

A Place of My Own Lena's Story

Part I - Talon: A Whole New World

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Chapter 1 – Talon Graves

"The dead are merely
The countrymen of my future."
Dean Koontz
"Fear Nothing"

Lady Lena Stockton carried her fussy son into the nursery. She smiled as she recalled how her fiancé, Mikael Provinoff, had wanted to join her for the nightly ritual of putting their son to bed, but they had guests and someone needed to attend to them. Of course neither Jason Kline nor Christina Strong were strangers to the Holding. Jason had after all served as priest in the church that was connected to the main house before he'd gone off to work for Talon, and Christina was going to be family soon. Still, Lena thought it would be rude to leave them and their guests on their own.

Jason and Christina had brought the first of the wedding guests with them. Brenda Thompson was Christina's sister, once before met previously in America, and Rafael Brown was her fiancé. Lena remembered the anxiety she'd seen in Christina's eyes when the group had arrived the evening before, and figured it was simply wedding jitters.

She had just closed the large oak door behind her when Christopher, in his impatience, gave out a full-blown wail. "Hey, little guy," she said good-naturedly. "I know you're just tired and don't want to give up the attention of your new throng of admirers."

Lena bounced Christopher on one hip as she crossed to the dresser that Mikael had made for his son and pulled out a fuzzy warm sleeper, one of the many things that Christina and Jason had brought with them from America. Lena was happy to see that the two of them were taking their roles of godparents seriously.

Brother Stephen Brennan, who was to perform both the wedding and Christopher's baptism, and his uncle Cormac, would arrive the following evening. Lena was anxious to see them again, the two men had helped her to return home after her kidnapping, and she wanted the chance to extend her gratitude.

Lena glanced to the closet door where Christopher's christening gown hung on a tiny hanger and felt intense happiness run through her veins. The baptism was scheduled for the evening after the ceremony so that the newlyweds wouldn't have to postpone their honeymoon for too long.

"Christina and Jason brought this for you from home," Lena told her son as she changed him into a fresh diaper then the blue fleece sleeper. Unfortunately, Christopher wasn't totally satisfied.

Home, Lena thought nostalgically. She hadn't lived in America for a long time but the country was still home to her. One day I'll take Christopher there and show him where I grew up, she thought as she cooed to her son. Smiling, she began to recall the events that began the road to where she found herself now...

I don't think I will ever understand the events that led me to Talon Graves. I was in my final year of college when I was first introduced to the world of darkness. The subject of my thesis dealt with the Inquisition, and I was trying to find some arcane bit of information that would set the paper apart. My peers in the medieval history department at the University of Michigan were very competitive, and I'd received many jibes about my overdone subject matter. I had a gut feeling though that there was something unknown about the Inquisition;

something that had remained buried through the centuries, and I was determined to find out what it was.

It was the spring quarter of 1993 and my paper's due date was fast approaching. Most of my research was done, and I'd even begun work on the actual writing, but I hadn't found the one new piece of information that I instinctively knew was out there. I'd by accident discovered on the Internet a chat room where visitors discussed many historical topics, including the Inquisition.

I must say that much of what some of them said struck me as odd. The site tended to draw highly educated individuals; you could tell by the way they expressed themselves. There were a few, though, that said the holy fight wasn't over. They hinted that the monsters the Inquisition sought to destroy still threatened the general populace, and the abominations had to be stopped.

At first I brushed them off, thinking they were only pranksters that were poking fun. Then some of the things they said started to make sense. What if they were right? My head began to fill with the possibilities of proving that vampires and werewolves really existed and I started looking once again at the books where I'd found my initial information.

Don't get me wrong; I didn't allow myself to get totally sucked in to the idea. Eventually I figured that if I couldn't prove the existence of monsters maybe I could uncover this brotherhood of raving radicals.

While going through everything again I found a phrase that I'd overlooked before and realized that in the chat room it was used as a name: Deus Vult. In Latin, it means "God wills it," and it was used as a battle cry during the Crusades. A group called the Society of Leopold later picked it up. I quickly reviewed the history of the conversations I'd saved and saw that Deus Vult had many conversations with someone called Nightstalker. A friend of mine was able to find out that Nightstalker was located in Adrian, Michigan and that Deus Vult was somewhere on the West Coast.

I decided to keep an eye on those two and went to the site often just to view their conversations. They didn't always talk to each other. In fact, Nightstalker seemed to have no interest in what Deus Vult had to say and usually left the chat room soon after the other person entered.

I figured that Nightstalker was a man because one night he was talking to a woman I knew. Jamqueen was an English student at Grand Valley State University who'd helped me with some Italian translations early on in my research. The two of them were flirting with one another when Deus Vult entered the room.

'Were you partying in Toledo last night?' he asked Nightstalker.

'No.' was the only reply given.

'Funny. I heard about an unfortunate accident at a night club and thought you might know something about it.'

'Sorry.' As usual, Nightstalker had clammed up. The mention of the nightclub though reminded me of something I'd heard about on the evening news. Apparently there was a bombing in a popular club that killed quite a few people. Was Nightstalker involved? He was denying any knowledge so far.

'I still would like to meet in real life,' Deus Vult was saying.

'About?'

'Why don't you choose a location and we'll see what happens?'

'Not interested.'

'You know, you should take credit for the things you've done.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.' And with that Nightstalker logged off.

I thought about the conversation I'd witnessed for a few days. Jamqueen had noticed that I was in the room after Nightstalker left and we had talked for a while. She was as surprised by Nightstalker's abrupt exit as I was. She informed me that they had agreed to get together to discuss some translation work he wanted her to do but after the innuendoes that Deus Vult had made she wasn't sure if she wanted to meet Nightstalker.

I was feeling brave and intrigued so I told her that if she wanted I would go to the arranged meeting place and check the guy out for her. What I really wanted to do was check the guy out for myself. Jamqueen agreed, thanking me profusely, so now I find myself waiting in my car outside a coffee shop in Adrian.

I had done my homework as best as I could. I'd obtained newspaper articles about the club bombing in Toledo and I had printed all the chat room histories I had in hopes of getting an idea what kind of guy this Nightstalker was. I felt like some cheesy private investigator in a weekend movie.

Nightstalker had told her he had long blonde hair and that he would be wearing a black duster. Ten minutes before the allotted time an old red Chevy short box truck pulled up to the curve down the street and a man got out. He fit the description given to Jamqueen and from my vantage point I could see he was in his mid thirties and was built like a Mack truck.

I was surprised when a fluttering started in the pit of my stomach at the sight of the man. He was close to six feet tall and his blonde hair fell loose to his shoulders. Whoever this Nightstalker was, he looked like a person you didn't mess with.

I stayed in my car as he went into the small restaurant where Jamqueen was to meet him and I waited for nearly an hour until Nightstalker left. I followed him to a rather nice house that stood out like a sore thumb in a dingy neighborhood. The house was white with two stories and what looked like new siding and black shutters. It was nestled between a video rental place and a mom and pop pizza joint.

The truck pulled into the drive that already contained two other cars and a big Harley motorcycle that was parked near the garage. I watched the man get out and enter the house as I parked down the street and contemplated what to do next.

You're not going to get the information you want by sitting here, I chided myself but I couldn't muster the nerve to open the door and get out. What the hell was I going to say anyway? Hi, my name is Lena and I've been playing peeping Tom on your chat room conversations, would you mind if I asked you a few questions? Like that didn't sound stupid.

It was getting dark and I knew I had to either go to the door or go home. I wanted to start the drive back to Ann Arbor before it got really late and I was sure Nightstalker would want to eat dinner soon.

I decided that the direct approach was the best. I would simply tell Nightstalker the truth, that I was a student looking for information, and see what he had to say. I gathered my courage and absently wiped my damp palms on the legs of my jeans as I went to the front door. There were many lights on throughout the house and I could see a few people through the windows busy at various tasks.

I felt a little conspicuous when a beautiful woman answered the door. She was about my height with thick curly brown hair that hung past her shoulders. Her skin was alabaster white and flawless that made her violet eyes stand out even more. She looked me over as if trying to figure out if I was friend or foe. I guess she decided friend because she relaxed her entire body against the door like a cat.

"Can I help you?" she asked as she placed her hand on the door. Her red lips compressed to make her seem as if she were pouting.

"Hi," I managed to croak out. "I'm looking for the person who uses Nightstalker as an alias at the Breckenridge chat room."

She smiled slightly as she looked me over again. "Talon," she called, never taking her eyes off me.

"Yeah?" I heard the male voice ask from within the house. A moment later Nightstalker stood behind the woman and put his hand on her shoulder. His eyes, however, were on me. They were predator's eyes. Eyes that said he would kill in an instant if prompted. My heart quickened and my palms were once again wet with sweat.

"Hello," I said with a shaky smile. "Nightstalker?"

Talon's eyes narrowed on me for an instant then scanned up and down the street. "What do you want?" he asked pointedly when his eyes returned to mine as if he could tell the truth just by looking in them.

"Oh Talon, really," the woman chided as she looked over her shoulder at the taller man. "How rude. At least let the girl in before you rip into her." She stepped back in welcome and Talon had to follow. He didn't like it but didn't stop me either.

I hesitantly crossed the threshold and the door was closed behind me. "Why don't you go into the den?" the woman suggested.

Talon's brows furrowed and she smiled again. "You're right as usual, Tracy," he said dryly before she turned and left us standing in the small foyer of the house. "In there," he said with a nod that indicated a partially opened door to my right.

I decided that this guy was a man of few words as I crossed the area and pushed the door open further. I steeled myself to doing whatever I had to do to gain the information I knew was just out of my reach.

The room was tastefully decorated in various shades of brown and yellow. There was a large desk near a picture window and I realized after I'd entered the room that there was someone else there. The guy looked to be in his early twenties and he was working diligently at a computer set up on the desk. I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see Talon give the guy a knowing look that prompted him to stand quickly and exit the room with only a brief glance my way.

"Jamqueen?" Talon asked when the door closed.

"No, sorry," I replied, turning to face him. For a second I thought his eyes were going to bore into my skull and I tightened my resolve to keep from showing him how ill at ease he made me. "After your abrupt exit from the chat room last week she was a little leery on meeting you. She was scared by what Deus Vult was suggesting so I volunteered to come check you out."

His brow furrowed again with my explanation and he crossed his arms over his broad chest. "So who are you?"

"My name is Lena Stockton. I'm a student at U of M, in the history department. I know Jamqueen from the chat room." There goes the eye tunneling again. Time to come totally clean and see what I get. I shifted a little before conceding, "I have to admit that the real reason I agreed to meet you is about another matter."

A tawny eyebrow raised and Talon walked further into the room, his eyes never leaving me. "And what would that be?" he asked finally.

"I'm doing my thesis on the Inquisition," I began. "Some of the things that Deus Vult and a few other people have been insinuating are leading me to some rather interesting conclusions. I was hoping you could help shed some light on the subject."

I felt like a fool when he threw his head back and actually started to laugh. I knew it was a definite possibility that my assumptions were wrong but I couldn't get rid of the certainty that held up in the back of my mind.

"I'm glad you're so amused," I said through clenched teeth as I turned to look out the window. I was standing next to an armchair so that when I moved I accidentally stumbled and had to put a hand out to steady myself.

The sudden picture that filled my head shocked me. I was still in the same room but no longer a participant in the scene that was being played out. There was an old man with white hair sitting in the chair I had bumped into and he was talking to Tracy, the woman who had answered the door. They appeared to be arguing and Tracy seemed to be backing down. Then things went fuzzy and I shook my head to clear it.

"Hey," Talon was saying when I looked up. Concern was written across his face and he took a step toward me. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," I said as I put a hand to my temple where a dull ache was starting. "I just lost my balance when I accidentally bumped into the chair."

Talon was serious now; all the humor that had shown in his eyes earlier was gone. "Look," he began, "I think I know what you're looking for and I don't think I can help you. Why don't you just ask straight out?"

It was the longest sentence I'd heard him utter. I was a little shocked by his bluntness but relieved for it as well. I had to form my initial question carefully. "Alright," I began, facing him once more. "Is the Inquisition still in existence? And furthermore, are the creatures they supposedly hunt?"

Chapter 2 – Chance Meetings

"And I found where my edge is
And it bleeds into where you resist."
Tori Amos
"Spring Haze"

Talon seemed intrigued by my bluntness. The humor was completely gone now and he appeared to have a newfound respect for me. "What are you hoping that I can tell you?" he asked after a moment.

I blinked in surprise. What did he mean? Wasn't what I'd asked him straightforward enough? "W-well...I was hoping you'd tell me the truth," I replied, half hoping this would be over soon. If I didn't get some aspirin in my stomach I would be really sick.

"And what are you hoping for?" Talon took a predatory step toward me that made me stand straighter. "Did you think I would be able to confirm your childish notions that there are things out there that go bump in the night?"

"There's nothing childish about wanting to know the truth," I stated matter-of-factly. "What is it that you want to hide?"

"Nothing," was all Talon said in reply. "Nothing at all."

I decided to switch tactics with him to see if I could swing him into inadvertently slipping something. "Where you involved in the bombing of the night club in Toledo?"

The surprise in his eyes and the furrowing of his brows told me that my ploy was working so far. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Probably nothing," I said with a shrug. "But maybe if I felt that you were telling the truth about the bombing I would be more inclined to believe you when you say there's nothing here for me to know."

Talon shook his head in mild amusement before saying, "Go home, Miss Stockton. Finish your paper with the information you have. There is no hidden story to uncover."

"Perhaps you're right," I replied tightly. "I'm sorry to have wasted your time. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to get home before it's too late. I want to e-mail Deus Vult and ask his opinion on the matter."

Talon was on me in an instant. "If you know what's best," he growled, "you'll steer clear of him or anyone like him. He's a loose cannon that's going to get himself and everyone around him killed." Pure animalism was apparent on his face and I was scared and angry at the same time.

"Let go of me," I ground out through clenched teeth. I tried to pull away but his grip was strong. "How dare you -"

"How dare I what?" His tone was as angry as my own. "You have no idea what these people are capable of. You're just a girl skirting in the fringes of something you'll never understand."

Anger pulsed through my brain. I had to get out of there, away from Talon. Without thinking my knee came up to connect soundly with his groin. He doubled over in pain and I broke away without another thought. I didn't see anyone as I fled the house and for that I was grateful. I half expected him to call out or follow and when he didn't I counted my lucky stars.

My mind was reeling from the encounter but I didn't want to try to process what Talon had said until I was once again safe in the privacy of my dorm room. I fumbled for the keys in the pocket of my jeans and after I'd crossed the street to my car I took a moment to gather my wits.

I didn't pay much attention to the van when it turned the corner, not until it stopped next to me and the side door flung open. A man appeared and before I knew what was happening he grabbed me from behind and pulled me inside, the door sliding shut behind us.

"Lay still and don't move," the man said roughly after he had me down on the floor of the vehicle. And to my surprise, I did. I had no desire to try to get away and I didn't understand why. The pain in my temples was increasing but that was no reason for a total lack of self-preservation. I could smell the man's foul breath as he studied me for a moment before moving to the driver's seat and throwing the van in gear.

I'm going to die, I thought to myself as he took off, and no one would know what had happened to me either. I hadn't told any of my friends on campus where I was going or why. How could I explain that I was going to see a man about the possible existence of vampires? They would have laughed at me like Talon had. The only person who knew about the meeting with him was Jamqueen and we didn't even know each other's real names.

My mind was hazy but I was able to take in what I saw. The van appeared to be newer, a cargo style that's inside hadn't been finished off like a normal passenger van. Its walls and floor were metal from what I tell and looked like sheets of metal had been put over the back windows, for some reason that I couldn't grasp. There was a heavy curtain that hung behind the seats in the front of the vehicle that I assumed would close but for what purpose, again I didn't know.

It was hard to see. There wasn't any light coming from the dash so I didn't have the opportunity to really see the man who'd kidnapped me. I was almost positive he wore jeans and a long black leather trench coat. I remembered smelling the leather in the brief contact he'd had with me. His hair was dark and shaggy and looked as if it hadn't been washed in a week.

I tried to tilt myself up to a sitting position but couldn't make any of my limbs cooperate. My willingness to do what the man said made me feel like a coward but there was nothing I could do other wise. I felt the tears well in my eyes at my hopeless situation then run down the sides of my face.

After a while, I'm not sure how long, the man brought the van to a stop and shut the engine off. There was a small amount of light spilling in from outside the vehicle so I could see the outline of his face when he turned in the seat to face me. He had a scraggily beard and I could now see that both his jeans and white tee shirt were ripped and filthy. His eyes seemed to glow in a way that made my stomach turn. I wanted to beg him to spare my life but the words wouldn't form.

He rose from the seat and went to the side door. Once it was open the man jumped out and turned to grab my ankle. He pulled me to my feet without a word and I landed rather hard on one ankle. He had a firm grip on my upper arms though so I didn't stumble or fall. I did, however, manage to get my hands between the two of us before he pulled my close.

"Now, I want you to co-operate," he growled as he looked at me intently. "Tell me everything you know about Talon Graves and his mistress."

"I-I j-just met him tonight," I found myself saying before I realized it. My mind was starting to clear and I began to think of ways to get away from him. "I don't know him at all or the woman he's sleeping with." I carefully tested my ankle to see if it was sprained and was relieved to find that it was just twisted a little.

"Why did you go to see him?"

"I was looking for information for a paper. I was hoping he could help me." I wasn't about to tell him the subject matter I'd been looking for.

"Damn," he hissed, looking away from me. "I should have known." His hands tightened on my arms, digging into my flesh and I began to get really frightened.

Now is when he'll kill me, I thought as he seemed to ponder the situation for a moment. I have to get away from him.

Horror rushed through my entire being when the man turned back to me. His mouth was half-opened and moonlight glinted off his extended canines. My mind was still digesting the fact that he was a vampire when he lowered his head to my neck and his teeth ripped into my flesh and pierced an artery.

A screamed died in the back of my throat. The pain was excruciating as the vampire carelessly sucked the blood from my body. I pushed at him with my hands, trying without success to push him away from me. In moments I felt weak and began slipping into unconsciousness.

New stabs of pain tore through my body when his mouth was ripped away from my neck. I felt my body fall to the ground in a lifeless heap but I did nothing to break the descent. There were tears in my eyes again as I realized this was the place where I would die. Alone. The victim of something that other people didn't believe existed. I waited for a kick in the stomach or for the vampire to gloat over my demise.

When nothing happened I managed to open my eyes when I heard sounds of fighting. I could see that I was in an old parking lot that was cracked in many places and had weeds of all kinds growing through them. I was facing the storefront and saw that it was abandoned and had a lot of graffiti on it. I didn't see anyone at first but the sound of flesh hitting flesh still continued.

The wound in my neck was still bleeding and somehow I brought my hand up to press it as hard as I could. I turned my head, hoping to find out if it was the vampire that was fighting or if he lurked in the shadows in hopes of another meal. What I found was Talon standing over the body of the vampire, pulling a long sword from a sheath on his back. How he'd managed to get the vampire in that position, I didn't know but I was glad he had.

My vision was blurred from blood loss but I watched as Talon moved to cut off the vampire's head. Just before the blade connected, however, the vampire swung his hand up toward Talon's chest and I could see claws at the ends of his fingers as the moonlight reflected off them. Talon quickly sidestepped the vampire's attack and the last thing I saw was the blade of the sword coming down and the head of the vampire rolling across the ground.

Chapter 3 - Hero

"Anybody knows you can conjure
AnyThing by The dark oE The moon"
Tori Amos
"Suede"

I awoke slowly in a comfortable bed. Sunlight warmed my face even though the bright light hurt my head. I didn't want to but I opened my eyes and looked around the room. I didn't recognize where I was.

The wallpaper was yellow and covered with purple violets. The bedspread that had been pulled over me was thick and cheery and decorated with the same flowers. I tried to raise my head to look around the room more but couldn't even get it an inch above the pillow.

A glance at the bedside and a feeling of discomfort told me an IV ran into my right hand. The liquid was clear so I figured it was a saline drip to keep my body hydrated. It paid to be friends with a nursing major sometimes.

Memories of what had taken place the night before came back once I felt secure again and they left me both shaken and trembling. I'd taken Jamqueen's place at her meeting with Talon and had followed him back to his house. After I had tried unsuccessfully to get him to open up about the nightlife I left and was subsequently kidnapped by something I'd been wondering existed. Thoughts of the vampires feeding from my blood sent fresh shutters down my spine and had tears forming in my eyes. Then I remembered seeing Talon over the vampire and slicing its head off before I passed out. Considering what had happened to me, I thought it odd that there wasn't a bandage on my throat after the vampire had fed from me.

Before the tears had a chance to slip from my eyes I heard a door open and close quietly. I attempted once again to turn my head and was relieved when it moved a little. A young woman came into view carrying a tray but I couldn't tell what was on it. She noticed that my eyes were open and she smiled down at me sweetly.

"Hey," she said quietly. "Finally awake, huh?"

I tried to say yes, opened my mouth in fact, but nothing came out. My throat was so dry.

"Don't try to talk," she cooed as she set the tray down on a nearby table. "Let me get you some water and then you can try again." There were so many questions I wanted to ask her. Where was I? Had Talon brought me here? What did she mean by 'finally awake'?

I heard water running and then she was by the bed again with a small glass of water in her hand. "My name is Susan," she informed me as she helped me to sit and drink. Stupidly I wanted to gulp down the liquid but thankfully Susan didn't let me. "You're going to be fine. Nothing that a little more rest won't take care of. Talon is really worried about you."

"Is he here?" I croaked out after I'd cleared my throat.

"Sure," Susan smiled again as she eased me back down to the mattress. "This is his house."

"Where is he?"

Her brows furrowed a little. "He went out for a while. Actually I shoed him out after he'd stayed by your side for two days--"

"Gossiping again, Sus?" Talon asked from the doorway. My eyes darted to where he stood and I found myself grinning shyly as I was struck again by how good-looking he was. I didn't know what to make of the fact that he'd brought me into his home when I'd been hurt but after about thirty seconds I realized the reality of it all.

Of course Talon wouldn't have been able to take me to a hospital. He wouldn't have been able to explain my injuries and that was the simple fact. Here I was thinking he was so wonderful when in actuality he was only saving himself from the necessity of explaining what had happened to me.

"I thought I told you to be gone for at least an hour," Susan scolded him, effectively ignoring his question. She went to the tray again and produced a fresh bag of saline that she connected to the IV. "It's only been twenty minutes."

"I got antsy," Talon stated as he came over to the bed. "You're awake," he said looking down at me.

"Looks like it," I replied, not wanting to make eye contact with him. "How long have I been out of it?"

Susan finished with the IV and left the room before he answered my question. "Three days," he said after she closed the door behind her.

"Three days?" I repeated aghast. I tried to sit up again but was only able to get up to my elbows.

"Let me help," Talon said coming forward to put an arm under my shoulders and then stuffing pillows behind me then lowered my shoulders again. His tone told me he wasn't joking and that he was in fact quite worried about me. His concern made me a little edgy. I feared there was some underlying reason for his aid but didn't know what it could be.

I was better able to see the room now anyhow. It was pretty and feminine and I wondered whom it actually belonged to. Certainly not Tracy, the woman who'd answered the door that night. She was too modern and sophisticated. She would be uncomfortable in this room.

Talon retreated to a chair that had been set close to the bed. After he sat he regarded me in his intense way once more that made me squirm. "How are you feeling?" he finally asked.

"Okay, I guess," I replied. I was still extremely tired but the need to know how long I'd been out of it was stronger. "I've been asleep for three days?" I asked again.

Talon looked as if he didn't want to answer. "Yes. You must have hit your head when you fell in the parking lot."

I eyed him wearily. What the hell did he mean hit my head? He was trying to make it sound like the fact that I'd lost a great amount of blood had nothing to do with it and I told him so.

"Don't be ridiculous," he scoffed. "That guy grabbed you before I had a chance to get out of the house. I followed him to that parking lot but you were on the ground already." Talon watched me as if to determine whether I believed him or not. Which I didn't. "I was just glad I got there before any real damage was done. You should be more careful," he finished in an accusing tone.

My mouth dropped in surprise. How could he sit there and lie to me with a straight face? My eyelids were getting heavy and the desire to sleep was getting harder to resist. "Listen," I started angrily but the effect was lost when I had to stifle a yawn. "I remember what happened in that parking lot and hitting my head is the least of my worries. Don't patronize me."

Talon tore his eyes away and stared out the window. "You can't deny what happened to me any more than I can," I continued after pushing aside thoughts of how striking his profile was. Recollections of all the vampire stories and movies from my childhood played through my mind and I wondered if he was trying to protect me from something horrible. "What's going to happen to me now?"

"Nothing," he replied quietly. "When you're back on your feet again you can go home and continue on with your life. That reminds me," his gaze returned to mine, "I had your paper finished and turned in. What you had finished was good. Mickey was impressed."

"Mickey?" I'd totally forgotten about my thesis or that it was due the day before. I'd figured that if I'd gotten anything good out of the meeting with Talon that I'd add it to what I had written.

"He's a friend of mine," Talon grinned. "He wanted me to tell you that he was interested in picking your brain about the subject. It seems that history is a hobby of his."

"Sure," I replied through another yawn. "Sounds good."

"Get some sleep," he said, standing once more. "I'll stop by to see you later." He came to the bedside once again and clasped my hand in his larger one. "Don't worry about anything." He squeezed my hand once then turned and left the room.

After the door had shut behind him and I was drifting off the sleep I realized that that was the closest he'd come to admitting what had happened. I'm making process, I thought with a slight smile as sleep finally pulled me into its grasp.

The vampire's mouth was on my neck again, sucking, sucking until I thought there was nothing left in me for him to take. And it hurt. The pain was so intense and I thrashed around, trying to get away from him.

"No," I cried. "Please stop. Stop."

The vampire laughed. He pulled away from the open wound on my throat long enough to taunt, "That's what you get. I told Talon I would bring him down even if I have to do it one person at a time." His hands were in my hair in an effort to keep me on my feet.

Blackness threatened to overtake me and I welcomed it. Anything to make the pain stop. Anything to take away the smell of his breath and the feel of his greasy hands.

"No, no," I said desperately over and over again. "Help me...please...someone help me..."

"Lena." A warm hand was on my shoulder and shaking me gently. "Wake up. It's just a dream. You're alright now."

The vampire's face was inches from mine and he laughed at me incessantly. I wanted nothing more than to get away from him, to get to safety.

"Please," I whimpered pathetically. There was no one there to help me but I pleaded for someone anyhow.

"Wake up, Lena," the voice was insistent now. The scene around me faded to black as I felt my shoulders being raised and then there was something warm and solid against my cheek. "You're safe." I realized it was Talon who was there as I came back to consciousness. "He can't hurt you again."

Tears poured from my eyes and Talon rocked my back and forth. "It happened," I gasped between sobs. "It really happened and nothing you can say will make it go away." I felt so weak and spineless sitting there in his arms as he cradled me like a baby. I'd always been so self-reliant. You had to be when your parents were killed and you found yourself placed into foster care. I'd always had to rely on myself for everything; it wasn't in my nature to count on anyone.

"I know," Talon was saying. His hand was running over my head while the other held me close to him but I pressed even closer. "Forget it for now. Remember that you're safe here. I won't let anything happen to you."

For the first time in my life I allowed myself to be comforted and I was surprised at how it made me feel so secure. Just this once, I told myself as the last of the tears faded and I pulled away from Talon enough to wipe my face.

"I'm sorry," I said feebly, not meeting his eyes.

"Don't worry about it." His tone was light and compassionate and I was glad for his presence. Talon hooked his finger under my chin and raised my tear-streaked face to meet his eyes. "I meant what I said. He won't hurt you or anyone else again."

The tenderness of his gesture made me close my eyes in embarrassment. He lowered his hand again and we sat in awkward silence for a while. I noticed that it was full night now. The room was dimly lit by a lamp that was on a low table next to the chair that I assumed was where Talon had been sitting because there was a newspaper on the table as well.

"Do you think you can sleep?" he asked.

"No." I was wide-awake now and felt much better. I didn't want to be alone either but I wasn't sure if I could handle Talon's company. His presence was beginning to affect me in ways I wasn't sure that I neither liked nor thought I would be able to resist for long. "I'll be okay," I said hesitantly, looking down at my hands. "You don't have to stay with me anymore."

Talon laughed, as he stood then stared down at me. "Why don't I see what I come up with along the lines of food? Are you hungry?"

I hadn't been until he said something. "A little," I admitted flippantly but was betrayed by an audible grumble from my stomach.

Talon laughed again and I realized I was beginning to like the sound. "I'll be right back," he chuckled as he headed for the door. While he was gone I wondered why he was spending time with me and not Tracy. Given the way Talon had regarded her the night I met him, the woman had some kind of hold on him and the fact surprised me. Men like Talon Graves weren't easily manipulated so she must be special indeed. The clock on the bedside table said ten o'clock so I wondered if she was asleep in another room. Talon's room.

Talon returned a few minutes later with a bowl of hot chicken noodle soup and a cup of tea on a tray. He stayed while I ate and we talked about my degree in history and what I was going to do now that I was done with school. I was careful not to say anything about the loss of my parents. I wasn't sure how much I trusted Talon yet with the intimate details of my childhood.

He seemed a little antsy but attentive to what I had to say and asked pertinent questions when necessary. I was impressed by his knowledge in the field of biblical history and that he asked my opinion on certain matters. I'm not a religious person by nature but through my course of study I'd learned a great many things about Catholicism and other religions because they played a huge part in the day-to-day lives of the people in the medieval era.

My eyes started to droop again and I was surprised to see it was after midnight. Talon must have noticed and stood. "Get some rest," he ordered. "I need to go anyway. There are things I need to take care of." He picked up the tray from where it had placed on the bedside table and moved toward the door then turned to face me again. "I'd like to ask you about something in the morning."

"Okay," I said slowly, interest peaked. "About?"

"It'll keep," was all Talon said before leaving the room and closing the door quietly behind him.

Chapter 4 – Secrets Revealed

"I have just
caught a glimpse
of what my life
is to become"

Jewel
"The Road"

I awoke at the crack of dawn refreshed and feeling a great desire to be outside in the sunshine that I saw streaming through the window. The sky was as bright blue and reminded me of Talon's eyes. Stop being an idiot, I scolded myself. You sound like a lovesick puppy.

Susan must have been in earlier because the IV had been removed and I noted that some fresh clothes had been stacked on the chair that Talon had occupied the day before. I was feeling brave so I threw back the covers and carefully maneuvered my legs over the side of the bed.

So far, so good, I thought. Bracing one hand on the bedside table, I slowly boosted myself to a standing position and found that while my legs were a little uneasy with my weight after four days of bed rest they still held me upright.

Step by hesitant step I grabbed the stack from the chair and made my way to the bathroom. Once there I turned on the shower and removed the nightgown I'd been wearing. I crossed to the sink and considered my reflection for a moment. My eyes were a little sunken but my color was generally good considering what had happened to me. My eyes fell to the spot where the vampire had latched onto my neck and I was surprised that there wasn't a scar of any kind. I leaned over the sink to get a better look as I ran my fingertips over the skin there. I still found nothing.

"What on earth?" I said out loud. There weren't even white marks that would have shown after a scar had a chance to fade. After thirty seconds or so of staring I decided that I wouldn't get any answers until I had a chance to speak with Talon again.

I stepped into the shower and washed quickly then changed into the clothes after I dried off. They weren't colors I would normally choose for myself but they fit perfectly and I had to admit that they flattered my features. I wondered if Talon had picked them out himself or if he'd sent Susan.

When I returned to the bedroom I found Talon just walking in. "Good morning," he said cheerfully. "I heard the shower and wanted to make sure everything was alright."

"I'm fine," I replied even though my legs were a little shaky and I could think of nothing but sitting down for a while. "The sun was beckoning me outside. Is it alright?" With all our talk the previous day Talon had never told me if there would be any perverse affects from having the vampire fed from me. Like never being able to be in the sunlight again or anything else.

"Sure. I was hoping to coax you out today. How are you feeling?"

"Good," I said easing down on the bed. "It felt good to shower and put on clean clothes. Thank you."

"It was Susan's idea." Talon eyed me for a moment. "Why don't you rest for a minute and then we'll have breakfast on the deck."

"Will Tracy be joining us?" I had to ask. There was no use torturing myself by wondering about her and just get it out.

Talon blinked. "No," he said after he'd recovered. "She's a night owl. Besides, she doesn't live here." He was explaining himself and it made me wonder just how involved the two actually were.

"Talon?" I heard a male voice call from the hall. "Are you up there?"

"In here," he said turning toward the open door. "What's up?"

The young man who'd been in the study the night I met with Talon appeared in the doorway. He looked to be in his early twenties like myself and had a boyish face. He wore glasses that made him look twelve but his smile was warm and bright as he took me in. "Hi, Miss Stockton," he said pleasantly. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you. And its Lena," I replied. I figured this had to be Mickey, the person responsible for completing my paper. I reminded myself to thank him for it later because his gaze turned to Talon dishearteningly.

"Hal just called," Mickey said. "There's trouble over there."

Talon's entire demeanor changed in an instant. He was like an animal ready to jump at a word or wrong move. "When?"

"Last night."

"Stay with Lena. When she's ready help her downstairs. I promised her breakfast on the deck." Then he turned to me. "I'm sorry. There are a few phone calls I have to make. I'll join you later."

"Of course," was all I got a chance to say before he stalked out of the room.

Mickey shyly entered the room and gave me a once over. "Thank you for finishing my paper," I told him. "I hope that my notes weren't too hard to understand."

"Are you kidding?" he replied, immediately more at ease as he waved a hand through the air. "You should see some of the chicken scratch gibberish Talon expects me to figure out sometimes. Your stuff was a walk in the park."

"I'd like to take a look at it," I said as I slowly got to my feet again. I didn't want to admit it but taking that shower had really thrown me. My legs weren't too wobbly but I knew that would change soon enough. "I supposedly wrote it after all."

"No prob," Mickey said with a shrug. "It's still on the computer. I'll print you off a copy." He came over and offered his arm and I was touched by the gesture. As we made our way downstairs I got a better look at Talon's home and found it both tasteful and functional. I also took the opportunity to ask Mickey about the matter with Hal that had Talon on alert.

"Well," he started as if he wasn't sure how much to say. "Let's just say that Hal was hired to do a little investigating for Talon. One of his people hadn't been heard from in a few days and from what I gather the situation isn't peachy."

"Is Talon's line of work dangerous?" I knew I had to be careful about how I went about looking for information where Talon was concerned. Employees like Mickey were loyal to the core about their bosses and what they considered private.

"Not really. Not the stuff that Hal's looking for anyway." We were about the same height so all Mickey had to do was glance in my direction to guess what I was thinking. "What do you think of Talon?"

"Well..." I replied slowly, wondering how to answer him. "At first I didn't think he was very considerate but when he saved my life and brought my back here to recover...let's just say it's takes a special person to open his home to a total stranger." Which was true, I just hoped I wasn't giving away the fact that I found Talon Graves very attractive. Time to change the subject. "What's Tracy like? I only saw her the one time but she seems nice."

Mickey grinned. "She's great – for a vampire."

We'd just stepped off the last stair and were heading toward the back of the house when I stopped dead in my tracks. "Vampire? What in the hell are you taking about?" Outrage filled my tone as I pulled away from Mickey.

For his part he was considering me with shock. "I-I'm sorry. I thought you knew. I thought you would have to know since Talon had brought you here. Tracy said she was glad he had considering how bad off you were. She even did what she could for you." Mickey was as distressed as I was. Thank God there was a chair in the hall where we had been walking because I had to sit.

"What do you mean Tracy did what she could? What did she do?" I was stunned beyond belief. Here I thought Talon had saved my life but for what, to be an appetizer for his girlfriend?

"D-didn't Talon tell - "

"Where is he?" I asked cutting Mickey off as I stood. Fury filled my veins and I no longer cared how wobbly my legs got or how fuzzy my head was. At this point I was seeing stars. When Mickey didn't answer I turned and went back to the front of the house, angrily calling out Talon's name in the process.

I found him in the study where we'd had our first conversation. I wanted to spit nails as I threw up the door to find him there. Talon was just hanging up the phone from where he sat at the desk and he looked at me in amazement.

"What is it?" he asked not bothering to get up. Concern was clearly written on his face but I ignored it.

"I'll tell you what's up," I railed. Mickey had entered the room behind me and the two exchanged helpless expressions. I didn't give him a chance to do anything before I continued. "And just when were you going to tell me about Tracy?" I knew that most of my outrage stemmed from the fact that I was attracted to Talon and I felt betrayed by him. Of course that had to be left out of the conversation.

Shock left Talon's features as his eyes darted from me to Mickey who already had a guilty look on his face. "I'm sorry, Talon," he said. "I thought you'd told her. It just slipped out."

"Mickey isn't to blame," I insisted. "How was he suppose to know what was secret and what wasn't. What's going on here?" What am I, a happy meal? I wanted to ask but thought better of it.

Talon ran a hand through his blonde hair in exasperation as he stood and rounded the desk. "Leave us alone, Mickey, I'll take it from here."

The look of pure relief was unmistakable in the young man's features as he turned quickly and left the room. For my part, I was still regarding Talon venomously.

We regarded each other in silence for a moment sizing each other up. After a while Talon spoke, "I was going to tell you about Tracy myself over breakfast but Mickey beat me to it." Then under his breath as he turned his head away, "If it weren't for Hal and his idiot crew. Look," he continued when his eyes met mine again, "the truth of it is if it weren't for Tracy you would be dead by now."

I blinked in astonishment. What could a vampire possibly have done to help me? The thought was ridiculous but I allowed Talon to continue.

"Didn't you notice that you don't have a scar from your attack?" he asked. After the words were out of his mouth my hand went to the place where the vampire had fed and I recalled my shock only an hour ago when I hadn't found a mark.

This doesn't make sense, I told myself. What did she do?

"Tracy isn't like that asshole who grabbed you," Talon explained. "When I brought you back to the house you were still bleeding pretty badly. I'd done what I could to stop it but your pulse was really weak." I saw the concern flash through his eyes and it took the wind out of my sails as well as surprised me. Whatever had happened Talon apparently did it for my best interest and I decided to hear him out.

"Most vampires stay away from humans as much as possible," Talon continued. "They have their own agendas to deal with and only want to be left alone." He went on to explain that vampires had the ability to heal most wounds with a touch of a finger. When he got me back to the house that night Tracy took one look at me and with the pass of one of her delicate fingers the wound was no more.

I knew Talon's story would seem outrageous to most of the populace but after what had transpired in the past few days I was ready to believe that my grandmother was God if he'd said it. I accepted his explanation but asked him how she'd felt about saving my life. "I am after all only human," I said with a touch of sarcasm.

Talon relaxed a little and smiled. "She knew you were an innocent in what had happened. You were a victim of circumstance and she hopes you will not hold it against her for what she is." With the last statement he eyed me warily.

I got the drift. Nobody wanted me to be a blabbermouth. I could deal with that, but on my own terms. I felt confident now. I knew I could ask for anything and Talon would probably give it to me. And what I wanted was the chance to learn all I could about them. To catalog, if only for my own purposes, how they really lived and died. Which stories and wives tales were true and what was false? Something told me that Talon was already working along those lines with Hal and that now was my chance to hop on the bandwagon.

"I won't hold anything against her," I began. "As long as you let me in on whatever it is you're up to."

Chapter 5 – A New Beginning

*"Help me believe in anything
I want to be someone who believes."
Counting Crows
"Mr. Jones"*

"Talon was afraid to have me join his staff at first," Lena told her son as she picked him up from the changing table. Christopher liked it when she talked to him in her soothing voice so she often told him stories of her travels after she went to work for Talon. Of course she realized he didn't understand her but it was good practice for when he was older and it helped keep the details fresh in her mind.

Her life had been extraordinary thanks to Talon Graves and Lena was grateful for all that he'd done for her. I miss him, she thought to herself as she grabbed a receiving blanket that one of the women in the village had given her and wrapped it around Christopher. He was quiet now and peered up at his mother with the intense eyes he'd inherited from his father, Mikael.

"Shall I tell you about Venice or Cairo?" Lena asked, offering her finger to the baby that he immediately grasped tightly for being only a month old and tried to pull it to his mouth. Lena laughed slightly as she crossed to the rocking chair that Mikael had made as well and sat down.

"I know," she started. "My first assignment was in Washington D.C."

Washington D.C. / Fall, 1993

It was my first trip east. I'd always thought I would see New York or Boston first but D.C. had it's own flavor I instantly loved and I wished that I had more time to look around. I had two weeks there and the staff at the Smithsonian were very accommodating in helping me find the information I was looking for even though it wasn't getting me anywhere. Talon had told me the going would be slow but the tedious hours I was spending in the archives made me want to stretch me legs a little.

It had taken me a while to get Talon to open up about what he was doing. Eventually I'd dragged it out of him what Hal and his staff were looking for and when I told him I could do it better and quicker his brows had shot up in amazement.

"Really?" he'd asked. We'd finally moved to the deck out back and were having coffee and fresh blueberry muffins that I would later find out were one of Talon's few weaknesses. "What makes you feel that you could do any better?"

"First of all, that's what I'm trained in," I'd said leaning forward to consider him seriously. "Secondly, my degree is in history. What more do you need in a researcher? You've already seen how I operate if you've looked at my notes from my thesis. From what you've said the project you're working on requires the same approach that I have experience in."

I had to admit that I was a little surprised by what Talon was looking for. Apparently the ancestry of how vampires came into existence didn't derive from Vlad Tepes as many legends stated. Tracy and those like her were a part of a long line of creatures whose lineage was hazy to best. It appeared that there was a figure that dated back to the dawn of man whose identity was unknown. This was the information Tracy, through Talon, was looking to find out.

This first vampire was said to have left behind writings about how he came to be and detailed his exploits after the fact. It was unknown if he were still in existence or if he was long dead. That was another point Talon had been charged to find out.

I had been fascinated by the prospect of the subject matter and eager to jump into the search. Talon, however, needed convincing.

"Regardless of your education there are those out there that would do anything to find out this information themselves. Didn't you hear me when I said that one of Hal's men was found dead in Stockholm?"

Of course that fact didn't escape me. I merely chose to not let it affect my desire to participate. "So hire bodyguards," I'd suggested. "You're paying for their muscles anyway. Just let me be the one to do the research." I had regarded him a moment before adding, "Besides, how much have they actually turned up anyhow?"

I had him there. In Talon's explanation that I'd had to practically drag out of him, he'd claimed that while the search had been ongoing for nearly three years, nothing significant had come up. He seemed to relent a smidgeon.

Talon took a sip of his coffee then leaned back in his chair. "Let's say I agree," he began. "Where would you start?"

"Well, I'd want to go over everything that's been turned up so far," I'd said making a mental list. "From what you've said Hal has been concentrating in some good areas but what he failed to do is start in the right place."

Talon's brows had gone up at that but I continued. "I've found that in order to do good research it's easier to begin in the place you'd least expect." His brows furrowed at that point and I'd been taken aback by the urge to smooth the creases away with my fingers. "America is significantly younger than any country in Europe. Therefore, because we are the melting pot of the world we've adopted the cultures of all the countries."

Talon had been interested then. "As a result, while our libraries and museums may not contain all the information that is possible to have, they have more than enough to help narrow a search without putting in all the leg work. I think I could have something to go on in say...six months," I added.

Talon had thought about it for about thirty seconds. "You're on," he'd said with a grin. "And if you don't have anything by then you walk away. No questions asked."

I'd blinked. That was a curve I hadn't expected but reluctantly I'd agreed. Talon talked to Hal and had arranged for a full security detail to be with me around the clock while I'd made calls to arrange for access with some of the best libraries and museums in the country. I'd chosen the Smithsonian first and after I was finished in D.C. I would go on to the Metropolitan in New York City. I hoped to get at least a foothold on the subject without much trouble. I couldn't wait to travel to Europe or Asia but I needed a decent basis first.

After a week in D.C. I'd come up with a few good leads on where to look next but I wanted more evidence before I said anything to Talon. I had an overwhelming need to prove to him that I could do this but it didn't extent for my desire to prove anything historical. I was aware of the underlying desire I had for Talon himself but I also knew that he was unavailable.

Talon had made it quite clear that there was an involvement between he and Tracy so I resigned myself to the fact that there was no way for me to compete. After all she was a vampire and I knew that if I became a nuisance she could kill me whenever she wanted. Self-preservation won out.

"Miss Stockton?" George asked from the doorway where he'd poked his head in. "You wanted me to remind you when it was six."

I glanced at my watch and was surprised to see that it was indeed six. It never failed to amaze me how lost I could get when it came to books.

"Thanks, George," I replied taking a look around the desk I'd been given to work at and decided that it didn't need straightening before I left for the day. George was one of three bodyguards that had been assigned for my protection by Talon and Hal. I couldn't go anywhere without one of them and it sometimes made me wish I'd never suggested it to Talon. I stood and closed the book I'd been reading and slipped it and my papers in my briefcase. "Let's head back to the hotel so I can call Talon."

Part of the agreement was that I called him every night to make a progress report. I looked forward to hearing his voice but the nightly conversations didn't afford me the opportunity to try to get him out of my head, which I wanted to do very much. Talon was pleased by my progress so far but never made a comment on Tracy's thoughts on the matter. Not that it made one bit of difference to me. In my eyes I worked for Talon not Tracy. As a matter of fact I hadn't even seen her since the night she answered the door at Talon's which suited me just fine.

As George and I rode back to the hotel I began to look forward to the prospect of dinner. I was fast becoming used to the meals that I was spending with the three men being paid to protect me. Since I didn't have many memories of family bonding the nightly ritual of dining with John, Adam and George brought our group together like one and helped me feel safe at placing my life in their hands.

I pulled out the book once again continued to read along the drive. There was plenty of light left and I had one of my feelings that I was on to something. There was a reference to a learned man whose origins were unknown in a story that had been passed down by the locals in Poland. A great cathedral had been under construction nearby and the man who popped up in the middle of the night claimed to be a scholar looking for a place to call home for a while.

I read further and saw that the man was only seen at night. He claimed to study and write during much of the day and only ventured from his desk to eat sparingly then return to work. He wanted to hear the stories of the area and would even pay to be allowed to chronicle the oral history that had been passed down for hundreds of years.

Times were lean and the town's people were eager to earn an honest coin by telling the man their stories. He welcomed them into the home he occupied and his guests came away with tales of the fantastic things they saw in his home and the wonderful refreshments that were served by the scholars own hand for he didn't employ any servants. He claimed they only interrupted him when he was trying to work.

I had to close the book once again when we arrived at the hotel and resigned myself to wait to open it again until after I'd called Talon. George and I phoned down for room service then I went to take a quick shower before placing the call to Michigan. We'd agreed the nightly call would take place at seven and I knew better than to be late.

I'd made that mistake on the second night in D.C. when I'd gotten lost in a volume of ghastly poetry I'd hope to find a reference in and found Talon in my hotel room when I'd returned there shortly after midnight.

"Where the hell have you been?" he snarled. It appeared as if he'd been pacing the room between the door and the window in the living room of the suit that housed the three guards and myself.

"Where do you think?" I snapped just as harshly as he had. He didn't give me a chance to put down my briefcase before he was in front of me had my arms in a vise like grip.

"Let's get one thing straight," he hissed through clenched teeth. "When I tell you to call me a seven I mean seven. This isn't a game we're playing here, little girl. There are other lives besides yours at stake and as long as I foot the bill you'll do as I say."

He was scaring me and I didn't try to hide it. "I'm sorry," I managed, not bothering to attempt to get out of his grasp because it would be useless. "I lost track of time that's all. It won't happen again."

Talon relented then and pulled me close to him. "I'm sorry to be so rough," he said. "It's just that we've lost too many people in this and I don't want to you to become another statistic."

My heart leapt at the thought that he was that worried about me then I realized it was because I was his employee and I pulled away from him before I did something I would regret later. "You don't have to explain, Talon. I didn't realize how strict you were about the call. Don't worry, it won't happen again. I'm sorry you had to come all this way to check up on me."

Talon's brows furrowed again and I had to turn away lest I fall into temptation and fantasy and smooth the lines away. "Okay," he replied changing tactics. "Let's go get something to eat before I have to fly back."

Dinner had been wonderful. Talon had taken me to a little Greek restaurant and we were there for three hours discussing the progress I'd made in the two days on the job. He didn't want to admit it but Talon was impressed with the leads I'd found thus far and even commented that he couldn't wait to see what I came up with once I hit Europe.

I gleamed under his praise and was sorry when he dropped me back off at the hotel. It was after that that I'd asked George, who had the evening shift to let me know when it was six so that we could leave the museum and have enough time to return to the hotel to call Talon.

"Hi," I said warmly when Talon answered the phone. I was a little surprised that it was always him that answered. It made me feel special to think that he anticipated my call and was waiting by the phone.

"Hi, yourself," he replied. "How's it going?"

"Really well I think." I told him about the story I'd come across just before leaving the museum. "I'll probably finish the passage over dinner. Do you think it's him?"

"Could be," Talon said. "Does it fit into the timeline you've established to far?"

"I think so. I haven't booted up the computer yet to verify." One of the things Talon had given me before leaving Michigan was a state of the art laptop to record my findings in. I wasn't used to working with it yet and choose to leave it in the suite for safe keeping during the day and I logged my findings on it each night, usually while I ate dinner.

"Still not used to using it yet, huh?" he teased. I could hear the smile in his tone and when I closed my eyes I could see him sitting at his desk holding the phone to his ear. Was Tracy there or did he make sure he was alone for this nightly ritual between the two of us? I wondered if I would ever know.

"No, not really. But don't worry, it's secure. John takes it to bed with him during the day and Adam looks after it until George and I return from the library."

Talon was chuckling now. "I know you understand what's at stake, Lena. You'll get used to it eventually." He then expressed a concern that I was working too hard and that I needed to get out a little.

"With the amount you're paying me I shouldn't even sleep," I giggled. "Are you worried I'm burning myself out?"

"Just make sure that I don't have to come out there and show you how to have fun," Talon said sternly.

Oh, please come, I thought. Then out loud, "Yes, sir. Maybe I'll see if George wants to take in a movie."

"That's a girl. Listen, it's late. Get some sleep and I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Okay," I replied. We made our good-byes and rang off. After dinner I changed into pajamas and retrieved the book I'd brought back from the library. After stacking my pillows behind me I propped the big book open on my lap and continued the story.

No one questioned the scholar's hours or the fact that when his visitors left his home they seemed dizzy and needed bed rest. In fact, it was thought there was a sickness that was invading the area. There was never any connection made between the visits and the unexplained illnesses until years later when the author was himself in the area, collecting stories for his own volume.

That could be our man, I thought to myself. Him or another vampire. On paper I detailed everything I thought pertinent about the tale and mentally added the location to the others I thought important to check out personally.

I spent another week in the city before traveling on the New York. I had many leads to look into and I was hoping to find just as many in my research at the Met.

Chapter 6 – Worms in the Big Apple

Something in your eyes That Tells me why
I'm a fool for your warm affection."

Erasure

"Rain"

New York / Fall, 1993

To say that I was disappointed in what I found in New York was an understatement. I couldn't even find anything more to back up what I'd found in Washington. I was disenchanted and Talon could tell when I spoke to him each night.

"You can't expect to be led through a forest with breadcrumbs like Hansel and Gretel," he said one night. "You did really well in D.C. Besides, you're scheduled to be there for a few more days. Maybe something will turn up."

"I hope so," I relented. "I decided to take John up on his offer to teach me Arabic. I guess his father was in the service and was stationed in Iran for a while on a diplomatic protection duty. When he found out we will eventually travel to Egypt he thought it would come in handy if I knew the language and got separated from them for some reason."

"You'd better not get separated from them," Talon snapped. "If those three yahoos can't keep you safe then I'll find some who can."

"He's just taking precautions, Talon," I soothed. "Don't worry, I'll be fine." In our conversations lately it was steadily becoming apparent that Talon felt I wasn't being protected enough. "They aren't as good as you are but they'll do." I shouldn't have said that I realized but I didn't regret it. I swore I wouldn't.

Talon was silent for a minute then replied, "If I could be there you know I would."

"You have other responsibilities besides holding my hand," I said. Then I added teasingly, "Besides, don't you want me to expand my horizons by learning another language? Or do you think I'll charge you more for my services?"

Talon laughed outright. "You're funny," he said. "Remember that line when you ask for a cost of living raise."

Things perked up a little after that. I found a few minor references that I thought were worth checking out and added them to my list of places to go which was starting to take shape. I found many references that pointed toward a biblical figure that held promise but I wasn't able to put enough together to say that this was the person I was looking for.

I put together an itinerary for travel starting with Europe and then heading through North Africa and on to Asia if I turned up absolutely nothing. I faxed the itinerary to Talon and he okayed it without question. My expense account seemed bottomless but I didn't take advantage of it. Between the hours I spent doing research I arranged for passports and visas and other papers the four of us would need when we left the US.

I was excited to go but at the same time a little apprehensive at the prospect. Talon was coming to New York the next day to see us off and I couldn't wait to see him again. In fact, his plane would be landing soon and they'd made arrangements for him to meet us at the hotel. Part of me wanted Talon to accompany us to Europe, which was selfish, but I couldn't help myself.

George and I hadn't left the museum for the night yet and I was feeling restless so I decided to walk around the exhibits for a while before heading back to the hotel. I told George I'd only be a little while. The museum was closing soon and I wanted to wander by myself for a while.

Without thought I headed for the Egyptian exhibit that took up a large chunk of the building. Aside from medieval history, the time of the great Egyptian rulers was a favorite of mine and to see all so many of that era's treasures in one place filled me with a sense of awe.

I was looking at a beautiful sarcophagus when I heard someone enter the room. I glanced at my watch and saw there was only a few minutes left until the museum closed so I looked over my shoulder to see if it was one of the staff I'd come to know in the past two weeks that I'd been here.

It wasn't anyone I knew. The man appeared to be in his late fifties and was dressed in a well-tailored dark suit. The way he meandered about the room made me think that he did work there and was taking a few minutes at the end of the day to enjoy the exhibits like I was.

"Good evening," he said when he looked up to see me standing there. I registered his shock at seeing me and I felt a little guilty at disturbing his hiatus from his responsibilities.

"Hello," I replied pleasantly. "Are you taking a break, too?"

He smiled as he took a few steps closer. "How did you guess? I try to come down as much as possible to look around. It relieves stress." He regarded me a moment before adding, "I don't believe we've met. I'm Alexander Mosley."

"Lena Stockton," I replied, holding out my right hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, I'm sure." He took my hand easily and I noted how cool it was. Warning signs went up in my head and when he let my hand go I involuntarily took a step back and eyed him warily. He skin didn't seem too pale but that could easily be concealed by makeup.

I silently cursed myself for telling George I would be all right alone. But I realized that George wouldn't be much help if Alexander was indeed a vampire and his life would be in as much danger as my own was. My mind was racing to remember the way that I'd wandered to get where I was but fear was quickly taking over.

"Are you all right?" Alexander asked as he reached out to touch my shoulder in concern.

"I-I'm fine," I replied, pulling back abruptly. I grasped at the excuse he offered. "I guess I'm not feeling well all of a sudden. Please excuse me."

"Let me help you," he moved to take my arm and I couldn't think of a way to refuse without being rude. I prayed that someone would come along and I could slip away.

"Are you the woman whose visiting from the University of Michigan?" he asked as he propelled me along the exhibits.

"Yes," I managed. "You've heard of me?"

"Oh yes. I was hoping to meet you before you left. I understand you're researching ancient texts."

That was the story Talon and I had come up with to explain my research, which in fact held a certain amount of truth. I kept an eye out for an escape and as Alexander led me past an Egyptian tablet that was showcased in glass I noticed that he didn't have a reflection.

I jerked back in horror as memories flooded my head of the night nearly six months ago when the vampire in Adrian had attacked me. I heard Alexander call out to me but all I wanted to do was get away. Run until my legs couldn't carry me anymore.

"Calm down, Miss Stockton," he said and instantly I felt my panic die down. I stared up at him in disbelief as I realized that I wanted to do whatever he wanted. Just like I had when I lay helpless in the back of that van while I had been driven to what would have certainly been my death if it hadn't been for Talon.

"There is no reason for this distress," Alexander said soothingly. "I merely wanted to take a moment to see how your research was going. I won't hurt you."

"W-who are y-you?" I managed to ask.

"Why, I told you. Alexander Mosley. Of the Manhattan Mosley's?" he asked like I was supposed to know. "No matter," he went on when I didn't respond. "It has come to my attention what you are after Miss Stockton and it leads me to wonder why." He studied me pointedly but I didn't know what to say. I wanted to tell him whatever he wanted to hear. Anything that would get him to leave me alone.

"What is it you want to know, Mr. Mosley?"

"Who do you work for and what do you plan to do with the information you're looking for once you have it?"

I found myself responding before I thought to lie. "I work for Ta-"

"Lena." I glanced over my shoulder and saw that Talon had just entered the exhibit room. Relief flooded my senses but I couldn't force myself to call out a warning.

He must have assessed the situation quick enough and started forward. A man entered behind Talon and I recognized him as the director of the museum, Mr. Minarik, then George behind him.

Alexander cursed under his breath and took a step away from me. "There you are," Talon said as he came up beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "George said you were taking a stroll but I couldn't wait to see you."

"H-hello," I stammered. There was still a part of me that wanted to answer the vampire's questions but Talon was pulling me away from him and chattering on about his flight, leaving Mr. Minarik and George with the vampire.

When we were out of earshot he pulled me into his arms and put his mouth next to my ear. "Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

I nodded mutely. I seemed to be regaining my faculties and it left me feeling like an idiot. I had been just about to give Talon away without thought. What kind of power do these creatures hold over mere mortals, I asked myself as I let Talon hold me tight against him.

"Miss Stockton said she wasn't feeling well," Alexander was saying to Mr. Minarik and George. "Perhaps it would be best to see her home for the evening."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of her," Talon replied as he lifted his head and regarded the men. "Thank you for your help Mr. Minarik. If I'd been left to find her on my own I wouldn't have found her for a week. George." The big man that I'd come to trust so completely nodded in reply and silently led the way out of the exhibit.

"Don't say anything until we get outside," Talon muttered. I wasn't surprised when we didn't return to the work area that I'd been using during my stay at the Met. Instead George led the way as we immediately exited the building and ducked into the black limousine that was waiting at the curb.

"Are you okay?" Talon asked for the second time in ten minutes. The limousine was just pulling away after George had shut the front passenger door behind him.

"I'm okay," I assured him as I held onto his hand tightly. "Don't worry – I didn't tell him anything. He knew who I was though and what I was looking for."

"Had you ever met him before?" Talon asked. He was sitting so close and he had his other arm around my shoulders. I felt safe once again. It was funny really. I thought I'd put my fears behind me about that night that felt so long ago but in reality I was worried that I was a liability to Talon instead of an asset.

"No, I swear. The only people I had contact with were the ones that I asked about materials."

Talon sat back and pulled me closer. "It's a damn good thing you're leaving tomorrow then," he said as his hand absently rubbed my upper arm. "Did you catch his name?"

I told him, relieved that he didn't intend to keep me from the planned trip. "I'll have Hal look into him," Talon said and I felt him turn his head to place a light hiss on my head.

I was exhilarated! Of course it was a brotherly gesture, Talon was still involved with Tracy after all, but it was effective enough to chase away the last traces of fear.

"I'm glad you came in when you did," I said. My head was pillowed comfortably on his chest and I never wanted to move again, "He had this...hold of some kind over my mind. I wanted to runaway one minute then spill my guts the next."

"Some vampires have the ability to control the minds of others," Talon explained. "It makes it easier for them to get others to do what they want."

"That must be why I had no desire to get away from the other one either."

Talon's arm tightened slightly around me but before he had a chance to comment the limousine came to a stop outside the hotel. Talon quickly gave instructions to the driver to return to the museum with George to retrieve my files and papers while he and I went in to the suite.

Once inside Talon poured generous amounts of brandy into two snifters and handed one to me. "Drink this and then go have a bath," he instructed. "When George returns we'll have dinner and go over everything you've found so far."

I smiled at his attempt to help me forget the encounter with the vampire. It was so much like what he'd tried before I couldn't fault him for the endeavor and said nothing. Instead, I obediently sipped the brandy and moved to the settee and curled into a corner of it.

George returned a short time later and reported that the work area had been intact, that nothing was missing as far as he knew but that I would be better able to ascertain the fact. John and Adam came in a short time later and said that everything at the airport security checked out fine and our plans to leave were on schedule.

Talon went to his briefcase while the rest of us looked over the room service menu and pulled out four thick manila envelopes. He handed one of them to each of us in turn and I was shocked when I opened mine and found documents with my picture on them but used five different names.

"What's all this?" I asked holding up a few of the faked passports. A quick glance told me that one of them said I was from Ontario, Canada while another claimed I was a South African from Johannesburg.

"In case we run into trouble," Adam, who was usually very quiet, said. "Talon agreed to the necessity when I suggested it last week."

At first the thought of having alternate identities came as a shock to me. Then I recalled how Alexander Mosley had been able to find out who I was so easily and I realized how handy they could be.

"There's a background history included with each ID," Talon was saying. "I suggest that all of you go over each of them and work out the details before using any."

"We're still traveling over as who we are, right?" I asked, not sure how soon I would have to acquaint myself with one of the identities.

"Yes," Adam put in. "Hopefully we won't have to use any of them. It's just a back up."

We ordered a dinner fit for a king and had a lovely time talking and laughing. George was a natural comedian who had our sides aching with the stories he told of his childhood when he lived on a ranch in Colorado. Talon had insisted on a bottle of Don Perignon that didn't help with anyone's ability to control themselves.

Our flight was due to leave at ten the next morning so I thought that it was fortunate that everyone made it to bed by midnight. There were a few heavy heads the next day that were easily fixed by generous amounts of coffee and we didn't even miss the flight. Our

alternate identities were stashed away in the fake bottom of my carry on where they would be safe from detection.

The drive to the airport was made via the limousine and I found it odd that Talon was quiet the entire way. I'd expected last minute instructions or even threats to the guards as to how to go about their jobs but he didn't say much of anything. In fact, he stared out of the window like he was wrestling with an internal conflict of some kind.

"I'm not going to tell you to be careful," Talon said just before I boarded the plane. Adam and George were already abroad doing a final check before take off and John was standing a few feet away, affording me a few minutes alone with Talon. Talon would be catching a flight himself back to Michigan in another hour but I still wished he were coming with us.

"That's a surprise," I teased. We were facing each other and it felt like there wasn't another person in the terminal. I remembered the gaiety of the evening before and fantasized what spending more time with him would be like. "I'm still waiting for you to slip me a can of special garlic mace or something."

He smiled ruefully as he took a step closer and pulled the two sides of my light jacket together. The action surprised me. In the past twenty-four hours Talon had been touching me more than he had since we'd first met and it delighted me. "I think what happened last night at the museum taught you enough about what you could be dealing with. Just make sure you continue to call every three days like we talked about. I may have to come over for some other business so if I do I'll see if I can arrange to pop in."

"Sounds good, boss," I replied with a mock salute. The last call for the flight was made and John started to make his way to the entrance. I had to go but for some reason I couldn't take the first step. "I'll call when we get to the hotel in London."

"Okay," he replied. Was that him that sounded breathless? No, couldn't be.

"Bye," I said quietly. "Take care."

John was in the hallway now that led to the plane. Talon took a step back then stopped. He never said a word as he closed the gap between us again and hooked his hand around the back of my neck. Before I had a chance to react his lips were locked on mine in a passionate kiss that stole my breath away. I know it sounds so cliché but that's what I felt like. I kissed him back just as desperately.

It was a brief kiss but it conveyed everything that I felt for him, feelings that I knew I had no right to let out of my own head. Talon belonged to someone else and I had no right to be doing this. But I didn't stop it either.

Talon pulled back and I could see the guilt in his eyes but I refused to feel the emotion myself. Silently I turned and walked toward the plane.

Chapter 7 – World at my Fingertips

How can I say what must remain unspoken
Don't want to spoil all that we said before."
Erasure
How Can I Say"

The work in London was slow and tedious and I threw myself into it so that I didn't have time to think about Talon or what had happened at the airport. When I called him after we'd arrived, the conversation was stilted and uncomfortable for the both of us. Talon didn't mention the kiss and I was too afraid to discuss it.

The usual ease was gone and I had no idea how to get it back. I swore to myself time and time again I wouldn't regret what had happened nor would I apologize for it, Talon was the one who kissed me after all. Every time we talked I was dying to ask him why he'd done it but I was afraid of what the answer would be. So I plowed ahead. Work was the only thing that kept me from suffocating in my own misery and thank God I was able to make some headway.

With the information I was able to piece together in first London then Dublin I felt confident I was on the right track. When we hit Paris six weeks after our arrival in Europe my spirits were high and I actually had some specific time periods where I was positive that I was tracking the person we were looking for.

There were times that I became caught up in the whole idea that I was helping to find the father of all vampires and I would ask myself what in the hell I thought I was doing. The natural historian in me knew the research was worthwhile and would serve as useful knowledge not only to the vampires of the world but the humans as well. After all, people fear what they don't understand so knowing the circumstances that brought these creatures into existence had to be good for something. That's what my mind said anyway.

My heart, or the part of my that still remembered that night and the vampire who'd violated me so completely, said that the only encounters I'd had with the creatures had led to fear, dread and threat of death. Could I be responsible for those similar feelings running through everyone I knew and then some if this information revealed something vulgar? I didn't know the answer and wasn't willing to take the time to look within.

We were scheduled to be in Paris for almost a month so I'd made arrangements to rent a house close to the museum for our comfort. Thanksgiving was spent with my bodyguards and I made the extra effort to have a special holiday for them because we were all far from home. I amazed myself by cooking a full traditional meal that everyone loved. John said that the mashed potatoes were so much like his mother's that he went to call her even though it was late in California where she lived.

I made time to see the sights in the city. I did the tourist thing, taking pictures and shopping in the great boutiques on the Champs Elysees. There was a coffee shop close to the house and I liked to stop there in the morning with John and the interpreter I'd hired on the way to the museum for cappuccinos. The city was cold but there wasn't snow yet. All in all the city was delightful and I was glad I had the opportunity to see it.

One morning while we were at the coffee shop I ran into an American, rather it was he who ran into me. John and Victor, our interpreter, were already waiting by the door, cups in hand while I went back to the counter for a napkin. The next customer had already stepped forward and had placed his order. The girl handed him his cup and before I could dodge out of the way he turned into me and he ended up wearing most of the hot cup of espresso.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I cried as I grabbed some napkins and handed him some so that he could dab at his overcoat. Then I realized that he might not understand me and I looked over at Victor who had already started over.

"No, it's okay," the man answered to my relief in perfect English. He took the offered napkins as he replaced the cup on the counter. "It's my fault entirely. I'm in a hurry and wasn't watching where I was going."

He finally looked up at me. His hands held sopping wet wads of paper napkin but that didn't detract from the fact that he appeared as if he'd just stepped out of a fashion magazine. His clothes were perfectly tailored and his shoes looked Italian. His hair was dark brown and he wore a full beard that made it difficult to guess his age.

"You didn't get any on you, did you?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine," I answered. "Do you live close by? If not I can call for a driver to pick you up. I normally walk to the museum so you're free to use our car." John was at my side now, silently looking me over for signs that I'd been hurt. When he was satisfied he turned to the stranger for a thorough once over.

"No, I live only a block or so away," he informed me. "I'm waiting on a conference call and wanted a fresh cup. I'm really sorry. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes," I said with a smile that the stranger returned quickly. "If you're okay than I guess I'll be on my way."

"I'm sorry," he said again as he held out his hand. "Let me make it up to you. Would you like to join me for lunch? I'm sure my son would find your company refreshing. My girlfriend, Lydia, has been out of town for a week and he's always found my conversations to be boring if he doesn't have any outside stimuli."

I picked up on John's look of hesitance. "Thank you but I'm afraid I can't," I replied brightly. "If you'll excuse me I'm already late."

"Of course," he said with a nod and a silly grin. "It was nice to have run into you."

"Thank you. It was nice to run into you too." I spent the rest of the day with a silent stupid grin on my face at the encounter. After the few weeks that I'd been in Europe it was nice to run into someone from home with a real sense of humor.

It was in Paris that I located my first real find. There was an ancient book that was written in Latin that I'd had to beg to even look at. Once I had the book in my hands I rushed back to the cubicle I'd been given and was engrossed for the rest of the day. That wasn't the find, however. At the end of the day when I closed the book in preparation to go home, I noticed that the paper that had been adhered to the inside of the back cover was loose.

I sat down at the table again and opened the back cover. Carefully, I peeled back the paper and found that a ripped piece of parchment that was folded in half had been tucked inside. I glanced around the area suspiciously before I slipped the paper out and unfolded it carefully.

It was incredibly old. The handwriting was neat and precise but it was the content that shocked me. It was written in first person and the author was describing his hunger that was a thirst that he couldn't control. An angel was telling him that he had to fight the hunger and that if he could hold out the grace of God would be his reward.

I was convinced that what I'd found was an actual excerpt from the writings of the first vampire. The last line mentioned a temple in Abu Sir where the encounter supposedly took place and something about the great resting place of the kings. The place sounded familiar and it took a few minutes before it hit me. If I remembered correctly, Abu Sir was the site of a few pyramids and shrines southwest of Cairo. The mention of the resting place of the kings

must be another reference to the pyramids there as well as the ones at Giza that was only a few hundred miles to the north!

I was exhilarated at the find but I didn't believe that it was the vampire's hand however. The handwriting was in Latin, the same as the rest of the book where I'd found the parchment, and matched the monk's who'd copied it.

I knew Talon would be happy about the find so I was anxious to get back to the house to call him. George understood that I was excited on the short drive but I didn't divulge what I'd found. That knowledge I wanted to share with Talon first.

I made notes in the car on the arrangements that would have to be made for the trip to Egypt. I'd planned on heading into Germany when we were through in Paris but the lead on the parchment couldn't be ignored.

I silently thanked John for the lessons he'd given in Arabic. The idea of dealing with an interpreter left me a little uneasy given what I had to look for.

Even with my head swimming with what had to be done the ride to the house seemed to take hours instead of minutes. When I finally closed myself in the den and picked up the phone to call Talon I paused. Holding the receiver to my chest I pulled the slip of paper out of my pocket and once again read the words to make sure it was real.

"Hello," Talon answered from half way across the world. In an instant all the feelings of unease between us evaporated and I felt that I could talk as freely with him as I had before the kiss in D.C.

"I've found something." There was no way of concealing the excitement in my voice.

"Lena?" he asked with a yawn and it dawned on me that while it was early evening in Paris it was around eight a.m. where Talon was. With the hours he kept with Tracy it was time for him to sleep.

"God, I'm sorry to wake you but Talon I've found something," I repeated. "It's an actual piece of his history."

"W-wha...Are you sure?" He was awake now and excitement brewed in his tone as well.

I laughed. It was the first time I'd ever known Talon to be speechless on this scale. "I'm pretty sure. I found a torn piece of parchment in a book with references in Egypt. I'm planning to go there as soon as possible."

Talon wanted to know every detail and I was more than happy to shared it all with him. I conveyed my ideas on where to look first as well as the other arrangements I'd thought of on the way from the museum.

"Sounds like you have everything in hand," he said finally. "There's only one thing I can think of that you're missing."

"What are you talking about?" What could I possibly have forgotten?

"Make plans for five instead of four."

He was coming? Suddenly the excitement of the parchment was gone and I was thrown back into the moments after Talon kissed me in the airport terminal. Would I be able to be in his presence and not feel like an utter fool?

"Is there a problem?" he asked when I didn't answer.

"N-no. Not at all," I stammered. "Will you be joining us here or do you want to meet us in Egypt?"

"I'll have to check out things here first before I can say. Go ahead and make whatever plans you need to and I'll catch up when I can."

"Okay. Let me know as soon as you find out," I answered. I hung up the phone and fell dumfounded into the chair at the desk. I tried to figure Talon's reasoning for accompanying us to Egypt. I understood that this was the first concrete piece of evidence that I'd found but he'd

hired me to do the research, not to hold my hand along the way. Did he have doubts that I couldn't do the work? Maybe he was still as uncomfortable as I was about the kiss and he was now looking for an excuse to fire me from the project. My heart dropped at the thought. I'd poured a great deal of effort into this research and I'd be damned if Talon Graves thought he could get rid of me so easily.

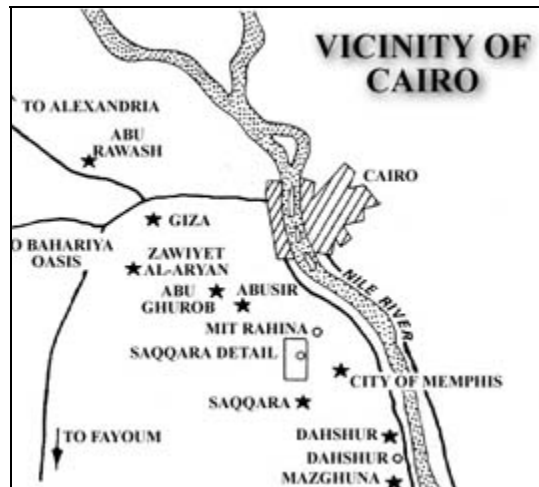
I'll show him, I thought to myself as I sat up straight in the chair once again and reached for the pad where I'd started my notes in the car. I would just have to beat him at his own game and prove that this project couldn't survive without me. Hadn't I already surpassed Hal's efforts in a fraction of the time?

It took me a matter of hours to arrange for all the details. I rented another house in Cairo to start off with because Christmas was coming soon and I'd liked the homey feeling over Thanksgiving and wanted to continue the holiday spirit.

I explained the change of plans at dinner and the guys, who seemed to pick up on my excitement, were just as enthusiastic to go to the land of the pharaohs as I was. John said he was eager to see how well his Arabic had survived after so many years out of the region, which launched into a few colorful tales from his childhood.

"I also want to see how good of a student you are, Lena," John teased as he took another bite of the veal we were having for dinner.

"You are a great teacher," I replied with a smile. These three men were the closest things I had to a family and I was worried that I would lose them as well if Talon decided to fire me. I won't allow that to happen, I thought as I resigned myself to the course of action.



Chapter 8 - Egypt

"I'm not going to bend,
 And I'm not going to break
 And I'm not going to worry about it anymore."
Counting Crows
"Anna Begins"

Egypt was everything I thought it would be and then some. The climate was comfortable for a desert and I felt like a great explorer in the khaki pants and bush jacket I'd purchased for our arrival. Talon had left word that he would be there later the next day and would meet us at the house. It had been only two days since my discovery in Paris and I was confident I would convince Talon I was the only person who could do this job for him.

Before leaving Paris I'd purchased a couple of books on Egypt and some of its greatest archeology finds so that I could brush up on my history. Since my specialty in history was the medieval era it had been a long time since I'd studied anything to do with Egypt and I was relieved to realize that I remembered most of what I'd had a chance to look over during the plane ride.

I was hoping to spend some time learning more about Egypt and its people. Islam fascinated me and John had promised to take me to a mosque during one of the prayer times.

"Don't worry," he said when I voiced concern over upsetting any of the worshippers. "Islam is an old and open religion. If it weren't for the fact that my mother would have thrown a fit at the time, I was considering converting when we lived here."

That was the first time that John had ever mentioned his mother. Adam had mentioned once that she was an alcoholic and that John really resented her for it. John himself hardly ever touched alcohol and I was proud of his resolve.

The house was spectacular. The rooms were airy and full of light and the owners had many plants scattered about so that, coupled with the warm colors in the furniture and walls, made all of us feel very welcomed. The house was owned by a British couple that used it for holidays and rented it out to trustworthy visitors that were cleared by their solicitor here in Cairo. I'd been told that the husband was a great patron of Egyptian art and that he'd met his wife here when he was in his early twenties and trying to become a famous archeologist. The couple were now in their sixties and had three children.

The house was full of the treasures that were collected from a lifetime of travels. There was a marvelous tapestry from twelfth century France that caught my eye in the dining room and many works of art throughout.

We got in rather late so there wasn't any time to look around too much. I slept peacefully until I had an incredibly erotic dream about Talon that woke me from a dead sleep. I was drenched in sweat and shaken by the thoughts that came from my own mind. Vowing that I wouldn't be able to sleep another wink I got out of bed and quietly worked my way through the rest of the books I'd brought with me until the first rays of dawn peaked through the windows of my room that led onto the terrace.

I was upstairs hanging the last of my things in the closet when Talon arrived at the house. I heard the men talking cheerfully in the main hall as I neared the top of the stairs a few minutes later. When I heard Talon's voice my heart flipped a little in my chest and I stopped so that the corner of the wall blocked me from his vision.

"How was the trip?" George asked Talon as the four of them stood in a circle.

"Fine," he replied, slipping his hands into the pockets of his black jeans. "I know the jet lag will hit me soon enough."

George laughed as John and Adam shook their heads in understanding. Since we'd made the trip only a few weeks ago, they all knew what the crossing did to a body.

I stood there a moment and gazed at him, knowing that my future would be determined in the next few minutes. Could I convince him that I was the best person for this project? What would I do if I couldn't? After the work I'd been doing for Talon the thought of going back to America to teach seemed menial.

"Where's Lena?" I heard Talon ask as he glanced over his shoulder. "I thought she'd be around when I got here." He seemed a little tense from my vantage point at the top of the stairs and I wondered what was going through his head.

"She's upstairs," John told him with a grin and a shrug of his shoulders. "You know how women travel. I finished unpacking in twenty minutes. Lena's been up there for an hour and a half at least."

Talon turned and took a step toward the stairs. "Maybe I'll head up and see if she needs a hand," he replied in a teasing manner. "She's probably lost in a pile of shoes."

Knowing that I wasn't ready yet to be alone with Talon, I quickly moved away from the wall and willed myself to stay calm. "What was that about lost in a pile of shoes?" I asked as I started down.

Talon stopped and looked up at me. I was startled to see how happy he was to see me as the pleasure shown in his blue eyes. I didn't know what to say so I only stared down at him in confusion.

"Hey," he said quietly and I felt like we were the only two people in the room. I didn't know how he could make me feel the way he did but in that instant I knew I didn't care. The longing in his eyes made me wish that he would finish climbing the stairs and pick up where we left off in the airport terminal.

"Hi," I managed as I remembered that the bodyguards were standing below us. I glanced over and saw that they'd all gone off and left us alone. "Why don't you grab your bags and I'll show you to your room," I said after I cleared the lump from my throat.

Talon nodded as he turned and retrieved the two bags that he'd dropped just inside the front door and headed for the stairs once again. He took them two at a time so that by the time I turned he was at my side.

I'd been lucky enough to find a house with five bedrooms so that no one had to share. I'd debated a long time when we'd first arrived over where to put Talon but George had made the decision for me. The bedrooms were arranged so that there were three on one side of the house and two on the other with the bathroom in between them. George informed me that

since Talon would be with us that he'd planned on me staying in the room between the other two in the front of the house. That way I'd be better protected at night since I had the men all around me.

I couldn't argue with him. The idea made sense and I didn't want to alert them to the fact that I was worried about the prospect of Talon joining us. So I let George make the decisions over who got what room and didn't say anything when I found out that Talon would be in one of the rooms next to mine.

Talon and I walked in silence together down the hall to the door of his room. Because his hands were full I opened the door for him and stood aside as he strode into the room and looked around.

"The housekeeper changed the sheets before we arrived," I informed him as I stood in the doorway with my arms crossed nervously in front of me. "There's plenty of towels in the bathroom across the hall in you want a bath. The tub is huge." I stopped as I realized how stupid I sounded.

Talon put his bags down near the foot of the bed then straightened to regard me with a scowl for a second. He must have decided that he didn't like what he saw because he crossed the room to stand in front of me again and put his hands on my shoulders.

"I know we have to talk," he said as he squeezed gently then turned his head to stifle a yawn. "I'm just too tired to do it now. Is tomorrow okay?"

"Talon there's nothing to talk about," I said feeling really uncomfortable. All I wanted to do was get away from him but his hands were like vise grips on my arms. "I have an appointment with the curator tomorrow to begin preliminary work before I go to Maghaghah. Do you want to go with me?"

Talon looked at me intensely for a moment then let his hands drop as he took a step back. "Sure," he replied, sounding as if he'd lost the wind out of his sails. "What time is the appointment?"

"Ten." I took advantage of the fact that he was no longer holding me and stepped back. "If you'd like I can arrange for a later time so you can sleep in."

"No, ten's fine," he interrupted. "Wake me up so that I have enough time to shower and I'll be okay."

Chapter 9 – Mixing Business with Pleasure

L amlh liam aro i liam (Your hand and heart are with me)
M e-ST u linn € ein (me and you Together by ourselves)
Gairid anTiam seo ach an- o (Short is This Time)
Gr a liam bi liam (Love with me/Be with me)
Is bre a liam do ph og (I love your kiss)"

Einalam

"Rising of The Moon"

Talon was up before me the next morning and we shared a quiet breakfast by ourselves in the dining room. The house was fully staffed but they were so silent that I'd never heard any of the servants move about the place.

"You won't be able to dodge me forever you know," Talon finally said as he put a piece of fresh fruit in his mouth. He'd echoed my own thoughts that had been playing through my mind since we'd sat down. I already knew that the discussion would happen whether I wanted it to or not, but I wanted to put it off for as long as possible.

"I know," I replied finally, taking a sip of the thick coffee in an effort to delay. "Can I finish my first cup of coffee first?"

Talon grinned, liking the teasing in my tone I guessed. "Sure, but don't take all day at it."

He didn't wait for me to finish, however, before he continued. "I won't say I'm sorry about what happened at the airport. I don't regret anything and I hope that nothing has changed between us." His eyes were locked with mine, causing my stomach to flutter. I returned my cup to the table because I couldn't trust myself to hold it at the moment.

I stared at him like an idiot. I was elated by the fact that he had no qualms about the kiss we'd shared but I couldn't help but think about Tracey. Had the two had a falling out? Somehow I didn't see Tracey as the type of person who let a man like Talon out of her life that easily. But since Talon seemed okay with everything I figured that I didn't have to feel guilty about it either. I was also relieved to know that he apparently didn't hold anything against me. Maybe my job wasn't in danger.

"What's that stupid grin for?" Talon asked with a bemused look on his face. I hadn't been aware that I was smiling but I sure felt like it.

"Nothing," I replied quietly, relief filling my heart. "I'm glad we're okay, too. Things have been so weird on the phone lately that I was sure that-"

"That I blamed you?" I found it amazing how he could read my mind sometimes. I've never known anyone like Talon Graves and I was sure I never would again.

I nodded slowly in answer before I confessed, "I thought you wanted to fire me and that was why you decided to come here."

Talon's brow furrowed in disgust as he looked away. "How could you think that? You've proven yourself in this venture and no matter what happens between us nothing can change that. Jesus, I know a valuable person when I found one." He faced me again before leaning forward and saying, "You aren't going anywhere."

My heart fluttered a little at his words even though he was only talking about the work I was doing for him. "Thank you," I replied quietly as I stared into my coffee cup.

Knowing that everything between us was in good standing took a great deal of pressure off my shoulders and I was now ready to enjoy Talon's company. The conversation was light after that, the two of us discussing what I hoped to uncover while we were in Egypt and what

Talon could do to help in the search. When we were ready to leave for our appointment at the museum I was surprised when Talon told John he could stay behind.

"I can handle it," he said as he helped me with my jacket. I glanced quickly over my shoulder to see John hesitate for a moment then nod to Talon.

John then turned his gaze to me where our eyes locked and he regarded me seriously. "Don't let her give you any trouble," he said, making an attempt to sound stern. In return I made a silly face and stuck my tongue out at him. It was amazing how much like brothers John and the others had become to feel like to me.

Our visit to the museum was fruitful. Like the other establishments that I'd visited already, the staff was quick to allow access to their records and offered any assistance we required. The elderly female head of the library was so charmed by Talon that I thought she was going to try to get him to stay after I'd left. We had lunch in a quiet outdoors restaurant next to the Khan el-Khalili, one of the many open markets in the city that was filled with tourists during the day. Talon didn't seem to be in a hurry and neither was I. We would begin our search the next day so I lavished in the idea of having another day off and that I got to spend it with Talon.

It felt right when Talon took my hand as we strolled around the market after lunch. As I looked up at him I realized this was the most laid back I'd ever seen him. The predatory gleam was still in his eyes as he kept an eye out for anyone who meant us harm in the busy market but his entire body posture was different. Relaxed.

The first two weeks of research in Cairo yielded nothing except an isolated story of whom we thought was our vampire, dating back to the late nineteenth century.

I was really frustrated and wanted to hurt something but Talon was quick to offer words of encouragement.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," he chided. "It's not going to jump out at you. Give it some time."

"I know," I replied with a sigh. "I just hate not knowing if I'm even on the right trail."

It was late. We'd eaten dinner together hours earlier and the others had all gone to bed. Talon and I were standing over the desk in the study trying to decide where to look next. We'd found a guide to take us to Abu Sir the following week and were now spending time looking for other possibilities.

"If anything is out there, you'll find it," Talon urged as he took a step closer and pulled me to him. He'd been doing that a lot in the past week, just holding me. I loved the feel of his arms around me, keeping me safe from the outside world. He hadn't tried to kiss me again and I was using the time to figure out if I wanted him to.

Christmas was in a few days and I'd managed to get shopping in for everyone. There had been a big production in decorating the house; we'd even managed to find a potted evergreen in one of the markets. It cost a small fortune but no one cared as we dragged it home. The staff pulled out boxes of beautiful glass and beaded ornaments that belonged to the British couple that owned the house and soon the spirit of Christmas filled every nook and cranny of the place, even though there wasn't any snow on the ground or carols playing on the radio.

I had to admit that I was excited for the holiday. I didn't have many happy memories from my childhood but I was determined to make it special for Talon and the others.

"I'm hoping there is something in Abu Sir," I said, my head on Talon's chest.

"If that page you found in Paris was right we have to find something sooner or later." I could feel the rumble of his voice under my cheek and I never wanted to move from that spot.

I lifted my head to regard him seriously. "How can you always be so sure of everything?"

Talon smiled as he brought his hand up and brushed hair from my face. "I'm sure of you, Lena. Don't ever doubt what you're capable of. I don't."

Silence stretched between us and I knew Talon was going to kiss me before he started to lower his head. Our lips touched tentatively at first, nothing like the passionate one that we'd shared in the airport. But all too soon it was deepened by both of us and I pressed myself closer to him, needing the contact to ground myself.

"I can't believe how good you taste," Talon breathed against my lips. "I can't get enough of you."

"Oh, Talon, don't stop," I said as my hands found either side of his head to keep it where it was. I wanted him to devour me, to be one with him. Desire raged through my veins as Talon slipped his hands under the tank top I wore and caressed the skin on my back.

"Come upstairs with me," he asked after he lifted his head and gazed into my eyes.

I nodded because I couldn't find the words to answer him even though that was exactly what I wanted. Tracy's face ran through my mind for an instant but I pushed it out. Talon was mine for now; she couldn't touch what we had here and now. Talon took my hand and together we went upstairs to my room. We didn't bother with the light once the door was closed, just moved to the bed as one. Talon pulled me to him once more and our mouths feed greedily on the other.

"Are you sure?" Talon asked. He had my head gently cradled in his hand and I could barely make out his features in the dark room.

"I've never been more sure about anything else in my life," I said as I pulled his shirt free from the waistband of his khakis and ran my hands over his muscled stomach. Talon groaned as his lips found mine for a dazzling kiss that left me breathless and wanting more.

Our clothes quickly pooled around us on the floor and I fell onto the bed as Talon dropped on top of me. He kissed and nibbled at every inch of my body, quickly bringing my senses to full awareness. In return I was caressing and tasting him as well. His skin was so hot that I was afraid my fingers would burn on contact.

Talon said my name over and over again as he placed small kisses on my belly and he made his way up my torso. My hands were in his long blonde hair and my body strained upward in an effort to get even closer to him.

I was surprised at how tender Talon's lovemaking was. I expected roughness, in a way craved it myself but I sensed that he was restraining himself so that he didn't hurt me and my heart cried out with compassion. Afterward, when I had my head on Talon's chest and his arms were around me protectively I once again saw Tracy's face in my mind. Would she be angry at Talon? At me? A small shudder ran through me at the thought of what the female vampire could be capable of.

"Cold?" Talon asked, hugging me closer.

"No," I replied not lifting my head. I didn't want to spoil the moment by bringing up his lover's name. Talon was with me now and no matter what happened I swore to myself that I would live with the memories we created in this room.

"I could stay in this house forever," Talon sighed. His hand was slowly running up and down my back while his other hand held mine on his chest. I smiled at the thought that he was content here. Apparently he wasn't worried about Tracy or the outside world yet. His nonchalant attitude helped ease my guilt.

"It is beautiful here, isn't it?"

"Mmm hmm. I think it's the company though." I could feel him move his head to look down at me.

"Really," I said teasingly when I lifted my head to peer into his blue eyes. "I think I like that compliment."

Talon's response was to pull my head down for his kiss. We made love again and again that night until the sun came up. At times it was slow and languid like the first time and at others it was a hot and intense act that left my body tingling. Talon whispered many endearments throughout the night but he never spoke of love and for that I was grateful. We both knew that Tracy loomed over us like a specter but neither of us voiced our concerns. We lived for the moment and for right now that was all I wanted.

I felt like a child on Christmas morning. I woke up early and had to prod Talon out of bed. "It's too early," he whined as he reached for a pair of pajama bottoms and pulled them on.

"Oh, come on old man," I teased. "I can't wait another minute to see what's in that big box from Adam under the tree."

I roused the troops before going downstairs to put the coffee on. The servants had been given the day off because I planned to make another big meal like I had in Paris for Thanksgiving. Talon entered the kitchen once the coffee started brewing and crossed the room to wrap his arms around my waist and kiss my neck.

"I thought you couldn't wait to unwrap presents?" he asked.

"I knew you guys would need coffee," I giggled as Talon tickled my neck with the overnight stubble on his chin. "I also wanted to put the ham in so it would be done on time."

"Well then be about it, woman," Talon replied in a mock stern voice as he took a step away and swatted my butt. "I want to eat by two o'clock."

"Watch it," I teased back, "or I'll put arsenic in your helping of mashed potatoes."

He laughed as he stole a quick kiss and left the room. As soon as I had everything started I joined the others in the den with the coffee tray and the opening of presents began.

John loved the book on Germany that I found for him. I'd been giving him lessons in the language in return for him teaching me Arabic. Likewise, George was excited about his gift of exotic teas and Adam loved his cashmere sweater I ran across in an open market one day.

Talon was impressed by my gift for him. He's once said in passing that he loved the book *Fahrenheit 451* so I got online and found a first edition copy for him that had been signed by Ray Bradbury.

The big box from Adam turned out to be a lovely pair of lapis lazuli earrings. He'd filled the box with Styrofoam popcorn and weighted the bottom with three bricks to throw me off.

"You're sneaky," I told him from where I was sitting on the floor, Styrofoam littered around me.

"You have to admit it was good," he countered as Adam and George joined him in a hearty laugh.

Talon waited until last to hand me his gift. I was a little surprised at the expert wrapping job and he admitted that he hadn't done it himself. I opened the box to reveal a beautiful leather journal with Celtic knot work and my initials tooled into the cover. As I held the journal in my hands I was struck by a vision of Talon buying it followed by another picture of him walking along Broadway in New York.

"I love Rockefeller Center at Christmas," I said dreamily.

"Why did you say that?" I glanced over at Talon and found that he was staring at me with a quizzical look on his face.

"I'm not sure," I replied with a shrug. "I just pictured you in New York and I remembered seeing the giant tree there every year on TV. Why?"

"I was in New York when I bought that for you," Talon said slowly as if he were trying to work out something in his mind. "What exactly did you see?"

I told him; not thinking it was a big deal. George teased me by saying that I had the sight or something but I thought the idea was ridiculous and threw a pillow at him to shut him up. Talon didn't say anything else about it after that but I noticed that he watched me closely for the rest of the day.

We worked side by side for the next week. We were together twenty-four hours a day, doing research at the museum during day and making love throughout the night. To my surprise we didn't get on each other's nerves, instead we laughed a lot and spent a great deal of time getting to know each other.

On the following Sunday when the museum was closed and we were hanging around the house trying to decide whether to go out for lunch or to stay in when the phone rang.

"It's for you, Mr. Graves," the housekeeper announced when she appeared in the den where Talon and I were lounging on the couch. He crossed to the desk and picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

It didn't take long for me to realize that it was Tracy on the other end and I was surprised by the tone Talon took with her. It was like he was offended by her interruption. In a way I felt good that he didn't want to talk to her while he was with me but on the other hand, I knew it could be a dangerous game for him to play.

"I told you I didn't know how long this was going to take," he told her. Talon had his back to me but I could see the tense strain of the muscles in his shoulders. "No, the trip to Abu Sir got pushed back because of the weather."

Which was true. I'd been on pins and needles over the past week while we waited for word that everything was a go again.

"What's more important, that we find the truth or that you have someone on your arm?" Talon practically snarled into the receiver as he turned so that I could see his profile.

Whatever she said next took the wind out of his sails because Talon exhaled loudly and ran his free hand through his hair; a gesture that I'd learned meant that he was totally annoyed.

"I'm sorry. We're under a lot of pressure because of the weather. Lena was hoping to move on to Greece soon but everything has had to back up." Guilt flooded through me when Talon spared a glance my way. "Don't tell me about responsibilities, Tracy. I know the cross I have to bear better than anyone."

He hung up the phone without saying good-bye and stood there looking out a window into the radiant sunshine of the afternoon. The muscles of his jaw clenched and unclenched in frustration.

I didn't know if I should approach him or not and I certainly didn't understand the cryptic words he'd used on the phone. What kind of cross did Talon have to bear and what did that have to do with him being here with me? I thought the information that I was looking for was something that Tracy wanted.

By mutual consent we hadn't talked about Tracy or the fact that both of us knew what we had couldn't last forever. I tried to stay still but after about a minute I rose and went to Talon's side.

It took every bit of courage I had to say, "If you need to go b-"

"No," he said harshly as he turned to me and pulled me against his chest. "No. She may own most of me, but not everything. I have some say."

I felt Talon's lips brush the top of my head and I wound my arms around his waist to hold him tightly. I tried not to think about his comment that Tracy owned him but it bothered me immensely. I didn't say anything, though; I knew I didn't have to. On top of everything else, I could feel the guilt pouring out of Talon and understood that his anger was directed at himself, not Tracy.

We stood there like that for a few minutes. I understood that Talon needed the time to pull himself together after the conversation with his lover and I began to wonder how much longer I would have him here with me like this.

Finally he pulled back and looked down into my eyes. "Let's get outta here. I feel like treating you to something special."

I smiled in return. "There's no need, Talon, really. Why don't we just pretend to be tourists today?"

And that's what we did. John, Adam and George accompanied Talon and I and we spent the entire day doing all the cheesy things that you read about in a typical travel guide. We took pictures of each other in front of every major landmark we could find and even went so far as to buy matching t-shirts with the pyramids at Giza on them. I felt absolutely ridiculous and exhilarated at the same time. My mind kept going back to Talon's conversation with Tracy and I was plagued by thoughts of what it all meant. Talon would catch my wary gaze and in an effort of pulling my thought away, he would scoop me into his arms or say something to draw my attention elsewhere.

More than once that day I thought I loved him and it scared the hell out of me. What could become of it all? I berated myself.

Chapter 10 – All Good Things...

It's unnerving
How just one move put me by myself."
Matchbox 20
"Leave"

The trip to Abu Sir commenced the following day. We got a late start but I didn't care; we would be out of Cairo for at least a week and that meant no more calls from Tracy, which suited me just fine for now.

Our guide was a comical little fellow named Ari. His English was impeccable and when he arrived at the house I was surprised by the two large land rovers parked out front. I'd let Talon make the arrangements for the guide and so I'd expected some Indy Jones type with horses, or worse yet, camels that expected us to ride through the hot desert.

Instead, I found myself in air-conditioned comfort sitting next to Adam in the backseat of the first rover. Talon was up front with Ari while John and George rode in the other vehicle with Ari's son, Jake.

As we left Cairo and headed inland Ari told us what to expect from the desert. We had to make sure to drink enough water, but not too much to diminish our supply. Talon had requested that we camp out instead of trying to find a hotel or family that would take us in so we were carrying all the gear that we would need. Ari also warned us about scorpions and other animals in the desert. The thought of a scorpion in my sleeping bag gave me the creeps and Adam must have read my expression because he reached over to hold my hand reassuringly.

The desert was unbelievably hot, but it wasn't like the summers I spent growing up in Michigan that were sometimes so humid it left you gasping for air. The temperatures soared to near one hundred degrees most days but somehow it was bearable.

We visited ruins and talked to storytellers from all over the area. There were a few very old tales about a shadow in the night that were meant to scare children into behaving themselves, but no names or physical descriptions were ever mentioned. Because of the obvious link to what we were looking for, I documented them anyway in my journal that Talon had given me for Christmas so that I could later transpose them onto the laptop.

Our days were filled with traveling and talking to people all day and at night we would stop and make camp. Ari had brought along three tents. One that he and his son shared while Adam and the others slept in the second. To my delight Talon and I had a tent all to ourselves and he joked that he felt like a desert sheik and that I was his harem girl.

"Don't get any ideas," I said late one night after we'd made love. "I'm not going to start wearing scarves and call you master."

"We'll see about that," he teased as his mouth descended to capture mine in a hot kiss.

All in all we spent nearly two weeks in the desert and came up with virtually nothing about the father of all vampires we sought. I was charmed, however, by the people and places of the area. I took dozens of photographs, so many in fact that my traveling companions groaned each time I produced my camera. Talon was the worst. He hid my camera on several occasions and once I had to threaten to cut his hair off before he returned it.

"That's not funny," he said soberly as he handed me the camera and absently ran a hand through his hair.

"You're just worried that I might get pictorial evidence that you're really a nice guy," I countered as I looked over the thirty-five millimeter for damage at the hands of an inexperienced photographer.

Two days before we were to return to Cairo I spotted the remains of a wall near the road and asked Ari to pull over. Once the rovers were stopped everyone piled out and started collecting gear. The wall turned out to be the higher section of a structure that was buried beneath the sand, leaving about only three feet exposed. Barley visible at the bottom was the beginnings of hieroglyphs.

We all started to dig and had a good section exposed after an hour and a half that revealed the remains of a stone balcony complete with a doorway and an adjoining window. The hieroglyphs were written around each of the openings into the building. Since Ari was the only one who could read the hieroglyphs, everyone moved out of the way to give him plenty of space.

Ari's translation said that the openings were protected by the power held by the priest that had lived there. "Beware, stalker of the night," Ari read aloud. "You who shuns the light of the great and powerful Ra. You are unwelcome in this place."

Talon's eyes met mine across the crowd of people and I knew the excitement I saw in his blue depths mirrored my own. Without breaking the contact I asked Ari, "What do we have to do to unearth the entire building?"

Ari was picking up on everyone's enthusiasm and quickly explained the paperwork and channels we would have to seek out in order to begin a major dig in the area. My mind was a blur over the possibilities of what could be laying under the sand. Obviously whoever had lived in the structure hadn't liked this creature of the night that I was assuming to be a vampire, but what was the total size of the building and what had been around it? If the person were rich it was likely that there would be many outbuildings and maybe even a private temple.

We decided to stay there for the night and would head for Cairo the next day to procure the necessary documents. That night as I slept in Talon's arms my dreams were filled with visions of ancient Egypt and what the house would look like once we unearthed it.

Once we arrived back at the house in the city everyone was busy preparing for an extended stay near the dig site. Ari helped to pull some strings with his friends in the government that hurried along the permits and other paperwork. In exchange, Talon offered Ari the job of running the dig, which Ari quickly accepted. Of course I would be the one ultimately in charge and Ari understood completely but he would have a better relationship with the locals that we would hire to do the manual work.

The first afternoon that we got back Talon had closeted himself in the den and called Tracy to give her a report of what we'd found. Afterward, he said that she was happy with the process thus far but offered nothing else about their conversation. In my heart I could feel him pulling away from me and swore that I wouldn't cling onto something that I knew wasn't mine to begin with. I only wondered how long it would be before Talon returned to his vampire lover and how would I react to him afterward.

To fill my time before we returned to our site I logged the stories that I'd collected from the people in the desert and found that some of the stories turned out really well. Maybe after all this was done and I couldn't stand to see Talon with someone else I would move on and write a book of old desert tales for publication.

"You need to get out of here," Talon said one day from the doorway to the den where I'd set up the laptop to do my work. The preparations were almost ready for us to head back to the site, in fact Ari had already sent his son and a few men ahead to watch over things and begin recruiting men for the work there. "Let's go for a walk."

I started to protest. There were a few stories that I hadn't added to the data banks yet but then I remembered that Talon had mentioned that a generator would be added to our

supplies so that I could work directly with the computer everyday if I wanted. "Okay," I said, trying to sound bright. "Let me get my purse."

Things between the two of us had been strained since we'd returned to the city. I knew that Tracy had said something to Talon during their conversation that was making him think twice about his relationship with me but he wouldn't come clean. To my further shock that didn't stop him from coming to my room every night and making passionate love to me. The sex we shared since returning to the house was different from before. Talon was desperate in his need to make it special, almost as if he knew it would end any day and he wanted to make it the best possible for me.

I hated him for it but I couldn't bring myself to stop it either. Talon was an addiction that I wanted to enjoy for as long as I could, regardless of the cost my heart would pay later.

We had lunch in our favorite open restaurant and walked around afterward, browsing in shop windows along the way. I was admiring a beautiful painting on papyrus when I heard someone greet Talon.

"It is you," I heard a man say as I turned to face the newcomer, wondering who in the world Talon could know half way around the world.

"Robert," Talon replied with a surprised laugh. "What are you doing in this neck of the woods?"

The two men were shaking hands by the time my eyes reached Talon's friend. To my surprise, it was the American who I'd run into in the coffee shop in Paris. The suspicious side of my brain took over at the thought that he just happened to end up on two of the places where I was doing research.

"Let me introduce you to a close friend of mine," Talon was saying as his arm reached out to pull me close. Robert's gaze moved to my face and I saw shock cross his dark features.

"Well," he said with a laugh as he reached for my hand, putting me at ease again. Either he was a good actor or the surprise in his eyes was real. "Isn't it a small world? How are you?"

Talon glanced at me quizzically before returning his gaze to his friend. "Do you two know each other?"

"Not really," I said, finding my tongue for the first time. "We bumped into each other in a coffee shop in Paris while I was there. I hope the coffee didn't stain your overcoat."

"Not to worry," Robert replied as he raised a hand in an effort to put my mind at ease. "I have a housekeeper with some sort of book with every secret one could ever need in it."

Talon and I laughed at the joke then Talon introduced the two of us properly. Robert Samuel was originally from America but had relocated to Paris three years before for business reasons. From the way the two of them interacted I got the impression that they'd known each other for a long time.

"What are you doing here?" Talon asked again once we were seated in a small café and cups of coffee had been ordered.

"I'm looking for a vessel of transference," Robert replied nonchalantly. My brows furrowed at his statement just as recognition crossed his features at what he'd just said. I had no idea what he was talking about but from his reaction it was something secret that he didn't know whether I knew or not.

Talon chuckled in response. "You always had the knack of saying the wrong things at the wrong time, old friend." He turned to me then and reached out to cover my hand with his on the table. "Robert," he began slowly, meeting my eyes, "has special abilities. They are powers that he was born with that manifested as he got older."

I glanced across the table to the man I'd thought of as so normal during our first encounter in Paris. He seemed uncomfortable by his slip but within seconds resigned himself to the situation and met my gaze with no regret.

"I lived with a father that cursed my mother for her gift," he said quietly, evenly. "He killed her for what she was and later tried to kill me after my powers manifested." I blinked at the bluntness of his statement. I tried to say something but Robert continued after a glance at Talon. "I will not ask your forgiveness for what I am, I swore I never would again. I apologize for allowing the knowledge to slip out like I did. I only ask that you help keep my secret because there are those out there who would pay a great deal of money to find one of my number and kill them."

I swallowed slowly and looked between Talon and Robert. The seriousness of their expressions told me that how I chose to answer the man I'd just met had everything to do with not only my future, but theirs as well. Besides, how bad could another secret be? I already knew that Tracy was a vampire and I sure as hell wasn't telling that at my next class reunion. I cleared my throat before I spoke.

"Don't worry, Robert, your secret is safe with me." The table was silent for a few seconds then Robert's face broke into a large smile and he reached out to take my other hand.

"Thank you," he replied but I didn't really hear him. My mind was filled with a picture seen through Robert's eyes. He was watching a group of teenagers as they walked down the street of a small town. He seemed to be focused on one of them but I couldn't distinguish whom. Then the picture changed and Robert was holding a small baby as he stood in a hospital hallway. I could see into a room where a young girl lay on a bed, sleeping peacefully. She had dark hair and reminded me of one of the girls Robert had been watching but before I could try to figure out for sure I felt someone pulling at my hand.

"Lena," Talon's voice was stern as he switched my hand from one of his to the other so that he could touch my face. I blinked and smiled weakly at him. Robert was concerned as well but stayed silent.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I told him as I reached for the glass of water sitting in front of me on the table. I didn't know what had just happened but I knew it wasn't the first time. When I'd touched the chair in Talon's study and when he'd given me my Christmas present. What was wrong with me?

"Where did you go?" Robert asked in a low voice.

I took another sip of water before I replied. "I'm not sure. You were watching a young girl." I peered into his eyes, looking for the truth. "Who is she?"

Robert sat back in his chair as if someone had struck him. "What exactly did you see?"

The desperation in his gaze was making me uncomfortable and I'd wished that I'd never said anything. "I-I'm n-not sure. It was nothing." I was saved by the waitress who'd decided to bring the coffee then. Everyone was silent until the woman moved away then Talon pounced.

"It wasn't nothing, Lena," he said. "And I know it wasn't the first time you've had vision, either."

I looked from one man to the other, not liking the spot I found myself in, and tried to find a way around it. Robert came to my rescue.

"Perhaps this isn't the best time or place for this discussion," he said, pouring cream into his cup. "Why don't we have dinner tonight and continue our conversation then?"

The concern in Talon's eyes melted away as he grinned at me lazily and took my hand once more. "Sound fine," he said not taking his eyes off me. "Why don't you come by around six, Robert?"

We enjoyed our coffee and everyone made sure to keep the conversation on light topics like the recent happenings in Europe as well as how well President Clinton was improving America. I was quiet most of the time, allowing the two men to catch up on their long friendship. My thoughts drifted to the pictures I'd seen in my head.

What did it all mean? Even though I really knew nothing about him, I wondered if I was like Robert and what would that mean in the future? If that wasn't the case, what was happening to me?

I didn't eat that much at dinner that night. After returning to the house that afternoon Talon had tried to brooch the subject of my visions again but I pushed him off rather rudely.

"I don't want to talk about it," I snapped as I threw my purse in a chair across the room. I felt like a freak and I was scared because I didn't understand what was happening to me.

"Lena," Talon said in a soothing tone as he moved close and tried to pull me against him.

"Don't touch me," I said, pulling back, horrified that that if he touched me I might see pictures of Talon and Tracy together.

Talon stopped and regarded me with hurt in his eyes. "Okay," he said. "Don't get excited. Everything is fine."

"No, everything is not fine, Talon," I snapped again as I started to pace the room. "You have no idea how freaked out I am right now. What's wrong with me?" I asked in a desperate voice as I turned toward Talon. Then I knew I'd said too much. Talon held out his hand to me again but all I could think about was getting out of the room. I turned from the man that meant too much to me and ran from the room, tears streaming down my cheeks.

Once in my room I locked the door then threw myself unto the bed until the tears had subsided. I heard Talon's knock on the door but I refused to answer him and finally he went away. I didn't know what I was doing. All I knew was that I was scared and confused and my natural reaction was to pull away. Deep down I knew that I couldn't really count on Talon for anything and that didn't help that fact that I felt so alone.

Five o'clock came and I knew I had to pull myself together because Robert would arrive soon for dinner. I changed into a long denim skirt and a white blouse and prepared myself to face Talon again. I realized that things were coming to an end with Talon and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I needed someone who would be with me when I needed him, not someone who was tied to someone else and could leave at the drop of a hat. Resigning myself to be strong, I waited until I heard the doorbell ring before I went downstairs.

Talon was closing the door behind Robert when I reached the bottom of the stairs and I was able to use the time to greet him instead of looking to Talon.

"Lena," Robert said as he kissed my cheek. "You look lovely."

"Thank you," I replied. Out of habit my gaze moved to Talon and I found that his eyes locked with mine with an anguish filled expression.

"Let's have a drink before dinner," Talon announced rather loudly and I realized that he'd already started drinking. Robert noticed as well and quickly looked between Talon and myself. Not waiting for an answer, Talon linked arms with Robert on one side and me on the other and lead the two of us into the den where three glasses were already set up next to a decanter of brandy that was only half-filled.

Talon crossed to the desk and sloppily poured out three generous portions then passed them around. I didn't care for brandy and Talon knew it but that didn't stop him from pressing a glass into my hand.

"A toast," he said as he lifted his glass toward Robert and myself, "to love...and the gut wrenching pain it causes." That said, he gulped down the entire contents of the snifter and reached once again for the decanter.

"Talon, what are you doing?" Robert asked incredulously.

"Didn't you hear me?" Talon replied as he raised the newly filled glass. "To love."

I had no idea what he thought he was doing but all thought of putting some distance between Talon and myself flew out the door at the sight of his disturbing behavior. Before the glass found its way to his lips my hand shot out and amazingly enough, stopped Talon from completing the motion.

Our eyes locked and I felt that familiar warmth spread through my belly. "What do you think you are doing?" I asked evenly in a low voice.

Talon smiled as he lowered the snifter and cupped his other hand to the side of my face. "Oh, my beautiful Lena. Don't you know stupidity when you see it?" When I didn't answer he continued, "I thought I could carve out a little piece of the life for me. For us. But I was wrong, honey, so terribly wrong."

Alarmed filled my senses. Whatever had happened to make Talon act this way had nothing to do with me not talking to him. "Talon, what are you talking about? You're not making any sense."

"What sense is there to make?" he asked as he turned away and walked to a nearby window.

Robert went to stand next to his old friend and place a hand on the other man's shoulder. "Talon," he started haltingly, "does this have something to do with Tracy?"

Talon only nodded and continued looking out into the late afternoon sunshine. "I wasn't sure if the two of you were still together," Robert said. "Has something happened?"

"She's ordered me to come back," Talon answered after a moment as he turned his head toward Robert. I was astonished. I didn't think that Talon and Tracy had the type of relationship where she could order him around. Sure, she was a vampire and all but Talon have so little control over his life?

Robert seemed resolved to the situation. "I'm sorry my friend," he replied in a low voice then moved his head closer to whisper something in Talon's ear that I couldn't hear. Talon shook his head in answer then turned to face me again as Robert moved away.

We stood for a minute, just looking at one another then Talon took a step forward and held out a hand toward me. I was numb. I didn't want to think, to react to anything. Our day of reckoning had arrived and Talon and I were going to have to pay the price for what we'd shared.

"You have to go back?" I asked quietly. I hadn't moved an inch but Talon still held out his hand to me.

"Tomorrow," he admitted his voice just as quiet as mine. He looked sober now, like the alcohol had never entered his bloodstream.

I nodded mutely and lowered my gaze to the floor. I felt Talon's approach and this time I didn't stop myself from melting into him. Silent tears streamed down my face as Talon held me close to him and ran his hands down my back in comfort. Eventually, I pulled back and wiped the tears from my face. I will never let him see me cry again, I swore to myself as I tried to push the feelings of loss and emptiness away.

It felt as if Talon were gone already. I knew it wasn't his fault and I didn't blame him. We both knew our time together would be short; it was just hard to realize that the end was here.

"I'll help you pack," I said as I lifted a hand to caress Talon's cheek for the last time. Once I left this room I would never again allow myself the pleasure. Robert must have left the room while Talon and I were locked in each other's arms and when I didn't see him I remembered that he'd come for dinner.

"Packing can wait," I told Talon, trying to sound happy. "Let's find where Robert has went off to and have dinner."

Misery lay heavy in my stomach that night. I was grateful to Robert who had picked up on our misery and told funny stories about some of his travel with Talon over the years. After dinner I excused myself, saying that I had a headache and needed some aspirin, and went upstairs. When I entered my room all I could see were the things that belonged to Talon and the next thing I knew the tears were falling again.

Numbly I started to gather Talon's clothes and personal items and stacked them neatly on the bed. Once that was done, I went to his room and pulled everything from the closet and drawers and placed everything in the two large suitcases that Talon had brought with him when he arrived in Paris. Finally, I carefully placed the Bradbury book that I'd given him for Christmas in a stack of T-shirts and closed the suitcases.

I packed everything but a change of clothes and Talon's favorite shirt, which I took with me back to my room and changed into it. I heard voices in the front hall and I knew that Robert was leaving and that Talon would come upstairs soon. I steeled myself against the desire to run to him and beg him not to go. Talon was lost to me now. Tomorrow he would get on a plane and go back to Tracy and there was nothing I could do to stop him. My heart was breaking and there was nothing I could do about it.

I heard Talon's footsteps on the stairs as I got into bed and turned off the light. I heard him enter his room next to mine and I could see him taking in the sight of his two packed suitcases and I wondered what was playing through his mind. Then I heard the door shut and I knew that Talon's resolve to leave had assured that there would be no turning back for us.

I didn't blame Talon for my broken heart. I am a big girl and I knew what I was getting into that first night we spent together but that didn't stop the pain that I was feeling. For the first time in my life, I cried myself to sleep.

Chapter 11 – We Will Meet Again

I miss you now
I have so many questions."
Stevie Nicks
"I Miss You"

Christopher had been asleep for only a few minutes and even though she didn't really have the time to dally, Lena couldn't bring herself to put him in his crib just yet. She knew Mikael was uncomfortable being alone with all the vampires that were here for the wedding but all the memories of her time in Egypt brought back the same feeling of loss and abandonment that she had felt at the time.

Talon will be here soon, she thought to herself as she tucked the blanket more securely around her son. It would be the first time the two would actually have time to interact since Talon had left Cairo on that clear winter day so long ago.

Christopher stirred in his sleep and Lena smiled as she unwound her son's fingers from around one of her own and stood. The crib was right next to the chair so she didn't have far to go to lay him down.

What will Talon think of you, my beautiful boy, she thought as she smoothed a quilt over his tiny back. Lena was incredibly nervous about seeing Talon again. After all, for so long she'd thought that he was dead at the hands of a vampire. And even though she'd finally found out that he'd actually been made a vampire himself four years ago, that time had been one of the worst times of her life.

Israel / Spring 1995

"Ari, I thought you said you were going to get rid of those protestors," I yelled over the din of chanting Israelis. We had been operating at the particular site for nearly eight weeks and had been in Israel itself for over four months but our activities were still scrutinized by a group of right wing something-or-others who thought what we were doing was wrong. Ari usually dealt with them so I never bothered with the details of their cause or what they called themselves. All I knew was that they were holding up my timetable and I only had five weeks left on my visa.

"I did," Ari replied as he removed his hat to wipe his brow. "They sent in a new batch. Don't worry, I've already phoned the authorities. They will arrive soon."

"Thank God," I muttered as my gaze dropped to the maps I was trying to study. Ari and I stood under a large tarp where a few tables had been set up to act as office and headquarters for the dig. I knew we had to be close to the entrance of the tomb. All the ancient texts and ruins I'd been able to get my hands on pointed to the location where we were digging.

We'd been rather lucky in the past year and a half. Several copies of the original manuscript I was looking for had been found and carefully packed off to Tracy. She was extremely happy with the progress I'd made but I didn't really care. The only reason I'd stayed on after Talon left was because I wanted to know the truth as much as Tracy and the others of her kind did.

Talon and I kept up our phone conversation as I traveled across the rest of Europe and into the Arab nations, but we hadn't seen each other since Cairo. Talon had suggested that I come home to Michigan to spend Christmas there but I'd refused. Part of me wanted to know

if I could handle seeing him again but another part rebelled against being in the same state as Tracy.

"Miss Stockton," I heard a young boy say from behind me. I turned and found Samuel, one of the local goys who liked to hang around the camp and help when they were allowed.

"Yes."

"Mr. John says there's an important call for you."

Important call, hmm? I glanced at my watch and saw that it was nearly noon. That meant it was around midnight in the States where Talon was. I figured it was him because he was the only one who called for me.

I grabbed my hat and put it on as I gathered my journal and a pen. Talon would want to know the latest developments so I wanted to be prepared.

"Hello?" I said into the receiver once I'd reached the shack where we locked up all our important equipment.

"Lena Stockton?" a female voice answered from the other end.

"Y-yes," I stammered, trying to figure out who the woman was. "This is Lena Stockton."

"My name is Joyce Rogers. I work at Nightstalker, Inc., the company that funds your research. I was wondering how soon you would be able to return to the States?"

Return to the States? Nightstalker, Inc.? What the hell was going on? "I don't understand," I began. "What do you mean your company funds my research? I thought this was a private venture."

"Mr. Graves monitored all your activities personally," Joyce explained. "There have been some recent developments that require you being here as soon as possible. Would you like me to arrange the details for you?"

I didn't really hear her because my head was a jumbled mess. Talon had never said anything about this company but from the woman's tone her claim sounded legitimate.

"Miss Stockton? Are you there?"

"I-I'm sorry," I replied, forcing myself to concentrate on the conversation. "It's just that I didn't know anything about the company..."

"I understand that this may come as a shock to you," Joyce said soothingly. "I'll arrange your flight out of Tel Aviv for as soon as possible and get back with you. Is that all right?"

I'd barely gotten my response out before she hung up the phone. I stood there mutely, unable to comprehend my newfound knowledge. Why hadn't Talon phoned himself? If he'd gone to such pain to keep the existence of Nightstalker, Inc. from me, why allow Joyce Rogers to call?

"They'll see you now, Miss Stockton," Joyce said from the open doorway that led into what looked like a large conference room. I stood and unconsciously smoothed the skirt of the Channel suit I'd picked up in New York on the way here. I hadn't heard from Talon in over a week so I was unsure what to expect from this.

As the door closed behind me I glanced around the room and adjusted the shoulder strap of my laptop case. A large mahogany table dominated the room. Seated around the table were a number of men and women whom I'd never met.

Joyce gestured that I take the only vacant seat at the end closest to the door. I did so and placed my case next to me on the floor before folding my hands gracefully on top of the table.

"Miss Stockton," an elderly gentleman with wire glasses at the opposite end of the table began. "My name is Ronald Bisby. You have been employed by the company for the last two years."

"Yes," I replied looking Mr. Bisby in the eye. He was trying to scare me but I'd seen way too much in my life to be affected by the likes of him. "That is what has recently come to my attention."

Without a preamble he continued, "We've brought you here today to inform you that the CEO of this company, Talon Graves, is dead. He was-"

I felt my body fall back against the chair. My chest hurt as if someone had just hit me with a baseball bat. Talon was dead? This man couldn't possibly know what he was talking about. Talon couldn't be dead, he just couldn't.

"Miss Stockton," Mr. Bisby said in order to get my attention. "I know this has come as a shock to you and I would like to extend to you my sincerest condolences for your loss. I know that you and Mr. Graves had become close during your involvement with the research."

He removed his glasses and laid them on the table before catching my eyes once again. "It is also my regret to inform you that your project will be cancelled."

My brain clicked into gear again. What did this guy mean that the project was cancelled? There was no way that Talon would have let this happen. He knew how dangerous his life was and how important finding out the truth was. He would have made some provisions.

"I'm sorry," I said, gaining my composure. "I don't think I heard you right."

"I'm afraid you did," Mr. Bisby replied. "Company funding has been tight for the past few quarters. As a matter of fact, Mr. Graves was using some of his own personal resources to insure the project continued." He picked up his glasses again and put them on before continuing. "We must cut corners if we are going to survive this transitional period."

"Then I'll go somewhere else," I said sternly as I leaned forward and rested the palms of my hands flat on the table.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Mr. Bisby said simply.

"What are you talking about? This is my research project. I'm the one who's been in the field for the past two years. I'm the one whose spent weeks in dusty back rooms of libraries all across Europe looking for clues and you're going to sit there and tell me that I can't take my work and go somewhere else?"

Mr. Bisby stared at me frankly before he answered, "That is exactly what I'm telling you, Miss Stockton. Nightstalker, Inc. owns the rights to all the research that you've done so far. If you try to continue the project we will file suit."

I sat alone in my hotel room that night drinking vodka. I had no idea what I was going to do with my life now that I no longer had the project. I'd already tried to phone the dig site but there was no answer. Mr. Bisby had made it quite clear that there was to be no further contact with John, Adam or George; since I would no longer need their protection and they already had been reassigned elsewhere. I couldn't even find Ari or any of the other people that had worked for any of the digs.

Even my research was gone. As soon as I checked into my hotel room I'd booted up my laptop, confident that I was going to continue the search despite Mr. Bisby's threats. I didn't know how they managed it but my laptop had been wiped. All my work was gone except for the few notes that I'd made in the beautiful journal Talon had given me.

I was truly alone now. The relationships I'd allowed myself to forge over the past few years had been ripped from me by a group of thieves in expensive suits. Finally, now that I

was alone, I allowed my tears to fall. Tears of hurt over the death of a good friend and for my life that I suddenly found was no longer mine. I had a gut feeling that the entire situation reeked of vampire involvement. Where in the hell was Tracy and all her wonderful powers when Talon had been killed? Why didn't she save him? What good was she?

I don't think that I hated vampires any more than I did that night. I swore that if I did see Tracy that night that I might die along with Talon because I was going to give her a piece of my mind and to hell with the consequences.

Around midnight the phone rang. In my haze I thought it might be John or one of the others as I grabbed for the receiver.

"Hello," I said breathlessly.

"Meet me at Hyde Park in half an hour." I recognized the voice as Tracy's but she hung up before I had to respond.

Thank God, Mr. Bisby had been so gracious to allow me the use of a limousine until I decided where to go next or I would have had to walk considering the condition I was in. I rested my head on the back of the seat on the way to the park and was relieved when I realized that my head had cleared a little on the drive.

The park was deserted at this time of night. The driver parked the car and shut off the lights. I checked my watch and found that I had a few minutes to spare so I got out of the car, hoping that a little fresh air would continue to help sober me up.

The night was cool, a typical March night, and I wandered near the limousine in case Tracy arrived and didn't see me. After twenty minutes I was getting more than a little pissed. Even though I had no idea what had happened, I had a gut feeling that Tracy had something to do with Talon's death. She might not have been the one who actually killed him but I was convinced that the circumstances revolved around her.

I was about to get back into the limousine and tell the driver to go back to the hotel when I saw a shadowed figure emerge from some bushes close to the vehicle.

"Lena?" Tracy asked not moving.

"Tracy," I replied as I pushed my hands into the pockets of my jacket to keep from lunging myself at her.

She stepped closer to me but didn't quite leave the shadows of the stand of bushes. She kept glancing from side to side as if she expected someone to jump out at her, making me feel wary just by watching her.

"I have something for you," she said she pulled out a large package from a bag that was draped over her shoulder. "Talon wanted you to have it."

I didn't know what to say. Even though I couldn't see them, I could hear the tears in her voice and somehow that knowledge drained away my hatred for the woman a little. I was relieved that Talon's death had upset her just as much as it had me, it made her a little more approachable. I reached out and took the leather wrapped package from her and clutched it to my chest while I tried to imagine what had her so spooked.

"He knew about the meeting," Tracy said quickly as she continued to scan the area. "He set it up so that if something happened to him you would be protected."

"Protected?" I asked, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "

She didn't seem to hear me. It was as if she heard something I couldn't and I was surprised to see terror in her eyes.

"What is it?" I asked but she was already moving back into the bushes again.

"I have to go," was all she said and then she was gone. I stared after her for a full minute but I couldn't detect a single sign that she was there or had ever been. My only proof was the package I still held tightly against my chest.

I heard what sounded like motorcycle engines that were coming in my direction and I wondered if that was what Tracy had seemed to hear. Were the rider's vampires? What did she have to fear from those of her kind? Suddenly I didn't want to know what had happened. Quickly I got back into the limousine and told the driver to return to the hotel as fast as possible. Just as we were pulling out of the park I heard a series of gunshots and I feared that Tracy was dead.

Once I was back safely in my room I carefully opened the package. Inside were envelopes with various papers that contained information about businesses and bank accounts in Sweden, Brazil and the Cayman Islands. The amounts in the accounts were staggering. I sat back in astonishment as I realized that Talon had left it all to me.

I was the new CEO a company that included several publishing houses as well as art dealers and art restorers. The company had several properties in the States along with a rather large land holding in Austria, all of which were at my disposal.

Also in the leather case was a pouch that produced a large silver cross on a matching silver chain. I recognized as one that I'd seen Talon wear often and I was struck by the oddness of its addition in the package since Talon had never let it out of his sight. I eventually came to the conclusion that Talon had to have known that something was up before he was killed and it further embedded the thought that vampires had something to do with his death. I swore I would do whatever I could to avenge him.

I managed to hold back my tears until I'd looked at every piece of paper in the package and then I allowed them to flow unchecked. I knew the first thing to do would be to look into the company and make sure everything was in order. Part of me wanted to hunt down whoever had killed Talon but I knew I had nowhere to start.

I fell asleep in my clothes with Talon's cross around my neck for comfort. My dreams were plagued with dark images of people I didn't know. It was as if they all lived at different times and had nothing in common except that they all wore Talon's cross. Each scene that I saw depicted the bearer's horrible death, usually at the hands of either a vampire or a priest. The most disturbing images were of Talon fighting another creature with glowing eyes outside a burning cathedral.

I recognized the building from a site that I'd visited last year in Italy. There'd been stories of the fire that had destroyed the place of worship and of the body of the priest that had been found there. It was said that there had been a young acolyte that was about thirteen years old who had lived at the church as well but nothing had been turned up about what had become of him.

In my dream I saw the vampire mortally wound a priest with long claws on the ends of his fingers. The acolyte was there as well and I watched as the monster turned to him and knocked him to the ground. Then Talon was there and the two were fighting fiercely. They moved so quickly in my mind that it was hard to tell one from the other.

Talon was the victor. He gently gathered the boy in his arms and left the fiery church behind. That was the last image I saw.

With the dawn came little peace of mind and a killer headache. But more important than that was the name that was in my mind when I woke up. Dr. Schuler. If I wasn't going crazy and he actually existed, maybe he would have some answers.