



*Thomas's
Choice*

Scanguards Vampires

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Exclusive Preview

of

Thomas's Choice

(Scanguards Vampires #8)

by

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Thomas's Choice
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Book Description

Scanguards vampire and master of mind control Thomas has mentored newbie vampire Eddie for over a year—and been in love with him for just as long. But he believes that his love will never be reciprocated.

While patrolling San Francisco for evil vampires, Eddie kisses Thomas as a diversionary tactic and is shaken to the core by his reaction. He's terrified of his sexual attraction to his mentor and afraid that moving forward and giving into his desires will destroy the relationship they have.

When hurt and disappointment about Eddie's inability to commit leads Thomas onto a dark path that spells destruction for all those he loves, only Eddie can pull him back from the brink of eternal darkness. But does Eddie have the courage to face his true feelings in time to save the man who's meant for him?

1

Eddie tumbled into the studio apartment, the girl who'd introduced herself as Jessica in his arms. She'd come on to him in the nightclub he'd patrolled earlier. Behind him, the door slammed shut, helped by Jessica's hand. Her mouth was hot on his lips, kissing him passionately while her hands roamed his body, sliding under his T-shirt to caress his naked chest.

All the while, she pressed her curvy body against his, squeezing her generous breasts against him. The scent of her arousal filled the small room, which was furnished with a bed, a dresser, and a small table with two chairs. An open doorway led to a postage-stamp-sized kitchen and another door indicated that there was a bathroom, probably equally small as the kitchen. His sister, Nina, had lived in a similar place before she'd met her mate.

Jessica was pretty: long blond curls, plump lips, innocent-looking blue eyes. Anything a guy could wish for. On top of it, she was willing to put out. Major. No coercion was needed, no seduction necessary. In fact, she was more than eager and the one leading the charge, just as she now pulled her own T-shirt over her head and tossed it onto the nearby chair. For all he knew this was common practice for her: picking up a guy at a club and taking him home for no-holds-barred sex. Hey, he wasn't complaining!

Jessica took his hands, which had lain on her back, and made him cup her bra-covered breasts. Maybe *covered* was too strong a word—what she wore could barely be called a bra. It was a mere collection of specs of fabric, strings and an underwire to hold them together. Her nipples weren't even covered. Instead, her breasts were pushed up as if on a silver platter. Like a feast for him to indulge in.

He glanced down to where his hands squeezed the ample flesh in an almost mechanical fashion, as if he wasn't the one touching her. It felt as if he were watching a mediocre porn movie—explicit for sure, but barely tantalizing.

She threw her head back, closing her eyes. “Oh, yeah, baby!” she called out, placing her hands over his to make him squeeze harder.

He complied, if only because he thought it was what he should do, not because he felt like it. Maybe if he kissed her again, he'd get into it more. After all, he was out of practice. In fact, ever since he'd been turned into a vampire over a year ago, he'd not been with a woman. Funny that he noticed this only now. Well it didn't mean that he hadn't found sexual gratification; after all, what guy didn't masturbate in the shower after waking? Or before going to sleep? He was just like any guy, finding relief at his own hand whenever he needed it.

Eddie slipped his hand onto her nape and pulled her to him, pressing his lips onto her waiting mouth, and kissed her. His tongue swept in to explore her, yet the excitement that he expected to shoot through his veins didn't materialize. His heart beat as evenly as before—though at almost double the speed of a human heart. But that was normal for a vampire.

In an effort to get things going, he pulled on her bra and yanked it off her, allowing her boobs to spill from the inadequate cage. They didn't sag, which made him wonder whether they were real or not. Would a girl her age—and she couldn't be more than twenty-two—have silicone implants? Why would anybody put something so foreign into their body? He stared at them, still contemplating the question.

Jessica's hand on his crotch, running her fingers along the zipper of his cargo pants, jolted him from his thoughts and brought him back to the task at hand.

“Oh!” The disappointed sigh she let out when she squeezed him told him that something wasn’t working the way it should.

Again she rubbed her hand over him, but Eddie snatched it, stopping her from touching him further.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, her lips pouting.

Everything was wrong. He wasn’t hard. He should have a raging erection by now. Any twenty-five-year-old would under the same circumstances. When he’d been human, a passionate kiss had pumped enough blood into his cock so he could get down to business. And now, with a half-naked girl eager to please him, his dick hung there like an old ragdoll, limp and uninvolved. As if it were somebody else’s appendage.

Why the fuck wasn’t he getting hard? Why was his cock asleep? What the fuck was wrong with him?

He closed his eyes, trying to conjure up images that would make any man horny: naked women bent over furniture, women stripping, even women doing it with other women. Yet, his cock remained in its deathlike state, not a single blood cell rousing it.

Out of nowhere, memories from a few weeks earlier intruded again, memories he’d tried to push away each time they reared their ugly head. Only this time he couldn’t push them away any longer. He had to face them head-on.

Several weeks earlier

Eddie marched along the corridor, heading for the conference room on the executive floor of Scanguards’ Mission headquarters. Some major shit was going down, and he wasn’t going to miss out on the juicy action. He loved this job, the camaraderie with his fellow vampires, the

friendship with his mentor, and the admiration of his sister. Nina was finally proud of him, of everything he'd achieved after taking the gamble of becoming a vampire. Finally, everybody was happy: Nina was bonded to Amaury, a major player at Scanguards, and from what Eddie could see, he was going totally gaga over her. He'd never seen a man so in love with a woman. That fact had erased all of Eddie's doubts about whether a human-vampire relationship could work in the long run. Nina and Amaury made it look easy. They seemed made for each other.

As he walked along the hallway, his nostrils suddenly flared. Somewhere on this floor was a human. And that was a breach of security.

"Who else knows?"

Eddie recognized Blake's voice. Even though Blake was Quinn's grandson, and Quinn was a director at Scanguards, it still didn't explain why the human had been allowed onto this floor. It was his duty to check it out and get the situation under control.

"Thomas. But he isn't talking either. I already tried. Unfortunately he isn't gonna tell *you* either," Oliver responded, his voice coming from the alcove that housed a refrigerator and some shelves.

"But he might tell Eddie."

At the sound of his name, Eddie stopped in his tracks. What would Thomas tell him? What secrets were these two talking about? He couldn't help but remain where the two couldn't see him and listen in on their conversation. He knew it was bad form, but something was fishy, and he'd find out what it was.

"Eddie? My god, you're right. Why didn't I think of that? Thomas would tell Eddie anything. Everybody knows he's got the hots for him."

All air rushed out of Eddie's lungs. His vision blurred, and his heart stopped beating. He

couldn't move, couldn't react, though he must have made a sound, because Oliver suddenly took a step out from the alcove and snapped his head toward him.

“Oh shit!” Oliver cursed.

Blake let out a heavy breath, shooting him a shocked stare.

“Thomas . . . he . . .” Eddie shook his head.

No, this couldn't be true! Thomas couldn't be attracted to him. This couldn't be happening! His mentor of over a year, the man he shared a house with, wanted to jump his bones? Fuck no!

Of course, Eddie had always known that Thomas was gay. Hell, everybody knew. Nobody had ever made a secret of it. And everybody accepted Thomas as he was: a generous man with a big heart, a brilliant mind. Nobody ever treated him any differently from any of the others. Neither had Eddie. He'd instantly felt comfortable with him when he'd first met him and been told that Thomas would be his mentor and help him get to grips with being a new vampire.

“Listen, Eddie, forget what you heard,” Oliver tried to calm him.

The cords in his neck bulged. “How the fuck can I just forget that?” Nobody could take back words like that, words that shattered his cozy home life with Thomas. They'd lived alongside one another in Thomas's view mansion on Twin Peaks like the ideal roommates, sharing their love for motorcycles and tinkering with anything electronic.

“Believe me, Thomas is an honorable man. He'll never act on his feelings since he knows they're not reciprocated.”

He tossed Oliver a furious glare. “God, I wish I'd never found out.” Ignorance was bliss; he realized that now.

“I'm sorry.” Oliver put a hand on his shoulder.

The touch infuriated him even more, and he pushed him off. He didn't want to be touched,

not by any man! “Don’t touch me!”

Eddie turned on his heels and ran to the nearest exit.

He’d always looked up to Thomas, admired his intelligence, his street smarts, as well as his absolute loyalty to Scanguards. He’d never once questioned Thomas’s motives for taking him in, for rearranging his own life to show a new vampire the ropes. But all this was different now. Had Thomas accepted the assignment Samson, Scanguards’ owner, had handed him simply because even back then he’d wanted to get into his pants? Had his motives not been as altruistic as Eddie had assumed?

He couldn’t help but wonder about all the incidents when he’d seen Thomas only half-dressed. Had his mentor done it on purpose to entice him to switch camps? Had Thomas tried to seduce him, and he’d just been too thickheaded to see it?

Eddie remembered one incident all too well. He’d spent the day at Holly’s place—Ricky’s ex-girlfriend—because he’d been out too late and missed sunrise. When he’d returned home, Thomas had stood in the living room, clad only in a towel, talking to Gabriel, who’d needed help with guarding the woman who would later become his mate.

Thomas’s skin had glistened with water from his recent shower, and when he’d stretched his arms over his head in what seemed like a casual gesture, Eddie had admired the defined muscles of his stomach and torso. And it had stirred something in him, something he’d dismissed instantly. Had Thomas tried to tempt him even then? Had he purposefully shown off his magnificent body because he got off on being looked at?

What about the many times that he’d seen Thomas walk to the refrigerator, dressed in his boxers, his bathrobe open in the front? Had Thomas behaved like that because it was his home, or because he wanted Eddie to look at him?

What would he do now? How could he go on living with Thomas, knowing what he knew? Every time he looked at his mentor from now on, it would be with the knowledge that Thomas had the hots for him, that Thomas wanted to strip him naked, touch him, kiss him, and make love to him.

“There, see, I knew it would be working,” a female voice pulled him from his thoughts and brought him back to the present.

Eddie opened his eyes and stared down at Jessica. She’d opened his zipper and pulled out his cock—his fully erect cock—and was now wrapping her hand around him. He was as hard as an iron rod, but he knew it wasn’t right, because he hadn’t gotten hard for her. He’d gotten hard while thinking of Thomas. While thinking of a man.

Disgusted with himself, he gripped her hand and yanked it off him. “I can’t do this.”

“Of course you can,” she purred and rubbed her naked breasts against him, an action that left him entirely unaffected when he should have dropped his head and sucked those hard nipples into his mouth.

Why wasn’t he doing what she wanted him to do? Why wasn’t he fucking her? At least then he could prove to himself that there was nothing wrong with him, that he was still the same person he’d always been: a straight man who desired women.

Jessica slid her hands onto his ass, drawing him closer. “Come on, Eddie, I know you want it.”

Yes, he wanted it, but not with her. He was as horny as he’d ever been, but he knew instinctively that his dick would wilt like a dried up flower if he tried to have sex with Jessica. And he wasn’t going to add that kind of humiliation to his already-battered psyche.

No, he had to push all this away, pretend none of this had ever happened and go on as usual. He'd done so the last few weeks, he could continue the same way—by avoiding being alone with Thomas as much as he could, and by trying to forget what he'd overheard.

Maybe Oliver and Blake were wrong after all. Maybe they were only imagining things. What did they know about Thomas anyway? They weren't the ones living with him. They weren't spending any time outside of work with him. And even at work, they barely saw him, since Thomas rarely did any fieldwork and was working on IT projects most of the time, while Oliver and Blake were out patrolling or protecting clients.

Eddie stared into Jessica's eyes. "Listen carefully," he started, then sent his thoughts into her mind, erasing every memory she had of him.

If they met again, she would never know what had happened between them. Nobody would ever know that he hadn't been able to perform—nobody but himself. And he could always lie to himself and pretend everything was all right.

2

Thomas clicked the remote for the garage door from fifty yards away and saw the gate rise. Only slightly slowing his motorcycle, he drove inside, killing the engine as he came to a stop in his oversized garage that housed not only several motorcycles but also a large blackout SUV. He rarely used it, preferring to ride his bikes instead. Feeling the engine of his motorcycle hum between his legs and the wind blow through his short blond hair gave him a sense of freedom, a sense of a life without constraints. Even if it was all an illusion, because he was neither free, nor living without constraints.

He was content with what he had achieved—not happy, but then who was ever truly happy with their circumstances? He shook his head at his thoughts and dismounted from his Ducati. He'd spent most of the night in his office in Scanguards' headquarters in the Mission district and barely talked to anybody all night. Now he looked forward to a cold bottle of blood and to exchanging a few words with Eddie before he turned in and went to sleep.

His conversations with Eddie were something he looked forward to every time he came home. But at home wasn't the only place where he saw Eddie. Since he was still mentoring him, he often took him on training assignments. On other occasions they were paired up as a team and sent out on assignments together to apply what Eddie had learned. Thomas lived for those assignments.

Pride filled him every time Eddie showed that he was a quick study. It warmed his heart to see him grow into his own and become an outstanding bodyguard with a quick mind and a steady hand. But it wasn't only his heart that was affected; his cock was just as involved. Just looking at the young vampire with the deep dimples in his cheeks when he smiled, made him hard in an instant. And Eddie smiled often. He was a happy-go-lucky kind of guy, laid back, and relaxed.

For over a year now, he'd tried to suppress his feelings, to no avail. He was irrevocably and hopelessly in love with Eddie. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Thomas climbed the stairs to the main floor of the house, leaving the garage and his priceless bikes, many of them restored antiques, behind. When he entered the great room which combined an open-plan kitchen with the large living room, he found it empty. He listened, but there was no sound in the home. Eddie had not returned from work yet.

Disappointed, he glanced at the clock over the mantle of the fireplace. In less than an hour, the sun would rise and the floor-to-ceiling windows that dominated one entire wall of the great room would display the waking city at his feet. Right now the San Francisco skyline twinkled in the dark. Only, the windows weren't real: they were monitors that played live videos from the cameras that were mounted around the perimeter of his house. A beautiful and realistic illusion, and the only way he could look outside during daytime without any UV light penetrating his home and burning him to a crisp.

Nevertheless, it was an illusion, one that helped him pretend he lived a normal life, when nothing in his life was normal. He was a vampire. He was gay. And he loved a man he had no right to desire. And underneath it all, his dark power slumbered, threatening to awake at any moment unless he kept the beast in check, a task that grew harder each year, almost as if he were a sleeping volcano, and the power in him the magma that was building up until the pressure became too strong and had to burst to the surface.

Thomas opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of blood. Slowly, he popped the cap off and set the bottle to his lips, drinking the cold liquid and allowing it to coat his dry throat. He closed his eyes, letting his heart conjure up images that made his pulse race and his cock swell. His fangs lengthened involuntarily as the pictures intensified and blurred into just one image:

Eddie lying underneath him, his head tilted to the side, offering his vein for a bite. And farther below, two cocks throbbed in concert, rubbing against each other in anticipation of what would happen next.

He shook the thought off—it would never happen, and he'd be better off if he stopped fantasizing about it. It only made the craving worse. Frustration howled through him.

Thomas gulped down the rest of the blood and tossed the bottle in the recycle bin where it clanged against the other empty bottles, reminding him that he had to dispose of them soon. Then he walked to the large leather sectional and plopped down on it, snatching the remote off the coffee table. He pointed it toward the flat screen TV and turned it on when he perceived something white in his peripheral vision. His head snapped toward the entrance door, the one he rarely used since he almost always entered his house through the garage.

His vampire vision zeroed in on the object that stuck out from underneath the door: a white envelope lay on the dark wooden floor.

He rose in one fluid motion and approached. At the door he sniffed, but whoever had pushed the envelope underneath the door was long gone. No residual scent remained. Thomas bent down and picked up the envelope, examining it from every angle. It was not addressed.

Curious, he tore it open and pulled out a single sheet of paper. Only a few words were written in a neat, but old fashioned handwriting: *You can't hide forever. One day you'll have to admit who you are.*

The letter wasn't signed.

The paper fell from his trembling hands. They'd finally found him. How, he didn't know. He'd changed his last name, his identity, even moved to another country, careful not to leave any trails. But even he couldn't hide forever. He'd always known it would happen one day. But it

was too soon. He wasn't prepared to face the truth yet. The truth of what he was, what he would always be no matter how long and hard he fought it.

He sank to his knees and dropped his head into his palms. How long did he have until they came for him? And when they did, would he then succumb to them and the dark power inside him? Or did he have enough strength left to fight them?

London, England, Spring 1895

Thomas sat in the gallery of Old Bailey, the criminal courts of London, carefully watching the proceedings taking place below him. He'd been coming almost every day to attend the trial, not out of morbid curiosity like most of the other spectators, but because he had a stake in its outcome. Even though he didn't know the accused, Oscar Wilde, personally, his plight mattered to Thomas.

Oscar Wilde, the famous playwright was a homosexual and accused of gross indecencies, and whatever happened to a man of his celebrity would have a lasting impact on the homosexual society of London. A society Thomas belonged to, whether he wanted to or not.

He'd always known he was different, but during his first year at Oxford, it had been confirmed: he loved men, not women. He'd tried to deny it at first, but no matter with which lies he'd tried to trick himself, he'd failed. He was what he was: a homosexual. A queer, a faggot, a fairy. Not a real man, but one who degraded himself and other men by performing acts of buggery.

Yet, it wasn't something he could turn off at will. His experiences with a young man at Oxford had opened his eyes to the joys of physical love and shown him the pleasures of the

flesh. And once he'd tasted that forbidden fruit, there was no way back, no way to deny what he wanted: the love of a man, no matter how forbidden it was.

He hid it as best he could, never dressing as flamboyantly as other queers did, always participating in the most masculine of sports and entertainment to compensate for his *affliction*. He even courted women of the ton, the aristocratic circles of England, and had turned into one of the most eligible bachelors not only because of his breeding and standing in society, but also because of his wit and charm, which he had no qualms about unleashing on any innocent debutante. They were swooning for him. If only they knew that their coquettish smiles, blushing cheeks, and rapidly waving fans left him as cold as a morning bath in an ice-crusting creek in the winter.

Underneath all the deception, he found time to meet other men of his penchant and give his carnal desires free rein. It was during those hours that he felt most at peace with himself. And most conflicted at the same time. Feelings of guilt and shame were never far away; yet whenever he made love to a man, he knew he couldn't deny who he was. He had no choice but to continue.

"May the defendant rise," a voice came from the courtroom below.

Thomas leaned forward, eager to hear the court's decision. Like him, others were doing the same, waiting with bated breath for the judge's ruling. It came down like a hammer on an anvil, just as loud and as crushing. Wilde hadn't been prosecuted for sodomy, but it might as well have been the case.

"Oscar Wilde, you've been found guilty of twenty-five counts of gross indecencies and conspiracy to commit gross indecencies."

An outcry ran through the crowd. Voices from below and from the gallery echoed against the walls of the courtroom, amplifying the sounds. Despite the judge's demands for order in the courtroom, the chatter didn't cease.

"Shame!" a young man next to Thomas called out, but behind him others voiced their approval of the verdict.

"Serves the bugger right!" a man proclaimed and shoved the young man to the side. "You're one of them too, aren't you?"

Thomas tried to rise and felt the young man bump into him. When he grabbed the man's shoulders to steady himself, frightened eyes looked up at him. For a moment, Thomas didn't move. This was what would happen to all of them: people would call them out for being homosexuals. Both he and the young man looking at him knew it.

"Yes, both of you!" the man behind them continued his tirade.

To Thomas's shock, others next to him joined in, pointing their fingers at him and the man, whose shoulders he was still clutching. Their eyes were filled with disgust, their mouths pulled up in sneers.

Thomas let go of the other man's shoulders and pushed him back. But it was too late. They'd all seen the flash of compassion that he'd felt for the young queer who'd expressed his opinion about the verdict. They'd all seen that Thomas felt the same. Because he was the same. He was no better than Oscar Wilde or the countless others who somewhere engaged in sodomy every night. The only difference was that he'd been more careful about his assignations, and hidden away his true nature from society better than others.

Thomas ran for the exit, desperate to escape the crowd's scrutiny. Had anybody recognized him? He glanced around, looking at the unfamiliar faces that he ran past. No, nobody from the

ton would have been in the courtroom. They found such events distasteful. It was his only consolation.

As he rushed outside, shouts followed him on his heels. He couldn't block them out.

“Faggot!”

“Poof!”

His lungs burned from exertion as he hurried down the broad staircase and crossed the foyer of the courthouse. He sprinted past the marble columns that flanked the entrance, and exited. Night had already fallen, and he was grateful for it. He would be able to disappear in the crowd that hung around the steps in front of the building, waiting for news of the verdict.

He kept his head down, not wanting to draw any further attention to himself. Unfamiliar faces passed him, and voices drifted past his ears. But he kept walking without engaging in any conversation, without breaking his stride. He pretended to be unconcerned about the goings-on around him. Even though he wasn't. The verdict had changed everything. From now on, homosexuals like him would be treated with less tolerance than before. People wouldn't look the other way anymore if they suspected a man of having an intimate relationship with another man. From now on he had to be even more careful or he would end up like Wilde—in prison.

“Wait up!” somebody called behind him, but Thomas kept walking without turning around.

Just a few more steps and he'd be able to cross Fleet Street and disappear into one of the many dark alleys in London. Then he could hire a hackney and get back to his rooms at St. James's Park. And nobody would be the wiser and know what had happened today.

“Young man!” a strangely insistent voice followed him.

He felt compelled to turn his head, but couldn't distinguish who had spoken. Nobody looked at him directly. Shaking his head in confusion, he turned back and bumped into somebody.

Strong hands gripped his shoulders. Thomas's gaze whipped to the person who'd stopped him. Panic surged and made itself known in form of a gasp. Penetrating brown eyes looked at him. The clean-shaven face of a man took on more definition as he pulled his head back by a fraction.

"There, there," the well-dressed stranger said in a surprisingly soothing voice, a voice that seeped into Thomas's body like rich wine or the comforting smell of a pipe.

The tension in his body eased as the stranger's hands smoothed over Thomas's shoulders, almost stroking him as if he were trying to massage the anxiety from his body. A pleasant tingling ran down his arms, spreading warmth in his body despite the cool spring evening.

"No need to be afraid of the mob back there," the man continued, tossing a look over Thomas's shoulder.

All the while, his hands caressed him, and Thomas allowed it even though he should push him away. They were in public, even though the stranger now drew him into the entrance of a shop that had long closed. They stood in the shadows; still any passerby would be able to see them if he looked more closely. Yet Thomas didn't have the strength to resist the man's touch. Nor the press of his thighs as he now moved closer.

"So pretty," he cooed, his eyes perusing Thomas's face and body. "It would be a shame if they locked you up for what you are."

Thomas's breath hitched. Was this man taunting him? Was he a Charley? A policeman disguised as a gentleman so he could ferret out the queers in the society? Had the witch hunt already started?

Thomas straightened, making an attempt to push off the man's hands. "Sir, I must ask you to let go of me. You have me mistaken."

The man's face came closer, his eyes drawing him in. "No mistake." His lips parted and the scent of pure masculinity blew against Thomas's face, making his legs weak.

His gut clenched, and farther south, his cock twitched in anticipation. The stranger confirmed with a knowing smile that he was fully aware of Thomas's growing arousal.

"Yes, no mistake at all." One hand separated from his shoulder and, painstakingly slowly, slid down Thomas's torso.

He knew only too well where the stranger's hand was heading, but he couldn't stop him. No, not *couldn't*: didn't want to. For some perverse reason, Thomas craved his touch. He needed to affirm what he was, a man who loved men, and that it felt good, no matter what the mob in front of the courthouse thought.

When a hot palm slid over his now fully erect cock, Thomas groaned and pressed into it. "Christ!"

The man chuckled softly. "Not my name, but I'll take it any day." Then he squeezed harder.

Thomas's heart raced, his chest labored to bring much needed air to his body, and his hands clutched the lapels of the stranger's coat, pulling him closer. With every stroke, he panted more uncontrollably. And with every second his control slipped further.

"But I haven't even started yet."

As if to prove his words, the stranger unbuttoned the flap of Thomas's trousers, pushed aside his undergarments, and took his shaft into his hand. The firm grip, the contact of flesh on flesh, nearly undid him. His head fell against the wall behind him. He closed his eyes and surrendered to the alluring touch, knowing that fighting his own desire was impossible now.

Tender words drifted to his ears, giving him the illusion of floating. He'd never felt anything like it, not even during his most powerful orgasms. But the way this stranger stroked his cock

and whispered sweet words into his ear while he kissed Thomas's neck, made him toss caution to the wind.

Forgotten was the fact that anybody passing by could see them engage in this indecent act, an act that could get them both thrown in jail. Forgotten was the fact that he didn't even know the man's name. Nothing mattered. Nothing but the immediate pleasure that this man was promising without asking anything in return.

"More," Thomas begged. "Harder!"

His companion complied without protest, stroking him more firmly, squeezing him harder and faster, bringing him ever closer to completion.

"Yes, yes, that's it."

Lips licked at the crook of his neck, teeth scraped gently against Thomas's heated skin. From somewhere a voice penetrated.

"Yes, come, my young friend. Spend for me. Surrender."

Surrender. Yes, it was all he wanted. Surrender to the touch of this man, give himself up to the pleasure, bathe in the lust of the moment. Without thinking, without regrets. Simply feel.

His balls tightened, and his cock jerked. Then he felt the rush of his semen as it traveled through his shaft as if shot from a pistol. Waves of pleasure washed over him and lifted him up as if he were floating. At the same time, a stinging pain shot through his neck. It was fleeting—too fleeting for it to be real. He had to be hallucinating, because the pleasure this stranger was giving him was making him drunk—drunk on lust, on desire, on sex. Drunk on the sensation of this man's lips locking on his neck, kissing him in a way that felt surreal.

As if the kiss were a bite.

3

Thomas opened his eyes and looked around. Startled, he sat up on a divan. He wasn't in the alley anymore. Instead he found himself in an opulently furnished salon. And he wasn't alone. Far from it.

He tried to take in what he saw, but his mind took a few seconds to process the scene in front of his eyes. There were close to a dozen people in the room—partially dressed people, mostly men, but there were several women among them too. If he were prudish, he would have found the entire scenario scandalous, but he couldn't quite conjure up such a feeling. Instead, he looked around with interest. A man had his trousers pushed down to his knees, his bare ass exposed as he was gripping the hips of another man, thrusting back and forth. Thomas didn't have to get any closer to realize that he was bugging the other man.

Nobody seemed to take any notice of the two, clearly too busy performing similar carnal acts. Thomas's gaze was drawn to a young man who lay on several pillows strewn on the floor in front of the fireplace. His shirt was open and an older man kissed his chest and tweaked his nipples while he rubbed his loins against the younger man. As Thomas continued watching, he felt his own cock rise at the erotic sight. He grew even harder when he saw the young man opening his trousers and pushing them down over his hips, letting his hard prick jut out. The man above him groaned and dropped his head to the man's cock, sucking it into his mouth.

Involuntarily, Thomas's hand went to the bulge that had formed under his trousers.

“Ah, you're awake.”

At the sound of the voice, Thomas's head snapped to the side. It only took him a split second to find the man who'd obviously brought him here: the stranger who'd stroked his cock with such skill that Thomas must have fainted when he'd climaxed.

With wide eyes, Thomas stared at him. He sat in a large armchair, his shirt open, exposing his strong chest and dark hair, his trousers missing. Between his legs a half-naked woman kneeled, her head bobbing up and down in his lap, sucking him.

He laid his hand on the back of her head, pulling her up by her hair, then issued his command from between clenched teeth. “Do it like you mean it!” Then his gaze swept back to Thomas, and his hand waved him to approach.

Mesmerized, Thomas got up and crossed to join him.

“I’m Kasper,” the man introduced himself.

“Thomas.” He stared down at the woman. Why had he assumed that Kasper was queer like him? Clearly, the man liked women.

Maybe his facial expression had given him away, because Kasper chuckled. “Oh that?” He pointed to the woman who was working him hard. “I don’t discriminate, nor do I judge. Whatever gives me pleasure.” He paused and dropped his gaze to Thomas’s crotch. “Earlier, you gave me pleasure, my young friend. I may call you friend, may I not?”

Thomas nodded automatically.

“And it also gives me pleasure to watch others.” He waved his hand to indicate the other couples who were engaging in similar acts. Men cavorting with men, even two women touching each other, sliding their naked bodies against each other.

“Who are you?” Thomas asked. “And where are we?” He’d never been to a place like this, where people behaved without inhibitions, without fear of being detected. It seemed like an oasis. Like paradise.

“Safe,” Kasper said. “Nobody will find us here. We can do as we please. Act out our wildest fantasies. Isn’t that what you want? What you’ve always dreamed of?”

Kasper's penetrating gaze captured him. Thomas felt imprisoned by his eyes, as if they were shackles that chained him to a fence from which he was forced to watch what was going on around him.

Suspicion coursed through him. "How would you know?"

"I can see it in your eyes. Everybody can see it, if only they bothered to look. I've been watching you for a few days now. There's something about you that fascinates me. So much passion, so much pain buried inside you, wanting to burst to the surface. Just like it did earlier tonight."

Kasper groaned and shoved his cock deeper into the woman's mouth. "When I had you in my hand I could sense your need. So pure, so unspoiled." He tossed a glance around the room. "Not like the men here. They lost that innocence long ago. But you still have it. It's very endearing." He pushed his hips upwards, thrusting harder. "And more than just a little arousing. What man wouldn't want to taste that?"

His suggestive look sent a bolt of desire through Thomas's body. His initial suspicion faded. He had to admit that he was flattered. As well as turned on, not just by his surroundings, but also by Kasper's words. To be desired by a man with his obvious power and standing was exciting. He licked his lips, eager for a taste of what this man promised.

"There's a lot I can give you, if only you want it," Kasper offered and lowered his gaze to his own crotch. "I can give you some of it right now." There was no doubt as to what he meant by that.

And hell, if Thomas didn't want exactly that. Without hesitation he put his hand on the woman's shoulder and pulled her back. "Take a break. I'll take care of this."

Kasper smiled at him as the woman scrambled away and Thomas took her place.

“I’m not going to suck you like a woman. It will be much better than that,” Thomas promised, running his hands from Kasper’s knees up to the apex of his thighs, where a magnificent cock stood erect, glistening with moisture. It twitched as if acknowledging the words.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that.”

Thomas bent over Kasper’s groin and licked over the head of his erection. A shudder went through his companion, and he smiled to himself. He would reduce this man to putty in his hands. A sensation akin to power jolted through him. It was new to him; yet he liked the feeling of knowing he could bring this man to his knees. It was a challenge he wouldn’t shirk.

“But while I do this, you’ll do something for me. You’ll tell me about yourself. And with every bit of information you give me, I’ll suck you harder.” Thomas placed his lips around the head of Kasper’s shaft and slid down on him, taking him in to the root.

Kasper trembled underneath him, before Thomas withdrew. “Start now,” he demanded and cupped his balls, stroking a fingernail against the tight sac, feeling a thrill go through him as Kasper shuddered and a drop of moisture spilled from his cock.

Kasper panted heavily. “I’m a leader of a group of men who have certain . . . leanings.”

Thomas sank his mouth back onto the engorged flesh and closed his lips around it, sucking him deep inside.

Kasper groaned and thrust his hips upwards. “We have our hideouts, safe places where we meet. Where we indulge in our fantasies.”

Thomas wrapped his hand around the base and sucked again, letting Kasper’s erection slide out of his mouth, only to capture it again a split second later, increasing his rhythm. He squeezed his hand around him while his other hand gently played with his balls. He had yet to meet a man

who could resist his intimate touch, a touch he knew was more tantalizing than that of a woman. Because he knew better than any woman what a man wanted.

“Nobody can touch us. We’re strong. They’ll never get us.” Kasper panted heavily, his hips working frantically to increase the friction, pumping harder and faster in and out of Thomas’s mouth. “Oh, fuck, you’re good!”

Thomas’s chest swelled with pride. This was what he lived for: to seek pleasure and to return it.

“And one day, we won’t have to hide anymore. One day, they’ll accept us.”

Thomas heard the words and wanted to believe them, but he couldn’t. Nobody would ever accept deviants like him. He would always have to hide. But at least if the hiding place was like this, a private den of iniquity, where sin was always on the menu and wickedness was expected, he could live with it.

Giving himself over to his task, he licked and sucked until Kasper finally surrendered and shuddered. It took long seconds before he stilled completely, his head falling back against the armchair, his body almost collapsing.

Thomas raised his head and looked at him. What he saw made him fall backwards onto his ass, trying to scurry away in horror. But he got no chance. As he fell flat onto his back, Kasper jumped onto him, legs spread-eagle, straddling him. Iron-hard hands encircled Thomas’s wrists, pinning them to the floor next to his head.

Kasper flashed brilliant white fangs at him, snarling like a beast. “Now, my dear, you’ll listen to me. Your little attempt at trying to control me was all good and fine, but make no mistake: I allowed you to control me for my own pleasure. Because sometimes, we all like to be dominated.

Sometimes we enjoy being controlled and played with. But I decide when and where and how. Do you understand that?"

Numbly, Thomas nodded, unable to speak, because all air had rushed out of his lungs. What was Kasper? What kind of creature was this man? No, he wasn't a man. He couldn't be a man. He was a beast.

"I find you interesting." He rocked his still semi-erect cock against Thomas's groin. "And utterly sexy. But I don't let myself be controlled by my baser instincts. I'm the master. I decide what happens, when it happens, and how it happens. And it just happens I've decided to make you my companion." He let a smile quirk around his lips. "And not just because you suck cock so masterfully."

Thomas shivered involuntarily. Despite the fear he felt when he looked at the sharp teeth that were protruding from Kasper's mouth, the thought that this powerful man wanted him thrilled him. He was mature enough to admit it to himself: being controlled by another man excited him. It turned him on and made him hard.

Kasper ground against him again, and Thomas felt his cock swell as a result of it. He closed his eyes, swallowing the shame of it. Because he should be ashamed of what he wanted: to be dominated by this man.

"You know it, don't you? How much pleasure can be had from pain, from shame, even from fear. That's why you're so perfect. So perfect for what I need." Kasper released one wrist and stroked his knuckles along Thomas's neck, sending shivers racing down his skin.

The vein at his neck began to throb.

"Oh, yes, you know what I am, don't you?"

Thomas shook his head, trying to deny what his mind had already figured out. It wasn't possible. Creatures like him didn't exist. Not in real life, not in London, not anywhere in England.

"Say it, lover, say what I am." A long finger trailed along Thomas's pulsating vein.

"Vampire."

When the word was out, Thomas released a breath and felt the pressure on his chest ease. Kasper lifted himself off and pulled him up to a sitting position, cupping his nape with one hand.

"See? It wasn't that hard, was it?" He pressed a brief kiss on Thomas's lips. Then he placed his hand over Thomas's hard-on. "Even though other things are hard again."

Startled, Thomas pulled back, but didn't get far, Kasper's hand on his nape holding him close. "You're not going anywhere, don't you understand that? Everything you'll ever need is here. With me. I can protect you." He pointed toward one of the windows which was hung with heavy velvet curtains. "Out there, a man like you will always be in danger. But I can help you. And together we'll wait for the time when there will be no more prosecution of our kind. We have time on our side."

Instinctively, Thomas knew what Kasper was proposing.

"I can give you eternal life. Don't you want to live in a time when queers like us will be accepted? When nobody will give a toss about who we fuck? When kissing a man in public won't land you in prison?"

Thomas finally found his voice again. "You don't know that such a time will ever come! They'll always look at us with disgust!"

Kasper shook his head, smiling. "How wrong you are, my friend. My sweet Thomas. If only you could believe that the future will be bright."

“How can I when all I see is pain? When I have to hide from everybody who I am? When even my sisters would recoil from me if they found out?”

Kasper caressed Thomas’s neck. The touch soothed him more than he liked to admit. Maybe his lover really could help him. If only to forget his troubles.

“All I ask for is a little trust. And patience. Our time will come. We will rise together. And in the meantime, we’ll wring every last drop of pleasure from each other.”

“Why me?” Thomas searched his lover’s eyes for an answer.

“Because you have potential. You’ll be strong. As strong as I am. And powerful. Together we can rule. But you’ll have to become like me.”

Thomas stared into Kasper’s eyes, their darkness pulling him in as if he were being hypnotized. “You mean become a vampire?”

“Yes, I will drain you of your blood and give you mine. You’ll be part of me. Strong, powerful, invincible. All you have to do is say ‘yes.’”

Unable to tear his gaze away from Kasper’s eyes, Thomas moved his head closer, his lips now hovering only an inch over his lover’s. “Do you truly believe there’ll come a time when we can be free to express our feelings without fear of punishment?”

“Yes. Soon that time will come.”

“Yes.” With a breath, he sank his lips onto Kasper’s and kissed him, wrapping his arms around him and dropping back onto the floor with Kasper on top of him. “Do it while you make love to me so I won’t see it coming.”

“Whatever you wish, my sweet lover.”

4

Today

Thomas pulled his motorcycle into the spot in front of Al's Motorcycle Parts and killed the engine. The one good thing about having to go shopping at night was that he almost always found a parking spot close by. The area south of Market Street was pretty much deserted by this time of night, and only clubbers were out now, most of whom didn't bother driving but instead took taxis to the clubs in the area or walked.

Al's was always open late. In fact, the shop only opened its door at sundown, even though Al could have easily opened during daylight hours. After all, the shop was windowless, and he would be safe in there even at daytime. But like many vampires, Al kept to the hours of his own species, shunning daylight.

He'd been coming to Al's shop for many years now, just about every time he needed to find a rare part for one of his motorcycles. Only recently, he'd completed the restoration of a WWII BMW, and Al had been a great help in sourcing some of the parts that Thomas had needed to replace. There was no place like Al's if he wanted to get authentic parts for his antique bikes. Where the guy found the genuine parts, Thomas didn't know, and Al had certainly never divulged his sources. It didn't matter. Thomas was prepared to pay a premium just so he could continue with his hobby.

Thomas pushed open the door to the large building and entered, accompanied by the sound of the chime above the door. The interior was well-lit, the endless shelves well-stocked, and the smells familiar: oil, solvents, and paints. He lifted his gaze to the counter, expecting the usual greeting from Al, but was instead hit with a wall of silence.

The man behind the checkout counter that was covered with faded linoleum wasn't Al, nor was he one of Al's employees. He was a vampire, all right, but Thomas had never met him. Had Al hired somebody new? It wasn't like him. Al didn't like change and hadn't taken on a new employee in years. Most of the time he worked by himself.

The vampire nodded at him. "Help you?" he asked brusquely.

Thomas crossed the distance between him and the counter, letting nothing in his gait betray the fact that he was curious. "Yeah. Al around?"

The vampire shook his head. "No."

"Will he be back soon?"

"No."

At the second monosyllabic answer, Thomas ground his teeth and had to relax his jaw so he wouldn't sound hostile. "When then?"

"Won't be back."

"Why?"

"Sold the place."

The news surprised him. Al had never mentioned that he had any intention of selling the shop. Selling meant changing, and there wasn't anything Al hated more than change, except for a stake in the heart and the rising sun on his heels.

Thomas perused the other vampire more closely now. There was nothing extraordinary about him. He neither looked very powerful, nor very bright. In fact, his speech pattern and posture made him look rather like a slow-witted cousin from the backwoods. Vampire trash if anybody asked him. The kind of man who'd never amount to anything.

"Sold when?"

He shrugged. "Last week."

"To whom?"

The vampire puffed his chest out. "To me."

Thomas kept his tongue in check so the next words didn't spill over his lips. There was no way in hell Al had sold out to the guy behind the counter. Something was fishy. But he was smart enough to know that any further questioning would only increase the guy's hostility. Maybe once he'd done some business with him, he could find out more.

"Well, in that case, I'd better deal with you." He pulled a piece of paper from his leather jacket and unfolded it, spreading the photocopy of an old magazine he'd found in front of the man. He pointed his finger at a spot on the drawing. "I need this part here for the front master cylinder. It's a 1956 model. Manufactured in Germany."

The vampire only glanced at the piece of paper then motioned to the aisles. "If we have it, it's on one of the shelves. Your guess is as good as mine." His bored look said it all.

Thomas shook his head. "It won't be on the shelves. It's a 1956 model. Nobody stocks those."

"Well, then we don't have it."

Thomas let out an annoyed huff. "I figured that much. What I'm asking is for you to find me one."

"How you want me to do that? Suck it out of my fingernails?"

"It's called special order. You must have contacts to some suppliers who do special requests."

The new owner of Al's Motorcycle Parts crossed his arms over his chest. "We don't do special orders. You can't find it here, go someplace else."

Thomas narrowed his eyes and leaned over the counter. “It’s your fucking job!”

The other vampire moved closer. “I say what my job is. And it’s not fetching shit for guys like you. I’m nobody’s errand boy. You get that?” He flashed his fangs.

Clenching his teeth, Thomas took his piece of paper and folded it slowly and deliberately, keeping a lid on his anger. It would be so easy to simply crush the guy with one blast of mind control, so simple, yet so satisfying. Inside him, his two sides warred with each other, each fighting for supremacy, both sides almost equally strong. His chest heaved from the effort it cost him to reveal nothing of his internal struggle to the outside. He couldn’t give himself away.

“My apologies,” he pressed out instead. “I guess I’ll have to take my business elsewhere.”

Then he turned on his heels, hightailing it out of the shop as fast as if a horde of bigots were chasing him with stakes in their fists. He swung himself onto his motorcycle and engaged the engine. When it howled, he shot into the road and thundered down the one-way-street like a speeding bullet.

He had to get away from the temptation to teach the guy a lesson in manners—as well as in business. It happened more and more lately: the smallest things set him off and made the dark power surge within him, eager to break to the surface. Ever since he’d killed Kasper, his maker—or Keegan, as he’d called himself later—he’d started feeling the thirst for power well up more often. And every time, the struggle to suppress the evil became more violent.

5

The V-lounge at Scanguards' headquarters was buzzing with activity when Thomas arrived. Everybody was getting ready to welcome Haven, Yvette's mate, into Scanguards. After several months of sorting things out with his old life as a vampire hunter, he'd finally come to a decision and accepted the position Samson had offered him. Tonight would be his official first day, and the guys had decided to throw him a little party at the lounge.

Thomas glanced around. The large room looked like the lounge of a five-diamond hotel, complete with comfortable seating arrangements, a fireplace, and a bar and bartender. Only, no bottles lined the back wall of the bar, and no mirror decorated it. The drinks served from the stainless steel taps weren't alcoholic; the barrels underneath contained various types of blood that the sexy female bartender was serving in crystal glasses.

Just because Thomas was gay didn't mean he didn't recognize that the woman working behind the bar was what a straight guy would call *sex on legs*. Besides, he noticed the way the other vampires looked at her: as if they wanted to drink from her rather than from the glasses she handed them. Like randy dogs, they hovered around the bar, trying their various pick-up lines on her, almost drooling. Did Thomas look like that when he looked at Eddie? He hoped not. It was pathetic enough that he was in love with a straight man.

The ice princess, as some of the guys had started calling her behind her back, kept her cool and polite exterior despite the suggestive comments and the obvious propositions, not giving away what was going on inside her. With a sigh, Thomas approached, and smiled at her.

"Roxanne," he called her attention to him.

She turned toward him and gave him a genuine smile, her body visibly relaxing. "Thomas, what can I get you, love?"

Her British accent was still pronounced, and made him think of home and the two sisters he'd left behind. Regret for having left them flowed through him. But he couldn't turn back time. There was no use in thinking of it now.

“AB positive, please.”

Roxanne pulled a glass from underneath the counter and operated one of the taps. “Dessert before dinner?”

He grinned. AB positive was considered the sweetest blood type. He winked. “If you don't tell, I won't.”

As she expelled a warm laugh, Thomas heard the whispers of the other vampires beside him.

“What's he got that we don't?” one of them grumbled.

Roxanne's head shot toward the man who'd spoken. She nailed him with a glare. “Class. That's what he's got. So scram.” She shooed them away, and to Thomas's surprise the men complied.

“You don't have to fight my battles for me, Roxanne.”

She smiled at him softly. “You're constantly fighting mine. Just returning the favor, love.”

Thomas jerked his thumb in the direction of the vampires who were now congregating near the fire place. “If you smiled at them the way you smile at me, your tips would be better.”

“I only smile when I mean it.” She set the glass of blood in front of him. “On the house.”

A heavy hand slid over his shoulder, making him turn.

“Is Roxanne plying you with blood again?” Samson asked, grinning.

Thomas laughed. “If only it worked!” he joked, knowing that if he were straight, Roxanne would make the moves on him. Yet, she respected what he was, and despite the fact that she was attracted to him, she treated him like a brother. He liked that about her.

He exchanged a long look with her.

“At least Thomas doesn’t want to jump my bones. That’s something I can’t say for that bunch over there.” She tossed her head in the direction of the fireplace.

Samson removed his arm from Thomas’s shoulders and leaned over the bar. “If they’re harassing you, you’ve gotta let me know. I’ll take them to task.”

She made a dismissive hand movement. “And make it even worse by tattling on them? I can handle them.”

“As you wish.”

“I would offer you a drink, but given that you’re blood-bonded, I guess there’s nothing I can do for you.”

Samson shook his head, smiling. “Nothing at all.” Then he winked at her. “Even though I’m not blind, and can understand why the guys keep trying.” Then he turned to Thomas. “We’re almost ready. Haven and Yvette should be arriving any minute.”

Together they walked away from the bar.

“Did Eddie come with you?” Samson asked.

“No, I had to stop by at Al’s for a part, so I left earlier.” He let his gaze sweep around the room, but couldn’t see Eddie.

“I’m sure he’ll get here in time. How is Al?”

Thomas rubbed the back of his neck, unease creeping down his back again. “Actually I don’t know.”

“But I though you said—”

He interrupted his boss. “He’s not there anymore. Somebody bought the place from him.”

Samson's eyebrows pulled together. "I hadn't heard anything about that. When did that happen?"

"Apparently last week."

"That's what I heard too. But that's not all." Thomas turned to the voice coming from behind them and looked at Zane.

"What else did you hear?" Thomas asked.

Zane shoved one hand into his pants pocket. "That he sold awfully quick. Somebody saw a couple of guys in suits march into his office, and a half-hour later Al started packing. Doesn't look right, if you ask me."

Thomas could only agree. "The new guy who says he bought it doesn't look like the sharpest tool in the shed either. I get the feeling he's just a puppet. He has no idea about the business, and I can't help but think that he's a front for somebody. Maybe we should look into this." He looked at Samson.

Zane interrupted. "I'm way ahead of you. I made a few inquiries and found out that he sold the place for next to nothing."

Samson grunted. "I don't like it. Do you think he was coerced?"

"Looks like it," Zane confirmed. "And he's definitely left town. I checked out his flat. Looks like he left in a hurry, only taking some personal items. His furniture is still there."

Thomas scratched his head, not liking at all what he heard. "Al isn't the kind of guy to make hasty decisions. Besides, he hates change. He wouldn't just move from one day to the next. That's not like him."

Zane rocked back on his heels. "Looks to me like he was shit-scared of something."

"But what?" Thomas asked.

“Zane, why don’t you get a couple of guys on it to see what’s going on?” Samson suggested.

“Let us know what you find.”

“Sure, will do.” Then he pointed toward the door. “Looks like our guest of honor just arrived.”

Thomas looked to the door of the lounge and saw Haven entering, Yvette by his side. The witch-turned-vampire was a big man, broad-shouldered, and strong. Even as a human he’d been able to hold his own, but now, as a vampire, he was among the strongest of them. Yvette was both his mate and his sire, a combination that made their bond even stronger if that was possible. While she’d always worn her hair short, after meeting Haven she’d stopped cutting it and it had grown back during her restorative sleep to the length it had had at her turning. She looked a lot more feminine now, and the hard edge she’d always had to her personality seemed to have softened too. Haven was good for her.

Haven had had his reservations about joining Scanguards after being a vampire hunter for most of his life. Luckily his love for Yvette had helped him see that his view of vampires, which had been influenced by a tragedy in his past, was too narrow-minded. Now that he had gotten to know their particular group of vampires, he’d finally accepted that even vampires could be good.

Thomas walked toward Haven and Yvette to greet them, Samson and Zane following him. Before he reached them, the door opened again and Eddie entered. Instantly, his heart started beating faster, and his fangs itched, wanting to descend.

Eddie looked as fresh and innocent as always. He wore a hooded sweatshirt over his jeans and immediately pulled it over his head to rid himself of it since the lounge was overly warm. As he did so, the T-shirt he wore underneath pulled up with it, exposing toned abs and a hairless chest.

Of course, he'd seen Eddie shirtless before, but no matter how often he got a look at his perfect body, it always caused the same visceral reaction in him: his mouth went dry, his palms became damp, his heart started beating into his throat, and he had to fight against his vampire side to stop it from bursting to the surface, wrestling Eddie to the ground, stripping him naked and driving his aching cock into him while sinking his fangs into his neck and drinking from him.

Eddie tossed the sweatshirt onto a nearby chair and pulled his T-shirt back over his jeans, depriving Thomas of the sight.

Maybe it was better that way. Maybe he should simply remove himself from temptation. Still, it wouldn't eradicate his daydreams, nor the fantasies he had about Eddie and himself: how they would shower together, stroking each other; how they would share a bed, making love; how they would feast on each other, sharing their blood.

So many fantasies, yet not a single one would ever turn into reality.

6

Eddie saw how Haven and Yvette were already beleaguered by their colleagues, who shook Haven's hand and congratulated him on his new position: bodyguard at Scanguards. Eddie remembered how proud he'd been when he had joined Scanguards over a year-and-a-half earlier. Back then he'd been human and had had no idea about the vampires that ran Scanguards. Much had happened since. Good and bad stuff.

He walked past the crowd, noticing that Thomas too was shaking Haven's hand. He'd known that he would find Thomas here. Nevertheless, his heart started beating faster, and nervousness crept up his spine, spreading over his entire body. He didn't know anymore how to behave around his mentor. Ever since he'd overheard Oliver and Blake, he felt awkward when talking to Thomas. And always on edge, as if he needed to weigh each word he uttered, careful not to say anything that might give Thomas the impression that Eddie was into him—because he wasn't.

Willing himself to calm down, he stalked to the bar and ordered a drink. "Hi Roxanne, O negative, please."

"Here for the party?" She started pouring his drink.

"Yeah, I never miss out on a party. Free blood, right?" He pointed to the taps.

"You bet. Just don't go overboard. The boss has instructed me to keep an eye on you guys. If anybody overindulges, I'm authorized to cut you off." She smirked.

He grinned back. "Spoil sport!"

She put the glass of blood in front of him and ruffled his hair. "Now go play with the others."

Eddie tossed her a mock-outraged look. "You make us sound like we're kids."

Roxanne chuckled and leaned over the bar, her ample bosom almost too close for comfort. He glanced at it briefly, but nothing stirred in his groin. "That's because *you* are."

He rolled his eyes. "I'm twenty-five!"

"Baby!" she cooed as if talking to an infant.

He grabbed the glass and downed its contents. The rich blood coated his throat, stilling his hunger. He instantly felt better, calmer. Maybe he'd just been overly hungry, and that was why he felt so apprehensive about being in Thomas's company. Hunger could do a lot of funny things to a vampire. He'd found that out the hard way when he'd first been turned. He'd never been so ravenous in his entire life. Nor as violent.

A hand tapped on his shoulder. Eddie spun around and released a shaky breath when he realized that it hadn't been Thomas's hand that had touched him.

Get a grip, he chastised himself.

"Hey, Cain."

"Wow, you're jumpy. What's up?" The dark-haired vampire with the permanent stubble on his chin and the penetrating dark eyes looked him up and down.

"Nothing. Why would something be up? Just getting my first drink."

Cain nodded toward the bartender. "I'm having what he's having."

Roxanne smiled. "Coming right up."

As she turned to the taps, Eddie caught the long lusting look that Cain raked over her body, lingering on her breasts, then dropping to her shapely ass. He could clearly see what his colleague was thinking. Oddly enough, when Eddie let his gaze sweep over Roxanne's curves, he felt nothing. The woman was exceedingly beautiful, but Eddie didn't feel any desire rising in him, nor any blood surging to his cock. Touching and kissing her held no appeal for him, when he should have the same lusty feelings as half the vampires in the lounge had for this extraordinary female specimen with the upper crust English accent.

Maybe something was wrong with him. Maybe a hormonal imbalance. Perhaps he should go see Maya and have her check him out to see if his testosterone levels were low. Maya, Gabriel's mate, was the only vampire physician—apart from the psychiatrist Dr. Drake—in San Francisco. Her specialty when she'd been a human doctor had been urology. If anybody knew a male body then it was she. Maybe after the party, he'd pull her aside and make an appointment with her.

“Did you hear anything about that?” Cain's voice drifted to him.

Eddie fumbled for an answer. He hadn't heard what Cain had been talking about. “Sorry, can you repeat that?”

Cain narrowed his eyes and gave him an assessing look. “You wanna tell me what's wrong with you? First you're jumpy, and now you're distracted.” His colleague leaned closer.

Eddie's breath hitched. Did Cain suspect the reason for his inattentiveness?

“You'd better pull yourself together, kid! I have the feeling there's some shit going down here soon. I just overheard Gabriel telling Samson he's calling a staff meeting later tonight. You'll need all your marbles. So whatever hot broad is distracting you, put her out of your mind.”

Eddie sighed inwardly. If only it were a hot woman who was occupying his thoughts, then he would have nothing to worry about. He'd never been distracted by a woman. Sure, he'd fucked some of them, but now that he thought of it, he'd never been so into it that he'd forgotten about the rest of his life. Even as a teenager, he'd preferred hanging out with his buddies to sneaking off into some dark alley with a girl to get some action. His friends had actually teased him that he was too much of a good guy. And good guys didn't get laid. No wonder he'd been almost twenty when he'd lost his virginity.

It hadn't rocked his world. Maybe he was just not a very sexual guy. He shook his head. No, that couldn't be true either. After all, he masturbated daily. Didn't that prove that his sex drive was alive and well? Perhaps he'd simply not met the right woman. That had to be it. Roxanne was just not his type, that's why he didn't feel any spark in his groin when he looked at her.

"What are you guys whispering?"

Heat shot into Eddie's cheeks as he heard Thomas's voice behind him. He took a steadying breath and turned slowly, trying to keep his face an unreadable mask.

"Cain was just saying there's supposed to be a staff meeting tonight," Eddie repeated Cain's words.

Thomas shrugged. "Hadn't heard anything. Must be a last minute thing."

Cain pointed toward the crowd around Haven and Yvette. "I should go say hello." But Cain didn't get a chance, because at the same moment, Samson asked for quiet in the room.

"Thank you! And thanks all for coming tonight," Samson started. "I'm very pleased to welcome our newest member into Scanguards."

Next to him, Haven stood smiling, his arm around Yvette who looked up at him with pride shining in her eyes. He bent to her ear, and whispered something to her which made her eyes go wide. Eddie could only guess that it had been something very private, and something very erotic.

Thomas tapped his arm, sending a shiver through his body, then leaned closer to whisper to him. "Never thought I'd see Yvette like that."

Eddie forced himself to remain calm. "Like what?"

"All feminine and soft. You haven't known her as long as I, but she was one tough cookie."

"She seems happy. Haven's a great guy."

Samson continued, “Haven has been helping us in many difficult situations. And I’m therefore very happy to announce that he’s finally accepted my offer to join Scanguards. Haven, would you like to say a few words?”

Haven nodded quickly. “Yeah, well, I’m not a man of many words. Just to say: I’m looking forward to this new challenge. Now let’s party!” He waved to one corner of the lounge, where a band had set up.

Music filled the room. Eddie watched how Haven pulled Yvette to the area in front of the band, where some of the furniture had been removed to make space for a small dance floor. As Haven and Yvette started dancing and were soon joined by Zane and his hybrid wife Portia, Eddie turned away from the sight. His sister Nina wasn’t here, nor was Delilah. Humans weren’t allowed at the lounge. It was a strict rule that not even Samson broke.

However, the room wasn’t completely devoid of women. Apart from Yvette and Portia, Maya and Rose, both vampires, were also present. They were mingling with the male vampires, but their mates were never far—both Gabriel and Quinn kept their eyes on the other Scanguards employees, ready to interfere if another male dared touch their wives inappropriately.

Next to him, Cain and Thomas both chuckled. Eddie turned his head to see what they were finding so funny.

“Don’t they look like dogs with a bone?” Thomas asked, motioning to Gabriel and Quinn.

Eddie rolled his eyes and cracked a smile. “Pathetic!”

“Let’s drink to that!” Thomas agreed and turned back toward the bar. “Three of the . . .” He turned with a questioning look. “What are you guys having?”

“O neg,” Eddie said.

“Same,” was Cain’s reply.

“And yourself?” Roxanne asked.

“Make that three O negs.”

“You guys are easy.”

Cain made a grimace. “Did she just insult us?”

One side of Thomas’s mouth tilted upwards. “Sounded like it.”

“What are we gonna do about it?” Eddie asked, grinning, glad that both Cain and Thomas were concentrating their attention on the bartender. It took the heat off him, and he could finally begin to relax.

“I think punishment is in order,” Cain suggested.

Roxanne tossed them a *get real* look and continued filling the glasses with blood.

“I don’t think she believes you,” Eddie teased.

Thomas laughed. “That’s probably because she knows we’d never punish her.” He winked at her. “After all, she sits at the source.” He motioned to the taps. “And you never bite the hand that feeds you. Literally and figuratively.”

Roxanne finished pouring the three glasses. Then she took one and held it over the sink, tilting it a bit. “So, you want your drinks, or not?”

Eddie, Thomas, and Cain exchanged quick glances.

“That would be lovely, Roxanne,” Thomas said, his voice softer than before.

Roxanne’s look softened and Eddie could clearly see how Thomas’s voice appeased her and made her melt. The reason he knew that was because he too could feel it: how Thomas’s deep voice penetrated his body and sank deep into him. It made him want to lay back on one of the large sofas, stretch out, and settle in for a soothing massage. Strong male hands on naked skin. Smooth long strokes. Fire on his body. Electricity charging through his veins.

Eddie's fangs lengthened.

"Better give one to Eddie first," Thomas remarked. "Looks like he's hungry."

Eddie willed his fangs to retract.

Shit!

He should have more control over himself. After all, he wasn't a newborn vampire anymore.

He was over a year old already, and he was past the worst cravings, past the most difficult time.

But whenever he was near Thomas, his reactions were unpredictable.

END of *Exclusive Preview* of Thomas's Choice.

I hope you enjoyed this preview.