

Chapter 3

The Chophouse was easy to overlook. It didn't call attention to itself. It was huddled between two closed storefronts with a tiny front window next to an even smaller door. Its outside décor boasted an unlit sign and no parking. A pitiful string of white lights in the front window was the only thing that gave any indication there might be life within.

The door was nice, and it gave you some pause once you got up to it. The gleaming glass and metal sparkled with the light within. The tiny glass box of a Foyer didn't look like it would hold more than three people, and the guy sitting on the stool inside it looked like he accounted for at least two. You looked at the guy and all you saw was mass.

Eddie held open the door for Solomon and we wedged ourselves inside. The blisters that seemed to be forming on my feet came alive as we were swallowed by the slightly warmer air.

"Place is closed," said the guy, who looked like he had said the speech quite a few times tonight, "Private party."

Eddie extended the red, red business card over Solomon's left shoulder.

The guy took it with a flare of recognition. "Hey Eddie."

"Jim." Eddie said, drinking in the smoke.

Jim looked the card over. "What did Carl do?"

"We need to speak to Helena." Solomon said, in a low, strong voice that made a streak of fear run up my spine and seek shelter in my brain.

"You're Solomon." Jim said.

"I am."

Jim dropped the red, red business card into an inner pocket of his jacket. "She's in the private room, entertaining."

“Thank you.” Solomon said.

Jim turned to Eddie. “Bar’s open too.”

“Thanks man.”

Jim pulled the door out for us, and there was somehow room.

I looked up at the man, and he looked at me.

He smiled, large, and I could see fangs as thick as my fingers pointed down out of his mouth.

I pressed myself against Eddie’s back, trying us inside quickly as the guy chuckled behind me.

In an instant there was a lot of dark wood, white smoked glass and good jazz surrounding us. The booths surrounding us were deep and looked comfortable. The lighting surrounding us was bright, but did not neglect the dark cozy corners in the room. I felt surrounded by good taste, with no way out.

“Anything I need to know before I go in there?” Solomon asked.

“Yeah. It’s going to be stressful as hell. And we’re wasting a perfectly good open bar.” Eddie said.

I couldn’t help watching the dancers. They were crammed onto a tiny dance floor at the very back of the building, next to a private room. They swayed back and forth in clothes I couldn’t have even started to afford.

They all looked as young as me. They all looked like they were having a good time. Some of the girls were laughing into their date’s shoulders. I started to wonder how I started feeling so... old.

I turned around to say as much to Solomon, but they were gone. I could see them jockeying for a position at the bar.

I felt three cool fingers drum once against my exposed neck. I jumped and swung around. It was a girl, both short and skinny enough not to interest me. Unlike the dancers around her she was wearing an expensive dress that looked and smelled like it had come from a trunk. Her hair was cut into a bob with short, short bangs. She didn’t blink.

Unsure of what I should do, I half- grinned, and held up a hand to communicate hello over the music. Her eyes crinkled, and she did the same with a limp wrist. She had unnaturally compelling eyes. They could have been green.

She clasped her hands behind her back and strode forward. Startled, I moved back. And I kept moving back, figuring a wall or a post had to appear eventually. But I just kept walking backwards into the sea of cold bodies behind me.

“Solomon?” I yelled over the music.

Strangely enough, Eddie was the one who heard me. I saw him peeking around the corner, dirty martini in hand. He looked me and the girl over and raised his glass in appreciation.

Doors suddenly slid shut behind the girl, cutting me off from the rest of the restaurant. We were in a room that I hadn't seen before. The big glass doors made you feel like you were part of the restaurant. There was dark wood here too, and pale cream walls with modestly good art on it. The place reminded me of a dining room from one of the Godfather movies. It was an earthy place where unpleasant business took place. It smelled like a hospice room in a rest home... blood, age and unpleasant substances.

And we weren't alone.

Only a handful of people were not dressed completely in black. They all looked me over, suspiciously. There were some murmurs making their way around the room until a thin bald man with a metal cane came up to us.

He thumped the cane onto the ground twice. Thump. Thump.

The room went quiet.

Everyone was staring at us from the corners of the room. Watching, waiting to see... There was an undercurrent that came from being surrounded by... things. Creatures I was not supposed to know about. At least out front it had been a mixed vibe. There were some humans, it had almost felt safe.

The sound of my breathing became terribly loud.

“What's your name?” the girl asked. She had a strange accent that for some reason reminded me of Isabella Rossellini.

I swallowed. “I'm Tom. But I go by... Tom. Yeah.” I winced as I realized every word out of my mouth was one too many.

“Tom. You're new here aren't you Tom?”

“Oh no, I've lived here my entire life,” I told her. “Well not here, I mean I've never been here and it's real nice. But the area, I've lived in the area my entire life.”

She gave a polite little giggle. “You’re so new. I can smell it on you. You haven’t been what you are for very long.”

“Really?” I asked, feeling painfully stupid.

“I like new things Tom.”

She took my wrist in her tiny little hand. She had a grip that the bouncer out front would have envied.

“Oh. Um... that’s nice.”

“The old rarely ever do, you understand.” Her fingertips brushed against the bare skin of my wrist, raising an army of goose bumps, “Do you like me Tom?”

“Helena, we’ve warned you about playing too rough with other people’s toys.”

Someone had come up behind me. The new voice had been British once. But like Allen’s it was years removed from its native soil.

“He’s stronger than he looks, I think.” She calmly said as she let go of me.

“Yes, but let’s not damage any of Solomon’s property, no matter how tempting it may be.”

Helena shrugged delicately. The bald man thumped the cane again twice, and everyone went back to talking in their groups. Helena slid away from me.

Turning around, I saw the man face to face. His thin face suited the glasses he wore; they clung to the end of his nose dodging loose strands of dark-blond hair. He was one of the few people in the room not dressed in head-to-toe black. His well worn button down shirt was covered by a beige blazer with leather elbow pads. He was smiling without showing his teeth. For some reason I knew he was a vampire. Maybe it was the thin blue veins that lined his scalp, or his black eyes which hadn’t seen the sun in years. He looked like a nice guy, but... a vampire.

He saw my recognition and looked a little relieved.

“Forgive me, but I thought we’d have to spell it out for you.” He told me.

“No, I think you might have had to.” I admitted, “I’ve been told I’m not the sharpest knife on the shelf.”

“I see. I’m Nicholas.”

“Tom.”

“So I heard.”

“Oh.”

“How many others of your pack are here?” he asked.

“Two others besides me.”

The cane made itself known as the door slid open. Thump. Thump.

“Good. I’d be disappointed if you came here without supervision.”

“Depends on the supervision, don’t it?” Eddie asked, as he appeared with Solomon. I heard some groans in the gathered crowd behind us.

Solomon and Eddie broke apart. Solomon went over to Helena and her bald butler, Eddie came up to Nicholas and me.

The second Eddie and Nicholas were next to each other they were in the most masculine hug I’d seen. They hunched together and started talking in muted tones. I had seen Eddie respect Solomon, but it was a forced respect. A necessary one. To see Eddie willingly respect anyone was a strange thing.

The faces of those watching us suddenly varied from amusement to pity to clear interest. Helena was eyeing the proceedings with crinkled eyes, her head resting off to one side in her limp-wristed hand.

Eddie abruptly pulled me into their huddle, “...I thought I’d just let him handle it. You weren’t over your head, were you kid?”

“Huh?” I said.

“He was saying that the entire time she had her hands on him. He’s still new.”

“Doesn’t mean he can’t take care of himself,” Eddie pointed out, messing up my hair, “Thanks for stepping in. The boss would have my head if I got him killed on his first night out.”

“Once he’s stopped laughing.”

“Maybe.”

“It’s good to see you back on your feet, Ed.”

“Good to be back on ‘em.” Eddie told him, “Not having all the shit to deal with is sure as hell less distracting.”

“Everything’s been working out then?”

“Everything but finding work. But the economy’s bad. It’s hard all around, shouldn’t complain.”

“I’d still give an arm or leg to have you as my right again.” Nicholas said carefully, “But you know that already.”

“Hell, give me a few months and you might still have me back.” Eddie said, “I’d rather work the angles during clan disputes than 9 to 5. You know you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Nicholas was smiling like his face was going to break. “Well.”

There was a thump-thump of the cane on floor again, and Nicholas bowed out of our little circle and went to join Solomon and Helena.

Eddie’s eyes never left Nicholas and his mouth never stopped grinning. He even grinned into his next cigarette as he lit it.

“Can you smoke in here?” I asked.

“Probably not,” Eddie admitted.

“You guys are partners?”

“Hell if I know. Haven’t seen him since Solomon got me on the wagon. I haven’t even been to one of these things in almost two years.” Eddie turned and made nasty motions with his tongue at the people watching us. A group of female vampires made faces and started scowling the other way. “But it’s nice to see my reputation’s still the same.”

“How do you know him?”

“I worked as muscle for his clan for years. They paid well.”

I waited a moment, but that’s all he said.

“OK...So the other...” I suddenly felt self-conscious and dropped my voice down, “So the other vampires know that you have a truce?”

“Come again?”

“I thought we were at war...”

“Who?” Eddie asked.

“You know vampires... and werewolves... being enemies and all.”

Eddie looked concerned. “And just what shitty B-movie horror train wreck did you pull that little bit of info from?”

“Well... that movie last winter. You know with the special effects out of the Matrix, and that one British actress was dressed in head to toe leather and...”

“Oh yeah...” Eddie grinned, “I remember that. Well, I remember her, at least. She had one hell of a cute ass. Damn, the things I do to that bitch if I had half a chance...”

The image of Eddie doing anything to anyone made me nauseous, “You saw it?”

“Just the previews, but I remember the jist of it.”

“So, we’re... us and the vampires... we’re friends, then.” I tried.

Eddie looked like he was trying to work out what he was going to say when something loudly hit the floor.