

"Where's Leigh?"

Lucian paused on the top step. He and Mortimer had finished clearing out the nest and trailing gasoline through the basement and up the stairs to the kitchen, the first time either man had been there since rushing downstairs. Bricker had been the one to run up to retrieve the cans of gasoline they'd left in the room. He'd brought the smaller one down to them, then taken the other up to the second floor to drop a trail of the flammable liquid there and down to the main floor.

"I left her seated at the table," Lucian said. "Maybe Bricker already took her out to the van."

"Maybe," Mortimer agreed wearily.

Lucian turned back to continue splashing the gasoline on the tile floor, but he, too, was tired. It had been a lot of work.

There had been more vampires in the nest than expected. Morgan had managed to turn upward of thirty-odd followers... and they hadn't all laid around accommodatingly for Lucian and his men to put out of their misery. It had taken quite a while to take care of them all.

It was only after they'd gone through the rooms in the basement that they realized Morgan had gotten away in those first moments of chaos after they charged downstairs. So had the man he'd called Donald. The pair had slid out through a pair of cellar doors that opened into the backyard. The daughter of the previous owner had apparently forgotten this detail.

Moods grim at what they considered a failure, they'd started to lay the gasoline down. Lucian now trailed it into the hallway, following Mortimer toward the front door. They met up with Bricker coming out of the living room, splashing his own can around.

"Did you take Leigh to the van?" Mortimer asked.

Bricker's eyebrows flew up. "No. I thought Lucian did before following us downstairs."

"No." Mortimer shook his head. "He left her at the table in the kitchen."

Lucian shrugged and returned to splashing the gasoline along the hall toward the front door. "Morgan must have taken her. We catch up to him, we'll find her."

Neither man looked pleased, but moved quickly toward the door to stay out of his way. Bricker emptied the last of his can as he went, then tossed it aside and stepped out of the house. Mortimer followed and Lucian continued with his own gasoline until it ran out two feet short of the door.

Tossing his can to the side, Lucian pulled a Zippo from his pocket. He flicked it open, struck the wheel with his thumb to light it, then tossed it over his shoulder as he stepped onto the porch. He pulled the door closed just as the fire whooshed to life behind him.

It wasn't until he'd started down the steps that Lucian saw the woman. She was on her knees on the gravel where Morgan's van had been parked. Her arms were wrapped tight around her waist as she swayed weakly where she knelt. Her pain was obvious, as was the fact that a combination of determination and the desire to survive were all that had helped her make her way out of the house.

Mortimer and Bricker were on their haunches, one in front of her, one beside her, both of them peering at her worriedly.

"She's turning," Mortimer announced as Lucian paused beside them.

Of course she was, he thought wearily. He had hoped she hadn't yet been given blood. Then they could have erased her memory and sent her on her way. However, that wasn't possible anymore. She was now an immortal and would have to be taken care of and trained.

The only good news was that unlike those in the house, Morgan hadn't had her long enough to turn her into a heartless, killing machine.

"We'll have to take her back to the hotel and take care of her," Mortimer announced, the words bringing a grimace to Lucian's face.

"We don't have time to nurse a baby vamp," he said dryly. "We have to catch up to Morgan before he starts another nest."

"Well, we can't just leave her here," Mortimer pointed out. "Bricker and I will take care of her."

"What about Morgan?" Lucian asked.

The two men exchanged a glance, then Bricker said, "The plan was to go back to the hotel, get some sleep, and then start out fresh tonight, right?"

"Right," Lucian allowed, his gaze flickering to the sky and the bright white orb of the sun. It was nearly mid-morning, and the sunlight was getting stronger by the minute. He bent to unstrap the quiver from his leg as Bricker made his case.

"Well, the turn doesn't usually take more than twenty-four hours. Eight hours while we sleep, then one of us can stay and watch over her while the

other two go after Morgan and the Donald guy. There are only the two of them; all three of us aren't really needed."

"And who's going to stay awake today to give her blood?" Lucian asked as he straightened with the empty quiver in hand.

"Bricker and I will take turns."

Lucian wasn't pleased, but he supposed there weren't a lot of choices. Besides, he was growing uncomfortable under the direct sunlight and wanted an end to the discussion.

"Fine, but she's your responsibility," he said abruptly, and headed for the vehicles they'd parked on a small, unused dirt lane beyond the trees surrounding the house.

Lucian released a small breath of relief as he slid into the safety of the rental car. There was still sunlight coming through the windshield, but it was better than being out in full light. He placed the crossbow and quiver back into the large duffel bag on the passenger seat, then straightened and glanced out the window again. Bricker was carrying the brunette toward the van a car's length up the lane, while Mortimer rushed ahead holding both weapons.

Lucian shook his head as he watched Mortimer open the van's back doors and Bricker jump inside with the woman. The men, he knew, hadn't thought it through. The woman was going to be a problem. She was moaning and writhing in obvious pain as the turn began, her white blouse bearing a large rust-colored stain that could be mistaken for nothing other than blood. And it was after 10:00 A.M., so the hotel lobby would be busy. Yet, somehow, they had to get her into the hotel.

When Mortimer closed the van doors and hurried around to get behind the wheel, Lucian started the rental car and backed out of the lane. He retrieved the cell phone from his shirt pocket as he started slowly up the road. He punched in the first number on his speed dial and glanced in the rearview mirror to watch the van back onto the road behind him as he waited to be connected.

"Hello?"

Lucian smiled faintly at the sleepy snarl, knowing he'd woken up his nephew. "Good morning, Bastien."

There was a pause, then a suspicious, "Uncle Lucian?"

"That's right. I didn't wake you, did I?"

Bastien grunted in reply. "How did it go? Did you get Morgan?"

"No. He got away with another man. Someone named Donald."

"I'm going to need more information than that if you want me to trace this Donald guy -- " Bastien began.

"That's not why I'm calling," Lucian interrupted. "How long would it take for one of the company planes to get here?"

"A company plane?" Bastien echoed.

"Yes."

"Hmm. We only have the one available at the moment. The others are all booked today," he said thoughtfully. "I'd have to call the pilot and co-pilot. They'll have to get up and around and get to the airport, gas up, file a flight plan, fly down to Kansas. That's a what? Two hour flight? Two and a half hours?"

"Closer to two and a half hours," Lucian guessed. He hadn't paid close attention when he'd flown down.

"Two and a half," Bastien murmured. "I'm guessing it would be at least four to five hours, probably more, before the plane could get there. No, definitely more," he added suddenly and explained, "The only pilot we have available at the moment lives an hour from the airport."

"So, six hours, maybe more?" Lucian asked with a frown.

"I did offer to keep one there at your disposal until you were done, but you said -- "

"Yes, yes," Lucian interrupted impatiently. He hated hearing I told you so. "Just send the plane down. Have them call me at the hotel before they leave and I'll head to the airport to wait."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"No." Lucian clicked the button to disengage before realizing he hadn't said good-bye, or even thanks. Living on his own had made him a rude bastard. Fortunately, his family members -- including Bastien -- were used to it.

Returning the phone to his pocket, he took the turn that would take them back to the hotel. Heeuelizink to the h [planhe airport to w a frairpprte p

"How are we going to get her to our room?" Mortimer asked as he slid out of the van and met Lucian getting out of his car. Apparently, he had considered the problem during the drive.

Lucian's gaze moved around the hotel parking garage. They might be able to get her to the elevator without anyone seeing her, but the elevator would certainly stop in the lobby, and possibly at other floors. He already knew from their short stay that the elevators were always busy, jam-packed in fact. Chances were they would encounter anywhere from twenty to sixty people between the elevator and the hall to their room. He didn't like the idea of having to erase the memories of so many people.

Lucian's ruminations were interrupted by the purr of a car pulling into a parking spot. Both men glanced over as a woman got out, walked around to the trunk, opened it, and struggled to pull out a huge black suitcase.

Before he'd even thought about it, Lucian found himself walking to the woman's side. He flashed his best smile, but when that just made fear curl to life in her eyes, he gave up the smile and slid into her mind instead. Controlling one was better than having to control sixty.

"You can't be serious?" Bricker gasped minutes later when Lucian opened the back doors of the van and the man caught sight of the large, now empty suitcase.

"You come up with an alternate method to get her inside without having to erase the memories of half the hotel clients and I'd be happy to go along with it," Lucian said as he set the suitcase on the van floor. He didn't know what all the fuss was. It was a huge suitcase, lots of room. It had wheels that would make it easy to maneuver, was cloth so she wouldn't suffocate, and she wouldn't have to be in it long. It was a short walk to the elevator, a quick ride up, then a stroll to their suite of rooms... and she wasn't even really conscious. It wasn't like she would ever know.

Mortimer finally gave a helpless shrug. Letting his breath out, Bricker peered down at the woman writhing in his arms, then glanced up at Lucian. "Okay, open the case."

Lucian flipped the lid open, then glanced around to be sure no one was in the parking lot to see as Bricker set Leigh into it. The only person around was the woman who owned the suitcase, and she was asleep in the driver's seat of her car. Mortimer would bring the suitcase back when they were through with it and erase the whole episode from her memory. Lucian had already slipped a fifty dollar bill into her purse for the use of the suitcase. She would recall it as a fifty she'd found on the floor of the parking garage. Lucian hated being beholden to people, whether they remembered it or not.

"Maybe I should leave it unzipped a couple of inches to make sure she gets enough air," Bricker said thoughtfully.

Lucian turned back to the interior of the van to see that Leigh was already in the suitcase and Bricker had it half zipped up. As he'd thought, there was lots of room. With her seated at the bottom, knees pressed close to her chest and head resting against them, there had to be six inches of space above her head.

"I'll take the bottom to lift her out," Mortimer said once Bricker had the zipper closed except for an inch at the top.

Lucian moved out of the way to give the men room, then glanced at his watch. It had only been twenty minutes since he'd called Bastien. If they got through this quickly, he could catch a good four or five hour nap before he had to wake up to head to the airport. He grimaced at the idea. He'd rather get eight hours, but five was better than the none the other two men would get.

"All set." Bricker followed the suitcase out of the back of the van and slammed the doors closed.

Nodding, Lucian turned to lead the way to the elevator. He pressed the call button, then glanced back to see that the men were only halfway there. Bricker was pulling the suitcase, but both he and Mortimer were moving slowly, fussing over bumping it too much.

Lucian bit his tongue on the reminder that she was unconscious, and turned back as the elevator arrived. He nodded at the couple who stepped out, then stepped on board and pressed the hold button as he waited for Mortimer and Bricker to reach him. He thought he showed amazing patience by not commenting when they finally reached the elevator. Lucian remained silent as they lifted the suitcase over the small crack at the door to prevent unnecessary jarring. The moment they were inside, he let the elevator doors close and pressed the button for their floor.

"Do you think she's okay in there?" Bricker asked as the elevator started upward.

"I don't know," Mortimer murmured. "Maybe we should check on her."

Before Lucian could snap that they were being idiots, the elevator suddenly gave a ding and slid to a stop. The doors opened, revealing the lobby and about two dozen people all waiting to crowd in.

Mouth tightening, he moved to the corner of the elevator where Bricker and Mortimer stood, positioning his body in front of the suitcase to prevent anyone from bumping it and discovering it held something more than clothes. Mortimer stood to the side of the case, protecting it from that angle, Bricker stood behind it, and the other side was against the back wall of the elevator. It was the best they could do.

Lucian ground his teeth together as body after body crowded into the small contraption. When not one single person more could squeeze in, those still waiting in the hall sagged and moved away from the doors. They closed, and the elevator finally continued upward.

One floor up it stopped again. Two people got off, one got on. At the next floor, one got off and two got on. But after that it was a slow, steady stream of people getting off, until by the eighth floor there were only themselves and two other couples. The others all eased a little away from each

other, taking advantage of the extra space, but Lucian stayed right where he was. Leigh had begun to thrash about inside the suitcase, and the last thing he wanted was to step aside and let them see the cloth case bulging and shifting about.

He should have moved forward, though, he realized a moment later when he got a good whack in the back of the knees that nearly sent him to the floor. Grabbing the rail that ran around the elevator, he caught himself and ground his teeth as he was repeatedly pummeled through the bag. Distracted by the beating he was taking, it wasn't until Bricker began to whistle loudly that Lucian realized Leigh wasn't just thrashing about, she was moaning, too.

Noting that the other two couples were now looking around with confusion, searching for the source of the moans, Lucian began to whistle as well. Unfortunately, he had no idea what tune Bricker was whistling, so started an entirely new one. When that didn't wholly drown the sounds Leigh was making, Mortimer joined in with a tune of his own.

It was a great relief when the elevator dinged, the door opened, and the last two couples rushed out. Lucian moved away from the suitcase as the doors closed, relieved to note that the next floor was their own.

He rolled his eyes as Mortimer bent to rub one hand soothingly over the part of the suitcase that kept bulging outward, and murmured, "It's all right, Leigh. We're almost there."

"Don't do that," Bricker said. "You don't know what you're rubbing."

Shaking his head, Lucian turned away as the door opened onto their floor. Mortimer and Bricker were two of the toughest hardasses he knew, but they had been acting like a couple of old women ever since Leigh appeared. It was almost painful to watch.

Leaving the two men to bring their burden at their own speed, Lucian strode down the hall to the door of their two bedroom suite. He was seated on the side of his bed, kicking his shoes off, when he finally heard them enter.

Pushing his shoes aside, Lucian stood and began to undo his shirt as he walked to the door. He arrived just in time to see them finish unzipping the suitcase. Before they could open it, Leigh had thrown it open and tumbled out. Both men immediately let the suitcase drop and rushed to her side. It only took one look for Lucian to see that she wasn't conscious. She was pale, sweat was pouring off her, and she was now thrashing around on the ground, almost appearing to be in convulsions.

Lucian watched Mortimer and Bricker move her to the couch, but when they began to flap over her like a couple of useless old women, he decided it was time to step in and take control.

"One of you has to take the suitcase back, then head to the nearest hospital and get a portable IV set up and more blood."

"I'll go." Mortimer took the suitcase, zipped it up, then headed for the door. "How much blood?"

"Lot's of it. And another cooler, too," Lucian added, then glanced at the screaming woman and added, "And some drugs to kill the pain and make her sleep."

"What do I do?" Bricker asked as Mortimer hurried out of the room.

Lucian shrugged. "Watch her to be sure she doesn't hurt herself."

"Shouldn't I try to give her some blood, or something?" Bricker asked, concern on his face. It was obvious he was desperate to do something of use.

"You can try, but she'll probably just choke on it and vomit it back up at this stage."

"What?" Bricker asked with amazement. "Well, how the hell did people go through the turn before IVs and stuff?"

Lucian grinned. "They suffered through it until their teeth finished changing, then we carefully allowed them to feed."

"How long will it take for her teeth to change?" Bricker asked.

Lucian shook his head wearily. "It's different with each person, Bricker. It depend□ea

Irritated to have what little sleep he was going to get disturbed, Lucian strode to the door to the living room and jerked it open, stepped out, then simply stood there gaping.

Leigh was no longer on the couch where the men had first put her. She was now on the floor in the middle of the cleared room, thrashing, kicking, writhing, and rolling. But it was Bricker who had shocked Lucian. At first glance one could be forgiven for thinking he was mauling the girl. The large, dark vampire was lying sprawled sideways across her torso, one hand stretching up to try to hold both of hers, the other reaching down to try to keep hold of her ankles as he bounced, jerked, and jolted around on her undulating body.

"What the hell are you doing?" Lucian finally asked, having to shout to be heard over Leigh's screams.

"Trying to keep her from hurting herself!" Bricker yelled back, grabbing at the hand that got loose and began to hammer anything in its way; the floor, the couch, Bricker himself.

"Well there's someone at the door. Didn't you hear the knocking?" Lucian asked with exasperation.

Bricker turned a disbelieving look over his shoulder. "Yeah. But I'm a little busy here."

"Jesus Christ, Bricker! You're stronger than the woman. Restrain her," he snapped impatiently.

"I don't want to hurt her trying to keep her from hurting herself," the man snapped back.

The pounding at the door got louder, and the shouting now sounded like more than one voice. Sighing, Lucian moved toward it. "I'll get the damned door, then."

"Gee, thanks a lot." Bricker sounded less than appreciative.

Lucian opened the door to find himself staring at three men: a diminutive man in a suit, who was obviously the manager; and two large beefy guys in security uniforms. He forced them all backward as he stepped into the hall, then pulled the door closed behind him to shut out the screaming. It didn't work very well -- the screams were muffled but still voluble.

"We've had some complaints about the noise," the manager began, his voice trembling with outrage, then he gave up all pretense at polite inquiry and snapped, "What the hell is going on in there, Mr. Argeneau?"

Lucian didn't even bother to try to explain. It was impossible to explain anyway. Instead, he slid into the mind of the manager and took control, blanking his thoughts. He then turned his attention to each of the security guards. Within moments the men were on their way back to the elevator, the entire incident removed from their memory. Lucian watched them onto the elevator, then turned to open the door to the suite and found it locked. And he hadn't thought to bring the key-card with him. He knocked, but knew it was a useless endeavor. There was no way Bricker would hear him over the racket going on inside.

He slumped against the door, giving up any hope of getting back inside any time soon.

Lucian was nodding off outside the suite door when someone shook his shoulder. Blinking his eyes open, he lifted his head and jumped quickly to his feet when he saw Mortimer standing over him, holding a large cooler.

"What are you doing out here?" Mortimer handed him the cooler so he could pull out his own key card and slide it into the lock. The light turned green and he opened the door.

Lucian just shook his head and moved past him. He was too tired to bother with explanations. As Mortimer rushed over to help Bricker restrain the woman, Lucian set the cooler on the coffee table, which had been moved across the room, probably to prevent Leigh from slamming her head into it.

The first thing Lucian looked for were the drugs. Spotting the syringes and ampoules, he took them out, selected the one most likely to silence and hopefully still the woman, and inserted the needle. He drew the liquid into the syringe as he crossed to where both men were now wrestling with Leigh, and knelt to jerk the sleeve of her blouse up her arm. Holding her arm firmly with one hand, he used the other to inject her. She went silent and still almost before he removed the needle from her arm.

Grunting with satisfaction, Lucian stood and walked back to the coffee table. He set the syringe on it, then reached into the cooler for one of the bags of blood. Slapping it to his teeth, he dropped into one of the overstuffed chairs and let his head drop wearily back and his eyes close.

Lucian stayed like that, ignoring the murmur of Mortimer and Bricker's voices until the bag was empty. Then he lifted his head and opened his eyes as he pulled the empty blood bag from his mouth.

The two men had moved Leigh back onto the couch, he saw. They'd situated her with pillows and a blanket, set up an IV of blood that ran down into her arm, and were now both fussing over her. Bricker was wringing out a cool cloth and using it to wash the sweat off her neck, hands, and lower arms, while Mortimer placed another cloth over her forehead, left it for a minute, then took it, dipped it in the water, wrung it out, and placed it back on her forehead again.

Lucian found himself just gaping. He'd never seen anything like it. These two were hard, heartless hunters. What had gotten into them?

The phone on the table beside him rang, and he reached over to pick it up. Relief coursed through him at the sound of Bastien's voice.

"You got lucky," his nephew announced. "One of the directors was supposed to fly from Lincoln, Nebraska, to California today, but business is keeping him another day, so he doesn't need the plane. It's coming to pick you up in Kansas."

"Hmm," Lucian murmured. "What time will it get here?"

"If you leave for the airport now, you might just get there first."

Lucian sat up abruptly. "That quickly?"

"It's on the way now, and Lincoln's a hell of a lot closer than Toronto," Bastien pointed out.

"Yes, but, I have to -- "

"I already ordered a limo for you," Bastien interrupted soothingly. "It should be there any minute, and I arranged with the rental company to pick up your car from the hotel parking garage."

Lucian opened his mouth to say he'd still need it. He had no intention of getting on the plane. He was going to put Leigh on it, have Thomas pick her up at the airport and deliver her to Marguerite's for his sister-in-law to look after. However, he changed his mind and let the order go. They didn't need two vehicles. He could ride in the van with Mortimer and Bricker. They'd only ended up with both the car and truck because the boys had flown in the day before him. Since they were busy gathering information on Morgan, he'd rented a car rather than take a taxi to the hotel. Lucian hated taxis. As far as he was concerned, taxi drivers all drove as if they had a death wish... and they talked too much. How could they claim to be concentrating on traffic, traffic lights, and pedestrians with their mouths constantly flapping?

"Is there anything else you needed?" Bastien asked.

"No," Lucian said abruptly. "That's fine."

"Good, then you'd better get moving."

Lucian thought Bastien might have said good-bye, but wasn't sure. He was already setting the phone down.

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Leigh's head was throbbing. It felt like someone was crushing her skull. Slowly. She'd never experienced pain like this. It was accompanied by a bad case of cotton mouth and stomach cramps like she'd never known. Basically, she felt like hell.

A groan started to slip from her lips, but the pain it caused in both her dry throat and her head made her abruptly cut it off. She tried to blink her eyes open, but the sudden assault from the light made the pain in her head roar and she quickly closed them again.

This was bad. Very bad. She hadn't felt this bad since... well, ever, she realized. She'd had broken bones, colds, flu, chicken pox, and every other childhood ailment, but didn't recall feeling anything like this.

After several moments of lying still didn't do anything to ease her pain, Leigh decided she'd have to get up and find some aspirins or something. And water. She was so dehydrated her tongue felt like sandpaper. It would also -- she hoped -- help remove the nasty taste in her mouth.

Mentally bracing herself against the coming pain, Leigh eased her eyes open, only to close them again as the pain in her head ratcheted up a notch.

Aspirin, she reminded herself. And water. Just a dozen steps to her bathroom and she could have both. Maybe she could manage getting there without opening her eyes. She'd lived in her little house for two years, surely she could find the bathroom without opening her eyes? If I can walk, she added, as worry claimed her. As bad as she felt, it was possible she might be too weak to get around.

Leigh took a deep breath, then managed to sit up on the bed. The small action left her panting and breathless. Oh, this can't be good, she thought vaguely, then became aware of a tugging on her arm every time she moved it and forced one eye open to peer down.

Spying the tape wrapped around her arm, she blinked her other eye open in surprise and stared with confusion, then noted the tube sticking out of it and followed that up to an empty bag hanging from a stand beside the bed. The bag was empty, but there were traces of a red liquid pooled in the bottom, and a label on the bag with a large O and Rh positive under it.

Blood?

Her head turned slowly as she examined the room, and she realized with dismay that it wasn't her cozy bedroom in the home she'd purchased and decorated so lovingly. This was a room she'd never seen before -- a large blue room with a sitting area to one side that included a couch, a coffee table, and chairs. There were a set of double doors, obviously to a closet, and two other doors besides.

A prickly sensation of fear crept up the back of her neck, and she began to recall some of what had happened the night before. Donny stopping her on a dark street. Her anger with him. Turning to walk away, then losing control of her body, and then... Morgan.

Leigh stiffened as she recalled him biting her and giving her blood in the back of the van. The van had stopped at an ugly old house that seemed about to collapse in on itself. Morgan carried her inside and downstairs into a cold damp basement. She'd stared in horror at the coffins there, and the pale, hard-faced people, then he took her into a tiny room that held just a cot. Then Donny was leaning over her, telling her everything would be all right. He'd chosen her. They would live forever.

She remembered shaking her head, trying to get past the pain throbbing in her temples as he'd gone on about vampires and eternal life. She hadn't listened to most of it; her mind had been fixed on only one thing: she knew she had to get out of there.

And she had, Leigh recalled. With Morgan gone, she'd had control of her body once more. She'd managed to stay conscious despite the pain and weakness that assailed her, and suspected Donny had unintentionally helped her. He'd been as solicitous as a lover, covering her with a blanket as he promised a happy ever after and an eternity of wonderful nights in their own little coffin built for two.

Every word he'd said had fueled the fury burning in her, so that when he finally left the room, she somehow managed to gain her feet and stumble to the door to make her escape. She'd made it all the way upstairs and into the kitchen without interference.

But what happened then? She had a vague, fuzzy dreamlike memory of three men in the kitchen. She'd recognized two of them, since they were at Coco's every night that week, eating at the bar because they showed up so late. The third man was blond with chiseled features, as gorgeous as a Greek god come to life.

It must have been a dream, she decided. No man could be that good-looking.

She glanced around the room again. Had she escaped from that house? Perhaps she was still there, but in a different room. She had no idea, except that this wasn't her own room in her own cozy home.

Shifting her feet off the bed, Leigh started to rise, only to pause at another pull on her arm. Turning, she grabbed the tube and tape and gave an impatient tug, wincing as the tape ripped hair from her arm and pain shot through her. Gritting her teeth against the sting, she managed to gain her feet, but found herself swaying alarmingly. In the next moment, she crumpled to the floor, her legs folding under her.

"Dammit, Julius! Get down! You'll make me drop the tray."

Stiffening, Leigh raised her head to peer over the bed and at the door across the room. It was closed at the moment, but she heard a man's exasperated voice clearly through the wood. Ignoring the pain in her arm, she ducked instinctively to hide behind the bed, her body seeming to make the decision before her mind had processed her options. In the next moment she was sliding under the bed on her stomach. Once in the center, she stilled and held her breath, her eyes finding the door through the crack between the floor and the ruff around the bed.

A pair of bare feet and the bottom hem of what looked like black jeans appeared as the wooden panel swung inward.

"Stupid dog," the man muttered as the bare feet moved into the room. Then, four black paws followed and Leigh bit her lip. A dog. Her hiding space suddenly didn't seem such a good idea.

"Well hell! Where did she go?"

Leigh glanced to the side as the bare feet stopped beside the bed, then moved forward to the headboard. There was the clatter and clink of glass as something -- the tray he'd mentioned? -- was set down on the bedside table, then the bare feet moved away, toward one of the other doors in the room, this one on the same wall the headboard was against.

"As if I don't have enough to do with you wrecking the house at every turn and my constantly having to run up here to change the blood bags," the man was muttering.

Leigh wasn't paying much attention to him, however. Her focus had turned to the dog. Rather than follow the man, the four black paws were approaching the end of the bed, and she had a sinking feeling her hiding spot wouldn't last long.

Ignoring her various aches and pains, she glanced around wildly, looking for some sort of weapon, any weapon at all, but she saw nothing, not even a dust bunny under the bed. If this were her room and her bed, there would have been clothes, shoes, possibly a hanger or two. Shoes, or even a hanger, made a better weapon than the nothing under this bed. The space was as barren as a desert.

"When I get my hands on Thomas," the man was muttering now. "He's deliberately not answering his phone because he knows I want him here to help with this mess."

Leigh glanced to the side, to see that he'd moved away from the first door and was now moving to the closet doors. Curiosity got the better of her then and she reached out with her sore arm to lift the side ruff enough to see him.

Her eyes widened. He was barefoot, as she'd known, but also bare-chested, or mostly bare-chested. The flowered apron he wore covered part of a very muscular, very naked chest and skirted over his black jeans. A kerchief was tied around his face, covering his mouth and nose like a bank robber of old. Another covered most of the short blond hair curling in waves away from his face, and he wore rubber gloves on his hands, then her attention was diverted as he opened the closet door.

Leigh grimaced at the sight of the shoes lining the bottom of the large wall closet. They were women's shoes, maybe half a dozen, and every one sported a pointed heel. A lot of good they did her there, she thought irritably, then glanced sharply toward the end of the bed as a rustle caught her ear.

Much to her horror, the dog had found her. He was now on his stomach at the end of the bed, snuffling as he began to scooch his way forward under the bed. Eyes widening, Leigh scooted back as far as she could until her feet hit the wall at the head of the bed, but the dog just followed, dragging himself forward on his belly and making little whimpering noises that she thought might be meant to reassure her that his intentions were friendly.

Leigh's eyes widened in growing amazement as his size became apparent. The animal was beyond large, his head a big square that could have passed for a small television, his body lifting the bed each time he bumped it. He was a bloody monster. Huge! He could eat her for dinner and probably still manage a snack afterward.

"I don't need this. I -- Julius? Where the hell did you go now?"

Leigh tore her eyes away from the dog who was now almost completely under the bed and glanced toward the bare feet as they moved to the door where they'd entered. The man was obviously looking out in the hall for the dog, and for a moment she hoped he might leave the room in search of them both. Then she was distracted by a wet tongue sliding up her cheek.

Blinking, she turned to discover that the dog had reached her. Fortunately, his intentions didn't seem vicious. Unless he was just taking a taste before he bit, his greeting seemed friendly enough. Relieved that she needn't fear having her throat ripped out -- again -- she eased one hand forward and patted the dog awkwardly in greeting. Leigh knew it had been a bad move the moment she heard the thump of his tail on the floor as he tried to wag it in greeting.

She squeezed her eyes closed, hardly aware of the tongue slapping wetly across her cheek this time, though it was hard to ignore the doggy breath.

"I should be out helping to hunt down Morgan."

That mutter caught Leigh's attention and she stilled under the dog's tongue. Hunting down Morgan? Then he wasn't a cohort of Donald and the man who'd bit her?

"Instead, I'm stuck here babysitting a -- " There was a pause as the man apparently became aware of the thumping sound of the dog's tail. Leigh raised her hand to her face to block the dog's tongue and opened her eyes in time to see the feet by the door turn slowly back to face the room. Just as she noted that the tip of the dog's tail was sticking out from under the bed, the man snapped, "Julius! What the hell are you doing under the bed?"

Leigh groaned inwardly and watched the bare feet move closer. They stopped beside the tip of Julius's protruding tail, then a pair of knees and the skirt of his apron came into view as he knelt at the foot of the bed. A bare arm followed, then his face appeared, still hidden behind the kerchief. His eyes, however, were not hidden, and she felt her stomach clench as she stared at the silvery blue as he glared under the bed. It took her a moment to realize he was glaring at the dog, then his gaze shifted to her and he blinked in surprise.

"Oh. There you are." The glare softened, but there was still irritation in his eyes. "What are you doing out of bed? Don't I have enough to do?"

Leigh had the most ridiculous urge to apologize, but bit her tongue to keep it back. She had no idea who he was, or where she was, or --

Her thoughts scattered as the dog gave her face another lick. Either he believed she was a doggy popsicle or they were going steady now, she thought, her sense of humor returning as the ridiculousness of the situation sank in. Her hiding spot had been a decided failure, yet she was still in it. And she wasn't even sure she needed a hiding place. If the man was hunting Morgan... "The enemy of my enemy" and all that.

Leigh was about to roll out from under the bed when her hand was suddenly caught in a rubbery grip and she was dragged out. She managed a gasp of shock, then found herself scooped up into strong arms and carried to the bed she'd struggled out of just moments ago.

"You shouldn't be up and about yet. You're too weak," the man scolded as he straightened, his kerchief billowing against his lips with each word.

"I -- " Leigh began, but he'd noticed her arm and interrupted.

"You've torn out your IV. Now I'll have to put it back in."

Leigh watched wide-eyed as he grabbed the tube from the IV, found the end of it, and began to remove the tape to examine the tip. Most of her fear was easing away. He seemed harmless. A little batty, she decided, taking in his eccentric costume, but harmless. She barely had this thought when her gaze was drawn to the dog. He was finished dragging himself out from under the bed and leapt up onto it to settle at her side.

Leigh eyed him warily, afraid he would start licking her again. Now that she could see all of him and tell how big he was, she was very, very grateful that he seemed a friendly mutt, but not so grateful that she wanted to be covered in doggy spit from head to toe. Fortunately, it seemed he was done with that. He spread out on the bed beside her, dropped his head onto his front paws, closed his eyes and appeared to go to sleep.

A discouraged sigh drew her attention back to the man in time to see him send an irritated glance her way. "You broke it."

Leigh blinked. "I did?"

"Yes. Snapped the needle tip in half," he announced, then glanced over the bed. Leigh glanced down as well, her gaze skimming the surface of the white bed for the tip of the IV needle.

Muttering under his breath, he bent to run his hands over the linen surface, presumably in search of the needle tip. Leigh drew her legs up, pulling them in closer to her body to avoid his hands, but the increased pain in her arm as she started to wrap it around her knees made her still. Raising the arm, she turned it over and peered at it, grimacing as she noted the tip sticking out. It almost seemed to push farther out of her body before her very eyes. She'd been so distracted by her fears, she hadn't paid attention to the pinching pain in her arm.

"Oh, there it is." Taking her hand, he drew her arm out straight and then plucked out the bit of metal. He peered at it closely and scowled, his gaze sliding from the broken needle to the IV with irritation. "How am I -- "

His question ended abruptly as the phone rang. Scowling, he tossed the needle tip on a tray now on the bedside table. Presumably, this was what she'd heard him set down when he first entered, because she was sure it hadn't been there earlier. Her gaze slid over the contents with interest. It held a pitcher of water, a glass, and a plate of something vaguely resembling dog food... except that it was steaming. Leigh eyed the water greedily as the man reached for the phone.

"Hello?" he said into the receiver, and she eased closer to the bedside, her tongue slipping out to lick her lips as she drew closer to the water.

The phone rang again.

Leigh glanced back to see the man's eyebrows draw tight together until they almost became one. He stared at the buttons on the phone and pushed another one. "Hello?"

The phone rang again.

"Bloody, newfangled -- " He began pressing button after button, repeatedly saying, "Hello?"

"Lucian?"

The dog beside Leigh shifted in his sleep, ears twitching at the sound of the voice that came through the telephone speaker.

"Marguerite." The man's relief was palpable, Leigh noted curiously as she eased a little closer to the side of the bed. She could almost reach the water jug now.

"Why do you sound so far away, Lucian?" the woman asked.

The man, Lucian, snorted with irritation. "You're in Europe, Marguerite. I am far away."

"Yes, but you shouldn't sound far away." Her voice was exasperated. "Are you on speaker phone?"

"No," the man said quickly, and Leigh bit her lip to keep from smiling at the lie when he sent a warning glare her way. Apparently, he didn't want to fuss with any more buttons, but didn't want to admit he didn't know how to use the phone either.

That thought made her frown. Why didn't he know how to use his own phone?

"Hmmm." The disbelieving murmur distracted Leigh from her thoughts, and she glanced toward the phone, her gaze stopping on the water instead. She was close enough to reach the pitcher, she noted, and started to pick it up, only to have her hand knocked away.

"Well," Marguerite announced. "I called because it seems Vittorio forgot to take out the garbage. He apparently collected it all in a big black garbage bag and set it by the back door in the kitchen to take out before we left, but in all the excitement, he forgot."

Leigh lost interest as soon as she heard the word garbage, but then her attention was focused on the pitcher as Lucian picked it up and poured a glass of water. Then he set the pitcher down, picked up the glass and handed it to her.

She felt relief course through her. She took the glass in both hands, then opened her mouth to thank him only to find her lips covered by one rubber gloved finger as he shook his head. He wasn't supposed to be on speaker phone, she recalled. No doubt he didn't want the woman to hear her, as it would give away the game.

Mouthing the words "Thank you," she raised the glass to her lips and took a swallow, just managing to restrain a murmur of pleasure as the clear, cold liquid filled her mouth. God, it was good.

"I'm sure it's fine," Marguerite continued. "I was just worried because we put Julius in the kitchen and he has a tendency to nose through the garbage and -- "

"Nose?" Lucian asked dryly, his tone drawing Leigh's gaze. He was glaring at the sleeping dog on the bed. "Don't you mean claw through it, rip it open, and drag it around the house?"

"Oh dear," came faintly from the phone. "I take it Julius got into the bag before the people from the kennel got there?"

Lucian hesitated, his gaze shifting from the dog to Leigh, before he simply said, "Yes."

Leigh glanced at the dog, wondering how they'd come by his name. Julius seemed a pretty powerful name for a dog. On the other hand, she supposed he was a powerful dog, and names like Spot and Fluffy just wouldn't have cut it.

"But you got Julius off all right?" Marguerite asked. "There was no problem with the kennel people? I've never put him in a kennel before, but I couldn't leave him alone there at the house. I don't know how long I'm going to be gone. You did make sure they got his medicine and instructions? He has an infection and has to have his pills."

Leigh took another sip of water as she waited for Lucian to answer. Obviously, there had been some sort of problem, since the dog was still here, but Lucian just turned his back to her and said, "Look, Marguerite, I'm glad you called. There is a problem."

Despite the fact that he was actually talking to this Marguerite through the speaker phone, Lucian still held the receiver to his ear, and Leigh found herself smiling faintly. There was just something about the man that made her want to smile. Despite what had happened, and the fact that she hadn't a clue where she was or who he was, she didn't find him the least bit threatening. It was hard to find a man in such a weird getup threatening, she supposed, her gaze sliding over him again and seeming to get caught on the ripple of muscle in his back as he shifted the useless phone receiver to his other ear.

"What problem?" Marguerite asked as Leigh's eyes dropped over his tapered waist to his behind. Her eyebrows lifted a little as she saw that he didn't have the flat ass that so many men were cursed with, but a pert rounded one that just made her want to reach out and give them a squeeze.

"The girl broke the needle ripping it out of her arm."

The irritation in his voice drew her gaze back up as he turned to give her an irritated glance.

"I need to replace the needle. Where do I find them?"

"Oh dear." This comment was followed by a long silence, then the woman said, "I'm afraid I don't have any replacements."

"What? But -- "

"Lissianna doesn't need them anymore so I've never bothered to --" She e e e as g h n y r t a e r s i n r o a i n l y o t s e b a c k M p h e a -- "

Julius barked again despite the glare Lucian had turned on him, and Leigh bit her lip at the frustration on his face as he clutched the phone to his ear.

"Why is Julius still there?" Marguerite sounded alarmed. "I thought the kennel people came to collect him!"

"They did," Lucian answered. "A woman came by."

"Then why is he still there?"

Lucian opened his mouth, closed it again, then reluctantly admitted, "She didn't arrive at an opportune time."

Silence seeped through the room. When Marguerite finally spoke, her voice was terribly calm, even a little cold, as she said, "Explain."

Lucian's eyes shifted to Leigh, and her own widened in surprise at the accusation in his gaze. It seemed obvious he blamed her for whatever had happened.

"I'd left the front door open and gone in to check on... er... Leigh," he said, grasping for the name. "She was back to her screaming and thrashing so I decided to take her up to Lissianna's room."

He ignored Leigh's startled gasp at the announcement that she'd been "back to screaming and thrashing" and continued, "I picked her up to carry her upstairs, and when I got into the hall there was a woman in the doorway. I started to explain that Julius was in the kitchen, but the sight of Leigh covered in blood and in a fit must have upset her, because she... er... took off."

"She saw Leigh covered in blood and in the midst of turning?" Marguerite said carefully.

Leigh glanced down, noting the large red stain on her blouse, and supposed the sight of it might be somewhat distressing. She certainly found it distressing.

"I believe Julius may have been barking rather frantically at the time as well," Lucian announced.

"You believe?" Marguerite asked dryly.

"I had my earplugs in to drown out the screaming," Lucian explained.

Leigh gaped at the man. Geez, he was all heart.

There was a long drawn-out sigh across the phone. "She probably thought you were some mad killer."

"That's what the police said," Lucian agreed.

"The police?" Marguerite squawked.

"Everything is fine," he said shortly. "I explained everything."

"You explained what?" Marguerite sounded almost hysterical. "You couldn't tell them the truth."

"Don't be ridiculous, Marguerite, of course I didn't tell them that." He released a long sigh that sent his kerchief fluttering again. "It's obvious you're on edge from your long journey. Don't worry. I'll take care of everything here. Get some rest."

"You'll take care of everything?" Marguerite sounded a bit stressed, but Lucian wasn't listening. He'd set the receiver back in its rest and was pushing buttons, trying to disconnect as she went on, "I've known you for seven hundred years, Lucian, and in all that time you've --"

Her rant was cut off as Lucian finally succeeded in finding the button to end the call. Leigh was almost sorry he'd succeeded. She would have liked to hear more. Marguerite had known Lucian for seven hundred years? She must have misheard her, Leigh thought. She'd probably said seven hungry years or something, though that didn't make any sense either. Anyway, she had a feeling that whatever followed would have been interesting.

Relaxing as silence drifted through the room, Lucian straightened his shoulders and turned to Leigh. He stared at her for a while, then gestured to the tray. "I made you something to eat if you're hungry."

Leigh peered at the steaming pile on the plate on the tray, then asked uncertainly. "What is it?"

"Prime cuts in gravy."

"Prime cuts in gravy?" she echoed slowly. "Did you cook it?"

"I opened the can and heated it up in the microwave for one minute. Someone named Alpo cooked it."

Leigh stiffened, her head shooting up, eyes wide with disbelief. "Alpo?"

He shrugged. "That's what the can said."

Leigh shook her head with bewilderment. "You can use a microwave, but not a phone, and don't know that Alpo isn't the chef, but the brand name for dog food?" There was something seriously wrong here.

"I can use a phone," he snapped. "I'm not an idiot. It's just Marguerite has these stupid fancy phones with more buttons than a plane cockpit and..." He paused and seemed to regain his temper, then added, "As for a microwave, I have one of my own. I occasionally like to warm... beverages before I drink them." He scowled, then added, "And what's wrong with dog food? Food is food, and it smells pretty good."

Leigh stared at him as the vague, dreamlike recollection of stumbling into the kitchen returned to her. Her eyes narrowed on Lucian as she wondered if he'd been the blond with Morty and Bricker in the kitchen, the one who'd covered her mouth and pulled her out of the door and against his chest. Had that really happened? Was Lucian that man?

Leigh supposed he could be, but it was hard to tell without seeing his face.

"Do you want it or not?" Lucian asked, and she turned to him with disbelief.

"You're kidding, right?"

He shrugged and repeated, "Food is food, and I didn't find anything else in the kitchen."

Leigh shook her head. She wasn't that hungry and hoped to God she never was. "No, thank you."

Shrugging again, he picked up the plate and set it on the bed in front of Julius. The dog immediately began to lap it up.

"See. He likes it," Lucian said, and Leigh bit her lip against the rude comments that sprang to mind as she watched him bend to the bedside table and open the door.

Curious, she leaned forward and found that it wasn't a bedside table at all. It was actually a small refrigerator and it was presently stacked half full with bags of blood.

"Open your mouth."

"What?" Leigh asked. It was such an unexpected order, and his head was in the refrigerator and half-muffled. She was quite sure she'd misheard him.

"I said open your mouth." Lucian straightened from the refrigerator with a bag of blood in hand.

Leigh eyed it with confusion. "Why?"

Apparently not the most patient of men, rather than repeat himself again, he reached out, clasped her face in one hand and dug his fingers into her cheeks. She was forced to open her mouth to avoid pain. Lucian paused and frowned as he peered at her teeth.

"Of course not." Shaking his head, he glanced around, then back to her, his gaze pausing on her blouse. "Right."

Leigh frowned, wondering what on earth he was thinking, then gasped in surprise as Lucian caught the bloody front of her blouse and raised it to her nose. She tried to pull her face away from the crusty cloth, but he simply followed with the stiff material, and she stilled as she breathed in the scent of her own blood.

Normally, her reaction would have been to wrinkle her nose with distaste at the tinny scent wafting up her nostrils. However, Leigh found herself pressing her nose closer into it, her stomach rippling with cramps as she breathed in the distinctive smell. After a moment she became aware of a shifting sensation in her mouth.

Startled, she jerked her head away, her hand rising to her mouth. Her fingertips brushed against the sharp tip of a tooth that was suddenly protruding past the others, then Lucian brushed her hand aside and slapped the blood bag to her mouth.

Leigh heard the pop of her teeth piercing the plastic, then felt something cold slipping up through her teeth as the bag quickly began to deflate. Her eyes shot to Lucian, scared and bewildered as she tried to understand what was happening.

"Right," he said firmly. "I'm going to explain a few things to you. In the meantime, you just sit there and hold onto this."

Lucian caught her hand in his free one and raised it to hold the bag in place. Once he was sure she had a grip on it, he straightened and considered her, apparently trying to decide how to go about explaining what he had to tell her.

"I don't know how much you remember of last night."

"Onny," Leigh muttered around the bag, then paused, thinking there was no way he would understand anything she said. Much to her surprise, however, he seemed to grasp it.

"Donny?"

"Unh," Leigh said, nodding.

"The red-haired guy Morgan was talking to?"

Leigh nodded quickly again and spoke around the bag once more, "Or'an 'it 'e."

"Morgan bit me -- you?"

Leigh nodded again.

"Right. Then you do remember. So I don't need to explain that vampires really do exist, one bit you, and -- apparently -- gave you blood?"

Leigh grimaced around the bag against her lips, vividly recalling choking as the tinny liquid poured into her mouth. The same liquid apparently presently being sucked up by her own teeth, which had grown decidedly fangish.

"And now you're turning, too," he continued. "You're a vampire."

"O' 'it," she muttered around the nearly empty bag. That so wasn't what she wanted to hear.

"Oh shit, indeed."

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LYNSAY SANDS is the nationally bestselling author who is known for her hysterical historicals as well as the popular Argeneau/Rogue Hunter vampire series. With her witty and charming personality, Sands describes books as, "Waking dreams or stories, tales to amuse, entertain and distract us from everyday life." She's been writing stories since grade school and considers herself incredibly lucky to be able to make a career out of it. Her hope is that readers can get away from their everyday stress through her stories, and if there are occasional uncontrollable fits of laughter, that's just a big bonus. Visit her official website at www.lynsaysands.net.

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