

FOREVER MINE

KD Williamson aka "Minerva"



A VAMPIRE ROMANCE FROM

KD WILLIAMSON
aka "MINERVA"

**FOREVER
MINE**

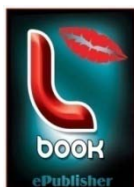
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By

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aka

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Lesbian Fiction: Vampire Romance

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* * *

Dedication

To my perfect foil, my Michelle. You keep me grounded and I keep you wondering. To the strongest woman I know, my mother.

CHAPTER 1

THE SMELL OF the French Quarter awakened her, wafting in from a small, solitary window. It was a strange bouquet of horses, alcohol, spicy food, and sin. Her eyes remained closed as her other senses wallowed in the New Orleans milieu. The sounds of laughter and other merriment filtered in like a chaser. By now, the streets were teeming with tourists, youth, the inebriated, and the regulars.

It was time.

Lashes lifted, revealing eyes the color of amber. Blackness as dark as pitch surrounded her, created by the thick, tarp-like material hanging from each side of the bed. Fortunately, it blocked even the dimmest ray of light, and she adjusted her sight accordingly.

This room, this bed, was a sacred place. Only a select few knew of its existence and how to obtain entrance. Those select few were her eyes and ears, because with the advent of the sun, Renee was at her most vulnerable and impossible to awaken. The area was hidden well within the building itself — a secret room within a room.

Most of all, it was a place for Renee to just... be.

Renee sighed, sat up in the large bed, and reveled in the darkness. An abundance of pillows buffered her. The pale Egyptian cotton sheets fell from her tall, lean body, and cool night air kissed her naked skin as she reached for the ceiling in a luxurious stretch. Pink-tipped nipples tingled and stood at attention. She glanced down at herself, marveling at the muscle that slightly hardened the softness of perfect curves.

Renee smirked.

She was not above being vain and thanked a shadow from long ago for freezing her in time. Renee pushed a hand through elegantly bobbed auburn hair and yawned. Abruptly, hunger made itself known as abnormal canines brushed over her tongue and lips. The smirk transformed into a full-blown smile as hopes of a full belly and satiated body filled her with the promise of an interesting night to come.

She arose, pulling the heavy material to the side. The soft light from the window made porcelain skin glow, giving her almost an angelic appeal, but she was no angel. Renee stopped in front of the large mirror, striking a pose full of pouty lips and smoldering eyes. Seeing only the reflection of the huge bed staring back at her, she laughed throatily at her own morbid sense of humor. The past few hundred years would have been extremely boring without it.

Renee strolled toward the open window and peered into the night. Horses clopped down the narrow streets, pulling their tourist filled carriages behind them. The drivers bellowed and pointed at the various restaurants and bars for the alternative lifestyle. A myriad of people milled about, some walking in groups, some on bicycles, some staggering toward Bourbon Street looking for another daiquiri or a signature Hurricane. Renee took a deep, unnecessary breath, and reveled once more in the overwhelming humanity that surrounded her. Thankful at least for New Orleans; it had been the only place able to make her feel some semblance of life again. Pushing away from the window, Renee moved toward the bathroom.

It was time to start the night.

* * *

Currently alone, Renee leaned back into the plush surroundings of the private VIP lounge and sighed. She grasped the wine glass in front of her and swirled the blood-red beverage, watching it coat the sides before splashing back to calmness. She stood up and looked down at the room below.

Piercing golden eyes saw everything at once... flashing lights, gyrating bodies, people laughing, crying, and drinking themselves into oblivion. It was a depiction of life and misspent youth in its many forms. Her club, The Lion's Den, had become one of the most exclusive clubs in town. It provided an outlet for said youth and entertainment for herself. Renee literally bathed in their vitality and their delusional invincibility in hopes that the traits were contagious. In this, she harbored the hope that the ancient burden she carried — heavy with lies, heartache, and loneliness — would lift, even minutely.

The clearing of a throat brought Renee from her thoughts. She glanced upward to see Charlotte, her assistant, waiting patiently. "You have something for me?" Renee asked.

"A few, actually; I've been watching them. They seem to be the pick of the litter tonight. A couple of them fit the physical description you always want. You know — tall, brunette, amazing eyes. You should be pleased," Charlotte said.

Renee smirked. "That may not be saying much at all. Pickings are slim, Charlotte, very slim. Show them up."

* * *

Long minutes seemed to turn into hours as another overly loud laugh caused Renee to groan silently. Soundproofing muffled the blaring music that filtered unchecked from below.

Unfortunately, she was privy to every idiotic word swirling around her.

"Oh, come on, Renee, tell us what you think."

Renee ignored the pleading looks aimed in her direction. Her eyes narrowed slightly as the jarring sound of the woman's voice permeated hyperaware senses.

It was like nails on a chalkboard. Irritation raced over her skin.

She peered at the four young women surrounding her. They bubbled with beauty, vitality, and gushed with excitement. They should have been perfect candidates. They were not. What they were was so far up her ass, she could taste cheap hairspray. Conversation flowed around her, but intelligence was lacking.

Renee did not give a tinker's damn if JLo was pregnant or if Britney was crazy. Renee was with the silent minority: Leave Britney alone.

Growing more bored by the moment, Renee brought the glass to her lips and sipped. She groaned as the Pinot Noir coated her tongue and throat with its warmth. *I should have stayed in bed. Now, let's see what I can do to salvage the night.* Renee flicked her tongue over a razor-sharp canine and canted her head to the side with interest.

Her grin was slow, sexy, and sadistic.

The woman laughed again and added an unwelcome hand to Renee's thigh.

Renee cringed internally, but her grin widened. As if by its own volition, her hand lifted from the table, and she watched with veiled delight as blunt nails grew into two-inch talons.

With unbelievable quickness, she sliced through flesh and muscle.

The woman opened her mouth to speak again, but there was only a gurgle. Renee held up her glass, catching pulses of blood as it spewed from the side of the woman's neck with her dying heartbeat. Golden eyes twinkled with merriment as she watched her prey's head slump forward, nearly separated from the body that housed it.

A carpet of silence lay neatly over the occupants of the booth... followed by the most terrible of screams.

Several sets of horrified eyes turned to look at Renee as she brought the glass to her lips. Her eyes pinned them all there, daring them to leave. The stare of indignation was

unnecessary. For the moment, wide-eyed terror anchored them to their seats.

Renee raised a brow. "I'm sorry. Where are my manners? Did any of you want some?" she asked with malicious glee. Without waiting for a reply, she passed the glass around the table. "Drink up. There's plenty more. Though you might want to hurry. It's ghastly when it's cold." *Now this is entertainment.* She rested her chin in the open palm of her hand, tapping still-bloody nails against her cheek.

Renee gave them each an individual glare, challenging them to spurn her generous gift. There was a point to be made.

Her eyes reddened as she continued her gaze, replacing their will with hers alone. Renee knew an extra push was needed for them to partake of her offering. These women would remember this night and she wanted them to. It really didn't matter whom they told. Renee smirked internally, knowing there was no one in creation who could really challenge her.

Secretly, she pushed back the hope that someone would.

Disgust marred their beautiful faces as they sipped the offering. The young girl nearest her took the glass with shaking hands. She gagged as the blood passed her lips, regurgitating all over the table.

Renee's eyes burned with anger at such insolence. "This isn't the place for you, ladies. You've bored and bothered the wrong person." She stood abruptly. "Now go. I won't be so nice the next time," she added and smiled wolfishly, revealing garishly long canines.

Renee peered down at the decimated body with utter disdain as a cooling puddle of blood congealed on the floor and table. Draining the rest of the lukewarm contents in the glass, she knew that as soon as she left the room, the mess would be swept away as if it never existed at all.

After all, she paid her staff handsomely to serve, to clean, and to forget.

Renee laughed as her guests scurried away like frightened rodents. She smoothed a hand through auburn locks and looked down at her black silk shirt to see that her clothing was littered with blood. Renee sighed in irritation. It was one of her favorite shirts.

She exited the lounge, making her way downstairs and across the club with purpose. *What has the world come to? The youth of my generation were genuine and excited about life. So much has changed — and not for the better. It defeats the purpose of being immortal.* Renee smiled bitterly to herself. *Although, time and the world around me seemed to be such a small thing when I wasn't so alone, when I had... I will not think of her.*

Renee shook her head in attempt to clear her it, but it continued to cloud, despite her efforts.

* * *

Paris in the 1940s was a time of decadence. Bombs fell like raindrops, but the Parisians continued to live life to the fullest. Sex, the arts, parties, and many other levels of entertainment were at their peak... anything to forget the death that lurked just outside.

It was the perfect place for Renee to pass the time, while the monstrosity of war consumed most of the world. The women were intelligent and their blood tasted of champagne and opium.

She had not a care in the world.

With money stolen and earned, Renee supported the arts, especially if the artist was a beautiful woman. She cut a bloody swath through the community, drinking of them as if she could absorb their knowledge.

In Renee's opinion, there was nothing cruel about it. It was just her favorite meal.

Natasha Lionette should have been no different. She was more than likely an American artist in Europe, flocking to the area like every other painter to experience the rich culture and societal grandeur. Now, she was like everyone else, caught in the tide of war. Still, her paintings set her apart from the rest with their dark, brooding beauty.

This alone confused Renee.

How could one so young know about such pain and despair? The confusion turned to intrigue, and, always curious, Renee set out to unravel the mystery at her earliest convenience and manipulation. With the help of a well-orchestrated party at her gallery, Renee had her chance.

The crowd buzzed with excitement and gossip. The air was thick with perfume, and the men and women were dressed in the finest French couture. Champagne seemed to be running from an endless font, making tongues and morals looser.

She moved through the crowd that filled the gallery. Renee sipped from her glass of champagne as her cool, determined eyes scanned the swarm of people and dismissed every one of them. Still, a saucy smirk stole over her features as she spied a couple very close to a sexual act in a far dark corner. She watched for a few moments before her focus shifted.

Natasha stood tall and majestic. Long, curly, dark hair hung freely, moving with every turn of her head. Where all the women were dressed in frilly things, Natasha stood out in the crowd, wearing leather boots cinched around her calves, tight grey trousers that highlighted long, muscular legs, and a starched white shirt that made tanned features stand out in sharp relief. Her face was a portrait of angles, beautiful in laughter, as she stood in front of her work, entertaining a group of stodgy old men.

Renee stood just outside the circle, peering in. The men quietly turned to look at her. She smiled disarmingly. "Leave," her eyes whispered. In a blink of an eye, only Renee and Natasha remained.

Renee drained the rest of her champagne, giving Natasha time to go from shock to curiosity.

It did not take long.

Clear, flashing green eyes met amber in a bold gaze. "That was a nice trick." Natasha's voice was deep, but smooth, like the contrasting sides of velvet.

Renee chuckled. Her back straightened as she tried to extend her tall frame. Still, Natasha stood a few inches taller. Renee felt strangely small, and used her words to compensate. "I have many more. I can teach you if you like."

"I don't know. Sounds like dangerous work to me," Natasha answered.

They peered at each other silently, as if mesmerized. Natasha was the first to break from it. "The way you walk around... as if you own everything... I take it you are the gallery owner, and my anonymous contributor?"

Renee nodded. "Very astute of you."

"Mmm, so what do you want in return?" Natasha's green eyes narrowed. "Are you just like the men who dabble in the art world? They use their money to influence and make artists sit at their feet like dogs. Is this what you want? To bed me? Own me? Use me?"

Renee stepped closer, invading Natasha's personal space. "Yes, and so much more. Would you deny me?"

Natasha smiled in some secret amusement. "Of course. You'll get nothing from me easily."

"Good. I love a chase." Renee ran a finger down Natasha's cheek. "It'll make catching you so much more gratifying."

Natasha pulled away. "Trying to take privileges already, I see." Her jaw clenched. "You presume too much."

Renee grinned and stepped back. "I'll teach you many things, and something tells me I'll learn plenty from you, Natasha."

"Again, you make too many assumptions. I'm sure you are used to getting what you want, but I don't play that game. I'm not a whore, and just because you hold all the money, I will not fall at your feet."

"Hm, what if I fall at yours? Everyone needs a... friend," Renee said.

"I have plenty," Natasha answered.

Renee scoffed, "Those old men? They're even dirtier than I am. I'm the lesser of two evils, I assure you."

Natasha laughed. "I rather doubt that. I sense that being near you could be a very precarious adventure indeed."

"I could change your life, Natasha."

Natasha's name rolled off Renee's lips as if she owned it. Icy green eyes widened. This did not escape Renee, knowing she had piqued the other woman's interest.

"We shall see. I haven't even decided if I'm going to talk to you again."

Renee grinned. "Yes, you have. It's written all over you."

Natasha's lips thinned. "So, is it your money or your use of words that draw people to you?" she asked sarcastically.

"By people, should I assume you mean women?" Renee countered.

"Mmm."

"I would have to say that it is the latter. They rather enjoy the use of my tongue."

Natasha's laughter was quick and deep. "Charming, and a forked tongue it is."

"My body then?"

Natasha continued to snicker. "Stop! It would be unsightly for champagne to come out of my nose. What would people think?"

"I don't understand why you find that humorous. Do you not find me attractive? This vexes me," Renee said irritably.

Renee could literally feel Natasha's eyes caressing from her head to toe. Every inch of her tingled.

"No. It's not that. It's your arrogance I find funny." Natasha said.

"You mean my confidence," Renee corrected.

"No, I meant your arrogance. I don't mince words."

Renee canted her head to the side. "Funny, it was my arrogance that helped you keep talking to me."

"Touché." Natasha's eyes glittered with amusement. "You have my attention. Now, let's see what you do from now on to hold it."

"Actually, I would love to talk about you."

"Ask away," Natasha said.

"Now tell me: What does someone as young as you know of such torment?" They turned toward one of the paintings.

Natasha spoke candidly, "I am an American, but Germany had become my home. It stayed that way even when this Godforsaken war started, which then paved the way for Nazi sympathizers to do the most despicable things. I lost so much because of that — my family and the life that I knew — so how can I not know about pain?"

"I'm shocked that you would be so open about this," Renee said.

"So am I." Natasha's tone was confused, and her face looked to be full of wonder.

"Tell me anyway," Renee said.

"Why?"

"Because I want to know, and I think you want to tell me. I would be honored if you did," Renee said.

"You don't think for a second that you would be intruding?" Natasha asked.

"Be honest. Does it feel that way to you?"

Natasha shook her head. "No. For some reason it does not. I can't explain it."

"Then don't try. I have learned that it's best to go with impulses when they strike," Renee said.

Natasha peered down at Renee for long moments, as if weighing her worthiness. The noise of the party disappeared. Renee waited patiently, giving Natasha her undivided attention. The corner of Natasha's lips lifted in what looked to be a pained smile. She opened her mouth... and her past spilled out. "My father worked for a somewhat lucrative investment firm with international ties, but it was based in New York. He traveled Europe and loved it dearly. He would come back to the states with such stories of what he'd seen and the cultures he experienced. For some reason, he became captivated by Germany. We moved there when I was a teenager. It was hard, but both my sister and I adapted well." Natasha paused and swallowed.

Sensing that she needed to give the conversation a slight push, Renee asked softly, "Is that where you honed your craft?" She was enraptured by the tale and this woman.

"No, I went to art school right here in Paris."

"Your family must have been so proud. Your sister —?"

Natasha's smile was full of warmth, but her eyes were sad. "She wanted to be a famous chef. She was much younger than me."

"You don't have to continue."

"No, it's best that I finish this part at least," Natasha murmured.

"Alright," Renee said.

"We spent almost ten years in peace on the countryside. When Hitler came to power, I guess we thought we were safe. The Americans had no part in this war as of yet. We were wrong. My family was killed by a roaming band of Nazi sympathizers. I still don't know why or who they thought we were."

They talked well into the night.

Renee was utterly captivated. Never had she seen such fire, such passion in a woman who had lost so much. She began to look forward to the nights again.

* * *

With a growl, she shook herself free of memories to return to the here and now. Renee had an assistant to admonish for the lack of originality that had just left the VIP area. Next time, Charlotte needed to try harder.

Renee's movements were fluid; dark silk clung to every curve, and graceful, full hips swiveled with each step. The heavy bass of the beat surrounded her and she could feel the eyes on her, but no one dared to touch her.

The occupants on the dance floor parted magically, clearing a path.

She radiated power and malice. Some were repelled by it, some were attracted, but they all were in awe of it. Renee smirked, tasting the fear in the air as well as the interest. Still, the smirk fell quickly. *I grow tired of these cattle. There isn't a free thinker among them. I created this place, hoping to draw the best of youth, and all I have are the bottom feeders.*

Now annoyed by the gazes following her, Renee flew through the crowd with lightening speed. Within seconds, she stood in front of the bar. The nervous bartender dropped a glass, but Renee caught it before it hit the floor. "Mind yourself or you will pay for it with your hide," she hissed, displaying elongated fangs.

The young man reared backward in fear, but as quick as her anger came, it disappeared. Her fangs retracted, giving her the appearance of a simple woman. *What was his name?* Her gaze burned into him as she tried to remember. "Ah, my dear... Ted. Where is she?"

"Wh-wha... huh?"

Renee sighed once more, detesting stupidity. She studied him, feeling the confusion come off him in waves. "You really are stupid aren't you?"

Ted nodded and pointed behind her. Renee turned slightly and saw her assistant, wearing a determined expression, weaving her way through the crowd. Renee waited for Charlotte's arrival.

Charlotte did not waste any time. "There's trouble. The girl you dispensed of tonight has friends. Apparently, she's related to someone very important. There are quite a few men waiting in your office. They said they had to speak to you, or they would burn the place to the ground." Charlotte sucked in a much-needed breath.

Renee chuckled. "Ah, what would any corrupt city be like without its crime families? I'll be there momentarily."

"Should I gather some he —"

Renee shook her head. "No, I'll take care of this myself. I need to send a message."

* * *

A few minutes later, Renee opened the door to her office and nearly choked on the amount of testosterone. Three rather large fellows sat on the chocolate leather sofa. One leaned against it, and the other had the audacity to sit behind her desk, swiveling in the chair.

She grinned as five pairs of eyes zeroed in on her in an attempt at intimidation. "So, you're here because I killed the wrong piece of trash?" Her voice was light, but mocking.

The one in the desk chair stood up. He was Renee's height, with a slight build and greasy looks. "I should kill you where you stand. My name's Willy and you will remember it."

Renee smiled outright, but on the inside, sadness permeated every inch. All of this misery would be gone in an

instant — if only he could do what he threatened. "There are days when I wish someone would."

The silence was overwhelming, but it was disturbed by the cocking of a gun.

A slight breeze was the only indication Renee had moved.

Willy yelled in surprise as the woman disappeared from his gaze. "What the fuck?"

Renee stood behind one of the larger men who had taken her statement seriously and drew his weapon. He grunted in surprise and pain. Renee held his gun hand in a crushing grip, while the other encased his throat.

Her eyes flashed a warning as the others stood up, revealed their weapons, and surrounded her.

"You wouldn't dare. That karate shit doesn't scare me. You don't know who you're fucking with," Willy threatened.

In a horrifying show of inhuman strength and speed, Renee squeezed, crushing the man's windpipe in a satisfying crunch. As he gagged and squirmed in pain, she raised his gun hand and the sound of the gunshot was deafening. The goon that stood the closest crumbled to the ground.

Only a few seconds had passed.

In one smooth motion, Renee stepped away and let the first body fall next to the second one. "It's just one of those days, gentlemen."

She watched with vicious satisfaction as a combination of confusion, surprise, and terror chased their way across Willy's face. "Come on, keep up boys. Drop the weapons. They won't help you here." Her gaze contained a promise of violence and death. Renee walked calmly past them and sat in the dark leather chair. She leaned forward, rested her arms on the desk, and waited.

"How did you... What are you?" the greasy man asked as he re-holstered his weapon. The rest of them followed his actions.

"That isn't important. Now, why are you here?"

"She was the police superintendent's niece," Willy said.

"Who? That irritating twit from earlier?" She did not wait for an answer. "I guess that I need to be more discriminating. What do you want from me? An apology?"

The men gazed at each other as if waiting for the other to speak. Willy stepped forward. "Uh, we were supposed to bring him your head. You started this, lady. We wouldn't be here otherwise."

Renee's laugh was full of delight. Then, suddenly, it stopped. "I will end it also. None of you want a fight with me. I've kept to myself since I arrived here, but I could easily own this city and every government official in it. It would be unbelievably easy." Her voice was calm, but fierce. "Tell your chief to stay out of my way or he and his cute little family will pay for his meddling."

She paused for effect. "What were their names? Ah, Kelly and Sandra, I believe."

"How did you —"

"I've collected everything, good or bad, there is to know about every official in this town. Everything. I call it my little insurance policy. There isn't a damn thing you can do to me, but if anything happens to any of my people or my club, the responsible party will pay with their lives or their reputation. If I'm feeling decidedly nasty, they will pay with both. I have friends in high places too. Money does talk."

Renee waited for the information to sink in.

"Now, get out of my sight. I've had enough of you." Renee waved her hand nonchalantly at the crumpled bodies. "Take your trash with you."

After the office cleared, Renee leaned back into the chair. Exhaustion swept over her. *What am I doing? I don't have anything left to fight for. I'm too old and I've seen too much. This arrogance and need to control does not bring me the same*

pleasure anymore. Hardly anything does. Perhaps I do have a death wish.

Weariness was suddenly replaced by a cornucopia of feeling.

"Renee?" Charlotte walked into the office, closing the door behind her.

Renee's gaze jerked upward, her eyes wild and full of emotion.

"Are you alright?" Charlotte asked. Genuine concern could be heard in her voice.

Renee's expression turned to stone as her emotions moved back behind the seemingly impenetrable wall. "Save your empathy for someone who deserves it. Charlotte. I do not."

Charlotte pushed the reading glasses back from her the tip of her nose and pursed full lips. "I-I'm sorry...."

"Don't be. We're not friends. You've served me freely for years, and you'll be rewarded for that someday soon."

"I'm honored. I know you haven't brought anyone over for a very long time," Charlotte said.

"I'm not going to be here forever." *Nor do I want to be.*

"All that I know and all that I own will be yours," Renee said.

"What about —"

"Please, Charlotte. Don't make the mistake of speaking her name. Don't make me regret my moment of weakness when I told you the whole sordid story."

"I'm sorry. Maybe if you go back to the bar you'll see something you'll like. Get your mind off things," Charlotte said almost playfully.

A russet colored brow shot upward. "Maybe I will do that. I have to change first. I still have some of that twit on me."

CHAPTER 2

SOMETIME LATER, RENEE decided to follow Charlotte's advice and grace the bar with her presence. Feeling many sets of eyes on her, Renee turned toward the patrons.

They all quickly looked away.

She laughed out loud. "Cowards."

Renee took a seat and leaned forward to catch one of the two bartender's eyes. She crooked a finger in his direction.

"Y-yes ma'am."

"Do you keep everyone waiting this long, Andy?" Renee's gaze was guarded, but held a warning.

"No, ma'am. It's a little busier than usual tonight." Andy smiled as he met Renee's eyes. "The usual?"

"Yes." She eyed him curiously. *I guess it is good that not all of my employees are afraid of me.* Only a few seconds passed before a full glass of red wine appeared in front of her.

The back of Renee's neck tingled with awareness.

Renee's eyebrow rose in interest. Somebody was watching her.

With the use of supernatural senses, Renee followed the heat. Several heads turned quickly, afraid of being caught staring again, but one remained. She studied the owner of the impertinent gaze.

Emotion slammed into her gut, leaving her almost breathless. *It's her. Please let it be.*

Time stopped. Then, it reversed itself.

* * *

Months flew by, and to Renee, nothing else existed save Natasha. The women she fed on had become only objects of

sustenance. The war was over and Paris was rebuilding, as was Renee. Renee's fortune became vast as she took over restaurants, cafes, and galleries, whose owners... disappeared.

The more she acquired, the more she showered on Natasha.

Dusk brought them together, just as it did many other nights. As if they had some unspoken agreement; the gallery where they first met became a rendezvous point where they drank, dined, talked, and Renee watched Natasha create art.

Each night, Renee awoke, overflowing with anticipation of Natasha's arrival. Renee's lavish apartment, hidden well within the gallery itself, had become their haven. Her servants milled about, preparing drink and hors d' oeuvres at her command. These nightly meetings had become essential to Renee's wellbeing. Yet, they had barely touched.

This night was to be different.

They sat at the bistro-like table tucked away in Renee's plush office and sipped the finest of wines. Renee placed a set of keys on the table and smiled softly at her own accomplishment.

Natasha peered down and fingered the new objects. She sighed. "What am I to do with all of these acquisitions? I know nothing of running a business, Renee." Natasha's eyes were confused and pleading.

"Whatever you wish to do with them. I just want you to have the fame you speak so much about," Renee said.

The emerald gaze narrowed. "Or are you trying to buy me? I've told you once, I will not be your whore."

Renee's head snapped back as if struck. "No, I..." Renee looked away, feeling suddenly unsure. "I've never wanted to give anyone anything before, not like this. I care, and I want you to have the world. Is that so wrong?" Renee glanced upward through thick lashes.

Natasha's features softened. "I can understand what you're saying, but I don't need all of this. Just be my friend."

Renee's stomach twisted. She stood up and walked toward her desk. "Is that all you wish to be?" Afraid of the answer, Renee turned away.

"You have been there for me more than anyone else ever has. I've told you things... let you see my pain. I've cried in your arms for my mother, my father, and my sister. I have cried for the pain that I've caused and the revenge I've taken. I have laid myself bare to you, but I know nothing of you except that you wish to give me things. I believed that friends were all you wished to be." Natasha's voice was layered with confusion. "I don't understand you."

Renee's head dropped once more. She crossed her arms over her chest in an attempt to keep from flying apart. "Perhaps it is I who does not understand myself. I have seen so much, been through so much. I'm colored by it all. I don't know what to tell you or show you." She paused. "I don't know who to be."

"Should I tell you what I see?" Natasha stood and slowly walked toward Renee. Not waiting for an answer, Natasha continued. "I see ferocity, passion, kindness, loyalty, and I sense that only a select few have seen this — if any. I also see the need to take, to have, to own, but you will not take me or own me. I will give myself to you freely if you earn it, just like I must earn you. I know this will take some time, but you will learn not to hide from me. There are so many questions I have of you." Natasha shook her head. "Why do I only see you at night? Why is your skin cool? Are you sick?" Natasha moved closer, hovering behind Renee.

Renee's chest heaved as the words and Natasha's presence washed over her. She turned and their gazes met. Renee searched green eyes for certainty. Words that she wanted to release since the beginning rose in her throat, almost choking her. "I have done things in the past that would shock you, but I do not regret them. I do things every night that you may view as barbaric, but you must know this is a part of who I am. I cannot change this. Maybe I am all the things that you see, but

I am so much more. I have seen pain and I have caused it. I have seen death and been a part of that also. There is so much to tell you, but let me break your heart only a little at a time." Renee paused and her eyes were imploring. "I beg you."

In an unexpected move, Natasha reached out, pulling Renee into her body. The air left Renee's lungs in a whimper. Their eyes met and the air around them crackled with intensity.

Renee melted. The excitement generated between the two of them was irresistible. She licked her lips to alleviate a suddenly dry mouth and could not tear her eyes away. "I —"

"No, it's my turn to speak." With a free hand, Natasha reached up tracing the other woman's cheek with shaky fingertips. "You have lied to cover up the things you have done, as have I." Fingertips trailed over trembling lips, outlining them with sensual purpose.

"You have killed, as have I. You have brought others pain, as have I. You have accepted me for who I am, even with my past. Let me do the same for you." Natasha paused, tilting Renee's face upward. "If it takes an eternity, I am here to listen. We are so much alike that this is obviously meant to be." Slowly, Natasha's head lowered and the air around them hummed with awareness as lips finally touched.

Renee sobbed into the contact. Heat tumbled through her body, and in that instant she was broken and remade again.

* * *

Free from the past for the moment, Renee was thrown back into the present as she continued her trek down the bar. She appeared beside the owner of the curious eyes. Not waiting to be invited, Renee took the seat next to her. With a bold gaze, Renee studied her quarry slowly. She nearly gasped as deep green studied her with the same intensity. *This is uncanny. They are almost identical, more so than any of the others. Except for the eyes. The color is all wrong; they are too dark.*

A long, wild, dark mane framed a face of distinct beauty, complete with high-cut cheekbones and full lips. But, it was the dark green gaze that gave Renee pause. It was alight with pain and hidden vulnerability, which she knew made the woman an extremely easy mark.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" Renee inquired with a raised brow.

For a few seconds, the woman ignored her and continued to sip her drink. Finally, vivid eyes flashed as she spoke.

"Yeah, I do, considering I don't remember inviting you over." The woman's voice was a throaty purr dripping with sarcasm.

Renee waved her hand, dismissing the words. "It's merely a formality."

"Mmm, well, let's make it formal then. You're not invited. Feel better?" She turned away briefly, picking the olive out of her martini. She bit it neatly in half.

Renee smiled. *She has that same fire.* "I'm not leaving, so get used to having me here."

The woman sighed and scanned the bar, no doubt looking for a vacant seat. "I could just leave."

"You won't. You have to finish your drink." Renee smirked.

"That's a flimsy excuse at best." The woman's eyes seemed to twinkle with reluctant amusement. "You wanted something?"

Renee gave the woman a second glance. Her black leather jacket gleamed in the multi-colored lights, hiding a crisp white t-shirt that was tucked into faded jeans. Renee smiled softly. *Maybe the night will not be a bust after all.* "I want a lot of things. Some are large and some small." She waved a hand back and forth for emphasis.

"Mmm." The brunette popped the other half of the olive into her mouth. "What does that have to do with me?" she asked sarcastically.

Renee threw back her head and laughed. "You're an insolent one. Do you even know who I am?"

"There's no reason for me to care," the woman replied between sips of her drink, meeting Renee gaze for gaze.

The air expanded and heated around them.

"Oh, you will." Renee's voice lowered an octave as she leaned forward, invading the woman's personal space. "And soon."

"Is this the part where they usually swoon? Because I have to tell you, I'm not the swooning type."

"Neither are you the type to come in here. You're very out of your element," Renee said.

"So are you."

Amber eyes widened. "Perceptive of you. It isn't my crowd, to say the least. I found that out earlier." Renee smirked at her own understatement.

"Mine either. It was close so I came in to have a drink."

Renee studied the woman for a long moment. "You don't lie well. You're in the mood for something sexy. Something different. I can almost smell it on you."

The woman chuckled. "Maybe I am lying. But let me guess, you think that you are that something different?"

"I might be. Lie again and tell me you're not intrigued," Renee said.

"I won't. I am. Doesn't mean a damn thing. I'm a woman. I can change my mind. Maybe I'll just sit here and look at the local color."

They turned toward the dance floor. Every Goth and freak in the city gyrated to the heavy techno beat.

Renee smirked again. "And it is colorful isn't it? New Orleans is definitely the place for it. You can commit every sin possible before the sun rises."

"That it is."

"Well, I think this banter has gone on long enough. Let me introduce myself. I'm Renee Leblanc, and this is my little den of iniquity." In an attempt to be cordial, she held out a hand.

The woman smiled genuinely for the first time as she took the offered hand. She gasped, and Renee knew that the woman felt the heated jolt of sensual awareness that passed between them. Visibly shaken, the woman tried to pull back. "I'm, um, Cameron Brooks."

Renee grinned. "No, don't pull away. Why would you run? You can't run from everything, especially me and this." Renee trailed a finger down Cameron's neck. She watched her pulse jump in reaction and heard the sudden intake of breath. Renee licked her lips in response. It was the most beautiful sound... rushing blood, rivaled only by the sound of a woman's pleasure.

Green eyes narrowed and she jerked away. "I don't understand...." She paused and her voice hardened. "And I didn't give you permission to touch me."

"That's beside the point, but I think you do understand. Everyone understands lust. Is that not what you're feeling? Isn't it why your eyes followed me?" Renee leaned forward and subtly sniffed the air around Cameron. Uncertainty, arousal, and confusion seemed to seep through the woman's pores.

It was a heady perfume, and Renee nearly moaned in delight.

Cameron wiped at the sweat that beaded on her forehead. She opened her mouth to answer the question posed to her. "I..."

"Shhh." Renee held an elegant finger up to Cameron's lips. Her smile was lascivious. "I already know the answer, but you do put up a brave front. I can see through your nonchalance."

Caught in the web Renee wove around them, Cameron swallowed audibly. With the tip of her tongue, she stroked Renee's finger, leaving a wet trail. Cameron's breathing went ragged.

Renee growled and her eyes narrowed to slits. She bent forward even more, until she could feel Cameron's breath on her face. With her finger still in place, Renee swiped her tongue sensuously over Cameron's lips. Renee closed her eyes as she savored the salty sweetness. "Let me give you what you want," Renee whispered hoarsely.

"What's that?" Cameron inquired huskily.

"Me."

Cameron sucked in a breath. Renee's bravado aroused her, intrigued her. "This... arrogance becomes you, but you're going to have to do better than that."

"I know, and I can do much better. You won't forget this night. I'll change your life," Renee murmured sexily.

An instant later, an animal-like growl escaped her lips, and she barely resisted the urge to become the monster that lay just under her skin. An unwelcome hand tapped her shoulder. With burning eyes, she turned toward the intruder. "I know you have more sense than this, Charlotte. Otherwise, you wouldn't be working for me."

Charlotte shrank back as if struck. "I... I've got more news about earlier."

"Can't you see that I'm busy? We'll discuss this later."

Renee turned away, dismissing her assistant without a second thought.

She did not leave.

"What, Charlotte?" Renee's voice was deceptively calm.

"Um, one of those guys came back."

Renee sighed and glanced back at Cameron.

"I'll only be a moment."

Renee slid off the stool. She led her companion to a dark, secluded corner of the club. Snatching the woman by the arm, she slammed her against the wall.

Seamlessly, her face morphed... her forehead ridged and fangs elongated.

With a hand firmly enclosed around the assistant's throat, Renee hissed, "This had better be good enough to keep me from killing you right here."

"You know it is. Otherwise I wouldn't have interrupted you putting the mojo on that woman." Charlotte wheezed, resisting the urge to claw at the hands that held her captive.

"Don't speak of things you know nothing about, Charlotte. What is this about?" Renee loosened her hold as the monster retreated.

"That creepy looking guy came back with a message. There may be more trouble than we thought. He said that this wasn't over."

Renee made a spur-of-the-moment decision. "Clean it up. I don't care what you have to do. Clean it up well, Charlotte, because you don't want me to have to do it myself. They went too far by coming here. I want to do more than expose their skeletons. A lesson needs to be taught." Renee gave her assistant a meaningful look.

Charlotte swallowed and nodded. Renee released her completely and watched her disappear amongst the crowd. Dismissing the whole situation, Renee moved back toward the bar and the woman that waited there.

Renee spied Cameron almost immediately. Her eyes were drawn to her, but she stayed hidden in a shadowed corner. She continued to peer at the other woman. The pain came as she expected it to — hard and unforgiving — making her almost double over with its onslaught. *An eternity... Can I keep doing this for an eternity? How can it still hurt so much? I control so much, yet I can't control them. The memories will not leave me.*

* * *

Renee heard the gasp from across the room as she dropped the sheet that hid her nakedness. Natasha stood frozen with

paintbrush in her hand. The blank white canvas in front of her waited to be transformed.

"Are you going to paint me dark and brooding like your other work? Is that how you see me now?" Renee asked.

"No." Natasha dropped the brush and pushed the easel to the floor. "I don't do portraits. You know this."

Amber eyes widened. "Then why all the subterfuge?"

Natasha moved slowly toward Renee. She did not speak until they were almost touching. "Because, I wanted to see you like this... exposed and vulnerable." She reached out, tracing Renee's bottom lip with the tip of her finger.

Renee pulled the appendage into her mouth, sucking and nipping the skin lightly. The moan that seeped from Natasha shook Renee to the core. She pulled the finger from her lips, dragging the wetness down her chin before grasping Natasha's hand in hers. "All you had to do was ask. I would give anything."

"For months, you have been pulling away when I touch you, when I try to go beyond kissing. Why?" Bright green eyes were pained and alight with need. "I want you so much."

Renee licked her lips, preparing to lie smoothly. "I've been waiting for the right time...."

Natasha wound her hands through short, red tresses. She pulled Renee's head back slightly, exposing her throat. "Is it now?" Natasha did not wait for an answer. She lowered her head and simply devoured awaiting flesh. Tongue, mouth, and teeth licked, raked, and nipped.

"Ta-sha," Renee whimpered, and then uttered a name she had not spoken in decades. "God." Need raced through her body, pooling wetly between her thighs.

Desire was quickly followed by fear. It had been an alien emotion until she met Natasha... until she loved. The onslaught of emotions overwhelmed her. Renee could feel the transformation, and for the first time, she was ashamed. She

wrenched out of the embrace, and turned away in an attempt to hide her face.

"What are you hiding from me? I want you, but there is something else going on here. You're keeping secrets!" Natasha bellowed. She kicked abandoned art supplies across the room. "I don't care what it is. Just tell me. I have so many questions. There are things that do not make sense to me. I've been waiting for you to talk to me, but I think this is the time— right here, right now."

"I can't." Renee covered her face with her hands.

"Why are you cool to the touch? Why when we lay together I do not feel your heart beating? What are you? Just tell me," Natasha implored. She slowly walked up behind Renee. "I love you."

Renee's body shook with bitter laughter. "I've waited forever to hear those words and for the person to mean them." She turned, revealing blood-red eyes, a harshly crinkled forehead, and fangs that prickled over her lower lip. "Do you love me now?" Renee hissed and turned around. She took several steps backward, giving Natasha room to run, to lash out, and a myriad of other things.

Verdant eyes widened to the size of saucers, but Natasha resisted the urge to step away.

She looked away instead.

Renee's laughter was just as bitter the second time. "That is your answer." She stepped back, but a strong hand stopped her progress.

"I knew. God help me, somehow I knew." Natasha reached out, touching the face that was barely recognizable.

Renee jerked in surprise, with further intentions to flee.

"No, look at me."

Their eyes met, and Renee stood frozen in shock. The need, the fire was still there. Natasha lowered her head, brushing Renee's lips softly. Her body sagged in relief.

"I love you," Natasha whispered.

Natasha's curious tongue slithered over elongated canines. Renee moaned. Hot hands roamed over her naked back and pulled her into Natasha's warm body.

Renee muttered as she broke the kiss. "We can't. I want to, but we can't." She wanted to believe and to trust in the moment, in the words, and in the actions.

"Why?" Natasha asked raggedly. Her breathing was labored as if she had run a thousand miles.

Renee started to look away.

"No, no more of that. Tell me."

"I'll have to feed on you, and I don't want to lose control. It's why I've been pulling away. Sexual excitement triggers the need for blood. It's been so long since... Usually I just go in for the kill..."

"Do it." Her voice was dripping with arousal. "I trust you. Just do it." Natasha captured Renee's lips again. The caress deepened, becoming frenzied, almost violent. Natasha palmed Renee's buttocks, lifting her until legs encircled her waist.

With no major secrets between them, Renee attempted to let go and believe. But despite the pleasure and the words of love, some part of Renee held on to a seed of doubt hidden well in the intense emotions swirling about her. Still, lost in the sexual haze, she gave in, and Natasha's warm, wet mouth found her neck once more.

"Oh... God..."

* * *

Renee growled in anguish. The pain turned to anger, and she had found only one thing to alleviate it. Her eyes flashed as she zeroed in on her target, still seated at the bar.

"Find me," Renee whispered into the air.

Green eyes scanned the crowd and zeroed in on the darkness the flashing lights refused to dispel. Renee smiled and

revealed herself. With a few steps, they were face to face again. Renee moved soft locks of dark hair behind Cameron's ear and leaned forward until her lips were just touching it. "You stayed."

"You knew I would."

"Good, let's finish this." Renee grasped Cameron's hand, but met resistance.

"Did you actually think I was just going to come with you?"

Renee did not answer. She was enjoying the game too much.

"Then you **are** arrogant, and I'm not that easy. Surely, you can come up with something better?" Cameron asked.

Renee peered at Cameron, assessing her. "What's wrong? Upset that I didn't let you make the first move? A woman like me intimidates you? Grow up, little girl."

"Ha! You're challenging me?"

"I don't know. Are you up to it?" Renee asked.

"Reverse psychology never worked for me," Cameron said.

"I say what I mean. I'm not one to mince words. I excite you. I can see it all over your face and feel it on your skin."

Renee was not prepared for what happened next.

Cameron grabbed her arm in an iron grip. "What do you see now? What do you feel?"

Renee adjusted to the situation. Instead of breaking free, she leaned in until their faces were nearly touching. "I can show you better than I can tell you."

She crushed her lips to Cameron's, taking, molding, and exploring. The kiss was carnal and near pornographic. Renee's tongue slithered, darted, and enticed.

With a mere kiss, she wrote a story of the pleasures to come. Renee pulled away, leaving Cameron teetering on the

edge of the barstool. Cameron's face was flushed and her breathing heavy.

Without another look, Renee rose from her seat and began moving through the throng of people. She smiled inwardly, knowing without a doubt that Cameron was behind her.

Renee could taste Cameron's excitement. It grew as they moved to the back of the club. She pulled open a door that led to a dark corridor. Renee's boots clicked against the tiled floor as they walked, creating an echo.

"Where are you taking me?"

Renee smiled in the darkness. "Why? Are you frightened?"

Cameron snorted. "You've got to be kidding."

"It's alright if you are. I'll protect you."

"Oh really?" In a quick smooth move, she pushed Renee against the nearest wall. Cameron looked down into golden brown eyes that seemed to glow from within. Her insides clenched in arousal. "And who's going to protect you?" Cameron's head lowered swiftly with the intention of taking the mouth below. She was stopped short as her head was yanked back forcefully.

Renee grinned, showing sparkling white teeth. She flexed her hand again, pulling Cameron's hair just hard enough to hurt, to titillate. "How very butch of you." Her eyes were riveted on Cameron's jugular.

It pulsed with life.

Renee bit her lip hard in order to calm herself. "You are under the misconception that you are in control here."

Cool lips found scorching skin. Renee's tongue flicked out, tracing up Cameron's neck. She nibbled teasingly at the skin there. Arousal, thick, sticky, and wet collected between her legs as a ragged moan escaped Cameron's lips. "You don't want to conquer me," Renee whispered. "You want to be conquered."

The sudden, strong thudding of Cameron's heart gave Renee all the answer she needed. "Are you... frightened yet?"

There was no answer.

Renee loosened her hold. "Now, follow me."

A few more feet down the hallway, Renee stopped in front of another door. She waited until she could feel Cameron at her back before opening it. It looked as though the room had been bathed in blood. Red sashes hid a large canopy bed that took up the entire space. Although the room was awash in color, it appeared sterile. For Renee, it was the perfect space for debauchery. Renee smiled at the look of consternation drawing Cameron's dark brows together.

Cameron's mouth opened as if she were about to speak, but the only sound to be heard was the rustling of sheets as Renee crawled gracefully onto the bed.

Renee crooked a finger, plainly seeing the woman's nervousness. With a slight nod, she beckoned Cameron to speak.

"I get the feeling you've done this more times than I can count. Is this all you want from me?"

Renee threw back her head, laughing loudly. "What did you think this was going to be, a love match? That's an illusion. All of it. I've been caught in its spell. It leaves and only pain lingers. Love made me who I am." She rose from the bed, moving toward Cameron with majestic purpose. Her eyes burned with anticipation.

Cameron blinked and found herself face to face with Renee once more. Cameron could not breathe. The air was taken, leaving only an overwhelming sense of awareness. It crawled across their skin like fire.

"Love has no business here," Renee said bitterly. Firm hands wound their way into Cameron's tresses, pulling forcefully until their lips were only a millimeter apart.

"Wait," Cameron husked out between breaths. Green eyes widened in alarm, and the urge to back away was strong. "I saw that. What is the thing with your eyes?"

Renee smirked. "Are you scared now?"

Cameron shook her head.

"Remember, don't lie to me. You reek of fear, but you're also turned on, extremely turned on. I can smell that too. Don't deny me now. You've fought enough." Renee tilted her head to the side. "Don't you think?"

Hypnotized by the words and eyes that seemed to hold her captive, Cameron surrendered.

The second touch of lips was dangerously erotic. Renee moaned as she plundered the mouth above her. Her tongue swiped over Cameron's bottom lip. It was simply a warning as teeth sunk into soft flesh. Cameron gasped in pain and tried to pull away.

Renee held her captive.

She groaned, smoothing her tongue over the wound and lapping at the specks of blood. Sucking at the flesh, Renee opened the wound further. Coppery sweet liquid dribbled into her mouth, and she shared the bounty with her companion.

Cameron whimpered as white-hot flames licked her body, concentrating between her legs. As if Renee knew the effect she was having on Cameron, she increased the contact. Possessively, Renee wrapped a leg around Cameron. Cameron muttered in delight and palmed Renee's ass, pulling her into her body with a hard grind.

Cameron sauntered slowly backward toward the vicinity of the bed. Their bodies strained against each other.

Groaning, Renee tore her mouth away and sank her hands into supple leather. With a negligent use of strength, she ripped the jacket, as well as the t-shirt underneath, from Cameron's heaving chest. Her mouth scored over hot flesh... nibbling, licking, and sucking every reachable inch.

"Fuck!" Cameron called out as reams of pleasure stole over her.

The backs of her thighs bumped against the bed, and she fell against it helplessly, surrendering to the moment. Her back hit the mattress with a small bounce. Once they were settled, Renee sat up, straddling her companion.

Feral in her need, Renee peered down at rose tipped breasts. Her hands cupped them, kneading them roughly. Powerful hips thrust into her and she met each movement with her own.

Renee brushed her thumbs over pert nipples, growling when Cameron arched into her touch. She bent forward, dragging her wet tongue slowly across one as she teased the other unmercifully with her fingertips.

Needing more, she wrapped her hands around both breasts, meshing them together before taking both nipples into the cavern of her mouth. With an agile tongue, Renee swiped them again and again before sucking them to the back of her throat.

Cameron cried out as sharp teeth were added, intent on further overwhelming her senses. She wrapped her hands in Renee's hair, holding Renee's head against her chest. Sweat dampened her skin, making it glow in the dim light of the bedroom.

Renee let the beast run amuck.

She grasped the hands holding her in place, and in a display of power, held them over Cameron's head, against the bed. Understanding the unspoken command, Cameron dug her hands in the cover below, capturing it in her fists.

Renee inched down the woman's body, leaving goosebumps and fire behind as silky material brushed against equally silky skin. Renee tore at Cameron's jeans, releasing the zipper with frantic glee. She slid them down incredibly long, tan legs.

When they reached the impediment of shoes, Renee tugged hard, sending everything across the room. With hungry

eyes, she stared down at the writhing body before her. A sensual, sinister smile graced her lips as she trailed fingertips up impossibly long legs. *Mine to do with as I please. Always mine.*

The muscles in Cameron's legs twitched in reaction as electric tendrils of pleasure shot up her spine. Wetness flowed out of her, coating her thighs. She parted her legs slightly and gasped when cool air hit her overheated center.

Cameron gritted her teeth and waited to see what was to come.

A few seconds later, Renee yanked Cameron's legs apart, exposing her to hungry eyes. Renee peered down at the woman's drenched, open sex. She licked her lips in anticipation.

Curious fingers slithered lightly over moist folds before peeling lips back and revealing Cameron's swollen, throbbing center. The smell of Cameron's arousal made Renee drool.

Without warning, without pretense, Renee curled her tongue. Bypassing the brunette's clit, she plunged inside her, drinking her, savoring her.

Cameron screamed, grinding herself against Renee's face. Strong hands pushed her legs open further, preparing her as long, knowledgeable fingers slipped in beside Renee's tongue. "God!"

Cameron's body nearly arched off the bed in an attempt to impale herself on the fingers below.

Renee set the rhythm... hard and deep. As her hand slapped against wet skin, Renee's tongue moved upward, thrashing Cameron's clit with inhuman speed. Growing fangs scraped over her tongue. Still, she continued, as the need to feed started to boil inside her.

Cameron's hands dug into the covers below, ripping them from the corners of the bed. The pleasure was so thick that it was bordering on pain.

She opened herself to it.

With each thrust, electricity arced inside her, escaping through her skin. She welcomed the climax washing over her in an alarming rate.

Cameron cried out hoarsely as orgasm took over, making her numb to everything else except the energy coursing through her.

* * *

Renee's body hummed in empathy, but it was her other needs that firmly took over.

While Cameron's body was still trembling, Renee sank her fangs deep into the inside of Cameron's thigh. A moan greeted her at first, as she slowly lapped at the first real taste.

A scream followed as Renee burrowed in deeper still, ripping into the artery savagely. Cameron thrashed about and pushed violently on Renee's head in an attempt to escape.

It was futile.

Renee groaned loudly as the climax racked her body, intensifying with each drop of blood splashing into her mouth. A few seconds later, she released her prey and licked her lips, savoring the last few drops. Renee slithered back up Cameron's body, peering into her face. She smirked at the now forever frozen expression of ecstasy and agony.

"Told you that I would change your life," Renee whispered.

She reached up and closed unseeing eyes and waited for the short moment of peace that seemed to be more and more fleeting.

There was nothing but the pain.

Renee's insides screamed. The sounds pushed their way out of her mouth.

"Damn you, Tasha!" In an instant, she was transferred to the past.

Renee nodded at the man buzzing about her like a fly, but for some reason, instead of dismissing him outright, she pretended to hang on his every word as he droned on about the past war.

"Mmm," she mumbled, but her attention was riveted on the scene across the gallery floor.

In one area there was a concentration of beautiful women, and in the middle stood Natasha. Renee listened to every word that floated between them.

"I would love to pose for you, Natasha," the short, blond pleaded.

"I could make you a household name all over Europe, Natasha," the tall, white-haired woman stated.

"Renee is of no importance. With my name attached to you, your art could be all over the world," the curvy brunette boasted.

"She cannot possibly satisfy a woman like you," said the blond.

Renee's resulting growl rumbled in her chest before it snaked out between gritted teeth.

Natasha laughed, and to Renee it sounded a little too delightful.

"Ladies, I assure you that I am happy where I am."

Despite Natasha's retort, Renee could feel her insides burn with rage, and within a few seconds, golden brown orbs transformed into a bloody red. The sound of the fly abruptly stopped. Renee canted her head to the side and peered deep into the man's eyes. "That is the smartest thing you've said all night."

Confused, he opened his mouth to speak, but jumped backwards, startled.

"Good boy," her voice was deep with warning. "Now, don't ruin it. Leave now." Without waiting to see if she had

been obeyed, Renee walked slowly toward the crowd of women.

"Plotting ways to get her away from me, are you ladies?" Renee's tone was nonchalant, but as she met her gaze, Natasha knew better.

"Renee, you know I would never..." Her eyes were pleading.

Renee held up a hand, stopping Natasha's speech. "I know, love." Renee hooked her arm into Natasha's and patted her bicep reassuringly.

Their eyes met again and Natasha cringed.

Renee smiled. It wasn't just that they were flirting with Natasha. It was that they were doing right under her nose. Renee's gaze was menacing while her voice was as soft as silk. "If you'd like, ladies, I could show a couple of you around. I do have an artist or two who could use a little extra help in every area. Their work is stunning, I assure you."

"Thank you, Renee," the older woman simpered.

"How generous!" cried the blond.

"Do they look anything like Tasha?" asked the last woman.

Renee's anger heightened several more degrees at the sound of her pet name for her lover. "Ah, there is only one of her, but I do not think you will be disappointed." Renee pulled away from Natasha and pointed at two of the women. "Come with me then. I have some things stored in my office." She paused and smiled winningly at the others. "If the rest of you will excuse me..."

Renee did not dare look at Natasha. Instead she muttered, "I'll be back soon."

Renee rushed her followers toward the vicinity of her office. She ignored the pain and anger that she could feel rolling off Natasha in waves. There would be a hefty price to pay for doing this, she knew. Still, there was a point to be made. Natasha was hers, and anyone who had the audacity to

try to tinker with that deserved whatever punishment she saw fit to dispense. The woman inside her was merely affronted, but the beast had been challenged. Irrational as it might be, it took the reins, and it wanted blood.

* * *

Renee closed the office door with a soft snick.

"Renee," one of the women cooed. "Why don't you have some of these paintings displayed?"

Renee watched as the two women pawed at the collection, but she didn't answer, causing them to turn and look at her. Her grin was slow and mesmerizing. Without a doubt, Renee knew she had their full attention. Holding their gaze, Renee imposed her will upon them. "You are not really interested in that, are you ladies?"

"No."

"No."

"What you really want is me, isn't it?"

There was a simultaneous, "Yes."

She crooked a finger at the blond who doubted Renee's ability to satisfy Natasha. "Come show me."

In a trancelike state, the woman walked toward her, and when she was a few inches away, Renee growled and tangled her hand into the woman's hair, tugging brutally. With a flick of the wrist, her throat was exposed.

"You should watch what you say and to whom you say it. She belongs to me," Renee whispered menacingly. There was no reaction, but it was of little consequence.

Satisfaction would be had.

Without another word, Renee tore into the flesh before her, garishly ripping the woman's throat, leaving a bloody, gaping maw. There were no screams and no cries for help. She laughed as she drank, and with the wave of her hand, the other

woman, still bewitched, meandered forward as docile as a lamb.

Jealousy was an ugly beast, and at this moment, Renee held its hand and danced with it.

As the second bloodless form crumpled to the floor, Renee wiped her dripping mouth on the back of her hand. A modicum of regret pierced her, and she wondered at the vehemence of her emotion. It could have been, after all, a simple overreaction, a ghastly defense mechanism to hide her own insecurity. She spat on the floor in contempt and wondered how love could turn her into such an animal. She ignored the voice from deep within telling her she had always been one.

The sound of the door creaking open startled Renee, catching her unaware. She turned, and her eyes widened as her lover filled the doorway. Immediately, Renee went to cover her face, but as she looked into stricken eyes, she noticed that blood was everywhere.

There was no hiding.

"What have you done?" Natasha's face held disgust and disbelief. "I knew something was going to happen, but I hoped that you were better than this. What was I thinking? I should have followed you immediately! Tell me, if I had, could you have still done this?"

"I... They were going to — " Renee answered.

"What? Take me away from you?"

"Yes, I —" Renee blinked and tried to gather herself. In a matter of moments, she had done so. "No one speaks of you in that manner. Not while I am around."

"Oh, come off it, Renee. The only thing you were worried about was someone stealing me away right from under your nose," Natasha said as she slowly walked toward her lover.

Renee sucked in a surprised breath. "I, um." She paused and then snarled. "How could they speak to you that way when I was practically standing next to you? They made you sound

like some common whore that could be bought with promises and the highest price. You're the woman I love!"

Natasha grasped Renee by the shoulders, shaking her from the tantrum. "I am not going anywhere, Renee, no matter what they throw at my feet. There is no need for this madness. It has to stop! You can't kill everyone who talks to me in a manner that you don't like!"

"But —"

"No! I see all of this, and I still love you. I still want you. Do you not understand? I breathe you." Natasha's chest heaved in reaction.

"But, how —"

"I know you have to feed. I know you have to kill for survival. I understand that, but what you've done here makes you essentially no different than the dogs who murdered my family. I want to hate you. God — look at you. But I can't. I don't know what that makes me. I'm scared of what that makes me, but I'm scared of not having you in my life even more." Natasha's eyes were pleading and tinged with sadness.

Renee's eyes widened as disbelief and shame coursed through her. She wanted so much to believe. She shook her head and whispered, "Tasha, I just —"

"Damn you, Renee, just shut your mouth. Shut your mouth and accept this! It doesn't matter what you do or what I see. It doesn't matter that the rational part of me is screaming for me to run. Listen... to... me." I accept you. I'm a part of this insanity voluntarily." Tired of using words, Natasha went into action. After yanking Renee's head back, Natasha used her mouth and tongue to trace over the trails of blood that were splattered on Renee's face.

Unable to deny the eroticism of the moment, Renee moaned loudly.

"Don't you see? I don't have a choice," Natasha murmured before her mouth found its mark. Twin whimpers filled the

room as they lost themselves in each other, forgetting the carnage that lay at their feet.

Days and weeks passed, giving Renee time to work through her insecurity. Still it lingered, no matter how many times she was kissed, touched, or made love to. Renee fought the feeling tooth and nail, giving as much of herself as possible to Natasha and speaking about her fears, her jealousy, and ways to alleviate it.

It was to no avail. The weeks turned into months, and as Natasha name grew larger in the art world, so did Renee's fears.

* * *

Renee smiled as she walked around the new gallery. "Your work has started many people talking. Everyone will want a piece of you now," she whispered wistfully as Natasha came up behind her. Strong arms engulfed her.

"You sound worried. You should know by now that there is no reason to be," Natasha said.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, I love you. It's just that simple."

"Is it? Even when beautiful women start throwing themselves and their money at you, in earnest?" Renee turned in her lover's arms.

Their eyes met.

"Even then," Natasha muttered softly, patiently.

"It worked for me. Why wouldn't it work for someone else?" Renee asked.

Natasha's head snapped back as if in pain, and the pain began to speak. "That was cruel. I fell in love with you. I didn't use you. Why are you talking like this? I haven't given you any indication that I want someone else."

Renee raised a hand, caressing a soft cheek. "You've been mine all this time, and now I have to share you. I never had

anything of my own, a love of my own. I didn't exist before you. It scares me... losing you.

"I know, Renee. You have to know that I'll be here as long as I can be."

"I want you longer."

Natasha sighed and shook her head. "We've discussed this. That is not the life I want."

Renee's gaze deepened. "I have to be sure."

Natasha's eyes went vacant.

"Tell me you want to be mine always." She pushed her hands through Natasha's hair, revealing her neck. Renee knew it was a precarious game in which she was about to engage. If she drained too much, Natasha would die. It had to be a perfect balance. She could only take the amount she was willing to replace when her lover awakened, undeniably changed.

"Always...."

Renee opened her mouth wide, exposing her fangs. She groaned as they sank into her lover's flesh.

* * *

Silently, she slid off the bed as the memory of old pain followed her and mingled with new misery. Opening the door, Renee smiled half heartedly as Charlotte seemed to magically appear.

"Should I dispose of her?"

Renee nodded. "Trash bin outside, and make sure they come right away this time. I don't pay them to lollygag. I'll be there in a few minutes to watch you dump her. I need to... clean up." She looked down at the dark spots on her shirt.

Charlotte bent her head respectfully, knowing the routine.

Renee walked around the bed, staring at the lifeless body. *I gave her everything of me. I let her see who I am. I even gave her the greatest gift — eternity together — and this is all I have now.*

CHAPTER 3

THE TOP OF the trash bin closed with a loud thwack.

Renee tilted her head to the side, but waited for the others to go inside.

Now alone, she spoke to the night air. "I know you're there. You're close enough where I can feel you."

From somewhere in the shadows, a tall, striking woman appeared.

Renee gasped and her eyes widened. She moved slowly toward the visitor, unsure if the woman in front of her was just an apparition. Reaching out, she touched a cool cheek. Natasha leaned into the caress before jerking away.

"Beautiful," Renee mumbled "Always so beautiful."

As if she did not hear the compliment, Natasha whispered harshly, "You do this out in the open for me to see. You know I am never far from you." She took a step closer. "You kill me over and over again. Is this what I have made you?"

Renee's expression turned pensive. "You don't get to be self-righteous. This is my new way to cope. You left me, remember? Do you have any idea how much it hurts? This is my only reprieve, and it is only a short one." She waved a hand at the dumpster. "This is what remains of me." She peered down at herself as if she expected parts of her to be missing or out of place. Renee closed the remaining distance between them. Amber met green. "I made you for me... to love me. Come back and end this madness... my madness."

"After what you've done to me!" Natasha's face morphed. "You made me a monster! I hate you for that. I could never love you again," she hissed and turned away, hiding the demon.

Renee laughed. It was a laugh of amusement and bitterness. "Be who you are. Embrace it. There is no turning

back, and as for love, I can make you feel it again." Renee sobered and paused, as if thinking. "Why do you follow me if you do not feel anything? You left and took the most important thing I have to give — my heart. Does that mean nothing to you?"

Natasha turned around. "So you kill me again and again. Why?"

"Because you killed me. The woman you knew is dead."

Natasha's jaw clenched. She looked everywhere, except into amber-colored eyes. "How long are we going to play this game?" Her voice was unsteady, broken.

"I have forever."

Confusion and acceptance washed over Natasha's face.

Silence surrounded them. There was no muffled music, no honking horns. Pleading amber eyes watched the figure step away and disappear into the cover of darkness.

"You'll come back to me, any day now."

Renee stayed a moment longer, letting the slight wind rush over her. She sighed, resigning herself to this fate, and walked quietly back into the club.

CHAPTER 4

"**I** WANT IT DONE now! Find who did this; I don't care what you have to do! Get this shipment off the street!" Police Superintendent Thomas Jordan slammed the phone down for emphasis. "Goddammit!" He took a deep, cleansing breath and let it out slowly.

Jordan brushed a piece of fluff from the small statue of Janus before polishing it with his sleeve. It stared back at him. It was how he felt at the moment — extremely cold inside, almost frozen. He wondered if the god had as much trouble with his duplicitous nature as he had himself.

It had become difficult to wear two hats, especially over the last twenty-four hours.

Jordan placed his palms flat on the desk and watched dispassionately while they shook. He had a hard job, making sure the streets of New Orleans were just clean enough that there would not be overwhelming complaints, yet still dirty enough to bring in the money to which he had become accustomed. Jordan peered at the photo of his family. His wife stood tall, with long, flowing red hair, but still he dwarfed her. He traced the image of his daughter. *The life to which we've all become accustomed.*

With a shaky sigh, Jordan reared back in the expensive leather chair and stood up. Walking to the large picture window, he looked down on Perdido Street, watching the New Orleanians move along seemingly without a care in the world.

He brushed a hand down his freshly cleaned uniform and loosened the buttons on his jacket. He was a strong man, standing over six feet and still heavily muscled despite evidence of a protruding belly. As an afterthought, he loosened his tie and undid the first two buttons of the crisp shirt that

stood out as white as snow against his creamy brown skin. *Should I be shocked that Linda didn't care that her daughter was gone? She was probably high when I told her. I guess it's a good thing. How was I going to explain that she was almost beheaded? A car crash was as good a story as any, especially considering the people she hung around.*

The buzz of the intercom shook him from his thoughts. He turned around and leaned over the huge desk. "Yes, Mary?"

"Um, there is an Officer William Conrad here to see you."

He looked down at his Rolex. *I know we didn't have an appointment.* Jordan swore silently. *What is he thinking, coming here? I don't care if he is a cop.* "Send him in and hold my calls until I tell you otherwise."

"Will do, Chief."

* * *

Willy stood before the door for a few seconds and pushed a hand through his greasy hair. He knew this was not going to be pleasant. First of all, it was an unscheduled visit to the superintendent's office, and that was a huge affront given the mostly clandestine nature of their partnership. Second, he didn't have good news.

Willy opened the door, and he could see the rage written plainly on the Superintendent's face. "Chief, I know —"

"Get in here and close the door! Now!"

After obeying and before he could even respond, Willy found himself hemmed against said door with a huge black man snarling in his face.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You know better! I would kill you right here if I could." He glared at the other man, hammering his point home. "Believe me?"

Willy swallowed audibly. "Yes, sir. B-but, I had to see you in person. It couldn't wait 'til tonight, and you wouldn't have believed me over the phone."

Jordan rolled his eyes and practically threw the man onto the couch. "Talk. And it had better be worth it. Did you take care of things like I asked you to?"

Willy wiped his hands on his slacks and opened his mouth to speak. "Um, well, we went to the club her friends told you about. Chief, I don't know what the hell happened, but Jake and Paul are dead. She moved so fast and she was so strong. I've never seen anything like it." Willy could feel the blood leaving his face. "And her eyes, they were like glowing red."

In the process of sitting back behind his desk, Jordan stopped dead. "What did you say?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but her eyes were red and she threw us around like we were flies. It was the freakiest shit I've ever seen!" Willy threw his hands in the air in animated fashion as he spoke. "I don't know what she was —"

"I know."

"Wha —?"

"Vampire." Willy could see the blood drain from Jordan's face, and his eyes were wide with fear and disbelief. He played with his clunky diamond pinky ring, and a look of deep contemplation covered his face. "I didn't make it to where I am today without dealing with some strange shit, but this is very unique indeed."

Willy sat stock still, then exploded in laughter. "You've got to be shittin' me. This ain't no damn Harry Potter movie. I know kids these days think all that shit is possible, but —"

Jordan stood up once more and made his way over to Willy, towering over him menacingly.

"You listen here, you stupid fuck. My family has been around here since this city was built. There are stories of things no sane person would think were possible. I'm an educated man, but I've been to the bayou. I've seen things with my own eyes that would fuck your feeble little mind up."

He shook his head to clear it. "This had better not leave this room! You understand me?"

Willy nodded.

"My people have been around these parts for a long time. They still practice the old ways, and I don't mean that dime store crap tourists buy into. My great-grandmother used to cast demons from people for a fee. I remember everything — the red eyes, the blood, and the screams. My grandmother used to tell me that once they fed, it was too late to make things right again. A vampire — it's not bullshit." Jordan paused and ran a hand over his bald head. "Looks like I'm going to have to call on the more ethnic side of the family."

Willy's eyes widened. "You don't pay me enough for this shit! This city is nuts and you're the fuckin' Mr. Peanut!"

Jordan smiled, but it was not kind. "You'll do what I say or they won't even find your dick. Do you understand me?"

Willy swallowed hard. "Y-yes, sir."

"Give it a few days, maybe even a week or so. Let her think it's over. During the day, do a raid. Trump up some charge and arrest all the employees you see. Make sure you leave some kind of message. I want her to know who did this. She'll come to me," Jordan said.

"But, Chief, what is that gonna do? She murdered that girl and all we're going to do is throw her people in jail? That sure as fuck isn't enough." Willy paused, unsure whether he had overstepped his bounds with his tirade, then continued in a rush, "Oh, and check this out. You should know she made some pretty heavy threats. She threatened to ruin you if you came near her or her people. Something about an insurance policy and having friends in high places. Maybe you should think twice 'bout all this." "It's enough to buy us some time for a little bayou justice. Don't worry about her threats; I'm not going to. She wouldn't be the first to say something like that. I'll win any pissing contest. She may have someone high up, but I know the lowest and most dangerous. Just do what I tell you."

Willy nodded hesitantly. "Why don't we just go in there at night with some garlic, some stakes, and shit like that?"

"You watch too many movies Willy. None of that shit works. There are only a couple of ways to kill a vampire. One is with another of their kind, and the other, I do believe, is long, slow, and painful. That's what I want for her."

"But, how —"

The intercom buzzed.

"Shit! I told her to hold my calls." He paused as he went back to his desk. "Mary, I know —"

"I thought you might want this one, Chief. The mayor is on line one for you."

Jordan sighed. "Fine. Stall for a minute, will you?"

"Gotcha."

As he sat down, Jordan waved in Willy's direction. "Get out of here. I'll contact you and give you the green light. Don't do a goddamn thing until then. You got me?"

Willy rose and started toward the door.

"Gotcha," he mumbled under his breath as he ambled toward the exit. "This is some fucked up shit right here. He's gotta be on something, and it's going to bring us all down."

CHAPTER 5

THE NIGHT WAS heavy, hot, and teeming with life.

Natasha tilted her head upward, scenting the air, tasting it, and finding it a delectable mix of debauchery, blood, and misery. She nearly moaned at the thickness of it. The hunger that drove her into the night gnawed at her very core, leaving a sharp, burning pain in its wake.

Every atom in her body vibrated with need.

The woman within her screamed in disgust and hate at the transformation, while the artist begrudgingly acknowledged the perfection. The vampire roared in exhilaration at the freedom which the woman frequently denied.

The sound of her shoes was cacophonous in the enclosed alley, even with the bustle of people virtually lining the streets of the French Quarter. The smells of well-cooked food wafted in between the buildings, reminding Natasha that she was behind one of New Orleans' finest and most adored restaurants.

Still, the dank and sour stench of garbage and unwashed bodies assaulted her, reminding her that this city was duplicitous in nature. It was one of the biggest tourist attractions and also one of the poorest cities in the nation.

Natasha pushed on, needing satisfaction, craving it.

Creeping things slid across her feet and the sound of crying brought her to a standstill. She zeroed in on the sound and moved toward it with purpose. Natasha stood over a moving heap, hidden between two dumpsters. Even through the darkness, she could see the sad, watery eyes peering at her in fear, confusion, and hope. Natasha knelt and reached out her hand. "Come with me." Her voice was soft and full of compassion. "I can help."

If it were possible, the heap with eyes shrank deeper inside itself.

"It's okay. It's not what you think." Natasha paused. "I'm not what you think. I don't want your body; I just want to help," she repeated.

After a few more seconds of hesitation, a grimy hand reached out. With a tug, the heap became the form of a woman. Dirt hid her features, save deep brown eyes that remained wary. Natasha smiled, but her smile was carefully devoid of emotion.

Her eyes glowed red, piercing the dankness of the alley and mesmerizing the woman before her. "You will not scream."

The woman moved her head to the side and then nodded.

Natasha's smile remained. "Come closer." The distance closed between them. Natasha took the woman's chin between thumb and forefinger. "This is for the best. Trust me."

Again, the woman nodded.

The monster completely uncurled, and in a quick moment of violence, the vampire's hand wrapped itself in greasy hair, jerked the woman's head back, and exposed the mottled skin of her throat. Gratification beat with certainty through the woman's plump veins. With a moan, Natasha sank in deep. The sweetness spilled over her tongue. She growled as the woman flailed, then went limp. Natasha took a step back and watched with dispassionate eyes as the woman became a heap once more.

Suddenly, she could feel eyes on her. It felt like dozens of them, watching, judging, and condemning. Humanity returned as Natasha brought a hand to her mouth to cover the heart-wrenching sob.

Guilt and hate replaced the hunger.

I should be used to this. Why am I not? Forgive me. I am no stranger to killing, but vengeance was the only thing that made death palatable. A low keening sound exited her lips.

The sound drove her. She ran from the smell of death, the feelings of pain, and the reality of who she had become.

Visions of the past beckoned her.

* * *

The sun beat down on the German countryside. Natasha smiled and looked up at it, letting it bathe her in its rays. She stopped and reveled a little while longer before stepping into the lush, green forest that seemed to cover miles and miles of their land. It was not her forest per se, but she knew every trail by heart. The squirrels were no longer frightened of her habitual appearance.

Natasha sighed as she entered the wooded area. This was a much-needed break, and despite her professor's protest, she had taken the summer off from school to stay with her family. Natasha was a firm believer that one did not have to suffer for her art.

She walked for what seemed like an eternity, but in reality had only been a few hours. Dusk was settling in, painting the sky a combination of fiery reds and oranges. It was her cue to make the trek back home.

Moving quickly, she deviated to a shortcut that would get her back faster. Her growling stomach had convinced her to do so. She smirked, thinking she should feel guilty for not helping with dinner, but it was not her forte. Lilly, her sister, would have everything in hand.

As she neared the clearing that led to yet another trail not far from her home, the sound of loud voices gave her pause. They had not been expecting anyone, to her knowledge, and her father had promised no business for the first couple of days she was visiting. Still, it almost sounded like an argument of some kind.

A sudden, blood-curdling scream stopped Natasha right in her tracks. Then, she broke into a full on run.

Bang! Bang!

"Noooo! Not my Lilly! Why are you doing this?"

It was her mother's voice. Natasha's empty stomach curled in on itself as sheer terror laced its icy fingers through her. She stumbled through the brush and fell to her knees, losing her body's non-existent contents. Her face felt hot and sweaty, and she shook with fear. Pushed by that feeling alone, she got back up.

The voices became clearer the closer she got. Confusion and anger were at war inside her. She ran harder, tree limbs and other brush scraped against the skin of her arms and face, causing it to sting. It did not matter.

"Shut up! Worthless American! You don't deserve to speak to me!" a stranger shouted.

"Please, I'm not political. I have no power in my government. I don't have power in any government," Natasha's father pleaded.

The unknown accented voice was filled with laughter. "So arrogant. I wonder, Will you be that way when you watch her die, hmm?" Loud rounds of laughter followed. "Is this all of you? I saw another room. Don't lie to me!"

Natasha heard the sound of flesh hitting flesh, and her father cried out in pain. The sound propelled her forward.

"No, my oldest is away at school. It is only us. Please have mercy. I have money. I can help you get whatever it is that you want," her father answered.

Another round of raucous guffaws was his answer.

"We want this house and this land, and it's ours for the taking — just like your lives. This is our country now, and we're cleansing it, starting with you."

Bang! Bang!

Now close enough for a clear view, Natasha stared, wide-eyed, as her father fell to the ground. She covered her mouth with her hand to keep from screaming. She threw herself

against a tree as silent tears fell. Her body shook uncontrollably. She wanted to do something, but like a voyeur watching a catastrophe, she was riveted to the spot.

Kneeling and head bowed, her mother remained the lone survivor.

Natasha could see the fine tremor in her body. Despite the crumpled forms of her family around her, the woman remained stoic, quiet.

Four men stood, and all of them were armed. One of them was behind her mother with the barrel of his gun pressed to the back of her head. "They were even kind enough to leave us dinner, eh Rolph?"

The group chuckled yet again.

Bang! Bang!

Natasha watched as her mother's head exploded.

The men looked on dispassionately as her mother's deformed body pitched forward. "Damn, I hope I can wear that man's clothes. I'll stink with this muck all over me." He wiped at his shirt to no avail. Blood was everywhere.

The red blinded her.

Her chest heaved, and the breath wheezed from her lungs. The lush green foliage that surrounded her and the dimming sky took on a scarlet hue. Natasha looked down at her trembling hands and saw it too.

Blood.

The color and image were seared on her brain. She swallowed the scream that threatened to rip from her throat. Then, there was only blackness.

The cool breeze and the sounds of night woke her. Natasha opened heavy eyes in confusion. *Why am I outside?* Reality crashed down upon her. "It was just a dream. A horrible, horrible nightmare. This can't be real," she husked.

Natasha closed her eyes once more and squeezed them tight. She opened them slowly, only to see the remains of her family strewn over the front yard. "Oh God!"

The sobs were gut wrenching and painful. She wept for her sister, who would never know what it meant to be an adult and live her dreams. She wept for her father, who was killed in the country he so loved. She wept for her mother, who had dedicated her life to her family and would never see their futures.

Natasha beat her fists against the tree until they were raw. The physical pain blighted the sorrow for the moment.

It was just enough time for rage to beckon.

The hatred she suddenly felt left her with a putrid feeling. *Why should they keep living life when they've destroyed mine?* Natasha's world tilted as emotions bombarded her. Her vision grayed. When the world righted itself again, her surroundings were of a surreal quality bursting with frayed, fuzzy color. An eruption of hysterical laughter escaped her lips – its source unknown to her. She peered at the house through watery eyes. Most of the lights were still on in the back, but there was no guard outside. Natasha sniggered again. It was their mistake.

The German countryside was not safe anymore, even for them.

Natasha was going to make sure of it.

Propelled by hate, sorrow, and rage, she moved quickly across the yard with the cover of night. She stopped when she reached the side of the shed, plastering herself flat against it and listening for aberrant noise.

The door to the shed was unlocked, just like it always was, and Natasha slipped inside. The smell of gas and oil greeted her senses. Tools littered the walls and other heavier equipment took up space on the floor. There was a stash of canned goods, candles, and other essentials needed for weather and now recently war. Natasha reached for a nearby gas can and smiled when she found it was full. She wanted to hear them scream,

just like her family did. The compulsion should have shocked her, but it merely spurred her on.

Crouching down low, she began to saturate the area around the house with the foul-smelling liquid. When she reached a window, she fearlessly peered in to see the four men sprawled in the living room. The floor was littered with bottles of alcohol procured, no doubt, from her father's bar.

It was perfect.

When the can was empty, Natasha went back for another one, pouring its contents over the remains of her family. Bile rose to her throat. Natasha swallowed it down and continued her mission.

On yet another trip, she picked up wooden boards from her father's stash in the corner. The supply had been forever growing, but had not yet been used to add the improved deck he had been discussing for what seemed like ages. The sting of tears deterred her momentarily, followed quickly by a cold, calculated surge of anger.

The men didn't hear a thing as she boarded up the doors and windows. Fate was giving her a chance to set the universe right again. She went back to the shed one last time to get a box of matches. Her father truly did have everything stored in there.

Natasha examined the match as it flared to life. She dropped it. Fire ravaged and spread almost immediately. Natasha wandered slowly back to her tree to observe as the flames licked and consumed.

The first desperate scream was accompanied by her own.

When the last sounds of agony stopped, Natasha sobbed. She turned toward the verdant forest and walked until the sun rose again, illuminating the road ahead of her. Natasha heard the sound of a horn, but ignored it. Then, someone called her name. Hands were grasping at her, someone was talking to her. The feel of leather at her back and the roaring of an engine were inconsequential.

Everything was.

There was a token investigation, and the charred remains of several bodies were found both inside and outside the house. There were questions, and when Natasha could answer them, a lie trickled from her lips. No one mentioned anything about guns and bullets, so neither did she. Her father had some of their neighbors over for a dinner and a nightcap. Grief-stricken, Natasha couldn't remember who it was exactly, but she had taken a long walk as was her custom on a beautiful afternoon. She returned to see her house on fire. It must have started in the kitchen. Her sister was always attempting grand things in the kitchen. With a war raging, the deaths of few became of little interest compared to the proposed deaths and exile of millions.

No one questioned her story.

* * *

With a husky cry, Natasha returned to the present. Still intent on outrunning the horror of the past as well as the present, she moved with preternatural speed through the throng of drunks, browsers, and tourists on Bourbon Street.

Carefully, she avoided touching them, even though they had no knowledge of her presence at all. The gaudy lights, the risqué pictures and posters advertising strip clubs and Larry Flint's Hustler Club, zoomed by as if they were flashes of a pornographic imagination. As a victim of the Doppler Effect, the loud, booming music tunneled around her, losing its power the further she moved away.

When she got to Canal Street near St. Charles, Natasha stopped and took an unnecessary breath, then she moved toward the line of people waiting for the streetcar. She watched them with jealous eyes. *They have no idea what they have.* Standing back as far as possible from the excited crowd, Natasha took a moment to think. Pain rushed her and she snarled in resistance, causing several tourists to turn and peer at

her strangely. However, before they could inquire further or stare longer, the streetcar clacked and clunked its way forward.

Natasha made her way to the back, thankful there was room for privacy. She could have gotten home faster and more efficiently, but nothing settled her like a ride on the streetcar. Usually the thwacking sound of metal sliding over metal and the slight murmur of excited tourists reminded her that wonder still existed, even with the smallest things like a lump of steel on a rail. It was the little things that so many took for granted, but to Natasha they were like gold to a greedy man. As a result, every nuance of humanity was of the utmost importance. It was only then that she closed her eyes and allowed the pain to reign free — because even that was human.

Her insides were in turmoil, but if anyone were to turn and look, her features were calm, collected, and a beautiful study in angles. Natasha leaned to the side, letting her cheek brush the coolness of the glass. She turned and looked out the window, but saw nothing. Her eyes were inward. *Is it human to love someone and hate them at the same time? I have followed her all these years, hating her for what she made me but loving her so much, I had to be near. What does that make me? How can I love someone that made me into this demon?*

Memories assailed her, taking her from the chaos of the present to the confusion of the past.

* * *

Natasha was jolted into consciousness.

Immediately panic seized her as darkness closed in on her from all sides. A damp, dank smell assaulted her. She reached out blindly and received a handful of earth in return. Thick, rich dirt entered her mouth and nostrils. A silent scream erupted from her throat, and in reflex, she began clawing at the dirt surrounding her. Anger and fear enveloped her, and she dug with incredible speed.

Tasha, slow down. I'll help you.

Startled, Natasha stopped in utter confusion. "Re —?" The anxiety returned as she tried to speak, but more muck entered her lungs. It was odd, really. Natasha expected to feel as though she were drowning but there was only panic. As if it were instinctual, her desperation and thoughts turned inward.

Renee? Help me. Let me out!

Just hold on. Give me a moment.

The fear doubled.

You're not in here with me. How can I hear you?

Natasha could feel the hesitation from her lover.

I will explain it all to you. I promise. Renee's thoughts continued to reach out.

With a sudden flash of images, Natasha remembered it all.

Fury erupted from deep within. Snarling, she burst through the dirt and muck, rising from it as if she belonged there. An unexpected burning ripped through her body, taking precedent over the rage. It clawed at her, leaving her weak and shaky. Natasha stumbled forward, falling to her knees. "Wha... What's happening to me?"

Renee knelt at her side, moving thick, dark hair away to reveal Natasha's dirt-streaked visage. A rich combination of confusion and terror filled Natasha as she peered at her lover.

"You will forgive me for this someday. What I did was selfish, but I love you." Using an elongated fingernail, Renee cut into her wrist. "You need to drink. That's why you're in so much pain. This will not be enough, but it will do for right now."

Natasha shrank away in disgust. "You don't love me. You just wanted to own me!" She tried to stand, but was unsuccessful. "I will not do this! I'd rather die!"

Renee waved her damaged wrist in Natasha's face. "Yes, you will."

The scent made Natasha's mouth water. Without her volition, her body gravitated forward. Before she knew what was happening, she grabbed her lover's wrist in a vice-like grip, squeezing it to improve the blood flow. With a hearty moan, Natasha gave in. The taste was hot and sweet, and she moaned in earnest as it dribbled down her throat. The burning dampened and control returned.

Renee hissed and pulled away. "You have to stop. You'll weaken me."

Their eyes met.

Energy sizzled between them.

Natasha sucked the blood from her own lips, and Renee traced the agile tongue as it disappeared behind extended canines. *My God, how can she be more beautiful than before?* Renee reached out, brushing her hand against Natasha's cheek.

Only you would think that, Natasha thought.

You learn quickly.

"How are we able to talk to each other this way?" Natasha asked.

"We are linked. We can only do this because we allow it. It can be blocked at any time."

"That's good to know."

Renee raised her brows in question. *I suppose... You are upset with me, still?*

"Upset? Angry?" she shouted. Natasha's demeanor shifted in a matter of seconds. "There are no words in English, French, or any language to describe how I feel right now!"

Renee sighed. "Can you try to see if from my perspective? One lifetime with you is not enough."

"That is utter bullshit!" Natasha stood. Violence tore through her. Rage boiled through her veins. It gave her pause. She could not remember ever feeling such strong emotion.

"Every emotion you are feeling is intense, out of control. Anger, lust, hunger, love have been multiplied tenfold. Soon,

you will learn how to manage it." Renee slowly moved closer, stopping only when there was barely space between them. She licked her lips. "Just think of how it will be between us. Every touch, every kiss will be excruciating."

Natasha reached out, tracing bloody red lips with a fingertip. Even though breath was not necessary, her chest heaved as the air around them crackled once more.

"Can you feel it?" Renee asked.

Natasha leaned into the touch as another fierce need pummeled her. The pull toward the other woman was utterly compelling. She did not fight it. Natasha moaned, and without warning, crushed their lips together with the ferocious intensity that most people only dream of.

Renee whimpered as she communicated the savagery of her own need through their connection.

Harder. You can't hurt me. I want it all! she cried as she got what she asked for. *It could be like this for eternity. This is better —*

Natasha tore her lips away and wiped them with the back of her hand. "Better?" she whispered. "I'm dead, Renee. Dead. I'm the thing that children fear. You've made me into the same monster that you are!"

Renee's body jolted as if she had been slapped. "You love this monster. You accepted this monster. You've gone beyond hypocrisy," she muttered, her voice dripping with pain.

"Yes! And what kind of person does that make me? Oh wait, doesn't matter. I'm not even human anymore. I turned a blind eye for so long. They weren't people to me. You were all that mattered."

"Then none of this should matter. You're as human as you want to be. You'll hate, love, feel pain —"

"And I'll be a murderer."

Renee bowed her head at the comment. "You'll be a survivor. You will never grow old. You will never get sick."

Renee paused. "You have no choice, Natasha." Her tone was harsh, serious. "Starve and die or accept who you are now, no matter whose fault it is."

Renee reached out to touch Natasha once more.

Natasha recoiled. "Do... not... touch me," she hissed through clenched teeth.

"As the woman who loves you, and your sire, I will see to it that you live. That is my choice. I will teach you what you need to know. You will accept this," Renee emphasized.

"Really? I've gone from your artist, your lover, to your slave? You do not own me."

Renee enclosed Natasha's arm in a vice-like grip. "You have no choice. Do you understand me? You will die otherwise!"

"I don't care! It has to be better than this. You've taken everything from me. What is there to live for? I never wanted this." Natasha pulled her arm from Renee's grasp. "Get away from me!" She pushed Renee away, sending her flying several feet through the air. Not looking back, Natasha ran into the night.

* * *

Twenty-four hours seemed like an eternity.

Natasha staggered through an unknown forest. The sewer she stumbled upon as the sun rose provided necessary cover during the day, but she did not escape unscathed. The left side of her face, her arms and hands, bore scorch marks because of her lack of knowledge and expediency. The pain was nearly unbearable, but the thirst... the thirst was worse. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess of desperation. She felt feral, like some ravenous wild thing. Still, Natasha refused to hunt in the forest, teeming with life. She fell to her knees, but lacked the strength to get up again.

Agony ripped through her, causing her to cry out. "I don't want to die," Natasha whispered as she succumbed to the blackness around her.

Minutes, hours, possibly days later, arms encircled her, lifting her.

"I don't want to die," Natasha repeated through dry, cracked lips.

"I know, love. I know," Renee whispered.

The scent of blood surrounded her, dripping from her lover's wrist. Natasha whimpered in relief as she drank. Strength returned quickly. Her wounds healed. They peered at each other in silence for long minutes.

"How did you find me?"

I felt you. I should have come earlier, but I thought you needed this time, Renee answered.

How generous of you.

Tasha...

"No, let me say what I need to," Natasha interrupted.

"Alright."

"You'll teach me what I need to know," Natasha said.

"Alright."

"I love you, but I don't know if I can ever forgive you. I don't even know if I can live with you."

"Alright." Renee swallowed. Her tone was hollow.

The quiet engulfed them again.

Renee was the first to pierce it. "I did not mean for this to be so hard for you. I know you've been through so much. I'm sorry, but turning you felt like the right thing to do." Renee tightened her embrace. "Do you believe me?" Her eyes were pleading.

Natasha nodded. "I know you love me... need me."

"You have no idea."

"I do now. I don't think that you would go to these extremes otherwise."

Through their gaze alone, they communicated deep understanding, but there was also the knowledge that something had broken between them.

* * *

The buzz of someone pulling the cord yanked Natasha from the past. She sighed and wiped a hand over her face as the streetcar began moving again. The memories made it seem like yesterday, but the searing pain that used to accompany them had diminished to a dull ache. *Maybe some part of me is learning to forgive her.* The notion both frightened and relieved her. Still, the anger... the anger was still present and overwhelming. *Then again, maybe not quite yet.*

Refusing to dwell anymore, she peered out the window as they rolled through the Garden District. Large houses and mansions jutted out and gleamed with their own dramatic lighting. It was immaculate, compared to Mid City and further down Canal. As she passed the zoo, Tulane and Loyola University, Natasha realized that she had gone too far. She pulled the cord, and without acknowledging the driver, who bid her farewell, left the safety of the streetcar.

Natasha moved through the streets and anyone watching closely would have only seen a blur. Turning on Napoleon, she crossed Chestnut and headed toward Magazine Street. Her mouth curled into a smirk and she nearly rolled her eyes as she passed Rosegate. Even with the late hour, there were tourists standing outside, snapping pictures in hopes of catching a glimpse of the famous author. If people only knew that a real specimen lived nearby, there would probably be a mob on her doorstep, complete with torches.

Natasha opened the door to her impromptu home of three months, wondering how long she would be here. She had followed her ex-lover over three continents during the past fifty years, and she had yet to stay in one place for more than a year.

Sooner or later she would show herself and Renee would beg for her return.

Now something had changed, and Natasha wondered if all her years on this earth had finally driven Renee insane. Was she killing women who looked like her because she wanted her dead? To act out some sort of morbid revenge? Or just to get her attention?

"Is that you, Nat?"

Natasha smiled genuinely. "Who else would it be, Remy? Or were you expecting one of those little girls you like to play with?"

"I wouldn't have to if you'd come around." Natasha could hear the laughter in his voice.

She passed the stacks of boxes in the foyer and living area and went straight to the den. Remy had his tall, wiry frame folded into the lone chocolate leather chair, watching the rather large flat screen that took up a good portion of the back wall. Natasha glanced at the TV and sighed when she saw the logo at the bottom right corner. "E! again, Remy? Is there nothing of significance on? Or you could have been unpacking."

His gray eyes moved from the screen to the woman standing in the doorway. "What for? All the essentials are unpacked and by the time I decorate, we'll be on the move again."

Natasha made a noise in the back of her throat. "You could stay here. It seems to be the perfect place for you."

Remy sighed. "Must we go through this every year? There are not many artists who get to learn and share some semblance of life with their idols. When I've learned what I need to, I'll leave under my own steam. Besides, I'm part of the mystery. The whole world wonders about you. To them, you are the perfect recluse, and they want to know who the devilishly handsome man is who speaks for you when you want to be heard or reveal your latest work."

Natasha sat on the armrest. "It's been almost twenty years. I'm not that complicated. Your whole life should not be me, and you're not getting any younger."

This time Remy's sigh was loud and dramatic. "Let me guess. You were thinking a little too much and too long on the street car?"

Natasha smirked. "Shut up, Remy Chapman."

"I thought so. I like my life, and I like the way I lead it. No ties." Remy reached for the remote and muted the TV. "So, how are you doing with seeing her again?"

Natasha was silent for a few moments. Then, she divulged Renee's recent depravity. "I wish that I knew what she was thinking. She's either blocking me or it's been so long since I tried that I've forgotten how to do it. Still, what she's doing can only lead to trouble."

Remy pushed a hand through his midnight curls. "You may not want to hear this, but you know I'm going to tell you anyway. Maybe she wants trouble. Maybe she's hoping that she'll cross the wrong person and they'll do what she hasn't the courage to."

Natasha scoffed, "You mean she wants to die? Never. She's too selfish for that."

"Is she? Everything and everyone has the capacity for change, Nat. Maybe even her. Look at you. You were a mess when I met you, so tortured... And now you've found some way to cope, even though it still hurts you to hunt, to kill, to be."

"Mmm. Maybe. My moments of regret after a kill are shorter now — or I may just hide it better. What do you think?"

"I think you're fooling yourself about a lot of things." Remy glanced at the time conveniently on the TV screen. "I think you'd better get to bed. I wouldn't want you to get a mark on that beautiful face of yours."

Natasha greeted him with a knowing smile. "It's barely three."

"Uh huh, but I'm having company soon. I don't want her to think she has competition. Or would you like to join in? Fifty years is a long time to be celibate."

Natasha rose. "Ask me in another fifty, if you can get it up then."

The sound of Remy's laughter followed her. Natasha's thoughts turned pensive. *What if he's right? What are you doing, Renee?* Natasha closed her eyes, suddenly weary and needing relief from the past few days. She made her way to her own wing of the house, clicked on the stereo and shuffled through the CDs until she found what she was looking for. The strains of Puccini wafted around her. Not wanting to get paint on her clothes, she tied the frock around her body. All the confusion, the anger, and the pain bled through the brush onto a canvas.

CHAPTER 6

CHARLOTTE HAD PLENTY of time to think, and now she was in a slight panic. How does one plan the demise of a public, political figure? She swallowed, having no idea how to do so without harsh repercussions, then smoothed a hand over long, blonde curls and stood tall, hoping that at almost six feet it would give her some kind of advantage. She swallowed again as she knocked Renee's door.

"Come in, Charlotte."

Charlotte could feel those amber eyes follow her every move. Renee leaned back in her chair.

"Problems with my... request?" she asked sarcastically.

"Uhm... Well, you see... He's the superintendent, the big chief."

"And?" Renee asked.

"And I don't think it would be kosher if he and his family just disappeared or turned up dead."

"Really?" The sarcasm had gotten even drier.

"Really. I'm not just trying to look after you, Renee.

Although, I will always do that. I'm sure the guys who came in here were cops, and if we take this further, the whole police force could come down on our heads. I know we're just cattle to you, just servants, but I think I can speak for myself and the others in saying that we don't want to die. At least not that way." Charlotte fell silent, but her gaze was unwavering, fearful, expectant, and somehow pleading at the same time.

Renee drummed her fingers against the desk. "You know, I have been around for a very long time. It used to be that people in a vampire's employ did not question orders or think for themselves. That apparently has changed." Renee's voice was cool, calm. "You surprise me, Charlotte."

Renee got up and sauntered from behind the desk until she stood in front of her assistant. "I can smell the fear on you, and still you look me in the eye." She paused simply for effect. "I like that. You are not some simpering human who would lick my boots. I've said it once, and I'm saying it once more. I made an excellent choice with you. Your time will come soon. If something should happen to me, I've made arrangements for you and those loyal to me." Renee smiled sadly, genuinely.

Charlotte's expression changed from fear to confusion. "You speak like someone who is dying, but I know better. Is there something I need to know?"

Renee continued to smile. "Just know that I am tired of needing, wanting, and not having. I do not know what that means for me anymore, just that I am tired." Renee's smile faltered. "Thank you. Leave it be. I'll handle this my own way. You can go."

After Charlotte closed the door, uncertainty struck her. *Was this the same vampire who killed that kid just because she bored her? What does she mean that she'll handle this in her own way?*

"What's going on here?"

* * *

Again, Renee took her seat. *If Charlotte only knew., I'm sure someday I'll meet an enemy clever enough to do what I can't.* She sighed as her thoughts took a turn. *I bet I know what you're doing right now, Tasha. Painting something nice and dark. I miss you.* She glanced at the desk calendar, pondering the year. *If I had not touched you, you would be 73. Older, but just as beautiful. Did I make a mistake? Did I? Would you have stayed? Or would my heart still be just as dead?* Renee let out a bitter laugh. "I guess I will never know."

A hollow emptiness settled over her, and she knew of only one way to fill it now. There were still hours left until daylight

and maybe just a few women would meet her morbid specifications. Renee knew it was insanity, but it was one of the only things keeping her together, however tenuously. That and the brief glimpses she was allowed of Natasha from time to time. *How much longer until this ritual is not enough?*

She knew the answer, but did not dare speak it out loud.

* * *

Jordan scowled at the car radio and turned it off. The constant static was starting to get to him. It had been a long time since he had last made this trek through Terrebonne Parish. In fact, he was barely out of boyhood the last time he was here. If the public only knew what he had seen and sometimes participated in, he knew his fall from grace would be swift. He would be a laughing stock. Voodoo was commonplace in Louisiana, but it had become commercialized. Still, there were some who took it seriously, some who practiced and reveled in it as a way of life. This could be said about his family, especially the older generation, and they kept the secret well.

He sighed and turned up the air conditioning in the borrowed truck. It was not what he was used to, but right now, it paid to be inconspicuous. Unofficially, he had taken the morning off. On paper, he was attending a lengthy meeting with city bigwigs.

Highway 56 seemed to go for miles. The ride was scenic. One minute the land was lush trees and the smell of honeysuckle, and the next it was marshy and almost looked dead. Jordan smiled as he finally saw the sign telling him that he was entering Cocodrie.

The roads were barely paved and the small town was surrounded by a body of water, Bay Cocodrie. Jordan remembered fondly riding on shrimp boats and watching the men haul huge nets out of the water filled with the small

aquatic creature. He peered out of the car window as he drove further in. The town had not changed a bit. Most houses were on stilts because of frequent flooding and the danger of hurricanes. Yearly predictions were habitually ominous, warning of history-making storms that had yet to arrive and wash the coastal town away.

Through it all, Cocodrie remained.

The place itself could be a nice escape for those wishing to put city life behind them. It was slow, everyone knew everyone, but they kept to themselves. They were a God-fearing bunch, like most in these parts, but Jordan did not blame them one bit. "You have to believe in something," his mother used to tell him.

He pulled the beat up Ford truck into the dusty parking lot of a small, non-descript convenience store. The old men sitting on the porch in rocking chairs eyed his every move. Jordan got out of truck. He pulled the wife beater out of his jeans and wiped the sweat off his face. His appearance was derived to help him blend in to the population. Jordan smirked internally at his own cleverness, noting that the men wore similar attire.

"Who you?" one of the men asked.

"Just visiting some relatives and looking around. Been awhile since I been here." He took off his sunglasses and smiled.

"Who yo kin?"

"Well, my momma always told me not to spread my business around, so I'm not going to do it now."

The old man cackled. "Yo momma right, friend. Whatcha need?"

"To get out to the island."

The old man laughed again. "Good luck wit dat. You can try down the docks. One 'dem boys may take you out on der boat. If you pay 'nuff."

"Thank you. Ya'll have a nice one, hear?" Jordan said.

The old men nodded in his direction.

Moments later, Jordan pulled up to the dock. Boats of various sizes crowded around the small area. Some were newer and gleamed white or gray, while others were dingy and looked as though they had seen better days. As he got out of the car, eyes followed him just as they had before. He walked up to a group of men who were deep in conversation and laughter.

The talking quieted as he drew near.

"Well looky here boys. We got us a visitor." The man stood out. He was huge and his stomach, highlighted by the dirty red t-shirt, hung lazily over his battered pants.

Jordan smiled. Men were the same everywhere. *It's a good thing I brought plenty of cash.*

"A visitor with money," Jordan added.

"Dat so?" The man ran a hand over his grizzled beard.

"Uh huh," Jordan said.

"Maybe we can hep ya then fo' da right price. Whatchu need?"

"A ride to the island and back."

Silence surrounded him.

Then the man in the red shirt chuckled, nervously. "I'm 'fraid we got more sense than dat."

"I bet I have more money than you do sense. How's a thousand sound?"

The man whistled and turned to his comrades.

"Anyone gonna bite?" Jordan asked.

Eyes widened and heads shook in the negative. The man sighed. "I 'pose I got bigger balls dan I do a chicken streak. Make it twelve-hundred dollars and ya gat a deal."

"Done. Let's go now. I don't want to be there after dark."

"Ya got 'dat right," the man said.

The ride was short, and for that Jordan was thankful. They pulled up to an extremely rickety dock on a small wisp of land and parked beside a very small, battered boat. A single house

stood on stilts. How it was standing was still a mystery. The house was a dingy yellow. The shutters around the windows were broken and some were falling off. Several windows were taped or boarded up. The small yard around it was uncluttered, except for the clothesline that went from the house to a dilapidated tree.

Jordan looked over at his pilot. The man's eyes were bulging from his head. "Don't even think about leaving. Let me give you some incentive. There is an extra five hundred in it for you if you're right here when I come out."

The man's eyes continued to bulge, but he nodded.

Jordan made his way onto the dock toward the house. He paused at the door and knocked, hoping it would not fall off its hinges.

"Dis betta be important. Dis land is private," a raspy voice answered.

"Aunt Sissy?"

"Who dat call me by dat name?"

"It's Jordy... just paying a visit. I wanted to talk to you about some things."

"Jordy? Della's boy?"

"Yeah."

Sissy's laugh sounded more like a cough. "I'll be damned. Git in her'."

Jordan opened the door. The area was dark except for a gleaming ray of light coming from a back window. It was oppressively hot and smelled of chemicals and old food. Jordan squinted his eyes and took in his surroundings. There was a small couch and chair hidden under brown covering. The room was peppered with tables. They were spilling over with papers and jars, some empty, and some filled with unidentifiable contents.

His gaze went back to the old woman sitting in the chair. White hair covered her head. It was braided but still shaggy

looking. Her skin was light brown and utterly wrinkled. Eyes stared at him, but when he looked back, he could see they were obscured by the gray film of cataracts.

"Don't jus' stand der, boy. Sit down. What brings you?"

Jordan scrunched up his nose and brushed unknown contents from the couch before sitting precariously on it. He knew he needed to get straight to the point. He did not want to be here any longer than necessary. Nothing in this area was up to his usual standards. His desire to get back to civilization grew with each passing minute. "I know it's been a long time, but I wanted to ask you about those stories that I used to hear when I was little. You know, the ones about the women who took blood?"

Sissy coughed again. "Loogaroo." She paused. "Dey not stories. You know dat."

"I know, but can you tell me about them again?"

"Dey old women who made pact with da devil. Bring him blood and he gave dem power. Dey live forever. Dey strong and fast. Dey take the form of human but dey are demon tru and tru. Da demon has changed tru time, but dey still jus' as nasty. It drink da blood now. Dey get da power to demselves now."

Jordan leaned in. She had his full attention. "Yes, a vampire. I know that fire and sunlight only hurts and weakens them. How do you kill them? The stories used to say by being beheaded or drained by one of their own, because they are the only ones who can get close enough or are strong enough. There is another way. Isn't there? I know none of the movie bullshit is true."

Sissy fell silent. Then asked, "What dis 'bout, Jordy?"

Jordan licked his lips, knowing he had to say the right thing. "One of them threatens my family."

"I see."

"I'm glad. So how —"

"Ya pay da right amount, I tell ya."

Jordan was speechless. After a brief pause, words returned to him. "You're kidding?"

"Na." She shook her head.

"But you're family."

She laughed. "I not yo family. Ya don't care 'bout me. Da only reason Loogaroo bothers you is 'cause ya prolly bothered her first."

Incensed, Jordan stood up and threw a wad of bills at her. "Here, you old fuck!"

"Tammy! Come out her' and count dis, girl."

Jordan heard a rustling come from another room.

A tall, thin young woman walked out. She glared at him as she bent down to retrieve the cash. "Dar's five hundred."

"Dat will do." Sissy waved her hand. "Now sit back down, boy, and listen good."

Even though he was disgusted, Jordan obeyed.

Long minutes later, Jordan left the house and strolled back toward the dock. An extremely satisfied smile formed on his face as a plan took shape in his head.

Tammy put the latch on the door. "Ya didn't tell him how ta protect himself. I could have made him an *ouanga*."

Sissy waved nonchalantly. "Bad men deserve what eva bad men git."

"How do ya know he's a bad man?"

"I can smell it all ova him."

CHAPTER 7

RENEE'S EYES SHOT open as the last vestiges of the memories, the nightmare, assailed her. She knew it was still daylight, but the sudden barrage of emotion that came with the dream left her restless. Everything hurt. Even the sheets burned her skin. The pain was overwhelming. It was not often that she replayed that night, but when it happened, it stripped her of reason.

Her mind was cloudy, leaving her vulnerable and open. She reached out to the one thing that had given her stability.

A single word was all that was needed.

"Tasha."

Her subconscious uttered it before her body shut down and settled back into instinctual sleep. Renee lapsed into the seemingly endless cycle of memories, but this time, they were shared.

* * *

Renee was filled with pride and hope as she watched her lover, her companion, feed. It was a sensual display as their eyes connected and images and thoughts were shared. They had developed a special bond over the past few weeks, and she hoped that the wonder and strength of it would be enough to facilitate forgiveness.

Almost every night they prowled the countryside. Renee instructed on the hunt, the kill, and the satiation of the thirst. The first time had been excruciating for Natasha, Renee knew, but she had been savage in her thirst. Renee remembered snatching Natasha away and shouting to her that if she drained every drop, she would be weakened considerably. Taking a life had spun Natasha into a depression deeply fraught with

guilt. For days, she had refused to hunt or even drink from her lover.

Renee had been sure that when Natasha attacked and drained one of the servants, the hunger had driven her mad or just mad enough to accept the situation. It gave her the chance she needed, and Renee took advantage.

Quickly becoming a slave to instinct, Natasha displayed natural talent and seemed to almost revel in the freedom and magic of it all. They often shared victims, and tonight was no different. After their meal was finished, their lips met in a carnal display of passion primal in its savagery, right beside the still warm corpse.

Natasha tore herself away from her lover. "I'm still thirsty," she said needfully.

Renee nodded in supplication. "You're new. It's not uncommon to need more. Let's go home. I'll send for a snack."

Sometime later, they had their fill of a woman who gave herself freely, as had many others. Renee's servants were adept liars, whispering of gifts of eternal youth and a life free of pain and suffering to the most gullible, to the most drunken, and to the loneliest. She only gave them death. Renee rolled the now naked body on the floor, clearing the bed for its owners.

Natasha climbed up Renee's body using her arms as supports, so they were just barely touching. Natasha's kisses were soft, teasing.

Renee growled with impatience and need.

"Do you not miss it? The softness... the gentleness we used to share?" Natasha asked.

"I won't break."

"I'm aware of that, but we've been like animals lately —"

"Think about it, Tasha. You can do anything you want to me. Live out your darkest needs. Save the gentleness for later. We have time."

Natasha's eyes brightened as a slow smile curled her lips.

The images that flashed through Renee's mind were dark, lewd, and deliciously sensual. A strong bolt of need uncurled from her belly and shot to her groin. Renee's legs widened and she wrapped them around her lover's hips, surging upward into the heat they had created.

"Yesss, do it!"

Natasha chuckled. "You would give me that much control over you? You would be completely helpless and there would be pain involved."

Amber eyes were pleading and needful. "Please touch it. Touch me. I don't care how," she whispered.

Natasha complied.

Renee did not utter another word that night.

She only screamed.

* * *

Renee felt the presence in the room and assumed it was one of the servants getting rid of last night's meal. But it lingered. She could almost taste the nervous apprehension in the air. Renee decided to ignore it for the moment as she peered down at her lover looking so relaxed, so young, and devastatingly beautiful, even in sleep. The fact that Natasha was a late riser always afforded her these small moments. She reached out, lightly tracing each feature. Icy green opened slowly and a smile graced her countenance. Renee felt something inside her chest flutter and she leaned in, kissing the smile that was meant for her alone.

Renee pulled away slowly and sighed, knowing she had to deal with the irritant in the room. "Yes?" Her voice was calm, quiet. She pulled away the thick covering that surrounded the bed and glared at the young woman, waiting for an answer.

"Madams, I have something to speak to you about."

Her accent was thick, but Renee could still hear the worry in her tone.

"I do not have all night. I'm getting thirsty."

Natasha sat up in the bed, rustling the sheets around her.

"Behave. Renee, let her speak."

The woman curtsied. "Thank you, madam."

There was a pregnant pause.

"Go on," Natasha urged.

The woman began to wring her hands. "I beg for mercy. I come to you before anyone else."

There was another pause. The woman had Renee's full attention now. She watched carefully, almost hearing the girl take a painful swallow.

"I have made a mistake and I accept whatever punishment madam wishes to inflict."

"Stop hedging. What is the matter?" Natasha asked impatiently.

She swallowed again. "The... uh... woman I brought to you a few nights ago. She was not a prostitute, even though she was drunk and out unescorted. She had a family, a husband, and children."

Natasha closed her eyes. "Jesus."

"Please, madam." The woman began to sob. "Someone saw me with her. The police were here this morning asking questions. I am so sorry."

Renee growled and rose from the bed. The woman stepped back and her hands flew to her throat. "You stupid, impotent girl. Do I not pay you handsomely? You have a small job, and you cannot even do that correctly. Get out! Run, because if I find you.... Just get out!" Renee's chest heaved with anger and fear. She knew that Natasha was going to take this news to heart. She watched as the door closed with a soft snick.

Slowly, Renee turned to Natasha and could instantly read the turmoil in her features. Natasha was frozen as a torrent of emotion washed over her. She reached out to touch her, but Natasha moved away quickly.

Natasha held up her hands in front of her naked body like a barricade. "Don't touch me!"

"We may have to leave this place. Tasha —" Renee ignored her request and tried again.

"No! I cannot believe I let myself do this. I fell into the trap you made for me." Natasha's eyes were panicked and filled with pain.

Angry and hurt by the words, Renee returned with a few of her own. "You would not have done this if part of you did not want to. You enjoyed it! I saw it. Felt it. You loved every minute of it."

"No!" Natasha threw her hands up in exasperation.

"Yes! Don't lie to yourself. Most of all, do not lie to me." Renee caught and held Natasha's arm in a vice like grip. At a complete loss, she had no idea how to defuse the situation.

"I can't do this, Renee." Natasha knocked her hands away and turned around, searching frantically for her discarded clothing.

"This is what you are. Who you are."

Natasha's laugh was bitter. "I forgot that they were people. How could it take this long for me to open my eyes? They were somebody's child, wife, or husband. I have broken a family and it is probably not the only one. Don't you see? I know what it feels like. I'm no better than the murdering Nazi scum who did it to me!"

"This is different, Tasha. They did that out of malice. You did it to survive."

"I can survive on rats!"

"No, you cannot! It's not enough. Eventually, you'll die."

"What about blood from hospitals and blood banks?"

Renee shook her head. "It must be fresh from a beating heart until that heart stops and not a second more. You know this. Even drinking from me will only sustain you for a few

hours. You can't bend the way things are to what you want them to be."

"It doesn't matter. I can't do this, and most of all, I can't do this with you. I don't know if I care what happens to me anymore," Natasha exclaimed as she pulled on the rest of her clothes.

An icy jolt of fear reverberated through Renee. "You... You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. I hate myself right now, and if I stay, I will most certainly hate you for contributing to this depravity. My depravity. I cannot believe I let myself fall so far."

"But the time we've had together.... Don't you see how good it can be? Don't you see?"

Natasha shook her head. "All I see right now is what you want me to become, what you've tried to make me into. I am lost in this. I am lost to myself."

"Tasha, just give it some time," Renee begged.

"I have given enough. Do what you want with my things. I have to go, Renee. Please, just let me go."

Stunned and defenseless, Renee watched helplessly as the door opened, then closed. The sound was jarring. She shuddered at the finality. One word escaped her lips, and she screamed it as if it had been ripped from her soul, "Tasha!"

* * *

Natasha jolted awake. She reached out as if she could touch the memories that lingered. With a shaking hand, she pushed mussed hair back from her face. *She hurts just as much as I do. I knew this, but I don't think I was ready to see it until now.* Natasha swallowed. *We've broken each other.* The need to see Renee was overwhelming. *She needs to know that I understand what I've done to her, even if she never understands what she did to me. Maybe that will be enough for*

her to stop this insanity. I know she needs to feed, but what she's doing goes way beyond. It needs to end.

Her mind made up, Natasha untangled herself from the sheets.

Downstairs, Remy watched his friend and mentor pace from one end of the room to the other. Her movements were jerky and troubled, so unlike her usual grace. He decided to start off slow, knowing she would eventually spill all. "Going out early tonight?"

Natasha stopped and peered at her friend. It was the only opening she needed. "She came to me while I slept. We shared a dream, a memory really. She pulled me in."

Remy's brow wrinkled in concern. "What does that mean?"

"I never knew she was in so much pain. I have to stop her. Maybe if I just talk to her, really talk to her —"

"You didn't answer my question. What does that mean?"

"I-I guess this time we were vulnerable to each other because we were sleeping. There was no other way she could get into my head," Natasha answered.

"That should make you think. Talking to her won't be enough. She doesn't need words. She obviously needs you. and you her. You, my friend, lead a pitiful existence caught in her shadow because you can't admit that some part of you wants to be beside her in what little light there is left," Remy said.

"No, I —"

"Oh come off it, Nat. You love her still. That's why you follow her. What you guys had... What you guys have is something so strong that it would scare most people. I imagine it scares you." The burning red eyes glaring at him did not frighten him in the least. "Your anger doesn't bother me, Nat. You count on me to be honest with you. I'm not going to stop now. This isn't the first time I've said something like this."

"I'm a monster because of her. How can you say that?"

Remy shrugged. "It's been fifty years. There is nothing you can do about it. Are you going to go through eternity like this?"

Natasha snarled at his impertinence.

"Maybe I will." In a blink of an eye, she was gone, but his words haunted her.

Remy sighed and shook his head. "So stubborn. If I didn't look after you Nat, what would you be? Who would you be if you didn't have somebody around you daily who actually cared?"

* * *

Renee was shaken by the experience, but she hid it well. Because of the dream, the pain was fresh, and so was the animosity toward Natasha. As a result, tonight would be no different from any other. She wove through the crowd, giving some a hint of a smile and others the cold shoulder. *I'll find the lucky woman myself tonight.*

While she stood at the bar, a wine glass appeared as if by magic.

Closing her eyes in pleasure, she sipped from it and scanned the area around her. The hand holding the glass stopped midway to her lips. *It can't be. She wouldn't have the audacity.* Renee sat the glass down and moved toward the unbelievable sight. As she got closer, her senses tingled with awareness. *I have been wrong before.* She had to be sure.

Renee took in the jean-clad form, and her insides clenched almost violently when the woman turned to look at her.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to feel me."

Renee wanted to kiss her and mar the pretty face at the same time. "You closed yourself to me remember? It is not always easy." Renee spat the words out as if they tasted bad.

"It was, earlier today."

Their eyes met and a wealth of emotion passed between them, ending in bitterness.

Renee sat down beside her former lover, but angled her body as far away as possible. As if by magic, another drink appeared. "Why are you here, Tasha?" This time her voice was flat and void of inflection. "Am I not raw enough?"

"I did not come to hurt you."

Renee chuckled. "But you do, just by existing away from me. Can you understand that?"

"Actually, I do... now."

"Ah, so my moment of weakness gave you an epiphany?"

"Of sorts. I just wanted to talk to you."

Renee gulped her drink, needing to feel the heat burn through the sudden numbness. "So talk, and then leave."

Renee watched as Natasha bowed her head and looked away. She saw the sudden flash of pain in Natasha's eyes, and she quivered in satisfaction.

"You can't stand to be near me, can you?" Natasha asked.

"Not tonight, but there are times when I crave you like humans need air." Renee's gaze was intense, honest.

Renee did not miss the small gasp that escaped Natasha's lips at her words. It gave her a different type of satisfaction, knowing that she could still shake her former lover to the core.

"I hurt you," Natasha whispered.

Renee peered at Natasha. It was the understatement of the millennia, and she knew the incredulity was showing in her expression. "Hurt isn't a strong enough word."

"I stand corrected. I devastated you. I realize that more than ever now, but you have to get past it. I'm broken, just like you are, and I do not engage in the atrocities that you do."

An auburn brow rose in condescension. "If you were living on rats, you would have been at death's door long ago. You look very healthy to me."

"No, I've learned better. Criminals and society's discarded have eased —"

Renee's laugh was throaty and full. "You sit here and pretend as if you have some higher moral standing than I do. A kill is a kill, Tasha." Renee drained the remaining wine from her glass. "There is a reason for my so-called lunacy. I do what I need to do." Renee grasped the refilled glass and stood. "Our talk is over. Please... leave. If you care at all.... Leave." Her voice broke.

As she glanced away, Renee noticed Charlotte walking in their direction. She shook her head, knowing that it was signal enough to stop her assistant's progress.

Natasha sighed. "Renee... wait! I am not here to judge. I just want to..." Natasha reached out. Her fingers brushed against Renee's bare arm.

The moment was heavy with electricity.

Renee was flooded with heat. She stood stock-still in her effort to recover. After a few seconds, she spoke. Her words were measured and succinct. "No one touches me without permission. You lost that privilege long ago."

Natasha bristled. Her eyes turned blood red. "Please! You give yourself so freely, what does it matter what I do to you?"

"I give nothing! Do you not know me at all? No one has touched me that way since you!"

Confusion wrinkled Natasha's forehead as she backed away. "Then why —"

Renee knew she had revealed too much. Feeling vulnerable, she lashed out. "Leave, Tasha, or I will make you regret it!"

"No, not until you listen to me."

Ignoring Natasha, Renee stood and made her way back toward the dance floor. Her emotions were divided at the moment. Part of her wanted to be near, but part of her was utterly repelled by Natasha's presence. She needed to cleanse her palate, and knew of only one effective way to do so.

Renee grabbed the closest woman to her, who came willingly. Sometimes they were extremely easy. It was a good thing; Renee was not up to the chase tonight. As the club patrons danced around them, Renee wrapped herself around the woman and swayed to the music. Feeling green eyes watch her every move, Renee wound her hand through the woman's hair in preparation for what was to follow... a kiss that was meant to pillage and possess.

"Come with me," she whispered as she ended the embrace.

* * *

Natasha sat for a moment, stunned by the whole display. She recovered quickly and renewed her determination to stop Renee.

With a red glare and a growl from her, the security guards' expressions blanked, and Natasha pushed past, following Renee's scent down the long corridor.

She stopped in front of the door and listened. Soft moans greeted her. With a growl she kicked the door open.

Natasha snarled in disgust when she saw Renee wriggling on top of the other woman.

Renee tore herself away from her prospective lover and smiled dangerously, revealing her fangs. "Get out. You have no rights here!"

"I have every right!"

"What the hell's going on here?" the woman asked desperately.

"You will get up now, and you will leave." Natasha's words were soft, but the underlying violence was palpable.

The woman did not move.

"Now!" Natasha bellowed. Caught deep in the undertow of anger, Natasha could feel her body react. Her teeth elongated as if she were preparing to hunt.

Natasha felt the agitation roll off Renee in waves. Renee bolted from the bed. She hissed in Natasha's direction and smiled sadly at the nameless woman. "She did you a favor. Go now."

Luckily still dressed, the woman scampered out of the room.

The air was dripping with anger and passionate resentment.

"You have no claim on me, Tasha. That was given up! Don't you remember?"

"Don't tell me what I already know. I was there! Tell me, do you feel any guilt for what you did to me? What you did to those women? Feeding is necessary, I know, but what you've done goes beyond survival."

Renee walked toward Natasha, only stopping when they were a mere breath apart.

Renee laughed viciously. "I hurt every day. Every day I fall apart and put myself together again! Every emotion that exists, I feel!" Renee latched on to Natasha's shirt, balling the material in her hands.

Natasha's felt sharp prickles of agony stab her with each word uttered. The guilt was overwhelming, pressing down on her with unimaginable weight that nearly sent her to her knees.

It had to stop.

Natasha took Renee by the shoulders, shaking her. "You do not need to do this to these women!"

"I need something. Why can't you understand?"

Natasha shook Renee again, peering into eyes that had once entranced her. Now, all she saw was madness — madness she felt she had a hand in creating and facilitating. Something inside her softened, and her expression must have done the same.

"Don't pity me! I don't need your pity!"

"I know," Natasha stated quietly. "You need me." She wrapped her arms around Renee. She could feel the tension and disbelief. "You need me."

Smaller arms nearly crushed Natasha's ribs as they squeezed and held on for dear life.

Renee whimpered. Her body shook as it absorbed the impact of the moment. "Oh God... Oh God."

Natasha kissed the top of her head and murmured. "Shh. It's okay."

"I got so lost," Renee sobbed.

"Shh, no words. Let's just have this time. Let me give you what you need."

"But —"

Natasha silenced her with her mouth. When their lips touched, everything crumbled around them. It was equal parts angry, urgent, and hungry.

Renee cried out as her knees buckled.

Sensing her need, Natasha wrapped Renee tightly in her arms and held her upright. Natasha moved at a speed that rivaled even light.

Natasha reveled in the stunned look on Renee's face as she was suddenly thrown on the bed. In another swift motion that was sure to be celebrated, Natasha grasped at Renee's clothing with knowing hands and ripped them away as if they were paper.

As a gasp escaped Renee's lips, Natasha could see the scorching arousal written so plainly on her lover's face. Amber eyes glistened and an excited flush covered her face.

Natasha's gaze brushed over every inch of Renee's skin like a heated caress that was intense enough to burn. Natasha smiled softly, knowing that Renee had gotten her message as the gasp became a languid moan.

"Please... no teasing," Renee begged.

Natasha removed her clothes slowly, totally aware of the effect she was having on Renee and the growing need between them. Still, she wanted to savor every second.

There were no guarantees of change, of tomorrow. Natasha wanted this memory to look upon in place of so many others.

Finally, she revealed matching lacy, blood-red underwear, and Natasha was not disappointed in the reaction.

As if she were out of breath, Renee's chest heaved. Her legs opened of their own volition, showing Natasha the evidence of her obvious need.

In her few seconds of preoccupation, the rest of Natasha's clothing had melted away, leaving her exposed to a heated gaze.

Renee growled when Natasha's hands touched her, grasping her knees and spreading them wider.

Natasha stood over her. Her eyes were riveted by the moist area between Renee's legs. It was an entrancing sight shaved bare, glistening, and swollen.

"Taste it," Renee hissed. "It's only for you." Her plea turned into a groan. Her body arched upward. Engorged, wet flesh sought relief from the air itself.

Natasha's mouth watered at the sight. Fifty years had passed since she had tasted or touched the woman who lay before her, and she was ravenous.

Wrapping her arms around Renee's legs, Natasha pulled Renee upward until she was nearly vertical. With a tortured moan, she gave in to Renee's request and her own need.

Renee simply screamed.

Natasha devoured every inch with her lips, her tongue, tracing each fold and crevice by memory. The taste of her was enough to start her heart again.

Her trail ended at Renee's clit. It pulsed and throbbed against the tip of her tongue. She flicked it leisurely before

sucking it into her mouth and drawing Renee's pleasure out to the point of pain.

Renee's broken whimpers and grinding hips were a symphony of sensation that even the worst artist could appreciate. Hands raked and pulled in Natasha's hair. She took it as a demand for more.

Natasha pressed her face forward as far as it would go. Her cheeks and chin were covered and dripping from her efforts. Natasha's body shuddered in delicious empathy, leaving her thighs coated and sticky with her own arousal.

It was both a glorious and tragic moment to feel again after so long.

* * *

For Renee, it was a moment of total perfection. For this moment, she felt whole. For this moment, she felt loved, and for this moment, she felt overwhelming happiness.

She ground her hips into her lover's face, wanting the feeling imprinted there forever. Still, all too soon she felt the end creeping up on her.

Renee fought it but lost the battle when Natasha speared her tongue deep inside. The invasion was slow and deliberate at first, but quickly picked up speed until it was an unbelievable pounding.

Renee's hips took on a mind of their own, bucking, grinding, and seeking in an effort to capitalize on pleasure.

It was too much, too raw, and too good.

Another scream pierced the room.

In a molten gush, her orgasm uncurled from somewhere deep in her belly, shooting outward in thick, rolling waves, affecting every muscle, every bone, and every millimeter of skin.

Natasha remained still, letting the hot, creamy evidence trickle onto her tongue.

Renee whimpered as small, sharp pulses of pleasure burrowed through her body.

"Don't stop," she whispered hoarsely.

Natasha groaned in response. Setting Renee back on to the bed with infinite care, she slid on top of her and moaned again as Renee's legs wrapped around her. Natasha angled them until heated, needy skin met.

With a satisfied grunt, she began a rolling thrust. Swollen, excited flesh brushed and clung together, sealed by moisture.

There was no tenderness in this meeting. Their bodies came together in a hard slap that reverberated throughout the room.

Renee buried her hands deep within dark tresses. She pulled Natasha's head forward and into her aching, neglected breasts.

Natasha squeezed one and teased the other repeatedly with the tip of her tongue. With each flick, Renee felt the flesh become harder, more sensitized.

Renee opened her mouth to beg, but a strangled moan escaped as Natasha sucked the aroused flesh deep to the back of her throat, again and again, before reluctantly releasing it.

Renee's nails dug into Natasha's back, drawing blood. The smell of it seemed to spur them on.

With a growl, Natasha sank her teeth into Renee's breast and created a hard suction that was just on the other side of pain.

Renee was on fire.

Each sound from her lips was a whimper or a moan. Both her body and her need wound tighter as Natasha marked her.

In an effort to pull Natasha closer still, Renee grabbed on to her buttocks. Curious fingers ventured into the crease, then downward until they met with unbelievable heat.

Natasha moaned at the intrusion. Her hips began to thrust impossibly faster. Renee met her stroke for stroke.

She was becoming undone.

The scent of blood and sex washed over her, leaving her craving. She wrapped her hand in Natasha's hair and pulled harshly, bringing their lips together once more.

Renee broke the searing contact just a few scant seconds later and whispered, "I need you."

* * *

"Take it!" Natasha hissed, and fangs sank deep into her neck. Her mouth opened on a scream, but nothing escaped.

She came in a series of jarring explosions.

If she had been capable of tears, Natasha would have cried, but her body did it for her. Renee continued to drink as Natasha's body ripped itself apart. They held on to each other tightly, reveling in the delectable aftershocks.

Natasha moaned deeply at the sudden release of the vice around her neck. It was a pleasurable pain that she hadn't known she would miss until now. Natasha took a moment to savor it as the world righted itself.

Eyes met and time stopped for a little while longer. Memories, acknowledgement, and apprehension passed between them. For Natasha, they were too heavy. She leaned in for a soft kiss in hopes of dispelling the swirl of emotions and extending the peace between them a moment longer. When she pulled away, the look of love filling and brightening Renee's eyes sent bone-chilling fear through her, pushing her into an immediate tailspin. *I trusted what those eyes said once. I do not think I can again. What was I thinking? It was just a moment of weakness, nothing more. I can't allow it to be more.*

Just like that, for Natasha, the moment had passed. The fear awakened a deep ache that moved slowly from her chest to her extremities. The love was there. The need was there, but the fear usurped it all.

Blinded by what she was feeling, Renee rained kisses onto Natasha's face and hugged her tightly. *She has to know what I am feeling right now. My words are not enough.* She extended her mind, hoping to reach her lover's. She gasped when her efforts were rebuffed. "Tasha?"

Natasha, visibly shaken, scrambled out of bed. "This was a mistake."

Renee bristled at the statement, but decided to remain calm in hopes that it would not lead to another battle in the war they had been fighting.

"You wanted this... needed this... just as much as I did."

"Maybe so, but it does not change anything between us. I cannot bring myself to completely forgive what you did to me or to those women out of some misguided need for revenge." Natasha scanned the room for her clothes.

To Renee, the situation was eerily similar to one so long ago. The feelings of desolation and rejection left her suddenly drained, as if she had lived ten-thousand years.

"I was right. You are going to hold this against me for eternity." Her voice was flat and emotionless.

"I don't know, Renee. I just know that right now, today, I am not ready. I don't mean to cause you more pain, and I hate myself for it. Right now, I just need to push everything that I'm feeling down deep until I can deal with it a piece at a time."

Sounding more hollow by the moment, Renee replied. "I think that I understand what you're saying. I don't have to like it, but I understand." Renee paused and uttered the words that she knew Natasha had been waiting to hear. "You are right. What I did to those women... will not happen again. I can't go on like this. Nothing is getting better. In fact, it's only gotten worse," she said with conviction.

Natasha peered at her and frowned.

"What? You don't believe me?" Renee asked.

"It's not that. Am I missing something here? The way you sound —"

"I don't know how to make this more sincere for you. I'm sure it will make no difference anyway." Rattled and hurt by the line of questioning, Renee looked away.

"I'm sorry. I —" Natasha's mouth snapped shut, and she nodded her head in acknowledgment. "Good, I'm glad to hear that you mean this."

Numbness took over Renee. She was an empty shell; nothing existed. She felt herself shrinking, and it further loosened her tongue. "I've been thinking so much about our time together lately," Renee muttered in the same distant voice as she watched Natasha put on her shoes. "But it is right here at this moment that I realized something. You were right about everything, Tasha. I am so sorry that I've made your existence so miserable. I was wrong in doing this to you."

Natasha moved her head to the side and squinted. Renee could see the disbelief and skepticism hammered into Natasha's expression. It hurt, but at the moment, agony was her best friend.

"Save the pity party, Renee."

Renee took a deep, needless breath. "You had so much beauty inside you once, and now, it is all anger. That is my doing. I know that you're not ready to hear those words now, but just know that they've been said."

Natasha walked toward the door and stood there. "Maybe it is too late to apologize."

Renee turned away from the door and whispered as she heard it close, "Maybe it is."

Her eyes closed and her brow wrinkled in confusion as she felt sudden wetness against her skin. She wiped at it and peered down to see streaks of blood on her hands. A droplet hit the sheets, and she looked down in wonder as the bloody tears fell. It was yet again a momentous occasion as she did something she had not known she was capable of: crying. Sorrow replaced

the numbness. It made her heavy, tired. There was nothing else for her body, her mind to do but to shut down.

CHAPTER 8

FOR NATASHA, THE streetcar ride home offered no solace. Her thoughts were in turmoil and remained so as she entered her own foyer.

Hearing the door open, Remy turned down the television and called out his friend's name. On automatic pilot, Natasha followed the sound of his voice.

"I'm here." Her head was down, hiding her face.

Remy got up from the couch and moved closer. He examined the woman standing in front of him. He traced her form from head to toe, as if sensing that there was something different about her. After a few more seconds, he burst into laughter. "So you took my advice... in a roundabout way, that is," Remy said.

"I was weak and just so tired of hurting her." Her head remained bowed as if ashamed.

"Well, at least something good came out —"

Natasha shook her head and met his gaze. "Nothing changes. She can't be trusted."

"Whoa, you really are scared, or she is some piece of ass."

Before Remy could utter another word, he was pinned against the wall. Natasha's eyes blazed.

Remy's expression was one of indifference. "I guess we both know which one it is."

Natasha sighed and let him go. "Sometimes you go too far."

He chuckled again. "Sometimes you need me to."

"Maybe." Natasha paused. "She said a lot of things tonight. She admitted to being wrong about everything."

"I've never met her, but from what I've learned about her, that's kinda big."

"Still, I cannot trust her. I'm not sure that I know how, no matter how sorry she seemed."

Remy patted his friend on the shoulder. "I think you're making a mistake here. You won't love again because you can't get over her. It's a Shakespearian tragedy in the making. Don't let it end like one. Forgive her. You have eternity to learn to trust each other again."

"It's not that simple, Remy."

Suddenly tired of the situation and Natasha's stubbornness, Remy's tone became harsh, "Yes it is! My God, you're acting like children, but even they let things go! This could be your last chance here. Grow some balls, Nat! Or you're going to be alone while the rest of the world goes on without you."

Remy waited for a reply. When none was forthcoming, he peered at Natasha. Her face looked as though it was carved in stone. She gave nothing away. Irritated, he waved her away. "I'm going out. I'll see you later."

Natasha rubbed a hand over her face. She had no idea what to do. Her heart had lied to her before and her head had become so confused that it actually hurt. *At least she will not hurt another woman needlessly. That was the reason for my visit, after all, Natasha lied to herself smoothly. Maybe sleep will give me a different perspective on things. For some reason, I don't think she'll be visiting my dreams this time.*

* * *

By the fourth ring, Jordan was aggravated. He drummed his fingers on the desk and nearly shouted when a voice finally appeared.

"This better be good," a sleepy voice whispered.

"Shut up, Willy, and listen."

"Oh, hey Chief. I didn't look at the caller ID."

"I don't have all night so let me get straight to the point. Get some men together and raid The Lion's Den as soon as you

can. Plant some evidence and arrest everyone that you see. Find out who her right hand is. Someone will crack eventually and tell you. Then, use him to set an example, and oh, make sure you leave a nice calling card. I want this bitch to come to me so angry that she won't see what I've got planned for her until it's right in her face."

"You sure this is gonna work?"

"It'll work. Don't be a pussy. She sleeps during the day," Jordan answered.

"It still sounds a little risky."

"Don't worry. I have a little surprise planned."

"Whateva you say, Chief. Whateva you say," Willy said.

* * *

Charlotte sat in her office, combing over the books for the club. She smiled, knowing Renee would be pleased with the profit, despite already having more money than God. She removed her glasses and picked up her cup, sipping at the last vestiges of coffee. Charlotte cringed. It had gotten cold and chicory was ghastly when it was cold. She rose from her chair, intent on getting a refill.

A frantic pounding halted her progress.

"For God's sake, come in. No need to beat the door down."

It was one of the bartenders. He had come in extra early to deal with a midday delivery. He leaned against the door. His face was as white as a sheet and his breath was ragged.

"What —"

"The police are here!" he whispered harshly.

"What? That doesn't make sense...." She paused as understanding dawned. "Shit! Slip out the back if you can. I have to go see if I can do something to stop this."

He nodded and refused to move as she reached the door. Charlotte looked at him in disgust. "Stop all the blubbering and get out of my way!"

He nearly jumped a foot in the air before complying.

Charlotte walked down the short corridor. She sucked in a deep breath in order to center herself. This was not going to be pretty. When she opened the door to the main part of the club, a familiar face smirked back at her.

"You're really pretty, especially without the glasses. It's a shame that you're a freak. What kind of person works for a demon?"

A slow smile crept over Charlotte's face as she remembered one of the vampire's lessons. *When your back is against the wall, smile. It will keep them guessing.* "William, isn't that your name?" She paused as he nodded. "I've found that we freaks are the best kind of people there is." The grin remained. "Let's just get to the point of this little visit."

Willy's smirk remained. "Let me guess, you're her right-hand man?"

"You're not stupid, no matter how much you look it. You'll find nothing here. We do not engage in illegal —"

Willy interrupted. "Damn, that was easy. Thought you were just the gopher first time I saw you." He nodded his head toward one of his men.

Charlotte nearly doubled over as his fist slammed into her stomach. Tears prickled her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Slowly, she began to breathe again as she raised to her full height. At that moment, she knew this was going to end badly. She always knew that dealing with Renee was going to be a death sentence, just not this kind. Resignation settled over her. "It's going to be that way?"

Willy nodded, "Yep, it is. Oh, by the way, you shouldn't leave your coke behind the bar. It was so easy to find, despite the fact that we planted it.

Charlotte looked him square in the eyes. "You have no idea what you're doing and what she is capable of. She'll pay you more than he ever will. I'll see to it. You can just walk away."

Willy laughed. "Are you kidding me? I'd be done in this town. We all would. This... This shit is easy."

Feeling no need to be civilized any longer, Charlotte lashed out at the men around her, intent on taking a few down with her. Her hands and feet moved in deadly arcs, incapacitating a good number of men around her. Unfortunately, they kept coming. Charlotte knew that this was a set up, pure and simple, to continue the war that Renee herself had started. There would be no easy out.

Charlotte was never been one to take that path anyway.

Renee had taken very good care of her. She had never been just some human latching onto a vampire. Charlotte knew she was the closest thing Renee had to a friend, no matter how much the vampire denied it. She had functioned as a confidant when it was needed. At that moment, Charlotte realized that Renee fit that description too. She had made many enemies to get to her position and made many, many more in order to stay there. Renee was the only one who treated her with respect, watching and admiring Charlotte's climb to the top.

It was a small consolation.

A gun fired and searing pain spread through Charlotte's abdomen. She reached for the area, pressing down on it. Blood oozed through her fingers at an incredible rate. She felt light-headed and weak.

Unable to stand any longer, she fell to the floor.

Willy shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it's not exactly how he wanted it, but what the fuck? It's done. Left one hell of a calling card, too." He looked at his colleague and they both laughed. He glanced around at the rest of his men as they picked themselves up from the floor. "Punk asses, all of ya. Round up all the live bodies you can find. I'm sure they're hiding somewhere. Then let's get the fuck outta here."

CHAPTER 9

WELL ENSCONCED IN her haven, Renee awakened.

The sounds of the night filtered in through the habitually open window. She tilted her head, extending her hearing to take in almost the entire club. It was dangerously, uncharacteristically quiet. Her senses prickled, and for the moment, she forgot about the shambles her life was in and concentrated on the eerie stillness. Renee rose from the bed and moved around the hidden room quickly, pulling on clothes. Her mind was a whirl of endless possibilities, but she settled on one.

Something was wrong.

With amazing speed, she whisked through the long hallway watching for shadows, sniffing for scents, and listening for strange voices.

There was nothing.

As she neared the door leading to her entrance to the main part of the club, a familiar scent accosted her. Fangs extended on instinct. She took the scent in deeper, noticing the particular tang of bile and excrement. Reaching past that was someone more familiar. Alarmed, Renee opened the door. Crouching down low, she scanned the area and found it free of threats.

"Charlotte? Are you hurt badly?" she whispered.

There was no answer save a watery gurgling sound. Renee lifted her head, realizing that the sound and the smell were coming from the same area. Renee followed the scent and then froze in horror. Charlotte lay by the bar, clutching her stomach. The blood had lessened to a slow trickle, but it covered the floor and her as if it belonged there. The gurgle was Charlotte's death rattle.

"Charlotte! No!"

Renee rushed to her side, ignoring the mess she nearly slipped in. She cradled her assistant's head in her lap. "I'm so sorry. If the wound had been fresh, I could have turned you, saved you. I'm so sor-ry." Her voice broke with emotion.

Nearly sightless eyes stared up at her. Charlotte's mouth opened and the only thing to escape was blood.

Then, there was nothing.

Renee felt the life leave the room. With wide, uncertain eyes, she glanced around the room and suddenly realized that she was now utterly, completely alone. "No," she muttered and began to shake the body. "No, you have to wake up!" The feelings of isolation and forced solitude were overwhelming, nearly choking her.

Charlotte's head rolled lifelessly to the side.

"I can't do this by myself. Wake up!" Her tone was desperate, needy. Renee shook harder, and only when she heard bones cracking did she stop. She peered at her assistant's body in astonishment. Looking closer, Renee noticed a piece of paper sticking out slightly between one of Charlotte's fingers. She reached for it and read it in utter disbelief.

"Your move, bitch."

Anger simmered slowly into a boiling, bubbling rage. It filled the void left from the previous night. It overran the chaos of the past fifty years. Renee welcomed it, knowing there was nothing else. The monster she knew she was capable of being unfurled, devouring the last vestiges of her humanity.

The physical transformation was painful. Her face and body contorted as her skin thickened and turned to a mottled gray. Searing agony pierced her head as her ears formed to points and her hair felt as though it was being ripped from her scalp. Fangs and nails grew to an animal-like length. Renee shook as she concentrated on holding onto her last rational thought. Then she rose, letting the body drop uselessly to the floor.

Not looking back, she exited the club and raced through the French Quarter toward the Garden District.

* * *

Remy whistled as he added the pickles to his roast beef po' boy. He turned to put the jar back in the refrigerator and nearly screamed as a form peered back at him through the screen door.

Renee brought a finger to her lips, then beckoned him outside. He glanced at his watch and frowned. There were only a few more minutes until Natasha awakened. Given that his friend's social circle was only made of two individuals, Remy made an educated guess. "I'm going to assume that you're Renee?" he asked as he stepped outside.

"Remy?" Renee's voice was strained.

"Yeah, how did you know where to find us? How do you know who I am?"

"Char —" she stumbled over her name, "... did some digging."

"Why are you here? She's going to be up in a few minutes, and she didn't exactly come home last night soaring on cloud nine," Remy said.

"I know. She was always a late riser, even when she was human, but this isn't about her," Renee answered, avoiding his last statement.

"Then, wha —?"

"I need you to go to the parish jail in the morning and bail my people out and get them lawyers," Renee said.

"What? What are you talking about?" he asked in confusion.

"Charlotte's dead. The police superintendent... No. This is my fault; all of it. It could have been prevented, but there's no going back now. Just do it!" Renee hissed. Her control was waning. Her features were dark and unrecognizable. "You'll

find all the money you need in the safe back at the club." She gave him the combination. Her voice deepened and became raspier. "Divide what is left between them." She backed away.

For the first time in twenty years in a vampire's presence, Remy was afraid. Renee no longer looked human.

"Uh, none of this makes sense." His voice shook.

"It does not have to. Just do this and I promise you that it's the end of her suffering. She will not see me again."

Remy swallowed. "Alright. What do I tell her about this?"

"It does not matter. Just make sure you do what you've promised. I have to do right by someone."

Remy nodded. He opened his mouth to speak again but realized he was alone. "Damn."

* * *

Remy glared at his po' boy. The craving was long gone. The sound of footsteps heading his way distracted him from food all together. The kitchen door swung open as Natasha entered.

"Thought I'd find you in here." Her appearance was bedraggled and her voice distant, tired.

Remy didn't answer.

"Remy?"

"Let's step outside for some air. Looks like you need it. It's a beautiful night."

"Alright, if we must." Natasha's tone was hesitant, confused.

As she followed him out, a familiar scent assailed her. Her nostrils flared. Natasha growled. "She was here!"

Remy merely nodded. He had intended for it to be the perfect segue.

Natasha grabbed her friend by his shirt. "Why?"

He told her everything.

"That doesn't make sense. Unless —"

"What?" Remy asked.

"Remember when we talked about the possibility of her antics angering the wrong kind of people?" Natasha asked.

"Yeah, she started to say something about the police superintendent. I'm assuming it has something to do with that. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"I'll start there then."

"Nat, why are you even going to bother?"

Natasha's bravado faltered. "I don't know. Part of me feels obligated to stop this and part of me is angry at her for putting herself on this path. I can't just leave things like this... leave her like this. Someone needs to save her from herself."

"You forgot the most important reason." The statement hung in the air between them. Remy decided to give her a break. "Something else too. She looked different. I know I've never met her before tonight, but I know what you look like with your game face on. This wasn't it."

"What do you mean?" Natasha asked urgently.

"I mean that she didn't even look human. It was scary as hell."

"Damn it! I had a hand in this. I have to fix it. She'll stay like that. There will be nothing human left. She'll just be an animal full of instinct, violence, and the need for blood."

"Be careful, Nat. I don't think any of this is going to end well."

* * *

Jordan left his door wide open as he trailed the woman into his office. The plan was simple, really. He expected her soon. It was night, after all. He could almost taste satisfaction. It was not that his niece was killed; this was an added bonus. It gave him license to do what he wanted. Truth be told, he didn't much care for the stupid little bitch. It was that someone had

the audacity to cross him in the first place. She had to pay in the worst way possible and be put in her place.

After the building was cleared, he rigged the door that led to the stairwell to slam, no matter how softly it was opened. With his door open, Jordan could always hear the elevator ding. He had complained about it more than once. He smirked to himself. *Simple as pie. Either way, I'll know that she's there.*

"Thank you for meeting with me so late, Sister. I appreciate it," Jordan said.

"That's not a problem. It's only just nine o'clock, but I still don't understand why you wanted to speak with me. I'm new at the convent and pretty much low man on the totem pole." She laughed at her own joke. Her creamy complexion lightened further as she smiled.

Because nobody would miss you. New Orleans is the murder capital, after all. "Is that why you're not wearing your habit?"

"No, not at all. When you explained your plans to me. I thought it best to show you that I could look like those in the community you are trying to reach. I don't want to intimidate them by wearing my full garb right away."

"That's understandable. I figured it would be better to talk to someone more impartial about this — a clean slate so to speak — to get a better perspective, and a diverse one too. People here take religion seriously, but with the gang violence and black-on-black crime, my officers are at a standstill. I would love to see the few African-American nuns and those of mixed race become more involved in the community. You do look like them, and there's a chance that they will listen to you."

"That makes sense. There aren't many Sisters that look like me. What you're proposing is a little unorthodox, but I've always wanted to be involved in a grassroots campaign to help our children. Although you have to remember, I have to get approval for this kind of thing."

"It's been on my mind for a while now. We're losing the war on the streets, Sister, and I don't like losing wars." The irony of his statement nearly made him smile.

As if on cue, a door slammed. Jordan nearly danced a jig. It was time to start putting his plan in place.

"There's the three of you.... You know, but you are my favorite sister. If I could have stopped what happened, I would have."

"What?" the woman asked, confused.

Renee stepped into the room.

"One of your sisters, hmm? Good, you get to watch while I kill her. Then, when I'm done with you, I'll take your head to your wife." Fury spilled from Renee's every word.

The woman screamed. "What is that thing?"

Jordan would have been a fool if he didn't admit that he was a bit frightened by the vampire's appearance. He was no fool. He swallowed, hard, and beat down the fear. "Ms. Leblanc, meet my half-sister."

"What? I'm not —" the woman exclaimed.

Renee's movement was quick, deadly. She wrapped herself around the woman, tangled her hand into her hair, and yanked painfully. Her mind was blank.

There were no warning bells or moments of rationalization. There was only this kill.

Without another moment's hesitation, she plunged her fangs deep into the woman's neck, drinking her with loud, sloppy slurps. The woman flailed about and let out a blood-curdling scream that cut off suddenly as Renee threw her to the floor.

Renee took a step forward, rewarding her next victim with a ghastly smile. "I imagine... your screams will be more feminine than hers."

"Wait for it," Jordan muttered.

A sudden, piercing pain stopped Renee cold. Her throat felt as though it was being crushed. Her skin and insides burned as if someone had filled her veins with lava. The next shriek came from her own throat. "What... What have you done?" She fell to her knees.

Jordan chuckled as he walked from his desk to the mini bar. There was nothing like a good, aged bourbon to celebrate a victory. He poured two fingers' worth and tossed it back, neat. "Well, you see... it always pays to have connections. Guess what I learned? Blood from a holy man — or should I say woman? — doesn't digest too well. In fact —" He nearly danced toward her and peered into fear-filled golden brown eyes. Jordan pulled his arm back, then punched her in the face with as much strength as he could muster.

Renee fell backwards, gasping.

"Now, where was I? Oh, in fact it's one of the only things that kills you. I'm sure you already know the details, but let's go over them anyway." He smacked his lips in glee. "It destroys the demon, and the less human you are the more painful and the slower the death." Jordan clucked his tongue. "And from the looks of you... it's gonna hurt... a lot. It's a shame, too. You were too damn good-looking, and just my type. I love little redheads. Ask my wife." His smile was positively evil. "Oops, that's right, you're not going to get the chance," Jordan taunted.

"Aghhh," Renee whimpered.

"Come on. You can do better than that. Dig deep! Scream for me!" He leaned over her, making forward motions with his hands.

"Ahhhhhhhh!" Renee's body arched into the air as if yanked by a string.

"That's what I like to hear!"

* * *

The door to the plaza opened easily. She studied the large plaque covered with names, office numbers, and extensions until she found the one she wanted.

Natasha dashed up the stairs. They seemed to go on forever. As she neared the floor housing the superintendent's office, she extended her senses. Immediately, she knew something was horribly wrong.

The sound of her lover's scream solidified it.

Within seconds she stood in the doorway, watching with wide, disbelieving eyes, as a tall, hulk of a man stood over Renee. With a mighty yell, Natasha launched herself in the air, plowing into Jordan. Their bodies collided with the wall, leaving a body-sized impression.

"What the fuck!" So consumed was he with Renee, he didn't hear the door open again. Jordan coughed and wheezed, then lost his breath completely as strong hands encased his throat.

Bright green eyes glared wildly, her expression frenzied. "What did you do to her?"

Jordan gasped. "Who-who are you?"

"I am your death if you don't tell me what I need to know!" She shook the burly man like a rag doll. The smell of death catapulted her into a swirl of emotion. The pain, the past, and the manipulations seemed infinitesimal.

Remy had been right.

Forgiveness was the way. It was the path to the happiness they once knew. In the face of her lover's death, she finally understood what was most important. Violence exploded from within and Natasha knew that at this moment, there was nothing she would not do for even a ghost of a chance to have some semblance of life again.

"Ahhh!" Renee yelled as her body shook.

Natasha released him suddenly and rushed to Renee's side. She cradled Renee into her chest. "I'm here. I know it hurts."

Renee's eyes rolled to the back of her head. Her chest heaved. She dug her nails into Natasha's arm as agony passed. Renee let out a choking laugh. "He... he doesn't know that he... has done me a favor. T-thank him... for me... will you?"

"This is crazy! You don't mean that!"

Renee whimpered. "Yesss.... I do. I can't go on anymore. Not like this."

"Let me handle this. Don't try to speak. Rest now."

Jordan watched the display in confusion, then understanding. He scrambled up from the floor. His eyes frantically searched for an escape. He had moved only a couple of steps before his body was in a vice-like grip again.

Natasha's eyes were alight with rage. "You will tell me what you've done. Now!" Her grip tightened and dug into his skin.

Jordan shuddered and Natasha knew it was fear. She knew the man was a coward. Natasha could smell it on him like cheap, cloying cologne. She made the conscious decision to use that fear, as well as pain, to get the information she needed.

"S-she drank from a... nun."

Natasha roared. "Do you have any idea what you've done? How did you find out about this?"

Jordan simpered, "I-I... wanted to win. She started this war, but I don't want to die. Please!"

"Tell me! Or I will pull you apart, piece by piece." She punctuated her promise by ripping his right ear completely from his head. She threw the useless piece of skin onto the floor.

"Arghhhhhhhhh!" Jordan screeched and reached for the injury, pressing his hand against the open wound.

"Tell me and I will make it quick. You have my word. This is the only way. You know too much. You've done too much."

Despite her words, Jordan screwed his eyes shut and begged for his life once more. "Please don't kill me. I'll tell you... everything." He paused trying to recover his breath. Cocodrie... Aunt Sissy... island in bay. She only... has 'til morn... ing." Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Please... don't kill —"

Ignoring his pleas, she kept her promise. With a satisfying crunch, Natasha snapped his neck, letting the body flop to the ground. Her hands were shaking as she reached for the phone.

It only rang twice.

"Yeah?"

"I'll be there momentarily. I'm bringing Renee.... She's hurt badly." Her tone was calm, hiding the unspeakable turmoil churning inside.

"Sleep will probably heal —"

"No, Remy. She's dying." She cringed inwardly. "I need you to look after her. I only have until morning to find some answers."

"But —" A dial tone greeted him.

"Damn."

* * *

Natasha held onto Renee tightly as she sped through the streets. Light and sound streaked by her, but she could still feel the violence from her lover's body. Renee's body jerked and convulsed. She was beyond pain, beyond screaming. She merely mewled like a wounded animal.

"Don't do this to me, Renee," Natasha whispered over and over again.

A few short minutes later, Remy met her in the foyer. He gasped at Renee's appearance laid bare in the artificial light. Her face had aged, weathered, and taken on what he could only describe as animal-like features. Her skin was a mottled gray.

"Christ, Nat."

"I know. I don't have much time. Take her to my room. Make her as comfortable as possible." Natasha spoke with a confidence she did not feel. Hopelessness crashed down, but she fought it vehemently.

"Gotcha. Where are you going?"

"Cocodrie."

CHAPTER 10

WITH THE USE of human transportation, it would have taken Natasha at least three hours to reach her destination. She relied on her vampire abilities instead. Her mind was desperate, racing. *It cannot end this way. The rest of me will die with her. My own stubbornness has done this.*

A trail of dust followed her, causing several drivers to stop and watch in fascination as a blur of unexplained activity swished by them. As she entered Cocodrie, relief settled over her, but the urgency rekindled itself.

The town was dark, quiet, and oblivious to her presence.

Natasha reached the docks and peered out toward the water. She saw her goal. Just as the earth had, water churned and splashed behind her. Not sensing danger, Natasha did not knock as she entered the old woman's home.

"Who dat?" a sleepy voice asked.

Instead of answering, Natasha followed the sound into a small, but well-kept bedroom. She stood at the foot of the bed.

"Who dat? I know someone her'."

Natasha knew no introductions were necessary. This was a woman of power, of knowledge. She would know the meaning behind her visit. "You will tell me how to save her. You will help me fix what he did to her."

Sissy sat up in her bed and stared in Natasha's direction.

"Dat so?"

"It is," Natasha hissed.

"Ya don't scare me, Loogaroo. So ya threats mean nothin' her'."

"Please." Natasha's voice cracked and gentled. "I can pay you. I don't want to hurt you. I've killed enough tonight."

Sissy shook her head. "I knew dat man would git his."

"I'm sorry about that, but please help me."

The old woman cackled. "Don't care 'bout dat man. Don't care 'bout ya either. Save yo' money. I got nothin' ta say. Ya straight from da devil you are, and ya need ta go back ta him."

Natasha took a step backward. "I was a woman once, just like you."

Sissy spat in her direction. "I know dat. Don't care how good a woman ya were. Git out. Ya nothin' like me! Git out!"

Natasha flinched. "There are evil people too." With a flick of her wrist, the woman could be dead, but she knew it would not get her anywhere. Natasha expected rage to start in the pit of her stomach, but there was only desolation and acceptance. She had to face the predicament that she had a hand in creating. There were only three hours left until first light, and Natasha wanted Renee's time to be spent in loving arms.

She turned and made her way back outside. The sounds of the night mocked her, and the sudden sound of footsteps made her wary.

"Show yourself."

Tammy stepped out from the shadows.

"I heard what she said. I sleep in da other room. She my teacher, but I know she wrong. It not her place ta decide ya fate. Dis power no good for Sissy. Legba needs ta be allowed ta make dat choice. I know ya not evil like she tink. Dar something in ya.... Why else would ya come to find da answers? I can help you, Loogaroo."

"Don't call me that."

"Tis what ya are."

Natasha bowed her head. "I suppose you're right."

"The demon inside her is dying. Ya have ta replace it wit a new one."

"You mean she has to be turned again?"

"No, not so simple. There is a ritual. Use salt and rice ta make a circle around ya. Ya make a sacrifice wit da blood of

opossum, snake, nutria. It don't matta. Pray ta Legba, ask her to bless da ritual and make tings right. Da other one must drink from ya 'til ya almost drained. If it is too li'l, she die. If it is too much, ya die. It has ta be jus' right."

Natasha listened attentively. "How will I know if we have the blessing?"

"Ya both live. If not, ya both die."

"I know nothing about this. Why would some god listen to me?"

"I be wit ya from her'. When ya feel me, jus' do what I say. It must be done in between da night and day.

"If this works, she's taking my demon. Will I be human?"

"Na, ya time has passed. Ya will be different."

"I don't understand. Different how?"

"Dat is up ta Legba."

Natasha swallowed.

"Dis is a risk and a sacrifice." Tammy looked up toward the sky.

Natasha nodded. "Why are you helping me?"

"I told ya. Ya not evil. Ya neva was."

* * *

Remy was surprised when the front door opened. "That was quick."

"Well, when I'm motivated... How much time until sunrise?"

"It's 5:17am now. Sunrise is supposed to be at 5:43am."

"Good. How is she?"

"Honestly, Nat. I wonder if she will make it that long. She's been asking for you." He glanced down at the squirming, rodent-looking animal in Natasha's hand. "Uh, what is that?"

Natasha motioned her friend over with a wave of her hand and shoved the nutria in his direction. "Listen, I need you to get me these items." She motioned him closer and repeated what

she had been told. "Bring them upstairs, and I'll fill you in on the rest."

Remy took the wiggling package. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Keep it alive and bring it with you when you come upstairs. We're going to need it."

With a million questions on his lips, he only nodded and set off toward the kitchen.

* * *

Natasha was utterly shocked at Renee's appearance. Her features were sunken and the skin pulled tight over her cheekbones.

"Ta... sha?" Her voice was thick, raspy.

Natasha crawled into her bed, hovering just beside Renee, not wanting to cause her more pain. "I'm here."

"He... y."

"I'm here, Renee." Natasha leaned closer.

"I'm so... sorry. Never meant to hurt you... so much. You were the one... good thing, and I destroyed it... and you." Renee choked back a moan. "It... hurts." Renee reached out.

Natasha peered into completely dilated pupils. She leaned in, allowing cold, clammy fingertips to brush against her skin. "I know you're sorry, and I am too. I'm going to fix this. I promise."

"J-ust end this... p-please."

Natasha nodded. "I will. You will see. It will end, one way or the other."

Renee gasped and went still.

Remy cleared his throat. "What do you need me to do?"

"Sprinkle the salt and rice in a circle around the bed."

"O-kay. What about the rat?"

"It's a nutria, and unfortunately, it is our offering."

Remy just stared.

"Just do it, Remy, and no matter what you see, I don't think you're supposed to interfere."

"Gotcha and no more questions, except one: What are we doing?"

Natasha sighed. "Some kind of ritual. Do not worry. We're going to have help. I guess that I'll know when she is ready to start."

Remy nodded.

"One more thing. If we survive this, I imagine we're both going to be out of it for a while. Do what Renee asked you to do and then get us out of here. I don't care where. I just know that this is not the best place to be right now." Natasha paused. "If we don't, clean out the accounts and get out of here, but not before you burn this place to the ground. Do you understand me?"

His eyes widened. "I don't know —"

"There is nothing left on this earth for me if it doesn't work out. What I've been doing; it wasn't living. Even you know that. You've told me so many times."

He sucked in a deep breath. He was surprised by her admission, sadden by the possibilities, and proud to have helped his friend along the way. "Okay, whatever you need. I'm your man."

Natasha smiled sadly in his direction. "No, you're not, but I love you just the same."

Remy blushed and began to pour the rice and salt on the floor as instructed.

* * *

Many miles away, Tammy lit candles and readied the altar, as well as her dagger. She studied the circle drawn around her and nodded, knowing that it was perfection. She brought the crucifix to her lips and kissed it. The opossum in the cage

beside her hissed. Tammy opened the cage, pulling the animal out. The hissing stopped as she began chanting.

A humming energy filled Natasha. She sat up in the bed and peered at Remy. "I feel something. I think it's time."

Remy sucked in a deep breath and held the rodent over the circle.

Natasha's body arched forward as the humming became a sizzling electric current. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

Remy watched on with anxiety and concern etched into his features

Renee lay as still as death.

Natasha fought the sudden overwhelming feeling of displacement.

"No, let me in," a familiar voice ordered.

Natasha surrendered.

"Through me ya will tell ya story and pray fo' what ya need."

An ear-piercing screech reverberated around the room as Natasha's past flashed before her eyes. Pain, violence, and grief swirled around her.

"I see it all. Now say ya prayer and ask for da blessin'."

Natasha's mouth opened, but the words would not come.

"No need ta speak. Ya will be heard."

"Please, she doesn't deserve this. It's my doing. I can make things right. Let me have the chance to make things right."

"Now! Let her feed!"

Natasha scrambled up on all fours, hovering over Renee. She leaned back on her knees and used a fingernail to slit her wrist. Blood dripped onto Renee's face. As it reached her mouth, Renee's tongue snaked out in need. Natasha pressed her wrist to her lover's lips, and the suction was intense. She could feel herself weakening, and the compulsion to pull away was overwhelming, but she resisted.

The world around her blackened.

CHAPTER 11

SHE STOOD TALL on the cliff overlooking the lush valley filled with majestic verdant trees, drinking in the colors that lit the twilight sky. Never had she seen such vibrant reds and oranges. It covered the area around her in a dusky hue, making it almost surreal. Natasha felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned.

"It's still so hard to believe. How is it possible?" Remy asked.

"She said that I would be changed, but I would not be human again."

"But you're able to be out in the sunlight with no pain, no damage. Most of all, you don't need to feed anymore," Remy marveled.

"Yes, I do, but it's not the compulsion that it used to be. I need it. I won't have to hunt every night now, but someone still has to die for me to live."

"Mmm, I imagine that this is a small relief for you. I know how hard it is for you to... do that." Remy beamed at his friend. "Some other good news. She looks completely human now, as much as she can anyway. She's probably going to wake up soon."

Natasha smiled. The muscles required for the act felt rusty and underused. "Good, I'm glad to hear that. We have much to discuss."

Remy shook his head. "Man, I don't think I've ever seen you look like that."

They both turned at the sound of a door creaking open.

Remy smirked. "Well, I'll leave you to that talk."

* * *

Renee peered at Remy. His smirk extended to her. Hesitantly, she nodded in greeting before getting lost in green eyes.

"I-I could not help but overhear. Is it true?"

"Yes."

"What does it feel like to see the sun again?" Renee's gaze was envious.

Natasha beckoned her closer with an outstretched hand. Renee glanced at it uncertainly. *It is alright.*

Renee gasped and ran into open arms. She clung to Natasha for what seemed like an eternity. There were so many things she wanted to say, but did not know how. *Where are we?*

The mountains in North Carolina.

How long was I asleep?

Two days.

Their gazes met and held. Renee was the first to look away. She pressed her face into Natasha's neck. *I don't know what to say or where to start.*

Neither do I.

Where does that leave us?

At the beginning, all over again? Natasha asked.

I suppose so, but I don't want it to be like it was before. It can't be. I can't be.

Natasha's arms tightened. *I agree completely. It won't be easy... this road.*

You're right, but we didn't go through all of this for nothing. It means something that we're standing here... together.

Natasha quieted, letting each word roll over her, fill her, and begin to heal her. Finally, she spoke again. "You wanted to know what the sun was like?"

Renee only nodded.

"It makes me feel warm and alive. I get the same feeling when I look at you now."

Renee looked up. The expression on Natasha's face was full of hope, forgiveness, and acceptance. It was enough to make Renee's tenuous grasp on humanity permanent.

The End

About the Author

After living in New Orleans for four years, KD, better known as Minerva, migrated to North Carolina after Hurricane Katrina with her partner, two pugs with Napoleon complexes, and a cat who thinks that he's human. Minerva has worked in the mental health field with children for over ten years. She has been writing since college. She enjoys a good story, a good laugh with friends, and a good video game.

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