

## Chapter 1

“You can’t have it!”

Logan Ellis stared at the seventy-something woman standing hunched in front of her then down at the purse. Big and brown, it probably gave the lady back problems, so it wasn’t as though she’d really miss it. If nothing else, she was doing the old bat a favor.

She narrowed her eyes when the woman clutched the handbag tighter, wrinkled fingers splayed across the worn leather like it was an irreplaceable national treasure.

She hated having to ask twice. “I said give me your purse.”

When the geriatric gulped, eyes searching the dark streets for a Good Samaritan, Logan ripped the bag from her weak grasp and took off down the sidewalk.

Did no one understand the concept of getting mugged anymore? You weren’t supposed to fight back for the twenty bucks in your wallet. You weren’t supposed to stand defiant in the face of the robber. You were supposed to care more about your life, more about your safety than your possessions.

What was the world coming to?

Slowing, she slid around a corner before breaking into a full out run again. The worn soles of her too small shoes made little noise against the cold pavement, save for wet sloshing sounds as she splashed through urine tainted puddles.

No one could just be a victim anymore. Everyone had to fight. Everyone had to be a damn *Reader’s Digest* cover story.

*You should have taken her umbrella, too.* Logan smiled as she raised an arm and wiped her rain soaked face on the sleeve of her dirty coat. If rain wasn’t the closest she could get to a real shower, she might have considered it. However,

running with an open umbrella didn't make for a quick getaway.

Turning sideways, she slipped between the cracked doors of an abandoned warehouse. She sucked in mouthful after mouthful of air, trying to slow the hammering of her heart against her ribs. She shook out the tight muscles in her legs between steps, moving towards the heap of soiled blankets in the far corner.

She seriously needed to find a better way to get money. This ripping off purses and wallets for twenty to forty bucks at a time just wasn't cutting it anymore.

It wasn't until after she'd sank into the damp blankets and dumped out the purse that Logan realized her manufactured bliss was wearing off. Scattering the contents with a swipe of her hand, she tore open the change purse and counted.

Thirty-two dollars.

Thirty-two dollars in the form of thirty-two one-dollar bills.

No credit cards. No ATM card. No checkbook.

Not even a drivers license with an address so she could go punch the stripper loving old lady for giving her grief over thirty-two dollars!

After standing up and shoving the money into her pocket, Logan kicked the purse. "Stupid, perverted crone!" she yelled, taking comfort in the hollow sound as it bounced off the crumbling walls. She'd intended to catch Granny before she went to the strip club, but there were too many people around.

No doubt, the hag was now standing at the police station, crying her eyes out about the hooligan who stole her purse. She was probably making up some story about not being able to buy her life saving medications with her social security.

Logan laughed as she worked through the doors and back out into the alley. Little did the officers know that Grandma was spending hundreds of dollars a month to watch young,

muscled studs shake their dicks. Hell, maybe she was paying for more than just a little shaky-shaky.

Maybe she was getting some serious couch time.

Pulling the half-eaten apple she'd found in the trash outside the strip club from her coat pocket, Logan took a bite and continued down the alley. Cold rain pelted her face, acid laced droplets clinging to her eyelashes, dripping from her hair.

Some people said New York City was at its most beautiful in the rain. She truly believed those people had never sauntered down a trash strewn back alley, ankle deep in jagged potholes teeming with fetid body fluids.

Sure, Broadway and Times Square were great places. Fancy cars, expensive clothes, spoiled celebrities. Where some people would stuff more cash in a valet's pocket than most people made in a month.

But that wasn't the city Logan knew.

She knew the darker parts. Chopped cars, ratty clothes, filthy rich drug dealers. Where if you so much as looked up when you heard the crack of a gunshot, the next bullet was shattering *your* skull.

That was the city Logan Ellis had known for over a decade.

She jogged across the street intersecting the alley, unmoved by the screeching tires of an old Buick as it swerved around her. When the driver snarled a lackluster string of obscenities through the passenger window made of plastic and tape, she presented the New York one-finger salute and kept going.

Less than three blocks away, a little bag of powdered-escape lie nestled in the pocket of a greasy man with chipped teeth. She wasn't about to let a car get in her way.

Halfway down the next alley, Logan slowed to a lazy pace. Fifteen yards in front of her, shadowed figures blurred and twisted. Feral growls mingled with the steady drumming of raindrops against the pavement, a symphony of mindless rage and nature's hatred.

*Vampires.* She stopped and leaned against the grungy brick wall of what used to be a Chinese Buffet. She bit off another piece of apple and chewed it as she watched the three figures attack each other. All roughly the same size, they clashed then drew back, circling like starved animals before doing the same dance again.

Six months ago she'd have run away as fast as her legs would take her. Six months ago she'd have let those legs run her straight to the nearest police station. Unfortunately, six months ago she'd needed those very legs to stay upright when said police tossed her out on her ass after reminding her they didn't take statements from homeless drug addicts.

As an afterthought, she really didn't blame them. What were they supposed to do when a dirty street waif stormed through the doors, screaming about vampires fighting in an alley down the block? Run out into the night with their guns drawn and bust a cap in some undead ass?

Not hardly.

At first, she'd been convinced a bad batch of drugs made her see them. But after seeing another fight break out a week later, then watching one stalk through a dilapidated warehouse leaving a trail of bloodless, vagrant corpses in his wake, she realized no amount of drugs would make them go away.

Neither did a week without drugs.

In the end, she'd found herself with little choice to do anything other than accept that vampires were real, they had fangs, and they were everywhere. There was nothing she or the police could do about it, other than give her yet another NYPD standard issue boot print across her right ass cheek.

Having learned her lesson, now she just kept her distance and waited for the carnage to end. Eventually, they'd either kill each other or scurry away at the first signs of morning, licking their wounds like human sized sewer rats.

Shaking back her sleeve, Logan glanced down at the shattered but still working face of her recently acquired time-piece. Three o'clock in the morning. There was still a solid

three hours of darkness before the sun would rear its ugly head.

She stared between the vamps and her watch. She really didn't have time for this kind of obstacle and couldn't take another route. Street dwellers were a territorial lot and she didn't have permission to follow any path but the one she was currently taking.

They left her with little choice.

Shearing off the last good piece of apple between her teeth, she smiled as she turned sideways and planted her right foot. Lifting her left knee, she bent her elbows and locked on her chosen target before whipping the apple core as hard as she could.

It smashed against the tallest vampire's head with a hollow, mushy thud. In less than the time it took her to resume her place against the wall, all three were facing her, fangs clearly visible.

She finished swallowing her dessert and grinned at their disbelieving faces. "Would you beasties mind killing each other somewhere else, or at least stopping for a minute so I can get by?"

The one she'd thrown the fruit at snarled and snapped his teeth together like an angry dog. "Whose Puppet are you?"

She arched a brow. What the hell was that supposed to mean? But she didn't have time to consider it further, focusing instead on the much larger figure fading into view behind her fanged roadblocks. As it loomed forward, the shadows gave way to a pallid face framed by long, dark hair, spilling over broad shoulders.

Now *he* was a classic vampire.

The sound of clicking teeth pulled her attention back to the pissed off puppy and his question. "Puppet? I'm not exactly sure what that means. I suppose the only frayed strings I dance on are God's."

"She's not a Puppet. She's human."

Logan watched, more than just a little amused when her three roadblocks whirled around then straightened. Appar-

ently the new vampire scared them with his comment. Whether it was the deep, rumbling timbre of his voice or the words themselves, she wasn't sure. Either way, the man garbed from head to toe in black didn't appear to be pleased.

He stared down at the men through sharp, narrowed eyes. "How many rules have I set for my city?"

Each passed a glance between the others before the smaller one spoke. "We didn't know she was there."

He raised a large, black gloved hand. "I didn't ask about her. I asked, how many?"

"One, Sir."

"And do you recall the punishment for breaking that one, very simple rule?"

All three managed to nod before their bodies burst into a golden red haze, which quickly dissipated in the falling rain. No flash and flare, no theatric sounds, not even an angry declaration...they'd simply vanished.

Had Logan not seen a vampire die before, she might have felt a tad unnerved by the sight. But having witnessed it a time or two already, she mainly found herself intrigued by how clean the whole process was. There was no release of foul smelling body fluids, no pools of blood to clean up, not even a body to dispose of.

*It must be nice to leave nothing behind.* Shaking her head to clear the dark memories threatening to overtake her, Logan stepped around the stone-faced ghost and continued down the alley.

She'd barely gotten more than a few feet away before she sensed him fall into step beside her. Eyes focused ahead, hands in her pockets, she kept moving. "Am I supposed to say thank you or something?"

"You have no questions about what you just witnessed?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

"Why should I?"

"I would think, to one such as yourself, it's not exactly normal, surmise it's not something you see every day."

Great. She was being stereotyped by a vampire. She made a mental note to return the favor at the first available opportunity before shooting him a sideways glare. "Well, since *one* such as myself happens to walk these alleys rather frequently, *one* such as myself happens to see that on a fairly regular basis."

"How often?" he asked, his tone tinged with something between anger and concern.

She shrugged. "Once every two, maybe three weeks. It usually ends with one killing the others or all of them running away when the sun spills over the horizon." She balanced her arms out to her sides as she prepared to jump over a large, overflowing pothole. "Does it really matter?"

He caught her just as she landed, strong fingers closing tight around her elbow. "Look at me." He didn't leave her much choice when he whipped her around to face him.

She tipped her head back and stared up into his piercing blue eyes. Had it been a much earlier time in her life, she might have thought him handsome and those eyes incredibly beautiful, but a decade on the street had done strange things to her perception of beauty.

Had it been a few months ago, she'd have also spit in his face and kneed him in a very special place until he let her go. But after what he'd done to the guys in the alley, she thought better of it. If he could kill other vampires so easily, she could only imagine the mess he'd make of a human.

She momentarily considered the distinct slope of his cheekbones and chiseled cut of his jaw before returning to his eyes. "Happy?"

His firm, full lips drew tight after what felt like an hour of intense scrutiny. "No."

She wrenched her arm free and started across the street towards a rundown convenience store on the corner. Casting a glance back over her shoulder, she smiled when he moved to follow. "That makes two of us."

## Chapter 2

Kerestyan Nelek stared through the dingy windows of the convenience store, watching intently as the street waif pointed at something on the wall behind the clerk. Unusually tall and thin to the brink of emaciation, she nodded before tossing a few crumpled dollars on the counter.

She stepped out onto the sidewalk less than a minute later, a pack of cigarettes in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. Shards of short black hair hung in her green eyes, rain still dripping from the jagged ends even as she stood beneath the tattered green awning.

It wasn't until she'd opened the pack, discarded the wrapping in a rusty trashcan and lit a cigarette that she finally acknowledged his presence. "Why are you following me?"

He considered her for another long moment. Thus far, she appeared to have little concern for how dire her situation was. Perhaps she didn't understand. "You've seen something you shouldn't have."

She laughed. It was a light, feminine sound and far more carefree than he'd anticipated. "Buddy, I've seen a lot of things I probably shouldn't have, and done even more."

He narrowed his eyes at her dismissal. "My name is not Buddy, and what you've seen doesn't bode well for your survival."

Again, her melodic laughter filled the air. "Look, Vlad, I've lived on the street for a long time. A lot of things don't and never did bode well for my survival. But at the end of the day, you know what?"

Internally, he grinned at the Dracula reference. It was amazing what modern media had done to his kind. Outwardly, he showed no hint of amusement. "What?"

She drew in a deep breath and blew out a cloud of white smoke. "I'm still here. So spare me the threats and get on with whatever it is you're going to do."

Whatever it was he was going to do, had been decided the moment he'd learned of her presence in the alley. Even more unfortunate for her was the lethal edge the decision gained when he'd stared into her eyes and found she possessed several months' worth of memories involving vampires. However, her apparent and decided lack of concern for not only his very existence, but her own, caused a long forgotten emotion to spark in his mind.

He stepped forward to join her under the awning. "What's your name?"

She turned and, much to his surprise, motioned for him to follow as she began walking down the sidewalk. "Logan. You?" Taking another drag from her cigarette, her words puffed out past a smile, "Unless it really is Vlad?"

"No, my name isn't Vlad. It's Kerestyan."

"Sounds old." She tucked the bottle of water into a large pocket on the side of her ragged coat, which was easily three sizes too big and made for a man. "So, Kerestyan, what brings you out into the city on a beautiful night like this?"

The sarcasm dripping from her words wasn't lost on him. He returned it. "I was watching the Children."

She coughed out a laugh. "Are you a babysitter?"

"I'm the Lord."

Another smile spanned her colorless lips, lingering somewhere between playful and devious. "Had I known God was so easy on the eyes, I might have thought twice about giving up on Him."

He ignored her appraisal of his physical body and focused on her admission. When he chose to engage with human women, they often commented on his pleasing appearance,

but very rarely did they bother to share their beliefs with him. “You don’t believe in God?”

She shook her head, lips pursed as she inhaled another mouthful of acrid smoke. “Oh, I believe in Him. I just don’t think He believes in me anymore.”

Kerestyan absorbed the irony of her statement and followed when she turned down another alley. Ambient light from faded billboards and storefronts cast a pale blue glow down the corridor. Refuse containers lined the crumbling brick walls, their contents spilling over the edges, littering the broken pavement in a rainbow of decaying colors. The stench of rotten food, wet animals and old blood hung heavy in the air, reminding him of London a thousand years previous.

He ground his teeth together, a habit he’d adopted well before his earliest memories of London. Vampires were long rumored to be the most depraved, debased species, yet what humanity allowed itself to be surrounded by never ceased to amaze him. He knew few vampires who didn’t surround themselves with luxury at every turn, and even fewer who wouldn’t be enraged if caught in a place like this.

A few feet behind her, Kerestyan watched as rats scurried under windblown tents of damp, yellowed newspapers, squeaking and screaming near Logan’s feet. She appeared to pay them little mind as she moved forward, her long legs allowing her to cover almost as much ground with one step as he could.

He stared at the back of her dark brown coat, which his heightened perception told him had once been a light caramel color. The woman moved with a confidence, a certainty that belied her familiarity with the territory, as if she knew nothing else – no other home.

Although he knew many humans did, Kerestyan had never understood how one could call a stretch of concrete their home. A lush swath of land one fought for and protected, yes. But not a cold, vapid maze of pavement that lent no comforting qualities.

He cast another glance over the dark alley. A home was a place for family, where safety was felt as easily as warmth and comfort. Even in death he knew what it was to have family, what it meant to have a home.

Did Logan have such a place, or was this truly all she knew?

He closed the distance between them in a single stride and tilted his head towards her. "Where are we going?"

"To see Larry."

"Who is Larry?"

"A drug dealer."

Kerestyan felt his lips curl. He only knew one dealer in the city who went by the name of Larry, and he'd never been overly fond of the man. "Why are we going to see a drug dealer?"

She brushed the glowing end of her cigarette against the wall, pinched the end then dropped it into her pocket before offering yet another smile. "So we can buy drugs. What else would we do with a drug dealer?"

He could think of hundreds of things to do with a drug dealer, none of which ended in the dealer's favor. Unfortunately, he'd quickly learned upon assuming the throne of New York that drugs were an integral part of human society here. And like it or not, a handful of vampires, some of whom were far older than Kerestyan, had their fingers firmly dug into the profits from the trade.

He smiled internally. His systematic eradication plan hadn't exactly gone over well with those vampires. Then again, it hadn't gone over well with the humans, either. In the end, too much investigation which brought the wrong kind of human authorities far too close to members of the vampiric race, forced him to accept that drugs always had, and would forever be a part of New York City.

Kerestyan gazed down at Logan, noting for the first time the slightly sunken state of her eyes. "How long have you been engaging with Larry?"

She wrinkled her nose as she pulled the bottle of water and a small plastic case from her pocket. "You make it sound like I'm getting down and dirty with him." Her body stiffened and her shoulders trembled a second before she stuck out her tongue. "Oh, it makes me want to gag just thinking about it. Yuck. Trust me when I tell you, it's a cash *only* transaction."

Although her reaction brought him great pleasure, and conjured a rather undesirable image of Larry, Kerestyan chose to focus on the matter at hand. "You do understand that whatever your chosen drug is, your life would be substantially better without it. Yes?"

She jerked open the white case, flipped one end over and jammed it into the other, revealing an unexpected but well used toothbrush. "Great. My very own vampire moral compass." Bright blue paste bubbled up from the bristles as she squeezed the end. She slid it in her mouth and held it against the inside of her cheek. "Should those words even be in the same sentence?"

He couldn't help but smile. Truthfully, those words should have never been in the same thought, let alone a spoken sentence. But he wasn't about to openly admit that to her. "Am I to infer that you believe vampires are morally corrupt?"

"Bankrupt," she said, though the word was garbled by the back and forth movement of the brush against her teeth.

Kerestyan stopped walking and crossed his arms over his chest when she turned around to face him. He'd been many things through the course of his existence, but in no way or form was he, or had he ever been, bankrupt. He gave her a hard look. "Bankrupt?"

She closed her mouth around the toothbrush, using her teeth to hold it in place while she twisted open the bottle of water. It was only after she took a large mouthful, swished it around for what felt like an unnecessary amount of time and then spit it out, that she finally returned her attention to him. "Yes, bankrupt. As in, totally depleted or ruined."

He studied the frothy, blue and white marbled puddle less than two inches from his left boot. "I am not morally bankrupt."

She took another drink of water then shoved the head of the brush in the bottle and shook it. "Oh no?" Wickedness spread across her face as she deconstructed the toothbrush then slipped it back into her pocket. "Then tell me, Great-Loving-and-Kind-Lord-Vampire," she paused to toss the bottle in a trashcan, "why you're stalking me."

It wasn't the evil smile draped across her lips he found so intriguing, but more the challenge flickering behind her emerald eyes. "I'm *following* you because I can't allow you to return to your normal life, knowing what you've witnessed."

Her eyes slowly traced the length of his frame before she stepped forward and tipped her head back. "Have you been in this situation before?"

He considered the thin strip of space separating them. Outside of feeding, he'd never had a human, male or female, approach him with such little hesitation. "This exact situation, no."

"One similar?"

"Yes."

She cocked her head. "Did whoever was in my shoes meet the same end as the guys back in the alley?"

"Sometimes."

She chuckled as she turned and began walking away. "I may not be an expert, but something tells me murder probably strains the moral compass."

"You should know all other avenues were exhausted first."

She slowed and spun on her heel. "Like what?"

*Don't explain yourself to the human.* Part of him wanted to heed the voice in his mind, but the other side was curious about how she'd respond to the truth. As it was, she already knew far more than she should.

He moved forward, crowding her the way she'd done to him only moments before. "Mental manipulation, memory reconstruction, and in some instances, memory removal."

She didn't back away. Instead, she smiled again, only this time it was a wide grin revealing her perfect teeth. "I'm pretty sure death causes memory removal."

He couldn't resist any longer. "How is it you're wearing a coat which looks to have been dragged behind a vehicle for fifty miles, your pants don't appear to have fared much better, and I'd guess you haven't eaten in days...but you have the teeth of what most would refer to as a supermodel?"

She stretched up to her toes and leaned in close, her warm, minty breath searing his ear. "Most supermodels haven't eaten in days either."

This time, it was his laugh filling the air around them. From look alone, he would've never expected such a quick and intelligent retort. He reached out and brushed away a few strands of wet hair that had fallen in her eyes. "Touché."

Resting back on her feet, she eyed his hand as he withdrew it. "You know, for a bankrupt vampire who's resigned me to death, you're awfully interested in me."

"I wouldn't necessarily call it interest."

"No?"

"I'd term it more as temporary curiosity."

"Why? I'm obviously not the first human who's been in this predicament with you." She tipped her head from side to side. "Okay, so maybe not this exact predicament if I believe what you said earlier. But still, why me?"

He stared down into her distant eyes. Much to his dismay, the reasons were growing by the minute, but he disclosed the most important. "You show little concern for your own safety, not to mention your complete dismissal of what I am."

"I don't dismiss what you are." She shrugged and started walking again. "It's just...what am I supposed to do about it?" She didn't leave time for him to answer before she added, "About as much as I could do if you tried to kill me right here."

He fell into step beside her. "I assure you, should I decide to end your life, I won't do so in the middle of a vermin infested alleyway."

She walked for a few minutes in silence, seemingly transfixed by the broken pavement at her feet. It wasn't until they neared the end of the alley that she finally raised her head and nodded at Larry, who stood under a broken streetlight on the corner across from them, hands hidden in the pockets of his dirty grey trench coat.

She stepped into the street but turned, leaving him with a view of her thin profile. "Whatever you do to me, I'm sure it'll be better than any way I'd die out here." She stood quiet for another moment before inclining her head towards the corner opposite him. "I have some business with Larry. Should I expect you'll be waiting for me?"

Kerestyan slowly nodded. "We've not yet begun to finish *our* business."

### *Chapter 3*

Logan slid the baggie into her coat pocket then nodded at Larry, who smiled up at her, chipped teeth beaming rotten yellow. She rubbed the warm plastic between her fingers and felt her muscles relax, solely from knowing it was in her possession.

“Who’s your boyfriend?” Larry asked, motioning across the street behind her.

She turned and smiled as her eyes traced the length of Kerestyan’s body. He was, without question, a much better sight than the one audibly counting twenty one-dollar bills less than a foot away.

He looked out of place standing at the mouth of the alley, an image of irony with his wide shoulders and regal stance as the wind sent trash scraping across the concrete around him. His stature alone was an oddity in this section of town, but his black button down shirt, matching slacks and clean, knee length wool coat, were even more so.

Truthfully, he looked like a business man who’d made a wrong turn and ended up having to walk, because as destiny would have it, his Mercedes had broken down.

She waited until Larry reached twenty before she laughed. “He’s not my boyfriend. Not even close.”

Larry shoved the cash in his pocket. “Then what the hell’s he waitin’ for?”

After pushing her rain soaked hair away from her face , Logan shook the water from her hands. "Honestly, I have no idea."

Larry looked her up and down from beneath a single raised brow, an appraisal that made her skin crawl. "He's dressed a little too fancy to be standin' out in the rain for nothin'. You start hookin'?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Larry. I started earlier tonight and already caught myself a millionaire. He says he gets off on skinny druggies with nice teeth."

He shrugged, pulled a cell phone from his pocket and started punching numbers. "I've heard worse. Take care of yourself." He raised the phone to his ear and flashed that disturbing smile again. "If you wanna work for someone, let me know. I know a couple a people who'd love to add a tall white girl to their stable."

She turned her back to him and stepped into the street. "Thanks, Larry. I'll keep that in mind." She lowered her voice. "Keep it in mind in case all of the Dumpsters in New York suddenly become empty and it never rains again."

When she heard Kerestyan laugh, she glared at him. Considering she was still a good fifteen feet away from where he stood, it was highly unlikely he'd heard her grumbled comment. "What are you laughing at?"

He didn't say anything until she'd rejoined him in the alley. "The chances of that happening are remote at best."

Well, apparently he did hear her. She started to ask for an explanation, but stopped and rerouted her thoughts. "I take it super bat hearing comes standard on all vampires?"

If she wasn't mistaken, the glow behind his intense blue eyes was born of pure amusement. "Super bat hearing?"

"Yes." She pulled the half cigarette from her pocket and lit it. "Don't all the movies and whatnot compare vampire abilities to bats?"

He gave a sideways nod, which caused his long, wet hair to fall over one shoulder. "I suppose they do. However, I have to admit I know very few vampires who can turn into the fabled bat."

"Really? No bats?" She let smoke roll across her tongue for a minute before blowing it out. "Well, what about turning into a wolf?"

"No. Vampires do not turn into wolves." His tone was curt, and far more serious than she expected.

*Interesting.* She took another drag from her cigarette and tipped her head to the side. "I remember seeing *Fright Night* when I was a kid. That guy turned into a wolf."

He closed his eyes and exhaled a gusty breath. "I don't care what modern media depicts. Vampires do not turn into wolves. That form is reserved for an entirely different species."

Logan coughed and sputtered a few times before she could force the words out. "A different species? What species?"

With the way his lips thinned and tightened, it was clear he didn't appreciate the questions or their delivery. But his displeasure became even more obvious when he stopped and spun her to face him, his strong fingers digging into her biceps. "You need to make a decision."

She tried to jerk free of his hold, but this time it didn't work. He squeezed tighter, sending shocks of pain down the backs of her arms. "Let me go. You said you wouldn't kill me in the middle of a dirty alley." She stumbled back and dropped her cigarette when he did as she asked. "What's wrong? What the hell did I do?"

He straightened, dark eyes locked on her. His pale face was cold and expressionless, like it had been right before he'd done whatever resulted in the death of her once roadblocks. "The amount of information you currently possess calls for immediate execution. It benefits neither of us for me to add to your knowledge of the supernatural. Your choice is death,

or temporary confinement while other avenues are explored. Make a decision.”

Logan couldn't do anything for a moment but stare up at him. Had she known two simple questions would cause such an extreme mood shift, she wouldn't have asked. But then, maybe it didn't have anything to do with her questions. Maybe he just ran out of blood or something and it happened to coincide with the timing of her questions?

Maybe vampires suffered from some backwards version of PMS...

The deep, rumbling sound of him clearing his throat pulled her attention away from considering his potential blood related emotional problems. She tipped her head back and closed her eyes, letting the cold rain splash against her face. “You want me to make the decision?”

“Yes.”

“Right here, right now?”

“Yes.” For the first time, the word rolled out as a growl.

She opened her eyes to see his thick arms folded over his chest, biceps straining the fabric of his coat. “Neither choice is very appealing.”

“Neither is this situation.”

She sighed. She wasn't exactly thrilled with the situation either. It wasn't like she crawled out of her grungy warehouse one day and went searching for vampires. Of all the times she'd stumbled across them, aside from her first encounter, only two instances ended in her having to run away. Once, they'd even run from her. But more often than not, they just continued attacking each other or sucking on a bum or prostitute, and paid her little mind.

She considered Kerestyan's set jaw and narrowed eyes. Not one of those vampires looked like *him*. While he only appeared to be in his mid-thirties, there was something flickering behind his eyes, something dangerous about the

way he held himself that said he hadn't been thirty for a very, very long time.

She shook her head. With that realization, she definitely didn't like her choices. "Why don't you just make the decision, Lord Vampire?"

He gave a single, clipped nod. "From this moment forward, consider yourself remanded to my custody, duration unknown."

She threw her hands out. "Wait! What happened to temporary?"

He lowered his arms and moved forward, which caused her to take small steps back until her shoulders were pressed against the slimy wall, palms flat against his hard chest. "You gave up negotiation rights when you refused to decide your own fate."

It wasn't until that moment, with her back to the wall, that she finally felt the odd tingles running the length of her spine. Fear had never been an emotion she particularly cared for, and feeling it now, in a situation she'd lost complete control over, only made her despise it more.

It also made her realize just how much smaller she was than him. At a little over six feet tall, most men were either at eye level or shorter than her. But the big, angry vampire in front of her, who still hadn't backed off, was a head taller and easily twice as wide.

She leaned her head back against the wall and cast a glance down one side of the alley, then the other. Choice one: She could knee him in the junk and hope he doubled over long enough for her to race down the alley and find a place to hide. Pro: She had to know the nooks and crannies of this end of town better than he did. Con: If she didn't, chances were he wouldn't be pleased at all and it would probably lead to memory removal.

Choice two: She accepted that fate had dealt her a really fucked up hand and she'd become his prisoner – whether

she liked it or not. Pro: Unless he started physically abusing her (which she didn't get the sense was his style), even prison involved a bed and three meals a day, none of which were prepared in a trashcan. Con: See memory removal.

Logan searched Kerestyan's stern face when the taut muscles under her fingertips flexed, taking on the texture of steel. "I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"No. You've had too much exposure to vampires to undergo mental manipulation or memory reconstruction, and your drug use only complicates the process."

The tingles danced a frantic number at the top of her spine, but what he'd said was only half the reason...

He didn't blink.

He didn't breathe.

The entire time she'd stared at him, watching his eyes for any hint of emotion, not once had they closed. His chest didn't rise and fall at a steady pace underneath her hands. The only air he inhaled was just before he spoke, the only air he exhaled was while he talked or as an expression of irritation when she'd asked about vampires turning into wolves.

He really was a vampire, not that she'd doubted it. She knew they were real. She'd seen them enough to believe her own eyes, whether they were drug hazed at times or not. She'd just never had a conversation with one, never took the time to seriously consider the ramifications of their existence or the possible affect on her life.

Maybe she should have.

She stared between her fingers at the tiny crisscrosses of black fabric that made up his shirt. "What avenues does that leave then?"

His chest rose ever so slightly. "Not many." It didn't fall.

The damn tingles exploded across the skin at the nape of her neck and shot down her arms, chilling her fingers more than the cold air and rain combined.

He inched closer and pushed an arm between her lower back and the wall. "Do you have any personal items you'd like to collect?" His voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

She closed her eyes, knowing any opportunity to enact choice one had just slipped away. "No."

"Is there anything else you need before we leave?"

She gave in to the shiver working its way through her body, focusing instead on how similar the feeling of complete resignation was to the moment she decided to leave home. How empty it felt then, how hard it was to feel now.

When she was little, her mother always told her everything happened for a reason. That life was a series of fragile moments strung together with diamond thread, and how she believed those threads led to a defining moment that forever changed a person's life.

Everything seemed to go still as memories Logan wished could be removed flashed in her mind. Images blurred and twisted. Hazy pictures of happiness melted into crudely drawn nightmares, brought to life through a soundtrack of angry screams.

She shook her head, wanting nothing more than to drown it all out. She couldn't help but wonder how many threads connected to this moment. How many glittering strands were woven around her now, while she stood in more than just the darkness of the alley?

"Logan? Do you need anything?"

Pushing her memories as far back into her mind as possible, she forced herself to smile. "How about a juicy steak and a bottle of vodka?"

A cool puff of air caressed her ear at the same moment his arm tightened around her, pulling her body tight against his. "I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, keep your eyes closed. Mystical travel tends to be easier on the human psyche if the subject doesn't watch."

Better for the human psyche it might have been, but his comment only made her very human curiosity peak. She squeezed her eyes hard, fighting the urge to open them as wide as possible. But when wind screamed down the alley, kicking up trash, dust, and if she wasn't mistaken, a squeaking rat or two – she was more than convinced of the reason to keep them closed.

It was when the wind reached fevered pitch that she felt the pavement drop out from under her feet and a wave of nausea crash over her. Her stomach churned and tightened. The muscles of her abdomen cramped and twitched. Bile seared the back of her throat.

For fifteen seconds, she felt like she'd been sucked into icy oblivion.

But as quickly as the sense of dislocation came, it ended.

She wiggled her toes, relieved to feel solid ground against the soles of her shoes again. She had no idea where she was, though she knew they weren't outside because she wasn't getting wet. She had no clue what the hell had just happened, she only knew she never wanted to do it again.

“Who the hell is that?”

She slowly opened one eye when a deep, gravelly voice filled the room. A rather dark room she quickly realized, save a subtle blue light flickering against the white walls.

“Her name is Logan.” She heard Kerestyan's voice a second before his arm left her waist and a lamp clicked on a few feet away. “She's a guest.”

“Whose guest?”

Logan really couldn't do anything but blink when the owner of the voice stood up from a comfortable looking couch across the room and stared right at her. She'd seen a lot of strange things on the streets of New York City, but this...this took the cake.

Armor. The guy was wearing armor as clothing. Thick, black leather covered his body, and attached at the forearms,

chest, thighs and shins were molded metal plates. The chest piece had the head of a dragon carved into it, but aside from that one simple embellishment, every inch of it was blacker than coal.

Kerestyan waved a hand in Medieval Man's general direction. "Sit down, Odin. She's *my* guest."

Odin, if that indeed was his real name, looked almost identical to Kerestyan in every way, except for their clothes, the faint scar marring his bottom lip, and the fact that his eyes were black. And not just his irises; his eyes were completely blacked out.

He raked her with a hard glare from those creepy depths then scowled. "It's wet and dirty. Where did you get it?"

Did she really just hear that? She stiffened and narrowed her eyes to match his. "I'm not an it."

He turned towards Kerestyan, mouth agape. "You brought one home that can still talk?"

Kerestyan made a good show of exhaling a deep breath as he shrugged his coat from his shoulders. "Yes, she is wet and dirty. Yes, she can speak. And yes, she is human." He stuffed his gloves into the pocket of his coat then draped it over the back of a dark grey chair. "Her name is Logan, not it, and you will address her by her name and nothing else while she's in my home."

Odin's black eyes popped wide open. "You're keeping it?"

Kerestyan disappeared through a doorway, but his voice seemed to stay in the room. "Do me a favor. Knock off the offended vampire routine. She's more than aware of what you are, and probably cares less about your undead state than you do about her dependence on oxygen."

Logan smiled as she looked around the room, but even more when Odin wrinkled his nose as her eyes moved past him. Now that she knew, she wasn't surprised this was Kerestyan's home.

It suited him.

The colors were dark but rich. The furniture wasn't fancy, more comfortable in appearance and constructed from durable materials like leather. A few black and white photographs of the New York skyline from different time periods adorned the walls. Plants sat atop various dark wood end tables. Matching bookcases took up the wall farthest from her, and a line of heavy black curtains covered the entire wall to her right.

And of course there was the large television situated in the corner near the bookshelves, just a few feet away from the Renaissance Reject who was still giving her the evil eye.

She took a few hesitant steps towards him. "Do I offend you or something?"

It looked as though he intended to respond, but his mouth snapped shut when Kerestyan came back into the room with a cobalt blue plate in hand.

He held it out towards her. In the center was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, surrounded by apple slices. "It's not steak, but it'll have to do for now."

"No! Don't feed it. It'll never leave!"

Logan would have responded to the Tin Can, she really would have, but there were two very different reasons why she didn't. One, Kerestyan was already striding across the room. And two, she forgot just how sticky peanut butter, jelly and bread became when mixed with saliva.

By the time she managed to clear a path between her teeth and tongue, Kerestyan already had his finger jammed into Odin's chest. "I told you what her name was. Brother or not, I'll rend the flesh from your bones if you defy my wishes again. Remember where you're standing."

Brothers? Well that certainly explained the resemblance. Content to let Kerestyan handle his own obviously dysfunctional family member, Logan shoved a piece of apple into her mouth and savored the clean, sweet taste of it.

Besides, who was she to interrupt vampire dinner theatre?

Odin tipped his head down and stared at Kerestyan's hand for a second before knocking it away. "Yeah, yeah. Your home, your law, and all that other old bullshit I've tried so hard to forget. What the hell is she doing here?"

"She isn't here of her own accord."

"Ooh, is she food?"

"No!" Kerestyan boomed. "She is not food."

Logan covered her plate as Odin took a few steps in her direction, but relaxed when he stopped a good ten feet away. She arched a brow, feeling a sudden and rather strange kinship with the apples as he leaned forward and sniffed the air around her.

He scrunched up his face and covered his nose. "Oh, gross. She stinks like a Jersey sewer." He lowered his hands and used one to waft air towards his face. "She's also an addict. My nose says heroin, white not brown, injected. For at least three years, maybe four."

Kerestyan shook his head. "She's not a glass of wine."

Logan straightened. "You can smell my blood?"

"When you open a package of meat, can you smell if it's rotten?"

She didn't award his response with an answer. Instead, she shrugged and took the biggest bite of peanut butter and jelly sandwich humanly possible. She'd been cut down most of her life, one more person demeaning her, vampire or other, wasn't going to make a difference.

"Odin, leave her alone."

"No. She seemed more than capable of defending herself when I called her an it, she can do the same now."

Logan licked a glob of strawberry jelly from her lower lip and smiled up at Odin. Only one comment seemed to perfectly fit her current situation. "I see dead people."

He leaned forward, hands on his hips. "Me, too. It's the only explanation for what's standing in front of me. Unless some high school kids broke into the anatomy closet and stole the

classroom skeleton, stretched some cadaver skin over that bitch then cast an ancient ritual to animate it.”

She laughed. For as much as she now disliked the bastard, she had to admit he was amusing. “Did they do the same to that shit you’re wearing? You do realize it’s 2008, right?” She raised a hand. “Wait, let me see if I can reach you using your own language. You do ken ‘tis year of our Lord two thousand and eight, aye?”

He stood up and turned to Kerestyan, a shit eating grin stretched all the way across his face. “I shall dub her, Bones. Henceforth, I shall refer to her by no other means. ‘Tis now her title, she shall wear it well.”

Kerestyan didn’t respond to his brother’s anachronistic declaration. Instead, he pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and tossed it at Odin. “There’s still two hours before sunrise. Would you please go down to the grocery store that’s open all night and buy Logan a few articles of clothing?”

Logan tried as hard as she could to keep the last piece of apple firmly in her mouth when the roll of bills sailed across the room and smacked into Kerestyan’s chest with a hollow thud.

“I am so not going to buy her clothes. I’m your twin, not your bitch.”

Kerestyan glared at him. “I can’t very well do it myself. After witnessing both of you in childish action, by the time I returned, you’d most likely be missing a vital piece of anatomy, she’d be dead, and my home would be in flames.”

Odin gave her a dirty look but smiled at Kerestyan. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” He reached out and pinched Kerestyan’s cheek. “But I’m only doing it because my little brother asked so sweet.”

It was a good thing Logan had swallowed her last bite of sandwich; otherwise she’d be choking on it. If for no reason other than the half-appalled, half-murderous look on Kerestyan’s face.

Of course, by the time Odin had walked over to her, snatched the empty plate, unzipped her coat with a quick drop of his hand then wrenched it over her head...she was fairly sure her face mirrored Kerestyan's with astounding accuracy.

When he grabbed at the hem of her first shirt, she jumped back and smacked his hand. "What the hell are you doing?"

A rather animalistic and equally as unsettling growl rumbled in his throat. "I can't buy you clothes if I can't see what size you are. And I swear to God, if you so much as touch me again, I'll smear you from one end of this penthouse to the other."

Much to her relief, Kerestyan collared Odin from behind and yanked him back. "Logan, would you be so kind as to strip down to a single layer, please?"

She smiled at him. "Why yes, Kerestyan, because you asked so nicely and didn't start ripping off my clothes, I'd be more than happy to fulfill your polite request."

Odin pushed the now laughing Kerestyan away. "You two sarcastic bitches deserve each other."

By the time Logan had removed shirts one through six, all of which ranged an odd span of colors and sizes, the laughter had faded and both men were staring at her. One mouth hung open while the other formed a thin line of disapproval.

She smoothed the long sleeve of her tight, orange t-shirt. "What? You've never seen a woman wear more than one shirt before?"

Odin's mouth closed and opened a few times before words finally came out. "She's like a fuckin' seven layer burrito someone forgot was in the back of the fridge for six months."

She had to laugh. How could she not with such vivid imagery coming from someone who dressed like he was going on an unholy crusade at any moment? "It's February in New York. Considering I sleep wherever I can, which is mainly

outside or in buildings that don't have electricity, learning to layer is essential."

He actually snorted. "So is eating, Bones. Did you ever try that?"

She stepped back when Odin squatted in front of her and moved to poke her, having learned her lesson about smacking him. "Stop it."

It may have stopped him from touching her, but it didn't stop him from staring at her chest and abdomen like she was a science project. "I think I can actually see all of her ribs." He stood up, inhaled a deep breath through his nose then returned to Kerestyan's side. "You should probably call Vouclade."

Kerestyan nodded. "Agreed. Are you returning to the castle tonight?"

"Yeah, after I get her the clothes you asked for. Want me to tell him to stop by in the morning?"

"If you would, please."

Not that she was part of the conversation anymore, but she had to point it out. "It is morning. And because I just have to ask, who's Vouclade and why is he in a castle?"

Odin grinned. "Not your morning, our morning. Vouclade is our brother, and he's in the castle because he lives there."

She squeezed her eyes closed then opened them slowly. "You're two thirds of triplets?"

This time, it was Kerestyan who smiled at her. "Vouclade is our brother in blood, not birth. Odin and I are brothers in both."

Logan rubbed a hand down her face. Vampires, castles and blood brothers. What the hell had she gotten herself into?

And where did names like Odin and Vouclade come from?

She splayed her fingers and peeked between them. "I take it you're named after the Greek God of War, Odin?"

His face scrunched up in a most unattractive way. "What is this, mix and match mythology hour? Do I look Greek to

you?" She didn't have time to answer. "I'm a fucking Norseman, not some Greek pussy." He fisted a hand and slammed it against his chest plate. "I wasn't named after Odin, I *am* Odin."

She dropped her hand, eyes immediately jumping to Kerestyan as if she needed his affirmation. "You've got to be kidding me."

He raised a hand and rubbed the back of his neck. "I assure you, he was only worshiped as a God because of his supernatural abilities."

Logan stared between the twins. As if her night hadn't already taken a surreal turn, now she had to find a way to digest that she was standing less than five feet away from a revered mythological figure?

Maybe memory removal wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

Odin smacked Kerestyan on the back of the shoulder hard enough the crack echoed through the room. "I'm gonna go get Bones some clothes. While I'm gone, I'd suggest a bath. Oh, and don't forget to give her a razor. Lord knows how much bush she's grown since the last time she used one." Then, right in front of her all too sober eyes, he disappeared into thin air.

In the moment immediately following, Logan felt as though she'd taken the strange train to Vampireville. Human population: one lonely addict.

Unwilling to consider the thought any further, she gathered her shirts and coat then glanced up at Kerestyan, who was already watching her. "Where should I put these?"

"Follow me."

She indulged his request and stayed close as he moved through the doorway he'd used earlier. A short hallway brought them to the kitchen, which much like the living room was decorated in dark colors and rather large. All the

expected appliances were present, along with a few she didn't recognize.

Another longer hallway opened at the back of the kitchen, four doors lined either side spaced about twenty feet apart, while a single door ended the hall roughly a hundred feet away. More art decorated the walls, only now it was in the form of paintings. Most were of older city scenes, and she was willing to bet not a single one was American.

He stopped in front of the third door on the right, pushed it open, and then turned around to face her. "This will be your room for the duration of your stay. A full bathroom adjoins it, so you should have all the privacy you need. There's a range of toiletries in the cabinet under the sink, feel free to use whatever you please."

Logan peered into the room, wondering whether what was happening to her was really all that bad. Huge wasn't even the right word to describe it, and luxurious barely did it justice. She inched inside when he stepped back and motioned towards the door. If he'd looked out of place standing in the alley, right now she had to be returning the humorous image tenfold.

The large bed, a striking vision of cobalt blue velvet and silver silk, set angled in the left corner at the back of the room. Ornate chests, mirrors and dressers, all made of blackened woods and glass were scattered about. And the thick, black carpet actually squished under her feet as she slowly crept farther into the room.

She was definitely the odd one out now, with her arms full of clothes equally as dirty as the ones she still wore, and just as wet.

It wasn't until she heard a door close in the hallway that she realized Kerestyan had left her. She turned around just in time to see his large frame fill the doorway, dark fabric draped over one of his forearms, lips slightly upturned at the corners.

“Do you like the room?” he asked.

Truthfully, it wasn't her style, but she'd never say it wasn't beautiful. She also wouldn't deny it had a uniquely aged appeal. “It feels really old.”

“It is. Well, not the room itself, but everything inside.” His firm lips stretched into a full smile. “Including me.”

She considered his position, leaning against the door frame. “Technically, you aren't in the room.”

He chuckled. “Let's not argue semantics. I do that on an almost nightly basis with Odin.” He slid the mass of black fabric down his arm and held it out for her. “I brought you something to wear after you bathe. I apologize if they swallow you, but there's a marked difference in our stature.”

She accepted his offering and resisted the odd impulse to hold his clothes under her nose. “I thought Odin was bringing me new clothes?”

“One thing you'll learn about Odin, he's easily distracted.” He raised a hand and let the genuine smile touch his eyes. “He will bring you clothes, he said he would and he never goes back on his word. However, it may not be with any kind of alacrity.”

“So you're saying it could be tonight, could be a week from now, but eventually they'll turn up?”

“Yes. Eventually is a perfect word.”

She jostled the arm holding her clothes. “What should I do with these?”

He seemed to consider the pile for a moment. “Honestly, I think it would be better for your health if you allowed me to dispose of them, but I can have them laundered if you prefer.”

Logan stared down at her soiled layers. If someone had asked her a week ago whether making the choice to throw them away would be so hard, she would have easily said no. But right now, in a situation she had no control over, standing in a room that wasn't hers, deciding to throw away

something that truly was her own, was more difficult than she ever imagined.

When he attempted to pull shirt six from the top of the pile, she tightened her arm against her chest. "I, I don't..."

"It's alright, Logan." His voice took on a gentle quality that made her shiver. "I'll have them laundered."

Relaxing her arm, she allowed him to take her clothing. Once he had everything except her coat, she moved back in an effort to put a little more space between herself and the vampire. "Thanks. So, do you have any house rules?"

"No. You're free to move about as you wish. The only thing I ask is should you move about during the day, please don't throw open any of the heavy draperies. The sun and I have a mutual disdain for each other."

Somehow, she wasn't surprised. "Roger that, Lord Vampire."

"One more thing, should you choose to explore and Odin happens to return in the midst of you doing so, consider him the mean dog and yourself the child with the sharp stick."

Her wide grin was completely involuntary. "Doesn't deal well with humans, huh?"

"On the contrary, he spends a great deal of time with humans. It's just that there are places he expects them to be, and places he doesn't. My home happens to be one of the places he doesn't."

"Oh."

He leaned forward and rested a hand on the door handle. "Don't worry, given a little time, he'll get used to you." He bowed his head as he pulled the door closed. "Goodnight, Logan."

The second the door clicked into place, Kerestyan's offered clothes, which were so neatly draped over Logan's forearm, enveloped her face. She smiled against the soft material and inhaled deep, letting the scent fill her senses. Smoky and warm, the aroma reminded her of a wood fire

just after a cold rain. There was also a hint of something sweet and earthy, and she would have tried harder to place the scent had the ghostly image of a campfire, complete with the faces of her mother, sister and father, not flared to life in her mind.

Forcing the memory aside, Logan dropped her coat on the floor, tossed Kerestyan's clothes on the bed then rushed to remove her own. After opening the door a few feet away and flipping on the light to make sure it was the bathroom, she dumped her wet underclothes in the chair outside and slammed the door closed behind her.

She pressed the heels of her palms against her closed eyes and curled her fingers around her forehead, letting her fingernails dig into her scalp. Given her current situation, she didn't have the strength to relive her past. What she needed to do was wash three weeks' worth of New York City filth from her body. She needed to focus on what was happening now, not what used to be.

She didn't need to remember how normal her life had been eighteen years ago when she was only twelve years old. She didn't need to remember how empty it'd become less than a year later. And she certainly didn't want to remember what it would never be again.

End of excerpt.