toll, but with Lucas's arms around my back, his fingers twisting through my hair, I'd finally dozed off.

Recalling the Kiss' reaction when we returned from the river, I smiled. Marianne had been gleeful, bouncing around the house shrieking her delight. Rowena hugged us both as if she'd never let go, smiling at us like a proud parent. Everyone greeted us with affection and announced delight at seeing us together once more. Even Gwynn took me in her arms for a quick, albeit awkward embrace.

Gwynn had turned to Lucas afterward and dropped to her knees, lowering her head submissively. “Lucas, I beg your forgiveness and once again assure you of my commitment to you and our Kiss.”

“Gwynn,” Lucas responded, catching her arm in his and drawing her to her feet with a gentle smile. “Your commitment to our Kiss

has never been in question. I know you only did what you considered was right. It will not be mentioned again.”

It in that moment I realized Lucas was truly considered their leader, although many of them were older. In some cases, by centuries.

The thought evaporated as quickly as it arrived when Rowena provided another delicious meal to tempt my taste buds and Ben insisted I head up to bed. Everyone seemed concerned by the deep bruise-like rings shadowing my eyes and I wouldn't argue when I knew Lucas would come with me. For now, all I wanted was to spend every available minute with him, savor having him hold me and touch me again.

“Charlotte.”

I snuggled against Lucas's hard length, not enthusiastic about leaving the warm bed. It seemed much more fun to stay here, rather than deal with what I faced this morning.

“Charlotte.” Lucas's voice was insistent and begrudgingly, I blinked open my eyes and looked up at him. “Jerome is ready for you.”

Sighing deeply, I flipped onto my back. “I don't want to do this.” I'd never had surgery before, the prospect was making me nervous and truthfully, I didn't want to miss a minute of time with Lucas. Being given anesthesia was going to put a big dent in my day and I begrudged the idea when we'd only just reunited.

“I know you don't want to,” he replied patiently. “I don't believe anyone ever *wants* to have surgery. It is necessary, however, if you are going to walk correctly again.”

I groaned, the sound loud in the quiet room. “I know, I know. It doesn't mean I have to like the idea.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow, his eyes twinkling. "What can I do to make you feel better?"

My eyes lit up. "I do have one idea..."

Lucas grinned and rolled over, pinning me beneath him and raining soft kisses over my face. He kissed my forehead, my eyes, and my nose and then pressed tiny kisses down my cheeks until his lips touched mine. I raised my arms, clasping his face between my hands as I deepened the kiss and Lucas responded with a heartfelt groan. He wrapped his arms around me and rolled, taking me with him so I lay over his body. We continued to kiss repeatedly until Lucas groaned once more and gently pushed me away. "Enough," he growled quietly, happiness and desire evident in his blue eyes. The silver in them burst and flared when he smiled, like fireworks in a night sky.

"How come you get to say when it's enough?" I complained.

"Because one of us needs to practice some self-restraint," he retorted swiftly. He stood up, strode to the window and unlatched it, breathing deeply. "And because I've spent the night with your scent for the first time in eight torturously long days. I need time to build up some immunity."

I sat up and glanced at the clock. It was a little after ten and the weather outside was glorious, clear blue skies with a smattering of downy white clouds moving swiftly in the breeze. I'd rather be doing a million things rather than having surgery.

"Don't even think about it," Lucas caught me staring longingly out the window and guessed my thoughts. He strode to the bed, pulling down the sheets and scooping me up. "You are having the surgery. Period."

I sighed and snuggled close to his neck, pressing a warm kiss against his skin. "Isn't there something I can do to get out of this?"

He smirked. "No. I'll take you down to Jerome."

"Traitor," I grumbled.

Lucas ignored me, carrying me towards the bathroom. We stopped briefly so I could freshen up, then he carried me down to the study. I was astounded to find Jerome preparing to do the surgery. "How often do you perform surgery in a house?" I enquired mildly.

Jerome was drawing white liquid into a syringe. "Not often, I'm pleased to say. Place her down on the gurney, please," he directed Lucas.

"Where did all this stuff come from?" I glanced around the plethora of medical equipment, which seemed to have taken over the space.

Jerome grinned sheepishly. "I borrowed a few items from the hospital."

Lucas dropped me gently onto the gurney and Jerome handed him a small bowl filled with brown liquid. "Wipe down her foot and ankle with antiseptic, please. Extend it about halfway up her calf."

"Don't I get one of those stupid gowns?" I questioned lightly, trying to mask my apprehension.

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary," Jerome murmured. He placed the syringe onto a sterile green mat and smiled compassionately. "It's a minor surgery, Charlotte. I promise, you're going to be fine."

I watched Lucas swiping the cold antiseptic over my foot and ankle for a few seconds. "Are you doing this by yourself?"

"No, I have some assistance. Or rather, I have a number of *assistants*," Jerome replied. He was pulling a surgical gown over his clothes and Marianne strolled through the doorway, proceeding to tie it behind his back before she slipped into one of her own.

"Rowena's on her way," Marianne announced. "Ben will be another few minutes."

"You've all fed?" Lucas questioned quietly.

Marianne nodded, turning around so Jerome could tie the gown at her back.

"Marianne?" I said querulously, my voice an octave higher than usual. This situation was rapidly starting to frighten me.

"I'm assisting Jerome," Marianne announced cheerfully. "Don't worry, I've been out to hunt and I'm stuffed to the gills."

I dropped my head back against the hard gurney and squeezed my eyes shut. "I thought all you had to do was break my ankle and reset it?"

"That's true," Jerome agreed, "however I need to access the bone first. That requires a small incision."

I launched upright, nearly knocking the bowl from Lucas's hands. "Incision! Doesn't that mean there'll be blood?"

"Relax, Charlotte, we've got this under control." Lucas dropped the cotton swab into the bowl and placed it on the desk. He captured my hand in his, squeezing my fingers in a gesture meant to be comforting. "We talked it through last night while you slept. Marianne, Rowena and Ben have volunteered to help Jerome. The surgery won't take long, Jerome estimates about twenty minutes and then plaster. They only need to be in here for a minimal amount of time and it reduces the risk to almost nothing."

"Almost nothing!" I shrieked. "*Almost* nothing! Are you serious?" I swung my legs off the side of the gurney. "This is crazy!"

Marianne captured my shoulders, holding her face inches from mine. For someone so slender, her grip was tremendously strong. "Listen to me. This has to be done and it would take too much explaining if we took you to the hospital – they'd know the ankle had

been broken some time ago and would want an explanation of how it happened. It's much safer for everyone if we do the surgery here." She squeezed my shoulders and smiled encouragingly. "We've taken every precaution, everyone who is to be involved has fed this morning and Ben, Rowena and I volunteered because we have greater self-control than some of the others. We know the biggest risk is the smell of blood, so we'll refrain from breathing during the surgery. At most, each of us will only need to be in here for about seven minutes during the period where blood is involved, then there's only the plaster cast left to do."

Jerome had been calmly scrubbing his hands in the bathroom off the study and came back to stand beside Marianne. "I give you my word, nothing untoward will happen. I've mapped out the surgery with military precision, everyone knows exactly what I'll be doing, and they all know what to do if the craving gets too intense. I promise, you'll awaken from the surgery as human as you are right now."

"I think this is nuts!" I struggled frantically, wriggling and pushing at Marianne who gripped my shoulders again. My breathing was rapid, my chest tightening in panic. "Completely insane! Let me *go*, Marianne!" I shrieked.

Lucas caught the back of my neck in his palm and guided my face up to his, kissing me firmly on the mouth. He brushed the tip of his tongue across my lips and I moaned softly, giving him entrance. One kiss, two, then three and I stopped struggling. "I promise, my Charlotte." Another drugging kiss and I began to wonder why I'd been yelling. "Nothing will go wrong." He kissed the tip of my nose. "I will not allow anything to happen to you." He dropped his mouth to my lips again and I snaked my arms around his neck, kissing him back. For a few minutes we stayed like that, lost in one another and

I felt the tiniest sharp prick of a needle in the back of my hand. Lucas pulled away, gently extricating himself from my grasp. I was breathing raggedly, an intense longing settling deep in my groin. I realized with embarrassment that Jerome and Marianne had watched the entire spectacle – Marianne was grinning with delight and Jerome watched us with calm bemusement.

“I think she's ready for you, Doc,” Lucas stated quietly. He leaned forward once more to kiss me; placing his hand behind my neck and easing me down onto the gurney. Marianne placed surgical gloves on Jerome's hands and he picked up the syringe he'd been filling earlier, inserting it into the intravenous line he'd attached to the back of my hand.

“Count backwards for me, from one hundred,” Jerome requested as he slowly pressed down on the plunger.

Lucas kissed me between each number from one hundred down to ninety-six and I remembered nothing else.



There was a strange metallic taste in the back of my throat. I stirred against the pillow and licked my dry lips, swallowing to try to rid myself of the strange sensation.

Music was playing softly; I recognized the tune and struggled to open my eyes. “Goo Goo Dolls,” I murmured, growing more aware of my surroundings with each passing moment.

“Charlotte.” A deeply melodic voice spoke my name and I caught a tantalizing hint of Lucas's scent, a combination of pine and mint, sunshine and ocean breeze.

“Hmmm?” I rolled over, becoming aware of the extra weight on my ankle. With supreme effort, I blinked open first one eye, then the

other. I was lying on the couch in the living room, with the heat from the fireplace warming my cheeks. The gorgeous face I saw made me smile contentedly. Lucas was perched on the carpet, one leg hitched up with his arms linked around his knee and he seemed relieved when I opened my eyes. I was conscious of the metallic flavor again and jarred myself into consciousness, reaching up to touch the sides of my neck. "Am I still human?"

There was deep amusement in Lucas's voice when he spoke. "Yes, my love, still gloriously, beautifully human." He loosened his grip and drew himself onto his knees, leaning his forearms on the couch cushion as he kissed me tenderly. "For the purposes of candor, being bitten on the neck is also a myth. Whilst it is the obvious position to seek an artery, there are other, far more interesting places to select on the human body." He waggled his eyebrows wickedly.

"Oh!" Combining a heated blush with a huge yawn, I raised myself up on my arms. It was still daylight outside but heavily overcast and light snow flurries were drifting past the window. The house seemed empty other than Lucas and me. "What time is it?"

Lucas glanced at his watch. "A little after one." He turned to the coffee table, picking up a glass and handing it to me. "I'm sure you must be thirsty."

I took the glass and sipped the cool water gratefully. "Did everything go okay?"

He retrieved the glass from my hand and placed it on the table, turning back to capture my hands in his own. "The surgery went well, it took about twenty minutes as Jerome estimated and nobody was overwhelmed by the urge to bite you. The damage to your ankle has been repaired and you will be fine in about four weeks when the plaster is removed."

I chuckled at his report. "Are you aware how bizarre that sounded?"

"If you intend to live with me, you'd best get used to bizarre," Lucas warned with a smile. "Your life will never be normal."

"That's okay," I reassured him, pressing a kiss against his wrist. "I think I like it better this way."

We shared a smile and then he called Jerome's name.

Jerome limped through from the kitchen and checked me over, taking my pulse, listening to my chest, and taking a quick glance at the cast on my ankle. Announcing himself satisfied, he squeezed my shoulder and straightened up.

"Everything okay?"

"The surgery went well, it was only a minor problem which I've resolved. I want you off that foot for seven days to keep swelling to a minimum."

"A week?" I repeated incredulously.

Jerome met Lucas's eyes, the two men sharing a smug smile. "If you hadn't insisted on removing the cast with a bread knife, you wouldn't have found yourself in this predicament."

I screwed up my nose and scowled. "Okay, I get it. A week."

Jerome's eyes twinkled and he threw me a wink. "Good to hear. I'll be back tomorrow to check on you." With a little wave, he picked up his bag and hobbled out through the front door.

I subdued a little smile and Lucas remarked on it. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing, really. I just like what you said before – about me living with you." A shy smile crept over my lips. "It sounded sort of... permanent."

Lucas brushed his lips over mine, running his fingers through my hair. "I'm certainly hoping it will be permanent," he murmured,

“because the thought of being without you is more than I can bear.”

“Is that why you didn't go hunting?”

Lucas nodded. “Living without you – the thought of it emptied my world of any reason for existing. Although a vampire cannot commit suicide as such, I intended to test how long I could go without feeding – whether the pain of the thirst would be enough to eventually kill me.”

“Would that have worked?”

Lucas smirked. “Highly unlikely. My backup plan was to leave here, track down Ambrose's Kiss. I'm certain with the right amount of goading I could have convinced them to execute me.”

I shuddered, a tremble working its way throughout my body at the thought. “I'm so sorry.”

“Don't be,” Lucas responded simply. “You are here with me now, and I'm gloriously happy. You make my existence complete.” He leaned forward and cupped my face in his hands, kissing me gently at first, then with more insistence as he deepened the kiss, tracing the curve of my lips with his tongue. I moaned softly, blood racing through my veins as desire heightened and I ran my fingers across Lucas's broad shoulders, tracing the strong lines of muscle and sinew with my fingertips.

There was a quiet cough behind us and Lucas broke away, grinning sheepishly at Rowena who stood at the head of the couch with a tray in her hands. I blushed furiously and didn't know where to look.

“My apologies, Rowena,” Lucas said casually.

Rowena grinned happily. “No apology required, Lucas, I'm thrilled to see you together and clearly so very happy.” She leaned over the back of the couch, carefully placing the tray on my lap. “Some lunch for you, Charlotte, you must be hungry.”

Certain that my skin was the color of ripe strawberries I managed a feeble smile. "Thank you, I'm absolutely ravenous." Too late, I realized the double entendre contained in the words and blushed an even deeper shade of scarlet.

Rowena didn't respond, but shared a knowing smile with Lucas before she turned and left us alone.

"How did you become the leader of the Kiss?" I questioned after eating a sandwich.

Lucas looked up from the laptop, which he'd placed on the coffee table while I ate. "It happened over a number of years. I never intended to be leader, somehow it just eventuated."

"I thought either Ripley or Ben would have been leader – they're both considerably older than you."

"Neither Ripley or Ben wanted the job; they are both involved in their careers and have no interest in the politics of governing a group of vampires."

"But you did?"

Lucas snorted. "Hardly. It came about through necessity, rather than plan." He leaned back against the couch. "As you know, we all have some special abilities, both supernatural and highly refined human abilities. I have the ability to recall every conversation I've ever conducted in my existence. Which is a remarkably handy talent when you work as an attorney for decades at a time." He grinned, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Hard to get anything past me in cross-examination, as you can imagine."

"What else can you do?"

"Besides the usual vampire traits, my psychic skills are limited. My other skills are more mundane I'm afraid and not something to be particularly proud of. My strongest include strength and the ability

to fight, which I learned in the slums of Chicago and honed after I was created as vampire.”

“So you fought your way to leadership?” I asked.

“No, not at all. Our group is quite harmonious and we've never resorted to using fists to resolve issues amongst us,” he explained, before a wry grin crossed his handsome features. “Although sometimes I am tempted to slap some sense into Gwynn.” He sobered again, his gaze focused on the middle distance. “When I was first created, I was approached by a number of Kiss to join their groups, but I refused every request.”

“Why?”

“I wasn't looking for a new family. It took many years for the grief of losing my family, my life to pass. I'd lost my fiancée because I had to avoid her. I couldn't stay in Chicago, nor see everyone I'd known when I was alive. Becoming vampire requires leaving behind everyone you've ever loved, purely because they cannot know the truth and would eventually notice our lack of ageing.”

“I never thought of that,” I said quietly. Each one of them had endured similar losses to the one I'd sustained. Perhaps even more traumatic, was the knowledge their relatives had been alive and well, yet they had to deliberately break contact with them.

“For a long time I lived alone, moving from place to place to ensure my condition remained secret. After twenty years or so, I decided I needed to create some relationships with other vampires. I'd met many during my travels, of course, but most groups were violent and fought amongst themselves for seniority within their Kiss – something I had no wish to involve myself in. My interest in trying to better myself had always been there, it was perhaps magnified once I became vampire. I knew then I had decades to learn and study, I was no longer tied to the cycle of birth, life and death and I

could choose any career I wanted, study to learn about it, work at it for a decade or two and when I got bored," he shrugged nonchalantly, "start all over again."

"But you eventually joined a Kiss?" I probed, curious about his past and how everyone had come together.

"Yes, in 1888 whilst living in California. It was a mistake from the beginning as I had already begun questioning my existence and our way of doing things. I was coming to abhor the senseless slaughter, yet I had aligned myself with vampires who relished the hunt for humans and willingly slaughtered hundreds. Sometimes they would hunt for the sake of it, with no need to quench their hunger, merely the desire to chase and terrify their prey. It took a very short time to decide it had been a mistake. Unfortunately, you cannot just say your goodbyes and leave a Kiss without some confrontation; each Kiss is fiercely competitive and works on a dictatorial system of control. The leader is the equivalent of God to his group and he in turn controls down the line through his second and third, his warriors and troops, guards and protectors. Announcing I wanted to leave meant I had to fight my way out."

"Fight?" I echoed softly.

"I had to win challenges against six of his best men," Lucas explained, his eyes taking on that far away look again. "It was to be a fight to the death with each of them, one after the other. If I won all six challenges, I would be allowed to leave. If I lost—" His voice dropped away for a moment. "Ripley was a member of the same Kiss, had been for many, many years – decades in fact. I knew how miserable he was – he too was considering trying to exist without the need for human blood – but Ripley has never been a warrior. He's cunning and wise, but not a physically combative man unless extreme measures are called for. He and I had grown close during

my time with the Kiss and I decided I would try to gain his release. I told Alterus, the leader of the Coraclãs Kiss that I would fight twice the amount of his men, if Ripley would be allowed to leave with me."

"Twelve?" I echoed. The idea was mind-boggling – how could one man fight twelve?

Lucas nodded. "I'd honed my skills as a fighter over many years, first as a teenager in Chicago, then later when I was protecting myself from the inherent dangers of being a vampire without a Kiss. I won't go into the details, suffice to say it was brutal and cruel, but I defeated the twelve and Alterus had no choice but to keep his word and release Ripley and me."

"So Ripley was the first member of your Kiss?"

Lucas smiled. "Ripley was my friend, first and foremost. We didn't so much form a Kiss, as we remained together to pursue our new ideals and to protect one another. We decided to leave America for a while and travelled to Europe, settling in France for a few years and then we travelled on to England. Ripley had a passion for returning and seeing the country of his birth again. Which is where I met Ben – he joined our group when we met him in 1898, at the Countess of Blanche's dinner party in York."

I raised a questioning eyebrow. "The Countess of Blanche?"

Lucas nodded, lifting the empty tray from my lap and placing it on the coffee table. "A very rich, very influential socialite in the late Victorian era who also happened to be vampire. Ben was living on her estate as a guest at the time – whilst she didn't lead a Kiss in the formal sense, he was very much her vampire. She used him as a gigolo."

My eyebrows lifted for a second time. "Excuse me?"

Lucas sighed. "Ben was her sex slave, for want of a better description. Whilst he was kept in excellent conditions, given

everything he could ever want, he was tied to the Countess because of his lack of financial means." Lucas grimaced, rubbing his fingers over his brow. "Ben had come from a wealthy background, however when he was created, all financial security was gone for him as he had no way to make formal claim against his father's estates. He had to rely on his own wits, his own abilities to survive. He did survive, admirably well for centuries, but it took all his cunning to do so. He had no formal skills, nor the money to earn those skills. For many centuries, Ben lived from hand to mouth without the ability to increase his standing in the world. His abilities as a Knight stood him in good stead, he was readily accepted into a Kiss where he acted as the leader's second, but it was not the life he dreamed of and without the means to create the life he wanted for himself, he drifted for many years without hope or dreams of a better future."

"That's terrible," I offered quietly.

"It happens that way for many of us," Lucas admitted. He sighed again, reaching out to clasp my fingers in his. "Ben started to make inroads into improving his future in the late sixteen hundreds. He set out to learn as much as he could, wanting to become a healer of some description, but his plans were thwarted at every step and he fell back on his abilities as a knight to survive. Ben has served in more conflicts than the rest of us combined, from the Napoleonic Wars through to the Boer War. It was whilst he was serving in Her Majesty's Forces that his fortunes began to change for the better, but not without significant sacrifice. He'd worked his way up through the army to the rank of Captain and he was well respected amongst his peers, creating unlikely friendships amongst his so-called 'betters'. It was through one of these friendships that he came into the Countess's circle and she immediately recognized him for what he was – vampire."

"She had human friends?" I asked curiously.

Lucas chuckled. "Of course, she did. She was a Countess, and mixed with the best of Britain's upper classes."

"How did she hide the fact she was a vampire?"

"Extremely discretely. She was quite young, in her early thirties when she was turned and she had the extreme self-control that comes of being part of England's landed gentry. Beautiful manners, the epitome of poise and style. She had been turned in the sixteenth century and disappeared overseas, residing in Paris, Berlin, Vienna – a multitude of European capitals. She would remain in each place for perhaps ten or twenty years – only long enough for the rumors and innuendo regarding her remarkable 'youth' to become a subject of gossip, before she would move onto the next place.

"What if someone recognized her?"

Lucas grinned. "You think like a modern woman, love. In those days, travel was only something for pirates and explorers to indulge in. Most people never travelled, or if they did rarely and certainly not on great expeditions around the world. There were plenty of places for the Countess to appear and continue with her life as she chose to live it, without anyone being the wiser."

"So she met Ben?" I prompted, eager to hear the rest of the story.

"She was instantly besotted with him, but Ben had no emotional interest in her. He was already determined to help the less fortunate, but of course, with no reputable name behind him, no funds – it was almost impossible. When the Countess discovered Ben's aspirations, she offered to fund his social work and provide the entry into polite society he needed by keeping him as her lover."

"And Ben agreed to that?" It seemed unlikely. Ben was so composed, so assured of himself, I couldn't believe he'd ever allow

anyone to use him like that.

"Yes, Ben did."

I flushed with embarrassment when Ben appeared by the couch. I hadn't heard his arrival and hated that he'd caught us discussing him so blatantly. "I'm sorry, Ben," I muttered.

"For what? You are sharing our lives now, there's no reason to be embarrassed about my past. I'm certainly not," Ben stated casually. He glanced at the empty tray and smiled. "Would you like anything else?"

"A Coke?" I requested sheepishly.

"I'll go and find one for you." He strode off towards the kitchen and I rolled my eyes at Lucas, still smarting from Ben catching us.

"You really are beautiful when you do that," Lucas remarked, brushing his fingers over my cheek.

"Do what?"

"Blush. To see the color in your cheeks is charming. You look much better today; the dark shadows beneath your eyes are disappearing."

"Sleep will do that for you." I studied his eyes, suddenly aware of the darkened rings which had formed around them. "The skin around your eyes is darker."

Lucas sighed. "I should go hunt. Regrettably, I believe it will take longer to readjust to your presence than I'd hoped."

"Maybe you should stop kissing me so often," I recommended shyly. It was a half-hearted suggestion, one I hoped he'd refuse.

Lucas shook his head decisively, a smile blossoming. "Stop kissing you? Impossible, my love. My yearning in that regard burns harder than my thirst."

"Really?"

"Really." Lucas stood up, brushing his hands down his faded Levi's. "I think I should go out for a while." He grinned, then winked at me. "You really do smell delicious. Far better than anything I'm likely to find in the forest."

For a split-second I was shocked, until I caught the impish twinkle in his eyes. He was teasing me. "Got you. Bet you thought I was going to bite you."

I returned the smile. "Nu-uh. I don't believe you'll ever bite me."

His expression grew serious in the blink of an eye. "I pray you are right. I find myself so overwhelmed when I kiss you; it's a constant battle to keep from holding you too hard or hurting you in any of a dozen ways that are possible."

"I trust you," I responded simply.

He leaned down and kissed my forehead. "Thank you."

Ben reappeared, handing me a can of Coke and I smiled my thanks as Lucas strode towards the door.

"Look after her. Perhaps you could finish telling her your tale."

CHAPTER 24
SPIRITS RELEASED

"You really don't have to do that," I muttered as Lucas quietly closed the front door.

Ben settled opposite me, an amused expression in his eyes. "I told you, I don't mind at all. What I did at the time, sleeping with the Countess as payment for her support of my philanthropic work... it's something I've regretted, but I won't apologize for what I did." He glanced up, his eyes filling with affection when Rowena walked in. She dropped down onto the couch beside him and took his hand. "It brought Rowena to me."

I was curious now, the concern about snooping into their private lives outweighed by a desire to hear the rest of their story. "That's how you met Rowena?"

They shared an affectionate smile before Ben spoke up. "Rowena and her husband were visiting with Maria, the Countess, when Lucas and Ripley visited her in 1898."

"Finchley?" I recalled the name from my talks with the spirits.

Rowena shuddered delicately, a dark shadow briefly crossing her eyes. "Yes. He had taken me to England on an extended holiday and we spent a week at the Countess' home in York on our return journey to Scotland."

Ben leaned across and kissed his wife tenderly before continuing. "Finchley was a bastard of a man, there's no kinder way of putting it. He treated Rowena abysmally, as nothing more than a beautiful treasure he'd purchased. After dinner that first evening –where I found myself transfixed by her beauty and spirit – Rowena and I met in the library after everyone retired for the evening. It was quite accidental, no impropriety involved. I'd merely gone to select a book to read, whilst Rowena had gone to the library to escape from Finchley for a little while."

"What happened?"

Rowena smiled. "He completely and utterly charmed me from the beginning and we sat and talked for hours. Ben told me of his desire to help those less fortunate and I hung on every single word, fascinated by this wonderful man who was so polite, gracious and so incredibly handsome."

"If I could blush, Rowena, I would do so after that glowing recommendation," Ben murmured quietly. "The attraction worked both ways, I truly believed Rowena was the most stunning and delightful woman I'd ever met. For myself, it was love at first sight and I craved being at her side forever. That first night we did nothing more than share one illicit kiss, yet I knew from that point on she would be the only woman I would ever want."

"Which of course, was quite impossible," Rowena added in her soft lilt. "Finchley was my husband and divorce was unacceptable in those times. Not that Finchley would ever let me go."

"And I was tied to Maria, through my pledge to her in return for her financial aid."

It seemed like an impossible situation for both of them and my heart ached, even though there was tangible proof in front of me

that those obstacles had been overcome. "How did you get together in the end?"

"Lucas and I had become good friends during his visit to the estate. Whilst Finchley and Rowena only stayed for a week, Lucas and Ripley remained for a month as they were touring England at the time. Lucas became aware of my attraction to Rowena and encouraged me to make a break from Maria. You may not know this, but Lucas is a remarkable investor in the stock market and has been for many, many years. Even in those early days he was playing the market and making substantial amounts of money. He knew how unhappy I was in my current predicament, and forgive me, Rowena, for saying this, but whilst I slept with Maria each night, I neither loved, nor truly desired her. I was doing my duty in every physical sense and despised what I'd been reduced to – prostituting myself."

"You only did what you needed to do, Ben. I knew where your heart lay," Rowena assured him with a gentle caress of his arm.

Ben continued. "Lucas encouraged me to leave Maria's home and return with him and Ripley to the United States when they sailed later in the year. They were already attempting to give up human blood and I was utterly intrigued by the idea of living on animal blood. It was something I could see myself doing. At the time, I had no thoughts of pursuing a relationship with Rowena – as much as I loved her, she'd made it clear there were no hope in that regard whilst Finchley controlled her life."

"Did you leave?" I asked, sipping the Coke.

"Maria wouldn't consider it initially, she insisted she owned me. I found the situation intolerable and it became increasingly difficult to perform my *duties*, so to speak. I no longer found Maria even remotely attractive and I confess, I resorted to imagining myself with Rowena when I was called upon to service her bed."

The frustrating heat of a blush colored my cheeks again and I stared at my hands until it passed.

"Lucas is right, you do blush beautifully," Rowena teased with a little laugh. She turned her gaze to Ben. "I think we should finish this story and spare Charlotte more embarrassment."

"Of course," Ben agreed with an amused smile. "Lucas departed after the first failed attempt to free me from Maria's grasp – he and Ripley continued their tour of England and I believe they visited Ripley's former home and checked on his distant relatives, ensuring they were safe and well. When they finished, Lucas and Ripley returned to Maria's estate for a further week before their voyage to the States."

"Lucas was determined he would find a way to free Ben from Maria's clutches and he came up with a solution only a day or two after returning to her estate," Rowena continued.

"I believe we will make her blush again," Ben warned.

"I don't believe Lucas intends to keep secrets from her, so we will only be bringing forth a blush before its time," Rowena retorted quietly. "Within twenty four hours, Lucas had confirmed what he'd already suspected on his last visit – the Countess was deeply attracted to him and who could blame her – he is a ridiculously handsome man. Lucas used that information to his advantage and to gain Ben's freedom, he offered the Countess two things she couldn't refuse."

A twinge of unease blossomed but I couldn't stop myself from asking. "What two things?"

"Money and sex," Ben announced simply. "Lucas offered to pay back all the money she had spent on me and promised he would sleep with her for exactly one month."

"She agreed to that?" I choked back jealousy. Lucas had been alive for a very long time and obviously he'd slept with numerous women.

Rowena laughed, the tinkling noise loud in the otherwise silent room. "Yes, she did. Of course, she believed she would have no trouble in seducing Lucas into staying. She was terribly disappointed when Lucas did exactly as he'd said he would. He remained in York for precisely one month and when the contract ended, he signed a promissory note for the amount she'd spent on Ben's anthropological work and walked out."

I raised an eyebrow, but remained silent. Lucas had done it to secure Ben's freedom and I couldn't begrudge the couple sitting opposite me for what Lucas had done to rescue Ben. There was still a remaining question however. "How did you and Ben get together if you were still married to Finchley?"

Rowena frowned deeply, clasping her fingers more tightly around Ben's arm. "My husband had already found out about my attraction for Ben – he had his steward spying on me and knew Ben and I had been corresponding with one another. He grew ferociously angry and threatened to have my family killed if I didn't stop the correspondence at once."

My eyes narrowed with fury for what she'd suffered. "That's terrible!"

"It was terrible," Ben agreed in a quiet voice, rubbing his fingers across the back of Rowena's arm. "When Rowena stopped writing I assumed the worst – she had decided to end the attraction between us. It happened around the time Lucas had affected my freedom and assuming she no longer wished to pursue our... affair, for want of a better term, I left England and sailed to the United States with Lucas and Ripley. We remained here for nearly three years before I

received a letter from Rowena, forwarded by a mutual acquaintance.”

“I'd managed to smuggle the letter out with a servant sympathetic to my plight.” Rowena continued the story, wrapping her arm around Ben's. “My situation had worsened in the three years since I'd lost touch with Ben, whilst my husband knew Ben had left the country, it didn't stop the insane jealousy consuming him over what he saw as my betrayal.”

“But you'd never loved him,” I protested quietly.

“No, but he loved me in his own perverse way,” Rowena explained, “and he would do anything in his power to keep me as his prisoner. He enjoyed playing mind games, shattering my self-esteem and treating me abysmally. We are immortal, but we can be executed as you know and it was a threat he used constantly during the dying years of our marriage. He refused me access to our servants and friends, threatening not only their lives but my own, assuring me he would kill me if I didn't do as he said. For most of those three years I was locked in a tower on our estate with limited opportunity to feed and he taunted me, inviting humans to come and visit when my thirst was at its worst and taking delight in watching my desperation as I tried to avoid attacking them.”

“That's terrible!” I was outraged by the prospect, having seen what happened to Lucas when the thirst for blood was intense.

“When I received her letter I was desperate to return to England, determined to travel to Scotland and retrieve Rowena no matter the cost. Discovering what she had been subjected to, knowing she had never intended to end our correspondence and only did so because of Finchley's threats of retaliation made my blood boil. Lucas, Ripley, and I immediately departed for Southampton, but it took nearly two weeks to make the voyage, even on the fastest ship of the time. By

the time we reached London and then travelled to Scotland, I was beside myself with worry. We arrived at Finchley's estate late one evening and Lucas insisted we wait until morning to call upon Rowena and Finchley, to see if we could resolve the situation without bloodshed."

"Lucas sent a calling card to Finchley requesting an audience and they arrived at the estate shortly after 10am the following day," Rowena continued. "Through discreet investigations in the village, Lucas and Ripley had already discovered tales of Finchley's brutality to those around him, his cheating and swindling ways. Worse still was the fact that Finchley and his cronies killed haphazardly in the local area, feeding without concern for secrecy and neglecting to follow the rules the Council sets down."

I lifted an eyebrow. "The Council has rules?"

"Yes, of course. One of which is keeping our nature secret. Lucas thought perhaps this would be a bargaining chip he could use with Finchley; by subtly implying he would report Finchley to the Council." She shook her head wearily. "Finchley was an arrogant bastard though, he didn't give a damn. He considered himself lord of everything he presided over, untouchable. Forewarned of their visit, Finchley had surrounded himself with henchmen and intended on executing Lucas, Ben and Ripley, but he hadn't allowed for Lucas and Ben's exceptional fighting skills. Even Ripley, who is not our strongest combatant was prepared to take up arms."

"Lucas was magnificent, I'd seen his combat skills a few times during our three years together, but he is truly a brilliant strategist and immensely strong. He fought hand to hand until Finchley was the last man standing and then, we executed him." Ben stated the facts with no trace of emotion, no horror at what they'd done and an apprehensive shiver worked its way up my spine. When all was said

and done, despite how polite and pleasant they were, these people lived in a totally different world to the one I'd known until recently.

"Ben and I have been together ever since and we have always been grateful to Lucas for what he did that day. Not only in freeing me from Finchley, but he ensured the local people were properly taken care of after Finchley's execution and cleared up any loose ends which could have led to attracting attention from the authorities. We sailed back to the United States just weeks later and Ben and I married shortly after our arrival here." Rowena gazed at her husband with undisguised adoration. "I've been gloriously happy ever since." With a lingering kiss against Ben's lips, Rowena stood up elegantly. "If you'll excuse me, it's high time I was leaving. I'm going into Billings with the girls to pick up Marianne's wedding gown." She leaned over and hugged me briefly before setting off and I lay back against the pillows, marveling at the love they shared for one another and the respect they showed for Lucas. He'd obviously been their hero, long before he became mine and I couldn't prevent pride swelling in my chest.

"Charlotte, your head seems remarkably quiet since you've returned," Ripley announced as he and Striker walked into the living room a few minutes later. Striker was dressed casually in black jeans and a knitted grey sweater, Ripley wore dress pants and a silk shirt of pale blue. Ripley lowered himself into one of the deep armchairs and Striker took up a position on the couch beside Ben.

"I think they're sulking," I admitted, deciding to ignore a flash of annoyance at Ripley being in my head. "I got irritated with them constantly telling me I'd made a mistake by leaving and badgering me to come back."

"They were right," Striker announced with a smirk. "How'd you make them shut up?"

"Lost my temper. The final straw was when they started appearing, nearly scared me to death. They popped up constantly for the first three days."

Ben sat bolt upright, his attention captured. "What do you mean, exactly, when you say they popped up?"

I shrugged casually, uncertain why this news was so interesting. "They aren't only in my head now. I see them."

Ben and Ripley exchanged a glance. "Corporeal visions?" Ripley said.

Ben nodded thoughtfully. "It very much sounds like it." He returned his attention to me, curiosity rampant in his sharp brown gaze. "You actually see them? As though they were in the room with you?"

"As easily as I see you." The first time it happened was the day after I'd left. Alone in the cottage and utterly miserable, I'd been making coffee, my thoughts messy. When I turned from the counter Marianne's grandmother had been standing right in front of me. The experience terrified me beyond belief and I'd screwed my eyes shut, convinced I was hallucinating. When I tentatively opened them again, she'd disappeared.

I'd curled up on the armchair, deeply shaken and trying to convince myself it was a delusion. The voices were still in my head, clamoring for attention and creating a massive headache. I thought the appearance of Marianne's grandmother had been the result of stress. At least that's what I'd told myself – until it happened again.

Lying on my cot that night, I had my eyes closed and was trying to force myself into sleep. Hearing a shuffling sound, I opened my eyes and found myself face to face with Lucas's long-dead fiancée, Charlotte. She was leaning over me with no indications of malice, and talking to me as if she was really there. I squeezed my eyes

shut again, willing her to go away. I didn't understand what was happening, but I was convinced I was losing my mind.

Over the next twenty-four hours I experienced frequent visits from spirits I'd only ever conversed with mentally. The difference being, now they were actually in the room with me, as if they'd returned to life. Every time I screamed at them to leave me alone. Eventually, they did. I explained all this to Ben and he seemed as fascinated by this turn of events as I was confused.

"What does it mean?" I asked when the silence extended for more than five minutes and I'd grown tired of the pointed looks being exchanged between Ben and Ripley. "Why aren't you saying anything?"

Ben sighed. "I'm sorry, Charlotte. I was so amazed by what you'd revealed I was speaking with Ripley with telepathy. My apologies for the rudeness." He glanced across at Striker. "You too, Striker."

Striker shrugged nonchalantly. "Figured you'd get around to filling us in sooner or later."

"I forget how little you know about us, Charlotte. Ripley, Rowena, William and I have the gift of telepathy; we can speak to one another over short distances. William is a much younger vampire, but already he has developed the same skill. His capacity isn't as perfected as ours, he can only project his thoughts over a few feet at most, but he will no doubt be a powerful telepath in the future."

I nodded thoughtfully. "I saw him and Rowena speaking telepathically yesterday."

"We don't use it a lot; we consider it rude to use the skill when some of us don't have the ability. But in some circumstances it can be a useful talent, particularly if there are dangers nearby. Not only can we speak back and forth telepathically, we can sometimes project messages to those of us who are non-telepaths." He took a

deep breath, assessing me carefully. "As to what this all means, I would suggest your psychic powers are quite remarkable and evolving rapidly. You haven't had further corporeal visits since Wednesday?"

"No." I didn't know why this was so interesting to Ben and Ripley; to me they'd been nothing more than a frightening nuisance.

"What about the voices? You aren't hearing those either?" Ripley questioned. He and Ben shared another meaningful glance.

I reached for the water Lucas had left on the coffee table and Striker immediately got to his feet, reaching for the glass and passing it to me. With a smile of thanks, I took a sip then shook my head. "I've kind of got them boxed up," I admitted bashfully.

Striker raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Boxed up?"

"I was feeling stressed. Leaving here and not knowing what the future held, I couldn't cope with visits from a bunch of dead people. I discovered if I concentrated hard enough, I could force them into a kind of... box in my head. Once I got them in there, I finally got some peace."

Ben and Ripley exchanged another profound look and I sipped my water, wondering what they made of this turn of events.

"It might be some sort of shielding ability," Ripley suggested.

Ben nodded thoughtfully. "It's possible, but to control it so quickly, progress so swiftly. It's extraordinary, particularly considering she's human." He turned his gaze to me. "They haven't appeared since you," he paused and a tiny smile played on his lips, "put them in the box?"

"No," I agreed, returning his smile.

Ripley sat forward in the armchair, resting his elbows on his knees. "Charlotte, would you try something for us? See if you can get one of them out of the box?"

I closed my eyes obediently, envisioning the box in my head and opening the lid. Nothing happened. I concentrated harder, silently calling to them. When I opened my eyes, Ripley's mother was standing in the living room, directly behind Ripley's chair.

"Your mother is here, Ripley," I announced quietly.

"That is some seriously freaky stuff, Lott," Striker announced in a low voice.

Ben's eyes traced my line of vision, searching for what I was seeing. "Is she completely clear to you? Or opaque?"

"Completely clear." As I watched, Lady Caroline Wadworth glanced around the room in fascination, her gaze absorbing everything in the room.

"Can you speak with her?" Ripley asked quietly.

I spoke, despite feeling an utter fool for talking to someone only I could see. "Hello, Lady Wadworth."

"*Good afternoon, Charlotte.*" She spoke with a crisp English accent, her words clipped. "*Is this the world in which you live?*"

"Yes."

"*Is that— that's my Ripley?*"

"Yeah, that's Ripley." Despite my hands shaking, I smiled weakly at the delight in her pale grey eyes. She stepped elegantly around the armchair, kneeling in front of her only son. Ripley had been concentrating on my face but now he glanced down at the spot where his mother crouched, following my line of sight.

"Is she really here?" Ripley asked softly. His eyes were round with amazement and I realized he was hearing the conversation from his mother's point of view, by way of his head and mine.

"Yes," I replied. "She's kneeling beside your left knee."

"*He is such a handsome man, I'm so proud of him.*" Lady Wadworth glanced around at Ben and Striker. "*These are his*

friends?"

"Yes, Lady Wadworth. This is Ben Becket and Striker."

"Could you describe her?" Ben asked.

"She's perhaps five feet tall, with pale grey eyes and golden brown hair, which she's wearing in an elaborate curled hairstyle, piled high on top of her head. She has a long gown in dark green velvet, it's tightly pinched at the waist and there are little cuffs on the sleeves and she's wearing one of those weird frills around her neck."

"A cartwheel ruff," Ripley supplied.

"She's wearing a necklace, which looks like a— flower; I think it's perhaps a rose? It's made up of rubies and emeralds, I think."

"Mother wore a necklace like that," Ripley agreed. "She wore it always; my father gave it to her."

"I'm pleased you let me speak with you, Charlotte. You look much improved now you've come back to these people."

"Thank you. It's... very nice to speak with you, too."

A cool touch on my shoulder revealed Lucas's return from hunting and he settled on the arm of the couch. We shared a smile before he spoke softly. "Go on."

I turned back to Ripley, his mother still kneeling in front of him. She'd returned to observing the room, a look of wonder in her eyes.

"What year is this?"

"2008."

"Then it's been four hundred years since I last saw my beloved son. Such wonders you have in 2008." Her eyes came to rest on the laptop, which Lucas had left on the coffee table. *"Goodness, what is that?"*

"It's called a computer. It's used to collect information and store it."

"Do you not have paper in 2008?"

I stifled a giggle, convinced it would be impolite to laugh at a woman of her standing. "Yes, we have paper, but a computer stores more information than you could write on a thousand pieces of paper and you can retrieve the information in a second." The familiar throb of a headache started to pulse behind my eyes.

"Is the one named Acenith here?"

"No, she's not home right now."

"Such a pretty girl. Ripley cares for her deeply, I believe."

With no ready response to this declaration, I asked a question that had been unresolved since I embraced this weird ability. "You can see them?"

"Yes, I see through your eyes when you look around. What you see, I have been able to view. Now it's different, I can see you, as you see me," she explained. *"I can witness things for myself now and it is astounding."*

"Where do you— what happens to you when I'm not in contact with you?"

The beautiful woman smiled and looked into her son's eyes, adoration and love reflected in hers. *"That is something I cannot answer."*

"Is that because... you don't really exist? Other than in my head? Or is there something more? Where did you go, when I blocked you from contacting me?"

"Oh! Is that what happened? We wondered why we could no longer reach you." She smiled gracefully. *"We do live, child. On a different level of existence to this world. I am afraid that is all I can tell you."*

The headache that had been threatening erupted into fully-fledged pounding and my hands trembled with the effort of keeping

her spirit in the here and now. Lucas rubbed my back tenderly, his presence a comfort.

"You are tired, my dear child. You rest for now and I shall visit another time." Lady Wadworth smiled affectionately and her image faded away.

Slumping against the pillows, I rubbed at my temples. "She's gone."

"You okay, Lott?" Striker sounded concerned.

"It's a headache, it's nothing."

Ben reached my side at once, brushing his fingers over my forehead. "I'll get you some pain relief."

"What was that was all about?" Lucas asked.

Ripley explained the last few minutes events as Lucas massaged my shoulders, his fingers easing the tension which had built up without my awareness.

Ben reappeared with a bottle of Tylenol but before he could open it I spoke up. "The headache's disappearing. I don't know why."

"Some Tylenol won't do any harm – besides, the pain relief Jerome gave you after the surgery will be wearing off," Ben insisted. He opened the bottle and retrieved two capsules. "Other than the headache, how do you feel?"

"A little tired."

"What you did was astonishing, you described my mother exactly as I remember her," Ripley announced, as Ben handed me the capsules and passed the glass of water to me. "I could hear the entire conversation."

Ben glanced up. "Both perspectives? You could hear your mother?"

Ripley nodded, enthusiasm clear in his voice. "I can't explain it." He turned his gaze to me. "Charlotte, when I hear a person's

thoughts, I only hear their voice. Even when they are recalling someone else's words to them, I only get everything one-dimensionally." His eyebrows rose a little. "In your case, I'm not only hearing your thoughts, but I could actually hear mother's voice, emanating from directly inside your head."

With a tired shrug, I lay my head back against Lucas's thigh. "Don't ask me, I can't explain it."

"Neither can I," Ben agreed. "But it is an extraordinary turn of events."

"Extraordinary as it may be, I think Charlotte should lie down and sleep a little. You look exhausted, my love," Lucas said. I wriggled down obediently against the pillows and Lucas pulled the blanket over me, playing with my hair until I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 25
THE BET

The aroma of food woke me, tantalizing my taste buds. I wasn't sure how long I'd slept, but the room was dark and someone had turned on the lamps. With a yawn I stretched, rolling over to find Lucas sitting on the floor beside me, clasping my hand in his.

"Hi," I said sleepily.

"Hello my love. Do you feel better now?"

Releasing his hand for a minute, I dragged myself up into a sitting position, nodding in agreement. "I smell food."

"Rowena brought Chinese food. We can naturally assume you are hungry?"

"Naturally." Glancing around, I realized the women had returned from their shopping expedition. The living room had literally exploded with copious amounts of parcels, bags, and boxes which Marianne and Gwynn were unpacking. "I thought you were picking up your wedding gown?"

"We did. While we were there Gwynn thought we should buy half of Billings," Acenith explained with a gentle smile. "In case you were not aware, both Marianne and Gwynn could win gold medals in the shopping Olympics."

Rowena appeared at the foot of the staircase, wearing snug jeans and a claret-colored sweater, her hair drawn back into a ponytail. "I believe that's everything prepared for the wedding now, thank goodness."

"Except for Charlotte's dress," Marianne said. She was unpacking expensive-looking boxes filled with equally expensive-looking clothes. "I had the perfect dress picked for you but Acenith insisted you should be allowed to choose something yourself."

"It's only fair," Acenith protested softly. "I know you have exquisite taste, but Charlotte should at least get a look at the dress before she's expected to wear it."

My gaze flew from Acenith to Marianne and back again. "I wasn't aware that I'd be coming to the wedding."

"Of course you're invited to the wedding," William assured me in his quiet way of speaking. "We wouldn't let you miss the event."

"I assumed it would be a V.I.V. occasion."

William stared at me and Lucas explained with a wry smile. "Very Important Vampire. It's Charlotte's way of saying she understood the wedding was a vampire-only event."

"That's cute, I like that." Marianne chuckled, tossing her pink streaked hair away from her face.

"The wedding will be attended by a number of our vampire friends, but a good proportion of the guests will be human," Ben explained.

"Oh." Panic rose swiftly in my throat. My association with vampires outside of the Tine Kiss had been less than pleasant to date.

"The vampires attending are not human feeders, love. Friends of ours from New York, some from Egypt. You won't be at any risk whatsoever, I promise."

"Oh," I repeated. "In that case, I'd love to be there. I've never been to a wedding before."

Lucas threw me a curious look and I realized he must be thinking of my Mom's second marriage. "I did go to Mom's wedding, but it was in a registry office. Nothing special." It was painful bringing up Mom's marriage to Pete – since the night when I'd released my pent-up memories of Mom's murder, Lucas hadn't mentioned it again and neither had I. It had been a relief to discover he wasn't going to press me for any more details, although I was sure he must be curious and have some unanswered questions. Although enormous relief had followed releasing the memories, I hadn't faced them head on for a second time. They were still too raw, too painful.

My stomach rumbled loudly, drawing grins from the men and Rowena headed towards the kitchen. "Look at the time, it's after eight. I've been keeping some takeout warm for you."

"Thank you!" I called as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Gwynn approached with a rectangular box in her hands. "I've bought you a gift. Ben says you're confined to the couch for the next week, so I purchased something to keep you amused."

"I— thank you." I took the lid from the box to discover an iPad. I gazed up at Gwynn, overwhelmed by such an expensive gift. "I— Gwynn, I can't possibly accept this, it's too much!"

"Of course you can," Gwynn responded airily, obviously pleased by my reaction. "It's the very least I can do after treating you so badly. Please accept it; you would make me feel better if you will."

I smiled happily, running my fingers over the top of the box. "I really appreciate it. I don't know what else to say."

Lucas took the box and placed it on the table. "I'll set it up while you eat."

Rowena emerged from the kitchen with a tray holding four containers, setting it carefully on my lap. "Fried rice, chicken and cashews, sizzling steak and king prawn chow mein. I didn't have any idea of what you would like, so Acenith and I guessed." She winked conspiratorially. "We don't have a lot of experience in these matters."

"Wow, Lott. If you get through that lot I'll be astounded." Striker chuckled, eyeing the containers as I picked up the fork and started eating.

"Bet you five bucks she can eat the lot," William announced quietly from his seat beside Marianne.

"You're on," Striker grinned. "She's way too skinny to get all that food in, so I'm gonna win for sure."

"Don't be so certain," Lucas warned mildly, "If there's one thing I've discovered about Charlotte, she can eat."

"I hear you had an interesting afternoon," Acenith said inquisitively.

I shrugged, swallowing a mouthful of chicken. "Ben and Ripley seemed to find it interesting. I'm not sure, it all seems pretty weird to me."

"It's a remarkable power," William protested softly. "Your grandmother had psychic abilities?"

"Yeah. I'm not sure how strong they were, I remember when I was little she used to always be telling Mom I had an old soul. I don't know if she recognized this ability, or if the things I said and did were things that seemed familiar to her. Mom didn't have psychic talents at all." I ate a mouthful of fried rice, swallowing it thoughtfully. "Ripley, you said something earlier about a shield?"

Ripley nodded, tucking his left ankle on top of his right knee and gripping his calf with his hands. "Some vampires have a shielding

ability when their psychic powers build. It can develop in a variety of ways, for instance, some can shield their thoughts from others.”

“Some vampires can use their shield as a barrier to protect them from harm,” Acenith added.

“Harm? They can defend themselves?”

“Yes,” Acenith agreed. “I've heard tell of one vampire who could use it to shield specific parts of her mind from readers like Ripley.”

“That's pretty amazing.” I thought about the explanation as I continued eating dinner. “I imagine it'd be a useful skill to have, but I still don't see how what I do is useful. Talking to dead people and being able to shut them away doesn't really help anyone, does it?”

“Of course it does,” Lucas insisted. “Without the warnings, you would have been in danger when Ambrose's Kiss visited. Without the information you received from your Mom – Ben, Striker and I would have been in grave danger when we went out and met with them. It was your connection to the spirits which allowed us to escape unscathed.”

I shrugged, still skeptical. “I guess so.”

“Do you ever have spirits contact you whom you don't know?” Rowena questioned. She'd settled down on the carpet in front of Ben's legs and he'd leaned forward to wrap his arms possessively around her shoulders.

“Before I met you guys, I'd only ever heard from Mom and my grandmother. After I met Lucas, I started hearing from the other Charlotte.” Lucas caught my eye and smiled. “When I met you all, I heard from your families.” I chewed at my lip while I thought. “It seems I hear from people who are important to people who are... important to me.”

Rowena's smile was dazzling. “Thank you, Charlotte, that's so lovely of you to say so.”

"Have you seen my mother?" Striker queried. "You know, actually seen her, like you saw Striker's Mom?"

"I think they all visited me at the cottage. Almost endlessly for the first three days. At least," I admitted, "until I discovered a way to stop them."

"Ah, the whole 'boxing them up' technique?" Striker grinned.

I finished the chicken and cashews with a sigh and started on the sizzling steak. Dropping individual pieces into the box of fried rice, I coated them in rice then picked them up again and popped them into my mouth. "I guess that's what Ripley meant about shielding abilities. I thought I was going crazy; having dead people appear in your field of vision is creepy. It took me two days of trying before I discovered I could force them into a box in my head. When I shut the lid, in my imagination, they can't talk with me anymore." A frown creased my forehead. "I know it sounds bizarre, but it seems to work."

"You actually visualize a box?" Ben questioned. He was playing with Rowena's hair, massaging her scalp and Rowena looked like she was in heaven.

"Yeah. After my family were murdered, someone gave me pamphlets about the grief process, and coping with it. Psychologists apparently recommend it – a way of allowing your brain to deal with stress as you recover from a major trauma. You're supposed to pack anything in the box that you can't cope with and then you're supposed to bring stuff out slowly as you start to recover." I shook my head. "It didn't work for me; I guess I was so overwhelmed I couldn't even begin to sort it out. But it seems to be working with my spirit visitors."

"Are you aware that's the first time you've mentioned your family since Christmas?" Marianne pointed out gently.

"It's getting easier, more so now I talk to Mom regularly. I haven't come to terms with what happened – I don't think I ever will – but it's easier to cope. Mom reminds me of the good times we shared." I smiled wistfully. "In some ways, it's like having her back."

Lucas rubbed my arm tenderly, his touch exceedingly light. "I'm so pleased for you, Charlotte. You went through such unspeakable horrors, more than any young person should do. It's nice for you to have contact with your family again."

We settled into a companionable silence while Gwynn and Marianne continued to unpack the day's purchases. I returned to my meal, eating in silence until I'd swallowed the last mouthful of chow mein and dropped the fork onto the tray, utterly satisfied.

"Damn it," Striker remarked good-naturedly. He retrieved his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans, pulled out a five-dollar note and handed it to William, who winked at me and smiled triumphantly.

"Striker, can you pass my sketch pad and some charcoal please?"

"You want to do some drawing?" Striker asked, complying with my request.

"I want to sketch Ripley's mother," I explained, taking the sketchpad and flipping to a fresh page.

"I believe you, Charlotte. Although I could not see her, I heard her voice," Ripley remarked quietly.

"I know," I replied, already sketching from the vision I'd seen. "I want to see how accurate I was."

Ben settled on the arm of the couch, watching over my shoulder. "It would be fascinating to see how precise these visions are," he agreed. "Do you mind if I watch you work?"

"Of course not." I'd already focused on the task, knew that within seconds I'd forget about Ben and everyone else in the room for that

matter. I sketched swiftly, capturing every aspect of the woman I'd seen earlier. I sketched her exactly as she'd appeared, kneeling in front of Ripley's knee, and followed up with a smaller sketch of her face and shoulders, then a full-length sketch capturing the items I'd described to the men. Finishing with a rough sketch of the necklace I'd seen her wearing, I tried to capture as much detail as I could recall of the exquisite jewel.

Satisfied that I'd catalogued everything, I passed the sketchpad to Ben and he examined the drawings closely. He handed them over to Ripley. "What do you think?"

Ripley studied the sketches closely for more than a minute, eyes flicking across every little detail, his expression serious. "You have captured her perfectly, Charlotte. That is my mother, exactly as I remember her."

"May I see?" Acenith asked. The sketchpad was passed from one person to the next, finally coming back to Lucas who passed it to me with an encouraging smile. "You really are a remarkable artist, my love."

"Thank you." His praise delighted me, bringing a happy smile to my lips.

"Charlotte, would it be an imposition to ask you to make a sketch of my mother? I'd very much like to see her again," Gwynn requested quietly.

"Of course," I agreed easily. "I'd be happy to do it." After our recent rocky moments, Gwynn and I seemed to be developing a fledgling relationship and I was eager to have that happen. Sketching her mother was a small thing to do and if it would cement our relationship into something more concrete, I'd be glad to do it. I reached for the charcoal I'd discarded on the coffee table, ready to start.

“Not tonight,” Lucas said firmly. “You had surgery this morning and the past week has been challenging. There is plenty of time.”

CHAPTER 26

BILLINGS

I would feel more comfortable about this if I were going with you," Lucas announced.

"Relax, Lucas. We're just going shopping at Bellevue's," Marianne retorted good-naturedly. "Acenith and I will be with Charlotte. Nothing could possibly go wrong."

A fortnight had passed since the surgery and Marianne decided the time had come to go shopping for a dress for the wedding. The purpose of the day was two-fold; she'd also suggested we could also use my gift voucher to supplement my meager wardrobe. Seeing me in my old denims and t-shirts day after day was a constant source of frustration for the women and they'd united to insist I needed classier clothes. I couldn't count the number of times I'd been greeted by a sigh or a groan, followed by the suggestion of how beautiful I would be if only I dressed better. It made me giggle when Marianne made these pronouncements, given her unique and unusual way of dressing. I took it in good humor though, promising I'd make a concerted effort once we'd been shopping. Given the all clear by Jerome, we'd settled on the Saturday before the wedding for the expedition and both Acenith and Marianne had waited impatiently for the day to arrive.

"I don't mind if you come along," I admitted as I made my way across the living room on crutches. Lucas and Marianne had been discussing the shopping trip in the living room as I slowly walked downstairs and Lucas smiled warmly when I reached his side, obviously pleased I'd taken his side.

"No way! This is a girls day out and honestly, you two have been joined at the hip for the past fortnight. It will do you no harm at all to have a day away from one another," Marianne announced.

It was true, Lucas and I spent every waking moment together and we both liked it that way. The past two weeks had been blissful and I thanked my lucky stars every day that I'd met him. Although I wasn't certain it was possible, I fell a little more in love with him every day. The only time we spent apart was Lucas's hunting trips and I usually busied myself painting while he was gone, delighted when he returned home. We'd grown increasingly comfortable in each other's company. Many hours were spent talking and more still in companionable silence. He was the last person I saw before I fell asleep at night and the first person I saw when I awoke each morning.

Lucas and I exchanged a look and I shrugged. "I think Marianne's made up her mind."

"Yes, Marianne has," she responded with a beaming smile. She picked up her jacket and slung her purse over her shoulder. "Let's go."

Lucas gripped my shoulders and leaned in to kiss me softly. I marveled that it didn't matter how many times we kissed, I still experienced the quickening of my heartbeat. Straightening up, he brushed my hair back from my face and ran his cool fingers over my cheek. "I'll see you when you arrive home."

With one last lingering glance, I walked carefully towards the front door with Marianne. The idea of this trip was making me nervous, my natural shyness exacerbated by the prospect of spending the day alone with them. Although we spent a great deal of time together, this would be the first time I'd spent extended time with any of the women alone. Out of my comfort zone, the thought was nerve wracking.

Those nerves quickly became a thing of the past – time passed in a happy blur with Marianne and Acenith keeping me amused and involved as we shopped. Acenith had a unique knack of selecting clothes that were perfect for me, she had exquisite taste and an uncanny ability for knowing exactly what would suit me. Marianne busied herself running back and forth with Acenith's selections, reducing the amount of walking I needed to do and voicing her opinion as I tried on various outfits, passing her approval on each item added to the purchase pile.

I'd never owned much in the way of clothes, during my childhood money was tight and I'd only ever had the basics I needed. Clothes weren't something to spend a lot of money on, Mom had concentrated on coolness in summer, warmth in winter – sturdy, basic clothes of reasonable quality that she picked up second hand or on discount and big enough to last a season or two. After she'd married Pete I'd scraped by with old favorites – jeans, sweaters, t-shirts. Pete hadn't been a big believer in spending money on his family. The majority of clothes I'd worn in the past two years had been those same old favorites and I'd only replaced items when they were worn out and no longer wearable.

Shopping with the two women was a revelation. They both had superb taste, money was apparently no object and they chose a variety of materials for my new wardrobe – cotton and wool,

cashmere, velvet and knits. Nothing in the stores we visited escaped their attention and they chose some outfits I would never have given a second glance. When I put them on, I quickly discovered they were perfectly suited to me and I swung from side to side, admiring how pretty each item was.

By the time we'd finished spending the substantial gift voucher and a considerable amount on Acenith's shiny black credit card, I was both elated and exhausted. Trying on clothing with the cast had proven tiring and I was starving.

Marianne looked dreamy for a second or two and grinned as we dropped the bags into the trunk of Acenith's car. "Time for lunch, I see."

Squirming uncomfortably, I turned to Marianne. "Why don't I grab something on the run?"

"Of course not, today is all about you and right now you need to sit down, rest and eat something substantial for lunch," Acenith insisted.

"How's that going to work?" I questioned in a low voice, mindful of the people around us. "Won't it look strange if I order and you don't?"

Marianne winked. "Of course we'll be eating." She glanced around the crowded mall before leading us towards a restaurant a few stores down from where we stood. "Uno's is always nice. And busy."

I followed along behind Marianne, limping slowly towards the restaurant on the crutches. Acenith held the door open and I hobbled into the busy eatery where we were swiftly ushered into a booth. The server left us with menus and I settled back, studying the options anxiously and wondering how Acenith and Marianne would cope with having to eat something.

"I think I'll have the Caesar Salad, what about you, Marianne?" Acenith said, refolding her menu and placing it down on the table.

"Caesar Salad sounds wonderful. I think I'll have a bottled water to go with it," Marianne agreed. She glanced across the table and smiled warmly. "What would you like? I'm sure you must be hungry because you didn't have morning tea with Acenith and me."

I stared blankly at Marianne before I twigged to what she was doing. By suggesting to anyone within earshot that she and Marianne had eaten earlier, it allowed me to choose whatever I wanted from the menu. "I think I'll have Linguini Romano and some garlic bread. And a Coke."

The server took our orders and I settled back against the booth seat, glancing around with interest. The restaurant was crowded with lunchtime diners busy eating and chatting with their companions. Most people didn't give us a second look, although a lot of male patrons did a double take at Marianne and Acenith's beauty. The two women didn't seem to notice, but I squirmed uncomfortably in my too-loose jeans and baggy t-shirt. I'd chosen the best of my wardrobe but looked mediocre compared to the two elegantly dressed women opposite me.

The server brought our drinks and I watched curiously as Acenith and Marianne opened their bottled water and poured some into the provided glasses. As I watched discreetly, neither one of them picked up the glasses – Marianne toyed with hers, turning it around and around and Acenith busied herself dropping a straw into hers, twisting it between her fingers.

"I think we should concentrate on your dress for the wedding this afternoon," Marianne announced. "We'll go to the store to check out the one I wanted to buy, see if you like it. And then you'll need lingerie."

I nearly choked on the Coke. "Lingerie?" A mental image of the negligees Marianne had been dressing me in popped unbidden into my head, reminding me of the increasing struggles Lucas was having in keeping his hands off me and I wondered whether it was wise to tempt him further. Maybe Marianne and Acenith assumed we'd begun a sexual relationship – Lucas stayed in my room every night and it would be an easy assumption to make – normal people would be having sex. In our situation it wasn't going to happen, probably for a long time given Lucas's continual fight against his personal demons. Even then I wasn't sure I was ready; although I regularly melted into a puddle of lust I wasn't convinced I was ready to take that step. I could hardly work up the courage to talk about sex without turning as red as a beetroot. How would I cope with the actual event? My experience was non-existent; I'd never had a boyfriend, let alone a lover. "Lucas and I— we haven't— we're not..."

Acenith reached across and laid her cool hand over mine, squeezing my fingers reassuringly. "Relax, Charlotte. Marianne is talking about new bras, stockings, panties. Nothing too risqué."

I blushed a deep shade of crimson and stared at the Coke glass until my color started to return to normal. When I looked up again Acenith was smiling, her eyes showing sympathy over my faux pas. "You blush so easily, it's charming."

"Lucas seems to think so," I admitted. I sipped my Coke, considering a question I wanted to ask and had been too shy to discuss with Lucas. These women were rapidly becoming my friends, so who better to ask? I glanced around the crowded restaurant, confirming if anyone was near enough to overhear. The loud hum of noise emanating from the other tables made it seem unlikely. "I wondered," I began, hot color rushing to my cheeks again, "is it

possible for Lucas and I to... well... a physical relationship— um, can we..." I trailed off, overwhelmed by acute embarrassment.

Marianne and Acenith exchanged a long glance and Marianne glanced discreetly around the room before answering. "It is physically possible, without a doubt. There's no difference between the male anatomies before or after creation, although," she smiled wickedly, "male stamina is greatly increased *after* creation."

"Marianne!" Acenith hissed. "You will make this worse for poor Charlotte."

Marianne nodded and patted my hand. "Sorry, I couldn't resist." Her expression sobered when she spoke again. "Whilst it's physically possible, there are a multitude of problems involved. It's incredibly dangerous to consider a sexual relationship with Lucas; it's not something which has ever happened before. Not without the human dying," she said in a low voice. "Even if Lucas could control himself through the actual act, the chances of you surviving intact are probably negligible." She switched her gaze to Acenith, who nodded somberly.

"Lucas's strength would be an issue," Acenith agreed quietly. "When we make love to another vampire our strength is equal, and when passion is involved we don't have to remember ourselves with another vampire. With a human however," she shrugged delicately. "When a man's passion is raised, he is not thinking about how hard he is hugging, how much pressure he's putting on his partner. His desires return to a baser level," she explained.

Marianne was watching the room warily and she leaned forward to speak. "There are far too many people here, let's talk about this in the car on the way home." Straightening up, she smiled brightly. "Now about this dress, I'm thinking emerald green because it will highlight your eyes perfectly..."

Lunch at Uno's passed in a blur as I contemplated the discussion which had ended prematurely. I barely noticed the server bring our food and I watched Marianne and Acenith chatting together, shuffling food around their plates as if they were eating. By the time they'd finished, not a thing had entered their mouths, but their plates appeared as though it had. It was quite a clever trick, most of the shaved cheese, bacon pieces and croutons had been adjusted around the plate until they were hidden beneath mounds of rocket lettuce. To anyone not realizing what they were doing, it appeared they'd eaten the accompaniments and left the majority of the lettuce. As Marianne pointed out, the server was busy, she certainly wasn't going to take notice of how much they had or hadn't eaten, and all she would be concerned with was the size of her tip.

My heart wasn't in the conversation, which ebbed and flowed during lunch. All I wanted to do was go back to the house and think over what I'd been told. I wasn't certain how close Lucas and I were to taking the next step in our relationship but the idea of being unable to was disconcerting. Did this mean we could never have a physical relationship and intimacy would be impossible? What about having children? Bleak as the prospect was, I imagined we might never have a baby together and the sadness was overwhelming.

Having a child of my own was something I'd always expected in my future. I'd loved playing with dolls as a child, mothering them, pretending to feed and change them. I'd mothered my siblings later, enjoying those quiet times when I fed them a bottle, or changed a diaper.

The thought of children had been driven from my mind over the past two years; something I'd assumed would never happen because I didn't intend to live long. With the appearance of Lucas in

my life, I'd begun to daydream about a baby in my future. In Lucas's future.

With regret, I recalled the conversation we'd had when I'd left on that terrible night a few weeks ago. I'd told him I wanted a normal life, a normal husband; a normal family. I'd used the words to hurt him, to convince him I didn't want to be with him any longer. Realization now dawned as to how much truth the lies I'd spoken contained – and how deeply my words must have wounded him. He knew our situation could be impossible and I'd thrown it in his face. Even now he must be aware this situation could eventuate, that I might want babies he was unable to father.

The most devastating problem was – where did that leave us?

Shopping for a dress was difficult – although I tried hard to seem interested, my heart wasn't in it. Marianne had me try on the dress she'd selected and while I admired it, both she and Acenith decided it wasn't the one. Consequently I tried on dress after dress, with Marianne pronouncing herself unsatisfied with all of them. With a week to go until the wedding and thoroughly fed up with clothes shopping, I made the mistake of suggesting I'd wear one of the numerous items they'd already selected. Both women reacted with horror, but Acenith realized my heart was no longer in it and suggested she'd find something for me in the next few days. By the time we'd reached that decision I'd have gone to the wedding in a garbage bag if it meant I could stop trying things on.

Lingerie shopping was easier, Marianne asked for my sizes and delighted in flitting around the store, picking out a vast array of pretty bras and matching panties while Acenith and I sat and watched. My foot was aching and my arms and hands throbbed from using the crutches, so I was willing to wear just about anything she chose.

I flopped into the back seat of the car, lolling tiredly against the headrest. Watching the countryside speed past in a blur, I came to the conclusion both Acenith and Marianne drove as fast as Lucas did, with little regard for highway laws.

Marianne was sitting in front with Acenith while she drove and she turned to talk after we'd left the outskirts of Billings on our way back to Puckhaber. "I'll be happy to answer your questions now we have some privacy," she offered. "I'll answer anything I can."

I turned from staring out the window to look at Marianne. "I'm frightened," I admitted quietly. "What if we can never—" Frustrated by my own inability to even discuss the subject, I brushed my fingers over my temples impatiently.

"You're certain you wouldn't consider being created?" Marianne questioned cautiously. "By doing so you could have a sexual relationship with Lucas without it being an issue."

I shook my head emphatically. "No." I immediately regretted my resounding refusal, fearful I sounded offensive to the two vampires in the car.

Marianne noticed my discomfort and reached across to gently pat my knee. "I don't blame you, Charlotte. Few of us would have chosen this life and I've had days where I've regretted that I'll never have a baby with Striker. I know Gwynn finds it difficult also."

"Ben told me this has never happened before... a vampire falling in love with a human."

"Oh, I'm certain it might have happened before," Acenith responded, her concentration intent on the road, "but it is a complex situation. Vampires have had sex with humans for centuries, but as you are aware, it always involves feeding and death. I can't believe that nobody has ever fallen in love before now."

"I've heard of some couples – but the vampire half created the human half to another vampire so they could consummate their relationship."

"And if that didn't happen, obviously their relationships failed because the vampire half of the relationship murdered the human half," I groaned.

Marianne smiled sympathetically. "Did you want to have children in the future?"

"Yes— No— I'm not sure," I admitted miserably.

Acenith glanced back at me for a few seconds, a deep frown marring her smooth skin. "Charlotte, you could never have a baby with Lucas, whether you remain human or not."

"Acenith, I don't think..." Marianne began, staring at Acenith in dismay.

I glanced from Marianne to Acenith and back again. "What does that mean?"

Acenith inhaled deeply, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "She should know, Marianne." Taking Marianne's silence as assent, she continued. "Even if you and Lucas can overcome your difficulties and begin a sexual relationship, you cannot have a baby. Not because it's physically impossible for you to fall pregnant – but because getting pregnant would kill you. The vampire fetus will destroy you, drain you of blood and eat its way out of your body when it is fully developed. You cannot survive if you fall pregnant to Lucas."

I drew back, completely horrified by what I was hearing. It couldn't be real; it wasn't something I had any parameters to deal with.

"You shouldn't have told her," Marianne scolded. She slipped between the seats, remarkably lithe for such a tall girl and flopped down on the seat beside me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

"She hasn't had enough time to get used to us and certainly isn't ready to hear what you've told her!"

"You've seen how close they've become," Acenith argued quietly, "I have no doubts about their love for one another. This is a very real problem and Charlotte has a right to know how difficult this will be for *both* of them." Acenith glanced back at me, her eyes filled with sympathy. "I'm not trying to scare you or hurt you. You've become very special to all of us and I consider you a friend. It's important you have all the facts."

"So you're saying... this won't work unless I become a vampire?"

"No, I'm not saying that," Acenith responded after a long silence. "However, it is something you may have to consider if you want this relationship to continue."

A tremble worked its way through my whole body and Marianne drew me closer, whispering soothing words in my ear. I thought about what Acenith was saying for a long moment, the familiar anxiety working its way through my chest at the thought of becoming vampire. It was something I just couldn't consider. I couldn't imagine myself hunting – the idea of it made me nauseous.

"You don't find hunting..." I trailed off, not sure what descriptive word may or may not be politically correct to use with a vampire.

"Icky?" Marianne supplied with a weak grin.

I nodded; relieved I hadn't had to spell it out.

"No, not really. When I was transformed and went hunting for the first time, I found it a completely natural process."

"As did I," Acenith agreed.

"Have you and Lucas discussed this?" Marianne asked curiously.

"No," I admitted. "He's aware I want to stay human and he's never suggested otherwise. We have, uh, discussed a physical relationship, kind of, but Lucas says he needs time, to uh—"

“Overcome the yearning to bite you?” Marianne supplied helpfully. She grinned wickedly, eyes twinkling. “I can understand his problem. You do smell delectable.”

“Um, thanks?” I wasn't sure what else to say to this frank admission from Marianne.

Acenith giggled, breaking the tension in the car. “Ignore Marianne, she's being facetious.” She looked at me in the rearview mirror, her expression growing serious. “I'm guessing, based on your reactions and embarrassment that you've never had sex before.”

I nodded, a flush rising across my cheeks. “I've never even had a boyfriend.”

“Oh, boy,” Marianne rolled her eyes and Acenith shot her a dirty look.

“Charlotte, I know you're frightened and confused and overwhelmed by the revelations we've given you this afternoon and I'm sorry for that. But despite your embarrassment and difficulty discussing the subject, you should talk to Lucas about this and then you should both speak with Jerome. Between him and Lucas, I'm sure they'll find a way for you to overcome the difficulties of a physical relationship. I'm not certain what the answer will be to preventing a pregnancy, however,” she admitted doubtfully.

“Couldn't I take birth control pills?” I blushed again. Talking about anything to do with intimacy always had the same effect on me and I'd avoided it in the past. Even at high school, I'd stayed away from the discussions among the other girls, unable to talk about sex without stuttering like a fool. Now though, it seemed my future with Lucas depended on it and I yearned to know as much as I could, despite my discomfort.

Marianne glanced at Acenith, whose shrug was non-committal. “I really could not say. I grew up in the fifteenth century – birth control

wasn't even thought of then. Once I became vampire, birth control wasn't an issue. I have no experience with which to guide you." She smiled softly. "Talk to Lucas and Jerome. I'm sure they can help."

CHAPTER 27

OPTIONS

Laying on the bed, curled on my side I stared out the window, watching the trees sway back and forth in the wind. The weather was gray and overcast, rain hitting the glass and creating rivulets which ran down the pane.

I'd been lying here for ages and the sky was growing dark as evening approached. When we arrived home I'd come upstairs for a break, pleading exhaustion after shopping all day. It wasn't a lie – I was shattered and wanted to get off the crutches – but I mainly needed some privacy, time to sort through what I'd learned.

Striker greeted us at the door with glee, announcing he'd purchased a Nintendo Wii after he and I discussed console games a few days ago and challenged me to a game.

"Not right now, Striker. Can I have a rain check?"

He glanced from my drawn features to Marianne and back again, before readily agreeing to a delay. I'd made my way towards the stairs, but Striker scooped me into his arms and carried me upstairs before I could argue.

"Where's Lucas?" I questioned after he'd gently lowered me onto the floor in the bedroom.

"He's in the study with Ben, has been all afternoon," Striker reported. "Do you want me to get him?"

"No, I'm really tired, think I'll have a nap. I'll see him later."

Striker left, quietly closing the door behind him and I remained standing for a few minutes watching the rain tumble down the window. Dragging myself out of the daydream I turned to the iPod and flicked through the music options to find something to listen to. I turned it up and hobbled to the bed, flopping down wearily.

Everything ached. I closed my eyes and the loud music penetrated my senses, the heavy rock beat and the expansive drum solos. I started to hum under my breath even as my mind wandered.

By the third repeat I'd turned on my side and was watching the rain splashing against the window, my mind a million miles away. The same thoughts flowed through my mind continually – like the streams of water on the glass they had beginnings but no conclusive end. Droplets hit the glass, flowing quickly to the bottom of the pane and then dropped from the second story to the ground below.

The volume of the music slowly lowered and I rolled over to discover who was in the room. Lucas stood by the iPod, watching me with a serious expression.

"I knocked, but you didn't hear me."

I sat up, pushing my hair back from my face. "I thought I'd have a sleep," I explained, flushing as he studied me astutely.

"I'm certain sleeping must be easy with three repeats of Nickelback playing at one hundred and ten decibels," Lucas announced drily and grinned in amusement when he saw me screw up my nose.

"I've probably disturbed everyone, I'm sorry."

"We did wonder how many times you intended listening to the same album, but no matter." He strode around the bed and sat down

on the edge facing me. "Acenith and Marianne told me what you've been discussing with them."

I blushed, wondering if he'd be unhappy about me discussing our relationship with other people. "I'm sorry, it just kind of happened."

Lucas captured my hand in his. "It is I who should apologize, Charlotte."

He'd taken me by surprise. "Why?"

"I'd hoped to find an answer to the questions you are now asking before I brought up the subject," he murmured, his eyes downcast as he rubbed my hand between his.

"No luck, huh?" I guessed.

He continued to study my hand, rubbing his thumb over the ring on my finger. "I'm afraid not." When he lifted his head, his eyes were shadowed. "I will understand if you want to leave me, not continue this. It's completely logical as I cannot give you what you desire."

I reached up to cup his face between my hands. "What do you think I desire?"

He looked confused for a second, his brow furrowed. "I naturally assumed... Charlotte, I can never give you a child."

"And that doesn't make me love you any less," I responded quietly. "I don't want to leave now, any more than I did when I had that disagreement with Gwynn. Although I'd be disappointed if we couldn't have a baby, it's not something I'd give you up for."

His expression relaxed and he caught my other hand in his, intertwining our fingers together. "I thought— when you came up here and told Striker you did not wish to see me, I assumed you were already packing. I expected to come up here and discover you ready to leave."

"I didn't say I didn't want to see you; I told Striker I wanted to have a sleep. Which was a lie, I guess." I smiled contritely. "I needed

to think things over," I said, watching the frown creep back across his handsome features and I continued hurriedly. "Not to think about whether I should leave, that was never a consideration. I needed to think about our circumstances, try and come up with a solution for our, ah, physical inconsistencies." I nearly fell off the bed with embarrassment.

The emotions on his features shifted, the frown replaced first by incredulity, then delight. He leaned forward, capturing my lips against his for the briefest of kisses. "Did you come up with an answer?"

"Not exactly." I frowned before looking up into his eyes again. "Marianne and Acenith seemed to think... birth control pills wouldn't stop me from falling pregnant." The familiar heat rose on my cheeks as I spoke the words, but I continued in a rush. "So I'm assuming most forms of contraceptive wouldn't work." It seemed strange to talk like this with Lucas, we'd only known each other for a few short months but our relationship could hardly be termed normal from the beginning. Living here with him and his friends seemed to put a different edge on time. It felt as if I'd known him for much longer and the desire grew stronger every day. Eventually, and I didn't know when it would be, we needed a solution.

"That is correct." Lucas chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully. "I can't tell you with any certainty they wouldn't work, but I think we have to assume they won't. I will not do anything to place you in danger." He reached forward and kissed me again, his lips a little firmer against mine. "Any other ideas?"

I took a steadying breath, savoring the fragrance of his sweet breath while I considered. "Well, obviously we can't risk a pregnancy. Acenith explained what would happen."

"That's right," Lucas replied. "And I think we are both aware that becoming a vampire is something you don't wish to consider." There was no judgment in his voice, only the statement of a fact.

I shook my head. "No." I thought for a few more seconds, weighing up options. "The only option we've got is to stop me from falling pregnant. Permanently."

Comprehension dawned in Lucas's eyes. "No. I will not even consider that as an option."

"Why not?" I argued. "If I had a... hysterectomy, we wouldn't have a problem."

Lucas stood abruptly and strode across to the window, staring out onto the river for a long time before he spoke. "I will not take away your capacity to have a child. Even if we were to consider this as an option – and I can assure you, I will not – we still have a problem, my love. Whilst my yearning to indulge in a physical relationship with you grows stronger every minute of every day, my other desire is less than controlled. Even if we found a solution to one, we still have the other to deal with." He turned back to me, his arms crossed over his broad chest. "Even when I have the desire for your blood controlled, I will never consider taking away your ability to have children. I want you to experience every aspect of humanity. And that includes the joy of bearing a child."

"I would only ever want your children," I protested quietly.

Lucas was at my side before I had time to blink, wrapping me in his arms. "And for that I will be forever grateful, my Charlotte." He placed his index finger under my chin, drawing my face up to meet his gaze. "But I want you to have the experience of a baby if you desire it. Whilst I can't father your child, we do have some options."

"Such as?"

"Adoption or fostering—"

"I'm certain you being a vampire might negate those options," I stated. "Besides, neither one of them require me to fall pregnant."

"You didn't let me finish," Lucas responded softly. "There is another option. Donor sperm."

It took a second or two to comprehend what he was suggesting. "You'd consider me carrying another man's baby?"

He nodded, and his expression was serious. "If it gave you what you desired I would consider anything my love." He kissed me then, a slow, passion-filled kiss that set my heart fluttering. "So can we please remove a hysterectomy from our list of options? Please?" he begged as he released my lips.

Overwhelmed by the delicate scent assaulting me, combined with the touch of his lips against mine, I could only nod my agreement.

"Good," Lucas murmured as he leaned forward and kissed me again. "I promise you, I will find a solution. It might take some time, but I will find an answer. I can assure you, I'm as dedicated as you are to finding a solution to our 'physical inconsistencies'. I've waited a long time for you to come into my life, and now that I've found you, I can assure you I am *desperately* in need of a solution."

CHAPTER 28

WEDDING PREPARATIONS

"Alright young lady, let's take a look at this ankle, shall we?" Jerome finished cutting through the plaster cast and pulled it away.

Lucas and Ben stood beside me while Jerome probed the area he'd repaired. After two weeks the swelling had gone down and he was taking out the stitches before putting a fresh cast on my ankle. Once this cast set, I'd have the luxury of throwing away the crutches and walking on the new cast with a moon boot.

"How is it?" Lucas questioned. He'd been holding his breath as a precaution but seemed fine now he'd seen the wound was devoid of fresh blood.

"Excellent. I'm pleased," Jerome responded, using a small tool to snip the stitches and drawing them out with tweezers. "The x-rays this morning were excellent; the bone is sitting in the exact position it should be." He glanced at me with a warm smile. "Another four weeks and you'll be back to normal."

I grinned. Everyone knew I was fed up with the cast and couldn't wait to get back on my feet. "Does that mean I can go into town?"

Jerome drew out the last of the stitches and dropped it into a small bowl. "Yes, you should be able to drive into Puckhaber. You'll need to borrow a car that's automatic."

"You can take mine," Ben offered.

"I would prefer to take you myself. Could this not wait until after the wedding?" A frown marred Lucas's normally-perfect features.

"I've got to go, I need to collect the rental bond from Maude and check my mail. And I want to visit Hank and get Marianne's painting framed."

We'd had this discussion a number of times – I was itching to escape the house and visit with Hank and Maude and I wanted to try and catch up with Lonnie. I also had a secret agenda, one even Lucas didn't know about. I'd been working on a small charcoal sketch of Gwynn's mother for the past fortnight, grabbing a few minutes on it here and there when everyone was busy. I wanted to give it to her when I presented Marianne with the painting and both needed framing. I'd called Hank a few days ago and he'd promised he'd get it done while I waited in town. I'd been nagging about going to Puckhaber ever since. The week before the wedding seemed like the perfect time as the entire household was busy with preparations for Saturday.

"None of that can be urgent this week," Lucas countered, watching Jerome wash my ankle and foot with warm soapy water before drying it carefully.

"It is urgent this week," I rolled my eyes. "You know I want to have the painting framed before the wedding."

"Marianne will be happy to wait until I can go with you."

Lucas had been fretting about letting me out of his sight ever since I'd suggested this trip and I knew it was only because he loved me. He was ridiculously over-protective at times which grated on my sense of independence. Admittedly, my record for keeping out of trouble wasn't brilliant, so I could understand some of his apprehension. "I promise I'll be back as quick as I can and besides, I

think I'm better off getting out of the house. I'm not any help and there's a lot to do before Saturday."

"Perhaps I could talk to Marianne, see if I might take you on Tuesday or Wednesday," Lucas mused thoughtfully.

"We've already discussed this," I responded as Jerome began wrapping my ankle in cotton wadding. "I'll be away most of the day and I'm positive Marianne wouldn't be happy about you disappearing with me."

Ben glanced at Lucas. "I don't wish to take sides, but Charlotte is correct. You know how Marianne has been these past few days; it's apparent the bride is suffering an intense case of nerves. I believe it will be better for all of us if we're here to help. Rumor has it there is a significant amount of work in the garden which you and I have been volunteered for."

Lucas sighed heavily. "Alright." He offered me a smile. "If you insist on going to Puckhaber on your own I will endeavor to trust that you won't find any trouble."

I smiled happily and drew him down to kiss him briefly on the cheek. "Thank you."

"What day do you intend to go?" Ben questioned.

"Tuesday is the earliest you can walk on the cast," Jerome pointed out.

"I have a shift at the help center on Wednesday and another on Thursday," Ben added.

"Tuesday, then."

I spent Sunday and Monday holed up in the living room, determined to let the cast dry properly so Lucas couldn't find any reason to stop me driving to Puckhaber the next day.

For the most part I was alone, with everyone else intensely busy preparing for the wedding. For someone who was usually so cheerful

and zen, Marianne had developed a fanaticism for perfection at her wedding which involved more than one temper tantrum and a significant amount of yelling in a normally peaceful household.

For most of Sunday afternoon Lucas, Ben and the other guys were busy outside, preparing the garden for the wedding. From what I'd overheard, a marquee had been hired which would take up a considerable section of the manicured lawns to the side of the house. From the kitchen window I could see them flitting from one area of the garden to the next, pruning, mowing and tidying. Monday was the same; Lucas disappearing early in the morning and not reappearing until dusk approached.

The women were busy too, I saw them for brief periods as they flew around the house, cleaning, polishing and dusting. Nothing escaped Marianne's attention and I decided it was best to remain quietly on the couch and let them get on with it.

To keep myself amused I'd been doing research on my new iPad. Never having owned a computer in my life, it was all a new experience. Lucas and Ripley had been giving me lessons, teaching me how to use the internet and showing me the workings of some of the apps they'd loaded. I'd discovered the joys of Google and was using the search engine to research vampires.

Starting at Wikipedia I'd read through the information about folklore, pathology and the various belief systems throughout the world which regarded vampires as a real entity. Then I'd briefly glanced at a website called 'Vampires.com', which was nothing more than a webpage devoted to comparing movies and television programs featuring vampires. It certainly didn't provide the information I was interested in. For most of Monday afternoon I'd been studying a website I'd discovered called the 'A to Z of Vampires' and I was poring over this site when Lucas found me and

flopped down onto the couch beside me. Wearing faded blue jeans and a torn t-shirt, he was covered in dirt and a smudge of grime adorned his right cheek.

"How are the gardens coming along?"

"Considering there was little wrong with them in the first place, fine, I suppose," Lucas said with a derisive smirk. "Marianne becomes more fanatical with each passing day."

"It is her wedding day," I pointed out reasonably.

"A fact she mentions regularly," Lucas responded drily. "What are you up to?"

"Studying vampires."

He raised one mocking eyebrow. "And what, pray tell, have you discovered?"

"A whole lot of myths I've already debunked living here with you," I admitted. "But I did find some interesting information."

Lucas's expression was disbelieving. "What sort of interesting information?"

"Mainly myths and legends from around the world. For instance," I glanced down at the webpage I'd been studying, "the Chinese believe in the *Kuang-shi*, where a vampire is the result of the demonic possession of a recently deceased corpse. They have a terrifying appearance and as the vampire matures, it gains new skills – such as flying."

"Fascinating," Lucas retorted dryly. "And complete nonsense."

I smiled. "Well *obviously* the terrifying part is wrong. I did wonder about flying though..."

Lucas laughed, the deep sound echoing through the empty room. "You think I forgot to mention that I turn into a bat?"

"It's one of the myths I haven't asked you about yet."

Lucas shook his head, his eyes filled with mirth. "You never cease to amaze me, my love."

"So I guess I can draw a line through the bat myth then?"

In response he took the iPad and laid it on the table, then lifted me onto his lap in one swift movement, wrapping his arms around me. He lowered his head and kissed me, his lips firm and insistent against mine. When he drew back, he winked. "Yes, you can draw a line through the bat myth," he whispered against my cheek, nuzzling my earlobe with his cool lips. "Anything else?"

"Nope," I whispered back. "But I want you to kiss me some more."

With a growl low in his chest he drew me closer, his lips capturing mine again. I surrendered to him, all other thoughts swept away as I lost myself in the feel of his hard chest against my breast, the heady aroma of his scent sweeping over me. Beneath my backside, I felt the firm pressure of another part of his anatomy and all too soon Lucas groaned and released my lips, leaning his head back against the couch and shutting his eyes. I rested my head against his shoulder, waiting for him to gain control of his desire, aware of the familiar pattern we regularly found ourselves repeating.

When he regained his equilibrium he lifted his head from the couch cushion and gazed down at me, tracing patterns against my shoulder with his fingers. "I love doing that," he admitted quietly.

"I love you doing that. I lose track of everything I'm thinking when you kiss me."

"I'm going to take a shower. An icy cold one," Lucas said with a grimace. He deposited me carefully onto the couch and passed the iPad back to me. "And you can continue this fascinating journey through the mythology of vampirism." He stood up, leaning over to

kiss my forehead briefly. "You can tell me what other snippets of brilliance you come across when I get back."

I poked my tongue out at him and watched appreciatively as he strode across the room to head upstairs. Turning back to the iPad I continued reading the webpage while the others began to reappear from their work around the house. Soon I'd been joined by Marianne, Gwynn, Striker and Ben and they were followed shortly afterwards by Rowena, who came in with a dinner tray for me. Acenith and Ripley were the next to arrive and it was only then I realized William was missing and questioned where he was.

"He's on his way; he went into Billings for a few things." Marianne was sitting at the end of the couch, writing copious notes in a notepad. Still dressed in the clothes she'd been working in all day, she had her hair pulled up in a short ponytail, from which strands of hair had slipped and were falling down around her face as she scribbled. I feared the scribbling could only be leading to further work for Lucas and the others.

Lucas appeared from his shower and sat down, placing his arm around me and I leaned against his chest. "Found anything yet?" he questioned, kissing the back of my neck and making me shiver. "Actually, let me rephrase that question. Found anything that remotely resembles something realistic?"

I giggled. "No; more myths about bats, silver bullets, holy water and stuff."

Ben glanced up from the newspaper he'd been reading. "What's going on?"

"Charlotte is researching vampires." He rolled his eyes. "On the internet."

The front door opened and Gwynn stood smoothly, hurrying to greet William who emerged from the darkness outside. He drew her

into his arms, kissing her deeply and I was humbled once again by how deeply these people cared for each other. It was beautiful to see and heat grew in my cheeks as I drew my eyes away from their display of affection.

William released Gwynn after a time and they walked hand in hand to where we sat. William threw a small package to Lucas who caught it with ease.

"Thank you, William. I appreciate it." Lucas said, drawing his arm from behind me to open the small box.

"What's that?" I asked curiously.

"Insurance." Lucas lifted the lid from the box and I saw a cell phone inside, similar to the one Lucas owned. He took it from the box and flipped it open, pushing a button inside before handing it to me. "This is for you."

I stared at it for a second. "You bought me a phone?"

"Not just any phone. It has all our contact numbers programmed into it and see here?" He pointed to a button at the top of the phone. "This button activates a taser which I've had built into the phone. Press it once to arm the taser," he turned the phone over and showed me the base, where two small silver knobs sat about an inch apart, "then press it a second time before you touch anyone with it. It will discharge a 600-volt surge of electricity in a pulsating frequency. Enough to debilitate your attacker long enough to allow you to safely escape. I hope."

My eyes widened. "Does this have anything to do with my trip to Puckhaber tomorrow?"

"Yes it does. I want you to be safe."

"I told him it was overkill," Striker announced cheerfully.

I sighed heavily, simultaneously impressed by his desire to keep me safe and aggravated by his overreaction. "Puckhaber Falls has a

population of 942 people. Do you honestly think I'm going to be attacked in the middle of Main Street?"

"I'm not taking chances," Lucas replied smoothly. "Please humor me, Charlotte."

Sighing inwardly, I offered him a flicker of a smile. "Okay. But I'm pretty certain I won't need to taser anyone." Eyeing the small phone sitting in the palm of my hand, a thought occurred to me. "Will it work on vampires?"

Lucas frowned and I caught the flicker of worry in his eyes. "Unfortunately not. I don't have any weapons I can give you in that regard. I'm relying on your psychic abilities for warnings about danger from vampires."

"And my psychic ability," Marianne piped up. "And we can relax, because Puckhaber Falls seems to be completely vampire-free tomorrow."

CHAPTER 29
PUCKHABER FALLS

Early the following morning I was sitting in Ben's sleek black car and I waited impatiently while Lucas adjusted the seat for me and pointed out the radio controls, headlights, and various other items in the luxurious car. The weather was overcast and steady rain had been falling since I'd woken around six.

"Okay, I believe you are ready," Lucas finally announced, crouched beside the driver's seat in the garage. He glanced up and I recognized the concern in his eyes, accentuated by the tiny frown creasing his forehead.

I brushed my hand across his cheek and he captured my hand in his, closing his eyes. "I'll be fine, Lucas, I promise."

"You have your cell phone?"

I nodded with a patient smile. "And I've practiced my cover story. I fell while skiing in Aspen with you at Christmas."

Lucas's mouth lifted into a ghost of a smile. "Remember if anyone asks you something and you're not prepared—"

"I need to take a deep breath, remember my cover story, and stick to the plan."

He nodded encouragingly. "We know you will not betray us, love."

"Of course I won't," I leaned out of the car and kissed him. "I love you and I want you all to be safe, as much as you want me to be safe."

"Does that mean you would consider staying home?" he asked with a hopeful smile.

"No."

Lucas got to his feet with a sigh and leaned in to kiss me, with considerable enthusiasm. When he drew away my heart was thumping frantically in my chest and I took a second to breathe deeply and shift my brain back into gear.

"I will see you when you get home," he said softly, watching as I started the car and carefully backed out of the garage and onto the gravel drive. With a wave, I drove off.

Ben's car was luxuriously appointed with leather trim, a brilliant stereo and it was extremely comfortable to drive. Despite the continual downpour of rain, I felt secure in the car and the steady swish of the windscreen wipers afforded a clear view of the road.

I found a radio channel I liked and turned it up a little, humming to myself as I drove. I had Marianne's painting sitting on the back seat and hidden inside the roll of canvas was the charcoal portrait of Gwynn's mother. Despite Lucas's concerns I was excited about this trip, it had been ages since I'd seen my friends and I was looking forward to visiting.

Releasing her from my mental box I enjoyed a talk with Mom on the way to Puckhaber. Now I'd discovered I could shut away the spirits, the peace I experienced was delightful. I was in control, only giving the spirits access when I chose. It was a liberating feeling and now I'd discovered the ability the spirits were closed off more often than not. I suffered a bit of guilt about shutting them away, but after

years of constant voices and the headaches associated with them I thought I deserved a little peace and quiet.

It was a little after ten when I drove into Puckhaber and slowed down on Main Street, searching for a parking spot close to Hank's store. I found one close enough that I wouldn't get soaked going into the store.

Holding the canvas close to my chest, I walked hurriedly to the door of Hank's store, the umbrella Rowena loaned me keeping me dry. The bell over the door tinkled when I entered and Hank looked up from his usual position behind the counter.

A delighted grin appeared on his heavily lined face and he leaped up to take the paintings as I folded the umbrella and dropped it in the stand by the door.

"Lottie, it's great to see you! Lucas told us about the foot, took you skiing didn't he?"

"Hi Hank. It's lovely to see you again," I responded with a genuinely warm smile. I followed him over to the counter, glancing around the familiar shop with interest as he bustled about, placing the paintings on the counter before turning to drag me into a bear hug.

"You look really well, other than the ankle of course. You went to Aspen, Lucas said?"

"Yes, we went at Christmas."

"You're a dark horse, that's for sure. Lucas Tine! I swear, the women around here went into mourning when I told them he was off the market," Hank responded. "You're happy?"

I couldn't stop the wide grin that spread across my lips. "Yes, we're very happy."

Hank carefully unrolled the canvas as we spoke. "I hear you're staying at Lucas's place now?"

"Yes, with Lucas and his friends." I nearly added information before I remembered Lucas's words when he coached me about today's visit. *'Only give enough information, no more. It makes it easier if the story isn't complicated.'*

"They're commissions."

"You're gonna stay at Lucas's for a while?" Hank asked. "Maude says you've given up the lease on the cottage."

"I'll be there for a while then Lucas is taking me travelling," I responded lightly.

"I'm so happy for you both, honey. Where are you heading off to?" Hank pulled out a tape measure to start calculating frame sizes for Marianne's painting.

"Um, not sure yet," I stammered, cringing. This was harder than I'd expected. Despite the amount of practice I'd put in with Lucas, this was much different. Planning a lie was easier than putting it into action. At home I'd been able to think through my answers; here at the store I was rapidly discovering I needed to think on my feet with a second's notice.

"Lucas works in Billings, doesn't he? Is he going to take holidays, or does he plan on quitting?"

"Um, he's quitting," I said, keeping my tone non-committal. Lucas's advice echoed in my thoughts. *'Change the subject if you are feeling pressured.'* "How's your wife? I hope she wasn't disappointed when I didn't come to your house for Christmas."

"No, no, she was fine. Pleased you and Lucas got together, although I think even she has a little crush on him." Hank finished measuring Marianne's painting, writing down a couple of numbers with the stub of pencil he perpetually kept behind his ear. He turned his attention to the charcoal I'd done for Gwynn. "These are really quite lovely. Did you copy from old photos?"

"Um, yeah." I hadn't considered Hank would make that assumption – the clothing Marianne's family and Gwynn's mother wore was a dead giveaway of a different era. Taking a deep breath, I decided to take control of the situation before it got out of hand. "I was thinking of something wide and dark for the oil, maybe a finer frame in gold for the charcoal."

To my relief, Hank got back onto the subject of framing and we spent a while choosing the perfect frames and mounts. After the decisions were made, Hank made coffee and we enjoyed a catch-up which thankfully steered clear of anything that would require more lies.

"I'll drop back after I've finished my errands," I told Hank, preparing to leave and head to Maude's office.

"No problems. Should have them ready in a couple of hours." He waved vaguely as I stepped outside, his mind already focused on his work.

The rain drizzled as I limped down the street, carefully crossing to the other side and trying to keep my foot dry by skirting around puddles.

"Lottie! Good to see you!" Maude greeted me with a bright smile when I walked into her office a few minutes later. "How's the ankle? I thought you'd be out of plaster by now."

"Technical difficulty," I explained. "The bone didn't heal the way it should so I had to have it rebroken and reset."

"Did you have that done in Billings?" Maude questioned.

"Um, yeah." It seemed most of my conversations were punctuated with 'um' this morning.

"I guess you're here to collect your bond refund?" Maude directed me to a desk in the corner of the small office. "Take a seat and we'll get this sorted out. She turned to her filing cabinet and

opened the top drawer, rummaging through the files. "So is the rumor I heard true? You're seeing Lucas Tine?"

"Yeah, we've been seeing each other since Christmas."

"You lucky girl, he's such a charming man and so handsome! If I was twenty years younger I'd have tried for him myself— ah, here we are." She brought a folder to the desk and sat down, skimming through the paperwork. "I have to say, given you had to work with a cast on your leg, you did a fabulous job of cleaning the cottage. I swear it was cleaner than when you rented it."

"I had some help from Lucas's friends."

"Oh yeah, there's a group of them living at his place aren't there? Ben Becket and his wife and young Marianne and her fiancée. That house of Lucas's is worth a fortune, I tried about six months back to get Lucas to let me appraise it but he wasn't interested. They're a good-looking group – real pale though. All look as if they could do with a holiday somewhere with lots of sunshine."

I bit my lip to conceal the smile which threatened. Fortunately Maude found what she was looking for, ending this awkward line of discussion. "Ah, here we go. I owe you two thousand dollars, there wasn't a single thing wrong with the place when I inspected. Is a check okay?"

"Can I have five hundred in cash?"

"Sure, no problem. Now what are you doing for lunch? Will you be in town? I'd love to catch up some more."

I nodded in agreement. "I'd like that."

I waited while Maude counted out five hundred dollars from the safe and tucked it into my wallet before taking the check for the balance from her.

Promising to meet her in an hour, I headed further down the street to deposit the check at the bank and then went into the post

office to collect my mail. For the past two years my mail had been delivered to the local post office wherever I was living, making it easier when I decided to pack up and leave. Not that there was much correspondence – letters from my parole officer were an intermittent item; I was given a reasonable amount of freedom because my sentence was for justifiable homicide and I was considered unlikely to reoffend. As long as I kept them up to date regarding my location, I was pretty much free to move wherever I wanted in the continental United States. The postal clerk retrieved my mail, handed it over and waited while I flipped through, retrieved the utility bill and paying it from the cash Maude gave me.

Walking out, I flicked through the other half dozen letters in the pile. A couple of letters from friends in previous areas, which I automatically shifted to the back of the stack. A letter from Mom's lawyer, confirming the small monthly stipend from Mom's life insurance had been paid into my bank account. The final letter was a mystery, my name and address written in a bold handwriting I didn't recognize. Flipping it over, I found no return address and I pushed through the door, slitting open the envelope with my finger.

I unfolded the thin sheet of paper inside and got a shock when I glanced at the bottom and saw it was signed by my father.

Hiya Kiddo,

Know it's been a long time since we spoke. Too long in fact. Wanted to let you know I've remarried, met a real nice lady on my last tour of duty in Japan. Her name is Misaki, she and I got hitched about eighteen months ago.

Misaki reckons I needed to contact you and she's probably right. I know I was never much of a father to you, and it was only about six months ago that I heard about your Mom.

Much as she and I had our problems and split when you were so young, I wouldn't wish what happened to her on anyone.

Misaki and I have moved stateside now, I've retired from the Marines and we've made a home for ourselves in California. Thought you'd like to know you're a big sister – we have a son, who's a year old and his name is Kazuki. Cutest little thing I ever did see, reminds me a lot of you. I look at him now, and it got me thinking about you, I know I was a lousy father and I wasn't there for you. Hell, it was a shock to discover you are nearly twenty-one now and it's been almost seventeen years since I've seen you.

Don't know what your Mom ever told you about me. She would have been right in telling you I was a lousy bum who drank too much and got married too young. I wasn't ready for the responsibility of you and your Mom, that's why I flipped out and left.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that I've got my life pulled together now. After I left your Mom, I joined the Marines and I've done sixteen years of service. I used my payout from the Marines to open up a little motorbike shop here in San Diego and business is good.

I'll understand if you want nothing to do with me. I've been looking for you for the past six months, since I learned about your Mom. Finally tracked down your lawyer and he gave me an address to send this to. I wanted to let you know I want to try and make amends for everything I haven't done in the past seventeen years. I know I haven't been a good father, but I'd like the opportunity to make up for that.

Regards,

Matt Duncan

Telephone: 632 784 5855

Mobile: 632 452 1268

Email: duncanbikes@aol.com

Address: 43268 Sycamore Drive, La Mesa, CA, 91942

My hands shook as I refolded the sheet of paper, putting it back in the envelope and shoving it into my purse along with the other mail. I wasn't sure how I felt about hearing from him after seventeen years. How was I meant to feel? There was no emotional attachment – I didn't even remember him.

My new cell phone rang and I rummaged around in my purse to locate it. "Hello?"

"Charlotte?" It was Marianne, her soft voice filled with concern. "Is everything okay?"

I frowned. "Yeah, why?"

"I got a sudden surge of future events from you, but I wasn't sure what caused it."

I limped carefully along the sidewalk outside the post office. "It's nothing. I got a bit of a shock, that's all." A sudden suspicion entered my mind. "I assume Lucas has got you watching me?"

I could hear the smile in her voice when she responded. "Part of his insurance, not that I'm entirely reliable. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not. I know he's worried. Can you let him know I'm fine? I'm having a good time catching up with friends and I'll be heading back in a couple of hours."

"You're sure you're really okay? I saw a man, someone older..."

I sighed. For a self-professed 'hit and miss psychic', Marianne was remarkably accurate about reading things about me. I knew it was a situation Lucas and Ripley were fascinated by, wondering why she was so tuned into events in my life and seemed more accurate

in that regard, although by no means perfect still. "I'm fine. I got a letter from my father. It was— unexpected."

"I see."

"Marianne, I'm fine, really I am. I'm going to have a haircut and then I'm having lunch with Maude before I pick up your painting. I'll be heading back then."

"Don't rush, it's chaos here," Marianne said grimly. "I'm beginning to wonder why I ever wanted to get married."

"Because you love Striker with all your heart and can't wait to be his wife. When Saturday comes, I'm sure all the effort will seem worth it."

Saying my goodbyes, I smiled faintly to myself and limped towards the local hairdresser's salon.

CHAPTER 30
JEALOUSIES

I walked into the small restaurant Maude had recommended a few minutes after twelve. I'd managed, for the most part, to put my dad's letter out of my mind for now. I'd think about it later, preferring to enjoy lunch with Maude. Restaurants in Puckhaber Falls were rare and this one was more of a small café, sandwiched between the supermarket and the hardware store. Despite the location, it was bright and clean and they served good, wholesome food.

I was delighted to discover Maude had tracked down Lonnie and she waved enthusiastically from the booth where they sat. One of Lonnie's friends was with them, a girl I'd met a couple of times and I slipped into the booth next to Maude and opposite Lonnie, who reintroduced me to Alison Whitehead.

"Lonnie, it's so great to see you!" I'd hoped to catch up with Lonnie, she'd offered friendship when I'd done my utmost to avoid it and I experienced a rush of warmth knowing she'd taken the trouble to come and see me.

"Maude called and told me you were here so I ditched class," Lonnie announced with a grin. She leaned across the table to hug me enthusiastically. "I've missed you!"

I smiled with genuine delight when she released me. "I've missed you too."

"You look amazing," Lonnie announced admiringly when I'd settled into the booth beside Maude. "Those clothes are beautiful."

I was wearing one of the outfits Acenith selected, black linen trousers with a red silk shirt, teamed with a short grey leather jacket. "Thank you." I dropped my purse onto the seat beside me. "How's college?"

"Awesome, I'm loving the classes. Oh, and guess what? Mike Tredway and I are dating; remember I introduced you to him at the Quikmart?"

"I remember." Tall and slim, Mike seemed to spend a great deal of time in the Quikmart when Lonnie was working a shift and he could usually be found standing near her at the checkout, chatting animatedly whenever she wasn't serving. It was sweet to think they'd gotten together and by the look on Lonnie's face, he was someone special in her life.

"So? Catch us up on all the gossip. I hear you're dating Lucas Tine you lucky thing!" Lonnie almost squealed her excitement.

"Yeah, Lucas and I are dating," I admitted with a shy smile.

"Is it true he took you to Aspen to ski?"

"Yeah, that's where I broke my ankle." I shrugged. "First time I go skiing and I manage to break a bone."

Alison was watching me coolly and I wondered what she was thinking. I opened my mind to the spirits, curious about what Mom would say about my lunch companion. Mom appeared immediately. "*Watch out for her. She's got her eye on Lucas.*" Startled by the abrupt warning I carefully shut Mom away and perused Alison discreetly. Although I'd met her a couple of times I didn't know much about her. She was pretty, with blonde hair, fair skin and blue

eyes and I'd been told extremely popular with the male population of Puckhaber. She struck me as someone who was supremely confident about herself. While she'd been polite the few times we'd met, we'd never spoken beyond a brief hello and a nod of recognition to one another.

"How did you and Lucas meet?" Alison asked.

Before I could respond Lonnie answered for me. "It was so romantic! Lucas hit her with his car, accidentally, of course and then he insisted on driving her to the hospital himself. He was such a gentleman; so thoughtful and obviously worried about Charlotte. He visited her in hospital and insisted on paying all her medical bills and I could just tell he was interested in her!"

"Wow," Alison responded dryly. "And you've been together since Christmas?"

"Yeah, we have."

"That's great. I'm kind of surprised though, you don't seem like Lucas's type."

I stared at her, my eyes cool. "What type is that?"

"Oh, I didn't mean to sound rude," Alison responded quickly, all fluttering eyelashes and fake apology as her eyes roamed over me dismissively. "I thought he was into blondes."

Lonnie glanced from Alison to me, she seemed to sense the sudden tension and decided an interruption was in order. "I think you're so lucky. Lucas! He's the most handsome guy on the planet! Except for Mike of course. And you look fabulous, so much better than you did when you were living on your own in the cottage. You always seemed kind of depressed. But now you're just glowing and your hair looks gorgeous! Wish I'd been blessed with curly hair, I can never do a thing with mine."

I wanted to kiss her. She was doing her best to diffuse the tension and I touched my hair self-consciously. I'd asked the hairdresser to cut it into a shoulder length bob and with the reduction in mass it was curlier than ever before. "Thanks, Gracie did it. I'm attending a wedding on Saturday."

"I know!" Lonnie announced with delight. "Marianne and Striker's wedding – I just *knew* you'd be going with Lucas."

"How do you know Marianne?" I questioned, grinning at Lonnie's over-exuberance.

"She volunteers at the library and I met her a couple of years back. You're invited too, aren't you Alison?"

Alison nodded, cold blue eyes still calculating. "Of course."

"I heard it's going to be the social event of the year," Maude interjected. "Marianne Cooper is such a pretty woman and she's got a beautiful figure. I'm sure she'll look gorgeous, although I wonder about those pink highlights in her hair."

"I think they're cool," Lonnie announced. She sipped her orange juice then focused her attention back on me. "So give me all the news, where are you living now you've given up the cottage?"

"I'm staying at Lucas's house," I admitted quietly.

"You're living together?" Alison questioned, scrutinizing me with obvious disbelief.

"Umm, yeah. Kind of." I wasn't certain how to explain our relationship and was still worried about the warning message. A wave of emotion washed over my mind and I analyzed it; it wasn't anger but it was something that made me feel very possessive of Lucas and extremely annoyed with the girl sitting opposite me.

"You really had a thing for him, didn't you Alison?" Maude questioned, her expression chilly when she studied the young

woman. "I remember you rushing out to talk to him whenever you saw him in town."

Alison shrugged. "He's okay looking, but there's those rumors he's gay so I was never really interested."

I rose to the bait swiftly, startling even myself. "Of course he's not gay," I snapped.

"Whatever," Alison said, studying one perfectly manicured fingernail. "I guess you just made me wonder, when you said you were 'kind of' living with him. Are you seeing each other exclusively?"

"Yes," I announced firmly. The emotions churning through my heart started to become more distinguishable. Possessiveness was one of them. I didn't like the way this girl looked when she spoke about Lucas. The other emotion, one I couldn't remember encountering before was jealousy. I was jealous of this woman, resentful of her being interested in Lucas and demeaning him because he was *obviously* with me. Who did she think she was?

My cell phone rang again and I excused myself from the table. Snatching the phone from my purse I limped to the door of the restaurant and stepped outside, shoving the door none-too-gently. I could guess who was ringing and privacy would be in order. "What?" I snapped.

"Are you thinking about *murdering* someone?" Marianne demanded without preamble.

"The thought has crossed my mind," I admitted. "But you can relax. I'm not going to act on the idea."

"What on earth is going on?" Marianne persisted.

"A slight complication, nothing to worry about," I responded, trying to get a grip on my fury. "I'm fine, really. I'll tell you about it

when I get home." Not giving her a chance to respond I disconnected the call and walked back into the restaurant.

Lunch had arrived by the time I returned and while we ate the talk remained neutral, with Lonnie telling me about her college exploits and Maude providing a rundown of just about every resident in town. For the most part Alison remained quiet, listening to the conversation between the three of us although I noticed her interest peaked whenever the subject of Lucas was raised. Was I being paranoid? This was a difficult emotion to deal with; I'd never had reason to be jealous of anyone in my life. I knew I was being ridiculous, knew Lucas was committed to our relationship but she was just so damn... *attractive*.

Alison said her goodbyes after we'd finished lunch and stood up gracefully. "I must get back to work. It was nice seeing you again, Lottie. I'm sure we'll catch up at the wedding on Saturday."

I forced a grim smile as she said goodbye to Lonnie and Maude and when she'd left the table, I turned my attention back to them with an inward sigh.

"Why don't we have another coffee?" Maude suggested. "I'm not in any hurry to get back to work and I'm enjoying catching up."

"Sure, why not?" Lonnie agreed, grinning. "Now that I've ditched classes I've got all afternoon."

I glanced at my watch, confirming I still had at least half an hour before Hank would finish so I was more than happy to sit and chat until then. "That sounds great," I agreed, loathe to let lunch end. Maude motioned to the server and ordered three coffees then settled back on the vinyl booth seat, obviously relishing the interruption to her usual day.

"What are you going to wear to the wedding?" Lonnie questioned when the server appeared with three steaming cups.

"To be honest I don't know. Marianne and Acenith were helping choose but when we went shopping we couldn't settle on anything. Acenith is organizing a dress for me."

"What about you, Lonnie? Have you got a dress?" Maude questioned. She tore open a sugar sachet and tipped it into her coffee, adding cream and stirring vigorously.

Lonnie sipped her coffee. "I'm wearing the dress I wore to my cousin's wedding last year. It's really nice and it seems such a shame not to wear it more than once. Besides," she added with a grin, "I can't really afford anything else right now."

"That's a good idea," Maude agreed.

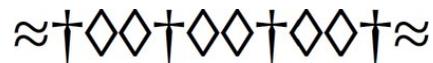
"I'd have liked to buy something new," Lonnie added wistfully, "you should see the dress Alison bought – she's spent enough for both of us."

Another surge of jealousy assaulted me and I glanced across at Lonnie. "Is she taking a date to the wedding?"

"No, she's going alone. She isn't dating anyone right now." Lonnie screwed up her nose, eyes narrowing with annoyance. "Sorry about that business with Alison earlier, she kind of invited herself to lunch when I saw her outside. She maintained for months she wasn't interested in Lucas, but we all knew she was pretty hung up on him. She can be a real bitch sometimes. Fancy making that ludicrous comment about Lucas being gay – I couldn't believe it!"

I struggled to hold back a little smile, remembering how Lonnie had voiced the same thought only a few short months ago, although her comment hadn't been made with the level of vindictiveness Alison's had. I still couldn't believe any of them had made such a ridiculous assumption, just because Lucas didn't date. Sometimes I felt years older than my peers and this was one of those times. "It's not a problem."

I sipped my coffee thoughtfully as Maude and Lonnie chatted. Although I'd brushed it off with Lonnie, I found myself wondering how pretty Alison's dress was going to be. I fervently hoped Acenith's shopping excursion would ensure I had a dress which would be prettier.



“Lottie! Wait up!”

Standing in the doorway of Hank's store, I turned to see Sheriff Davis striding along the sidewalk. Tall and solidly built, dressed in full sheriffs uniform he could be intimidating, but the skin around his eyes crinkled when he grinned, softening his harsh features.

“Howdy Sheriff, how are you doing?” Hank questioned, following me out the door with the newly-framed painting grasped between his hands.

“Good, Hank. How are things with you?”

“Yeah, we're doing okay. Just giving Lottie a hand getting this to her car.”

The Sheriff's gaze flicked across to me and he took the smaller parcel from my arms. “Let me give you a hand.”

With a warm smile, I agreed and pointed out Ben's car to the two men.

Hank whistled appreciatively. “That's one fancy car, Lottie. Where'd you get it from?”

“Ben lent it to me.”

“Pretty fancy after the Volkswagen,” Sheriff Davis declared with a wink. He'd seen the sorry state of my Volkswagen before its transformation and kindly ignored a couple of things which really merited a citation.

"I still have the Volkswagen, but she's had a makeover. Striker fixed her up for me," I explained, "but with my ankle I can't drive a stick shift yet."

"How is the foot?" The sheriff asked while Hank loaded the painting carefully into the rear seat, then took the smaller picture from the sheriff and laid it on the passenger seat.

"Much better, thank you. A couple more weeks and the plaster can come off."

"Right, I'll be getting back to work," Hank announced when he was satisfied the paintings were safely stowed in the car. "Sheriff, I'll see you at the card game tonight?"

"Surely will," Sheriff Davis agreed easily, "someone's gotta make sure you fellas don't cheat."

Hank held his hand over his chest, his eyes twinkling. "Clint, you wound me with a comment like that."

Sheriff Davis chuckled, his brown eyes filled with amusement. "Hank, you're the worst one for cheating if you see an opportunity."

"Why not? It's the only damn way I'll win," Hank agreed without a trace of contrition. He leaned forward and kissed my cheek, drawing me into a brief hug. "Don't be a stranger, y'hear?"

Promising I'd see him soon, I watched as he ambled back into the store, the bell over the door tinkling when it opened.

"I hear you've moved out to the Tine place," the sheriff announced as the door shut behind Hank. He had his thumbs tucked into his belt, looking every inch the serious law enforcement officer, but the smile in his eyes told me he approved.

"Yeah, I have. Rowena said she spoke to you; let you know I was staying out there."

"Yeah, she did. Good thing, too, or I'd have to arrest you."

I chuckled at his supposedly serious demeanor, knowing he was joking around. "How's things around town?"

"The usual stuff. Mrs. Stimpely complaining about kids playing in the street and making too much noise; old Grainger is convinced someone is going to steal his DVD collection, despite the fact that his place is shut up tighter than a drum and there's no sign of any break ins; the usual suspects speeding after midnight..." He sighed heavily. "Sometimes I wonder why I do this damn job."

Dissatisfaction was evident in his tone and I was sympathetic. "You must get fed up with the monotony of the routine."

He nodded. "I love the job, but it isn't enough sometimes." He glanced up and down the street, sharp brown eyes absorbing everything. "Still, I love the town and the folks who live here."

I knew from previous conversations that Sheriff Davis was single, having divorced from a childless marriage some five years ago and was approaching forty-five. He'd worked as a police officer in Billings for nearly twenty years, until he was shot in the line of duty by a drug-crazed psychopath who'd gone nuts in a supermarket. He was as tall as Striker was and nearly as intimidating, his solid muscular body gave no suggestion that underneath it laid a heart of solid gold marshmallow. His chestnut brown hair held a hint of grey at the temples and his face was all angular features with a sharp, prominent nose. When he wasn't smiling I imagined he could be scary, but he'd always been pleasant and easygoing when I'd seen him. I wasn't certain he'd be so pleasant if you got on his bad side, but I knew him to be firm but fair and well liked by the citizens of Puckhaber. "You need to find a good woman," I teased him gently.

He gave me a hard look, although the twinkle remained in his brown eyes. "That'll be the day. The last thing I need is another

damn woman taking me to the cleaners like Marcie did when we divorced. I'm happily single and planning to stay that way."

"If you say so," I replied lightly. Glancing at my watch, I twisted the car keys in my fingers. "I'd better go, Lucas is expecting me."

"Before you go, I wanted to give you a heads up. Lucas's place is isolated out there and I've heard a couple of crazy rumors about wildcats in the area. I don't believe a word of it – just hunters who've drunk too many beers, but there've been a couple of reports in the past month so tell Lucas to keep a lookout."

"Wildcats?" I repeated with a frown. "In Montana?"

He shook his head, his expression filled with bemusement and it was obvious he wasn't taking the claims too seriously. "Yeah, I know. If it had only been one report I wouldn't have given it an ounce of credence, but I've had four separate reports from three groups of people. Multiple sightings and they all reckon they seen the same thing, some sort of big wildcats. From the descriptions it's too big to be a bobcat or a cougar and I've heard suggestion of colors ranging from golden brown through to black." He shrugged. "Don't think there's a word of truth to the reports; as I say, these fellas all admitted to drinking copious amounts of beer before they saw these supposed cats, but better safe than sorry. Just let Lucas know about them and tell the guys to keep a lookout if they're out in the woods. I know they all go hunting from time to time and I'd trust their opinions far more than the clowns who did the reporting."

CHAPTER 31

CONSIDERATIONS OF MURDER

The drive home was uneventful, which was helpful as I mulled over the interactions I'd had in Puckhaber most of the way home. Primarily, the talk with Alison. Flicking through Ben's collection of compact discs I'd found some classical music and turned the sound up to a ridiculously loud volume. It helped me to relax because each time I thought about Alison I ground my teeth in frustration. It wasn't that I didn't trust Lucas – I didn't trust *her*. Alison's reputation preceded her, I knew from Lonnie that she went after every man she wanted with single-minded determination and it was apparent from her discussion at lunchtime she wanted Lucas. The last straw had been discovering she'd be at the wedding. I rolled my eyes – maybe she'd change her mind and bring a partner. Or with luck she could get hit by a car, or fall of a cliff.

The other conversation foremost in my mind was the one with Sheriff Davis – he'd thrown me for a loop when he'd mentioned Lucas and hunting. Although the discussion had been innocuous enough, I was freaked out by what he'd said. For a few seconds I'd suspected he knew what Lucas and the others were. It had been an innocent enough remark, but enough to lose my composure.

Thankfully I'd managed to hold it together and avoid blowing their cover.

Entering the driveway a little after four, the windscreen wipers were at full speed in a futile effort to cope with the torrential rain. The weather had deteriorated as the day wore on and I was hoping it would clear by Saturday. Marianne would undoubtedly take a dim view of bad weather on her wedding day.

Pulling up behind the house, I stared at the gardens in amazement. While I'd been gone the biggest marquee I'd ever seen had sprung up on the freshly-mown lawn, brilliantly white against the green surrounding it. The men milled around, stripped down to jeans as they worked on the marquee in the pouring rain, securing it with ropes and pegs.

Branching off from the front of the marquee was a long white covered walkway, leading all the way back to the front door of the house. I assumed it was added so everyone could make their way to the marquee without getting soaked, a precaution in case the weather was as miserable on Saturday as it was today.

There were men I didn't recognize working out in the rain and I wondered who they were. All were impressively built with muscular physiques. It was unusual to see outsiders at Lucas's home and I watched them for a few seconds, wondering if they were the vampires who were visiting for the wedding. Despite my determination to handle the arrival of new vampires calmly, a shiver of apprehension worked its way down my spine.

I turned the stereo volume down, not wanting to blast Ben out of the car the next time he got in it. As I was pulling the keys from the ignition, the car door opened and Lucas appeared beside me like a vision. He was shirtless and rain poured over his muscular shoulders, trickling down over his hard chest. His denim jeans were soaked

through and sticking to his well-built thighs. His dark hair was slicked back and he looked absolutely, breathtakingly gorgeous.

"Hi," he grinned. "Beautiful day."

"Uh huh." I found myself mesmerized by a drop of rainwater which trickled down his chest, rolling across one stiff nipple before it dripped to the ground.

Lucas laughed, the deep sound booming into the car. "Where is your umbrella, my love? Let's get you inside."

I struggled to pull myself together and dragged my eyes away from his chest to snag the umbrella from the floor in the passenger side, handing it to him. Lucas opened the umbrella and held it over me as I stepped from the car onto the wet gravel. He guided me around the house to the front door, pushing it open.

"I won't come in," he announced, glancing down at his dripping jeans. "Marianne will kill me if I get the house messy."

I nodded, trying and failing to keep my eyes averted from his bare chest and also failing to stop the wicked thoughts racing through my mind.

"I'll finish up and be in soon." Amusement was readily apparent in his dark blue eyes. "Perhaps I should put a shirt on to remove temptation, love."

I blushed crimson and he laughed again, turning to run back down the stairs into the rain.

Dropping the wet umbrella into the stand, I slipped off my single, sodden shoe before limping into the entranceway.

Marianne met me before I'd taken five steps and captured me in a hug. "I'll get the paintings from the car. Gwynn is going to love your gift."

Before I could reply she'd slipped out through the doorway and returned in seconds, carrying both paintings. She'd run so swiftly the

brown paper wrapped around them had scarcely gotten wet.

"I wanted the sketch to be a secret," I grumbled good-naturedly. I knew where I'd gone wrong, I'd imagined giving it to Gwynn on the journey home, picturing how thrilled she'd be. Focused on me while I was away, Marianne had clearly picked up on those thoughts.

She grinned. "Your secret's safe with me. When are you going to give it to her?"

"Rowena told me her birthday is next week, so I thought I'd give it to her then."

"What a lovely surprise, she'll be delighted!" She rested the larger of the two parcels against the wall and smiled. "I'll take this up to your room and hide it. Am I allowed to have my painting now?"

There was no way to get angry with her and I smiled back. "Of course."

By the time I'd slowly walked into the living room, Marianne had gone upstairs, deposited Gwynn's gift somewhere in my bedroom and returned. Despite living here for a while, the phenomenal speeds vampires could manage still astounded me.

Slumping onto the couch I watched Marianne carefully remove the brown paper from her painting. Delight blossomed in her eyes when she appraised the finished portrait. I was thrilled with it, the frame had enhanced the piece I'd completed and Marianne's family gazed at her, almost lifelike in the painstakingly made brushstrokes.

"I absolutely love it," Marianne announced, eyes shining. "I can never repay you for what you've given to me."

"You're more than welcome."

Rowena strolled into the room, an enormous vase of yellow rosebuds in her arms which she placed on the coffee table before admiring Marianne's painting.

"Where would you like to hang it?" Rowena asked. "Did you want to place it here in the living room, or would you prefer to have it in your bedroom?"

"Here in the living room, so I can look at it all day long. We'll check with Lucas when he comes in, make sure that's okay with him."

"Of course. We'll have one of the men hang it," Rowena agreed. "I think perhaps over on the long western wall, don't you?"

"Speaking of men, who are those guys in the meadow?"

"Friends of mine," Marianne explained. "They offered to help with the marquee and they're staying for dinner, so you'll meet them when they come in to wash up." She rolled her eyes melodramatically. "Although given how much it's raining, they probably won't need to wash up."

An image of Lucas, shirtless and perfect popped into my mind and I gulped, trying to ignore the lust stirring deep in my groin. "Are they..."

"Not vampires," Marianne replied easily. "They're shape shifters."

"Excuse me?" I thought I'd heard Marianne incorrectly.

Rowena offered me a comforting smile. "They are shape shifters, Charlotte. They can transform from human to animal shape and back."

"Never mind that now. Why don't you tell me what happened in Puckhaber today? In particular, why you were considering murder?" Marianne demanded, ending further questions about shapeshifters.

Rowena didn't seem surprised and I realized Marianne had already told her about the vision she'd had earlier. "You haven't told Lucas, have you?"

"Of course not," Marianne snorted indelicately. "But I do want to know why you had such violent thoughts?"

Rowena placed a hand on my arm, her touch delicate. "You're obviously very angry and do I detect a hint of... jealousy?"

Between Rowena's ability to sense emotions and Marianne's psychic power, it was apparent there was no way to keep how I was feeling secret. I told them about lunch with Maude, Lonnie, and Alison Whitehead and when I'd finished my tirade against the blonde-haired vision who'd so incensed me, Rowena smiled sympathetically. "Jealousy is a difficult emotion to deal with, especially when you don't generally suffer from it. You really have nothing to worry about though; Lucas only has eyes for you.

"I know and I trust him implicitly. It's Alison Whitehead I don't trust," I grumbled. "She's got a reputation for going after any man she wants and she's made it very clear she wants Lucas."

"Are you certain you heard your mother correctly? You couldn't have misconstrued her message?" Marianne asked carefully. She'd sat down beside me, her slender arm wrapped around my shoulder.

"No, I'm pretty sure *'Watch out for her Lottie. She's interest in Lucas'* couldn't be misconstrued in any possible way," I responded, gritting my teeth.

Marianne wrapped her other arm around me in a comforting hug. "I can easily cancel her invitation, you know. Whether she comes doesn't worry me one way or the other."

I rolled my eyes, suddenly aware of how tactless I'd been. "I'm sorry, she's obviously your friend and I've been awful, carrying on about her like this."

Marianne chuckled. "She's more an acquaintance than anything else. We attended cake decorating classes together." Seeing my startled expression she grinned. "Alright, alright. I know it's ridiculous for a vampire to try cake decorating but I had a mad

moment where I thought I might develop enough skills to decorate my own wedding cake.”

“How did that turn out?”

“Abysmally bad. For starters, they required us to provide our own cakes. After I’d nearly burnt the house down, Lucas banned me from any further baking attempts. Even without the cake fiasco, my efforts at making icing flowers were positively ghastly.” She flashed her brilliant smile and I couldn’t help but grin back. “Honestly Charlotte – whether Alison Whitehead comes to the wedding or not is neither here nor there. We’ve invited half of Puckhaber Falls – one less won’t matter.”

“Perhaps it would be better if Alison did attend,” Rowena mused. “It will prove to Charlotte that Lucas has absolutely no interest in any woman but her. Maybe if she sees for herself that he will not show an ounce of interest in Alison, it will improve her self-confidence.”

I knew she had a point. I suffered from low self-esteem; perhaps having Alison here would be beneficial. I was positive Lucas wouldn’t give her a second glance. Making up my mind, I turned to Marianne. “Let her come. Rowena’s right, Lucas will completely ignore her.”

“As you wish,” Marianne agreed simply. “Now, tell us about the letter from your father.”

I reached for my purse, pulling the letter from the pile I’d shoved in there earlier. “You can read it.” I passed it to Marianne who skimmed through it quickly before handing it to Rowena.

“How do you feel about this contact?” Rowena asked when she’d finished. “I know you spoke about finding your father when you left, but I imagine that was for our benefit rather than any true desire to locate him?”

"I never really intended to see him," I agreed, tugging at my lower lip anxiously. "It seemed like a good way to convince you I'd chosen to leave."

"Thought so," Marianne responded.

I flicked at a piece of fluff on my dark trousers, thinking about the letter before I spoke. "Seventeen years is a long time to wait before contacting me. I hardly remember him and to be honest I'm a bit resentful about his deciding to write now. It's as if he's got his life sorted into neat little boxes and now he wants to be my Dad again. I'm twenty years old, for crying out loud. I needed my father when I was younger and I'm not certain I need him now." I stopped suddenly and the two women waited patiently while I sorted through the complex emotions his letter had evoked. "But on the other hand, he's the only living relative I've got."

"Why don't you consider it for a while? There's no reason to make a decision immediately, read through the letter a few times and think it through," Rowena said. "Sometimes it's better to take time over a decision, not make a rash judgment based on your first response. He could genuinely regret the decisions he made in the past. Maybe he really does want to make amends. It would be a shame to make a hasty decision and live to regret it later."

It was the perfect response and I was pleased all over again that I'd met this wonderful... *vampire*, who'd taken over mothering me in so many ways. It was awesome to have someone to talk to about things again, something I'd missed in the past two years. I valued her advice and knew she would do her best to help me make the right decisions. "You're right. I'll think about it." Glancing from Rowena to Marianne and back again, I smiled tremulously. "I'd prefer to keep this between us for now. I don't want to bother Lucas with it, he'll only worry and I need time to sort through it myself."

"Of course," Rowena agreed. She stood up, brushing her fingers across my hair. "Now why don't I make you a nice cup of coffee?"

She disappeared into the kitchen and I turned back to Marianne, eyeing her with interest. "These friends of yours, the shape shifters? What does that mean?"

Marianne placed a cushion beneath my ankle where it rested on the coffee table, then settled back against the couch cushions. "Shape shifters are humans who transform into animals."

"They live in Puckhaber?" The idea was mind-boggling; it seemed Puckhaber Falls was a hotbed of supernatural beings although from what Lucas had told me, there were groups worldwide. I just hadn't known about them until now.

Marianne nodded. "On the other side of town. They tend to live in groups, like we do."

"How did you get to know about them?"

"They arrived here about eighteen months ago, we began to see some of them in the forest, and as I'm the friendly one," she announced with a cheeky smile, "Lucas charged me with approaching them and brokering an agreement between us."

"Agreement?"

Rowena arrived with a cup of steaming coffee and handed it to me before sitting down on the couch which faced mine, clasping her hands in her lap. "When we meet other groups it tends to be quite combative unless some sort of truce is put in place. Shape shifters don't like vampires and vice versa as a rule. To share the same grounds, an agreement has to be made to keep to our own areas and not interfere in each other's business."

I sipped the hot coffee, inhaling the heady aroma. "Why don't you like one another?"

Marianne's tinkling laughter caught my attention. "You're such a novice, I sometimes forget that. We're a totally different species to the shape shifters, just as we're different to humans. It causes suspicions and hatred to breed quickly."

"But you've managed to make friends with these people?"

Marianne nodded vigorously, the silver in her eyes flaring. "When I met with Nick and his group I quickly realized we could be of mutual benefit to one another. As you're aware, choosing to feed only on animal blood makes us somewhat of a rarity in the vampire world, a rarity which means we're small in comparison to other Kisses."

I nodded and she continued.

"Nick and his group are in a similar position. They're a small pack, only about thirty members and made up of various shape shifters who've come together after being persecuted by other packs. Nick is their leader, but he's young and they've experienced confrontation in the past."

"Wait – define young?" When speaking with vampires, young was a matter of conjecture when you were dealing with creatures that had lived sometimes for hundreds of years. "And what sort of confrontations?"

"Nick's twenty five, remarkably young for the leader of a shifter pack and they've had problems with other packs attacking them in the past because of their unique makeup. Packs are usually made up of one type of shape shifter, for instance they all turn into wolves, or bears. In Nick's pack, they've come together as outcasts from other packs, so they turn into all sorts of different animals."

Rowena leaned forward, her long hair draping elegantly across one slender shoulder. "Nick's group needed protection and Lucas thought we could benefit from a similar arrangement, so he

proposed to Nick that we support one another and look out for each other's groups." She grinned. "Initially it took a good deal of work to reach an understanding, they were as suspicious of us as we were of them, but when their pack was threatened about twelve months ago, Nick asked for Lucas's aid and we backed them when they were attacked by a group from South Dakota. Since then, we've become quite firm friends."

"So much so that Katie's carer is Cecilia Field, one of Nick's pack," Marianne added. "And Jerome is a member of their pack too."

"Jerome? Doctor Harding?" I was dumbfounded.

"Yeah. We hadn't told you before now because we needed Nick's permission. He's given that permission now."

"What types of animals do they turn into?" I questioned. The concept was fascinating and I wondered how it happened – did they change in an instant, or was it a slower process. It would be neat to see one of them change and I wondered if I might get to see a transformation happen.

"Nick's animal is a wolf; David's, too; Toby turns into a bear, Rafe is a lion," Marianne reeled off, touching her fingers one after the other as she went, "Marco's is a coyote. I'm not certain of everybody's animals in the pack, some are less predatory. For instance, Cecelia's animal is a swan. Jerome is a Newfoundland."

"Wait! You said one of them turns into a lion?" I glanced from Marianne to Rowena, recalling the discussion with Sheriff Davies earlier.

"Yes, Rafe does," Rowena confirmed. "Why do you ask?"

I swiftly repeated the conversation I'd had with the sheriff and even before I finished, Rowena was up and heading to the door. "We must warn Nick, he needs to know about this."

Ten minutes later I was being introduced to Nick Lingard who sat solemnly on the couch opposite me with Lucas and Ripley at his sides. Wearing a faded blue t-shirt and black denims, his feet were encased in scuffed brown boots and it was apparent from the dripping dirty blonde hair curling at the neck of his t-shirt that he'd changed rapidly without bothering to dry it. His skin was olive toned; his eyes gray and he had a neatly trimmed goatee which took attention away from the jagged scar that marred his otherwise pleasant features. The scar ran from just below his left eye to the corner of his mouth and it took all my willpower to avoid staring at it. Like Striker, his eyes gave the impression of a man much older, someone who'd experienced more than his share of ordeals.

"What did Davis tell you?" he asked bluntly after the introductions had been made. There was no softness in his eyes; they were as cold as the February weather outside.

"Two groups of hunters sighted some sort of wildcat in the woods," I said after a cautious look into Lucas's eyes and seeing his subtle nod.

"Where?" Nick snapped, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

"I don't know."

"What sort of cat?" His eyes narrowed and I shifted uncomfortably, uncertain about the tall angry man in front of me.

"I don't know—"

"How many did they see?"

"Only one, I think..."

He raked his fingers through his hair impatiently, eyeing me with contempt before he spoke again. "Probably better if I see Davis myself, not gonna get much from this one," he muttered.

Lucas opened his mouth to speak but I got in first, irritated enough by this stranger's bad attitude to overcome my natural

shyness. "If you'd give me half a chance instead of interrupting every two seconds, I could tell you what 'this one' does know! Are you always such an arrogant pig?"

For a few seconds there was total silence and then Lucas smirked. He offered me an approving smile, while Marianne laughed out loud. "She's right, Nick. You're being an arrogant pig. I thought you'd gotten over this attitude – or perhaps you're just cranky because I made you stand out in the rain for six hours, putting a marquee together?"

For a moment Nick was silent, eyeing me coolly before he relaxed a little and his lips formed a small half smile. "Guess I deserved that."

"You certainly did," I announced, still smarting from his arrogant attitude.

"Sorry. I don't trust strangers easily," Nick admitted, his entire demeanor relaxing a smidgeon. "Would you tell me what Davis said?"

"Will you promise not to interrupt?" I eyed him icily, arching one eyebrow in question.

His eyes grew wide and for a second I thought he was going to hurl further abuse but suddenly he chuckled throatily, glancing at Lucas. "I can see why you've fallen for this one; she's a little hellcat."

"She has her moments," Lucas agreed, gold swirling in his eyes when he winked at me. "Go ahead, Charlotte. Tell our grumpy friend what you were told by the sheriff."

This time, Nick remained stoically silent whilst I retold the story, including everything Sheriff Davis had said.

When I'd finished, Ripley spoke. "So nobody got a good look at the wildcat?"

"Apparently not, Sheriff Davis said the description of the color and size of the cat was pretty confused. Any color from golden brown through to black and bigger than a bobcat or cougar."

"But the guys who saw it were full of booze," Nick said quietly. His brow was furrowed and he seemed deep in concentration.

"What do you think, Nick? Could it be someone from your pack?" Lucas questioned.

"The golden brown might be how they'd describe Rafe, but it would surprise me if they'd describe it as a wildcat if they'd actually seen a lion," Nick answered uncertainly. "Black – well that could be José."

"José?" Ripley questioned. "I don't believe I've met him."

Nick shook his head resolutely. "He's new. Black panther. Came to the pack after he ran from his own."

"Reason?" Lucas questioned.

"They were using him for fights, says he didn't want to do it anymore," Nick supplied. "He joined us about two months back."

"Is he proving to be a problem?"

Nick's eyebrows lifted. "Hasn't been. Up until now." Abruptly he stood up, offering Marianne a radiant smile. "Sorry, Marianne. Have to go and sort this out. We'll have to take a rain check on dinner."

"You'll be here on Saturday, won't you?" Marianne questioned as she reached on tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Would you like our assistance?" Lucas questioned.

Nick shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but this is pack business. I'll handle it."

Without another word, Nick strode to the door and Lucas saw him out before returning to my side, dropping down onto the couch beside me.

“What did you think of Nick?” he asked softly, pressing his cool lips to my neck.

“I think he's arrogant, rude and full of himself.”

Lucas chuckled softly, brushing his lips across mine in a tender kiss. “You'll like him, once you get to know him.”

“Somehow I very much doubt that,” I announced primly.

CHAPTER 32
GERARD DUBONET

Saturday morning dawned with a dramatic change in the weather – after days of incessant rain it was dry. Although the sky remained heavily overcast and ominously grey, it seemed the rain might hold off for Marianne and Striker's special day.

Lucas wasn't anywhere to be seen when I woke and I missed the reassuring presence of his arms wrapped around me. I rolled over and discovered a glorious scarlet red rose resting on the pillow, a small card attached to the stem.

My Charlotte,

I chose to let you sleep in this morning and I've headed out with the family to hunt. We will be back in a few hours to prepare for the wedding.

There are lots of people working around the house, so I know you are perfectly safe. You might want to dress before you head downstairs.

Rowena left pancakes for breakfast, they are keeping warm in the oven.

My heart is yours,

Lucas

A tiny smile played on my lips when I ran my fingers over the exquisite copperplate script. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why they'd ventured out this morning – with the house filling with humans this afternoon every precaution had to be taken to ensure there'd be no 'accidents'. It was difficult to equate Marianne hunting with the beautiful bride she'd be later this afternoon though.

Shrugging the covers off I glanced out the window and did a double take. Lucas had said 'lots', but literally dozens of people were milling around outside. Some were carrying tables and chairs into the marquee while others were towing enormous pots of lush greenery on trolleys. One group were hauling cartons of alcohol and trays full of glasses and there were four women standing near the side of the marquee, surrounded by buckets filled with thousands of freshly cut flowers that they were arranging in vast ceramic urns. Shaking my head in disbelief, I grabbed clothes and headed into the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later I headed downstairs, discovering the house was also filled with people. A middle-aged man with brown eyes, a rounded face and a receding hairline, wearing a tailored charcoal grey suit spied me and hurried over, holding out his hand.

"You must be Miss Duncan. I'm Gerard DuBonet, the wedding planner. Mr. and Mrs. Becket told me you were sleeping upstairs before they headed off to brunch. They informed me you're recuperating from recent surgery and required extra rest before the wedding this afternoon."

Struck dumb, I managed a nod as he shook my hand. Despite my stupor, I noticed his hand was cold. Icy cold. He released my fingers and placed his palm against the small of my back, steering me towards the couch. "Mr. Becket told me you'd be hungry when you rose. I'm afraid we've taken over the kitchen with preparations for

this evening, so if you'd sit here in the living room I'll have someone bring your breakfast to you. Would you like coffee?"

I nodded, still trying to catch up. "Thanks. Cream and one sugar."

To my bemusement Gerard DuBonet clapped his hands together and a young woman immediately hurried to his side. "Please get Miss Duncan's breakfast tray and serve her here in the living room. She'd also like coffee with cream and one sugar please."

She headed towards the kitchen and I flopped onto the couch, trying to get my head around the morning's events. I assumed Lucas knew Gerard DuBonet was a vampire – how could he not know? But a vampire who was a wedding planner? Each time I thought I was getting a handle on this strange new life something came along and turned my confidence on its ear.

Breakfast was delicious, pancakes with maple syrup, fresh berries and whipped butter. I picked at the pancakes and watched the crowds of people milling around. For curiosity's sake I started to count heads and gave up when I reached eighty. The whole house was crazy busy and apparently everyone had a job to do.

Gerard DuBonet reappeared at my side, cool and unflappable despite the tidal wave of activity surrounding him. "May I take your tray Miss Duncan?"

"Thank you."

"More coffee?"

"Please." I handed him the empty cup and he smiled warmly. Curiosity nearly got the better of me, but I decided it'd be crazy to ask this man if he was a vampire. What if he wasn't? What if he didn't know about the existence of such things? It would be a stupid move on my part and besides, he'd talked about the family going to brunch – if he was a vampire wouldn't he know they were doing something entirely different?

“Is there anything else?”

“No, thank you.” I watched him stride towards the kitchen, tray in hand and just before he went through the doorway his attention was caught by something and he handed the tray off to a dark-haired young man. Seconds later, he strode past me with a half a dozen bags of ice balanced in his arms and I was relieved I hadn't broached the subject of vampires. His hands were obviously chilly because he'd been handling bags of ice – nothing more serious than that.

A girl in her late teens provided me with another steaming hot coffee and I accepted it gratefully, settling back to watch everyone rushing around. Feeling relaxed and even a little lazy, I came the conclusion I was enjoying myself. Although I'd been nervous about attending the wedding, it all seemed quite exciting today.

Two hundred guests had been invited to Marianne and Striker's wedding –their vampire friends from Egypt and New York had arrived last night and I assumed they were also out hunting this morning. Despite my anxieties they'd turned out to be really nice and they'd accepted my presence with good grace and polite greetings. I found myself enjoying their company, listening to stories about how they'd all met.

Sipping my coffee, I mused over how things I'd never known existed had come into my life in rapid succession over the past few months. A world humans didn't know about was now my world. Strangely, it was a world I found myself feeling increasingly comfortable with. Knowing Lucas was there to protect me made all the difference. Despite his ongoing concerns regarding his thirst I was positive he'd never harm me. The thought of Lucas warmed my heart and unbidden, my mind wandered to when I'd returned home to have him greet me in jeans. Just jeans. The recollection of that

drop of rainwater rolling enticingly from his nipple caused a swell of sheer, unadulterated lust to wash over me and I imagined licking it off with my tongue. I knew it was dangerous to daydream like this, the more time we spent together the more I wanted what was impossible to have. It was becoming increasingly difficult to control myself when he kissed me because there was so much more I wanted to do. With a sigh, I drained the last of the coffee, wondering once again if we'd find solutions to our many problems.



I turned from side to side in front of the mirror to ensure everything was okay with my gown. I was particularly pleased with the overall effect, even if I did have some misgivings concerning the underwear.

Acenith outdid herself in selecting the gown, I mused happily as I admired myself just one last time. This dress was gorgeous, made of soft jersey it was pewter grey and adorned with hundreds of crystal beads that shimmered under light. The bodice of the dress was fitted and the exquisite lacy bra underneath gave me elegant cleavage in the subtle 'v' of the neckline. The skirt flared slightly, making it easy to walk in the cast and it reached the floor in a flow of gently draped material. If you didn't know, you wouldn't have known there was a cast on my foot. To add to my delight, the gown featured a cute little train at the back and I'd never felt more beautiful in my life.

Gwynn had arrived earlier to help with my hair; she'd worked it into a smooth chignon at the nape of my neck which was a miracle with hair as curly as mine. I'd done my own makeup, I didn't wear it often and chose to wear just a little eyeliner, blush, lipstick and mascara. Staring at the woman in the mirror I had trouble believing

it was me. I felt like a princess and the color of the gown made my green eyes seem luminescent.

The one thing I wasn't comfortable with was the underwear. I'd always been a simple bikini-style underwear kind of girl and Acenith had presented me with a skimpy little thong, declaring it was the only style which wouldn't show under the gown. I'd stared at it doubtfully for a long time and even now I was feeling naked. I'd contemplated changing into some of my own underwear but finally decided against it. Acenith wouldn't be pleased if I did and the thong matched the beautiful bra. I was getting used to the sensation of the thong, but I was certain I was never going to like it.

I'd been alone for the past hour or two while everyone prepared for the wedding. The men were down at Ripley's converted stables and the women were ensconced in Marianne and Striker's bedroom, helping Marianne prepare for her big day. They'd been concerned about having someone help me but I'd shrugged it off as unnecessary and insisted Marianne receive all their attention.

Unfortunately, as the time for the wedding ceremony approached my nerves returned and I found myself fretting that Alison might make a play for Lucas.

Picking up the lipstick and mascara, I threw them into the tiny pewter-colored bag Acenith found to match the dress. It was a few minutes before four and I'd been given strict instructions to be ready and downstairs at four o'clock. With one last glance at my reflection I opened the bathroom door and stepped out.

I heard an appreciative wolf whistle and a voice I recognized. "Wow."

Nick Lingard reached my side, dressed in an impeccable black suit and crisp white shirt which enhanced his broad shoulders and narrow waist. He'd shaved away the goatee, revealing a deep cleft in

the center of his chin and I stared at him, wondering why he was here.

To my surprise, he held out his arm. "I've been asked to escort you downstairs," he announced gruffly. "You look beautiful."

"Um, thanks?" The response came out more as a question than a response and I silently cursed. The last thing I wanted was to spend time with this guy.

"I promise, I'm on my best behavior," he said with a wink. "Marianne will kill me if I piss you off a second time." He wagged his fingers in a 'come here' gesture, his gaze flicking pointedly to the arm he was still holding out.

With a mutter of disgust I linked my arm through his, prepared to put up with his obnoxious behavior for the five minutes it would take to get downstairs. Pausing for a second, I leaned over to grab the train of my gown, slipping the tiny material loop sewn on it over my finger. It wouldn't do to fall down a flight of stairs now.

"How do I look?" Nick asked, automatically slowing his pace to match mine.

"Fine," I announced through gritted teeth.

"Gee, thanks."

Ignoring his sarcasm, I made my way slowly down the hallway to the head of the stairs. Nick paused, eyeing me uncertainly.

"Maybe I should carry you."

"No. Thank you." I smiled coolly and gripped the handrail firmly.

Nick shrugged. "Your funeral."

We walked carefully down the stairs and a upswell of voices reached my ears from the living room below. Coming around the corner of the stairwell, I swallowed nervously. The living room was crammed with people – while I'd been preparing upstairs the furniture had been removed and rows of chairs, draped with gauze

and decorated with pale pink silk bows and large sprigs of jasmine stood in the great room. Enormous urns of fresh flowers were placed around the room and the sweet smell of jasmine wafted up towards us.

Concentrating on making it down the stairs in one piece, I hadn't noticed Lucas waiting for me. He seemed completely stunned when we reached him and Nick released my arm.

"There we go. I'll go find the pack," Nick announced to no one in particular and left us alone.

I touched the gown self-consciously and glanced up into Lucas's smoldering blue eyes. "Do I look okay?"

He swallowed heavily, his eyes hooded as his gaze swept over my body from top to bottom and all the way back again. "You take my breath away, my love," he responded simply. He drew me into his arms, nuzzling against my neck. "I have never seen a more beautiful woman." Pressing a soft kiss to my lips he drew away, seemingly unable to force his eyes away from me.

I smiled happily. "You look nice, too."

It was a ridiculous understatement – he was magnificent. Wearing an impeccably tailored black tuxedo, his crisp white shirt was decorated with a narrow pewter silk tie which matched my gown. The cut of the suit enhanced every inch of his body and he was catching the eye of more than one admiring woman in the room.

Lucas held out his arm and I hooked mine through his, savoring the fine texture of the jacket beneath my fingertips. "I'll take you to your seat." He guided me carefully through the crowds milling at the back of the room and then we walked down the aisle heading for the front of the assembled guests. For a split second I imagine this being me one day, walking down the aisle to Lucas. It was an

enchanting daydream and I filed it away to be studied in more detail later.

Rowena sat in the front row, flawless in a gown of aqua blue. Katie sat beside her, pretty in a dress of the palest pink, her hair French-braided and she was toying with the wide white ribbon tied around her waist. Lucas brushed a brief kiss against my lips and settled me in the chair beside Katie, promising he'd return soon and with one last heated glance he strode back through the guests.

Rowena leaned towards me conspiratorially and whispered in my ear. "I told you he would only have eyes for you. You're breathtaking."

"Thank you," I whispered back.

Ben fulfilled his duties as usher and came to sit beside Rowena in the seat she'd saved on her right, offering me an appreciative glance and a wink.

Glancing around I saw Lonnie seated a few rows back. Alison was beside her and I had to admit to feeling a bit smug when I realized Alison had watched Lucas and I walk up the aisle together. She looked as if she'd just swallowed a lemon. Lonnie greeted me with an enthusiastic wave and I recognized the slim, dark haired man beside her as her boyfriend Mike.

Minutes later the other men strode in, spectacular in black tuxedos with pale pink ties around their necks and matching handkerchiefs in their pockets. The three of them looked so happy together, laughing and talking with each other. Striker caught my attention and winked and I smiled in response. Ripley was performing the duties of best man, William the groomsman, and Gwynn and Acenith were bridesmaids.

Rowena and I spoke quietly while we waited for everyone to take their seats and when the music began, I shut my eyes briefly. When

I opened them again, I found Rowena watching me with a question in her eyes.

"Marianne's family wanted to see the service," I whispered. With a little concentration I'd brought Marianne's mother and father, her grandmother and her siblings into the room with us. They looked across, smiled and waved, then turned to watch their daughter marry the man she loved.

"You'll have to release them if they cause you any discomfort," Ben warned in a low voice.

"I think it's okay, I've been practicing," I reassured him softly.

Gwynn and Acenith walked down the aisle, their gowns a gorgeous pale pink jersey. Both wore simple garlands of roses and jasmine in their hair. The music changed to Mendelssohn's Wedding March and Marianne appeared, tightly clutching Lucas's arm. She was stunning in a gown of white lace and tulle – always beautiful, today she was positively radiant. Gone were the flamingo streaks in her hair, she'd dyed it back to its natural sleek black and it was woven into a French braid, intertwined with tiny pink rosebuds and sprigs of jasmine. Carrying a bouquet of pink rosebuds she made her way to a grinning Striker and Lucas released his hold on her, kissing her cheek gently before placing her hand in her husband-to-be's.

He left them in front of the minister and sat down beside me, taking my hand in his. He didn't seem able to take his eyes off me and I was thrilled with the effect I was having on him.

The ceremony didn't take long, the minister marrying Striker and Marianne kept things short and sweet. I was captivated by the whole event, exchanging smiles and warm looks with Lucas as the formalities progressed. When Marianne and Striker exchanged a long, lingering kiss, I stood with the rest of the guests to cheer and applaud.

From the corner of my eye I watched Marianne's parents applaud along with everyone else, then seeing their nods of assent I shut my eyes briefly, returning them to my mind. It was getting easier to do, even the effort of bringing the five of them corporeally to the wedding had only created a mild ache behind my eyes which rapidly dissipated.

We strolled from the house to the marquee as darkness fell and the visual effect of the decorations in the marquee was enchanting. Thousands of flowers, along with tubs of ivy and other dark green foliage were highlighted by hundreds of gently flickering candles set into chandeliers overhead. Circular tables decorated with white linen and pale pink roses had been set with glittering crystal glassware and shining silver cutlery and they encircled the edges of the vast marquee leaving an expansive dance floor in the center. A band had set up at the right side of the marquee and they were currently playing music at a low volume to allow the guests to talk. Waiters moved through the crowds offering trays of canapés and glasses of alcohol. Lucas caught a waiter as he passed, taking two glasses from his tray and offering one to me.

"What's this?"

"Champagne, love."

"I'm not twenty one."

Lucas grinned. "I believe we can live a little dangerously tonight." His gaze swept over my gown, his eyes tracing a sensuous path across my body and he leaned forward, whispering against my ear. "I would like to live *very* dangerously later, my love." He pressed a tender kiss against my neck. "I must go and speak with Ben, I'll return soon."

With legs that had turned to jelly I sipped the champagne while I tried to control my rampaging hormones. Did he mean what I

thought he did?

The evening was magical, Lucas and his Kiss proved to be impeccable hosts and tray upon tray of gourmet food was served, along with the best wines, beers, and spirits. I watched covertly and noticed that while Lucas and the others regularly accepted drinks and food from the trays, nothing passed their lips. It was a clever ploy, designed to make them appear as human as everyone around them.

"Having a good time, Lottie?" Lonnie and Mike appeared in front of me, holding hands and grinning happily.

I nodded. "What about you?"

Lonnie almost jumped up and down on the spot she was so excited. "It's amazing, and you look absolutely stunning."

"She does, doesn't she?" Nick strode across to us, his tie loosened at his throat. He held out a hand to Mike and they shook hands, before he smiled down at Lonnie. "I'm Nick Lingard, a friend of Marianne's."

"Mike Tredway and this is my girlfriend, Lonnie Stewart. I've seen you around town, haven't I?"

"Yeah, I work at the repair shop out on Ford Road."

Mike nodded with a grin. "I knew I'd seen you somewhere."

Nick glanced down at me. His expression suggested he was nervous, although I had no idea why. "I came across to ask this lovely lady if she'd dance with me," he announced smoothly.

"Go ahead," Mike urged, taking my champagne glass before I could protest.

Nick held out his hand and it seemed as if I had no choice but to go with him, unless I wanted to make a scene in front of Lonnie and Mike. I placed my hand in his begrudgingly, and he smoothly drew me towards the dance floor.

He took me into his arms and I looked up at him helplessly. "I can't dance," I admitted in a low voice.

"Just follow my lead, you'll be fine," he announced smoothly, gripping me more firmly around the waist. "It's not too hard."

"Easy for you to say," I muttered, watching my feet as I stumbled.

"Look at me, Charlotte – not your feet," he commanded in a low tone.

"Do I have to?"

To my surprise, he chuckled, the sound deep and low. "You really hate me, don't you?"

I glanced up, found him watching me with unconcealed amusement. "I couldn't say I like you," I admitted with a blush.

"We got off to a bad start," he admitted as he slowly twirled me across the dance floor. "I don't trust easily."

"Obviously." For a few moments we danced silently and I concentrated hard on not falling over and making an utter fool of myself.

"Can we start again?"

"Why?"

My reward was a heavy sigh before he spoke, his voice low. "You're Lucas's girlfriend. He's my friend. We should make nice with each other, for him and Marianne."

"Maybe you should have thought about that when you first met me," I responded tartly.

He cursed softly under his breath. "I told you I don't trust easily, it makes it hard to take anyone I'm meeting for the first time at face value. Particularly when they're giving me bad news about my pack."

I glanced up into his eyes. "It was someone from your group, then?"

He nodded, scanning the crowd around us for anyone within hearing distance. "One of my younger pack members was getting carried away when he was out. Let himself be seen, which is a definite no-no. He's been reprimanded."

"I assume you yelled at him, too?"

"I did not yell at you," he responded calmly.

"Fine. You grumped at me."

To my annoyance he laughed, eyeing me with an amused smile. "You remind me of my kid sister, she was always telling me I was grumpy."

"Obviously a very astute girl," I replied. I eyed him for a long moment when I realized what he'd said, how he'd used past tense when he spoke of her. "What happened to her?" I questioned softly.

"Nothing, as far as I know." Seeing my startled look, he continued quietly. "My folks kicked me out when they discovered what I was, told me I was a freak of nature and I couldn't live there anymore. I haven't seen them or my sister for nearly ten years."

A wave of sympathy stopped me in my tracks. "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

He shrugged, drawing me back into dancing again. "Probably why I'm such a bastard to people I don't know. It takes a lot to gain my trust and I should have known better with you, being Lucas's girl and all, but old habits die hard. I've been kicked in the ass once too often in the past few years."

The song ended and Nick loosened his grip on my waist, preparing to escort me from the dance floor but I tugged at his hand and he stopped, turning back to me with curiosity in his eyes.

Offering him a soft smile, I spoke. "Hi. I'm Charlotte Duncan, Marianne's friend. Would you like to dance?"

He grinned, his grey eyes lit up with pleasure. "Nick Lingard. It's a pleasure to meet you. I'd love to dance with you." He drew me back into his arms and we started to move slowly around the dance floor to a ballad being played by the band. For a minute or so there was silence, then I heard Nick's voice in my ear. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

We continued to dance in companionable silence and I looked around the marquee, catching sight of Alison walking along the edge of the dance floor. She was making a beeline for Lucas, who stood with Ben near the bar and my blood started to boil. I couldn't believe her – how dare she make a move on my boyfriend? And right in front of me?

Watching her angrily, I saw her doing her level best to capture Lucas's attention; laughing too hard, smiling brilliantly and making certain he got a good look at the ample cleavage on display in her low-cut gown.

"What's up?" Nick questioned, following my gaze to where Alison stood with Lucas.

Without giving my actions any thought, I dipped into the box in my head. Mom appeared beside Alison, perfectly formed on the edge of the dance floor and she glanced over at me with a broad smile. I relayed a request to her and her smile grew wider and she nodded. I wasn't sure if what I'd asked was even possible, but it was worth a try.

Mom turned as a waiter walked by, carrying a tray of filled champagne flutes. She kicked her foot out and to my amusement and utter astonishment, the young man tripped over it. The tray and its contents flew through the air and Alison bore the brunt of the spillage, champagne dripping from her hair and clothes.

With a delighted grin I watched the sheer fury erupt on Alison's face. She berated the poor waiter before she stormed away from Lucas, completely humiliated in front of everyone. Closing my eyes for a moment, I slipped Mom back into the box in my mind.

"What just happened?" Nick inquired. He lowered his gaze to mine, searching my face for answers.

Lucas glanced around and caught my triumphant smile. He spoke briefly to Ben before he turned and strode across the marquee towards me.

"Excuse me," I murmured softly to Nick. Breaking free of his grasp I went to meet Lucas. It was clear from the expression on his face that he wasn't nearly as thrilled with my actions as I was.

With no preamble Lucas caught my arm and walked me to the side of the marquee, finding a quiet spot away from everyone. "What just happened?" he demanded quietly. There was anger in his voice and I couldn't understand why.

"Nothing."

Lucas frowned, his eyes flashing angrily. "I know you did something, Charlotte. I can see it in your eyes." He caught my face between the palms of his hands. "Tell me the truth, please."

"Alright," I agreed, my temper over Alison's audacity swamping me. "I saw Alison parading around you like a Playboy bunny, all big boobs and big smiles and I got Mom to help me out. She tripped the waiter."

Lucas looked utterly dumbfounded for a second and he searched my eyes until he seemed satisfied I was telling the truth. "Your Mom?" he repeated blankly.

I nodded, knowing my eyes were probably exposing my own temper. I saw Ben stride towards us with Katie in his arms and he

and Lucas conversed for a minute, too rapidly for me to understand what they said.

Ben took me by surprise, smiling warmly. "It seems you continue to surprise us with your abilities."

"I'm sorry – Alison Whitehead just made me so mad!" As quickly as it had blown up, my temper diffused and my shoulders sagged a little at the knowledge I'd angered Lucas.

Ben raised a questioning eyebrow and Lucas shrugged. "Jealousy issue."

My temper rose again, inflamed by Lucas's casual reaction. "I've got a right to be jealous; she was all over you like a rash!"

Ben managed to keep his smile concealed, but his eyes twinkled with amusement. "I will admit she was making her interest crystal clear." His expression grew serious when he looked at me again. "I can understand why you were angry, but Charlotte..." He shook his head minutely. "What you can do... it's something we need to keep very quiet. It wouldn't do for our guests, *particularly* our very good friends from Egypt and New York to discover the true nature of your abilities."

With a frown I glanced from Ben to Lucas, confused as to why it was such a big deal. I opened my mouth to question it when Lucas and Ben simultaneously arched their necks and sniffed at the air. It was the same reaction I'd seen from Lucas when he'd first inhaled my scent at the river when I came back after our separation.

Confusion and a ripple of fear trickled down my spine when I realized it wasn't only them. To my right I saw three of Nick's pack doing exactly the same thing and on my left I saw William, his movements mirroring theirs. I had no idea what it meant, but it couldn't be anything good.

CHAPTER 33
DANGER

The events of the next few minutes made my head spin and I struggled to understand what was happening. Lucas took Katie from Ben's arms and captured my arm in a firm grip, striding towards where the members of Nick's pack still stood, seemingly transfixed by whatever they could smell.

"Rafe, find Nick—"

"I'm already here." Nick appeared at my side and there was an edge to his voice. "Did you catch that scent?"

Lucas nodded, his expression hard. "I'm asking you to do me a huge favor." He passed little Katie to Nick and pushed me towards him as well, speaking swiftly. "Take Charlotte and Katie. Get them out into the woods, as far away from here as you can. I know you will keep them safe until we can sort this out."

Nick didn't even argue with Lucas, only nodding solemnly. "You can handle things here?"

"How many do you think?" Lucas demanded.

Nick took a second to think. "Not certain. Ten. Perhaps more."

I'd heard about all I wanted and edged back towards Lucas. All around us the wedding celebrations continued, nobody had noticed anything unusual besides the vampires and shape shifters. Dread

crept over my skin. What had they sensed that I couldn't? Why was Lucas determined to make me leave? I didn't want to be away from him and I said so.

"I don't have time to argue this out with you, my love." He pushed me towards Nick again, who captured me in a firm grip and towed me towards the entrance of the marquee despite my protests.

We'd nearly reached the entrance when a number of people appeared from outside and Nick stopped abruptly, pulling me tightly against him and adjusting his grip on Katie. He took a step back and I stumbled with him.

The newcomers weren't people I recognized as wedding guests and there was something distinctly ominous about them. Four men stood in a menacing row in front of Nick and me, while another half dozen men wearing dark suits passed us by and strode swiftly into the marquee. They stationed themselves around the perimeter, silently watching the crowds of revelers who were dancing and talking, completely unaware of what was happening just feet away.

Two more men strode into the marquee and I recognized one of them with a mounting sense of doom.

It was the wedding planner I'd met this morning.

With a sinking heart, I recalled that I hadn't mentioned him to Lucas and with sudden clarity I knew I should have. Even more terrifying was the knowledge that when I stared into his eyes they glittered with flecks of gold and he was most definitely a vampire. I'd been fooled by the way he'd carried around those bags of ice, convincing me he was human.

He pointed to me and spoke to the tall man standing beside him. "That's the girl."

Two men grabbed me, shoving Nick out of the way. He stumbled, but managed to stay upright and keep Katie from getting hurt. When

they dragged me back towards their group I tripped over the train of my gown and by the time I'd righted myself, I found myself standing opposite Lucas, Ben, Nick and some of his pack. They were swiftly joined by Ripley, William, Marianne and Rowena who formed a semi-circle facing us.

The tall man stepped in front of me, his gaze menacing. His black hair was slicked back and there was heavy black stubble covering his chin and cheeks. His eyes were pitch black and his thin features appeared sallow in the candlelight. "We won't harm you, but you're coming with us."

"No!" Lucas roared.

The man turned to glare at him. "Keep your mouth shut, vampire, or my men will shut it for you. We don't want any trouble. We'll just take the girl and leave."

Ripley glanced at the crowd of guests, who so far seemed unaware of the drama taking place just a short distance away from them. His forehead was creased with worry and I knew they'd all be concerned for the safety of everyone in the marquee. "May we take this outside?" he suggested to the tall man.

"As you wish, but we're taking the girl. My men will remain in the tent and if you attempt to stop us, I'll order them to attack." He inclined his head towards the entrance and I found myself dragged outside by the two goons.

Lucas seemed to have regained some of his composure and spoke first. "Why do you want her?"

"None of your fucking business," the same man snarled.

"She just a human. What possible use could you have for her?" Lucas questioned. He said it with such deep contempt in his voice, if I hadn't been so frightened I would probably have been hurt. What Lucas and Ben had been telling me only minutes ago filtered through

the terror crowding my mind. Was it my psychic ability they were after? Did they somehow know about the voices in my head?

I stared at Gerard DuBonet, the wedding planner. Or at least, the vampire who'd pretended to be a wedding planner. It seemed apparent he'd been here this morning to investigate me and I wondered if he somehow knew about my ability. After what I'd seen and heard in the past few months, it wouldn't be surprising if he did.

"What we want is our business. We will take our leave now, with the girl."

"Wait!" Lucas shouted.

The black-haired man turned back and stared at Lucas, his expression disdainful.

"She is my mate," Lucas said quietly. His eyes never left mine and anguish clearly burned in his.

This announcement meant something to the man because he hesitated for a moment, then studied me with a suggestive leer. "I don't believe you, vampire. But if what you say is true, it should be easy enough to prove."

The group around Lucas steadily grew, joined by Acenith, the rest of Nick's pack and the vampires from Egypt and New York. Every one of them looked lethal, but they were keeping their emotions tightly in check and hidden from the throng of humans behind them.

The tall man approached me with a smirk. He dropped to one knee and plunged a hand beneath my gown. I struggled against my captors and squeezed my eyes shut when he groped at the thong.

He pushed a finger roughly past the fine material and shoved it inside of me and I couldn't prevent the sharp cry which left my lips. Tears escaped past my closed eyelids as I suffered the indignity and humiliation of what he was doing. I opened my eyes when he

withdrew his hand and stood up, running his finger crudely beneath his nose and sniffing. "She's not your mate. She's a virgin," he announced bluntly.

Ben and William had both gripped Lucas's shoulders, stopping him from rushing my captors. The look in his eyes was terrifying; he was beyond anything but white-hot rage. "You bastard," he growled, his teeth clenched in fury. "I'll kill you for this!"

The man leered at me again, his eyes tracing a path across my breasts. "Such a pretty little thing. For bringing you to my master, I sincerely hope he'll let me deflower you," he stated quietly against my ear.

My arms were pinned fast, but my feet were free. With all my strength, I kicked him in the groin with my plastered foot.

He yowled, doubling over in agony and nearly dropping to his knees. Staggering a little, I was dismayed when pain spread through my toes and the front part of my foot.

He regained control after a minute and straightened up, although I was pleased to see he was still a little hunched over. The look he gave me was heavy with rage. "You've got spirit, you little bitch. I'll have to break you of that."

He hit me. It was an openhanded slap, but enough to leave me seeing stars. I tasted blood on my lip and fretted about bleeding around the vampires. The man leaned towards me and whispered against my ear, making me cringe. "I'll have my men kill *every* single person here if you don't come with me now. And I will take great pleasure in personally killing the one who tried to protect you. Your choice."

I thought of all the innocent people enjoying the wedding, unaware of the drama unfolding just outside. I looked at the faces of the people I loved. Lastly, I met Lucas's eyes and for a second or

two we stared at one another, the agony mutual. The expression in Lucas's eyes was lethal, still being held back by Ben and William his face was contorted with fury.

I turned to Ripley, wondering if he could access my thoughts, if he could hear me when there was so much tension and noise surrounding us. I only had one message I could give him, the only thing which might help. "*Gerard DuBonet, Gerard DuBonet, Gerard DuBonet.*" His face remained impassive, his expression giving no indication of whether he could hear what I was trying to tell him – and his gaze remained focused on the leader of this group.

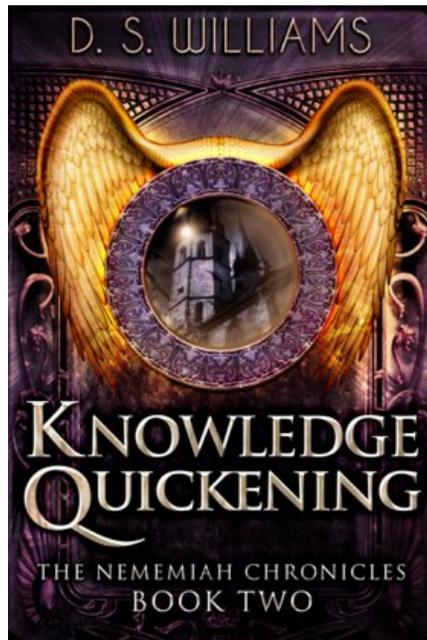
I stared up at my captor, wanting to make sure he would see every ounce of hatred I was experiencing reflected in my eyes. "Alright, I'll come with you. But you have to give me your word that nobody here will be hurt."

"I give you my word."

I didn't know if I could believe him, but I'd run out of options. The only way to help my friends and keep this from becoming a massacre was to leave with them and pray I might get rescued later. "Okay. I'll go with you."

He nodded briefly at the men gripping me and they hauled me away from the marquee. The last thing I saw when I turned back was Lucas staring after me – rage, frustration and desolation evident in his dark blue eyes.

Next in the Series:
Knowledge Quickening
(The Nememiah Chronicles Book 2)



Abducted by an unknown enemy and fearing for her friends, Charlotte Duncan must draw on determination she never knew existed – and trust a mysterious stranger – to find a way out.

When Charlotte is suddenly kidnapped, she struggles to find a way to escape. Filled with worry for the man she loves and her friends, she must rely on her strength – and trust in a stranger’s help – to evade her captor’s clutches.

In the second book in the Nememiah Chronicles paranormal romance series, Knowledge Quickening follows Charlotte as a new cast of demons, shapeshifters, werewolves, and vampires make an appearance. Unable to embrace her psychic gifts but determined to

live, Charlotte will discover things about herself she never believed possible – and face a future wildly different than she ever imagined.

Knowledge Quickening

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



D.S. Williams likes to live fictional people's lives, mainly because they're much more interesting than her own.

There was a time when D.S. thought she could be like 'other' people, holding down a job in the real world. It quickly became apparent this wasn't a suitable environment for someone with her head in the clouds; but it took nearly ten years of employment, then fifteen years as a full-time parent before she found her niche in working from home – where she can go off on those tangents of imagination.

Employment and family notwithstanding, she's spent forty odd years engrossed in make-believe worlds, creating characters, placing them into impossible situations and bringing new settings to life. Characters are created in the deepest, darkest corners of her mind and they never, ever do as they're told – while D.S. has a plan, her characters tend to travel a path wildly different to what was prepared for them.

A lover of multiple genres, D.S. will write just about anything, although she especially loves romances. If you can add werewolves, vampires or other mythical creatures to the mix, she's in her element. She also loves a spot of suspense, a touch of teasing, and never met a good cliff-hanger she didn't like.

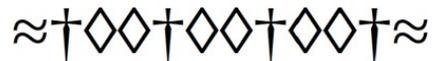
D.S. is currently working on a number of new projects. She adores strong male characters, feisty females, and developing complex relationships for everyone who turns up in her books.

D.S. loves collecting notebooks and pens, in fact; some would suggest it's an addiction. Her home is overflowing with (mostly empty) notebooks, and she has a pen for every single occasion.

While D.S. is Australian, her stories are generally set in other countries. She uses her love of research and an addiction to Google Search to flesh out the settings she creates. Most of her books are set in the US, although a current work-

in-progress is set in the wine-growing regions of France, and a future book will take place in Scotland.

A reclusive introvert, D.S. lives with her Darling Husband, daughter 'The Bonza Babe' and two new additions - a Cane Corso/Mastiff named Mollie, and a cheeky American Staffy puppy named Stanley. She's travelled around Australia for nearly 30 years as a military wife, but now lives in sleepy Bridgetown, Western Australia where she intends to spend the rest of her days writing, reading and meeting new (fictional) friends.



To learn more about D.S. Williams, visit her [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).

BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

Knowledge Revealed (The Nememiah Chronicles Book I)

Knowledge Quickening (The Nememiah Chronicles Book II)

Knowledge Hurts (The Nememiah Chronicles Book III)

The Knowledge of Love (The Nememiah Chronicles Book IV)

Knowledge Protects (The Nememiah Chronicles Book V)

Protective Hearts