



A Place of My Own  
Lena's Story

Part II - Mikael: The Best of Times

Chapter 12 – Jason Kline .....	2
Chapter 13 – A House to Call Home .....	7
Chapter 14 – What Did I Do? .....	12
Chapter 15 – Settling In .....	15
Chapter 16 – Coming to Terms.....	21
Chapter 17 – A Pocket Full of Roses.....	25
Chapter 18 – A Change In Status.....	29
Chapter 19 – Additions to the Family.....	31



## **Chapter 12 – Jason Kline**

"I moved straight into your shoes  
 I took up your cause and answered your phone."  
 Elastica  
 "Never Here"

### ***Europe/Spring 1995***

I stood outside my rental car and stared up at the impressive building that loomed over me like a God looking down from the heavens. I'd found out about the Schuler Institute by making some discreet inquiries in New York and I was told it was a shelter of sorts for children without homes. But the size of the posh facility, however, and the security I'd seen on the way in told another story. Talon was linked here in some way that might solve the mystery of his death and I was determined to find the answers. A young girl was standing just outside the door and introduced herself as Pia.

"The doctor wanted me to tell you he had an unexpected emergency that needed his attention." She seemed like a typical teenager; her German was perfect so I wondered if that was where she was from. I found myself smiling at the pleasant girl. "Would you like to go to the common room and get a soda?" she asked.

I agreed as I noticed that she wore a beautiful necklace that looked surprisingly Native American to me. It was made from alternating black and white beads and had at least five large animal claws as well.

Unfortunately, we passed through only a small part of the institute as Pia led the way to a large cafeteria area where there were many groups of teenagers hanging around. The room held enough tables and chairs to seat an army and also housed a row of arcade games, pool and Ping-Pong tables and a couple air hockey games.

My nerves were stretched near to the point of breaking because I wanted answers about Talon's death but if there was one thing I learned from my dear friend was patience. If there was something here that would help me understand Talon's death I would find it.

Pia led the way to an empty table then went in search of something to drink. I felt slightly uncomfortable in a room full of teenagers and hoped to Christ that I didn't let it show.

Pia quickly returned with the sodas and I only half listened to her attempts at conversation as I watched the door for signs of the doctor's arrival.

A young man appeared next to the table and I was vaguely aware of the greeting he gave to Pia. "Join us," she urged as she pulled out the empty chair next to hers. I pulled my eyes away from the door to get a look at the newcomer and my eyes nearly popped out of my head.

I was astonished to realize that he was the young boy from my dreams. Of course he was older now, probably nineteen or twenty, but the crystal hazel of his eyes were the same ones that had haunted my dreams since I'd learned of Talon's death. For the first time since I had the vision of the young girl through Robert Samuel's eyes I wondered about the visions I'd seen. I hadn't had a vision since that night in Cairo but now I was beginning to realize that I might have a gift of some kind. Either that or I was absolutely nuts. I also knew without a doubt that the cross Talon left in the package was meant for this young man.

I must have looked like a fool with my mouth hanging open because both Pia and the young man regarded me oddly. "Are you all right, Miss Stockton?" Pia asked.

"I-I'm fine," I managed before turning my attention to the young man. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"It's Jason," he said with a quick but shy grin. "Jason Kline."

I was about to ask him if he knew Talon when I heard a deep male voice at my shoulder. "Lena. How good it is to finally meet you." His accent was definitely Austrian and even though his English was halting I understood him well enough.

I turned to face Dr. Schuler but not before I noticed recognition in Jason's eyes as if he knew me or maybe had heard my name before. I wondered if he knew about me, as well?

Dr. Schuler seemed to be in his late sixties but looked surprisingly robust for his age. His grip was firm as he shook my hand then he took a seat at the table next to me. "I see that you have met Jason," he continued with a nod in Jason's direction. "This is good."

My eyes met Jason's once again and I saw my own uncertainty mirrored in his eyes. Had Talon set up this encounter in some way before his death? I wondered. Did he intend for Jason and I to meet? If he did, why? If it were possible, my need to understand what had happened to Talon increased a thousand times.

"I don't understand," I said, not sure where to go from there.

"Have we met?" Jason asked.

Dr. Schuler chuckled as he stirred the cup of coffee that he'd brought to the table with him. "Do not be silly, Jason," he said. "If you had met Lena, do you not think you would remember someone of her great beauty?"

Jason blushed furiously as I looked between the two men in disbelief. I felt as if there were something in the conversation that I was missing. "Excuse me, Dr. Schuler," I began. "I'm feeling a little lost here. Is there something I'm missing?"

"I agree," Jason interjected.

"I know all this seems very odd to the two of you," the doctor told us. "Talon had a feeling that the two of you would one day find each other."

My eyes locked with Jason's as he realized where my name was linked with his past. I found myself wondering what Talon had told him about me and when. He'd never mentioned visiting this place or Jason for that matter to me. The only reason I knew about the young man was because of my dreams. Dreams that at first I'd dismissed as only fantasy and my sorrow over losing my dear friend, but now I was beginning to realize that they held a bit of truth to them.

"What are you talking about, doctor?" Jason asked.

Dr. Schuler regarded the younger man a moment. "Talon knew that both of you were linked together by your associations with him. He also knew that if something happened to him the chances were good that the two of you would learn of each other and would want to share in your grief together."

The noise of the others in the room drifted away as Jason and I studied each other and for the first time I realized something I'd never considered before. All the people I'd come to think of as family had been ripped away from me when the funding had been taken from the project and I remembered how desolate I'd felt afterward. There'd been no one there to share my grief with and the loneliness was so intense. In my heart I felt that Jason had suffered those same feelings when he'd learned of Talon's death.

Without thought I accepted him into my world and he must have understood because he rose from his chair and rounded the table until he stood next to me. I stood as well and without a word we wrapped our arms around each other, seeking the comfort that only we could offer each other.

We stood there for some time and let our mutual tears fall. When we pulled apart I noticed that Pia had quietly excused herself and Dr. Schuler had moved off to drink his coffee and give Jason and I some privacy.

I looked at Jason and smiled as I wiped tears from my cheeks. "I met Talon in Michigan about two and half years ago," I started.

Jason returned my smile and we sat down once again. "I met Talon the night he saved my life at the monastery."

"I know," I replied. "I've seen that night in my dreams."

Jason studied me for a minute then shook his head and murmured, "He was right then."

"Who was right?" I asked.

"Talon. The last time he visited he told me a little about you and that he thought you had the sight of some kind."

"He did, did he?" I asked perversely. "Well it's nice of him to share his thoughts with me." Of course it didn't help that I never wanted to talk about the subject.

"He said you would realized your gift with time." The kindness in Jason's eyes struck me with amazement. He was a young man who knew too much for his few years and he accepted what he couldn't do anything about. I felt protective of him already.

For the next two hours we shared our times with Talon Graves. I purposefully left out the details of our affair; I wanted to protect Jason from those details. He was in many ways naïve about the outside world. He'd been the acolyte of the priest that was killed that night in the monastery and hadn't had contact with many things.

Talon had brought Jason here so that he could finish his teenage years around those his own age and had been here ever since. He told me how he'd been able to continue his studies to be a priest at the institute and would be ordained soon. I could tell that Jason was quiet and reserved and I could see where he would be uncomfortable around most people, but there was a fire in his eyes when he talked about the church.

I certainly wasn't religious by nature but there was a calm about the soon to be Father Jason Kline that I liked very much.

I was just feeling as if I was getting to know him when he mentioned something about one of his friends being a werewolf.

"A werewolf?" I asked, astonished. "Are you serious?"

"Sure," he said with a shrug and a lopsided grin. "Kyle is really nice. He's from Ireland. Wait until you meet him." He studied me a moment then said, "You don't know about the institute, do you?"

When I told him no Jason proceeded to inform me that the facility was in actuality a place where young werewolves came to learn how to use their skills so they didn't inadvertently hurt anyone. He went on to tell me that you were born a werewolf that you didn't develop the symptoms after one bit you like the legends said.

"So everyone here is a werewolf?" I asked, not balking at the idea. After all, I knew that vampires were real, so what the hell, why not werewolves?

"Not everyone," Jason confirmed. "I'm not and some of the staff isn't but most of the students are and the instructors too."

I heard a scuffle near the door and I turned to see that two men had just entered. Well, one of them was a man, the other appeared to be just a boy but he was taller than anyone I'd ever seen and had hair the color of a carrot. The man was dressed in leather pants and a leather biker jacket. His black hair was long and pulled back in a loose ponytail at the nape of his neck.

"There's Kyle now," Jason said as he waved to his friend.

"Who's the other guy?" I asked.

"That's Razor," Jason replied with a touch of awe. "He's kind of like an instructor around here. He's amazing."

Kyle O'Shay had returned Jason's wave and had pointed Razor in our direction. As I watched the two men approach, I wished for just a few more minutes alone with Jason. I wanted to ask his opinion on Talon's death. From what I could tell we were on the same wavelength about Talon and I wondered if he had any input on what had happened.

"Good day, Jason," Kyle said in his thick Irish accent.

"Hey, Kyle," Jason replied. "How was the lesson?"

"We havena had it yet," Kyle said impishly as he glanced at the other man. "Razor pulled himself outta bed late. We thought we'd grab a bit a lunch then head out."

I was a little uncomfortable when I realized that Razor was paying me a little too much attention. To my horror, his nostrils were actually flaring as if he were trying to smell me. I tried to play it cool and not squirm under his inspection but it was hard. Really hard.

"Who's your friend, preacher boy?" Razor asked. He had no distinguishable accent so I figured he was American like me.

"This is Lena Stockton," Jason replied. "Lena, meet Kyle O'Shay and Razor."

"Gentlemen," I said with a slight nod.

"Smells like city," Razor said. "City and money."

"Be nice," Kyle said wearily. There was a certain amount of respect in his tone but I could tell Kyle knew how far he could and couldn't push the other man.

"Why don't you guys join us?" Jason asked. They did and soon I found myself in the middle of an incredibly lively conversation. I learned that Jason had continued his studies in the church when he came here and would in fact be taking his vows soon to become a priest. Kyle was an endearing young Irishman. Razor was interesting as well and managed to stop himself from sniffing at me too much.

I spent a week at the institute getting to know Jason, and Kyle as well. I was able to broach the subject of Talon's death one sunny afternoon while Jason and I had a picnic near one of the many mountain streams that ran on the institute's grounds.

"I have to admit that I find it hard to believe that someone got the better of him," Jason confessed before popping a grape in his mouth.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

I had to patiently wait for his to finish chewing before he answered. "Come on, Lena. You've dreamed about the fight that took place that night at the monastery. You've seen Talon fight. There are not many that could beat him." He fell silent for a moment before continuing again in a quiet voice. "Once, when he was here visiting me, I was leaving the building to go for a walk and had to pass by one of the sparring rooms. Talon was fighting with Razor and neither was holding back."

My eyes nearly bulged out of my head as I waited for Jason to continue.

"I watched for nearly twenty minutes as the two of them hammered each other and there wasn't an end in sight. Finally, Razor backhanded Talon in the chin and he went down in a heap. He was out of it for a day."

I was speechless. I knew Talon could handle but from what I'd been able to gather in the few days I'd been at the institute was that werewolves were a totally different ballgame all together than vampires. They were stronger and faster and could heal at an alarming rate. I never really thought about the edge that Talon seemed to have over the vampires he'd come into contact with but suddenly a thought entered my mind.

"Jason, was Talon a werewolf?" I asked slowly.

"I don't think so," he answered quickly. "He didn't answer when I asked about it- just brushed me off and said something about being nosey and I let it drop. Talon was never as nature bound like everyone I've met here so I never considered the possibility again."

All too soon my time at the institute came to an end. I was saddened to leave the comfort of Jason's company so soon but we promised to stay in touch. Some force was pulling me to the land Talon had left me and I couldn't explain why.

I made arrangements to travel to the village of Maxdorf where I would have to go by carriage the rest of the way to the village.

Jason and Dr. Schuler took me to the train station and just before I boarded I pulled out a small box and handed it to Jason.

"What's this?" he asked with a grin and a hint of embarrassment. "I thought I was suppose to give you something." And with that he pulled out a box of his own.

I smiled as I took the gift from him but waited for Jason to open his box. I had a feeling he was going to be surprised by what was inside.

I watched as the lazy smile disappeared from Jason's face and astonishment took over.

"Talon left it for you," was all I said as I kissed first Jason and then Dr. Schuler goodbye and boarded the train, bound for my next adventure.

## Chapter 13 – A House to Call Home

"You must think that something  
is happening with you, that life  
has not forgotten you, that it  
holds you in its hands; it will  
not let you fall."

Rainer Maria Rilke  
"Letters To a Young Poet"

*"And that's how I came to live here," Lena told her sleeping son. She knew she should put him in his cradle but she wanted to relish in the warmth that his little body made.*

*Lena remembered how scared she'd been that first day when she'd arrived in the village that spring. She'd had no idea of what to expect and that was a good thing because what she found was straight from the pages of a history book.*

*She arrived in the town of Maxdorf on the early train and found the inn that she'd been directed to by her lawyer in New York. The inn was owned by Claus VanShunberg and*

*The village was small with only about a hundred inhabitants and twenty or so buildings. All the houses and few businesses were clustered together in the center of the little town and fields of barley and wheat surrounded them. Cows and horses dotted open pastures as they grazed with the smaller sheep and chickens.*

*There was no electricity or running water in the village. No cars, either. The villagers used horse drawn carts and wagons, much like the one that Lena had arrived in. She was relieved to learn that the villagers spoke a German dialect and a few even knew English so communication would be no problem.*

*The village had charm, though, and the people had been warm and welcoming to their weary traveler. As soon as they found out who Lena was, that she'd inherited the land from the great Lord Talon Graves, well, if it were possible the already huge smiles and calls of welcome had increased tenfold. From that moment on she was called Lady Lena and even though she was embarrassed to be singled out that way Lena understood the importance of the title to the villagers and stopped asking to be called by only her first name.*

*The manor house was a surprise. The structure was huge and the village church was connected on one side. Lena was instantly enchanted by the old gothic design of the house with its three stories and an impressive stone tower. Donya, one of the village girls who would work at the house had given Lena a grand tour but she wouldn't go near the tower when Lena suggested it.*

"Oh, no, ma'am," she gasped in horror. "I can't go up there."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Lord Talon forbade it. He said that no one was to enter the tower." It was my understanding that Talon, and Tracy when she visited with him, had few laws for the village so the edict to stay out of the tower had none the less piqued my interest.

I went to the tower alone that night with only a candle to light my way. When I reached the top of the spiral stairs I was surprised to see a palm reader identifier on the wall next to the only doorway to the rest of the tower.

What's that doing here? I asked myself as I stared at the thing as if it would sprout a mouth and tell me itself. When there was no answer forthcoming I lifted my right hand and laid my palm on the mechanism.

Light flooded the area from sconces that had been built into the walls to look like a natural part of the design of the room as the reader scanned my hand. I didn't really expect to gain access to the area that Talon no doubt hid many secrets in if he took the time to have the room fortified so well. But when the pressure locks released and the door slowly swung open my heart did a small lurch at the thought that Talon had included me in his inner sanctuary.

Inside I found a state of the art computer system complete with a satellite that when lifted on its pedestal it poked through a hatch in the ceiling. I laughed to myself at how much the contraption looked like something out of Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory but I also understood the need to keep the satellite hidden. It didn't exactly go with the façade of the house.

The computer was a find to say the least. It took some time to get past the securities that Talon had established but the challenge was a welcomed one. Once inside I checked over the files, hoping that the information from my research would be there but I was disappointed. The hard drive did however contain all the data I would need to oversee the running of the various companies and accounts that Talon had left to me. If I wanted to, I could live here full time and only go back to New York for emergencies.

I also figured out how to operate the satellite and was able to check my e-mail for the first time in nearly two weeks. By the time I locked the tower again and went down to bed, it was nearly dawn and I knew I wouldn't get much sleep. There were many things that needed my attention that day and I had to get an early start.

"Good morning," Donya said with a smile as I entered the kitchen a few hours later. She was busy making bread when I came in but she stopped to wipe off her hands and went to a cupboard where she retrieved a china cup and saucer.

"Good morning," I replied as I took a seat at the bar in the center of the large room where Donya was working. I could tell by the aroma that she already had loaves in the oven and they smelled wonderful.

"I was planning on bringing you up a tray in a little while," she said as she handed me the cup she'd filled with coffee. "I thought you would be tired from your trip and I didn't want to disturb you."

"It's alright. I wanted to go over the household accounts this morning before I went to meet with the village elders." The coffee was wonderful and after only a few hours of sleep I knew I was going to need all the kick-start I could manage. I looked around the room and saw that some of the bread had already finished baking and was cooling on a counter near the stove.

"They are all eager to meet you," Donya informed me. She was now greasing loaf pans that were waiting on the counter next to her for the dough she'd been kneading. The scent of the fresh bread baking in the oven was intoxicating and my stomach started to growl. Donya heard the rumblings and giggled as she crossed to the finished loaves and cut off a large slice. "That should hold you until I can cook you something proper," she said and indicated a jar of strawberry jam and a crock of butter. "What would you like?"

"This should be fine," I replied as I slathered first the butter and then the jam over the bread. "What are the elders like?"

"They are very wise," Donya answered. "Adolf Schnalzburg is the leader and one of the few who've actually been outside the Holding. His father sent him to Berlin when he was twenty to learn about crop rotation from the university. That is where he met his wife, Helena."



I spent the next forty-five minutes listening to Donya tell me everything she knew about the seven members that served on the council of elders that ruled the village. She was a good storyteller, something she said she learned from her aunt, Myra, she told me when I asked. Myra was the village healer and was well known for her ability to spin tales.

"She is very anxious to meet you," Donya interjected.

"Really? Why?" I was working on my third slice of homemade bread by now and I was afraid I was going to make myself sick. If I keep this up I'll be fat, I told myself as I took another bite.

"I don't know. All she would say was that she'd been waiting for you to come for some time."

I thought over Donya's last statement as I finished the last of my coffee and rose to go dress for the day. Donya had put water on the fire to heat for me to bathe with and I wasn't looking forward to life without a shower. A life without any running water for that matter. Electricity and plumbing for the manor was on the top of my list of changes to make. I didn't want to ruin the charm of the house but there were certain conveniences that I didn't want to live without.

Just before I walked out the door Donya called out, "Oh, by the way, Mikael will be back today."

"Mikael? Whose that?"

"He is our Beschuetzer," she stated matter-of-factly. "He's been hunting for deer in the woods and should return this afternoon."

Beschuetzer. It meant protector in German. By Donya's tone, it was a form of respect and I wondered who this man was and what he'd done to earn the title. Did Talon have something to do with it?

I continued up to my room where I quickly washed and dressed for the day. I wondered what Mikhail was like but I figured that the time to meet this protector would come soon enough and I pushed him from my mind for the time being.

The meeting with the village elders in my opinion went very well. We meet for tea at the manor and I was relieved that no one seemed uncomfortable in the lush surroundings of the formal living room. I smiled as I thought of Talon in my place and wondered if the group had been able to keep him in line.

Donya's aunt, Myra, was present and all during the hour-long gathering she kept a close eye on me. But the attention didn't make me feel uncomfortable, though. It was like she was sizing me up for something that had nothing to do with the duties of the new lady.

In the end I think they all liked me in some way. I was informed that there would be a party of sorts held that evening to welcome me to the village. There would be food and dancing and it would give me a chance to get to know everyone in an informal atmosphere.

One by one the group of elders left making excuses that they had to get back to their work. Finally it was just Myra and myself. I knew this was the way the afternoon would end so I settled back in the settee I was sitting on and waited to see what the older woman had to say.

Silence filled the room for a minute as Myra continued to size me up. When she finally spoke, her statement shook my world.

"I have dreamed of your coming. Even though Talon said you would come one day, I knew the day was coming soon. Tell me of your sight."

My hands were shaking so badly that I had to put my cup and saucer on the coffee table before I dropped them. So Talon had told this woman about my visions, too, I thought. I

was suddenly pissed off at him that he could tell others about my secret. Like I wasn't the one who was experiencing it or the one trying to figure things out. To my knowledge, Jason knew and now this old woman in a remote village that I suddenly found myself ruler over did as well. Who else knew? Had Talon confided in Tracy as well? All of a sudden I felt very vulnerable and didn't want whatever this damn 'sight' was.

"There isn't much to tell," I replied with a shrug. "When I first met Talon there were a couple of times when I could see things when I touched something. After I found out about Talon's death, I started having dreams about events that I've recently found out actually happened. I don't understand what is happening to me and I'm not sure I even want it."

"The sight is a gift," Myra told me in a soothing voice. "It is given only to those who will use it to aid others."

I didn't consider the ability a gift yet. So far, I'd only seen death in my dreams and I didn't understand exactly what it had been that I'd seen while I was awake.

"What did Talon tell you?" I asked.

"Talon and I had many long talks about my abilities," Myra said with a slight smile that told me she and my old friend had gotten along with each other very well. "Of you, he only mentioned the fact that he suspected you had the sight like me. He was concerned about what would happen to you if you didn't have anyone to guide you through the process of telling fact from fiction. He asked that I would help you if we ever crossed paths. That is all."

Her bluntness struck me as refreshing and my reservations fell away. I proceeded to tell her about my dreams and the few visions I'd had and she sat quietly as she listened to my tale, asking only a question or two here and there. When I was finished Myra poured herself a new cup of tea that had to be quite cool by now and sat back as she regarded me silently.

"Were you holding anything while you slept?" she asked after a minute.

I thought back, trying to remember those days and nights after I found out about Talon's death in New York. They seemed to mesh together into a jumbled mess. I knew that I'd drank a lot at first, that was why I hadn't take the dreams too seriously because I'd just dismissed them as mere dreams. Then I remembered that in those first days I'd worn Talon's cross that had been in the package Tracy had given me. When I'd decided to make the trip to Europe to find Dr. Schuler, I'd removed the necklace. It had been like I'd known that it wasn't meant for me. I told Myra about the cross and she nodded her head as if she suddenly understood everything.

"Ah, I see now," she cried in delight as she slapped her knee. "I believe that your gift is different from my own. I see premonitions of the future, without the aid of a stimulant. It seems that you require a prompt of some kind."

When I stared dumbly at her she continued. "You must touch something. The first time, at the house in Michigan, you stumbled into the chair and caught yourself. That contact triggered the vision you saw. Same thing happened with the gift and when Robert took your hand. As you held them, you saw Talon purchase the gift for you in New York City and the vision of the girl from Robert's past."

"What about the dreams?" I asked.

"Those came from the necklace," Myra replied. "When you wore it to bed your mind was much more receptive to the stimulant. That is why the dreams were so lengthy and detailed. Have you had any since then?"

"No. I gave the cross to its rightful owner."

"That's alright. I believe I know some exercises that can help you develop your talent. That is...if you want to." The look I found in Myra's eyes told me that the decision was mine.

She wouldn't pressure me into doing something that I wasn't ready or didn't want to do. I was silent for a moment while I thought through the possibilities.

The obvious plus was that the ability would give me an advantage in certain situations. In time, after I'd developed my skill I might be able to determine if someone was lying or help return stolen property. The possibilities were endless. On the other hand, seeing what happened to objects could turn into a burden that in the long run I might not want to bear. By then it would be too late and I would be stuck with an ability that I couldn't turn off. What would I do then?

"Would I be able to control when I used it?" I asked Myra.

"Yes," she replied. "You haven't been flooded with visions yet and I believe you will only receive one when there is something necessary to tell."

Myra made sense. I asked her a few more questions about what she could teach me and in the end I agreed to let her try. I still felt hesitant about the situation but I think a part of my uncertainty had to do with the fact that I was worried over how attached I would become to the old woman. After John and the others had been ripped from me after Talon's death I knew I was vulnerable. For the first time in my life I had a semblance of a real family that I no longer had contact with. What would happen to me if I got close to Myra and she died suddenly or I had to leave the Holding? I was afraid to think of the possibilities.

After I'd agreed to let her teach me, Myra was readied herself to leave. On her way out she told me that she would see me that night. "Don't be nervous," she said over her shoulder. "You have already been accepted by all of us. Tonight is just an opportunity to get to know each other."

## Chapter 14 – What Did I Do?

*"Silence is The steel That pierces and cuts me To The bone"  
Melissa Ethridge  
"The Late September Dogs"*

I must have tried on ten outfits before I figured out what to wear. I didn't want to be too formal or too casual so I decided on an ankle-length white dress with a matching sweater in case it got cold.

Donya was waiting for me in the kitchen when I came down. I was really grateful when she'd volunteered to be my guide for the evening. After her aunt had left I pressed Donya for information on just about any subject that concerned the villagers. I felt pretty confident that I could survive a night full of conversation with strangers.

I was surprised at how festive the village square looked. Brightly colored banners had been strung along between the houses and businesses in the center of town and there were lanterns hung on poles that had shades similar to Chinese ones that adorned them.

Everyone seemed happy to us when Donya and I arrived. There were a few faces that I recognized from when I came to the Holding the previous day and I even managed to remember the names of all the village elders. There was a feast spread out over long tables that smelled absolutely delicious. Many of the village women came forward and complimented my dress and when I got a closer look at what they were wearing I was glad for the choice I'd made.

Their clothes were simple, well made garments that were much more colorful than what I remembered seeing the previous day.

As Donya guided me around the crowd, my eyes caught sight of a man that stayed off to the side under the shadows of the porch at Gerald Lugruch's blacksmith shop.

"Who is that?" I asked Donya as I looked in the man's direction.

She glanced quickly to where I was looking then waved enthusiastically as she steered me in that direction. "That's Mikael," she told me when she turned to me again. "Remember, I told you about him earlier?"

"Yes," I replied as my eyes narrowed on the man. He'd casually returned Donya's friendly wave but the closer we got to him, I could see that he was eyeing me intently.

When we reached the brooding individual Donya made the introductions. "It's nice to meet you," I said sincerely as I held out my hand. My eyes adjusted quickly to the lack of light and I was able to get a good look at him.

Mikael was an intense looking man. His short dark hair was a little long and disarrayed on the top of his head and his green eyes seemed to penetrate through my skin as he looked at me. He was well over six feet tall and very muscular. His clothes were well cut but not as brightly colored as the ones the other villagers had chosen for the night's festivities.

The only thing that stood out about his attire was the beautiful onyx stone that he wore on a cord around his neck. I tried to get a better look at it without being too obvious but I couldn't see much when he took it in his left hand and held it tight.

Mikael took my hand in his right one and gently shook it. "It is nice to meet you as well," he replied in halting English. There was no warmth in his response and the fact that he spoke to me in English was surprising. I'd been relieved that my German was good enough to speak to the people of the village because so far no one had exhibited any knowledge of the English language until this man who now stood in front of me.

Mikael released my hand but made no move to pull his eyes away from me, even when Donya asked him about how his hunting venture went. "I did well," he replied in German, still

eyeing me coldly. I didn't know what I could have done to offend him, but it seemed as if Mikael Provinof had already taken an instant dislike to me.

"Your English is very good," I told him as I crossed my arms in front of me in a defensive stance. There was no way in hell I was going to let this guy scare me. I didn't care if he was the protector of this village or not. "Where did you learn?"

"An old friend," he ground out through clenched teeth as if I should know whom he was talking about. If it were possible, his eyes had narrowed even further and his head had lowered so he was looking up at me over an imaginary pair of glasses. I had to admit that he was beginning to have an eerie effect on me. And the only thing I could think of was that he and Talon were close and Mikael was in some way blaming me for his friend's death. I didn't know how to respond and I wasn't sure he'd believe anything I had to say anyway.

Donya was looking back and forth between the two of us. She didn't understand the part of our conversation that was taking place in English but she could tell that something was amiss between Mikael and I. "Perhaps we should get something to drink," she suggested.

I glanced over at her and plastered a smile on my face in an effort not to alarm her. "That sounds fine," I said. "It was nice to meet you, Mikael," I said in German, hoping he wouldn't make a scene.

He huffed in reply as Donya and I made our exit. I glanced over my shoulder at him in surprise at his rude behavior. Whatever his viewpoints were, he obviously felt very strongly about them and I knew there could come a time when we would have to discuss his feelings. In the meantime, I planned on finding Myra as soon as possible to get her opinion.

Finding her didn't take long. Myra was standing in a group of women near the area that had been set up for dancing. "Why don't you go ahead and get that drink," I suggested. "I'll go talk to your aunt for a while."

Donya nodded and went off toward the food tables as I headed in the opposite direction. Myra noticed my approach and must have noticed something in my expression because she excused herself from the others and headed toward me.

"Is something wrong?" she asked as she took my arm and pulled me away.

"I'm fine," I replied with a shaky laugh. "I just don't think Mikael likes me very well." I didn't know how to take his obvious dislike toward me. It's not like I'd never experienced an attitude like that before but I liked to think of myself as a person that got along well with others and Mikael's rejection was a shock to me.

"What do you mean?" Myra's eyes scanned the crowd, looking I assumed for Mikael.

"Donya just introduced me to him and I got the distinct impression that I'm not on top of his most liked list."

Myra frowned a little at my choice of words as we walked to an empty table that was apart from the others. We sat and she regarded me intently before speaking. "There is something you should know about Mikael. He - "

"He and Talon were close weren't they?" I interjected. When Myra didn't answer right away I continued. "I got that impression by some of the things he said. I think that he blames me for Talon's death for some reason. And that's okay for now but eventually he'll find out the truth."

Myra was silent for a minute as if there was something else she wanted to tell me. "Mikael is a hard person to understand. He is alone most of the time either working or in the forest. Yes, he and Talon were friends. Mikael is Beschuetzer and it is his responsibility to protect the village."

I still didn't understand what that meant. Was Mikael a sheriff of sorts in the village? And what did that mean for me? Were the two of us expected to run things together? That

wasn't going to work very well if we were at each other's throats, which was something I wanted resolved as soon as possible.

"How did he come by the title?" I asked.

For the next hour Myra and I sat and talked about Mikael while the rest of the village danced and sang around us. We weren't interrupted but every so often one of the younger girls brought over fresh cups of sweet apple cider. Myra's voice was calm and quiet as she told me about him.

Mikael had been born in this village and I was surprised to learn that we were nearly the same age. His parents were both dead and he has lived on his own for about ten years. He was a wood carver like his father and there wasn't a home in the village that didn't have a piece of furniture that he'd made, including my own. I sat back then, wondering which of the many cabinets and tables in the house that I'd come to admire in the day I'd been here were made by the man who'd come to think of me as his own personal albatross.

Throughout our discussion I felt as if Myra was holding something back from me about Mikael but I didn't know how to ask her about it. Finally she informed me that Mikael and I would indeed have to work together, during the Gergechtigung that was held monthly if I was in residence.

Gergechtigung is the German word for justice so I assumed it had something to do with the way it was dealt with in the village. When I asked Myra about it she told me that Talon kept journals of the process that I would find in the library. "Look them over and if you have any questions I will try to answer them."

Eventually, one of the young men approached the table Myra and I shared and asked me to dance. At first I refused but then I caught Myra laughing mischievously out of the corner of my eye and I took her silent challenge.

I'd been half watching the intricate steps while Myra and I had talked but it did nothing to help me. Andre proved to be a good partner, however, and was able to lead me around the dance area and not get his feet smashed at the same time. I was breathless and laughing by the time we left the floor but I managed to look up and see Mikael where he stood talking to Myra.

I absently thanked Andre before he left me for showing me the dance as I kept an eye on the two at the table. The conversation seemed intense as Myra pointed up at Mikael. She was still seated but I didn't get the impression that Mikael had the upper hand just because he towered over the old woman. After a few more heated comments passed between them, Mikael stormed off toward a dark cabin at the edge of the village.

I didn't say anything about the encounter to Myra when I went to say goodnight. I hadn't seen Donya in a while but I didn't need her to get me home. It had been a long day that had only served to pose more questions to what life would be like here and I was tired. Besides, I wanted to go up to the tower for a while to check my e-mail to see what was happening in New York before I turned in for the night.

## Chapter 15 – Settling In

"I'll Tell you something  
I am a demon  
Some say my biggest weakness."  
Garbage  
"My Crush"

I spent the next two weeks developing a routine. I found Talon's journals the day after the dance and spent most of the day going over them. It was so comforting to read the words Talon had logged in his own meticulous handwriting and I only had to stop a few times to wipe the tears from my eyes.

I missed him so much. I missed the nightly talks we'd shared and in a small way I missed the time we'd spent together in Egypt. I knew that that time was so far removed from where I was now and I understood that it wasn't love that had brought Talon and I together. We'd been two people who'd been so starved to be close to another person that when we came together it was like fireworks on the fourth of July. I still didn't regret the time we had together, in fact I held that time in a special place in my heart and knew if there was a way that I could bring Talon back I would.

What I really missed was his presence. Even though we weren't together I knew that if anything ever happened to me he would be there to make everything okay again. No matter what the cost.

I was right about the Gergechtigung. It was a court session of sorts were I would have to make determinations about conflicts between villagers. From Talon's notes the disagreements weren't anything more than disputes over livestock or land rights but I was worried about making those kinds of decisions so soon upon my arrival.

To my relief, the next session wasn't due for another couple of weeks and hopefully there wouldn't be anything to make a decision over. My relationship with the residents of the village was still too new to take the risk of offending anyone else besides Mikael.

I'd been careful to avoid Mikael during the two weeks that had passed since our meeting. Part of me wanted to confront him about his rudeness that night but another part understood all too well what it was like to have Talon ripped from your life. I only hoped that he would eventually give me a chance. I got the feeling that the two of us needed to get along in order for the rest of the village to get along.

I didn't want to leave the Holding. Even though I'd only here two weeks there was something about the land that cried home. It was somewhere where I wouldn't have to worry about the nightmares, I place I could call my own.

Myra informed me that she would give me some time to settle in before she expected me to begin my lessons. I still wasn't sure I wanted to get involved with this gift I had but I knew Myra was right when she'd said I would only get the visions when it was important.

I used the time to explore the manor house until I knew every crevice of the place. In the basement I found a dried well that probably dated back to when the house was originally constructed. The mouth was surrounded with a wall of piled stones where the water collector could have perched one or more buckets to wait until it was their turn to be filled.

I looked over the edge and saw that the well went down some twenty feet and the bottom was about ten feet across. As I straightened once more, I noticed that there were what appeared to be sockets that were built into the circle ledge. Upon a closer look I realized that the lights were about two inches apart and encircled the entire well with adjoining fixtures

on the ceiling. They appeared as if they created a prison of light when lit and I wondered what its purpose was.

I poked around the room and after about ten minutes, found a switch behind a wall sconce that, when triggered, illuminated the powerful rays of light that seemed to be of the UV variety. The only thing I could fathom was that the well served as a possible cell for a vampire, but to my knowledge no one knew of this place to endanger it. I then realized that it was Talon that I was thinking about and I knew that he prepared for every possibility. I left the area with yet another thankful smile to my dear friend for providing a place of refuge for me.

The next morning was the first rainy one we'd had since my arrival. The surrounding forest was beautiful as the fat drops of rain fell and weighed down the leaves of the giant oak and maple trees. I felt like I was being drawn outside by some unknown force and without thought I grabbed a rain slicker from the closet and some rubber boots then slipped out the back door.

I knew I was going to get soaked but I didn't care. There was something carefree about wandering aimlessly through the gardens and into the tree line that made me feel like I was a kid again. It felt wonderful to be so carefree.

I didn't encounter anyone on my walk. No one would be venturing out on a day like this unless they had to and I knew that I should head back to the house but something ahead of me caught my eye.

At first I thought it was a short log that was lying on the forest floor but I realized that what I'd noticed was the amount of red that covered it. As I drew closer I came to realize that it wasn't a log at all, instead I saw that it was a large brown wolf that had a deep cut in its side.

Hesitantly, I walked toward the wolf's head and saw that the animal was awake and looking up at me with hurt in its eyes. Without thought to what could happen by getting so close to a wild animal, I knelt beside the wolf and laid my hand gently on his soft fur.

Instantly my mind was filled with pictures of the forest moving past me in a blur of movement. I was seeing through the eyes of the wolf and didn't break the contact of my hand on its body. The animal was in a panic; I could feel the urgency around the edge of the pictures in my head. It was the first time I'd received anything else along with a vision and I knew I had to save this beautiful creature. All of a sudden there was another wolf standing in front of the wolf/me. It was black with the same color eyes and it stood over a deer that it had just brought down. Blood covered its snout and chest and I could see that it had been a particularly ugly kill.

The two wolves had stared at each other for a long time and I got the impression that the black one had invaded the other's territory. What I saw next was a flurry of claws and teeth as the two attacked each other in bloody combat. The black wolf was lucky and caught the brown one along his side that resulted in the wound that had drawn my attention to him in the first place.

"Oh, poor thing," I murmured when my eyes focused once more and I looked into his eyes. "Don't worry. I'll help you."

The wolf was shaking now from shock but it seemed as if he were trying to pull away from me, which made sense given the fact that it was a wild animal that was hurt to boot.

"It's okay," I told him in a soothing voice. I was stroking his head with one hand while I tried to assess the damage done to his side. The rain was doing a good job of matting the dark fur and seeing was difficult. I was relieved to find that it looked as if the bleeding had



stopped but I couldn't really tell with all the wet fur in the way. I'd managed to pick up a few basics in first aid during the time I'd worked for Talon and I was sure I would be able to nurse the wolf back to health.

As I was trying to determine my best course of action to help him when the wolf began to change. First the hairs of his soft brown coat grew shorter and then started to disappear all together. I glanced at the head of the animal and found that the snout had shortened considerably and was beginning to fade entirely. Before my eyes, paws changed into hands and feet and within minutes I was staring at the nearly returned form of a man.

It was Mikael. So many things made sense now. Myra's aversions in telling me about his entire past. Why he was the protector of this place. Talon must have known as well and that was why there was such a bond between the two. Mikael was a werewolf and Talon had always seemed to link himself with the creatures of this world that no one else knew existed.

Mikael had passed out; the change must have taken a great deal out of him. I could see now that the wound on his side had indeed stopped bleeding but the cut was deep and needed to be closed soon or the bleeding would start again. Carefully, I probed the wound while I tried not to notice all of Mikael's other physical attributes as he lay naked before me.

He was still wearing the necklace I'd only gotten a glimpse of the other night. Now I could tell that it had been carved into the shape of a rough looking idol that could have been pulled from an archeological dig. I recognized it as one of the oldest images of the earth goddess that had been worshiped by many of the first tribes of man that had lived in Europe. I wondered if the idol was a gift or if it held a greater meaning to the man who wore it.

I had to get him inside. Disregarding the fact that it was still raining, I pulled the slicker off and did the best I could to wrap it around the naked man I was now faced into caring for. I had no way of knowing if anyone else in the village knew that Mikael was a werewolf or not, except for my suspicion of Myra, so my best bet was to get him back to the manor house and nurse him in one of the many bedrooms upstairs. It took a while but I managed to put the wet coat on him and by then he was beginning to come around again.

"Can you walk?" I asked when Mikael's eyes opened a slit.

He nodded weakly and with much difficulty I helped him to his feet and turned us in the direction of the house. It took us forty-five minutes to cover the space it had taken me less than half the time on my walk. Thankfully, Donya was nowhere in sight when I pushed open a side door that was closest to the servant's stairway. I didn't want to deal with anyone just yet.

I had to get Mikael upstairs and into a bed as soon as possible. He was leaning on me heavily and I didn't think I could support him much longer. I was afraid that the wound would open again before I had a chance to stitch it and if it did I worried that my limited knowledge of first aid wouldn't be enough to help him.

I wasn't looking forward to the prospect of calling in someone with more experience and then explaining how Mikael happened to be at the manor and without clothes for that matter. I didn't need a scandal in this small place but doubts began to plague my mind now that the initial adrenaline rush had worn off.

"Where am I?" Mikael asked in a loud voice that I was sure would bring Donya, regardless of what deep bowel of the house she'd gone off to clean. To my relief, Mikael had sounded a little more coherent but didn't make a move to support himself more.

"Shh," I hissed as I looked around, afraid Donya would appear and I would have to explain the presence of a near naked man in my slicker with a large gash on his side. "We need to get upstairs. Do you think you can make it?"

"I think so," he answered quietly after he cleared his throat. "You brought me to the manor?"

"Of course I brought you here. Where else could I take you?" He didn't answer, just looked at me warily from the corner of his eye.

We made it upstairs without being seen. I took Mikael into one of the bedrooms in the north wing where I knew no one hardly ever came. He'd begun to shiver on the way up the drafty stairs so I knew that top priority was to get him warm before I could deal with the wound on his side.

Once Mikael shed the slicker and was in the bed, I went to a deep oak chest in the room and pulled out two more thick blankets. That was part of the reason why I'd chosen that room, because I knew there was a chest filled with extra blankets and it was close to the back stairs. I needed to bring up warm water and other things to clean Mikael's wound and the closer the room was the more likely it would be that I wouldn't be found out.

After I'd spread the blankets over him, I checked Mikael's forehead for fever and found a slight one so I added aspirin to my mental list of items to collect. His face was a little pale and gaunt which was understandable given the circumstances. He hadn't said anything since before we'd come upstairs and now we found each other staring at one another. Mikael wore the frown I'd seen when I first met him and again I marveled over the fact that here I stood, helping a person who so obviously disliked me.

"I need to go get warm water to clean the wound," I told him quietly, praying my voice stayed even. "And dressings. Will you be alright?"

Mikael grunted then and turned his head away from me. "You do not have to do that. I will be alright soon enough."

That angered me. What kind of idiot would refuse someone's help when they were hurt? I didn't care if he liked me or not, I knew Talon would never forgive me if I didn't do all I could for Mikael. "If you think for one instant that I'm going to sit back and let you bleed to death you're nuts, buddy. You don't have to like me, I really don't give a shit, but you will let me do what I can for you. You mean too much to the people of this village and I won't allow you to let that gash get gangrene and die."

With that I flew out the door and slammed it behind me. After I heard the loud smack of wood hitting wood, I realized that I was trying to hide Mikael's presence in the house and by slamming the door I wasn't doing a very good job of it.

Stealthily, I went to my room where I retrieved aspirin and other medicines I knew I would need for the job ahead of me and put them along with an empty water bottle that I'd brought with me in a cloth bag. I would be able to throw the bag over my shoulder and it wouldn't get in the way of carrying a heavy pitcher of warm water from the kitchen I would have to retrieve next. After I had everything collected I remembered that my clothes were soaked to the skin and I quickly changed into another pair of jeans and thick sweatshirt.

That accomplished, I grabbed the bag and headed downstairs to the kitchen. As I neared the bottom of the back stairs I stopped and listened to see if Donya happened to be in the room. To my relief, all was quiet so cautiously I finished my descent and peered around the room as I went to the cupboard that I knew housed the pitchers used to transport water upstairs. Quickly I filled the bottle with cool water from the pump in the sink then the pitcher from the kettle that Donya always kept on the back burner of the stove.

Next, I went to the linen closet where just a few days ago I'd helped Donya put away fresh bandages that had been neatly rolled and stacked in one of the deep drawers. Donya had explained that even though there hadn't been any trouble in the village since World War II, the manor house had always been fortified regularly with fresh supplies in case of attack. It was her duty to make sure that the supplies were checked and replaced as needed and she always worried about the sterilization of the bandages and washed them often.

I grabbed what I thought I'd need and placed the bandages along with a clean washcloth in my bag then returned to the room where I'd left Mikael. I found that he'd moved only to pull the covers back and was now inspecting the wound on his side.

"Did it start to bleed again?" I asked as I unloaded my arms on the bedside table. My tone was clipped with irritation because I was still mad at Mikael for his attitude toward me and I didn't feel like hiding it. Efficiently, I brushed his hands aside and had a look at the wound myself. I was surprised to see that it was beginning to close. There was still blood and bits of hair matted around the deep cut but it seemed to be healing quite well on its own.

"What the hell..." I breathed.

"I told you I would be alright," Mikael replied but he still winced when my fingers probed too close. "I heal very quickly."

"Sure," I said when I straightened again and reached for the bottle of water and aspirin. I took out two tablets and handed them to Mikael then unscrewed the top of the bottle and gave that to him as well. "Those are for your fever."

Mikael swallowed the pills without question and downed the entire bottle of water. I found myself watching in fascination as his Adams apple bobbed up and down with each long draw of water he took and had to blink my eyes quickly to regroup myself. He was a really great looking man but I couldn't forget the fact that he hated my guts. I reached out to touch his forehead again and was surprised when he jerked away only a little. He felt cooler but the fever was still there.

Mikael seemed to be studying me, sizing, or resizing, me up to see if I fit the muster. And to tell the truth, I didn't care if I passed or not. In an act of defiance, I grabbed the washcloth and amerced it in the water then began the task of removing the dried blood and dirt that was around the wound. I wasn't very careful until I heard Mikael attempt to muffle a groan then I relented.

We were silent for minutes while I worked at cleaning the skin just above Mikael's hip. At first I didn't think about it, then I realized how close I was to the part of him that I was sure not many women had seen and all I could think about was getting the task over with as quickly as possible.

I needed to do something to divert my attention from what I was doing. "Who was the other wolf?" I asked while I rinsed out the washcloth.

Mikael didn't answer at first, like he didn't want to talk about it. "Just a rogue," he said finally with a loud exhale. "He will not be back."

"Was he a werewolf, too?" I asked. I stood considering Mikael and I could see the war that raged within him behind his eyes. I realized that in many ways he reminded me of Talon. Mikael was a protector. No matter what happened in his life, Mikael would do what he could to look after those who couldn't do so themselves. That didn't necessarily make him a bad man; just one you had to be willing to share.

"Yes."

"Are you sure he won't be back?"

Silence again as Mikael tried to decide what to tell me. "I do not think so. He only entered my – the territory to see what I would do."

"But he got the better of you," I pointed out in a quiet voice as I stared at the washcloth in my hand. "I saw it." I wanted to be upfront with Mikael about the visions I sometimes had. I figured that would be a started in bridging the gap that was between us.

"It was a lucky strike," Mikael replied.

"Lucky?" I asked, astounded. "You call that lucky?"

"He knows that I will be totally healed in a day. He was out to see how far I would go to protect the village."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. There isn't a holy place here, but maybe he and his pack are looking for a place to call home and saw all this open land. It is hard to say." Mikael eyed me again before continuing, "You do not have to worry about the safety of the others. I have been taking care of things for a long time now."

"I'm beginning to understand that," I muttered as I started to clean the wound again. I was almost finished and when I was done I reached for the antibiotic cream and smoothed some over the area.

"So now you know what I am," Mikael started.

"Yes," I replied as I glanced up at him. I didn't know what to make of the look he was giving me so I picked up a bandage roll. "I know a little about what you are. I visited the Schuler Institute before I came here. Sit up, please."

"You've met Dr. Schuler?" Mikael seemed amazed but complied to my request. The blanket fell down his chest and once again I saw the sculpted muscles of his chest.

"Yes. He's a very nice man. I stayed there a week." I knew I sounded lame but I didn't want to divulge that I went there for reasons unknown and found there a friend I hoped that would stay with me for a long time. I quickly wrapped the bandage around Mikael's waist and tied off the end.

"You must be starving. I remember that Dr. Schuler mentioned once in passing that hunger increased after a beating like the one you had today. Is there something you'd prefer?"

"Meat," Mikael replied. "The more raw the better."

"I'll see what I can find. You can stay here until you are able to move on your own. I didn't know who knew about you and didn't want to take the chance of someone finding out." I moved toward the door but Mikael's voice stopped me.

"Thank you." He'd spoken lowly, probably thinking that I wouldn't have heard him.

I stopped in the doorway with my hand on the doorjamb. I didn't look back but I wanted Mikael to know what his words had meant to me.

"You're welcome."

## Chapter 16 – Coming to Terms

"I thought you'd see with me  
you wouldn't have to be something new."  
Tori Amos  
"hey Jupiter"

"Here," I said when I entered the room forty-five minutes later, a plate covered with a cloth napkin in hand. I hadn't been as lucky on my return trip to the kitchen. In all the confusion of patching Mikael up I'd forgotten that Donya had planned on visiting an old childhood friend that morning so there was no need to be so quiet. She was cutting vegetables for stew when I came down the stairs and I had to spend a few minutes talking with her so she didn't become wary of my activities.

Mikael was still in the bed when I came in. His color was better than when I'd left him but I could see the hunger in his eyes and regretted the time it had taken to return.

"It's pot roast from last night," I said as I removed the cloth and handed Mikael the plate, which he tore into without comment. "Donya was back and I had to be sneaky so she didn't get suspicious."

"I will rest for a little while then return to my house," he choked out between huge bites of the roast.

I understood that Mikael disliked me but I wasn't about to let him endanger himself, fast healer or not, by taking off in the middle of a rainy afternoon. "I'd rather you stayed here the night," I suggested in a neutral tone. "I can sneak down to your house later, after night fall, and get whatever you need and bring it back."

Mikael regarded me a moment with an untrustworthy look before speaking. "Why is it so important to you that I stay here? I remember you saying that earlier."

I felt my eyebrows lift in surprise. Did he think that I was going to hold him here against his will or something? Like I could; but my temper started to flare as I set about to make him understand.

"First of all, no matter how quickly the gash on your side is healing, you've been hurt, Mikael," I began. "You've lost a good amount of blood and you have a slight fever on top of that. You need to rest because if you don't you'll be running the risk of getting sick later and I don't want that responsibility on my hands."

Mikael started to say something but I didn't let him get a word in edgewise. "Secondly, in case you've forgotten, you don't have a stitch of clothing here and I really don't think you'll fit into anything I have."

To my surprise, he laughed. I stared at Mikael dumbfounded while he held his stomach and laughed his fool head off.

"I'm glad you find this funny," I said harshly. "I'm trying to protect you even though you've been a jerk—"

Mikael had sobered a little while I raved and was now wiping his eyes with the back of one hand. "What is a jerk?" he asked suddenly.

"A jerk," I started through clenched teeth, prepared to let him know just how much of one he'd been to me. Then I changed my mind. "Never mind. Just know this, you're not getting out of that bed until tomorrow morning at the earliest and I don't care if I have to sit on you to keep you there."

It was Mikael's turn to lift his eyebrows as he let what I'd said sink in. "You are a dedicated nurse," he said with a touch of humor while I marveled over the extent of our conversation. This was the most he'd ever said to me and he was being really civil to boot.

Maybe he was beginning to realize that I wasn't the bad guy like he'd originally thought, I wondered in the back of my mind. The problem was, what did that really mean?

"Only when I have to be," I replied and crossed my arms across my chest. "I had to learn the importance of taking care of yourself the hard way. I don't need a second lesson to get the point."

"What do you mean?" he asked, his brows furrowing.

I told him about an incident in Greece when one of the dig workers had come down with a touch of scarlet fever and ended up dying from lack of treatment. Afterward, we figured that the man hadn't said anything because he needed his pay to feed his family and had been afraid that he would be fired if we knew he was sick. It was something that both Ari and I had felt bad about for a long time and we were both determined that it would never happen again. After that we'd made sure to inform our workers that health care for them and their families would be provided on every dig from then on. We never lost another worker but the one instance was still a hard pill to swallow.

"I felt responsible," I told Mikael. During my story I'd moved over to one of the windows in the room and was looking over the back of the house. The afternoon was beginning to darken, partly from the rain and partly from the fact that dusk was fast approaching. "I saw the signs but I figured if it were that bad Stavaros would come to us."

I looked to Mikael and saw that he was watching me with interest and suspicion. "Because of my lack of leadership a man died," I pointed out. "I won't let it happen again."

"What about Talon?" Mikael asked, his words struck a hard blow and proved that he thought I had something to do with Talon's death. It was time to have it out and I hoped I was ready for it. Could I make him understand that I was innocent?

"You think I had something to do with his death, don't you?" I asked in a quiet, even voice.

"Did you?"

"No," I replied evenly. I could feel the tears forming in my eyes and fought to hold them back. This situation had the possibility of getting ugly and I wasn't about to show any weakness toward Mikael. "I was on a dig in Israel when Talon died and didn't find out about it until I was summoned to America. I was told that one of my closest friends in the world was dead by a group of suits who then informed me that the funding for my research had been pulled and I was then out of a job."

Mikael was silent a while as he considered my words. Now his arms were crossed on his chest and he regarded me with hawk eyes.

"You tell the truth," he said with assurance, as if there was some supernatural way in which he knew for sure. "Did you work for him?"

"Yes. He wanted to find documentation about the first vampire," I confessed, knowing I may have finally found a person in which I could confide in. Mikael was a werewolf and would accept the research I'd been involved in. Just like Jason, Mikael knew about supernatural creatures.

"He told me of the endeavor and that he'd found an extraordinary person to head the project. He never told me who you were."

My tears were under control now. I smiled slightly at the knowledge that Talon had been so free with his praise of my abilities and me to so many people. "For all it's worth, he never told me about this place either. When I found out he'd left the Holding in my care I felt very honored. I won't let anything happen here."

He smiled as he spoke. "I see. But protecting the people is my responsibility."

I laughed, realizing how literal my words must have sounded to him. Of course I couldn't protect the village like Mikael did, but I was prepared to do anything within my power to help him.

"You know what I mean," I replied good-naturedly. "I just want you to know that if you need anything I'll get it for you. We need to be a team, to show a uniformed front."

"I agree," Mikael said after a moment. There was a touch of amusement in his tone that made me look at him in a different light. Now that Mikael believed that I had nothing to do with Talon's death he seemed a great deal more approachable. The hateful scowl that I was beginning to think was a permanent fixture on his face was gone and was now replaced with a most welcoming smile.

"It will be dark soon," I said, looking out the window again. Dusk was settling over the village and the smoke from cooking fires was streaming out of every chimney with the exception of Mikael's. "You will stay here tonight, right?"

"I will stay," Mikael replied after a moment. "But I will need a few things from my house." My eyes narrowed at the way he was looking at me. Mikael's gaze had the same predator aspect that I usually found myself drawn to but for some reason the thought of him looking at me in that way scared me.

Suddenly I felt really uncomfortable and wanted out of the room and as far away from Mikael as possible. I crossed to the door quickly as I nervously ran my hands through my hair. "Good. I'm just going to slip downstairs and see what else I can sneak up for you from the kitchen."

I didn't bother to wait for a reply as I made my hasty exit. My face felt hot from my harebrained thoughts of Mikael regarding me with any interest and I swore I wasn't going to let the encounter make me act like an idiot. Mikael and I were finally beginning to be friends and entertaining notions that he may be attracted to me wasn't a good idea. The thought was plain ridiculous. Besides, the raw hurt of losing Talon was still too fresh in my heart. What we'd shared happened a long time ago and I was over our love affair, but I knew I wasn't ready for a new relationship yet, either.

I retreated to my room until I could control of myself but I found that I only thought of the man recuperating in my house. It had been so nice to actually have a civil conversation with him and I knew we would discover that we had more than a few things in common. I remembered how his green eyes had twinkled when he'd laughed at me and that I'd enjoyed the ease of his smile.

I have to get out of here, I screamed to myself as I went to the door and down the back stairs. I knew couldn't be alone for another minute and allow thoughts of Mikael's naked body play through my mind and not have repercussions.

Donya was still in the kitchen so I silently slipped out of the house to go to Mikael's cabin for some of his clothes, I would grab more food for him when I came back. It wasn't fully dark yet and the rain had finally stopped so I was able to make my way to the two-room structure without running into anyone.

I was relieved when I found that the door wasn't locked so I let myself in and quietly closed the door behind me. It took me a minute to locate a large white candle and the box of matches that were next to it in the darkened room, but when I did and had the room illuminated I found myself gaping.

The living area that I found myself looking around was neat and tidy but sparsely furnished in only one half of the room with living necessities. The other half was set up with Mikael's tools and the project he was currently working on.

The rocking chair was beautiful and had many intricate designs that Mikael was in the middle of carving on the back. I moved closer to make ample use of the limited candlelight and saw that a maze of vines completely covered the top of the back and Mikael was now working them the rest of the way down the piece. It looked as if he had begun to add flowers into the design but the work hadn't progressed far enough for me to be sure.

Feeling like a peeping tom, I moved to the door of the bedroom and opened it hesitantly. The room was as large as the living room but that was where the similarities ended. The huge sleigh bed that dominated one wall looked so incredibly inviting that I wanted to lie on it to try it out. The thick comforter was a handmade quilt and appeared to be well taken care of. I wondered if Mikael's mother had made it.

There was also an elaborately carved dresser and wardrobe in the room. The workmanship was similar to the rocking chair I'd seen in the living room but the style wasn't exactly the same. Mikael's father had been a wood worker as well so these were probably some of the pieces he'd made before his death.

There was a general feeling of warmth in the room that seemed absent from the living area. It was almost as if Mikael had made a sanctuary for himself in these four walls where he could be surrounded by the things he had left from his parents. I myself had no concept of what it could be like to miss family that much and felt like an interloper in what seemed to be such a sacred place.

I was racked with guilt as I began to open drawers, looking for the things I knew Mikael would need when he felt better and would need to return home. When I left the cabin I took one last look around and again wondered about the man who lived here. In the past few hours the way that I had viewed Mikael Provinof had drastically changed for the better. I was glad for the change but worried as well. What did this change in status mean for the two of us?

Now that we were on the same page I was hoping that Mikael would help me with the things I didn't know about the Holding and its people. Myra had already been a great help to me but I wanted to use my time with her to concentrate on the things I needed to learn about this gift I'd found myself with.

I put the candle back where it had been and quietly closed the front door behind me again. As I returned to the manor house I pondered over decisions I knew I would have to make in the coming weeks and the questions I wanted to ask Mikael when he felt better.



## Chapter 17 – A Pocket Full of Roses

"So just Kiss me and let my hair  
messy itself in your fingers"  
Jewel  
"So Just Kiss Me"

Mikael returned to his cabin two days later. He was concerned about the renegade werewolf he'd encountered in the woods and wanted to go sooner. I was concerned about the wound on his side and had been able to convince him that it needed to be completely healed in order for him to be up to his usual standards.

During the time he spent at the manor house I put away those earlier feelings I'd experienced toward him and did what I could to encourage our new friendship. Mikael was easy to get along with and as I'd first thought, we did have things in common. We had many long talks in English during those two days to help him practice and thankfully Donya never knew he was there. I was relieved that Mikael was able to shed some light on the Gergechtigung and what I would have to do when the time for one came.

I was lonely again the night that Mikael snuck out of the manor house and back to his own residence. In the short time he'd spent with me, I'd grown used to his company and now that I faced long nights alone once more I began to wish that I wasn't the lady of the manor. I wanted to be one of the village women, snug in her cottage surrounded with children and a husband that loved her. I knew the thought was ridiculous and shook it off as a lack of anything constructive to do with my time.

I decided to make the renovations to the house that I wanted. First, I consulted with Myra for her opinion and then with the rest of the elder's council. They understood my desire to live in the way I was accustomed to and supported whatever I wanted to change but declined when I offered to bring everyone in the village into the twentieth century.

Mikael understood my desires too, and offered to contact friends of his on the outside to do the work. Privately, he informed me that the people he knew were a pack of werewolves that lived about two days from the Holding and would be grateful for the work. Within a few weeks, the manor house was a buzz with the sounds of construction and I loved the noise they brought.

I spent a great deal of time with as many of the villagers as possible. I was invited to join a women's sewing circle that met on Saturday nights. I wasn't a very good seamstress at first, but the other women didn't criticize me, instead they gave me helpful hints that I was incredibly thankful for. I really enjoyed the time I that I was with the other women and looked forward to the nights spent in their company.

What I found that I was better suited at was the knitting that Myra taught me during our afternoons before my tutoring in her tidy cabin. I began my lessons with her the week after Mikael was better. The progress was slow but she had the patience that only comes from a person with many years and eventually I was able to make some progress with my visions as well. The impressions had to be recent for me to pick up anything, but with every new vision I felt better about the gift that I'd been given and I began to accept that part of my life, too.

With Mikael's help, I held the first Gergechtigung. There were only two cases that were brought forward and even though I was really nervous, I made it through the experience just fine. Mikael commended me on my problem solving after the session and asked me if I wanted to go for a walk in celebration. We'd taken to using English in our conversations when it was

just the two of us, and even though he still had trouble with certain things, like contractions, he was doing extremely well and it gave me an opportunity to use my native language.

It was now early May and he explained that there was a meadow nearby that was filled with the first wild roses of the season. "Sure," I said, hesitantly. Mikael and I had spent time together as well since he'd recuperated in the manor house but this was the first time he'd asked me to do something with him. It was the equivalent of a date to the people of the village and I was a little leery about portraying the two of us in that light. My desire to see the roses won out, however. "Let me grab my shawl."

The Gergechtigung had taken place in the large ballroom of the house so it only took me a moment to run upstairs. When I returned, I poked my head in the kitchen and took Donya that I would return in about an hour.

"Where are you going?" she asked. It was Friday so she was preparing to do the laundry with the new washer and dryer that had just arrived the week before. The younger girl had become very protective of me since my early days at the Holding and sometimes I laughed when she tried to mother me.

"Mikael wants to show me the roses in a nearby meadow," I informed her.

Donya's eyebrows rose with interest. "A walk then, huh? Maybe I should come along with the two of you."

"Really," I scoffed in return. "Mikael just thought I'd like to see them. We won't be long," I called over my shoulder as I made a hasty retreat before Donya thought she was actually going to join us.

The afternoon was bright but a little chilly so I was glad I'd thought to grab a shawl. The path we took appeared as if many trudging feet had constructed it over the years. Tall grass grew on either side, leaving one with a feeling of solitude. It took us about a half an hour to walk to our destination and Mikael and I used the time to talk about my upcoming trip to New York. I'd received word earlier in the week that there were some matters that only I could resolve.

I didn't want to make the trip. I wanted to make sure that the renovations on the manor stayed on schedule but thankfully Mikael had graciously offered to watch over everything in my absence.

"August said the rest of the plumbing will arrive in four days," Mikael informed me. "He's hoping to have most of it finished by the time you return."

"That would be nice," I conceded. I was looking forward to long, luxurious baths once work on the house was completed. The huge garden tub that was to be installed in the master bath had arrived weeks ago and I almost had it filled in the kitchen so I could try it out. Sanity won but the waiting was bittersweet. "Are you sure you don't mind keeping an eye on things?"

"No," he replied as he glanced over at me. "I understand that you are uncomfortable about leaving now. It's the least I can do."

A tree had recently fallen, blocking out path. "I will have to clear this away," Mikael commented as he jumped on top of the big log then turned and offered me his hand.

I took it and smiled up at him as he helped hoist me up and over the log. I was so happy that we were now on good terms. It was comforting to have someone like Mikael that I could talk to about anything and he would understand. Myra and I were close but I didn't feel comfortable telling her the details of my work for Talon and that left a little strain between the two of us. With Mikael, I was able to share my worries and doubts over the course of events that led to his death.

I never told Mikael about Talon and myself. I think he'd more or less guessed that something had happened between the two of us but he respected my privacy and never asked.

"Here we are," he said as we came to a stop. Without me realizing it, we'd arrived at our destination that could only be described as one of the most beautiful sights I'd ever seen. The meadow was about one hundred yards across and twice that deep. Patched of red and pink wild roses dotted the grass that was kept short by many of the village's sheep and goats that roamed the area free to graze. Other spring wildflowers were also in bloom, but it was the roses that held my rapt attention.

"Oh, they're beautiful," I breathed. The scene was so picturesque that I didn't want to step in further, worried I would spoil its loveliness with my very presence.

Mikael took my hand and pulled me to the closest bank of bright red blooms. "I thought you would enjoy them," he told me quietly.

I knelt down so that I was close enough to smell the roses without picking them. They were absolutely intoxicating. I felt something slip behind my ear and realized that Mikael was carefully tucking a rose there. My eyes met his and I felt something surge through me that I hadn't experienced in a long time. Desire.

His gaze had the same hunger that I'd noticed weeks ago after he'd been hurt. I was suddenly frightened of the situation and I stood, not sure if I should suggest that we head back or bolt in that direction on my own.

Mikael reached out and tentatively brushed the back of his fingers against my cheek. My throat was so dry that I couldn't speak a word as I watched his head inch closer and closer to mine. I knew he was going to kiss me and even though it was the last thing in the world I thought I wanted, I didn't do anything to stop him, either.

His lips touched mine with an incredible need that shocked me. I found myself responding to this man that I hardly knew and I didn't care about the repercussions. I felt his powerful hands on my back, pulling my lower body closer to his, while my own hands traveled up to his shoulders where I held on tightly.

Time seemed to stand still as our lips and tongues teased with each other. "Lena," I heard Mikael breathe against my lips. "I can't believe how good you taste."

His words, that had mirrored Talon's own exactly the first time we kissed in Egypt, slammed me back into reality. I pulled away from Mikael without a word and turned back to the path we'd followed to get to the meadow. I heard Mikael call out to me but I didn't stop. Couldn't stop.

It's hard to describe how I felt in those first few moments after Mikael's hungry kisses. I definitely hadn't been repulsed by him, of that I was certain. There was a power that ebbed from him that I couldn't deny. I believe that I was horribly petrified of the thought of getting close to someone again.

Blindly I ran, barely conscious of the path or the log that was blocking it part of the way back. As I scrambled over it I heard fabric from my skirt tear but I didn't stop to look at the damage. I didn't stop, in fact, until I reached the door to my room on the second floor of the manor. It was then, after I stood shivering in the middle of the room that I realized that I'd dropped my shawl somewhere along the way.

I sat in front of the vanity mirror with my hand over my swollen lips as I replayed Mikael's kisses in my mind. I began to understand that my relationship with Talon had made me skittish over other men. Not that I was still pining for him or anything, but the way we were torn apart was so overwhelming and the final blow that he was now dead and forever out of my life was enough to make anyone wary.

Harsh voices erupted in the hallway. "You can't be up there," I heard Donya shriek.

I had absolutely no doubt that it was Mikael that Donya was trying to divert. I stood once more and faced the closed door. I had no idea what the next few minutes would bring

and I didn't even know where I wanted these turn of events to go. What I did know was that those few moments that I'd had in Mikael's arms was the most intense response I'd experienced in a long time.

## Chapter 18 – A Change In Status

"I never thought I could love again  
Then you came and changed something within."  
Mandy Moore  
"You Remind Me"

Mikael threw open the door with Donya in tow, grasping one of his thick arms with both hands. He held my shawl in one of his tightly clenched fists and had eyes only for me.

"Lena," she said in exasperation. "I don't know what's gotten into him but he won't listen to reason."

"Leave, Donya," was all he said in a voice that was so calm I would have sworn had come from someone else. Donya looked to me with doubt in her eyes but slowly I nodded that it was all right for her to go.

"It's okay," I said, trying to sound brave but I my voice caught.

Donya released Mikael's arm, apprehension apparent in her eyes. She glanced once more between the two of us then quietly left the room.

"You dropped this," Mikael said as he held out the shawl. There was fire in his gaze and I tried not to look too frightened as I stepped closer and took it from him then pulled away again.

My mind was furious trying to think of something to say. There was a small part of me that had loved the way Mikael had taken me in his arms. It was a natural feeling that I hadn't experienced in a long time and one I desperately craved without realizing it. I wanted more but my brain, however, was telling me to be wary. That a relationship with this man I hardly knew would be dangerous to me and my fragile heart.

"I will not apologize for what happened," Mikael began. "I am not sorry." He took a step toward me and I stood my ground even though I wanted to retreat to the other side of the room. I was afraid if I tried to move though, my knees would buckle under me.

"Why did you run away?" Mikael's voice finally softened and he closed the distance between us. I saw his face through tears that were swimming through my eyes as he took my face in his hands tenderly.

I had no idea what to tell him. I wasn't about to divulge the fact that I was scared senseless at the thought of being with him, with anyone. My eyes move from his face to stare at his shirt and as they did, fat tears escaped and made wet tracks down my cheeks.

"Please do not cry." Mikael used his thumbs to wipe away the tears then pressed his lips where they'd fallen. "Do not be afraid. I would never do anything to hurt you."

My eyes met his again and I so badly wanted to reach out to him, to tell him my stupidity had nothing to do with him. "Mikael," I began with a tremulous voice. "It's not you."

"It will be alright," he said as he pulled me into his arms. "I have no idea what I have been feeling. All I know is that I want to be with you all the time. You haunt my dreams, Lena Stockton. I have never felt this way about another person."

I clung to him. Those were the words I'd waited my whole life to hear and still I hesitated to take what I wanted. For the first time I cursed the affair I'd had with Talon. It was because of him that I didn't jump at happiness when it stared me in the face. It was because of him that I held back.

"Will you say something?" Mikael asked quietly. I felt his fingers on my face again and I knew that I was quickly drowning in the emotions this man stirred in me. This time I initiated the joining of our lips that I hoped would open the door to the rest of my life.

Mikael wasted no time in deepening the kiss. His tongue slipped past my lips to play with mine and I was surprised when I heard someone moan passionately and realized that it originated from my own throat.

Mikael nipped and tugged at my mouth before he moved on to kiss every inch of my face. He murmured promises in German that I didn't hear as I felt myself sinking further into the spell that he was weaving. My hands found their way into his hair as Mikael nuzzled my neck and started to propel us toward the bed that was behind me.

"I need you," he nearly growled as he began to gather the skirt of my dress in his hands. "Please do not deny us this."

"The thought hadn't crossed my mind," I replied with a tantalizing smile as I threw away the last of my reservations for the time being. I lifted my arms as Mikael brought the dress over my head then he proceeded to drop it to the floor.

His hands were so gentle as he ran them down my arms and gathered my hands in his. My heart lurched as he kissed both of them in turn then let them go so he could remove his shirt then let it slide to the floor to join my dress. His chest was incredibly powerful with a path of fine hair that led downward and disappeared into the waistband of his pants. I allowed my fingers to follow the trail as our lips met once again.

Mikael's hands were on my breasts, kneading them softly, making them respond in the way only he could and another moan passed my lips. Soon the rest of our clothes were discarded about the room and we fell into the bed together, irreversibly tangled in each other's arms.

His lovemaking stole all coherent thought from my head. Mikael was an attentive lover in ways I'd never known and afterward as we lay there, I wondered where he'd learned half the exotic things that I'd just experienced.

"That was absolutely incredible," I said. My head was on his chest and I could feel his heart beat sure and steady under my cheek. He still wore his onyx necklace and even though my fingers were itching to examine it I didn't want to offend him so I left it alone. Everything felt so perfect that I didn't ever want the moment to end. Let life outside this room continue and Mikael and I could stay here.

"I am glad you had so much fun," he chuckled. "I did not hurt you did I?"

"No." I lifted my head and peered down at him. I knew it was time that I confessed my insecurities but I was still uneasy. "I'm sorry I ran from you," I began. "I've only had one real relationship and it ended badly. He was involved with someone who mattered to him a great deal more than I did."

Mikael regarded me a moment then said, "Talon."

I only nodded and didn't meet his eyes. I had no idea how I felt that it was so easy for Mikael to guess what had happened between Talon and I. No one likes being that easy to read, especially by someone they've just started an intimate relationship with.

"It happened in Egypt," I confessed. "It was only a few weeks then Tracy called him back to the States."

"I never really understood their relationship," Mikael said. "Talon always had a certain air about him that spoke of power and control but sometimes it took only a word from Tracy for him to change his mind. It was odd to see it happen."

Mikael must have sensed my unease about the subject because he cupped the back of my neck with one hand and pulled my head down for a searing kiss that stoked the fires of passion that I'd thought had been sated for the moment. We made love again and spent the rest of the afternoon in bed. It was only when Mikael complained that he was going to die from hunger that I quickly put my dress back on and went down the kitchen for food.

## **Chapter 19 – Additions to the Family**

*“Call my name aloud and I’ll be There for you  
There is no end To all The Things I would do.”*

*Erasure*

*“Worlds of Fire”*

Life was, for the first time, normal. I had a place where I felt secure, where I had responsibilities that didn’t include anything too paranormal, and most importantly where I felt loved. I still had hang-ups about how my relationship with Mikael was going to work out, and to his credit Mikael never pressured me about anything. I knew he thought we should be talking about marriage and commitment but the one time he brought it up I’d reacted so negatively that he never said another word about it.

Soon after the renovations on the manor house were completed, I received a call from Jason and he told me that he’d finished his studies and was now an ordained priest in the Catholic Church. He would be assigned to his first church soon and I could tell he was nervous about it.

“I have a favor to ask,” he said cautiously.

“What is it?”

“I am allowed to request the parish where I am to be assigned. I wondered if you would mind if I requested to come to the Holding?” he returned in a rush, as if it were something he’d practiced it over and over again. “It would give us a chance to get to know each other better and frankly, I would love the opportunity of serving a small congregation my first time out.”

“Of course,” I said without hesitation. “We’d love to have you here.”

Jason arrived two weeks later. He and Mikael hit it off right away and it was like a family coming together. The villagers were happy to once again have a full time priest and soon we fell into a comfortable routine.

Jason stayed with us for two years. In that time we developed a relationship so powerful that anyone who met us for the first time swore that we were brother and sister. The undeniable bond that was our inheritance from Talon Graves was forged in a substance stronger than the hardest steel that nothing could tarnish.

I also came to know Kyle O’Donnell better in that time. Kyle came often to the Holding to visit Jason and in return began a close friendship with both Mikael and myself. He was so easy going and told the best stories in his Irish brogue that left our sides aching from laughter.

The relationship between Mikael and I grew as well in that time. We understood each other so completely that all we had to do was look at one another and we knew what the other was thinking. He was my perfect match in every way and I neither wanted nor needed anyone else. He never pressured me about marriage because there was a commitment between us that didn’t need vows to strengthen.

During the time that Jason was at the Holding I showed him everything in the tower room. He loved the computer that Talon had installed there and for hours we stayed in our little techno-weenie world. Mikael always teased us about it and said that if we didn’t spend some time outside we’d turn into albinos.

I also told Jason about the holdings that Talon had left to me after his death and that if he ever needed anything all he had to do was ask. He took that information and with my permission, Jason used a storage room in the tower to stockpile all sorts of gadgets like cell phones and palm tops. I never understood why he felt the need for so many extra devices. I

just figured that it made him content to be so well prepared in case of an emergency and so I didn't comment. Jason's adolescence had been taken from him in the attack that killed his priest mentor so I felt like an indulgent parent.

I knew that Jason was corresponding with someone online that he never told me about. He began asking me questions about wigs and contact lens and other things that would change a person's appearance. At first I thought the inquiries were peculiar but he explained that he was merely interested and that I had nothing to worry about.

"What makes you think I'm worried?" I asked.

Jason smiled. "You have that look," he replied as he crossed his arms across his chest.

"What are you talking about?" I admonished.

"You know," he teased, his face contouring with concern that left me stifling back a giggle. "The look you get when one of the kids in the village gets caught picking flowers in your gardens."

"That's ridiculous," I retorted. Mikael came in and found the two of us laughing together five minutes later.

"What's going on in here?" he asked glancing between Jason and myself. His English had improved so much during our time together that he almost sounded like an American. We shared with him the details of what Jason had questioned me about and the three of us shared another bout of laughter as we went off to have lunch.

It was a month later that Jason found me in the tower going over the new accounts that I'd received the night before. I still only used the satellite at night, when the villagers couldn't see it, to download the information I needed to run the businesses that Talon left in my care. He looked as if something heavy weighed on his thoughts so I tried to appear light hearted.

"What's up?" I asked as I put the paperwork aside.

Jason sat down in the chair next to mine and studied his clasped hands. "I have given my resignation to the church," he said after a minute.

He didn't look up at me and I was glad because I couldn't hide the shock I felt. I didn't understand what Jason was talking about. I thought he loved being a priest, in fact he'd planned and trained for it his entire life. Quickly I reviewed the time he'd spent here at the Holding and tried to remember a time that he'd had difficulties but I couldn't find anything.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked finally.

Jason was silent as he continued to look down at his hands. "I've been offered a new position that isn't connected to the church," he began. "I can't tell you the details about it even though I want to."

His eyes meet mine then. "I want to tell you, but I can't. The job is dangerous, I'll tell you this much, but I'll be okay."

"Jason, I don't understand," I stammered. "What position? Who will you be working for?"

Anguish filled his features. "I can't tell you that," he said bitterly. "I know you don't understand any of this but I want you to know that this is something I've thought about a great deal."

"This is about the person you've been talking with online doesn't it?"

"Yes. But you have to understand that I'll be okay." I could hear in Jason's voice just how much he wanted me to understand the decision he'd made and accept it. I wasn't sure if I could, though. He wasn't giving me much information so I couldn't help but feel leery about the whole thing.



Why couldn't he tell me who he was going to work for? I already knew that I couldn't forbid him to do anything. I wasn't his mother but I had come to feel that we'd become very close over the past two years and I realized that that was why Jason had come to me like he had. He could have just walked away without an explanation but here he was, dying to tell me the whole truth but for some reason he couldn't.

He's his own man, I told myself as I plastered a small smile on my face. If he thought this was what was best for him at the time that was fine with me. It would have to be.

"I'm not sure what you want me to say," I told him as I reached out to take his still clasped hands in my own. "If you think that this is what you have to do right now then okay, I understand. I'm not sure I like it, but I understand."

Jason smiled with relief as he brought our hands to his mouth and kissed my knuckles lightly. "I knew you would," he said as he lowered our hands to his lap once more. He studied me a moment before he said, "I won't be leaving the church entirely. I'll still be doing the work of God just in a different way."

I was sad to see Jason leave, as was the entire village. We gave him a large going away party that was so similar to the one thrown when I'd first arrived at the village. I cried as I watched Jason load up his few possessions in a suitcase.

"Lena, don't cry," he said before he took me into his arms and held me close for a moment. I knew that leaving was hard for him but he was determined to go. "I will get a hold of you when I can," he said when he pulled back and looked down at me. "I will come back a visit, too. And who knows, maybe I'll come back for a wedding."

That last statement was his last jibe about the relationship between Mikael and I. Jason had made it quite clear that he thought Mikael and I should get married but never pushed the issue too far. For that I was grateful.

Mikael and I had shared many conversations late at night about what Jason could possibly be going off to do but he'd been very tight lipped to Mikael as well when he told him.

One of the men from the village was taking Jason to Maxdorf where he would continue on to his new job. Donya had packed a large basket of food for Jason to take with him and the whole village turned out to send him off.

The manor house was quiet after Jason left but life continued on as normal. I still had lessons with Myra as often as possible and the women's circle every Saturday along with my other duties. But the circumstances leading to Jason's leaving weighed heavy on my heart and I prayed daily that he was okay.

I don't remember when thoughts of Talon first entered my mind. I think I began to dream about him almost as soon as Jason left. Mikael commented with concern that my sleep was restless and that I seemed to be searching for someone in my dreams. I went to Myra to see if she could foretell anything about the dreams but she was reluctant to voice her thoughts.

"The way is cloudy," she said cryptically. "I cannot say for sure but I believe that someone from the past will rise again."

"Can you see who?" I asked.

"No," she replied rather quickly. "I have looked into this matter all that I can but I am not sure what it all means." She eyed me warily as if she were somehow afraid for me.

"Perhaps it will make sense in a few days."

I began to think that it was Talon that Myra was seeing in her visions and that she didn't want to tell me about it. Eventually, though I would have to know the truth, yet at the same time I was afraid to know. Surely if Talon were still alive he would have gotten word to me somehow, I reasoned to myself. My head was filled with what could have happened to

Talon if he wasn't indeed dead. I dreaded the thought that he might have been made a vampire but I realized that it was a likely conclusion. Still, I put those thoughts aside and prepared myself for the likelihood that it was possible.

Jason kept his word and stayed in contact with Mikael and I. He never gave us any details about what kind of work he was doing but I got the impression that it dealt with some kind of covert information gathering. He did tell me about these ridiculous personalities he'd developed, complete with names and backgrounds as well as different looks so that he could travel without being tracked. I also figured that he didn't stay in one place too long because no matter how careful he was he always mentioned something about the place where he was calling from.

My dreams of Talon continued on and off after Jason left but other than those memories, my life was perfect. That was until I got the phone call from Christina Strong.

I was in New York with Kyle. He'd been attacked during a visit there to see his old friend and mentor, Razor and I was contacted as a next of kin. Kyle had no other family to speak of and the doctors at the hospital had found one of my business cards in his wallet and that was how I came to be there. Razor had been involved in the attack too and lay in a bed down the hall from Kyle's room.

"Hello?" I answered my cell phone when it rang. I had just returned to my hotel room and I was dead tired. I thought that it was Mikael calling to see how Kyle was and I realized just how much I wanted to hear his voice. He'd decided to stay at the Holding this trip because I didn't know how long I would need to be here and he said that it wasn't a good idea for him to be gone too long.

"Yes, is this Lady Lena Stockton?" a female voice asked from the other end.

"Yes it is," I answered, wondering who this woman was.

"You don't know me, but I was traveling with someone I believe to be a friend of yours and we were separated. I found your number in his planner." She sounded like she was about my age and she was definitely American like myself.

My heart sunk. Jason's face immediately popped up in my mind and I feared the worst. "A friend? Who?"

"Well, I'm not sure what name you know him by," she replied hesitantly, "but right now he's Philippe."

I was right in assuming it was Jason. I immediately recognized the name as one of the alternate identities that he'd established for himself and dread clutched at my heart.

"Ah..." I said, letting her know that I knew whom she was speaking of. I tried to keep my tone light in case Jason had run into foul play and this woman wanted something from me. I had no intention of letting her know what Jason meant to me, yet.

"We were traveling in Italy and were separated," she repeated. "I found train tickets to a village in Austria, but I need help. I have to find Philippe quickly, he is in great danger."

"What is your number?" I asked the frightened young girl. She appeared to be honest in her desire to find my old friend and frankly I was worried about the entire situation. She quickly gave her cell phone number to me and I wrote it down on a piece of hotel stationery.

"Meet me at the village-" I began but I was cut off in mid sentence. I held the phone away from my ear and stared at it for a moment as I tried to figure what had happened. The obvious conclusion was that the young woman's cell phone had malfunctioned in some way and either the battery had gone dead or she'd lost her signal.

I crossed the room to the chair where I'd dropped my purse when I'd come in and retrieved my date book. I called every number I had for Jason but I only reached answering

machines so I left messages as I booted up my laptop. By using some of the tricks Jason and I had figured out together I was able to trace the phone call from the young woman and verified that it had indeed come from Italy as she'd said.

I tried the phone number of her cell but I only got a recording that said the number was out of service. I called Mikael next and told him what had happened and that I was coming back as soon as possible. I hoped that maybe Jason had mentioned the Holding to the young woman and she would eventually make her way there, otherwise, I had no way of helping her.

I went to the closet and began to pull out my suitcases as I mentally figured out what I would have to do in order to leave the city. I would be back in Austria in thirty-six hours but that seemed like a lifetime. I spoke to Mikael from Maxdorf as I waited for a carriage that would take me the rest of the way to the Holding and he informed me that he'd received a call from his pack mates. They were on their way to the Holding and they were bringing a young female vampire with them.

I stopped in the restroom of Claus' hotel before I got into the carriage and I was surprised by what I found there. Someone had left a partial roll of toilet paper with odd messages written on the individual squares. I tucked the roll in my purse, intending to look at them closer when I reached my destination.