



DARK PASSION

Volume Three in the Brethren Series

SARA REINKE

Dark Passion

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DARK PASSION

By Sara Reinke

BOOK THREE IN THE BRETHERN SERIES

CHAPTER ONE

The average rainfall in South Lake Tahoe, California, was only slightly more than eight inches a year, but Eleanor was willing to bet that they were getting it all in one fell swoop, judging by the full-fledged downpour that beat a heavy, thunderous beat against the roof of the Range Rover.

A willowy brunette with shadow-cast eyes, Eleanor sat in the passenger seat, seatbelt still latched in place, her thick cascade of hair drawn back, fastened with a faux tortoise-shell clip at the nape of her neck. Her body was thin, her complexion pale, her fingers wiry as she twined them together restlessly against the nest of her lap. Her clothes seemed to hang on her much as they might have a dry cleaner's rack, loose and ill-fitting, accentuating the gaunt haggardness that marred what otherwise would have been a face of striking, nearly mesmerizing beauty.

By contrast, Naima, the woman sitting behind the Rover's wheel, had dark brown skin and chocolate-colored eyes, her black hair sheared so closely to her scalp it looked more like a shadow draping the pate of her ebony skin. Her body was long and strong, all elegant lines and muscular curves. She, too, was beautiful, her features chiseled, nearly regal.

Together, the pair watched the Heavenly Motor Lodge, an older motel built in Tudor Revival style. With a fading white stucco and exposed hardwood trim façade, it was a relatively nondescript building made all the more lackluster by the shroud of rain. There wasn't much to see. A housekeeper pushed a wheeled cart, heavy with stacks of folded white linens and paper-wrapped rolls of toilet paper, along the awning-covered walkway. A young African American woman, her skin a lighter hue than Naima's, had returned shortly before the rain had begun; dressed in a sweat suit, she'd obviously been out for a morning jog. No one else had yet to venture out and brave the weather.

The woman had ducked into one of the motel rooms, but emerged now, nearly twenty minutes later, redressed in blue jeans and a long-sleeved fleece pullover. They watched as she followed the walkway to a neighboring door some distance from her own, then raised her fist and knocked loudly against the wood.

“Who is that, do you suppose?” Eleanor murmured, as the windshield wipers slid against the glass in sweeping arcs, awarding her a brief glimpse of the girl that was quickly obscured by a fresh pelting of raindrops.

“Her name is Angelina Jones,” Naima replied as the motel room door opened and the young black woman ducked quickly inside. She used her telepathic abilities with an abandon that would have been frowned upon among the Brethren of Kentucky. Without inhibition or reservation, she’d open her mind and glean whatever she wanted or needed to know. “They call her Lina. She’s traveling with them.” She cut a glance at Eleanor. “She’s sleeping with Brandon.”

The motel room door opened again, and a man stepped briefly past the threshold. He panned his gaze, looking around the parking lot, his brows drawn, his mouth turned in a frown.

“That must be Rene,” Eleanor said.

“Yes.” Eleanor didn’t have to look at Naima to know she was frowning. It was obvious in her voice. “It must.”

“He senses us.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Naima shook her head. “He can’t. I’m blocking him.”

“That won’t work, will it?” Eleanor asked as, again, the wipers cut a clear path on the windshield. “He’s like you.”

“No.” Naima’s frown deepened. “He’s not.”

The man, Rene, went inside again, closing the door behind him.

“Let’s go.” Eleanor reached for her seatbelt, unbuckling the latch. “It’s almost noon. Surely they’re up by now.”

“You promised you’d wait,” Naima said, catching her by the coat sleeve, her dark eyes wide with sudden alarm.

“No, I *said* I would wait.” She flapped her arm, dislodging Naima’s hand. “I never promised anything.”

She opened the truck door and got out, slamming it on Naima's startled, sputtered protest. The rain was on her immediately, pounding the top of her head, beating against her shoulders, soaking her, and she drew the back of her parka up vainly by the collar, trying to shield herself as she scurried across the parking lot.

When she reached the shelter of the covered walkway running the length of the motel, Naima caught her again. Winded and drenched, the two women stood together, shivering, puddles of rain pooling on the sidewalk beneath them.

"We have to go back," Naima said, water spattering from her lips. "You'll need your treatment soon. Michel made me promise—"

"I'm fine. Michel is a mother hen." Eleanor pressed her fingertips to her thumb, a crude shape meant to simulate a bird's beak, which she then used to poke at Naima's arm. "Peck, peck, peck. I don't have time for his incessant nagging."

She turned, but Naima's fingers coiled against her coat, stopping her once more. "The man in that room..." Naima cut her eyes toward the motel room door, her expression grim. "He has a gun."

Eleanor smiled, the corner of her mouth hooking. "You won't let him shoot me."

When she turned, walking toward the motel room door, Naima didn't try to stop her. "No, but I should," she muttered as she followed, loud enough for Eleanor to hear.

As Eleanor raised her hand to knock on the door, it flew open wide, startling her. It took her a wide-eyed, surprised moment to realize she stood face to face with the business end of a pistol, one that was aimed with lethal emphasis squarely between her eyes. On the other end of the gun—visible only through her peripheral vision because she was too busy gawking at the barrel, or rather, the black, fathomless hole in the center of it—stood Rene, the man they'd seen earlier in the doorway, his dark blond hair swept messily about his face, his brows furrowed deeply, hiding his eyes in heavy shadows.

"Bon jour," he said, his voice low and menacing. Beyond his shoulder, Eleanor caught a glimpse of the young woman, Angelina Jones, and another girl, pale-skinned and dark haired, sitting against the edge of the bed, looking as weak and exhausted as Eleanor felt.

Tessa.

"Bang," Rene said, his fingertip against the trigger, flexing inward to fire. "You're dead, *chère.*"

Naima was on him before his finger finished folding. She shoved her hand forward, and he flew through the air like he'd been jerked back by an invisible set of strings. He sailed across the motel room, crashing into a large mirror over the vanity sink, shattering the glass. With a breathless grunt, he crumpled face-first onto the ground, surrounded by a shower of tinkling, glittering shards, the gun knocked from his hand.

"Rene!" the young woman, Tessa, cried, scrambling to her feet. Naima's eyes had rolled over to black, her pupils widening. As she whipped her head around to face Lina and Tessa, her jaw snapped open wide, her fangs distending.

"Jesus!" Lina grabbed the nearest, closest approximation to a weapon she could find—a brass floor lamp. "Tessa, get behind me!" she cried, swinging the lamp like a baseball bat, sending the weighted rectangular base smashing into the side of Naima's head, knocking her sideways, stunning her. When she moved to swing it again, Naima thrust her hand out, and the lamp was wrenched violently from Lina's grasp.

Lina skittered backwards, her eyes wide with shock and fright, and she blinked at the lamp dangling in the air, whirling in sharp, snapping circles above her head. "What the...?" she gasped, gawking between the lamp and Naima. "What the fuck—?"

She might have said more, but her voice cut short in a startled yelp as Rene staggered to his feet and tackled Naima, breaking her concentration. The lamp toppled to the floor, causing Lina to dance clumsily out of its path while Rene and Naima landed heavily against the carpet. Like hers, his pupils had

swollen, swallowing his eyes with blackness, and his fangs had fully dropped. They grappled together, and Rene straddled her, one hand clamped heavily against her throat, the other drawn back, his fist poised to strike.

“Naima!” Eleanor cried, just as Naima gathered her wits and telekinetically shoved Rene from atop her, slamming him up against the ceiling and pinning him there, nearly spread-eagle and immobilized against the plaster.

At the sound of Eleanor’s voice, Tessa turned, seeing her clearly for the first time. Her eyes widened, the alarmed color that had risen in her cheeks draining abruptly to ashen.

“Tessa...” Rene gritted his teeth, the tendons in his neck standing out as he strained against Naima’s invisible hold, struggling to move. His face was riddled with cuts and scrapes from the broken mirror, rivulets of blood streaming in thin lines down his forehead from his scalp. “Lina...both of you...run!”

Eleanor had been looking at Tessa, at the sudden, tussling flood of emotions in the girl’s face as she had recognized her—shock, grief, disbelief, joy and, inexplicably, outrage—but her eyes snapped toward Lina at the *click* of a gun hammer being drawn back. Again, she found herself facing the barrel of Rene’s pistol, only this time, Lina wielded it, swinging it wildly between Eleanor and Naima, her eyes enormous with panic, her arm shaking with fright.

“Let him go!” she shouted at Naima, her voice hoarse and shrill.

Naima met her gaze coolly. The lamp base had busted open her bottom lip and she brushed her fingertips gingerly against the wound, dabbing at the blood.

“I said let him go!” Lina cried. “Do it now or I’ll shoot!”

“Lina...!” Rene gasped, still pinned above her head, his face flushed with the effort to move now. His eyes rolled desperately toward Tessa. “Tessa...for God’s sake...run!”

“I’m a police officer!” The pistol shook violently in Lina’s hand, and she clasped it with her free one as well, struggling to steady her aim. “I’ll shoot you, I swear to fucking Christ! Whatever you’re doing...whatever the fuck you are, bitch...let him go. *Now!*”

“It’s alright.” Tessa stepped directly into Lina’s line of sight, moving between the pistol, Eleanor and Naima, her hands outstretched. “Lina, put the gun down.”

Lina stared at Tessa, dumbfounded, not lowering the pistol. “Are you crazy? Tessa, get out of the way!”

“Lina, please,” Tessa said. “Put the gun down. It’s alright.” She turned to the doorway, to Eleanor and again, Eleanor had no accounting for the anger, bright and apparent, flashing in her dark eyes. “This is my grandmother.”

CHAPTER TWO

Augustus Noble pressed his hand against his grandson Brandon's mouth and nose, sealing off his airways and smothering his breath. At this, Brandon, who had lapsed into a state of semi-lucidity induced by blood loss and pain, opened his brown eyes wide, staring up at Augustus in bright, startled awareness. Mute, he couldn't cry out, even muffled, around the heavy clamp of Augustus's palm, and as he suffocated, he raised his hands, blood-smeared and shaking, and groped in feeble protest against Augustus's wrist.

It would be so easy, Augustus thought as Brandon struggled weakly beneath him. The boy had been shot; his right arm was all but immobilized, his shirt and the sheets beneath him soaked in blood. While it wasn't a wound that would prove ultimately fatal, the same could not be said for Augustus's hand.

It would be so easy to watch you die, Augustus thought, because Brandon could hear him, sense his thoughts telepathically and see the murderous fury in his eyes. The dim illumination from the overhead lights in the jet's small sleeping compartment suddenly became dazzling as Augustus's pupils dilated, spreading wide, swallowing the circumference of his visible corneas in blackness. He felt his face flush with blood, his gums throb with sudden, hot engorgement, and his canine teeth extended, dropping into wickedly hooked fangs long enough to force his lips apart, his lower jaw to dislocate from its hinges.

Everything that you've done, he seethed, shoving his hand more firmly against Brandon's face as the boy tried vainly, desperately, to peel his fingers away. Brandon's cheeks had flushed scarlet, nearly violet, his eyes rolling wildly in frantic terror, his hands slapping, tearing at Augustus's. *Everything that you've cost me...everything you might cost me yet...it would be so easy.*

Augustus jerked his hand back, leaving Brandon to gag for sodden breath, writhing against the bed, clutching weakly at his throat. He wiped his palm against the dark wool of his Armani slacks. That moment of rage, of brutal

impulsiveness, was all he would allow himself. The world slipped back into its customary shades of light and darkness, his pupils shrinking once more. His gums ached, his teeth receding as he reclaimed his wits and forced his anger—and the bloodlust it had provoked—to subside.

“It would be too easy,” he whispered as he turned to leave.

Do it... Brandon croaked in his mind. He'd rolled onto his side and grimaced as he shoved his hand beneath him and struggled to raise his head. *Kill me then. Just...just like you did with Grandmother Eleanor...*

Augustus pivoted, meeting his grandson's gaze. “What?” Although his face betrayed no hint of emotion, within him, it felt as if all of the blood had just abruptly drained into his feet, leaving the rest of his body leaden and cold. “What did you say to me?”

You killed her, Brandon said, shuddering with the effort to prop himself upright. *So kill me, too. Go on...do it, you...you son of a bitch.* He crumpled against the bed, his consciousness fading. *It's all...you've ever wanted anyway...*

Stupid boy, Augustus thought, then turned and left the room. *You know nothing about what I want.*

He left the bedroom and locked the door to the adjacent lavatory aboard the Boeing BBJ jet. As he closed the door leading to the main cabin, he ignored the sideways glances from his fellow Brethren Elders as they relaxed in cream-colored leather benches and seats, leaning together and murmuring to one another, quiet conversations to which Augustus had no desire to be privy. He could only imagine what they were discussing; with one in particular, Allistair Davenant, it didn't take much imagination.

They think I'm weak, that Brandon's failings are my own.

There was no disguising the wry smirk on Allistair's face, even from a passing glimpse. The son of a bitch was enjoying this. Every last goddamn minute of it.

Once alone, Augustus leaned heavily against the sink basin. He lowered his head, closing his eyes and letting his breath escape in a long sigh.

You killed her.

He realized he was shaking, a slow but steady tremor working its way through his entire form, and he knitted his brows, bracing his muscles, forcing it from him. After a long moment, he reached beneath the lapel of his suit coat, drawing a photograph, yellowed with time, from an inner pocket.

He gazed at the woman in the image, beautiful and young, with wide, cat-like eyes and a wondrously full mouth. Dressed in a ruffled gown of filmy cream-colored gauze with belted waistline, cap sleeves and plunging V-neck, she wore her hair fashionably short-cropped and pin-curled in dark, glossy waves.

Eleanor.

Christmas, 1932. *It seems like only yesterday*, he thought and lifted the photograph to his nose, drawing in a deep, comforting breath. It was faint, all but faded, but still discernable to him: *Je Reviens* perfume. One inhalation was all it took; the granite façade of his stern exterior faded, the unflinching line of his mouth softening, yielding to a forlorn, nearly wistful smile.

He had lived a long time, long enough for the many passing decades to blur together, and yet he could still recall the night the photograph from his pocket had been taken as if it had been only yesterday, how the fragrance of Eleanor's perfume—flowers, fruit and a light hint of musk—had enveloped him whenever he'd drawn near.

"You're too hard on him."

That's what Eleanor would have told him about Brandon. In fact, she *had* told him this shortly before he'd lost her, while sitting against the bed and watching as he'd paced his bedroom like a surly, malcontent panther.

"He's young," she'd told him, drawing a momentary glower. In his mind, he could hear the rich, sensuous timbre of her voice and see her clearly; she'd been eating a Snickers candy bar—like the perfume, her favorite since the 1930s—and panning her eyes back and forth with his every stride.

It's funny, he thought. *We were married for nearly two hundred years and they seem no more than the blink of an eye to me now. But these three without her...they've stretched on and worn thin, each one lasting an eternity.*

“He’s weak,” he’d replied. “And spoiled. He’s pathetic.”

To his surprise, she had offered him no retort, only a crooked and enigmatic little smile. She’d unfolded her long, lean legs—awarding him a quick glimpse of her pale silk panties beneath the hem of her matching night-slip—and rose to her feet. “He’s young,” she said again, walking across the room, crumpling the empty candy wrapper in her hand. As she passed him, she swatted him in the ass. “Just like you were once.”

“He’s willful,” he said. “He takes delight in finding opportunities to defy me.”

“So do I, Auguste.” She was fond to call him by this, the French name variation to which he had been born, a name he’d forsaken so long ago it sounded nearly foreign to his ears, that of a man who had long since disappeared.

Eleanor laughed as she spoke, a light, nearly musical sound, and slipped the spaghetti straps of her slip from her shoulders. The alabaster silk drooped to the floor, sliding in folds past the taper of her waist, the outward curves of her hips. It pooled around her ankles and was joined in less than a breath by her panties, leaving her body—as lovely and nubile as a twenty-year-old’s—exposed, painted in sunlight from a nearby window.

For nearly two centuries he’d known her; for nearly that same tenure of breath, he had touched, tasted, explored and otherwise enjoyed every contour, curve and line of that same lithe body. And yet he still hardened simply at the sight of her, the front of his slacks suddenly straining with an arousal so immediate and fierce it was painful.

She glanced at him over her shoulder, her eyes filled with a mischievous sort of light, her brow arched, the corner of her lush mouth still hooked in a smile. Then she walked into the bathroom, her bare feet whispering against the granite tile floor, her hand outstretched behind her in unspoken—but instantly obeyed—beckon.

You killed her.

Brandon's voice echoed in his mind, his words sharp and filled not with the customary fear Augustus had come to expect from the boy, but with disdain. With disgust.

You killed her.

Augustus returned the photograph to his inside pocket and looked up into the mirror, pinning himself with his own dark gaze. His hair—once dark brown, nearly black, a thick and heavy fall—was now stark white, even in the warm glow of the lavatory's brass-adorned fixtures. He still looked young by human standards, but by Brethren terms, his age was apparent in fine lines etched from too much worry, too much grief, too much anger and all for far too long.

So many secrets, Michel Morin had told him once, the dearest friend Augustus had ever known, another piece of his life that—like Eleanor—he'd lost. *You can't carry them, Auguste. Not all alone.*

"Yes, I can," he whispered to his reflection. He spared a cutting glance toward the bathroom door, beyond which his grandson rested, lapsed back into unconsciousness again in the jet's sleeping compartment. "And I will."

CHAPTER THREE

Two weeks earlier, Augustus had looked down at another grandson, the battered, mutilated body of Brandon's older brother, Caine. Then, as now, Augustus's face had remained a stoic, unaffected mask of cool detachment, as if his hand had never caressed Caine's face in fondness, his mouth had never stretched into a smile at the unexpected sight of him or his heart had never swelled with pride to witness any of his numerous accomplishments.

Caine, he'd thought, and inside, he wanted to scream the boy's name, to shriek in stunned and anguished protest, to crumple to his knees on the glossy polished tiles of the morgue floor, bury his face in his hands and weep. In that moment, he would have given every cent in his considerable, multi-billion dollar fortune for that precious, elusive luxury.

The crown of Caine's dark hair had been stitched back into place following the removal of his skull cap during autopsy, a gruesome band of sutures encircling his head. His torso had been bisected with surgical precision; a Y-shaped series of stitches cut down to below his navel, following the lines of his collarbone to his shoulders. His left eye was gone, his brow and forehead caved in: the sunken point of impact where a bullet had punched through flesh and underlying bone.

He'd been shot three additional times: once in the chest, again in the shoulder and in the groin. Augustus could see fading impressions like bruises against his flesh where two older bullet wounds, one at the juncture of each shoulder, had been healing. Caine's face—handsome and angular in life, his features so much like Augustus's own, they might have passed for brothers—had been beaten so badly his eyes and cheeks were swollen, his nose a misshapen, bloated mess. His lips were split—deep fissures in which the brightness of meat beneath was still apparent. His last moments had been painful, then, and violent,

undoubtedly filled with anger and fear, realizations that nearly shattered Augustus's heart.

"Things have gotten out of hand." Allistair Davenant had entered the room soundlessly behind him, but Augustus had known he was there, sensing his presence—a creeping, tickling sensation inside of his mind—even without turning around.

He's dangerous, Michel Morin had told Augustus once. If he ever finds out the truth, Augustus, he'll kill you.

"Something needs to be done," Allistair said. His voice was quiet but filled with cold, leaden remonstrance as he spoke. *This is all your fault*, was the underlying message, one that went unspoken but remained apparent just the same.

"I know," Augustus said.

"The humans cut him open. They *examined* him. Who knows what they found? What they think?"

Augustus glanced to his left, where a pair of women dressed in identical blue smocks and scrub pants with blue paper caps and slip-covers on their shoes sat against the floor, shoulder to shoulder, leaning against the cinderblock wall. Their gazes were distant, unfixed and glazed as they stared across the room and seemingly off into space. One of them had begun to drool, a thin, silvery stream slipping from the edge of her mouth, sliding down the curve of her chin. Their minds had been disconnected; they were, in essence, sleeping, aware of neither Augustus nor Allistair, much less the other eight members of the Brethren Elders who had accompanied them into the building.

These others were currently occupied in the main part of the morgue building, keeping the remaining humans they had discovered on staff, five more in all, in similar states of suspended consciousness. Unbeknownst to them or Allistair, Augustus had done more than simply will them to sleep. He'd eradicated their memories, stripping from their minds any awareness or recollection of their presence. It was an ability unique to Augustus, even among the Elders, who

were the most powerful telepaths among the Brethren; one they didn't even suspect, much less know about.

He's dangerous. Michel's warning about Alistair came to mind again, haunting him. *If he ever finds out the truth, Augustus, he'll kill you.*

"This needs to end, Augustus," Alistair said.

He cut a glare in Alistair's direction, his brows furrowed deeply. "I said I know, Alistair." *So shut the fuck up,* was his own underlying message, as clearly imparted as Alistair's had been.

Alistair retreated a step with a condescending nod, his hands raised slightly in feigned surrender as Augustus looked at his grandson's corpse again, at Caine's waxen pallor, mottled hues of yellow and alabaster with violet and plum-colored bruising.

"Of course, no one expects you to hold to your order now." Alistair's hand draped lightly against his shoulder. "I've spoken with the others. We're all in agreement. If you rescind the call against Brandon, no one will object."

Augustus might have hoped for even a few moments alone to grieve, that Alistair would take his repeated non-verbal cues and return to the foyer with the others to wait for him, but knew that he wouldn't. This was as close to breaking as Augustus had been in a long time—since Eleanor—and Alistair had a front row seat, a goddamn kid at the circus, cotton candy in hand. *He's not going anywhere.*

"It would be unfair to expect you to kill Brandon," Alistair said. "Caine's death changes everything. The clans are equal now, yours and mine, both with the same number of male heirs. Power has always belonged to the clan with the most. Equal heirs mean power divided equally now between the Elders of the clans—you and me."

He was enjoying every goddamn minute of this, reveling in Augustus's torment, just as he had for weeks now. Brandon had defied Brethren law by abandoning the ritual of the first kill—the bloodletting—and fleeing the farmlands the Brethren owned in Kentucky. The law mandated that Brandon be put to death for running away. Augustus had been powerless to prevent the decree.

But at least if he's dead, the truth will die with him, Augustus thought, brushing his fingertips against the ruined remains of Caine's face. *For now, anyway.*

The humans had washed the blood away from Caine's skin and hair, but there was no disguising the extent of his injuries, the damage Brandon had done to him. But like expressing his pain outwardly, allowing himself even the momentary reprieve of grief, killing Brandon and being rid of him once and for all was a luxury Augustus couldn't afford. Not any longer. And Allistair knew it.

Because now I need Brandon, goddamn it, Augustus thought. And Allistair knew that, too.

"If Brandon completes his bloodletting, you'll once again have sole authority over the Brethren," Allistair said, standing close to Augustus as he spoke, his voice nearly a purr. But Augustus didn't need to be reminded of this.

If he killed Brandon, he would look the fool, too damn stubborn to recant his own order when presented with the chance, even if it cost him his power. But if he didn't, he'd look weak. No one's interests but his own, and those of the Nobles, would be served by Brandon's survival. *Allistair will be sure to remind everyone of that.*

He glanced at Allistair. "And you'll lose dual dominance," he said. "You'd do that willingly?"

Allistair's brows lifted, his expression growing wounded. "I can imagine your pain..." His cut his eyes pointedly toward Caine's body. "I know how hard this must be for you. Right now, my personal interests are secondary."

What a crock of shit. Allistair had dreamed of dominance over the Brethren for so long that even now, with only the prospect of sharing it jointly, he was practically salivating. He'd been plotting and scheming and trying to otherwise manipulate his way into control of the clans for as long as Augustus had held it, and whatever he was up to now with this act of seemingly selfless and gracious charity, Augustus doubted his personal interests were anything less than first and foremost.

Augustus zipped the front of the black body bag enveloping Caine closed. He could feel Allistair prodding at his mind, trying to probe past his carefully laid mental defenses, the telepathic shields that he'd kept in place for so long they felt more second nature to him than the abilities they were meant to suppress. Allistair didn't know about these abilities; none among the Brethren did, but he'd suspected something was different, something secret, for a long time. Just once, Augustus would have liked to open his mind fully, to show the son of a bitch what he'd kept tucked away for so long, the truth of what he was truly, fully capable.

Instead, he had hefted the shrouded form of his grandson in his arms, cradling the cumbersome weight as easily as he had when Caine had been only a child. He'd brushed past Allistair, carrying Caine toward the morgue doors, his face stoic once again, his throat choked with tears that he would never allow to fall.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I don’t understand,” Rene said, glowering at Eleanor and Naima each in turn as he sat on the side of the motel bed. When Tessa pressed a wet washcloth against a particularly sore spot on the back of his head—where he’d hit the ceiling, thanks to Naima—he winced. “I thought you said your grandmother was dead, *pischouette*.”

“I thought she was.” Tessa’s eyes remained wary, if not apprehensive, as she glanced at Eleanor.

Eleanor had tried several times to approach her, embrace her, overjoyed at seeing her granddaughter again. Each time, however, Tessa had hedged away with the same uncertain, inexplicably suspicious look in her eyes. At first, Eleanor thought it was because she was injured; after a few moments of closer scrutiny, this became apparent to her in the way Tessa moved, her posture. But it hadn’t taken long for the truth to become clear, even if Eleanor didn’t grasp the reason for it—Tessa was furious with her.

She doesn’t understand, she told herself in ineffective reassurance. Auguste told her I was dead, and she’s believed it all this while. It’s the shock of seeing me again.

The motel manager had apparently been alarmed by the ruckus of Rene’s earlier brawl with Naima, enough so that he’d called the police. A pair of uniformed officers had shown up only moments earlier to investigate the disturbance. While they hadn’t seemed impressed at all that Angelina Jones identified herself as a police officer, they’d done an immediate emotional about-face when Naima had stepped toward them, her mouth curved in a pleasant, courteous smile.

She hadn’t said a word; merely stood within a foot of each of the men—the officers and the motel manager—with that enigmatic and lovely smile lifting the corners of her lips. After a prolonged moment of this silent scrutiny, the police

had turned and left, the manager trailing behind them—all without as much as a backward glance. They'd only just now departed.

"What did she do to them?" Lina asked, sitting rigidly in a straight-back chair, like a cat tensed and ready to run at any given moment, without any warning or notice. "The cops and that manager." She leveled her gaze at Naima and frowned. "What did you do?"

"I made them forget," Naima replied simply, with a shrug, as if to suggest that such things were perfectly ordinary, everyday occurrences and nothing at all to marvel over.

"Forget what?" Lina asked.

"Everything," Naima said. "They don't even know we're here." Again, with a nearly coquettish smile, she added, "I can do the same for you..."

"Leave her alone." Rene gritted his teeth against a grimace as he stood, squaring off against Naima.

Eleanor had to admire his pluck, if nothing else. She could appreciate why Tessa obviously found it so attractive.

"Naima, stop," she said. "They don't know you're teasing."

Naima shot her a momentary look that clearly imparted: *Who said I was?* Eleanor chose to ignore this, smiling instead at Tessa, trying once again to get past that peculiar hostility that all but radiated in waves from the girl.

"We didn't get off to the right start," Eleanor said. "And I'm sorry for that. It's been so long, and I'm so happy to see you again, Tessa, darling." Her voice grew strained and her eyes stung with sudden tears. "I've missed you so much. You and your brother both. Where is Brandon? Still sleeping in the other room?" She glanced toward the motel room door, expectant and excited. "May we wake him?"

"Nice try." Lina frowned, any pretense of civility gone from her face. She rose to her feet, her hands balled into fists. "I've had enough of this bullshit, so stop playing dumb. Where's Brandon?"

Rene's gun was now hidden away, safely out of her reach, but she looked around, her brows furrowed, searching for any handy weapon. Eleanor flinched,

as if Lina had found one and then struck her with it, exchanging a surprised, bewildered glance with Naima. “What?”

Lina wasn't playing. That much was obvious. And the fact that she was so grimly, furiously serious made Eleanor's heart suddenly jump with mounting anxiety, a frightened, fluttering cadence she could feel hammering beneath her breasts. To Tessa, she said, “Brandon's missing?”

“Don't act like you don't know,” Lina snapped, marching forward. She planted her hand against Eleanor's shoulder and gave her a shove, sending her stumbling back a step. At this, Naima stepped up, her eyes rolling immediately to black, her fangs beginning to extend. Like a pissed-off cat with its hackles raised, she opened her mouth and hissed at Lina. Unperturbed or heedless, Lina squared off against her, settling her feet into a fighting stance and folding her hands into light, ready fists.

“Come on, bitch,” she challenged, hoisting her chin defiantly. “I'm not scared of you. I've taken out two of your kind in the last month.”

“Naima, no...” Alarmed, Eleanor caught her by the elbow. Athletic and lean, Lina was a strong woman, but she was still only human; Naima could break every bone in her body, all at the same time, with little more than a passing thought. And considering Naima tended to use her powers without much else, more impulse than conscious decision, Eleanor knew that placed Lina in immediate—lethal—danger.

“What do you mean, ‘*taken out two*’ of us?” she asked Lina with a sinking, horrible feeling twisting her gut. Slowly but surely it was dawning on her. *They're not here because Auguste got them out somehow. Tessa and Brandon...they ran away from the farm.*

And oh, God, she knew what that meant—would that would mean their grandfather would be forced to do. She stared at Tessa in aghast. “Oh, child,” she whispered. “What have you done?”

“She didn't do anything. It was me,” Lina snapped.

“Lina, *chère*...” Rene began, but she cut him off.

“It was all me, goddamn it, so you tell your husband that—this goddamn ‘Grandfather’ everyone thinks is so high and mighty. Caine and Emily came after Brandon, and I shot them both. They’re dead because of me. Brandon and Tessa didn’t have anything to do with it.”

Again, Eleanor recoiled as if she’d been struck, this time in the gut. “Caine is dead?” she whispered, her tears spilling. Not for Caine as much as for Augustus, because she could only imagine his grief—his overwhelming, heart-wrenching anguish—when he found out. *And he’ll be all alone with it*, she thought. *No one to trust with it, no one to turn to...oh, God, Auguste...* “And...and Emily, too?”

“It’s no more than they deserved—no better than what they meant for Brandon,” Lina said. “Don’t act like you don’t know! Augustus Noble put out the order to kill Brandon, and the only reason he’d call it off now is to save his precious goddamn dominance. What—did he think sending you here, all full of smiles and hugs, would trick him somehow? Or trick us—distract us while the Elders grab him and run? I’m tired of this.” Now she shoved Naima, knocking her back into the TV stand and startling the glorious, ever-living shit out of her—the only thing that kept Naima from retaliating immediately. “Tell me where Brandon is! Tell me right the fuck *now!*”

Naima sprang forward, cat-like and smooth. Without a sound, she leapt at Lina, then Rene darted into her path, moving so quickly, he was little more than a blur, clamping his hand against her to stop her short.

“That’ll be just about enough out of you, *salope*,” he told her, his brows furrowed, his eyes rolled to black. He’d tucked the gun back beneath the waistband of his jeans, but drew it now in that same, lightning-quick fashion. Within the blink of an eye, he held the muzzle against Naima’s nose. “Let’s see if your *gris gris* bullshit can stop a bullet.”

“Rene, no!” Eleanor tried to push him away, but Naima beat her to it. Rene had a moment to suck in a startled breath, then flew away from her, again as if jerked on an invisible cord across the room.

“Rene!” Tessa cried, frightened. He hit the wall hard and the gun tumbled from his hand as he collapsed.

“I’ve had it with you, bitch,” Rene seethed at Naima, looking up, his voice slurring as his fangs dropped, his jaw distending. *“Dansons.” Let’s dance.*

The outer door abruptly blew open, slamming into the wall with a sharp report like gunfire, as a swirling, swooping, furious flood of birds—hundreds of them—burst into the room. Naima cried out as they engulfed her in a cloud; drawing her hands toward her face, she staggered back, then collapsed to her knees and disappeared in the swarm.

“Both of you stop it!” Eleanor cried, shying back, ducking as birds rushed past her. “Stop it right now!”

Naima uttered a hoarse, nearly animal-like screech, and all of the birds whipped away from her, flung in all directions, sent careening and crashing about the room. *Oh, God, she’s snapped,* Eleanor thought, because Michel had warned her about this possibility.

If pushed too hard, too far...if she feels too frightened or threatened or angry...she could revert to her feral state again, he’d said. *Her grasp on the rational is tenuous at best, as she’d had a lot of issues—a lot of anger—penned up inside of her for far too long...*

“Naima, stop!” she screamed as Naima launched herself at Rene, this time not with the intention of stopping or hurting him, but meaning to kill him. *“He’s your brother—stop it!”*

It was like the proverbial dousing of ice-cold water on a pissed-off cat. Naima immediately dropped to the ground, snapping out of her furious reverie, stopping within a foot of Rene. She shuddered all over as she struggled to regain her composure, her breath huffing and heaving.

For his part, Rene looked like someone had kicked him mightily in the balls. His eyes had reverted to normal, and his fangs retreated into his gums. “*Quoi?*” he whispered, sounding shaken and stunned. “What...what the fuck did you just say?”

Naima spat against the floor. Apparently in her effort to control herself, she'd bitten her tongue deep enough to draw blood; her saliva was red-tinged against the thick, shaggy nap.

When she didn't immediately answer, Rene blinked from Tessa to Naima, to Lina and Eleanor, then back to Tessa again. "What did you..." he sputtered. "That's not...no, I...I don't..."

"This is Rene's *sister*?" Lina repeated, staring in aghast at Naima.

"His *half-sister*," Naima replied with a pointed glower, adding drolly, "Obviously."

"But how...?" Tessa gasped, stunned. "How is that possible?"

"The usual way brothers and sisters come about, darling," Eleanor interjected mildly. "It's a long story, and I can try to explain. But first we need to find Brandon. Are the Elders hunting for him?"

"Yes." Tessa nodded. "He ran away from the farm. Caine and Emily followed to bring him back. I heard the Grandfather say the Elders would hunt him down and kill him, so I left, too, to warn him, help him if I could."

So Brandon had finally pushed too far. He'd always been too headstrong and stubborn for his own good. Eleanor had liked to think he got that from her. But while that tenacity in her nature had endeared Augustus to her, in his grandson it had only infuriated and frustrated him. *Oh, God*, Eleanor thought in alarm. *But Tessa said that Caine was dead! That means...*

"He can't kill Brandon now," she said. "Augustus can't kill him now—he wouldn't have dared. Not with Caine dead."

Not if he knew Caine was dead, anyway, she thought, a whole new sinking feeling seizing her gut.

"He knows about Caine," Tessa said quietly. "The Grandfather knows. I...I think so, anyway. I called Dad and told him. Surely he would have said something...gotten word to him somehow."

Eleanor could have kissed her in that moment, if Tessa would have let her, but settled for letting out a heavy sigh of relief. "If Augustus knows about

Caine and the Elders have found Brandon, he's safe...for the moment, anyway," she murmured, more to herself than anyone else.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Lina exclaimed, staring at her like she had lost her damn fool mind. "Augustus Noble is a sick fuck—a sadistic son of a bitch who wants to force Brandon to *murder* someone—and you think Brandon is going to be *safe* with him?"

"If he can't be with us, then at least Augustus can protect him," Eleanor said. *For a while, anyway*, she thought, because she understood all too well that the elaborate house of cards her husband had spent more than two hundred years building now teetered on the tenuous brink of inevitable collapse.

And when it falls, it will destroy him.

"*Protect* Brandon?" Lina practically screamed. "He broke Brandon's hands last year!"

"Yes, protect him," Eleanor said. "He has to. Because of what Brandon is, what he can do." She looked at them grimly. "Because of what they *both* can do."

CHAPTER FIVE

"I don't like this," Rene growled as the little Mercedes sports coupe he drove skittered and lurched for uncertain purchase on the steep, rutted road. Beside him, Tessa sat belted into the passenger seat, her hands splayed lightly, anxiously, across the slight, outward swell of her pregnant tummy. In the back seat, Lina opted for no seat belt and leaned over the center console, her brows narrowed as she watched the Range Rover bounce along ahead of them.

They had left the motel and agreed to follow the women—Eleanor Noble and Naima—out along the southwestern shore of Lake Tahoe toward Emerald Bay. Their path had led them close enough to Rene's own property here to make him grow anxious and irritable, then immediately past it onto an expansive private, gated estate.

"They're your neighbors," Tessa murmured. She hadn't said much about seeing her grandmother—a woman she'd believed dead for three years—or about the fact that her twin brother, Brandon, was missing. She hadn't said much of anything at all, as a matter of fact, and watched the conifer forests roll by past her window with a dazed, stunned sort of expression on her face. "All of this land..." She cut her eyes momentarily to Rene. "It's right next to yours, isn't it?"

"*Oui*," he said. "But out here, you can walk for miles in any direction and never see another living soul. It's no small wonder I never realized."

More than just her grandmother, Eleanor had once been Tessa's closest confidante and beloved friend. Around her neck, Tessa wore a simple but striking pendant, a green sapphire solitaire that Eleanor had given her for her sixteenth birthday, one that she herself had once received as an affectionate token from her husband, Augustus. Tessa had treasured that necklace almost as much as she had Eleanor herself...right up until Brandon had told her the way Eleanor had really felt about Tessa.

It should have been you! Brandon had snapped, prodded into a hasty, heated admittance. *Are you fucking happy now, Tessa? Grandmother Eleanor told me what happened to me—getting attacked, losing my hearing, getting my throat slit—it all should have happened to you!*

And in his mind, Tessa had been able to see Eleanor tell him this. *A Brethren man should be strong—speak his mind and stand his ground, especially a Noble. Women don't need to hear or speak to make babies, no matter their clan. And in the end, isn't that really all Tessa can ever hope to accomplish?*

I was nothing to her, Tessa thought, blinking angrily against the sting of tears. *All of those years she made me feel special, and she never believed it for a minute. She never meant a goddamn word of it.*

"I don't like it," Rene said again. "How do we know these aren't the ones who took Brandon in the first place? They could be tricking us, luring us into whatever same kind of trap they used to catch him."

"No." Tessa didn't believe that. Seeing Eleanor again had whipped up a churning frenzy of emotions in her, and she'd wanted to simultaneously hug and throttle her. But no matter her own personal feelings, there hadn't been anything deceptive, at least outwardly, in Eleanor's mind that Tessa had been able to sense.

"She was surprised to hear Brandon's missing," she said to Rene and Lina without averting her eyes from the window. "She had no idea."

"We don't even know Brandon *is* missing," Rene said pointedly. "Hell, the *petit* could have just gone out for a walk, grab a bite to eat, something—anything. We should have just stuck by the motel and waited to see if he came back."

"Brandon wouldn't do that," Lina said. "Not without leaving me a note to let me know where he'd gone."

Tessa didn't need telepathy to know Lina was worried sick about Brandon. Her anxiety and concern were starkly apparent in her rigid posture, the crimp between her brows, the tense, terse way in which she hooked her fingertips into the caramel-colored leather upholstery.

“Something’s happened to him.” Lina’s voice cracked; her eyes welled with sudden, uncharacteristic tears. “They got to him somehow...the Elders...that son of a bitch, Augustus Noble.”

Eleanor had tried to tell them that Brandon would be safe with his grandfather, words that hadn’t made sense to any of them and that did little, if anything, to assuage both Tessa’s and Lina’s mounting fear.

“What about Martin?” Lina asked. “That sneaky bastard—he’s got to be in on this somehow, sent word to them somehow, him or that bitch wife of his. You said your place is out near here, Rene? Let’s stop, then, goddamn it. You’ve got him tied up there—give me five minutes alone with him, and I’ll find out—”

“We’ve already passed my place,” Rene told her. “There’s no turning back now, not if we’re following Tessa’s *mamere*.”

Martin Davenant was Tessa’s husband, if only by forcibly arranged marriage. A sadistic, abusive, conniving man, he’d followed Tessa not out of any genuine concern for his wayward bride, but because she was carrying his child. Dominance among the Brethren clans was solely based on which family had the most male heirs, and while Tessa’s family, the Nobles, had held exclusive control for centuries, Martin’s family, the Davenants, trailed closely behind.

And if my baby is a son, they’ll try to take him back, she thought, pressing her hands more firmly, protectively against her womb. *They’ll take my baby away from me.*

The Brethren were polygamous; Tessa had been Martin’s sixth wife. His first—and likely the best suited to match his violent, scheming nature—had been Monica Davenant. She’d accompanied Martin in his pursuit of Tessa, but Tessa had killed her in a brutal, bloody confrontation.

Which means I’m as good as dead myself, if the Brethren ever find me, she thought, because to kill another member of the Brethren was to mark oneself for death. No questions. No excuses.

An eye for an eye and blood for blood, Tessa thought, with a shiver.

“You cold, *pischouette?*” Rene asked, leaning over to switch the register from moderately warm to red-zone hot. His voice had softened, the angry edge gone, and when he glanced at her, his brows were raised with tender concern.

Martin may have supplied the seed for her baby, but it was Rene who had proven himself a true father. He’d damn near sacrificed his own life; as half-human, he’d offered his own blood to nourish Tessa and the baby and, more than this, to deliver them both from the brink of death following her fight with Monica. Monica had impaled Tessa through the abdomen with an iron fireplace poker, and, if not Tessa herself, then surely her baby would have died without Rene’s selfless intervention.

She’d fallen in love with him long before that, but that gesture had cemented in Tessa’s heart and mind that she could never return to the Brethren or the life she’d known there. *Because my life is here now, with Rene*, she thought. *Our life is here—mine and my baby’s. We belong with Rene.*

“I’m alright,” she told him with a smile.

“Are you hurting?” he asked. “It’s a rough ride—*je suis désolé.*” *I’m sorry*, he’d said.

Tessa shook her head, patted his hand. “Really, Rene. I’m fine. Watch the road before you run us into a tree or something.”

This attempt at banter helped to reassure him more than any words she might have offered, and he managed a laugh, shaking his head, averting his gaze to the windshield again.

“They’re turning up ahead,” Lina remarked, frowning as the Range Rover’s brake lights flared, then the lumbering SUV took a wide left, clambering up a sloping, gravel drive. At the top of the drive, they saw a large house—a stylized façade of wood and glass, graceful architecture that both blended into the surrounding wood environment and complemented it.

“What is this place?” Tessa whispered.

The Range Rover parked beside a muddy Jeep Cherokee just outside of double-wide garage doors. Rene stopped the Mercedes at some distance behind, but left the engine running, his hands poised on the steering wheel. As

they watched, Eleanor and Naima got out of the SUV. Rene hadn't said anything on the car ride along the way about the revelation that the tall black woman was somehow related to him. When Tessa had tried a tentative time or two to broach the subject, he'd rebuffed her attempts with a growling retort or glower.

His sister, Tessa thought in amazement as she watched Naima stretch languidly, raising her slender arms above her head and arching her spine. *How could he have had a sister all of this time—literally next door to him—and never known about it?*

Naima loped toward a flight of stairs leading up to a patio that wrapped around the southward facing side of the home, a wall that seemed built from nothing more than mirrored glass, surely awarding a nearly panoramic view of the mountainside and lake below to those inside. After a long moment, in which Eleanor studied the Mercedes patiently, expectantly, she at last turned and trailed behind Naima.

“Where are we?” Tessa asked again.

In Kentucky, the Brethren lived in family collectives, all under one roof, albeit very expansive roofs. The Noble family mansion, for example, was one of the largest Victorian mansions still in use as a private residence in the United States, second in size only to the Vanderbilts' Biltmore Estate. But while this home was indeed large, it was still no more than a single-family dwelling, not at all like the Brethren mansions.

Tessa opened her door, but as she reached for her seatbelt, Rene caught her hand. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“I'm getting out,” she replied. With the door open, she could now catch sweet, distant refrains of music, someone playing a piano from somewhere close by. “Rene, we've come all this way. What did you think, we were just going to sit in the car when we got here?”

“I don't like this, *pischouette*,” Rene said. “I got a bad sense about this place, don't you?”

Actually, Tessa had just the opposite sensation. She could feel the presence of others like herself—all Brethren had that innate capability—but it

was a very comfortable feeling inside of her, something warm and not at all unpleasant. She'd felt something similar shortly before she and Brandon had been attacked by Monica Davenant. The twins had been nearby, down by the lakeshore, a historical site called Vikingsholm. Brandon had stood out by the water's edge, his eyes closed, his mouth turned in a soft smile.

There's something peaceful about this place, don't you think? he'd asked Tessa. *I feel like...I don't know. Like I belong here.*

"Let's just go back to the motel," Rene pressed. "We'll go there and we'll wait for Brandon. If he's not back by this afternoon, then we can go introduce Martin to the back side of Lina's fists, see if we can—"

"Rene, your sister is here," Tessa said. "Your grandfather, too—your family."

"You're my family, *pischouette*," Rene told her. His brows lifted, pleading. "You and the *bébé*. I don't need anything—anyone—else."

"Well, I do." Lina frowned. "I need Brandon. Do whatever the hell you want, Rene, but let me out."

"Lina, *chère*, you know what I meant," Rene said. "Listen to me. Even if the Elders have taken Brandon, we know where they're going, where they'll bring him—to Kentucky. We don't need their help." He cut his eyes to the house.

"That woman damn near knocked you through a cinderblock wall...without laying a finger on you," Lina said, meaning Naima. "I'm going to go out on a limb here, Rene, and say yeah, we could use help like that."

"You don't even know that they *want* to help," Rene countered.

"No," Lina agreed. "But I'm about to find out." She gave his seat an emphatic slap. "Out of my way, damn it."

Rene cut off the car engine, stalling the Mercedes out to a rumbling, begrudging standstill. Taking this as an unvoiced invitation, Tessa unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed out. Although Lina quickly clambered out behind, Rene remained inside for the moment at least, his expression anxious and torn.

The piano music grew louder, more distinct, a familiar, classical melody Tessa couldn't quite place as she went up the stairs to the patio. There was no

sign of Eleanor or Naima at the top, but she saw a series of glass doors had all been opened to allow the cool, crisp air into the house. The sweet strains of piano music floated from just beyond the thresholds, and, curious, Tessa crept toward them.

The patio doors opened onto a large living room. A black grand piano stood against glossy hardwood floors near the windows, and here a young man sat playing a wondrously sweet melody. Eleanor had said she was bringing them to meet Rene's grandfather.

Could this be Michel Morin?

When the piano abruptly struck a sour note, then fell silent, she jerked in surprise. Seeming to share in her start, the man turned and looked directly at her and there was no way he could have been Rene's grand-anything. Like her own grandfather, Augustus, Michel Morin was more than 300 years old and, according to Eleanor, the founder and CEO of one of the largest biomedical research companies in the world—Pharmaceaux International. Brethren or not, the man before her at the piano was entirely too young to be a mogul of that sort of magnitude. He looked little older than Tessa herself.

"Uh...hello," he said, his expression curious but unalarmed. "May I help you?"

"Oh...!" Tessa hiccupped, shrinking back in the doorway, nearly tripping over Lina in the process as the other woman came up behind her. "I...I was just..."

"Oh, Tessa, Lina, good." Eleanor appeared in a nearby doorway, walking in from what looked to be an adjacent formal dining room. "Come inside. Don't be shy. We don't bite." She said this last with a pointed glance at Lina and mischievous sort of giggle.

"Hey, Eleanor." The young man smiled. "I didn't hear you come in."

"We went around to the front door, darling," Eleanor said with a smile. "I hate to disturb you when you're playing. It was lovely. What was it, Chopin?"

He nodded. "*Fantasy Impromptu in C-sharp minor.*"

“Tessa, Lina...” Eleanor flapped her hands in beckon as she crossed the living room. Naima trailed behind her, her feet bare now, her stride long, languid and graceful, nearly prowling. “Tristan, I’d like you to meet my granddaughter, Tessa, and Angelina Jones, a friend of Brandon’s. This is Tristan Morin...Rene’s youngest brother.”

Tall, athletic and lean, with a haphazard tumble of sand-colored hair and the same caramel-colored eyes and sharp, refined features, Tristan bore a striking and undeniable resemblance to Rene. He glanced between Tessa and Lina, his gaze lingering at Lina’s throat and the small, but still discernable marks where only weeks earlier, Brandon had fed from Lina.

The Brethren needed blood to sustain themselves, to maintain their accelerated healing abilities and prolong their lives to span centuries. Humans would have called them *vampires*. Brandon had always called them *monsters* and had fled from not only his home, but his birthright as well, because he’d refused to kill a human in order to feed. He’d never heard of any other way, much less tried it—and neither had Tessa—until meeting Rene. Having learned from Rene that feeding didn’t have to necessarily equate to killing, Brandon had drawn his first taste of blood from Lina’s throat.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Tristan said, then turned his gaze to Eleanor. “I need to speak with you and Naima for a minute. In the kitchen, maybe, do you mind?”

There was something in his gaze, a pointed severity that stood in noticeable contrast to his polite smile. Tessa didn’t miss it and apparently, neither did Eleanor.

“Tessa, why don’t you and Lina have a seat?” she suggested. “Make yourselves at home. When Rene comes in, he can join you. I’ll bring us all some tea.”

She followed Tristan as he left the room, ducking back into the dining room. Naima went with them, leaving Lina and Tessa alone in the living room.

“What the hell was that about?” Lina asked in an undertone.

Tessa shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“He’s Rene’s brother? How many brothers and sisters do you think Rene has?” Lina hissed.

Tessa shook her head again. “I don’t know.”

Lina folded her arm across her chest and looked around anxiously. “Well, I’m with Rene,” she said at length, still whispering. “This place gives me the creeps.”

Tessa patted her arm. “It’s alright.”

“Easy for you to say,” Lina remarked, drawing away. “You’re not the only human in a house full of goddamn vampires.” She glanced toward the patio. “I’m going to go see what’s keeping Rene.”

Tessa nodded. It hadn’t occurred to her that Lina might feel uncomfortable, even more than she or Rene. Lina had seen the Brethren at their worst—in the full throes of the bloodlust, when their pupils would dilate, seemingly engulfing their eyes in darkness, and their jaws would dislocate to accommodate the fully extended lengths of their retractable canine fangs. She’d seen them feed in this frenzied state, had stood her ground and shot two of them—Caine and Emily—when attacked, and had even trusted Brandon enough to feed from her. She’d even dealt with the shocking discovery that Rene—a long-time friend—was a vampire, too, but never once had Tessa sensed anything like fear or apprehension when Lina was around them.

But she doesn’t know Eleanor, she thought. Or Naima or Tristan. She doesn’t know them, and she saw what Naima could do in the motel room. She doesn’t trust her—or the others, either—or me and Rene to keep her safe from them.

When Lina left the room, returning to the patio to look for Rene, Tessa remained behind. Voices from beyond the dining room drew her gaze—Eleanor, Tristan and Naima talking in muted but heated tones. She couldn’t tell what they were saying, and stole closer to the doorway, curious.

“...but he couldn’t have gotten far, not on foot, not in these woods,” she heard Tristan say. “Michel wants us to go out and search, but I’ve been waiting for you and Naima to get back, since her tracking senses are so good.”

Is he talking about Brandon? she thought.

“You should have called me,” Eleanor said, angrily. “You should have told me right away!”

Oh, God, Rene was right! Tessa thought. *The Elders didn't take Brandon—these people did! They must have brought him here, and he escaped somehow. Oh, God, he's all alone out there against them!*

The Brethren were all telepaths, and she was tempted to open her mind to them, skim their thoughts, eavesdrop more closely to their conversation, the veritable fly on the wall. But they'd know it if she did, and she didn't want to risk discovery. Instead, she stole into the shadows of the darkened dining room and, keeping close to the wall, crept toward the swath of bright, fluorescent light cut across the smooth wooden floor from the kitchen doorway.

“...leave right away,” she heard Tristan saying. From her vantage, she could look through the doorway directly at a microwave atop a kitchen counter. Through its glossy black surface, she could see the ghostly reflected images of her grandmother, Naima and Tristan all standing closely together.

“He's aware of us now—a danger to us all,” Eleanor said grimly. “You'll have to kill him.”

What? Tessa thought, stunned. *Oh, God, no! Brandon...!*

She whirled around, darting back into the living room. Racing for the patio doors, she plowed nearly headlong into Rene and Lina as they stepped into view at the threshold.

“Oh...!” Tessa yelped as Rene caught her by the shoulders, steadying her.

“Whoa, *pischouette*,” he said. “*Où est le feu?*” *Where's the fire?*

“We have to go!” Tessa exclaimed, grabbing him by the front of his coat.

“We have to leave *now*, Rene—you were right about Grandmother Eleanor, right about everything!”

“Slow down, Tessa,” Rene said, frowning, sweeping his dark gaze around the empty living room. “What's going on? What happened? Did somebody try to hurt you?”

“Not me—it’s Brandon,” Tessa said, and at this, Lina’s eyes widened. “They took Brandon. You were right, Rene. I heard them in the kitchen talking about it just now—Eleanor, Naima and your brother...”

“*Quoi?*” Rene’s eyes widened in stunned surprise, then cut across the room. “*Brother? What brother?*”

“His name is Tristan. I heard him talking about Brandon. He must have gotten away somehow. He’s out there in the woods somewhere, Tristan said—they’re going to hunt for him.” She looked up at Rene, pleading and frightened. “Grandmother Eleanor said they’d have to kill him! We have to get out of here *right now!*”

“Tessa, darling...?” Eleanor’s voice drifted from the dining room, and through its shadow-draped doorway, they could see her approaching, a slim silhouette against the backdrop of darkness.

“Get to the car,” Rene said in a low voice, hooking his arm around Tessa and steering her past him, through the patio door. “Lina, take her. Both of you now—get back to the car.”

“Rene...!” Tessa gulped in protest, but he cut her off.

“I’m right behind you. Go!”

“Come on!” Lina clamped her hand against Tessa’s and then they were off, sprinting nearly side by side down the length of the patio. Just before they reached the stairs, Tristan leaped from an upper story, a balcony jutting out over the deck. He landed nimbly, almost soundlessly, in front of them, drawing both women to startled, skittering stops.

“Wait,” he said, holding out his hand. “You don’t—”

“Fuck you!” Lina shoved his hand aside with her left, driving the heel of her right palm forcefully into his chin. The blow surprised Tristan and knocked him off his feet; he cried out sharply and fell backwards, tumbling ass over elbows down the stairs.

“Come on!” Lina cried again, grabbing Tessa’s arm and dragging her down the steps. They staggered and stumbled over Tristan at the bottom of the staircase as he lay in a crumpled, groaning heap, then raced toward the silver

Mercedes. Just as they drew within a few frantic steps of the car, they heard Eleanor scream shrilly from the house. Then, with little more than a whistle of wind, Rene came crashing down out of the sky, thrown from the patio with all of the ease of a major league pitcher heaving a curve ball. He slammed down against the hood of the Mercedes, crimping it in a deep crater, shattering the headlights, splintering the windshield, bursting the radiator in a sudden, steaming flood and setting off the alarm.

“Rene!” Tessa screamed in horror, rushing toward him.

There was another light rustle of wind, and Naima pounced down atop the car roof, landing on her feet, as graceful as a ballerina completing a *grand jeté*. Her eyes were black, her fangs distended, her mouth unhinged on her dislocated jaw. She hissed at Tessa like an oversized, pissed off cat, then thrust her hand out, fingers splayed wide.

Tessa had a half-second to hear an ominous creak, followed by a brisk, sharp *snap!* and then a pine tree, its trunk twice again as big around as her waist and at least a dozen stories tall, came crashing down at her, torn loose by the roots from the dry ground beneath it.

“Naima, no!” she heard Eleanor shriek from the patio.

“Naima, no!” Tristan’s cry overlapped Eleanor’s, and he darted in front of Tessa, moving so fast he was little more than a blur in her peripheral vision. Skittering to a halt between Tessa and the toppling tree, he shoved his hand forward as if he meant to catch it against his palm.

Amazingly, as he did this, the tree stopped in mid-fall, dangling at a precarious angle less than ten feet above them. A rain of pine cones and dried needles suddenly tumbled down from the boughs, jostled by this abrupt, jarring halt.

He can do it, too! Tessa thought, scuttling backwards. *He’s like her—he’s like Naima!*

Tristan and Naima locked gazes, both of them with hands outstretched and brows furrowed. Tessa heard the soft grunt of Tristan’s breath, as if he struggled or strained against something, and realized...

*They're pushing against each other, both of them holding onto that tree!
It's like some kind of tug-of-war game—oh, God, only this isn't a game...!*

"Let...go of it..." Tristan seethed at Naima, his hand beginning to tremble now. Above him, the tree shuddered and dropped a precarious foot or two. Tessa cried out in fright, and Eleanor rushed to her side, grabbing her arm and jerking her backwards, just as Tristan frowned more deeply, balling his hand into a fist and drawing the tree to another shuddering stop.

"Put it down, Naima!" he shouted, his hoarse cry reverberating down the mountainside.

The ferocity in his voice seemed a proverbial slap upside Naima's head. In an instant, she cowed. The bloodlust left her; her pupils constricted back to normal proportions, the whites of her eyes visible again. Her fangs began to recede into her gums, and with a slight shake of her head, her jaw snapped back into proper place. When she released whatever invisible hold she had on the tree, Tessa could tell through Tristan; he stumbled as if relieved of a tremendous burden and gasped loudly, ragged and relieved. He swung his hand, letting his arm wilt abruptly to his side, as if exhausted from the effort of holding it outstretched, and the tree swung with it, moving in a slow, gentle arc before settling harmlessly against the ground.

Naima didn't say a word, merely whirled around and darted into the trees, leaping nimbly down from the roof of the car and disappearing into the forest.

"Jesus...!" Tristan let out a long, shaky sigh, then fell to his knees.

"Tristan!" Eleanor darted from Tessa's side to his.

"I...I'm fine," he murmured. "I'm okay, Eleanor."

"Did you see that?" Lina whispered to Tessa. She remained rooted in place in the driveway, her eyes round and stunned, her entire body trembling like a willow frond caught in a breeze. "Jesus, Tessa, did...did you see what they did? That tree...it...they just..."

"I saw it." Tessa nodded, watching as Eleanor draped her arm across Tristan's shoulders with a nearly maternal concern twisting her face, letting him lean against her as he staggered to his feet.

How did they do that? she thought. *Naima and Tristan...how did they do that with their minds?*

Eleanor turned to Tessa. “What were you doing? Why on earth did you run like that? Naima could have killed you!”

“Rene!” Lina exclaimed in a choked voice, snapping out of her stunned reverie and rushing toward the Mercedes.

Oh, Jesus—Rene! Ignoring Eleanor, Tessa pushed Tristan further aside and scrambled to her feet, hurrying to the Mercedes. Lina was already there, leaning over the trunk, cradling Rene’s face in her hands.

“He’s alive,” she told Tessa. “He’s breathing, at any rate. But I can’t get him to wake up. He’s out cold.” Her eyes large and frightened, glossy with frantic tears. “What the hell just happened here?”

Tessa glanced back at Tristan.

Rene’s youngest brother, that’s how Eleanor had described him; but while there was that uncanny resemblance between the two, all at once, Tessa wasn’t so certain. *Because Rene can’t move things with his mind*, she thought. *Hell, I’ve never seen anyone do that before, not even the Elders.*

So how could they?

“I don’t know,” Tessa whispered to Lina. “I have no fucking clue.”

CHAPTER SIX

Brandon groaned soundlessly, his eyelids fluttering open a dazed and groggy half-mast. The sun was out; he could see it spread out in a pale whitewash against the ceiling overhead, and the sudden glare forced him to squint and turn his head away. To his surprise, he found his hands immobilized and his feet likewise, as well; when he tried to move, he felt the snug friction of something drawn securely about his wrists and ankles drawing taut, holding him fast.

What the fuck...? he thought, and it occurred to him he didn't know where he was, much less what had happened to him. All he knew was that his shoulder hurt, a dull, throbbing ache that resonated throughout his entire body, pain that reached in thin, insidious fingers throughout his torso, down into the pit of his gut, into his balls. He hurt; he couldn't move and there was something inside his nose, something that apparently ran down the back of his throat. He could feel it there, tickling against his tonsils, a light irritation that made him want to cough reflexively, choke it up somehow. And if he crossed his eyes, he could see something affixed to the end of his nose; white first aid tape securing it in place.

What the fuck...? he thought again. It was too bright, that much was for sure, and all at once, he realized why. *My pupils have dilated...*

When a member of the Brethren felt the incessant lure of the bloodlust, their pupils would expand, a primitive, nearly vestigial reaction courtesy of their predatory ancestors for whom night hunting had likely been a necessity. This allowed a wider scope of vision, the ability to glean even the faintest light source.

The bloodlust. He realized why it might have triggered in him—the scent of blood, metallic and bittersweet, hung headily in the air from somewhere close at hand, likely in his immediate vicinity.

When he turned his head again, he saw a girl in a chair beside his bed. Latina, probably Mexican, with black hair parted in the middle and draped over

her shoulders in twin, glossy sheaves, she sat somewhat slumped, more forcibly upright than of her own choosing. Her wrists had been bound to the chair arms with duct tape. An intravenous line had been started in her arm, a plastic port inserted at the juncture of her elbow, and from there, a thin tube filled with blood ran in broad, graceful loops toward the floor.

Brandon cut his eyes, following its length, a panicked, stricken realization dawning upon him. *Oh, God*, he thought, because the blood transfusion line drooped to the floor, then up again toward his bed. Toward him. The thing in his nose, running down the back of his throat...

It's that tube. Oh, Jesus—it's the same tube!

Left deaf and mute in the aftermath of a brutal childhood attack, Brandon had no voice with which to scream in sudden, anguished, horrified protest, but he tried none the less, straining against the unyielding tethers of his bonds, arching his back off the mattress, whipping his head back and forth in furious but futile protest.

Oh, God, no no no no NO! he shrieked in his mind, because he remembered now—Rene had shot him; the man he'd thought of as one of his few, true friends in the entire world had betrayed him. That was the pain in his shoulder—the spot where Rene's bullet had caught him. He'd turned Brandon over to the Elders—to Augustus Noble, his sick, sadistic, son of a bitch of a grandfather—and they'd delivered him back to Kentucky.

Now he recognized the room he was in—the tall windows and hardwood floors, the stoic furnishings and lined bookshelves. His books, his things—his room at the great house, the Noble family estate.

He'd come home.

No! he screamed, silently, desperately, because they were forcing him to do what he'd so staunchly refused up to that point. They were making him feed, draining the girl's blood directly into his gut, bypassing his ability to choose—or refuse. *No, God, no!*

The girl wasn't dead yet, but she was nearly so. He could tell by her waxy, ashen pallor, the glassy cast to her eyes, the way her gaze had fixed, nearly

unblinking, at a distant point beyond him on the far wall. Her blood would help accelerate Brandon's own natural healing abilities, making him stronger, restoring him. The Elders meant to bleed her dry, to utterly glut Brandon's system and leave her exsanguinated in the process.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention, and Brandon turned to find a man at the foot of his bed. Tall and handsome, his stern features as smooth and cold as if etched from marble, he wore an elegantly tailored suit in a deep shade of charcoal that stood in marked contrast to his waist-length fall of heavy white hair. He watched Brandon with impassive detachment, his mouth a thin and unreadable line, his brows almost imperceptibly creased.

Augustus Noble. The Grandfather.

You son of a bitch! Brandon screamed at him, thrashing against his bonds. The Grandfather could hear his thoughts, though to judge by the fact that his expression remained unmoving and unmoved, you couldn't tell it.

You son of a bitch—let her go! Brandon shrieked. *It doesn't have to be this way! She doesn't have to die! Let her go!*

All of his life, he'd been told that in order to feed, the Brethren had to kill their human victims. That was why he'd rebelled against them, against the very foundation of his own nature, and why, ultimately, he'd run away. He didn't want to kill. And finally, through Rene Morin, he'd come to understand that he didn't need to in order to feed, that everything in the Brethren's philosophy of the bloodlust was inherently wrong.

She doesn't have to die! Brandon screamed again, but Augustus only turned and walked away, wordless, emotionless. *You son of a bitch! Don't do this! Please don't do this!*

Augustus left the room, closing the door behind him, and Brandon fell still, shuddering and gasping against the bed, his eyes stinging with sudden, anguished tears. *Please don't do this*, he thought helplessly. *Oh, God, Grandfather, please...she doesn't have to die...!*

A human who overindulged in alcohol could, in theory, drink himself to a state of unconsciousness. Apparently, the same held true for a Brethren who

made a glutton of himself on blood. Brandon passed out at some point, while still able to sense the young woman's cognizance faintly, feebly.

I'm sorry, he'd thought to her, opening his mind, straining to reach whatever remained of her conscious awareness, even as he'd slipped into shadows. And because, idiotically, it had dazedly occurred to him that she wouldn't understand him, that she didn't speak English, he'd offered again, this time in Spanish: *Lo siento. Por favor...perdóneme... Please forgive me.*

When he came to again, night had fallen outside. The room was shadow-draped, the landscape dark beyond the window panes and the girl was gone, the bedside chair empty. A single lamp had been left alight on what had once been Brandon's desk across the room, providing a narrow circumference of dim yellow glow. He was alone, but not for long. Within moments of rousing, movement attracted his gaze; his bedroom door opened, and Augustus entered. He'd shed the suit coat and tie, opening the top buttons of his shirt and turning back his shirt sleeves.

The last time Brandon had seen his grandfather in such a casual state of dress, he'd proceeded to beat the shit out of Brandon, not to mention break both of his hands. An anxious, frightened knot began to twist in his stomach, but he refused to let even a hint of it show in his face.

I won't give that son of a bitch the satisfaction, he thought, his brows furrowing, his dark eyes locking on his grandfather.

Augustus closed the door behind him and walked slowly, almost leisurely across the room. Carrying a half-empty tumbler of what appeared to be bourbon in one hand, he hooked the back of Brandon's leather desk chair with the other, turning it about on its pedestal and guiding it on its wheeled casters to the foot of Brandon's bed. This seemed to be as close as he wanted to get to Brandon; foregoing the armchair beside the bed, he sat instead in the desk chair, adopting a relaxed pose as he leaned back, crossing his legs so that his right ankle propped against his left knee.

“Tell me, Brandon,” he said aloud, facing Brandon so his lips could be read as he spoke. He held Brandon’s gaze evenly and took a sip of his drink before continuing. “How did your brother die?”

The question caught Brandon off guard, and he blinked at Augustus for a moment, hesitant and wary. To that point, it had never even crossed his mind that the Grandfather might have been aware of Caine’s death. The truth was that Lina had shot and killed him. He and Brandon had faced off in a violent showdown in which Brandon had pretty much pummeled his older brother’s face into a mashed, mangled pulp, but ultimately it had been Lina and a couple of well-placed nine-millimeter slugs that had left Caine’s brain scattered across the floor.

“I found his body in the city,” Augustus said, still speaking aloud, keeping his eyes leveled at Brandon. “I brought him home again, saw him properly buried. Your sister, Emily, too. I suppose in all fairness, I should acknowledge that they were both as guilty of bending the rules of our people...I dare say, the very foundations upon which our entire Brethren society has been meticulously crafted all of these years...as you are.”

He took another drink of bourbon, and it occurred to Brandon that he was drunk. There was no other explanation for the fact that his mind wasn’t completely closed to his grandson, that his usual iron-clad, impenetrable mental defenses weren’t all in their stalwart and customary places. Brandon could sense things about him—not much, but enough to surprise, even shock him. Beneath the cool exterior, the unflappable, granite façade, lurked a barely discernable, but still palpable sorrow.

He was grieving.

“I want to know how he died. I saw his corpse, the autopsy results, the coroner’s report. I can run through the various scenarios in my mind to try and imagine, recreate if you will, Caine’s last moments here on earth, but since you were with him...since you were there, and privy to his demise...I think the most accurate account would come from you.” Augustus tilted his head back and, in a single swallow, drained his glass dry. When he looked down again, that fleeting

hint of grief was gone, the impenetrable gates of his heart and mind slamming into place once more. He was cold and stoic, his eyes like a shark's, black and predatory, impaling Brandon.

Tell me how he died, Augustus said inside Brandon's mind.

There was no way in hell Brandon could tell Augustus the truth. If he knew that Lina—a human—had killed Caine, he would call out the Elders again; he would turn them loose once more on the hunt—this time for Lina. And oh, God, Brandon didn't want to imagine the things they would do to her when they found her.

I shot him in the head, Brandon told the Grandfather. *Just like I shot Emily. They came after me, and I shot them.*

Augustus nodded once, his lips a thin line. He laced his fingers together and propped them against his knee, a pensive posture. "Tell me more."

Brandon blinked in bewildered surprise. *Wh...what?*

"Tell. Me. More." Augustus carefully articulated each of these words, his narrow mouth wrapping slowly, deliberately around each individual syllable. "Start at the beginning and tell me how it came to pass. Tell me everything, blow by blow, right to the end."

Brandon shook his head, puzzled, wary. *I...I don't...* he began. *Why?*

Because I want to know! Augustus roared, plucking the glass tumbler from the nest of his crotch and flinging it wide, sending it sailing toward the head of the bed. Brandon cowered reflexively, hunching his shoulders and wincing at the subsequent pain. The tumbler smashed into the wall above him, showering him with splintered glass.

Brandon opened his eyes hesitantly and found Augustus watching him, utterly collected and controlled once more.

He died crying like a bitch! Brandon snapped, his brows furrowed. He struggled to sit up, straining against the manacle cuffs that held him bound to the mattress. *Like a goddamn girl! He promised me anything I wanted to let him live—money, clothes, his inheritance...*

It might have been his imagination, but he could have sworn the muscles beneath the Grandfather's eye twitched slightly, an involuntary tremor.

I told him to suck my dick, Brandon said. Told him to take it all and swallow it, too, and he did, you son of a bitch! He did, and I shot him anyway, right in the fucking head. I blew his goddamn brains out—that's how your precious Caine died, so what the fuck do you think about that?

Augustus studied him, and the corner of his mouth softened slightly. It wasn't exactly a smile, but it was a thin and distant cousin. "I think if that were true, I might have a newfound respect for you, boy," he said at length. "But since it's a lie..." That ghostly hint of a smile abruptly withered. "...and a patently piss-poor one, at that, I would say that you need a fresh lesson in the prudence of honesty."

He uncrossed his legs and stood, a seamless, fluid movement. The backwash of lamplight was aglow in his pale hair. When he approached the bedside, Brandon tried to bare his fists defiantly, but was immobilized by the cuffs.

Do your worst, you fuck, he seethed. I'm not afraid of you anymore. Break my bones—every goddamn one of them. I don't care.

Augustus stood above him, his face a smooth, unreadable mask. "Did Rene Morin shoot and kill my grandson?" he asked, his lips barely moving, only enough so that Brandon could discern the words.

Again, Brandon was caught off guard. *No*, he answered, automatic and earnest. Almost immediately, he kicked himself mentally in the ass, because if ever there had been an opportunity to get even with Rene, that would have been it. *Because the son of a bitch betrayed me, sold me out*, he thought. *He'd deserve nothing better than having Augustus gunning for his sorry fucking hide.*

Augustus reached down, and Brandon stiffened, expecting to be struck. Instead, he jerked in surprise as Augustus trailed his fingertips lightly down the contours of his face, from his hairline to his chin. As he did, Brandon felt him inside of his mind, a sudden, heavy, suffocating sensation as Augustus forced his

way past Brandon's natural shields, the rudimentary defenses he kept erected around his psyche.

Oh, God...! he thought in bright, sudden alarm. His eyes flew wide, and he struggled to block Augustus somehow, to keep him out. Augustus looked down at him, and again, the corner of his mouth lifted in that wry, slight hook.

Get out of my head, Brandon seethed, because he could feel him prodding more deeply now, sifting through his memories. Images flashed through his mind, the same things Augustus could see—of Rene speaking to Brandon on the morning of his betrayal, less than an hour before shooting him.

He doesn't have the balls, Rene told him, referring to Martin Davenant. *Not with that ledger in his hands. If your grandfather finds out about that book, he'll string Martin up...*

Martin had been embezzling money from Bloodhorse Distillery, the multimillion-dollar corporation of which Augustus was president and chief executive officer. The realization that he'd been doing this was apparently news to Augustus; his expression shifted slightly, his brows lifting, as if in surprise.

Did Lina take the Mercedes keys with her? Rene had asked Brandon in the course of this same conversation, and if Brandon could have cried out aloud in dismay, he would have.

Lina, Augustus said, that whip-thin smile widening now; a ghost no longer, but something triumphant. Brandon knew he could see her now; the memory of her name had brought with it a flood of associated thoughts and emotions, all of which Augustus was privy to—Lina's face, her full name, the smell of her skin, the sound of her laughter, memories of watching her sleep, of kissing her, holding her, making love to her...

Get out of my head! Brandon screamed, and all at once, as if caught by an unseen wire, Augustus suddenly flew backwards, away from the bed. He sailed across the room and slammed into a bookshelf, sending hard-back volumes crashing to the floor. He crumpled to his hands and knees, clearly stunned by the blow, and when he raised his head, his hair hanging in his face in a pale disarray, his eyes were round and shocked.

What the...? Brandon thought, wide-eyed and startled, too. What the hell just happened? How...how on earth did I...?

Augustus stumbled to his feet, no longer graceful or catlike, but slow-moving and pained. He tried to tuck his hair back behind his ears, grimacing visibly as he attempted to straighten fully upright.

If you hurt her, I'll kill you, Brandon told him, drawing his gaze. He'd never seen the Grandfather look so vulnerable before, his emotions on clear display, his customary stoicism all but dissolved. He stared at Brandon, his brows narrowed, even as a thin stream of blood trickled down from his left nostril and trailed the contour of his mouth, his chin. It splattered against his white linen shirt in fat droplets.

If you so much as think about her, I'll rip your goddamn heart out, Brandon seethed. *Do you hear me?*

Augustus limped toward the door. He said nothing. His mind was a heavy steel plate through which Brandon could discern absolutely no thought or emotion.

Do you hear me? Brandon shouted, straining against the cuffs around his wrists, arching his back off the mattress. *I'll fucking kill you if you touch her! You son of a bitch—I'll kill you! Do you hear me? Do you hear?*

Augustus closed the door behind him without as much as a backward glance.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Auguste?”

Augustus turned at the quiet beckon and found his brother, Benoît, in the corridor behind him. “Are you alright?” Benoît asked.

Gentle, kind-hearted Benoît. Born to the same clan by different mothers, they were only six months apart in age, with Augustus the oldest between them. Despite this, it had long and often been Benoît who was the caretaker between them, who looked out for Augustus’s well-being even when he stubbornly refused to do so for himself.

“I’m fine.” He shook his head, gritting his back teeth together in a grimace he hoped wasn’t noticeable as he forced himself to straighten his posture fully. Never mind that his lower back twinged with sharp, stabbing pain as he did this; Brandon had thrown him the broad length of the bedroom, and the edge of a bookshelf had caught him brutally in line with his kidneys.

I’ll probably piss blood for the next several days, but I’ll survive, he thought ruefully. Serves me right. I underestimated the boy...how strong he is...how aware of his own abilities.

It was a mistake he’d be damn sure not to make again.

As he drew closer, Benoît uttered a sharp, startled gasp. “You’re bleeding!”

Augustus sniffled, frowned, then wiped his nose with the side of his hand. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing?” Benoît pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and promptly thrust it in Augustus’s face. “Hold still and stop. Tilt your head over. No, not back—*down*, I said. Toward the floor.”

“You didn’t say *down*. You said *over*,” Augustus growled, his voice muffled and flat as Benoît clapped the handkerchief over his nose. “Stop that, goddamn it. I’m neither an imbecile nor a child. I can do it myself.”

Benoît stepped back, raising his hands in mock surrender. “What happened?”

“Nothing, Benoît. I told you. I’m fine.”

More than the stupid arrogance on his part that had prompted Brandon’s attack, Augustus was furious with himself for letting the boy see him in pain. He’d been unable to disguise it, no matter how he’d tried. It had been an uncharacteristic moment in which he’d revealed an even more uncharacteristic weakness.

“You’re not fine. You’re exhausted.” Benoît hooked his arm around Augustus’s waist, and God help him, Augustus accepted the assistance, grateful for the reprieve on his aching spine. “Have you slept at all since you came back from California? Come on. I’m amazed you’re still upright.”

So am I, Augustus thought, though for different reasons.

Benoît helped Augustus limp down the corridor to Caine’s room. Augustus had taken up residence here since his return, finding simple comfort from being surrounded by the young man’s things. Eventually, he would work up the courage to go through them, box them up, store what remembrances he could and be rid of the rest, but for now, at least, he settled for clinging to that one last, lingering reminder of the boy’s presence.

When they reached the bedroom, they found they weren’t alone. Sebastian Noble, Augustus and Eleanor’s son—Caine and Brandon’s father—sat slumped and passed out in a chair. An empty decanter on the floor beneath his limp, dangling fingers spoke volumes about what, for Sebastian, had become a nightly ritual.

The Brethren were polygamous, but Sebastian had only ever taken one wife. While this wasn’t necessarily by his choice—as Elders arranged marriages after careful consultation with the Tomes, a series of genealogical records that traced each Brethren clan back to its origins—it had left him nonetheless in the admittedly piteous position now of having lost almost all of his direct and most immediate descendants, all in one fell and foul swoop.

Sebastian had always adored Brandon. When the boy had run away, Sebastian had been overwrought; when Tessa, Brandon's twin, had also fled the compound, then Emily and Caine had been killed, it had emotionally devastated Sebastian. Left with only his youngest, Daniel, who was four, and now Brandon, given the boy's return, Sebastian had taken to drinking himself into an incoherent, weeping stupor every evening, then sleeping all day, abandoning his responsibilities to house, home and family business.

"Something will need to be done," Allistair Davenant had told Augustus only earlier that evening, watching with cold contempt as Sebastian had stumbled about, already well into his cups before the sun had even set. "Diego tells me he hasn't even been to the farm office this week. You will need to speak with him, Augustus."

"I know," Augustus had replied darkly.

"I'm speaking as your friend," Allistair had offered—blatantly insincere. "With everything that's happened...I'd hate to bring yet another issue within your clan before the other Elders."

In Brandon's mind, Augustus had heard Rene Morin make mention of a ledger, one in which Allistair's son, Martin, had apparently kept account of money he'd been embezzling for some time from Bloodhorse Distillery. A *lot* of money. He'd been stealing from the Brethren, but more than this, Martin had been stealing funds that had been entrusted to Augustus, as the dominant Elder, to exclusively control. Thus, in essence, he'd been stealing from Augustus.

And if he managed to somehow accomplish that without Allistair's knowledge or consent, I'm a goddamn prima ballerina taking center stage tonight as the Sugar Plum Fairy in The Nutcracker.

"Go fuck yourself, Allistair," Augustus had replied coolly. Or at least, he wished he had. But Allistair had him by the balls in a nice, firm vise-grip he wasn't going to be relinquishing any time soon. And they both knew it. And without that ledger—or something like it, something Augustus could use for leverage—there wasn't a goddamn thing he could do about it. So he'd simply smiled, as fake as Allistair's assurance of friendship, and said, "Thank you, Allistair."

“I’ll take him to his bed,” Augustus murmured of Sebastian, going to the chair and draping one of Sebastian’s arms limply over his shoulders.

“Please, Father,” Sebastian had begged earlier, after Allistair had left. Bleary-eyed, disheveled, unshaven and reeking of bourbon, he’d clung to the front of Augustus’s shirt, standing at Brandon’s doorstep, trying vainly to get past the threshold. “Let me see him. He...he’s my son! You can’t...you can’t keep me from him...!”

But Augustus *could* keep him from the boy, and he had, just as he had every other time Sebastian had pleaded to see Brandon, having no intention of rewarding either Brandon’s stubborn and continued defiance or Sebastian’s drinking.

With a grunt, he dragged his son clumsily upright, but then sucked in a sharp, pained gasp through his teeth at the effort.

“Here.” Benoît reached for Sebastian, and Augustus offered no protest as he drew the younger man from his grasp. “You’re unwell, Auguste. Let me take him for you.”

With a heavy sigh, alone in the room as Benoît helped Sebastian out the door, Augustus sank down onto the bed. He lay back against Caine’s black silk sheets, sucking in another gasp as the movement pained his back.

Eleanor.

Sometimes—like right now—he missed her so badly, he could weep. He’d taken his suit jacket off earlier, having indulged in some of Sebastian’s favored vice and downed a more-than-usual quantity of bourbon in his own right that night, and didn’t have her photograph, the ghost of her fragrance immediately at hand. To comfort himself, he had to settle for his own distant memories, and he closed his eyes, taking him back to a time and place so long ago, he seemed a different person, even to himself; someone young and naïve, earnestly carefree.

It was the mistletoe, he thought. The entire course of Augustus’s life had changed on account of one goddamn night and that goddamn weed sprig. That it was considered poisonous didn’t surprise him in the least; even uneaten,

mistletoe had cast a dark and damnable taint over his world that remained even to that day.

It had been Twelfth Night, 1792. In those days, Christmas itself was little more than a church holiday, but the season itself was marked with a month-long series of mid-winter feasts and parties culminating in early January with the Twelfth Night celebration.

The table had been laden with an opulent spread—roasted turkey and goose, mincemeat pies, custards, gooseberry tarts, brandied peaches, puddings and pies—and the wassail, mulled wine and spiced rum had flowed freely. Pine boughs, ivy garlands and holly sprigs adorned the mantels and window sills; candles, lamps and carefully tended hearths lent the house a thick, warm glow of festive good cheer.

As was customary, the men spent the day on horseback foxhunting. Late afternoon and into the evening, they'd pass around drinks and sing perennial favorites like "The First Noel," "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen" and "I Saw Three Ships." The furniture would be pushed aside for dancing that would last long into the night.

Although they hadn't met for the first time on Christmas Eve in 1792, it had been the first time Augustus had really taken notice of Eleanor since the Brethren clans had migrated from Virginia to the relative wilds of what would one day become the state of Kentucky. They'd come at the behest of a colonist friend, William Whitley, a human with a penchant for horseracing and frontier adventure. His stately brick home was a strangely civilized sight compared to the log cabins and forts that typified the landscape, and along with the Brethren males, frequent guests to the Whitley estate included Daniel Boone and George Rogers Clark.

"Who is that?" Augustus had murmured to Michel Morin, his best friend since early childhood. A girl had just entered the Averay family home, where they had gathered to celebrate the holidays; though accompanied by her mother and sisters, all wrapped in long cloaks and laden with armloads of food, she stood out to him as if aglow. Her ivory skin was porcelain smooth, offset by preternaturally large, almond-shaped eyes and dark, glossy hair pulled off her face, pinned in a

cascade of ringlets. Her cheeks were flushed with cold, and her mouth, with full lips as if bee-stung, was quite possibly the most perfectly formed he'd ever seen.

"Who?" Michel followed Augustus's gaze, sipping from his rum.

That the girl didn't stand out to Michel as radiantly as she did to him astonished Augustus. "That one, there."

She cut her eyes to him then, as if she'd heard him speak, even from the other room. Their gazes locked, and for all the world, everything else around Augustus had abruptly fallen silent and still. A sudden warmth seized him, filling him from pate to heel, and he stood immobilized by the simple but undeniable power of her stare, captured by those chocolate-dark eyes.

"That's one of the Trevilian girls...that bastard drunk, Nestor's daughters, I think. Helen, maybe? No, Ellen. No..." Michel's brows raised, an *ah-ha!* expression. "Eleanor. That's her name. Eleanor Trevilian."

Eleanor's mother called to her from the kitchen, her voice sharp and imperative. Appropriately rebuked, Eleanor turned her eyes away from Augustus and followed the beckon.

"Careful, lad." Michel clapped his hand against Augustus's shoulder, chuckling lightly, a low rumble beneath the ruffled trim of his ascot. "She's spoken for." When Augustus glanced at him, brow raised, he nodded. "Promised to Victor Davenant."

Victor had been Alistair's older brother, a loud and stupid son of a bitch who had been built like a prize-winning bull and had gone from boorish to downright brutal whenever he had some brandy in him. Which, from Augustus's understanding, was quite often. The idea of Victor's broad hands and thick fingers pawing at Eleanor Trevilian's slight frame—or worse, slapping her in a fit of drunken rage—turned Augustus's stomach, souring the remnants of the otherwise wonderful holiday meal he'd eaten earlier.

But Victor Davenant also had at least half a head and twenty pounds on Augustus. To top things off, at that time, the Davenants were the dominant clan among the Brethren, with Victor being next in line to be Elder, which meant

fucking with him would be akin to social, as well as physical, suicide for Augustus.

“There’s a shame,” Augustus remarked, knocking back the rest of his brandy.

“*Oui, en effet,*” Michel agreed. *Yes, indeed.*

That might have been the end of things had it not been for the goddamn mistletoe.

The night had worn on, with everyone getting drunker, the singing louder, the dancing more raucous. Augustus had spent the evening mesmerized by Eleanor; every time he’d seen the young woman, he’d frozen in place, unable to think, much less breathe. In a round of dancing, in which he’d tromped and twirled from one partner to another, he’d abruptly found himself face-to-face and hand-to-hand with her. Her luscious mouth had proven even more so at that close proximity, and to make matters worse, she’d been smiling, laughing out loud, enjoying the dance. Her cheeks had been brightly flushed, her dark curls bouncing, her dewy complexion glossed with a light sheen of perspiration. As she’d touched her palm to his, he’d lost his place in the intricate jig steps and stumbled, nearly crashing to the floor.

“I’m sorry...!” she exclaimed, thinking she’d tripped him somehow.

Humiliated and nearly hyperventilating because of her damnable nearness, he’d pushed his way from the dancers.

“Hey—you alright?” Michel had tried to catch him by the sleeve, but he’d shrugged himself loose and ducked outside. Here, the biting chill in the winter air had helped snap him back to his senses. Or so he’d thought.

Because when he walked back inside, he stumbled headlong into Eleanor Trevilian in the doorway.

“Oh...!” she exclaimed, and he caught her in his arms, feeling the momentary but wondrous press of her breasts against his chest, close enough to her now to draw the intoxicatingly sweet fragrance of her—lavender and heather—into his nose.

“Forgive me,” he mumbled, cutting his eyes away from her face before her gaze settled fully on him, impaling and imprisoning him again. This did him no good, however, as he found himself looking down past the edge of the ruffled modesty trim on the bodice of her dress, to the generous hint of cleavage he could just glimpse beyond. All at once, a rush of warmth gripped his groin. “I...I beg your pardon, miss...”

“Hoah, now!” Michel called out in sudden, booming good cheer, just as Augustus managed to pull back from Eleanor, praying to God he could duck past her before she noticed the erection swelling the front of his trousers outward. “Look who’s found himself underneath the mistletoe!”

Mistletoe? Augustus looked up, a sense of dread now growing in uncomfortable complement to the arousal in his crotch. *Oh, shit.*

Eleanor looked up, too, and beheld the damnable cluster of shiny, oval-shaped leaves and miniscule white berries. Fastened with a bright red velvet bow from a hook in the doorframe above them, it dangled overhead, the horticultural Sword of Damocles.

The party erupted in an uproarious mix of laughter and cheers. Michel clapped Augustus heavily on the shoulders as the crowd closed in around them, forcing him forward, shoving him firmly into Eleanor again. “Kiss her, you bastard!” Michel cried, laughing. “Go on now! ’Tis the season!”

Augustus’s humiliation was complete as he looked into Eleanor’s eyes. She was again pressed against him, enough so that she could feel his arousal now, though her skirts hid it from anyone else’s immediate view; he could tell by how wide and shocked her eyes had become, the way all of the color had drained from her face, save for two patches of hot, mortified color in the high apples of her cheeks.

“Kiss! Kiss!” their family and friends cheered. Augustus leaned forward, meaning to give her a quick and fleeting buss, one that would shut everyone up and leave him able to stagger out of the damn doorway, back outside again, where the cold would take care of the matter of his crotch.

But when his lips lit against hers, it felt like something electric passed between them, a jolting shock that ripped through his entire body, stripping the wind and wits from him. Again, it was as if everything around them had faded to silence and there was nothing but her, the sweet fragrance of her hair and skin, the velveteen softness and warmth of her mouth.

He could have stood there all night beneath the mistletoe, his lips pressed to hers, and probably would have, too, had divine providence not again so thoughtfully intervened. Some of the more drunken among the party guests had gone outside, armed with muskets and rifles, and began to fire wildly into the air in what was a frontier celebratory tradition. At the startling, resounding booms, Augustus and Eleanor drew abruptly apart, and the crowd around them then rushed to the nearest windows and doors, cheering for this new distraction.

“Hey, Auguste, come on!” Michel laughed, grabbing Augustus again, and he had a fleeting moment to blink at Eleanor before he was jerked back through the crowd in forcible tow, heading for the back door and the yard beyond.

Augustus opened his eyes, waking with a start, blinking up at the moon-draped ceiling of his grandson’s bedroom. With a groan, he turned his head, blinking blearily at the bedside clock. It was shortly after four in the morning. He’d overslept.

Goddamn it.

He winced as he sat up. His body healed fast, and already most of the pain that had all but crippled him when he’d fallen asleep had faded. A heavy stiffness remained, however, as if he carried something strapped to the base of his spine, but he did his best to ignore it as he rose to his feet.

Pushing his long, disheveled hair back behind his ears, he walked over to Caine’s bureau, atop which he’d left a wooden case similar in size and shape to a cigar box. Inside, Augustus had stowed a variety of medicinal supplies; chief among these were several hypodermic needles and small amber-colored ampoules of morphine, each containing 10-milligram doses of the powerful drug. He readied one of the syringes with a full dose, then returned the slim, plastic

cap over the needle. Pocketing it, he left the room, walking quietly down the corridor until he reached Brandon's door.

He kept the room locked at all times, even when he was inside. No one had been permitted to see Brandon—not Sebastian, not the boy's mother, not even Allistair, although he'd pressed to under that same damnable, smarmy pretense of "friendly concern," and would undoubtedly continue to do so until Augustus relented. But for the moment, at least, no one saw Brandon save for Augustus, and he meant to keep it that way for as long as he was able.

He slipped a small key ring from his pants pocket and used one of the gold keys dangling from it to unlock the door. In virtual silence, he opened the door and slipped inside, shutting it behind him and turning the deadbolt back into place. He'd left the lamp on when last he'd left; by its dim, yellow glow, he saw the tumble of books on the floor from where he'd hit the shelves.

Augustus walked to Brandon's bedside and gazed down at the young man, who lay asleep, his dark hair swept messily about his face, the bedclothes bunched and tangled about his legs from where he'd struggled against the canvas straps lashing him to the mattress.

You should teach him, Eleanor had pressed him once. They'd been lying in bed together, side-by-side, naked in the moonlight, and he'd snorted with dry laughter, sitting up. *What? Why not?*

Because... For a moment, he'd been distracted when he'd turned to look at her because she'd been so goddamn beautiful, with her dark hair spread out on the pillow beneath her, her hands folded neatly against the flat plain of her belly. The outline of her body—long, lean and sweetly curvaceous—had been apparent beneath the light drape of the sheets, and his thoughts—which had been brooding, turned toward Brandon—abruptly shifted gears toward more pleasant distractions.

Because why? she'd asked when he leaned over to kiss her, pressing her fingertips over his mouth and preventing him. He'd rolled his eyes, then rolled away, and this dismissal had pissed her off. She'd sat up, dark eyes flashing

hotly. *Because why?* she'd asked again. *He can't help what he can do, Auguste—no more than you can.*

But I can help it, Augustus thought, watching Brandon sleep. *I can block his power, keep it hidden away, so deep inside of him, the boy doesn't even realize it himself.*

Which is what he had done for the better part of two decades. It had always been a challenge; a considerable drain on his stamina and reserves, but never so much as it had been in the few short days that had passed since Brandon's return. Benoît had been right—Augustus *was* exhausted, but it had nothing to do with sleep, or lack thereof. Brandon was exhausting him; the sheer effort it took now to contain the boy, to stifle his mind...dampen his powers.

He turned to the IV stand beside Brandon's bed, from which a constant drip of saline-based fluid constantly cycled. To this line, which ran through a slim rubber tube through a port in Brandon's hand, Augustus injected the morphine dose, because the drug dulled the boy's mind, aiding in his own efforts, giving Augustus a temporary, but desperately needed reprieve.

It would have been easier to kill him. And again, as he slipped from the room once more, Augustus silently damned the mistletoe that even now, two hundred years later, kept him from doing so.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Stand back.”

Eleanor caught Tessa by the arm and drew her away from the crumpled hood of the Mercedes. She'd been standing there, helpless and hiccupping on tears, watching as Tristan had maneuvered Rene's unconscious form onto a back board and secured a neck brace around him. He'd accomplished this without laying a finger on Rene, just as he had with the pine tree.

As she'd watched, Tristan had closed his eyes, his brows furrowed visibly, his face flushed as if the exertion on his mind affected his body as well. With one hand extended, he managed to levitate Rene's body off the front end of the car, suspending it in mid-air while, together, Eleanor and Lina slid the back board beneath him. By the time he lowered Rene again, a light sheen of perspiration had glossed his brow.

“I'm alright,” he'd murmured, flapping away Eleanor's concerned attempts to touch him. “Come on. Help me load him in the truck.”

They piled into the Jeep, with Tessa scrambling up into the rear compartment to sit beside Rene. Lina hopped in shotgun, while Eleanor sat in the back behind Tristan, who drove.

“Where are we going?” Lina asked as Tristan dropped the Jeep in reverse.

He draped his hand against her seat and looked over his shoulder, the truck's wheels grinding in the loose gravel as he whipped it in a tight, reverse semi-circle. His gaze caught Tessa's. “Hospital,” he replied.

Rene moaned softly as the Jeep bounced and jostled along, traveling at what felt like break-neck speed along the winding, rutted road twining further back into the rugged mountains. Tessa leaned over, holding his hand lightly and smoothing his hair back from his brow.

“It’s alright,” she whispered, even though he couldn’t hear her. His face was bruised and bloodied, still riddled with dozens of fine, hair-thin lacerations from the brawl in their motel room. “It’s alright, Rene.”

But when the truck at last skidded to a stop and Tessa looked up, peering through the back hatch, she frowned. She’d thought Tristan meant to bring them back to the city, to South Lake Tahoe—to civilization, for Christ’s sake. Instead, she found herself looking out at another cabin similar in architectural style to the larger version they’d only just left—a broad, creek-stone foundation, tall windows and cedar-stained wooden plank exterior walls.

“What...?” she began, but Tristan was already out of the Jeep, slamming the door. “What is this place?” she asked Eleanor. “I thought he said he was taking us to the hospital.”

The corner of Eleanor’s mouth lifted slightly; too gentle to be considered patronizing, but annoying nonetheless. “This *is* the hospital, Tessa,” she replied. As Tristan opened the back hatch, she said, “Don’t lift him out of here by yourself.”

“I won’t. Here’s Karen now,” he replied as, beyond the windshield of the truck, Tessa saw a woman emerge from the building Eleanor had called a hospital. Tall and blond, her pale hair caught back in a loose ponytail, she wore blue jeans and a faded cardigan over a T-shirt; between those and her hot pink flip flops, she looked anything but a doctor or nurse.

“Hey, you,” the woman, Karen, said with a puzzled sort of smile to Tristan. “Wasn’t expecting to see you again quite so soon.”

“You know me,” he replied. “No rest for the wicked. You mind to go inside with Lina here and bring me out a stretcher?”

Karen’s puzzlement turned to surprise, then concern, as she cut her eyes toward Lina. “Sure thing.”

As the two women hurried back into the building, and Eleanor opened her door, climbing out of the Jeep, Tessa leaned out, hoping there was more to the place than her vantage allowed her to see. There wasn’t. “This is really a hospital?” she asked, looking doubtful.

“Not exactly, no,” Tristan replied, motioning her back against the wall. “If you want to get technical, it’s a highly specialized medical facility—the only one of its kind in the entire world dedicated to the care and treatment of our species...” He seemed to be reciting this, and with a decidedly unenthusiastic, nearly bitter edge. He also sounded breathless as he said it, his eyes closed, brows furrowed again. Tessa jerked in surprise, uttering a startled yelp as the back board—and Rene atop it—suddenly moved, sliding toward the rear of the compartment and rising a good inch or so off the ground.

At the sound of her cry, however, the board fell with a loud, resounding *thud!* that shimmied through the floor. Tessa blinked at Tristan, wide-eyed and startled anew.

“Please don’t do that,” he said

“Do what?” she whispered.

“Yell like that. Break my concentration. You’ll make me drop him.” He gave her a sort of exasperated, pleading look.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s alright.” Tristan closed his eyes again. Whatever he’d done earlier to catch the pine tree in mid-air, save it from crashing into Tessa, it had obviously exhausted him. What should have been a slight and easy task compared to that instead visibly taxed him. That thin furrow crimped between his brows again, and once more, the heavy stretcher levitated.

As Tristan began to step back from the Jeep, Rene and the board followed as if in invisible tow. Again, as she had with the tree, Tessa watched in stunned amazement as Tristan drew Rene out into the dappled sunshine, holding him suspended at least four feet off the ground, rotating the back board so that Lina and the blond woman, Karen, could rush a wheeled stretcher beneath him.

From the outside, it may have looked like anything but a hospital, but inside, the small building proved clinically state-of-the-art. Five patient bedrooms framed a centralized station with computer terminals and equipment storage. A waiting area with comfortable leather couches and chairs flanked the southern

side, where the broad windows awarded a spectacular view. Bright fluorescent light gleamed against white-tiled floors and immaculate counter tops.

“Where’s the doctor?” Tessa asked.

“Bay two, on the right,” Tristan said to Karen, who was guiding the stretcher. “Just wheel him up to the bed.”

While they brought Rene into one of the patient rooms, Tessa paused by the central station. All but one of the computer terminals were dark here, the monitors turned off. The workstations were all neat and tidy—too much so. They looked spotless, unused. A quick glance around at the patient rooms revealed all of the doorways darkened save one; here, a dim hint of light seeped out through the partially closed door.

As soon as her eyes settled on that door, a strange shiver ran down Tessa’s spine, a light but insistent prickling sensation.

There’s someone in there. There was no way to know this for sure just from standing there; she couldn’t see enough into the room to tell, but she felt it just the same. Frowning, she walked around the counter toward the threshold.

Maybe it’s an office, she thought. A staff lounge or something. The doctor must be inside. There’s nobody else here I can see.

She placed her hand against the door and paused, hearing strange sounds from inside. One, she recognized easily: music playing softly; the sweet strains of piano, a faint, if not somewhat familiar melody that took Tessa moment to place.

Beethoven. *Für Elise.*

Another sound overlapped this, a strange, wet burbling that reminded Tessa of a fish aquarium.

“Hello?” Tessa pushed lightly against the door, opening it in a slow-moving arc. It creaked softly on its hinges, and inside, Tessa saw what looked like an oversized bath or Jacuzzi tub. The sound of bubbling water became more clear, and, curious, she crept past the threshold.

“Hello?”

A small bathroom to the left of the doorway blocked all but the end of the tub from her view. But as she drew closer, she could see over the edge now, past the black-lined lip of glossy white plastic to the blue-tinted interior. It was filled nearly to the rim with water.

What the hell...? she thought, because there was someone floating in it—a woman, reed-thin, her pale flesh nearly translucent. Beneath the filmy surface of her skin, a spiderweb network of veins and tangled red capillaries were visible. Her breasts were withered; her belly sunken and hollow. The bony prominences of her collarbone, sternum, ribcage and pelvis were all plainly visible. Emaciated and weathered, her face looked little more than a skull with a parchment-thin covering of flesh over top. Her thin hair, like gossamer, floated in a thin corona around her head in the water. Her entire body appeared to be mottled with bruises, as if she'd been pummeled furiously and repeatedly with fists, mallets, sticks and canes.

Oh, my God, Tessa thought in breathless horror. She looks dead...like she's drowned or something! What the hell's wrong with her?

When the blonde, Karen, caught her sharply by the arm from behind, she yelped in bright, frightened start.

"You don't belong in here," Karen said, her brows narrowed angrily, her eyes sharp like slivers of granite as she hauled Tessa abruptly back into the hallway.

"I'm sorry," Tessa hiccupped. "I...I didn't mean...I only thought..." Abashed, she turned around, her cheeks blazing with shamed color, and darted back to Rene's room.

Karen followed her only moments later, returning with a loud clatter, the rattling of metal as she wheeled a cumbersome cart to Rene's bedside.

"What is that?" Lina asked. She'd positioned herself nearly sentry-like by the head of the bed, her arms folded across her chest, her brows pinched with worry.

"Portable x-ray," Tristan replied as he and Karen began working together to unfold the cart, setting up a spindly but sturdy stainless steel frame. To this,

they affixed a heavy contraption in a bright yellow plastic case that Tristan then connected through a series of USB cables to a laptop computer. With the machine set up, he and Karen wheeled it toward the bed.

“Why don’t you guys go sit in the waiting room?” Tristan glanced over his shoulder. “Karen and I’ve got things covered in here for now.”

“Of course.” Eleanor hooked her hand gently against Tessa’s elbow. “Come on, darling. I’ll make you a nice cup of tea and—”

“I don’t want any tea.” Tessa flapped her away. “I’m not going anywhere until the doctor gets here.”

“Tristan *is* the doctor,” Lina said quietly. “Don’t you remember? Your grandmother told us in the truck.”

Eleanor had said a lot of things during the ride, none of which had permeated through Tessa’s panicked concern.

But he’s so young, Tessa wanted to say, but pressed her lips together in time to stifle the words. Among the Brethren, looks could be deceiving—how could she have forgotten? They weren’t immortal but they *were* long-lived. Eleanor, her grandmother, was well over two hundred years old and looked little more than thirty. Tristan may have looked Tessa’s age but he could have been ten times that with little change in his outward appearance.

“Come on, Tessa,” Lina said, her voice uncharacteristically low and soothing. She left Rene’s bedside, slipped her arm around Tessa’s shoulders and steered her, unprotesting, toward the door. “Rene will be alright.”

Lina had been a cop before getting caught up in the mess that was the Brethren. She’d seen enough in her career to have serious doubts about what she’d just said, and Tessa could sense this as plainly as if she’d spoken it aloud. But Lina had been frightened and worried about Brandon to begin with; now, she was frightened and worried for Rene, too. Tessa didn’t want to add to her concerns, and went along in reluctant tow as Lina escorted her to the waiting room.

While she sat on the couch, Lina stood nearby, arms folded, her eyes anxious. Eleanor stood at the windows, looking beyond the glass to the pine forests.

“What if that woman comes here—Naima?” Lina asked.

“I don’t think she will.” Eleanor shook her head. “And if she does, she’ll have composed herself again.” She nodded once, her breath frosting the window in a thin, fleeting haze.

“*Composed* herself?” Lina arched her brow. “That woman is a goddamn menace. She threw Rene off a two-story balcony, for Christ’s sake, and with enough force to crush the front end of a car! You make it sound like she was having a...a tantrum or something!”

“In a lot of ways, she was,” Eleanor offered with a shrug. “You don’t understand, and I’m sorry. Naima’s different. But she’ll get herself back under control again, and when she does, she’ll be alright. You’ll see.”

“No.” Lina frowned. “I won’t. Because I’m not staying here, not one more goddamn minute.” Shoving up her shirt sleeves, she marched toward the door. “I’m going to go out in those woods and track down Brandon before you or that crazy bitch can get to him first.”

“Brandon in the woods?” Eleanor blinked in surprise. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play stupid with me,” Lina said, her frown deepening. “Tessa heard everything—the three of you in the kitchen saying how you needed to hunt Brandon down in the forest and kill him. That’s why we were running away.”

“Brandon?” Eleanor said again, still looking puzzled. “We weren’t talking about Brandon. We were talking about Martin Davenant.”

At this, Tessa looked up, startled. “What?” She stood. “What do you mean, Martin? Rene has him tied up at his cabin.”

Eleanor shook her head, her expression grim. “Not anymore, he doesn’t. We’ve been keeping a periodic watch on him, checking in at the cabin. And this morning, he was gone. We think he’s loose in the woods somewhere. And if he

finds out about us, the compound out here—if he even gets a sense of us, we’re all in terrible danger.”

“Martin’s gone,” Lina repeated, then she uttered a sharp bark of humorless laughter. “Well, that’s just fucking great! Loose in the woods somewhere, my ass—I guarantee you he’s made his way down to the town somehow. It can’t be a coincidence that Brandon turns up missing, and now Martin’s gone, too! Martin’s taken him, I just know it. He’s probably on his way to hand him over to the Elders right now.”

“How could Martin have found Brandon?” Tessa asked.

“I don’t know.” Lina shook her head, then threw up her hands. “I don’t care. Naima tossed Rene around like a rag doll using *her mind*, so I have no idea what the hell Martin Davenant might be capable of! All I know is that’s the only scenario that makes sense to me—and Rene was right earlier. *We do* know where they’re going, where Martin or the Elders or whoever the hell has Brandon is taking him. To Kentucky. So that’s where I’m going, too.”

“You can’t go against the Elders,” Tessa told her quietly, drawing her furious gaze. “Or Martin, either, not by yourself.”

“I went against Emily by myself,” Lina reminded. “And Caine, too.”

“That was different,” Tessa said. “And you know it. Brandon’s told you about the Elders. You know we’ll need help against them if they’ve taken Brandon. Rene might have been right earlier, but you were, too—we can’t do this alone. *You* can’t do this alone. *We* need help.” With a reluctant glance at Eleanor—the last person in the world she wanted to trust or depend on—she added, “We need *their* help.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Here, darling,” Eleanor soothed, pressing a cup of tea between her grand-daughter’s hands. *It’s the shock of things*, she kept telling herself. *Finding out I’m alive...her brother’s missing...meeting Naima and Tristan...seeing what they can do...and poor Rene, so badly hurt... She’s just in shock.*

The three women had returned to Tristan’s Jeep, then driven back up the sloping hillside to Michel Morin’s house. Once inside, Eleanor had put a pot of chamomile tea on to steep. Her Victorian sensibilities hadn’t abandoned her, even after 100 years, and she’d carefully arranged a plate of assorted cookies and crackers to serve with the tea.

To this point, I’ve been a dreadful hostess, she told herself. *And after everything Tessa’s been through, and being pregnant, too...no wonder she keeps recoiling from me.*

Light winked off of something around Tessa’s neck as Eleanor leaned over her—a gemstone pendant on a thin, filigree chain that had slipped out from beneath the neckline of her shirt. The moment her gaze settled on it, Eleanor recognized it and felt a tremor run through her, shuddering her to the core.

Auguste.

Christmas, 1932. It had been the Great Depression, and for most, a time of loss and hardship. As if in furious defiance of the national economy, however, Augustus had lavished Eleanor with holiday gifts, taking her off the compound grounds in Kentucky—typically forbidden for women among the Brethren—and bringing her to the opening night gala at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Dazzled by the bright lights and dizzying traffic, delighted by the prospect of seeing the show’s star, dancer Martha Graham—as Eleanor herself loved to dance—she’d thought the evening couldn’t get any more wonderful. She’d been mistaken.

I remember it clearly, she thought. As they had stood outside of the music hall, with frigid wind whipping against them, threatening to tug loose the careful arrangement of tight pin curls she'd fashioned in her hair, he had draped his arm around her. Wrapped in a long, black wool overcoat, he'd been impossibly warm and had smelled impossibly good to her; the musky spice of his cologne trapped beneath the overlapping lapels of his coat, stoked by his body heat to a heady, nearly intoxicating intensity.

"Are you cold, *ma belle*?" he asked, leaning down so that loose strands of his long hair that had worked free from the ponytail caught against the nape of his neck tickled against her and his breath brushed her in warm, soft huffs.

Wrapped in an ankle-length, high-collared fur coat draped lushly over the folds of her ruffled gown, Eleanor had been hard pressed to be cold, but Augustus had reached beneath his coat nonetheless, his hand stealing beneath the underlying lapel of his tuxedo. "Here," he told her. "I have something that may help."

At the time, she hadn't realized the pale blue box he slipped from his jacket was a signature of Tiffany and Company. Brethren women were allowed few luxuries, much less jewelry, and the dress she was wearing, the fur coat—the entire holiday trip—had been an extravagance that had been, to that point, uncharacteristic.

He'd smiled at her visible bewilderment, and oh, God, even now just thinking about the way the thin line of his mouth had hooked gently upward made her lonely for him. He'd opened the box to reveal a necklace inside—the very pendant Tessa now wore. Far from the gaudy, clunky jewels exemplified by the time, this had been delicate, elegant and sleek—a large, solitary pendant, a faceted green stone, simply mounted and affixed to the end of a finely wrought chain.

"It's an oriental emerald. I had it shipped from Sri Lanka," he told her, as she gasped in breathless amazement to see it capture and reflect the bright lights of the cityscape around them. The antiquated term, *oriental emerald*, was

no longer in use; the stone, a 10-carat green sapphire was today valued at more than fifteen thousand dollars.

“It’s not much…” Augustus had offered, his brows lifting, his expression somewhat sheepish, and she’d no idea what the hell he was talking about.

“Not much? It’s too much! You shouldn’t have!” She’d sputtered these and other words of futile protest as he’d lifted the delicate chain from the box with gloved fingertips, then draped the necklace lightly about her throat.

“Auguste, you can’t do this.” She’d tried again. “It’s too much. What will the others say?”

Because Augustus had still been very new to his position as Elder of his clan, and as the eldest among these, the leader of the Brethren. Although he now held exclusive control of the Brethren’s finances, they were not his to do with as he pleased, and she knew that these tokens, no matter how sincerely he offered them, would be seen as inflammatory by the other Elders—especially Allistair Davenant.

“I don’t care what they say.” Augustus had continued smiling, charmed by her stammering protests. “There wouldn’t *be* any money if it weren’t for me. I’ll spend it as I damn well please.”

In 1788, Augustus’s father, Reynard, had purchased a horse called Messenger, having the animal shipped all of the way from England, where it had been sired by a long and distinguished line of thoroughbred champions. To that point, horse breeding and racing had been little more than a hobby to the Brethren and their focus had been in tobacco farming. Reynard Noble had been the first to seize upon horses as a lucrative business venture.

Through a man named Alexander Clay out of Philadelphia—one in a long line of humans frequently employed by the Elders to help the Brethren tend to business matters; today, these humans were called the Kinsfolk—Reynard had hired Messenger out as a breeding stud. Eventually, he had sold the gray stallion to millionaire businessman Henry Astor. From there, the horse had gone on to be considered the “father” of American standardbred horses, best suited for harness racing.

Through Reynard and Henry Astor's association, Augustus had befriended John Jacob Astor IV—"J.J." as Augustus had fondly called him—when both had attended Harvard together. J.J. had gone on to build his own fortune in real estate and hotels, projects in which he frequently invited Augustus to invest—and which Augustus had frequently done so. This had earned the Brethren enough money to comfortably weather not only the stock market crash of 1929, but the years of economic depression that had followed. It was one of many sound business decisions that Augustus had made on the Brethren's behalf that had reaped bountiful rewards; similarly, in 1933, when Prohibition would end, Augustus would make the radical—and, among his fellow Elders, unpopular—decision to invest in liquor distilling, increasing their long-term wealth even more.

On that cold December night in 1932, Augustus had kissed her. His lips had been chafed with the frigid wind, but his breath and tongue had been impossibly, wondrously warm. "Let me lavish you," he'd murmured against her mouth, words that had sent a fresh tremble of excitement suddenly racing through her. By that point, she had been married to him for more than a century; had made love to him tens upon thousands of times; knew every inch of his long, lean body with the same intimate familiarity as she knew her own, and yet the man could still make her wet, leave her panties soaked with need, with little more than a whisper.

Enough so that they'd broken out of line together, retreating to his glossy black 1930 Duesenberg Model J, whereupon they'd promptly fallen together into the leather-upholstered back seat. Augustus jerked open the front of her fur coat, spreading it out like a pair of ermine wings. He'd opened his coat and trousers with one hand, pushing up her dress with the other. As their driver had stood outside, undoubtedly privy to every breathless cry and moan she uttered as she writhed, Augustus had lowered himself atop Eleanor, filling her in a single, deep stroke. He fell into an immediate, powerful rhythm, driving himself into her; within moments, she was clutching at him, arching her back off the seat as she climaxed.

“I love you,” he’d whispered and then he had come inside of her, and she could still remember the play of light and shadows against his face. Every muscle in his body had tensed, growing rigid, nearly tremulous against her, and his voice and breath had caught in a choked, guttural cry.

“Let’s skip the show,” he’d breathed when he was finished, offering a winded laugh as she’d caressed his face, brushing back sweat-dampened strands of his hair. He’d booked them a penthouse suite at the Waldorf-Astoria, a hotel that had once belonged in part to his dear friend, “J.J.,” who—along with one of Augustus’s cousins—had died in the 1912 sinking of *Titanic*. “We can return to the suite...” He’d kissed her lips lightly. “...I could have a bath drawn for you...” Now his mouth had trailed to the corner of her jaw, tracing down the slope of her throat. “...then I could take my time with you...all night long...”

She’d taken him up on the offer, and even though she’d missed the chance to see the legendary Martha Graham first-hand, she didn’t regret it for a moment. Especially now, she considered, smiling to see the pendant around Tessa’s neck, when her longing for Augustus still more often than not over-rode her hatred of him.

She’d given the necklace to the girl five years earlier, a sixteenth birthday present.

She hadn’t consulted with Augustus when she’d done this, and he’d worked himself into a snit because of it.

“I bought that for you,” he’d complained, looking wounded, as if she’d hawked it at some fleabag pawn shop, not offered it to Tessa. “She’s going to marry Martin Davenant in two years—they’ll rip that off her neck just to spite me.”

Not everything is about you, Auguste, she’d wanted to tell him, but had held her tongue, mostly because she had known he was right. That Tessa still had the necklace now surprised and amazed her; she would have thought Allistair Davenant, if not his misbegotten son, would have leaped ass over elbows for the chance to lay his hands on that pendant.

“Then she’ll always hate them for it,” she’d told Augustus. “And never forget where she came from, who she is—a Noble, not a Davenant.”

"This looks lovely on you," she murmured with a smile, snapping out of her nostalgic reverie and brushing her fingertips against the green sapphire.

Tessa drew back, brows drawing narrow, her dark eyes flashing with a mixture of anger, humiliation and pain that Eleanor didn't understand. "You can have it back."

Hurt and confused, Eleanor shook her head. "I...I don't want it back, darling. It's yours now." She reached for Tessa, but again the girl recoiled. "Tessa, please...I know you must be angry...thinking I was dead all of these years. But you have to understand—I had no way to tell you otherwise, no way to get word to you."

"Does the Grandfather know?"

"Yes," Eleanor said. "He arranged for all of this, to have me brought here." *And I hate him for that,* she wished she could add.

"Yes, well." Tessa uttered a quiet little snort and stood from the sofa. "He's good at that. Arranging things."

"Tessa, please..." Eleanor said as Tessa turned to march away. There was more to the story than she understood, more to Tessa's anger than just the shock of discovering Eleanor still lived. More than just in the words Tessa said, Eleanor could see it plainly in her eyes, the rigid stance of her posture, the angry balls of her fists. *There's something she's not telling me, something that's come to pass. My God, the child hates me now. What is going on?*

"You can't know how hard this has been for me," she pleaded, feeling tears suddenly well in her eyes, choke in her voice. "Being away from you all of this time...away from your grandfather...from all of you. I didn't ask him to do this—I didn't know he would. He told you I was dead, cut me off from you...from everything. I've missed you."

When Tessa had turned seven, and what had been a cute and childish fascination with all things ballet had bloomed into an honest interest in the study of dance, Eleanor had pressed Augustus to hire tutors for her. World-class instructors, hand-selected by Eleanor herself, had been employed at the estate

for Tessa's exclusive benefit. Augustus had even commissioned to have a ballet studio constructed for her inside the Noble great house.

"You spoil that girl," Augustus had told her with an insincere frown on more than one occasion, especially those in which Tessa would go flitting through the house in pink tutus and tights, spinning in pirouettes or prancing about in *grand jetés*.

Sometimes they had put on performances together for the family, Eleanor and Tessa dancing side by side, and as Tessa had grown older, she'd enjoyed giving lessons in turn to her younger cousins in the studio. She and Eleanor and some of Tessa's aunts or Augustus's other wives would gather together and make costumes for the children's recitals, sewing sequins and gluing glitter onto leotards and gauzy skirts. And Augustus would always sit and patiently endure the spectacles of these shows, pretending not to enjoy them, but finding them charming nonetheless, if only because Eleanor enjoyed them so. Which was only because *Tessa* had.

Eleanor's bottom lip trembled; her tears spilled down her cheeks in slow-moving, hot trails. "I...I've missed so much, but you, Tessa—you most of all. And now with the baby...I just...I'm so happy for you."

For a moment, that inexplicable hardness in Tessa's face softened, and she looked uncertain in her rage. Then she stiffened again, her face adopting that granite-like hardness that sometimes had gripped Augustus.

"I bet you are," she remarked, her voice cold. "After all, that's all I could have ever hoped to accomplish, right? Making babies."

"What?" Eleanor blinked at her, bewildered. This time, when Tessa walked away, she followed, catching the girl by the arm. "Tessa, what are you—?"

"Let go of me!" Tessa whirled and let her hand fly, slapping Eleanor across the face hard enough to snap her cheek toward her opposite shoulder, leaving her to gasp in stunned, breathless surprise.

"Brandon told me what you said—I saw it in his memories," Tessa snapped. "I know how you felt about me, the reason you gave that necklace to me. I know everything, Grandmother."

Eleanor could feel the bruising already beginning in her face, a hot swath of cheek and temple. At a sudden tickling, her hand darted to her nose, just as blood spurted suddenly, hotly from her left nostril. "Oh...!" she gasped.

"Eleanor!" Lina had ducked into the bathroom while Eleanor had served tea. Emerging now from the corridor, she saw the slap and rushed forward, crying out in alarm at the sight of blood. She got an arm around Eleanor as she doubled over, trying to catch the blood in her hands, keep it from spattering on the rug. "What the hell did you do?" Lina cried at Tessa.

"I just..." The anger had drained from Tessa's face. She looked stricken and dismayed. "I didn't mean to...I just...I didn't hit her hard..."

"Looks like you hit her plenty hard to me!" Lina darted into the kitchen, then back again with a dish towel in hand. Shoving this unceremoniously beneath Eleanor, clapping it against her nose, she led her toward the couch.

"I didn't mean to," Tessa hiccupped again.

"It's alright." Eleanor's voice sounded pinched and muffled through the terrycloth. She shook her head and tried to gently shrug Lina away from her. She didn't understand; neither of them did.

It had started three years ago with mysterious bruises on her leg. Augustus had noticed them, dark purple impressions against the pale flesh of her inner thigh when he'd been kissing her here, blazing a trail toward her apex, where he'd liked to let his mouth linger.

"What happened here?" He'd stiffened, sitting up so abruptly it had alarmed her, immediately snuffing what had been, to that moment, a quite molten, mounting desire in her.

"Where?" Confused, she'd sat up, too, drawing the filmy hem of her silk slip up toward her stomach to see. When she'd seen the bruises, she'd been confused and more than a little scared. Though she had no memory of any injury there, it had looked as though she'd suffered something fierce or brutal.

Even more peculiar, these bruises had lingered. Usually among the Brethren, contusions faded within days, even hours, depending on the frequency of blood feeding. But those along Eleanor's thigh had lasted the better part of two

weeks before finally disappearing from view. More disturbing than this had been the fact that they had been followed by others that looked equally as severe and painful—and for which she had equally no accounting. In fact, it hadn't been until one round of particularly enthusiastic lovemaking between her and Augustus, in which he'd clamped his hands against her buttocks to lift her off the mattress, plunging into her, that she'd come to understand. Even though he hadn't clutched her hard, the imprints of his hands had appeared within the hour—the purple, gray and rose-tinted silhouettes of his fingers and palms, indelible and stark against the meat of her buttocks. It didn't take much, then, little more than firm or fervent pressure to leave a mark on her skin.

It had frightened Augustus more than it had her...at first, at least. In fact, when she'd mentioned this to him, he'd been stricken, nearly frantic.

"It can't be," he'd whispered, his eyes round with fear she hadn't understood in full. "No, no, no..." He'd paced their bedroom, his hair streaming behind him in a pale, moon-glossed wake. "No...no, it can't...please no...God, no..."

"It's alright," Eleanor said again to Lina and Tessa, even though the bleeding from her nose had not slowed in the least and likely wouldn't for at least another ten or fifteen minutes. With all of the excitement of seeing Tessa again, then Naima going feral and attacking Rene, she'd all but forgotten something critical and key Naima had told her many long hours earlier, as they'd sat together outside the Heavenly Motor Lodge.

We have to go back. You'll need your treatment soon. Michel made me promise...

My treatment. It had completely slipped her mind. And now she was paying for it. *At least Tristan isn't here to see, she thought. He'd never let me hear the end of it. And that's nothing compared to what Michel would say.*

As if on cue, a voice from the doorway exclaimed, "Eleanor!" And with a heavy patter of feet against the floor, suddenly Michel Morin leaned into view, his dark hair wind-swept and disheveled, his eyes flown wide.

I'm alright, she told him mentally, because there was no point in trying to speak around her pinched nose and the heavy towel anymore. But even as she thought this, she felt the first hints of dizziness coming on, her head swimming dazedly, her vision growing momentarily blurred.

"How long has she been bleeding?" Michel asked Lina, his voice sharp and loud.

"Not long," Lina replied, sounding uncharacteristically small and cowed. "Less than a minute."

"Bring me my bag, over there by the door," Michel barked at her.

"Michel, calm down," Eleanor said aloud.

He ignored this as well. She could see Tessa standing nearby, still stricken and upset, no trace of that sharp fury that had gripped her face earlier visible now. Which was just as well, Eleanor thought dazedly. *Since I still can't figure out what the hell she was talking about...what I did to upset her...*

When Michel gave her an injection, sliding the length of a hypodermic needle into her arm, she closed her eyes. "Just relax," he murmured.

"I *am* relaxed," she replied pointedly through the towel. "You're the one who's in a state."

It took a few moments for the injection to kick in, for the synthetic hormones he'd administered to affect her blood. When they did, the heavy fountain of blood from her nose at last began to stave, and she was finally able to ease the blood-soaked towel away from her face, sniffing experimentally.

She tasted blood in her mouth; could see it splashed all over the front of her ivory cashmere sweater, her blue jeans, the floor. *God, what a mess.*

"I'm sorry," she said to Michel, her voice little more than a croak.

"What happened?" Michel demanded this of Lina and Tessa, his dark glare swinging back and forth between the two of them. That he didn't know who either of them were hadn't apparently occurred to him yet; he was still too panic-stricken to care.

"I...I didn't mean to hit her so hard," Tessa whispered, all round, dark eyes and ashen pallor.

“You didn’t, darling,” Eleanor said, wanting to soothe her. “Really.”

But Tessa could see her face now. Aside from being blood-smeared, it was bruised. Eleanor could feel it, her eyelid forced to half-mast by the contusions, her lips feeling sluggish and swollen as she tried to speak. Tessa could see this and her eyes widened all the more in horror.

Oh, God, she thought—and in her despair, her mind was wide open, so Eleanor could hear her. *I’m sorry! Oh, God, what have I done?*

It’s not you, Eleanor pressed. *Tessa, darling, listen—it’s not you. It’s me. That’s why your grandfather sent me away, sent me here. He hoped Michel and the others here—the ones like Naima and Tristan—could help me.*

Help you? Tessa blinked at her in bewilderment. *With what?*

Eleanor struggled to smile, even though she knew it would look gruesome. “I’m sick, Tessa,” she said aloud, holding her granddaughter’s gaze. “I’m dying.”

CHAPTER TEN

The rule of King Louis XIV of France lasted from 1654 until 1715. At that time, the Brethren families were considered *noblesse chevaleresque*, one of the oldest varieties of aristocracy in France, with peerage dating back more than three hundred years. They were of the esteemed *Chevalier* noble rank, akin to knights, direct descendants of the *Ordre du Temple* itself; the *Templiers* or renowned Knights Templar. They governed duchies and were recognized as dukes by the king.

It had been the Rococo period in French art and architecture, a time when the Brethren chateaus had been draped and adorned in all manner of intricate, elegant furnishings with gilded trim, draperies, flowers, birds and bows. Clothing had been equally frilly and preposterous, at least in Augustus's estimation. He'd been only a child, but still forced to endure the torment of tight-fitting breeches and carefully starched hosiery; polished, heeled shoes along with tailored justicoats with ridiculously broad cuffs and flared tails. Ruffled ascots and sleeve cuffs had added to his torment, and because powdered wigs came into vogue around 1715, he was also forced to cram one of the stifling, itchy, sickeningly sweet-scented horsehair monstrosities to his pate for social occasions.

Against this backdrop of gauche opulence, Augustus's mother, Isabeau, had died. At the time, the clan had gone by its more archaic surname of *Noblet*; the "t" would not be dropped until after their pilgrimage to the American colonies years later.

He'd never been particularly close to Isabeau, so throughout his life, it remained somewhat of a mystery and surprise to him that in the end, he had been her ultimate caretaker. Like most aristocratic children of the time, both human and Brethren, he'd been raised by a series of nannies and nurses. Isabeau had been little more than a beautiful stranger to him, someone he'd

glimpse in passing on her way to or from a party or ball, a glittering, gilded ornament—one among many boasted on his father Reynard's arm.

Because throughout his childhood, he'd been accustomed to seeing her in enormous, ruffled skirts that had made her seem voluminous from the corset-cinched waist down, he remembered that she seemed very small to him on her deathbed. She'd worn only a linen chemise, the neckline scooped low enough to reveal the wasted ridge of her breastbone, prominent through her ashen skin. Her dark hair splayed across her pillows, framing her head in a dull, tangled corona. Her hands, skeletal and pale, lay draped across the wasted remains of her once-ample bosom. What had started several years earlier as peculiar and inexplicable bruises had escalated into often violent nosebleeds or hemorrhages, lengthy bouts of exhaustion and malaise, until finally, her poor, frail body had been no longer able to bear the strain. It was as if her own blood poisoned her, somehow, or had turned to acid inside of her veins and now ate away at her from the inside out.

Abominacion. That's what the others whispered together in French sometimes, the Brethren women in their tight, whispering circles. He'd hear them, or sense it in their thoughts, this strange and ominous word. *Abomination.*

It's not natural, they'd say. There's no healing from it.

Curiously, outside of these mentions, the other Brethren never acknowledged Isabeau's illness. In time, in fact, her name itself became as if something forgotten or forbidden in the utterance. She was left alone, save for food trays sent to her room; meals that Augustus was charged with delivering but that always went untouched.

There had been little for Isabeau at that point but sleep. The expansive bedchamber was always dark, its towering windows blocked with heavy drapes. The sunlight hurt her. He'd risked opening a set of the curtains once, and the moment a sliver of sunlight from beyond the panes had cut across the bed, she'd screamed—a hoarse, strangled sound, as if it had burned her parchment-frail skin.

Reynard had beaten him with the brass tip of his cane for that sin of curiosity. And after that, Augustus had left the draperies in place.

It smelled inside his mother's room; at the time, it had been no more than a stench to him, but over the years, he'd since come to understand it was the pervasive stink of encroaching death, lingering and omnipresent, heavy in the air.

"Nourriture pour tu, Mère," he'd say, trying to not breathe in that offensive odor as he set the tray atop her bedside table. *Food for you, Mother.*

Isabeau would never open her eyes, never speak to him, never so much as acknowledge him. He hadn't even known if she was aware of his presence or not. He'd hoped not. Even the hint of friction that came from her eyelids fluttering open was enough to draw blood. He'd learned that on the same day he'd opened the drapes; her eyes had bled violently, and the horrific image of her shrieking like a wounded crow, blood smeared all down her cheeks like gruesome tears, haunted him even now, centuries later.

To his knowledge, no one else visited her. In the end, her clothes went unchanged, as did her bed linens, which only added to the pungency of the chamber. Moving her had apparently caused more bruising and bleeding. As far as Augustus was ever aware, Reynard had not stepped foot beyond his wife's bedroom door in the year preceding her lonely death.

"Nourriture pour tu, Mère," he'd told her one morning, setting her tray on the table. It was dark, as was customary, in the cold, malodorous room, and it took him a long moment before his eyes adjusted enough to the gloom to realize.

He saw blood on her face; a thick stream that had trailed from her nose down her cheek to the pillow, dried and crusted against her pale skin. It had apparently burbled up from between her lips and peppered her face and chest; now, it caked her mouth.

"Mère?" Augustus had whispered, frozen in place. *Mother?* He knew he should steal more closely to the bed, touch her to see if she responded, if she lived, but his small feet remained rooted verily in place. In a small, tremulous voice, he tried again: "Mama?"

She'd died sometime in the night, blood vessels in her lungs disintegrating, drowning her in a thick and abrupt flood. When he finally mustered the courage to approach, to reach out with one trembling hand and touch her arm, her flesh was icy cold, as if she'd lain submerged in a winter stream. To his horror, her skin peeled away at even this fleeting, tentative touch, sliding back beneath his fingertips in a grisly sheet to reveal glistening meat beneath.

Augustus had screamed, then ran from the room, his feet beating a frantic cadence against the floor. Even now, a grown man many, many times over, he would still sometimes wake up in the middle of the night biting back a shriek as memories of that moment, of the discovery of his mother's corpse, haunted his dreams.

Like right now.

He sat up in bed, the sheets tangled about his legs, his face glossed with a clammy sheen of perspiration. His breath was bated to scream, his eyes flown wide, and it took him a long, bewildered moment to realize...

Just a dream. He forked his fingers through the heavy crown of his hair and pushed it back from his face. "*C'était juste un rêve,*" he whispered to himself. *It was just a dream.*

From beside him in the bed, a woman moaned, stirring without waking. Because his mind was still sleep addled, he had a sudden, shocking moment in which he dazedly thought it was Eleanor somehow. Almost as quickly as this thought shot through his brain, however, he recognized his surroundings and snapped to his senses.

Not Eleanor. Julianne.

His second wife lay spooned beside him, naked and warm beneath the blankets. A Noble by marriage and Davenant by birth—Allistair's second cousin or some such removed—Julianne was a quiet woman who attended to her duties to him with diligent attentiveness. She never tried to engage him in idle conversation or inquire as to his business affairs, which was why, he supposed, he liked her company more often than not. That, and she had seemingly no gag

reflex, a talent that had left him breathless and amazed without fail over the 150-year course of their marriage.

He wouldn't have picked Julianne as his bride any more than he would have the four others he called his own—Meredith, Yvette, Esther and Ila. He seldom saw these women, let alone interacted with them; outside of fucking them for occasional variety, he knew precious little, if anything, about any of them. They had been forced upon him with neither his consent nor approval, the result of yet another Brethren law that bound and gagged him to his people. Love was irrelevant and wholly out of the question, a laughable concept.

The Tomes, he thought, because that was what dictated marriages among the clans. God, how the Elders would pore over those musty, antiquated books for hours—sometimes days—at a time, outlining well in advance breeding pairs of their kith and kin. The Tomes were insufferable and unequivocal. There was no questioning their ultimate, if not divine authority; no escaping them.

Well, no...

Sometimes he imagined he could hear Eleanor inside of his mind, her voice purring lightly in his ear, tinged with a hint of sly amusement.

...there is one way, Auguste. Only one way to change the will of the Tomes.

Julianne groaned again in her sleep as Augustus kicked back the covers and swung his legs around. Her hand, which had been draped loosely against the flat plain of his stomach, slipped limply to the mattress as he stood, naked. He'd come to her earlier that night wearing only a silk robe, his long hair unfettered; shrugging his way into the former once more, he flipped the latter out from beneath the back of his lapel with his hands. He left the room, no tender endearments or goodnight kisses—sentiments he didn't feel toward Julianne, let alone bother to express.

He went to Brandon's room. Through the use of an intravenous pump, Augustus had kept him heavily sedated following the boy's telekinetic attack. This, like the morphine, allowed him some reprieve from the otherwise constant struggle of trying to contain Brandon's mounting and considerable power.

He's fed.

It hadn't taken Augustus long to realize this; the telekinetic blast that had knocked him across the room and—to judge by the lingering pain he'd felt in the small of his back as he'd thrust himself repeatedly, vigorously between Julianne's thighs—cracked his tail bone, had cemented this beyond a reasonable doubt in his mind.

He's fed—and not just off of a human.

Still fettered at the wrists and ankles to the bed frame, Brandon slept, his breath coming in long, slow, deep exhalations. Even unconscious, however, he resisted his grandfather; when Augustus opened his mind, trying to reach inside the boy's head, his memories, it was a struggle, like trying to push aside a heavy door moored in place by rusted hinges.

But he had to know. Not wanting to provoke Brandon further, and frankly, still licking the proverbial wounds from his earlier attack, Augustus hadn't forced himself into the younger man's mind. He did now, shoving brutally past Brandon's inner defenses, no matter how deeply seated or subconscious. As he did, he watched Brandon move slowly, restlessly against the bed, tugging against his restraints, a slight furrow crimping the bridge of his nose. Mute, he couldn't cry out in protest, but his breath grew rapid, fluttering, nearly hiccupping.

Augustus saw the woman, Lina, again. Brandon had fucked her—yet another secret Augustus would have to keep hidden away from Allistair Davenant. Sex with a human was expressly forbidden—more than this, it was considered an abhorrence, second only in travesty to the feeding of one Brethren upon another. That Brandon now fancied himself in love with Lina was of ridiculous inconsequence. She knew about them. Like a fool, the boy had told her everything.

She will have to die, he thought, and at this, Brandon jerked in the bed, gasping sharply, as if he'd overheard.

He fed from her...but who else? Augustus thought, although he had his suspicions and it didn't take much by way of a measured leap to determine. The choices were few and far between once you took into account those who had

been outside of the Brethren compound—Caine or Emily; Brandon's twin sister, Tessa; Martin Davenant, Tessa's husband, and Monica Davenant, Martin's dim-witted, self-serving first wife.

And Rene Morin.

"You know me," Rene had told him when he'd called his cell phone. "You know my name—Morin."

"The world is full of names, boy, and yours—like you—means nothing to me," Augustus had replied.

But that had been a lie. He had indeed known that name. And it had nearly stripped the strength from his legs to hear it again. *Because it's as dear to me as my own.*

Rene had favored his grandfather in face and form; seeing him at the airport hangar in Nevada had come as such a shock to Augustus, he was amazed no one else had remembered or realized, especially Allistair. Rene had looked so much like Michel that Augustus had felt a ridiculous, nearly irrepressible urge to embrace him.

My God, it's been what...? Two hundred years? Damn near close to that since the last time I saw him...since that damnable night...October 12, 1815.

In Brandon's mind, he could see the boy feeding from Rene Morin.

It doesn't mean we're going steady or anything, Rene had told Brandon, words that had made him laugh; words that now sounded so eerily like something Michel would have said, in a voice that was eerily reminiscent of Michel, that Augustus found himself moved to smile.

*"Something amuses you, *Auguste*?"*

At the sound of Allistair Davenant's voice, Augustus whirled in start, the mental bond he'd forcibly forged with his grandson abruptly snapping. Allistair was little more than a silhouette against a backdrop of shadow in the doorway; only the faint ember of his cigarette and the dim cloud of smoke encircling him gave him any semblance of substance.

"What are you doing..." Augustus asked, his brows narrowing as he slammed all of his own mental shields back in firm, furious place within his mind,

clamping himself shut to any efforts Allistair might have made to intrude, and sealing off Brandon's mind, as well. "...in my house?"

"Now, now." Allistair clucked his tongue and swaggered forward. As he drew near, the thin circumference of light from a tabletop lamp hit his face, illuminating what turned out to be a thin, widely stretched, nearly Cheshire-cat-like smile. "Can't old friends make themselves at home in each others' abodes?"

Augustus cut a glance at the bedside clock. "It's three-forty in the morning," he said, speaking curtly and through gritted teeth. His entire body had gone rigid and strained; he doubted at that moment that even Julianne and one of her patent-pending deep-throating expeditions could have loosened the furious tension from his form.

"Oh, come now, Augustus." Allistair flicked a column of ashes on the hardwood floor, an unspoken and irreverent dare, then drew the cigarette to his mouth. The paper hissed as the embers seared brightly upon his inhalation. "Time is a concept best reserved for imbecilic humans, for whom such things have relevance or consequence. For you and me, what's three-forty in the morning but some numbers on a clock face?"

He held up something he'd been carrying in his free hand—a bottle of champagne Augustus recognized by its label: a 2002 Perrier Jouet Fleur de Champagne Rose from his own private cellar. He'd paid damn near \$650 for it. Allistair had been making himself at home indeed.

"Especially when there's such cause for celebration," Allistair added pointedly, tucking the cigarette between his teeth and unwrapping the foil from the bottle neck right in front of Augustus's stupefied—and admittedly bewildered—eyes.

"Celebration?" Augustus asked and when Allistair freed the cork with a loud and resonant *POP!* that sent a frothy cascade splashing suddenly to the floor, he jerked in new, all-the-more dumbfounded surprise.

That son of a bitch just opened my 2002 Perrier Jouet Fleur de Champagne Rose!

He met Allistair's gaze, his eyes hard and filled with murderous outrage. "And what precisely are we supposed to be celebrating?"

Allistair blinked at him, his brows rising in feigned surprise. "I'm sorry," he said. "Did I say *we* would be celebrating? Oh, no. Oh, dear." He clucked his tongue again and shook his head, affecting a mournful, pitying look. "I meant *I* would be celebrating, Augustus, old friend. My newfound dominance, that is. The Davenant supremacy over all the clans."

This, more so than the matter of the wine, the impertinence of his late-night intrusion, suddenly ignited Augustus's fury. With his hands balled into fists, his brows furrowed deeply, he marched forward, grabbing Allistair by the throat, jarring that damnable cigarette out of his mouth. He forced Allistair backward, slamming him into the nearest wall with enough force to dent the plaster beneath his head. "What the fuck..." he seethed, leaning so close, he could smell the stink of seared tobacco on the other man's breath. "...are you talking about, you pompous, pontificating ass?"

That Allistair merely smiled at this, that same Cheshire-cat grin stretching the corners of his mouth to nearly cartoonish proportions, made the skin along the nape of Augustus's neck suddenly crawl.

"Sebastian is dead," Allistair said and the words hit Augustus with all of the brute force of a freight train. His hand fell away from Allistair's neck as he stumbled back in stunned disbelief.

"Wh...what?" he whispered.

Allistair smiled, mockingly kind again. "I'm afraid there's been an accident," he said. "A very unfortunate...very untimely accident. It seems that in his grief over the loss of his children, Sebastian took it upon himself to join them."

What? Augustus shook his head. *No*, he thought. *No, no, that's not possible...not my son...*

He'd only just seen Sebastian earlier that night; sober for the first time in weeks, Sebastian had been sitting in a wing-backed leather chair in the study, his eyes pinned on the smoldering remains of a fire past the hearth.

“It’s good to see you on the mend,” Augustus had told him clumsily, accompanying this with an even more awkward clap on the shoulder, because he’d genuinely wanted Sebastian to know that he’d noticed his effort at sobriety, and appreciated it.

“Thank you, Father,” Sebastian had murmured by way of response, not averting his eyes from the cinders.

Augustus had stood there for a long moment, unmoving beside the chair. Finally, he’d heaved a sigh that must have sounded as weary as he felt because Sebastian glanced his way.

“I am not a man accustomed to...” Augustus had motioned with his hand as if, like with his deaf-mute grandson and his damnable sign language, this would somehow take the place of words he found difficulty uttering. “...expressing myself...my emotions...with any sort of readiness.”

Sebastian continued looking at him. He hadn’t shaved that day; his chin and cheeks were shadowed with a thick growth of new beard.

“I’m sorry for your losses, your grief.” As Augustus had spoken, his jaw had been locked so squarely and so tightly, the words had practically squeezed out through the narrow margins of space between his teeth. “For the pain it has brought you. I...I would spare you it all if I could.”

I love you, Sebastian, he’d wanted to say, but he hadn’t. He had never said those words aloud to his son; never said them to anyone at all, in fact, except for Eleanor.

Sebastian had blinked at him, his eyes glossy all at once with a sheen of tears. “Thank you for that, Father.”

“He went out to the barns, his office in the main building,” Allistair said, interrupting Augustus’s recollection.

No, Augustus thought. He wanted to say it aloud, to scream it; scream himself hoarse in sudden, agonized protest.

“He took one of your old dueling pistols with him...the same one I believe you used to kill my brother, Victor.” Allistair’s brows narrowed, and any trace of a

smile abruptly faded from his lips. “How ironic that the instrument that once secured dominance for you has now equally insured it for me.”

No, no, God, not my son...!

Allistair raised the bottle of champagne in a mocking toast, then turned, walking toward the door. “He’s still out there, still in the barn,” he remarked as he left. “I felt that cleaning up the mess he left behind would be a suitable reintroduction for you...” With a pointed glance over his shoulder, he added, “...to the ways of things when you’re a subordinate.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Shortly after that fateful Twelfth Night celebration in 1792, Benoît's mother, Amelie—who had all but raised Augustus as her own, even before Isabeau's death years earlier—sent Augustus by wagon out to the Trevilian homestead laden with a large wicker creel stocked with jars of jam and honey.

"Keep them upright now. No spilling," Amelie had instructed, still fresh enough from their ancestral home to speak with a prevalent French accent.

Of the many benefits Augustus had found since the Brethren had uprooted and migrated to the English colonies was the decided simplicity in their lifestyle. They were, of course, still considered wildly affluent by any standard, but gone were the gilded pomp and circumstance of their *noblesse chevaleresque* status. Their houses were plainer and less prissily adorned; likewise, their clothes, wigs and customs had grown more practical and plain. Along the Kentucky frontier, far from what most would have considered any semblance of "civilized" society, the Brethren lived more comfortably, more at ease—and Augustus perhaps more than any other among them.

"Can't Benoît bring these?" Augustus had protested as Amelie had unceremoniously shoved the basket into his hands. It wasn't the prospect of the task that he disliked, but rather, the destination. He hadn't seen Eleanor Trevilian since their ill-fated meeting beneath the mistletoe. She haunted his dreams with her chocolate eyes, glossy dark hair and bee-stung lips. In sleep, his mind would take him again and again to that damnable party, to dancing with her, to that moment when his lips had touched hers. More often than not, in his dreams, the kiss would escalate far beyond its humble reality; his tongue would tangle against hers, his hands would fall first against the generous swell of her breasts, then southward. He'd dream of pulling up her skirts, knotting them and the underlying crinolines in his fists then pushing her back against the wall. She'd twine her legs around his waist and then he'd open his pants, the head of his straining arousal

pressing lightly between her thighs, prodding between the slick, hot folds of her trembling threshold.

He'd always awake from these dreams with a hard-on so massive it was painful, and he'd lie beneath his coverlets, nursing himself to release with his hand. So it wasn't that he didn't *want* to see Eleanor again that made him balk at the very proposition of doing so. It was the idea that he *did* want to—very much so, in fact. Too much for anyone's ultimate good.

"Benoît is indisposed." Amelie had turned him smartly about, giving him a shove toward the kitchen doorway for good measure. "*Tu le ferez.*" *You will do it.*

So he'd taken a buckboard out to the Trevilian estate, his shoulders as hunched with weary and unhappy resignation as the nag that drew the wagon in tow. It was a cold, gray winter's day, and he wore the collar of his greatcoat turned up so he could duck the lower quadrant of his face beneath. He kept his tricorne hat pulled low over his brow to keep a light, icy drizzle from getting too much into his eyes. By the time he reached Nestor Trevilian's farm, he was shivering, damp and even more ill-humored than when he'd started off.

And to make things worse, who else should be in the kitchen with her mother but Eleanor Trevilian herself. Dressed in a simply adorned day dress of cornflower blue with ruching trim and the skirt sides gathered in the fashionable but practical *polonaise* style, she was somehow even more beautiful to him than she'd been at the party, and for a long moment, he found himself frozen on the stoop of the kitchen outbuilding behind the larger main house, unable to breathe, much less move.

"Well, come on, then, sir!" Eleanor's mother had flapped her hand at him in impatient beckon. She and Eleanor had been among at least a half dozen women gathered in the kitchen, with most of the others being house slaves at work chopping vegetables, kneading bread dough, stoking the fire, or any other number of chores. "Don't just stand there like a big, dumb rock! *Apportez-les ici!*" *Bring them there!*

Thus galvanized, Augustus had stumbled forward, cradling the heavy basket against his stomach. Eleanor's mother took it from him with a breathless

sort of grunt by way of thanks, then glanced over her shoulder at her daughter. "Show young master Noble into the main house, Eleanor, and offer him some brandy. Hang his coat and hat on the pegs by the fire lest he catch his death of chill in this weather."

"*Pas, merci,*" Augustus said—*no, thank you*—because the only thing he wanted less than to spend any more time in Eleanor Trevilian's company was to be *alone* in her company. "I...I should be going, *Madame*, but thank you all the—"

"Nonsense." Madame Trevilian flapped her hands again, this time shoing Eleanor forward, and Augustus glanced in her direction just long enough for his face to flush with bright, mortified heat.

"*Oui, Mother,*" Eleanor murmured with a curtsy. When she walked past Augustus—and he shrank back in the doorway to award her as wide a berth as possible—the fragrance of her skin and hair—the faint hint of lavender and wood smoke—trailed behind her. Like a puppy that has piddled the carpet and is certain of its own upcoming beating, Augustus turned tail and did likewise, following Eleanor across the yard.

"It's good to see you again, *Monsieur Noble,*" Eleanor remarked, glancing at him over her shoulder. She'd grabbed a shawl off a hook by the door before leaving the kitchen; now she wrapped this around her shoulders, covering her head with it, shielding her hair from the damp air. It might have been his imagination, but for a moment, he could have sworn she was smiling, as if perfectly aware of his mortification and amused by it.

"Indeed, *Mademoiselle Trevilian,*" he mumbled in reply, averting his gaze to his shoes, the grass, his nearby wagon, the back of the house—anything but her. "It...it is always a pleasure."

They walked a bit further and then, once out of sight of the kitchen doorway, Eleanor stopped and turned to him. He could see that a wayward strand of her hair had worked itself loose from beneath the shawl and now lay plastered against her pale, damp skin. Resisting the urge to reach out and brush it aside with his fingertips took a great deal of personal resolve.

“I must admit, I am somewhat surprised, as well,” she said, looking up at him, pinning him with her enormous eyes. “To see you again, that is.”

“Really?” He arched his brow and managed to maintain his composure in spite of her direct and mesmerizing attention. “And why might that be?”

She shrugged. Again, that little hint of a smile played at the corner of her lips. “I suppose I wouldn’t have thought you bold enough...what with what happened at the Twelfth Night party and all.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, feigning innocent obliviousness, even though he knew the damnable heat in his cheeks would be visible and give him away. “What happened at the Twelfth Night party?”

“You kissed me.”

More fake surprise. “I did?”

“Beneath the mistletoe.”

“That?” He managed a clumsy laugh. “That was courtesy. Holiday good cheer.”

She turned around again, walking toward the house. “It was my first such occasion for such cheer, then,” she said. “My first kiss. I rather liked it.”

He blinked after her for a long, surprised moment, but when she glanced back at him, he managed another laugh, less forced this time. “Well, then, I...I’m glad to have been of some service to you,” he said, following once more, falling in step behind her.

“Of course, I imagine if Victor were to learn of it, he’d challenge you to some manner of a duel, threaten to shoot you dead where you stand for your impertinent disregard.”

His stomach knotted. “Where is he, by the by?” he asked, his voice coming out in a strained croak. “Victor, I mean. I didn’t see him at the party.”

“No. He wasn’t there. Last I heard tell, he’s been in Williamsburg all this while, gone with his father and brothers until next month, at least.”

“Oh.”

As they rounded the corner of the house, they were out of sight of the kitchen building. And standing pressed back against the wall, as Eleanor did all

at once, left them out of the line of sight of any of the westward facing windows, as well, should anyone happen to glance outside.

He turned to face her there, standing close enough so that when their breath frosted in the air, the filmy mist coalesced together in a thin cloud between them.

"I would even dare to say that I might..." Eleanor began in an innocent, sing-song sort of fashion, but then her voice faltered and she looked away, falling silent. "Oh, never mind."

"What?" He cocked his head, drawing her coquettish gaze. "You might dare to say what?"

"It's nothing." She flapped her hand, eerily similar to her mother's earlier dismissal. "You don't have the gall."

"The gall to what?"

Still with that ghost of a smile, she said in a low voice, nearly a purr: "To kiss me again."

A jolt shuddered through him, emanating from somewhere deep in his groin. He didn't say anything; all at once, his throat had collapsed to the circumference of a pinhole from the feel of things, and his mouth had gone as dry as a muslin sock. When he stepped closer to her, she didn't move. When he reached for her, letting his fingers unfurl slowly to caress her cheek, slip into the satiny softness of her hair, she canted her face slightly as if in unspoken invitation. When he leaned toward her, he felt the soft intake of her breath against his mouth, hitching in anticipation, and when he kissed her, she uttered a low, soft murmur of pleasure, leaning into him, touching his face and holding him fast.

His lips parted, and hers did likewise; their tongues brushed lightly at first, tentatively, then tangled as the kiss deepened. He pulled her against him, the soft swells of her full, lovely breasts pressing into his chest, her slim fingers hooking into the damp wool of his coat. When he drew back, he hovered within millimeters of her face, feeling her breath flutter against him.

"Mon Dieu," he whispered, making her blush brightly and laugh. *My God.*

He'd seen her every day for weeks after that, the two of them meeting surreptitiously at the farm's nearby spring house. There was no point in denying it anymore; he was utterly, hopelessly, unequivocally in love with her. They would meet in secret and spend hours together, talking, laughing, whispering, kissing. At first, their encounters were nearly ingenuous in their innocent passion; he'd taken lovers among the Brethren before, but she had yet been a virgin. He'd been patient with her, never pressing her for more than she was willing to surrender, enjoying the opportunity to let her explore, experiment and discover all of the secret, wondrous pleasures the flesh could present. On more than one occasion, he'd limped home with an arousal so intense, thanks to her curious mouth and hands, that he could hardly breathe for it. And then, when the time had come and she had let him lay with her, he'd taken his time, tender and unrushed, making love to her against a blanket he'd spread against the hard-packed dirt floor of the spring house.

It had been her first time, and he was gentle against her, easing himself past her threshold and sliding with slow and deliberate care into the incredible warmth of her depths. When her breath had caught in a sharp, pained gasp, he'd slowed his pace even more; soon her fingernails had dug crescent-shaped indentations into the meat of his biceps as she'd tugged against him, urging him deeper still. At last, he'd fallen into a strident rhythm, the tight confines of her innermost sheath relaxing around him, gripping him with firm, velveteen pressure. The muscled plain of his stomach had slapped against hers; her hands slipped to his buttocks, clutching at him, driving him into her.

When she came, her eyes rolled over black, her pupils distending, her fangs extending from her mouth. She'd writhed beneath him, her back arching from the ground, her entire body—within and without—tightening against him in reflexive, rigid pleasure. With this, he'd promptly found his own release; it shuddered through him, making him cry out, his voice ragged and hoarse.

"Mon Dieu," he whispered when it was over and he was left exhausted, trembling, breathless. *My God.*

He crumpled against her, her long, lean thighs enveloping his hips. Her hands trailed lightly up his arms to his shoulders, caressing the muscles spanning the bridge to his neck and from there, down the length of his spine.

"I love you," he breathed, nose to nose with her, his lips dancing against hers as he spoke.

"I love you, too," she whispered in reply, her cheeks still flushed with the afterglow of her pleasure, her eyes glistening with the reflected glow from the lamp he'd brought with them. There had been something sad in her gaze as she spoke, a sort of melancholia that at first, he hadn't understood. "I want this forever," she said, touching his face, smoothing back his hair. "I want you forever. I'll die if I marry him."

He saw tears well in her eyes now and her voice grew tremulous. They'd not spoken much about Victor Davenant, or Eleanor's betrothal to him, even though it had always been between them, a lingering ghost, something unacknowledged but unavoidable.

"I swear to you, Augustus, if I can't be with you, I'll steal a knife from the supper table and slash my own wrists with it..." Eleanor's voice faded and she looked away, a tear slipping over the bottom edge of her lashes and rolling slowly down her cheek.

"Don't say that." He kissed the tear away; brushing his lips lightly, repeatedly against her skin until finding her lips and settling more firmly. "We'll find a way. I promise."

"How?" She looked at him, pained. Like him, she, too, had heard all of the rumors of Victor's often violent behavior. She'd seen him at public functions, witnessed first hand his brutal capacities whenever he'd get into his cups. *I'm afraid of him*, she'd told Augustus once—one of the few times she'd ever mentioned Victor. *I'm afraid of what he'll do to me*.

"I'll talk to my father," Augustus said. "And to yours. I'll sit down with them both and tell them I want to marry you. I'll beg them, if need be. I'll—"

“Augustus, no.” Eleanor shook her head. “You can’t do that. They’d only refuse you, no matter what you’d say. There is only one way. You know what to do. There’s only one way to change the will of the Tomes.”

And he had known indeed, even though neither he nor Eleanor had ever said it, never dared to mention it aloud. There was only one way to change the will of the Tomes, and Augustus had known what it was.

Victor Davenant would have to die.

“You’re crazy,” Michel Morin had said, staring at Augustus as if he’d sprouted a horn out of the middle of his forehead. “You’re out of your mind. Have you been into the brandy?”

“No, of course not,” Augustus replied with a frown. It was snowing outside. At that time, the world was technically in the waning days of what would someday be dubbed the “little ice age,” meaning winters were far longer and much, much colder than they would be in future decades. The two men had been bundled up, scarves twined around their necks, greatcoat flaps raised against a biting arctic wind as they’d stood alongside one of the Noble family’s barns.

“Well, you need a drink,” Michel told him. “Or in any case, *I* do, because I can’t believe you just asked me to tell Victor Davenant that you kissed Eleanor Trevilian on Twelfth Night. *Tu êtes fou!*” *You are mad!*

But just as Augustus had never been able to deny Michel anything, likewise could be said for Michel. More than friends, the two men had long been like kin, a bond they had physically sealed with one another in childhood, when Michel had drawn the blade of a knife against his palm, then Augustus’s. As they’d pressed their bloody hands together, Michel had looked him in the eye and smiled.

“Now we’re like brothers,” he’d whispered. “Nothing will ever come between us. Not ever.”

Thus that night, when men from several Brethren clans had gathered at the Morin house for drinks, Michel had made it a point to feign drunken

impropriety, mentioning the mistletoe incident loudly and well within Victor Davenant's earshot.

"You have sullied her virtues!" Victor had bellowed, his face flushed beet-red with brandy and rage as he'd towered over Augustus, peppering his face with spittle.

"It was a kiss, Victor. Let it go," Augustus had replied. "It's not as though I laid her out on the kitchen table and had a go with her." He was faking his own inebriated boldness, and with this, he awarded Michel a bawdy wink and an elbow nudge. "Though to judge by the former, I'd say she would be magnificent at the latter."

"You, sir, have besmirched my betrothed and greatly offended!" Victor snapped. "I demand satisfaction!"

"Fair enough, sir," Augustus had told him with a wink. "I say you'll have it, too, on your wedding night at least."

At that point, Victor had punched him, and he didn't remember much else for the ringing in his ears. The sun hadn't risen in full the next morning before Michel had arrived on his doorstep.

"Well, you big, stupid lummo, I hope you're happy now," he'd said, shrugging his way out of his overcoat and leaving it to the hands of a house slave to dispose of. "Victor's made it official. He's challenged you to a duel in defense of Miss Eleanor's honor. Pistols at dawn tomorrow."

"As you're the deliverer of these tidings, I suppose that makes you my second," Augustus remarked, pressing a damp compress against his swollen eye.

"*Oui*," Michel had dourly agreed. "That is, if I don't bloody well shoot you first myself."

"I tell you what." Augustus stood from his chair, lowering the compress from his face and blinking his swollen eyelid experimentally. "Return to the Davenant estate with a counter challenge."

Michel blinked in surprise. "What?"

“He hit me. I’d say that entitles me to draw some manner of offense of my own.”

“You had it rightly due,” Michel told him pointedly.

“True enough, but protocol is protocol,” Augustus countered. “Tell him I will offer no apologies for slandering his bride-to-be, and in fact, issue challenge that he answer for this grievous injury to my face. Whoever between us is left standing when we’re through takes *Mademoiselle* Trevilian for a bride.”

“*Quoi?*” Michel’s eyes flew wide. *What?*

“I have besmirched her honor—you heard Victor. Seems only fitting that I restore it by making her a proper wife, should I add further insult to injury by shooting her betrothed dead.”

“And what about the Elders? The mandate of the Tomes?”

Augustus shrugged. “We’ll ask the Elders to agree to it. If Victor is dead, the lass cannot very well marry him, can she?”

“That’s a very large *if*,” Michel said. “And you’re not a very good shot.”

“Careful, now.” Augustus laughed, clapping him on the shoulder. “Insult me too much and I may challenge you, too.”

As he tried to walk past, Michel caught him by the arm. “What is this about?” he asked in a low voice, his caramel-brown eyes locking with Augustus’s, hard with concern.

“What is dueling ever about?” Augustus laughed again. “Two dogs pissing along a fence-line, nothing more.”

“No, Auguste,” Michel said. “What is this *really* about?”

And with a heavy sigh—because he’d been feeling guilty all the while for not having confided the truth of his affair with Eleanor to his best friend—Augustus told him everything.

To which Michel had responded: “Stupid!” He frowned at Augustus. “Stupid, stupid, stupid—you bloody damn fool, you’re going to see yourself killed all over the matter of a woman. A woman that’s not even rightly yours, at that!”

“Your confidence in my marksmanship is flattering,” Augustus said.

“She doesn’t love you. What the hell are you thinking? She’s using you, Auguste. She’s neither deaf nor stupid—she’s heard tell of Victor’s habits, the same as the rest of us. She knows he’ll beat her senseless. She saw her avenue of escape in you at that Twelfth Night party—hell, any man, woman or child with half a semblance of wits in their skulls could see you’re taken with the girl. She could ask you to run buck naked through a blizzard or barefoot over razor blades and you’d do it gladly, willingly. She knows it, Augustus, and she’s sealed the deal by letting you bed her.”

“That’s not true.” Augustus frowned. “You don’t know Eleanor. And if you think I’m that gullible, you don’t know me, either.”

Michel flinched as if Augustus had physically struck him, his eyes growing round and wounded. Augustus regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth; with a heavy sigh, he forked his fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his face.

“I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry.” He looked at Michel, pleading. “I have to do this, don’t you see? I love her, Michel.”

“Enough to die for her, Auguste?” Michel had asked, his eyes filled with worry.

“If need be, yes,” Augustus replied.

Ten paces at dawn, back to back, then a turn before firing at will. Those were the terms ultimately agreed upon, and as the sun crept over the edge of the horizon on the following day, Augustus and Michel arrived to find a crowd of Brethren males, all to bear witness, on the wooded grounds of the Davenant farm.

“Victor would graciously offer you one last chance to apologize for your offenses, and see this spectacle averted,” Allistair Davenant had proposed, approaching them with his hands in his pockets against the bitter chill, his breath framing his face in a frosted cloud. As Victor’s second, he spoke directly to Michel, but kept his dark gaze fastened on Augustus.

“*Monsieur Noble* would graciously offer likewise,” Michel replied without missing a beat. “Considering he is the one who suffered the greater injury and has no intention of having such offense go unanswered.”

Things were more dignified in those days, Augustus would later often reflect. Even arguments and rivalries were conducted within a set of courteous parameters. They behaved as gentlemen of civility and reason; emotions were kept from public review. He supposed that was why, in all of the long decades that had followed, when decorum deteriorated to nearly debase and barbaric standards, that he had long held to those Georgian standards, and had expected nothing less from his fellow Brethren, never mind his own family.

He’d been frightened that winter’s morning, in part because he’d quickly found himself tromping through frost-crusting grass to the slow cadence of ten called paces. But he had also found himself frightened because Michel’s words kept resounding in his head over and over, making his stomach knot with nagging, apprehensive doubt.

She’s using you, Augustus... She could ask you to run buck naked through a blizzard or barefoot over razor blades and you’d do it gladly, willingly.

Is it true? he thought, the brass-adorned butt of his father’s dueling pistol cold in his hand, his index finger draped lightly against the trigger. Reynard was nothing if not an insufferable stickler for honor and duty. He’d found no objections to the duel, or Augustus’s stipulation that, should he win, he be made to marry Eleanor.

“It seems only right,” he’d agreed with a nearly disinterested nod.

Is Eleanor only using me to be free of an ill-fated marriage?

“Aim for his top waistcoat button,” Michel had advised as they’d crossed the field together moments earlier. Telepathy was expressly forbidden during the duel; any counsel to be offered had to be done so aloud.

“I know how to shoot,” Augustus had muttered back.

Women were not allowed at the duel, so there was no sign of Eleanor. In fact, Augustus had been unable to see her for several days, but rather than the

absence making his heart grow fonder, it had only made him all the more uncertain.

Does she really love me? Or has all of this been a lie, little more than a convenient game to her?

As his foot settled down for the tenth pace, he turned about-face. Across from him, Victor Davenant pivoted as well, his arm leveling out, the dueling pistol extended. Even from the distance, Augustus could see his brows were furrowed, his eyes sharp and bright with murderous intensity. There was no doubt in those eyes; no fear or uncertainty. As sure in his own ultimate victory as he was in his right to have issued challenge, Victor exhibited nothing but confidence in his stance and his aim.

How Augustus wished he could say the same for himself, as his own arm trembled uncontrollably as he stretched it forth, pointing the barrel of the ornate pistol as Michel had directed, squarely at the top brass button of Victor's embroidered waistcoat.

They were to fire at leisure, and that moment in which neither seemed willing to take the first shot seemed to stretch out an agonizing eternity to Augustus. When at last, Victor's finger flexed, the booming report of the pistol caught Augustus wholly by surprise. He jerked in start, blinking as a sudden cloud of smoke engulfed Victor, obscuring him momentarily from view.

He felt a sharp, abrupt pain as the fifty-caliber ball punched into his chest, only slightly south of his own top button. The impact was forceful enough to jar him back an uncertain step; the pain left him breathless, with tiny pinpoints of light sparkling across his line of sight.

Fuck me, I've been shot!

He couldn't seem to catch his breath; his chest felt for all the world as if the shot had brought with it an enormous stone that now crushed against his ribcage, smothering the wind from him. Across the way, the smoke slowly cleared, and he could see Victor again, those cold eyes riveted on him, a patient and aloof expression having softened the furrow between his brows.

He was waiting.

Waiting for me to fall, Augustus realized. Waiting for me to die.

His own brows narrowing, he willed his arm to draw steady and still, to quell the shaking that ran from his shoulder to fingertips, affecting the aim of his gun. Gritting his teeth against the spasm of pain that came from forcing himself fully upright once more, he leveled his gaze down the length of his arm, the barrel of the pistol. A wink of muted sunlight off the brass buttons of Victor's doublet drew his attention; marking the top one once more with his eyes, he folded his index finger inward against the trigger and felt the sudden, massive recoil as the pistol bucked against his hand.

A boom of thunder deafened him momentarily, and the world was abruptly engulfed in pungent, heavy smoke. He stumbled clumsily in place, doubling again, gagging vainly for air. As it waned, he looked up and across the field where Victor Davenant still stood, silhouetted in the gloom.

"You son of a bitch." Victor blinked at him in something akin to surprise. Then he keeled over backwards, crashing to the ground like an uprooted tree, slamming so heavily against the frosted earth that his legs bounced up twice before falling still again, sprawled in the grass.

"Did I kill him?" Augustus murmured as Michel dropped him onto his bed, having all but dragged him into the house, his arm slung across Michel's shoulders and Michel bearing the unfortunate brunt of his little more than dead weight.

Breathing had grown progressively more and more difficult, and now he found himself unable to do much more than hiccup in quick, short gulps of air. Blood had begun to pepper out of his mouth; he could taste the nasty, metallic bitterness of it against his tongue. Pain kept his body rigid and tensed; each labored exhalation sent agony spearing through his torso, and he held himself braced against it.

"It's *your* death you should be concerned about," Michel told him with a grunt as he shoved back the flaps of Augustus's coat and began hurriedly

unbuttoning the front of his doublet. "Christ Almighty, he got you good. You're bleeding like a stuck pig."

The waistcoat undone, he next jerked open Augustus's shirt. The Morin clan had long been healers among the Brethren, the ones charged with caring for the physical needs of their fellows. Like his father and brothers and cousins besides, Michel had been trained to the fullest extent of the admittedly limited and lacking medical fundamentals of the time. When he prodded lightly against Augustus's chest, his fingertips careful and curious, Augustus jerked, uttering a strangled cry.

"He got your heart," Michel said, his eyes round and frightened, his expression grim. "Likely through the lung and into the left ventricle. Every time it pumps, that wound tears all the more, and blood floods out into your chest cavity." He stroked his hand against Augustus's forehead. "The good news is you got the girl, *mon ami*. The bad news is that you're not going to live long enough to enjoy her."

"How...long...?" Augustus whispered through pain-gritted teeth.

"An hour. Maybe less. Maybe more if you calm yourself, slow your heart rate somewhat." Michel's voice grew choked, and lamplight glistened off of tears that welled in his eyes. "You stupid bastard, what am I supposed to do without you?"

From beyond the small chamber's closed door, where family and curious onlookers had gathered, came a loud and sudden clamor. The door burst open long enough for a small figure to dart through, a woman wearing a cloak with the hood pulled over her head. She slammed the door on the din of protest behind her, then turned to the bed, lowering the cowl.

"Oh, God...!" Eleanor whimpered, her eyes enormous with aghast. "Auguste...!"

She darted to his bedside, collapsing to her knees and clutching at his hand. Her eyes were tearful, her cheeks streaked and damp. She drew his knuckles to her mouth and kissed him frantically, her breath hitching and

hiccupping. The sight of his blood visibly horrified her, and she uttered a mournful, breathless mewl.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Augustus murmured, uncurling his fingers as she cradled his hand, touching her face lightly. “This...is nothing a woman needs to see.”

“I’m your wife now,” Eleanor told him. “There’s no other place for me but by your side.” She looked to Michel. “He’s dying, isn’t he?”

When Michel nodded, she mewled again, fresh tears spilling. “Oh, please,” she begged. “Isn’t there anything that can be done? Anything you can do?”

Michel glanced at Augustus. “He could feed...” he began.

Eleanor was already on her feet again, about to sprint from the bedside. “I’ll summon my father’s coachman,” she said. “Send for a slave, anything.”

“Human blood won’t help him.” Michel caught her arm and she turned to him, bewildered. “He’s too far gone, his wound too grievous.”

“But...but there’s nothing else,” Eleanor stammered in confused protest. “No other way, no one else he could possibly...”

“Yes,” Michel interjected quietly, cutting a glance again at Augustus. “There is.”

And Augustus understood. He often liked to joke that Michel’s only fault as a healer was his overactive imagination. Michel’s ideas of treatments and therapies often ran the gamut from simply *avant garde* to downright controversial, if not outright forbidden. Judging by the glance Michel had given him, Augustus knew what he had in mind and that this idea leaned more toward the latter end of that tenuous gamut.

“It’s an abomination,” he’d told Michel once, months earlier, upon Michel’s first mention of the idea. At the time, he’d suspected it was something Michel had already attempted for himself; a foolhardy experiment that, if discovered, would have seen his friend killed. “It’s forbidden!”

As he lay on what was about to become his deathbed in all too short measure, Augustus shook his head, feeling blood burble up his windpipe, choking him as he gasped out: “N-no!”

Michel met his gaze gravely. "It will save you. I know it will."

"What?" Eleanor looked between them and when neither answered, she grabbed Michel roughly by the sleeve. "What will save him?"

"He needs to feed," Michel said again, this time looking down at her.
"From one of us."

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Let’s take a look here,” Tristan murmured as he peeled back a square of gauze bandaging that covered a deep wound in Tessa’s midriff. He was careful as he did this, working with a practiced gentleness, but the cotton fibers caught against the still-tender edges of the injury, making her jerk.

“I’m sorry.” He pivoted slightly, taking a plastic bottle of saline solution from a counter behind him. They’d returned to the medical clinic where they had brought Rene; the man who had introduced himself brusquely as Michel Morin had whisked Eleanor off behind closed doors in one of the patient rooms while Tristan had offered to take a look at Tessa’s stomach.

She lay on her back against an examination table in her bra and blue jeans, having stripped off her shirt at his direction. It was cold in the room; goosebumps had risen all along her skin and she shivered uncontrollably. This was probably also due, in part, to the fact no man had ever seen her so unclothed before, except for her husband, Martin, and her lover, Rene. Tristan hadn’t regarded her with anything but a clinical sort of attention, but she still felt uncomfortable, self-conscious and awkward nonetheless.

When he squirted a stream of saline against her belly, she jerked again in surprise, but now the dampened bandage lifted easily in his hand, no longer pulling against the wound.

“This is healing nicely,” Tristan remarked, after studying the point where a wrought iron fireplace poker had run her all of the way through. “Roll over. Let me see your back.”

Again, he had to use the saline solution to loosen the gauze from the exit wound, and again, his gloved fingers were gentle, his touch nearly imperceptible, despite the tenderness of the area he lightly prodded.

When he was finished, he re-dressed the injuries. "I didn't see any sign of infection," he remarked as he worked. He'd asked her to sit up on the side of the table, now, and glanced at her as he spoke.

"Rene's been taking good care of me," Tessa said.

His brow rose slightly but he made no specific comment.

"Why didn't you ever try to find him?" Tessa asked, and this time, when he cut his gaze her way, she held it. "Rene, I mean. He's your brother."

"My *half*-brother," Tristan said with the same pointed emphasis Naima had used in the motel room earlier. "And I never tried to find him because he wasn't ever lost. At least, not while I've been alive."

Puzzled, she frowned, and he chuckled. "Michel found out about Rene when he returned from Vietnam. He saw some write-up in a medical journal or something, an article about a soldier named LaCroix wounded in the abdomen who healed with damn-near miraculous speed. He put two and two together, given Armand fucked some human by the same name some years earlier. He loved her or something...at least, that's what he claimed."

He returned to his work, taping a fresh gauze pad into place on her midriff. "So anyway, Arnaud finds out about Rene from Michel. Next morning, he took off, flew down to Louisiana. It's my understanding he met Rene in person before driving to New Orleans. He killed himself there, blew his brains out in a hotel."

"I...I'm sorry," she said, at a loss as to what to say, but feeling obliged to say *something*.

"Nothing to be sorry about," Tristan replied with a dismissive sort of shrug. "No great loss, you ask me. Of course, Michel felt all sorry for Rene. He made up a "will" for Arnaud, set things up all legal-like, so Rene would be taken care of financially. He thought it would be best that way, that Rene never knew about the rest of us. He'd lived his whole life to that point unaware. Michel thought it would do him more harm than good." He touched her shoulder, trying to ease her back against the cushioned table. "Let's check on the baby. How far along did you say you are?"

"Four months...I think."

She'd hoped to keep pressing him for information; Rene knew next to nothing about his origins, at least as far as he'd told her, and she was curious herself about this apparently lost clan of Brethren, the Morins. But now, at the mention of her baby, and as she watched him walk across the room toward a large machine, she found herself suddenly distracted and apprehensive. He pulled the machine over to her tableside on a wheeled cart; it looked like some kind of computer, but the keyboard had far more keys than any desktop model she'd ever seen before.

"What is that?" she asked, reaching instinctively, protectively for her belly.

"An ultrasound," he replied. Then, trying to be helpful, he elaborated: "It's sort of like a camera, only it uses sound waves, not—"

"I know what an ultrasound is," she said, breathless and wide-eyed all at once. "I just...I've never seen one before...never had one..."

In Kentucky, she had been allowed to see one of the Brethren doctors from another clan, but he'd done little more than have her pee in a cup to verify the pregnancy. She had seen things like ultrasound devices on TV and had often longed for the chance to peer as if by magic through the walls of her stomach into her womb.

"Lay back," Tristan said. "I'm going to open your jeans a little bit, just so I can reach your abdomen better."

"Okay." Tessa nodded, in her sudden excitement forgetting to be embarrassed or shy as he unfastened the fly of her jeans and pushed them down slightly on her hips to leave her stomach entirely bare and exposed. As he squeezed a large glob of clear gel near her navel, she trembled again, this time in eager anticipation.

Tristan hit a couple of keys on the computer, and the monitor sprang to life, a white-against-black display marked by grid hatch-marks on the sides and bottom. "Can you feel it yet?" he asked her as he placed a plastic paddle against her, sliding it in the slick gel, using it to spread the goo in a thin layer across her skin. "Sense it in your mind, I mean?"

“Yes.” She nodded. “If I close my eyes, I can...see it somehow. Like this little golden glow, bright inside of my head.”

When he smiled, he looked for all the world like a younger version of Rene. “We might be able to tell the sex today,” he said. “I don’t know. If you’re at sixteen weeks, that’s still pretty early, but we’ll see.”

“It’s a boy,” she said and it was his turn to blink in surprise. “I...I had a dream about it.” She blushed brightly, feeling the heat in her cheeks.

“Huh.” Tristan made a low, interested noise in his throat, then returned his attention to the monitor as a hazy white shadow swept and swirled into view. “Look here...” Holding the paddle immobile against her stomach, he reached up and tapped a section of the screen where a small blur of light and shadow fluttered rapidly. “Do you see that?”

Tessa nodded. “What is it?”

Tristan smiled. “The heartbeat.”

All at once, her throat seemed to have collapsed into a pinhole. “My baby’s?” she whispered, and now the heat in her face had reached her eyes, and they stung with sudden tears.

“Yup.”

She stared at the screen, transfixed and mesmerized by that tiny but fervent motion. When he moved the paddle, she had to stop herself from reaching out and grabbing his wrist to stay him. For the next few minutes, he panned the paddle slowly along her abdomen, pointing out all of the wondrous, impossibly miniature details in her baby’s growing body.

“And this...” Tristan said, as an image suddenly floated into view; the ghostly, pale outline of a diminutive head, miniscule features presented in delicate but definitive profile.

“...is the face,” he murmured, and Tessa couldn’t breathe.

Oh, God, I wish Rene could see this, she thought in awe-struck amazement. *It’s beautiful. My God, it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen!*

“We’re looking at a crown-to-rump measurement of about four and a half inches,” Tristan remarked, as a quick series of digital lines momentarily bisected

their view of the screen. “That’s consistent with around fifteen or sixteen weeks gestation. Oh, and hey...” He glanced at Tessa and raised his brow. “You might want to hold off on the blue booties.”

“What?” She frowned between him and the screen, not able to discern what she was looking at. “Why?”

“Because *she* is a girl,” he said, and when her eyes widened in surprised disbelief, he laughed. “See these three lines?” He tapped the screen and she had to squint to make out what he pointed to. “This is the genital area.”

“Are you sure?” Tessa whispered, staring at the screen. *Because I dreamed it was a boy...when I fed from Rene, I...I saw it in my mind—a little boy, a son. Our son, mine and Rene’s.*

“Ninety-eight and three-quarters of a percent sure,” Tristan said. “I’ve seen a few ultrasounds, sexed a baby or two in my career.”

Tessa stared in amazement again at the monitor. “A girl,” she murmured, the corners of her mouth lifting into a slow, marveling smile. *My beautiful baby girl.*

She didn’t know what it meant, that she’d dreamed of a son but now had learned the baby was a girl, but she felt happy regardless—blissfully, giddily amazed.

“Is my grandmother going to be alright?” Tessa asked Michel Morin, having redressed and joined him and Lina in the common area of the clinic.

“She will be...now,” Michel replied, adding this last after a pointed pause and even more pointed glare in Tristan’s direction. Prior to Tristan offering to check Tessa’s wounds, Michel had drawn him aside. Even though she hadn’t been privy to their conversation, Tessa had known it was nothing good; both men had stood face to face, their brows narrowed, their postures tense and angry. Their words had been indistinguishable, their voices low but terse.

“Karen’s in with her,” Michel continued, looking away from his grandson. “When her treatment is finished, she can go back to the house.”

“Treatment?” Tessa repeated, puzzled. Eleanor’s words still echoed with ominous import in her mind.

That’s why your grandfather sent me away, sent me here. He hoped Michel and the others here—the ones like Naima and Tristan—could help me. I’m sick, Tessa. I’m dying.

“What’s wrong with her?” Tessa asked Michel.

“She said she was sick,” Lina said, her frown clearly indicating that, like Tessa, she was perplexed. “But I thought your kind couldn’t get sick. Your healing abilities or whatever, kept you from it.”

“We can’t,” Michel said. “Not human illnesses, anyway. Our immune systems are so much more powerful than yours that most pathogens have little, if any, effect on us. But this is different—it’s not a pathogen. It’s a congenital condition that affects only our kind, not humans; an inborn infirmity that manifests in midlife and is characterized by severe hemorrhagic fever and, ultimately, death.”

“In English, please?” Lina said, her frown not softening.

From behind the staff station, Tristan guffawed, drawing another glower from Michel. “It’s like a combination of hemophilia and the Ebola virus, the effects these conditions have on humans,” he said, by means of explanation. “It starts off with relatively minor symptoms—weakness and malaise, unexplained bruises that take awhile to heal, wounds that won’t heal or bleed excessively. Over time, the symptoms gradually worsen. Eventually even the lightest touch is enough to cause massive capillary rupture and hemorrhage. Your own heartbeat, the act of breathing or swallowing—it’s all enough friction to cause irreparable damage. You bleed to death.”

“And Eleanor’s got this?” Lina asked, her voice softer now with sudden horror, and when Michel nodded, she added, “How sick is she?”

“Sick enough,” Eleanor replied for herself, emerging from a nearby patient room, leaning heavily against the door frame. Her face was still markedly bruised—as if she’d been through a round or two with a prizefighter and lost. She

looked exhausted and haggard, but shrugged off any offers of help from the blonde, Karen, who hurried along behind her.

“You don’t need to be up yet,” Michel began with a frown, but Eleanor waved him away.

“Stuff and nonsense. My ass would be covered in bed sores from all the damn rest you’d see me have. I took my medicine, Dr. Morin, and now I’m fine. Nothing a vodka and tonic won’t cure.” She turned to Lina. “The prognosis for my condition is typically three years from the first symptoms appearing.”

“Three years until what?” Tessa asked.

Eleanor smiled gently at her. “Until death.”

“And how long has it been for you?” Tessa whispered, a sudden, sick feeling gripping her. *Because I know*, she thought, again thinking of what Eleanor had told her earlier.

That’s why your grandfather sent me away, sent me here. He hoped Michel and the others here—the ones like Naima and Tristan—could help me.

“Three years,” Eleanor replied with a grim, crooked smile. “Nearly to the day, in fact.” Her smile widened, and she slapped Michel in the stomach with the back of one frail hand. “We should have a party, toast my anniversary, don’t you think?”

“Eleanor’s prognosis is better than the typical,” Tristan said, leaving the desks and joining them by the windows. “Because Michel is trying a new treatment therapy on her.”

“Oh, yes,” Eleanor said with a laugh. “Daily treatments of some synthetic clotting factor he’s developed, plus intravenous fluids, electrolytes...” She flapped her hand again. “I don’t even know what all. It runs together to me after awhile.”

“But it’s keeping you alive,” Lina said, a statement not a question.

“For now, anyway,” Eleanor replied.

“How long?” Tessa’s voice was small and when Eleanor turned to her, the nonchalant good cheer in her face softened.

“I don’t know, darling,” she said, her brows lifting. “For now, I’m taking things one day at a time. I’m healthier at the moment than I rightly should be...”

As she spoke, she glanced over her shoulder toward a closed patient room door—the room Tessa had peeked inside, with the strange tub inside, the woman floating lifelessly within.

“...and no one should be worrying about me anyway.” Eleanor cut her gaze back to the group. It was a movement so quick and subtle, that backwards glimpse, that no one else had probably noticed, much less understood, but Tessa did. Or thought she did, anyway.

The woman in that room, she thought. She's sick, too. She has the same disease...only she's different somehow...sicker than Eleanor.

“We should be worrying about Brandon,” Eleanor said. “And Augustus, too.” To Michel, she said, her voice nearly pleading, “We have to help them.”

“The hell with Augustus Noble,” Lina snapped. “As far as I’m concerned, Brandon’s the only one we need to help.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Michel said to Eleanor. When she opened her mouth to protest, her eyes flashing hotly, he frowned. “You’re not physically capable of making a cross-country journey, Eleanor, not even by plane.”

“Well, *I’m* going,” Lina declared. “I’ve said it before—more than once. I’m tired of waiting. You people either get your shit together and help me or give me a goddamn set of car keys, because I’m going to Kentucky to get Brandon.”

“Michel, go with her, then,” Eleanor said. Michel blinked at her, visibly surprised. “She can’t face the Elders all by herself. Tessa’s pregnant—and wounded besides—and so is Rene. Naima’s run off, and we need Tristan here. If I can’t go to Kentucky, then you’d damn well better.”

Michel looked around for a moment, frustrated but trapped. “I have a grant meeting on Wednesday with the National Science Foundation...” he began.

“Can’t you reschedule?” Eleanor asked.

Even more flustered, Michel sputtered, “Well, I...I suppose... I’d have to call the lab...my secretary...”

“Here.” Lina tossed him a cell phone. “Use mine.”

For a long moment, he stood there, fuming in silence. At last, he muttered something Tessa recognized from Rene’s frequent use: “*Merde.*” Which was

French for *Shit*. Which, to judge by his simultaneous heavy sigh and the sudden sag in his shoulders, meant he was reluctantly agreeing.

“Give me the keys.” Without waiting for an invitation, Lina snatched Michel’s car keys from his hand. “I’ll drive. We’ve got a hell of a lot of lost time to make up.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"It's a girl, Rene," Tessa whispered, sitting in a chair at Rene's bedside. Beyond the windows flanking the room, the sunlight had faded to near-darkness, and the room was heavy with shadows, punctured only by the slim sphere of amber light cast by a bedside lamp.

She held his hand between her own, stroking the back of his knuckles with the pad of her thumb while he slept. His face remained battered, lacerated and bruised; stark white butterfly bandages closed a particularly nasty wound trailing the length of his temple. A cannula rested beneath his nose; twin tubes draped down the sides of his face to frame his chin, delivering a constant supply of oxygen directly into his airway. Another tube, an intravenous line, dripped a steady stream of clear fluid into his bloodstream through a port in his arm.

He slept comfortably; Tristan had injected him with a high dose of narcotic painkillers earlier in the afternoon, and it had all but sedated him. At her soft voice, however, and the light, persistent friction of her caress, he groaned softly, feebly. His eyelids fluttered and he blinked at her, dazed.

"*Pischolette...*" he murmured, the corners of his mouth lifting in a sleepy smile. This was his pet name for her; Cajun for *little girl*, it had once infuriated her, but now the endearment filled her with a tremulous and happy sort of warmth. "Hey..."

"Hey, yourself." Her eyes involuntarily welled with tears as she spoke, and as she stood, she smiled, leaning over the bed to kiss his mouth. "How are you feeling?"

"Like..." His voice faded; his eyes momentarily drooped again. "Like I've been hit by a bus."

"Close," Tessa told him. "More like a car. Only you hit *it*, not the other way around."

When he frowned, puzzled and groggy, she brushed his hair back from his brow and explained to him what had happened.

“*Viens m'enculer,*” he muttered. *Fuck me.* He lifted his hand, pressing his fingertips gingerly to his brow and wincing. “*Je me rappelle...* I remember now. That crazy bitch, Naima.” He closed his eyes again. “My God, she’s strong. I...I’ve never seen anything like that...like her.”

Opening his eyes again, he frowned, his expression growing alarmed. “Where’s Lina?” he asked, shoving the cannula away from his face, then reaching next for the IV line. “We can’t stay here. We’ve got to leave. Here, *pischouette*, help me...”

“It’s alright.” Tessa caught his hand before he could jerk the IV loose, needle, line and port.

“But Brandon,” Rene protested. “You said he was in the woods, that they were—”

“He’s not in the woods. I was wrong. It wasn’t Brandon they were talking about tracking down and killing—it was Martin.”

His brows lifted, his eyes widening in surprise. “They know about Martin?” he hissed, cutting a sharp glance toward the door to his room, which stood partially ajar. “How?”

She shook her head. “They sensed him when you brought him to your cabin in the woods,” she said. “Michel has been keeping an eye on him ever since. They know he’s dangerous.”

“Michel?” Rene frowned again and she remembered that he’d missed introductions.

“Yes.” She nodded, smiling, taking him by the hand again. “Michel Morin. He’s your grandfather, Rene.”

She thought this would please him, but instead, the crease between his brows deepened. “I told you, *pischouette*,” he said. “You’re my family—you and the *bébé*. These people here... *ils ne sont rien*. They’re nothing to me.” Again, he reached for the IV. “Help me up. We’re getting Lina and getting the hell out of here.”

But as he sat up in bed, the movement obviously hurt him, because he twisted sharply, uttering a breathless sort of cry, then crashed back against the mattress.

“You have to lie still,” Tessa pleaded. “Rene, you’re hurt. You’ve got busted ribs and internal bleeding—Tristan says you’re lucky you didn’t break your neck. You need to heal.”

“What...the hell...does Tristan know?” Rene growled, but it was a feeble protest. His eyes were closed, his teeth all but gritted; a thin sheen of pained sweat now glossed his forehead.

“Plenty,” Tessa replied. “He’s a doctor. He gave you X-rays, a CAT scan. They have all of that stuff here, even...” Her voice faltered, and she smiled again, involuntarily, as she reached for her belly. “Even an ultrasound. He checked on the baby with it, Rene. I got to see her heartbeat...her little face...” Because Rene stared at her now, the hardness in his face shifting to wide-eyed amazement, she grinned even more broadly and nodded, blinking against new tears. “He said it’s a girl. My dream from before...it must have been wrong. It doesn’t matter. Tristan said the baby’s healthy. She’s going to be alright, Rene.”

“That’s wonderful, *pischouette*.” He reached up, hooking his hand against the back of her head and pulling her down to him, kissing her.

“You don’t mind, do you?” she whispered, nose to nose with him, seized with a sudden, tremulous anxiety. “That it’s not a boy after all?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I think I’ll leave you right this minute. *Au revoir*.” He managed a laugh. “*Fille drôle*,” he said, then pulled her close and kissed her again. *Silly girl*. “I think I can put up with another Noble *femme* in my life...even a miniature one.”

As they drew apart, he looked around, seeming to take the room, the view beyond the window, into account for the first time with any clarity. “Where are we?” he asked. “Back in Tahoe?”

Tessa shook her head. “There’s a clinic here in the woods, near that house they brought us to. Tristan said it’s the only one in the entire world, a place

for people like us, where they have doctors trained to treat us. Your grandfather built it.”

“There’s some luck, no?” Rene grimaced as he shifted his weight in the bed. That bitter edge had returned to his voice; the slight furrow crimped his brow again. “Keeping us here all nice and neat, just like your granddaddy’s horse farm in Kentucky.”

“It’s not the same.”

“No?” He glanced at her, raised her brow. “What say you, me and Lina go get our things, then, and try to leave? How far you think they’re going to let us go, *pischouette?*”

“They already let Lina leave,” Tessa said. “A couple of hours ago, with Michel. They were going to the airport. Michel has a plane there; they’re going to fly out to Kentucky and see if my grandfather and the Elders took Brandon somehow, if that’s where they’ve brought him.”

“Lina and some...*old man* are going up against Augustus Noble and the Elders?” Rene’s brows raised. “Are you crazy, *pischouette?* They’ll need an army to go up against those guys.”

“No, they won’t.” Tessa shook her head, and when Rene opened his mouth to protest, she cut him off. “Michel’s like Naima. Tristan is, too. They *all* are, Rene. Michel’s like an army all by himself. And he’ll keep Lina safe. He promised me he would.”

“*Ah, vraiment?*” Rene asked. *Oh, really?* “You’ll excuse me if I don’t take much comfort in that oath, *pischouette.*”

“I do,” she said quietly. “I trust him, Rene.”

“Why? Because he says he’s kin to me? We don’t know that, Tessa, not for sure. Hell, we don’t know *anything* for certain about these goddamn people except—”

“Except they’re keeping my grandmother alive,” Tessa said, again drawing his voice abruptly short. “She’s sick, Rene. She’s dying, and I...” She glanced down at the floor. “Michel Morin is the only person who can save her. My grandfather knew that—he trusted him to it. And I...I do, too.”

A few moments later, Karen interrupted them, knocking lightly against the door, then poking her head inside. “Well, hey,” she said, seeming surprised and pleased to find Rene conscious. “Welcome back. How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” Rene replied with a scowl. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Karen Pierce,” she said, unfazed by his gruff tone. “I’m a nurse.”

“You’re human,” he observed—something that had likewise caught Tessa by surprise when she’d first taken note of it.

Karen wagged her fingertip in the air, mock-scolding. “Friend, not food.” As she walked over to his bedside, she smiled at Tessa. “There’s a lounge just across from the staff station outside,” she said. “We’ve got tea bags and snacks, some bottled water. Why don’t you check it out, help yourself, while I take care of his next medicine dose?”

She slipped a capped syringe out of her pocket as she said this, and Rene’s frown deepened. “I don’t need any more medicine,” he said, but when he tried to move, to pull away in protest as she reached for his IV line, his face twisted with sudden, unexpected pain.

“No.” Karen smirked, chuckling quietly. “Not at all.”

Tessa left them, having deposited a reassuring kiss against Rene’s brow. Closing the door quietly behind her, she found herself standing in the semi-dark corridor. Dusk had settled beyond all the windows, but Karen hadn’t adjusted the interior lights accordingly yet. Rather than the panels of bright fluorescents overhead being lit, instead, only a series of sporadically inset, circular lights cast slim pools of orange glow down onto the floor. From behind the nurse’s station desk, she could see additional illumination; one of the computers had been turned on, the screen left aglow. Karen had apparently been sitting here; an opened can of Diet Coke and a half-eaten Lean Cuisine entrée sat beside the keyboard, while a computerized game of solitaire, apparently underway and unfinished, still waited for her on the monitor.

Tessa saw a door across from her, a nameplate that said *Staff* affixed. But it was another door that drew her gaze and her curiosity—the door beyond which she'd seen the mysterious tub earlier that day, the woman submerged in the water.

She's sick like my grandmother, whoever she is, she thought. And whatever's wrong with her...that's how Eleanor could end up.

Eventually even the lightest touch—blinking your eyelids—is enough to cause massive capillary rupture and hemorrhage, Michel had told them. You bleed to death.

Was that why the woman in that room floated in a pool of water? Tessa wondered. *Because anything else—bed sheets, pillows, a mattress—it would hurt her?*

Glancing warily behind her to make sure Karen remained in Rene's room, otherwise occupied, Tessa stole across the clinic. Just as she reached the threshold to the enigmatic room—close enough to hear the soft burbling of water through the door—another sound caught her attention. It came from another door, two or three down the way, close to the staff lounge. *Office*, the placard on the front read. No name, no title.

No warnings to keep out, either, Tessa told herself, as again, a soft noise came from that direction. Muffled and nearly inaudible, it sounded like a moan or a faint, feeble cry. *Like someone's hurt*, she thought.

Keeping close to the wall, she crept to the threshold. Again, this time through the wood, she heard a low, breathless groan, but when she reached for the knob, her curiosity irresistibly piqued, the door—left fractionally ajar—swung open against her sudden weight.

“Oh—!” she yelped in startled fright, stumbling across the threshold and falling to her knees. She looked up, mortified, and froze in sudden, stricken surprise.

Oh, my God...!

Like the other rooms in the clinic, the office's far wall was nothing but glass, nearly floor to ceiling windows that awarded a sweeping view of the forest

vista beyond. One of the perpendicular walls held large, laden bookshelves; along the other, four-drawer filing cabinets stood abreast of one another, as if along the frontline of a phalanx. A large wood desk swallowed the center of the room; behind it, Tristan sat in a large, wing-backed leather chair.

The room was freezing; the cold night air had filled it, pouring in through one of the windows, which had been cranked outward at a wide angle on recessed hinges and left ajar. His sister, Naima, had apparently entered the room through this opening. Now she straddled Tristan in the chair. She'd closed her fist in his hair and wrenched his head back, tearing the front of his shirt open wide to reveal not only the flat, muscled plain of his chest and stomach beneath, but his throat, as well, and here, she'd bitten him. In the full throes of the bloodlust, she'd sunk her elongated canines to the gum-line in the meat of his neck, punching into his vulnerably exposed common carotid.

In the movies, vampires always went for the jugular, but in reality, the best blood—rich and freshly oxygenated—was found in any of a victim's large systemic arteries. Naima had pressed her lips fiercely against Tristan's throat, her jaw unhinged, giving her an unnaturally wide gape, and the soft sounds Tessa had heard, the quiet moans, had come from Tristan as Naima fervently, greedily fed from him.

But at the unexpected clamor of Tessa's entrance, Naima jerked her face away from Tristan. His blood glistened against her dark skin, and when she saw Tessa sprawled in the doorway, Naima uttered a furious, screeching hiss. Then, equally cat-like, she sprang away from Tristan, darting toward the window. With a loud series of rustles and snaps from the foliage beyond, she disappeared into the cold night.

"Oh, my God...!" Tessa gasped, scrambling to her feet. "Tristan!"

It was an abomination to feed from another Brethren. Brandon had done it, and Tessa had, too—Rene had shared his blood with both of them to save their lives, but even despite those dire and desperate circumstances, Tessa had been left with the cloud of guilt over it; the unshakable sensation that she'd committed a grievous offense for which she could never make amends.

Tristan sat slumped in the chair, his pallor ashen, his head canted back. His eyes were closed, his arms dangling limply over the sides of the chair, blood still spilling from the gory puncture wounds in his neck. With each feeble tremor of his heart, it bubbled out, peppering his skin and staining the stark white collar of his shirt in a fine, vermilion spray. Tessa tried to ignore the fact that the smell of it—rich, metallic and distinctively sweeter than any human’s blood—was somehow, strangely appealing to her.

“Tristan,” she whispered, frightened for him, cradling his face between her hands. He was semi-lucid, bled nearly dry, suffering so massive an amount of blood loss that, had he been human, he would have already been dead. “Tristan, oh, my God!”

She looked frantically toward the door, not wanting to leave him. His skin was cold—deathly cold to the touch—and pale as a corpse’s. She could feel his breath against her, but only barely, as he drew in sporadic, feeble gasps.

“Karen!” she cried out, hoping her voice would carry across the clinic and reach the nurse in Rene’s room. “Karen, help!”

At the sound of her cry, Tristan stirred weakly. “*Gunnngghh...*” he moaned, an inarticulate sound coming from fathoms away.

“Don’t move,” Tessa whispered to him, stroking his hair back from his face. “It’s alright, Tristan. She’s gone now. Naima’s gone. Don’t move—I’m going to go get Karen.”

She darted away from the desk, rushing through the doorway and out past the nurse’s station beyond, nearly plowing headlong into Karen as the blonde woman emerged from Rene’s room.

“Come quick!” Tessa cried, grabbing her by the arm. “Tristan’s hurt—Naima attacked him! Hurry!”

“What? Where?” Karen’s eyes flew wide in surprise.

“In the office!” Tessa turned, dragging Karen in tow. “Hurry!”

She stood, frozen, in the doorway as Karen lowered Tristan clumsily to the floor. He was unconscious again, unresponsive as Karen called to him by name.

“Tristan.” Karen slid her fingertips against the uninjured side of Tristan’s neck, checking his pulse. “Tristan, it’s Karen.” Gently peeling his eyelids back, she flashed the bright beam of a penlight down to check his pupillary response. “Can you hear me?”

“She bled him almost dry,” Tessa said, stricken. “Naima would have killed him if I...if I hadn’t...”

“No, she wouldn’t have.” Karen leaned back, snapping the penlight off, then jamming it almost angrily into her pocket again. “Help me get a stretcher in here, do you mind? We’ll put him in a bed, let him sleep it off.”

“What?” Tessa blinked in bewildered surprise. “What do you mean?”

Karen stood. “I mean Naima didn’t attack him.” She shook her head, disgusted. “He *likes* it when she does this. He gets off on almost bleeding to death.”

She spared Tessa a glance as she brushed past her to get a stretcher. “You people sure are weird sometimes.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Once upon a time, the expansive second-floor ballroom at the Noble mansion had played host to elaborate, elegant parties attended by some of the utmost among the human elite—industrialists, movie stars, politicians and more, they had all paraded about inside the luxuriously appointed hall in celebration of the Kentucky Derby. Today, it was an oversized nursery for the clan's brood of youngsters, its illustrious past all but faded for more than 50 years. Here, Augustus's grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren mingled with Benoît's, as well as those of their brothers and cousins besides, all of the surviving males of the Noble clan.

Once upon a time, there would have been hundreds of children. Today, there were no more than forty under the age of five at enthusiastic play in the ballroom, a somber, if not somewhat revealing indicator of the Brethren's wavering ability—or lack thereof—to sustain themselves.

When Augustus stepped through one of the doorways, he lingered at the threshold, surveying the swarming children with his gaze. He was looking for his grandson, Sebastian's youngest boy, Daniel, who was four years old. Spotting him as Daniel loped in wide, clumsy circles, a plastic airplane in his hand and spittle flying from his lips as he imitated the sputtering of an engine in flight, Augustus began to pick his way toward the boy.

"Good morning, sir," one of the adult women said, having caught sight of him upon his entrance and rushed through the throng to intercept him. Wide-eyed and breathless with surprise and trepidation—because paying call to the nursery was something he seldom, if ever, did—she'd plastered an uncertain smile on her face as she'd gushed to him loudly in greeting.

He should have known her name, but it wouldn't immediately come to him. Married to one of his grandsons, maybe? She was pretty enough, with dark blond

hair, generous hips and large breasts; a figure worth not only noticing but coveting, besides. Still, her name escaped him.

“May I help you, sir?” she asked. Her eyes were curious and somewhat fascinated, traveling up and down his form. Admittedly, he probably looked a wreck, compared to his customary appearance. He wore jeans for the first time in his nearly three hundred and five years of life. They had belonged to Caine, as did the loose-fitting, black silk shirt he wore, unbuttoned to his collarbone, his sleeve cuffs turned back to the elbows. He was barefooted, his long hair unfettered, left to drape down the length of his spine and over his shoulder in a thick, heavy fall.

Sharon. That was her name. Sharon Giscard-Noble. She was married to his cousin, Julien’s third or fourth son.

“I’m looking for my grandson, Daniel,” Augustus said to Sharon.

She smiled brightly, more relaxed now to realize his presence didn’t mean *she* was in any sort of trouble. “Of course, sir,” she said, nodding. “Why don’t you have a seat? There are some sofas over there, by the windows. I’ll get him for you.”

“Thank you, Sharon,” he said, trying his best to give her an appreciative nod.

“You’re welcome, sir,” she replied, still smiling, even though he remembered now that her name was Margaret and she was married not to Julien’s son, but to his brother, Charles.

He settled himself comfortably in one of the Rococo-style sofas by the large picture windows and pretended to occupy himself with the view of the yard, the cold, gray, drizzly day beyond. There was no need to cut a glance toward the other women charged with monitoring the youngsters; even though they stood together in a loose cluster across the room, he knew they were leaning together, whispering about him—the way he looked, the manner of his dress, Sebastian’s death and, of course, his own humiliating dismissal as dominant Elder.

Rumor spread like wildfire in dried grass, and this one in particular, so surprising and unexpected, was certainly no exception. Allistair would have seen

to that. Already, he had forced Augustus into a lengthy, pre-dawn meeting with their attorneys and accountants—even before he'd been forced to attend to his own son's burial. During this time, Augustus had surrendered all fiduciary and corporate control of the Brethren's assets to Allistair.

He'd done this without protest. Not only because there had been none he could offer—as that was no longer his place—but because his heart and mind had been with Sebastian. With every looping pen stroke, the burden of guilt on his heart grew heavier and heavier, a shroud of sorrow consuming him, swallowing him whole, leaving him leaden and numb. The pain of losing a lifetime of effort and energy—the businesses and bank accounts he'd pretty much single-handedly founded and fostered—paled to nothingness next to the realization that his son was gone.

The fact that Allistair hadn't yet made a more public spectacle, parading Augustus about in disgraced subservience, amazed Augustus. To that point, it had been a fleeting reprieve, and Augustus knew it. Allistair was biding his time; he'd called together a session of the Brethren Council that evening, and Augustus had no doubt that a humiliating and humbling reception would be in store for him there.

To judge by the playful demeanor he'd observed Daniel exhibiting, the gossip had at least escaped the children for now. As the woman, Margaret-not-Sharon, approached, she led the boy in reluctant tow. The boy's dark eyes were round and hesitant, the joyful smile Augustus had seen only moments earlier faded in full.

My God, he looks like Brandon, Augustus marveled. Sometimes his mind would still return to a night more than fifteen years earlier, in which Brandon had been only Daniel's young age. Attacked by human burglars and left for dead, the boy had been beaten with merciless savagery, his throat cut. Had he been human, he would have died. There had been many among the Brethren—some even to that day—that believed, despite his birthright, he still should have died.

That he didn't is nothing shy of miraculous, Allistair had remarked on more than one occasion, those flint-dark eyes beady and fixed, suspicious and guarded, on Augustus's face.

"Here he is, sir," Margaret said—as if Augustus, unable to put her name and face together, would be equally so incapable when it came to his own flesh and blood. With a smile, she guided Daniel forward, offering his hair a reassuring, nearly maternal tousle as she did.

The boy glanced back at her, then at Augustus again, shying back in reflexive fright as Augustus stood.

"Leave us," Augustus said to Margaret. From his peripheral vision, he saw her drop a quick curtsy, then turn and hurry away.

"Yes, sir," she murmured, leaving Augustus and his grandson alone in the corner.

"Hello, Daniel." Augustus did his best to affect a gentle smile.

"Hullo, Grandfather." Clearly, it did him no good. Still clutching the toy airplane between his hands, Daniel drew it toward his face now, as if he hoped to hide behind it.

Augustus folded his long legs beneath him, then tucked his hair behind his ears. "That's a nice airplane," he remarked, holding out his hand. "May I see it, please?"

Hesitantly, Daniel offered it to him, drawing his hand swiftly back when Augustus took it. After pretending to examine it with some semblance of interest for a moment or two, Augustus raised his brow. "Very nice," he said. "What kind is it?"

Daniel shrugged. "I don't know," he said. In the shy, mumbling speech of a reluctant child, this came out as *I dunno*.

"It's a Sopwith Camel," Augustus replied. "The British flew them during the First World War. Do you see this bulge right here?" He pointed to the cowl of the toy. "It's a special casing over the nose guns. It's why they named the planes *camels*."

Daniel blinked at him, mute and intimidated, as this was likely the most by way of idle—let alone friendly—conversation Augustus had ever offered him.

With a sigh, Augustus set the plane aside on the sofa and stood again. Only a short while earlier, the movement would have hurt like hell, thanks to Brandon having thrown him across the room. Now, only a slight twinge rippled through the muscles of his lower spine; nothing that reflected outwardly in his face as he offered his hand, palm-up, to Daniel.

“Will you walk with me, *mon petit*?” he asked.

Daniel blinked at Augustus’s outstretched hand with all of the enthusiasm he might have awarded a proffered rattlesnake. “O-okay,” he said after an uncertain pause. As he slipped his small warm hand against Augustus’s cool palm, he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

The gardens behind the Noble mansion had been commissioned and designed by world-renowned landscape architect George Kessler in 1922, the year before he’d died. The formal centerpiece consisted of symmetrical flower beds, a lush and vibrant seasonal progression of sunny daffodils, hyacinths, tulips, dahlias, zinnias and mums, along with nearly ten sprawling acres of multicolored azaleas. Framed by reflective pools and Romanesque statuary, the gardens had been modeled after those remembered fondly from Augustus’s youth in France.

It was a cold spring, but the flowers proved hardy, and the damp air was heady with their intermingling fragrances as Augustus and Daniel walked together, side by side, following a paved, winding path. It took two of Daniel’s scampering strides to match one of Augustus’s longer ones, and the boy held his hand all the while, still seeming reluctant and unsure.

When they reached the largest of the reflective pools, long and rectangular, with lily pads and water blossoms floating against its mirror-like surface, Augustus drew to a halt, slipping his fingers away from his grandson’s.

“When your father was a boy, I would bring him here sometimes,” he remarked, walking slowly beside the pond, his eyes on the ground. “We would

take our lunch together on that bench right over there, and we'd feed bread crusts to the cygnets."

He leaned over, lifting a relatively flat, oblong-shaped pebble in his fingertips. As Daniel watched, he gave a deft flick of his wrist and sent it skipping across the top of the pond, leaving a trail of ripples pocked against its smooth surface. A glance told him the boy was impressed, forgetting his fear for a moment and following the rock with wide eyes.

"Would you like to try?" Augustus asked, raising his brow in invitation. When Daniel nodded, he leaned down again, sifting in the loose gravel around the edge of the pool before finding another suitable stone. "Here. Don't just toss it, *petit*. Use your wrist. Try to keep it flat."

It took a couple of tries, but Daniel didn't grow impatient. At last, he skipped a pebble atop the water and laughed out loud, a happy sound so much like Sebastian's had been at that age—a sound Augustus might have otherwise lost to time and forgetfulness, had it not been for that moment—that it nearly broke his heart.

"Good boy," he said with a smile. Again, he folded his legs beneath him, lowering himself to Daniel's eye level. "Would you like to come and see Brandon today?"

Daniel's face lit up, his mouth spreading in a broad, delighted grin. "He's here?" he asked, and Augustus nodded. "At the great house? He's back? Oh, yes, Grandfather! Yes, I want to see him now!"

Augustus smiled. "Not now, *petit*," he said gently. "But today, I promise. I'll bring you to him soon. First, I'd like to talk to you."

The boy grew apprehensive again, his eyes round and fearful. "Am I in trouble?"

Augustus shook his head. "No." For a long time, he simply looked at the boy, because Daniel looked like Brandon, who in turn, looked like Sebastian. And because the soft earth from the makeshift and clumsy grave he'd dug alone for his son was still embedded beneath the edges of his fingernails, the realization of

this left him breathless and dumbstruck all at once, his eyes flooding involuntarily with tears.

The sight of these unnerved Daniel all the more. He'd never seen his grandfather cry. But come to mention it, *no one* had ever seen Augustus cry except for Eleanor.

"I've something to tell you, lad," Augustus told Daniel softly, reaching up and pressing his hand against the boy's face. "And when I'm finished, I...I would like you to come with me to tell Brandon, too. Would you?"

Daniel nodded. "Yes, sir," he whispered.

Augustus smiled. "You're a good boy," he said softly, his voice strained and hoarse, and, as Margaret had done, he ruffled the heavy crown of Daniel's dark hair fondly with his fingertips.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The smell of something warm and aromatic drew Brandon from the depths of unconsciousness. His stomach growled urgently enough for him to feel it, a deep and distinctive rumbling in his gut, as he opened his eyes dazedly and blinked in groggy disorientation up at the ceiling.

Movement out of the corner of his gaze startled him; Julianne, one of his grandmothers, set a tray atop his bedside table. There was a large bowl on it; he could see steam curling in wispy tendrils from over the china lip. A small plate held several thick slices of bread, and a glass of milk, three-quarters full, sat in the top corner.

Julianne turned to him and smiled to find him awake. Never as beautiful, graceful, elegant or outgoing as her counterpart, Eleanor, Julianne had nonetheless always been one of Brandon's favorites among Augustus's wives. Gentle and even-tempered, she'd always treated Brandon with kindness and compassion—traits uncommon in her birth family, the Davenants, and ones her husband had certainly never demonstrated toward the younger man.

I brought you some soup, she said in his mind, her voice quiet, nearly velveteen, like a soft caress. With a wink, she added, *Corn chowder. Your favorite. Do you feel well enough to sit up and try some?*

I...I think so. Brandon nodded. *Thanks, Julianne.*

He was surprised to discover his wrists and ankles were no longer bound to the bed. Likewise, his intravenous lines and the nasogastric tube had disappeared. When he sat up, he winced, his movements slow, stiff and pained, and Julianne slipped a comforting arm around his shoulders to help him. As she stacked his pillows behind him to help prop him upright, he glanced down at his bare torso. The bandages were gone now, the bullet wound closed. Dark bruises—a gruesome pattern of black, violet, gray and brown—marked the place where Rene had found his mark.

Julianne helped situate him more comfortably, then scooted the table closer to his bed. This was the first time Brandon had been allowed to see anyone in his family outside of the Grandfather since he'd been brought back to Kentucky, the first time he'd been untethered from the bed or allowed to eat anything. Puzzled and somewhat wary, he leaned forward and took a small taste of the soup.

It's hot. Be careful, Julianne warned, but that one taste had roused his stomach again, causing it to growl again in eager anticipation. He began to gobble the soup down, scalded tongue be damned, slurping it in rapid-fire, sloshing spoonfuls as fast as he could. That he didn't pick the bowl up and lick the basin clean when he'd finished astonished him, and it wasn't until he'd crammed his cheeks full with the bread, then moistened it all with a mouthful of milk that he realized Julianne was watching him with a strange, nearly sorrowful expression, her brows lifted, her blue eyes round and sad.

"I'm so glad you're home," she said, speaking aloud this time. "I've been worried about you, Brandon."

He hadn't even said hello to her. Realizing this now, he felt like an ass. Rising slowly to his feet, grimacing again as muscles and joints that had laid immobile for too long at last moved and unfurled, he more stumbled against her than embraced her, despite his best intentions.

I missed you, too, he thought to her. He sure as hell wasn't glad to be back at the great house, but his life there had never been a complete hell. Julianne had made things better for him in her own way, as Tessa always had, and their youngest brother, Daniel. His father, too—Sebastian—had always made life among the Brethren more bearable, as if, at least on some level, he'd sympathized with Brandon's desperate need to be different than they were, even if he hadn't completely understood it.

Can you get word to Dad that I'm here? he asked as he drew back from Julianne's embrace. There was no way that Sebastian knew Brandon had been returned to the mansion; he would have been keeping a constant vigil at Brandon's bedside if he'd known. Brandon doubted even a mandate from the

Elders themselves—never mind the Grandfather—could have kept him from it. *Can you bring him here to my room somehow? I really need to see him.*

Sebastian had always been Brandon's champion, the one who had stood against Augustus and kept Brandon from the horrifying ritual of the bloodletting. It had been Sebastian who had arranged for Jackson Jones, the private tutor who had instructed Brandon in aikido and American Sign Language. It had always been Sebastian who had safeguarded and protected the young and vulnerable Brandon from his more ferocious and vicious-minded kin, like Caine and Emily.

Maybe he can help me now, Brandon thought, closing his mind to Julianne, seized with bright and sudden desperate hope. *Sneak me off the farm somehow, help me get back to California...to Lina. He'll listen to me, believe me when I tell him I'm in love with her. He'll be able to...*

His thoughts trailed off as he noticed an abrupt change in Julianne's expression. That tender sorrow had deepened all at once; she looked stricken now and pale, as if all of the blood had drained from her face, flooding into her feet.

What? He blinked, confused, and reached for her. *What is it? Julianne, what's—*

Leave us.

The Grandfather's voice, falling cold and heavy within his mind, immobilized him with sudden, reflexive alarm. For her part, Julianne shrank back as if scolded, her eyes immediately filled with shame, her gaze dropping down to pin her toes.

"Yes, sir." When she spoke, it was a mumble, her lips scarcely moving; only because this was her customary address when given an order from Augustus did Brandon glean what she said.

She didn't as much as glance up at Brandon again as she scurried past him, hurrying toward the door. Brandon turned and was surprised anew to see his youngest brother Daniel tucked against Augustus's leg, his small fingers laced through his grandfather's. At the sight of Brandon's face, the boy's eyes

flew wide and his mouth dropped agape. Breaking away from Augustus, he darted across the room, arms outstretched.

Brandon uttered a soundless, reflexive laugh and leaned down to greet him, catching the boy in his arms and hoisting him aloft, hugging him fiercely against his chest. It hurt like all fuck, especially in the still-tender place where Rene had shot him, but Brandon didn't care. He clutched Daniel to him, closing his eyes and kissing his ear through the boy's tangled dark hair.

Brandon! Daniel cried, his breath hot as he gasped against Brandon's neck, his arms wrapped so tightly about him, he nearly throttled his brother. *You're here! You're alright!*

I'm here, Daniel. Brandon kissed him again, then rubbed the tip of his nose against Daniel's, smiling despite the sudden sting of tears in his eyes. *I'm alright. Everything's alright now, I promise.*

No, it's not, Daniel whispered, the joy in his face abruptly faltering. Behind him, Augustus crossed the threshold and closed the door behind him. Brandon shot him a dark, suspicious glare and held Daniel against him more protectively.

It's not alright, Brandon, Daniel whimpered, and suddenly his large, dark eyes glossed over with tears. His bottom lip trembled and when he spoke aloud, the tremor carried through in his words. "D-daddy's gone, Brandon."

Brandon blinked, bewildered. *What?* Another glower at Augustus. What the fuck had he been telling Daniel? *What do you mean, gone?* He shook his head, managed a clumsy smile. *He's just gone to the barns, like he does every day...at his office, I'm sure.*

But Daniel shook his head, and now the trembling made its way through his entire little body; he quaked against Brandon as if caught in a draft. His tears spilled, and when he talked, Brandon struggled to make sense of the words. "He's gone," the boy hiccupped. "The...the Grandfather told me...he...he said he was gone, Brandon...that he's never coming back!"

And then the next part, Brandon was sure he misunderstood; the boy's tears had distorted his words, making lip-reading him accurately all but impossible.

“He’s dead!” Daniel exclaimed as he burst into sobs. “Daddy’s dead, Brandon! He’s dead!”

There was no way that was true, no way that could be right, and Brandon drew his brother against him more tightly than ever. *No, he’s not, Daniel*, he said inside the boy’s mind. *Oh, God, who told you that? Who put that idea in your head?*

But he knew. He knew damn good and well, and when he set Daniel back down on the floor, he squared off against Augustus, his fists bared, his brows furrowed in murderous outrage.

You son of a bitch, he seethed. Augustus didn’t react to this; his face remained granite-smooth and sternly impassive as Brandon marched toward him, his entire body rigid with fury now.

You lying, goddamn son of a bitch, Brandon said, then whipped his fist around in a sharp, hooking arc, slamming the bridge of his knuckles into the side of Augustus’s face. Augustus’s cheek whipped toward his opposing shoulder with the force of the blow, and he staggered sideways, catching himself against the doorframe and sparing himself a graceless fall.

You do what you want to me, but you leave Daniel alone! Brandon cried. *Do you hear me, you son of a bitch? No more feeding him your lies, your goddamn manipulations and games!*

He drew his fist back again and let it fly, feeling pain shoot from his hand clear to his shoulder at the brutal impact. This time, he drew blood as he connected with the corner of Augustus’s mouth, and Augustus fell sideways, crashing to the floor.

I’m right here, you son of a bitch—leave Daniel alone! Brandon shouted, standing over him, fists still clenched. *Do you hear me? Do you—*

Augustus looked up, his brows furrowed, his eyes smooth and black, his fangs extended. He shoved his hand forward, fingers splayed. It wasn’t a blow, not in the physical sense anyway, but all at once, as if plowed into by a runaway freight train, Brandon flew off his feet and backwards across the room. He

slammed into the far wall, crunching the plaster beneath him, then crumpled face-first to the ground, landing in a shuddering, breathless heap.

Holy shit, he thought, gasping, his ears ringing from where he'd smacked his head against the wall. He'd bitten his tongue hard upon the impact and watched with dazed fascination as he spat blood onto the floorboards beneath him. *What...what the fuck just happened...?*

Do you feel better now, boy? Augustus asked, and Brandon looked bleakly across the room, watching his grandfather limp slowly to his feet. His mouth was still bleeding; he brushed his fingertips against the battered corner. His fangs had receded, but his eyes remained blackened, his brows crimped furiously. *Do you feel like you've accomplished something? Proven you have balls somewhere between your thighs—at least to yourself?*

When the bloodlust came over him, Brandon watched the world flood with sudden, bright glare; his pupils expanded, swallowing his eyes in darkness, and his gums throbbed as his canine teeth began to lower. *Fuck you*, he seethed, letting bloody phlegm fly at Augustus. *You think two right hooks, a goddamn busted lip is going to make up for all of the years you terrorized me?*

Terrorized, Augustus repeated, his brow arching sharply as he offered a dismissive snort. *I did nothing to you, boy, but expect you to honor your birthright—and your clan.*

Nothing to me? Brandon cried, limping to his feet. *You did nothing to me? You broke my goddamn hands!*

Because you disobeyed me! Augustus shouted back. *You went behind my back—against my goddamn word—when you applied to that college! What would you have me do? Every time I turn around, you defy me—abandoning your bloodletting, making your sister—little more than a child—take your place in the hunt, mingling with humans, fleeing the farm! You've been a constant source of aggravation and infuriation for me, boy—a thorn in my side nearly from the moment of your misbegotten birth!*

There's the truth of it, isn't it? Brandon yelled, closing his hands into fists again. *Say it, why don't you, you son of a bitch! All of my life, you've hated me—humiliated me, hurt me! You wish I'd died the night my throat was cut!*

Brandon, no—! Daniel cried out in his mind, but Brandon charged forward anyway.

He swung his fist, meaning to hit Augustus again, to hit him over and over until he broke his hands for the third time in as many years, more than willing to shatter the bones irrevocably this time if it meant wiping that goddamn smug, stoic look off his grandfather's face. He sent his knuckles careening expertly for Augustus's temple and gasped in stunned surprise, his eyes flying wide, as all at once, his fist stopped in mid-air, captured in mid-swing by something that felt like an invisible hand.

There was nothing there that he could see, but he could feel the air compressing around his wrist, the way water will exert tangible pressure the deeper you sink into a swimming pool.

What the fuck...? He tried to pull his hand back, loose of this unseen grasp, but it held him fast.

Stupid boy, Augustus said with a frown. *You should have died on the night your throat was cut. Hated you, hurt you, humiliated you—I made you, boy.*

He's doing it, Brandon thought in bright, frightened amazement. *He's doing this somehow...without laying a finger on me. How in the fuck...?*

The same way you could... Augustus told him dryly. *If I'd let you.*

Stop it! Daniel rushed toward them, grabbing hold of Augustus's pants leg and tugging fervently, desperately. "Both of you stop fighting! Please!"

All at once, Augustus's stony expression shifted; for likely the first time in his entire life, Brandon saw something resembling honest-to-Christ *emotion* in the Grandfather's face, his eyes. He saw sadness there, something exhausted and profound, a heavy shadow that clearly weighed upon the older man.

And he realized.

Where's my dad? he whispered in his mind. *Oh...oh, God, where...where is my father?*

All at once, the invisible force holding his hand pinned in mid-air vanished. He could move again; his fist, still coiled, dropped to his side. Daniel broke away from Augustus and darted forward to cling to him, grief-stricken and shuddering with sobs.

Where's my dad? Brandon asked again, stricken.

Augustus turned and walked away, sitting down on the floor with his back against the wall, his knees drawn toward his chest. He faced Brandon in this position, his hair disheveled, his mouth bleeding, his eyes still filled with that grim, stark sorrow.

Where is he? Brandon asked him, holding Daniel close, feeling his throat choke closed with sudden tears. *Oh, God, please...where's my father?*

Augustus sighed heavily, his face flooding with despair. He forked his fingers through the crown of his pale hair and closed his eyes. He didn't say a word, but it didn't matter.

He didn't have to.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tessa woke with a start, her eyes flying wide at the sound of heavy footsteps hurrying up the stairs. For a long, bewildered moment, she blinked across the sun-draped room, adjusting to the unexpected glare and wondering where in the hell she was. And then she remembered.

Tristan's house.

The night before, after having deposited a still-unconscious Tristan in one of the empty patient beds at the clinic, Karen had talked Tessa out of her plan to spend the night sleeping in a recliner in Rene's room.

"If you don't want to go all of the way back up the hill to your grandmother's, you can spend the night over at Tristan's," she'd suggested, and Tessa had taken curious note, though not asked, about her specific reference to Michel's home as *your grandmother's*. Eleanor had been exhausted, despite her stubborn insistence to the contrary, and after Michel and Lina had left earlier in the evening, she'd taken to her bed, falling almost instantly, deeply asleep.

"Tristan lives just down the way, a short walk," Karen had explained. "Come on, I'll show you."

Tessa had tried to protest, but Karen had shaken her head. "Trust me—he's not going to be needing his bed tonight. He won't be going anywhere at least until tomorrow afternoon—he's out cold."

Tessa had noticed a particular tenderness in the way the nurse had treated Tristan. After Karen had hauled him clumsily and pretty much single-handedly from the stretcher to one of the clinic beds, she'd taken a warm, wet washcloth and dabbed it gently against his face and neck, washing the blood away.

"I wish he wouldn't do this to himself," she had murmured, a sad look in her eyes. Her fingertips had lingered as they traced the contours of his face; when he'd murmured fitfully, she'd made a quiet shushing sound and stroked his

hair back from his brow. There had been more to these gestures than just concern or friendship; more between them than just the fact they were colleagues.

She's in love with him, it had occurred to Tessa.

She and Karen had walked together to Tristan's house, following the rutted, winding gravel road leading from the medical clinic down a short but steep embankment. Karen had lit the way with a large flashlight, and their breath had hung in the air around them in iridescent, eerily aglow halos. Tessa had kept an anxious eye out for Naima, worrying that the woman might still be lurking in the woods somewhere nearby, but there'd been no sign of her.

Tristan's house was beautiful, a large A-frame structure with an expansive, open floor plan. On the first floor, the living room was separated from the kitchen by a granite-tiled breakfast bar. In the kitchen, the appliances were all glossy black and stainless steel. The floors were all hardwood, the furnishings all the austere, nearly spartan Prairie-style. Large windows flanked by bookshelves framed a broad creekstone hearth and fireplace; Oriental rugs offered the illusion of room perimeters, delineating the dining area, with its dark oak table and chairs, living area and a separate music area, where a grand piano had been placed. A walk-out patio, glassed in with wall-to-wall windows, provided a magnificent view of the sweeping mountainside and lake below.

A steep set of iron stairs spiraled up to a bedroom loft overlooking the main floor. Here, a king-sized bed with ivory bedclothes and matching down comforter dominated the space, alongside a simple wooden dresser and matching chest of drawers. The closet was nearly as long as the far wall into which it had been recessed, with two panels of folding doors marking its threshold.

Tessa had admired everything with the hesitant fascination of being a stranger in someone else's home. Tristan's choice of bedside reading had amused her—a hardbound copy of *The Dangerous Book for Boys* by Conn and Hal Iguulden, a dog-eared paperback copy of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand*

Splendid Sons and an even more dog-eared copy of the latest issue of *Penthouse* magazine.

“Just come on by the clinic tomorrow morning, once you’re up,” Karen had told her. “I’ll be there all night.”

It had taken Tessa a long time to fall asleep in Tristan’s enormous bed. She’d felt swallowed by the expansive mattress, buried beneath the heavy warmth of the cream-colored sheets and blankets. For what had seemed like hours, she’d lain awake, watching the play of shadows and moonlight filtering through the windows, bobbing and dancing against the bed and floor. She’d listened restlessly to the creaks and groans of the house; soft, innocuous but unfamiliar sounds that had kept her wide-eyed and on alert. When she’d finally succumbed to sheer exhaustion, she’d slept hard, tucked within the ivory cocoon of bedclothes. She hadn’t stirred at all from this sound and dreamless slumber, not until the clamor of footsteps on the stairs had jerked her abruptly back to consciousness.

Still half-bewildered and more than half-alarmed, Tessa froze, curled on her side beneath the blankets, when Tristan suddenly crested the top of the spiral staircase. He was obviously in a hurry and didn’t even glance in her direction, bee-lining instead for his dresser, unbuttoning the front of his still-blood-stained shirt as he went.

“Shit,” he muttered, shrugging his way out of the shirt and tossing it into a nearby laundry basket. He dropped some things against the top of his dresser—a key ring that jangled briefly, noisily, then his cell phone and watch. Standing with his back to the bed, he still didn’t seem to notice Tessa and fished his wallet and some loose change out of the pockets of his jeans.

I need to say something, Tessa thought, immobilized, her breath caught in the back of her throat. *But surely he knows I’m here. Karen said she’d be working at the clinic all night—she’s got to have told him.*

She’d started to exhale, to offer a timid greeting, but cut herself short with an abrupt gasp when Tristan obliviously dropped his pants right there in front of her, peeling down both his blue jeans and underlying boxer-briefs in one quick,

hastened movement. He hopped clumsily from one foot to the other, kicking them loose, then yanked off his socks. He turned, stark naked, and walked quickly back to the stairs, again taking absolutely no notice of his audience, who remained paralyzed with shock in his bed.

She might have appreciated the fact that he was every bit as lean and finely cut with muscles as his older brother, every visible inch of his body sculpted and admirably hewn, had she not been so stunned. It wasn't until after the thunderous din of his footfalls on the stairs had faded into silence again that Tessa allowed herself to huff out a long, shuddering breath.

Okay, she told herself as from downstairs in the bathroom came the sudden sound of running water; Tristan was taking a shower. This is no big deal. So I saw him naked. He doesn't know that. He obviously doesn't know I'm here. I'll just get up, put my shoes on, and walk back over to the clinic. He'll never even know the difference.

She pushed the blankets back and crawled out of the bed. Slipping her feet into her sneakers, she stood, then tried to rearrange the bedspread and pillows to create the illusion that no one had slept there.

Quietly, cautiously, she stole down the stairs, the rubber treads of her shoes padding lightly against the metal risers. The bathroom door stood open wide; inside, she could see the glass shower door steamed to heavy opaqueness; Tristan was a barely discernable silhouette. Sucking in her breath through her teeth, she scuttled quickly past the doorway, then the breakfast bar and its low-slung wooden stools, to reach the door.

The knob turned easily against her hand, but to her dismay, when she tried to open the door, it wouldn't budge.

What the hell? Tessa tugged again and again, frowning. *What's the matter with this stupid thing?*

And then she saw the deadbolt. It was a double-key variety, with a keyhole on either side, meaning that someone needed a key to lock or unlock it whether inside the house or out. Karen had taken Tristan's keys while he'd been sleeping the night before and unlocked it, but it was locked now; through the

narrow margin of space between the door and frame, Tessa could see the glint of brass from the bolt.

He locked the door when he came inside, she realized. Shit!

Tessa looked around, glancing desperately over her shoulder toward the breakfast bar, hoping Tristan had left his keys there. No such luck.

And then she remembered.

Upstairs. He'd dropped his keys on top of his dresser when he'd gone up to the bedroom.

"Shit." Tessa turned on her heel and hurried back to the stairs. Taking them two at a time, she rushed back to the loft and across the bedroom. Just as she reached for the keys, the shower turned off downstairs.

"Shit," she hissed again, and then, from atop the dresser, Tristan's cell phone began to ring, loud and shrill, startling her.

"Shit!" She heard Tristan's footsteps again; he'd heard the phone, too, and was coming to answer it, moving at a brisk pace from the sounds of things.

"Shit!" Tessa looked wildly about. Should she get back in bed, crawl under the covers again and hope he wouldn't notice? Or maybe crawl under the bed? *Or should I just suck it up and stand here, let him find me, tell him it's all been a stupid misunderstanding, something we can laugh about together, ha ha ha?*

She heard the rapid patter of his footsteps slapping up the stairs, and her heart raced in bright alarm. Without really thinking, she cut toward the closet, jerking the accordion-style door open just enough to squeeze inside, then closing it quickly, quietly behind her. The darkness inside was cut into stripes of light and shadow by the glow of sunshine seeping through horizontal slats in the door. Through these, she could watch as Tristan came into view, hurrying to his dresser, even as the phone stopped ringing.

"Shit," he said. He was soaking wet, his hair a sopping, haphazard mess framing his face, and he struggled to hold a towel around his waist with one hand while flipping open the phone with the other. Tessa didn't breathe, didn't make a sound, but watched him sit against the foot of his bed, punching some buttons on his phone with the pad of his thumb. It occurred to her that she could see the

place on his throat where Naima had bitten him; already closed and nearly healed, the twin places stood out like parallel bruises against the slope of his neck. Karen had said he'd be out of commission until mid-day at least, but he seemed fully recovered from his blood loss in Tessa's estimation.

"Hey, it's me," he said after a moment, drawing the phone to his ear. He stood again, balancing it here with his shoulder, and using his free hand to begin toweling himself dry. Which meant he was naked again—this time in full, frontal view, less than three feet away from her.

Oh, Jesus...! Tessa shied reflexively back, clapping her hand over her eyes. It wasn't that it had been an *unpleasant* view—anything but, as a matter of fact—but only two men had ever seen her naked before; likewise, she'd only ever seen Martin and Rene unclothed and was immediately abashed and mortified, her face ablaze.

"I'm sorry, I was in the shower," Tristan said to whoever was on the other end of the line. "I'm running a little behind this morning, I..."

His voice trailed off as whoever he was speaking with cut him off. Holding the towel against the nape of his neck, swatting at his hair, he nodded once, then twice, murmuring in consent. "Okay," he said. "Okay, sure. No, I'm glad they found him."

Found who? Tessa wondered, her hand slipping slightly from her face.

"No, just keep him there. Don't let him get away again," Tristan said.

Is he talking about Martin?

"He's one scrawny kid, for Christ's sake," Tristan said, his voice growing sharper. "Put him in my office and lock the door if he fights with you. I'm getting dressed right now, and I'll be there in an hour."

Brandon...! Tessa realized with a shock. *He's not talking about Martin.*

'One scrawny kid,' he said—he means Brandon!

She jerked back in startled fright, shying into the far corner as Tristan jerked open the closet door. He leaned inside, dripping water against the floor as he reached for a shirt. Distracted by his phone call, he didn't as much as cut a

glance at Tessa. Still completely oblivious to her presence, he grabbed a shirt from a hanger and ducked out again, leaving the door to stand open wide.

“Yeah. I’ll see you then. I’m on my way.” With a click, Tristan snapped the phone shut, then tossed it on the bed. Tessa risked a hesitant peek through the nearest door slats again and watched as he opened drawers, rifling through the contents, grabbing a pair of boxer-briefs. He pulled them on, then shrugged on his shirt, hooking his jeans off the floor with his foot and kicking them up, catching them in hand.

I was right yesterday, when I heard him and Eleanor talking at Michel’s house. They really have been hunting down Brandon!

Oh, God... she realized, her eyes widening. And Lina’s gone now—she’s with Michel. What if he’s done something to her? Oh, God, what if he’s hurt her?

She watched Tristan sit on the end of his bed again, shoving his feet into a worn pair of hiking boots that he only half-assed laced in place. Leaving his shirt tails untucked, he stood again, raking his fingers through his hair to try, vainly, to smooth it down. He grabbed his keys off the top of the dresser, then crossed out of her field of view; his boot soles pounded heavily on the iron stairs as he made his way hurriedly to the first floor.

Still unmoving, Tessa listened as the front door opened, then slammed swiftly closed. *He’s not going back to the clinic*, she thought. He’d said he would ‘be there in an hour,’ wherever *there* was.

He’s not going to the clinic, which means I can’t even see if Rene is well enough to help me. Which means...

Tessa risked a tentative peek around the closet door, then crept out. “Which means it’s up to me,” she whispered, trying to muster her resolve. *Brandon’s in trouble—big, big trouble if he’s up against these guys. He needs help.* Aloud, she added, “He needs me.”

She padded quickly downstairs, not really sure what she meant to do. Moments earlier, she’d heard the powerful roar of the Jeep engine gunning to life. With Rene’s Mercedes demolished, she had no way to follow Tristan anywhere.

“Shit,” she muttered. He’d left the front door deadbolt unlocked in his haste, but a fat lot of good it would do her now.

“Shit,” she said again, peeping through the blinds in the door window, seeing the Jeep idling outside. Abruptly, a figure appeared on the other side of the glass—Tristan had gotten out of the Jeep and returned to the door, and Tessa recoiled in wide-eyed, frightened surprise.

“Shit!” she gasped, as she heard the doorknob lock open, then saw the knob itself turn. She scuttled back into the kitchen, pressing herself against the side-by-side refrigerator, so damn certain she was about to be caught she couldn’t move any further to try and hide.

The door flew open, and Tristan breezed inside, rushing past her without noticing her huddled by the fridge. He was muttering to himself, a rapid-fire frenzy of curses under his breath as he tromped quickly up the stairs. Just then, she heard a shrill peal from the loft and realized.

His cell phone’s ringing! He forgot it upstairs!

Taking full advantage of the moment, Tessa bolted for the open door. She hurried out onto the small front porch, then down to the lawn, scaling all three wooden steps in one broad stride. She started to run, to take off up the graveled path leading back to the medical clinic, then paused, glancing back at the Jeep.

The engine was still running, the exhaust pipe belching out a steady stream of white smoke that lingered in the air, a thin, pungent cloud. *The key’s in the ignition*, she thought. *Which means the doors aren’t locked. Which means...*

Which meant finding a way to follow Tristan had just potentially become much easier.

Why follow him when I can tag right along?

She opened the back hatch and scrambled quickly inside, closing it behind her. A blanket lay in a rumpled heap on the floor; they’d used it to cover Rene as they’d transported him to the clinic. She used it now to cover herself as she crouched down in the back compartment, hiding in the shadows.

After a few moments, she heard Tristan get into the truck, slamming the door loudly. The Jeep lurched as he dropped it hastily in gear; she heard and felt

the deep treads of the back tires grinding for purchase in the loose gravel as he swung it about in a wide, reverse arc, then put it in drive and sped forward.

An hour spent cramped in the back of a Jeep SUV felt for all the world like a thousand years to Tessa. They hadn't traveled for more than fifteen minutes before the Jeep had stopped, but Tristan had left the engine idling, and she'd heard him call out, obviously at a coffee shop drive-through, that he wanted "a Venti bold with a double shot and no room"—pretty much Greek to Tessa.

Once underway again, the warm, heady aroma of the coffee filled the confines of the Jeep's interior. Tessa's stomach began to warble, and she clapped her hands over it beneath the blanket, trying to muffle the steadily growing sound. When her legs began to cramp and ache from being folded beneath her, she moved slowly, grimacing, breath bated, trying to resituate herself without attracting Tristan's notice. She also struggled diligently to keep her mind tightly closed, so he wouldn't sense her thoughts or be aware of her presence. She needn't have bothered. He was distracted by the task at hand, driving the Jeep at a furious and reckless speed along the highway. She had no idea where they were going; all she knew was that once the Jeep came to a halt, the engine shuddering to still silence beneath her, she sighed heavily in abject relief.

The front driver's side door squealed on its hinges as he opened it; it fell shut behind him with a sharp, smart clatter. Tessa could hear the crunch of his boot soles against concrete as he walked away from the truck. It wasn't until these sounds had faded into silence that she dared to risk sitting up, letting the stifling confines of the heavy blanket fall away from her head. By this point, she was itchy, sweaty and nearly suffocated; her neck, shoulders, knees and legs all ached miserably.

Where are we? she wondered with a frown. Tristan had parked the Jeep directly facing a plain, cinderblock wall, the outside façade of a nondescript building. A metal sign mounted on a pole in front of the parking slot read

Reserved for Staff, but offered no other clues or indications as to their whereabouts.

Tessa winced as she crawled toward the back hatch, then grimaced again as she popped it open, letting in a sudden flood of bright sunshine that had otherwise been blocked by the Jeep's tinted windows. Blind and stiff, she slid out of the truck and to the ground, drawing her hand to her face to shield her eyes from the glare.

Brandon? she thought hesitantly, opening her mind just enough to try and sense her twin's presence. The nights in Tahoe had been cold, and the days were cool, but wherever they were now felt decidedly warmer, more spring-like—a good thing considering she wore nothing heavier than a long-sleeved T-shirt.

Brandon, are you here? Can you hear me? Still shielding her eyes, Tessa looked around. Tristan had delivered her to a city, some place bigger and more bustling than any part of Lake Tahoe that Tessa had seen to date. The building was one story high, rectangular shaped and relatively unassuming; a large sign that depicted a pair of outstretched hands cupped together read in large, blue letters: *Helping Hands of Washoe County*.

This didn't illuminate matters for Tessa in the slightest.

Still frowning, she walked alongside the building, following a narrow sidewalk toward what looked like a main entry. Here, she found a large group of people lingering outside, mostly men, but some women and children, as well. Some were smoking cigarettes, others laughing and talking together. All of them appeared to be waiting for something. Another series of signs, with corresponding hand-painted arrows, directed visitors in one direction to enter a thrift store, another direction for addiction counseling, another still for teen pregnancy assistance.

Tessa's frown deepened. *They brought Brandon here? Why?*

One sign in particular caught her eye. *Health Services*, it read, with an arrow pointing to her right, back toward Tristan's Jeep. *Is that where he went?* she wondered. *Is that where Brandon is?*

Retracing her steps, Tessa followed the sidewalk around the side of the building. She found another entrance just past where Tristan had parked. *Health Services* had been stenciled in white against the glass door, with hours of operation posted beneath that. *Services provided on a sliding fee scale*, a sign printed on paper and taped inside the glass read. *No one will be denied services due to inability to pay.* Beneath this, in Spanish, it read, *Nadie serán negadas los servicios debido a la inhabilidad de pagar.*

What the hell is this place? Tessa thought. She couldn't feel her brother there, no hint of him at all. But she might not have been able to if he'd been injured or knocked unconscious. When the door marked *Health Services* swung open unexpectedly with a digital chime to announce it, she shied back. A young woman came out carrying a crying baby in one arm, trying to keep hold of a young girl, no more than four years old, with the other.

For a moment, as Tessa and the little girl met each other's gazes, her heart and mind immediately turned to her youngest brother, Daniel, and a swell of loneliness gripped her. Brandon had been so heartbroken to leave Daniel behind; with the possible exception of their father, Sebastian, there'd been no one at the Noble family great house with whom Brandon had felt a greater or fonder affinity. He'd once felt that way about Tessa, too, but she knew things had changed between them after their eighteenth birthdays, when she'd been made to marry Martin Davenant. The twins—once inseparable—had drifted emotionally apart, and it hadn't been until recently, until Brandon had fled the farm and Tessa had followed, that they had begun to rebuild their once tight-knit relationship.

The young mother drew the girl past Tessa in stumbling tow, and Tessa snapped out of her momentary reverie. Steeling her resolve to find Brandon, she caught the door before it closed and ducked inside.

Just past the threshold was a bustling waiting room filled with patients. Tessa shouldered her way through the loose-knit throng, approaching a window through which she could see a woman in nurse's whites registering people and handing out clipboards. "Fill out the top form on the front, not the back," she said

in a monotonous, repetitive drone. “Keep the pink copy for your records and give the white one back to me.”

Okay, genius, Tessa said to herself. *Now what?* She looked around somewhat helplessly. If Brandon was in that building somewhere, she wouldn't be able to search for him through the clinic. The door beyond the waiting room was closed; she'd have to cut past the nurse at the window to get through.

Maybe I can go back to the main entrance, work my way around through there somehow, she thought. Beyond the window, she could see into a busy staff station. A pair of doctors stood with their backs to the window as they took charts in hand for waiting patients. One was a Hispanic woman, her dark hair drawn back in a long, thick plait. The other was a young man; when he turned, his expression was curious, as if he'd heard someone call him by name.

Or he sensed someone like him—a Brethren—standing here at the window, Tessa realized with an inward groan of dismay, because the young doctor was Tristan, a white lab coat drawn over his shirt and jeans.

He looked directly at her, and the irony that he could have been alone in his own home repeatedly with her and not notice her presence, but now—surrounded by at least two dozen other people in tight, cramped quarters—he spied her easily, was not lost upon Tessa. His eyes widened in surprise.

“Tessa?”

She thought about running, about just turning around and bolting for the door, but in the end, stood her ground. *Where the hell can I go?* she thought in weary resignation. *He was my ride here. And I don't even know where I am, never mind how to get back to Rene.*

“Shit,” she muttered, for at least the hundredth time that morning.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“What are you doing here?”

Tristan still looked at an absolute loss as he closed the door to a small office in the back of the Health Services clinic. He'd led Tessa through a winding maze of corridors to reach here, past numerous examination rooms, all of which appeared to be full at the moment. At his invitation, she'd settled herself in one of two chairs in front of his desk.

“How...” He forked his fingers through his hair, shoving it back from his face; an anxious gesture. “How did you get here?”

“Where exactly *is* here?” Tessa countered, and he blinked at her for a long, surprised moment before answering.

“Reno, Nevada,” he told her at length.

“I rode in the back of your Jeep,” she said, in the spirit of *quid pro quo*. He looked decidedly flustered to see her, as if her presence alarmed him somehow—which only confirmed her suspicions that Brandon was being held against his will somewhere close by.

Why else would he be nervous about me being here?

His brows rose. “You *what?*” Shaking his head, he leaned back against a bookcase filled with medical digests and reference guides. “Jesus. Why, for Christ's sake? Better yet—*how?* You...you're supposed to be staying up at Eleanor and Michel's.”

She shook her head. “I stayed at your house last night,” she admitted with a somewhat sheepish expression. “Karen said I could. I wanted to stay with Rene at the clinic, but she said...” Her voice faded as his expression grew even more stricken.

“Great,” he muttered, clapping the heel of his hand to his brow and leaning his head back. “Just great.”

“Where’s my brother?” she asked. *Enough of this bullshit*, she decided, frowning and balling her fists. She rose to her feet, turning to face him fully. “I know you have him here somewhere. Tell me where Brandon is.”

He blinked in surprise again, his hand drooping to his side. “Brandon? What are you talking about? I told you yesterday—”

“I know what you said,” Tessa snapped, cutting him short. “And I know what I heard, too, while you were on the phone. ‘He’s just one scrawny kid,’ that’s what you said, and to lock him up in your office if he tried to fight back.”

She hadn’t planned on this, a direct confrontation. In fact, she hadn’t planned any of this out at all, not what she’d do if she found Brandon—much less what she’d do if she didn’t. She was going on instinct here, trying to do what she thought Rene would do in her place, because Rene was reckless but fearless, and that tactic had seemed to be working out pretty well for him. *At least until Naima threw him onto his car.*

“What?” Tristan looked for all of the world like she’d told him she had grown a third breast. “That? I...you heard that?” He shook his head then managed a short bark of laughter. “I wasn’t talking about Brandon. I was talking about a guy here—a patient of mine. He’s a heroin addict who just tested HIV positive. That phone call was to let me know he’d come in for methadone at the clinic next door. I needed to tell him his test results before he ran out and infected somebody else.”

It was Tessa’s turn to blink like a guppy, somewhat agape and wide-eyed with surprise. *Shit*, she thought with another private groan.

Tristan cocked his head. “You really thought I had your brother tied up here somewhere?” he asked, his expression somewhat wounded.

“Why else would you come out here?” she asked. “What the hell was I supposed to think?”

“I *work* here,” Tristan said. Again, he looked anxious, and his brows lifted. “Only, you can’t say anything about it. Not to Eleanor—not to anyone, okay?”

“Why not?”

“It’s just…” Tristan sighed heavily, then shoved his fingers through his hair again. “Look, Michel will be really pissed if he finds out.”

“Why?” Tessa asked, puzzled.

The phone on his desk began to ring, and he jerked at the sound, startled. “I’ll explain. I swear to God I will. Just…just sit tight here for a little while, will you? Let me help Carla get caught up outside and then we can take off out of here. I’ll buy you lunch, think of something to tell Eleanor—I promise.”

The phone rang again, making that anxious, almost trapped look on his face grow even more urgent. “O-okay,” Tessa said with a nod, glancing at the phone as it rang for the third time.

“Thank you.” There was a sigh in his voice, one of abject relief. Tristan caught the phone in his hand and without greeting said, “I’ll be right there. Yeah, okay. I’m on my way.”

“Why work here in Reno?” Tessa asked him several hours later. They sat across from one another in a booth at a Chinese restaurant. She’d never had Chinese food before; he’d seemed charmed by the ingenuousness of this admittance and helped her pick out something from the menu—chicken *ho fun* with vegetables.

“I mean, there are hospitals around Lake Tahoe, aren’t there?” She watched with undisguised fascination as he deftly wielded a pair of chopsticks to eat a pan-fried dumpling stuffed with seasoned pork. These had been delivered to their table in a small bamboo steam basket, each on a bed of bright green lettuce, with a side sauce of ginger, soy sauce and diced green onions for dipping.

“Yes, but I don’t want to take a chance on Michel finding out what I’m doing,” he replied, dunking one of the dumplings—a *potsticker*, he’d called them. “I did an internship at the Helping Hands clinic in medical school. I liked the work, liked the people there.”

He’d insisted that they “go all out,” as he’d called it, considering it was her inaugural Chinese meal. Their entrees had yet to be served, and already the

table was laden with dishes—the potstickers, scallion pancakes, vegetable spring rolls and *char siu bao*—or barbecued pork wrapped in steamed dough pockets. It all looked exotic and smelled divine; she'd caught herself already a time or two licking her fingertips after a particularly tasty bite.

“I don't understand why Michel would be mad at you for working there,” she said. From her observation, the people at the Helping Hands Health Services Clinic—both staff and patients alike—had adored Tristan.

“He's a good man and an even better doctor,” one of the nurses had told Tessa, when she'd poked her head into the office to offer her some bottled water. “I know he looks really young, but don't you worry. He's one of the best.”

Tessa had been able to sense her thoughts; the nurses had been gossiping about her, surmising her to be a prospective new patient, a wayward indigent girl who'd found herself knocked up and looking for help. She supposed she couldn't rightly blame them; having roused from bed only to spend an hour smothering beneath a heavy blanket in the back of Tristan's Jeep, Tessa sure as hell thought she looked and *smelled* indigent.

Tristan washed down his bite of dumpling with a sip of oolong tea. “Michel paid for everything, my medical school, all of that. It's like I'm an indentured servant to him now. That's what he thinks anyway. That's how he treats me...”

He sounded forlorn, so desperately unhappy that his words struck a chord with her, eerily reminiscent of her brother, Brandon, and the way he had once spoke of feeling trapped at the Brethren farms in Kentucky.

“But you can leave,” she said quietly. “You can go whenever you want—like this morning, you drove to Reno.”

“So why don't I just leave for good?” he interpreted, and she nodded. “Because there's nowhere I can go. I told you—he owns me. I don't have a dime to my name. That truck isn't even mine.” He nodded toward the window, indicating the parking lot beyond. “My house, my furniture—hell, even the clothes on my back...” He tugged his shirt collar demonstratively. “Michel bought and paid for them all. I work at the clinic here because I can pretty much set my own hours, come and go as I please. But they don't pay for shit—I try to save as

much as I can, but at this rate, it will take me ten years before I can make a break on my own.”

His brows lifted, imploring. “Please don’t say anything. Not even to Eleanor. This job is important to me. It’s...it’s *mine*. I know that sounds ridiculous, but...”

His voice faded, and he lowered his eyes, looking shamefaced down at his cup of tea. Tessa reached across the table and touched his hand, hooking her fingers against his. “No, it doesn’t,” she said, drawing his gaze. “I won’t say a word.”

Tristan smiled, giving her fingers a gentle, momentary squeeze. “Thanks.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

On the drive back to Lake Tahoe, Tessa rode in the passenger seat beside Tristan.

“Although you’re more than welcome to climb in the back again,” he’d offered with a wry smile that had made her laugh.

“I have an idea,” she said once they were on the road. “You said you needed to come up with something to tell Eleanor so she wouldn’t find out about going to Reno today. We can stop by the motel in Lake Tahoe to get our stuff—mine, Lina’s, Brandon’s and Rene’s. That’s what you can tell anyone else who asks. You brought me into town so we could check out.”

“Okay.” He nodded, a brief smile tugging the corner of his mouth up. “That’ll work.”

“Do you think Rene will be laid up much longer?”

“*Ennh.*” He made a thoughtful sound and shrugged. “He suffered pretty severe non-penetrating trauma—a depressed compound temporoparietal skull fracture with nonhemorrhagic contusions at the margins; some rib fractures and related minor costochondral separation, along with pulmonary contusion and intra-alveolar hemorrhage. He had some hepatic parenchymal injuries and blunt splenic trauma and...”

Because Tessa blinked at him, at a loss, his voice faded, and he laughed. “Sorry. I come from a family of doctors. I’m used to talking shop.” By way of translation, he continued, “He took a landing that would have killed a human. Cracked his skull and bruised his brain, busted some ribs, banged up his liver and spleen.”

He glanced at her and winked. “So, yeah, he’s going to be laid up for awhile.”

She turned her gaze out the window, troubled by this revelation. “He’ll hate that,” she murmured. “Being shut up, bedridden. He told me he’s

claustrophobic. Something about when he was in Vietnam all those years ago...but I think, too, it reminds him of when he was shot, when he was hospitalized after the amputation.”

After a moment, and without looking at her, Tristan said. “You know, Michel sent me out there when that happened, when he found out Rene was shot in the knee.”

Tessa turned to him in surprise, and he nodded without averting his gaze from the road. “Yeah. And blamed me for not being there fast enough when they went ahead and amputated his leg. The weather was bad, some kind of freak blizzard, and Michel’s jet had got waylaid in Denver. That was apparently my fault.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Tessa said quietly.

Tristan smiled at her, again in that humorless sort of way, and drew his index finger to his lips. “*Sh*,” he said, dropping her a wink. “Don’t tell Michel that.”

At the Heavenly Motor Lodge, they went to Lina and Brandon’s room first, and Tristan helped her gather together their things, stuffing them into suitcases and duffel bags.

“Oh,” Tessa whispered, finding a small brass case on the nightstand. Affixed to a slim gold chain, the case held a spiral-bound notebook, while a matching ballpoint pen fit neatly through the hinge section.

“This is Brandon’s,” she said in response to Tristan’s inquisitive glance from across the room. She smiled softly, sadly. “Our dad gave it to him years ago. He used it to communicate. The Grandfather...Eleanor’s husband...he didn’t like for any of us to use sign language with Brandon, and made him write everything down.”

“That was nice of him,” Tristan remarked.

“We weren’t supposed to use telepathy with Brandon, either,” Tessa said. “Because he wouldn’t go through the bloodletting.”

Tristan frowned, perplexed. “Bloodletting?”

“It’s a ceremony,” she said. “The rite of the first kill. A sort of coming of age, I guess you could call it. We all have to go through it, only Brandon refused.

He said he wouldn't kill a human." She looked over at Tristan, curious. "You don't do anything like that?"

It was obvious from his expression that he had no concept of what she'd described. *God, how Brandon would have loved to trade places with you, Tristan Morin*, she thought. "The Grandfather thought forbidding Brandon to use his telepathy would punish him somehow, so he'd agree to do it, the bloodletting."

"Nice," Tristan remarked again, his voice brittle and dry. "He and Michel are cut out of the same cloth, it sounds like."

"Brandon hated this thing," Tessa said, feeling the hot sting of tears well in her eyes, then plop down in glistening droplets against the gilded brass cover. "He said it reminded him of how he was trapped there at the great house...how he...he could never hope to get away..."

She drew her hand to her mouth and closed her eyes, crying. She didn't want to; being pregnant made her more emotional than was her nature, but she was also desperately frightened for Brandon, helpless to protect him.

"Hey..." Tristan crossed the motel room in three long strides, sitting next to her on the bed. She felt his arm drape across her shoulders.

"I'm sorry!" she gasped, ashamed of herself.

"Nothing to be sorry for," he murmured, drawing her against his chest, his embrace gentle and comforting.

"It's just...Brandon's all alone now," she wept. "You don't know the Grandfather. I don't care what Eleanor says—he's an evil man! He's cruel and vicious and he...he'll hurt Brandon! He'll punish him for running away...he'll hurt him so badly, and there's nothing I can do to stop it!"

"It's alright," Tristan said, his voice quiet and soothing. "Please, Tessa. Please don't cry."

She huddled against him until her tears subsided. Still trembling, she started to sit up, but when she lifted her cheek from his chest, she realized he'd lowered his face toward her as he'd spoken. He was so near to her now the tip of her nose grazed his as she looked up, and she could feel the sudden warmth of his breath against her mouth.

“Tristan...” She turned her face toward her shoulder, but now found herself staring almost directly at the twin marks along his throat where Naima had bitten him, close enough to still discern the fading rings of bruises around each of the marks, where Naima’s teeth had punched forcefully through his flesh and underlying muscles.

“Right.” He drew back, then, noticing her attention, grew decidedly disconcerted. Hunching his shoulders somewhat and drawing his hand up, clapping his palm against the wounds, as if trying to hide them from her view, he stood from the bed. “...let me get you some water,” he said clumsily, hurrying into the bathroom.

A box of tissues sat atop the nightstand on the opposite side of the bed. Tessa leaned across the pillows to reach it, then paused, her eyes flying wide in surprise. There was a trashcan on the floor in that corner of the room; out of ready sight, she saw it plainly once she leaned over. Draped half-in, half-out of the can, as if haphazardly tossed there, was a white terrycloth hand towel—stained with what looked like blood.

“What the hell...?” Tessa clambered across the bed, swinging her legs around and lifting the towel out of the trash. The blood had long since dried and crusted, which explained why neither she nor Tristan had smelled it before then. But there was a lot of it, enough to make her heart suddenly leap with frightened worry.

“What the hell?” Tristan echoed as he came out of the bathroom. Setting aside a cup of water, he hurried to the bedside. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s not mine.” She shook her head. Lina and Brandon had left the *Do Not Disturb* sign on their motel room door, and thus, the cleaning service hadn’t been inside since yesterday. “The blood’s dried on here, old.”

She drew the towel tentatively to her face and inhaled. The smell was faded, but still discernable. And not entirely human.

“It’s Rene’s.” Surprised, she looked up at Tristan.

“Are you sure?” He took it from her, giving it an experimental sniff.

Tessa nodded. “No one else has blood like that—part Brethren, part human. He has a distinctive smell, a...”

Her voice faded. She meant to say *a distinctive taste*, because he had this, too, but again, the admonition that feeding from another Brethren was an abomination made her press her lips together and keep the admittance to herself.

“Eleanor said he and Naima were fighting at the motel,” Tristan said. “Broken glass everywhere, busted mirrors. He must have cut himself and...”

“Not in here. In our room, down the hall,” Tessa said. She frowned, remembering. “But he had a cut on his head before that.”

She’d been dozing when Lina had come to their door. Rene had let her in; Tessa hadn’t even seen Rene’s face yet when Lina had commented on the wound.

“Jesus!” she’d exclaimed, reaching for him. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing,” he’d growled irritably, and when he’d ducked away and pivoted, Tessa had seen what had caused Lina so much concern—a deep laceration cutting a jagged line down the side of his temple; crusted with blood and framed with bruising, it had looked painful and fresh. “I hit my head, that’s all. The towel rack in the bathroom. *Ce qui est erroné, chère?*” *What’s wrong?*

Tessa hadn’t thought anything more about it, because there really hadn’t been the chance to. Lina had come to them to see if they had seen or heard from Brandon. She’d gone out for her usual morning jog, leaving him asleep in their room and had found him missing upon her return. Within moments of this revelation, Rene had started growing agitated, sensing what had turned out to be Naima and Eleanor nearby, watching them from the motel parking lot.

And then all hell had broken loose, Tessa thought, remembering the astonishing and seemingly effortless way in which Naima had hurled Rene across the room with her mind, sending him crashing into a mirror first, then pinning him to the ceiling.

In the aftermath, she’d forgotten all about the strange head wound, because he’d had so many others for her to fret over.

And if he used this to clean up after he'd hurt himself, what would it be doing here? she wondered. *He told us he hadn't seen Brandon yesterday.*

"I've been laid up here with *la pischouette* all morning," he'd told Lina, in fact.

So where did this towel come from?

"That's strange," Tristan remarked, letting her take the towel from his hand.

"Yes," Tessa murmured with an unhappy frown. "It is."

After trundling Lina and Brandon's belongings out to the Jeep, Tessa and Tristan next set their sights on the room she had been sharing with Rene. A newspaper had been left out on the doorstep, wrapped in plastic and dotted with raindrops left over from the previous day's downpour. Tristan took it in hand and slapped it against the side of his leg, scattering water pellets.

Tessa and Rene had made love shortly before Lina had come to their room to report Brandon missing, and a tangle of clothes on the floor—discarded jeans, her panties, a lace-trimmed bra—still marked the spot. Color blooming brightly in her cheeks, Tessa darted over to the corner, grabbing the clothes in her hands and stuffing them unceremoniously in the nearest open suitcase she could find.

A glance told her she needn't have bothered; Tristan had closed the door, but otherwise remained in the doorway. He'd taken the newspaper out of the bag and unfolded it to look at the front page. The death of Monica Davenant was still the hot news item, taking center stage as the lead story. *Investigation Finds No Leads in Grisly Murder*, the top headline proclaimed.

"You did this?" Tristan glanced at her, his brow raised. When she nodded reluctantly, his brows lifted all the more and he uttered a low whistle. "Remind me never to piss you off. Who was she?"

"Monica Davenant. She was Martin's first wife."

He looked momentarily puzzled, then nodded. "I remember. Multiple wives. That's how you do it there in Kentucky."

She bristled somewhat at this, the strange, almost derisive tone he'd suddenly adopted. "You don't?"

"We can't. There's only us Morins. Could get creepy." He winked, then tossed the newspaper on a chair. "We marry humans. Most times, anyway. My mother is Brethren, one of the women in the clan when Michel moved them here. I'm the only full-blooded Brethren to have been born in the clan since...the Great Depression, I guess."

She didn't know much about the Morin clan, primarily because Rene had known little to nothing about his roots. The information they'd been able to glean from the brittle pages of the Morin Tome had been ambiguous at best, and more often than not had left them with more questions than answers. Thus, when Tristan started talking about it freely, almost idly, as he began picking up toiletries off the vanity counter, dusting off fragments of broken mirror glass, she took a chance and pressed him on it.

"How did that happen? You being full-blooded, I mean?" she asked, careful to keep the piqued interest in her voice at bay.

He shrugged, wincing as a shard of glass cut him. Shaking his hand, he drew his index finger to his mouth and sucked on it momentarily. "My mother and Arnaud had an affair," he said, lisping around his fingertip. "She wasn't related to him by blood, only by marriage. One of those pre-arranged things you'd mentioned earlier, from back when they lived in Kentucky."

He pivoted away from her, turning more toward the light, and examined his finger. Even from her proximity, Tessa could see the thin line of blood where the glass had slit open his skin; more than this, she could smell it, that same tantalizingly sweet odor she'd noticed the night before, after Naima had bitten him. She found herself bristling again, but this time because the scent of his blood aroused that primal part of her nature that was called the bloodlust. Being pregnant, she needed to feed more frequently than she would have ordinarily, and abomination or not, to feed from a fellow Brethren. All at once, the scent of Tristan's blood was akin to the aroma of steak sizzling on the grill to someone who'd skipped both breakfast and lunch.

“...she was married to Michel’s oldest son, Gerard. When he found out about her affair with his brother, Gerard threw her out. By that time, Arnaud had killed himself, and my mom, Lisette, had no place to go. Michel felt sorry for her, I guess...especially since she’d realized she was pregnant with me, so he took her in.”

He leaned over, unplugging an AC adapter from the wall. “Arnaud had a history of that...trouble keeping his dick in his pants.” Holding the adapter out for her to see, he added, “You need this for anything?”

“Yes, it’s to recharge Rene’s prosthetic,” she replied. “Here...” Crossing the room, she took it from his hand and began to wind the thin length of cord up, wrapping it around the cubical base. Trying to get him back on the subject of his family, she glanced at him. “Arnaud is Naima’s father, too?”

Tristan nodded, packing again. “Her mother was a slave back before the clan left Kentucky. She was part of the reason we had to leave. Arnaud had a fling with her mother, and Naima was the result. When some of the Brethren found out about her, they thought she was an abomination. They didn’t think Brethren should breed with humans.”

“But Michel did?”

“He says it’s the only way to keep our gene pool clean. He thinks that’s the reason there’s a high morbidity rate in Brethren children, a lot of stillbirths and miscarriages—and why my mom...”

His voice faded abruptly.

Your mom, what? Tessa wondered. Is she still alive? Does she live somewhere near him in Lake Tahoe, with Michel, Eleanor and the others?

“Michel thinks that’s how the disease that Eleanor has came about,” Tristan continued at length. “It’s something inherited, passed down from generation to generation, because no matter how hard the Elders try, you can’t avoid some degree of crossed wires in a closed breeding...” He fell silent again. “Whoa.” When he turned, he held a revolver in his hand, his fingers curled lightly around the grip, his brow arched.

“That’s Rene’s, too,” Tessa said. “Or rather, it belongs to some guy who tried to rob us. Rene...stopped him, then took the gun.”

Actually, Rene had ripped the would-be robber’s throat out, but only after the kid had used that same pistol in Tristan’s hand to blow a hole about the diameter of a half-dollar through Rene’s palm.

“He shot Rene with it,” she said, thoughtful now. “Maybe that’s where the blood on that towel in Brandon’s room came from. It’s mostly healed now, but it could have started to bleed again.”

That much, though? she thought, because there’d been a copious amount of blood soaked into the white terrycloth nap.

“We should take it with us,” she said. “I doubt he’d want us to leave it behind.”

Tristan nodded, tucking the pistol gingerly down inside an opened duffel. Tessa was about to try and broach the subject of family history with him again when she caught sight of Rene’s cell phone half-hidden under the TV console. It had likely fallen there during his brawl with Naima; Tessa dropped to her knees now and reached beneath, drawing it out.

He’ll want this, I’m sure, she thought. As part of the ongoing police investigation into Caine’s death, Lina was now considered a prime suspect. Likewise, so was Rene, as her former police partner. Thus, his bank accounts had been frozen in an attempt to flush him and Lina out of hiding. He’d been trading phone calls with his attorneys trying to iron out the mess.

He’s probably got a half-dozen messages on here from them alone, she thought, flipping back the top of the phone to check. His phone was different than hers, fancier, which wasn’t saying much since Rene liked to buy only the best of everything, and Tessa had to settle for an antiquated cell phone model her father had given her years earlier.

How the hell do I...? She frowned, thumbing a couple of buttons, trying to pull up a missed-call list. Numbers suddenly filled the screen, but the header read *call log*. These were calls Rene had either made or received, not missed.

“Shit,” she muttered, then her frown deepened, because the number at the top of Rene’s call log list was 859-555-0155

859 area code? That’s in Kentucky, she thought. That’s a Brethren farm phone!

All of the Brethren had cell phones on one plan provider, which meant all of the business lines had successive numbers. Sebastian’s phone number was 859-555-0153; her uncle Adam’s number had been 0156, and she’d often called him by mistake, since the 3 and 6 on her phone keypads were so close together. Martin’s was 859-555-0147—there were ten numbers she’d never forget, because prior to hunting her down and beating the shit out of her, Martin had called her from them at least ten times a day, haranguing her with a seemingly endless stream of violent threats.

But 0155...? She had no idea whose number that was. Curious, she thumbed the green Call button and drew the phone to her ear. To her surprise, she trembled, a mixture of fright and anxiety surging through her. Who were you calling, Rene? she wondered. And why?

The phone on the other end of the line only rang once before rolling over to voice mail. A female voice, automated and silken, greeted her: “The number you are trying to reach is unavailable at this time. To leave a message for...”

Tessa was about to hang up; her thumb had shifted to the red disconnect button on Rene’s phone when suddenly a low voice drifted out from the other end of the line; deep, resonant and so familiar the downy hairs along her forearms and gracing the nape of her neck stirred at the sound of it.

“Augustus Noble,” she heard her grandfather say, and then the smooth operator returned to the line, asking her to please wait for the beep.

“Oh, my God...!” she whispered, the phone tumbling from her fingers to the floor. She wanted to scream it, but this was about all she could manage. Her throat had constricted, collapsing in on itself, and she could barely force air through the pinhole of her windpipe, never mind her voice.

Oh, my God, he called the Grandfather? Her heart was racing; her legs had gone leaden and her entire body felt paralyzed with stunned disbelief. Why?

How did he know the number? Hell, I didn't even know the number! How could he have...? Why would he...?

And then it occurred to her; like a bucket of ice-cold water had suddenly been dumped over her head, the realization rocked her.

Martin.

Martin had worked in the accounting department at Bloodhorse Industries, the company Augustus Noble owned and managed on the Brethren's behalf. Martin's day-to-day responsibilities often would have left him subordinate to Augustus, and thus, in need of contacting him should he be out of the office.

Martin would have known the Grandfather's cell phone number, Tessa thought. And, oh, God, Rene would have known exactly where to find Martin yesterday morning.

She looked across the room at Tristan. He hadn't noticed her distress yet, too busy zipping an overstuffed duffel bag closed and slinging it over his shoulder. She tried to speak, but nothing came out except a breathless croak. It was enough, however, to get his attention; he glanced her way, his brow raised.

"I need to get back to the clinic," she managed to wheeze out on her second try. Short of breath and decidedly light-headed with shock, she worried she might keel over in a dead faint.

"Are you okay?" Tristan took note of her abruptly ashen complexion and dropped the duffel to the floor as he hurried toward her. "Tessa, what is it? What's wrong?"

"I need to get back to the clinic," she said again, even as he caught her by the arms to steady her decidedly unsteady stance. Clutching at his sleeves, she looked him straight in the eyes, desperate and pleading. "Please, Tristan, take me there. I need to see Rene *now*."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Karen, have you seen my granddaughter this morning?” Eleanor asked, leaning over the counter of the nurse’s station.

Startled, Karen whirled, her blue eyes flown wide, her hand jerking back from her computer’s mouse. She’d been absorbed in a game of solitaire, so completely so that she hadn’t even heard the clinic door open or Eleanor’s soft footsteps as she’d approached. “Eleanor!” she exclaimed in breathless surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I walked down from the house,” Eleanor replied, and before Karen could do more than knit her brows in response to this, she added, “I know I’m not supposed to do anything to over-exert myself.” She dropped a wink. “Michel’s gone, so *shhh*, don’t tell on me.”

The crimp between Karen’s brows softened, and she laughed. Stifling a yawn against the back of her hand, she stood, stretching slightly and glancing past Eleanor toward the windows. “Is it morning already? God, I hadn’t even noticed.”

“Yes, and a beautiful one besides.” Eleanor had carried an insulated coffee cup with her on the brief trek from Michel’s house. Now she took a sip of her latte, careful not to scald her upper lip. “A little cool, but it feels good. Refreshing.”

Karen checked her watch. “I’d better go check on our patient. He’s about due for another round of pain medicine.”

“Is Tessa with him?” Eleanor asked, trailing behind her as she walked toward Rene’s room.

“No. I took her over to Tristan’s last night. Thought she’d be more comfortable there.”

“Oh?” Eleanor raised a brow. “And where did Tristan sleep?”

“Not on the floor in his office...where I should have left him,” Karen said dourly. Before going to Rene’s door, she paused by another, rapping once before swinging it open wide. “He’s here, passed out...”

Her voice faltered once she looked inside. Eleanor could see beyond her shoulder; the room was empty, the covers thrown back from the bed, the window left open so that a light breeze rustled the gauzy drapes.

“That son of a bitch,” Karen muttered while Eleanor chuckled. “It’s a two-story drop. He could have broken his neck.”

“He can leap like a cat, he and Naima both,” Eleanor reminded.

“Yeah, well, that’s why he was in here,” Karen said, marching over to the window and slamming it shut. “Naima, I mean. Tessa caught her feeding from him. It about scared her to death. I’m surprised she didn’t go into labor right there in the office doorway.” As she crossed the room again, brushing past Eleanor, she added, “He’s going to die one day. You do realize that, don’t you, even if he doesn’t? One day, she’s not going to stop in time, and he won’t be able to recover from it.”

It wasn’t unusual for the Morin Brethren to feed from one another. In fact, it was a practice actually introduced centuries earlier by Michel himself. But Tristan had taken the practice to a decidedly more risky level, having a near-lethal amount of blood drained from him in a single feeding. It produced an adrenaline rush for him, or some such nonsense; that’s what Michel had told her. He strongly disapproved of the practice and had forbidden Tristan to pursue it. True to form, Tristan had completely ignored him.

“I know it’s none of my business,” Karen continued, returning to the nurse’s station and readying a syringe of medication for Rene. “I mean, I’m just a human and all, so what the hell do I know...”

“That’s not true,” Eleanor said, and the young woman shot her a pointed look.

“Tristan thinks so.”

Poor Karen, Eleanor thought. The girl was simply head over heels, but he was blissfully ignorant of her adulation.

“That’s not saying much, darling. Tristan thinks pork and beans from a can constitutes a meal,” Eleanor said, and despite herself, Karen managed a laugh.

“Thanks, Eleanor,” she said. “I owe you one.”

Eleanor had started the day feeling invigorated and energetic, even before she’d had her first cup of coffee. By midday, though, that energy level had peaked and waned. It was nothing out of the ordinary, at least not of late, but nonetheless, she hated the way it made her feel—tired, feeble and pathetically *old*.

Due for another of her intravenous clotting treatments sometime after lunch, and having no desire to wander restless and alone through Michel’s expansive, empty home, Eleanor remained at the clinic with Karen. At first, she was surprised when Tessa didn’t return to visit with Rene.

“Do you suppose she and Tristan went somewhere together?” she asked.

“Makes sense,” Karen replied, looking none too happy at the prospect. “Considering he’s an hour late in relieving me here.” With this, she glanced across the staff station toward a patient room near the office. “I can’t do anything for her without him. He knows that, damn it. He knows we need to change the tub filters today.”

Finally, having thumbed through every dog-eared copy of *Vanity Fair* and *US Weekly* in the waiting area and having sat for too long in a chair that had proven too comfortable, bathed in a sunbeam that had grown too warm, Eleanor succumbed to her body’s incessant, infuriating fatigue. Her eyelids drooped, then closed all together. Her mind faded, and she dozed, catnapping in the lounge.

She dreamed of Augustus and the past, of the day more than two centuries ago when he’d been shot in the chest during a duel over her honor. He’d lain dying, choking to death on his own blood, his lung punctured, his heart lacerated. Every shuddering, straining beat had brought him closer to the edge. She’d been terrified; as close to mindless with panic and fright as she’d ever been to that point—and likely had ever been since.

“Oh, please,” she’d begged Michel because she had known if anyone could save Augustus, if anyone could fathom some way to stave off the inevitable and keep him alive, it would be Michel Morin. “Isn’t there anything that can be done? Anything you can do?”

“He could feed...” Michel said, a solution so simple, so astonishingly apparent, she nearly laughed out loud for not having thought of it herself.

“I’ll summon my father’s coachman,” she exclaimed, springing to her feet. “Send for a slave, anything.”

“Human blood won’t help him,” Michel said, catching her sleeve, stopping her before she’d bolted out the bedroom door. “He’s too far gone, his wound too grievous.”

“But...but there’s nothing else, no other way, no one else he could possibly...” Eleanor hadn’t understood, but Augustus had. She hadn’t realized this at the time, but years later, it had occurred to her. Augustus had known; his expression had grown stricken, his eyes wide as he’d shaken his head in feeble protest.

“Yes,” Michel had told her. “There is.”

He’d explained to her quickly, even as he’d shoved back his own shirt sleeves.

“Our blood is different than a human’s,” he told her. “Our ability to heal comes from a chain reaction on the cellular level—changes prompted by chemicals like hormones and proteins in our blood. And if we drink our own blood...” At this, he’d pulled a dagger out from beneath his vest, a knife he’d carried hidden away in a secret sheath affixed to his belt. “...we trigger another chain reaction altogether, one in which that cellular process of healing is accelerated all the more.”

“You...don’t know...that!” Augustus had gasped. His face had been sweat-glossed, his eyes wild with frantic protest as he’d turned to Eleanor. “He doesn’t know that...not for sure! It’s a bloody damn theory...nothing more...drunken conjecture he...he came up with...after too much brandy one night...”

She'd looked to Michel at this, and he'd offered a sheepish sort of shrug. "It's only a theory, yes," he'd admitted, adding swiftly, "But a good one—a sound one, and certainly not one made while I was drunk." To Augustus he said, "I only told *you* about it while I was drunk. And theory or not, here's the chance to test it. You're dying. It's not like it might do you further harm."

"It's...an abomination...!" Augustus had cried. "If the others see...if they find out...we'll be burned alive, you...you bloody damn...!"

Every breath had sent blood in a fine spray from his lips, peppering his face and neck. Even so, his brows had been furrowed in angry defiance, and when he'd grabbed Michel's wrist, stopping him from cutting into himself, there had been strength in his grasp. "I won't do it, goddamn it!"

"Use mine." Eleanor had draped her hand atop Augustus's, making both of them draw abruptly still and stare at her as if she'd been struck daft. "Use my blood, Michel. Cut me here..." She'd thrust her arms out, exposing the creamy white undersides of both arms, the slender deltas where the joints of her thumbs met her wrists. "Augustus is right. If you cut yourself, someone will see, Michel. They'll be suspicious. They'll know what you've done. Cut my wrists, and I can hide the wounds under my muff when I leave. Tonight at home, I'll break a mirror, open them again, tell my mother in my despair, I tried to kill myself."

Because both men were still blinking stupidly at her, she'd frowned. "It's the only way!" she'd snapped angrily. "Do it!"

Michel had cut her, the edge of the blade sliding deep into her skin, sending her blood gushing forth in a throbbing, spurting stream. She'd brought her wrist to Augustus's lips, and though at first, he'd shaken his head, his eyes frightened and furious, at length, the tension had drained from his mouth, and she'd felt him relax against her. His lips had parted, then pressed with firm and deliberate pressure against her. As she'd looked down at him, his body had responded to the taste of her blood; his pupils had opened wide, engulfing the visible parts of his eyes in glossy darkness. She'd felt the sharp tips of his canine teeth as they'd descended to touch her skin. He'd uttered a soft groan and brought his hands up to hold her arm, drinking fervently.

Eventually, she'd swooned, but Michel had been there behind her, catching her in his strong arms and cradling her against the broad panel of his chest. "Take me...to my mother..." she'd murmured, her eyelids fluttering, the room around her fading to shadows. "Tell her...I'm overwrought...don't...forget my muff..."

Eleanor roused from her nap to a crick in her neck and a decided dimming in the quality of sunlight streaming through the windows. Wincing as she moved, she looked over her shoulder to the clock. She'd been asleep for the better part of an hour. Still no sign of Tessa. *What are you up to?* she wondered.

When she stood, she saw there was no sign of Karen, either. But the door to the patient room near Tristan's office now stood partially ajar, and Eleanor suspected that Karen had grown sick of waiting for Tristan to turn up, and had gone about her duties without him.

Eleanor didn't like that room and didn't venture near it, even to let Karen know she was awake. Beyond its threshold were too many reminders of just what might have been, had Michel not intervened on her behalf, too many harbingers, stark and apparent, of what might yet await Eleanor in the weeks and months ahead.

She'd stopped weeping about her illness a long time ago, but sometimes, in the middle of the night when no one—especially Michel—could hear her, she'd still cry over Augustus and what he'd done to her. *He cast me aside...chose this for me, without my knowledge or consent*, she'd think, heartbroken and lonely.

Bastard, she thought, because while in her heart, she still loved him with the same ferocity that had seen her wrists cut open, her blood in his mouth more than two hundred years ago, in her mind, she couldn't forgive him for abandoning her. Not even if he'd thought it would save her life.

To smuggle her out of the Brethren compound in Kentucky, he'd first had to make everyone else—and Allistair Davenant in particular—believe she was dead. He hadn't clued her in on this particular plan, of course. Nor had he told her at all about Michel coming for her. He'd simply picked a fight with her one day

over something mundane and utterly inconsequential, something so little and unextraordinary, she'd hardly been able to counter his verbal attacks, she'd been caught so off-guard. And when at last, his face had flushed with rage, his eyes rolling over to black and he'd marched toward her, cursing her for her "constant disrespect and impertinent disregard for his authority," as he'd roared, she'd been bewildered but unafraid. Never in her life had Augustus brought any harm to her; never had she had any cause to fear him.

His hand had clamped against her throat so forcefully her breath had cut short in a single, swift gasp. She hadn't even had time to react; he'd shoved her backwards, hoisting her easily off her feet and shoving her brutally into the wall. She'd felt the plaster splinter behind her head, and her feet had drummed helplessly in the open air. Though she'd slapped and pawed at his hands, scratching with a growing desperation as the strain for air had become searing, unbearable, he had been relentless. In the end, she'd voided her bladder reflexively, helplessly, soaking her nightgown from waist to hem, and then she'd blacked out, her mind swallowed in shadows, her last conscious thought being, *My God, he's murdered me.*

She hadn't understood, not even when she'd come to groggy, aching consciousness again, engulfed in absolute darkness. The ground beneath her had been hard-packed earth, cold and firm to the touch, reminiscent of the floor in the spring house where she and Augustus had once made love.

The cellar, she'd thought dimly, shoving her hands beneath her and raising her head. Her chest hurt; her throat felt scraped and swollen and raw. *No, not the cellar. The Beneath.*

A network of subterranean tunnels wound their way between the Brethren great houses. These were the Beneath. In the pioneer days, they had turned to these hidden sanctuaries whenever Indians would try to attack them; Eleanor had fuzzy, faded memories of huddling in the darkness with her mother and sisters, listening to the muffled, muted thunder of rifle fire from overhead in the house, as her father and uncles would defend them. But as she'd grown older, the labyrinth of the Beneath had taken on a completely different and more

sinister reputation. A creature had been said to live in its depths—the *Abomination*, adapted from the medieval folklore of their homeland in France. This vicious beast supposedly prowled the tunnels and caverns, living on the blood of mice and rats, waiting for inopportune Brethren—by the stories, usually naughty children—to venture too closely or deeply within its lair.

Stuff and nonsense, Eleanor had always thought. A pathetic lot of bullshit Allistair Davenant had dreamed up to terrorize his children. But still, having found herself alone in that dank, absolute darkness, Eleanor had found herself paralyzed with terror, straining her eyes for any hint of light, her ears for any semblance of sound.

And when she'd heard it—a soft scrabbling against the ground, distant at first, but growing closer—she'd nearly fainted again in blind, wild terror. She'd tried to run, but there was no place to go. In every direction, no matter where she'd scramble or scuttle, she'd smack headlong or ass-first into dirt walls or dead ends. Finally, mewling softly for frightened breath, pressed against one of the tunnel walls, she'd simply grown still, clamped her eyes shut and waited to die.

Of course, she hadn't died. And she laughed at herself now for her own child-like foolishness. Because it hadn't been the Abomination crawling toward her in the Beneath. It hadn't been any sort of monster at all—it had been Michel, come to her rescue, sent at the beg and beckon of Augustus.

Michel and Naima, she thought with a smile, pressing her hands against the small of her back and stretching again, working out the kinks. *Even after all of that time, all of the years she'd been away, she still remembered plainly, like she had a map in her head...Naima still knew her way through the tunnels.*

"You're awake." Karen had ducked out of the room across the way, a hopeful expression momentarily brightening her face. When she recognized Eleanor, that brightness faded. "I heard you out here. Thought it might be Tristan finally rolling in." She smiled again, that brief cloud of disappointment dissolving. "Since you're up, what say we go ahead and get your treatment started?"

The daily sessions were growing insufferable. Her poor fragile skin would bruise horribly with every needle prick, no matter how expertly or gingerly applied. These would remain for days, even weeks, sometimes growing so large they would overlap down the lengths of her arms, mottling her skin in rainbow patterns of blue, purple, gray and gold. It took the better part of two hours for the clotting factor to seep into her system, draining in drip by miniscule, monotonous drip from a small plastic pouch, down her slim intravenous line. It burned all the while, an incessant and miserable heat stinging not only the needle site, but throughout her veins, too, and even though she had been told time and again to sit as still as she could, relaxed and motionless, she wouldn't be able to help herself and would squirm restlessly, uncomfortably. Eleanor had long ago started to wonder which was worse—the disease itself or Michel's efforts to subdue it.

Poor Karen was exhausted, thanks to Tristan's tardiness. Her fatigue was apparent in the haggard shadows beneath her eyes and framing the contours of her otherwise pretty face. She had enough on her mind without Eleanor pulling a petulant-patient act. Thus, she forced a smile and tried to feign some enthusiasm in her voice.

"Sounds good," she said, even though it sounded like anything *but*.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Hey, *pischouette*,” Rene murmured sleepily, smiling at Tessa, his eyes heavily lidded. She’d just sat down beside his bed, slipping her hand against his and giving him a slight squeeze to rouse him from unconsciousness.

“Hey,” she whispered, trying to smile. She and Tristan had arrived at the clinic about an hour ago, and she’d been working up the nerve ever since to have this conversation with Rene. In the meantime, she’d paced the waiting area restlessly; Eleanor had been in one of the nearby patient rooms receiving her daily treatment therapy, while Karen had drawn Tristan angrily into his office. Tessa hadn’t been able to hear what they were saying, but every once in awhile, Karen’s voice, sharply punctuated, would be clearly audible, even through the closed door.

“What...time is it...?” Rene asked, blinking dazedly around the room, frowning slightly as he tried to get his bearings.

“A little after two,” Tessa replied. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” he murmured, settling back against the pillows, closing his eyes again. “Where...where’ve you been today? Having fun, I hope? Making new friends?”

“I went to the motel. Tristan brought me there.”

He’d been teasing her, offering a slight smirk, but when she answered, he opened his eyes, his brow rising with piqued interest. “Tristan,” he repeated. “Making new friends *en effet*.” *Indeed*.

She ignored his dry tone. “We packed up our things, checked out, brought it all here. I got the charger for your leg.”

“Great, *merci*.” He nodded once, glancing across the room. There, his prosthetic leg lay propped against another chair, spindly and skeletal in the shadows.

"I found your phone, too." Tessa shifted her weight, reaching into the hip pocket of her jeans to pull it out.

"*Merci*," he said again, as she placed it on his bedside table.

"Rene," she said, her voice little more than a hush. She was trembling now, like a live wire ran through her body, delivering high-voltage electricity in her veins. Her breath hitched; already she could feel tears wanting to well in her eyes, and she blinked fervently against them, trying to will them to recede. "I...I need to ask you something."

He smiled, his eyelids drooping again. "You...can ask me anything...*pischouette*."

Oh, God, I hope that's true, she thought. She closed her eyes for a moment, knotting her hands into fists against her lap. When she looked up, she met Rene's bleary gaze. "What happened to Brandon?"

She'd been hoping to see nothing more than innocent bewilderment in his face at her inquiry; had been praying for this, in fact. Her heart broke, shattering into a thousand razor-sharp, vicious little shards when, instead, she saw a fleeting but apparent look of furtive caution dart through his eyes.

"What do you mean, *pischouette*?" he asked after a moment in which the tip of his tongue slipped carefully out of his mouth and swiped his lips from corner to corner.

She'd broken out into a cold, anxious sweat, could feel it, sticky and nasty, beneath her breasts and arms, spotting the middle of her spine. Her stomach had twisted into a taut, strained knot, and she gulped for breath, still fighting her tears.

"There was a towel in Brandon's room," she said quietly. "It had your blood on it."

"*Quoi*?" he asked, shaking his head as he shrugged his shoulders and tried to sit up. *What?* "What are you...? No, *pischouette*, I don't..."

"It was a lot of blood," she said. "And it made me think of that wound on your head."

He shook his head again, then tried to laugh. "*Pischolette*, I got tossed through a mirror yesterday, then bounced off the hood of my car. I've got a lot of wounds on my head."

"No, the one you had before Naima and Eleanor came to the door," Tessa said. "The one you said came from the towel rack in the bathroom."

Despite her anxiety, something in her face, the set of her brows, the thin line of her mouth must have conveyed her severity to him, because his clumsy smile faltered and faded. His brows lifted, his face softening.

"Tessa..." He reached for her, brushing the cuff of his knuckles against her face. "I don't understand what you're getting at. I hit my head—I told you that. I don't know about any towel with blood on it in Brandon's room. I swear to Christ I don't."

I want to believe that, she thought miserably. *Oh, God, Rene, I want to believe you so badly...!*

"On your cell phone, I saw a number listed," she told him. "On your call log, to an 859 area code."

"Wait a minute." It was Rene's turn to frown; he sat up more fully in bed, drawing his hand away from her. "You went snooping around on my phone? *Pour ce qui?* What the hell for?"

"That area code's in Kentucky," Tessa said. "My grandfather's horse farm—his cell phone, Rene. You placed a call to my grandfather."

"Now wait just a goddamn minute, *pischolette*..." Rene said, his eyes flashing angrily.

But she didn't. She couldn't. If she stopped now, she'd never start again. She'd listen to him and believe whatever line of bullshit he tried to feed her, because she *wanted* to believe him. Because the alternative was too horrible for her to even fathom at the moment, too heartbreaking to possibly be true.

"There's only one person who could have given you that phone number," she said, charging ahead, cutting him off. "Because I don't know it, didn't realize what it was until I tried to call it and got his voice mail. But Martin would know my

grandfather's number. If not from memory, he would have had it programmed into his own phone."

"Tessa..." No longer just angry, Rene looked frightened now, his entire body tense, the tendons and ligaments strained and standing out in thick cords in his neck. His eyes darted nervously about, a wild animal caught and cornered, searching desperately for any sort of escape. "Tessa, listen to me. I—"

"There's no way Martin would have told you that number, though. Not without something being in it for him. Something like the ledger I took from him—the proof he's been stealing all this while from Bloodhorse Industries. The ledger that was missing from our hotel room in town." Again, she reached into her pocket. This time, she pulled out a folded slip of paper, which she let flutter unceremoniously into the nest of his lap.

When he sputtered in wordless protest, she added, "I found that on the floor at your cabin, over in a corner." She nodded at the receipt. "You and Martin must not have noticed it. Tristan brought me there on our way back from the motel. Because I had to see. I had to know for sure."

Rene blinked at her. He didn't try to say anything now. His face drew, pained and unhappy, his brows lifting, his eyes suddenly glossed with tears of his own. "Know what, *pischouette*?" he whispered, little more than a breath.

Tessa began to cry. "That you made a deal with my grandfather...and then you...you tricked Brandon somehow...hurt yourself, that wound on your head. Maybe you said Martin had hit you, I don't know. Whatever it was, whatever you did or said, it made Brandon come with you. You turned him over to the Elders." She stared at Rene, tearful, pleading with her eyes. "Tell me I'm wrong, Rene. Tell me it didn't happen like that."

Oh, God, please, Rene.

He turned his eyes away, looking across the room again, pressing his lips together. His brows knotted in that deep, fierce way that was so fond and familiar to her by now, and the hard angle of his jaw tightened as he clenched his teeth together.

"Tell me," she whispered.

“I did it for you.” Rene’s voice was brittle, his words leaden and clipped. He wouldn’t look at her, keeping his eyes pinned to the far wall, his jaw locked. “You and the *bébé*. I made him promise, *pischouette*—I made that son of a bitch give me his word they wouldn’t come after you anymore. That you’d be free.” A quick glance. “I did it because I love you.”

“*You gave them Brandon!*” Tessa cried, stumbling to her feet. The chair pitched over backward behind her, clattering to the floor. “You traded my freedom for Brandon! *For my brother!* They’ll kill him, you bastard!”

Weeping freely, she balled her fists and began to pummel Rene with them, striking him again and again, swinging blindly, furiously. Tristan rushed into the room, his eyes flown wide with alarm. “Tessa!” he cried, catching her by the wrists and hauling her forcibly back from the bed. “Tessa—no! Stop it!”

“You son of a bitch!” Tessa thrashed against Tristan’s restraint. “How can you say you love me? How can you say you love my baby and then turn around and do this to Brandon? He loved you like a brother—he *trusted* you, Rene! You’re worse than my grandfather—you’re a bigger monster than Augustus Noble could ever be!”

She spat at him, peppering his face with her saliva. He hadn’t tried to shield or defend himself against her rain of blows, nor did he try to now. He seemed to shrink in the bed, his nose bloody from her fists, his shoulders hunched, his eyes closed, his cheeks streaked and glistening with tears.

“I hate you!” Tessa screamed as Tristan led her out of the room. “I hate you for what you’ve done, you bastard—*I’ll never forgive you for this!*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“That’s interesting,” Michel Morin had remarked in 1792, standing behind closed doors in Augustus’s bedchamber, his hands on his hips, his face canted back as he studied a gold pocket watch floating lazily in midair. The watch rotated in a slow-moving circle, and sunlight winked off the intricate engraving on its open, hinged cover.

“Interesting?” Augustus exclaimed. He’d been sitting on his bed but sprang to his feet now, his eyes wide and incredulous. “*Interesting?* My bloody damn pocket watch...” He jabbed an emphatic finger at it, although it hovered at nearly even eye-level with Michel and was thus impossible to miss. “...is hanging in the bloody damn air!”

“*En effet,*” Michel murmured. *Indeed.* He poked the watch lightly with his fingertip, sending it careening lazily away from him, as if floating on an invisible current of water or air.

“Make it stop!” Augustus cried, brows furrowed deeply, his fists tightly balled.

At this, Michel blinked in surprise. “Me?”

“Yes, you!” Augustus yelled. “It’s your bloody damn fault this is happening to me—first my wash basin, then my chamber pot, then my cuff links and now this! You did this to me. You made this happen, now you make it stop!”

“What are you talking about?” Michel reached up, closing his hand around the watch. After a moment of tugging, he glanced at Augustus and frowned. “It’s stuck.”

“Yes, it’s stuck—in the goddamn air!” Augustus slapped the watch away from him, and it spiraled wildly across the room, floating even higher now, approaching the ceiling rafters.

“Perhaps it’s a ghost,” Michel said thoughtfully, watching it go. He turned to Augustus again and laughed. “Oh, come now, Auguste. You can’t possibly think I have something to do with this. How in the name of all that’s—”

“None of this nonsense started happening until you made me drink Eleanor’s blood. Here it is, less than a week later, and every day something new takes flight in my immediate vicinity, floating hither, thither and bloody damn yon!” Augustus gave him a frustrated, angry shove. “My right shoe flew out the window yesterday, light as a bird, and it flew clear past the kitchen before tumbling earthbound again!”

“*Vraiment?*” Michel asked, his brows raised with interest. *Really?* “There’s a side effect I wouldn’t have anticipated. I’d thought perhaps her female hormones might bear some effect on you, see your voice alter, mayhap you’d grow slight breasts, but this...?”

“Fix it!” Augustus shouted, pushing him again.

“I don’t even know what *it* is!” Michel exclaimed with a laugh. “Here, sit down. Calm yourself. It’s no great worry. We’ll find a way.”

“No great worry?” Augustus shrugged him off as Michel tried to lead him back to the bed. “I can’t go out of the house while this is happening! I can’t leave my bloody room! People will say I’m bewitched!”

“Oh, posh. They stopped burning witches ages ago.” Michel flapped his hand dismissively. “Sit down, for God’s sake. I can’t do a damn thing with you jumping about, red-faced and yowling.”

Still fuming, but begrudgingly resigned, Augustus let Michel ease him back down onto the edge of his mattress. He frowned as Michel began to examine him, poking and prodding at him, tilting his head this way and that and flashing a candle in front of his face to check his pupillary response.

“Curious,” Michel murmured, pensive, as he gently palpated beneath the shelf of Augustus’s chin.

“What?” Augustus asked.

“Nothing,” Michel replied. “And that’s precisely the problem.” He stepped back, folding his arms across his chest. “With the obvious exception of the fact

you're still recovering from a near-fatal gunshot wound, there's not a damn thing wrong with you that I can tell. You're as healthy as a horse."

"Of course I am. What, you think *I'm* doing this somehow?" Augustus pointed again at the pocket watch, which had now made its way on that unseen current back toward his bed and bobbed in the air now above Michel's left shoulder.

"Well, who else would be?" Michel replied. "No one has changed, and nothing in this room is any different than it was four days ago, Augustus—except *you*. So if these incidents..." He reached up, tapped the watch and chuckled with a nearly child-like delight as it spun away again for the wall. "...as you've described have coincided with your occasion to feed from the girl, well, then, one can only surmise that the two are somehow related. Have you tried to stop the watch from floating?"

"What do you mean?" Augustus asked with a frown. "I've chased it all over the room, tried to grab it and pull it down, the same as you."

"No, I mean *think* about it," Michel said, tapping his forefinger to his brow. "Close your eyes, calm yourself and concentrate. See if thinking about moving it makes it happen."

Augustus blinked at him. "Are you mad?" After a moment, he shook his head. "Never mind. Of course you are. You've lost your damn fool mind. I can't move something by *thinking* about it. That's not what's causing this—my *mind*."

"How do you know?" Michel challenged, folding his arms again. "Have you any better ideas for making it stop?"

Because he'd had none, Augustus had heaved a woeful and put-upon sigh, then closed his eyes. "Think about the watch," Michel suggested. "Picture it in your mind and think about holding it in your hand. Maybe then it will come to you."

"Come to me," Augustus muttered. "It's a watch, not a bloody damn dog."

Michel slapped the crown of his head. "Try it."

Augustus did. And after a moment in which there was nothing he could hear outside of the heavy measure of his own breath, he felt something cool

brush against his right hand. When he opened his eyes and looked down, the pocket watch fell to the bed beside him.

“I’ll be damned.” Amazed, he picked up the watch. He held it up to the light, turning it this way and that, marveling. With a glance and a grin at Michel, he said, “It worked!”

“So it would seem,” Michel said.

For the better part of that day, the two experimented on this newfound ability. Within hours, Augustus had gone from levitating objects at random with no conscious decision to do so, or control over them once they were airborne, to being able to heft even something as sizeable as his own oak bed frame a good three feet off the floor. He found these attempts wearisome, and by lunchtime, he had a massive headache throbbing behind his temples, but was otherwise physically unscathed.

“Amazing,” Michel declared. By this point, he hadn’t stopped grinning for the better part of an hour at least. “Come on,” he said, clapping Augustus on the shoulder. “I think some fresh air will do you some good.”

Outside, they’d hiked together down to a winding creek bed, and here, Augustus had begun chucking a variety of stones using his fledgling telekinesis. At first, the rocks plopped heavily downward whenever he’d turn them loose with his mind, but with time, effort and a bit of practice, he was able to skim them over the burbling surface of the stream, bouncing them three, four and even five or six times before setting them free.

“Not bad,” Michel observed as Augustus had demonstrated this last. “Not bad at all.”

The two of them sat together, side by side, resting against neighboring tree trunks while they took turns skipping stones. Michel did it the old fashioned way—with his hand.

“This is really an unexpected side effect of your feeding,” he remarked, watching as the last of the ripples from Augustus’s last throw faded on the surface of the water. “Maybe it triggered the release of some manner of latent hormone that stimulated a heretofore untapped area of your brain, wakening

capacities that otherwise would have remained dormant. Here, give me your arm.”

Augustus held out his hand to his friend. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to feed from you, see if it affects me in the same—” Michel began, and Augustus abruptly jerked his arm back.

“Hey, no!” he exclaimed.

“What?” Michel frowned. “Any viable experiment must have results that have been verifiably duplicated. In this case, that involves one of us feeding from another.”

“I’m not a rot damn experiment,” Augustus growled.

“Of course you are. This whole endeavor has been nothing less. It just happens that in testing the validity of one hypothesis, we’ve uncovered the makings of yet another. It’s perfectly normal, all part of the scientific method.”

“I’d been shot damn near in the heart and lay bleeding to death when we tried this experiment of yours,” Augustus said dryly. “Shall I shoot you, too, just so our circumstances this time ’round coincide?”

Michel groaned as he stood, arching his back slightly to stretch. “If I thought that would make a difference in the overall outcome,” he said. “Then I’d say yes. But as it is, I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Splendid,” Augustus muttered, rising as well. Already, he was shrugging off his justicoat and reaching for his cufflink to unfetter his sleeve, turn it back to his elbow. “Here, then, goddamn it. Bite me and be quick about it.”

“You taste different than a human...sweeter,” Michel commented when he was finished. Now Augustus lay supine beneath a tree, his coat draped over him like a blanket, his eyes heavy-lidded, his mind groggy with blood loss. Michel sat beside him, dabbing at his blood-smearred bottom lip, licking his fingertips thoughtfully. With a wink and a lopsided grin, he added, “Mayhap it’s your true nature seeping through.”

Too weak to offer much more, Augustus flipped him off.

“You’ll be on the mend soon, don’t worry.” Michel laughed. “I’ll carry you home by the by and tell your mother you simply over-exerted that which hadn’t fully restored in you to date. That should satisfy any curiosity as to your malaise. And you should be back on your feet, well enough again by this evening for the Council meeting.”

Augustus’s eyes had fallen closed; he opened them now, curious. “What meeting?”

Michel glanced at him, then away again, hooking his elbows around his knees. “The Davenants have called us all to order. There’s been some trouble at my house, some...incidents for which you and your little condition have provided a much-needed distraction.” Another glance; this time, he affected a quick, two-finger salute. “And a much-appreciated one at that, I should add.”

With a groan, Augustus shoved his elbows into the dirt and tried to sit up. “What’s happened? Why have you said nothing before now?”

“I told you—you distracted me with the whole watch bit and now this.” Michel nodded to indicate Augustus’s forearm. Swaddled with strips of linen torn from Michel’s shirt tail, the vertex of his wrist had served as the point from which Michel had drained his blood.

“It’s nothing,” Michel said, though the troubled cast that had come over his face told Augustus otherwise. “Allistair Davenant is being an old-fashioned, superstitious, ignorant, pig-headed bastard.”

“When is he anything less?” Augustus said, drawing a quick but discernable smile from his friend.

“I’m afraid Arnaud’s found himself in yet another spot.”

“Arnaud?” Augustus pushed himself up further. “Your Arnaud?”

Michel nodded. He’d been married for more than a decade, his name having been selected among the clan Tomes almost immediately upon his eligibility at age 50. Whereas Augustus was newly wed to Eleanor and childless, Michel had three sons. Although only twenty, his youngest, Arnaud, had already proven to be a ready source of consternation and concern for his father.

“Seems he’s been laying in rut with one of the house slaves,” Michel said. The only sin more grave than that of feeding from another Brethren was that of having sexual relations with a human. A holdover from the Brethren’s earliest medieval incarnations, when they lived isolated and secreted away from humans, interacting only as required to hunt and feed from them, the act was still considered an abomination, the sully of pure Brethren bloodlines that had been maintained for thousands of years.

“The girl apparently had a child, though this has been some five years past,” Michel said. “The Council has only just now learned of her on account of my father’s farm manager stumbling upon her in one of the barns—a Negro child with fangs like a Brethren, tearing open the necks of chickens and suckling on their blood.”

Fully seated now, Augustus forked his fingers through his hair. “*Viens m’enculer, Michel,*” he muttered. *Fuck me.*

“*Oui,*” Michel agreed. “So anyway, there’s the matter of what’s to be done about this—Arnaud, the slave girl and their misbegotten whelp. And with the Davenants at the helm of things, you can fairly well guarantee it will be nothing pleasant.”

And with Michel having stood as my second in a duel that killed the eldest-born Davenant son, I’m willing to wager it will be nothing short of death for all three of them, Augustus thought, but he didn’t say this aloud. It wasn’t an implication lost on Michel, to judge by the somber, stricken expression on his face.

“*Je suis désolé, Michel,*” he said quietly, draping his hand against his friend’s shoulder. *I’m sorry.*

Without averting his melancholy gaze from the stream, Michel reached up, clasping his hand atop Augustus’s. “*Merci, Auguste,*” he murmured in reply.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When the Brethren Council had met that evening, gathered together in a large stone meeting house on the Davenant farm erected specifically for them, Michel had been called forward and made to stand in between his wayward son, Arnaud, and the cause of all of the scandal—a diminutive, whip-thin, gangly child with a head full of tight black pincurls. Her skin was the color of chocolate, her eyes enormous and round. Clearly being brought before the group of nearly 200 stern-faced, unfamiliar white men frightened her; without her mother or any friendly faces to comfort her, she stood alone, hands clutched together, trembling and pigeon-toed.

“A travesty of nature,” Allistair Davenant’s father, Lamar, had declared, shoving his forefinger at the girl. “An abomination in direct and blatant violation of all of our Brethren laws. And indeed, those very same laws are specific in their mandates when they are broken.”

Reading from his clan Tome, as the dominant Elder among the Brethren, Lamar had been flanked by Allistair, now his eldest immediate heir. Though he said nothing throughout much the proceedings, Allistair watched it all with a sadistic sort of glee apparent in his eyes, the slight upturn of his mouth. In the bright glare of an enormous bonfire built in the middle of the room upon a circular granite hearth—the traditional centerpiece of the Council’s meeting halls—the pair of them looked nearly ghoulish.

“My son has had his share of troubles even before he came of proper age,” Michel conceded, nodding in courteous deference. “He’s young, yet, and reckless, but I accept the fault for this. My hand mayhap hasn’t been strict enough, my oversight of him negligent. I would beg my fellows of this most esteemed Council for clemency on my son’s behalf, that any disgrace from this come not upon him or my family, but instead to me, where it is most rightly due.”

Augustus had been heartsick for his friend, but helpless to do more than hold his place on the council bench, his face impassive, outwardly unmoved by Michel's humble plea. He had only hoped they wouldn't burn the boy.

Such had been the horrific fate he had witnessed once for one Brethren man, Gerard Trevilian, one of Eleanor's second cousins thrice removed, or some such ancestry. During Augustus's first term in the Council, decades earlier—long before Eleanor's birth—Gerard had killed one of his Brethren fellows. Neither over a matter of honor nor in the course of a duel, the offense had been ruled outright murder, and his punishment had been swift and severe. Strapped to the rungs of a ladder, he'd been lowered slowly over the central fire pit until the heat from the flames had begun to blister and sear his skin. By the time his clothes had caught fire, his screams had long since echoed throughout the chamber and into the night; the pungent stink of his roasted flesh had permeated the hall, nauseating and thick. It had been a gruesome spectacle orchestrated by Lamar Davenant; one to which Augustus and his fellow council members had been forced to bear horrified witness.

"Your humility is admirable, *Monsieur* Morin," Lamar told Michel at length, having leaned toward Allistair for some quiet counsel before answering.

"Thank you, sir," Michel replied with another respectful nod.

"But I am afraid this is far from a simple dalliance or minor infraction of Brethren law," Lamar continued. His brows drew narrow, his thin mouth turning into a frown of distaste. "The boy has made his bed—sullied his honor and his entire clan's besides—between the wretched thighs of a human Negress. I cannot and will not allow this to go unanswered. However..."

As he said this, Lamar drew the thick blade of his tongue over his lips, even as the corners flicked up in a fleeting, icy smile. "If my fellows of the Council would likewise feel so inclined, I would spare the boy the penalty prescribed by law—death. Male heirs are an asset among the clans, and I wouldn't want any among us to say I acted arbitrarily in this instance in order to best preserve my own interests and dominance. Instead of death, Arnaud Morin shall instead receive fifty strokes with the bullwhip, in plain view of all members of our Brethren

society, these to be counted aloud by him and administered by you—his father—with the deliverance to begin anew at any point in which you fail to strike with the full strength of your arm or the full length of the lash.”

Augustus blinked at this, his stoic façade faltering with sudden, pained horror. *Michel...!* he thought, opening his mind to his friend, helpless and aghast.

Close your mind, Michel seethed without sparing him a glance from the floor. Do you want to join Arnaud on the whipping post? Shut your bloody damn mind.

“As for the matter of this...thing.” Lamar wrinkled his nose and frowned at the girl. “She will be taken to the Indian tunnels and there, she’ll be locked away. Seal every entry point and exit to the Beneath—use walls and gates and iron bars, whatever is needed to secure them fast. Send along her whore of a mother. Their fates, then, will be beyond our control or concern, and will be left instead, to the mercy of God.”

In that moment, Augustus had hated Allistair Davenant. Lamar might have held dominance; Lamar might have pronounced the sentences aloud, but it had been Allistair who had planted the ideas in his father’s mind. Of that, Augustus suddenly had no doubt.

He hated Allistair for having humiliated Michel; hated him for having prescribed such a cruel and sadistic alternative punishment that would, in all likelihood, cause as much heartache and grief to Michel as the execution of his son would have. He hated Allistair with a virulent, visceral intensity that left him trembling in his seat at the Brethren Council, his fists closed so tightly, his knuckles had blanched white.

Allistair did this, he thought, his dark eyes leveling spear points at the back of the other man’s skull. And by God and all that’s holy, that son of a bitch is going to pay.

Brandon.

It made no sense that Brandon would be dreaming about the Grandfather, about Augustus’s voice in his head, because the last person he had been

thinking about, much less giving a flying fuck about, before he'd drifted off had been Augustus.

He hadn't even noticed when Augustus had left his bedroom at the great house, so inconsequential had he become to Brandon. Where once he'd found the older man terrifying and intimidating, he saw him only as pathetic now—a desperate, miserable, hateful old man trying to keep hold of his family's dominance and power no matter the cost.

Even if that cost had included his own first-born son.

Daniel was heartbroken over Sebastian's death, and Brandon had drawn him against his chest, feeling his slender legs twine about his midriff as he'd stood, hoisting the boy aloft. Brandon had carried Daniel to his bed and lain down with him, keeping his arms around his brother, cradling him against the shelter of his chest. He'd held him in this fashion as the boy's whimpering, fluttering sobs had subsided, and eventually, the two had drifted to sleep, tucked together like kittens in a wicker creel, their foreheads touching, their hands intertwined.

It made no sense Brandon would dream of Augustus, and yet he did, his grandfather's voice in his mind. In the dream, Brandon opened his eyes, his eyelids impossibly heavy, his entire body leaden and weak. He was cold, as if he'd been submerged in a bathtub filled with ice; his bleary vision bobbed and jostled as he shuddered uncontrollably. The act of breathing felt sodden, nearly impossible, as if his chest had been filled with something thick and liquefied, like maple syrup or honey, and every time he'd gasp for strained and struggling breath, he felt pain spear through his entire body.

There was no sound. In the dream, this was something new and terrifying to him, rather than customary and expected, as it was for Brandon in waking. And he understood; some cognizant part of his mind realized what was happening, where his mind had taken him.

The night of the burglary. The night my throat was cut...my head beaten.

The night I lost my hearing and my voice.

His father had carried him upstairs from the library that night; Sebastian had been inconsolable as he'd laid Brandon out on his bed, his face tear-

streaked and bloody from where he'd launched himself at his son's attackers, killing the would-be burglars in a violent, bloody frenzy.

In the dream, though, his father was gone and in his place, two men had come to stand at Brandon's bedside, both of them gazing darkly down at the boy. One, Brandon recognized—Augustus Noble, his grandfather. The other he didn't know at the time; lacking in Augustus's handsome and still-youthful appeal, this man had seemed very old to Brandon, his face doughy and drawn, his mouth frozen in a thin, downward curve. He'd looked down at Brandon with all of the contemptuous disinterest he might have awarded a cockroach clinging precariously to his coat lapel.

Allistair Davenant, that omnipresent narrator in Brandon's mind whispered, the part of him that was still conscious enough to realize he was dreaming, to fill in the cognitive blanks.

"He cannot survive," Allistair said to Augustus without averting his dark, glittering, impassive eyes from Brandon.

Brandon the child hadn't been able to read lips and thus never would have comprehended the movements of Allistair's mouth and tongue as they'd flapped and fluttered, but Brandon the adult and omnipresent narrator understood him perfectly.

"He's too young," Allistair said. "His healing too underdeveloped."

"I know," Augustus had replied with a nod.

"He's suffering, Augustus." Even though Allistair draped his hand on Augustus's shoulder in sympathetic fashion as he spoke, the corner of his mouth had lifted in a crooked, nearly wry smile, and that cold, brittle gleam in his eyes didn't waver in the slightest.

Augustus's brows had crimped ever so slightly and he'd shrugged the other man loose. "I know."

"Sebastian is grief-stricken," Allistair said. "His mind is addled by shock and dismay. He cannot be relied upon to make the choice, to do what needs to be done."

He turned and walked away from the bed, leaving Brandon's view, pausing only long enough to clap Augustus on the shoulder once more, briefly, firmly. "It's up to you, then, to see it through, *mon ami*," he said.

I am not now, nor will I ever be your friend, Augustus had seethed in his mind, and Brandon had heard him clearly.

With Allistair gone, it had just been the two of them alone in the room—Brandon, supine against blood-soaked sheets, hiccupping for feeble breath, and Augustus, his face as smooth as porcelain, unaffected and unreadable.

As Brandon watched, Augustus reached down. At the time, his hand would have been large enough to clamp firmly over the boy's mouth and nose, sealing off his airway completely, delivering him to a merciful and swift demise. Brandon the child hadn't understood his intentions, but Brandon the adult did, only there was nothing he could do in the dream to stop him.

No! he cried out, a helpless and powerless observer, trapped within the confines of his own mind. *No, you bastard! You son of a bitch—no!*

Abruptly, Augustus's hand had changed its course, sweeping up within mere millimeters of his grandson's face as he drew it up to his own. Brandon watched, bewildered, as Augustus rolled back the sleeve of his robe. It was the middle of the night; Augustus had been roused from his bed. His long hair hung in a thick, unfettered sheaf that tumbled messily over his shoulders. Beneath the open V of his robe, he was shirtless, the visible plain of his chest smooth and vulnerably exposed.

Holding his hand in front of his face, Augustus closed his eyes. That slight crimp between his brows furrowed again, as if he concentrated on something intensely, and when he opened his eyes, Brandon realized he'd summoned the bloodlust within himself. His pupils had widened, engulfing his corneas in blackness, and his fangs had descended. While they hadn't dropped far enough to unhinge his jaw, it was enough so that when Augustus brought his wrist to his mouth and cocked his head, he was able to sink his canines deep into the meat of his arm just beneath the outward curve of his thumb joint. Here, he expertly

punched through both the ulnar and radial arteries in a single thrust; blood spurted from his arm in a sudden, pulsating burst.

Here, petit, Augustus thought, lowering his hand to Brandon's face again. Instead of smothering him, he pressed his bloody wrist to the boy's mouth. Confused and frightened, Brandon tried vainly to turn his head away; with his free hand, Augustus caught him by the crown of his pate, forcing him to stillness.

Drink, he said to his grandson, his expression still unreadable, his eyes locked icily with the boy's. *Drink from me, Brandon. Do it, boy. Now.*

The flavor of the blood against his tongue—sweet, tangy—and the fragrance of it—thick and heady, nearly intoxicating—stoked within Brandon his own fledgling, uncertain bloodlust, and despite his fright, his initial revulsion, he responded. Pressing his lips more firmly against Augustus's flesh, he began to feed, letting each forceful burst of blood fill his mouth, gulping each down in succession, weakly at first and then more fervently.

When at last Augustus crashed to his knees at Brandon's bedside, his arm slipping from Brandon's mouth, it was obvious he'd been drained to the point of near swooning. The terrible coldness had left Brandon, the heaviness, the feeling of drowning. Warmth had spread throughout his form, the way years later, a shot of bourbon would whenever Brandon would share one with his father.

Struggling to prop himself up with his hands on the mattress, Augustus looked up, his eyes dazed, and met Brandon's gaze. In that instant, Brandon knew he was dreaming; that none of this was possible, that it had all been little more than a figment of his unconscious mind.

Because in it, Augustus Noble had smiled at his grandson. "Good boy," he'd whispered before pitching sideways, crumpling into a heap against the floor.

Brandon.

Brandon opened his eyes with a startled gasp. The dreamscape immediately vanished and he found himself face-to-face with Daniel, the little boy tucked and fast asleep against him. Daniel's small hands were draped against Brandon's. His mouth was opened slightly, his breath pushing out with every exhalation against Brandon's face.

Someone touched him from behind, a heavy hand falling with not-so-gentle insistence against his arm, startling him.

Brandon.

When he rolled over, eyes flown wide, he saw Augustus at his bedside. Just like in the dream, his expression was stoic, no hint of emotion revealed, and for a moment, seized with a powerful sense of *deja-vu*, Brandon simply blinked stupidly at him, bewildered and not entirely certain of his own consciousness.

Get up, Augustus said, speaking in Brandon's mind. *It's time.*

He stepped back as Brandon sat up, still sleepy and confused, slipping away from Daniel's warm embrace.

Time? Brandon said, swinging his legs around, his feet hitting the cold, smooth wood floor. *For what?*

Augustus turned and walked toward his bedroom door; an unspoken directive for Brandon to follow. *For the truth*, he replied.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Where are we going? Brandon wondered as Augustus led him up to the third floor of the great house. Tessa's old ballet studio had been there, but otherwise Brandon had seldom, if ever, had any reason to venture any further than the first two floors of the enormous mansion. The third floor was where Augustus slept and where each of his wives maintained their own private quarters. The rest of the family jockeyed for space in the first- and second-floor bedchambers.

As with the rest of the home's interior, the third floor was opulently decorated with French-Rococo-inspired furnishings and accents. When Augustus abruptly stopped outside of a pair of closed doors, Brandon—curious and distracted by these unfamiliar surroundings—nearly plowed headlong into the middle of his back.

Without saying a word in explanation or elaboration, Augustus reached into his hip pocket, and it occurred to Brandon that he'd never seen his grandfather in jeans before. In fact, with the exception of that weird dream that he'd only just had, which had inexplicably felt more like a memory and in which he'd seen Augustus in his bathrobe and pajama pants, Brandon had never seen the man in anything other than dress slacks, button-down shirts and conservative-colored ties.

Augustus pulled a key ring out of his pocket, sifted through it momentarily, then unlocked the doors. He didn't pause as he breezed across their broad threshold, but Brandon lingered at the doorway, wide-eyed with new wonder as he peered into what he realized was his grandfather's private suite of chambers.

The entry antechamber was absolutely breathtaking; true, the entire great house was resplendent with priceless antique furniture pieces, but to Brandon, it looked as if Augustus had saved the most precious and exquisite among these for his own quarters.

The floor beneath his feet, hardwood and parquet-fashioned, was warm-hued, well polished and glossy. The walls were paneled in a patchwork of beveled wood, graced with brass lighting fixtures and decorated with large oil-painted portraits in gilded frames. One Brandon recognized immediately—a raven-haired woman in a flowing white, off-the-shoulder gown.

Grandmother Eleanor.

He might have expected to find the other portraits to be of Augustus's other wives, but to his surprise, he recognized none. A woman in a towering powdered wig, dressed in the elaborate but elegant fashions of the aristocracy during the time of the French Revolution seemed to be the prominent subject of several.

Her name was Isabeau Noblet, la Marquise la Bâtie-de-Seysse, Augustus said, as he took notice of the object of the younger man's attention. She was my mother.

His thoughts broke through Brandon's mind, snapping him from his reverie, and he stepped hesitantly forward.

Close the doors behind you, please, Augustus said, turning again, walking into an adjacent room. Brandon did as he was told, any defiance he might have otherwise mustered quelled for the moment by his sheer, child-like wonder. He followed Augustus, tilting his head back and admiring the Noble family crest, which appeared repeatedly in plaster relief along the trim-line where the walls and ceiling met.

In the next room, contemporary-styled leather couches and armchairs had been tastefully arranged near a broad marble mantle that crowned three adjacent fireplaces, each wider across than Brandon could stretch his arms out and bridge. A relief vista had been carved into the ivory-colored stone, a depiction of what appeared to be women from ancient Rome, each draped in togas, carrying scrolls, harps or flutes, dancing and frolicking in elaborate, decorative detail.

Augustus poured himself a tumbler of amber-colored bourbon from a cut glass decanter. He glanced over his shoulder, across the room toward Brandon, his brow raised somewhat expectantly.

Brandon nearly keeled over. *I'll be goddamn*, he thought, stunned. *He's offering me a drink!*

He nodded, still feeling stupid and bewildered and watched as Augustus splashed two fingers' worth of what was surely the best of Bloodhorse's distilled stock. Cradling both glasses against his palms, Augustus crossed the room toward his grandson, holding out his drink.

Thank you, Grandfather, Brandon managed, accepting the glass.

Augustus raised his own tumbler ever so slightly, an unspoken *you're welcome*. "Sit with me by the fire, boy," he said aloud before turning again, walking away.

Yes, *sir*. Brandon followed, sinking slowly into one of the large, chocolate-colored sofas, feeling swallowed whole by the smooth, cool leather. A laptop computer had been left open on the coffee table in front of him; Augustus again startled the glorious, ever-living shit out of Brandon by sitting beside him on the sofa, then leaning forward, tapping his finger on the laptop mouse-pad, bringing the darkened screen alight.

Ten or twelve years ago, there was a rash of horse-related attacks in the area, Augustus remarked, sipping his bourbon. He'd never been heedful of Brandon's deafness before, or in any way, shape or form accommodating to the young man's disability—going so far, in the past, as forbidding Brandon to even use his telepathy to communicate. Now he spoke with his mind because he sat in profile to Brandon, a consideration that struck Brandon, as had so many other things since he'd woken up, as damn near surreal.

A group of vandals would break into area Thoroughbred farms and shove sponges up inside the animals' noses, Augustus said, using one hand to move his mouse arrow around on the computer screen, clicking open a program icon, then typing in a user-name and password at a window prompt.

It was very clever actually, he said. *Not your average household cleaning sponges. These had holes that were evenly spaced, all the same size, so even when a veterinarian would shine a light up the nasal passage, they weren't easily seen. The sponges would cause the horse respiratory distress, sometimes even*

leading to death. Our farms were never targeted, our horses never victimized, but as you can imagine, it was a tremendous concern for me.

Brandon blinked at him. *I can't believe the Grandfather is sitting here shooting the shit with me*, he thought, bewildered. *What's the catch? Where is this going? I have to be hallucinating. That's it. I'm still asleep in my bed.*

I had all of the barns on the Brethren compound equipped with security cameras at that time, Augustus told him. *State-of-the-art, computerized alarms, even infrared sensors that were motion-activated. Nothing happens in any of our farm buildings of which I am unaware.*

Another keystroke and suddenly the computer screen shifted into four panels, each one a grainy video image of a barn interior.

I can choose any barn I'd like, Augustus said, hitting more keys, changing the views in each of the four panels. *Nearly any angle, every exit and entry point.*

He turned to Brandon, speaking aloud now, facing him directly. "And that is how I know that Allistair Davenant killed your father," he said, his words raising a chill along the back of Brandon's neck.

Brandon watched as, on the computer screen, video footage from the night before showed Sebastian Noble entering the main barn shortly after midnight. There were no cameras directly inside Sebastian's office in the main barn, but he could clearly see his father cross the main paddock and go through his office door.

Sebastian had been followed within less than ten minutes by another man. The image had been grainy, distant and indistinct, but Brandon recognized him nonetheless.

Because I just saw him less than an hour ago, standing in my dream.

Allistair Davenant rapped lightly on the office door, then disappeared inside. For the next ten minutes, nothing happened on the security videos. Then Allistair left, his gait swift and smooth as he retraced his steps and exited the barn from the direction in which he'd originally come. If Brandon had started counting from the moment Allistair was out of frame, he would have reached no

further than twenty-five before a flash of light appeared on the right-hand side of the screen, showing split-second through the slats in the Venetian blinds covering Sebastian's office window. A gunshot.

Augustus's dueling pistols had been kept in a glass case inside Sebastian's office, on commemorative display, along with other historic trophies and awards. Brandon had spent a lot of time in Sebastian's office in his youth, as he'd followed his father around pretty much like a shadow, and he'd seen the pistols countless times. Sometimes, Sebastian had taken them out and held them for Brandon to admire and study with awe-struck fascination, and Brandon knew his father maintained them religiously, cleaning them and keeping them polished and primed.

Allistair Davenant killed your father, Augustus told him again, drawing Brandon's gaze. He didn't level the gun or pull the trigger, but he is responsible nonetheless. I've known him damn near 300 years and know his methods well. Believe me, boy, whatever words he offered Sebastian last night...whatever sick and twisted manipulations he put into play behind that closed office door, he did it with aforethought and sick, sadistic malice. He pushed your father to the breaking point. He showed him the edge...then shoved him over.

Brandon shook his head, stunned and disturbed by what he'd seen. *But I...I don't...* he began. *Why?*

"For the same reason Allistair Davenant has done anything over the past two centuries," Augustus replied. He drew his tumbler to his lips, then canted his head back, downing his bourbon in one swift swallow. When finished, he met Brandon's wide-eyed gaze gravely. "Dominance, boy. He wants dominance over us all. And this time, he got it."

Brandon frowned. *So that's what this is all about?* he said, slamming his tumbler down on the coffee table and standing. *Goddamn clan dominance? I should have known. With Caine dead and now with Dad, that leaves you out of the goddamn loop, doesn't it? Allistair Davenant's dominant now, and you'll do whatever it takes, whatever you have to, in order to get it back—even if that means making nice with me.*

He expected to get a rise out of Augustus by challenging him so, but instead, Augustus simply looked up at him. "You're wrong," he said.

Like hell! Brandon snapped. *You think if you pal around with me, invite me up here to your suite, liquor me up, let me in on all of these video secrets of yours, that I'll get all warm and fuzzy inside and want to help you out—poor Augustus Noble, out of power, out of money, out of goddamn luck. Forget it.*

He started to march away from the fireplaces, back toward the antechamber and the door. *I'm not going to go through the bloodletting so you can get your goddamn dominance back!* he shouted in his mind.

Augustus brought him to an abrupt, startled halt. *I'm not asking you to.*

Brandon glanced over his shoulder, then turned around slowly. Augustus cupped his empty glass in his hands, his gaze distant as he watched the reflected play of firelight in the hard angles cut into the tumbler's base.

I don't care about that anymore, Augustus said, and Brandon laughed.

Oh, bullshit—please! he said. *All Allistair's ever wanted was dominance? It's all you've ever wanted, too. The only thing that's ever mattered to you. Nothing else—not my dad, not Caine, not even Grandmother Eleanor has ever meant more to you than your power. Your goddamn stupid stinking power! You deserved to lose it, you son of a bitch. And I'm sure as hell not going to help you get it back.*

You're right, Augustus said, and again, Brandon shied back in surprise.

What?

Without averting his gaze from the glass, Augustus nodded. *You're right. More so than you probably even know, boy. It's my fault all of this has happened...all of it on account of my pride...my ambition...*

He forked his fingers through his heavy fall of hair, shoving it back from his face. *I've lost everything that's ever been important to me...anyone I've ever loved...all in the name of dominance. I've sacrificed friendships, crucified marriages, broken hearts, broken bones...* He said this last with a fleeting sideways glance at Brandon.

Caine is dead...and now my son, and I take the blame for that. Augustus nodded, pursing his lips together, his brows narrowing slightly. *It's my fault. My burden.*

He looked up, and Brandon realized it wasn't just the glow from the fire glistening in his eyes. Tears had welled; to Brandon's shock and surprise, they began to roll freely, unabated down Augustus's cheeks, slow at first, and then faster and faster, streaming down in rapid succession.

"It's all my fault," he whispered aloud, then clapped his hand over his face. Brandon couldn't hear his sobs, but he could see the force with which they wracked Augustus's body, shuddering through his shoulders.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Tessa.”

She stirred groggily at the sound of her name, soft but insistent, just like the hand she could feel against her arm, offering a light shake.

“Tessa.”

Her eyelids peeled back a reluctant margin, allowing a thin seam of pale, dusky light through—the first gray hints of dawn. She tried to answer; all that came out was a rusty “*Glunnngghh.*”

Whatever the hell time it was, it was too early. After her furious, if not somewhat histrionic, fit at the medical clinic, Tessa had retreated to Michel Morin’s mountainside home, accompanied by Eleanor. Here, her grandmother had drawn her a warm bubble bath in a deep, oval-shaped tub equipped with whirlpool jets; here, Tessa had gratefully, blissfully settled herself for the better part of at least an hour, a damp washcloth draped over her eyes, plunging her into comforting darkness.

She’d dozed, and it had only been the mouth-watering aromas of something drifting upstairs from the first-floor kitchen that had at last drawn her from her cozy pool. Eleanor had cooked for her—chicken *etoufee*, which had always been her signature dish, her recipe one of Tessa’s all-time favorites. The two women had sat together on one of Michel’s enormous couches, eating the hearty stew, watching the sun set in a back-splash of color and light against the mirror-like surface of Lake Tahoe below.

“Are you sleeping with Michel?” Tessa had asked. It had felt like old times between her and Eleanor, the beloved and fondly cherished days of her youth when Eleanor had been her best friend and confidante—someone in whom she had trusted implicitly and adored without erring or question.

Eleanor had laughed. “What? Don’t be silly, darling. No, of course not.” Her face had clouded then, her laughter faltering. “Though if I was, I’d sure as

hell be entitled. Augustus has slept with other women almost the entire duration of our marriage—taken plenty of other wives. That never made me think his love for me was any less. Women have needs, too, just like men.” With a wink, she’d added, “Sometimes even more so.”

Tessa had told her what she’d learned about Rene. Which had only made her bawl again. Eleanor had wrapped her arm around her shoulders, drawing her near, letting her huddle, child-like in her grief, against her bosom as she’d wept.

“He...he said he did it because he *loves* me!” Tessa had exclaimed. “He did that to Brandon—he betrayed his trust, and he said it was for me, me and the baby!”

“Cruel to be kind,” Eleanor had murmured amidst a collection of nonsensical, comforting sounds. “Shakespeare wrote that. From *Hamlet*, I do believe. ‘I must be cruel only to be kind. Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.’” She’d shaken her head, offered a derisive little snort. “Only a man could conceive of logic like that.”

This had made Tessa laugh, despite her tears. She’d looked up, and Eleanor had smiled, chuckling with her, then cradling Tessa’s face between her hands and pressing her lips to her brow. In that moment, Tessa hadn’t quite forgiven Eleanor for the comment she’d made to Brandon years earlier, the quip that Tessa, like all Brethren women, couldn’t aspire to more in life than making babies. But she’d forgotten it at least, and for a while, she hadn’t felt better, but she had felt comforted and loved, and that had certainly helped ease at least some of the tremendous grief, sorrow and outrage that Rene had brought upon her.

“Tessa.”

“What...?” Less bleary now, Tessa rolled over. Burrowed beneath a downy comforter and soft sheets beneath, Tessa had slept so soundly that at first, when she saw who was sitting behind her on the bed, who had been saying her name repeatedly, patiently, she damn near thought she was still asleep.

“Tristan?”

He smiled at her, wearing the button-down shirt and jeans he'd worn the day before, only because the morning must have been cool, he'd thrown a fleece sweatshirt on over top. *He must have only just now left the clinic*, Tessa thought, watching, bewildered, as he rose to his feet and held his hand out to her in beckon.

With Michel gone to Kentucky, that left Karen and Tristan taking 12-hour turns at manning the store. "There are others who can help," Eleanor had told Tessa. "Michel's son, Mason, is on his way in from Los Angeles. He's a plastic surgeon there; he can give them some relief."

"You awake?" Tristan asked, his hand still outstretched expectantly.

Tessa frowned, propping herself somewhat upright on her elbow and shoving her hair back from her face. "I am now," she growled with a glance at the bedside clock. It wasn't even seven yet.

"Good. Come on." He dropped her a wink. "I want to show you something."

He'd parked his Jeep outside and drove them down from the Morin acreage to the waterfront near Vikingsholm at Emerald Bay. Even from a distance, Tessa could see where the second floor windows in one of the old mansion's turrets had been boarded up for repairs; this was where, from the front lawn, Monica had thrown her, as effortlessly as she might have a rag doll.

"I've seen Vikingsholm," she told Tristan dryly, shivering slightly at the unease she still felt to be anywhere near the house. Monica had died inside of Vikingsholm, and Tessa might have, too, or at least, the baby inside of her, had it not been for...

She shook her head, wrenching her gaze from the mansion. *I'm not going to think about Rene.*

"Not that." Tristan slipped his hand against hers and led her down to a broad wooden dock that jutted out over the water. She could look over the edge of the dock as they walked along; the lake was as clear as glass, and with a

deceptively unobstructed view to the sandy bottom below, there was no way to discern the depth.

“This,” Tristan said, drawing to an unexpected halt about midway down the dock. A mooring line had been tethered to the piling here, a length of fat rope drooping down to the lake, securing a small rowboat. White with glossy wooden trim and a trio of benches, it had anchor points for oars, but none that she could see.

“Here.” He startled her by leaping down from the dock into the belly of the boat, landing so nimbly—despite the nearly three-foot drop—that the skiff scarcely bobbed, and only a few loose ripples marred the water’s otherwise pristine surface. Looking up, Tristan held out his hands. “Do you trust me?”

There was something in his eyes as he said this—round and earnest, a hint of mischievousness, maybe even a challenge, as if daring her to.

“Should I?” she answered, and the wounded look that crossed his face was utterly feigned. When she felt a gentle nudge easing her forward, a slight but irresistible push from behind, she yelped in start and glanced over her shoulder. There was nothing there, but still the force remained, not as much as push now as something drawing her in unavoidable tow, sliding her across the deck planks toward the edge.

Tristan...! she realized, remembering how he and his sister, Naima, had played tug-of-war with an uprooted pine tree. She turned to him, eyes flown wide, her mouth open as she sputtered in protest, and then he telekinetically pulled her over the side of the dock and held her momentarily suspended, her sneakers pedaling in the open air.

“Tristan...!” she gasped.

Don’t be frightened, he told her in his mind. *I’ve got you.*

She couldn’t breathe until her feet touched lightly down against the boat deck. When he released her, it felt like the quality of air around her shifted, as if she’d been momentarily encased in a bubble as she’d floated down from the dock, and all at once, that bubble had popped. She wobbled for uncertain

balance, her arms pinwheeling as the boat rocked beneath her, and he caught her with his hands, steadying her.

“Here,” he said gently, helping her sit. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t,” she replied. “I just...that was weird.”

He laughed.

“How do you do that?” she asked.

Tristan shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s not something I really think about. Like walking or something. You just figure out how to do it, then it pretty much comes naturally.”

She watched him unloop the mooring lines from the dock above them, then sit on the bench across from her, facing her. After a moment in which he simply looked at her, a light smile still tugging the corners of his mouth, she raised her brow.

“Now what?”

“Now we go,” he replied.

“Go where?” she asked, and when he pointed beyond her shoulder, she turned. A small, cragged outcropping of granite and pine forest jutted out of the middle of the bay—Fannette Island, once part of the estate upon which Vikingsholm had been built.

“The island?” She glanced back at Tristan again, then pointedly at his empty hands. “Don’t you think we’re going to need some oars?”

He laughed again. “We’ll make do.”

The boat began to move, seemingly of its own volition, slicing a sudden but certain path away from the dock and marking a brisk pace. Wind off the lake was crisp and cold against her face; spray from the edge of the bowline peppered her cheeks in icy, miniscule droplets.

He’s doing this, she realized in amazed fascination, looking first at Tristan, then pivoting in her seat to admire the view ahead of them as they left the dock and beach behind. The lake was beautiful, the cerulean water yielding to the shades of aqua and green that had given the bay its name the deeper it went. As

the sun rose, it gleamed across the mirrored surface. Fannette Island drew closer and closer; now she could clearly discern the small, castle-like stone building at its rocky peak—the “tea house,” it was called.

“You know, they filmed the old TV show *Bonanza* out here,” Tristan remarked, drawing her gaze. Her hair whipped into her face, flapping against her cheeks; with only his mind, he drove the boat forward with all of the speed of an outboard motor. “The water’s always blue like this, and it very seldom rains.” He nodded skyward. “Clear blue skies, clear blue water, evergreen forests in between. It was the first TV show to be filmed in Technicolor. They wanted it to be worth the while.”

Tessa shook her head. “I’ve never seen it,” she said, calling out over the hissing rush of water.

Tristan laughed. “Me, either,” he admitted. “Michel told me about it.”

The boat slowed as they approached the jagged island shoreline. The shallows here were full of Canadian geese, as they rushed down from hidden alcoves among the rocks and reeds and splashed into the lake, honking and hissing at the would-be intruders.

“It’s nesting season,” Tristan explained. “The island’s technically closed for the season, until the summer. The geese migrate in and breed here. There are no predators to bother them. Watch out for them, though—they’ll bite.”

He brought the boat aground along a narrow scrap of pebbled beach, sliding it nearly in full out of the water. More geese came out to scold as Tristan climbed out of the boat, then offered his hands and helped Tessa follow. The soles of her canvas sneakers sank into the wet, sticky sand; icy dampness immediately seeped through the soles.

“Tristan...” she said in protest, drawing away from him as he tried to lead her from the boat. When he glanced at her, quizzical, she frowned, folding her arms. “What are we doing here? I’m cold. I’m hungry. I didn’t have a really good day yesterday and I’m still not exactly in what you’d call a great mood.”

“Trust me,” Tristan said. He ducked his head and stripped off his sweatshirt, offering it to her. “Put this on if you want.” She made no move to take it, and he laughed. “Come on. I don’t have cooties or anything.”

She couldn’t help herself and smiled. “Fine. Whatever.” Snatching the shirt, she pulled it hurriedly on over her long-sleeved tee, not missing the fact she could still feel the residual warmth of his body—and discern the residual scent of his cologne, something light and musky, with a hint of spice—in the plush fabric.

Stop it, she told herself. She didn’t want to think about the fact that Tristan smelled good. She didn’t want to notice anything about him—or any other man, for that matter. She was pissed off at Rene specifically, and at men in general, and her grandmother’s words echoed inside her mind:

Cruel to be kind... Only a man could conceive of logic like that.

“Okay.” Crossing her arms again, she frowned at him. “Show me whatever it is you want to show me, then let’s get back. Eleanor will be up soon. We’re going to Virginia City today. Aren’t you tired, anyway? You’ve been up all night.”

“This is nothing,” he replied, slipping his hand against hers again and leading her toward a thinly marked path leading up the granite slopes from the beach. “I used to pull eighteen, twenty hour shifts all the time in med school. Sometimes more than that, and usually back to back. Watch your step here...”

He glanced back at her, and when he drew another of those gentle telekinetic bubbles around her, her eyes widened in surprise. “Don’t be scared,” he told her, lifting her over a particularly steep and treacherous part of the trail.

“I’m not,” she whispered. While she floated up, up, up, weightless as a helium balloon wafting on a persistent breeze, he climbed up on foot, moving with the ease of someone not only accustomed to that particular trail, but to hiking and climbing in general. Which would explain the hard-cut definition in his lean and muscular build, as she’d observed only yesterday.

But she didn’t want to think about, either.

She reached the top before he did; again, she felt the air around her shift when he released her, as if had been heavier somehow, more dense, nearly fluid, as he’d held her suspended with his mind. As he crested the top of the

steep trail, his hair was windswept, his brow glossed with a light sheen of perspiration. Otherwise, he seemed unaffected, not winded or weary in the least.

“Hey,” he said with a grin, swatting his hands together to dust off dirt. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Yeah.” He stepped toward her, and she didn’t move. The closer he came, the more like a challenge it again became, as if he was deliberately encroaching on her personal space, trying to make her shy away. She didn’t move, stubborn and suddenly somewhat excited by this strange, flirtatious dare. Her heart hammered as he drew within inches of her, then closer still.

Women have needs, just like men, Eleanor had told her, and all at once, Tessa found herself acutely aware of those needs within herself. More than just that light hint of his cologne, she could smell Tristan’s blood, too, as it coursed in his veins, because like hers, his heart rate had quickened as he’d drawn near; every pounding measure made him all the more intoxicating.

“Tristan...” she whispered, because he cocked his head now, tilting slightly downward.

“Yes?” he whispered back, and for a moment, his lips brushed hers, softly, sweetly.

“I...I have to pee...” she gasped, jerking back as if he’d bitten her. She pushed past him, wide-eyed, cheeks ablaze, her breath caught in her throat. “Excuse me.”

She could have sworn he chuckled quietly from behind her as she darted behind some sparse underbrush beneath venerable pines. Cursing herself under her breath, Tessa clapped a hand against one of the trunks and held onto her jeans and underpants with the other as she squatted to urinate.

What the hell are you thinking? she asked herself, even though she knew *exactly* what she was thinking—and what Tristan had been thinking, too.

He kissed me, she thought, rubbing the side of her hand against her mouth. At first she did this lightly, then, angry at herself, she did so more fervently. *And I let him! God, for a moment there, I even wanted him to!*

For a moment, I wanted him.

If she was being honest with herself, it had been more than a momentary indiscretion. Tristan was a striking young man; she'd noticed that from the first. But yesterday had changed things. Seeing him naked had stirred a powerful and undeniable physical attraction in her; spending the afternoon with him in Reno, getting to know him better had only made him emotionally attractive, as well.

Women have needs, Eleanor had said, and goddamn it, that was true. Rene had instilled those needs in her. Whereas sex with Martin had always been painful and humiliating, making love to Rene had been amazing; something she'd enjoyed, grown accustomed to, and now missed.

Something I can't have anymore, not with him anyway, she realized with a visceral ache. *Not after what he did to Brandon. Oh, God, how could I ever let him touch me again? I can't. I can't forgive him for that. Not ever.*

She shook her head, then her ass to dry her pee, and stood again, wriggling back into her pants. *I don't want Tristan*, she told herself. *I'm confused and upset...angry with Rene...everything's a mess and I lost my head for a moment...never mind my heart.*

I do not want Tristan Morin.

Thus steeled, she marched back toward the trail, where Tristan still waited for her. It would have been so much easier to maintain her newfound resolve had he not been so goddamn handsome.

"Better now?"

"Yes, thank you." She gave him a pointed scowl. "Don't do that again."

His brows raised, the portrait of innocent bewilderment. "Do what?"

"Exactly," she replied, tromping past him, leaving him behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Tristan made her breakfast.

He brought her to the highest point on Fannette Island, where the superstructure of the old tea house still stood. The roof long gone, along with any glass in the windows or remnants of wooden floors or trim, it loomed like the ruins of a medieval castle overlooking the mouth of the bay.

Here, on the remains of the original stone foundation, Tristan had a two-burner propane camping stove waiting for them. He'd spread out a blanket, pinned in place beneath a large and apparently heavy picnic basket; in the time it had taken him to get Tessa and bring her here, the corners and sides of the blanket had blown in the wind and tangled together, flopped and knotted atop the basket. He jogged ahead of her to straighten them, while she blinked in bewildered but charmed surprise.

"What is this?" she asked.

"*Ta-da.*" He turned, arms outstretched, and she laughed as the blanket he'd only just now so carefully rearranged flapped loose again in a sharp gust of wind. "Come on, come sit down," he said, fighting with it again. "I'm going to make you breakfast."

"Breakfast," she repeated, approaching him, then sitting down slowly, warily on the picnic blanket. "Why?"

This time, his surprise wasn't forced or joking. "Because I like you," he said. This admittance seemed to disconcert him, and he looked quickly away, forking his fingers through his hair. "And, uh, I'm not a bad cook. Or so I've been told. And the view from up here is pretty spectacular first thing in the morning. Here, come and see."

He caught her hands and drew her to her feet, leading her to one of the barren windows. Beyond it, indeed the view was breath-taking, and she leaned out, smiling as she took in the sweeping, scenic vista.

She returned to the blanket and sat, arms hooked around her knees, watching him make omelets. He'd packed all of his supplies inside the basket, and the morning had been cool enough to keep it all fresh—eggs, milk, cheese, butter. Once he had several thick pats melting in a small, chrome-finished skillet, he began cracking the eggs deftly, one at a time, using one hand only, dropping the fat, golden yolks and gooey, iridescent whites down into a stainless steel bowl.

“This is very nice of you,” she remarked.

He poured the egg mixture into the skillet; it immediately began to bubble and hiss in the hot butter. “Yeah, well, hey—I’m a nice sort of guy. And like you said, yesterday was rough on you, and I figured since I’m partly to blame for that, I ought to at least try to make it up to you.”

“You?” Tessa blinked in surprise, then laughed. “Tristan, you didn’t do anything.”

Opening the package of shredded cheese, he began to sift a loose handful down onto the eggs. “Yeah, but you thought I had.”

“I was wrong. Trust me, spending time with you yesterday...it was nice. Definitely the bright spot on an otherwise really shitty day.”

He chuckled, prodding almost idly at the omelet with the corner of a spatula. “You think?”

“Yes. In fact, a part of me wishes we’d never come back from Reno.” She said this last ruefully.

The corner of his mouth lifted. “A part of me does, too.”

She clapped her hands appreciatively when he presented her with her steaming omelet on a styrofoam plate, accompanied by paper napkin and plastic fork. “Breaking out the fine china, I see,” she kidded, making him laugh.

“Only the best for you, milady,” he told her with a spatula salute.

He finished making an omelet for himself, then sat across from her while they ate. “Any good?” he asked, after she’d taken a bite.

Tessa nodded. "Very good," she mumbled around a mouthful of egg. He'd produced a thermos of orange juice from the picnic basket as well, and she took a drink to wash down her bite. "You were right. You're a good cook."

Seeming pleased by her compliment, he shrugged nonchalantly. "My mom taught me when I was a kid."

For a moment, the comment hung in the air between them, seeming like something that he'd uttered reflexively, then longed to take back, judging by the sudden tension in his shoulders, the way he averted his gaze to his plate.

"The woman at the clinic..." Tessa said softly. "The one in that room...with the water tank...she's your mother."

Tristan nodded. Sorrow passed briefly across his face, and she felt her heart ache for him. "How long has she been sick?"

"Almost three years." He looked up at her. "But she got off lucky. Shortly after her initial diagnosis, she had a brain aneurysm that ruptured, a subarachnoid hemorrhage. It caused her to have a massive stroke, which pretty much left her in a persistent vegetative state." By means of translation, he added, "She's brain-dead."

"Oh," Tessa whispered. "Oh, Tristan, I...I'm so sorry."

He shook his head. "I'm not. Like I said, she's lucky it happened. She has no cognitive ability whatsoever. She hasn't been aware of anything—not who she is, who I am, what's happening to her, nothing—since it happened. And that's a blessing, trust me."

"She has what Eleanor has," Tessa said, and Tristan nodded.

"She's the control subject in Michel's therapy trial," he said. "She was incapacitated shortly after Eleanor's diagnosis, too. So Michel decided to try his synthetic clotting factor treatment on Eleanor and compare her deterioration to Mom's." Even as he said this, he winced. "That didn't come out right. I...I didn't mean..."

"It's alright," Tessa said. "I understand."

I'm not afraid of dying, Eleanor had told her the night before, as they'd gazed together out at the darkened forest beyond the windows. Her eyes had

glistened with tears as she'd spoken, her expression forlorn. *I'm afraid of dying alone.*

"How bad is your mother?" she asked Tristan. Michel and Eleanor had said the disease usually proved fatal within three years of diagnosis, which meant Tristan's mother had to be near death.

"Pretty bad." He shook his head, poking at his food with his fork as if he'd lost his appetite for it. "We keep her suspended in water...I guess you've seen the tank...because any physical contact...it just peels the skin back, the tissue underneath..." Setting his plate aside, he shoved his fingers through his hair and sighed. "We have to change the water every day because we haven't been able to catheterize her for months now...without it tearing her up. So I use my telekinesis...it's the only way to move or hold her, while Karen empties the tank, then refills it. She can't eat...can't drink...can't swallow. She's wasting away, her body turning on itself to sustain it. Eventually, even the friction of her lungs expanding and contracting...it will cause her to hemorrhage internally, and she'll die. I keep hoping for that. I mean, I know she's not there anymore, not her mind anyway—not even a hint of her. I know, I've tried to sense it. She's all of the way gone, so it doesn't even matter, but still, to see her that way..."

His voice grew strained; a sudden sheen glossed his eyes. "She's my mom," he whispered. Tessa reached for him, wanting to comfort him, but he stood abruptly, huffing out a sharp breath, struggling to compose himself.

"I...uh, I'll be right back," he said, trying to fake a smile for her. "My turn to take a piss."

When he came back, the tears were gone, and his smile was far more unforced.

"Better now?" she asked, and his smile widened.

"Much." He folded his legs, sitting to face her again. "I promise I didn't bring you all of the way out here just so I could bore you to death with more of my life story."

“You’re not boring me.” Leaning forward, she draped her hand against his, drawing his gaze. “I like listening to you.”

“That’s good,” he remarked. “Since I can’t seem to shut up whenever I’m around you.”

They laughed together, and it occurred to Tessa that it felt good, that for the moment, at least, she wasn’t thinking about Brandon or Rene or focusing on her heartache and fears.

“You’re an amazing woman, Tessa,” Tristan said.

“God.” She managed a clumsy laugh. “How do you figure?”

“You must be. Eleanor’s told me about how things are in Kentucky. I can’t imagine what your life there must have been like, but I know it was probably bad enough that to hear me whining about all of my so-called problems must seem like nothing by comparison.”

“I felt trapped in Kentucky,” she told him. “And it sounds like you feel that way here.” After a momentary silence, she said, “You really stay because of you mother, don’t you? Maybe Michel paid for your school and owns your house, your car, but you’re a doctor. You can go anywhere you want, change your name, start over again, and he couldn’t stop you...not if you really wanted. So there must be something else keeping you here...something or someone that makes you feel like you can’t leave.”

When she looked up, he met her gaze, his brows raised. “Amazing,” he said again, this time with a crooked smile. His fingers fanned out across the leg of his jeans, and hers slipped into the crevices left between. She noticed him looking at her, studying her with a gentle sort of intensity, and felt her cheeks bloom with shy color.

“So why *did* you bring me out here?” she asked. “I mean, this place is really beautiful and all, but I’m beginning to think there’s no such thing as a room-*without-a-view* in Lake Tahoe, and you could have fixed me breakfast back at Michel’s house.”

Tristan smiled. “I brought you out here to tell you that your brother will be okay.”

She blinked at him, her own smile abruptly fading.

“Michel and I may have our differences,” Tristan continued. “Plenty of them, in fact, but the fact remains that he’s the most powerful son of a bitch I’ve ever met. You saw what Naima could do? Michel taught her everything she knows—and that’s not the half of what *he* can do.”

“The Elders are very strong,” Tessa began.

“Michel’s stronger,” Tristan interjected. “I promise you that.”

“Why?” She shook her head. “How can you do the things you do—you, Michel, Naima? The way you moved that tree...the boat...me.”

“Didn’t Eleanor tell you? She didn’t explain?” When Tessa shook her head, he sighed, then tucked his hair back from his face. “We weren’t born different than the other Brethren, your clans in Kentucky,” he said. “But there, you guys feed from humans. And Michel’s always taught us to feed from each other.”

Tessa’s eyes widened. “What?”

“It makes sense. If you feed enough from a human to satiate yourself—not just satisfy the bloodlust, but really take what you need for sustenance—you kill them. But one of us...you can drain a Brethren nearly dry; give us a day or two and we’re as good as new again. A fully replenishing food resource. The side effects are just added bonuses.”

“Side effects?”

Tristan wagged his fingers demonstratively. “Telekinesis, for starters. It makes your telepathy stronger, too, more fine-tuned, more powerful. Michel said drinking Brethren blood triggers some kind of endocrine response that human blood doesn’t, releases hormones and neurotransmitters inside our brains, jump-starts abilities that would otherwise be latent in us.”

“Is that why you let Naima...?” Tessa reached for the collar of his shirt, brushing it aside enough to reveal the fading imprints of Naima’s teeth, the ghost-like remnants of the bite wounds. At her touch, he shied away, shrugging his shoulder to dislodge her hand.

“Hey, speaking of feeding...” His voice filled with forced nonchalance. “You probably need to, right? With the baby, I mean.”

“No.” She shook her head fervently. “I...I’m okay.”

She’d only fed once without killing her victim; when she’d fed from Rene to save the life of her unborn child. It had taken every ounce of strength and will she could summon or muster not to inadvertently drain him dry in the process. She wasn’t about to test that same fledgling resolve on Tristan here—in the middle of nowhere, with no one to see or stop her if something went wrong.

Dubious, he said, “You sure? I’m talking as a doctor now. You need to be feeding regularly. Every few days or so. You’re starting to look peaked. When’s the last time you—?”

“I’m not helping you fulfill your death wish, Tristan,” she told him firmly, rising to her feet and brushing off the seat of her jeans.

He laughed. “Death wish? What are you talking about?”

She pointed to his neck, even though the wounds were no longer visible. “I saw.”

He knew what she was talking about; his expression had grown shame-faced and sheepish, his gaze anxious and darting.

“I know Naima did that to you,” she said.

And I know why, she thought, because Karen had told her.

Naima didn’t attack him. He likes it when she does this. He gets off on almost bleeding to death.

He drew his hand self-consciously to his neck. “It...it’s nothing.”

“You could have died.”

Fully replenishing food source or not, the Brethren could bleed to death, just as a human could. It took an almost complete and absolute exsanguination to do this, to deliver one of them so near the brink of death even their accelerated healing capabilities couldn’t restore them—but it was possible.

He smiled, a sad sort of smirk. “Hey,” he remarked. “It’s a way out, isn’t it?”

Tessa marched over to him and folded her legs beneath her, squatting. She grabbed him by the hair at the nape of his neck, startling him; he gasped, a sharp, hissing wince as she wrenched his head back, exposing his throat.

“Is that what you want, then?” His pulse had started to pound; she could see it throbbing beneath the pale slope of his neck, could smell the intoxicating, heady sweetness of his blood, suddenly adrenaline-infused, as it rushed through him. She hadn’t been serious; had only meant to shock him out of his foolishness, but now, at the scent of his blood, the awareness of it, she could feel the bloodlust in her stirring. Her gums throbbed as her canine teeth began to extend.

Tessa leaned toward him, drawing the tips of those lengthening teeth against his skin, craning his head back further, leaving his throat vulnerable. His breath came short and ragged, like a lover seized with sudden, unforgiving and urgent need. His hands slipped against her shoulders, helping to guide her, position her mouth at his throat.

“Is this what you want?” she whispered, lipping now around her fangs, even as she settled them lightly, but with growing insistence against the still-healing wounds.

“Yes,” he gasped hoarsely, and she could feel the jackhammering of his heart in tandem with her own. His entire body was tense, the muscles just beneath his skin’s surface rigid with anticipation of her strike; his fingertips hooked into her shoulders fiercely, and he shivered with nearly electrified tension.

Sinking her teeth into him was like into softened butter. He tasted salty and sweet, his flesh yielding easily; he uttered a breathless groan as her canines slid deep into the muscles and underlying tissue to find their mark in his carotid. His blood filled her mouth in a sudden, tangy burst, and she clamped her lips to his throat, gulping greedily, swallowing every thick, hot mouthful as it came to her.

“Don’t stop,” Tristan whispered, pulling her closer until she straddled his lap, clutching at her to keep her mouth against him. The more she drank, the more she wanted, the bloodlust within her growing stronger, it seemed like, not slaked. His body relaxed, the resistance draining; she moved her lips slightly to adjust her seal on his throat as his head slumped, his shoulders drooping. As he

weakened, his hands slipped away from her, but he drew them up again, feebly, hooking his fingers in her hair.

“Don’t stop,” he breathed and she didn’t; she couldn’t. The bloodlust was unleashed now, and this time, there were no illusions of her unborn child calling her victim *Daddy* to stop her from taking all that she needed or wanted; everything she could.

“Don’t stop...” His voice was little more than a push of air against her ear now. “Please...don’t stop...don’t...”

And then, with a breathless cry, he jerked against her, sounding for all the world as if he’d just experienced an amazing burst of sexual release. Startled, she jerked back, her teeth slipping from his throat.

“Tristan...!” she gasped as he crumpled. “Oh...oh, my God...!”

I’ve killed him! she thought, scrambling forward, her bright, sudden panic shocking the bloodlust from her. *Oh, God, what have I done? What the hell was I thinking?*

“Tristan?” Leaning over, she cradled his face between her hands, stroking his hair back, trying to rouse him. “Tristan? Answer me! Oh, God...!”

His eyelids fluttered open dazedly. “It’s...alright...” he murmured with a weak smile. He brushed his fingers clumsily against her cheek before letting his hand slump back to the ground again.

“What have I done?” Tessa began to cry, her tears spilling down her cheeks, spattering against his.

“It’s alright,” he breathed again. “I just...I need to...sleep...”

“I thought you were dead,” she whimpered. “I...I thought I’d...”

He shook his head, his eyes closing again. “Not dead...” he said, his voice fading. “Just...crossed...the threshold...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tessa curled alongside Tristan, resting her cheek against the nook of his shoulder, her hand draped lightly on his stomach while he slept. She'd glutted herself on his blood; in the aftermath of such a greedy feeding, she felt drowsy and dazed. Eventually, lulled by the rhythmic measure of his heartbeat beneath her ear, by the warmth of his body as it slowly, inexorably restored, Tessa closed her eyes and dozed.

When she woke, the quality of daylight around them had shifted from early morning to at least midday, nearly lunch time. Tessa sat up, grimacing at the stiffness in her body from having slept against the stone floor of the dilapidated tea house.

What time is it? she wondered, pushing her hair back from her face. *Shit, and I promised to go shopping with Grandmother Eleanor today.*

"Tristan." She leaned over him and he stirred, turning his face as she touched him. "Tristan?"

"*Mmmnnn,*" he murmured, then his eyes opened sleepily, and he blinked at her. "Hey, you..."

Tessa smiled. "Hey."

"What...time is it?" With a frown, he grunted and tried to sit up; with Tessa's help, a supportive arm around his middle, he was able to. He glanced at his watch. "We should be getting back. Eleanor...will worry..."

"Can you manage?" she asked, worried. He still seemed groggy; when she helped him to his feet, he stumbled and leaned heavily against her to keep his balance.

"Oh, yeah." He nodded, forking his fingers through his hair, shoving it back from his brow. "I...I just..."

There were bloodstains on his shirt, his collar laid back to reveal new twin points of fresh scabbing, fresh enough to still smell faintly, sweetly with his blood.

“...I don’t feel so good...” he finished, then sat down hard, practically collapsing where he stood.

“I’m sorry.” Tessa knelt beside him, keeping her arm around him. “This is all my fault. I can’t believe I did that. I...I’m so sorry, Tristan. I just...you were right. It’s been a while since I fed, and I know I need to, and I only meant to tease you but I just...I...”

Her voice cut short as his fingertips pressed against her mouth. “You...didn’t do...” he said, shaking his head. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Naima didn’t attack him, Karen had told her. He likes it when she does this. He gets off on almost bleeding to death.

She stared at Tristan for a long moment, as his hand lingered at her mouth. Finally, when his fingertips slipped away in a soft caress, she whispered, “You told me you had ‘crossed the threshold.’ What does that mean?”

“When...someone feeds from you...” Tristan said. “...enough so that if you were human, you’d die...your body attempts one last, instinctive *fight or flight* response. That’s crossing the threshold. It...it gives you this...massive burst of endorphins. It feels like...God, like nothing in the world. It’s incredible.”

Still weak, he leaned into her, resting his head against her shoulder. “I’ll be alright,” he murmured, his eyelids drooping closed again. “Just...just give me a minute...”

He slept again. Tessa lay him back against the ground, shrugging out of the fleece pullover and folding it into a makeshift pillow to tuck beneath his head. She covered him with the picnic blanket, then carried the remains of their breakfast down to the beach. Making her way down the steep, sloping path by foot was a lot harder than being telekinetically carried up, but with the exception of a couple of missteps that netted her a muddy bottom and a tear in the left leg of her jeans, she survived relatively unscathed.

The geese were pissed off at her intrusion so near their nesting sites, but forgave her for a little while as she tossed them scraps from the omelets. After that, they settled for ignoring her for the most part as she followed the muddy

shoreline, feeling the press of the cool breeze against her face, listening to the burbling water as it lapped along the cragged beach.

She found herself gazing across Emerald Bay directly at Vikingsholm, and when she shivered, it wasn't on account of the chill. *Everything changed there*, she thought. *God, had I thought things were fucked up before that day? Little did I know.*

Even though she struggled not to, she found her thoughts turning again and again to Rene, to what he had done to Brandon.

I did it for you, he'd told her, only how could he say such a thing and think she could ever believe it, much less take comfort in it? *You and the bébé. I made him promise, pischouette—I made that son of a bitch give me his word they wouldn't come after you anymore. That you'd be free. I did it because I love you.*

Did you think that would make everything okay, Rene? she thought, tears stinging her eyes. As they trailed down her cheeks, the wind cut icily into the streaks, making her shiver anew. *Did you think if you said those words—'I love you'—that I'd just forget what you did, forgive you for it? Did you think I could forget about my own brother?*

Pressing her hands to her belly, she opened her mind and sensed the warm, golden glow of the baby girl within her womb. *My daughter*, she thought. She'd fed well for the first time in ages, and the baby's illumination within her mind was dazzling and bright; like her mother, she, too, had drawn sustenance from Tristan.

"What are we going to do now?" Tessa whispered to the baby. For a while, at least, her happy ending had seemed nearly cut and dry—she would build a life together with Rene, while Brandon did the same with Lina, and if that had meant a life perpetually on the run from the Elders, then so be it.

Now that life—*any* life with Rene—seemed hopelessly out of the question. *Because I can't forgive him for this. I just can't.*

Which meant there was nothing for her. No place to go, no one to turn to. Brandon was gone, and Lina was, too; despite Tristan's and Eleanor's

reassurances, Tessa couldn't fathom that things would turn out okay, that they'd be able to rescue her twin.

And no matter how much she might have wanted to, Tessa knew she couldn't stay in Tahoe with Eleanor. *Because she's with the Morins now—with Rene's family. And Rene should be here with them, too.*

The baby fluttered in her abdomen, a happy little flip-flop and Tessa drew her palms back and forth, rubbing the growing swell of her belly. "Oh, God," she whispered, staring out at the water. "What am I going to do now?"

To her surprise, Tristan was gone when she returned to the tea house, having picked her way back up the trail on mostly hands and knees, for fear of falling. Now she stood at the top, in the middle of the building's stone foundation, dirty and bewildered.

"Tristan?" she called, walking from one dilapidated wall to the other, peering through the windows, puzzled. "Tristan?"

"Over here," she heard him say, and turned to see him limp slowly out of the woods, leaning against a tree trunk as he passed. She hurried to his side to help him and he smiled. "I got it."

"No, you don't. You're about to fall over." She frowned. "What were you doing? Why didn't you call for me? I would have helped you."

"I was taking a piss," he replied with a wry hook to his mouth. "You would have helped with that? Because you know...I could always go back, try again...?"

Tessa laughed. "No, thank you."

He raised a speculative brow. "You sure?"

She slapped his belly. "Quite. Now come on. We need to go...and you're obviously feeling better. Eleanor's got to be worried by now."

As she walked away from him, meaning to go and collect their picnic things, he caught her hand and stopped her.

"Marry me."

She turned, blinking at him stupidly, certain she'd misheard. "*What?*"

“Marry me,” he said again. “There are at least a dozen wedding chapels per square mile in Reno—you can’t swing a dead cat without hitting one. What say you and me, we go back to the Jeep, drive out there and get married?”

“When? Now?” Like an owl, she felt all-eyes, ogling and stupefied. He nodded, and she shook her head. “Are you nuts? I...we can’t get married.”

“Why not?”

“Because I...I don’t...I just...” Tessa stammered. “I don’t even know you.”

“Sure you do.” He laughed. “I think I’ve told you more about myself in the last day and a half than I’ve ever told anyone else in my entire life. And here...” When he opened his mind to her, she could sense it like a door being thrown open and a sudden draft bursting free. “Whatever you want to know, you can.”

“I don’t need to read your mind,” she sputtered in protest. “I don’t want to read your mind! I can’t marry you—I don’t love you!” Because this sounded harsher than she meant it to, she added, abashed, “I mean, I...I like you well enough, Tristan. You...you’re a good-looking man...very good looking, in fact, and you’ve been very nice to me...wonderful even, and I...” She shook her head and he laughed again. “Look, I just don’t know you well enough to love you, and you really can’t expect me to believe that you love me!”

He laughed again, a reaction that she was beginning to find infuriating. “What’s so damn funny?” she demanded.

“You come from a society where your clan Elders arrange your marriages,” he said pointedly. “Love doesn’t have anything to do with *those*, either.”

His brows lifted, and he caressed her face, trailing his fingers through her hair and sending a not-entirely unpleasant shiver through her. “Yesterday with you...it was definitely the bright spot on an otherwise shitty life for me,” he said. “For a long time...my whole life, in fact...I’ve felt like I was the odd man out. I’m the last of my kind—a full-blooded Brethren Morin. There won’t be any others, not like me, because the women who came out here with Michel...they’re all either dead, dying or sterile from old age. When I’m with you, I feel like...like I have a place. A purpose. No, I can’t tell you that I love you, not right now

anyway, not yet. And while I can't promise that you'll ever love me as much you love Rene...because I know you do...I swear to you, Tessa, I'll work hard to make a good life for all of us—you, me and the baby.”

“Tristan...” she began, but he cut her off.

“You told me I wouldn't leave this place because there was something or someone making me stay...but maybe I've just been waiting for someone to come along who makes me feel ready to go.”

He leaned toward her and kissed her again. In that moment, she realized how lonely she was, too; how truly, deeply and savagely Rene had broken not only her heart, but her hopes and dreams for her future—and her baby's. He'd left her pinwheeling for balance on the business end of a razor blade, and all at once, Tristan was offering her a lifeline.

“Marry me, Tessa,” he whispered as their lips drew apart.

All at once, something that had sounded so illogical and improbable only moments earlier made absolute and perfect sense to her. “Alright,” she said with a nod. “I will.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A loud clatter from the living room startled Eleanor wide-eyed and awake. It sounded like glass breaking, followed by the disharmonic din of something falling heavily against the piano keyboard. Several more thuds and muffled crashes followed, and Eleanor sat up, bewildered.

What in the world...? Pushing the covers aside, she crawled out of bed. She'd given Tessa her bed for the night, taking Michel's master suite on the first floor for herself. The pale silk robe that matched the floor-length slip of her nightgown lay draped at the foot of the king-sized mattress; Eleanor hooked it in hand and shrugged it over her shoulders as she padded toward the doorway.

She wasn't immediately alarmed. Humans had no reason to venture that far back into their private compound, which all but eliminated the possibility of burglars. However, one night shortly after her arrival in Tahoe, she'd inadvertently left one of the sliding glass doors to the patio partially ajar, and an industrious—not to mention curious—black bear had wandered into the house during the night, blundering about in search of food. For that reason, Michel now left a deer rifle tucked in the corner by the bureau, loaded with .30-caliber rounds.

She took the heavy firearm in her hands, chambered a round, then left the bedroom, stealing soundlessly down the corridor toward the living room. Drawing the rifle up, keeping it poised and ready, she stepped into the living room. It was bright outside, late morning, maybe ten o'clock or so—she'd slept in, it seemed.

Strange time for bears to be about, she thought. Across the way, she could see one of the patio doors slid half-way ajar. A large, heavy cut-glass bowl filled with water and gardenia blossoms had been knocked off a nearby table—the shattering of glass she'd heard—leaving broken shards, a broad puddle and crushed, half-drowned flowers littering the floor.

She heard a soft scuffle from her right and wheeled about, leveling the rifle and opening her mind simultaneously. She'd sensed something, that prickling in

the air that meant another of the Brethren was close at hand, and although at first, she'd mistaken the sensation for her awareness of Tessa, when she turned, she found herself pointing the barrel of the gun instead at Rene.

"You...you going to shoot me, *chère*?" he asked. Teeth gritted, arm clamped protectively at his midriff, he leaned heavily against the wall, feeble and stumbling. His hair was disheveled, his chin and cheeks coated in heavy beard stubble. He wore only a pair of blue jeans, no shirt or shoes, and he shivered violently, uncontrollably as he looked at her. His brows were narrowed, draping his eyes in heavy, menacing shadows, and the corners of his mouth were pulled down in a severe frown.

"I said...you going to shoot me?" he said again, his voice hoarse and low. "Because if you are, *chère*, then I suggest you get on with it...before I snatch that pea-shooter out of your goddamn hands and cram the business end of it up your sweet little ass."

Eleanor shied back, not lowering the gun, keeping her index finger flexed lightly against the trigger. "What are you doing here?"

His frown deepened. "I came to borrow some sugar," he replied dryly. "Why the hell do you *think* I'm here, woman?" When he tried to step forward, it clearly hurt him; he sucked in a pained gasp and nearly doubled over. "I...I want to see Tessa."

"Where's Karen?" Eleanor asked. "The woman at the clinic, the human. What have you done to her?"

"Nothing." Rene shook his head, gritted his teeth and righted himself. "I...I didn't do anything to her. Left her like I found her...sleeping in front of the computer." He met Eleanor's eyes, and his expression softened, his brows lifting. "Please let me see Tessa. Just...just let me talk to her. Let me try to explain."

"Explain what?" Eleanor asked coolly, arching her brow. "That you turned her twin brother over to a man who's sworn to kill him as part of a deal to supposedly keep her safe?"

That deep crease between Rene's brows furrowed again. "You and I both know Augustus Noble isn't going to hurt Brandon," he seethed, shambling

forward again. For every step he staggered toward her, Eleanor drew back, keeping the gun pointed between them. “Just...just like you and I both know he probably couldn’t if he tried. None of them could. Because Brandon is like them...” Rene flapped his hand, loosely indicating the house around them, but Eleanor understood his meaning. *Like the Morins*, he was saying in a roundabout way; like Naima, Tristan and Michel.

“Brandon’s strong like them...he...he can probably do all that bullshit with his mind, the same as they can...he just doesn’t know it yet. Only...” Rene locked gazed with her, glaring. “Only your husband knows it, doesn’t he? I used to think he was scared of Brandon because of it, but now...now I think different. I think Augustus Noble is afraid of the *others* finding out what Brandon can do...because he can do it, too.”

“I don’t care what you think,” Eleanor told him, although he was so nearly dead-on in his guesswork, chill bumps had raised along her arms beneath the filmy sleeves of her robe. “I don’t care why you did what you did—it was wrong. It was horrible and cruel and you’ve broken my granddaughter’s heart. I want you out of this house. Now, or I’ll shoot.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Rene seethed. “Not until I talk to Tessa. So if you’re going to shoot me, bitch...like I said before, go ahead and do it.”

He knocked the barrel of the gun out of her hands with enough force to send Eleanor stumbling sideways and into the wall. He pushed past her, tromping heavily toward the stairs.

“Leave her alone!” Eleanor cried. Forgoing the rifle, she rushed after Rene, grabbing him by the arm. “Tessa! Tessa—run!”

At this, Rene caught her beneath the shelf of her chin, cutting her voice abruptly short. He pushed her back against the wall, not hurting her, merely immobilizing her. Looking stricken, he said, “I’m not going to hurt her. Is that what you think?”

When he turned Eleanor loose, she staggered back, her hand darting to her throat. He hadn’t gripped her hard, but in her condition, it would leave bruises

anyway; already she could feel the dim heat of blood pooling beneath the surface of her flesh as the contusions formed.

“I love Tessa,” Rene said, his eyes round and pleading. “I know you don’t know me, much less care about my life, but I...I’ve never had anything or anyone...not like that, not like Tessa. Everyone I’ve ever tried to love I’ve wound up pushing away. This time I...I was trying to do right by her—and the baby.”

He stared at Eleanor, visibly anguished. “Don’t you think I know what I’ve done?” he whispered. “How much I’ve hurt her? I swear to God, lady—on my *Grandmère’s* grave, I only did it to protect her. Tessa and the baby...they’re all I’ve got. They’re all I’ve ever had.” His eyes had glossed over with tears, and he hung his head. “Please let me talk to her. I’m begging you. Just let me try.”

She left him crumpled against one of the couches in the living room and went upstairs. Ordinarily, she might have been tempted to take her gun in hand again and chase him out the door with it, but something had convinced her otherwise.

It was what he’d said, the way he’d said it, the simultaneous looks of love and desperation in his eyes as he’d pleaded with her.

Because I wish Augustus would say those things to me, she thought, as she stood outside of the closed bedroom door. *I wish he’d say them about me.*

She rapped once, lightly against the door, then opened it a wide enough margin to poke her head through. “Tessa?” she called. “Tessa, darling, it’s me, Eleanor.”

The curtains had been left partially open inside, and sunlight spilled through in a wide pool against the floor. The bed was empty, the blankets turned back, and of Tessa, there was no sign.

“Tessa?” With a frown, Eleanor turned and went down the hallway, checking the library and bathroom. “Tessa?”

Where could she be? They’d both stayed up late; it had seemed like old times between them, and whatever hostility Tessa had felt toward her since their reintroduction had faded. Had Tessa roused early and gone for a walk? If she’d

gone to the clinic, it seemed likely Rene would have stumbled upon her—literally—along the way.

A cool breeze fluttered against her cheek, tugging at her hair and rippling the drapes when she returned to the bedroom. Curious, Eleanor went to the window and found it open. Strangely, she found pine needles stuck to the sill, pinned by thin globules of sap. More dusted the carpet, marking a scattered trail toward the bed.

Eleanor frowned. *Like they were tracked inside on somebody's shoes*, she thought. *Someone who could leap up two stories to reach the window...just like a cat.*

"Damn it, Tristan," she muttered aloud.

"She's gone," she told Rene as she came back downstairs.

He blinked at her, puzzled. "What do you mean, gone?"

"I mean she's not in her bed. She's nowhere upstairs. So unless she's tucked away in a cupboard somewhere, hiding from us both, then I'd say she has left the premises."

He blinked at her again. "You always such a smart-ass, *chère*?"

Eleanor smiled at him wanly. "Only when someone breaks into my house." Without missing a beat, she breezed across the living room toward the kitchen, the long overlapping hems of her gown and robe sweeping about her ankles. "I looked out the window. My car's still outside, so she couldn't have gone far. I'm sure she's just out for a walk, clearing her head a bit. How about I make us a pot of coffee?"

He seemed utterly baffled by her sudden, unexpected hospitality.

"Uh...okay."

She did him one better, making not only a carafe of French roast strong enough to sprout hairs from even the most prepubescent of chests, but a plateful of scrambled eggs, English muffins and sliced fresh oranges. Bringing these to him, serving him in the living room, she sat across from him in a comfortable

easy chair, forgoing any food for herself, and sipping from a steaming cup of coffee.

“Why are you being nice to me?” he asked with a frown.

“Because I believe you,” she replied. “Michel’s told me about you, the kind of life you’ve lived. What you said about Tessa...how you feel about her...I believe that. I truly do.” Another sip of coffee, accompanied by a slight frown. “Although you should be made aware, Rene, that my granddaughter’s not the sort who makes peace easily. You’ve hurt her terribly, and you know it—and I know you don’t need me to tell you that you may well never regain her trust or affection again.”

He studied her for a moment, chewing thoughtfully. “You have,” he remarked.

“What?”

Rene tapped his fork at her. “You have,” he said again. “Regained her trust again. I don’t know what or how much she’s told you, *chère*, but trust me. She might not have been as pissed off at you as she is me, but she was awful goddamn close.”

“Me? What on earth for?”

“Because you told Brandon she wasn’t good for anything but making babies,” he replied, shocking the breath momentarily from Eleanor. “You said what happened to him, the attack that left him deaf and dumb, it should have happened to her because then it wouldn’t have mattered; she was only good for having babies.”

Eleanor sputtered for a moment. “I...I never said that. Where would she get such a ridiculous idea?”

“From Brandon,” Rene replied, shocking her anew. “She saw it in his mind, his memories. She heard you say it.”

Immobilized with surprise, Eleanor struggled to remember. *Had* she said something so seemingly callous to Brandon with regards to his sister? It didn’t seem possible; she adored Tessa, had never considered her only worth in her childbearing abilities. *My God, I spent the grand majority of that girl’s life giving*

her everything she could ever want—more privileges than any other Brethren girl got to enjoy!

She'd tried to give Tessa the childhood she'd always dreamed of, the kind she'd read about in books and stories, the kind the Brethren didn't allow. Ballet lessons, a private dance studio, horseback riding tutelage, French lessons, piano instruction, all of the games, toys and dolls her heart desired—anything and everything for Tessa.

Even my pendant, she thought. The green sapphire Augustus had given me—the most precious thing I've ever owned, and I gave it to her. Because sweet sixteen...

"...is more special for girls." That's what she had told Tessa upon presenting her with the sapphire. Tessa had been breathless with excitement and delight; she'd offered thin protests that Eleanor had refused to entertain.

"Lift your hair up, let's put it on now," she'd murmured, drawing the chain about Tessa's slender neck. "Hush now. I want you to have it. Sweet sixteen is more special for girls."

Even as she remembered this, another recollection came to her—standing in the front foyer of the Noble mansion, speaking with Brandon. She was on her way out to some philanthropic fundraiser with Augustus and waiting for him, wrapped in a fur coat, her ears and throat draped in diamonds and gemstones that matched her gown. Brandon had waited with her—like Tessa, on the cusp of his sixteenth birthday, and looking far more a man than a boy. Handsome and tall, he'd reminded her of his father—her son, Sebastian—at his age, but more than this, he'd reminded her of Augustus from the days of their relative youth, when she'd first fallen in love with him.

"Beautiful Brandon," she'd murmured, stroking his face with affection. She remembered wondering what kind of life he might have known had it not been for his handicaps. Smarter than his brother Caine, and more handsome by far, would he have been Augustus's favorite, taken under his wing and awarded his fond attention, had Brandon's throat and ears never been maimed?

“Sometimes I wish it had been Tessa instead,” she had remarked, more to herself than anyone because there had been none save Brandon in the foyer to listen, while for his part, he couldn’t hear her. “A Brethren man should be strong—speak his mind and stand his ground, especially a Noble. Women don’t need to hear or speak to make babies, no matter their clan.”

Oh, God, now Eleanor understood, because at the time, she’d been lost in her own melancholy thoughts—the realization that in two more years, Tessa would be gone, married off to that wretched Martin Davenant, subjected to a life of what surely would be little more than hell. Eleanor herself had lived that life once, beneath her father’s eaves, and had once faced a similar, dire prospect in her own promised hand to Victor Davenant.

Women don’t need to hear or speak to make babies, no matter their clan, she’d said, and why hadn’t it occurred to her that she’d been *facing* Brandon as she’d spoken, because while he couldn’t hear her speak, he could *read her lips*, and had obviously been able to understand every word she’d uttered. Even if she hadn’t meant for him to.

“Oh, my God,” she murmured, aghast, staring at Rene. *No wonder she’s been so angry with me. And she’s pregnant now, too. God Almighty, what the poor child must think...!*

“You see, *chère?*” Rene smiled at her, popping another forkful of eggs into his mouth. “Me and you, we’re pretty much in the same boat. So maybe there’s hope for me yet, no?”

By the time Rene had finished eating and Eleanor had cleaned up the breakfast dishes, Tessa still had not returned.

Where are you? Eleanor wondered, standing at the edge of the patio railing, outside now, her hair flapping in the wind. Frowning as she swept her gaze across the surrounding pine forest, she opened her mind and strained to sense Tessa out there somewhere.

“You say she couldn’t have gotten far...” Rene limped out onto the patio. He still looked like hell, but getting some food in his stomach had helped him

recover at least a modicum of strength. “You got your car keys handy, *chère*? I say we take a drive around, see if we can spot her anywhere.”

“She left,” Naima said from behind them. Eleanor turned in surprise and found the younger woman cresting the top of the patio stairs. The last time she’d seen her, Eleanor had feared Naima had suffered a mental snap, what Michel would have called a “feral break,” reverting to a wild but inherent part of her nature that had been dormant within her for nearly two hundred years.

Today, Naima had clearly recovered. Clean and neatly dressed in a silk tunic and matching yoga pants, she was the consummate portrait of elegance and grace. Even when Rene recoiled from her, his eyes flown wide in alarm, she responded with no more than a sheepish glance at Eleanor, and a feeble, apologetic smile.

“It’s alright,” she said to him. “I haven’t come here to fight you.”

“*Ah, vraitment?*” Rene asked, his brows crimping angrily. *Oh, really?* “That’s a shame, because I was really hoping for the chance of a rematch with you, bitch.”

“Rene, stop.” Eleanor caught his arm. To Naima, she said, “Are you alright?”

“Better now.” Naima nodded, then offered a slight shrug. “I’m sorry for what’s happened, for all of the trouble I’ve caused.”

“It’s alright.” Eleanor left Rene’s side and hurried to her, drawing her into a warm embrace. “Oh, darling, it’s not your fault.”

“Not her fault?” Rene all but choked this out. “She threw me off a goddamn balcony and damn near *through* the hood of my car! What do you mean, it’s not her fault?”

“It’s alright,” Naima murmured to Eleanor, shaking her head.

“No,” Eleanor said, turning to Rene. “You don’t understand.”

“You’re right. I don’t,” he replied with a frown. “So why don’t you clue me in, eh, *chère*? Before this one here...” He nodded fiercely at Naima. “Takes a mind to chuck me overboard again.”

“Naima was born in the year 1787,” Eleanor said. She’d drawn Rene indoors and sat with him again in the living room. Naima remained outside, standing at the patio balustrade, looking out over the lake and forest. Talking about her past, or even hearing someone else mention it, was painful and disconcerting for her, something she avoided at all possible cost.

“The daughter of a slave owned by Michel Morin’s father and sired by your father, Rene—Michel’s son, Arnaud. She was the first human-Brethren hybrid anyone had ever known, and her mother managed to keep her existence a secret until she was five years old.”

Eleanor looked over her shoulder, out the window at Naima; lean and graceful, she gazed out beyond the balcony, the serenity in her posture belying the horrific truth of her origins and the volatile and turbulent components of her nature that always simmered within her, just beneath the surface.

“The Brethren Elders at that time decided to bury her alive, for all intents in purposes,” Eleanor told Rene. “They banished her into a network of tunnels below the great houses, underground passageways we’d once used for shelter during Indian raids.”

“The Beneath,” Rene said, and she blinked at him in surprise. “Tessa told me about it. She said she was scared of it—she and Brandon both. Their brother Caine used to tell them stories about monsters in it.”

“Not monsters,” Eleanor said quietly. “One monster. The Abomination.”

She didn’t say anything more for a long moment, and Rene leaned back, arching his brow. “*Attendez*,” he said. *Wait*. “Just a goddamn minute here. Are you telling me that Naima...” He shoved his forefinger beyond the back of the couch, pointing out the window. “...is that monster? *She’s* the Abomination?”

Legends of *L’abomination*—the Abomination—had existed long before even poor Naima. In the Tomes, there had even been depictions of the creatures dating back to medieval times; Augustus had once shown them to Eleanor.

“Michel used to say this is how we began.” He’d said this in a low hush, his face close to hers as they’d leaned over the large, musty-smelling book. As dominant Elder, he’d housed all of the clan Tomes behind locked doors in a

special library at the Noble great house. Eleanor technically hadn't been allowed in that room, much less to view the Tomes, but then again, Augustus had always granted her favors and privileges unparalleled and unprecedented among Brethren women.

"Creatures like this?" she'd whispered, eyes wide in aghast horror as she'd stared down at the crudely inked drawing—a hunch-backed, hairless creature with bulging black eyes, fang-rimmed mouth and elongated fingers, each capped with hooked claws.

"Il était une fois," Augustus had murmured in reply. *Once upon a time.* "This is a reproduction, he told me once, from a depiction found in a medieval human text."

He'd told her that Michel had once posited that the creatures shown in the Tomes were the earliest incarnations of the Brethren; that their ancestors had come from northeastern Slavic provinces in the Middle Ages, following the fall of the Roman Empire. In the early 1300s, a catastrophic famine affected much of Europe. This was also the beginning of what would be known as the "little ice age," a period of harsher arctic winters that would last for more than 400 years. Michel had believed these events were catalysts that eventually drove the Brethren predecessors into France.

"They lived as scavengers," Michel had theorized to her in Lake Tahoe the year before, after the two of them had stayed up late one night, sharing a bottle of cabernet sauvignon. "Probably off of fresh corpses in village graveyards so they could keep a safe distance from humans."

When the Black Death had hit Europe, wiping out more than 70 million people, Michel suspected that their ancestors had been lured out of hiding in mountains or forests. Cemeteries had been overflowing; mass graves dug outside of township perimeters, and worse—dead left in village streets. And once they had been drawn into the villages to feed, it had been an inevitability before they'd turned to the dying and not just the dead.

"And from there, it must have escalated," Michel had mused. "Not just the febrile, but the uninfected, too. These paintings of *L'abomination* came from a

medieval Saxon text that described how one village had sacrificed virgin daughters chosen by lottery to the creatures to keep them from raiding livestock or murdering village children in their sleep. Maybe the creatures didn't kill these women. Maybe they kept them alive, fed from them intermittently, raped them and impregnated them in between. Something must account for our human appearances, our transition from *L'abomination* to our incarnations today."

"Naima isn't the Abomination," Eleanor told Rene. "But the superstitions helped keep her hidden all that while, because the Brethren *believed* she was. She survived in those tunnels for the next twenty-three years, living off of insects and vermin, in little more than total darkness." Her eyes grew sorrowful; her throat closed, choked with tears. "I can't imagine what she went through all of that time, how she managed. And all the while, we thought she was just a story, something made up to frighten naughty children. When Michel found out she was still alive, he tried to rescue her, to prove to the Elders that she was one of us, as good as any of us, better, even, because of her human genes."

She met Rene's eyes. "We're a dying race, the Brethren," she said. "It's something that has been long-since coming, and Michel warned them for years of its imminence. In their desperate attempt to maintain clan purity, the Brethren Elders have, for generations now, been slowly breeding us to death. Our bloodlines have become so thin and strained that they're at last beginning to unravel and snap. Michel believes that's how we've wound up with the disease that has afflicted me...and why so many of our women are sterile, our children stillborn or lost in infancy.

"Michel believed humans were the key to our survival—not as food sources, but as mates. He'd been experimenting for some time on the benefits of Brethren feeding from other Brethren, and when he found Naima, he extolled these virtues to the Elders. The telekinesis you've seen with her—the enormous telepathic strength you felt in Brandon, they're all side effects brought on when Brethren feed on one another. And because we can take as much blood as we need from each other without killing, he proposed that we'd be our own most viable food source—not humans."

Rene uttered a low whistle, then glanced back at Naima. “Pretty radical concepts,” he remarked. “Just based on what Tessa has told me about the Elders and their lot.”

Eleanor nodded. “They were radical ideas back then, too,” she said. “Radical enough to divide the Brethren, clan against clan—those who favored Michel’s ideas, and those who opposed them.”

“What happened?” Rene asked and she met his gaze.

“Something horrible,” she whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Here you go,” Julianne murmured as she finished knotted the thin strip of Brandon’s black tie at the delta of his throat. She looked up at his face as she smoothed down the lapels of his matching black jacket, the starched white collars of his shirt; her eyes were mournful even as she tried to feign a smile. “How handsome you look.”

Thank you, Julianne, he thought to her in reply. Night had fallen outside, the landscape beyond his bedroom windows draped in darkness. In less than an hour, he was to appear at Augustus’s side before the Brethren Council.

She’d brought him a tray of food for his dinner, and he’d had the distinct impression it was to be a last meal of sorts, like that served to prisoners on their way to the gas chamber or the electric chair. Filet mignon, medium-rare, just like he preferred it, with truffle mashed potatoes and asparagus Parmigiano, paired with a glass of what had tasted, to his inexperienced tongue, like a heavy merlot.

First the meal, then the Armani suit, hand-delivered to his room, still with tags on the sleeves, still shrouded in plastic from where it had been tailored to fit his exact proportions. Polished black leather Oxfords, still in the box, along with gold cufflinks, twin coils of 18-carat gold nestled abreast of one another inside a powder-blue Tiffany’s box, had also arrived. He hadn’t needed Julianne to tell him who these extravagant gifts were from...

Augustus.

...or why he’d received them.

Because I’m a dead man walking. He looked beyond his grandmother’s head to the mirror behind her, catching sight of his reflection in the glass. Dark hair, shoulder length and swept back from his face, still damp on the ends from his recent shower; dark eyes ringed with exhausted, grieving shadows; the chiseled features and refined cheekbones that he’d inherited from his father, who had, in turn, inherited them from Augustus. He needed to shave. There had been

no razor among his new gifts. It was the only minor flaw in his otherwise impeccable appearance.

When Augustus entered the room, Brandon didn't need to open his mind and sense him. He could tell in the way Julianne's posture abruptly stiffened, her eyes cutting toward the door and growing timid. She shrank back from Brandon like a shadow receding from a sunbeam; cutting her gaze to the floor, she murmured something he couldn't discern because he couldn't fully see her lips, then she hurried from the room.

You're dressed, then, Augustus observed as Brandon turned to him.
Good. It all fits you well.

Standing in the doorway in a nearly identical outfit to his grandson, Augustus looked far more at ease than Brandon felt, as if the two of them were preparing to embark on no more than an evening of cocktails and light entertainment.

Thank you, Grandfather, Brandon said. Whatever grief had stricken Augustus earlier had faded in full. He was his customary, composed self once more, his face as smooth and impassive as stone.

The car will be here to collect us shortly, Augustus said. *We haven't much time.* Turning in the doorway, he glanced over his shoulder. *Come with me.*

To Brandon's surprise, Augustus led him to the first floor and through the large kitchen to a sprawling pantry area beyond. Here, amidst the shelves stocked with canned foods, bagged staples and pots and pans was the door to the great house cellar, a place few among the Brethren had ever seen. The heavy wooden door was secured by a padlock; Augustus fished a small key ring from his pocket, then unlocked it.

The Abomination lives there. That's what Brandon's brother, Caine, and some of his cousins had used to teasingly say, not of the basement necessarily, but of the subterranean tunnels that lay below even this—the Beneath. Said to live off the blood of spiders and rats, the Abomination was the stuff of legends, a creature invented to frighten little Brethren children.

Or so Brandon had always believed.

As Augustus opened the cellar door, a huff of cold air, musty and dank, wafted out. Brandon shivered, drawing back reflexively as he blinked into the black, gaping maw of the threshold. When Augustus reached onto a nearby shelf and took a pair of flashlights in hand, turning to hand one to Brandon, the younger man inched back all the more.

“Follow me,” Augustus said.

Brandon couldn't hear the stairs leading down into the cool, damp basement creak beneath his feet, but he could feel them each time the soles of his shoes settled against the taxed, aging wood. Though the circumference of his own light was obstructed by his grandfather's tall silhouette ahead of him, by the glow of Augustus's beam he could see further down, light trailing against boxes and pieces of canvas-draped furniture.

At the foot of the stairs, Augustus turned right and walked confidently, quickly along the packed dirt floor. Less certainly, Brandon followed, panning his light curiously around him and overhead, watching the play of light and shadow against thick cobwebs caught between the floorboards above him. A time or two, he'd catch the quick-as-a-wink movement of something darting away from his light; maybe a mouse or a rat, scampering out of view.

Augustus stored his wine collection in the cellar and led Brandon through a winding maze of wooden racks and shelving units on which dusty bottles of assorted vintages had been left to age. On the bottom shelves, small wooden barrels had been tucked upon their sides; closer inspection revealed these to be bourbon from the Bloodhorse Distillery with fermentation date imprints ranging from 1962 to 1873, that Brandon could see.

They edged their way past dressmaker's dummies, old travel trunks and racks of clothing hanging in plastic bags. Several large iron stoves, antique and antiquated, had been brought down to the cellar during past renovations and forgotten ever since; Brandon stumbled across an overturned a box full of moldering magazines that appeared to all be issues of *Playboy* from 1953 through 1957—including one he caught a quick glimpse of as he shoved it back

into the crate, with a black-and-white image of a smiling Marilyn Monroe on the cover.

The Noble mansion had been built over nearly four acres; the cellar was equal in breadth, and they walked at least this with only the dim beams of their flashlights to guide them. The further they delved, the steeper the gradient of the floor became and the deeper beneath the earth they went.

Here.

Augustus stopped when the yellow, bobbing beam of his flashlight struck the corner of the foundation, mud and stone walls coming together in a rough-hewn, ninety-degree angle. Brandon drew to a halt alongside him, hesitant and bewildered.

They were now so far beneath the house that even given the family's lengthy history, nothing was stored here. No boxes, trunks or clothing; only bare dirt floor, rocks and loose pebbles anywhere Brandon panned his light. Ahead of them, less than three feet away, he caught the glint of metal in the sweeping glow—a silver padlock set into the floor.

Before this could puzzle him too much, he realized.

Not the floor. A grate built into the floor.

He'd seen one of these before, years earlier, on an early autumn afternoon when he'd tried to teach his sister, Tessa, how to drive. They'd stumbled upon what had appeared to be the ruins of a building deep among the back acres of the Noble farm. Tessa had insisted it was the remains of a Brethren mansion, but Brandon hadn't been so sure. All he'd known was that he'd felt a peculiar, somewhat sinister sensation there—the sense that something bad had once happened there. Very bad, in fact.

Hidden among the weeds and crumbled stone of the foundation had been a grate pretty much like the one he found himself looking at now—thick iron bars, caked with rust, weathered and imposing, sealed shut with a silver padlock.

What is that? Brandon asked Augustus, shying back again.

You don't need me to tell you that, do you, boy? Augustus shot him a dark glance, his brows narrowed. He'd threatened Brandon with this place enough over the years—of banishing him here—that this was pretty much the truth.

The Beneath. Brandon watched, wide-eyed with trepidation, as Augustus turned to face him. For a strange, surreal moment, he half-expected his grandfather to grab him by the front of his new, expensive suit and toss him head-long into that black, looming pit just visible beyond the grate's grid of iron bars. Instead, Augustus held out his hand.

This is a compass, he told Brandon. It points to magnetic north. It glows in the dark.

With a flick of his thumb, the face of the miniature compass suddenly came aglow with eerie blue-green light. Another flick of his thumb and the light went out. *It's also a key ring, Augustus told him. With only one key affixed. And that key will open any of the padlocks on these grates throughout the compound.*

Aloud, he said, "Tonight at the Council meeting, I'm going to petition to have you banished here—to this place, the Beneath—as punishment for your continued belligerence and defiance."

Brandon flinched as if he'd been slapped. *What?*

Augustus stepped toward Brandon, near enough so that when he clapped his hand to the boy's shoulder and spoke again, his breath ruffled Brandon's hair. "When they bring you here, behave as though it is new to you, something unfamiliar and heretofore unseen. They'll throw you down inside the pit. It's a steep drop, but you'll survive. Tuck your legs up or you'll break the bones on impact. Count beneath your breath to at least one thousand to make sure they return to the surface once more. Then use the compass to follow the tunnels north. It will take you several hours, perhaps the better part of a day, but you'll eventually come to another grate—you'll be able to see daylight through it plainly. Use the key, unlock it and leave. If you turn west and keep to that course, you'll reach the highway in an hour, maybe less."

If he'd been able to blame his ears, Brandon would have poked his fingers inside and dug to make sure he'd heard correctly. *How do you know that?*

Augustus met his gaze. *Because I've used it before*, he replied simply.

"There used to be more of us," Augustus told Brandon, as they stood together upon the threshold of the Beneath. There was no point in keeping secrets from the boy any longer; nothing to be gained from the hoarding of the truth.

With a glance at the younger man, Augustus added, "I suppose you've already deduced this for yourself, on account of your acquaintance, Rene Morin, no?"

Brandon nodded hesitantly. *Tessa said she found a clan Tome by that name—Morin*, he said. *Inside of it, there was a family tree, other names, too, that neither of us had ever heard of.*

Augustus nodded. *They're dead now*, he said, watching Brandon's eyes widen again. *All of them except the Morins. Allistair Davenant killed them.*

How? Brandon shook his head. *Why? I don't understand.*

Augustus looked down at the iron grate. Folding his legs beneath him, he squatted, gazing through the rusted grid work into the darkness beyond. Even now, almost two hundred years later, the memory of that horrible night, and all of the events that had led up to it, remained vivid and fresh in his mind, as if they had only just happened.

"I believe it is an immoral waste to kill humans for the purpose of feeding."

Michel had proposed this during the summer of 1815 in front of his fellow Council members; a bold and brazen statement that had left even Augustus blinking at him as if he'd been struck daft.

"What purpose is served in the constant cycle that is our feeding?" he'd continued boldly. "Humans are not an endless surplus from which we ought to glut ourselves. Slaves cost money to purchase and replace. Free men are missed, and we risk discovery if we choose them for feeding. Already, we are known among the savage tribes here, thanks to previous unchallenged hunts targeting their settlements—*wendigos*, the Shawnee call us—men possessed by dark spirits who lust for human flesh."

“Who cares if the savages know about us?” Allistair had flapped his hand dismissively at this, stirring a round of murmured concession from those nearest him. “Superstitious, ignorant, simple-minded children—they are little more than this. And as for our slaves...why, I suppose you think we should just set them all free, then? Let the Negroes run loose in the wilds, to fend for themselves against the elements?”

“They’re neither mongrels nor imbeciles,” Michel had returned, bristling. “They are bright enough and willing, besides, to read, write and cipher—I’ve taught many among my own as much.”

Allistair had snorted. “Little more than training a pet monkey to beg for a tidbit, or a parrot, perhaps, to speak.”

Abolitionism wouldn’t be considered politically correct by even the furthest stretch of the imagination for another fifteen years at least. Like so many of his ideas, Michel was wildly ahead of his time—and considered radical, ridiculous and outright shocking by most of his fellow Brethren.

But after that confrontation, Michel had begun to push long and hard for a reconsideration of Brethren laws. He’d lobbied wherever and whenever he could; in heated debates over pipes and brandies, in quiet discourse over cards or while watching horse races. During carriage rides or while out on a hunt, at work or play, over dinner, drinks, dancing or dessert, he’d presented his arguments shamelessly, fearlessly. However, it wasn’t until he rediscovered the girl that his fate had truly been sealed.

Twenty-three years after her banishment to the Beneath, Michel had learned of his granddaughter, Naima’s survival. Overwrought with guilt, consumed with grief, he’d beseeched the Council to release her.

“She’s one of us,” he’d insisted.

“She’s an *abomination*,” Allistair had countered. “That she has somehow survived all of these years is proof.”

“It has been her Brethren abilities that have kept her alive!” Furious, Michel had squared off against Allistair. “Her ability to draw sustenance from the blood of other living things, her inherent healing capabilities that have allowed

her to withstand abominable conditions that would have killed her dead in weeks—no, I dare say, even *days*—had she been no more than human, never mind *twenty-three years*.”

“The methods of her survival are of no consequence to this Council,” Allistair had said. “She is an abomination, a half-breed, little more than meat herself—and no doubt long-since gone mad from having lived in the darkness of the Beneath for so long. What would you have of us, Michel? Consent to allow her release? To let you keep her as some manner of household pet? And then what?”

His mouth had hooked in a crooked smile, his brows crimping. “I know. Let’s open up the clan husbandry to include breeding with humans. Let’s flood the Brethren bloodlines with the fetid stench of humanity. Let’s allow for the degeneration of more than three thousand years of documented heritage, the careful planning of countless generations that has insured and maintained the pristine purity of all of our clans—hoah, let us free our slaves while we are at it, so we us all can lay in rut together, a great orgy by which they’ll whelp us each and all brood upon brood of misbegotten, half-blooded heirs!”

“At least then there might *be* some heirs!” Michel had snapped back, face flushed now, his fists furiously bared—and oh, God, Augustus had wanted to reach out and grab hold of him, clap his hands over his friend’s mouth and stifle his voice somehow. “Not stillborn corpses or children so frail they die before they can toddle upright!”

He’d turned, a dramatic, sweeping pivot that had not only allowed him to address the circumference of the Brethren Council, but to summarily dismiss Allistair at the same time. “All that this ‘careful planning by countless generations’ has insured for our people is that we are slowly but surely breeding ourselves to extinction! No species can survive indefinitely within a limited and controlled breeding environment.”

Of course, many had laughed at him. At that time, Charles Darwin had been a child still, his theories on evolution and natural selection, which would one

day be widely accepted as incontrovertible facts, had yet to even be imagined. More than just revolutionary, this proposal had been inflammatory.

“We should live *with* the humans, a part of them, not apart *from* them,” Michel had posited. “By feeding from each other, we not only eliminate the need to use humans as our primary food source, but enable within ourselves abilities that would otherwise remain dormant. That these abilities exist within us, but are latent until we feed from another Brethren, suggests that there is some other design for our physiology—call it divine, if you must, or at least somewhat omnipotent—of which we have been, to date, unaware.”

With this, Michel had given a demonstration of his own finely honed telekinetic and telepathic abilities—talents he’d gained from feeding upon Augustus—and had unleashed a maelstrom of debate that he would have had to have been naïve not to have anticipated.

“We can better protect ourselves,” he’d declared. “Not just numbing a human’s mind to our activities if they discover our natures or see us feed—with the heightened capabilities we can glean from each other, we can eradicate that knowledge entirely. No more legends, no more folklore, no more stories told by hapless humans who have stumbled upon us in the throes of the bloodlust—we will be safe from scrutiny, more protected than we have ever been, even while living *among* them!”

Upon these issues, the Brethren had stood fiercely and almost evenly divided. The Lambert, Durand, Ellinger and Averay clans had all been persuaded to Michel’s point of view, while the others—the Davenant, Trevilian, Giscard and Noble clans had forged their own alliance in support of the traditional Brethren ways. Augustus had hated siding against his friend; it had been akin to taking a dagger and scraping out his own heart with the tip, but his father had demanded it of him.

Reynard had no longer been the clan Elder, having surrendered that position and authority to Augustus, but he’d still drawn breath and, as such, still held some measure of sway, be it directly, indirectly or both, over his family.

“You will take no part in such heresy,” he’d hissed at Augustus. Feeble with age, a withered old man confined either to a rocking chair or his bed, he’d still clamped a hand with some stubborn measure of strength in it against Augustus’s chin, forcing him to meet his rheumy gaze. “It is abhorrent, these things Michel Morin is proposing. Breed with humans? Feed from Brethren? He would see the very tombs of our venerated ancestors crack open wide and crumble into dust. It is heresy, I tell you!”

“You understand, of course?” Augustus had pleaded of Michel in private, and his friend’s eyes had been granite-smooth and headstone-hard as he’d nodded in terse, taut-jawed reply.

“Certainly,” Michel had told him. “What’s not to understand? Tell me this, Auguste—is it hard to fuck your wives with your father holding you so tightly by the balls?”

“You cannot say anything.” Augustus had caught him by the arm. “You’re angry, and I know it, and maybe it’s rightly due, but Michel, please, the things you’ve shown the Council...” His voice had faltered. “You can’t tell them that I can do it, too.”

Because if Reynard had known, if he’d learned that not only had Augustus fed from another Brethren, but that he’d been among the catalysts for the controversial ideas in Michel’s head, he would have more than disowned his son. He would have killed Augustus with his own hands, whatever the cost.

Michel’s brows had narrowed, his face cast with hurt and rage. “Don’t worry for it,” he’d snapped, shrugging himself loose of Augustus’s grasp. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Michel had felt empowered, not only in his convictions, but in the support he received from other clans. For every line in the sand he crossed, he saw it as gaining ground. But in the eyes of his opponents—and Allistair Davenant in particular—his radical ideas would ultimately lead to the ruination of the Brethren.

“He’s going to kill them.” Augustus’s wife Julianne had come to him one night to tell him this. By habit, he’d made his bed with Eleanor, and Julianne had

crouched at his bedside in the darkness, speaking in a near-whisper so as not to rouse her.

“I went to my mother’s home today,” Julianne told him, meaning the Davenant great house, where she’d been born. “My brother was there, Philippe. I overheard him with my father, both of them in counsel with Allistair. I heard him say plainly there was only one way to cleanse the scourge of heresy—and that was by fire.”

Augustus had sat up, wide-eyed, heart hammering beneath his breath. “When?”

“Tonight, after midnight.”

His pocket watch rested on the nightstand. As he reached for it, she offered quietly, “It is only now eleven. I would have been back sooner to bring you the news, but I was—”

Her voice had cut short, and he’d all but knocked her down as he’d shoved his way past her.

“Fetch my clothes and help me dress, woman,” he’d hissed, because he had been naked in the aftermath of lovemaking with Eleanor. She’d done as he ordered, helping him into breeches and shirt, watching as he’d shoved his feet hurriedly into his boots.

“You will speak nothing of this,” he’d warned. “Not of what you heard, not of anything that might come to pass this night—none of it, do you understand? Because if you do, I will beat you lame. I’ll lay your spine open to the bone with the lash, do you hear me?”

He’d ridden bareback into the night, whipping his horse to a frenzied pace, leaving its coat sweat-soaked, its mouth frothed against the steel plate of its bit. The Morin family great house was the furthest property in the compound. It would be the last to be reached if Allistair and the others had truly indeed meant to burn out their rivals. And as he’d cut through the dense forests that bisected their rolling farmlands, he’d caught the distinctive, acrid stink of smoke in the wind.

The Lambert mansion had been engulfed in flames. Even from a distance, across an undulating field, he’d been able to see the telltale glow of the blaze.

He'd cut west from there, riding harder than ever, his heart racing with panicked fright. The rush of wind in his face, dragging his hair behind him, cutting like ice through his clothes, had been unable to drown out or disguise the sounds of screams coming from the Lambert house, the shrieks of those undoubtedly trapped inside.

Dear God...! He'd been helpless but to rein the nag to a skittering halt when he neared the Durand house. Flames spewed violently from all of the windows, speared through the roof and belched thick clouds of smoke up into the sky. He'd been close enough to feel the backwash of intense heat from the blaze, to see the scurrying silhouettes and shadows of those who had set the fire swinging themselves astride awaiting horses.

Allistair Davenant, his cousins and brothers. Of that, Augustus had no doubt. Allistair might have convinced other men from his allied clans to help in his treachery, but he suspected the brunt of the blame would fall solely on the Davenants themselves.

They had barred the doors to the house, front and back, with thick shafts of timber propped in place to prevent any escape. Through the visible flames in the second-floor windows, Augustus could see shadowy figures leaning precariously out over the sills—men, women and children struggling to clamber out onto the roof, to get away somehow. Some plummeted the steep and brutal distance between sash and ground, and as he watched, mute and breathless in horror, men with pitchforks or clubs—Davenant men again, he surmised—would converge upon them, weapons poised to bludgeon the unfortunate survivors to death.

Because they don't mean to leave anyone alive, Augustus realized, watching as one of the Davenants—unmistakably Allistair, even under the cover of darkness and from his distant vantage—hoisted a screaming, struggling toddler between his hands, one of the Durand children who had managed to make it out of the burning house. Like he might have chucked a sack of grain, Allistair tossed the child back through the window from which he'd clambered; back into the inferno.

Michel!

Augustus forced himself to move, kicking his heels mightily into his horse's flanks, causing it to lurch forward, breaking into a wild, frantic gallop. He tore through the forest and across open fields, abandoning the well-worn carriage paths and rutted roads twining between the Brethren homes. Tree limbs slapped and stung his face even as he tried to duck around them; pine needles from low-hanging boughs caught in his hair, pulling and whipping him.

By habit, Michel kept lanterns aglow in the first floor windows of his home. Augustus caught sight of these even through the trees and steered the racing horse toward them. Without even reining the nag to a full stop, he swung his leg around and dismounted, stumbling clumsily in the yard, his arms pinwheeling for clumsy balance.

"Michel!" He scaled the granite front steps in a single broad stride, baring his fist and pounding loudly against the door. "Open the door! Open the goddamn door!"

"Are you drunk?" Michel answered the door open with one hand; in the other, he clasped a rifle, his finger folded against the trigger of a Brown Bess flintlock musket. Dressed in his nightclothes, his hair messily askew, his brows were narrowed, his mouth down-turned in a frown. "I was about to shoot your bloody ass. What the hell is wrong with you, banging on the door at all hours of the—"

"Call in your house slaves." Cutting him off, Augustus shoved his way inside, slamming the door behind him. "Call them inside now, Michel, then gather your family—your brothers and sons. We have to hurry."

"Are you drunk?" Michel asked again. "It's the middle of the bloody damn night!"

"Michel, listen to me." Augustus grabbed twin fistfuls of his nightshirt, pleading. "Allistair Davenant has gone mad. He's burning the great houses, he and his kin. All of them, Michel—the Lamberts, Durands, the Averays and Ellingers. They've blocked the doors, barred the windows—he's burning them alive, Michel, and he's making his way west. He's coming for you!"

Michel's eyes had grown round and stunned. "*Quoi?*" he'd whispered in French. *What?*

"We have to go!" Augustus cried, spinning him smartly about, giving him a shove. Already his cries and incessant door-banging had roused others in the Morin clan; sleepy and bewildered men, women and children had begun to gather in the doorway to the room and in the corridor, along the stairwell beyond.

"Get them up, get them dressed, get them to the cellar," Augustus had snapped at Michel. "Take them into the tunnels, into the Beneath—go!"

"Go where?" Michel asked, shrugging away from Augustus. "Those tunnels are dead ends—Lamar ordered them sealed twenty years ago." Clasp his rifle in both hands, he frowned. "We'll stay right here. If Allistair wants a fight, then by God, we'll give—"

"He doesn't want to fight. He wants you dead. And he's not going to stop until he gets that, Michel." Again, Augustus had grabbed his friend's shirt, tugging in implore. "Take a torch. We'll follow the tunnels to my house. I've left a lantern above the grate in our cellar so we'll know it." Reaching into the fob pocket of his breeches, he pulled out a small mahogany box, brass hinges affixed; inside was a small compass. "We can use this to make our way east. There's no other way. He's fanned them out all through the woods. We can't risk going by land."

"We?" Michel raised his brow. "What do you mean, we? I thought you wanted no part in my madness, your secrets to stay safe from Allistair."

Augustus blinked at him, wounded. Behind them, the gathered members of the Morin clan stood in sleepy, frightened silence. That suspicious anger, like sharpened edges of flint that made up the lines and furrows in Michel's face at last softened, and he sighed heavily, raking his fingers through his hair.

"Arnaud," he called to his son, glancing over his shoulder. "You and Mason gather the others together, rouse the ones yet sleeping. Get them all into the cellar, to the tunnels."

"But..." his eldest, Mason, had stammered, his eyes wide and round with trepidation. "But the...the Abomination..."

They'd all heard stories by now of the Abomination, of course; already, the younger generations had teased and tormented each other with horror stories of how the creature trapped in the Beneath would peel the skin and sinew back from a still-living hide, gobbling down each as one might a particularly succulent slice of beef or turkey. The women and children knew nothing of Naima; only those men of age among the Council knew—and even they still feared her fierce and feral reputation.

“Take rifles with us,” Michel had told Mason, with another heavy sigh and a ragged, distraught expression. “Pistols, too. Arm all of the men among us, and as many boys as you can. If we come upon her in the dark...we will shoot her.”

While the two younger Morins had gone to work rallying the clan, sending them in bustling groups down the clapboard steps to the dirt cellar, Augustus and Michel had gone out to the yard together.

“Why summon my slaves?” Michel asked, puzzled by Augustus's insistent directive. “Give me a few moments—I can sign writs of emancipation for each of them, make them freed, and turn them—”

“Allistair is expecting your house to be full, everyone in bed,” Augustus replied. “He will anticipate screaming, to see men and women, children, too, all trying to get out once the doors are barred.”

Michel had drawn to an abrupt halt, his eyes flown wide in horrified realization. “Auguste...” he whispered in breathless shock. “*Que...que dites-vous?*” *What are you saying?* Shaking his head, he said, “No. No, I cannot do that. It's immoral...it...it's monstrous.” Stricken, he stared at Augustus. “It's monstrous.”

“You have no choice!” Augustus grabbed his arm and gave him a rough shake. “Have you heard nothing I've told you? Allistair is coming—he'll be here any moment now, and he will burn your house to the ground. If he doesn't hear screams, if they see no shadows inside trying to flee, if they find no bodies once the cinders have died, then they'll know what happened and *they'll come for you*. Yes, it's monstrous, but there is no other recourse. Your slaves or your kin, Michel—*choose!*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

His face aglow only by the dim beam of his flashlight, Augustus glanced up at Brandon in the cellar beneath the great house. "He chose his family, of course," he said. The younger man's face was a haunting mirror of Michel's expression so many long years ago; stricken and pained, grasped with the horrific gravity of so difficult and devastating a choice.

"And it worked. They never knew otherwise. The Morins hid in the tunnels until long after their house had burned to the foundation. They followed them here, to this grate, in fact, then kept here, in my cellar for the next week." His gaze distant, lost in memory for the moment, he smiled. "It was much smaller, then, of course. Those houses we'd called home have long since been plowed under and rebuilt. I imagine the close quarters down here, the darkness...it was quite insufferable for them. After a week, they backtracked again, under cover of darkness, to the ruins of their home. They escaped that way, into the night.

"For a long time, I heard nothing from Michel...for a century, at least. I had a cousin, Julian, I'd sent overseas in 1912. By then, the stillbirths and infant deaths that Michel had tried to prevent had taken their toll on the Davenant clan, as they had upon us all, and the Nobles were dominant. I had been invited to bear witness in a wedding, an old friend of mine, John Astor, then to accompany them on a tour of Egypt, but was unable to because of business. I sent Julian in my stead. He died, along with J.J., when the ship they were aboard sank...the *Titanic*."

Brandon's eyes widened all the more at this.

"Michel sent me a card," Augustus said. "A brief measure of condolence, because of course, it had made headlines coast to coast, the list of the dead printed and reprinted a thousand times at least. There was no return address, no name signed to the note, but I knew his handwriting." Another fragile smile. "You never forget that of a friend."

Why are you telling me this? Brandon asked, drawing his gaze.

“Because Michel and I have kept in touch in our own fashion ever since,” he said. “Because when you leave this place, I’ll send word to him to find you. He can hide you, as he’s hidden all of his kin, all of these years, from Allistair’s knowledge or notice. And you can have what you’ve always wanted, boy—freedom from me. Freedom from this place. Freedom from what you are.”

He couldn’t hear the bitter edge to Augustus’s words, but apparently, the connotation wasn’t lost upon Brandon, nonetheless. His brows narrowed. *I had that freedom*, he said. *I didn’t need you or Michel Morin to get it—I found it all on my own, remember? And you just went through a hell of a lot of trouble—and I took a goddamn bullet in my shoulder—to take all of that away from me. Now, I’m supposed to believe you’re going to just turn me loose, let me go, bid me a bon-fucking-voyage?*

Brandon backed up, his hands closing into fists. *You’re trying to trick me somehow. All of this is some kind of goddamn game, no different than anything else you’ve ever done.*

“No.” Augustus shook his head. “It’s not.”

You hate me. You put out the order to kill me. How are you going to explain why you’re taking that back now?

“Because I didn’t take it back. The Elders did, even before I lost dominance. Allistair told me so himself, after we found out about what had happened to Caine. And for the record, boy...” He frowned. “I have never hated you. I’ve found you to be an infuriating, insubordinate, stubborn, reckless and foolhardy young man more interested in pursuing and preserving his own selfish interests than any of his kith or kin’s. I have been frustrated with you, furious at you and fed up with your ridiculous, self-serving, petulant antics, but I have *never* hated you.”

Yeah, Brandon said. *I could sure feel the love when you broke both of my hands, left me crippled.*

The cleft between Augustus’s brows deepened. “I had no choice but to do that.”

Oh, sure, I know. Brandon rolled his eyes. *My...what did you call them? My ridiculous, self-serving, petulant antics left you no choice.*

No, Augustus seethed with his mind. *Allistair left me no choice.*

Because he'd been furious, yes, when his Caine had presented him with the acceptance letter to Gallaudet University addressed to Brandon. It had been Brandon's task historically to retrieve the mail daily, and Augustus had entertained no doubt that the boy had anticipated getting the correspondence with no one else in the family—least of all, Augustus—aware of it.

He'd loved Caine, but as self-serving, witless and impetuous as Brandon could be, sometimes his elder brother had been every bit as much. Thus it had been to Brandon's ultimate misfortune that not only had Caine intercepted the acceptance letter, but that he'd then presented it to his grandfather while Augustus had been in a meeting with Allistair Davenant.

The chance to impress two clan Elders hadn't been lost upon Caine, and he'd shoved the letter forward with the smug overconfidence born of ignorant youth.

God Above. Although his face had betrayed no outward hint of emotion, inside, Augustus had felt his stomach knot when he'd read the letter and felt the heavy weight of Allistair's expectant stare.

"You cannot let this go unanswered," Allistair had said.

Of course, Augustus had no such intention. He'd been furious at Brandon's defiance—yet again—of the laws and mandates of their society. His hand had been already itching to snatch a lash, take it with strident measure against the backside of Brandon's torso, his father, Sebastian's pleas for clemency be damned. But a simple beating wouldn't satisfy Allistair, and he made no secret of this.

"An example must be made of the boy this time," he had said. "How often have you shown him mercy, only to have him turn and bite you in the ass for it again, over and over? The other clans have taken note; the Elders have come to me about it time and again. This special favor you've awarded him must—"

“There has been no special favor,” Augustus had snapped, interjecting. “I’ve punished the boy well within the limits of the law for every offense.”

“Well within the *lenient* limits of the law,” Allistair had said pointedly. Mockingly soothing, he’d offered a smile. “And who can blame you for that? None among us, surely. After all, he’s already suffered terribly in his young life. It’s a natural tendency to coddle him for his handicaps, to spare him any—”

“I don’t coddle him,” Augustus had cut in sharply. “For his handicaps, his youth, or any other reason. He’ll be punished for this, Allistair.” He’d shaken the letter. “You and the Elders have my assurance on that.”

Hoping that would be the end of the matter, he’d tried to walk away, but Allistair had stopped him with a single word. “How?”

“What?” Augustus had turned to him, brow arched.

“How?” Allistair had repeated. “You know I have to tell the Council about this and the other Elders will need to know. I can’t pretend as though I’m unaware of what’s happened, what the boy has done. Like you, I’ll be held to some account in this—I’ll need to be able to tell the others what you’ve done by means of reprimand, what measure you’ve taken to insure that this is the last of these offenses. Ever.”

His eyes had been like glittering pieces of obsidian as he spoke, dark, depthless and frigid. He’d been so full of shit, it had amazed Augustus that his breath hadn’t stunk with it. Allistair wouldn’t be held to any accountability, but he’d been right in that the others would find out about the letter. Allistair would make damn sure of that.

“I’ll beat him,” Augustus said.

“The boy has plotted to leave the compound—there’s your evidence, right in your hand,” Allistair said. “Not to question your judgment, but a lashing seems a bit...lax to me.”

“Twenty lashes,” Augustus said through gritted teeth.

“Twenty or a hundred, do you think that will deter him? I can’t speak for the Council, but I can tell you I doubt they will abide by that. This isn’t just a skirting around the rules, as in the past, but *direct defiance* of the laws,

Augustus—and of *you*. An example needs to be made of him, or God only knows what will be tried next—or who besides Brandon will try it.”

He'd looked thoughtful for a moment. “Break his hands.”

“*Quoi?*” Augustus had been startled into reverting unconsciously to French. *What?*

“Break his hands,” Allistair had said again.

“He won't be able to write,” Caine had interjected. He'd been listening to the debate with the fervent fascination of a puppy watching a meaty treat dangled before it. And at this opportunity, again like an untrained and overeager pup, he couldn't help but leap. “He won't be able to do that...” He'd wagged his fingers in the air. “...signing shit he's always using—even though you've told him not to, Grandfather.” He'd said this last with a pointed smile at Augustus, so certain he was being helpful.

“It wouldn't be a permanent disfigurement,” Allistair had said. “But long-lasting enough to teach him a lesson and set him up as an example for others.”

“It's perfect,” Caine had exclaimed, beaming at Augustus.

Allistair had chuckled, clapping his hand on Caine's shoulder, making the boy's smile widen all the more. “My God, what a fine Elder you'll make for your clan one day.”

Augustus had to admit the idea had held a certain sadistic appeal to him. By that point, he'd been so exasperated with Brandon and his repeated defiance, he'd fought the temptation to suggest simply killing the boy outright, wringing his neck and choking the breath from him. Even at his age, he still faced moments of rashness, times in which he reacted out of emotion or instinct, rather than from knowledge or time-tested experience. This was one such occasion; he hadn't even tried to suggest further alternatives to Allistair. Instead, he'd agreed, and with Allistair standing in the hallway, privy to the entire drama, he'd proceeded to see it through; in fact, laying eyes on Brandon had only made it easier, his fury more intense, his rationale all the more muffled.

It hadn't been until the aftermath, when he'd returned to his suite and downed several overfilled tumblers of bourbon, calmed himself and regained his

wits that what he'd done—the cruel, brutal reality of it—had occurred to him. He wanted to tell Brandon this; that he'd felt badly for what he'd done. He wanted to tell the young man that Sebastian had never forgiven Augustus for it, that an emotional wedge had been driven between them that day, one that had never been set right. He wanted to tell Brandon that Sebastian had gone to his death hating his own father for having hurt Brandon, that the shadow of that act—and all of the pain it caused—would forever haunt him.

Instead, he hung his head, closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

I'm sorry, he said with his mind.

Spare me, Brandon snapped. *Those are just words, nothing more. They don't mean shit to me, and they sure as fuck don't make up for what you did.*

No. Augustus looked up, met his gaze evenly, pressing the compass key ring against the younger man's palm. *But maybe this will.*

They returned to the house, retracing their steps through the long, dark deep of the cellar, returning to the storeroom off the kitchen where Augustus locked the padlock in place to bar the door behind them.

In the grand foyer of the house, Benoît and the other Noble males waited, dozens of them dressed in crisp, conservative suits and ties, gathered together in loosely knit circumferences, speaking together in low voices. Brandon couldn't hear them, but he could still tell when these quiet conversations drew abruptly silent as he and Augustus crossed the entry; every pair of eyes turned in their direction and settled upon them; every mouth fell obligingly still or drew suddenly in line.

"The cars are here," Benoît told Augustus with a courteous nod. Brandon's great-uncle managed a crooked smile in his direction, but was unable to disguise a decided uneasiness in his eyes, an anxious tension in his stance.

"Thank you, Benoît," Augustus said. His hand hooked against Brandon's elbow, and he led him in tow toward the front doors of the mansion. Here, in the great house's sweeping, circular drive, a caravan of limousines idled at the

ready, their parking lights aglow, exhaust fumes curling in thin, wispy clouds behind them.

Brandon trailed his grandfather down the long front steps. Augustus had given him a long wool overcoat to wear and had likewise donned one for himself. Now, Brandon tucked his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders against the cool night.

He'd never been to a meeting of the Brethren Council before. Because he'd never completed the bloodletting ritual, he'd never been accepted as a full, adult member of his society, and thus had never partaken in the democratic process that might have otherwise been his birthright. He didn't know what to expect; what went on behind the closed doors of the Council building remained there, and not even Sebastian had ever ventured a word in hint or clue as to what transpired during their meetings.

His trip to the cellar with Augustus had reassured him. Sort of. *At least they're not going to kill me*, he thought. How Augustus hoped to convince them that tossing him into the Beneath was a just punishment, especially now that he no longer held dominance over the clans, was beyond Brandon, but Augustus had seemed confident in this. *Or at least, he's convinced himself he can do it.*

Augustus delivered him to a large, slate gray Bentley, where a man in chauffeur's coat and cap opened the rear door to allow them access. Without even a murmured word in thanks, Augustus ducked his head and stepped into the car. Brandon followed, sitting stiffly against the creamy, camel-colored leather upholstery, feeling uneasy and restless.

Once the car was underway, the lights inside the cabin dimmed to near-darkness, and only the glow of the dashboard provided much by way of illumination. Augustus seemed content to direct his gaze out the window, and Brandon tried to do likewise.

Lina.

He tried to think of Angelina, even though doing so brought a pang of loneliness and need to his heart. His hand slipped beneath the flap of his coat, trailing against the pocket in which he'd hidden the compass and key Augustus

had given him. The Grandfather was offering him the chance to be with Lina again, this time for good.

Freedom, he thought, closing his eyes, imagining Lina's face—remembering her smile, her fragrance, the sound of her laughter, the silken warmth of her skin. She had to be beside herself by now with worry and fright, and with Lina, that undoubtedly meant she was ready to kick someone's ass. Brandon smiled as he considered this. Her fearlessness was admirable to him; something he longed to emulate. *Because right now, I'm scared half the fuck to death*, he thought. *And I'm willing to bet by the time we get to the Council chambers, I'll be all of the way there.*

He did it for Tessa, you know, Augustus remarked without averting his gaze from the smoky glass window. It was a comment seemingly apropos of nothing, and Brandon raised his brow.

What?

Augustus turned to face him and spoke aloud. "Rene Morin. He's in love with your sister and he shot you, turned you over to me in exchange for her freedom. Sometimes we have to do that, you know. Sacrifice to protect the ones we love."

His mind was on something else, not Rene, but his thoughts had obviously led him there.

And have you? Brandon prodded. *Sacrificed, I mean?*

He'd told Brandon as much earlier. *I've lost everything that's ever been important to me...anyone I've ever loved...all in the name of dominance.*

His words had been cryptic, however, and Brandon hadn't quite understood.

Your grandmother, Eleanor, didn't die, Augustus told him. *She's ill. Very ill. I sent her away to be with Michel so he could find a way to cure her. Of all of the people in all of the world I've ever known or will ever know, she's the most precious to me—the one I love. And I will never see her again. So yes, boy, you could say that I've sacrificed.*

Brandon stared at him, startled into momentary silence.

I had to make it look like death, Augustus said. But not just any method. It had to be murder, something committed in a fit of rage, otherwise the Elders—and especially Allistair—would never consent to casting her body into the Beneath. They'd never believe I wouldn't want her buried.

Again, his eyes wandered, clouding with melancholy recollection as he looked out the window. *So I choked her to unconsciousness, then threw her into the Beneath. I even called Allistair in as my witness. How's that for bitter irony? She never knew...not what I'd planned...not what I meant to do...even up until the end, I don't think she understood...even as I throttled her.*

He brushed his fingertips against his mouth as if he tasted something sour or unpleasant there. *Michel came to get her. I'd sent word to him weeks earlier.*

You said she's sick, Brandon said. What do you mean? We can't get sick.

Augustus smiled, something thin and rueful, lacking any hint or semblance of humor. *Michel was right. 'No species can survive indefinitely within a limited and controlled breeding environment,' that's what he tried to warn us all of those years ago. Had he understood at the time more about the mechanisms of genetics, he might have explained it as the result of cross-breeding...that no matter how careful or meticulous we may try to be, there weren't enough clans to sustain an entire species population—not even before the fires in 1815. Death, sterility, frailty and disease...these things have become bred into us, boy—as inherent to the nature of some among us as the bloodlust itself. I saw the effects of this affliction for myself with my mother, Isabeau, centuries ago in France, and I knew them well when I saw them again, three years ago in Eleanor.*

Brandon stared at him, stricken. *What will happen to her?*

Unless Michel can cure her? Augustus looked at him and smiled again sadly. *She will die, Brandon.*

He reached beneath the lapel of his coat, beneath his underlying jacket, and slipped something out of an inside pocket. He passed it to his grandson; a creased, yellowed photograph, old but unmistakably Eleanor.

December 27, 1932, Augustus told him, and now his smile grew less sorrowful and more wistful, sincere. I took her off the compound for the first time

in her life. We went to New York City—talk about a baptism by fire into the human world. In his mind, he chuckled. *We were to attend the opening night gala at Radio City Music Hall. That photograph was taken in the front lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria hotel.*

She...was beautiful, Brandon said, feeling obliged to say *something*, but uncertain as to what.

Augustus chuckled again. Yes, he agreed, tucking the photograph back into his coat pocket. *She was.*

The car came to a halt, as smooth as oil, and Augustus cut Brandon a glance. “It’s time.”

The Council Hall was built in the Greek Revival architectural style—square-shaped with a large front portico lined with columns. Comprised of a single room beneath the dome of a large rotunda, inside, balcony seating overlooked the main floor, while a large fire pit served as the centerpiece of the chamber.

Augustus led Brandon again by the arm up the main steps toward the portico. Behind them, a seemingly endless stream of limousines waited in the semi-circular drive, dropping off Brethren male Council members each in turn. At the main doors, a pair of young men in dark suits—humans called Kinsfolk who helped attend to the Brethren—waited politely to check their topcoats.

Once inside, Brandon craned his head back and marveled over the towering dome above him. The sloping interior had been adorned with stucco relief sculptures, clan insignias and crests being among the most prominent. The balcony areas were delineated with elaborately wrought iron railings. Framed portraits of esteemed elders, some dating back to the medieval days of knighthood, to judge by the costumes depicted, hung in enormous gilded frames along the walls.

The stone floor and walls caught even the most murmured conversations and sent them bouncing back and forth, overlapping again and again in a resonant, cacophonous din. Brandon caught sight of some of his uncles, cousins

and kin climbing stone staircases to the upper level, then making their way among crowded rows of their fellows to reach what must have been pre-assigned seating. One of these remained conspicuously empty.

Dad's seat, he realized, a visceral pain nearly wrenching through his gut. *That was Dad's seat...my father's place among the Council.*

He hadn't yet really had the chance to even mourn Sebastian's death, never mind fully process the overwhelming wealth of information and history with which Augustus had bombarded him. As he stared at his father's empty place among the Noble males on the Brethren Council, his eyes stinging with sudden tears, Brandon felt it all seemed surreal, like some sort of fucked up dream.

One I'm ready to wake up from, he thought.

The Elders have seats on the main floor, Augustus said, drawing his attention. *While other members in good standing remain above. They may approach the fire when called upon in due process to address the assemblage.* As if anticipating the question forming in Brandon's mind, he added, *You will remain with me for the proceedings. Sit when I sit. Stand when I stand. Keep your mind closed at all times and say nothing unless I bid it of you.*

He gave Brandon a stern look, discernable only by a slight, nearly imperceptible crimp between his brows. *Do you understand, boy?*

Yes. Brandon nodded, having no inclination at the moment to argue or play defiant. He felt humbled inside the Council Hall, and anxious all at once, all-too-aware that he and Augustus were the centermost points of focus for nearly every man in the room.

Are you frightened? Augustus asked him.

Brandon nodded once, loathe to admit it.

Good, Augustus replied darkly. *You should be.*

CHAPTER THIRTY

When Allistair Davenant entered the rotunda, flanked on both sides by the remaining eight Brethren Elders, including Augustus's brother, Benoît, the Council drew to a hush. All of the members rose to their feet in quiet, respectful deference, waiting as Allistair and the Elders filed into their places along an elevated dais near the fire. Augustus locked eyes with Allistair and silently dared the other man to look away first.

Pompous son of a bitch, he thought. That there wasn't a damp stain on the front of Allistair's tailored trousers where he'd either pissed himself or ejaculated in his power-hungry bliss shocked the hell out of Augustus.

At the front of the platform, a presiding podium stood; atop this, a brass-trimmed gavel rested. Allistair approached the podium with visibly giddy anticipation; taking his time, he curled and released his fingers a time or two against the edges before curling them slowly around the mallet handle and hefting it slowly into the air.

"By the authority bestowed upon the Elder of our presiding dominant clan, I hereby call this Council meeting to order," he called out, and again, Augustus was moderately surprised when a little cackle of impish glee didn't immediately follow.

Instead, Allistair cracked the gavel head sharply, making Brandon jerk in reflexive, anxious surprise.

Easy, boy, Augustus told him, a sliver of thought discernable only through Brandon's immediate proximity. *It's not our turn yet. The Council follows a strict agenda, and this is only the start.*

Augustus had presided over more of the monthly Council meetings and special sessions during his tenure as the dominant Elder than he could even rightly estimate, never mind count—so many that the orderly protocol droned on for him in familiar, boring procession. For Brandon, it was something altogether

new and strange; he could sense the boy's anxiety in his rigid posture, the trepidation in his rapid-fire heartbeat.

As the Council secretary began to recite aloud a litany constituting the minutes from their previous meeting, Augustus again opened his mind solely to his grandson. *Our turn will not come until the end. After this report will come the treasurer's summary, then matters of old business to be discussed. Then will come new business—and I suspect we'll be first and foremost on that agenda.*

By the time the secretary resumed his seat and financial committee representatives began passing reams of paper among the Council members, Brandon had visibly relaxed, which was good. The boy was high-strung and willful by nature. Nothing good would be served having him wound up tautly, like a spring-loaded trebuchet waiting to be fired.

Once all of the financial statements, bank account summaries, transaction histories and more, all related to the Brethren-owned industries, had been distributed, the treasurer verbally summarized each in monotonous turn. Questions were asked, points of interest raised and addressed, everything proceeding in dull, customary order. That is until Allistair spoke up, interrupting the normal ebb and flow of discussion.

"I would like draw the Council's attention to line item 137-A in the accounts payable report."

At this, a small murmur of bewilderment stirred through the crowded hall, drowned almost immediately by a loud rustling of papers as the Council members flipped and turned through their loose-leaf handouts.

"My son Martin, who helps to prepare these accounts-payable reports, brought the matter of this company, Broughman and Associates, to my attention."

Martin Davenant stood near the grim-faced choir of Elders and had passed reports among the Council members. At the mention of his name, he cut his eyes nervously from his father to Augustus, then swiftly about the room, as if seeking some avenue of escape.

Pathetic bastard. That Martin was able to find his own ass with both hands, a flashlight, a map and two weeks to try would have shocked Augustus,

never mind the man taking note of one specific budgetary line item out of hundreds. He'd always been personally and privately amazed that Martin Davenant had managed to get Brandon's sister, Tessa, pregnant; that the man could figure out which receptacle was which in order to best procreate the species frankly astonished him.

"For the past ten years, Martin has documented invoice remittance made payable to them," Allistair continued. "As you can see, for the preceding month, twenty-three thousand, two hundred and forty-two dollars and eleven cents were paid by direct deposit into their receivable account."

Broughman and Associates. Now why would that name seem somehow familiar? Augustus frowned inwardly, thoughtfully, trying to place it—and figure out why it would be something of worthwhile enough merit for Allistair to bring it to the Council's attention.

And then it occurred to him.

He doesn't have the balls, Rene had told Brandon, meaning Martin Davenant. Augustus had heard this in the younger man's mind, through his memories. *Not with that ledger in his hands. If your grandfather finds out about that book, he'll string Martin up...*

Broughman and Associates was the name of a fictional company Martin had invented along with his wife, Monica—and which Allistair had known about. Together they had used Broughman and Associates as a means to embezzle money from Bloodhorse Industries. Tessa had inadvertently stolen a ledger from Martin when she'd fled Kentucky, one that had contained enough documentation to prove this theft and Martin had gone after her—clearly with Allistair's sanction—in order to get that evidence back.

"...more than three million dollars over the last ten years," Allistair was saying, snapping Augustus from his thoughts. More specifically, the fact that he was now holding up this very same ledger—which Rene Morin had returned to Martin in exchange for being put in contact with Augustus to barter for Tessa's freedom. Allistair held the slim book up high above his head, pivoting slightly as

much for dramatic effect as to provide a panoramic view to all of those above and behind him.

That's the ledger Tessa stole from Martin, Brandon thought to Augustus, putting two and two together a bit more slowly, but still as effectively.

Yes, it is, Augustus murmured with a frown, because he suddenly had an anxious knot forming in the pit of his gut, an uneasy twisting that tightened with every word Allistair uttered.

This was not going to end well.

"It was not until this morning, when I received comprehensive executive authority over Bloodhorse Industries, that Martin and I were able to fully audit all financial records pertaining to this Broughman and Associates account. Through our attorneys, we have been able to obtain documentation that clearly demonstrates this company is in fact, non-existent, a phantom organization created to courier company assets into a private account owned and exclusively controlled by Augustus Noble."

Another murmur rippled through the crowd and all eyes immediately pinned Augustus where he stood.

What? Brandon glanced at his grandfather, his dark eyes round and surprised.

That son of a bitch. Augustus's frown deepened.

That's not true, Brandon said to Augustus. *Martin's been using that account to steal from Bloodhorse, not you.*

"I have copies of those identifying documents, signed in Augustus's hand, here..." Allistair handed a stack of papers to Martin, who in turn scampered forward like an eager pup turned loose of its leash. He began handing them out with the fervency of a parade majorette hurling confetti into the cheering crowds.

That son of a bitch, Augustus thought again. He'd signed lots of documents that morning, as he'd tendered control of all of the Brethren companies to Allistair. Because he'd been grief-stricken over Sebastian's death, emotionally exhausted and mentally numb, he hadn't paid attention to any of the papers that had passed in front of him; he'd moved mechanically, like a zombie,

scrawling his signature whenever and wherever prompted. He could have signed away his own soul to Satan's custody and charge and wouldn't have known the difference.

Stupid, he thought. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Grandfather, Brandon said, still wide-eyed and visibly confused. *You didn't...?*

No, boy, Augustus replied, turning to level his eyes at Allistair as his rival glanced his way, his mouth hooked in a wicked, triumphant sort of smile. *I didn't.*

Then how...? Brandon began, but Augustus silenced him with a single, quick shake of his head.

It doesn't matter, he told the younger man. *Say nothing. Stand beside me and hold your peace.*

But... Brandon protested. *They're blaming you for it. They're saying you stole that money!*

And you will let them. Augustus shot him a dark, severe glance. *You will stand still and close your mind and let them say whatever they damn well please, because there's nothing to be done for it—not by either of us. Not by anyone.*

He looked back toward the Elders and found his brother, Benoît, staring at him, stricken. Even without opening his mind, Augustus knew Benoît thought Allistair was full of shit, too, evidence or not. But he'd lived ten times the length of Brandon's young life, and Benoît knew better. Like Augustus, he understood what Allistair was doing, what he meant to accomplish, and realized the futility of any protest, no matter how justified.

"Based upon this evidence," Allistair declared. "I move that the Council passes judgment in accordance with Brethren Law." Clasp ing his hands lightly behind his back, he stepped down from his dais, away from the podium, and followed the circumference of the fire pit as he continued. "The punishment mandated for theft is discretionary, based upon the nature and amount of the offense. And while in this case, for an amount so large, the prescribed reprimand is nothing short of death..."

He can't do that! Brandon exclaimed, his eyes flying wide, his hands suddenly closing into fists.

Stand still and be quiet, Augustus hissed, closing his own hand fiercely against the boy's wrist.

But he's lying! Brandon protested.

Again, Augustus spared him a warning glance, and Benoît, too, because he could see his brother tensing in his seat, bracing himself to leap up in objection. *I said stand still and be quiet, boy.*

"...I move to suspend those rules on this specific occasion," Allistair continued. As he strolled toward Augustus, he smiled at him, gentle and patronizing. "I find myself in the unique position of being not only Augustus's successor in authority over the Brethren clans, but his predecessor as well. Thus, perhaps more than any other among us, I understand and appreciate the contributions he has made, the benefits and assets he's brought to us all."

When he reached out to clap his hand once in feigned affinity against Augustus's shoulder, it took every ounce of strength he possessed not to reach out with his mind, clamp a telekinetic hand against Allistair's throat and crush the breath from him.

"By that alone," Allistair said, locking gazes with Augustus and continuing that goddamn infuriatingly kind little smile, "I beseech this good Council to sentence him instead to the punishment dictated for lesser crimes of theft—that of flogging here, before his fellows. Perhaps our esteemed secretary could correct me if I'm mistaken, as my memory for all of our mandates has grown dim after so many years away from the podium...I do believe the maximum sanctioned number of lashes for any crime of theft is what...? Forty?"

A heavy silence fell across the room, broken only by a harried, hushed rifling of papers as the Council secretary dug through his files. All the while, Augustus and Allistair stared one another down. He could feel Allistair prodding at his mental defenses, trying to seep into his mind.

Fuck you, Allistair, he seethed.

That kindly measure of Allistair's smile hooked upward a little more. *Oh, no, Augustus*, he breathed. *It's you who's about to be fucked.*

"Fifty, *monsieur*," the secretary said at length. His voice warbled slightly, hoarsely at first; with a loud cough, he cleared his throat, then called out again. "Fifty lashes are the maximum penalty, to be called out aloud by the perpetrator of the offense."

"Well, then," Allistair murmured, with a conciliatory nod. "There you go." Turning and walking away, he said more loudly, "Then I therefore so move—that Augustus Noble, as punishment for his thievery from Brethren funds, be hereby brought to bear with the administration of fifty strokes with the lash in this hall, on this night, with each to be called aloud by Augustus himself."

As the resonant sound of his voice echoed to silence, no one responded and Allistair frowned.

"Do I have a second on the motion?" he demanded, his brows narrowing. Still, only silence, until at last Martin Davenant, who had returned to his seat along the balcony benches, stood with his hand tentatively raised. "So seconded," he called out.

"Then let us put it to a vote," Allistair said.

At his call for those in favor, hands hesitantly raised skyward. Augustus had expected no less; even if the younger Brethren males had no knowledge of how Allistair and the Davenants had managed to wipe out four entire clans by fire in 1815, they knew enough of his methods to not dispute or deny him. Reluctant though the vote may have been, it was unanimous nonetheless; even Benoît in the end had raised his palm toward the ceiling, his face a mask of undisguised despair all the while.

No, Brandon said, aghast, even as two of the human Kinsfolk strode forward, seizing Augustus firmly by the arms. *No, they can't do this...!*

Brandon, be quiet, Augustus said as the humans pulled him roughly forward. He tried to block the boy's telepathy, forcing himself into Brandon's mind, but the younger man was agitated now; his heart was racing, his

adrenaline coursing, and all at once, that power within him, untapped and unpredictable, likewise surged.

You can't do this! Brandon cried, rushing forward. Grabbing one of the humans by the arm, he jerked him away from Augustus, sending him stumbling back, then sprawling to the floor.

Brandon, stop. Augustus swung to him, holding out his hand. *Listen to me. Stop.*

But he's lying! Brandon shoved his finger emphatically at Allistair. Looking desperately up at the gallery, he cried, *Allistair Davenant is a goddamn liar! My grandfather didn't steal that money—Martin did! He's been stealing for years, and my sister Tessa found proof of it—that ledger in Allistair's hand! She took it from Martin when she ran away from the farm. Martin's the goddamn thief, not my grandfather!*

The irony that only yesterday, Brandon himself would have probably been first in line to lay Augustus's spine open with a lash, but today would suddenly and fervently plead on his behalf wasn't lost upon Augustus. He might have been tempted to smile, absurdly touched by this unexpected gesture, had he not been so pissed off at the boy for it.

Brandon, he seethed. You are not helping. Stand down and shut up.

He's lying! Brandon yelled again, and when he charged Allistair now, the older man stumbled backwards in surprised alarm. Before Brandon could get his hands—or more specifically, his *fists*—on Allistair, two Brethren males who had seated on the main floor near the entrance, grabbed him from behind.

Let me go! Brandon shouted, struggling between them as they hauled him away from Allistair. *Get your goddamn hands off—!*

His voice cut abruptly short as the larger of his captors shoved him suddenly, forcefully to the floor, slamming him down onto his belly and crushing the breath from him as he pinned Brandon with his knee. It was all of the distraction to Brandon that Augustus needed; the boy's mind was instantly vulnerable, and Augustus clamped it shut, as he might have clapped a hand to muffle Brandon's mouth.

Furious that his carefully arranged circus side-show had been so unexpectedly interrupted, Allistair returned to the podium, trying to smooth his hair down, tugging prissily at his lapels to straighten his suit jacket.

“Enough of this nonsense,” he growled, snatching his gavel in hand and banging it loudly, repeatedly to bring the room to silence again. To the two Kinsfolk holding Augustus, he flapped his hand in beckon. “Bring him here, damn it. Bind his hands to those columns. Be quick about it.”

“*Monsieur* Chairman...” Benoît rose to his feet. “I move to rescind the decision to punish Augustus Noble.”

Bristling like a cat just doused with a bowl of water, Allistair glowered at him. “You are out of order, sir,” he said through visibly gritted teeth.

“But *monsieur*,” Benoît said. “In light of these new allegations, I think it would prudent if we—”

“New allegations?” Allistair raised his brows sharply. “Is it now the policy of this Council to lend credence to wild and unfounded accusations offered out of turn by a boy who is not only not a member of this esteemed board, but also faces certain corporal punishment of his own?”

“I am not suggesting that at all, *monsieur*,” Benoît said carefully. “I would only ask that before we carry out any action arbitrarily—”

“Arbitrarily?” Allistair exclaimed, and from there, he launched into a furious tirade, his face flushed, his fists balled.

Benoît probably didn’t hear a word of it, however, because from the floor, Augustus met his gaze.

Let it go, he said. Benoît’s eyes widened, his expression stricken, and Augustus shook his head. *Benoît, sit u plais*, he pleaded. *Allistair feels he has this moment due. Whether it’s this way, or another, he means to have it. Let him. Better that it’s me who’s made to suffer than the rest of the clan.*

Benoît knew what he meant, even without Augustus saying it. If Augustus didn’t seek whatever revenge he felt entitled to directly against Augustus, he’d take it out on the entire Noble clan. And while some of the Council might not

have remembered what happened on that long-ago October night in 1815, Benoît did.

Let it go, Augustus told him.

“...and you, Benoît, have neither the authority nor the floor,” Allistair snapped. “So *sit down*, sir, and let us get back to the goddamn proper point of order!”

Benoît didn’t look away from his brother. Even though he spoke in seeming response to Allistair’s address, it was to Augustus whom he truly spoke. “*Oui, monsieur,*” he murmured with a nod, sinking in defeat to his bench once more. *Yes, sir.*

Augustus stood facing the panel of Elders—men he’d not only known as associates but, for the most part, as friends for most of his life—while the humans stripped his clothes from him. He kept his face stoic, his features set with granite-like detachment as they peeled back his suit coat, then roughly jerked his tie loose from his neck. They tugged his shirt tails loose from the belted waistband of his slacks; buttons popped loose, scattering noisily to the floor as they ripped it from his torso. One of the men grabbed the front of Augustus’s tank undershirt; seams strained, cutting into his neck and armpits, the back of his neck, then snapped as they tore loose.

The men spun him smartly about, then shoved him forward, trussing each of his wrists to parallel marble columns lining the rotunda interior. His arms were stretched wide and immobilized, the air cold against his bare chest, warm against his spine from the neighboring blaze of the bonfire.

From behind him, there wasn’t a sound.

Grandfather... Brandon pleaded in his mind. Augustus cut his eyes in the younger man’s direction without turning his head. From his peripheral vision, he could see Brandon, still pinned to the floor.

You can’t let them do this, Brandon said.

He didn’t understand. *Yes, I can,* Augustus thought, closing his mind so his reply went unheard. He had to let them do this—because if he bore the brunt

of Allistair's anger, resentment and hatred, then Brandon would be spared it. If Augustus was made to suffer, perhaps Allistair and the Council would be more inclined to show Brandon mercy, to listen to Augustus's plea to banish the boy to the Beneath.

Allistair's footsteps echoed off the arched dome overhead as he approached Augustus from behind. Overlapping this was a soft, slithering sound, the whisper of thickly plaited leather unfurling from a tight coil, the length of a whip Allistair carried in hand. Though he'd seldom used one himself, Augustus knew the sort Allistair had favored since the days when he'd owned slaves—a stout and sturdy, six-foot stock variety, with metal ball bearings threaded into the distal end of the lash.

The better to make you bleed, Augustus thought, his brows crimping.

"You will count the strokes, Augustus," Allistair said. He must have nodded in signal to the Kinsfolk, because one of them stepped forward, pushing Augustus's long, thick hair over his shoulders toward his chest in twin sheaves, leaving his back exposed.

"*Oui.*" Augustus stared at the wall ahead of him. It was featureless; smooth, whitewashed plaster without even a hint of cracking or flaw to give him something to focus on instead of what was to come. Steeling himself, locking his eyes on a barely perceptible dimple in the otherwise flat plane of the wall, he called out, "One."

His father, Reynard, had been fond to hit him. Even privileged children in bourgeoisie France hadn't been spared from the stinging kiss of the lash. It had been a long time since Augustus's childhood, however; a long time since he'd last been struck by anyone—save for the previous day's sucker punch, courtesy of his grandson—and when Allistair's strap cut a sudden, searing diagonal across the bridge of his shoulders, down the length of his spine, he clenched his back teeth together to stifle a startled, pained gasp. Even after the shocking sting of the blow had passed, the burning sensation of it remained, seeping deep into the meat of his musculature.

“Call it, Augustus,” Allistair said, the whip offering a little whisper-hiss as he swung it in the air, readying to strike once more. The tone of Allistair’s voice lent itself to a smile.

Fuck you, Allistair, Augustus thought, locking his eyes on that tiny pock in the plaster, locking his mind there, trying to ignore the burning stripe across his back and think of nothing but that slight depression, that miniscule indentation in the wall.

“Two.”

He was a proud man with no intention of giving Allistair satisfaction by crying out. But as the seeming eternity that spanned the count of “one” from “fifty” stretched on and on, and the whip’s edge began to feel more and more like that of a razor blade instead of braided hide, his resolve began to crumble. By the count of ten strokes, he’d begun to bleed. By thirty, his body had been glossed with a heavy sheen of sweat; he’d hung heavily against the bonds securing his wrists and he’d gasped for ragged breath, tasting blood in his mouth where he’d bitten his tongue stifling choked cries of pain.

“Call it, Augustus,” Allistair said, his voice rich with good humor. Any time Augustus wavered, he offered this cloyingly sweet prompt, and as he had each preceding time, Augustus bared his fists, gritted his teeth and did his best to hoist his chin defiantly.

“Thirty-one,” he called out, and this time, when the metal ball bearing cut deep into his flesh, he was helpless to prevent a low, hurting sound from escaping.

He’s had enough, Brandon pleaded from across the room. He began to struggle again, squirming against the man who still knelt heavily atop him. Because Augustus’s concentration had slipped, yielding to pain, so, too, had his telepathic muzzle on Brandon’s mind. Allistair glanced toward the younger man, and Brandon’s brows furrowed, his face flushed with rage.

He’s had enough—leave him alone, you son of a bitch! he yelled at Allistair.

Brandon... Augustus turned his head, looking over at the younger man.
For God's sake...shut up...

Make him stop! Brandon cried at him—the very words Augustus had been trying desperately to prevent Allistair from hearing. *Open your mind, use your power! Make him stop!*

“Thirty-two,” Augustus said, forcing strength and volume into his voice, and when Allistair struck him, he cried out more loudly, hoping it would be enough of a diversion.

Brandon... Mustering all of the power he could, forcing the searing pain—like he'd been splashed from nape to buttocks in napalm—from his mind, he dampened the boy's powers again, stifling his mind. *Be quiet!*

“Thirty-three,” he said, then, to sweeten the distraction, he glanced off his shoulder at Allistair. “Oh...you *are* still there,” he added breathlessly, feigning surprise. “From the feel of things, I...I'd thought one of your wives had taken over the whip in your stead...”

“Arrogant bastard,” Allistair seethed, too stupid not to take the bait, and this time, the whip cut across Augustus brutally enough to knock him forward, his head snapping back, his voice forced from him in a strained, strangled cry. Without waiting for Augustus to count again, Allistair furiously took the liberty himself. “Thirty-four!”

“Glunnggh!” Augustus jerked against his bonds, the ropes binding his wrists cutting deep now, sending blood in thin rivulets streaming down his forearms toward his shoulders.

“Thirty-five,” Allistair hissed, hitting him again. “Thirty-six...thirty-seven, you misbegotten *fuck*...thirty-eight...!”

By forty-two, Augustus's mind slipped into shadows. It was a dark, cool, disorienting and momentary reprieve; the next blow from the whip stunned him awake again with bright, searing pain, and he cried out again, unfeigned now and agonized.

Leave him alone! Brandon cried, and all at once, Allistair flew off his feet as if shoved by invisible hands. With a yelp, he went sailing across the rotunda,

crashing into the far wall, then collapsing, the wind and wits plowed from him. He crumpled in a groaning heap to the floor, and Augustus looked again at Brandon, his dazed eyes widening in new alarm.

“Brandon...” he gasped, wanting to stop the younger man. Even as he spoke, he saw Brandon close his eyes, his brows furrowing deeply; the man pinning him to the floor suddenly cried out in frightened surprise as he levitated upwards, an oversized balloon untethered and floating away...at least, briefly. Then Brandon heaved the man skyward, sending him hurtling like a rocket. The man’s scream cut short as he smashed into the dome ceiling, sending a shower of plaster chunks and powdery dust raining down.

Brandon limped to his feet. His eyes had rolled over black, his fangs extending, his body tremulous and rigid with the surging power of the bloodlust.

Brandon, no...! Augustus pleaded because there was nothing he could do now, no way to stop Brandon—no way to protect him.

Brandon squared off against Allistair as the older man staggered to his feet. Brandon’s fingers folded into neat fists, his glossy black gaze pinning Allistair with murderous fury.

Leave my grandfather alone, he seethed.

And Augustus passed out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Two days ago, if someone had told Brandon that he'd be facing off against one of the most venerable and powerful of the Brethren Elders in defense of his grandfather, he would have said they were nothing short of shit-sucking crazy.

And since Augustus had only moments ago succumbed to his pain and slumped against his bonds, fainting, that left no one more surprised than Brandon himself to be standing up against Allistair Davenant, the bloodlust thrumming like a high-voltage electrical current through his veins.

Leave my grandfather alone, he said again as Allistair staggered toward him. In the past two days, Brandon had come to learn many things. First and foremost was that Allistair was a cold-blooded murderer; as monstrous and evil as he'd ever believed Augustus to be, Allistair was in truth and in flesh. But more importantly than this, Brandon had learned that he was different from Allistair.

I'm stronger than he is, he told himself. *He doesn't realize it yet, but when he does, I'm going to shove his head up his own goddamn ass—for my father, if for nothing else.*

Allistair blinked at Brandon, visibly disheveled and dazed. "Abomination," he whispered. "Abomination," he said again, more loudly this time, his voice scraping up octaves until he was nearly screaming. "*Abomination! He has powers that have been forbidden—an aberration of the laws!*"

He moved so quickly, he became little more than a blur of motion in Brandon's line of sight—so impossibly fast, Brandon didn't even have time to track him with his gaze before he darted in front of the younger man and struck him, a blow delivered with the steel-lined cane of the stockwhip he still clutched in his hand. Designed as a working tool meant for driving cattle, the whip had a weighted cap on the butt of its stock; this smashed into the side of Brandon's head, knocking him off his feet and battering the senses from him.

He hit the ground hard, stunned breathless and immobile, and he remembered all too late as Allistair closed his hand in his hair, that he didn't have the slightest fucking clue as to how to use those newfound abilities that made him inherently stronger.

Stupid boy, Allistair hissed in his mind, dragging him upright by the hair. *Is this the little secret Augustus has been trying so hard to keep? All of this time, he's been housing an abomination in the eyes of the laws right under his very own roof eaves! Tell me, Brandon, how did you get these foul and unnatural gifts? Who among us did you feed from?*

Your mother. Brandon craned his head, grimacing at the painful strain against his scalp as he spit in Allistair's face. *I fucked her, too. She liked it up the—*

He yelped again, voiceless and mute, as Allistair roared in fury, tossing him by the hair, ripping out a thick handful between clenched fingers in the process. Brandon crashed to the floor, tumbling, then lay breathless and wounded. The top of his head, the crown of his scalp, stung like he'd dipped his head in acid. His fingertips fluttered there briefly, feebly, and came away spotted with blood.

Stupid boy, Allistair said again, and in another blur of motion, he was there beside Brandon, closing his fist in his hair again. Jerking Brandon to his feet, he swung his free fist toward his face; again, the movement was so fast, Brandon had no time to react or defend himself. Again, the strength in Allistair's blow was immense, nearly impossible. Brandon sailed like a rag doll, weightless and limp, smashing into the wrought iron railings of the gallery seats, then crashing earthbound again, slamming face-first against the marble floor.

Get up, Allistair said. Brandon could feel the vibrations of his footsteps thrumming in the floor beneath him. His vision swimming, his mind dazed, he tried to move, to get out of his way, but Allistair grabbed his hair again, nearly scalping him from the feel of things as he forced Brandon to his feet.

Who did you feed from? Allistair asked. His hand clamped heavily against Brandon's throat, shoving him backwards, pinning him to the nearest wall. His

windpipe crushed beneath Allistair's palm, and Brandon gagged for breath, slapping at him futilely, even as Allistair slowly, deliberately hoisted him aloft, sliding him up the wall, until his arm was fully extended and Brandon's feet dangled and pedaled more than a foot off the floor.

"Who did you feed from?" Allistair asked again. "Tell me, boy—I know your sins. And someone among us..." His pupils had expanded, swallowing his eyes in shadows, and he swept that black, icy gaze across the gallery now.

"...someone here in this very goddamn room has conspired with you to commit them. Someone in our brotherhood opened his veins to slake your bloodlust, or else you forced it from one among us—now you tell me, boy. *Tell me!*"

Brandon's face had flushed a dark, dusky shade of violet with the strain to breathe. His eyes rolled back into his skull; his saliva frothed in a thin foam at the corner of his lips and his hands drooped limply to his sides.

"*Who did you feed from?*" Allistair screamed.

"Me."

Augustus's voice was little more than a croak. He lifted his head, his pale hair hanging disheveled, nearly hiding his face from view as he craned to look over his shoulder. "The boy...fed from me..."

When Allistair's hand fell away from Brandon's throat, he collapsed to the floor, gagging for breath, clutching at his neck. His eyes flooded with involuntary tears, he looked toward Augustus, startled and confused. *What?*

He'd understood how he came to have his powers; Augustus had explained as much to him. But Brandon had thought this had meant when he fed from Rene, his latent abilities had been activated. In all the world, for the life of him, he wouldn't have imagined that it had been *Augustus* all along who had sacrificed his blood, who had endowed Brandon with whatever abilities he now called his own.

And then he remembered.

He'd dreamed of Augustus letting him feed, of that night in his childhood when his throat had been cut, his ears battered and ruined. He'd dreamed of

Augustus at his bedside, opening his wrist with his teeth and pressing the spurting wound against Brandon's mouth.

Drink from me, Brandon. Do it, boy. Now.

Allistair walked away, leaving Brandon huddled on the floor. Whatever he said to Augustus must have been spoken aloud and thus beyond Brandon's comprehension. He stared at his grandfather, his eyes enormous and stunned.

Rene had told him that he'd thought Brandon was stronger than the rest of the Brethren—including the Elders—and that Augustus had been blocking him somehow, dampening his powers, keeping him under control.

But what if that was only partially true? A sudden, sickening realization dawned on him. Allistair had burned his enemies' homes to the ground—murdered entire clans because they'd agreed with Michel Morin's philosophies, his ideas about feeding from fellow Brethren. *What if Rene's right, only the Grandfather hasn't been blocking my powers because he was scared of me...*

...but because he was scared of Allistair Davenant finding out about me...about us both?

Allistair snapped the whip in a sharp arc, his brows furrowed, his mouth open in mid-rant. Brandon could make out the words "godforsaken abomination," and "the whole thing was a plot," from among the shrill garble, and then Allistair began to beat Augustus again in furious, brutal earnest.

Grandfather! Brandon cried helplessly as Augustus writhed in pain, convulsing at every forceful, violent blow. When at last, the whip fell still in Allistair's hand, the braided length of the lash drooping in lip coils to the floor, Augustus had slumped between the columns, unconscious again.

Grandfather! Brandon cried again. He jerked in reflexive surprise when heavy hands fell against him, more Brethren males—Davenant sons—grabbing him by the arms, dragging him to his feet. They forced him to stumble along between them, hauling him forcibly toward the enormous fire pit in the center of the room. Through the leaping flames, along the far wall of the rotunda, he could see two other men trundling something down from the wall—a tall ladder that had been propped unobtrusively behind the columns.

What are you doing? Brandon asked, his eyes flying wide. He tried to stop, to tear himself loose from their grasp, but they were strong and held on fast. *What are you doing with that? Let me go...no, goddamn it...no...!*

He struggled wildly but it was useless. They forced his arms behind him, shoving them between the rungs of the ladder, then lashing them tightly, using another length of rope to connect them to his ankles, which were also secured to the ladder frame. Trussed securely, nearly hog-tied, Brandon was immobilized and helpless as a group of four men—two Brethren and two human Kinsfolk—wrestled the unwieldy ladder between them, propping it upright again.

Oh, Jesus...! Brandon thought, twisting his hands desperately against the ropes as he found himself staring down a dizzying height of well over twenty feet. The strain against his shoulders as they bore the brunt of his suspended weight was excruciating, nearly enough to strain the joints loose of their sockets, from the feel of things. Below, he could see the first row of bench seating along the proscenium of the gallery, the parquet mosaic pattern of the marble and granite tiled floor, the wide, gaping maw of the fire pit, from which thick, blinding tongues of red-hot flames licked and spewed.

What are they doing? he thought wildly, because Allistair was talking. He could tell because the man was on the move beneath him, walking again, gesturing with wide, sweeping motions of his arms. Others among the Council watched him and listened; some, like his great-uncle Benoît looked at Brandon instead, his eyes round and horrified.

What's he saying? he pleaded. Benoît could hear his thoughts; with Augustus unconscious, the block on his mind was gone. *Benoît, please, what's going on? Help me!*

I can't petit, Benoît said, his voice stricken and strained. Then, more rhetorical than directed at the younger man, he murmured, *Mon Dieu, Auguste...my God, what have you done?*

Benoît, please! Brandon cried, and the ladder swayed beneath him, the men below adjusting the base legs, locking them with metal clamps into some kind of round metal, mechanized platform below.

What the hell are they doing? he cried because now the ladder faced the fire pit in full; he had a bird's-eye view of the flames below and could feel the amazing push of heat even from his distant vantage.

You're an abomination, Brandon, Benoît said in a horrified hush. Allistair said you're an abomination and by the law, you must...oh, God, you must be burned.

At that precise moment, from beneath him, Allistair grabbed the handle of a large lever built into the ladder platform. Leaning against it, he shifted it several degrees—and as he did, Brandon felt a grinding sound as cog-works and wheels beneath the platform began to move. The ladder gave a lurch, then began to cant forward, angling in a downward slope toward the fire.

Jesus Christ! Brandon screamed, thrashing now against his bonds. He shrugged his shoulders, twisted his hands, bucked his hips—anything he could think of in his sudden, blind panic. He didn't know what he hoped to do—tear the ropes loose, break the rungs, somehow activate those telekinetic abilities within his skull that had suddenly—inexplicably—gone dormant once more. All he knew was that he was now leaning precariously—and face-first—toward death. A very painful, horrifying, hideous death.

Benoît! he screamed as the ladder lurched again. It swayed, wobbly and uncertain, then dropped another terrifying three feet or so toward the flames before abruptly halting. Spying another familiar face along the Noble seats, he pleaded: *Uncle Adam! God, please, somebody help me!*

Staring up at him from below, now half-obsured behind a drape of flames, Allistair Davenant smiled.

You sick fuck! Brandon cried. The ladder dropped again, plummeting at least five feet as Allistair shoved against the lever. Brandon felt the blazing heat sting his face, scorch the very air around him, snatching it out of his lungs.

Free yourself, Brandon, Allistair said, opening his mind again, speaking directly, with intimate menace inside Brandon's head. *Show me your power, you abomination, if you can.*

The only abomination is you! Brandon shouted back. *You son of a bitch—why don't you tell the Council what really happened to my father! Tell them what you did—tell them what you said to make my father shoot himself! I know you were there last night in the barns! I saw you on the security tape! Tell me what you did to my father!*

Allistair laughed. *Stupid boy. I didn't do anything. I didn't have to. It only took three words and the rest, he chose for himself. 'It's your fault,' I told him. There was little need for more. Caine...Emily...Tessa...you. He understood his culpability. And he took responsibility for it.*

You bastard! Brandon screamed, even as Allistair notched the lever downward again, sending the ladder plunging toward the inferno. Now Brandon could smell his hair searing, the acrid stink as the plastic buttons on his shirt, the rubber soles of his shoes began to soften from the heat, growing pliable and molten. His face was soaked in sweat; it streamed from his hairline, dripped from his brow, his nose.

He struggled to concentrate; he'd once been able to open his mind to the birds, as Rene could do, to summon them to his aid and he tried to now, desperate and terrified. Even though he could sense them roosting in trees surrounding the hall, the awareness of them was as rapid-fire as his own frantic heartbeat, fleeting and useless. Too panic-stricken to focus, he couldn't latch onto them with his mind, couldn't hone his telepathy long enough to control them.

Oh, God, I'm going to die, he realized, thinking of Lina, trying to cement within his mind the recollection of her beautiful face, to think of her and not the fire, not the heat that was inexorably roasting him alive, stretching his skin on his face taut and brittle, blistering his cheeks, searing his lips.

I love you, he thought to Lina, closing his eyes. *Oh, God, with all my heart—everything I have, Lina—I love you.*

The ladder abruptly swung backwards, sweeping him away from the flames so quickly, his eyes flew wide in disbelieving shock. Gasping for breath, sweat-soaked and semi-lucid, Brandon shuddered, feeling the amazing press of cool air against his face.

What the—?

He looked down and saw that Allistair had shoved the hinge's lever all of the way back. As he walked away, he gestured with his hands, addressing the Council again, speaking aloud so Brandon couldn't read his lips or understand him.

What is he doing? Why did he raise the ladder?

Not for a moment did Brandon think Allistair might have found some pity or mercy in his heart. Nothing Allistair said, thought or did was without purpose or benefit to him, as Augustus might have pointed out, and Brandon struggled to figure out what he might be up to.

Whatever it is... he thought, gritting his teeth and twisting his hands at the small of his back, straining against his bonds. *...it's bought me some time at least. I've got to make the most of it.*

Beneath him, two Kinsfolk scurried forward at Allistair's spoken command. Brandon watched them untie Augustus from the columns; he collapsed lifelessly to the ground as soon as his wrists were unfettered, and they wrestled him to his feet again, hauling his deadweight between them.

What are they doing?

As Brandon watched, the Kinsfolk bound Augustus to one of the columns again, this time with both hands suspended above his head, his body turned so he faced not only the gallery but Brandon, as well.

They're going to wake him up.

It made perfect sense. Allistair had waited close to two centuries to have this moment of revenge against Augustus. He meant to enjoy every moment of it. No purpose would be served, no benefit or enjoyment for Allistair in the end, if Augustus slept through Brandon's entire execution.

That stupid son of a bitch, Brandon thought.

In his absolute arrogance, Allistair meant for Augustus to bear witness as Brandon was lowered into the flaming pit.

He doesn't know. Allistair doesn't realize the Grandfather's like me, too. All he knows is that I fed from him.

He began to laugh. Though no sound escaped his throat, his entire body shook with the sudden force, and he leaned his head back, cackling silently until tears streamed down his cheeks.

That stupid son of a bitch...! He doesn't know!

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Augustus jerked to startled, abrupt consciousness as a dousing of ice water slapped against the crown of his skull, soaking his face and hair. Disoriented and dazed, his eyes flew wide, and he gasped for whooping breath—a sharp intake of breath that cut short even more sharply as the raw, bloody wounds in his back sent spears of pain through him. In that instant, as he arched his spine and uttered a choked cry, he remembered where he was and what was happening to him. And that Allistair Davenant hadn't finished meting out the fifty lashes he'd promised.

To his bewilderment, however, his field of vision had changed. Now, instead of facing the back wall of the rotunda, he found himself turned around a full ninety degrees to face the panel of Brethren Elders and the gallery of Council members. Instead of his hands stretched wide and bound into place, they were trussed above him, wrist to wrist, secured around the broad circumference of a column.

And in front of him stood not Allistair, armed with his ball-bearing laden whip, but his son, Martin, holding an empty glass pitcher in his hand—the source of the water. Confused and surprised, Augustus blinked at younger man, shuddering with pain and sudden chill, his hair blood-stained and soaking wet, water droplets sputtering from his lips.

Brandon was also no longer where Augustus had last seen him—pinned to a wall by Allistair. A glance to his left revealed the young man now lashed to a towering ladder, propped erect, facing the fire pit.

Oh, God, he thought in horrified realization, because he'd seen that ladder before. More than a century earlier, he'd born helpless witness as Gerard Trevilian had been burned alive while strapped to it—just like Brandon was.

Although raised fully upright, clearly at some point the ladder had been lowered over the fire; Brandon's hair and clothes were sweat-soaked, his face

flushed and glossy, his body nearly limp as it dangled from the high perch. Brandon rolled his eyes toward Augustus; even from the distance between them, he could see the boy's terror, stark and apparent, in his face.

"Let him go." Augustus leveled his gaze at Allistair, ignoring Martin as if he'd been made of glass, something to look through and beyond, no more.

"You know the Law, Augustus," Allistair replied. "By now, you should have them all committed to heart—even if you have chosen to disregard them. *Vous ne souffrirez pas une abomination pour vivre. Il doit être purgé de nos rangs par le feu.* 'You shall not suffer an abomination to live. It must be purged from our ranks by fire.'" He had approached a long lever handle as he spoke; near the base where the ladder legs locked into a mechanized platform, the lever could tilt the ladder up and down.

"Do whatever you want with me..." Augustus said. "But please..." He twisted his hands helplessly against the ropes. "Allistair...I beg you...leave the boy alone."

"Beg me?" Allistair's brows flew up and he laughed. "*Mon Dieu*, how the mighty have fallen! What a tender sentiment, Augustus! Utter bullshit, of course, but still—wildly touching!"

He grasped the lever in both hands and shoved against it, sending the ladder falling forward a good twenty degrees before jarring to an abrupt halt. Brandon had braced himself during this sharp descent, his brows knotted, his teeth visibly clenched. Again, he looked to Augustus, wide-eyed with fright.

Grandfather...! he pleaded.

"Let him go!" Augustus shouted, straining against the bonds, ignoring the searing pain that lanced through his mutilated back. "You want vengeance—take it here, with me! Turn the boy loose to the Beneath, banish him to the darkness, put me on the ladder in his place!"

"My God, I once feared you," Martin remarked, his face pinched with disgust, as if he'd found dog shit smeared on the heel of his shoe. "Now look at you. Sniveling and pleading...like a goddamn bitch."

He swung the pitcher around, smashing it into the side of Augustus's face. It was leaded crystal, heavy and thick, and the blow stunned the senses from Augustus again, shattering his nose and crunching the bone in his cheek, from the sound of things.

In that moment, two hundred years of keeping secrets, of constantly restraining himself, of suppressing his powers and abilities—some of the most inherent components of his very nature—suddenly came to an end. All of the inner defenses and shields Augustus had worked so diligently to build and maintain for so long abruptly crumbled, and he felt the bloodlust wash over him in a clarifying, emancipating rush. As his eyes rolled over to black, his pupils spreading open wide, the glare from the bonfire grew nearly blinding; in less time than it took to draw a breath in full, his fangs extended, each nearly the length of a grown man's finger, each hooked with wicked intensity, dislodging his lower jaw from its sockets in accommodation.

"You should fear me *now*," he seethed at Martin as all around him, the silver-dollar-sized tiles on the floor, thousands of them comprising an intricate mosaic design, began to jostle and bounce, ripping loose of their grout moorings and chattering like wild castanets. Hairline cracks suddenly splintered all along the rotunda's foundation; the plaster tore upwards with overlapping whispers that grew louder and louder the higher they went, as they ripped even wider, sending powdery dust and broken fragments showering down in a sudden, spattering rain.

"What the fuck...?" Martin drew back, that arrogance in his face draining to ashen fright. His eyes darted wildly about as one by one, the more than three hundred and fifty Phillips-head screws holding the gallery's wrought-iron railing in place began to unwind from their sockets, each spinning madly before leaping out into the air, loose of the walls, tumbling with melodic clamor to the floor. The railing groaned, then slipped sideways, screeching as it plunged at a sudden, steep angle, falling away from the gallery floor, ripping large sections of the wall loose along with it.

The Council members seated aloft sprang to their feet, crying out in sharp, frightened alarm, all of them scrambling over benches and seats, trying to reach the stairs. From the Elders' platform, Benoît and the others leapt up as well, bolting from their seats as the heavy, ornate railing at last crashed fully free from above and crashed to the floor, splintering the wooden dais and podium beneath it.

Now the cracks in the walls had made their way to the ceiling, splintering off from there in a tangled network of interconnecting off-shoots and fingers, like a spider web. The inner belly of the dome began to crumble; large pieces of plaster, some the size of dinner plates, came toppling, smacking into the ground, sending Brethren males scurrying out of their paths with frightened cries.

"Oh, Jesus...!" Martin whimpered, shrinking back as one by one, the strands comprising Augustus's rope bonds began to snap loose, each with a distinctive popping sound, like the muted refrains of guitar strings breaking. Fissures, each as wide as a number-two pencil, raced up the length of the column behind him, tangling together, twining and interlocking. When Augustus jerked his hands apart, snapping the frayed ropes, the entire column split along with them; with an enormous crash, chunks of marble and granite sprayed in all directions, the top segment of the column smashing sideways, leaving the base and bottom quarter of it moored and mauled to the ground.

"Oh, Jesus!" Martin scrambled backwards, his arms pinwheeling, his feet slipping and sliding in the fallen debris and loose floor tiles. He crashed down onto his ass, and when Augustus strode toward him, his fists balled, his brows furrowed so deeply his face seemed swallowed in darkness, Martin cowered, throwing his hands up to his face.

"Father...!" was all Augustus gave him time to yelp. He shoved his hand forward, and Martin's voice cut abruptly short, his throat clamped shut, his tongue telekinetically stilled. Raising his hand, Augustus hoisted Martin aloft, leaving him momentarily suspended in mid-air for all of the Brethren Council—but especially Allistair—to see, and then he shoved his palm forward, sending Martin flying.

"Father!" Martin's scream ripped up shrill octaves when he landed in the middle of the fire pit. Immediately, he was engulfed in flames, his clothing and hair alight.

"Father!" he shrieked, dancing wildly about, arms and legs flailing as he struggled to escape the blaze. *"Father, help me!"*

The melting soles of his shoes could find no purchase against the concave incline of the pit's basin and at last, he collapsed, his flesh searing, peeling back from his sinew and bones in blackening sheets. His cries fading, the hot, sweet stink of burning meat choking the confines of the rotunda.

After this, there was silence, save for the popping hiss of the fire, the rattling of the floor tiles, the steady patter of falling plaster from overhead. The men of the Brethren Council stood pressed and wide-eyed against the walls of their meeting hall, shocked and horrified.

Allistair had recoiled from the lever; as Augustus walked toward him, he backpedaled even more. Without averting his eyes, his black and murderous gaze, Augustus addressed his brother.

"Benoît, get the others out of here."

His eyes as large as tea saucers, Benoît nodded mutely. When he scurried for the nearest exit, the others followed in hasty retreat, not as much at his beckon as by his example.

"You..." Allistair gasped at Augustus. When he stumbled over loose chunks of plaster, he fell backwards, then shoved with his heels, pushing himself on his ass. "You...you're one of them...an abomination!"

"I'm the *first* one of them," Augustus corrected. He cut a glance toward the ladder upon which his grandson hung, limp and barely conscious; with a squealing of taxed and torqued wood, the ladder legs ripped free of the metal clamps securing them to the tilting platform. The ladder bobbed in the air for a moment, as weightless as a dried leaf caught in a stream's current, and then it drooped to the floor, touching down with all of the quiet care of a snowflake against a deep drift.

Allistair stared at him, then the fear in his face faded. His brows narrowed, and he shook his head furiously, dislodging his jaw to make room for his canines as they suddenly thrust downward. Blackness swelled in his eyes, swallowing them whole, and he snarled up at Augustus, looking for all the world like a feral dog.

Then you'll be the last of them to die, he seethed in Augustus's mind as he leapt from the ground, not canine now, but cat-like, quick and graceful, a panther pouncing in for the kill. His hands outstretched as if he meant to clap them about Augustus's throat, throttling him, his mouth hanging wide at a preternatural angle, he uttered a hoarse, shrill, furious shriek.

Augustus let him get within a centimeter of him, Allistair's splayed fingers nearly reaching his neck, and then brought him to an abrupt, complete halt in mid-air with only a thought. Hanging three feet off the floor, immobilized, Allistair blinked at Augustus, his eyes growing round first with surprise—then with fear.

"Who's fucked now?" Augustus hissed, then threw Allistair away from him, sending him rocketing toward the ceiling, then crashing down again. He landed on the platform, slamming against the lever with enough force to impale himself, the handle spearing through just beneath his shoulder blade, punching out within inches of his sternum. He fell all of the way to the floor, driving the length of the lever through his torso, and lay there for a long moment, a puddle of blood growing in circumference beneath him, his hands pawing at the lever.

"You..." he croaked, as blood bubbled, then dribbled out of his mouth, spilling down his cheek toward his ear. He looked up as Augustus approached, the bloodlust fading from his eyes.

"You..." he wheezed again, then fell still, his hands slumping lifelessly to the floor, his legs splayed wide. His eyelids drooped but didn't fully close, leaving the illusion that, even dead, he gazed at an indistinct point somewhere beyond Augustus's right shoulder.

At first, Brandon thought he was a child again, that somehow, he'd gone back in time to the night in which he'd been attacked in the great house library.

The pain was as bad as he remembered it from that night; his entire body felt scraped raw and bloody and even the effort to breathe left him whimpering soundlessly in excruciating agony.

He opened his eyes when he felt someone slide an arm beneath his shoulders, then another beneath his knees. His gaze was bleary, his mind hurting and dazed, when he first caught sight of the man leaning over him, his face fondly familiar.

Dad... Brandon whispered, and there was pain when Sebastian lifted him in his arms. He twisted against his father's chest, crying out sharply, silently.

Easy, petit, a quiet voice murmured inside his mind. It was reminiscent of Sebastian's, but not quite the same, and as he emerged all the more from the murky depths of unconsciousness, Brandon realized the same could be said for the man's face.

He looked up again. *Grandfather...?* he asked, even as he passed out again—certain he hadn't roused at all and was, in fact, still unconscious and having some wildly improbable dream.

Augustus glanced down at him, then away again. *It's alright now,* he said as he picked his way through the rubble littering the floor of the Council Hall, carrying his grandson out into the cool darkness of the night. *Everything is going to be alright.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Tessa!”

She had just stepped out of the cool, comfortable, climate-controlled interior of the Little White Dove Wedding Chapel in Reno, Nevada, when Tessa heard someone shouting out her name. The surrealism of what she’d just done had frankly left her feeling a little light-headed and punch drunk, as if none of it was real; everything over the course of the last twenty-four hours had been little more than some peculiar and impossible dream. Thus, when she realized the voice calling to her wasn’t entirely unfamiliar—impossible though it may be—she wasn’t entirely taken by surprise.

She turned, squinting in the dazzling sunlight, drawing the blade of her hand to her brow. *Okay*, she thought. *Someone pinch me quick.*

Only there was no one to pinch her. Tristan was still inside the chapel taking care of the last of their paperwork. She was all alone on the sidewalk in the stark afternoon’s glare. All alone except for...

“Rene?”

There was no way he could be there, no possible way he could have figured out what she meant to do, never mind where she’d gone, and yet there he was—rushing down the sidewalk toward her, wide-eyed, visibly distraught and as disheveled as always. For a moment, the sight of his messy hair, unshaven beard scruff and untucked shirt-tails conjured a feeling of warmth and love within her, but then she remembered what he had done to her and to Brandon, and that dim fire within her abruptly smothered.

“Tessa!” he cried again as he drew near. “Tessa, please! Stop!”

“I am stopped,” she told him pointedly as he drew to a winded, gasping halt in front of her. Running had obviously caused him pain; he doubled slightly, his face flushed and shining with sweat. “I’m standing here on the sidewalk. I’m not going anywhere.”

“No,” he gasped, shaking his head. Behind him, she saw two other silhouetted figures in the distance, walking down the street toward him. Now she knew she had to be dreaming—it looked like Eleanor and, of all people, Naima.

“No, I...I mean, stop,” Rene said, standing upright in full, forking his fingers through his hair. He reached for her, his brows lifted in desperate implore. “Please, *pischouette*. Please don’t do this—don’t marry Tristan.”

“What?” Surprised, Tessa drew away from him. “How...how did you...?”

“Naima read your mind. She saw the two of you on the beach at Emerald Bay.”

“What?” Now Tessa frowned, glaring at Naima’s approaching figure. “She had no goddamn right—”

“Tessa, please, listen to me.” Rene caught her by the shoulders as she started to march past him. “You can’t do this. You just...you can’t.”

“Why not?” Tessa snapped, shrugging forcefully loose of him.

“Because I love you,” he said, and when she opened her mouth to lay into him, he cut her off. “And you love me, too, *pischouette*—I know it. You’re angry with me, *oui*, and God knows, you have every right to be, but I swear to you, I only did what I did for you and the baby.”

“You turned Brandon over to the Elders!” she cried. “I don’t care why you did it—you *did it*, and that’s all that matters! He’s helpless against them, and they’ll—”

“He’s not helpless,” Rene said. “Not against them—not against anybody. And you know it, *pischouette*. There’s something different about Brandon—I’ve said it all along. I’ve always thought he was stronger than they were, the Elders, and now I know it for sure. Your *grandmère* told me so.”

“What?” Incredulous, Tessa blinked at Eleanor as she drew within earshot.

“He’s like they are, Tessa,” Rene said, catching her shoulder again. This time, she didn’t recoil from his hand. “Like Michel and Naima. I thought maybe he’d been born different or what happened to his ears, his throat when he was hurt...it changed him somehow, but I was wrong. I thought your granddaddy was afraid of him on account of his power, but I was wrong about that, too.”

Tessa looked up at him, startled and confused.

“Your grandfather is like them, too,” Rene told her. “It’s not something you’re born with—it’s something that happens to you, the kinds of powers Michel and Naima have. It happens when you feed from another Brethren.”

Tessa shook her head. “No, that...that’s not possible.” She glanced over Rene’s shoulder at Eleanor. “That’s not possible. Brandon never fed before, not from a Brethren, not until Rene.” She turned to Rene again. “And you said you’d felt his power way before that.”

“He didn’t get his powers from feeding off me, *pischouette*,” Rene said, meeting her gaze gravely. “He got them from Augustus Noble—your granddaddy—on that night he was attacked as a boy. Augustus saved his life. Then spent the rest of it trying to keep his powers a secret from the rest of the Brethren...along with his own.”

He’s crazy, Tessa thought, shaking her head again. *Because if he’s not crazy, then that means...*

She’d fed from Rene. And she’d only just fed from Tristan that morning. If all that it took to gain the kind of powers Rene was talking about, the ability to move things with the mind the way Tristan and Naima could...

Then that means I’ll be able to do it, too, she thought.

“It’s true, darling,” Eleanor said with a gentle smile, holding out her hand nearly in invitation. “Please, won’t you give us the chance to explain?”

Tessa glanced from her to Rene again, then her frown deepened. “It doesn’t matter,” she said. “It doesn’t excuse what he did.” To Rene directly, she added: “It doesn’t change anything—doesn’t make things right.”

“No,” he said in agreement. “It doesn’t. Tessa, please...”

With a soft groan that belied the pain and effort it caused him, Rene genuflected on the concrete in front of her. Slipping her hands against his own, he stared up at her, pleading. “I don’t deserve you,” he said. “Or the *bébé*. But I love you, Tessa. Over these past few weeks, you’ve become everything to me...my whole entire world, *pischouette*. I’ll do anything to prove it to you—whatever you want. By Christ and my life, I’ll never hurt you again, never

disappoint you, never give you reason not to trust me. Whatever it takes, for as long as it takes—let me prove it to you.”

He drew her hands to his face, and when he kissed her fingers, tears slipped from his eyes, peppering her skin. “I’m begging you, *pischouette*,” he whispered, trembling.

She couldn’t breathe. She stared down at him, so torn with emotion—her heart so seized with love for him, a fierce and unwavering passion that had never fully diminished, and yet filled with such anger at him for his betrayal—she felt immobilized with indecision.

At that moment, the glass chapel door swung open, and Tristan came outside. In his hand, he carried several sheets of paper folded together. When he saw Rene on his knees in front of Tessa, the smile that had been on his face faltered. When he caught sight of Eleanor and Naima, the smile faded altogether.

“What’s...going on?” he asked after a moment.

Rene blinked between the papers in Tristan’s hand and at Tessa. More than this, he clearly realized the pair hadn’t just arrived at the wedding chapel; they were *leaving*. Dismayed realization swept across his face, and his hands fell limply away from hers. “Oh, God, *pischouette*,” he whispered, aghast. His shoulders slumped, his chin dropped toward his chest, and he shoved the heels of his hands against his brow. “Jesus Christ, you didn’t.” Lifting his eyes, stricken, he stared at her. “You didn’t.”

“You’re right,” Tessa agreed. “I didn’t.”

Rene blinked at her in bewilderment.

“I was going to,” Tessa said. “Maybe a part of me wanted to...if only to get back at you, make you feel even a little bit of the hurt I feel, the disappointment. But in the end, I just...I couldn’t.”

“She’s in love with you, you stupid son of a bitch,” Tristan said, tossing the papers at him, letting them flutter in Rene’s face before tumbling to the sidewalk.

Rene picked up the papers—a marriage license application, unsigned, and a couple of forms for flowers and music preferences, also incomplete. After a

moment, he looked again at Tessa, the dismay in his face yielding again to desperate hope.

“This doesn’t mean I forgive you,” Tessa told him.

He nodded. “*Je comprends.*” *I understand.*

Her brow arched slightly. “It does mean, however, that you can get up off the sidewalk before someone thinks you’re a panhandler and calls the police.”

He laughed, even as tears still glistened in his eyes. “*Comme tu souhaitez,*” he whispered, kissing her hand again. *As you wish.*

Brandon felt something light against his face; his cheek felt hypersensitive, the grazing touch tickling and persistent, like the scuttling of spider legs. With a frown, he tried to reach up and swat whatever it was away, but to his surprise, someone caught him by the hand.

Hey, now, he heard presumably that same someone say in his mind. *Cut it out.*

Groaning soundlessly, Brandon opened his eyes and found a young man who looked no older than he did leaning over him. Beyond the young man’s shoulder, he could see an IV stand, along with several electronic monitors. A bright fluorescent light shone directly over Brandon, making him wince, trying vainly to turn his head away from the blinding glare.

Keep your hands down, okay? he heard the young man say, and it occurred to him that he could sense his presence; he was aware of the man’s proximity by the slight, electrical shiver that seemed to have stoked within him, the prickling sensation that had raised chill bumps along his forearms.

Squinting against the light, Brandon opened his eyes warily again. *You...you’re like me...* he whispered.

The young man smiled and nodded. *Close enough for government work, anyway,* he replied. *My name’s Tristan Morin. I’m a doctor. Hold still for a minute. I’m almost done with your treatment.*

Treatment...? Brandon frowned, then flinched again as the young man, Tristan, dabbed something lightly against his face, some sort of cool salve he applied with latex-gloved fingertips.

It's topical heparin, Tristan explained while he worked, moving his fingers in slow semi-circles as he applied the medicine. *It will help facilitate healing. You've suffered ischemic thermal injuries on approximately nine percent of your body, limited mostly to your frontal, nasal, mental, supraclavical and sternocleidomastoid regions.*

Brandon blinked at him as if he'd just been addressed in Mandarin Chinese, and Tristan laughed.

"You have second-degree burns on your face and neck," he said. "The medicine I'm using will restore blood flow more quickly, help your tissue heal. When I'm finished, I'm going to apply a loose gauze dressing around your face that will make you feel like you're in an old mummy movie...if you stay awake that long. I gave you some alfentanil to help keep you comfortable before I started your dressing change; it might make you drowsy. Do you feel any pain right now?"

Brandon shook his head. *Not much.*

On a scale of one to ten, with ten the worst pain you've ever felt and one being none at all, how would you rate it? Tristan asked.

Uh...three, I guess, Brandon replied, looking around. His answer seemed to satisfy the doctor; Tristan raised his brows in tandem, nodded once, then returned his attention to Brandon's face.

It looked like they were in a hospital room, small and cubical, with a large window that allowed in a spill of warm sunshine and through which he could see pine forests beyond. Besides Brandon's standard hospital bed, with plastic side rails, the only furnishings appeared to be a small chest of drawers, a bedside table, a flat-screen TV mounted into the wall directly across from him and a solitary reclining chair.

Where am I? he asked.

Tristan leaned over him again, applying more of the salve to the opposite side of Brandon's face. *South Lake Tahoe.*

Brandon flinched, partially from surprise and in part because Tristan prodded gingerly against a still-tender place along his brow line. *Tahoe?* he asked. *But I...how did I...what am I doing here?*

Tristan sat back, reaching behind him for a medicine cart. "I don't make house calls," he said aloud, dropping Brandon a friendly wink.

No. Brandon shook his head, then winced, feeling stiff and aching all over as he tried to sit up. Something about the young man was niggling at him—more specifically, something he'd said. As Brandon's mind grew more and more into focus, it occurred to him. *Morin,* he said. *You told me your name is Morin?*

Yeah. Tristan nodded. With a quick smirk, he added, *Don't hold that against me, though.*

He snapped his gloves off, turning them inside out, one clutched in the other, then dropped them in a nearby waste can. As Brandon watched, he carefully peeled back the paper lining of another set of gloves, these a surgical-grade, sterile variety, and expertly rolled them over each of his palms. With these in place, he began to apply bandages to Brandon's cheeks and brow, wrapping a thin cotton gauze overtop to hold them in place.

How did I get here? Brandon asked. The last thing he remembered was dangling over a fire pit in the Brethren Council Hall. That had been in Kentucky. How in the hell he'd survived—never mind found his way back to California—was an absolute mystery. *And where the hell is 'here,' anyway?*

Tristan laughed. *"Here is the only highly specialized facility in the entire world dedicated to the care and treatment of our species."*

Our species? Brandon felt owlish and idiotic, blinking in bewilderment at the young doctor.

The Brethren, yes, he said. Finished with his bandaging, Tristan slipped his gloves off again, then turned back to his cart, cleaning up his supplies. *Your grandfather brought you here in a private jet.* With a wink, he added, *Being the*

dominant Elder apparently has its privileges. I know he'll be glad to hear you're awake.

It seemed to Brandon that he had a dim recollection of Augustus carrying him; it seemed like something out of a dream, being cradled in his grandfather's arms as if little more than a child.

Your sister will be, too, Tristan remarked, turning back to Brandon again, in time to see Brandon's eyes widen.

Tessa?

"Yup." Tristan nodded. "She's outside now in the waiting area. Would you like me to send her in?"

Yes. Brandon nodded. *Yes, please, that...that would be wonderful.*

"She's an amazing woman," Tristan remarked, looking momentarily—if not inexplicably—wistful. "I almost married her, you know." And of course, because Brandon didn't know this and merely blinked again in stupefied surprise, Tristan laughed. "Never mind. I'm sure she'll bring you up to speed."

Two days later, Brandon had healed enough for the bandages to be removed. Which came in handy, since he'd been unable to kiss Lina to that point, on account of having his face all but swaddled. Once they were off, he took advantage of the opportunity to make up for lost time, pulling her on top of him in the hospital bed, kissing her deeply, fiercely. He cupped her buttocks in his hands, caressing her through the taut, dark denim of her jeans, but when he reached for her abdomen, the button of her fly, she caught him.

"Don't make me wrist-lock you," she threatened against his mouth, making him laugh. He didn't remember her arrival in Kentucky, accompanied by Rene's long-believed but ultimately not-quite-so-lost grandfather, Michel Morin. From her explanation of things, they'd arrived only hours after the fateful Council meeting in which Augustus had killed both Martin and Allistair Davenant. "Tristan says you're still on the mend—nothing strenuous for at least another week."

Fair enough, he replied, smiling impishly as he reached again for her waistband. *You take the top. I'll lay here on the bottom. Nothing strenuous about it.*

“Yeah, for you.” She laughed, then wriggled enough against him to make him groan soundlessly before sliding away from him, her feet dropping back to the floor. “He did say walking would be good for you, though.”

Moving slowly, but steadily enough, he accompanied her from his room out to a broad patio outside of the medical clinic, and together, they stood in the cool eaves of venerable pine trees and looked through tangled boughs toward the lake below.

I called Jackie today, let him know we're alright, she said to him using American Sign Language, her hands moving quickly, deftly in the air. That was her nickname for her brother, Jackson, Brandon's former tutor. She glanced at him, then added: *He said the police have been calling night and day. Mom tries to pretend it's nothing, but it's really starting to freak her out.*

Unspoken and unnecessary was the inference that this was the last thing Letitia Jones needed, considering she had just recently undergone a radical mastectomy and was currently having chemotherapy treatments to treat breast cancer.

Lina sighed, looking unhappy. *I need to go back*, she signed. *I need to try and sort this mess out somehow, what happened to Emily and Caine.*

I talked to Augustus about it, Brandon said. *He told me he'd help us...help you, I mean. He knows some attorneys—good ones, he said, who can take care of things, make sure you're cleared.*

Her disapproving gaze settled upon him for a moment. “I don't want him to buy off my freedom,” she said aloud, probably in the hopes that he was somewhere within ready earshot. “I don't need his goddamn help. And when the hell did you start calling him *Augustus*?”

She didn't understand, and he didn't really blame her. The closest he could come to trying to explain what had happened; what had come to change

between him and his grandfather was to use the analogy of Ebenezer Scrooge from the old Charles Dickens story, *A Christmas Carol*.

Maybe it had been the fires in 1815 that had caused him to grow hard inside. Maybe it had been the flight of Michel and the Morins from Kentucky, the loss of his best friend. Or maybe it had been the fact that he'd willingly chosen to sacrifice Eleanor, to send her away—his one true love—if only to save her. Brandon didn't know. Something somewhere down the line had caused that portion of Augustus Noble's heart that cared about anything or anyone to fall dormant and still. Sebastian's death had changed things; it had changed *him*.

In the moment of profound, raw grief that Brandon had witnessed in the Noble great house, something had happened to his grandfather like nothing else had in the man's nearly three hundred years of existence. Rather than his heart being broken, maybe it had somehow been set free, broken loose of whatever cold, hard walls he'd long-since built to shield it.

"All of the things you told me about him," she said. "All of the horrible things he did to you...and now you two are goddamn bosom buddies?"

Lina... Brandon's brows lifted. *I haven't forgotten about the past...and I don't know that I've forgiven him for it...not all of the way, at least, but I'm trying. And he's trying, too.*

"You're a better person than me, then," Lina whispered, her dark eyes swimming with tears. "I can't forgive or forget. I can't even bring myself to try."

Brandon didn't need to ask of whom she spoke; it was no longer Augustus Noble. Even as her bottom lip trembled, Lina struggled to be fierce, her brows narrowed angrily, her entire body rigid.

Lina, he whispered to her now, slipping his hand against hers and drawing her tearful gaze. *Rene did what he thought he had to do—the only choice he thought he had, to keep Tessa safe.*

She blinked at him, stunned. "You...you can't mean you forgive him, too?" she asked, incredulous.

He couldn't answer that, because in all honesty, he didn't know. Rene hadn't come to see him even once since he'd woken up at the clinic, but they had

run into each other in the corridor earlier that day. The human nurse, Karen, had been helping Brandon take his first, hedging, hesitant steps since regaining consciousness, and they'd rounded a corner only to stumble nearly headlong into Rene.

"Oh, hey," Karen had exclaimed brightly while Brandon and Rene had blinked at each other, both wide-eyed and immediately anxious. "Just getting out of your follow up exam with Tristan?"

"Uh...no. He's not in the office," Rene had replied. Although he'd been speaking to Karen, his eyes had remained fixed on Brandon, and through them he'd conveyed a wealth of emotions—vulnerability, grief, remorse, fear.

They hadn't said anything; not one word to each other, not even in their minds, but as Karen had led Brandon past, he'd reached out, brushing his fingers lightly against Rene's. Rene had returned the momentary grasp, his fingers coiling fiercely, fondly against Brandon's.

Rene is my friend, Brandon said, and even as Lina opened her mouth to protest, her brows narrowing hotly, he interjected, *And he's yours, too, Lina. You guys have been through so much together...*

"He pissed that away!" she snapped. "Everything we've been through, everything I thought we meant to each other...he pissed all over it! How can I ever *look* at him again, never mind trust him!" She closed her eyes; her lashes curled against the café-au-lait plain of her cheek, and a tear rolled slowly loose. "I hate him."

You don't mean that, he said.

"Yes, I do," she whispered—but to judge by the sob she struggled to contain, but that shuddered through her lean frame nonetheless, she really didn't.

I can't imagine how horrible or hard that choice must have been for him to make, Brandon said. *And I can't say I would have chosen any differently, had our positions been reversed. Would you?*

This at last seemed to register with her. She blinked at him, more tears spilling, and after a long moment's hesitation, she shook her head. "No," she said at length. "I...I would have done the same thing he did...that son of a bitch."

She began to cry and he drew her to his shoulder, clinging to her fiercely.

On the other end of the patio, around the corner and out of earshot from Lina and Brandon, Tessa leaned over the railing and watched Tristan walk into the woods below. For a moment, he seemed to disappear among the trees, ducking into the shadows beneath laden, low-hanging boughs, and then her eyes adjusted to the gloom and she watched him sit down beneath one of the pine trees, hooking his arms around his knees, keeping his gaze distantly directed toward the lake.

“His *mère* died,” Rene remarked, leaning beside her, crossing his arms at the wrists.

“I know.” Tessa nodded, her expression troubled. “Karen told me.”

As she watched, Karen Pierce, the human nurse, followed Tristan’s trail from the clinic into the woods, her footsteps less certain than his had been, her posture tense and tentative.

“He doing okay with it?” Rene asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t talked to him. I told Karen I thought maybe she should.”

“Karen?” With a brow raised in interest, he, too, watched the slim blonde woman make her way among the trees. She, too, dissolved into silhouette, and Tessa and Rene watched Tristan look up, hearing her approach.

“Maybe you should talk to him, too,” Tessa said with a glance at Rene.

“Me?” Rene’s brow arched higher. “What the hell for?”

“Because he’s your brother,” Tessa replied.

“My *half*-brother,” Rene corrected.

“And he’s hurting,” she continued, adding softly, “And I know what he’s going through.”

The grief inside over her father’s suicide felt so thick and heavy, sometimes she thought it would smother her. She’d spent the better part of the previous evening weeping, whether while keeping vigil at Brandon’s bedside or taking a mostly wordless walk through the forest with Eleanor. Rene had come to

stay with her in the night, but she hadn't wanted to make love; instead, she'd curled up child-like and wounded with him, tucked at his side, her tears a constant and seemingly endless stream.

In the forest, Karen knelt in front of Tristan and reached for him, draping her hand lightly against his own. After a few long moments in which they clearly spoke to one another, Tessa watched Tristan draw his hands back, bringing them to his face. He shuddered as he burst into tears, and her heart ached for him. Karen put her arms around Tristan, and he crumpled into her embrace. Tessa looked down at her hands, blinking against her own tears, feeling her own sorrow and loss.

"I'm sorry, *pischolette*," Rene told her softly. His expression had grown shame-faced and sheepish, and he slipped his arm around her shoulders, drawing him into his chest. His lips brushed lightly against the crown of her head. "It's going to be alright. I promise."

Tessa closed her eyes, hearing the rhythmic cadence of Rene's heart beneath his breast, drawing comfort from his warmth, the strength in his embrace. More than anything else in the world, she wanted to believe that.

And maybe some day I will, she thought as her tears spilled.

"You know," Augustus remarked to Michel, giving his wrist a deft flick and sending a small, flat stone skimming along the surface of Emerald Bay, leaving hardly a ripple in its wake. "The bitch of it all is that with Allistair gone, and Martin with him, I'm the dominant Elder again now."

The rock skipped five times, dancing out a good ten feet from the pebbled beach fronting the expansive lawn at the Vikingsholm. To their left, well out of earshot on the long dock, Eleanor and little Daniel stood together. She had her arms around the boy as she crouched behind him, and together, they laughed as they cast out a fishing line into the water. She'd bought the pole for him, some sort of inexpensive, plastic kind with Spiderman decals, and completely ignored Augustus's pointed comments that they were as likely to catch a fish with the damn thing as they were to sprout wings.

Being with Daniel was good for her, and he was pleased now that he'd thought to bring the boy with him from Kentucky. Grief-stricken over Sebastian's death, Eleanor had found unexpected comfort in Daniel's company; he'd been only an infant when she'd left the farm, but they'd warmed to one another with a nearly uncanny swiftness. He suspected Daniel reminded her of Sebastian at his age; that alone clearly brought some ease to her sorrow.

Michel chuckled as he stooped down and picked up a rock of his own, using the pad of his thumb to wipe away damp grit. "What do you mean, the bitch of it? You hadn't lost it long enough to even miss it."

With a speculative frown, he tossed the stone. Six skips across the glass-like plane of blue-green water, then with a distinctive *ploink!* it disappeared in a concentric spill of ripples beneath the surface.

"*Pas le mauvais,*" Augustus murmured appreciatively. *Not bad.* "Eleanor doesn't want me to go back. She thinks I should turn over dominance to Benoît. As if it's that easy."

Michel laughed again. "Wives," he remarked.

"*Oui.*"

"Why do you think I turned all mine loose? I've enough on my plate, let alone my mind, without trying to figure out the mental mechanisms of a half-dozen women and their hormonal inclinations." Michel watched as Augustus found another suitable stone and cast it out across the bay again, skipping only four times before submerging. "Having Eleanor here for the past three years...murderous, I tell you. Like being married all over again."

He meant this as a joke. Augustus smiled politely, then glanced at him. "Are you sleeping with her?"

Michel chucked a stone into the water. It didn't skip once. "She wouldn't have me."

"So you tried?"

Michel laughed. "Auguste, you wound me," he said. "Of course I did."

Auguste.

Augustus rolled this name around in his head for a moment. For the past three years, with Eleanor gone, it had grown almost unfamiliar to him, and he hadn't realized how much he'd missed it, the name his mother had chosen for him at birth.

"Eleanor said I'm two people inside," he said. "*Augustus and Auguste.*"

Auguste is the man I married, she'd told him only earlier that morning, curled beside him in bed, her fingertips tracing light, tickling circles against the muscled plain of his groin. The one I fell in love with...the one who kissed me beneath the mistletoe. Temperate and kind, optimistic and carefree. His priorities were his family and his heart, keeping true to these.

And who is Augustus? he'd asked with a bemused smile, one she hadn't returned.

Augustus is someone I have never understood, she whispered. He's relentless, vicious, sharp-tongued and cold, concerned only with power and anything it takes to keep hold of it.

When she'd smiled at last, it had been sad and somewhat wistful. *You were Auguste when you were with me...and Augustus with the rest. But over the years, as I watched, Augustus took over more and more, swallowing you whole, eating you alive like a cancer.*

"You're not two people." Michel dusted his hands against the legs of his jeans. "You're a man, for Christ's sake. A man who damn near single-handedly ran a multimillion-dollar corporation. You have to be a hard-ass."

"Multi-billion," Augustus corrected.

"You have to be hard-headed, hard-assed, hard-hearted and heavy-handed—I know the pressures you were under every day, morning, noon and night. I feel them, too. *Mon Dieu*, try multitasking to juggle a Fortune 500 pharmaceutical corporation and one of the largest independent crude oil producers in the United States. Between Pharmaceaux and Artois, I used to run myself into so many circles, I'd mistake my own head for my ass. I was damn near grateful to turn that over to Rene when Arnaud died."

At this Michel's brows, which had furrowed, unknit; his entire face softened. Like Sebastian, Arnaud had killed himself; as with Sebastian, the younger Brethren's death had clearly affected Michel on a visceral, primal level.

Shortly after Augustus's arrival with Brandon and Daniel, he'd seen Michel draw his grandson, Tristan, aside. He hadn't learned until later about Tristan and Tessa's half-hearted attempt to elope, and at the time, he hadn't known why Michel was angry with the younger man. The two had exchanged quiet but sharp words, a confrontation that had ended with Michel shoving Tristan back a stumbling step in reprimand. Furious but rebuked, Tristan had stormed out of the medical center.

This occurrence was apparently nothing new between them, and Augustus wondered if Michel was so hard on the boy because he had been anything *but* with Tristan's father, forgiving Arnaud almost any offense—even those that had eventually forced his clan to flee their fellow Brethren.

"Grandsons," Michel had remarked when he realized that Augustus had witnessed the exchange with Tristan. He'd seemed sheepish and remorseful, but if he'd offered the young man any apologies later, Augustus was unaware of it.

Augustus had glanced toward the room in which Brandon—more often than not, the bane of his existence, or so it had felt—slept. "Tell me about it."

"Arnaud was a good boy," he offered Michel by way of awkward—and woefully belated—sympathy, as they stood on the beach. He clapped his hand against Michel's shoulder and drew his gaze.

"As was Sebastian," Michel told him, pressing his hand atop his friend's.

Both men shared the agonizing burden of culpability in their sons' suicides. They hadn't talked about it, much less admitted it, but neither had to.

Augustus blinked down at his toes, feeling the damnable sting of tears in his eyes. For centuries, he'd been able to mask his emotions, hiding them completely behind an iron wall of sheer will and bull-headed determination. Suddenly, in the matter of a week, he felt moved to tears at the drop of a goddamn hat. It was infuriating, and he was helpless to stop it.

Your heart is letting go, Eleanor had told him. All of the feelings you've kept buried for so long, they're coming to light now...unearthed after all these years.

From the dock, Daniel let out a peal of laughter; the melodic sound of Eleanor's overlapped it, as together, they swung the hook—affixed with a corner of bread crust, not a worm, even though Augustus might have told her, and she might have dutifully ignored, that any good fisherman with a half-head of sense knew you needed *live* bait, not leftovers from lunch to catch anything other than flies—again toward the water.

“You know, Rene and your granddaughter plan to renovate that little cabin of his up the hill,” Michel said. No longer skipping stones, he shoved his hands into his hip pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. Both he and Augustus had kicked off their shoes and socks, rolling their pant legs up to their knees. The mud was cold beneath their bare feet, squelchy and soft between their toes.

“Ah, vraiment?” Augustus raised his brow. *Oh, really?*

Michel nodded. *“Oui.* And you know, I've plenty of land past that...hell, Emile built that four-thousand-some-odd square foot villa down the slope from me three years ago and hasn't set foot in it once. You and Eleanor could take it.”

Augustus's brow arched higher. “And what about Bloodhorse? The multibillion-dollar corporation I single-handedly run?”

Michel shrugged, keeping his eyes trained ahead of him, gazing out at Fannette Island. “Make Benoît dominant. Let him run it.”

“I see.” Augustus nodded. “You'd have me live off your good graces and charitable esteem for the tenure of my days...and my wife along with me.”

“Oh, no,” Michel said with a laugh. “I'd put you to work. I can always use another hard-ass at Pharmaceaux.”

Augustus turned to him. “You're not kidding.”

“No, I'm not,” Michel replied. Then, with a glance and a smile, he added, “In fact, I've never been more serious in my life.”

The four of them shared a picnic lunch on the beach. While Michel carried the basket, blanket and supplies back to his truck when they had finished—with little Daniel scurrying in tow, arms laden, determined to help—Eleanor and Augustus lagged behind, hand in hand.

“He reminds me so much of Sebastian,” Eleanor murmured of Daniel, her eyes growing cloudy with tears at even this brief but fond mention of her son’s name. “And I...I haven’t seen Michel act this carefree since...my God, since your duel against Victor.”

Augustus smiled. When she pulled away from his hand, walking ahead of him, he strained to keep her grasp, hooking his fingertips against hers until at last, his arm could stretch no further, and she was gone.

“Forgive me,” he said, his voice little more than a hush against the backdrop of water lapping along the shore.

Without averting her gaze from her grandson, Eleanor replied, “There’s nothing to forgive.”

“I should have left with you long ago, on the day we first kissed. I should have put you on my horse and taken you to Virginia...to Boston...Philadelphia—anywhere.”

She’d seen his back, the deep, brutal wounds Allistair’s whip had carved into him. Tristan had given her careful instructions on how to change his dressings twice each day. She would try to be gentle, and Augustus would try not to flinch, but when she’d finish, he’d be trembling, his breath coming in strained gasps. And then she’d weep...not just for him, but for everything those whip marks represented. Because for all of his self-doubt and loathing at the moment, Augustus could have just as well inflicted them upon himself.

“It will be different now,” he’d promised her that morning, when they’d talked about their future. With Allistair and Martin both dead, dominance had reverted in full back to the Noble clan—and to Augustus. He hadn’t said much to her about this, but it weighed heavily on his mind, a tremendous temptation, and she knew it. For almost two centuries, he’d held exclusive control of a veritable

empire. All it had cost him was his soul. He'd lost the latter and reclaimed the former, but the allure of that sort of indomitable might remained.

"No, it won't," she had replied.

"I'm different now," he'd told her, pleading.

"No," she'd said. "You're not." And then she'd told him how he seemed like two different men to her at times—*Auguste*, the man she had fallen in love with and continued to love, and *Augustus*, the cruel patriarch who'd broken Brandon's hands, who'd controlled his family—and his race—with an iron hand and a cold heart. She didn't know *Augustus*; like a cancer, in time, he'd taken over whatever goodness and kindness had made up *Auguste*.

I don't even know if that man exists anymore, she'd remarked to him, solemn and sorrowful. *Auguste, I mean. My husband.*

On the beach at Emerald Bay, Eleanor studied him for a long moment. "I'm dying," she said. "Michel has been kind enough to buy me some time, but you and I both know it's only borrowed. I don't know how long I have left, and frankly, I don't care, because it's damn sure long enough not to waste my time vying for your heart. You said you should have run away with me in our youth. I say you should have run with me three years ago. But you didn't. You took the coward's way out, thinking you'd never see me again, that you wouldn't have to watch me die if Michel couldn't save me."

When he opened his mouth to protest, she held up her hand, silencing him. "I'd trade ten thousand years of pristine health without you for all of the infirmity in the world, if only to have one more day with you." Tears glossed her eyes again, and she tried to blink them away. "I always thought you'd feel the same."

Wounded, he reached for her. "I do."

"Then prove it." She slapped his hand away. "Three years ago, you chose the Brethren over me—your power over our love." Turning around, she marched away, her hands balled into fists. "Don't make the same mistake again."

She didn't expect him to follow her. There was too much *Augustus* in him even now; those dark components of his nature were too inherent anymore to

resist, she feared. Thus, when she heard the soft rush of his footsteps in the sand, felt his hand close against the sleeve of her coat, she turned in honest, nearly breathless surprise.

“Marry me,” he said.

She blinked at him for a puzzled moment, then laughed. “Silly man. We’re already married.”

“Not the Brethren way. The human way. With a license and rings and a wedding gown—whatever you want.”

Eleanor studied him, as if trying to decide whether or not he teased. “Why would we do that?”

“Because I want this forever,” he whispered, turning her own words—uttered ages ago, a seeming lifetime. “I want you forever.”

Stunned by his words, moved beyond any measure, she could do nothing but blink at him, mute. When he lowered himself to his knees in the tall grass, the first hints of spring wildflowers swatting against his hips and his long, pale hair fluttering in the breeze, she felt her eyes swim with tears again.

“You’ll give it up, then?” she asked, not daring to hope.

He nodded. “All of it. I swear to you. Augustus Noble is dead. There’s only Auguste now. And he has nothing without you, Eleanor.” Clasp ing her hands gently in his own, he added, “*I am nothing without you.*”

He pulled her gently down until she knelt in front of him. His mouth pressed against hers, his tongue tangling with hers. His lips were cold from the wind and the water, but his hands were warm as they cradled her face, drawing her near. When they broke apart, she blinked at him in wide-eyed, breathless amazement.

“*Mon Dieu,*” he whispered, and she laughed.

“Kiss me like that again,” she said and in her mind, so only he could hear: *Kiss me like that for the rest of my life.*

When he did—long, slow and deep—Auguste left no doubt in her mind that he damn well meant to try. And Eleanor found she didn’t mind at all.