



A Place of My Own Lena's Story

Part III – Jason: Lost Brother

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Chapter 20 – The Search Begins

*"And There used To be such an easy way of living
And There used To be every hope in The world"
Meatloaf
"It Just Won't Quit"*

I did my best to remain calm as we waited for Mikael's werewolf friends to arrive at the Holding. Mikael could tell that I was extremely worried and did what he could to ease my fears but I could tell he was concerned for Jason as well. I willed myself to put aside the fact that if this was the woman I'd spoken to on the phone and she was a vampire that she couldn't have had anything to do with Jason's disappearance. Her fears about his safety had seemed so genuine that I had to maintain hope that she hadn't been lying to me about the events that led to his disappearance.

It took Mikael's friends three days to arrive from Italy where they'd picked up the young vampire that I would come to know as Christina Strong. To my horror, the werewolves had nailed her into a long box for the journey but because of the hatred that thrived between the two supernatural races I was glad they didn't kill her outright.

It was daylight when they arrived so we did the best we could to hide bringing in the coffin-like box into the manor house and took it downstairs to the light cell I'd found during my first few days here. Once the lid was removed I peered in to find the face of a beautiful woman with dark hair and a smooth face that had a strong jaw line.

Mikael tried to insist that I wait upstairs until they'd gotten the girl into the well but I waved him off. "What harm could she possibly do?" I asked, indicating the prone female before pointing out, "It's the middle of the day."

The other werewolves snorted loudly as they hefted Christina's lifeless body out of the box and unceremoniously dumped her over the side of the well. Once the rays had been engaged one of them handed a satchel to me.

"This was on her," was all the female werewolf said before she and the others went off in search of a meal together. With a glance in Mikael's direction I tore into the old fashioned bag and discovered some very tell tale signs of Jason there. Inside was a palmtop computer with a small LCD display and an electronic date book that I recognized as some of the things Jason had stocked in our secret room before he left the Holding. There was also an old bone that appeared to have been sealed at each end with wax and an unopened envelope. Also inside were numerous weapons and extra clips that I assumed had been taken off Christina and put inside the satchel.

Inside the date book were unused plane and train tickets that led to the Holding so I assumed that Jason had been on his way here when he'd been taken. Other than that, there was no evidence as to what had happened to him and when I talked it over with Mikael, he came to the same conclusion. At Mikael's suggestion, I'd tried to get a reading off the things in the satchel but to my disappointment, nothing came.

Together we'd also looked over the messages written on the toilet paper but not much made sense. There were references to a city where Angels had fallen that I assumed was Los Angeles. Another square mentioned royalty that was named for the homes of the dead. I immediately thought of Talon because his last name was Graves but as far as I knew he wasn't royalty. The other clues made no more sense but I hoped that Christina could shed some light on things. I decided that I had to resign myself to waiting for nightfall when the vampire would rise for my answers but I didn't like it one bit.

"She's awake," Mikael said as he turned to face the well opening. I'd come to realize in our time together that Mikael's hearing was far better than mine so I didn't doubt his words. After Christina's arrival we'd gone upstairs only long enough to see that our werewolf guests were comfortable and to get a quick bite to eat. I wanted to be there when Christina rose and Mikael made it very clear that he was going to be there as well.

We moved together as one to the side of the well but Mikael put his hand to my chest to stop me from looking over the edge. I understood that he was just protecting me so I waited even though I was itching for a good look at the young vampire.

"Hello," he called over the edge. I couldn't wait any longer and bent over the edge as well.

"Hello," Christina replied hesitantly. She was crouched on the floor of the well and was eyeing the rays of light wearily. She was smart; I gave her that much credit. She knew exactly what those beams of light could do to her and was keeping her distance.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Christina."

"How do you know Jason?" There was an edge to my voice but I couldn't help myself.

"He's a good friend of mine," she said after a minute. "Who are you?"

"Lena."

"Her Ladyship Lena Stockton?" she asked quickly.

"Yes," I replied in surprise. "How do you know me?"

"I spoke with you briefly by phone a few nights ago," she said as she got to her feet.

"It's good to meet you."

"When did I speak with you?"

"Tuesday night," she confirmed. "We didn't talk for long, but I was supposed to meet you in a small village in Austria." A sheepish smile sprang to her mouth. "My cell phone cut out before we could talk for very long. You said you would help me find Jason."

"Where is he?" I could feel my fingers tighten on the rock ledge.

"I don't know," Christina replied gravely, "but if you let me out, perhaps together we can find him."

Mikael took my arm and pulled me away from the edge of the well. "You can't possibly be thinking of letting that abomination out of there," he said in a low voice.

"Right now she's the best shot we have at finding Jason," I replied in an equally low tone. "Are you suggesting that we just leave her in there?"

"It's not a bad idea," he said with a growl.

"Mikael," I began, knowing I was going to have to convince him that I didn't think Christina had anything to do with Jason's disappearance. "She's not going to be very co-operative if we leave her down there." He started to say something else but I cut him off. "I understand your concerns and believe me when I say that I feel the same but right now I have to think about what's right for Jason. I know what's at stake for everyone – "

"What about the people of the village?" he demanded. "We cannot allow them to become her dinner."

"I'll take care of that," I said and without another word I returned to the side of the well and looked down again. Christina was still standing there, looking up hopefully. "I will only let you go if you promise not to hurt any of my people."

"You wouldn't happen to have some sort of blood bank here, would you?" she asked. "I need sustenance."

I didn't like it but I understood her need. I remembered the night when I'd been attacked by the vampire in Detroit and of the pain I'd undergone at his hands. It wasn't

something I wanted to experience again but if I had to do it to protect those under my care I would. "You will be provided with what you need," I finally said.

"If you give me what I need, I won't hurt anyone here," Christina promised.

Within minutes the lights were disengaged and Christina was standing in front of Mikael and myself. She'd climbed most of the way up herself but Mikael had pulled her the remaining feet to the top. She seemed to understand right away what he was and took a step back accordingly.

"Is that mine?" she asked when she noticed the satchel at my feet.

"Yes," I was holding the bone in my hands again. I'd been trying to get a reading off it and the other things in the satchel again but I'd come up as empty handed as I had earlier. Without another word I bent and retrieved the satchel and put the bone inside once more then pulled out the unopened envelope. It was time for some answers.

"Those things are Jason's," the vampire said as I began to open the envelope. "I don't think he would want us to open them."

"Our friend is in a position where he cannot make decisions right now," Mikael said matter-of-factly. "Maybe never."

"I prefer not to think about it that way," Christina said. The anger she projected at Mikael was apparent and to a degree I understood both of their points of view.

"You have to face the possibility that he may be dead," Mikael said evenly. It amazed me how unaffected Mikael was sometimes by death. I guessed it came from the fact that he'd lost both of his parents at an early age and that he was a werewolf. Many of the other shape shifters he'd known in his life had died terrible deaths and even though he'd only told me a few stories I knew it was a hard life that had been thrown in his lap by his genes.

"Do I?" Christina countered as I read the contents of the envelope. The first page listed what appeared to be concert dates as seen on the back of a t-shirt and lyrics to two songs with vampire themes. The next page held a web site address and the name, Sire Records. Across the top of the sheet was a handwritten line that I recognized as Jason's.

You thought I'd never find it. Talon, does this smell or what?

I gasped aloud as I clapped my hand to my mouth in surprise. Talon? Jason was conversing with Talon? How could this be? In an instant I felt relief that my suspicions that Talon was still alive were true then the sharp sting of betrayal that Jason knew and hadn't told me. I was aware of Christina asking about the papers I held but I waved her off for a moment until I had a chance to process what I'd just learned.

I felt Mikael at my side with a hand on my arm as I handed Christina the sheet with Jason's handwritten note and looked over the first page again. The dates listed had already taken place, albeit the last one only recently. Unfortunately I gleaned nothing from them.

We then discussed the events that had led the Jason's abduction. I had to press the knowledge that Talon was alive to the back of my mind for now so that I could concentrate on what Christina was telling me. The tale was a fairly simple one.

Apparently five days ago Jason had taken her to the monastery where he'd been raised and near dawn a man had shown up demanding the items that were in the satchel. According to her, they'd picked up the satchel in London a few days prior but she had no knowledge of its contents until Jason had disappeared.

Jason had sent her to hide in the wine cellar because dawn was so close and he went off to face the man alone. Once there, she heard gunshots from up above and a great gust of wind that shook the foundations of the building. The sun was coming up and Christina could feel the pull of her vampiric slumber when the door to the cellar flew open to reveal an old man who told her to come with him if she wanted to live.

She went with the old man and he gave her a cloak that kept her safe from the raising sun. As they were leaving the monastery, Christina looked over her shoulder and saw Jason on the old altar, blue bands of light holding his hands and feet to the old wood and a man with long stringy black hair standing over him.

She confessed that when she heard him scream out in pain that she wanted with all her heart to return and save him but the old man stopped her, saying there was nothing she could do now. He took her to a house nearby where she spent the day. When she rose the next night she was determined to find him and her search began. She'd found my number in the planner but she had no idea where she was.

When she'd finished her tale I regarded her for a moment before I asked, "What does Jason mean to you?"

"Jason is a good friend." It was obvious to me that her feelings ran deeper than she cared to admit but that was fine for now. "What does he mean to you?" she asked.

"Jason is like a brother to me," I replied with a smile as I glanced lovingly at Mikael. I believed her story. I'd come to understand the subtle tell tale facial features and body movements when someone who was lying during the time I'd worked for Talon. There was nothing like watching a haggler attempt to get the best price for something that wasn't worth half of what he was asking for or when a corrupt official tried to squeeze out a little more for himself on a dig permit.

I believed her but there was only one problem. Where do we go now? We'd reached the decision that Jason had been taken by someone with a powerful magic ability but he could have been taken anywhere. Mikael's friends had already informed us that they'd stopped by the monastery and that there wasn't a sign of Jason or his captor anywhere.

After a time Christina asked where she might feed and I remembered the pact that I'd made with her. Steeling myself for the pain that was to come, I faced her squarely and pulled my long brown hair over my shoulder and away from my neck to give her easy access. I kept my eyes averted after that and prayed the Mikael wouldn't do anything to interfere. This was what I had to do to protect those under my care; he would have to understand the sacrifice I was making.

When I didn't feel the stinging of her teeth sinking into my flesh, I turned and found that the young woman was holding her hand out to me. "Your hand, if I may," she said softly, as if trying to put me at ease. "If you don't mind, milady, I'd rather do it this way."

I didn't understand why she didn't want my neck. After all this time I'd just assumed that that was how all vampires fed. I looked to Mikael but he merely shrugged and stepped closer to me. I placed my hand in Christina's as I watched her canines slowly extend.

She brought my wrist to her mouth and I felt her teeth slowly invade my flesh. Mikael's arms were around me then and he turned my head into his shoulder so I couldn't watch anymore.

To my surprise, there was no pain. I felt strange as the blood drained out of my body but unlike the first time I'd been fed from, this was almost pleasurable in a way. After what seemed like only a moment, Christina pulled away then licked my wrist. I hadn't thought to have bandages ready to bind the wound but when I looked down there was nothing there, not one break in the skin. I stared in amazement.

"Are you alright?" Mikael asked. I was lightheaded and I knew I was leaning on him heavily.

"Just a little woozy," I told him, trying to reassure him that I was okay. "Is-is that enough for you?" I asked Christina.

She smiled slightly but I could still see the outlines of her teeth that hadn't retracted yet. "It has been a long time since I've fed, but that will hold me over until I can reach a large city. Thank you for your generosity, Lady."

"Perhaps I should take you hunting," Mikael suggested. "Would a large animal suit your needs?"

"That would be excellent," she replied.

"You would feed from an animal?"

"Whatever is available," she said. "Whatever works best."

Mikael swung me into his arms then. "You need to rest," he said to me. "Wait here," he told Christina as he headed for the door that led upstairs.

He didn't say anything until I was lying on the bed with a throw blanket tucked around me. "You shouldn't have done that," he said. He was smoothing my hair away from my face and looking at me with concern evident on his strong features.

"I had to," I replied weakly as I slipped a hand into one of his. "I couldn't let her feed off the villagers."

"You should have let me do it." He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles fiercely. I'd long ago told Mikael of the vampire attack in Detroit so he understood the sacrifice I was making by letting Christina feed from me willingly.

"No," I said. "What if that hadn't been enough? I couldn't have held her off then by myself. Don't you see that it was something I had to do?"

Mikael looked at me a moment then closed his eyes and shook his head reluctantly. "Get some rest," he said, bending over to kiss my lips. "I will take her hunting so you won't have to go through that again."

Chapter 21 – Leads

"BUT sometimes just for a moment
I reach out and hope you're still There"
Winger
"Miles Away"

Christina spent the day in Mikael's cottage and we told no one of her presence. It would only be a nuisance to spread news of a visitor and besides, soon I hoped to have a lead on where to find Jason and she would be gone.

That night the three of us discussed our options. I'd contacted people that I could trust in America and I'd been able to put together that the dates on the paper were indeed from the recent concert of a popular female artist named Madelyn. It just so happened that she lived in Los Angeles so we figured that it was as good a place as any to begin our search.

Christina pulled the palmtop from the satchel and seemed to ponder things for a moment. "May I use the phone?" she asked.

"Of course," I offered, sliding the cordless receiver over to her.

She picked it up and dialed. A minute later I heard her say hello then a minute later she asked if the person on the other end spoke English.

"What is it?" I asked when she held the receiver away from her ear and peered at it oddly.

"I just called Jason's number," she replied as she dropped the phone to the table. "I got some guy speaking Russian, then he hung up on me."

"Tell me what he said," I pressed. It had been a while since I'd used the language but I was confident that my skills hadn't slipped too far.

She told me that what the man on the other end had said to her but what he'd said only amounted to good-bye. "Do you speak Russian?" she asked. When I nodded yes she suggested, "Perhaps if you call back, you may get somewhere."

I looked to Mikael for advice but he only shrugged. Without a word, I reached for the phone base and punched in the buttons that activated redial and speaker phone.

"Da," was the answer on the other end.

"Hello," I replied in slightly halting Russian. "To whom am I speaking?"

"Why do you want to know?" was the man's response.

"I am trying to contact a friend," I said.

"Would that be Nikoli Petrovich?" the man asked with a sneer in his tone.

The name was one of Jason's alternate identities so I told the man yes. "I see," the man said, knowingly. "Perhaps the *Presidente* will be interested in this information, Lady Stockton."

I hadn't told him my name so the fact that he knew it meant one of two things. Either they did in fact have Jason and he'd already told them everything he knew or they'd been able to trace the call incredibly fast. Either way, they knew where we were and there was no doubt in my mind that they wouldn't hesitate to come after us.

Shock must have been evident on my face because Mikael was at my side in an instant and had the phone to his ear. He barked a few things to the man on the other end that I didn't listen to. All that I could think of was that I'd stupidly endangered the people of the village. What had I been thinking? Hadn't Talon told me time and time again to use a mobile phone that couldn't be tracked if you didn't know where you were calling? How could I have forgotten?

Mikael had hung up and was now making another call. The werewolves that had brought Christina to the Holding had left as soon as Mikael convinced them that Christina wouldn't cause any trouble. He was now getting in touch with them to request they return and this time with the entire family.

"What have I done?" I whispered, tears falling down my cheeks.

"What's going on?" Christina asked.

"It will be alright," Mikael told me. He'd dropped down to one knee and was holding me by my upper arms. "Nothing will happen to the village. We'll protect it. But you must leave, tonight." His grip on me tightened with his last statement.

"What have I done?" I repeated.

"Tell me what's going on," Christina demanded. "What happened?"

"Jason's phone is in Russia," Mikael told her. "He is going by the name Nikoli Petrovich. The man said they have him and that they knew who Lena is. They will be coming."

Realization lit up Christina's features. "And you sent for your family to protect the village," she commented in a soft voice.

"Yes, but you both must leave now," Mikael said as he looked from Christina to myself. "My tribe will kill you for bringing this trouble here and Lena must be taken out of danger. You will need to get some supplies. I will make arrangements for your travel."

I was numb as I listened to Mikael and Christina make plans for us to get away. Part of me wanted to stay and help fix the problem that I'd created but I knew that I would only be in the way and that Mikael would only worry about my safety. So much so that he might be hurt himself and I couldn't bear the thought. I knew he could take care of himself and the rest of the village. Jason needed my help now more than Mikael would so I set my mind to finding him.

Mikael refitted the box that Christina arrived in so that it locked from the inside and would therefore be safe and comfortable for her to travel in. Hastily, I grabbed a change of clothing and we were off.

As the three of us traveled by carriage to the village of Maxdorf, Christina called her sister, Brenda Thompson, in Salem, Massachusetts and asked her to arrange for us to fly to Los Angeles. Brenda quickly agreed and Christina told her to pass along word that Talon could be in danger.

Christina startled me a little when she asked me if I would teach her to speak Russian. Mikael seemed amused as he fingered the reins of the carriage when I said yes then he leaned over to kiss my cheek.

Mikael seemed uneasy about letting me go off to become surrounded by vampires but I had no fears. If Talon were in fact in Los Angeles I knew he would protect me no matter what happened. For whatever reason he felt that he couldn't tell me that he was still alive, but I knew deep down that nothing about him had changed.

Mikael went to the spacious car that I'd arranged for where Christina and I would be riding and checked everything out himself before he allowed us to come inside. There was a small bedroom in the back of the car where I could sleep and a living area with some couches and a desk. He carried in the coffin-like box where Christina would sleep during the day and put it to one side of the living area.

Mikael's good-bye tore at my heart. He pulled me out of the car and together we stood on the nearly deserted Euro Rail platform. It was the early morning and the other passengers were already onboard.

"Be careful," he told me fiercely as his hand slipped behind my neck and pulled my head to his until our foreheads touched.

"I will." There were so many things I wanted to tell him. A terrible sense of foreboding had come over me during the ride to Maxdorf but I didn't know if it had to do with my fear for Jason or something else. I wanted to cling to Mikael. I wanted him to come with me, but trouble was on its way to our safe haven and that he couldn't make this trip with me, no matter how badly I wanted him to.

"I love you," I choked out. Tears were in the back of my throat and I was fighting hard not to let them fall.

"I love you, too," he replied. The emotion in his voice told me everything that he didn't say with words. Our lips met in a joint motion that seemed more like they were of the same entity rather than parts of two separate ones. It was filled with the same electricity that I was accustomed to but this time there was a desperation that meant we were both worried this would be the last kiss we would ever share.

We traveled through Europe without incident. I was very careful during the day with Christina's box, seeing personally to the men that carried it from one place to another as we made our way through first Germany and then into France on the train. I felt as if we were heading in the wrong direction. Jason was in Russia as far as we knew but the evidence that we had led us to Los Angeles. I prayed that we were right to go to America instead.

I made sure to try to sleep during the day so that I could spend time with her at night. I could tell the strain of wondering what had happened to Jason was beginning to get to her and I hoped that she wouldn't do anything rash. We had long conversations as we traveled. I was starting her lessons in Russian and she was telling me more about herself.

When we arrived in Paris we boarded a plane that took us to New York. It was bittersweet for me to once again be in the city, even if it were for only a few hours. Memories of Talon only seemed to heighten my worry for both him and Jason and I did my best to hide my emotions from Christina when she was awake but inside I was wound very tight.

One of Christina's friends had sent his Leer jet to meet us in New York. Christina told me that Michael Moorecock was a vampire that lived in Los Angeles and had agreed to help us look for Jason in anyway he could. Christina also told me about another vampire that I would meet in California. Antonio Moreno was the man who'd taken her in when she'd woke up in an alleyway in Las Vegas with no memory of her past. She informed me that he'd been a vampire for over four hundred years and had known Christopher Columbus before he made his famous trip to the new world.

There was a limousine waiting for us when we landed at LAX. Christina had gently awakened me from the troubled slumber I'd fallen into during the flight to tell me we'd landed. My dreams had left me feeling edgy and wary as I tried to clear my head for what was to come next.

We were taken to an expensive restaurant in the hills where we were shown to a table. We ordered drinks and to my surprise, Christina actually drank hers. I didn't comment, sitting quietly instead until two male vampires in well-tailored suits joined us.

The first man looked like he was in his middle twenties and had short blond hair. Michael Moorecock's smile was alarming as he took my hand in greeting and asked me how I was feeling after the long trip.

Antonio Moreno on the other hand was reserved as he kissed Christina on the cheek before he took a seat next to her. His hair was long, almost to his waist, and a very dark brown. He wore it in a long ponytail at the nape of his neck that was tied with a ribbon.

Christina quickly shared with the two newcomers the events that led to Jason's disappearance and how we needed to speak with the singer, Madelyne, as soon as possible. I

was surprised when we were told that she was a vampire herself and that her servant who passed for her during the day had been murdered and she was the prime suspect in the vampire community. Currently, the woman was in hiding and only a few people knew where she was.

Michael and Antonio also informed us that some of the older vampires of the city hadn't been seen in days and unlike Madelyne, no one knew where they'd gone. It seemed as if Christina and I had found ourselves in the middle of much more than looking for Jason, and therefore had some tough decisions to make.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I had to talk to Talon. I had no doubt in my mind that he would know exactly what to do to find Jason and to see that everything that was going on within the city was resolved as well. I was a little deflated when I asked to see Talon and was told by Michael that it couldn't happen. Christina assured me that she would do what she could to get me in, though.

The three vampires dropped me off at a hotel about an hour later to check Christina and myself in while they went off to look into their vampire matters. I used the time to call Mikael and let him know that we'd arrived safely.

"I'm glad you're okay," he said quietly.

"Is everything okay there?" I'd worried the entire trip about was going on back at the Holding but I didn't dare call. If the Russians had shown up Mikael would be busy turning them away and I knew my call would distract him.

"We're okay."

I understood the possibility of bugs in the phone lines so I tried to be as vague as possible. "Are our visitors there still?"

"Left the day they came," he replied with an audible grin. "They thought my hospitality sucked."

"Did they break anything?" What I wanted to ask was if anyone was dead but I didn't dare utter the words.

What he told me put all my fears to rest. "No. Everything is in tact. How's LA?"

"There are odd things happening here, too," I told him with a sigh. "Christina is off with her friends now to see about what's going on."

We talked for a few more minutes then said good night. I promised that I would keep him informed on what we learned and Mikael promised that he would let me know if anything else happened at the Holding.

I wandered the suite trying to make sense once again about the situation we'd found ourselves in but I came up with no new answers. Eventually, I found myself standing near the desk where Christina had left the satchel that Jason had entrusted to her.

I opened the clasp and pulled out the bone scroll and held it lightly in my fingers. I'd wanted to open the wax seals like I'd opened the envelope but I had been petrified over what I would find inside. I'd already tried twice to get a vision from the scroll, so I wasn't ready for another dose of disappointment if I didn't get anything again. I sat down in the desk chair and stared at the scroll, willing it to give me that answers I sought.

In a flash I was in a darkened room lit only by numerous candelabras placed around the area. I was looking into the face of the most horrible man I'd ever seen; at least I thought it was a man. His skin was a dark blue and it was pocked with sores that oozed green fluid. He was holding out the bone scroll and the person whose eyes I was seeing through was taking it from him.

"This case has been endeared to me for two centuries," the ugly man was saying. During my studies over the years I'd been able to receive some audible suggestions along with the pictures if the impressions were strong enough.

"I haven't been permitted to intervene," he continued. "I have call on an old friend who is sending his mortal servant. Give this to him and his master will know what to do with it."

I blinked back to reality and attempted to put together what I'd just seen. I had absolutely no idea who the man was and nothing in the vision gave away where he was. That room could be anywhere in the world and frankly, so could the grotesque man.

I went to lay down a short time later. My head had begun to ache after the vision I'd received so I thought I would get a little rest until Christina came back.

Chapter 22 – Introductions to LA Society

It isn't you, isn't me
Search for Things you can't see
Going blind, out of reach
Somewhere in The Vaseline.
Stone Temple Pilots
"Vaseline"

I knew it was a dream. The room appeared to be the upstairs hall of a well-appointed house and Christina was there with another man on the stairs. It was dark but I was able to see the police tape blocking their way and Christina pulling it aside. I was an apparition who watched as she bent over to look at the dark bloodstains that marred the beautiful carpet.

I'd never had dreams like this before and haven't since, but as the man approached Christina and showed her something small that he held between his thumb and forefinger I knew that I was seeing these things in order to give what little help I could to the situation.

I awoke with a start, my clothing sticking to me from sweat. I went to the phone and dialed the cell phone number that Christina had given to me. She answered on the third ring.

"Christina, where are you?" I asked. My voice sounded shaky and I hoped that I didn't alarm her too much.

"At Madelyn's house," she told me. "Are you okay?"

"Have you found things there? Things you need more information about?"

She hesitated before saying yes.

"You must bring them to me," I told her fiercely. "Now."

"All right," Christina said slowly, as if she didn't understand why I was so urgent. "We'll be there shortly."

I paced for a full fifteen minutes until Christina and her friend Luke Thomas showed up. I was surprised initially by their appearance because the two of them were in evening attire. Christina was dressed in a long black gown covered with sequins and Luke wore a tuxedo that he looked very uncomfortable in. I wondered if all vampire functions were so formal as I took a moment to ponder this new vampire.

He was of average height and weight. His hair was blond and long and like Antonio he had it pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of his neck even though I got the impression that that wasn't how he always wore it. The way he regarded Christina made me think that either they were old friends or possibly old lovers. They were comfortable with one another so that made me feel more at ease with his presence.

One by one Christina handed me items that she and Luke had found at the scene of the crime. The first was a man's leather jacket. It was large and heavy but I took it and went to a nearby chair where I closed my eyes and concentrated.

The image of a young man with short blond hair entered my mind. He was tall, about six feet and very muscular. The jacket fit him like a glove, straining around his well-defined biceps. I told Christina and Luke what I'd seen and she nodded then handed me a small post earring.

What I saw nearly made me sick. It was the stairs and hallway that I'd seen in my dream but Christina and Luke weren't there. A man was choking the singer Madelyne, or rather the woman I assumed to be her daytime double. She was attempting to fight him off but she was dying and the man had a sick smile on his face. I saw that the earring was in his ear and that in her struggles to get free of him she'd pulled it from his ear. That must have been how he lost it in the hallway.

Again I told Christina what I'd seen and she nodded her head in her special quiet way. I was feeling tired now and the ache was back behind my eyes. I handed back the earring and she replaced it with a small weight that had blood on one side. I received no vision this time, only the impression that something horrible had been done with the weight, which was evident, by the presence of blood on it.

"Violence was done with this, I can see nothing more," I told Christina.

She seemed to think a moment then asked, "Lena, can you get information from locations? Say a house?"

"Yes, why?"

"We should go back to the house," Luke suggested. "She may be able to gather more information."

Christina agreed with Luke as she pulled out her cell phone and dialed. I moved a little away, not sure what all of this meant but I hoped that things would be rectified soon so that we could get on with finding Jason.

Christina approached me a few minutes later when she was through with her conversation. "Do you have a problem with Luke taking you to the house?" she asked, concern in her voice. "Things are going down and I need to get back to the Coliseum."

It was one thing to be alone and travel with Christina. Given what had happened to me so many years ago, it was unthinkable for me to trust a vampire. Her only saving grace was that she seemed to have some intense feelings for Jason but I didn't want to offend her, either.

"No problem," I said, remembering that Talon was in the city somewhere and that I was still sure if anything were to happen to me that he would be there.

"Take great care with her," Christina told her friend as she gathered a few things from her bags. "I have sworn to her safety."

"Of course," he said with a slight bow that made him look only slightly out of place because of the tux. "What if we find something?"

"Bring it to the Coliseum." And with that she was gone.

Luke and I made it to the house in uncomfortable silence, neither of us knowing what to say to the other. Unintentionally my fingers would linger from time to time to the gun that I'd slipped into my pocket before we'd left the hotel. I'd carried the Glock for a few years at Talon's insistence and its presence was once again helping me to calm my fears.

Luke led me to the second floor of the beautiful house and remained quiet while I attempted to gleam some more information about what had happened there. Again I saw the man and woman struggling in the hall but this time I heard the man tell Madelyne's double that her usefulness was over just before he snapped her neck and her lifeless body slipped to the floor.

"There's not much more to tell," I said to Luke then described to him the details of what I'd seen. No sooner had I finished telling him when he received a call on his cell phone.

"We've got a change in plans," he said when he hung up, explaining that Christina had been in an accident and that we had to meet the 'ambulance crew' that was getting her out. Apparently, Christina had been driving over the speed limit and when a police officer tried to pull her over she'd only gone faster. Eventually, she lost control of the car and had hit an embankment on the freeway. Luke and I quickly left the house once more and headed for downtown post haste.

We met the ambulance in a parking garage not far from where the accident had happened. Christina was unconscious but Luke assured me that she would be fine in a while.

"Don't worry about a thing," he told me pleasantly as we were quickly hustled into the trunk of the rental car so we wouldn't be spotted. We were heading for the Coliseum.

Christina woke on the way to our destination, and like Luke said, she was fine. Once there we made our way inside and I tried to control the nervousness that was collecting like a lead weight in my gut. I felt like Daniel going into the lions' den. I had no idea how many vampires there were inside that building but any one of them would be able to do anything they wanted to me and I couldn't stop them. I knew I had to keep my head and I figured the course of 'offend no one' would work the best.

I was anxious to see Talon. I had no idea what I would say to him, there were so many questions I wanted answers to. As long as he's okay nothing matters, I told myself.

A man named Burke who worked for Michael informed us that we were going to take the elevator and that they would stop one floor before the top, which was our destination. Christina, Luke and another vampire named Anna would get off there and continued up to the top via the stairway. I was to stay in the elevator until everything was safe with Burke and a few others.

It was a tense time as we waited for word. In the trunk Christina had mentioned that the evidence that I'd been able to put together about the murder had to be told to the elders of the city. Apparently the man that I'd described to her sounded like one of the elders themselves and they might be more inclined to help us find Jason if we did them this favor.

I was relieved when the elevator moved again and soon the doors opened to reveal Christina and Luke. There were also many other vampires in the hallway on either side of the elevator and the tension between the two groups was evident.

"Like a walk in the park," Burke said in a low voice as I moved to exit the elevator. His small smile of encouragement did wonders to help my self-confidence.

I was reassured as well when I saw Michael there. He was the kind of person who exuded power from every pore of his body and I had a feeling that I would walk out of this hornet's nest unscathed. I blinked with the realization that I was beginning to think of vampires as people, not monsters like the one that had so savagely attacked me on the long ago night in Adrian.

I barely paid attention to Michael's words on how to act in front of the vampire elders as we quickly crossed the hall and entered a large room. Directly in front of me sat a Native American man on a beautifully crafted rug with an equally beautiful woman by his side.

On either side of the man were long tables where I assumed the elders of the city were sitting. It was a mixture of men and women but I only recognized Antonio and the singer, Madelyne. Talon was nowhere in sight.

The man sitting on the rug produced a pipe and began to perform the pipe ceremony with Michael. I recognized it because I was part Native American myself and had seen the ceremony done many times as a child. When they were finished and the man had put the pipe away he spoke.

"If you can, Michael, help me find the Path of Peace. What is the evidence you bring before me?"

"My Lord," Michael began as he took a quick look around the room for effect. "These people, two of whom have no ties to this area, have taken it upon themselves to investigate this murder. I ask protection for them as what they do endanger their lives."

"My people have investigated this matter," the man said.

Michael looked to one side of the room and seemed to be regarding two men sitting there. My eyes followed his and I about jumped when I realized that one of them was the man I'd seen in my visions of the murder. I'd been so nervous about making eye contact with any

of the vampires when I'd first entered the room that I'd overlooked him. No wonder Michael was asking for protection for us.

"It is my belief that those you sent to investigate did not bring all of the fact before you," Michael stated simply.

A man who sat next to the one that killed the girl stood up so suddenly that he knocked the long table over. Instantly, Michael's hand went into his jacket where I assumed he had a gun. I didn't think about my gun, wondering instead where I would be able to hide.

"My children, sit," the man on the rug, said firmly. When everyone seemed to calm down he looked to Michael again and said, "Continue."

"Not all the facts were brought before you. The outsiders have investigated and they have new evidence to bring before you." Michael indicated Christina, Luke and myself.

"Protection is granted. Continue."

Michael introduced Christina and Luke then took me by the hand and pulled me a step forward. What he then said made little sense to me but for obvious reasons I didn't question him. "My Lord, this woman has been an aid to an ancient one of our kind in the past. She has protected our causes and our way of life. She has abilities and talents that have allowed her to discover much information previously overlooked or unknown. May I present Her Ladyship Lens Stockton."

The man on the rug regarded me with interest then gestured for me to sit near him. I moved forward further and removed the large turquoise pin that I'd worn on my blouse that day. "My Lord," I began, using the same title that Michael had. "It does my heart good to see the ways of our people living boldly and proudly within this city. I apologize the in inadequacy of the gift I bring you, but please take it as a token of my respect and thankfulness to you."

It is customary in most Native American cultures to present gifts to elders or to someone that you want to ask a favor of. It is a form of respect that dates back to before contact with the Europeans and one that I think personifies how noble the culture really was. I knew that some of my ancestors were Ojibwa and I hoped the respect that I was showing this man would win me favor with him.

He took the pin from my outstretched hand and after a moment once again pulled out the pipe and performed the ceremony with me. I felt greatly honored by his acceptance and silently vowed that I would do what I could to aid in this situation. When the pipe was once again out he looked to Michael. "Present your information."

The three of us told the man what we'd learned. My voice stuck a little when I indicated the man I'd seen in my visions and I didn't bother to look in his direction when I did so. I knew he would instantly hate me for the information that I'd brought forward but I didn't want to see the emotion in his eyes. He was a vampire after all and there was little I could do to defend myself against him.

When the man on the rug accused the man, David, he immediately rose to his feet. "Maybe if you came out of your dream world long enough to rule this city you wouldn't have those guns in the hall," he spat out in disgust. "Yes, I have ambition, but I've done nothing that our laws can enforce."

Voices erupted in anger as the man on the rug leapt up faster than my eyes could watch. In an instant he and David were exchanging blows as the man who'd sat next to David made a move for the woman on the rug.

"Graves," Madelyn called out desperately. "Tracy."

Talon, I thought, my eyes shifting around the room again to find him. I couldn't find him anywhere and I realized as the man who'd sat on the rug turned to look behind him that his name was Graves, too.

Disappointment filled my heart. The Talon I'd come to know and love wasn't the same man who was now pulling his blood covered hands out of David's chest and facing the man who held a gun to his woman's head. I was vaguely aware of Luke stepping in front of me to act as a shield as the sound of gunshots filled the room.

I hid my face for a moment, not sure what to do. When I looked again I saw that the woman had been shot but was no longer being held by the man, Tracy. He'd been shot while I wasn't looking and was now lying on the floor. I had no idea if she needed or wanted help but I found myself instinctively moving to her side to hold her upright.

The woman was oblivious to her own injuries and seemed to only want to get to Graves' side. She was leaning on me heavily so I was relieved when Luke came over to help with the weight. When she was close enough, the woman laid her hands on Graves' chest and spoke with a soothing voice in a language I didn't understand.

For his part, Graves appeared really upset about the situation and the fire in his eyes made me want to take more than a few steps away but I didn't let it show. Instead, I stepped toward the table where some of the vampires had sat and removed the tablecloth then held it out for him.

He took it gratefully and wiped the blood off his hands and arms. "You have risked much to come around our kind," he told me solemnly. His woman's wounds had closed and she was now standing on her own next to him.

"It is not the first time, my Lord," I replied with a warm smile then moved off to stand next to Luke while the room quieted once more.

Christina was talking with Antonio and between them they were looking at a piece of paper. When she turned to face us I saw that there were blood tears in her eyes and my heart stopped.

"Lena," she said as she approached us, "I need you to sit down."

"What is it?"

"Sit," she repeated sternly. Thankfully there was a chair nearby that had been knocked over during the scuffle that Luke righted quickly so that I could sink into it. "Lena, I'm afraid something might have happened to your Talon."

"No," I cried, not comprehending what she was saying. I felt the tears in my eyes as Christina's hand closed over one of mine in comfort.

"Yes," she said. "This letter says that he's been 'taken care of'." She handed me the paper that she and her sire had been looking at and I tried to read it but my tears obscured my vision.

Foolishly, I'd allowed myself to think that there was a chance that Talon was still alive. The clues were somewhat obvious and I didn't care if he were a vampire or not. Secretly, I'd been hoping that I would find him in this city and that somehow he would help us find Jason. I wasn't sure if I could deal with losing him again.

I realized that I was sitting in a room full of vampires, crying like a baby and I quickly excused myself to go to the bathroom so I could pull myself together. The person that stared back at me in the mirror was pale and had dark circles under her eyes. I hadn't been sleeping well, my fears for Jason outweighing the need for rest, and even though I knew Mikael could handle anything thrown his way I worried for the village as well.

"How did all this happen?" I sadly asked my reflection but got no reply. I splashed my face with cold water and dried it with a soft towel that had been stacked near the sink.

When I returned the room had been cleared except for Antonio, Michael and the vampire leader and everything had been put back into order. Christina approached Michael

and asked if he could help us find Jason by tracing the location of his cell phone. He said he would do what he could and that we had the private jet at our disposal.

We returned to our hotel room to await word from Michael. He'd informed us that it could take fifteen to twenty hours to trace the cell phone's position but at this point we didn't have much of a choice.

Chapter 23 – Behind the Iron Curtain

It's 4:30 am on a Tuesday
It doesn't get much worse than this."
Counting Crows
"Perfect Blue Buildings"

There were still hours left to the night but I was physically and emotionally exhausted. Christina had asked Luke to stay the day with us in our suite so I didn't feel bad when I excused myself and went to my room. My sleep was fitful and long in coming but thankfully my dreams were quiet and I didn't remember any of them when I woke early the next morning.

As I took a shower I silently promised myself that I wouldn't let the note Christina had shown me the night before deter me from what I knew we had to do. Talon had survived this long on his own and I would just have to hold onto the hope that I would see him once again. Jason was the one who really needed my help right now and I had to concentrate on him.

Once I was dressed I mentally calculated that if I hurried I would be able to call the Holding and catch Mikael before he had dinner.

"Hello?" Donya answered from the other end of the line.

"Donya, it's Lena. Is Mikael around?"

"Lena," the girl squealed with delight. "It is so good to hear from you. Have you found Father Kline yet?"

"Not yet," I told her, masking the anguish the failure was causing me. "Is Mikael around?"

"Yes. Yes, he's here in the manor. Let me find him."

"Hi," Mikael said five minutes later when he picked up. I could hear the smile on his lips and I wished that I were there to see him in the flesh.

"Hi," I replied with a sigh.

"Everything okay so far?"

"There's nothing yet on Jason but Christina has a friend here in LA that is trying to locate his cell phone. It could take a while, though."

"At least that's something," Mikael commented. "How are you holding up?"

I didn't know how to answer. Mikael and I had never really discussed Talon or the fact that I suspected he was still alive somewhere so I didn't know what to tell him. "I'm fine, I guess. I just wish that I could blink my eyes and make everything right again."

"I know, so do I." Mikael hesitated for a moment before continuing, "Listen, something arrived for you today."

"Oh?" I asked in surprise. "What is it?"

"I don't want to go into it right now." His tone suggested that whatever had arrived was something important but given the circumstances I understood why he didn't want to say too much about it over the phone.

"Okay," I replied slowly. I was dying to know what it was but I also realized the need to be careful. Could it help us find Jason? Talon?

"When you find out where Jason's phone is contact me and I'll meet you there with the package," Mikael was saying.

"Okay," I repeated. We chatted for a few more minutes about nothing in particular and finally Mikael suggested that the bill for the call was going to be outrageous. I told him that I didn't care but I knew we couldn't stay on the phone forever. We said our good byes and I felt

so lonely when I hung up but I remembered that I would be able to see Mikael as soon as we found out where our next stop was and the thought made me feel more at ease.

Next I called to check on Kyle. He was doing much better and I was surprised when Dr. Schuler said that he was on his way to the Holding to be with Mikael. He hadn't taken the news of Jason's disappearance well and he wanted to be there in case we needed an extra hand.

As it turned out, Moscow was our next destination. Michael was good to his word and allowed Christina and I the use of his plane but first we had to make a stop in Detroit. One of the clues on the toilet paper I'd found in Maxdorf had made reference to a Countess and the Graves in LA had been able to locate her there. I hoped that with finding her we would gain more insight into Jason's disappearance.

We landed in Detroit around noon but I didn't want to leave Christina alone on the plane. I called Mikael again after we'd been on the ground for an hour or so and only after promising that I wouldn't overreact would he finally told me what was in the package. The box contained a withered left hand with a gold wedding ring on the third finger. It was hard not to think that it was Jason's hand and I wasn't sure if I want to try.

I was filled with dread when I told Christina that night after she awoke. She must have read my face as soon as she entered the main cabin of the plane and hurried to my side. "What is it?" she asked.

"I spoke with Mikael this afternoon," I began after I'd asked her to sit. "Do you remember the box that I told you about that was delivered to the village? The one he wouldn't tell me what was inside?"

Her brow furrowed before she answered, "Yes."

Forcing myself to be as quick as possible, I told her about the conversation I'd had with Mikael and I could tell she was barely holding herself together by the time I was finished. I felt so horrible to be the bearer of the news and when she finally spoke she sounded like a ghost. "Jason's ring. Jason's hand."

"It could be a trick," I told her quickly but I knew what she felt. After all, hadn't I thought the same thing myself? I understood that I had to be strong for her. Somewhere along this path I found myself on with this woman I realized that I would have to be the strong one and put my thoughts aside. Jason and I were close but the bond that Christina felt for him ran much deeper. I had to protect her.

I realized I no longer cared that she was a vampire. She cared for Jason and that was all that mattered. "They might have taken the ring from him and put it on another hand, we can't so sure-"

"No," she stopped me as she rose to her feet. "We can't. Can you get it for me?"

"Christina..."

"Can you get it for me?" she repeated with a voice of stone. "Can you have Mikael send it where we can get it at our next stop?"

"I will see what I can do," I told her. I understood her need to see the hand herself but I doubted that the ordeal would be any good for her peace of mind. I gave Christina some time to collect herself before suggesting that we needed to go for our meeting with the Countess.

I wasn't surprised when the Countess turned out to be a vampire and one that apparently knew Talon very well. She lived in a large estate outside Detroit and had a great deal of light to shed on the situation. Apparently, until recently the Countess had been in the

possession of a crystal that was a conduit for a great deal of power. The crystal had been stolen earlier that month and so far no one had come forward with information about the missing item and the Countess had no leads as to its whereabouts.

After an hour or so of discussing a crystal that I didn't really care about, I was dying to ask about Talon. So far the Countess had only mentioned him in passing but had given no real information about him. "When did you last see Talon?" I finally asked. I couldn't help myself.

"About a month ago," the Countess answered after a moment in her old world accent. "He brought me a recording from Europe and we listened to it together and talked most of the night. It was a most enjoyable evening."

So he was okay a month ago, I thought to myself. She didn't know where Talon was going when he left so any other information that I'd hoped to get out of her was nipped in the bud. Christina told the Countess about our search for Jason and she seemed sorry that she couldn't help.

Christina and I accepted the Countess' offer to stay the day at her estate so that we could have a fresh start the next evening. It was eerie to admit but I was beginning to get used to be around vampires but I was still hoping to resolve the circumstances as fast as possible.

Christina had the forethought to ask Michael to arrange for alternate identities for our travels in the Soviet Union so when we were told the following evening that a package arrived during the day and could be found in the Carriage House we assumed that was what it was. We were surprised when we found a large box that resembled the one that Christina had arrived at the Holding in.

When we finally got it opened, Christina and I were shocked when Luke sat up and grumbled, "I was wondering how long it would take you guys to open that."

We were glad to see Luke and grateful that Graves had allowed him to accompany us to Moscow. Luke brought with him our alternate identities that Michael had arranged for the trip and I had to admit that the story I quickly overlooked was inspiring. Michael also included a set of covert communication devices that were the size of a dime and adhered to the skin behind the ear. They would allow us to talk to one another without anyone knowing and I silently thanked Michael for the thought.

After a quick stop in Flint we were in the air again before dawn. We arrived at Rhinemane Air Force Base in West Germany a little after sunset the following night and had assumed our new identities.

Christina was Katie Jo Jackson; the pampered daughter of a wealthy senator from Mobile, Alabama and Luke was her boyfriend Tom Cutter, a college and army dropout from the wrong side of the tracks. My new name was Catarina Baldwin and my role was to be one of her father's aides who was accompanying the couple on their trip to Russia to keep an eye on things and to serve as interpreter.

Christina played the part of a southern belle to the hilt as we were transferred to a special military plane that would take us the rest of the way to Moscow. At Katie Jo's unexplained insistence, we arrived at the American embassy where we were to stay just before dawn and we rested the day there. There was a message on my voice mail from Mikael that said he and Kyle would arrive in the city later that night and I couldn't wait to see him.

The next evening we struck out early to follow the few leads we had managed to piece together to look for Jason. We were careful not to be too obvious to the people we approached about who we were looking for and unfortunately we came up empty handed.

I could tell that Christina was upset by the lack of progress after our inquiries so I was hesitant to leave her side. I also couldn't wait to see Mikael again so when he called to say that he'd just checked into a hotel downtown I told him I would be there as quickly as possible. Luke was with Christina so I knew he wouldn't let anything happen to her.

"Oh, God I've missed you," Mikael said breathlessly after the door to his room was shut behind me and I was in his arms.

It was strange how much better I felt just being the protective circle of his embrace and for the first time since I'd learned of Jason's abduction, I allowed myself to break down. I felt so guilty that I was here with a man that I loved beyond belief while Christina pined for one that we didn't know for sure was still alive.

"Lena, what's wrong?" Mikael pulled back enough to look down at me, concern filling his eyes.

"I-I'm sorry," I sniffled. "I don't know what's come over me."

"My brave lady," he replied. The knowing look in his eyes told me that he understood why I was so upset and that he felt the same way. He pulled me close to him again and as I listened to the breathing of his heart, I felt myself calm once more.

A sharp knock on the door to the adjoining room made us pull apart and after briefly kissing my forehead, Mikael went to it and quietly opened it.

"All right, where's my favorite girl to the rescue?" Kyle boomed as he burst into the room. He looked around and when his eyes fell on me he started in my direction.

"Kyle," I replied with a warm smile. He pulled me to him and I was soon lost in his enormous bear hug. I was happy to see that he was feeling better and he assured me that all was well with him.

We sat down in the little conversational area in Mikael's room where the two told me that they'd stopped at the monastery on the way to Moscow to check things out.

They hadn't found anything out of the ordinary with the exception of the presence of Jason and Christina's luggage, which they'd brought with them.

"What about the package?" I asked after we'd talked for a while.

Mikael visibly stiffened beside me and I placed my hand reassuringly on his knee and squeezed. Kyle tensed as well.

"It's okay," I told Mikael quietly. "I'm ready."

Mikael looked as if he were amazed by my steadfastness and in reality so was I. I didn't want to see the severed hand but I knew I would have to and accepted the fact. There were so many questions that needed answers and we were down to finding out what the hand had to offer.

Mikael rose from the couch we shared and looked to Kyle a moment before going to the closet and retrieved a long box.

Once he was seated next to me again he gently placed the box in my lap then put an arm around my shoulders in support. I silently thanked him for being my anchor.

Carefully, I lifted the lid from the box and peeled back the tissue paper that was packed around the hand to keep it from moving. It was green and withered and the beautiful gold band glimmered on the third finger.

Tentatively I ran one finger over the ring that matched the set Christina wore so perfectly. I allowed my fingers to lightly make contact with the back of the hand and was immediately pulled into the vision.

Jason punched the last digit into the phone and raised it to his ear. His face was haggard and drawn with cuts on his lip and over one eye. Fear was vivid in his amazingly clear eyes as they darted from one side to the other.

He was grabbed suddenly on either side and the phone was yanked from his hand.

"Christina!" I heard him cry clearly in my mind as he was pulled away brutally toward a dark doorway that loomed behind him.

Then I saw his left arm laying flat on a stainless steel table, the gold band still twinkling in the bright light. In a flash a large knife came down, fiercely separating forever the hand from its arm.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I came back to reality. Mikael had removed the box from my lap and Kyle took it to the other side of the room.

I choked out what I'd seen as Mikael held me tightly against him, his hand running methodically up and down my arm.

Kyle brought me a glass of water and after a few minutes I'd gotten myself under control again and was able to sit up on my own.

"I need to get back and tell Christina," I said finally. At first Mikael and Kyle were hesitant but they soon realized that I wouldn't be stopped. Christina had to know what I'd seen.

They had a few lead of their own to check out so after Christina and Jason's luggage was piled into a cab, I kissed Mikael soundly where we stood on the sidewalk in front of the hotel then got inside.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he promised as he tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. I yearned to stay here with him but my first responsibility right now had to be Christina and telling her what had happened. The ring from the severed hand was securely tucked in the pocket of my skirt and I was nervous about telling her.

When I got back to the embassy I could see that Christina was grateful to have not only her luggage back, but Jason's as well. Without a preamble, she informed me that she thought she'd found the Countess' missing crystal.

"Where was it?" I asked as I removed my coat and draped it over a chair.

"In my stomach," she replied as she pulled it from her pocket. She then told me how Jason had made her swallow it the night he'd been abducted at the monastery. She hadn't put two and two together until tonight when she and Luke had been walking near Lenin's Flame. She'd become so ill the closer they came to it that Luke had been forced to carry her away.

Before I could fully process all that she'd just told me, Christina asked if I'd brought the ring.

"I saw the hand," I told her softly, "and when I touched it..."

"Tell me," she prodded gently.

Calmly and quietly I told Christina and Luke what I'd seen in my visions. Christina listened numbly, as if I were a doctor giving a patient's family bad news. Her face was like a stone and I could see the worry in Luke's eyes. I knew that mine reflected the same emotions.

"You're sure?" he asked as he edged close to the bed where Christina and I were sitting.

"I saw an arm," I told him, hating the words as they passed my lips. "The sleeve was the same as the shirt I saw him wearing when he called Christina." With a shaking hand, I pulled the ring from my pocket and reached for her hand. After I'd laid it in her palm, I closed her fingers over it and held her hand tightly in my own.

The thick blood tears were already streaming down her face when I looked up but her eyes frightened me. The animalistic anger that I saw in those green depths wasn't new to me but it never ceased to throw my nerves. Christina was a gentle person by nature and it was

hard to swallow the knowledge that a beast capable of ripping me to shreds lurked under the surface.

Luke pulled me away from her then took her wrists firmly and spoke quietly in her ear.

He was what she needed now, I told myself as I slipped out of her room. After a few minutes I heard them leave and they didn't return to the embassy until near dawn.

My emotions had run their course during that time and I prayed beyond hope that Jason was still alive.

Chapter 24 – Coming Up Empty

"Your sad songs reign in heaven
Here's a call for you so don't let it
Fall into your frail dreams of horror."
Remy Zero
"Hermes Bird"

Our time in Moscow passed quickly with only vague information about Jason and even that was outdated. Christina and Luke had discovered that a man had been following us around town. While they tried to decide what to do about him I had an idea.

I booted up my laptop and within minutes entered the chat room where I'd first heard about Talon all those years ago while I was still in college.

None of the names were familiar to me; too much time had passed since I last visited. I spent a good deal of time watching what the others were talking about to see if I could catch any hidden lingo. The time I'd been involved with the supernatural over the years had helped me hone my ability of telling the difference between those who knew what lurked in the night and the others who only guessed.

After a while I approached two individuals in the chat room and made some obscure inquiries into where they were from and that I was interested in the happenings in Eastern Europe. One of them told me they'd heard of someone with ties in that area and if I would wait a few minutes they would see if he were available.

I agreed to wait and in the meantime checked the top of the line firewall installed in my computer to make sure no one could get access to my system.

The Czar entered the chat room ten minutes later and immediately introduced himself to me as a person who was 'involved with the happenings in the area that I had asked about'.

I told him that I was trying to contact a friend who'd last been known to be in Moscow and that I was having trouble finding him.

Is it his line of work that has made him unavailable? the Czar asked.

Yes, I typed back. *I've contacted the people in town that he knew but they haven't seen him.*

Have you contacted the local authorities?

No. His work is delicate and they wouldn't understand his idiosyncrasies.

The Czar's reply was long in coming. *Perhaps you should check out a warehouse on the outskirts of the city.*

Before I had a chance to question him further he'd logged out of the chat room and so did the first person I'd talked to. I couldn't help thinking that it could be a trap but I would leave the decision to Christina and Luke.

I was able to locate the warehouse without a problem. Mikael and Kyle met us in the lobby of the embassy and we left the building on foot around midnight. It was soon apparent that the man who'd been our new shadow was still following us so Luke and Christina decided it wouldn't be a good idea to allow him to accompany us to our destination.

The group turned onto a side street and I continued on with Mikael and Kyle as Luke and Christina melted against the side of the building. Within moments I heard two gunshots in the still night and the two vampires joined us a few minutes after that. The man was now dead and floating in the nearby river and I didn't know whether to feel remorse or jubilant. After all, we had no idea who he was or why he was tailing us. What if he'd wanted to help

find Jason and was deciding on how to approach us? We would never know the answer to that question now.

We returned the main street and hailed two cabs to take us to the warehouse. For obvious reasons Christina and Luke took the second cab while I squeezed between Mikael and Kyle in the first.

The neighborhood where the warehouse was located was not a good one. As Mikael instructed the driver to stop a few blocks from the building I took the chance to glance around and wasn't encouraged by what I saw. The streets were littered with trash and other debris and partially stripped vehicles dotted the area. There were no lights in any of the buildings and there wasn't a soul in sight.

We got out and Mikael paid the driver who promptly pulled away from the curb without asking if we wanted him to wait. We walked the remaining way to the warehouse then split up to enter. We'd all agreed earlier to kill whatever we found inside.

Christina and Luke would enter the building from the left while Mikael and I took the right. Kyle would go in the front.

What happen once we were inside still haunts my dreams. There was a group of four men standing around a fifth that was kneeling on the floor. I saw Christina and Luke enter the room almost directly across from us and Kyle coming in from the front. They all held guns and were ready for the impending encounter.

I felt the cold porcelain of the Glock in my hand but I wasn't sure if I would be able to use it when Mikael raised his own weapon and shot. Christina did like wise and the room erupted with gunfire.

As I raised my gun and took aim I saw Mikael advance forward as well as Kyle from the front. They had both grown larger in mass and I knew that they were now stronger and faster as well. They attacked the men with claws that protruded from the ends of their fingers and began to pull the men apart. I stepped closer to the exchange, knowing that I would only get in the way if I got closer but I would be ready if one tried slipped away.

I could see by the extended canines that some of the men in the group were vampires but they didn't last long against the two werewolves. As Mikael and Kyle killed two of them one did try to escape. Without hesitation I fired and he dropped in a heap to the floor and didn't move.

Silence fell over the room and for the first time I looked to where I'd last seen Christina and Luke. Both were on the floor but appeared okay. Two more bodies were also sprawled near the two of them.

Once we were assured that everyone was okay we began to check out the bodies and what was left in the building. I saw a cage at one end of the room and quickly moved closer. Christina must have noticed the cage at the same time as I did and she made it there first.

Inside was a naked body of about Jason's size with it's back facing us. Christina threw open the door to the cage and turned the body over. The face had been beaten beyond recognition and the man had been shot in the chest. I could see fang marks on the man's neck and when I looked at the left arm I saw that there was no hand.

"Jason," I heard Christina whisper as I moved closer. I knelt by her side and reached out to lay my hands on the man's chest.

What I saw was a man dressed in rags and drinking a bottle of cheap Russian wine in an alleyway. Then wino was thrown in the cage where he was immediately grabbed by a vampire who greedily fed from his neck. Next the man was lying motionless in the cage and I was looking through the eyes of a person who held out a gun and shot the wino in the chest.

The last vision was on the man's left hand being cut off in much the same fashion as I'd seen what I'd originally thought to be a vision of Jason when I'd held the ring.

Even though the images were gruesome and appalling there was one positive fact that rang through my head. He wasn't Jason.

"It's not Jason," I said in relief. "This man saw someone they dragged off the street. They beat him and threw him in here with a vampire. Then they shot him." I swallowed before I finished, "They cut off his hand after he died."

I heard Christina inhale slowly then she stood and walked out of the cage. While Mikael and Kyle check out the rest of the warehouse Christina and Luke regained the blood they'd lost from the fallen bodies in the room.

All four of them were practically covered in blood and we had to walk many blocks before we could hail a cab. After a quick stop at the Russian equivalent of a twenty-four hour department store where I went in to buy long trench coats for everyone, Christina and Luke dropped the werewolves and me off at the hotel then they continued on to the embassy.

Our time in Moscow came to an end. We didn't know where to go from there so we returned to the Holding until we could figure out our next move. I returned to the chat room in hopes that I would get another clue that would help unravel this mystery. The Czar didn't log on, however, and neither did the other person who'd led me to him.

Now more than ever I was convinced that Jason was still alive. In the air terminal in Germany when we were waiting for the connecting flight that would take us to Austria I saw a man out of the corner of my eye that looked astonishingly like Jason. I turned my head quickly in that direction but he was gone, as if he were never there.

I didn't tell Christina about the encounter. She'd pulled into herself after the warehouse and it seemed that Luke was now the only one who could reach her. She had to be prodded to feed and hardly said a word to anyone. I understood her sorrow but I knew that there was nothing I could do for her except keep the faith that we would somehow find him.

I contacted my friends in New York and asked them to monitor the chat room twenty-four hours a day and what to look for. I also included the name of the warehouse in Moscow in case the people who had Jason were stupid enough to use it. Four day later I was rewarded by a call that said there was a man in Paris who knew the owner of the warehouse in Moscow.

I chartered a private jet for our use until further notice and we were on our way again. Mikael was staying at the Holding to keep the village safe and Kyle had agreed to stay as well. There was no telling what these people knew about Christina or me and Mikael wouldn't leave the people undefended any longer.

The Paris lead turned out to be as dead as the one in Moscow. I racked my brain trying to think of anyone I could turn to at this point for help and thought of Robert Samuel. I hadn't talked to Talon's old friend since I'd last seen him in Cairo and when I remembered my behavior that night I was sure he wouldn't want to help me.

Still it wasn't for me, it was for Jason, and so I picked up the phone and asked the concierge to locate his number for me. Unfortunately, I learned that Robert was out of town. When his secretary asked if I wanted to leave a message I told her no and hung up the phone with a heavy heart.

My New York contacts were able to find a nightclub in Berlin that was owned by the same person so we made arrangements to fly there next.

When Christina rose our last night in Paris she immediately checked her voice mail back home, an act she'd done religiously since she'd found out about the missed message from

Jason. As I watched her commit the act that left her a little more depressed each night, I saw her face contort with first disbelief, then wonder and finally resolve as she turned off the phone and laid it on a table. Without a word, she left the hotel suite.

Luke had been in the room and had witnessed Christina's reaction as well. After a glance in my direction, he grabbed his leather jacket and moved to follow her.

"Give her some space," I said as his hand closed over the knob.

He stopped. I could see the muscles twitch in his jaw and I understood then that he loved her. Somewhere along this mess of lies and twists Luke Thomas had fallen helplessly in love with Christina and he knew it was a love that he could never hope for her to return. Her heart belonged to a man no one had seen in nearly three weeks and he knew it. He would only be second fiddle and from what I'd learned about this man, that was a role that wouldn't sit right in his gut.

"I will," he replied then finished opening the door and left.

My eyes fell to the table where Christina had left her cell phone and I went to pick it up. I already knew the code that would access her voice mail and I did so with reservation. Whatever was on it was going to be bad but even I wasn't ready for what I was about to hear.

"How is your search going?" a raspy male voice taunted on the other end. "Have you found your handsome prince yet? Such a shame about his hand. When he refused to help us, it gave me great pleasure to kill him." The man laughed wickedly then and hung up.

I hung up the phone and placed it once again on the table. I didn't let the man's words dissuade what I thought was the truth. In my mind the hand that had arrived at the Holding belonged to the man we'd found in the cage in Moscow. No matter what any message said I believed that Jason was still alive and nothing could change that.

Christina on the other hand was on the brink. I knew that she blamed herself for Jason's abduction, regardless of the true facts. In her eyes, she hadn't done all that she could have to stop the Crone so the responsibility was hers alone.

Luke and Christina returned to the hotel hours later.

"Christina, you can't think he's dead," I insisted.

She came to me and leaned over to kiss my cheek. "Lena," she began with a voice that had seemed to have aged a hundred years in the span of a few hours. "You are like a sister to me now and I realize that it's important for you to believe Jason is still alive. Believe me when I say that every corner of my soul wants Jason to be alive, cries out for that to be true. My heart aches to look into his eyes, to feel the touch of his hand on mine. I long to hear his voice whispering to me, proving to me that he is alive."

Her voice broke but she continued with tears in her eyes, "But my mind is breaking under the strain of fighting with the fact that I have failed him where he would have saved me. Try to understand that thinking he's alive and being unable to find him is more that I can take right now. Please, let both just believe what we have to in order to get through this, and not argue the point."

I pulled her close to me and kissed her cheek. "I'll believe enough for the both of us," I assured her.

"Yes," she replies softly. "You have the heart for it."

Chapter 25 – A Family Reunion For Christina

"Don't go...I'm beggin' you To stay"
KWS
"Please Don't Go"

Berlin turned into Madrid and still we had no lead on Jason. Nearly a month had passed now since his disappearance and it was hard for me to keep hope alive. Part of me still wished to somehow contact Talon because I knew that he would know exactly what to do and where to go without hesitation. But he was beyond my reach as well and I had to remind myself of that more often than I cared to admit.

I spoke with Mikael daily and he assured me that everything at the Holding was fine so that I didn't worry. I longed for this ordeal to be over so that I could return home to him and the sanctuary I'd found there over the past few years. I missed Mikael more than words could express and watching Christina wither away was almost more than my heart could stand. She'd made her intentions quite clear, she no longer thought that Jason was alive and she wasn't going to stop until his killers were dead as well.

Her growing feelings for Luke worried me, though. She was so vulnerable by this time that I feared that she would cling to any man she'd come into contact with. I knew she still loved Jason so I didn't understand why or how she could react to Luke the way she did, but wisely I held my tongue. If she became agitated in any way all he had to do was lay a hand on her arm and she would instantly back down. It was mind boggling to watch but it was something I'd witnessed many times.

While in Madrid I received a report about a warehouse in Nashville where a body had been found that was missing its left hand. Amazingly enough, the name of the warehouse was the same as the one in Moscow so within hours we were in the air, this time bound for America.

Once we'd arrived in the city, Christina and Luke had to pay their respects to the local vampire elders before we could continue our search. I was used to this act by now and, as usual, I took the time to check into the hotel we'd decided to stay at.

After Christina and Luke joined me, the three of us found the warehouse, but to my dismay the building had already been cleared out. Any traces that we could have linked with Jason were long gone. I found that I couldn't meet Christina in the eye as we left the empty building to return to the hotel.

Christina left soon after we got back so see what she could find out anything new from the local vampire community. She came back with news that four vampires not from the city had set up shop in the building a week prior. A few nights later they cleared out rather quickly and the next day a watchman found the body.

She also found out about a second tail that was following us. While in Madrid we'd noticed another man much like the one in Moscow was trailing us and had decided to allow it until another situation arose where we didn't want him.

The vampire that Christina had talked to, a woman named Faith, said that there was someone else shadowing us and Christina had been able to make her as she returned to the hotel after her visit with Faith.

We decided that it would be a good idea to hang around for a while to see if we could learn anything else about the group of vampires who'd left town so quickly. The local hot spot for creatures of the night in town was a bar called The Iron so we thought it would be a good idea to let ourselves be seen.

Christina was first in line as we were walking in the front door and she literally walked into her vampire 'sister' Brenda Thompson. Brenda was surprised to see Christina and quickly wrapped her in a warm embrace as we stood just inside the door. I think that I was the only one in the group who noticed the fact that Christina's response was a less than enthusiastic one. It didn't surprise me; she'd been walking around like a zombie since Moscow but I didn't know what to do about it.

Brenda was in the company of two male vampires and a young mortal girl with striking green eyes. Introductions were made and we soon learned that Bruce Blackwell was a friend of hers and had traveled from Salem with her. Gabriel was a vampire from the Nashville and Charisma Therin seemed to be his girlfriend even though she didn't look like she was out of high school yet.

As we were talking Christina and Luke fell into the casual way they'd developed of touching each other. It was subtle, the way one hand slipped into the other or how an arm wrapped around the waist of the other person. I'd often found myself wondering if Mikael and I were ever like that.

I watched as the realization of the situation clicked in Brenda's blue eyes then watched as they narrowed on the pair. It soon became obvious that Brenda was in town for something important because she made plans to meet Gabriel and Charisma at a park later.

Once the pair had joined a group of teenagers and was out of earshot, Brenda grabbed Christina's hand and pulled her away for a private conversation. As I watched the two move away from the rest of us I silently prayed that Brenda would be able to spark even a small amount of life back into my friend. It tore at my heart to see her suffer like she was. She no longer made any pretense that Jason could somehow be alive.

From my vantage point, the conversation didn't go well. Luke had eventually joined the two women but in the end Christina walked off by herself, her spine stiff with anger. Bruce, who had stayed close to by during the sisters' conversation, had moved off to join Brenda while Luke came to my side.

"She needs some time to cool off," he said as he watched the other two vampires get into their car.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"Will be," he replied. "I get the impression that Brenda is a douse of reality that Christina doesn't want." He then told me that we were going to meet Christina at a nearby Shelby Park after she'd gotten a chance to cool off.

As it turned out there was a big reunion of sorts at the park. It seemed as if Brenda's business had brought her and her friends here as well although I never fully understood what had happened. All that I know for sure is that there was a woman from Salem that Brenda knew that needed help and so that's what we did. I'm sure that Christina knows more than I do but we've never had the chance to fully discuss the matter. It was what happened after the incident at the park that's important.

Brenda received a call after everything was said and done at the park that said a package had arrived for Christina at one of the vampire strongholds in the city. We left the park amid much discussion over what was in the package and whom it could be from. Silently I prayed that it was word of Jason and not another severed hand.

A convoy of vehicles entered a lavish estate fifteen minutes later and Brenda led the way inside. Within moments Luke and Christina were ushered into a room where the package awaited. I was a little uneasy around these vampires that I didn't know well and a little hurt that I wasn't included in the receiving of whatever it was that had arrived.

Instead, I went to the porch of the mansion and found a seat on one of the many white wicker chairs that were scattered about. I don't know how long I sat there before I heard what sounded like a motorcycle starting off to my left. I wondered who it could be so I rose from the chair and walked to the edge of the porch.

A large Harley came into view with a lone male rider on board. The man was large in build and wasn't wearing a helmet. Even without the telltale blond hair flying out behind him I would have known it was the man I'd once shared my life with.

"Talon, stop!" I cried out as I quickly moved down the steps and ran out into the yard but he didn't stop, didn't even look back. My heart stopped beating in those moments when I knew he was so close but had once again managed to slip through my fingers. Defeated, I made my way back to the porch and sat in the chair I'd already vacated, wondering why Talon had left without a word or glance in my direction. Was I just someone who reminded him of a part of his life that he didn't want to remember? Had he found Jason and needed to return to him because he was hurt? Maybe Jason was the package and Talon had dropped him off. I didn't know what was going on or who I could talk to at the moment so I just sat there and let the tears of frustration fall down my cheeks.

Christina emerged from the house a few minutes later. She saw me and came to me, crouching at the side of my chair as she took my hand. "Lena, what's wrong?" she asked.

I didn't know how to answer her so I just shook my head and continued to stare at the gate that Talon had driven through. She was hurting so bad by the loss of Jason that I felt that I couldn't share my feelings with her at that moment. I felt petty. What she said next was magic.

"Jason is alive," she said and I turned to look into her eyes and for the first time since I met her, I saw a twinge of happiness there. It was small but it was enough for me. For now.

I threw my arms around her and hugged her close to me. Thank you, God, I said to myself as she returned the embrace.

"We have to find him," she said, her hope restored in ways that I could have never inspired.

Luke and the others were on the porch by now as well. Faith, one of vampires from the city told us that she believed that Jason was in San Francisco so we prepared ourselves for what I hoped would be the final leg of this journey.

Chapter 26 – End of the Road

*"Among The many muted Faces
You Try To Find me in The spaces."
Mandy Moore
"In My Pocket"*

Christina asked her sister to accompany us to the West Coast. On the plane she shared the conversation that she'd had with Jason on a cell phone that Talon had brought to her in the package.

Jason had told her no when she'd asked to see him and that he might be disappearing forever. Christina confessed that she was sure he'd been turned and that he was now a vampire himself. She also said that she believed that something had happened to him during the change.

She explained that sometimes when people were made into vampires something happened to them and they were permanently disfigured, much like the character in the movie, Nosferatu.

I shuttered at the thought of Jason being maimed in such a way. He'd always been a good-looking man even though he never played off his looks. I understood that if what Christina was saying actually happened to him, Jason would feel the greatest form of betrayal. That didn't excuse him from being a jerk to the woman that I was sure he loved or turning his back on those who cared for him.

I also knew that Talon was harboring him. Wherever Jason was right now, I was sure Talon was not far behind and I was forming a few choice words for him as well. I'd quickly gotten over the hurt of him taking off like he did in Nashville and I was ready to give him a piece of my mind.

San Francisco was a beautiful city. I stared out the window of the limousine at the Golden Gate Bridge as we drove to yet another vampire stronghold. As usual, Christina and Luke had to present themselves to the elders of the city before we could do anything else and I hoped the meeting was a quick one.

I was fingering the necklace that Talon had left for me with Christina before he took off in Nashville. She'd given it to me after we'd talked about Jason's call while we were on the porch of the mansion and I'd worn it ever since. The charm was a gold cross that was reminiscent of one that he'd given me long ago when I'd worked for him.

To be honest, I was growing tired of the endless stream of vampires that I was constantly coming into contact with. Don't get me wrong, they still scared the shit out of me and I never failed to remember the fact that any one of them could rip me to shreds at a moments notice. I think that underneath it all I just really wanted to go home.

Finding Jason was still important to me and I really loved the bond that Christina and I had formed during our time together but it was just too much at times. I missed Mikael terribly. Our conversations on the phone just weren't enough. I had this incredible need to have Mikael's arms around me once more and I knew that he wanted me to return to the Holding as much as I wanted to be there with him.

Soon we were on our way to a hotel where we would stay until we were able to locate Jason. While she'd never been given a direct answer, Christina was sure that Jason had taken up residence in the city and she wasn't leaving until she had a chance to talk to him.

"Stop," Christina yelled to the driver out of the blue, shaking me from my thoughts. I looked around, trying to figure out what had startled her. Before I knew what was going on,

Christina had jumped out of the limousine and was quickly making her way to a man that was walking down the street.

"What is she doing?" Brenda asked as she tried to see what her sister was up to. The man had turned to face Christina and it was obvious that it wasn't the man she sought.

I watched as the man turn again in the direction he'd been going and Christina looked around where she stood. Instead of the disappointment that I'd expected to see on her face it appeared as if she were looking for someone.

As the car pulled over to the curb Luke was out in an instant and I was quickly behind him followed by Brenda. As I approached Christina I heard a raspy male voice from nowhere say, "You stole a car in Italy and were captured by werewolves. You were taken to Lena, and the two of you flew to Los Angeles where you helped stop a coup and pick up Luke." He was half way through his speech when I realized that it was Jason.

"You knew where we were and didn't bother to let us know you were alive?" Christina asked. I looked around but I had no idea where Jason was. By the volume of his voice he sounded like he was only a few feet away but when I looked in that direction I saw nothing.

"I'm not," Jason replied.

"Don't you realize how much we love and care about you?" I asked him. "We don't care what has happened." A dark figure took form on the sidewalk in front of us but it wore a long hooded cloak and gloves so there was no way of knowing for sure if it were Jason.

"There are things he needs to take care of," a voice said from behind us. "Things he needs to do." I turned and saw Talon standing there, just as I remembered him. Even though I now knew that he was still alive it was like a slap in the face to see him before me after I'd spent so much time laying his memory to rest in my mind.

Christina took a few sure steps toward the cloaked figure but he raised his hand to hold her off. I was surprised that she stopped but I stayed silent. This was between her and Jason now. There was nothing more I could do to get him to listen.

"I don't care what happened to you," she told him. "I need to be with you." She took another step but Jason moved backward. Clearly he was dead set on her not getting close to him.

"There are some things people need to take care of on their own," Talon commented.

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what in the hell was the big issue. What more could Christina do to reassure Jason that she didn't care what had happened to him? Couldn't he understand that she loved him, regardless of he looked like?

"What is the big secret?" I asked Talon heatedly.

"Do you think I care what you look like?" Christina asked Jason hotly.

"I do," Jason replied to quietly that I almost didn't hear him. So Christina's assumption was true. So what? Obviously she didn't care or she wouldn't have travel over half the world trying to find him.

"I can't believe this bullshit," Luke exploded. "Christina has been through hell trying to find you and now you can barely bring yourself to talk to her."

"I think you need to let them deal with this, Luke," Brenda spoke up from where she stood close to Talon.

"It's bullshit! She deserves better than this," he retorted in a low voice.

"This is their business, Luke, family business. You need to stay out of it." There was no disguising the edge to her voice. Brenda had no problem letting everyone know that she didn't approve of how close Christina and Luke had become.

"Brenda, Luke," Talon began, "Shh."

"Jason, can't we just go somewhere and talk?" Christina pleaded.

"When I deal with this," was all he said as Talon moved past Christina and me.

"It was the guy from the warehouse, wasn't it?" I asked Talon as I matched his pace toward Jason.

"I don't know."

"We thought we killed them all at the warehouse, but apparently one of them got away," I told him.

I stopped a few feet short of Jason as Talon draped an arm over his shoulders. "He'll get a hold of you."

"What's that suppose to mean?" I demanded.

"This is something Jason has to deal with himself," Talon replied evenly.

"Jason, please just let me get closer," Christina pleaded. There were tears streaming down her pretty face.

"I can't get closer myself," he replied sadly. With that Jason and Talon turned and began to walk away.

"Stop," Christina called. "Jason, will you just do one thing for me?"

"What would that be?"

I watched as she pulled the man's wedding ring off her finger that had arrived on the severed hand. I'd noticed that she'd been wearing it since just before we left Nashville and I knew that it was a great comfort to her. I only hoped that Jason realized that himself.

He reached out and caught it but in the process the sleeve of the cloak slipped back and revealed part of his arm. It looked as if gangrene had set in, the flesh was dark in color and swollen so that it looked very painful. He tried to put the ring on over the glove and when I wouldn't go on I noticed for the first time that his fingers were longer than I'd remembered. Without a word, he slipped the ring into his pocket and I silently prayed that one day he would be able to deal with his new existence.

I came to realize that once again Talon was about to walk out of my life and this time I felt the permanency much more than I had when I'd learned of his 'death'.

"Talon, can I please just hug you?"

His embrace wasn't as warm as it had once been but it was comforting nonetheless to lay my head on his chest one more time. There were so many things that I wanted to say to him but there just wasn't time. I cursed fate and the sorry hand it had dealt the lot of us. How could anyone turn their back on love when it stared at them straight in the face? My heart ached with longing for all of us.

I pulled away from Talon and held my hand out to the man that was so much like a brother to me. "I'll be thinking of you," I told him in a quiet voice. He was adamant about getting away and I had to accept that fact.

Jason reached out long enough to allow the back of his fingers to brush mine and I was reassured by the tenderness of his slight touch. When I turned my hand to grab his, though, he pulled away quickly.

"Please don't stay away so long," I told Talon. "Mikael and I miss you."

Talon's features contorted in a wry expression. "Next time I'll bring a dog treat."

"Let us help, please," I begged.

"Stop grasping at straws," he told me gently as he grabbed my upper arms like he had so many times during our stretch together in Egypt and moved me aside.

They turned away again but stopped when Christina called out Jason's name again. "I love you," she whispered when he turned her way.

His reply shattered even me. "You'll get over it."

Christina's knees buckled underneath her and she lay like a crumpled heap on the sidewalk. "I know you didn't mean that," I countered as he moved away and was quickly lost from my sight.

A loud thud sounded from the direction where Jason had gone. Christina's head snapped up quickly and she was on her feet again in an instant going after him, passing Talon with little effort. Out of nowhere Luke appeared, the cloaked figure of Jason in his arms. He dropped him at Christina's feet and she quickly fell to her knees again and brushed the hood away from his face.

There was little left of the man I knew to recognize. I was only allowed a brief glance before Talon tore Jason from Christina's arms and carried him away. Luke was right behind him as well as Christina when she gained her footing once again. They were all soon out of my sight, leaving Brenda and me standing on the sidewalk.

When I heard a gunshot my eyes quickly moved to Brenda and worry filled her lovely features. "Let's go," she said as she turned toward the limousine.

We found Christina and Luke in the middle of the street a few blocks down. They were in each other's arms and Christina was crying again. I went to her and knelt beside her and Luke.

"If anyone can help Jason, Talon can," I told her. "He's the best. I feel the same way you do, Christina, but they won't let us help." I'd said my piece and left it up for Christina for the next step. I stood and moved to where Brenda was standing next to the car and gave Christina a chance to compose herself.

"We really need to get off the street," I said after a minute. "Let's go back to the hotel."

Christina allowed Luke to guide her around when we returned to the hotel. It was just like she was in Moscow when she'd been convinced that Jason was dead. I could see that Brenda was concerned for her sister but once Luke took Christina to her room in the suite I told her that there was really nothing she could do to break Christina out of the trance she'd put herself in.

"Believe me, I tried," I told her.

"It kills me to see her like that," Brenda replied sorrowfully. "I wish there was something I could do."

"Just be there for her," I said. "She won't stay that way forever. When the time is right she'll come to you."

There was no need for us to linger so a few hours later we left San Francisco. We dropped Christina and Luke off in Las Vegas. He was going to stay with her for a while. Brenda clearly didn't approve but kept silent on the matter.

As Christina left the plane I stopped her and gave her a fierce hug. I didn't say anything because there was nothing to say. In a way I was glad that we finally had an end to the nightmare that had begun what seemed like such a long time ago. On the other hand the note was a sad one because two people that I knew loved each other weren't together for what seemed like no reason.

I knew that Christina was strong and that she wouldn't do anything stupid over the loss of Jason but I worried about her anyway. She promised to keep in touch but I had a feeling that a connection with me would only serve as a reminder of Jason and would in turn leave open the wound that would plague her heart for a long time to come.

I returned to the Holding as soon as I could. Winter had set in and I was quiet as I rode in the carriage. The trees were covered with fresh snow and usually I would have found the view beautiful but Jason's distorted features that I'd only glimpsed haunted me like a

phantom. In my dreams his eyes that were miraculously still their original color begged me to take away the pain and humiliation that now beleaguered his existence. Every night on the return trip home those imploring eyes awakened me.

Mikael was so happy to see me and I was relieved to be home but I knew that the events of the journey had taken a toll on my piece of mind. He didn't push me for answers, instead he lent his steady presence and with time I divulged every detail to him.

He was surprised to learn that Talon was still alive but he seemed to not like the fact that he was now a vampire. He didn't say anything negative out loud but I could see the worry in his eyes.

Eventually life returned to normal for us. With work I was able to put the thoughts of Jason's suffering behind me. He wanted time to learn to live with what he was now and I could accept that. I lit a candle for him every day in the chapel and said a prayer that God would look after him in his own way and if there was anything I could do to help him I would. Little did I realize then that God already had something in mind.