

# Nashville: Breaking Bonds

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## Chapter 1: Raleigh – New Information

*We go round and round, trying' to work it out  
And all I get's hell bent and bound  
Christian Kane – Makin' Circles*

IT WAS LATE, or maybe early, depending on which side of sleep for the day you were looking at. The time of the morning a man woke and got ready for the day, or sat and thought about the day that had passed.

Quarter to five in the morning and I was sitting at the table in my apartment wearing only a pair of faded jeans. I'd showered earlier, washing off the sins of the night before making myself a quick dinner. My hair, still damp from the shower, fell to my shoulders in blond waves.

On the table in front of me were two handguns, a small Beretta Bobcat and a much larger Desert Eagle, the later weapon in pieces. I'd been to the firing ranger earlier in the morning, and I'd learned long ago that a dirty weapon was one I didn't want to risk my life on.

Beside the bottle of gun oil was a half empty bottle of whiskey and a glass half full of ice and liquor. The day had started out bad and gone to worse, and I knew I needed the alcohol if I had any hope of sleeping even a few hours before I had to be back at The Iron for my shift.

My less than pleasant thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. A glance at the clock confirmed that it was still an hour before dawn, too early for salesmen and too late for any of my usual friends to come calling. I picked up the Beretta and walked to the entry, keeping the gun out of sight as I stood to one side of the door and opened it.

"Raleigh," Kiran Michaels said by way of greeting.

Kiran's tanned face was lined with something that might have been worry. The man was tall and lean, his hair long like my own, though not quite as blond. He could have passed for human, but I knew that he was stronger than any normal human, and had seen him shift to something less human, more cat-like, complete with wicked claws and teeth.

Without asking why Kiran was at my door at five in the morning, I simply opened the door and checked the street as Kiran walked past me. When it was clear that no one else was out at that time of night, I tucked my gun into the back of my jeans and closed the door before leading Kiran into the kitchen.

I was aware of his eyes on the bare skin of my back, on the scars that littered my body, scars I'd earned first in the service of the US Air Force, then in the service of my master. Mine hadn't been an easy life, but for the most part it had always been one I was happy to live.

"Want a drink?" I asked as I gestured for the younger man to sit down.

"Yeah, that'd be great, thanks," Kiran answered, tucking his hands into the pocket of his jeans as he remained standing. "Sorry to come 'round so late but I saw somethin' I figured you and the bossman might be interested in."

I walked to the sink and took a glass from the drain board before going back to the table and sitting down. Tipping the whiskey bottle over the glass, I poured an inch of liquor into it before pushing it across the table. "Musta been somethin' interestin' to come this late."

Kiran worked as a bouncer at The Iron, the bar I managed for my friend, Sebastian Ritter. Sebastian is of course more than my friend and, lately, less. Sebastian is a vampire who keeps me supplied with blood, which in turn binds me to him as his servant and vassal. Sebastian is my Kindred master.

I waited until Kiran had sat across from me and picked up his glass before going back to cleaning the Desert Eagle. I knew it wouldn't be long before Kiran told me why he'd come.

"You know that TV church guy named Hermanos?"

It took a minute for me to figure out who Kiran was talking about. I'd seen the commercials, but avoided the Sunday morning programs like the plague. "Creepy Hispanic guy, a bit too enthusiastic on the god-speak?"

Kiran nodded. "Yeah. I was on my way home when I saw one of Jesus' women passin' off a thick envelope to a guy in a fancy SUV."

I knew exactly who Kiran was talking about this time. Jesus Ramone was a Toreador that liked young women, girls really. Two girls barely in their teens were his constant companions, ghouls, bound to him by blood.

"I followed the guy back to a house over by the *Los Hermanos de las Tres Cruces* Church where Hermanos was waitin' on the porch. I parked down the street and doubled back just in time to catch part of their conversation. Seems Jesus wants another shipment and is willin' to pay more, even after the loss of the last one," he said pointedly.

I paused in cleaning the gun to look up. "Jose Hermanos is workin' with Jesus Ramone?" I damn sure wouldn't put it past Ramone to recruit an unauthorized ghoul, but Hermanos was way too old for the Toreador, and the wrong sex besides.

"Looked like it," Kiran answered, draining his glass. "I wondered if you knew anythin' else about them. They kept talkin' about a master of some kind. Wondered if they were like you."

A sharp look at Kiran's face told me that the other man hadn't meant anything by the comment. I hadn't exactly hidden my relationship with Sebastian, in fact Kiran was one of the few individuals not directly associated with the vampires in Nashville who knew exactly what Sebastian was, and that I was bound to him.

And it was Sebastian's job, and by extension mine, to keep track of what vampires and their servants were in Nashville. If Hermanos was ghouled, I should have known about it.

"No," I replied in a hard voice as I went back to cleaning my gun, "not like me, not unless someone's been... acting without permission. They're pretty strict on that here in Nashville."

"There's some kind of master 'cause they brought it up a couple of times. Thought ya'll would like to know." Kiran leaned forward. "All that aside, I want in on takin' that bastard down for good."

"I'm with you on that one."

Occasionally Kiran had helped out with problems that had arisen at The Iron, and elsewhere in town. Kiran had been with Sebastian and me when we'd found a house used to transport young children who had been abducted for sale to those who preyed on the young, mostly for sex. Unfortunately, Jesus had escaped all of us, and a few others besides.

"With the Blood Hunt, it's just a matter of time," I added, letting my hands do the work of cleaning the Desert Eagle as I thought about what Kiran had said. "Master. Hermanos," I murmured, mentally running through several variations and scenarios in my head. "Masters."

As much as I didn't want to jump to conclusions, I couldn't help from suspecting Duncan Masters of being involved with Jesus. Masters was well known for providing a wide variety of blood for those vampires whose feeding habits were restricted to a specific type, be it sex, class or age.

I drained the whiskey in my glass and looked up at Kiran. "What exactly did they say, do you remember?"

The younger man shrugged. "Somethin' about a cut and that he led them to Jesus in the first place."

"No," I said in a low voice. "When they were talkin' about 'master,' what did they say?"

Kiran thought about that for a moment. "If he wanted a cut he would have been on time."

"He," I repeated. "Master." I let my hands go back to cleaning the weapon as if the next question I asked wasn't going to be the most important one. "Or did they say 'Masters'?"

Once again, Kiran paused to think. "Yeah, they could've."

My hands began to assemble the Desert Eagle with slow practiced moves but my mind was racing. Sebastian had counted Masters as his friend for nearly thirty years, and nearly every night of those years I had resented the other man's intrusion on our lives. I had never before had any kind of evidence of Masters' wrongdoings, but not for want of trying. Of course, I didn't really have any evidence of it now. Still, I could allow myself to hope.

"I may have a job for you in a day or so," I told Kiran. "Shouldn't interfere with the gigs you have goin'."

Kiran raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? What kinda job?"

With a click I slid the clip into the hand of the Desert Eagle. "Tailin' someone. You seem good at it." I reached over and poured another inch into Kiran's glass, and the same over the ice in my own.

With a grin, Kiran sipped at his glass. "Sure, why not. Anythin' else you can tell me now?"

I met his eye, keeping my gaze serious. "Could be dangerous, but I think you can handle it. Might not be necessary, though, I'll need to check with Sebastian." I looked away, trying to figure out how to bring the matter up to my friend. Sebastian had always dismissed any hint of rumors surrounding Masters. "I'll have to let you know tomorrow night."

"Sebastian alright?" Kiran asked, frowning.

I wanted to confide in the younger man, needed desperately to confide in someone the concerns I had for his best friend and master, but Kiran wasn't Kindred, wasn't ghouled, and in any case, there was every chance that I was wrong about Masters. "It's my job to make sure Sebastian's alright. I need you to help me with that." I looked at Kiran thoughtfully then added, "We'll talk after your shift at The Iron tomorrow."

With a slow nod, Kiran said, "Sure. Sounds fine."

I wondered what I would do if I was wrong about Masters' involvement with Ramone. I fully believed Masters had some sort of hold over Sebastian, some way of controlling his loyalty, but what if Sebastian's changed behavior was simply a product of becoming a vampire?

"It's obvious you got a lot brewin' in your head," Kiran murmured after a few minutes. "Want me to take off? Or I'd be willin' to let you bounce ideas off me."

The younger man seemed sincere enough in his desire to help, but I wasn't sure if I could take the chance of confiding in him just yet. "You've been a good employee, despite knowin' too much about what we are. You've kept your mouth shut and your eyes open and helped us out more than we could've expected, given your nature." I hoped Kiran knew I'd meant no offence with the simple statement of facts. Most shapeshifters didn't care for vampires or their servants. "I trust you more than I trust a lot of guys, but this...."

I hesitated, arguing with myself about how much to tell the younger man, then shook my head. "This plays out wrong, I could find myself out of a job." I told him wryly, knowing that in this instance, losing the job would mean a lot more than finding a new place to work. "I don't think they'd fuck with you too badly, given the facts, but you have to know there's a risk."

"Some may say I shouldn't've been as helpful as I've been with ya'll," Kiran replied with a shrug, "but you've been straight up with me and I've seen you give a shit about folks that you didn't need to. I respect you for that. Bossman, too. That's why I've stuck by ya'll." He leaned forward and caught my eye. "I don't know your hierarchy, how it works 'n all, so let me say this. If there's somethin' that needs doin' and you're nervous as to how it'll effect you or Sebastian, then you tell me about it. If we agree it needs doin' then I'll handle it. You don't need to be involved."

I looked into the man's eyes and knew that Kiran thought enough of Sebastian and me to help regardless of what any of us were. At last I picked up my glass and sat back in my chair, swirling the amber liquid and ice as I spoke.

"I met Sebastian when I was stationed in Berlin back in '65," I began in a low voice. "We ran hard together while I was posted there, for all that he was a native, and I was one of the upstarts the US sent over to keep watch on the Germans and the Russians. He was a good man then, and he was still a good man when he looked me up in '72," I said firmly, remembering the night Sebastian had walked into the bar I'd favored. "I was in Madrid by then, and Sebastian, well, he was a bit different than I remembered, if you get my meanin'."

Kiran nodded, saying without words that he understood Sebastian had been a vampire by the time he'd shown up in Madrid.

"I quit the Air Force and signed on with him, and I never once second guessed my choices." I drained my glass and poured another. "In '74 Sebastian ran into a bit of trouble. He showed up a few months later with a new best friend." I could hear contempt for Duncan was thick in my voice, a contempt I'd never allowed myself to show to another person before tonight.

"This... new friend," Kiran asked softly, "was the same as Sebastian?"

"Yes, but older, I think. *Much* older. Sebastian puts a lot of store in the opinion of this new friend. More than is smart, I think." I sighed, then said firmly, "You have to understand that Sebastian is still a good man, it's just that somethin' happened when he was captured, somethin' that affected his judgment. I really don't know how to explain it. I've tried talkin' to Sebastian about it, but he doesn't want to hear it. He says I should trust him, and I want to, I really do, but I know Masters has some kind of hold over him. I just don't know how to stop it. And if Masters has somethin' to do with Hermanos and Ramone and these kids, I'm not sure Sebastian is gonna want to hear that either."

"Do you want me to try talkin' to him?" Kiran offered. "Would that be better?"

"No," I replied firmly, not wanting to put Kiran in that kind of position. "Wouldn't help. But if we could prove Masters is workin' with Ramone, Sebastian wouldn't be able to protect the bastard any longer. He'd fall under the Blood Hunt Tristan called on Ramone, and we'd be able to take him out. First, though, we gotta prove it."

"Where does this guy hang out? Do I know him?"

"Yeah, you've seen him," I told him. "Big black guy, comes in with Joan every so often. Duncan Masters."

Not that Masters was hard to miss. The guy radiated intimidation and self confidence. Joan Smith, a vampire Sebastian had adopted, followed the man around like a puppy, never straying far from his side, protecting his back when Sebastian wasn't there to do it.

"They ain't... together," Kiran asked in a voice that held only curiosity, "are they?"

I knew what he was asking and shook my head. "No, if that was it I'd understand the influence Duncan has over him a little better, but Sebastian prefers women, and Duncan, well, he's got a thing for a Tr—a girl up near Boston."

"Alright. So what is the next move?"

"Let me talk to Sebastian one more time," I said after a moment. "I won't mention your name, just that I heard rumors of Masters working with Hermanos to keep Ramone supplied. If he listens, great, we can put some of my other people on it. If not, I'd like you to follow Masters, see what you can find out, if you're game."

Kiran nodded. "Yeah, I'm game. I can do whatever you need as long as it doesn't interfere with my other commitments." The younger man hesitated a moment before saying, "Is there anyone further up the food chain you could go to? If Sebastian isn't in the right head space to deal then is there someone else to talk to?"

I couldn't stop the low chuckle that rumbled in my throat. "I may look like I have some pull, son, but when it comes to the food chain, I'm very nearly at the bottom. Tristan listens to Sebastian, and if Sebastian says there ain't a problem with Masters, Tristan's gonna believe him, not me."

Tristan d'Castilla was the vampire prince of Nashville, but he was also Sebastian's sire. In all the years I'd been Sebastian's ghoul, Tristan had always trusted his childe implicitly.

"We get proof, though, I'll take it to Mateo, Tristan's brother," I continued. "He'll listen, I think, but only if we have proof."

"Fine," Kiran replied. "You figure it out and point me in the right direction and we'll make this happen. Bossman's a good guy. I hate the thought of someone holdin' something over him."

"Stay after your shift tonight, we'll talk." I drained my glass once more, then stood. "Right now it's time for a few hours shut eye, for both of us."

Kiran echoed my actions and set his glass on the table. "See ya tonight."

I walked the other man to the door and checked the street carefully before letting him leave. As I watched him walk away I wondered if I had finally found someone to help me get my best friend back, or if I was damning us both to hell.

## Chapter 2: Raleigh – Hell Bent and Bound

*Either way you turn*

*It's gonna hurt*

*Christian Kane – Makin' Circles*

SOMEHOW I MANAGED a couple of hours of restless sleep after Kiran had left. Shortly after noon I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep any longer. I lay in bed for a while, thinking about who among the Kindred and their ghouls I could call to help me find proof that Masters was involved with Ramone.

It was a short list.

I knew if I had proof, absolute proof of Masters' wrongdoing, Mateo d'Castilla would help me bring it before the prince and convince him that it was real. The problem was in gathering the evidence in the first place. There was no way Mateo would stick his neck out to help me get verification of my suspicions.

Then I remembered that a few months after Tristan had taken over Nashville, I had overheard a conversation between the prince and his brother that led me to believe another of the Ventrue clan had complained about the power Masters had accumulated since his arrival in town. It was my understanding that Max Brehmer didn't like Masters any more than I did, and I hoped that dislike would be enough for me to talk to him about my suspicions.

It didn't take me long to find a number for Max, though I knew I couldn't reach him while the sun was still high in the sky. I dialed his number anyway, hoping that Rose, his wife and ghoul, would answer the phone. Thankfully she did.

Despite the fact that I'd woken her, Rose agreed to meet me for a late lunch. We met at a little place not far from her home, one I'd never heard of and so was fairly certain we wouldn't be seen by any other Kindred servants. Once our meal was on the table, I told her why I'd asked her to meet me.

"You are aware of the Hunt that was called last month, are you not?"

"I am," she told me, her eyes hard and angry. "It's about time someone caught that bastard red handed."

I nodded, remembering that there had been some complaints among the Brujah that the previous prince had ignored Ramone's depravities. "I came across some information last night that could tie him to someone else here in town."

She leaned forward. "Oh? Who?"

Without telling her who and what I suspected, I repeated the conversation Kiran had told me about. It turned out that she didn't need to hear my suspicions to connect the same dots I had.

"Duncan Masters," she breathed, sitting back in her chair as if stunned. "God, if we can prove it...." Her eyes focused on me again. "Why are you telling me this? Why aren't you telling Ritter? Isn't it his job, and yours, to take care of crap like this?"

Taking a deep breath, I tried not to feel as if I were betraying Sebastian as I told her the truth. "I'm not sure Sebastian will believe me. He's very... protective of Masters. I think-I think the bastard has some kind of hold over him."

She frowned. "Blackmail?"

I shook my head. "No, if it were blackmail, Sebastian would have taken him out years ago. This is something... else."

She looked at me for a long moment before she spoke again. "Masters would love to take Max down. How do I know you're not working with him, trying to set us up?"

I reached across the table to touch her hand. "I swear to you that I am telling you the truth, Rose. I want Masters taken out more than anyone, but I can't do it myself. Sebastian has never listened to any word against Masters, that's not like him. Something's wrong, and I need help to find a way to prove it."

"All right," she said gently. "I'll talk to Max. We've..." She hesitated a moment, then said, "We've been watching him, Max and me, and some of the Brujah. We think he's been working with Ben Carter, you know?"

I frowned as I remembered the vampire. Notoriously masochistic, he'd kidnapped Max's sister Anna, a Brujah ghoul and held her against her will for years. Max and his brother-in-law Nathan Montgomery had come to Flint to rescue her. It had taken Stuart Williams, the prince of Flint and Tristan's sire, months to deprogram the girl. Now Ben was back in Nashville, biding his time to get the girl back into his hands.

"We'll need to prove it, or prove that he's working with Ramone," I told her. "Hell, if we had any proof at all, no matter what his crime."

"We'll find it," she promised. "This Kiran is willing to help us?"

"He is," I replied. "I plan on talking to Sebastian tonight, see if I can get through to him. If he listens—"

"But you don't think he will," she said softly.

"No, I don't think he will," I agreed grimly. "If he doesn't, I'll give Kiran your number, he can help your people keep an eye on Masters. I'd do it myself, but I think it might be more important for me to stick to my regular routine."

She agreed reluctantly before pulling a notebook from her purse and copying down a list of names and addresses. "Give this to your Kiran," she said when she handed me the list. "These are the places we've been able to find him at, or follow him to. He's a slippery bastard."

"Yeah," I agreed, looking the list over. "His business, his ghouls, his primogen, nothing out of the ordinary here." I couldn't help but feel disappointed.

"Go home," Rose said gently. "Get some rest, you look like you need it. You'll need all the strength you can muster to get through this."

It was my turn to reluctantly agree. I paid the tab and went home, but I couldn't sleep. It was no surprise then that I found myself at The Iron long before I should have been there but I did manage to put in a couple of productive hours in the office before hitting the floor.

Knowing that I planned to talk to Sebastian was enough to make my head hurt, and it didn't help that one of the bartenders called in to say she'd be running late, forcing me to work the bar until she finally showed up.

Saturday nights are busy at best, and this particular Saturday we seemed to be busier than usual. I blamed it on the band we had playing, as they were popular with the natives.

Sebastian didn't usually make it in until around one in the morning, and when he walked in right on time, I wasn't sure whether to be happy about it or not. Resigning myself to the argument I knew was coming, I asked him to come back to the office with me so we could talk in relative privacy.

The 'office' was nothing more than a storage room with a desk. I didn't use the desk for much, as I usually did most of the paperwork for the bar at home, but it gave the employees somewhere to put invoices and mail when they came in. Shelves and cabinets lined the other walls, one of the later concealing the elevator entrance to the basement and the rooms below.

"What is it?" Sebastian asked.

I eyed him warily. He seemed relatively relaxed, but I knew looks were deceiving. Sebastian had held an underlying current of anxiousness for years, something that had come on gradually after his disappearance in '74.

"Got some news about Ramone," I told him.

Sebastian stiffened as if in anticipation of a battle. "Has he been sighted?"

I shook my head. "One of his girls was, though, over by *Los Hermanos de las Tres Cruces*. Sounds like he's working with Hermanos and his bunch to get a shipment to replace the one we got hold of."

"*Ficken*," he cursed softly. "Any idea where?"

"No, but we may have another lead," I said cautiously. "Ramone's bitch was talking to Hermanos about Masters gettin' a cut."

Sebastian frowned. "You think Ramone has ghouled Hermanos?"

I shook my head. "I thought about that, but Hermanos isn't exactly Ramone's type, is he?"

"Too old and not female," Sebastian agreed easily enough.

"What if he wasn't talkin' about 'master' as in domitor," I suggested, "what if he meant 'Masters'?"

"What are you saying?" he asked in a low voice. His tone told me he didn't like where he thought I was going but it was too late to stop now.

"Masters supplies specialty blood to those who want it, or need it," I reminded Sebastian. "What if one of those specialties is the blood of a child?"

His frown turned into a scowl and he crossed his arms over his chest. "Duncan is no more involved in child trafficking than I am," he growled.

"But what if he is?" I insisted. "We have to check this out, Sebastian. We can't risk ignoring this information."

"The 'information' you speak of is naught but smoke and mist," he snapped, chopping at the air as if it offended him. "I know Duncan well enough to know he would not do such a thing."

"Yeah, you know him well," I shot back. "So well that you won't hear a word against the bastard—"

"*Halt die fresse*," Sebastian barked harshly, taking a step closer to me.

I refused to give ground as I continued. "—and you talk about him as if he were Christ come again in the flesh to save us all!"



"How many times do I have to tell you not to push this, Morgan!"

The use of my given name told me just how far I was pushing him, but I couldn't stop now. I had to find a way to convince him to at least check on the information Kiran had given me.

"Use the sense God gave you, 'Bastian!" I pleaded. "If there's even a chance that—"

He grabbed the front of my shirt and balled the material in his fist. "No, I will not listen to this slander and hearsay!" he yelled into my face. "From the moment you met Duncan you have let jealousy rule your mind. This ends now!" He shoved me away and I fell back against some shelves, knocking a few boxes to the ground.

I pushed off the shelves and planted myself back in his face. "I'm not jealous of that son-of-a—"

He took a step back, contempt and anger painting his features. When he spoke his voice a low and dangerous purr that made the hair on my arms stand on end. "Do not make me believe that Duncan is right, my friend."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"I gave you my blood because I trusted you," he said, his voice hard. "I have kept you with me all these years because I trusted you. Do not make me distrust you now, Morgan. You would not care for the consequences."

I stumbled backward, reeling with shock at his words. I knew better than anyone what he meant when he talked of 'consequences' and I couldn't believe he could even think of killing me so easily.

Before I could reply, he turned and walked toward the door. I called his name, but he ignored me, leaving me leaning against the shelves in shock at how badly our conversation had gone.

I stumbled toward the desk and nearly fell against it, bracing my hands on the surface and trying to control my breathing. I'd known that Masters had a hold on Sebastian, but I'd had no idea the hold was so strong. Self preservation and years of obedience told me to forget investigating Masters, but deep down I knew it was better to die than not try and break Masters' hold on Sebastian.

I heard a throat clear behind me and Kiran say, "That didn't appear to have gone well."

Taking a deep breath I let it out quickly, trying to blow out my hurt and anger as I straightened. I knew I didn't have the right to risk Kiran's life by asking him to help me, but this wasn't something I could do on my own. "Are you still willin' to help?"

"I am," he said firmly, "now more than ever. He didn't sound like he was comin' from a good place, I'm worried for him."

One more deep breath and I finally had my emotions under control. I pulled out my wallet and took a piece of paper from behind my license. Turning, I stepped across the room and handed it to Kiran. "This is the official address of the target," I told him, "along with his registered business, and the addresses of two of his... employees. I have also listed an address I suspect he's using as an alternate haven."

He unfolded the paper and looked at the information. "For now I'm just supposed to watch?"

"Yes." I went back to the desk and opened a drawer, pulling out a cell phone I'd bought earlier with the hope I wouldn't have to use it. "But if you see Ramone, call me. My number is programmed in this." I tossed the phone to Kiran, who caught it easily. "Make note of anyone he talks to, everywhere he goes. I've got a few other people who will be following his employees."

He nodded. "What about my shifts? My other gigs? You got someone to take my place?"

"Yeah, I got you covered," I replied, thankful I'd taken the time to prepare for this, despite hoping my conversation with Sebastian would go better than it had. "Expect a call when your shift is over tonight. She'll let you know where the target is so you can take over for her. She'll cover when you're here and the nights you work your gigs, unless you want to pick it up when you're done playin' those nights."

"Works for me." He stuffed the addresses and the phone into his pocket. "I've only got my bike but there's other ways to hide. What's the area around the haven like?"

"Several nearby houses," I told him, "but a busy road not too far away, and enough cover that if you choose you can easily hide to watch him. If you have need of a different ride let me know, I can get you a car."

He shook his head. "I should be alright but I'll let you know." He nodded toward the front of the bar. "Best get back."

"Thanks, Kiran," I told him, unable to put the gratitude I felt into words. "I owe you one."

With a final nod, he slipped out of the room. I took a few minutes to gather myself and went back to work. Staying busy was the best way to keep my mind off the words Sebastian had said to me.

I was more thankful than surprised that Sebastian didn't return to The Iron that night.

### **Chapter 3: Sebastian – A Discussion of Thralls**

*Better keep your distance*

*From this tangled up shape I'm in*

*Christian Kane – Rattlesnake Smile*

AN HOUR AFTER my argument with Raleigh at The Iron, I stood at the window of a high rise apartment, looking out over the city. In my hand I held a clear crystal goblet half full of dark rich blood.

Behind me Duncan Masters sat on the couch, a thin blond woman kneeling between his widely spread thighs. I watched their reflection in the tall window as Duncan's dark hands tangled in her long blond hair and he pushed her head down further on his cock.

"Your mouth is delightful, my dear," Duncan drawled.

Joan could not answer, of course, but she did begin to move, following the demands of Duncan's hand in her hair.

For a moment the image in the glass seemed to blur, Joan's long blond hair growing shorter, darker, until I would have sworn that I was the one kneeling between Duncan's thighs. I lifted my glass and took a long drink, ignoring the resentment burning in the pit of my stomach.

The resentment was not due to clear memories of the feel of Duncan's cock in my mouth. I'd never been that picky about whom I'd taken to my bed, and I'd lain with many men over the course of my long lifetime. No, what I resented was the fact that tonight Duncan had chosen Joan to please him.

"Are you still vexed, Sebastian?" Listening to Duncan speak one would never know he was having sex, his voice was that calm.

"I grow tired these rumors," I growled, raising my glass for another drink. The blood was rich on my tongue, soothing the fire that burned deep in my gut.

"Yes, they do become tiresome," he agreed. "One wonders where your man hears such things."

In the reflection I watched Duncan thrust up into Joan's mouth as he held her head down. The wet sound of her swallowing filled the room. He held her down for so long that if the girl had been human, she'd have died from lack of oxygen.

Draining my glass I turned my eyes back to the city. "He didn't say."

"You've done well," Duncan purred to Joan. "Pour yourself a glass of the special vintage."

"Thank you, sir." Her voice was rough from the pounding Duncan had put to it, but she sounded happy just the same.

"Refill Sebastian's glass as well," Duncan added. "Perhaps it will soothe his temper."

"Yes, sir."

There was a rustling of cloth and the sound of footsteps before Duncan's bald head and smiling face appeared in the glass beside and a little behind me. With his dark clothes and skin, he seemed merely a streak in the reflection.

"You do not spend enough time with him, my friend," Duncan chided softly as he reached around to place his hand low on my stomach. "He works hard to please you."

I leaned back, letting my body rest against the taller man's chest. "I do not need a puppy to beg for my attention."

His hand moved downward to pull at the button of my jeans, popping it open. "Much of your time is spent here," he said as he slowly pulled the zipper down. "It wasn't always so. I'm sure that he misses you."

A moan broke from my lips as a cool hand encircled my engorged flesh. All of my attention was centered on my cock, on the smooth feel of Duncan's hand on my skin. Pleasure shot through my body, stealing more and more of my wits with every stroke.

"A thrall's life can be a heavy load to bear," he said against my hair, "and a lonely one when bereft of a master's attention. One must reward one's servants from time to time, lest the love they feel turn to hate."

"Duncan," I breathed, lost in the sensations radiating through my body.

The soft touch of fingers on the hand that still held the goblet and a tinkle of glass told me that Joan was pouring more of Duncan's 'Special Vintage' for me. Blood smell filled the air, driving me wild with need.

Duncan's hand tightened on my cock. "Drink," he purred. "Drink and then you will see to your boy."

Joan's small hand helped me lift the goblet to my mouth and the moment the blood hit my tongue I was coming, painting Duncan's fist with pale strings of semen. I gulped at the blood, reveling in the taste even as I reveled in the final strokes.

"Give him the attention he desires," he continued as the orgasm ran its course. "Remind him that you are his master, and he will lick your hand in gratitude."

I lowered the now empty goblet and looked at Duncan's reflection in the glass. "I will," I gasped, still reeling from the intensity of my orgasm.

At a look from Duncan, Joan fell to her knees and began licking the seed from his hand, from my dick. She continued her attentions, even after every drop was gone, until he sent her away with a quiet word.

Minutes later I was walking to my car, intent on having a firm word with Raleigh.

## Chapter 4: Raleigh – The Eye of the Master

*Black gold turned to sand*

*And the whiskey's the only well that's runnin' deep*

*Christian Kane – Somethin's Gotta Give*

WHEN THE BAR closed, I went home and tried to get some work done, trying not to worry about whether or not Sebastian would eventually calm down. I was distracted when Rose called to check in around two, and again when Kiran called an hour or so later.

"Masters just went into a place with sewer access," he told me. "Should I follow?"

I asked a few questions to pin down his location and to make sure no one else was in the area. From the sounds of things, Masters was visiting Regina, and unfortunately, there was no crime in a vamp visiting his clan's primogen.

"Look, I don't wanna send you down a rat hole after this guy," I told him. "Regina's gonna have lots of tricks and traps to make sure her haven is safe. Just keep watching and see if he comes out. If he doesn't come out before dawn, give me a call."

"Do I even wanna know who Regina is?" Kiran asked.

"Well," I said, drawing out the words in a slow drawl, "she lives down there, in the sewer, with a bunch of rats. I'm pretty sure you don't wanna know her. The question is, why does Masters wanna know her?"

"Rats?" I could hear the surprise in his voice. "Nasty. Fine, I'll just sit tight and see what happens."

"Keep an eye out," I cautioned. "Regina's kind are damn good at hidin' in the shadows."

"Gee, thanks for the warnin'," he retorted with humor in his voice. "Is she like Masters and Bossman then?"

He was asking if she was a vampire, but that wasn't a term to easily share with those not of the blood.

"She and Masters are supposed to be the same... flavor, but Sebastian is different." It was the best I could do without naming clans. "Masters and Regina are pretty nasty lookin', but use a type of glamour to cover it up. That glamour can also hide them, if you're not watchful."

"Son of a bitch," Kiran muttered softly. "Any way I can get around that?"

"You've got skills, more than your average Joe, at any rate," I reminded him. "If you don't think you can do it, let me know and I'll put someone else on it."

"I got it," he huffed, as if offended I would even hint he wasn't up for the job. "I'll call you after sunrise."

"I trust you, man, or I wouldn't have asked you to do this," I told him. "Drop off those addresses before you call it a night, would you?"

"Sure. I'll talk to you later."

I hung up wishing that I'd gone with Kiran to follow Masters. I knew Kiran was more than capable of handling himself in a fight, but sewer rats had tricks he might not be able to see through. The only reason I hadn't gone was that I didn't want to make Sebastian even more suspicious of me by breaking my usual pattern, not to mention the disaster it would be if Masters spotted me following him. I didn't want to give Sebastian cause to question my loyalty even more than he already had tonight.

After an hour of pushing papers around, I gave up trying to work. With a heavy sigh I headed for the shower, hoping to ease the ache in my back from its earlier impact with the shelves in the storage room. I could have healed it easily, of course, but that would have meant using Sebastian's blood within me and after the argument at The Iron I wasn't sure when, or if, he'd give me blood again.

Twenty minutes under the hot spray went a long way toward loosening up my muscles. I threw on a pair of jeans and headed to the kitchen for some aspirin hoping that would take care of the lingering soreness.

Halfway down the hall I nearly missed a step when I realized that Sebastian was sitting in the darkened living room waiting for me.

"Surprised to see me?"

His voice was almost pleasant, but I heard the undertone of anger and knew I had to be very, very careful.

"A bit, yeah," I replied as calmly as I could with my heart racing in my chest.

Instead of going to the kitchen for aspirin, I headed for the cabinet where I kept my liquor. Passing over the Jack Daniels I really wanted, I picked up a bottle of Red Breast I kept solely for Sebastian's visits and poured two fingers into a glass. In the last few years Sebastian had claimed he disliked the smell of the cheaper whiskey on my breath.

"Something to drink?" I offered.

"Perhaps in a bit," he answered smoothly.

Glass clinked as the neck of the bottle hit the rim of the tumbler before I could control the tremor in my arm. If Sebastian was here to kill me, the easiest way for him to do that was to drain me dry. I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

I heard him come to his feet and moved around the table to get out of the corner I'd put myself in, despite the fact that it brought me closer to Sebastian. He might be my master, but I wasn't going to let him kill me without a fight. I glanced at the Desert Eagle sitting on the table, but as my hands were full of the whiskey bottle and glass, I knew there was no way to reach it before he got to me. The Beretta tucked in the back of my pants was no consolation; I knew the puny .22 was no match for Sebastian if he planned to kill me.

Sebastian followed my gaze and frowned. "A little paranoid tonight, are we?"

Taking a drink of whiskey stopped a tide of bitter words from spilling out and gave me a moment to clear my mind. "Lot of shit goin' down in the city lately," I said after a moment. "Never know when I'll need the big gun close at hand." I was careful not to look him in the eye. I was having a hard enough time controlling my emotions, I sure as hell didn't want him to see the fear I felt on my face.

"Well, there's no need to worry while I'm here," he told me as he approached the table where I stood. Somehow I managed not to flinch as his eyes travelled down my bare chest, taking in the lines and planes of my body. "You've lost weight. Have I been working you too hard?"

I drained the glass and refilled it before setting the bottle down on the table. "I've been pretty busy lately." Too busy worrying about him to worry about the fit of my clothes.

"Yes, you have," he agreed. "Perhaps it is time for me to add another to my stable."

Unable to stop the stiffening of my spine, I forced myself to meet his eye. I wasn't a fucking horse and I'd be damned if I let him treat me like a dog. "I do my job."

"Do not mistake my words, my friend," he soothed, stepping closer to me. "It would be easier for you if there were another to share your load, would it not?"

"You've never had cause to question my work," I reminded him.

He took another step closer to me, coming close enough to grab me, if that was his intention. "And I do not question it now, Morgan."

The only times he ever used my real name was when he was very angry with me, as he had been earlier, or we were about to fuck. The hope that he wasn't as angry as he'd been at the club was second only to the hope that he didn't expect me to put out for him tonight. I drained my glass, praying that the whiskey would do something to calm my frayed nerves.

Sebastian reached for the whiskey bottle and refilled my glass. "Have you had time to calm down, my friend?" he asked softly. "To reconsider your accusations?"

This was no time to tell the truth, but I'd never been good at lying to him so I settled for dancing around it as best I could. "I'm sure there is much more to the conversation than was conveyed to me."

"That is good," he said, sounding relieved, "though I am curious as to who would pass along such innuendo. It must be someone close for you to give their word so much weight."

There was no way in hell I was bringing Kiran into this. "Not really." I took a drink from the glass and walked past him into the living room. "I'm sure I overreacted. Jealousy, as you said," I told him as I sat down on the couch.

"Perhaps Duncan is right, after all," he murmured as he followed me into the living room.

For a moment my breath froze in my chest and it took me a moment to speak. "Yeah? About what?"

"I haven't been spending enough time with you." He sat down next to me and put the bottle on the low table in front of us.

"We don't live in each other's pockets," I replied carefully, trying to calm the racing of my heart so he wouldn't see the wild beat of it in my throat.

"Ah, but there was a time we did, wasn't there?" he reminded me. The smile on his full lips made me think he remembered those days fondly.

"A long time ago," I said into my glass as I lifted it for another drink.

"Yes," he murmured, watching me, "before Duncan entered our lives. I can see why you would be jealous of the time I spend with him." He took the glass from my hand and set it on the table. "Perhaps I can begin to make up for that tonight before the sun rises."

"If you wish it," I said, my voice was carefully neutral. I let his hand on my chest push me backward until I was laying against the arm of the couch with him half on top of me, his face close to mine.

Any other night I would have been hard and ready for his touch, eager to reconnect with him in the only way we'd really been able to connect in more years than I could remember. Tonight, with the memory of his threats still ringing in my ear, the only thing I wanted less than to have sex with Sebastian was to die. Given a choice between the two, I'd prefer the sex.

Putting my hand on his lower back I forced myself to remain still as he undid the button of my jeans and pulled down the zipper. His cool fingers quickly found my lack of response and he looked at me with disappointment in his eyes.

"Your enthusiasm for the game appears to have waned," he murmured softly.

"I suppose I'm a bit too tired to rise to the occasion." It wasn't a lie, not really. I was damned tired of being afraid of the man who'd once been my best friend.

"Too tired or perhaps too angry with me," he sighed.

He pulled his hand from my pants and let it rest on the bare skin of my stomach. His voice was gentle as he leaned forward to speak against the side of my neck, but underneath the gentleness there was a tone of steel. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, earlier. You questioned my authority and I cannot allow that to happen. In my house there is only one master, and that is not you."

"Yes, master." I tried to keep the fear from my voice, but it was hard when I could feel his lips move against the skin of my neck. I settled for keeping my eyes on his hand and tried not to think of how easily he could rip out my throat if he wanted to. "I know full well who holds the power in your house."

He pulled back to look at me, but I refused to meet his gaze. "You speak as if I were your enemy."

My eyes closed briefly to hide the pain that shot through me at his words. "Not my enemy, never that."

He sat up a little, looming over me. "Then what?"

"You are my master," I told him simply. "I'm afraid the memory of our friendship has at times made me forget that fact. It is something I will not forget again."

He sat up more, putting enough space between us that he no longer laid against my body. "We are still friends, Morgan," he said fervently. "Your bond to me has not changed that."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," I replied in a carefully respectful tone, "but I have never threatened the life of any one of my friends."

"Wha—" He reared back as if I'd struck him, his hand falling away from my body. "You think I threatened your life? I would never have done so!"

"You spoke of consequences, did you not?" As I sat up the gun fell from the loosened waistband of my pants and onto the couch, but I ignored that to reach for the glass of whiskey on the low table. Still keeping my voice as level as I could, I said, "I've spent near 30 years doling out consequences to those you have pointed me to. I know well what it means to lose the trust of a Ventrue."

Lifting the glass I drained its contents, hoping the smooth whiskey would wash the bitter taste of the words from my mouth.

"You have not lost my trust, Raleigh," he said softly.

I reached for the bottle and poured myself another glass without looking at him. "As you say."

He swore loudly, getting to his feet in a smooth, angry movement. When he spoke again it was in German, his native tongue. "I cannot speak to you when you are like this. You will stop, now!"

Draining the glass I set it on the table before coming slowly to my feet. Looking into his eyes I let my emotions run free, letting him see the fear and pain burning in my heart. In English, I said, "Tell me what you wish of me and I will obey."

I waited silently before him, unarmed and with my pants still undone. He saw in my face that I would obey any order he gave to the best of my abilities, even if the order was for me to take my own life.

With a bitten off curse he spun and walked out the door, slamming it behind him.

My hand was shaking when I reached down for the bottle on the table. On unsteady legs I walked to the kitchen where I emptied the bottle down the sink, knowing I would never again be able to stand the taste of the expensive whiskey without vomiting.

Despite my earlier shower, I felt as if Sebastian's touch had left a trail of filth on my skin. I took the bottle of Jack into the shower with me and did not come out until the bottle was empty and the water ran cold.

## **Chapter 5: Raleigh – Blowing Off Steam**

*You need a quarter mile*

*A bunch of horses and some gasoline*

*Christian Kane – Let's Take a Drive*

DAWN WAS BREAKING over the horizon when Kiran finally showed up. I offered him breakfast in the hope that making a simple omelet would help ease my restlessness.

"Any problems with Masters?"

"No everythin' was fine." He gestured toward the newly opened bottle of Jack on the table. "Ain't it a little early for that?"

I shot him a wry smile. "It's late for me, almost my bedtime. I don't see much daylight."

He laughed softly. "Fair enough, but its mornin' for me so do you have any coffee?"

Without a word I turned to put on a pot of coffee.

"Anythin' I can help you with?" he asked, looking over the notes covering the table.

As I cooked, I explained that I'd been adding points to a map with the addresses Masters and his ghouls had been spotted at. Some of the points were places the Hermanos had been also seen, but for whatever reason, that bunch was harder to follow. Kiran took over and made short work of the job, finishing up as I carried the meal to the table.

"Looks like everything is centered in two neighborhoods," I said as I looked over the map. "This one on the south end is solid middle class."

"And this one is more lower end," Kiran said, pointing to a group of dots north of the river. "Most of the Hermanos movements are up that way too."



"I wonder if he's casing for more kids for Ramone," I murmured in a low voice. It killed me to think that right at that very moment kids might be kidnapped for some pervert to get his rocks off.

"Maybe. I wish we knew how the operation worked." He glanced my way and smiled suddenly. "But I guess that's what we're doin', huh?"

"That's what we're tryin' to figure out," I agreed, trying to ignore the sensual curve of his mouth. "Maybe if we do that, we can figure out what kinda hold Masters has over Sebastian." I looked at the whiskey bottle on the table but drinking more probably wasn't a good idea.

"Is there anything about Sebastian's habits I should know about?" Kiran asked.

"Like what?"

"How much time do they spend together?" His glance was almost wary and his voice dropped. "What is the nature of their relationship?"

I shrugged. "They see each other most every night, I think, for a couple of hours or so. As to the nature of their relationship," I said as I lifted the bottle to pour another drink, "closer than I'd like, I expect."

Kiran put his hand over the glass before I could lift it. "You okay man?"

I let go of the glass and sat back. "No, I don't think I am." Running my hand through my hair, I eyed Kiran's pockets. "You got a smoke?"

Without a word, Kiran pulled two cigarettes from his pack and lit them both before handing one to me. It had been years since my last smoke so I dragged on it carefully at first, until I was sure I wasn't going to cough.

Kiran took a long drag and exhaled slowly, his eyes on my face. "You're really worried about him aren't you? It's that serious?"

"It's life or death," I told him, trying not to think about what that meant. The situation put me between a rock and a hard place, and the chances of me getting out in one piece were pretty slim.

I eyed the half full glass on the table, but I knew getting drunk out of my mind wasn't the answer. I needed some sort of distraction, something to get my mind off of Sebastian and his damned reliance on Duncan Masters.

Kiran brought his cigarette back to his lips and I watched them purse as he took another drag. I remembered hearing tales of that mouth from one of the Brujah ghouls. She'd said that most nights he played at Alexander's, Kiran ended up in the back room, naked as the rest of them, enjoying the touch of skin on skin.

"Zoe says you hang out in the back room of Alexander's from time to time," I murmured, still watching his mouth.

He nodded. "Yeah, I've been back there a time or two."

"So a couple of guys..." I said, waiving my hand in a gesture that didn't really mean anything, "doesn't bother you?"

His eyes moved down my body, as if mapping out the curves. "No," he replied slowly. "You?"

"I take my pleasure where it comes," I admitted softly. "Ain't no shame in that."

"You and Sebastian are...?"

"When the mood strikes us." I looked away and took another hit from the cigarette, trying not to remember the feel of Sebastian's cold hands on my skin. "Not so much, since Masters came on the scene."

"I see." He seemed a little surprised but not put off by the revelation.

"It's not that I'm jealous, mind you," I said firmly, ignoring the burning ache in my chest. "Sebastian and I did a bit of experimentin' back when we first met, in Berlin, but it wasn't nothin'... permanent or anything. No hearts and flowers and the like."

"That's cool," he drawled, leaning back in his chair, one hand on the table and the other resting on his thigh. "I never would have guessed that you were... into that."

"Hey, it was the 60s, you know?" I told him with a grin. "Free love and all that. Plus, Europe don't have the hang ups about that kind of thing like we do here."

"Yeah, I get what you're sayin'," he grinned. "I got no hangups about it myself. Sex is sex, man."

Relieved he wouldn't get judgmental about my lack of sexual preference, or Sebastian's, I said, "So the answer to your question is yeah, I think the nature of their relationship has a sexual aspect. I think Masters will do anything he has to in order to bind Sebastian to him. See," I paused to take a drag from the cigarette, considering my words carefully, "their kind has a, well, a leader in the city, and that leader is Sebastian's... father, for lack of a better word. The last city we lived in, the leader was Sebastian's grandfather. That kind of thing holds weight, if you know what I mean."

"Well hell, yeah, I get what you're talking about," he said, getting up to refill his coffee cup. When it was full, he turned with the pot in his hand. "Want some?" he asked casually.

As much as I wanted to drain the glass of whiskey on the table, I got up and emptied it into the sink. "Yeah, hit me."

Kiran reached into one of the cupboards and took out a cup, filling it with hot coffee before handing it to me. "So, how long are we gonna have to pull this surveillance detail?"

I took the cup, letting my fingers brush against his. "Until we find whatever the fuck Masters is using on Sebastian, or I find a way to take him out without gettin' the rest of us killed."

"How likely is the second one?" he asked, settling against the counter.

I shrugged and let my hip rest against the counter as well. "Don't know. Don't mind fabricatin' evidence, if we have to."

"How good would it have to be for the powers that be to believe it?" He sipped at the coffee. "Hell, hopefully we'd find real evidence."

"I don't know," I admitted, watching him lick the coffee from his lip. "We have evidence that he's working with the Hermanos group, and some hints that they may be providing Ramone with... something. Maybe more kids. If we can get some concrete evidence, we'll be set. Tristan won't stand for that shit goin' on in his city."

"How much weight will what I overheard carry?"

I looked at him appraisingly. "I don't know. You're not..." I turned my eyes to my cup, silently cursing the way avoiding certain words and terms made it damned hard to have an honest conversation with the man. "You're not one of them or even one of us. Some of the older—"

Frustrated, I set my cup down on the counter. Kiran had shown Sebastian and me something of what he was when he'd sprouted fur and whiskers, teeth and claws. The least I could do was be honest with him.

"Some of the older vampires don't hold much truck with humans," I told him. "Then again, you ain't human."

His smile lit up his face in a most attractive way. "That I'm not."

My breath caught and I wet my lips, wondering if his mouth was as soft as it looked. "They-they might listen," I murmured, distracted by my wild thoughts.

"Well, if it comes to that feel free to call me as a witness," he said as he swayed toward me.

I dragged my eyes up to his and had to smile at his warm honesty. "I'll hold you to that."

His teeth came out to bite at his lip before he covered the movement with a drink of his coffee. I picked up my cup and took a drink of the hot liquid, knowing it wouldn't do anything to cool the heat pooling in my dick.

The fact that my cock was hard now reminded me that it hadn't been earlier, and I looked back at the table, still covered with the color coated map. "I just wish I could figure out what Masters is using to turn 'Bastian's mind like he is."

Kiran cleared his throat and turned toward the table, his movement bringing him closer to me. "You're gonna know more about the possibilities than I do," he told me. "Does Masters know any kind of magic? Mind control? "

"His kind are sewer rats," I replied. "They're strong, some of them can talk to animals, and they can hide themselves, or change the way they look."

He shook his head. "That doesn't sound like anything manipulative."

"Yeah, but I've seen him talkin' to people and suddenly they completely change their mind on somethin'," I told him, putting my cup aside once more. "Not just Sebastian, there was a businessman in Flint that loved his wife, practically worshiped the ground she walked on. After a couple of meetings with Masters, the guy practically sold her to the bastard, it was like he didn't care about her at all." I looked back at the map. "That's how Harleyanne came to work for him."

"Sounds like there's some kinda ace in his pocket then," Kiran agreed. "I just don't have the knowledge to be of any help. Sorry man."

"Maybe not, but you've got the strength to take him down." I ran my eye over his body, remembering how deceptively strong that lean form could be. "Not that you look like you do."

"Maybe not now," he said with a quirk of his eyebrow, "But I got some skills."

I couldn't help but grin up at him. "Skills, huh?"

He laughed softly and shrugged rather than answering my unspoken question.

"Well, I got skills too," I drawled softly, "but I can't take down a vamp without some serious weapons."

He put his cup down on the counter and crossed his arms loosely across his chest. "Eh, no worries."

My eyes ran down his proud stance, but I forced myself to turn away, pouring the mostly untouched coffee into the sink. As much as I thought sex would be a good distraction from my problems, Kiran was too good a friend for me to ruin it by making a pass, not in the mood I was in.

"Maybe I should have kept going with the whiskey," I muttered. "I'd really like to not remember that my best friend threatened to kill me."

His hand fell on my shoulder. "Hey man, don't think like that. There's somethin' goin' on. He's not in the right frame of mind right now."

"Knowing that's not gonna help if Masters convinces him I'm a liability," I said in a flat voice.

"Look, that's not gonna happen. You've got a lot of folks workin' on this," Kiran said reassuringly as he squeezed my shoulder. "If you have to go underground at some point well then so be it but we're all in this to get to the same endin'. You can't forget that."

"Yeah, you don't get it," I said as I turned back toward him. "If Sebastian decides I need to go, every vampire in this city will be out to get me, and their ghouls will be obligated to assist them. That's the way things work. And you know, it's not so much the 'I could die' thing, it's that my best friend would believe—"

I cut off abruptly, suddenly aware that my emotions were running as wild as a roller coaster.

He took me by the neck and turned my face up to his. "If that happens, n'honestly I think that's a really big if here, but if that happens, we'll still figure it out. I'm not affected by the vampire's politics," he pointed out, "I don't have to do what Sebastian says and honestly if it came to that I'd make a play for Masters on the spot, regardless of proof." He looked deeply into my eyes as if to impress upon me just how much he meant his words. "Sebastian is your friend, Raleigh, don't ever doubt that. We'll figure out what's goin' on and put a stop to it."

I wanted to speak, but I couldn't find the words to say what his declaration meant to me. I wanted to pull away, to find that whiskey bottle and drown myself in it, but more than that I wanted to lean against Kiran and borrow his strength, if only for a little while. It was such a girly thing to feel that I tried to pull away, but he just gathered me to his chest and held me there with his long arms around my shoulders. After a moment, I put my arms around his waist and leaned against him, taking comfort in the heat of his body.

Then I felt his lips brush against my hair. It surprised me so much I pulled back to look up at him only to find his face mere inches away. Slowly, giving him plenty of time to pull away, I lifted my lips to his.

Kiran returned the kiss slowly, gently, letting me set the pace as if he wasn't sure that this was what I really wanted. I deepened the kiss and felt my body respond to the heat of the kiss just as Kiran pulled away.

"Raleigh, you sure about this?" he asked softly.

"I ain't lookin' for a complication, Kiran," I told him, my voice low and rough, "but I could do with a bit of stress relief, if you're up for it."

He grinned down at me. "Yeah, I'm sure I'm up for it."

Our lips met once more, teasing and licking and sucking until I wanted to beg him to take me right there in the kitchen. On shaking legs I led him down the hall where a king size bed waited. The next few hours were filled with pleasure, driving every worry from my mind, at least for a while.

## **Chapter 6: Raleigh – Unexpected Aid**

*And I'm puttin' down everythin' I own*

*On the mercy of these bones*

*Christian Kane – Seven Days*

I WOKE TO the feel of long blond hair tickling my nose. Blowing it away, it took me a minute to realize that the hair was not my own. My last faint memory was of pleasure and warm bodies, so it wasn't a big leap to realize that Kiran had fallen asleep in my bed.

There were worse things than waking up with a gorgeous body lying against mine.

Unfortunately, I had much to do before the sun went down. I eased myself out of bed, careful not to wake the other man, and stumbled to the shower. I'd barely finished a bowl of cereal when I heard movement from the back of the apartment and the shower turn on. A moment later I heard a knock on my door.

The small Beretta in my hand, I went to find out who my visitor was. One look through the barely opened door revealed a tall man with stylishly cut dark hair and striking blue eyes. Tucking the gun in the small of my back, I opened the door.

"Mr. Terrel," I said in a low voice. "What can I do for you this afternoon?"

"Well, ya can start by callin' me Dillan," he said with a smile and a strong Scottish brogue, "and continue by invitin' me inside yer lovely home."

I stepped aside and allowed him to pass, checking the street to see if he'd brought company. Satisfied that Dillan was alone, I ushered him to the table and offered him a drink, which he refused.

"I'll get right to the point, Mr. Raleigh," he said as we sat down across from each other. "My employer is aware that you and a few others are followin' Duncan Masters about town."

Dillan's 'employer' was Lachlan Nash, a close friend of Tristan d'Castilla, the prince. If Lachlan suspected I was looking for information, it was likely Tristan knew of it. Tristan, of course, was Sebastian's sire, and I had to wonder if Dillan was here to take me out.

"I—"

He raised a hand to stop my protest. "He is well aware that you're not doin' the followin' yerself, Mr. Raleigh. Ya've the cat on yer side, and some of the Rabble's people. It may be enough to find the dirt yer lookin' for, but then again, Masters is as slippery as an eel. I'm thinkin' we can lend a hand to pin him down."

I knew that Sebastian would have told Tristan about Kiran's ability to shift into a cat, and obviously Tristan had told Nash. "Not to look a gift horse in the mouth," I said carefully, "but why does your boss want Masters taken down?"

Dillan eyed me for a long moment, then said, "Tis clear the bastard has a strong influence over Mr. Ritter, and Miss Smith as well. The concerns ye have for yer master aside, do ye ken the seriousness of the situation?"

I blinked once, slowly, giving myself time to think about his question. Of course I wanted Sebastian free of whatever hold Masters had on him, but I hadn't really let myself think about how the situation affected the rest of the city.

"Sebastian holds an important office in Nashville," I said after a moment. "As the Sheriff, it's his job to take out any unauthorized Kindred in the city, to make sure no vampires are made or ghouls taken without permission. If he is compromised—"

"If he is compromised," Dillan interrupted, "if the Sheriff no longer answers to the prince but instead answers to a rogue individual with an agenda of his own...."

"None of us has any way to know if the city is really safe for any one, Kindred or Kine," I finished.

"Tis sure we'd all like to avoid a return of the Justicars," he told me. "We must resolve this situation, as quickly as possible, for the safety of us all."

He didn't have to say that if resolving the situation meant taking Sebastian out along with Masters, it would happen and there wasn't anything I could do about it. The best I could hope for was to find out what hold Masters had over Sebastian, and undo it.

"Yeah," I said softly. "I'll do whatever I can to make this go away."

He grinned at me. "Good. Now we've been watchin' the rat for a few weeks ourselves, but it's a good idea to pool our information." He pulled the map, still lying in the center of the table, toward him.

Ten minutes later we had a pretty clear picture of where Masters had visited in the last two weeks, mostly at Hermanos' church, or meeting with one of the group at various places in their neighborhood. We were also pretty sure we knew someone who could help us get us to Hermanos.

I looked up when Kiran entered the room. I could feel my face softening a bit as I remembered with both gratitude and pleasure the hours we'd shared, but now wasn't the time to linger on the comfort he'd given me.

"Kiran, good." I turned to my other visitor. "Dillan, I'd like you to meet Kiran Michaels. He works at The Iron, and he's generously offered to help us out. Kiran, this is Dillan Terrel, one of my associates."

Dillan got to his feet and looked Kiran over before extending his hand. "Tis good to meet ya, Mr. Michaels."

"Kiran," he corrected, shaking the man's hand. "Nice to meet ya." Turning to me, he asked, "Anythin' new?"

"Dillan came to me this afternoon with some information from his employer," I told him, gesturing that he should get a cup of coffee from the half full pot on the counter. "It appears that Mr. Nash has been keeping an eye on Masters' activities for some time now."

"Ye are nae the only one to mistrust the man," Dillan said.

"Anythin' useful?" Kiran asked, sitting down at the table with a steaming mug in his hand.

"Yeah," I replied, "but I'm not sure the big boss will see it that way."

"Much of it is conjecture, at this point," Dillan added. "However, we do have photographic evidence that ties Mr. Masters to the group calling themselves the Hermanos. If we can find a way to separate one of 'em from the others, preferably Jose, Mr. Nash has expressed an interest in interrogatin' the man himself. He is certain he can find the truth of the matter in less than an hour."

"It turns out Jose has family in the area," I told Kiran. "An artist who frequents some of the higher class establishments."

He nodded. "I was gonna ask if there were any links to him. Who is it?"

"Ariel Espenosa."

"I've heard of her," he said after a moment. "We have the same agent."

I glanced at Dillan and he seemed to know what I was thinking, as he nodded. "How do you feel about contacting her?" I asked Kiran. "See what she has to say about him."

He shrugged. "I'm okay with that."

"Good." I sat back in my chair and thought about what I knew of the woman. "You can probably find her at The Masquerade around nine. Dillan is going to cover for you with Masters. Check in with me when you've talked to her and we'll see where we're at then."

Kiran glanced from Dillan to me. "How honest can I be?"

"She's worked with Masters before," Dillan said thoughtfully. "Perhaps it would be best to focus on Jose, to begin."

"Fair enough," he replied. "I think I'll head home to change and grab somethin' to eat."

"Call me when you're done," I told him, "and thanks, man," I added, meaning so much more than just his help in taking Duncan down.

With a wink, Kiran picked up his jacket and headed out.

"If you need anything," Dillan said, getting to his feet, "dinnae hesitate to call. Mr. Nash is most anxious to resolve this situation and would be willing to give you any reasonable aid it is in his power to give.

I stood as well. "Please thank Mr. Nash for me. I will be in contact later this evening to keep you informed of our progress."

A few hours later I kept good on that promise when I called Dillan to let him know that Kiran had indeed contacted Ariel, and he was bringing her to Alexander's to discuss the situation with me.

When Tristan had taken over the city, Alexander's had been a once popular club decidedly on the decline. With a better prince in power, Jax Alexander had been able to return to Nashville and had made many changes. In fact, the renovations had only been completed a few weeks before.

I waited for Kiran at a table near the door. When he walked in with Ariel, I let my eyes travel over her slim form. She was beautiful in an old Hollywood kind of way, curvy and blond with beautiful blue eyes and lips that made a man want to stand up and beg. I'd only heard her sing once, but that was all it took to fall under her spell. I wasn't the only one to feel that way. Sebastian had once told me that Ariel Espenosa was the kind of women men went to war for. He was right.

Shaking off my thoughts I told myself not to get distracted. Sebastian was in trouble and as much as I didn't want to put Ariel in any danger, she was the only one who could help us. I stood up and led the way through a door labeled 'Employees Only' and down a short hall. A door on the end led to a room that held a large bed as well as a small table and chairs.

It wasn't until the door was closed that Ariel got a good look at my face. "You're Sebastian's gh—" She stopped abruptly, glancing at Kiran.

"Yes, ma'am," I said respectfully. Beautiful as she was, she was still a vampire, and me, well, I'm not. "And Kiran knows enough about us to know that's true as well."

She looked between Kiran and me before finally moving toward the table. Kiran stayed by the door, leaning against it as if guarding our privacy.

"What's going on?" She asked, her voice soft but with an undertone of iron. I liked that about her, like that beneath the soft curvy frame was a core of strength. "The whole truth. Kiran said something about my brother being involved in kidnapping children and giving them to Jesus but what does Sebastian have to do with it?"

"*Señorita* Espenosa," I began, "it has come to our attention, thanks to Kiran here, that money was passed from one of Jesus' men to one of Jose's men, and there was discussion about Duncan getting a cut." I hesitated a moment, then said, "I think Masters has some kind of hold over Sebastian."

She sighed softly. "I think you're right, Raleigh, and have told the pri-Tristan's people the same." She glanced at Kiran, then looked back at me. "I think Duncan has Blood Bound him."

I felt my eyes widen. "I-I—" I was well aware that drinking Sebastian's blood tied me to him, made me want to please him, more susceptible to his commands and so much more, but I'd had no idea the same thing could happen to a vampire. "That would explain a great deal. Do you have any evidence?"

She shook her head. "Only observation, but it was enough for Lachlan to get involved."

"Okay." My head was still reeling as I tried to wrap my head around this new information. I ran a hand through my hair. "Can I ask what else you've noticed about Masters?"

"Have you noticed anything odd about Joan?" she asked.

Beautiful, and smart, this woman. Joan, I knew, doted on Duncan to the point of obeying his every whim but it had never occurred to me that she might be in thrall to him. "Do you think she is also Blood Bound to Duncan?"

"I think it's possible," she replied.

"Do you know what *Señor* D'Castilla's opinion is of the matter?" I asked carefully.

"He's very concerned," she told me. "Concerned enough that he's alerted his own people to the situation." She glanced at Kiran for a moment as if wondering how much the man understood our conversation. "Does he know about this new development with the children and my brother's involvement?"

"I spoke with Dillan earlier today," I replied. "I'm sure the information will be passed to Mr. Nash, and then to *Señor* d'Castilla." At least, I was sure of it now that I knew d'Castilla had questioned Sebastian's relationship to Masters. Thankful that Kiran knew enough about the Kindred that I didn't have to dance around what I wanted to say, I asked, "Do you think this information will be enough to call a Blood Hunt on Masters?"

"I'm not sure," she said softly. "I've been trying to spend more time with him but he's been different with me lately as well."

"Then we must find proof that Masters is involved through the Hermanos with the children." I sat down at the table, wondering how we were supposed to do that.

"He's very careful," Kiran said from where he was still leaning against the door. "I've only spent one night watchin' him and I can already tell that. I don't think he's gonna give anythin' up willingly."

She looked at me in surprise. "You have people watching him already?"

"It seemed prudent," I admitted. "It is the only way to gather information about him. Although, we had hoped to gather information about your brother, to see if we could gain anything from that direction."

"My brother is a master of lies," she said in a bitter voice. "But then he has been doing it long enough."

"Look, the whole point of goin' to Ariel in the first place was in the hopes of gettin' her brother to Nash," Kiran pointed out. "I think we still need to try that angle. See what happens there."

Ariel looked to me. "Is that what Lachlan wanted?"

"Dillan tells me that Mr. Nash will welcome any and all information to resolve this situation," I assured her. "He is concerned that the prince's childe could be compromised in such a manner, and is anxious to have this taken care of."



Ariel nodded her agreement. "The only thing I worry about is what the rest of my brother's group will do if he's removed from them, especially for an extended length of time."

"Well, if that's the case then we'll just have to be ready to hit fast," Kiran said firmly. "Evidence is sometimes overrated."

"*Señorita* Espenosa," I said hesitantly, not sure if the question was one I should be asking, "if we were to take Masters out, would that return Sebastian to his right mind?"

"As I understand it, yes," she replied. Then as if remembering something she added, "What about Regina?"

"We will have to see how far her involvement goes," I said thoughtfully. It wouldn't do to take out one problem and cause another with the Nosferatu Primogen. "She may simply be another dupe to Masters."

She nodded. "I'm willing to try to get my brother to a location where he can be taken but I think it's a good idea that it be made to look like I wasn't involved in his capture. He's made an attempt to get back into my life and I've let him to an extent so that could be helpful."

"Maybe they could be put in the same holdin' area?" Kiran suggested. "He might open up to her."

"You wanna lock them in a room together?" I asked, surprised.

"No, but maybe cells that are close together," he replied. "Does anythin' like that exist?"

I remembered the dark hallways and cells that lay below The Iron, the dreaded Pens that had seen many Kindred and human alike die within their walls. Tristan had ordered the area closed and the door hidden, but I was one of the few people who knew how to open it again.

"Yeah," I said grimly. "It does."

Ariel's face was sad and I could tell she was thinking of the Pens as well. "It's true then?" she asked him in a quiet voice, as if she'd known a few people who'd disappeared into those dark halls.

I nodded. "They haven't been used since d'Castilla came to power, but they are still available." I sighed. "The only problem is that Sebastian would normally be the one to authorize their use."

"But since its Lachlan, could he circumvent that?" she asked.

"He would," I agreed, "or either d'Castilla. Any of them would be able to circumvent Sebastian and ensure he wasn't informed of the situation." They were probably the only Kindred in town with that kind of authority.

"Well Nash already wants Hermanos brought in," Kiran pointed out. "Is there some damn form that's gotta be filled out in triplicate beforehand?" He seemed restless, as if he was tired of talking and ready for action.

I smiled at his impatience because I felt the same. "No. I'll call Nash and get his approval then head to The Iron." I looked at Kiran. "You work with *Señorita* Espenosa as to how to lure Jose out. Take a couple of Alexander's people, Spencer and Williams would be happy to help, I'm sure, and they have a van. Take James if you think you need anyone else." Suddenly I remembered that I wasn't the highest ranking person in the room. Though Ariel wasn't my master, she was Kindred, and therefore in charge here. "If that is acceptable to you, *Señorita* Espenosa."

She didn't seem bothered that I'd given her orders. "So you want this to happen tonight?"

"The sooner, the better," I said firmly.

Kiran nodded in agreement as well.

Ariel nodded again and pulled a cell phone out of her pocket. "I need to call Vanessa and let her know that I would be out of circulation for a few days. That should be long enough. Then I'll call my brother to arrange a place to meet."

Kiran left to find the Brujah ghouls while I made my own phone call.

## **Chapter 7: Raleigh – Opening the Pens**

*Gonna rain down fire*

*Gonna burn us all*

*Christian Kane – L.A. Song*

THE WALL THAT hid the entrance to the Pens was covered with Victorian style paneling, the same as the other walls in the room. There was nothing to hint of anything hidden behind the paneling, but I knew exactly where to go.

My touch on a piece of trim slid back a hidden panel and revealed a hand sized electronic scanner. I placed my hand on the pad and a bar of light ran from the top to the bottom, scanning my palm.

A soft click told me that my access had been verified. An entire section of the wall slid inward and then to one side, revealing a steel door. Pulling a ring of keys from my pocket I slid one into the lock and turned it. A moment later the door swung inward and a gust of stale air hit me in the face. Lights clicked on, illuminating a steep stairway.

The Pens had been opened.

Lachlan walked behind me down the long dark stairs to the third level of the Pens and watched as I checked the integrity of the bars that lined two of the cells. Together we returned to a door near the stairway and tested the closed circuit camera system to make sure anyone in the observation room would be able to hear and see everything that went on in the cells.

I would have left it at that, but Lachlan requested we return to the first level and prepare two of the nicer cells for occupation. Though I had my suspicions of who he planned to hold there, I tested first the bars and locks, then that floors observation room and camera system.

Once everything had checked out to his satisfaction, we returned to the surface to wait the arrival of our retrieval team. Twenty minutes later Kiran and the Brujah ghouls were dragging Jose Hermanos and Ariel in through the back door of the club both of them hooded and bound, which might have been overkill, but if we couldn't get some dirt on Hermanos, we'd have to let him go.

Each of the captors wore knitted caps, pulled up for the moment to clear their vision, but easy enough to pull down and hide their faces when we needed their anonymity.

I led the way down the stairs hidden on the storage room on the main floor of The Iron to the basement, then used the hand scanner to open the door that led to another set of stairs. We went downward, past the first and second levels of the Pens to the third.

The hall was dimly lit here, with bare bulbs spaced widely apart in the ceiling. We went past the few closed doors that hid observation rooms, around a corner to the holding area of the floor. These cells were simple connecting barred rooms, each holding the bare minimum for a prisoner. The air was stale here, reeking of disuse, though I suppose the stale air was better than the smell of blood and death that had once filled these hallways.

Kiran and Billy dragged Jose into a cell, while Carl and Mark took Ariel into the one next to it. The men holding Ariel made no attempt to be gentle with her. I hated the thought of hurting her, but they had to make it look real or Hermanos would never buy it.

I went into Hermanos' cell and gestured that Kiran should search him. Through the barred wall connecting this cell with Ariel's, I could see Carl checking her for weapons. Kiran emptied Hermanos' pockets and handed me first a knife, then a gun, both of which I tucked into my pants.

"God will strike you down for this," Hermanos declared, trying to fight his way free, but Billy was too strong for him.

I wasn't surprised that the bastard didn't bother to worry how his sister was faring. Ariel was making her own protests, asking who we were and what we wanted, but she didn't really fight her captors very hard. To my relief, she didn't look much hurt either.

Kiran pulled a wallet from the man's pants that a quick look inside showed it held over a thousand dollars.

"What're those?" Kiran asked as he handed me a small bottle of pills.

I spilled the pills onto my hand, but none of them were familiar. "No idea. We'll find out, though."

At my gesture, each of the men pulled the brims of their knit caps down, covering all of their features save their eyes. Once their faces were hidden, Mark held Ariel down on the cot as Carl untied her, but left the hood in place. After a barked order telling her not to move, they got out of the cell and locked the door.

Kiran sat Hermanos up on the edge of the cot and ripped off the ropes that held his hands, though he also left the hood in place. He waited for Billy and me to leave the cell before he stepped away from the cot.

Hermanos reached up slowly and pulled off the hood just as the door clicked close. He looked into the next cell at Ariel, who had also taken off the hood, before looking at the five of us standing in the hallway. As my face was the only one bare, he focused mainly on me.

"This is not the path God wants you to be on, my friends," he said in a low voice. "It is not too late to repent your sins and walk in the light."

I snorted in amusement. "God's not in charge down here, Hermanos."

"What do you want with us?" Ariel asked softly, getting to her feet and moving gracefully toward the bars that separated her from the hallway.

I grinned before gesturing for the Brujah ghouls to leave us. "I want a lot of things, *Señorita*, and I'll be getting every single one of them."

Kiran and I followed after the Brujah, heading for the observation room we'd passed on the way to the cells. By the time we got there, Carl had already pulled up the feed from our prisoners.

Ariel was shaking her head, looking scared as she whispered. "Jimmy, I can't stay here, not for long."

Hermanos bent to examine the locking mechanism on the door. "We'll find a way out, *hermana*."

"What are you looking for?"

"A way out," he told her. When it was clear that he wouldn't find way to open the mechanism, so he started testing the door, pulling on the bars.

Ariel pretended to help him look for a way out, and from what we saw, she looked pretty convincing. She would have known it was a waste of time, though. No one who had been brought to the Pens had ever escaped.

Billy stayed with Kiran and me while the rest of his friends returned to Alexander's, though I knew I could count on them if we needed their help again. I watched the monitors, listening to Ariel play the innocent victim and Hermanos pretend he cared about what happened to her.

Ariel was a much better actress than her brother, much prettier, too.

"Look, I've got to get upstairs," I said after a few minutes. "All this isn't gonna matter if Sebastian walks in on it. You two good down here?"

"Yeah," Kiran said with a smile. "They're not goin' anywhere."

Billy gave me his own assurance, and I left them to return to the basement of The Iron.

"When do you plan on going down?" I asked Lachlan, who had been waiting for me to come up from the Pens.

"Thirty minutes or so," he replied. "At times it is just as important to wait as it is to ask questions."

"A trick I've used a time or two myself," I replied softly. "Michaels expressed an interest in assisting you with the questioning."

He looked at me thoughtfully. "And your opinion of the worth of his aid?"

"Kiran is strong, and can make himself stronger very quickly," I told him. "If Hermanos is ghouled, or has some unknown means to help him fight, that strength would be very beneficial while you ask your questions."

"Yes, that is a fair point," Lachlan murmured. "Tell me, if we learn that your master has been helping Duncan of his own free will, with the child trafficking and other crimes, will you interfere with the prince's judgment?"

I couldn't stop the clenching of my fists, but I did manage to make myself reply. "I cannot imagine that Sebastian Ritter would knowingly, willingly, allow children to be taken into that kind of slavery," I said in a low voice. "If you can prove to me that he did, without a doubt, I will kill him myself."

"And your... cat?"

"Kiran has a strong sense of honor," I replied. "His answer would be the same."

He clapped a hand on my shoulder. "You are a good man, Raleigh, an honorable man. Sebastian chose well when he gave you his blood. I do not think your master would aid Duncan willingly, but I had to know what you would do if he had."

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I simply nodded.

"*Señors* d'Castilla should be here shortly," he continued. "Mr. Terrell will show them into the Pens. You should return to the club and make sure your master does not come down to find the door to the Pens open, should he decide to visit early. I will inform you of the results when the questioning has been completed."

It was nearly an hour after the prince and his brother went into the Pens that Lachlan returned to tell me what they'd learned. Hermanos had given evidence that Duncan was definitely involved in stealing children for Ramone. He'd also told them that neither Sebastian nor Joan had been involved, and Regina had been ruled out as well.

I didn't ask what would happen to Hermanos. I knew he wouldn't leave the Pens alive.

"Miss Espenosa and Mr. Michaels will be up shortly," he told me. "The three of you should leave the premises before Sebastian arrives."

"He's on his way here?" I asked.

Lachlan smiled. "He will be once I have called him with a summons from the prince."

When Ariel, Billy and Kiran came upstairs I went over to meet them. The Brujah ghoul wanted to return to Alexander's and give his report to his clan, but first he made sure that I would call them later to keep them informed.

"I can't thank you enough for helping to get the evidence," I said, speaking to all three of them. "Hopefully we can settle this as soon as possible."

Billy agreed and headed out the back door of the club.

"Tristan said we were with you," Kiran told me. "What's next?"

"We need to wait for the word that Sebastian's under wraps," I replied. "Why don't we head out to meet up with Masters' tail? Be right there when the word comes down it's a go."

Kiran clapped a hand on my shoulder, "Man, I love how you think!"

Moments later we were on the road.

## Chapter 8: Sebastian – The Summons

*I feel my eyes rollin' deep inside my head  
And there's a feelin' of misconception in the air  
Christian Kane – Rattlesnake Smile*

*"YOUR PRINCE BIDS you come."*

Lachlan's words were more than enough for me to turn the car around and head toward The Iron as fast as I could get there. The formal summons was normally used only when no refusal, or even delay, was acceptable. It wasn't the first time I'd heard that particular summons, but it was the first time it had ever been directed at me.

"What is it?" Joan asked from the passenger's seat.

"I don't know," I said thoughtfully, putting the phone in my pocket. "We have to get to The Iron."

Joan and I had been patrolling the south end of the city, driving through known hunting grounds for the city's Kindred and making sure all was well. Joan often came with me on my patrols. She was deadly in a fight, and I'd been happy for her assistance more than once.

It wasn't unusual for Tristan to work out of the basement of my club. Over the years several of Nashville's princes had used the audience room to perform official Kindred business. Tristan preferred to use other venues when speaking with the people of his city, but he had used the club on more than one occasion when it suited him.

Twenty minutes after the call had come I pulled the car into the back lot of The Iron. Joan followed me through the back door and into the office where Lachlan was waiting for us.

"Your prince bids you come," Lachlan repeated with a small formal bow.

"I come to my prince's call," I replied, bowing low to show my obedience to Tristan's command.

Lachlan turned to Joan and bowed again. "Your prince bids you come," he told her.

Surprised, Joan glanced at me before giving an awkward curtsy. "I come to my prince's call," she said in a low voice.

Stepping aside, Lachlan motioned toward the open cabinet doors that when closed hid a small elevator. Fighting off my unease I stepped into the car, followed by the other two Kindred.

As much as I wanted to ask Lachlan why Tristan had summoned me, summoned us, I didn't. It was possible the other man didn't know the reason for the summons, and even if he did know, it was likely he wouldn't tell me.

To both Joan and my surprise, Lachlan did not lead us into the audience room when we reached the basement. Instead, he led us toward a door that had not been visible the last time I'd entered the basement.

That particular door had been hidden behind a piece of paneling when Tristan had taken over the city; I'd overseen its concealment myself. The door led to stairs which in turn led deep beneath the club to an area known as the Pens. Previous princes had used the cells below to punish those who defied them. Most of the unfortunate victims who entered the Pens never returned. When Tristan had taken control of the city, he had ordered the area closed, to be opened by his word alone.

To one side of the once hidden door was a concealed panel that few people knew how to access. Behind that panel lay an electronic palm reader that would reveal the hidden door for only three people; Tristan, Raleigh, and me. Though the panel was not visible as we approached the entrance to the Pens, I knew it must have been used for the door to be opened as it was.

In the normal course of things, I should have received the order to open the Pens. Instead, I was being led to them as if I had committed some grave offense. Joan, not knowing the history of the Pens, went down the stairs without hesitation, but I found my steps dragging.

Tristan didn't have the slightest idea of how to work anything electronic, not without a great deal of help. I certainly hadn't opened the door, which meant that Raleigh had done so. Someone had ordered my ghoul to open the entrance to the Pens and made sure I didn't find out about it until I was standing in front of it. I wondered what else Raleigh had been ordered to do without my knowledge, and by whom.

"Who called for the Pens to be opened?" I asked Lachlan.

The other man's expression was unreadable. "Your prince bids you come," he said again, gesturing down the stairs.

While the reply did nothing to calm my unease at what might wait below, it did tell me that the order to open the Pens had come from Tristan. "I come to my prince's call," I repeated, turning to follow Joan downward.

Lachlan followed behind, moving silently on the dimly lit stairs.

I reached the first level of the Pens in time to see Joan making an awkward curtsy to Tristan, who had obviously been waiting for our arrival. Mateo stood beside his brother, a silent, unmoving sentinel to the scene.

"I hear your call and obey," Joan said with her head still bowed. Her nervousness was clear in the lines of her body, in the subtle shaking of her hands.

Tristan laid a hand on the top of her head. "Be at ease, daughter," he told her. "Rise and go with Lachlan."

"Yes, my prince," she said as she straightened.

Without a word, Lachlan led Joan down an otherwise empty hallway. From the few times I'd been in the Pens, I knew that on this floor the hall led to the better appointed cells, those used to hold important prisoners, the ones most likely of those imprisoned below The Iron to ever see the surface. I watched them walk away hoping Joan would come to no harm.

Once they had moved out of sight I looked back at Tristan and went to one knee, bowing my head. "I hear your call and obey," I told my sire. I felt Tristan's hand on his head moving gently through my hair.

"Rise, my son." Tristan spoke in Spanish, a language he often reverted to when with those fluent in the tongue. When I was back on my feet he said, "I have a task for you, Sebastian."

"Your will is mine," I replied simply.

"News of a conspiracy was brought to my attention," he said in a low voice, "one that risks the security of this city. I would have you put to question one who has been working with Jesus Ramone, and execute the sentence I have decreed for him."

I nodded. "Lead me to this man, sire, and it shall be as you say."

With a nod, Tristan led the way after Joan and Lachlan down the dimly lit hall. Mateo followed his brother, leaving me to trail behind. We passed several empty cells, separated from one another by four feet of stone and cement. Each cell had three solid walls but the fourth held only bars to reveal the entire contents of the cell to the hallway. None held much more than a bed along one wall, not even a toilet for the convenience of human prisoners who might have been held there.

A turn in the corridor revealed Lachlan standing before the closed door of one of the cells. Inside I could see a man huddling in a corner, his face hidden by his arms. As we approached Lachlan turned and opened the cell door.

"Lachlan has acquired a Bone of Lies for you to use in your inquiry," Tristan told me as we came to a stop outside the cell. "You know how it works?"

I nodded, having seen one used years ago. Any lies spoken by anyone who held such a Bone would be quickly revealed. Lachlan held a rib bone out to me, one already grey from use. I took the proffered object and walked into the cell.

As I approached the man in the corner, he lifted his head. I was surprised to see Jose Hermanos looking up at me with fear on his face. Immediately I thought of Raleigh's accusations the night before and spun toward the door of the cell, only to find it already closed.

"Sire, if—" I began, only to be cut off.

"Your prince has given you a task," Mateo said firmly. "Do you question your prince?"

As much as I wanted to protest, I knew that to defy my prince in this moment would mean my death. I turned back to Hermanos, only slightly comforted by the fact that the Bone would ensure that the man told only the truth. I was certain it would prove Duncan innocent of any wrongdoing.

"You speak Spanish?" I demanded.

The man nodded quickly.

I held up the Bone. "Do you know what this is?"

Hermanos shook his head and shrunk back into the corner. "It is the devil's work!"

"You will hold this while I question you," I told him, "or I will shove it into your hand and watch you bleed around it, do you understand?"

Terrified, Hermanos shrank back even further. "I have already held it!" he cried. "I have already answered his questions!"

I followed the man's frightened gaze to where Lachlan stood just outside the cell door. If Hermanos had already been questioned with the Bone, there should have been no need for me to repeat the interrogation. It was clear that Tristan wanted me to hear the answers for myself, answers I was not likely to believe without confirmation from the Bone of Lies.

For a moment the certainty I'd felt of Duncan's innocence waivered, but I shoved my doubts aside. Duncan was my friend, one who had saved my life many times over the years. He had gotten me out of the hell of St Louis and never once turned his back on me. I would be a poor friend if I doubted him now.

Turning back to Hermanos I held out the bone. The man's hand shook so badly he nearly dropped it before he tightened his grip on the gruesome object.

"Are you involved with Jesus Ramon?" I demanded, watching the bone closely.

"Yes! Yes!" Hermanos cried. "He wanted more kids! He paid well for them!"

The Bone lay quiet in the man's hand.

"Are you his ghoul?"

"No! No!" He shook his head frantically. "It is an abomination to drink the blood of a monster!"

Again, the bone was silent.

"Did you or any of your people use these children yourself?" I asked, my voice low and hard.

"No! I—"

Something in the bone stirred. It darkened slightly and a voice rang clear in the cell. "Lie!"

Hermanos closed his eyes as if in pain. "Yes, yes!" When I stepped closer to loom over him, he quickly added, "Not for sex, nothing like that, just—we took their blood before we handed them over!"

"Why did you take their blood?" I demanded, though something deep inside of me already knew the answer.

"It was part of the deal!" Hermanos said quickly. "He wanted the kids for Jesus, said the blood was a finder's fee! We used his driver, his truck, it was easy money for us!"

"Who?" My voice was a low growl. "Who wanted the blood?"

"Masters!" Hermanos cried, shrinking back from the wrath that must have been clear on my face. "Duncan Masters!"

With a roar I grabbed Hermanos by the throat and lifted him up, shoving him against the wall. "You lie!"

"No! No, I tell only the truth!" Hermanos yelled hoarsely. "The Bone, look at the Bone!" Frantically he waved the rib bone in my face. It had not stirred.

I stared at the silent Bone and felt as if the very foundations of my world were falling apart. Duncan had dismissed Raleigh's suspicions, but he'd never actually denied them. I'd believed Duncan, trusted every word that had fallen from his lips, and it had all been lies.



The world blurred in a haze of red.

Sometime later I found myself kneeling on a hard floor. The scent of blood filled my nostrils, the taste of it lingered on my tongue. My clothes were splattered with the dark red substance, my hands coated in it. Damp strands of hair hung across my face and it too was painted with blood.

Pushing my hair out of my eyes I looked around and realized that I was still in the cell I'd questioned Hermanos in. Blood was spattered across the walls and ceiling, pooled in thick puddles on the floor. Pieces of meat were scattered around the room, and it took a moment for my mind to accept the fact that those pieces were all that was left of Jose Hermanos.

"Are you back with us, my childe?"

Turning my head I was surprised to see Tristan standing in the hallway, safe on the other side of the bars. Mateo still stood by his side, though Lachlan was gone.

"Sire," I said softly. My throat was sore and my voice rough, as if I'd spent a long time screaming. I licked my lips and the thick taste of blood and meat nearly made me gag. I lifted the hem of my shirt and found a relatively clean spot to wipe the gore from my face, then got slowly to my feet. "My apologies, sire. I did not mean to—"

"Do not apologize for doing the task I set you to," Tristan replied. "Do you understand why I brought you here?"

I nodded and looked at the Bone lying in a pool of blood. Picking it up, I walked to the wall of bars and held it through one of the spaces between them. "Yes, sire. I would not have believed this evidence if I had learned it in any other way."

"Good." Tristan watched Mateo step forward to take the Bone from my hand and return to his side before adding, "I am sure you will not be surprised to hear that I have called a Blood Hunt on Duncan Masters."

Blood stained hands clenched as I bowed my head and closed my eyes. "Duncan endangered children and risked the Masquerade," I said in a low voice. "He concealed information about the subject of a Blood Hunt. He defied the prince. His blood must be spilled."

"He arranged the unauthorized embrace of Charisma Therin, the slayer," Tristan added his voice as hard as his dark eyes, "and ensured that the identity of her sire would not be known."

I looked up in surprise. Duncan had convinced me that the slayer was too dangerous to leave free in Tristan's city. He'd said that embracing the girl would allow us to keep her under control, and hiding the fact I had embraced her would protect me from any retribution from her friends. At the time I'd thought his words were wise, but now I saw the truth of how I had betrayed my prince, my sire.

"Yes, I know the truth of Joan's embrace," the prince continued gravely. "In this city, my will is the law, and no man is above my rule."

Taking a step back from the bars I fell to my knees and lowered my head in submission. It was the usual pose for the subject of a beheading. "My lord, my life is yours."

"There is one more crime that must be laid at Duncan Master's feet," Tristan said, his voice slightly warmer than before. "For many years, he has held a childe of my blood in thrall."

This time when I looked up at my sire I was sure my shock was plain on my face. "In thrall?"

"Yes, Sebastian, in thrall. We have suspected this for some time," Tristan said gently. "It was difficult to gather proof, and the only one I could have trusted to act without it was the man under suspicion."

Once again I lowered my head in shame. I had no memory of drinking Duncan's blood, but as most of what I consumed had come from his stores, it would have been easy for him to give me his own vitae. "Sire, I do not know if what you say is true, but even a Blood Bond can be no excuse for my deceit. I have failed you."

"You have failed yourself," Tristan corrected, "and, perhaps, your own servant. Despite the hold Masters has had over you, I have found little lacking in your service all these years."

"I am not worthy to carry your blood," I protested in a low voice filled with pain.

"It is I who will judge who might be worthy of my blood," Tristan stated coolly. "Nearly thirty years ago I asked for your service in exchange for my vitae. I have not released you from that service, Sebastian, nor will I do so now."

Slowly I raised my head, meeting Tristan's gaze with no little hesitation.

"I cannot let you walk free until the Blood Hunt has been fulfilled," the prince said sadly. "You will remain in seclusion until such time as I know your will is your own. In the mean time, you will be provided with cleaning supplies, and you will clean both this cell and yourself."

"Yes, sire," I replied quickly, knowing there was no other choice but to obey.

"When this mess is over, you will return to your duties, my son, and never again give me cause to doubt you, is that clear?"

I bowed my head once more. "Your will is my will, sire."

"Not yet," Tristan said regretfully, "but soon, my son, it will be."

## **Chapter 9: Raleigh – Seeking Prey**

*I hope God will be forgivin'*

*When I'm done*

*Christian Kane – How I'm Livin' Now*

IT DIDN'T TAKE us long to get from The Iron to the neighborhood we knew Masters was in. On the way, Kiran warned us that he'd likely change into what he called 'Crinos' form, and that while most supernatural creatures didn't automatically freak out when they saw it, most humans did. He said it was an instinctive thing, and one he couldn't control. I hoped the blood Sebastian gave me would protect me from the embarrassment of such a reaction.

We were nearly to the last location we had for Masters when the ghoulish watching him called me. To my disgust she had lost him. Of course, with three teams in the area looking for the bastard, there was every hope we could find him quickly.

"Keep an eye out for his Jeep," I told my companions before I dialed Dillan's number to let them know what had happened.

Although Kiran spotted one of the Hermanos vehicles down an alley, Masters' Jeep was harder to find. Not impossible, however, as we did eventually find it parked on a side street.

Kiran shifted to the slightly larger cat-like form I'd seen before. "I can track him," he growled as he opened the door to get out of the car.

"Don't forget we can't attack just yet," I reminded him. "Still haven't gotten the word yet."

"We'll follow for now," he agreed, moving into the shadows. "This way."

Ariel and I followed him for a couple of blocks before he stopped in front of a large house that had once been one of the more influential homes in the city. Now it was crumbling around the edges, like the rest of the neighborhood. A few lights illuminated the house from the inside, but we couldn't see anyone in the windows.

Kiran followed whatever trail he'd found for a couple of blocks before it led us to a rundown house. There were dim lights on inside the house, but we couldn't see anyone through the windows.

"Can we move yet?" Kiran asked, his voice low and rough in this form.

"They'll call when we can move," I told him. "We'll just watch, for now." I gave him a meaningful look. "Unless he tries to get away again."

Kiran nodded and moved toward the back of the house, Ariel trailing along behind, two shadows in the darkness. I slipped into the shadows between two trees and waited.

It felt like forever before I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I pulled it out and looked down at the screen.

"All is secure. Hunt has been called," it read.

Breathing a sigh of relief I sent a text to Kiran and Ariel's phones, letting them know it was a go. After exchanging a few additional texts we had a plan.

I moved toward the front door, taking care to stick to the shadows. The door was locked, but it only took a moment to pick it, and I slipped inside. Dim light spilled into the hallway and I could hear the sound of voices from an adjoining room.

"They'll destroy him as soon as they find him," Masters was saying, his voice deep and almost amused. "Of course, they'll have to find him first."

"You must be confident that you've hidden him well," a woman's voice replied.

I chanced a glance around the corner to see Duncan sitting in a chair by a fireplace drinking from a glass that held what looked like blood. Beside him sat a woman with short dark hair. I was at the wrong angle to see her face.

"I haven't hidden him, my dear," Masters told her. "Ramone left the city earlier this evening. I honestly have no idea where he's gone, though I suggested Europe. It is much easier for a man of his... proclivities to get what he... prefers."

"You don't expect me to believe that, do you?" she asked.

"Why not?" He took a sip from the glass. "It is, after all, the truth."

Down the hallway was another door that opened into the room Masters and his lady friend was in. In the light spilling from the room I saw Kiran and Ariel standing on either side of the doorway. I hoped he'd be able to keep her out of harm's way if things went badly here.

Then suddenly Kiran's form shifted from that of a cat-like man to something even more cat-like and much, much bigger. He was now so tall he had to stoop to stand in the hallway and bend over to look into the room. His ears were high on his head and pointed, and I could see the gleam of light reflecting on sharp teeth. He was covered in fur, spotted like that of a leopard.

A moment later he bounded into the room and grabbed Masters by the throat, claws digging into his flesh. The strength of the blow and the sharpness of his claws quickly cut through the flesh and bone, sending Masters' head rolling toward the fireplace before I could so much as move.

The woman began screaming even as blood arched up from the headless body. I stepped into the room and pointed my gun at her.

"Don't move, ma'am!" I barked. "Stay where you are!"

She didn't seem to hear me. She got to her feet, still screaming and staring at Kiran's huge form. She didn't stop until Kiran had shifted back to human.

"Shut up!" I yelled at her, moving around the couch to get closer to her.

Thankfully, she did.

Kiran stood before us, his body splattered in blood, his hands covered in it. Ariel stood not far behind him, her gun also pointed at the woman. Still sitting on the couch was Masters' decapitated body.

## **Chapter 10: Sebastian – Broken Bond**

*Lyin' in the middle*

*Of a bed of nails tonight*

*Christian Kane – Track 29*

I WAS RINSING the last of the blood from my hair when the hose fell from my grasp. Water spilled over the stone floor, rushing toward the wide drain near the back of the cell.

Earlier, one of Mateo's ghouls had run a hose through the bars of my cell so I could clean up the mess that I'd made. Thankfully, all of the cells in the Pens had a wide floor drain just for the purpose of removing the type of debris that came from ripping a body apart. The cell was clean now, and I was nearly so when I'd felt something... snap inside of me.

*"Señor Ritter?"*

I ignored the ghoul's urgent query and reached out to steady myself against the wall. Something had changed inside of me, something... a constriction of some sort had suddenly released its hold on me.

From down the hall I heard a woman scream, Joan's voice echoing on the stone walls. She sounded as if she had lost something vital, some integral part of her person, as if an arm or leg had been removed.

Clenching my jaw I swallowed my own scream. Despite the pain, I welcomed the loss that ripped through my mind. I felt decades of commands fall away, deeply ingrained programming that I'd never realized had existed.

*"Sebastian?"*

I tossed the dripping strands of hair from my face and turned to look at Tristan, who stood in the hall on the other side of the bars, Mateo's ghoul right behind him.

*"Are you well?"* my sire asked.

Laughter bubbled up in my throat and I barely managed to stop it from spilling past my lips. I turned and leaned against the wall, letting my head fall back and closing my eyes.

*"It is done, sire,"* I whispered hoarsely. *"Duncan Masters is dead."*

In the cell next to mine, Joan screamed again.

~\*~\*~\*~

Hours later I stood in the doorway to the audience chamber in the basement of The Iron. I could see Tristan and Mateo standing not far from the door talking to Raleigh. Despite the fact that Tristan had informed me of exactly what had happened to Duncan, I was surprised to see Kiran Michaels standing next to my ghoul. Zeke Mann, Hank Montgomery and Lachlan stood not far away from them, with Dillan at Lachlan's back. Serena was near the dais where two men stood over an unconscious woman I'd never seen before.

"You may let Mr. Johnson know that Ms Arden will be handled in a manner sufficient to appease all involved," Tristan was saying to Raleigh as I entered the room. "Although there is no way to find and release all the spirits she has bound, we will ensure that justice is done."

"I will inform him as soon as possible, sir," Raleigh replied.

Tristan looked past Raleigh's shoulder to see me standing in the doorway. "Ah, 'Bastian, my friend," he called.

My heart clenched at his warm tone. I didn't deserve his forgiveness, but one did not tell the prince not to forgive one's misdeeds. I wondered if the other Kindred gathered, all very influential in both the city, and the clan, knew of my crimes.

"Do not worry, my son," he continued, speaking in German, a language few in the city spoke. "No one here blames you for what has happened. Besides, your old friend has proven that he would protect you from the devil himself."

Raleigh seemed to tense, but I put my hand on his shoulder to reassure him. "I just hope my old friend will forgive me," I said in English. "I have much to atone for."

Raleigh reached up to grab my forearm, shaking his head. "There is nothing to forgive."

We embraced briefly, then I turned to Kiran. "I believe I have you to thank for resolving the situation."

He held out his hand to me. "It was nothin', Bossman. 'S just I don't like folks fuckin' round with my friends is all. I'd hope you'd do the same for me."

I clasped his hand and held it. "I would hope you wouldn't be that stupid, but seriously, I owe you."

Kiran pulled me closer and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "He never had a chance," he grinned. Releasing his hold in me, he reached for something at the small of his back. "I found this on him," he said, holding a large sheathed knife out toward me. "It's no ordinary blade."

Lifting it from his hands, I examined the sheath for a moment before pulling the blade free. I knew the knife well. "What's different about it?"

"There's a spirit locked in it. And it's eager." His voice dropped and he added, "For blood. For the knife to be used. It's very strange to me."

I looked at him in surprise. "Duncan's had this blade for months. He never said much about it, just that a friend gave it to him."

Tristan looked toward the woman lying at the foot of the dais. "It looks as though we know who that friend was, now."

"What will you do with it?" Kiran asked Tristan. "The spirit is content where it is, not like those that were in the basement."

"You are sure?" Tristan questioned.

"There were spirits in the basement?" I asked, looking at Raleigh.

"Apparently," he replied. "Kiran found them, but I had to call Glenn Johnson in to clear the area. He thinks the woman has been killing to bind spirits to objects down there for years." He looked at Tristan. "Johnson wanted me to convey his confidence that you will see she is punished correctly."

Tristan nodded to acknowledge the message, but didn't answer.

"So it's likely she killed someone to put the spirit in the blade," I said softly, looking down at the bared steel. "Perhaps the spirit would like to return the favor."

"What if it wasn't the woman who put it there?" Kiran asked.

"She was binding spirits to objects," Lachlan put in. "Do you know something that would lead you to believe she didn't bind the spirit in this knife?"

Kiran turned to Lachlan. "No, but I don't know of anythin' that says she did either. The woman was up to no good, we all know that, but she can't be the only one able to do this." He shrugged. "Seems like you'd wanna know you have the situation contained so's there ain't another one on the loose still."

"Perhaps we should delay the execution and question Ms. Arden to make certain," Mateo suggested softly.

Tristan nodded. "Yes, you are correct." He smiled at Kiran. "Thank you for pointing this out. You have proven to be a very valuable friend to our city tonight."

"I'm sure someone would have thought about it eventually," he told the prince, before turning back to me and Raleigh. "I should head upstairs if y'all don't need anythin' else. They're prolly short staffed up there anyway."

"Go home," I told him, resheathing the knife and tucking it into my belt. "You've done more than your share of work tonight, you deserve some time off."

With a grin, Kiran made his excuses and made his way upstairs and away from the machinations of Nashville's Kindred. It would be several hours before the rest of us could leave that room.

Lachlan used his Bone of Lies to question the woman lying at the foot of the altar. She was as reluctant to touch the Bone as Hermanos had been, but we were persuasive. After a few minutes of questioning it was clear that she was the only witch in the area selling object bound spirits.

She was able to tell us that the spirit bound in Duncan's knife was that of a serial killer. The man had murdered over thirty people in his rampage through the southern United States, and even after being bound to the knife, his spirit was eager to kill.

Tristan ordered her taken down to the Pens to ease Joan's hunger.

Duncan's ghouls were brought in then. Harleyanne was near inconsolable, her face streaked with tears as she struggled against Regina's iron grip. It took two Nosferatu to hold Beck. It would take days or weeks to complete the questioning needed to ensure we knew everything about Duncan's scheming, but we got a good start on it before Tristan finally ordered them removed to the lower levels of the Pens.

Like Ms. Arden, neither of Duncan's ghouls would leave the Pens alive.

Eventually Tristan called an end to our meeting, releasing everyone to return to their homes. Given Joan's distress at the loss of her Master and her anger over the news that Duncan and I had planned her embrace, she would spend several days in her cell before she was allowed to leave the Pens.

Raleigh followed me out the back door of the club and took the keys from my hand when I would have driven myself home. He drove to my house without a word, allowing me to brood in silence on all that had happened that night.

Another man might have left me at the door of the house and driven away, afraid of my wrath for killing Duncan or angry at my stupidity for letting myself become a slave. Raleigh unlocked the back door of the house for me and followed me inside.

"You look pretty wasted," he said as he walked into the darkened house. "I think a hot shower would do you good."

"I suppose," I agreed, following him through the kitchen. The cold water I'd used to wash in the Pens had done little more than rinse the blood from my skin.

He turned the hall light on as he passed through and I watched his back as he continued toward the bedroom. He seemed more stiff than usual, an awkwardness to his gait that told me he was not at ease in my company. After my behavior over the years, I could hardly expect him to be.

Once in the bathroom, he turned the water in shower on, letting it run to warm up. By the time he turned I'd slipped out of my shirt and let it fall to the floor. His eyes ran across the bared skin of my chest with a heat that surprised me.

I let the silence between us go unbroken as I stripped off the rest of my clothing and stepped into the shower. I could hear him moving around in the bathroom, but ignored him in favor of using soap and shampoo to clean the remains of Jose Hermanos from my skin.

When I stepped from the shower he was waiting, holding a towel ready for me. He kept his eyes averted as he waited for me to dry myself off and when I was done he handed me a pair of flannel sleep pants for me to slip into.

"You are quiet, Raleigh," I said in a soft voice. "I'd prefer you speak if you have something to say."

A frown crossed his face, but he wiped it away before it really registered. "What would you have me say?" he asked, his tone void of emotions.

I took a step closer to him. "I have never dictated your words," I told him.

His eyes darted to meet mine then moved back to the floor, reminding me without words that I had in fact demanded that he not speak of Duncan's crimes.

"Morgan," I said softly, "do you fear that I would punish you for what happened tonight?"

His back straightened but he still refused to look at me. "I fear nothing," he said in a firm voice. "Punish me or not, that is your choice, but know that I would have killed him myself, if I had gotten to him first."

I moved closer to him and was not surprised when he did not back away. "You should be rewarded, not punished, my friend," I told him. "Your courage and strength has ever drawn me to you, even when we were both mortal."

"That was a long time ago," he replied softly. "Much has changed between us."

"Yes," I said sadly. "I have failed you, my friend. I would have killed you, had he asked it of me."

He looked up at me then, and I did not try to hide the remorse and regret I felt burning in my heart. His expression softened, his stance relaxing just enough to tell me that he'd forgiven me.

"Let us not mourn for what didn't happen." He took my hand and laid it on his chest over his heart, pulling me closer to him. "My heart beats for you, Sebastian, life or death by your will alone."

I was humbled by his words. "I do not deserve you," I whispered against his lips before I captured them with my own.

His mouth parted, his tongue meeting mine as he pulled me closer. I pressed against him, feeling the long strong length of his body from chest to toe. Unlike the night before, it was clear from the hard length of his cock pressing against my own that he was pleased by the contact.

I tangled a hand in his hair and pulled his head back, baring his neck to my lips and teeth. I'd fed well tonight, but that blood had been sour upon my tongue. I wanted to taste Raleigh's blood, to feel it pounding through my veins even as our bodies became one.

"Please," he breathed, pressing his neck against my mouth.

Slowly I slid my teeth into his flesh, delighting in the taste of his blood. He moaned and swayed against me, his hand in my hair holding my head to his neck. I didn't need to take much from him so after a few moments I pulled my teeth free and ran my tongue across the wounds to seal them.

"I would have you in my bed," I whispered against his skin, "your body beneath mine, my own blood on your lips."

"Yes," he agreed breathlessly, eagerly.

And eager he was just minutes later, his pale body laid out beneath me on the dark sheets of my bed. He cried out when I entered him, his hips bucking to take me deeper. I bit at my wrist and held it to his mouth. His strong hand held my arm in place as he fastened his mouth on the wound and drank deeply while I thrust further into his body.

I knew it would take more than a hard fuck and an exchange of blood to bring our relationship back to what it had been before Duncan had stolen my will. I had others to thank for returning my mind to me, and much to atone for, but in the long moments when Raleigh and I were one, I knew that all would be well.