

CHAPTER ONE

Following on directly from Kiss of Steel, 16-year-old Lena is forced to make a decision that has long term consequences for her future...

Slipping through the skylight onto the roof above, Lena let out a sigh as she realised it was empty. Part of her—a part she was growing uncomfortable even admitting to—had hoped to find Will up here.

The hulking verwulfen bodyguard often used the rooftops as a vantage point from which to observe the rookery of Whitechapel. People forgot to look up, and so he and the rest of Blade's men could keep an eye on them without being observed.

The aloofness suited Will and his nature. Despite the fact that she now lived under the same roof as he did, she saw him only rarely. If Lena was as foolish as she sometimes pretended to be, she'd almost think he was avoiding her.

Unlikely, she thought, sitting down with a frown and gathering her pretty yellow skirts around her ankles. Will barely even noticed her. The idea of him going out of his way to avoid her seemed like the sort of frothy drivel she read in the French novels that Esme, Blade's housekeeper, bought.

"...hold still... And stop flexing your arm..."

Lena flinched at the suddenness of the words, glancing around. She knew the voice instantly. Honoria. If her older sister found her on the roof, she'd have words to say about how dangerous it could be. Never mind that the rooftop was the only place in the Warren that Lena could truly be alone to think.

"I'm not flexing," someone else snapped, in an aristocratic tone that took Lena back years to the time when she and her family had lived on the edge of the Echelon. "You're coming at me with a hypodermic syringe. Considering you've only just begun to forgive me, I may be tensing a little."

"What makes you think I've forgiven you at all?" Honoria snapped back and silence fell.

It seemed to be coming from the other skylight, which was cracked open an inch. Lena leaned closer in curiosity. The room below belonged to Honoria's laboratory, where she spent most of her afternoons.

"You did agree to offer me a consultation," the man replied in a quieter tone. It wasn't quite a question.

Who the devil was it? Blade was notoriously protective of his wife. It seemed completely unlike him to allow Honoria to entertain men in her laboratory alone.

Lying down on her stomach, Lena slid closer and tried to peer through the window.

All she could see was a band of her sister's red skirts and a gentlemen's dangling legs. Whoever he was, he was sitting on her sister's examination table. And he was wearing Hoby's boots. The cut of his pants were tailored exquisitely. Definitely an aristocrat or someone who had money.

A little flutter of excitement started in Lena's chest.

Life on the edge of the Echelon had been a heady thing. Her father had been a gentleman scientist who'd won patronage from two of the great houses of the Echelon. Though the Todd's were never quite accepted into the aristocratic ranks, she'd been expected to attend lessons in etiquette by Vickers, the duke who had held her father's patronage license. Lena might never have made her debut, but by joining other young women at their lessons, she had been introduced to several of their family members. Eventually she might have caught the eye of a young cousin or brother. Or at least that was her understanding of the situation.

Everything had changed the night her father was murdered and Honoria had taken Lena and her brother, Charlie, into hiding. Suddenly she'd been swept away from the bright, glittering world she'd stood on the edge of. Instead she'd been thrown into the squalor of the East End and forced by circumstance to work her fingers to the bone just to put food on the table. She had never resented her sister for that fact, but she'd hated the circumstances. And now that she no longer had to work from dawn 'til dusk or ration herself with food, she still found that she wasn't quite happy.

She loved the Warren with the eccentric members of Blade's adopted family but it was becoming abundantly clear that she had no place here. No future. Though she had a talent for clockwork and often pursued projects in her spare time for her old employer, Mr. Mandeville, she knew precisely what she wanted out of life.

A husband who loved her just as much as Blade loved her sister. At least four, fat, happy children who adored her, and a household of her very own in at least the fashionable end of town where it was safe.

The end of town where the man below had come from.

His voice seemed familiar. Like she should know him. But what blue blood of the Echelon would dare come into Blade's turf? Though it had been two years since he'd been knighted by the Queen, his distrust of the Echelon – and their distrust of him – had not lessened.

"You know why I agreed to the consultation," Honoria muttered, stepping back with a syringe full of blood.

Lena ducked back, but not all the way. She caught a glimpse of the man's smooth-shaven jaw and firm mouth. He'd stripped his jacket off and wore only a shirt, the sleeves rolled up on his right arm to allow Honoria access to his veins.

"Because--"

"You saved my husband's life," she continued, in that abrupt oh-so-Honoria tone. "If you think there's anything more to this, then you're wrong." Metal rasped against glass as she discharged the syringe into one of her vials. "Though you should have at least mentioned this earlier. Your skin's quite ashen. People must have noticed."

Lena could almost sympathise with the stranger. She'd been on the end of that tone many times over the years.

"Honor, I--"

"How long have you been injecting the silver nitrate for?"

"If you'd let me finish a sentence, I might be able to tell you," he replied, in the most neutral tone of voice.

That he called her sister by the same name Lena did made her frown.

“My craving virus levels have been high for the last five years. I don’t know why. I’m barely twenty-nine.” At last a hint of frustration broke through in his voice. “I’ve been injecting the silver nitrate since it came on the market as a solution to bring CV levels down.”

“It doesn’t work.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” The stranger snapped.

Silence. He swore under his breath.

“Your husband’s hair is getting darker. His skin too. I’m sure others have noticed but I’m possibly the only one who might suspect why. You found your father’s diary, didn’t you? He found the cure? The cure for the craving virus?”

A diary that their father had died to protect. Lena froze, her nails digging into the tiles on the roof. Very few people knew that fact.

“Or did you have it all along?” The stranger’s voice had softened. A hint of anger stirred in it.

Honorina came back into view, her skirts sweeping angrily against her ankles. “I had it,” she replied, tipping her chin up so that the spill of inky dark hair framed her pale, heart-shaped face. “Though there is no cure.”

“Liar.” The man slid off the table and stepped closer, staring down at Honorina. “Blade was virtually on the edge of the Fade. Another few months and he would have started evolving into a vampire. Like I am.”

This time Lena caught a full view of his face. Leo Barrons, the Duke of Caine’s heir. Virtually one step below the Prince Consort himself.

Once, years ago, Lena’s father had worked for his. Lena had grown up in Caine House, until Vickers had stolen her father’s patronage away. Or at least... she couldn’t quite remember what had happened. She’d been too young.

“You’re not quite at that level, yet.” Honorina snapped back. “Your CV percentage is sixty-five. You still have a year or two.”

“Until I start stinking of rot,” he replied tightly, grabbing Honorina’s wrist. “Like *he* did.”

“Let me go.”

Barrons’s jaw clenched. “Is this how you’ll punish me? Make me suffer the way he did? An eye for an eye. Do you think I deserve that?” Something pained shook him. “Christ, Honorina. I never meant the damage I caused. I wanted a way to get back at him for what he’d done to me. I never thought that I would infect anyone else.”

“Well, you did,” Honorina shoved him back a step, looking furious. “And now Charlie’s a blue blood because of you--”

Lena gasped, then slapped a hand against her lips and ducked beneath the edge of the skylight. This man had infected her brother? Tears burned in her eyes. All of the months she and Honorina had spent fighting the disease, fighting to save Charlie before the unavoidable happened. Charlie had very nearly lost control and gone for one of them before Blade finished the transformation and taught him to control his blood urges.

Charlie had spent months after that avoiding them, as though he’d still been frightened to be alone with either of them. It was only recently that he could bring himself to be near Lena, where they’d once been as close as twins.

The *bastard!*

“Did you hear something?” Barrons asked.

“It’s probably Esme, finishing her chores or one of the servant drones,” Honoria muttered, instruments clanging against metal. “Nobody’s awake yet who can hear us. Blade’s still in bed. Where you should be.”

“I don’t sleep much any more.”

Honoria’s tone softened. Just a hint. “You do look like hell.”

“Thank you,” Barrons replied dryly. The very politeness of their tones seemed to echo in the air. As if both knew an argument had been narrowly avoided.

“Have you made a decision?” he asked. Fabric rustled, as though he was rolling down his sleeve. “About whether you’ll help me?”

“Of course I’ll help you,” Honoria replied, sounding weary. “A part of me will never forgive you for infecting father with the craving virus – for infecting Charlie – but I’m not about to stand by and watch you become a vampire.”

A sigh of relief. “You don’t know how relieved I am to hear it. How does... How does it work?”

“I told you it’s not a cure,” Honoria warned. “Not completely. But I want you to bring your thrall’s to me to be vaccinated against the craving. When you drink their blood, it will begin to counteract the virus’s effects on your body. Your CV level’s should drop – should, I warn you. It doesn’t seem to do anything for Charlie’s, though perhaps his levels weren’t high enough in the first place.” A pause, where Lena could almost hear Honoria frowning. “I don’t know enough about it. I only have three subjects for research, and it’s barely been two years.”

“But it worked for Blade.”

“Yes,” she replied. “It worked for Blade, though his CV levels seem to be holding now. Perhaps if I had more subjects to examine--”

“Don’t.”

The sharp word dropped into the conversation like a stone. Lena eased herself up again to catch a glimpse of the tableau below.

Barrons had grabbed Honoria by the arm, his body almost ruthlessly blocking her from sight.

“What are you--”

“Whatever you do,” he warned, “don’t let word of this get out.”

“It could help a lot of people,” Honoria replied. “They execute almost five blue blood’s a year for entering the Fade. Imagine--”

“Imagine what they’ll do to get their hands on that knowledge,” he cut in with a deadly soft voice.

Honoria swallowed. “That’s what Blade said.”

“Whoever holds the cure, holds the power. There are men who would kill to control that. Or to control you. The only reason the Echelon hasn’t gone to war against Blade is because they’re not sure what the losses might be like. If they had any idea of what he has, of the cure, then they’ll burn this place to the ground and take you and your research under lock and key. They’ll stick you in a laboratory, Honor, and they’ll keep you there. You’ll never see your husband or your family again.”

The ashen colour of Honoria’s face matched Lena’s own. She couldn’t stop thinking of how many people in the Warren knew Honoria’s secret. Too many. Oh, Lena trusted them all, but there were some – like Charlie – who might not see the harm in spilling mention of it.

She had to warn him to keep his mouth shut. If he'd listen to her. Sixteen seemed to be an irritating age in young men. Especially cocky young blue bloods who could outmuscle most full-grown men these days.

Below her, Honoria took a deep breath. "I won't breathe a word of it," she murmured. "Come, I'll see you to the door. Bring your thralls back here tomorrow at one o'clock, and I'll inject them with the vaccination if they're willing. Tell them it's an inoculation against smallpox or something."

"I will."

The pair of them left the room below and Lena slowly sat up, the cool, ripe air of the rookery spilling around her.

What a discovery to make. She didn't feel the slightest bit guilty for eavesdropping as Honoria never told her anything important, but she couldn't help raking a shaky hand down her face.

Below her the door opened and Barrons stepped out into the brick yard at the back of the rookery. He was far enough away that Lena couldn't hear what was said between him and someone on the stoop – Honoria no doubt.

Taking refuge behind a chimney, Lena worked a pebble-sized piece of brick loose and waited until he strode out into the street. Then, with an aim that would have done most young boys proud, she threw it directly at the back of his head.

Will stalked along the streets with his hands shoved in his pockets, people eddying away from him as if he were surrounded by an invisible aura of violence. Wearing a scowl, he ignored most of them and tried to ignore the itch under his skin.

An itch that an hour's walk couldn't scratch.

Probably not even an afternoon's session in Blade's boxing saloon.

Ahead of him, a man stepped out through the brick arch that led into the yard behind the Warren. Will stopped in his tracks as they both dodged each other. Barrons.

"A long time, Carver," Barrons nodded to him with the slightest tilt of his head. He looked distracted and Will could smell blood and chemicals on him.

Honoria's laboratory then. For a second he wondered if Blade knew. Then the thought dissolved. Of course his master knew. No doubt he'd encouraged it. Blade liked to meddle too much, and only Will knew of the strained relationship between Honoria and Barrons and the cause for it. Not that either of them knew that.

Dark eyes met his. "It seems I shall be coming back tomorrow," Barrons replied. "Do you think I could bring the carriage through Ratcatcher Gate?"

"If you want," Will replied, his lips twitching. His lordship didn't like getting his boots dirty, if Will recalled. Though he would if required. That was one of the only reasons he tolerated the other man's presence. That and the fact that Barrons didn't speak to him like he was a piece of shit beneath his heel, like most blue bloods. He actually treated Will as if he were a man and not verwulfen. "Though it seems mighty charitable."

"Charitable?"

“You bring your fancy carriage in here,” Will waved a hand to indicate the rookery. “And there won’t be much gilt left on it by the end of the visit.”

“Blade growing soft in his old age?” There was teasing glint in the other man’s eye that took the edge from the words.

Nobody mocked his master. But Barrons had helped saved Blade’s life and the pair of them had an odd relationship. Allies that were also competitive in most matters. Or two cocks in the same yard, if one were to be more accurate.

“He’s granted you passage,” Will corrected. “That ain’t mean you got his protection.”

The idea of being under Blade’s protection almost made the other man’s cheeks colour in indignation. Then he suddenly smiled. “You’re jesting me.”

It wasn’t a question. Will shrugged, but he almost smiled. “Tomorrow you can walk. Same as any other man here.”

“I’ll see you then,” Barrons replied.

Turning around, Will started through the arch. He caught a flash of yellow skirts out of the corner of his vision and looked up at the roof, his body stiffening instinctively. *Hell*. Then a piece of brick whistled past.

“Barrons!” he snapped.

Both of them spun, Barrons snatching the piece of brick out of the air, his stance defensive. Someone who knew how to fight, despite his fancy black velvet frock coat and the glittering ruby rings on his fingers.

Barrons examined the brick piece, tension slowly ebbing out of his shoulders as he realised nothing else had followed it. “Someone who doesn’t like blue bloods.” His gaze raked the streets as he tossed the brick piece up and down in his hand. An eerie flash of darkness swept through his eyes. A hint of the predator within.

“Oh, she don’t mind blue bloods,” Will muttered, snatching the bit of brick mid-air. “One might say she prefers ‘em.”

Their eyes met, Barrons frowning. “I don’t--”

“Lena,” Will clarified, glancing up again. Nobody else wore bloody printed yellow cotton here. Nor did they have a penchant for scrambling about on the roof. Though he’d have thought her more likely to swoon at Barrons’s bloody feet than heave a rock at him.

Barrons obviously thought the same. “Why would she throw something at me?”

“Don’t know. Maybe the rookery’s rubbin’ off on her.” His fist clenched around the brick. “But I’ll deal with it.”

“Maybe I should?”

Will shook his head. “Don’t go stirrin’ the anthill when you only just got invited back in. I’ll have a chat with her, find out what’s going on in that pretty little head o’ hers.” He glanced up at the darkening sky. “Besides, you ought to get goin’. Them in the City will be stirrin’ now. Wouldn’t do to have anybody guess where you been spendin’ your afternoon.”

“No,” Barrons agreed softly. “It wouldn’t.” He nodded curtly. “My thanks. I’ll see you on the morrow.”

Then he turned and strode down the street, leaving Will with a pretty little problem to deal with.

No avoiding her now.

CHAPTER TWO

Lena heard footsteps in the hallway and snatched up a book as she dove toward the daybed. Tearing the novel open, she tried to rearrange her skirts and look like she was enthralled in the story as the door opened.

She'd expected Honoria, but as the silence stretched out, thick and heavy, her skin prickling under the weight of another's eyes, she knew immediately who it was.

Will.

Her breath caught and she lifted her gaze slowly. Will leaned against the doorjamb with his arms folded across his broad chest, biceps flexing tight beneath his dusty grey shirt and his eyes narrowed to slits as he observed her. Golden sparks danced in his irises, a hint of the wolf within. Never unleashed, but always riding just beneath the surface. A hint that violence could spill out of this man without a second's warning and sweep away everything in his path.

Dangerous. Predatory. So large that he almost loomed over her. It had frightened and unnerved her at first, because she wasn't used to men like that, but it also fascinated her.

And she didn't know why.

She'd always preferred a handsomer sort of man. Dressed in exquisite tailoring with smooth, manicured hands and charm to spare. Will was the polar opposite to that. He didn't give a damn what he looked like or wore, his hands bore the calluses of hard work, and he and charm were only vaguely acquainted.

Still, his presence always left her feeling breathless. And she couldn't stop herself from wondering what those callus-roughened hands would feel like on her skin. What the rasp of stubble on his jaw would taste like against her lips. A dangerous wondering, for it wasn't at all the remote, flirtatious feelings she usually associated with men.

No. It spoke of dark nights and smooth sheets, of the whisper of skin on skin and all sorts of things that she wasn't supposed to know about.

"Will," she said, her voice embarrassingly husky. "You're up and about early."

He pushed himself upright, his fist curled around something. Lena froze as he rolled a piece of brick across the broad palm of his hand and then tossed it lightly in the air.

"Couldn't sleep," he admitted. "Decided to take a walk."

Those sleepy, dangerous eyes watched her through narrowed lids. Just waiting for her to incriminate herself as he caught the piece of brick.

"I see." She cleared her throat and closed the book gently, smoothing the cover. It was upside down. Holding her hand over the title to hide that fact, she glanced up at him beneath her lashes and unleashed the full force of her smile on him.

That always seemed to do the trick.

Will shifted, shutting the door behind him. As usual, he dropped his gaze and ignored her, a slight frown tightening his forehead as he prowled the room.

The closed door was unusual. And he hadn't fled at the sight of the smile. Lena's lips stiffened. *Trouble*.

"Never knew you had such a good throwin' arm on you," he said, almost conversationally. Another casual toss of the brick piece.

"I don't," she lied with a straight face. "What are you talking about?"

Another dangerous glance her way. "The problem with yellow is that it's visible from quite a distance. Ain't no one else wear yellow around here."

He'd seen her. Lena swallowed. "Actually, quite a few young ladies do now. I appear to have started a fashion."

"Why'd you throw the brick, Lena?"

"Are you accusing me of throwing that?" she replied, putting the book aside in practiced indignation. "What the devil would I do that for? And at who?"

"My question precisely." He caught it again, his large fingers smothering it. "You'll be pleased to know it didn't hit its target. Barrons caught it before it hit him."

Lena arched a brow as he prowled closer. "Of course I'm thrilled. Wouldn't want someone ruining his perfectly coiffed hair."

Will stopped in front of her, leaning down to cage her against the daybed with both hands. Lena pressed back into the soft cushions, barely daring to breathe. This was a side of him she'd never seen before. He never locked himself in a room with her, never came near her. If she brushed against him, then he usually took off like a scalded cat.

This close, she could smell the heady scent of his skin, sun-warmed and slightly musky. Heat radiated off him. The kind that made her want to curl up against him. The kind that warned she just might get her fingers burned...

"Why?" he breathed, the *wild* flaring in his eyes.

She was trapped. Pressed into the cushions, her lungs locking tight in her chest as every ancient, primeval instinct surged to the fore. Will had always been just a little bit dangerous, but he leashed the fury within him so tightly that she rarely caught more than a glimpse of it.

This was more than a glimpse. This was the fury peering back at her.

"I don't know," she blurted, barely managing to hold his gaze. But to lower her eyes meant defeat in some inexplicable way. Her shoulders drooped. "Or maybe I do. I was on the roof to get some fresh air – some peace – and I heard Honoria and Barrons speaking in her laboratory." Lena swallowed against the tightness in her throat. "It's his fault that Charlie caught the craving! They both admitted it!"

Stillness leached through him. The predator was still there, but something had startled it.

"What else did you hear?" he asked roughly.

"They were speaking about the cure for the craving virus," she replied. "Barrons warned Honoria not to let word of it get out. He said that if the Echelon found out it would be dangerous."

Will gave a gruff nod. "Aye. Makes sense. Them bastard's like controllin' things."

Lena couldn't stop herself from scowling. "Do you think we can trust *him*? Barrons sits on the very Council of Dukes. Why would he keep this information secret?"

"We can trust him." Will pushed away from her, letting her breathe. Lena's fingers trembled as he paced the rug in front of her.

Then she realised that the balance of power in the room had shifted. Will had shoved his hands in his pockets with a blank scowl, the way he always did when he felt cornered.

Or was hiding something.

"What makes you so certain of that?" she asked slowly. Her mind raced. "And why would Honoria trust him, when she knew what he'd done to Charlie?" The questions kept falling into place. She'd been too distracted by her emotions before. "Why would she treat him? I know he helped Blade, but it was more than that. She knew him. Quite well, it seemed."

Oh yes, she definitely had him nervous. Will scraped a hand over the back of his neck.

"Weren't your father the Duke of Caine's prodigy once?" A loose shrug that might have meant nothing. "Honoria would've known Barrons as a child. There's only a few years between 'em."

Lena's eyes narrowed. "You do realise that you never look at me when you're lying?"

His gaze shot to hers.

"And you get a twitch..." She pointed to her right eyebrow. "Here. When you're nervous."

"I ain't lyin'."

Lena pushed herself to her feet, her skirts falling around her ankles. "You are so." She was suddenly certain of it. "You know something about Barrons. Why won't you tell me? This has to do with my family, after all!"

Will stared down at her from his great height. Emotion tightened his face and made his nostrils flare as she stepped closer, grabbing his wrist. Heat branded her fingers. As *verwulfen*, Will's temperature ran several degrees hotter than hers.

Their gazes locked. This was the first time she'd touched him in a long time. Perhaps... the first time ever. Despite her anger, Lena let her thumb stroke over the back of his hand, marvelling at the hot silken texture of his skin and the rough caress of the fine golden hairs on his arm. Men in the Echelon wore gloves and though she'd often seen Will's hands bare, she'd never truly thought about the sensation of his touch.

Lena's breath caught in her throat, a languid, liquid ache taking hold somewhere in her lower abdomen. Her gaze dropped to his lips. Harsh, chiselled lips that were drawn into a thin line now. A growl curled through his throat, eyes flaring molten gold with heat and hunger. Will's hand clenched into a fist and the muscles in his forearm tensed beneath her touch.

"What are you hiding from me?" she whispered, and for a moment she wasn't sure what she was referring to.

"Ask Honoria," he snapped, and wrenching his arm out of her grip, he turned and strode toward the door.

Will curled his fists and punched the hard, leathery bag that swung in Blade's boxing saloon. Sweat dampened his throat and bare chest, but all he could see was the bag. All he could hear was the meaty sound of his fists driving into it, again and again.

He threw himself into the routine, feeling the furious ache inside slowly begin to fade. He never quite lost that edge anymore, not with *her* in the house, but if he concentrated, he could find some semblance of control.

Christ. What had she been thinking to touch him like that? Her fingers sliding over the back of his hand as she looked up at him earnestly, those rosy lips parted.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been touched. Not like that. Esme had often given him a sisterly hug, but that was before she married Rip. Now it was... easier... not to push Rip's protective instincts. Rip might have begun to control his craving urges, but he always tensed up whenever Will and Esme touched.

But Lena... It was bad enough with her in the same house. Smelling her honeysuckle scent in every room, knowing that it came from her soap. Picturing it. The soap gliding over her pale, flawless skin in the bath. Over every relished curve...

Will groaned, his head bowing as he caught the swinging bag of sand and pressed his forehead against it. The leather was cool and smooth against his skin, but no relief. His cock *ached*.

He couldn't keep doing this. Hiding from her. Running the rooftops at night, trying to use exhaustion to take the edge off him. The fury inside pulsed, pushing against his skin from the inside with razor sharp claws until he felt like he was going to explode. He'd never once been afraid that he would lose control and slip into one of the berserker fuelled furies *verwulfen* were famed for. He'd learned control in an iron cage, under the harsh whip of the man who'd brought him for his travelling shows. But now it whispered darkly through him, itching under his skin, making him doubt himself.

He could hurt her. Kill her even, and not even know it. Or worse, be unable to stop himself from taking her.

"No," he whispered in panic, taking a deep breath in until his lungs burned. "You're better 'an this. *You can control this.*"

Will let the breath out with a shaky rasp, then took another. And another. He wouldn't think of her. Just keep avoiding her the way he had. Hell, push himself harder. Run faster. Push Blade into the boxing ring with him more often. It would work. He'd leashed the fury before and he'd do it again, even if he had to run himself into exhaustion every night.

Raking a hand through his sweaty hair, he pushed away from the punching bag. The edge was growing tighter inside him again. Leaning back, he put all his power into a swing, his fist hammering into the bag.

Sand spewed everywhere but at least it made him feel a damn sight better.

CHAPTER THREE

The questions ate at Lena all afternoon and well into the evening, when the rest of the house was stirring. She ate dinner in silence, listening to the laughter and conversation that swirled around her, feeling untouched by all of it. The only person who seemed to notice her distraction was Will. Occasionally their eyes would meet across the table before his gaze dropped back to his plate. A slight frown seemed etched between his thick brows.

Helping Esme to clear up the dishes meant that Honoria had escaped by the time Lena returned to the table. Blade was nowhere to be found either.

Will tipped his chair back onto one leg, his booted foot against the table leg for balance as he listened to Rip discussing a breach in the walls that encircled Whitechapel with the rest of the men. His gaze locked on her for a moment. Troubled. Assessing.

Then he gave a swift jerk of his head and set the chair legs down on the floor. The rest of the men looked up when he stood, towering over them.

"I'll be back shortly," he muttered, as loquacious as ever.

The conversation renewed. Despite the mix of emotions within her, Lena couldn't help a smile as she followed him to the door. Some things about Will would never change.

The hallway was lit by warm lantern light. It washed over Will's face, giving his skin a honey-drenched glow. He was so much darker than she. Unfashionably so. And no doubt he'd shaved this morning, but the rasp of thick stubble lined his jaw. Lena couldn't stop looking at him. Each small part that made him up was the opposite of what she'd always found attractive, and yet on the whole, she couldn't tear her gaze away.

Except to drop it lower. The rough linen shirt he wore was open at the throat, a gleaming silver claw hanging from a leather thong around his neck. Golden hair curled up to the base of his throat and suddenly a rush of heat went through her.

As if sensing it, Will cut a sharp glance at her, the light highlighting his cheekbones. "They're in the sittin' room," he muttered, cocking his head. "It sounds safe enough for you to interrupt."

Heat bloomed through her cheeks. Honoria had always struck her as the very embodiment of chastity. Until she'd married Blade. It wouldn't be the first time the pair of them were caught *in flagrante delicto*.

"Thank you." She hesitated. "You're making me frightened of what I'm going to find out."

"It ain't nothin' bad. But it'll change... a lot of things."

"And if she won't tell me?"

His golden-amber eyes met hers. "Then I will."

"I'd much rather hear it from you anyway," Lena hastened to add, reaching out to rest her hand on his arm.

"Ain't my place." His nostrils flared and he jerked his hand away. Shoving his hands in his pockets, Will tipped his chin toward the sitting room. "You'd best hurry. Won't be long before they're up to no good."

Gathering herself, Lena took a deep breath and started toward the sitting room. She loved her sister, but Honoria always thought she knew best. Even if it meant keeping Lena in the dark.

The door to the sitting room was cracked open several inches. Honoria lay on the daybed by the fireplace, her head resting on her husband's lap. Blade stared into the flames, his mind a million miles away as he gently stroked Honoria's hair. Honoria looked sleepy, relaxed. The moment was incredibly personal and for a second Lena didn't want to intrude.

Then Blade looked up and she realised that he'd been aware of her all along.

"May I come in?" Lena asked quietly.

Honoria lifted her head and then pushed into a sitting position, smoothing her skirts. The moment was broken and Lena perched awkwardly on the edge of the armchair facing them as they swiftly rearranged themselves.

Blade stood and stretched. "You want a nightcap, luv?" he asked, looking down at his wife.

Honoria arched a brow, looking between the pair of them. "Why? Do you think I'm going to need it?"

He smiled. Blade had a rather devilish smile when he wanted to. "Do you remember that conversation we 'ad 'bout secrets comin' 'ome to roost?" As Honoria's eyes widened, he started toward the door. "I'll bring the bottle."

The fire crackled in the silence as he shut the door behind him. Lena's eyes narrowed. It seemed certain verwulfen men couldn't keep their mouths shut when they ought to.

"Well?" Honoria took a deep breath, then said crisply. "You have that look on your face. Like you're afraid to tell me something."

Despite her tone, Honoria looked nervous.

Lena pressed her clenched hands between her knees. "I was on the roof this morning. I heard everything that was said between you and Lord Barrons."

She could practically see her sister's mind racing, trying to remember what had been said.

"I'll save you some time," Lena said. "You said that he was responsible for what happened to Charlie." Her voice broke. "Is it true?"

"It's... true. Leo knew that father was working on a vaccination for the craving virus. He switched the disabled virus with a sample of the live one. Father had been directly responsible for his own infection and Leo wanted revenge. He never knew that father injected Charlie with the same vaccination until it was too late."

"Then why are you helping him?" she cried. "Don't you remember all those months when Charlie was crying in pain because we were trying to help him fight the virus? He won't even stay in the same room as me because he's afraid he'll attack me! How could you?"

Tears gleamed in Honoria's eyes. "Because Leo's my brother too."

The words seemed to roar in her ears. Lena's mouth moved but nothing came out. Only a small, strangled sound that seemed almost animal in nature.

Leo Barrons? The Duke of Caine's heir was her brother? "But...how? Why?"

Then Honoria was sitting on the edge of the armchair, wrapping her arms around Lena. Gently she kissed her hair, the way she'd done when Lena was a small girl. "I'm so sorry, Lena. I knew I should have told you but I swore

I'd keep it a secret for him. If anyone finds out that Leo is illegitimate... There would be dire consequences for him. The Echelon doesn't like to be made a fool of. He would be named a rogue blueblood in the least, like Blade. Stripped of everything he has. Or... even executed. One cannot judge the Prince Consort's mind."

A hot tear slid down her cheek. Honoria rocked her gently, turning Lena's face into her shoulder. At the familiar feel of her sister's arms around her, Lena couldn't stop the tears. It had been a long time since she'd been held and she was so confused about everything at the moment.

Finally she managed to draw back and wipe her burning eyes. "So that's why father's patron contract with the Duke of Caine ended?"

Honoria nodded. "The duke found out. He was absolutely furious... I can remember... I...I was in the room. The duke looked at me for so long I thought he was going to smash my toy doll. Then his face changed. The rage just washed out him and he told father to get out and to take mother and I with him before he did something he'd regret. I think I'm the only reason that father survived."

"And... Leo?" Lena whispered. It felt strange to call him that. She barely knew him, though he had been polite to her when he called in that morning.

"Leo was raised as the Duke of Caine's heir. I don't believe it was a kindly upbringing."

A brother she'd never known she had. Lena stared at the clenched fists in her lap. She was still so angry at him for what had happened to Charlie, but it was harder now, knowing the link between them. An older brother.

"Are you very angry with me?" Honoria asked.

"I don't know what to think," she admitted. "I don't know what I feel." Numb mostly. Her mind couldn't quite fit Barron's image into what she felt an older brother should be like. "I think I should like to be alone for a little while. To gather my thoughts."

Honoria stroked her hair. "This information is very dangerous for him, Lena."

"I'm not about to share it with anyone," she snapped. "Do you truly think me such a fool?"

"Of course I don't think you a fool." Honoria sighed. "I just wished for you to know why I withheld the truth."

Lena nodded. After a moment she heard another soft sigh and then the sound of Honoria's skirts rustling over the rugs toward the door.

As soon as it shut, she let her head fall into her hands, pressing the heels of her palms against her hot eyes. Of all the things she had expected, this was not one of them.

And Will had known. Blade too. A conspiracy of people who had thought to keep the truth about *her own brother* from her. She could understand Honoria's motives, though it irritated her that her sister hadn't trusted her, and Blade did what Honoria asked, but Will... He could have mentioned it at least.

As if the thought summoned him, the door clicked open and he appeared. Lena hurriedly wiped at her eyes. No help for it. She likely looked a mess and the redness wouldn't fade for a long time from her pale skin.

Tipping her chin up, she stared at him. She was starting to feel something now. Anger. And Will was as good a target as any.

"Why did they tell *you*?" she demanded. "Why tell you and not me?"

Will slowly pressed the door shut behind him with a click. Each movement was precise, controlled. When he turned, the heat in his amber eyes was almost magnetic.

"Blade told me," he replied. "Thought his lordship were Honoria's lover before he realised the truth. Put him all out of sorts."

The idea of prim and proper Honoria having an old lover was ludicrous. "Blade didn't think much of my sister then, did he?"

That made Will's eyes narrow. "Thought the world of her." Then he realised he'd actually defended Honoria, whom he tolerated if nothing else. He grimaced. "Men do stupid things when they're blinded by love."

"How would you know? You've never loved anyone." Oh yes, she was starting to feel things now.

"Seen enough o' their foolery to understand it." Will sank down onto the sofa and leaned back against it, resting his long arms along the top as if he owned it.

"You always watch what people do. It still doesn't convince me that you understand it."

"Are you tryin' to act the fishwife, or am I just the poor sod who'll bear the brunt o' your anger?"

Lena's mouth fell open. Will stared at her with a hard, cold expression on his face and she realised that she had pressed him too far. He *wasn't* human and he knew it. Watching how people acted was the only way he could pretend some sort of humanity himself.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was unkind of me." Shame burned in her throat. "I'm... angry. I shouldn't take it out on you. You were only trying to help."

The molten gold in his eyes flared then died back to its normal golden amber. Will looked puzzled. "Aye. I'm used to it."

"Used to it?"

"The blue blood's collar my kind, Lena. Ain't the first time I've been called less than 'uman."

Lena swallowed hard. She'd never been an unkind girl, but then she'd never had to deal with so much unwanted emotion before. Her life on the edges of the Echelon had been simple, happy. Full of laughter, light and dancing. Girls who giggled at their lessons and silk gowns and fluttering fans. She'd never been required to think too much, or even expected to, and nobody was angry there. It was hardly polite to exhibit such emotions.

"I wish I could go back," she whispered. "I wish I didn't have to know all of this... to feel... like this. I'm sorry, Will. I never think of you as less than human." Slowly, she pushed to her feet, her skirts falling in a circle around her ankles. They swished against her legs like a whispering caress as she crossed toward him.

Will looked up, a wary expression on rough-hewn face. He froze as she reached out, not quite a flinch, but a sudden stiffening that warned her. Don't touch me, his body said. His eyes however, lit up like molten whisky, a frown drawing his thick eyebrows together.

Lena's hand hovered by his face. Something in his expression caught in his chest. Almost as though a part of him yearned for her touch.

It was ridiculous. Will had made it quite clear that he wanted nothing to do with her. Still...

Lena let out the breath she'd been holding. Did she dare? Perhaps she'd been wrong? She couldn't read him at all, which was unusual for a man.

Heart pounding in her throat, she reach out and let her fingers trace his cheek. A strangled sound echoed in his throat, but he didn't move. Indeed the stillness seemed to leech through his whole body, his eyes wild as they raked the room for an escape.

Her fingers danced over the rasp of his stubble. A tickling prickle that fascinated her. And he hadn't said no.

Turning her palm, Lena cupped his cheek, tilting his face up toward her. Their eyes met, the heat of him burning through her palm. She wanted to run her hands all over his body, to roll in that heat, to capture it. To finally feel as though she wasn't alone anymore, in a world full of people.

"Lena," he growled, capturing her wrist.

The touch burned through her. Lena sank toward him, her skirts pooling over his knees as she slid into his lap. Will let her go as if she'd attacked him, his hands coming up between them, helpless, pushing at the air in front of her as if he didn't dare touch her.

His eyes were wild. Searching hers. "Lena, you got any idea what you're doing...?"

"I do." Certainty burned through her. She was so confused about everything else: she wanted to stop this confusion at least. To understand why he could never stop looking at her, why he avoided her.

"You tryin' to provoke me?"

She leaned closer, sliding her hands up his broad chest. Will sucked in a sharp breath as if it hurt. His hands caught her wrists again, holding her there.

"I'm going to kiss you," she whispered.

"Fuck," he breathed, nostrils flaring as his gaze dropped to her lips.

Hardly the romantic utterances she'd dreamed of. But then Will was nothing like the fairy-tale daydreams she'd amused herself with in the past. He felt so real beneath her touch, so much more vibrant. The sensation of his body beneath her was nothing like a dream. Real. Hers. All she had to do was reach out and take it.

And so she did.

Lena brushed her lips against his. Will let out a rough exhale, his breath burning her. She breathed it in, his grip loosening on her wrists and his body sinking back into the cushions on the sofa. Slowly she followed, her hips sliding further until her knees dug into the back of the sofa and she could feel that hard press of his belt buckle against her inner thigh. Hands sliding over shoulders, sinking into the luxurious richness of his hair.

She opened her mouth over his, an expert at kissing, tasting the firmness of his lips. He didn't quite reciprocate, but a small, helpless growl sounded in his throat and as he opened his mouth to say something else, she licked at him.

Suddenly his hands were no longer pushing her away. One cupped the thickness of her bustle, riding her hips harder against his. Lena's eyes shot open as she felt something else brush against her thigh.

She caught a glimpse of the startled amber of his own eyes, then she fisted her hands in his hair and kissed him open-mouthed, her tongue darting against his, daring him to play back.

The tension in his body radiated through her, hands shaking as they raked over the curves of her dress. Will made another helpless sound.

"Lena—" A gasp. A plea.

She didn't care. It felt so good. Kissing him, yearning for him to kiss her back.

But he didn't. His hands fisted in her skirts, bunching the fabric higher and higher, until her calves were bared. Will wrenched his head away, shaking all over, his eyes burning so brightly that she almost gasped. His gaze raked her calves, over the dip of her bodice, and then her mouth. Both of them breathed hard.

Lena reached for him again—

The world upended. She found herself tumbled onto her back on the sofa, her skirts falling around her bare legs. Will shot her a stark look and threw himself away from her, shaking with some suppressed emotion.

The mood of the room tightened. Lena caught a fistful of her skirts and sat up, staring at him. This wasn't what she'd wanted. She felt out of breath and all awry, and he looked *furios*.

Her heart fell in her chest as memory flooded into her. He hadn't once kissed her back. He'd held her wrists as if he'd endured the kiss, but he hadn't retaliated.

Will stared at the wall, his back quivering. She sat very, very still, feeling ever-so-cold without his raging heat surrounding her.

"Will," she whispered.

He turned on her with a snarl, finger stabbing toward her. "Don't you ever do that again!"

The stark anger made her flinch back into the sofa. Suddenly she couldn't bear to have her skirts so tumbled around her. She smoothed them out, hot tears burning behind her eyes. She'd be damned if she'd let him see them, but—

"I know we got to live beneath the same roof, but I'd prefer it if you didn't throw yourself at me," he said coldly.

Then he was gone, leaving her to stare wordlessly at the door, a silent tear sliding down her flushed cheeks.

Will ran through the night, body straining and his heart thundering in his chest. He ran for hours over the rooftops, until he could feel his muscles quivering and exertion begin to take its toll. It still wasn't enough. He was starting to wonder if it ever would be.

Especially now that he knew just how she tasted, just how she felt, writhing on his lap, her arms sliding around him—

Will groaned. The city roofline surrounded him, chimneys lurking in the still night and the vestiges of Whitechapel far behind him as he staggered to a

halt. Not the place for a man like him to collapse and it was clear he'd pushed himself into the edges of the fury that afflicted his kind. Exhaustion throbbed through him, dulling the barest edges of his temper.

He could taste her still, burning on his lips. Tempting him, daring him. The feel of her tongue branding his own. But worse than that, the feel of her hand sliding over his jaw in the faintest of caresses. A sweet touch, almost more alluring than the taste of her mouth. a touch that made him hunger so damned much, for something he could never have.

Will gave a helpless groan and sank to his knees. What the hell had she been thinking? Pushing him like that, kissing him, not knowing how much it hurt inside to push her away. He hadn't been thinking. So shocked at the sensation of her mouth on his and her body nestled in his lap that he'd lost hold of himself, just for a minute. The next thing he knew, he'd had his hand on her ass, urging her against him, his cock aching like a fucking battering ram in his breeches. it would have been so easy to press her back down into the sofa and sheathe his aching flesh inside her wet heat.

So easy...

So dangerous.

Will let out a sob, raking his hand through his hair as he rocked back and forth. It took long minutes for the fury to ebb out of him, enough for him to stagger to his feet and look back toward Whitechapel.

For the first time in his life, he didn't want to go back.

Will clutched a bottle of whiskey to his chest and stared out into the dark night, trying to ignore the faint spatter of icy rain. The warren was silent beneath him, a fact he was furiously aware of. He couldn't face anyone right now, not even Blade.

Swilling another mouthful of whiskey, he felt it burn all the way through him with the echo of a long ago home. His true home, where he'd been born. Visions danced through his mind; his da swinging him up onto broad shoulders as they examined the mist over the heather-clad hills, laughing at his sister as she chased him across the yard, the look on the stranger's fevered face as he launched himself at Will, those blunt, yellowed teeth ripping at his throat... Of that he remembered it all too well.

This was home now. For so many years he'd known nothing of kindness, but when Blade first brought him here he'd mistrusted everyone and everything, Blade most of all. He'd been but a lad, but some memories were branded on his soul. You didn't ask for anything, because that was when they whipped you. You didn't beg for more food, because they laughed and sneered at you. And you didn't ever expect a kind touch, a gentle hand cupping your face, a kiss...

His hand shook around the bottle. For a moment he wanted it so much that he ached. A different kind of aching to the mess Lena's careless kiss left him in. an ache for something more.

He'd thought he'd found it once. The first few times Blade had come to him after taking him as a thrall, there's been a sense of closeness there. Will

hadn't understood it. The blood-drinking roused his body, his own blood, but the ache had been fiercer than that. The feel of someone touching him. Someone who cared for him.

He'd reached for Blade then, a horrible moment that left him merely shamed and embarrassed. Blade had been shocked but not cruel.

"Not like that, lad. Not us. You'll understand, one day."

And now he understood and the realization was a torment of its own. *Because he couldn't have her. Not ever.*

He lifted the whiskey and drained it dry. The liquor burned through him but it only left him feeling hollow and in need of a piss. He didn't understand how people got soaked. The worst liquor ever did was make him thirsty.

A whisper of sound caught his ear, far below. A muttered conversation in the dark. He could barely make out the words until he heard one that made his entire body still.

"...Lena..."

Silence ruled, broken only by a dog's lonely bark several streets over. Will coked his head to listen. The voice had been a woman, but at that pitch he didn't know if it was Honoria or Esme.

"Ush now, luv." *That* voice he recognized. Blade. Which mean the woman was Honoria. "I'll keep an eye on 'em. Will's a good lad..." More words, lost to distance.

They were talking about him. And Lena. Will couldn't move. He wanted so desperate to hear what they were talking about.

"But are you sure he won't hurt her?" Honoria murmured. "You saw him tonight, when he barrelled out of here. You saw her. I know exactly what happened in that room, Blade, what if—"

"It won't."

"Blade," Honoria's voice grew stronger. "Can you promise me that he won't hurt her? She's my sister. Do you trust him with her? I know he wouldn't want to hurt her, but what if...?"

The moment stretched out. Longer. Longer still.

And there was no reply.

"Aye." Blade let out a long breath. "I'll speak to 'im. He's been on edge of late. Maybe it were best if 'e found somewhere else to live, just for a little—"

For the second time in his life, Will knew what it was to not be wanted. The betrayal stabbed at him with sharp, greedy fingers, making it hard to breathe. Harder still to keep hold of the bottle. It slipped from his fingers, sliding over the steep pitch of the roof and vanishing. A second later the smash of broken glass tore the silence of the night apart.

The dog started barking again, others joining it. Will couldn't move. He felt even emptier, as if Blade's words had carved something else from within him. His sense of worth, of place, was rapidly narrowing.

Fins someone else... He knew the truth behind those words. Not wanted. Not here. In case he put his hands on Lena and hurt her.

You don't get to touch, you little cur. A foot kicking through the cage at him flashed into mind.

But he'd trusted Blade. Blade had bought him from the Sturrett's and given him his freedom. And now Blade didn't trust him.

Somehow he found his feet, moving automatically. He didn't even try to hide the sound of his footsteps across the roof. A golden light had flooded the

yard below as someone peered out through the window to see where the broken glass had come from.

Will paused on the edge of the gable, looking down at Blade. Their eyes locked on each other and a shiver of knowing went through his master's eyes. Blade opened his mouth to speak, but Will beat him to it.

"I'll find somewhere else to live," he said quietly, then stepped off the edge of the roof and landed in the cold yard below.

Will was gone.

Lena peered through the window pane, watching rain drum against the ledge outside, with a horrible, twisting sensation in her chest. This was her fault. She knew only the barest of facts of Blade and Will's arguments, but she felt it in her veins.

What had she done? Blade was out there in the rain, trying to find Will to bring him home, but the entire household was subdued. Guilt ached within her, almost a match to the stabbing pain of rejection.

A sharp rap sounded at the door to the sitting room.

"Come in," she called, not even bothering to lift her head from the back of the sofa she slumped across.

The door eased open. "Forgive me for intruding."

Lena's head shot up at the smooth, cultured voice.

Leo Barrons closed the door behind him with a controlled click, lace dripping from the sleeve of his coat. The lace was the only adornment; the crushed velvet coat was as black as midnight, and bore a stern mandarin collar. Only a handsome ruby dangling from his ear bore evidence of his station.

She couldn't move, her eyes searching for signs of familiarity about his features. Was that a hint of her brother Charlie around his eyes and hairline? Or her father?

They stared at each other, the moment stretched out awkwardly. Then Leo crossed the room toward her. "My thralls are taking their inoculations with Honoria. She informed me that you overheard us yesterday."

Heat bloomed in her cheeks, leaving Lena tongue-tied. What could she say to this man? Her *brother*. An older brother she'd never known.

"I'm sorry the truth upsets you," Leo murmured. "You should know that I've borne my own share of sleepless nights since this entire drama unfolded." He glanced down, at his cupped hands. "I would never have wished this curse upon Charlie if I'd known of the consequences of my actions. You have every right not to forgive me. I'll never forgive myself." At that he looked up again. "Although I should very much like to know you. You look so like Honor - and yet not. I used to watch you on the edges of the Echelon and wonder what you were like. You seemed so full of life and laughter."

"Once," she whispered, drawing her knees up to her chest. "A long time ago."

Barrons paced to the window and stared out of it. "I have another confession to make, though it loathes me to admit it. However it seems that

secrets have a way of coming back and... creating havoc." A bitter smile twitched at his lips. "Your sister begged for my help when you first came to Whitechapel and I turned her away. I was afraid the Echelon would discover our connection and I—I did not understand the straits you were all in. Yet another decision I wish I could change." This time his lips thinned, faint light staining his profile as he stared out at the rain. "But I can't. I can only offer my deepest apologies for what you have all suffered. And I know its not enough, but I promise I shall do all within my power to make sure you never suffer again."

"Why are you apologizing?"

"You did throw a brick at me," he pointed out.

Lena pushed herself upright, as her cheeks heated. She ignored the look in his eyes. "Honorias asked for your help?" She must have been desperate for money indeed. At the time, Lena had been so focused on her own misery and her brother's illness, that she had not, perhaps, truly understood what her sister suffered.

"She asked for money when she lost her position of employment. I said no and so she made a thrall contract with Blade." His voice trailed into silent, then admitted, "I spent most of my childhood hating Honorias. Perhaps a small part of me was relived to see her suffer, just a little bit."

"That's a terrible thing to say."

"Yes, I know. A terrible thing to think." Leo stared into the distance. "The duke has had me for so long that sometimes I fear I begin to think as he does. And that frightens me more than anything else in his world. That he has succeeded in remaking me in his image." He trailed a finger along the window ledge. "It was perhaps the dash of ice water to the face that I needed, and so I tried to misdirect Vickers when he was searching for all of you. I laid several false trails and made sure that he didn't know where you all were. it cannot atone, but... I tried. The idea that she had forgiven me for any of it astounds me."

"Why did you hate her?"

Leo gave her a frank look. "Your father never gave a damn about me, but he adored his daughter. They lived beneath the same roof and every time I saw them together, I wanted so badly to trade places with her."

"But you're the heir to a duke."

He gave a faint, slightly bitter laugh. "I would have traded it all to have a father who didn't see a bastard every time he looked at me. To have a family."

Lena rested her chin on her knees. He looked so lonely for a moment, staring into the distance and playing with the gold ring on his finger. "You have a family," she said slowly. "You have us."

She saw immediately that he didn't believe her, but he nodded. "You are too kind, but you must know that I can't be the brother you wish me to be." He held up a hand when he saw her begin to argue. "It's too dangerous, for all of us. If anyone were to discover my illegitimacy... You understand the world I live in, Lena. You know what would happen."

She swallowed and nodded.

"I can't be seen to visit here too often," he continued. "But if there's ever anything I can do for you—"

"You could take me with you," she blurted.

The fire crackled in the hearth as he stiffened.

"As your ward," she continued swiftly. "I could... I could make my debut with you as my guardian."

"People would ask questions."

"Then tell them that father saved your life when you were a child. You feel a debt of gratitude toward him."

She thought for a second that she had gone too far and cursed herself. She hardly knew him, after all. What had she been thinking? Leo would say no, for sure.

"Why do you wish to leave your family?" he asked instead, with a curious expression.

"There is nothing for me here." Will immediately sprang to mind, the memory of those amber eyes burning her through. Lena's gaze lowered. She was a fool even to consider that a reason to stay. He'd made his feelings for her quite clear. "I wish to find some of what my sister has found. I want someone to love me. And there is no one here for me."

Leo sank back down onto the sofa, his hands clasped as he stared at her. "Even with my backing you would only ever be considered suitable to be a thrall. Your bloodlines aren't good enough to make a consort contract with."

A little shiver went down her spine but she stilled it. To be a thrall was not to be powerless, and Honoria's experiences with Blade must have been pleasant enough for her to continue donating her blood to him. Perhaps it wasn't always awful. Perhaps she could learn to tolerate it? "I know. I just... I don't belong here. All I know is that the last time I was truly happy, I was about to make my debut."

"Have you spoken of this with your sister?"

"Heavens, no. The idea only just came to me then." Lena offered him a weak smile. "You do not have to agree. I wouldn't hold it against you, I just... hoped."

A sigh crossed his lips. Then he smiled. It changed his entire face; from stern and uncompromising, to something almost boyish. He looked so much like Charlie in that moment. "You were going to leave me to tell your sister, weren't you?"

"Are you accepting?"

"To tell Honoria, or to take you as my ward?" Leo asked dryly.

"Well, both, perhaps?" She gave him a devilish smile, her heart starting to pound in her ears.

Leo's eyes narrowed. "People underestimate you, don't they?"

"Frequently."

He stood and held a hand out to help her to her feet. "I shall take you as my ward, Lena, because I do owe you. But I'm not volunteering to tell your sister. That's your price to pay."

His cool hand curled around her and Lena drew herself to her feet. He was a good deal taller than she and something about his manner indicated that he generally preferred people not to touch him. But Lena was so terribly happy that she couldn't resist throwing her arms around him, and pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you!"

She was going home. The thought of leaving Charlie and Honoria, even the rest of the household, was a sudden pang in her chest, but she ignored it. She could always visit. And then Will could come home, and this

whole mess would be fixed. For the first time in months she finally saw a future ahead of her.

"You're quite welcome," Leo said stiffly.

"Come," she said, taking his hand. "I know someone who would like to meet you. Charlie's always longed for a brother. And then we can tell Honoria our plans."

"You can tell Honoria," Leo corrected. He hesitated. "I don't think I should meet your brother just yet. I was responsible for his infection, after all."

"You cannot hide from him forever. Come."

He let her lead him from the room and Lena smiled to herself as she hurried down the corridor. So many of her friends that she had left behind... She could see them again, and laugh and gossip over tea and forget this whole, horrendous nightmare. And in doing so, she would fix this problem she had caused between Will and Blade.

Her smile slipped at the thought, a pair of burning amber eyes haunting her. She would forget Will Carver, if it was the last thing she did.

No matter how much a part of her cringed at the thought.