



CRAVINGS

By

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For my parents, for teaching me love;
My brother for teaching me laughter;
And my two sons, for teaching me true joy.
But most of all, my husband, for giving them all to me.

Chapter One

Happiness in life is not free. You pay for every minute of it. And believe me, it doesn't come cheap.

Payment comes due the instant awareness sets in. At least it did for me. I woke up one day, took a look around and thought, *Hey, life is good.*

That very night, I made my first payment.

The good news is I won't be making another. That one took care of my happiness problem. No happiness, no payment. See how well things work out?

I live in Memphis. That's Tennessee, not Egypt, although we share more than a name with our counterpart across the ocean. We have a modern day Pyramid and our own life-sustaining river. And six years ago, we discovered the West Nile Virus had arrived.

A year later, I teamed up with two doctors to study this virus and discovered more than anyone wanted to know.

Something else had arrived with the infected mosquito. Or maybe the vampires had been here all along, and we'd just never known about them.

Either way, they changed my life. That was five years ago.

My name is Lindy Campbell and I'm a vampire. Sometimes. Other times I'm human, with warm blood flowing through my veins. Makes life confusing, but there you are. Officially, I'm considered a *Vamp-hum*. Not very original but since I'm one of a kind they didn't know what else to call me. Mostly, I consider myself a big mess.

Since it is most inconvenient to go dead when you're least prepared for it, I've learned to always be prepared. Unprepared will get you permanently dead.

There was a time when I was completely human. When I belonged among the living. The littlest things will get you kicked out of that club. Like growing fangs. Now I live among the undead. It's not that I'm totally accepted there either. They're just a bit more forgiving of the strange and unusual.

And I owe it all to Malcolm Montay. He's the bat boy who bit me.

I was down in New Orleans doing research on the Vampire community last year. My momma always told me if you go looking for trouble....

Luckily, one of the doctors from St. Frances I was working with at the time knew what to do. Doc started a blood transfusion immediately and got me to the hospital quickly. Would have worked too, if Malcolm hadn't been so old and powerful.

It cost me my job at the hospital. Can't have a vampire, even one half human, around all of the bloody patients, of course. So, I work in the Vamp community now.

The Memphis Vampire community is small time, a sort of test case for the larger cities who still deny they have any citizens who could drink their neighbors dry. The community welcomed my help. Sort of.

I was a nurse in my other life, but there wasn't much use for one among those who never die. Talk about your wasted college years. So the mayor decided--after pressure from the government--to name me the Director of the Bureau of Vampire Affairs.

We have one employee. Me. I had a choice between a dingy office in North Memphis or an office in my nineteenth century home in Midtown. It wasn't like I was ever going to use my dining room again anyway.

Basically, I do what needs to be done. I mean, not all cities cater to our undead citizens who live by the night and sleep in the day. Makes it hard to conduct business during regular working hours.

There are also the security issues to be dealt with. If you want to kill a vampire, what better time than when the sun is high?

Lately, I've been mediating between the societies. It's amazing how much the vampires and humans hate each other. I've learned from experience the hate is bred by fear. I can understand it. At times, I fear them both myself.

I haven't turned in almost a week. I know its coming and the wait is getting to me.

Usually, I look normal. Okay, a little better than normal. My hair grows quickly, I can't keep my nails trimmed, and I've never been in better shape. Must be the extra iron.

All the result of turning. Even then, I'm not the traditional vamp. Sunlight doesn't faze me. I'm a mixture of human and vampire at all times. Just like in life, I can't seem to commit.

Vampires don't kill their meals anymore. Much. Its illegal and bad publicity. Instead, we

have nightly deliveries of blood, much like the milkman. They even have these nifty containers that keep it fresh and at body temperature. You'd be amazed at what humans are willing to sell for the right price, lucky for us. And blood is at a premium. The mayor also reminds his citizens on a regular basis that if the blood supply runs low, the vampires will go out searching for their own meals. Gives a whole new spin on blood drives.

Downtown Memphis belongs to the vampires. Being on the Mississippi River, humans couldn't tolerate the mosquitoes since the big invasion, so they gladly turned it over. And it is good for mosquito control. One bite of a vamp and the pesky little things drop dead. Humans couldn't be happier.

Few security measures are needed in the undead community. Vamps are vulnerable and the humans could easily slay them. What prevents it? The living sleep at night and vamps believe in revenge. You tell me, who's scarier?

Which brings me to my newest problem. Someone killed a vampire last week while he rested. Now a human has disappeared in apparent retaliation. Talk about my worst nightmare.

Everyone is putting pressure on me. The mayor suddenly remembers that I'm half human, and the vamp community now acknowledges I'm one of them.

My first course of action would normally be to meet with the head vampire. The Master. Problem is, he's the one found staked out at dawn. The city has run amuck every since. Even the undead need leadership. I have rogue vigilante groups forming on both sides and the only thing standing between them is me.

I could talk to Joe Andrews, the MPD detective heading the case, but we're kind of not speaking at the moment.

We were dating when I became *one of them*. Believe me, it's never a good idea to date your food. Joe was the appetizer, entrée and dessert all rolled into one. Not that I ever had the chance to indulge.

Funny, '*I love you no matter what*' doesn't include turning into a vampire during sex. And '*adrenaline made me do it*' doesn't help.

Joe tried, I guess. But when I couldn't promise it would never happen again, our trouble began. Then he refused to move in with me on my side of town, and I couldn't move in with him on his, so we reached a stalemate. Talk about irreconcilable differences. Geez, it wasn't as if I bit him or anything.

So that leaves me with Malcolm. As the oldest vampire left in the city, he's next in line as the head boss. Lucky me.

I'll have to talk to Joe eventually, but given a choice between the man who tried to kill me or the man who dumped me because of it, I'll take the biter any day. At least Malcolm could claim hunger. Which explains why I was on my way to see the scariest man in town.

I turned on Central Avenue and parked my car at the Castle. It had stood for over a hundred years. Built by an eccentric in the eighteen hundreds, at one time it had housed a bar, restaurant and now the master of the vampires.

It was a beautiful place--an accurate replica of a mid-size castle that could be found in Scotland. I had heard rumors the stones had been shipped from there, taken from an old keep that had fallen to ruin.

Matching round turrets stood on each end, connected by a balcony on the second floor. There was an otherworldly feel to the place, as if centuries of souls had soaked into the stone and were standing guard, protecting all who entered. Oddly enough, it was a comforting feeling.

I had dressed carefully for this meeting. It was illegal to bite a human against her will, but I wasn't sure I completely qualified. And some men broke the rules. Just in case, I took the time to cover all of the tempting points.

Black leather boots covered the ankles and stopped at my knees. Custom made 4" bracelets covered both wrists and came with a matching necklace made of platinum. It was a fashion statement all its own. Starting at the top of my neck, the tiny spider web weave spanned to the top of my shoulders. I had had it made after the reprimand from Doc when he patched me up after Malcolm bit me. Someone whose dark blue veins stood out under pale, translucent skin should not walk around looking so tempting. There are plenty of other places on a body blood could be taken, but since complete body armor was gaudy and rude, I ruled against it. No sense insulting the man I had come to question.

I walked up the stone steps and reached down deep for my courage. I don't have much, and I keep having to replenish my supply. I hoped I had enough to get me through this meeting.

The style of a vampire varies, depending on his age. I have to admit, I prefer the older ones. The tight britches, tall boots, and flowing white shirts with lace at the cuffs remind me of the historical romance novels I sometimes read. Okay--not good for my tough woman image, but I'm a romantic at heart. Not that it's doing me any good.

As my eyes gawked at the man who led me through the halls, I wondered if becoming a vampire made everyone beautiful, or if there was a rule against biting someone ugly. Of course, if you were going to be shackled to someone for eternity, which would you choose?

He smiled when he caught me staring, but for the life of me, I had never seen a red haired vampire. Curling naturally, his thick mane reached his mid back and framed his pale face. I could see him in a plaid kilt, standing formidable on a mountain looking down over the valley. He was Scottish, I just knew it. Good thing he hadn't spoken a word to me, since it would be quite embarrassing to start fawning all over the enemy. It was the accent that did it to me every time.

After leaving me alone in a room, he made his exit quietly. I knew the building had electricity, but for some reason it wasn't in use. Candelabras were strategically placed around the room and were the only source of light. It reminded me of old black and white Dracula movies. Colorizing them had ruined the eerie effect, but they still showed some of the originals. How ironic was it that I had always loved them?

The room had been decorated true to its history. Rich fabric in red and gold brocade covered the windows and settee, as well as the chairs. The antique pieces were mahogany wood and were in pristine condition. It was as if I had stepped back in time. I had to remind myself there was a room full of coffins somewhere in this place to keep the romantic in me at bay.

"Ms. Campbell, how daring of you to visit."

I hadn't heard him enter. Not very smart of me, to go off daydreaming when I'm about to meet with my worst nightmare.

I turned and faced him. I didn't flinch or run, score one for me. In truth, Malcolm was a handsome man. His face was aristocratic and caused the observer to wonder at his origins. Had he been the son of a noble in his other life? His eyes were blue and fringed with dark lashes. His hair was dark and flowed down over his shoulders. Again, the romantic in me tried to surface, but I beat her back. I may not require much in the men I date, but a heartbeat was definitely high on the list.

"Not really. I think the risks are minimal." Unless you counted the risk of heart failure from my racing heart or the increasing possibility of turning with so much adrenaline flowing through me. Turning in the presence of the vamp who bit you couldn't be a good thing, could it? Talk about losing the upper hand.

“How so?” He moved gracefully across the room to the side table.

“Well, it is illegal to bite me for starters. Not to mention that the case I’m working is high profile, making me a hot commodity. Someone would certainly miss me if I were to disappear. And you need me Malcolm, whether you’re willing to admit it or not.” I didn’t add that no one had a clue that I was even here, and were I to disappear, the path would not lead to Malcolm’s door. I’d make certain the next time it did.

“Ah, interesting. So you feel you are safe with me?” He filled a silver goblet with deep red liquid, held it up in a silent offer. I shook my head. It wasn’t wine he was offering.

He reminded me of a cat playing with his food. I wasn’t sure if he thought of me as the main course or dessert. “You won’t kill me, so don’t toy with me Malcolm. Two men have already been killed.”

“You could be right. I will not kill you, as you say.” He sipped his drink, savoring it. “However, not for the reason you think. There has been only one death. Surgis. The human that was taken still lives.”

My body silently did a little thank you dance, but outwardly, I was the epitome of calm. It would seem callous of me to gloat. Still, it would make my life so much easier if the vamps hadn’t killed yet.

“How do you know?”

His raised brow told me clearly he found the question amusing. Glad I could oblige.

“The human taken is not worthy. Surgis was master among us. He had lived for centuries and was an honorable man. The human that was taken is beneath him.” Could there be such a thing as an honorable vampire? I doubted it but didn’t bother to argue the point. Maybe his ideas and mine were different.

“Okay. So why take him?” He raised the goblet to his lips slowly. I wished he would just drink it and be done with it. It was beginning to look a little too good to me.

“I said they have not killed him. I did not say they would not.”

“Where is he, and how do I get him back?”

“It is not so easy.”

Nothing ever is. “Look, the last thing any of us want right now is a war. We need to work together to stop this thing before someone else is harmed. And we have to figure out how to protect everyone until we end this.”

“I agree we need to take precautions to ensure the safety of our own. I am not concerned with providing the same to the humans.”

Okay, that made sense. But what I was about to suggest didn't. “Protecting them is protecting us.”

“Us? Are you one of us, Lucinda?”

Since I still haven't figured out what I am, I ignored the question.

“Guarding against a daytime attack will be complicated, if not impossible. We can't stand guard during the day. And the humans will need to stand guard at night. Inconvenient, but possible. I have a plan that will benefit all.”

“Continue.” Finished with his nightly snack, he crossed to the chair in front of me. No man should move that gracefully. I preferred him at a much larger distance. Vampires move at breakneck speed, so the distance would only be an illusion of safety. I'd take what I could get.

“Well, it's simple really. We have the humans protect us during the day, and we protect them during the night.”

“You would have our enemies guard us while we sleep?” The humor in his voice told me clearly what he thought of my plan.

“We're not all your enemies. Some of us have honor as well. There are those among us who can be trusted, just as there are those among you.” I was not going to get into a debate about trust with someone who didn't bother asking permission before draining you dry.

“So, you stand with the humans once again. You jump sides easily, Lucinda.”

“I have no side, Malcolm. You saw to that.” Probably not a good idea to bring up unpleasantness when I wanted something from him. Nor to remind him of his failure in turning me.

“I would have welcomed you as one of us. You chose against it. I am not responsible for the dilemma you face.” He steepled his long fingers in front of his face, bracing his elbows on the arms of the chair.

“Aren't you? I didn't ask to become a vampire.”

“If I am responsible for your unhappiness, I can certainly rectify it. I can turn you Lucinda, you've only to ask. I will give you a side in this battle.” His eyes took on that glassy hue of shadows and fog. The look that hid centuries of secrets, lifetimes of things seen and done so horrible that most humans would never believe them. I wasn't one of them. I had seen some of

those nightmares first hand.

“No thanks.” I moved to the edge of the seat, ready to bolt if the need showed itself.

“Very well. I will not force you.” His eyes cleared and my stance relaxed.

“Why?” I know, I should just be grateful. But I don’t trust unexpected gifts. Given the opportunity, Malcolm would force his will on anyone to get his way. “You said earlier you would not kill me for your own reasons. What are they?”

“Why would I remove from the world something I enjoy? Until I cease to enjoy your existence, you are safe.”

Oh, yeah. “You tried to change me once. How can I believe you won’t try again?”

“You are a worthy adversary. It is rare in a woman. You have been offered a gift--to be part of two worlds. I find that interesting and possibly beneficial to me at some point. We have a connection that can only be broken through death. I will not deny that I want you by my side. However, you have earned the right to choose. That is why I will not turn you completely against your will. You will come to me, but of your own accord.”

Wanna bet? A vampire is a dangerous creature. But that creature was once a man. And this man came from an era when honor meant everything. I trusted him not to kill me. At least not yet. How stupid is that? What was even scarier, I felt something intriguing about his words. His body called to mine. Whether it was the adrenaline or his blood in my veins I didn’t know. But I knew I would turn soon, and I didn’t want to be anywhere near him when it happened.

I crave two things when I go dead. Blood and sex. I’m not picky, any order will do. Give me a quart of blood, a good vibrator, and locked inside my apartment I can calm the beast enough to survive. It was like eating fat-free cookies instead of Oreos. It satisfied the hunger but not the craving. Instinctively, I knew if Malcolm was around me there would be no taming, no settling of the beast. I’d want the damn Oreo.

“Give some thought to my words, Malcolm. I’ll speak with the living”--I needed that distinction to remind myself that giving in to lust would get me undead--“and let you know of their decision.”

I left on that note. Got out of there as quickly as I could without actually running.

On my way home, I made my weekly stop by Doc’s house for my contribution to science. I’m the perfect specimen. Doc would love to dissect me, but we compromise and I give him blood instead.

He's trying to define the cause for my cell regeneration. If he can do this, it would be a real breakthrough. Cancer could be eradicated. Many illnesses would be a thing of the past. It's worth a needle prick to me.

Lately my life seems to revolve around blood. Pulling it out or pouring it in. I made my donation and left quickly. I was not in the mood for questions, and Doc always had plenty.

I decided to skip my talk with Joe for the night. I didn't need the stress, and the threat of turning was enough of a scare to have me postponing until tomorrow. I went home and dropped into bed.

Working both the night and day shift is rough. I try to make it to bed by two a.m. and rise by ten. Splits my time between them evenly.

Ten o'clock comes early when you've had little sleep. I slapped the alarm, then showered and dressed carefully. Unlike last night with Malcolm, I wanted to attract attention today. My ego demanded it with Joe.

I wanted to look good. Shoot, I wanted to look better than good. I wanted to give him a few sleepless nights, thinking about what he had given up. Pathetic, I know, and probably it would never happen.

I had just the little black skirt to do it. I even wore heels to showcase my long legs. What was the risk of a turned ankle when compared to making an ex regretful? Joe had always had a thing for my legs. I added a white blouse and short jacket then glanced in the mirror. I looked like a sexy businesswoman. He would never know he was being set up.

Chapter Two

I had gotten to know the men at his precinct while Joe and I were dating and most of them still treated me the same. Guess they had seen bigger monsters than me. I stopped at a few of their desks, making small talk and just catching up. I was stalling, working up the nerve before I walked into Joe's office.

I didn't bother to call first. I didn't want to give Joe the chance to refuse to see me. So when I walked into his office unannounced, his surprise was genuine.

"Hello, Joe." My voice was low, seductive, but he didn't know it was from nerves.

"Lindy." He stood. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I'm sure." He looked good, damn it. It wasn't fair that he should look so good to me after he'd broken my heart. All of the time I had spent cursing his soul to hell should have done something, if only in my mind.

"You're looking good, Lindy." He walked around his desk, stopped at the corner while I crossed to him.

"Yeah, dying agreed with me." Low blow, I know. Maybe I still had just a little resentment going on. The way he was filling out those jeans wasn't making it go away. His hair was dark chocolate and a little longer than he usually wore it. I could tell his fingers had made several trips through it already. That little habit of his had always given him that just out of bed look. Unfortunately, it had always been one of my favorite looks. Getting it that way had always appealed to me even more.

His hand on my shoulder guided me to the visitor's chair. Even through the layers of cloth, I could feel the heat, the strength of those fingers. Joe wasn't a stranger to hard work, and all of that manual labor had built up calluses on his hands. Those rough patches of skin had burned a trail across my body on too many occasions.

"Have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

Oh, yes. A quick round of sex, please. Joe still had a body that sent my own on red alert.

And it had been a while for me. Okay, a long while. Like, since Joe. I needed sex in the worst way. For someone who craved it as much as I did, I sure wasn't getting any.

"I'm here about Surgis and the man who has gone missing." Pull your mind from the gutter and back on business, I chided myself. There were better times to lust over Joe's body. Like when I was alone in my bedroom, the last place he'd be.

"Larry Brown. Do you know where he is?"

"No." I knew wherever he was, it was likely a vampire was holding him there. Maybe more than one. Memphis might be a big city, but it had a small town feel about it. And gossip ran wild in small towns. Word on the streets was we had the makings of an all out race war.

Joe moved back around to his own seat, and I sat down. I could feel my skirt riding up an inch or two. When his eyes lowered and watched the movement, I bit back a grin. Maybe I wasn't the only one feeling the heat here. Not that it was going to do either of us any good. Getting all worked up with no way to relieve it was pointless.

"Stay out of it, Lindy. It's a police matter." His eyes were back on mine and all cop. I have a thing for those stormy, gray eyes of his. When he's fully aroused, those eyes darken like the sky before the rain. Long, dark lashes frame them to perfection. Laugh lines fanned out from them, but the recent addition of lines on his forehead gave me the impression he was doing a lot more frowning these days. I didn't want that to be true. My Joe--the old Joe--had always had laughter lurking just below the surface. He broke eye contact first.

"You know I can't do that."

"Can't or won't?" he asked.

"The mayor has already contacted me. Can't."

"That's right, you've got yourself a big job these days, taking care of the dregs of the city. How's that working out for you?"

I wouldn't let his words hurt me. Not again. I could be as flippant as him. "You know, the job opportunities for someone like me are endless, but this one is working out great. At least I know where I stand with everyone I deal with. And look how important I am. The mayor calls me daily." Usually when he needed a good ass to chew on, but hey, at least he knows my number.

I could feel Joe's eyes drilling into me as if he were trying to solve some great puzzle. Most likely, wondering what he ever saw in me.

“Fine. Tell me what you know.” Guess he had found his answers. I leaned back, ready to play the game. But I wasn’t going to be the only one offering up information. I was going to get as good as I gave.

“We’ll play show me yours and I’ll show you mine.” My face burned as the meaning sunk in. Flirting with Joe was not only stupid, it was nonproductive. Sort of like getting all dressed up for a date, only to end up watching the late show alone. Too late to take it back.

“We’ve already played that game, Lindy.” His deep southern drawl dug up memories I’d rather forget. That same voice had whispered words of love and magic as he had slid into me, as I had closed tightly around him. Words he hadn’t meant.

“We share information. Tell me what you have and I’ll do the same.”

He leaned back in his chair, those gray eyes studying me a little too deeply. “Have dinner with me.”

Okay, that caught me off guard, since an invitation was the last thing I had been expecting from him. I also wasn’t expecting the way my heart skipped, then doubled its beat. My body was such a traitor. Look how quickly it just forgot all of those long nights shoveling in chocolate chip ice cream with crushed Oreo’s on top and the exhausting exercise regiment we’d suffered through to pay for it. All in the guise of getting over Joe. It had finally worked too.

“What you mean is sex.” I kept my voice level.

He shrugged casually as if it were my call. “If you’d prefer.”

Oh yes, I would definitely prefer. He grinned that sexy little grin that was half boy, half man. And all charm. Damn him, I wanted to say yes.

“You know it wouldn’t go anywhere. There’s too much standing between us.” An entire race, to be exact.

“I miss you, Lindy. Its just dinner.” His face sobered just enough to cause me doubt. We both knew it would end in bed. But unlike Joe, I also knew that since I was overdue turning, my dinner could consist of a warm glass of O positive. I didn’t think he would sit across from me, calmly eating his steak, while I drank it down.

“I’m sorry, Joe.” More sorry for me than him. After all, this split had been his idea. I’d simply been living in my own fantasy world. The one where love really did conquer all.

“So am I. Where does that leave us?” He leaned back in his chair, and ran his hands through his hair.

“Working together on this case. I believe this Larry Brown may still be alive.” I would start giving information first if it meant changing the subject. I’d do just about anything at this point to change the subject. I just couldn’t start thinking about Joe in a good light. Not yet. I was still too vulnerable to him. My heart just couldn’t take another pounding from him.

“You know that’s unlikely.” He raised his brow. Only one. Just like Rhett Butler. Why was that so sexy? And why was my mind locked on sex when I had real problems, life and death problems, to contend with? I swore I’d pull double duty with the vibrator tonight if I could just get my mind back to murder.

“What do you know about him?”

“Average, middle-aged guy. Works as a security guard, struggles to pay the mortgage and smokes two packs a day. The guy next door.”

“Not prime material as a blood bank.”

“No. I would imagine most bloodsuckers would prefer a healthier snack.”

“I spoke to Malcolm Montay. He has just taken over as the Master.” Let’s see how he liked that little bomb.

“You two are friends.” He shook his head and snorted. “Why does that not surprise me?”

I ignored the statement. Why was it that everyone assumed that just because they shared the same parasites, all vampires were friends? Most vamps were loners, truth be told. But fighting with Joe would get us nowhere. The only place I wanted to be right now was away from him. I’d had enough walks down memory lane.

“Malcolm said Brown was unworthy of Surgis’ death.”

That got his attention. Joe the cop was back. I could deal with him much better than Joe the man, Joe the stormy eyed ex-lover.

“Where would they keep him?” He leaned over his desk, braced his arms on it.

“I don’t know, and Malcolm swears he doesn’t either.”

“We need to find him if we’re going to prevent all-out war.”

“I know. I’ve suggested to Malcolm extra security be added to both sides.”

“Couldn’t hurt.” He nodded.

“Glad you agree. The problem is daylight guards are hard to find in the vampire community. I suggested both sides work together to protect each other.”

Normally I love Joe’s laugh. Deep and warm, straight up from the chest. Not today.

Today it set my nerves on end.

“And what did old Malcolm think of that idea?” He rocked back in his chair again.

“Same as you, apparently. It could work, damn it. If we used men we could trust, we could end this thing before it goes too far.”

He sobered. “What happens when someone gets through the guards and kills one of them? Do you honestly believe they wouldn’t swear that we had allowed the breach on purpose?” Okay, so the idea had a few kinks. Nothing that couldn’t be worked out.

“Each side would have to trust the other.” I knew it could work. If everyone would stop being stubborn about it and gave it a chance, I knew it would be the perfect solution. Either way, it was the only one I could come up with.

“Poor Lindy. Still trying to make us all one big happy family?”

I stiffened. I don’t do pity well. Giving or receiving. “If you have a better idea, then let’s hear it.”

Joe hated vampires. One had killed his partner before the no biting law had been passed. Joe blamed himself. Not because it was his fault, but because Tom had had a wife, kids. Joe had been single. He should have been the one to go down, hear him tell. Survivor’s guilt. Joe had it in gallons.

Joe had killed the one responsible but his hate had lived on. And I had become one of them. He had every right to be bitter. Then, so did I. If I could deal with it, then I felt he should too. Maybe I’m asking too much, but I didn’t think so.

“We can guard ourselves, so why do we need the vampires? We don’t combust under the sun,” Joe added sarcastically.

“Yes, but they can’t protect themselves sufficiently without human intervention. Where else are they going to find men who won’t hesitate to let them get killed? You’re policemen, sworn to protect all citizens. The only way they’re going to agree is if both sides are vulnerable to each other.” I waited. “You know it could work.”

“Or it could blow up in our faces. Did Malcolm agree?”

I shifted in the chair. I had been expecting the question and would have liked to say yes, but Joe would know if I was not straight with him. “Not yet, but he will. He’s smart enough to know there aren’t any better options.”

“Let me check out a few things, give it some thought. Set up a meeting with Malcolm for

me. If I decide to do this, I want to meet with the man--creature--face to face.”

Joe calling Malcolm a creature didn't offend me. After all, I had called him much worse since the night I'd met him, standing in an alley a few streets from Bourbon. And I didn't relate the monster calling to me. I might be one now, but I still feel like me so it's hard to relate.

I nodded and got to my feet. The quicker I escaped the office the better off we would both be.

He walked around his desk, crossed the room and caught me just before I twisted the knob. He was too close. The scent of fresh air, of Joe, filled my senses. I had always loved the way he smelled, the way he took over a room. I had felt safe tucked beside his six three frame, with his hand on the small of my back. But he hadn't been able to protect me from my own stupidity--walking into danger and being bitten. Worst of all, he hadn't been able to shield me from the worst hurt of all. His rejection.

I felt his arms around me, drawing me into the safe net again. I closed my eyes and for a moment let it surround me. How long had it been since I had felt so cherished? The answer came quickly, the last time Joe had held me.

His lips found mine, allowing all of the pent-up frustrations to flow from his lips. I met it with my own. I could say yes and spend the night in his arms. Feel him drive into me, joining our souls. I had never wanted anything more in my life. But tomorrow he wouldn't be able to stay. When I turned--and I would--he'd say goodbye again. Just as he had done the last time he had held me. I couldn't go through that again. I pushed against his chest. The light pressure stopped him. My strength could have pushed him across the room and we both knew it. But it would never be needed with Joe.

He released me and I walked out of the room. Out of the building. Out of Joe's life.

I walked down Front Street feeling sorry for myself. I wasn't proud of it, but at least I could admit it. I had always hated it when people whined over the roads their lives had taken. As if they had no control over it. Turn off, I used to say with such arrogance. And here I was, doing that very thing. But for the life of me, I couldn't find anywhere to turn.

My life wasn't what I'd dreamed it would be. Okay. Whose was? How bad was it? I was a vampire. Well, only half. Better than 100%. See, I could be positive. I missed Joe. There was the real problem. Couldn't do anything about that one.

I love the sunshine. I wasn't banished to the darkness of night yet, but it didn't seem to

matter. Joe and I used to spend hours riding through the hills behind his house. His horses now shied away from me. I didn't want to be different. I wanted my life back.

It was dark by the time I reached my apartment. I'd regrouped by shopping. I had sexy underwear, a sleek black dress, and new heels. My problems weren't solved but I felt better equipped to deal with them.

Until I found Malcolm standing in my living room.

"Fantastic view." He didn't turn from the picture window that overlooked the garden.

"Glad you're enjoying it. I thought you guys had to be invited in before you could enter." I slammed the door, since holding it open wasn't going to get him to leave any quicker. We both knew he wasn't going anywhere until he was ready.

"But you forget you are mine." His voice danced over my skin, and I reminded myself it was not real.

"Half." And that was half too much. It galled me to have to admit to even that much. But had he turned me completely, he would have been my master. Half was definitely better than that option.

"Enough to gain my entrance."

Was that a smirk on his face? Did vampires smirk?

"Figures." Wasn't my luck improving? Just what I wanted, the head vamp coming and going as he pleased.

"Try it on."

"What?" I stiffened. He turned to smile at me.

"The black dress in the bag." He nodded to the bag I was holding.

"Don't do that, it creeps me out." The shudder down my spine proved it. It wasn't that he was reading my mind. Truthfully, I didn't know what it was. He was ancient, and the older vampires just seemed to have the power to know things.

"As you wish. I'll wait while you change."

Did he know I hadn't turned in a week? Could he smell the need on my skin? No, he'd been talking about the dress. Get a grip, girl. "I'll pass. What is it you want Malcolm?"

"Business, of course." He strolled across my living room as if he belonged there. But he didn't. He had taken enough from me. I wasn't about to give him more.

"Joe Andrews, the detective in charge, wants to meet with you." I dropped the sacks on

the table and moved into the room. I didn't have a lot of choice, since it was my place.

"Did he find the idea amusing?" His eyes were on me, staring too deeply. What other allowances did our shared blood bring? There should be a manual somewhere. Maybe I'd write one. Secrets to vampirism.

"Will you meet him?" I asked.

"He is your lover, is he not?" Malcolm slid gracefully onto the couch and motioned me over. Spider to the fly.

"Ex. And that's none of your business." I leaned against the back of the chair.

"Everything that concerns you is my business, Lucinda."

"How do you know about me and Joe?" I didn't really want to know, but if I planned to sleep at all tonight, I needed the answer.

"I shared your memories when I drank from you. Your blood, your very essence is such sweet nectar. There will be a time when I drink my fill. You can deny what is between us, but that will not change it."

"The only thing between us is a small percentage of blood cells." I said it as if it was nothing, as if it didn't creep me out. Just thinking about part of him inside me was more than I could take. Best not to dwell on it. The straight jackets came in my size.

"The strongest bond there is."

No, love was. But I didn't argue the details. Even love, I'd learned, had breaking points.

"Will you meet with Joe or not?" My patience was growing thin. I was the victim of a robbery, still facing the thief who had stolen my blood, my memories, and Joe. That last one really made me cranky.

"Yes. You'll wear the black dress. As well as the feminine under-things in the bag," he added with a grin that seemed to say he had won and he knew it.

"Like hell I will." I jerked upright.

"Your choice, as in all things." His smile didn't fool me.

"I'll call Joe, see if he can arrange to meet tonight." I moved toward the phone.

"As my choice is to not meet with your ex-lover without you by my side."

"I'll be there." I had to be. This was my little red wagon, after all.

"Wearing appropriate attire as befits my escort. The dress."

"Men are bastards, dead or alive," I muttered, and then cursed when he laughed.

* * * *

The meeting was set for midnight at the castle. Malcolm was flamboyant but no one could argue his style.

I wore the black dress and had to admit I looked good in it. I liked to think it was my own idea, but I knew better. Easier to have Malcolm on my good side, if such a thing is possible.

Joe arrived ten minutes early. Always on time, that's my Joe. Just having him in the room made me feel better. Which is crazy, since I would do better in a fight here than he would.

I felt his eyes scan me slowly and wondered what was behind his scowl. I had brushed my black hair until it shined, then pulled it up. The ringlets of curls that brushed my shoulders were a romantic whim.

I had had Joe in mind when I had picked out the dress and wondered if he approved. The material of the full skirt danced around my ankles, the sleeves of lace ended in a V at my wrists. The front was form fitting, showing my figure without losing modesty. I had applied my makeup to complement my midnight eyes. I looked good, damn it, and resented the lack of appreciation from Joe. It never dawned on me his scowl might be for the cozy setting he'd walked into.

Refreshments were offered, but Joe accepted only coffee. My stomach was too jumpy for anything. The crystal decanter with its thick burgundy liquid was starting to look too tempting to me, and I figured I would turn before the dawn broke. Great. I just wanted to get away from this place before it happened.

I had spent too much time in Malcolm's company. His blood called to mine--or rather to that part of me I had gained from him. It was too strong to fight.

It seemed to grow worse with nearness, so I stood and moved to the fireplace, putting distance between us. I felt my blood began to warm again.

Since this was my idea, I assumed it was my show.

"We're here to discuss details of a joint security task force."

"I didn't realize all parties had agreed," Joe said, turning his eyes to Malcolm in question.

"Everyone is here. I assume that to mean we are all in accord," Malcolm replied.

"I'm not convinced this is a good idea," Joe said, and I fought the urge to strangle him.

"Nor am I," Malcolm agreed.

"Then we're wasting our time. I'll let myself out." I was tired of their game. It was like having two bulldogs fighting over the same bitch in heat. And I so did not like *that* analogy.

“Are you always the impatient one?” Malcolm stood to block my exit. I walked around his tall form.

“Yes.” Joe tried to hide his smile behind his cup, but Malcolm didn’t miss a thing.

“That’s right, you two are...were intimately acquainted.” Malcolm knew where to throw the darts.

Joe’s smile fell. I wanted to tell him I hadn’t divulged that information, but I didn’t. I could see it didn’t matter.

“That business has no place here. If you want to talk about security, I’m listening.” Joe slid his cup onto the small table.

“I assume you would be in charge of the living’s security over us,” Malcolm started.

Joe nodded.

“And I would be over yours?”

“Seems fair.” Joe’s eyes never left Malcolm. If these two were going to be in charge, the plan was doomed. The lack of trust between them was too obvious.

“Then Lucinda would coordinate the operation.”

“I don’t want her anywhere near this.” Joe was still ignoring the fact that I was even in the room. Talk about childish.

“I work security all of the time, Joe.”

“Not this time,” he snapped. Improvement. He might not see me, but at least he was hearing me.

“My agreement is based on Lucinda’s involvement. I trust her. I do not, however, trust you.” My biggest enemy in the world was defending me to Joe.

“The Memphis Police department will provide the security for everyone. I don’t need your involvement.”

“No. One side cannot control this. There must be a level of vulnerability. Why would we put ourselves at your mercy?” Malcolm added angrily.

“Look children. It needs to be coordinated through my office, and you both know it. I’m the impartial party. And I’m the one who can speak for everyone without daylight restrictions.”

“Choose your men. I want to have a meeting with all involved. I don’t want any misunderstandings.” Joe stood. “I’ll take you home.” Oh, sure, *now* he decided to look directly at me.

"I will see to Lucinda's return."

"I said I would take her home. I want to make sure she reaches it safely." Joe was holding his temper, but I could tell the hold was precarious.

"Do you doubt my ability to protect her? If so, how do you expect me to protect you?" Malcolm's voice was condescending.

"Let's get one thing straight." I walked in between them. "I don't need anyone protecting me." I turned to Malcolm. "Especially you."

I had had enough. I picked up my purse and made it to the door before either of them noticed. They weren't trying to protect me, but their own egos.

"Where in the hell do you think you're going?" Joe's demand didn't slow me, much.

"Home. The same way I got here, in my own car. I don't need two oversized egos fighting over who gets to protect the little woman." I heard Joe's curses as he followed me out.

"I'll follow you home."

"Suit yourself." I watched his eyes fall back to the castle.

"So you're with him now." Was that regret in his voice? I almost wished it was. I might even have cared if he hadn't just insulted me. How could a man who knew everything about me, a man I had slept beside every night for two years, actually think I would get involved with Malcolm? If that didn't just tell me how hopeless a relationship between us was.

"No. I'm not with anybody. And it wouldn't be your concern if I was."

"There's something between you. I felt it. He wants you." I cared about Joe, always would. The weariness in his voice softened me. He had a tendency to throw himself into a case, even to the extent of forgetting to take proper care of himself. Was there someone to make sure he ate when he should, sleep when he needed it? I hoped he had that, yet couldn't stand the thought of another woman in his life--caring about him, being cared about by him.

"He wants my blood," I corrected. There was nothing to gain from discussing this tonight. Like Joe, I was bone tired.

"It's illegal to bite you." It was a statement only a cop would make. As if because it was law, it was as good as done.

"Didn't stop him before." I made it to my car, but his hand on my arm stopped me. I turned back to look at him. Moonlight couldn't soften the tightness around his mouth.

"He's the one?" The anger in his voice stopped any smart remark I might have made. He

really didn't know. And how could he? I had never told him.

"Who turned me? Yeah." I sighed, and rubbed at the ache forming behind my temples. You would think since I was capable of self-healing, I would not have to deal with headaches anymore. The problem was, in my human form I wasn't able to heal even the smallest of injuries. And pain relievers had little effect on me. "What you feel between us is my intense dislike for him and his frustration over failing to turn me." I didn't want to use the word hate. If Joe and Malcolm were going to work together, I didn't need to create more animosity between them. But it was only fair that Joe know the score. Or at least all of the players.

"He wanted to kill you." He grabbed my other arm, turned me to him. His hands bit into my arms, not painfully, but forcefully enough.

"No. He wanted to turn me. And he considers the job unfinished."

"He's dangerous. I want you to stay away from him." He pulled me close, too close. His scent filled my head, went straight to my need for him. There is nothing like the smell of Joe. Woodsy, fresh and all male.

"He can't take the risk of biting me again."

"If he touches you, I'll kill him. I might kill him anyway for what he has already done." His hold tightened, but with my newfound strength, I could handle it. Even if I did have bruises tomorrow to show for it.

"It would be murder. He's not worth it. We can't undo what he's done. And I can protect myself from him." I hoped. "He can't finish the job unless I agree." I was reasonably sure of that.

"How in the hell do you expect me to work with him, knowing he's the one who did this to you?" He leaned his forehead against mine. His breath was hot on my skin. "God, Lindy, how can you stand to let him near you?"

I tried to pull away, but he held tightly. I pulled my head back.

"I can separate personal from business. I don't have a choice. People are dying. More will, if we don't stop this."

"It's my job, let me handle it."

"That's just it, it's my job too."

"Tracking down killers is for the police. You are a liaison for the vampires, not their damn personal police force."

"I'm not chasing down killers. I'm standing on the fence, trying like hell to help both

sides find the answers we all need.”

Joe reached out and tucked a stray curl behind my ear. Goosebumps ran up my arm when I saw his eyes soften. There had been a time when I would have given anything to have Joe look at me with those eyes. But not anymore. I was smarter than that. And if I could convince myself it was the truth, maybe I could finally get over the man.

“Would you allow him to touch you?”

“I’ve got enough vamp in me as it is. I don’t want more.”

“But his blood flows in you. There’s a connection between you two, even if it’s one you would rather deny.” I didn’t understand the anger that filled his voice. If he could even ask such a thing, it only explained why our relationship was done and over. If anyone should be angry, it was me.

“Yeah, there’s a connection. It doesn’t mean anything. After all, we had one once.” I waited for him to speak, but no words came. “Goodnight, Joe.” I pulled from him and this time he let me go.

I saw his headlights drive away after I pulled into my drive. It would have been easy to invite him in and fall into his arms. I wanted him, more than I cared to admit. I had always felt lovable in those strong arms, had believed they would be there to hold me forever. I should have known from experience that love never lasted.

I never knew my father. And I hadn’t been enough to keep my mother clean and sober. She died when I was twelve and the state sent me to live at St. Peter’s orphanage. I had thought the only place they existed were in old movies until that day. But the nuns had been good to me, and I had eventually made some friends.

But I had never felt loved until Joe. That he could throw something so special away so easily had torn me apart. Sure, I still loved him. Enough to invite him in to stay. Even if I wasn’t afraid he’d refuse, I wouldn’t. It was over for Joe and me. It had died with the other half of me that night in the Big Easy.

I washed my face, pulled on my worn flannel gown, and crawled into bed.

Chapter Three

I opened my eyes and knew the moment Malcolm's blood flowing in me had won the fight against my own. My body felt cool, sensitive. His blood brought a chill to mine, even on the warmest of nights. The air from the ceiling fan brought a tingle to my skin. No matter how many times I turn, it always amazes me that my own body can feel so alive. As if all the nerve endings are exposed. The slightest brush of wind, the faintest scent comes alive.

Which explains my obsession with sex at times like this. The dream I'd been having about Joe had brought about my turning, but my turning wanted to make that dream a reality. I could get myself in real trouble.

I was restored, rested after only two hours of sleep, but the night called to me like a long-lost lover. Like Joe. I sauntered from my bed, stripped off my gown, and stepped into the shower. I loved the feel of water cascading down my body. Each cool drop pulsed against my skin, tingling energy. I pulled the black dress I had left draped over the foot of my bed over my head and reveled in the caress it gave my body as it slid into place. I wanted the feel of the cloth against my skin, a sensual caress with each movement.

I brushed my hair into a shimmer of night and applied mascara to eyes that glowed a hint of red back at me in the mirror.

I didn't have a destination in mind, but it mattered little. The vampire in me needed the night surrounding me as desperately as my human side needed air.

Doc says everything has a scientific explanation. A virus creates vampires. The virus is passed one of two ways. Drinking their blood is a surefire way. But that seems to be asking for all kinds of trouble anyway.

The second way is a bit more complicated. When vampires bite, they immediately deaden the bite with a chemical, a natural painkiller of sorts. This is pumped into the victim through a cavity in the fang. Makes the experience more pleasant for the victim, and the fight a lot less.

Once the area is numb, the vamp can drink his fill. Unfortunately, the fluid also contains

the virus. Normally one bite does not provide enough of the virus to cause a change. Hence, the three bite rule. You must be bitten three times before you can turn. This provides enough of the virus in the blood stream to mutate the cells. Doesn't explain what happened to me. One bite-- and I did not drink his blood. I would have remembered that.

Vampires don't hypnotize. Sure, they can blur the memory a bit and command with their voice, but it's not the same as hypnotizing. But then, they don't have to. Vampires are gorgeous. If you were going to spend an eternity looking at someone, wouldn't you pick perfection? Again, doesn't explain me, but who can?

As for the rest, it gets a little strange. Doc tries to come up with answers where sometimes there just aren't any.

Me? Well, I don't like the mystical, scary stuff that can't be explained, so I deny it.

Like the fact that my cravings are increasing. More often and more intense. The virus is growing. Simple. So why does it flare up when Malcolm is around? Blood can't really call to blood, can it?

I looked up and found myself standing in front of the only place open I'd be welcomed at this hour.

The Cave was more than a bar. Owned by vampires, it was the only place in town that catered to the desires of the undead. Blood was offered by type, fresh or aged. The problem with my unpredictable turning, it makes blood delivery nearly impossible. I can't predict when I might need it, and the waste of such a needed thing prevents me from having it delivered nightly. There is a shelf life. So, I have to find it when I turn. The Cave is an easy solution, and they know me there. How sad is that?

The music ranged from smoky blues to ear-popping rock. Tonight, luck was with me. Soul was on the menu. As I let the sound of Otis Redding ease through me, I made my way to the bar. The place was crowded.

What went on here was between consenting adults and stayed within the walls. There was a room for every fantasy. Though vamps could ease their hunger with readily available blood, nothing could quench their thirst for feeding. Sometimes fangs just need to sink into flesh.

Biting humans was legal if consenting, and this was the place to find them. It amazed me what kinky little oddities some humans leaned toward. There was also the option of other vampires. It was a rush between trusting vamps, sometimes exchanging powers in the process.

And the blood from another vampire gave extra strength.

I guess the risk added to the fulfillment. A vamp could drain another dry, and until the blood was replenished, it was agony. Didn't sound like fun to me, but what did I know?

Heads turned my way as I drank my first glass. They could smell me. Going dead wasn't the same for me as it was for them. Doc had explained my body went into a sort of hibernation mode. My temperature dropped down to the forties and to a vamp that was warm. My heart and other organs just took a sort of rest, but didn't cease altogether. By human standards, I was dead. To vamps, I was alive. This made me not only a meal, but also a legal one. Not a safe place to be in a bar surrounded by hungry feeders, but I still had to consent. And they all knew that wasn't going to happen. It wasn't the first time I had stumbled in here after midnight trying to ease a craving I couldn't name.

I knew the moment Malcolm approached me that he was near. I turned and found my hand clasped in his. I followed him to his private table in back.

After the fate of the last master, Malcolm kept guards. I slid into the bench across from him without words.

He caressed the inside of my wrist, making my blood pump faster. I knew he noticed the veins at my neck. "Come upstairs with me, Lucinda. I can ease that pain."

He knew I had a need so deep it hurt. "No."

"It would be good between us." I felt my pulse race. It would be good, but the cost would be too high.

"I'm afraid." I found it odd that I had spoken the truth so easily. I mean, admitting your weakness to someone looking for one can't be a smart move.

"I would not harm you." No, I wouldn't feel a thing as he drained the life out of me.

"It's not the pain I fear." Not that pain was something I enjoyed. It just wasn't a big factor for me now that I knew it couldn't kill me.

"Then what keeps you from your greatest desire?"

"Devouring myself." I could easily give in to the burning need and follow Malcolm upstairs. He could assuage every desire I felt tonight. But tomorrow when I woke, who would I be? What my vampire needed was not what the woman in me needed. If I gave into it now, I was afraid the Lindy I knew would no longer exist.

"We were meant to be one." I just couldn't believe my fate could suck that badly.

“No.” I shouldn’t have come. The temptation was too great. It had been too long this time. And now that I wasn’t with Joe, the need for sexual release was with me even when I was in human form. I would find someone for a one-night stand if I thought it would help, but I knew it wouldn’t.

I didn’t need the physical act half as much as I need the emotional one. And the only one I wanted was Joe.

I stood and fled like a frightened child who’d just found the monster under the cover. But I couldn’t outrun this monster. It was in me.

I don’t know how long I walked the city, fought the demons inside me. Nothing would ease the pain, the need. Defeated, I stood before the wooden door and knocked. When Joe answered, he wore nothing but his hastily adorned pants and that sleep-filled sexy look in his eyes.

I couldn’t have turned away if I’d wanted to. His chest was bare. I drank in the mound of muscle on his arms, across his massive chest. The cut of his waist disappeared inside well-worn jeans. The top two buttons were open. Good lord. Even his feet were bare.

The punch of need hit me hard, nearly knocked me to my knees. Not a bad position to be in, if I’m in front of Joe.

My eyes dropped to his crotch, and I knew two things from the bulge. He wanted me as much as I wanted him, and he hadn’t bothered to put on his briefs. I licked my lips and my mouth watered.

“I need you,” I whispered, defeated. All of the fight in me was gone. It had been too long between turnings, too much time spent in Malcolm’s presence. And too long without Joe.

He didn’t say a word. He knew instinctively what I needed. He picked me up and carried me to his bed. It was the bed we had once shared together.

Our clothes were shed in record time. I knew his need was as desperate as mine. Nothing mattered, not the wide expanse of the world that was keeping us apart, not the angry words spoken at the end. Nothing but his hands on my skin, my hands on his.

My skin tingled, the nerves beneath jumped as he trailed his hands over my breast. Tiny flames leapt when he lowered his head and swirled his tongue around my nipple. When he took it in his mouth, I cried out from the pain of needing him so deeply.

Even before I had turned vampire, Joe had been able to play my body with just the right

stroke.

He bit the hard peak, then soothed the ache with his tongue. He started to suck, gently at first, then increasing the pull until I started to beg. He knew that was the one thing that drove me to madness. No one would ever understand my body's needs like him.

We danced as one, our steps perfected from practice together. His hand stroked my hip, ran up my spine.

My body begged, matched my words as I pleaded for him to end the torture. Joe entered me in one hard stroke. I needed that, the wild abandon. Like two primitive animals fighting for nature's way.

There was nothing slow and soft about our joining. I followed his pounding pace, as skin slapped against skin. The scent of our joining drifted to me. Primitive. Hot.

After so long apart, neither of us could stop the frantic pace. He leaned over me, his tongue lapping at my sweat-slicked body like a man dying of thirst.

I couldn't think, could do no more than feel as he continued his thrust inside me.

Joe filled me up completely. Every inch of his hard erection slid against my inner walls, driving me beyond sanity. He shouldn't be able to last so long. His stamina had always amazed me.

I screamed his name when release finally came, and felt him follow me over as wave after wave of aftershocks rippled through me. I clenched around him tightly, milking every last drop.

We lay exhausted covered in sweat. No lights had been turned on and only the sound of our breathing filled the room.

"Thank you. It had been too long and I couldn't control it this time."

"I should be thanking you." His arms tightened around me as he rolled onto his back, bringing me to rest on that perfect spot on his chest. My hand automatically reached across his chest, rubbing the soft hair. I felt the tears sting my eyes as mascara bled, but fought them back before one could fall. "Let me turn on a light, and we'll talk."

"No." There was nothing to say that hadn't been said. Nothing that would change the bitter truth. "Look, we both know this doesn't change anything. It can't. I'm still the monster in your eyes."

"Lindy--"

“Let me finish. I need to say this. Tonight, well, I almost did something I couldn’t have lived with.” I thought about Malcolm and fear hit me hard. If I was going to make a gigantic mistake, it would be with Joe. Never with Malcolm. “You saved me from that. I love you, Joe. I think I always will. But we’re not good for each other anymore. I can’t change what I’ve become and you can’t change that you hate the thing I am.” I swallowed back the tears again, nearly choking on the lump that slid down my throat. “Give us tonight. Leave the lights off and hold me. Forget I’m what you despise, and let me forget.”

“I could never despise you, Lindy. I--“

“No. Tomorrow will come soon enough, and you’ll see me for what I am. Give me tonight, Joe.”

“Okay, sweetheart.”

Morning came soon enough, but Joe woke alone. Cursing myself as a coward, I snuck out in the hours before dawn. After a perfect night in his arms, I didn’t want to see the knowledge in his eyes that he had made a mistake.

I refused to allow myself time during the day to wallow. Joe and I were consenting adults, and we had made a decision to enjoy each other for one night. I would stand by that decision and face the consequences.

* * * *

“Don’t ever do that to me again.” I knew Joe would be at the castle for the meeting, and I had tried to prepare myself for his anger. But the minute I had stepped from my car, he had been there ready to pounce. As if he had been waiting on me to arrive. I knew better. It was just my rotten luck.

“I’m sorry, Joe. I shouldn’t have showed up last night. It was just... There’s no excuse.” What could I say, that I loved him, craved him? I pretty much said that last night. Yeah, it had been sex that I wanted, but sex with him was what I’d needed.

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it. Don’t ever sneak out on me before daybreak like somebody who just paid for sex.”

“You’re calling me cheap?” I stopped, daring him to admit it.

“No. I’m saying that’s the way you made me feel this morning when I woke up alone. Like I had been used.”

Shit, hadn’t that been exactly what I had done? Used Joe, knowing I would walk away

come daylight.

“That was the last thing I wanted. I just thought it would be easier.” I stepped back from him to lean against my car, sliding my hands behind me. I had the nagging urge to wrap my arms around him, try to make up for the rotten way I’d made him feel. If it wouldn’t just make him feel worse later, I’d probably give in.

“Easier on who?”

“Both of us. I know how you feel about me--” He stood in front of me, his hands fisted at his side. The anger rushing through him was so strong, I could almost feel the waves of energy from it.

“Don’t tell me what I feel, Lindy.” He turned his eyes from me, but I still saw the disgust directed my way. Well, that made two of us who were disgusted with me.

“Do you deny your hatred for--what did you call them?--the devils revenge? That’s what I am now. A scourge sent by the devil.”

“Damn it, Lindy, it’s so easy for you.” His anger caused his voice to rise.

“Easy? You couldn’t even deal with me becoming part vampire. How in the hell do you think I live with it?” My voice rose, squealing as the blood raced through me. “You think this is easy for me? God, I don’t even recognize my own life. For a year now, I’ve tried to start over. Do you know what that’s like? The career I spent years preparing for vanished overnight. I was forced to leave my home by narrow-minded neighbors who didn’t want my kind near their kids. My friends disappeared one by one, and the man that I cared about turned away from me in disgust.”

“Sweetheart.” He reached for me, and it almost did me in.

“Don’t. I mean it, Joe. I don’t want your pity. It does me no good. I have a life again, such as it is. If it disappoints you, get over it. I have.

“I have a business, a job that I’m good at. People might not like what I am, but they sure as hell call me when things go to shit. I learned a hard lesson, but I won’t forget it. People don’t stand beside you when you need them.” I brushed past him, started to pace as his eyes followed me. “Well, I don’t need anyone. I can take care of myself.”

“I didn’t walk out on you, Lindy. You did the walking.” He said flatly.

“You were already gone, Joe. All I had was your shell.”

“You’re wrong. You had my heart. You just wouldn’t fight for it. For us. Instead, you

ran.” He stuck his hands in the pockets of his well-worn jeans.

“You wouldn’t have been able to stay with me.” Had I been the one to run? That time in my life was a blur to me. A nightmare of broken dreams and constant cravings. I wasn’t sure anymore if he had walked, or I had been the one to run.

“We’ll never know, will we? Yes, I had a hard time accepting things, but you didn’t give me time. You had little faith in me.”

“You would have ended up hating me.” Like I had hated myself at the time. I had seen the loathing on Joe’s face every time vampires were mentioned. I had tried to hide all of the signs of my turning from him. It had worked for a while, until the night I had turned while making love to him. In shock, he had pushed me away.

“I’ve spent the last year hating you for leaving. I don’t have any hate left.” It hurt all over again to hear him admit it.

“So where does that leave us? We have to work together. Can’t we at least be friends?” Could I be only friends with him? I would take whatever scrap of his life I could get. And wasn’t that just depressing.

“Sure. We’ll be friends. We’ll speak on the street, send Christmas cards. Now there’s a meeting we’re late for.”

He turned and left me standing on the drive. I watched him enter without me and had never felt so alone.

I needed a minute by myself to clear my head. Or rather, my eyes. I didn’t want my emotions high when I walked into that room with other men’s tension filling it. And I certainly didn’t want wet eyes. Men always associated a woman’s tears with weakness. It wasn’t true. Crying washed away weakness, leaving strength behind.

I crossed to the porch and then dropped down on the stone steps. I wouldn’t cry. I had never been promised the fairy-tale life, so how could this one be so disappointing? I had no expectations in life. It was hard work for little reward, but the only choice I had was to play the scenes until it was done.

I heard the pop and felt the pain in my chest. I hurt, Lord I hurt. The force knocked me flat on my back. I stayed there, looking up at the ceiling of the porch. There had been a scream on impact, but it never occurred to me it had come from me.

Joe was there. I don’t know how, but I was looking into his beautiful gray eyes. Damn,

but I loved his eyes. Last night it had been too dark to see those gorgeous eyes of his.

“Don’t move.”

My hand reached up to caress his jaw. He needed to shave, his five o’clock shadow prickling my fingers.

“Hurts.” Talking hurt almost as much as breathing.

“I know, sweetheart.” I could see fear in his eyes. Anger, concern. I lowered my hand to my chest and when it came away slick, I knew. I had been shot. Shit. This day was turning into a contender for the worst one yet.

“Call an ambulance!” Joe shouted.

“There is no time.” Malcolm was there, standing over Joe. I couldn’t see his features that were cast in shadows, but I knew the voice. “It’s a chest wound, and it’s not a hospital that she needs. She has lost too much blood to make the trip. There is only one way for her to survive.”

“Do it,” Joe demanded.

“I cannot. Only she can save herself. She must turn.” Malcolm sighed, the words heavy.

“I can’t.” My words came out as a whisper.

“Damn it, Lindy, do whatever it takes to save your life.”

“I can’t,” I repeated, louder this time though the effort hurt like hell.

“Only you can choose. You die tonight, or you stay to fight again.” Malcolm made it sound so easy. Like what, I wouldn’t turn into a freaking werewolf if that would stop the pain?

“I don’t know how,” I snapped, and it cost me to admit it. I had never changed at will, never had any control over it.

“You must control the beast, or it will control you.” Malcolm told me, as if that made any sense. So far, it had done one heck of a job controlling me.

“How?” I managed to ask.

“Stop fighting it. Bring her inside.”

Tender arms lifted me. Joe. I was too weak to put my arms around his neck. Turning my head to his chest, I inhaled the familiar scent.

They were all there. Humans and vampires standing side by side, watching me. Their eyes told me clearly that they didn’t expect me to survive.

“We’ll get them, Joe,” someone said and murmurs of agreement filled the room. Great, they would avenge my death. It was something I guess, but at the moment, it was a lot less than

what I needed. I needed major painkillers and Doc.

Joe carried me down dark stairs, placed me on a bed of red silk. My blood wouldn't leave stains.

"Look at me, Lucinda," Malcolm commanded, and I obeyed. "Feel the beast, let him free."

"I'm trying but..." I looked at Joe. I couldn't turn in front of him again, let him see the monster I was. It was stupid. I was dying, and Joe no longer loved me. But he was blocking me, preventing me from turning. "Go away, Joe."

"I'm not leaving you." He took my hand, and held tightly.

I looked back at Malcolm and let the truth show in my eyes.

"She cannot do this thing while you watch," Malcolm said as the truth dawned on him.

Joe dropped my hand and turned his back to me.

"There is little time. I can bite you, turn you--"

"No!" I saw Joe turn and take a step toward Malcolm.

"Then follow my words." Malcolm put my hand to his neck. I could feel the blood pumping. "Feel my blood, hear it call to you. Answer it, love. Come to me.

"Smell the blood, sweet, metallic. You can taste it. Warm, life sustaining. Come, my love."

I could feel my heart slowing, my body grow cool. Was I dying? I wanted to taste his blood. Wanted to feel it slide down my throat, warm, sweet. I reached for him.

I could feel the change coming over me, and instinct had me fighting it. I didn't want this, damn it. Never wanted the change to happen.

My heart rate increased, pounding in my chest. My breathing doubled, tripled as I struggled for more air, the panic robbing me.

And then I felt my heart beat change. The signal it had begun. One beat so fierce, my body jerked with it. I waited for the next. I knew it wouldn't beat again for three minutes. I had timed it once. But subconsciously, I waited. Hoped this time it would be different. Prayed it would be. It was the longest three minutes of my life.

I knew it would come. It always comes. Nevertheless, waiting for that lone beat terrified me.

The next one was softer, weaker. My fingertips and toes were cold. I felt it spread

through me. I took another breath, my last one for who knew how long. Maybe forever. My lungs stopped. I closed my eyes and waited. I was so tired. Dying takes too much out of me. Yet, there is no peace that comes with mine. Five minutes after the last beat, I felt the faint beat. Also my last. Check my vitals now and I would have been all but dead.

It has always amazed me that my body can recover from such an ordeal. My skin began to tingle. I knew Malcolm's blood was awakening and flowing through my body. I no longer was tired but felt invigorated. I felt my fangs cut through my gums. A vampire's teeth do not grow. Contrary to today's myth, my fangs were separate and come from the front side of my gums. It hurts, that slicing of skin. But thanks to the vampire blood that was now filling me, I could handle the pain.

I felt the last of my body die, but no longer cared. The night was alive and calling to me. Nothing else mattered. My senses intensified. I could see clearly in the dark and knew I would be able to hear conversations thought to be private behind locked doors. I inhaled deeply. Not for the air, but for the smell of the night. Sweet, erotic. The wind across my skin would squeeze a moan from my lips, caressing, teasing my body until I burned for a touch. I would feel invincible, beautiful, and sexy. I would feel like the night.

But there was no night around me. The walls surrounding me kept it out.

The pain had eased until it was no more.

I felt my senses sharpen. My body come alive. Malcolm was there, offering his neck to me. I had not drank from his blood after he had bitten me, and was still paying a price anyway. I didn't care. I reached for him, but Joe was there. He pushed Malcolm back a step and lowered himself to the bed next to me.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't bite Joe. I pulled from him, shook my head.

"You need fresh blood, sweetheart, not the aged stuff. Let me give it to you." I saw no condemnation in his eyes.

"No." We both knew I couldn't turn him. I was only half vampire and didn't have enough of the bacteria in me to turn him if I bit him. Still, I couldn't do it.

He took the choice from me when he took out his pocketknife and sliced a cut along his arm. The blood flowed freely, reached my senses. He held his arm to my mouth, and I drank greedily. I couldn't meet his eyes as his sweet essence ran down my throat. Nothing had ever quenched my thirst like the powerful taste of Joe.

Malcolm pulled Joe back before I drank too much. Wouldn't want to drain him. With one craving satisfied, I felt the second one hit me. Hard. I pulled back, looked into Joe's eyes. His were watching me, unreadable.

I knew my eyes glowed red, as my body glowed. I was undeniably beautiful. Weren't all vampires? I reached for him.

When he pulled back, it didn't deter me.

"No, Lindy. Not here, not now." His voice was rough.

"I need you, Joe." I crawled across the bed on all fours, after his retreating form. I pushed his chest until he was flat on his back. I straddled him, crawled the length of him letting my body drag against his strong, stiff form. I reached for his arm, licked the wound. The taste drove me closer to the edge before the trickle of blood stopped. But I was through with his blood. He had something else I wanted now.

"There's no time. The men are upstairs waiting." Did his voice sound thick? Yeah, I was sure I was getting to him.

"There's time." My fingers slid down the front of his shirt, popping buttons. I loved the sound. His chest was tan from years of sunlight, thick from years of labor. Just a dusting of pale hair circled each nipple and as I peeled his shirt back, my tongue circled each peak. I nipped, just a small bite without drawing blood before my hand slid lower.

I found the waistband of his jeans and popped the first two buttons, then slid my hand inside. He still wore cotton briefs. I could picture him in them, his hard erection straining to get out. I found what I was searching for and closed my hand around him.

I loved the smooth feel of the skin, the way it pulsed in my hand. Velvet soft, hard as steel. My mouth watered. I wanted to feel the head of it slide over my lips, swirl my tongue around slowly until my mouth was filled with him.

Another button on his fly popped before he grabbed my hand.

"Fuck." His deep raspy voice sent a shiver through me, increasing my need.

"I'm trying to."

"We can't." My hand was locked beneath his, still holding his erection tightly. Proving that we could.

"I've got to. I have to feel you inside me. I'll die Joe, I swear, if I can't slide your dick home and come apart around it."

“Shit, Lindy.” He released my hands and pulled my shirt over my head. Yes. I had won. Finally. I could almost taste him. Sweat and sex, as his dick would slide in and out of my mouth.

“Good God.” His hands slipped beneath my bra, circled my breast, squeezed just the way I liked it. Joe always knew just the way I liked it. Not soft, teasing caresses but full-blown fire.

“No need to be crude,” Malcolm said.

I could have killed him. Pulled that artery right out of his freaking neck. One word, and Joe remembered we weren’t alone. He jerked from me, rose from the bed.

“Joe.” I’d beg. If I had too, I’d do it.

“This isn’t the place, Lindy. Not the time.”

“I am afraid Lucinda is correct. The time must be taken. She cannot enter a room full of men without satisfying this need. She will awaken the beast in every vampire and some of the men will not be as able as you are to control their blood lust.

“As sorry for it as I am, detective, someone must see to her needs. If you cannot, then I will take it upon myself.”

Funny, Malcolm didn’t look sorry about it at all to me.

“Like hell. Touch her and you’re dead.” Since he had been dead for centuries, it wasn’t much of a threat.

When a woman entered carrying a small bundle, Malcolm spoke softly to her before turning back to me.

“Joe.” My voice pleaded with him.

“Ah, so that is the way of it then. Very well. Tonight, I bow to you. But know this. There will be a night when she will come to me of her own will. She will be mine.”

Malcolm crossed the room to the door. “I have taken the liberty of having a bath drawn and fresh clothes laid out”--he pointed to a door just as the woman came out--“there. Do not dally overlong. We will await you upstairs.”

“I’m going to kill that bastard one of these days,” Joe stated coldly as he pointed to the bathroom door, and like a good little girl, I obeyed. He knew better than to touch me until we were alone.

He locked the door and leaned against it while I pulled the blood-soaked clothes from me. I dropped them on the floor, sure it wasn’t the first time Malcolm had had blood on his Italian marble.

I rubbed my hand over my breast, amazed no hint of the wound remained. I had healed minor wounds before but nothing of this magnitude. I felt Joe's eyes follow my movements and felt the quickening between my thighs. Stepping into the tub, I soaped my hands, lingered on my breast, paying special attention to my nipples.

I had been afraid my turning would repulse Joe. But from the lust in those darkening gray eyes, he was far from it.

My hair had been spared the blood, so I concentrated on washing my body. Thoroughly, enticingly slow.

His eyes burned a trail across my skin, as they followed my every move. It only encouraged me more.

I stood, water cascading down my body. My hands followed the trail. Down across my breast, lower over my stomach, stopping at my thighs.

When I moved toward the one place I burned for a touch, I heard Joe's sharp intake of breath. My finger moved over my clit, slow and easy. I looked up, my eyes locking with his. His echoed with the same need.

When I stepped from the tub, Joe was there. But he didn't hand me a towel. Instead, he grabbed me, shoved me onto the cool marble vanity.

It wasn't my need that had him entering me with such force, but his own. I wrapped my legs around his waist, curled my fingers around the edge of the marble and met his demanding thrusts.

This was what I wanted, what I needed. This and only this. Joe. No one could make me feel more alive, more complete than this man.

The marble was cool beneath me, a soothing contrast to the heat of my skin. I lay back against it, Joe wrapping my legs around his neck. It forced him deeper inside me.

He leaned down over me, his hands on my shoulder, locking me against him as his punishing hips slapped against me. I wanted more of him, all of him. I wanted him buried so deep that he'd be lost inside me. Lost without me.

The grinding pace pushed me over much too quickly. His fingers dug into my legs as he followed me over.

Sex had never been our problem and wasn't our answer. But when he was buried deep within me, the questions no longer mattered.

Chapter Four

We entered the main room some time later. Joe's hand rested protectively against my lower back. Malcolm's fancy white shirt did little to hide my still aroused breasts, but my bra had been ruined. Bullet holes and blood will do that.

I had tied the blue swath of silk around my hips in a wrap-around skirt fashion. With each step, it caressed my legs.

We had cooled the beast but not driven it away completely. My eyes showed a hint of red, and my fangs had retracted to the size of my other teeth but remained dangerously sharp. It wouldn't take much to call the beast back, but it was tame enough to keep it from awakening the others.

As I entered the room, I bit my lip to stop the laughter that threatened to escape. No one was in the mood for humor. It shouldn't have been funny. And I definitely shouldn't have allowed that laugh to escape, if the dirty looks I received were an indication. The heads that snapped at my giggle confirmed that. But never had I seen such a contradiction in men.

Vamps were seated on the left, dressed in their finery. Cool silks, flowing lace, and plenty of leather. Vampires dress for flare. Cops were seated on the right of the table facing them, dressed in rough denim and wrinkled cotton. Flare was the last thing these men cared about. Both sides seemed braced for a fight.

They sat staring, mistrusting, across a conference table that could have graced any large corporation boardroom.

Malcolm sat on the left with his men, next to the head of the table. Joe took the seat opposite him, to the right. This left only the head chair for me. Meant I was in charge. Was this my lucky day or what?

Ten sets of eyes followed my movements as I dropped gracefully into the chair.

I'm not the best speaker. I don't have time for niceties and figured these guys were in no mood to hear them. So, I dove right in.

“As you can tell, I’m not dead.” Oops. Poor choice of words. “Or no more than usual. Before we begin, its only fair to point out that being on this task force is not going to be good for your health. Obviously word has gotten out, as proven by the hit on me earlier. I have enemies, but none have ever wanted me dead. So we must assume we all might become targets. And while some of us are harder to kill, we can all die.”

“I disagree that we all are in danger. We are but soldiers. You are the force that brings us together. Remove you, they remove the alliance.” Malcolm said.

“Okay. So I’m the only one they want dead,” I snapped.

“Possibly,” Malcolm said as he inclined his head to me.

“Great. My day just gets better. Lets assume, for my sanity, that they’re pissed off at all of us and not just me. Everyone must choose to put their life in jeopardy--”

“There are no cowards here,” one of the vampires said, as if I had just insulted the whole lot of them.

No cowards. Wanna bet? I knew of one standing before them right then. “Okay. So, we’re all going to do this.

“You men at this table are on opposite sides. It is evident by the seating arrangement. I understand this. You’ve been enemies in the past. But if we are to beat this, it stops here. The man next to you, across from you is now your partner. Joe and Malcolm have hand picked each of you because you are up to the challenge. We will work together, side by side, or we will fail.

“As you know, we have a nut case out there. He killed Surgis, and as of this morning another has been staked out at dawn.” From the collective gasp, most hadn’t heard this news. Obviously, Malcolm had told Joe after his phone call to me this morning since he didn’t appear to be one of the shocked ones.

“There is a human we need to find, a lunatic we need to kill, and retaliation we need to stop. Since this is Joe’s area of expertise, I’ll let him take over. He’ll lay out the plan for added security.

“But before I do, let me say that I’m here to help both sides become one. Everyone knows where to find me if they need me. Malcolm and Joe will be in charge of the different shifts.”

I turned to Joe as I took my seat and listened to him as he laid out the details. It took a bit of time to work them out with Malcolm and the men. Guarding the vampires would be fairly

simple. Most stayed in groups, living in community housing similar to the castle. A few strategically placed men would serve well.

The humans were not so convenient in their living arrangements. Spread out over the city as they were, night patrols were the best that could be offered.

But even with so little security, the humans' protection was almost guaranteed. One word from the Master and humans would be off limits. To go against Malcolm's command was a death wish. And they didn't die slowly.

Joe finished up, and then it was my floor again. I hated to approach the next subject, but someone had to do it. And I was the one in the head seat tonight.

"I'm not a detective, and I don't claim to be. I'll leave that up to you guys. But everyone here has contacts and can ask questions. The more asked, the better chance we have of getting the right answers."

I hesitated, gathering courage. There was a path my brain had been following all afternoon, and I wanted to hear their opinion. They weren't going to like it, but I wasn't here for a popularity contest. Besides, everyone knew I'd lose hands down.

"I'd like to run something by you guys, get your take on it. We're assuming a human staked Surgis. We have no proof and all of this is assumption. I'm not disputing this. I'm just playing the what-if game.

"What if it wasn't a human?"

"Are you suggesting Surgis was killed by one of his own? That is absurd." Rena was the only other female at this meeting, but it was easy to see why she had been chosen. Her body was lean, toned to deadly precision. And she had an attitude to match.

I had heard of her. She was the only other vampire in town, other than Malcolm, to pass the five hundred year mark. She had belonged to Surgis, though there was doubt as to who belonged to whom. Surgis might have been her master, but she was treated with respect due one her age. Or maybe she had just grown too strong to control. It explained what she was doing at the table.

Few had her powers. Had it been possible for a female to head the clan, she might even have been Master instead of Malcolm. I decided to give her a wide berth.

"Maybe. But hear me out. Surgis was starved when he was found. How? We know he'd eaten just after dusk. There were witnesses to this and means it wasn't lack of feeding that

starved him. That would indicate blood loss.”

“Someone cut him then,” Detective Johnson offered.

I shook my head. “Surgis was not a rookie. He would have healed a single wound long before the blood loss would have starved him.”

“Multiple wounds would bleed out quickly,” the detective suggested.

“Yes, but would he stand by while someone cut him up?”

“No,” Malcolm said. His agreement encouraged me to continue.

“Blood sharing. If he were drained, he would be starving and weak. It would be in line with the condition of the body when he was found. The autopsy report I received from Doc indicated the body was all but empty.” My friend Doc performed all autopsies on the vampires. The mayor figured it would help him in his research, and let's face it, nobody else wanted the job. In the five years that Doc had played coroner to the dead, he had performed two. Shows how big of a job it was.

“There would be a great amount of trust for that to happen.”

“Exactly. And another thing. Most people believe what they see in old movies. What does a stake through the heart do to a vampire?”

“Kills.” This came from one of the cops.

“See? Most humans believe that. But it's not true. It immobilizes the victim until the stake is removed. Eventually, their blood supply would be used up trying to heal the wound.”

“Could that have happened?”

“Doc doesn't think so. A young man maybe, but Surgis was powerful and his healing abilities extraordinary. He was strong. He could have removed the stake himself.”

“Unless he was too weak,” Joe said.

“Exactly. Same goes for binding him to stakes in the yard, waiting for sunrise.”

“He would never have allowed it to happen had he been able to fight,” Malcolm confirmed.

“Which means he was weak from the start, or trusted someone completely.”

“So it was one of us,” Malcolm said what everyone thought, but was afraid to say. I could hear defeat in his voice and something a lot more dangerous.

“I'm saying it could be. My point is we don't need to center this investigation on one certain type. We don't know what we're dealing with, and we need to keep an open mind. To go

out searching for a certain race will limit our chances of success.”

“There would be marks on his neck.” Rena just couldn’t let it go. I didn’t blame her. No one wanted to believe their own was capable of such an act. I knew from experience everyone was.

“Doc says marks can be made from fangs or just made to look like fangs using thin hose. There was too much damage from the sun to find any. They wouldn’t prove a thing. We need to look for motive. This could be a hate crime, but what else? Who had problems with Surgis, who stood to gain?”

“That would seem to be me,” Malcolm replied.

“Great. Case solved. Where were you Tuesday night?”

“You can not be serious. I will not stand for your insults to the master.”

Just what I wanted, a pissed-off vampire more powerful than ten combined.

“It is okay, Rena. Lucinda has a point; none of us are above suspicion. I was at the Cave, which can be verified.”

“See how easy that was? We can mark one off our list, after we’ve checked it out. We need to check everyone. No one is above question, not even me.

“Another thing. Jackson was Surgis’s man. Maybe he knew something, or maybe he was killed for the same reason. Either way, there is a connection.”

We assigned tasks for everyone and agreed to meet in a few days to compare notes. The meeting ended with hardly a problem, unlike the beginning. Being shot seems a problem to me.

“I’ll drive you home.” Joe was close behind me as I readied to leave.

“Thanks, but I’ve got my car.”

“You almost died tonight.” There was no anger in his words this time, just resignation.

“She will be protected, as she is staying here. I can protect her better against the humans.”

“In case you weren’t listening in there, we don’t know for sure it’s a human we’re after. What if it’s one of you?”

“I can protect her against anyone. No one would dare harm her here under my protection.”

“They didn’t seem to mind shooting her on your porch, did they? She’s coming home with me. Damned if she’s staying here alone with you.”

“Geez, no wonder I don’t date. Listen to you two. You sound like a couple of high school hormones, fighting over the newest piece of ass. If you would like my opinion, I think it would make more sense for me to stay here.” I felt Joe stiffen but had to ignore it. This was not personal, this was my job. “Whether a vamp is the one doing the killing or not, so far they are the only ones being killed. I need to stay close to it. This is where it’s happening. I won’t be any good to anyone tucked away in some cozy little house across town where nothing is going on.”

“You’re not staying here with him alone.”

I gave Joe my best try-me glare but I could tell it had little effect on him. “Your men will be here on duty.”

“Only during daylight hours. At night, you would be without other humans around.”

I didn’t have the heart to remind him I wasn’t exactly human myself anymore.

“I’ll stay as well.” From his sigh, I knew he wasn’t happy about it.

“Oh yeah. One big happy family,” I mumbled. Okay, I’ll admit there was a time in my life when I wanted to live with Joe. Sharing the third floor in the relic castle with vamps sleeping in the basement wasn’t my idea of co-habiting.

The fact that all other residents were dead to the world half of the time made it a little too cozy for me, and a little too creepy. Good thing we both had jobs to do and a life.

Only thing was, our jobs and our life seemed to lead down the same path lately. So, we ended up partners, so to speak. Not my idea of avoiding the forbidden fruit.

* * * *

It only took a few days to settle into a routine. Joe and I beat the bushes in the day, and Malcolm joined us at night. By the end of the first week, we had nothing new. And another human had gone missing.

This one was certainly more worthy of Surgis. Tim Dunlund owned a large portion of Memphis, literally. His buildings housed some of the largest corporations in town. The mayor was unglued and screaming down my neck. It was one thing to kidnap a nobody, but Memphis’ best-known millionaires couldn’t start disappearing. We just don’t have that many to spare even one. And this one was well known for his contributions to St. Jude Children’s Hospital.

Anyone involved with St. Jude carries an elevated status in Memphis. Everyone’s heart broke over the children in pain. Dunlund was on the board.

I knew it was likely retaliation for Jackson, the second vampire staked. He’d been Surgis’

right hand man but was only a babe in vamp years. It would have been easy to get the upper hand on him. I wondered when the human bodies would start stacking up.

The weekly task force meeting brought little news, and I decided to stop by Doc's afterward, Joe in tow. I hadn't been able to shake him all week, and he was getting to me.

As usual, Doc seemed glad to see me. I knew it wasn't because of my weekly blood donation. Okay, not entirely anyway.

He was a lonely old man, though he never took time to notice. Buried in his work, he seemed oblivious to the way he was shunned by most of his own colleagues. Everyone knew his work was important and applauded his effort. But they didn't trust a man who'd made studying the makeup of vampires his lifelong career.

"Lindy, honey, come in. Come in. I see you brought that man of yours along. Good to see you, Joe." Doc pushed his bifocals up the bridge of his nose and looked around the room as a frown creased his brow.

"Nowhere to sit," he said.

That was an understatement. Papers, tubes and fast food boxes littered every space.

I hopped onto the counter and Joe leaned next to me. Satisfied his guests' needs were met, Doc continued.

"I've found it, Lindy." His eyes sparkled.

"The answer to cancer?"

"What? Oh, no."

"Isn't that what you've been working on? A way to fight cancer cells?"

"I am. Was. However, I've discovered something else quite by accident. I know how to rid your body of Malcolm's cells."

I slid from the counter slowly, my eyes locked on Doc's. I couldn't get my hopes up again, not until I heard the details.

"It's so simple, really. Course, there are risks. But I believe we can minimize those."

"From the beginning, please."

"Of course, sorry dear. You know the leukocytes outnumber the erythrocytes in the blood of a vampire. The basophile excretes a substance--"

"English, Doc," Joe pleaded.

Doc looked lost as he stared at Joe, as if English were unknown to him.

“The white blood cells outnumber the red in vampire blood,” I translated.

“Yes. Yes. Actually, the red are near non-existent, since the vampire needs no oxygen. They have an increased level of lymphocytes.”

“The part of our immune system that produces antibodies to fight viruses, bacteria, invading forces,” I added.

“Our immune system cannot attack the cells of its own body in an autoimmune reaction or it damages the organism and leads to death.”

“What does this have to do with Lindy?”

Doc waved his hand toward Joe. “I’m getting to that. When the bacteria entered Lindy’s system, it increased her white blood cells. Normally, a high count would indicate infection. However, her count has remained high for a year, and still she remains healthy. This causes her ability to heal quickly.

“The transfusion I administered immediately after she was infected saved her red cells. As long as the body receives oxygen and can process it, it can live. She has only a small part of the bacteria in her. We need to kill the bacteria that attached itself to the blood she received from Malcolm.

“Usually blood cells clone to fight a virus. But Lindy’s blood cells and Malcolm’s have remained separate. This is good news. If we can destroy Malcolm’s cells without destroying hers, she will be cured.”

“When Lindy’s cells are dominant, she remains unturned. When the bacteria rise, or flare up, Malcolm’s cells are the dominant ones. She turns.”

“Which explains my urges. I mimic Malcolm.” Thank goodness, there was a reasonable explanation. A scientific one. That his blood calls to mine is just a little too creepy.

“Of course. His blood controls you at such times. Not your brain, of course, only your body’s reaction to the blood reaching your organs, your brain. Your neurological system is taken over by the virus.”

“So how do we kill Malcolm’s cells without killing my own?”

“I have been studying the latest victims’ cells. It is rare to be able to study a deceased vampire—they so rarely die. It seems a dying vampire’s cells attack their own as part of the dying process. Highly unusual. They seem to turn against themselves. If we injected the cells into Lindy, they would attack Malcolm’s cells, as they would recognize them as their own. Her own

cells may even turn against these foreign cells then.”

“Are you saying the blood cells you have would do it?” Joe asked.

Doc frowned. “No, they’re already dead. And they don’t match the cells you have. The match must be perfect.”

“So only Malcolm’s blood will do.” Perfect. Somehow, I didn’t think Malcolm was going to offer to kill himself just to give me blood before he died.

“Yes. And there is a narrow window of time, a fine line between the cells trying to heal and when they turn against their own. They kill quickly before all cells are dead.”

“So Malcolm must die. Not a problem,” Joe said.

I shuddered at the coldness in Joe’s words. I’d thought it, but didn’t say it aloud. Makes me the nicer person, huh?

“So we inject the killer cells from Malcolm into Lindy and they kill the bad cells.”

Leave it to Joe to simplify things.

“What prevents them from turning on Lindy after they’ve finished?”

“I don’t think they will.”

“But you can’t be sure.”

“No. Normally I would test my theory. Check for errors. However, this is a one-chance proposition. Once Malcolm’s cells start to attack there will not be time for tests. And since there is no other like our Lindy, no preliminary tests can be performed.”

“So she’s a test case. Too risky. You need to remove the risk, or you’ll have to keep looking for another way,” Joe announced, as if it was his decision to make.

“Hold on one damn minute. It’s my life, my risk and it’s my decision. I say we go for it.” Okay, I felt a little guilty. I’d just signed Malcolm’s death warrant. There had been a time once when I would have killed him myself. But I felt differently about it, about all of the vampires. I understood them. Hell, I was them. “Is there a way to mimic death, instead of actually doing it?”

“You got a problem killing Malcolm?” Joe challenged.

“I’ve got a problem killing any person.”

“You’re in luck then. Malcolm’s not a person.”

I found it best to ignore that. Vampires were infected humans. Was it their need to feed, to preserve their own life that made them the monster? Did the level of red blood cells in my veins make me so different?

Living people hated the vampires because they feared becoming one. In fact, they were all just one parasite invasion from it.

“I honestly don’t know, Lindy. Once the cells turn, there must be a way to stop them. Otherwise, vamps would be easier to kill.”

“What’s the best way to kill Malcolm and preserve the cells?” Joe skipped right to the heart of it.

“Sunlight burns them up too quickly. Starvation would do it, but it’s a long process. Then the body goes into a dried hibernation mode. Fresh blood restores them.”

“Could I starve, have my own cells turn on me, then add human blood to bring me back?”

“No. Damages the organs beyond repair. You are half human. You would kill the human in you. All that would remain would be Malcolm’s blood.

“Scratch that idea. That’s the side I’m not real fond of.”

“You can only kill the cells once the death process has started. It would be easier to bring a vamp out of that than someone who is part human.”

“Oh, so we’re trying to save the vamp now?” Joe stepped away from me and started to pace.

“Don’t be hateful.”

“I just want to make sure I’m up on this.” He stopped and turned to face me. “First, I get to kill him, and then I have to save him.”

“We’re doctors, we save lives.”

“Lives?”

“Yes. No matter what form they are.”

Chapter Five

It was just after dark when we walked into the castle. All the boys would be awake. Yippee.

I dropped onto the sofa, my feet aching after hours on them. Everyone in the room looked like they'd slept like the dead. Ha.

"A message was delivered for you. We have detained the messenger in case you have need to question him further." Malcolm strolled into the room, looking as fresh as ever. Once, just once, I'd like to see the man rumped and dirty.

I took the rolled parchment from his hands. Who uses this stuff anymore? I unrolled it and stared at the words.

"Is this written in blood?" I shrieked a little too loudly. Okay, the sight of blood probably shouldn't freak me out so much. But whose life is as centered around the stuff as mine was? Unless I was craving it, I just didn't want it to be so important in my life. When I was hungry, nothing looked more appealing.

Malcolm leaned over my shoulder and sniffed the paper. "It would appear so."

"Yuck." I fought the urge to throw it down. That would make me look like a sissy and while I'll admit to being a girl, I refuse to be a sissy.

Joe was suddenly beside me, all cop.

"Fingerprints, don't touch it."

"Your men have already dusted it. It lacked any evidence," Malcolm announced smoothly.

"Doc can tell us if it is human, animal, or vamp blood." I could have sworn Malcolm rolled his eyes. But it would have been beneath him, so I scratched the idea.

I passed the paper to his outstretched hand. His tongue flicked over the dried blood.

"Human. Male, between twenty and thirty years of age. Relatively healthy, light drinker."

"Well, that was attractive." My stomach rolled, and human or vampire, I swore off eating

in the near future. Malcolm's brow rose, obviously amused.

I took back my little note to see what someone felt important enough to write in blood.

"You have been warned once, now twice. There will be no third." I looked up and tried to smile, but even I knew I failed miserably. "Goody. You think that means they're giving up?"

No one laughed. This was one hard crowd. I gave up all pretenses of being strong and sturdy, said my goodnights, and stomped off to my room. It was barely nine o'clock. Seemed late enough to me, and I'd had my fill for one day of murder, threats and blood.

* * * *

Joe was waiting for me when I stepped from my room the next morning. I had insisted on separate rooms, even though I knew we'd probably just end up sleeping in one bed.

But at least with separate rooms, I had a place to hide out.

His eyes moved slowly down my body, but I couldn't read whether he approved. I was dressed in a skirt for a meeting with the mayor. His office had called wanting an update. I had offered to email him one. He suggested that we compromise, meaning I did what he wanted.

Joe's eyes stopped at my feet, and I wondered if he liked my bright red toenail polish.

"You didn't wear"--Joe pointed to my feet--"those before."

"Fuck-me heels?" Crude, I know, but there just wasn't a better description for the four-inch heels with the thin straps. There had been a time when I hadn't owned anything above a two-inch heel, and those had only been worn on special occasions. The truth was, I'd developed an odd appreciation of shoes lately and had a closet full to prove it. Nothing made a woman feel more womanly than a pair of sleek heels.

I couldn't tell if Joe approved of my new style, but it had certainly grabbed his attention.

"Shit, your mouth, Lindy." He cringed, leaning against the doorframe to his room.

I raised my brows at the apparent irony of his words. "My language has always been gutter. But I've never heard words like that from you."

I started down the stairs and he fell in step beside me. "I never wore the heels because I was on my feet at the hospital. They weren't practical." I chose to answer the first question and ignore the second.

"Everything about you has changed."

Why did I get the feeling that wasn't a compliment? "Why? Because my clothes are different? Because my mouth's a little harsher?" I turned at the bottom of the stairs and went into

the kitchen. It was the one place we were assured privacy. No one else in this house had probably even been in the room.

Joe and I had stopped at the market and stocked the place, mostly for the guys working shifts here. “Maybe I’m not the same. I was naïve once. I lived in my small, safe little world. And when that world crumbled, I metamorphosed. Change with the world or be crushed by it.”

I found the coffee filters, added coffee and water to the pot, then waited on the one craving I had carried with me even after Malcolm took a bite out of me. I leaned against the counter, mimicking Joe’s pose.

“I’m not locked into anyone’s rules but my own. If I’m a little rougher now, not the sweet, gullible little girl I once was, then be proud. It means I just might survive in this world. It’s a lot tougher than the glass house I lived in before.” I tried to keep my voice light, since I didn’t want to start my day fighting with him. But it was hard. “I won’t mourn the loss of the little girl.” I didn’t need to. I had mourned her a year ago.

“I didn’t say you should. Takes some getting used to, but I like who you’ve become,” Joe said.

“I didn’t ask for your approval.” That I wanted it really pissed me off. There had been a time when his approval had meant too much to me. I wasn’t ready to give him or anyone else that kind of power again.

“I noticed.”

“What do you want from me?” I rubbed my eyes, tired and weary. I needed a few hours, a couple of days, by myself. Away from constant turmoil.

“There was a time getting you back into my bed meant back in my life.”

“I can separate the two,” I said.

“Can you? Pity, I can’t. I want you, Lindy.” How long had I waited to hear those words from him, to know he meant them? I couldn’t trust that he meant them now.

I filled two mugs with coffee, passed one to him. We both took it black and strong. Another thing we had shared. The scene was a little too familiar for me. How many times had we shuffled into that rustic kitchen in Joe’s ranch house, after making love all night long? I’d start the coffee, and we would pet around on each other while it brewed. Joe never could make a decent cup of coffee.

Those mornings had been some of my favorite times. When early morning sunlight

shined through the picture window, warming the room while we warmed each other.

Had those times meant so little to him that he could just toss them away? Damn him and his prejudices.

“Check back with me tonight.” It was a shitty thing to say, but I was feeling pretty shitty at the moment.

“Damn it, I’m not talking about just sex. I want you in my life. Completely.” If only he did. It really pissed me off the way he reached for me one minute, then pushed me away in the next. I wasn’t some damn toy to pick up and play with, then toss aside when he was finished playing.

“You can’t have me, Joe. Not anymore. I won’t accept a man who can’t accept me as is. I deserve better.”

“Yes. I guess you do.” His eyes looked away.

“You want me now, but when the excitement wears off and we get back to everyday life, I’m still what you hate most.”

“Doc’s cure might come through.” He didn’t bother to deny it. I felt my heart break.

“Yes. But it won’t help us.” And he’d never get that. Love didn’t attach addendums. I loved Joe no matter what, that he couldn’t say the same said it all.

“I need to get to the precinct this morning, fill the captain in on what’s going on.” He was suddenly restless, as if he remembered that he needed to be somewhere else.

“Okay. I have some work at the office to take care of after I meet with the mayor. I’ll see you back here later.”

“I don’t think so.” Joe stepped through the door, scanned the living room. “St. John, you’re with Lindy today.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t need a sitter.” I followed him through the door.

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t need anyone. Just because some psycho is sending you threats written in blood, why should you change now?”

I watched him storm off, stop to talk to St. John before he walked out.

Detective St. John approached me carefully. “Looks like I caught a break in partners today.”

“What did he say to you?” I took another sip from the mug, trying to ignore my stomach

as it rolled. I hated bickering with Joe.

“Not much.” I hadn’t really expected him to tell me. Cops stood by each other, even when it came to women. Or maybe especially when it came to women.

“Huh. Why don’t you hang with Erickson today? I’ll be safely tucked inside my house.” It was worth a shot, although I knew it wouldn’t work. These guys obeyed Joe, no questions asked.

“Can’t do. Joe said if you ditched me, I’d have a career as a crossing guard at the elementary school. Besides, I sent Erickson after Joe. His rule, remember? Can’t go around alone.”

I fought a smile and lost. “Good move.”

“Thanks.” He nodded.

“Did it ever occur to you that I should be protecting you? I can take a bullet, a knife, and beat you in a fight.”

“Sure it did.” His grin was schoolboy wicked. “So protect me, baby.”

I laughed. St. John could always make me laugh.

“You know, none of us are invincible, Lindy. Not even you.”

So much for laughter.

* * * *

I had almost made it through the day without incident when the call came in. I grabbed my purse and headed out. After dropping my partner for the day at the station, I headed toward Joe’s office. For someone I had been able to avoid for almost a year, Joe was popping up much too often.

He was lost behind a mound of paperwork that looked dangerously close to falling to the floor.

“Peter Caldwell is missing,” I said.

He looked up as I entered the room.

“Who’s Peter Caldwell?” He stopped in mid motion, as if he could deal with me quickly and get back to what he was writing. Boy, was he wrong.

“An eighteen year old kid who thought being a vampire would solve his problems in life.” I dropped into the chair.

“Stupid kid.”

“Yeah.” I blew at the loose strands of hair that fell across my face. “He’s been missing two weeks.” Joe didn’t seem happy to hear that news. I could relate. I’d had about the same reaction when I’d heard. He didn’t bother asking how I knew before he did, him being the cop. Vampires didn’t report crimes to the police. Ever. They had a code to handle their own. Most of them didn’t trust cops.

“And we’re just now hearing about it?” He dropped the pencil on his desk, ran his fingers through his hair. My fingers itched to follow that same path.

“Had a fight with his girlfriend. She just realized he hadn’t been ducking out on her but was really missing.”

“His body should have shown up by now, if he’s a victim.”

“Yeah. We have no idea how long he’s been missing, but it doesn’t appear any humans have paid for his disappearance.” So far, the missing vampires had turned up at first light. The humans still hadn’t turned up at all.

“Maybe because his disappearance hasn’t been made public or because he hasn’t been murdered. Think he’s our guy?” Joe asked.

“My gut tells me no, but none of this makes any sense.”

“You know him?” He leaned back in his chair, crossed his ankles on the desk.

“He came in to talk to me before he made his decision to change.”

“And you couldn’t change his mind?” His eyes narrowed, as if he didn’t believe me.

“I tried, damn it. His girlfriend had been bitten back in the day, and he thought he couldn’t live without her.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Did you tell him women were everywhere? Damn, he could have just found a girlfriend that was actually breathing.”

I blinked, and it felt like he’d just slapped me. I tried to recover before he caught on, but he knew he’d hurt me. Well, screw him. I was a big girl.

“Yes, actually I did. Though I hope I did it with a little more finesse. But he seemed to think love really mattered. Like you said, stupid kid.”

Joe cursed as he dropped his feet to the floor. “Maybe he found out the truth after he’d ruined his life for her and he snapped. Or maybe she just dropped him cold, not believing in him enough to give him a chance.” We both knew he was talking about us, not two kids he didn’t know. “Shit, eighteen years old. Can’t even buy beer, and he can consent to becoming a

bloodsucker.”

“He’s grown, legal to vote.” I didn’t know why I was arguing with him, since I agreed with what he was saying.

“You’re condoning his decision?”

“No, just accepting that it was his to make.” I stood, and tucked another stray hair behind my ears. I had meant to pull it up this morning, but other things had interrupted. With the heat and humidity, it’d grow six inches before night fell.

“I’m on my way to see his girlfriend. Thought you might want to tag along. If you’re too busy, I can give you an update later.”

When he shook his head and followed me to the door, I called myself ten kinds of fool for making the offer.

Chapter Six

Angel Henson, Peter's girlfriend, worked on Beale Street. It had been a while since I'd been down there and the changes astounded me.

Beale was like a chameleon, ever changing on the outside but locked into itself on the inside. I could say the same for me.

I had seen the pictures of the many faces of Beale. In the late eighteen hundreds its casual atmosphere had been a mecca for freed slaves, with its muddy cobblestone streets, gamblers, prostitution and murder. I'd heard the stories about Little Ora, the best pickpocket in the south, and Mary the Wonder, who could offer her voodoo protections for a price. There had been the castle of missing men, the Monarch, where a man could walk in the front door and be carried out the back by the undertaker that shared the back alley.

Mosquitos had nearly destroyed the city back then. Cholera and yellow fever epidemics had killed or ran off over half the population, much as they had six years ago when they swooped in with the West Nile Virus. Guess we owed the vampires something for saving it.

It had survived a hundred years, to be reborn again. The rundown, desolate area had given birth to the blues. This was a time-weathered street that grew old--and not always gracefully.

However, no one could doubt its ability to survive. Humans hadn't given up the street just because the vampires had moved in. It was the one area of the city where all cultures, all races mingled. This street had seen enough segregation.

The atmosphere never changed--loose and free, with a mysterious magic that hung in the air. I could see why the vamps loved it. It felt ancient, other worldly, with secrets of its own.

Angel worked at Silky Sullivan's. Last time I'd been to Silky's it had been down on the square. Shows how much I get out these days.

Silky had moved the best with them. I made my way through the crowd and took a deep breath once I was on the terrace. It was hot, thick, humid southern air, just the way my lungs

preferred it.

Angel was dressed in the usual uniform of short black shorts, white shirt, and black bow tie. Not unique, as it was the uniform just about everywhere around here. She was cute, in an eerie sort of way. It seemed strange for a waitress to have fangs, but the girl had to make a living. Turning didn't come with a pot of gold, as I'm proof of. I doubted she'd find one working at Silky's.

"Angel? Why don't you take a break? We have a few questions we'd like to ask you about Peter. Detective Andrews is with the MPD, and I work for Vampire Affairs."

"Have you found him?" I saw hope fill her eyes.

"Not yet. Let's grab a table under that tree. We've cleared it with your boss."

"Sure, okay. My feet could use a rest."

"Do you have any idea where Peter might be?" She shook her head, still clinging to that hope. I didn't want to be the lucky one who had to take it from her.

"We had a fight. You don't know how screwed up my life is. I'm a freakin' vampire."

"I'm Lindy Campbell. Ever heard of me?" It's not my ego talking. I'm somewhat of a legend around here. One of a kind, usually hated by both sides. Seems someone is always bitching about me. Makes you known.

"Sure, you're the Vamp-hum. So, you like know what I'm talking about. How do you keep it from driving you crazy?"

I didn't pretend to not understand the question.

"Sure, it sucks. Just remember to never lose sight of yourself. No matter what anyone has done to you, you're still you. You just have a different lifestyle."

Her smile was sad, her eyes showing weariness much too old for someone barely on the verge of life. "Peter said you were cool. You pissed him off, trying to talk him out of that lame idea of his."

"It didn't work," I said.

"No, but for what it's worth, I couldn't change his mind either. But I couldn't do it. Turn him I mean. He found someone else to bite him. Now we're both lost souls. How could he think that's what I wanted for him?" Her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"He loves you," I said softly.

"And I love him. That's why I, like, freaked when he turned on purpose. I mean, we'll be

together forever, and that's pretty cool." She rubbed her eyes before the tears could fall.

"He worked so hard to put himself through Med School," Angel added.

"Doctor?" I asked.

"Yeah. He's an intern at St. Jude's. Was, anyway. No way they're gonna let him work in the lab now."

I knew how much that sucked. "What did he do there?"

"Worked with cell regeneration, if you can believe it." Angel's eyes filled. "He just threw it all away. Can you believe it?"

I couldn't. I had lost the same life as Peter, but I'd had no choice. No way would I have given it up voluntarily.

"He made his choice, which is more than you had," Joe added.

"My moaning won't help Peter. What do you need from me?" She slipped off her heels, and I fought the urge to join her.

"Does he have any enemies, Miss Henson?" Joe asked.

"No. Everyone loves Peter."

"Had he been upset lately?" I asked.

"We've been fighting a lot lately, about his turning." She shrugged, as if at a loss.

"Other than that?" I asked.

"No. When he was upset, he would go down to the river, watch the barges. I shouldn't have waited two weeks. My pride wouldn't let me call him. I thought he was just trying to make me crazy, like only a man can. You know?"

My eyes drifted to Joe automatically. "Yeah, I know."

I thanked her for her help and promised to call her if we found out anything. The way it was looking, I wouldn't be making that call any time soon.

"That's the second time I've heard St. Jude mentioned in connection with this case. Think it's a coincidence?" We stepped out into the hot summer humidity, and I could feel the air growing heavy.

Joe shook his head. "I might, if Larry Brown hadn't worked security there."

I slid behind the wheel. "They do a lot of work with blood diseases. Could be they stumbled onto something, or maybe someone wanted to take a short cut on research."

It was late when we returned to the castle. I wanted a hot bath, wine, and food.

What I found instead was chaos, attitude, and Rena.

She was lounging on the settee, posing for the room in a sheer, floor-length negligee. All eyes followed her every move as she lifted the delicately detailed goblet to her mouth. That she was sipping blood didn't seem to matter to the humans in the room.

"Stop toying with them, Rena." I snapped. My feet hurt, I was developing a headache and I was feeling a little sorry for myself after my talk with Angel. Nothing like a big fat reminder of just how screwed up your life is to bring a girl down.

"I'm bored." Rena slid the empty goblet onto the table and rose. I saw her intent as she glided toward Joe, and every muscle I had tightened. I'd need that hot bath before this was over just to stand erect.

"I need something a little more appealing to play with." She stopped in front of Joe and ran long red nails through his hair. I was mad at him, I reminded myself. He had been a real shit in his office, and even though he hadn't meant to hurt me, he hadn't apologized.

Rena was beautiful. In a way that made men stupid and women crazy. Fortunately, I was neither stupid nor crazy.

"This one is not so easy to tame." She practically purred.

"He won't consent to being bitten." Wasn't my problem, but I thought I'd give her the facts.

"Biting is not what I had in mind."

Did Joe need protecting? Did I have the right to step in and slap this hussy straight? When her hands slid to his open collar, I didn't care if jealously led me. I'd follow. Follow her straight to hell if those fingers went any lower.

"He's not for you." I tried to keep my tone light, unconcerned.

"Is he for you?" She turned her eyes to me, studying me carefully.

"That doesn't concern you. All you need to know is he's off limits." I ignored Joe's raised brows. Let him gloat. I should just stay out of it. Let him get into the trouble he was asking for. He was pissing me off anyway, allowing her to rub herself against him. But you didn't go around playing with a vamp fatale. Not unless your intentions were to see it through.

"That makes it all the more exciting, don't you agree?" Her hand slid lower, heading straight for his button fly. Joe stood stock still, no expression on his face. But his eyes were locked on me.

“I won’t tell you twice.” I stepped forward into their private space.

“Should he not decide for himself?” Rena complained.

I could feel her power rising, though the smile never left those blood-red lips. I could force the issue and end up in a catfight over Joe.

I knew Malcolm wouldn’t allow her to kill me. He wanted that pleasure for himself. And while any damage she could do to me might be uncomfortable, I would heal. For Joe, I’d do it.

I looked at Joe, waiting. My hand itched to slap the smile from his face when it appeared. He was finding this amusing, at my expense. I was actually willing to take physical pain for him, the jerk. Screw him.

“He’s a big boy, knock yourself out.” It felt good to watch his smile fall. I don’t do the jealous little woman well. And it rubbed, that I was sleeping with him but still didn’t have the right to be jealous. There had been a time once, when I would not have hesitated to slap any woman who had the nerve to rub herself against him in my presence. It was a matter of pride.

But that wasn’t the case any longer. I had made it clear that sex was all that was between us. Besides, Joe didn’t seem to be in a hurry to stop the woman and her roaming hands.

I crossed to the bar and poured a vodka and cranberry. I needed something more substantial than wine tonight. As I added ice, Malcolm approached. His long graceful fingers slid down my arm, leaving little goose bumps behind. Great, maybe I would turn and we could get a foursome going. I turned up my glass and drained it.

“How was your meeting, love?” I hated when Malcolm called me that. I turned to tell him just that when I felt Rena’s eyes burning into my back. Well, wasn’t this interesting? Could it be our little vamp had a thing for the master?

“Fine.” I made me another drink, this one to go. “I’m going upstairs, Malcolm.” I’d had about all I could take for one night. If Joe wanted to hang out with the vamps, I sure as hell wasn’t going to stop him.

“I’ll walk with you.” Malcolm purred.

“I know the way.” But I didn’t complain when he followed me toward the stairs on the far wall.

“You’re tired. I’ll have a bath drawn for you and food sent up.”

I chuckled. “You’re from another era, Malcolm.”

“Yes.” He stiffened. For some reason I couldn’t explain, I didn’t want to leave it as an

insult, when I hadn't intended it as one.

"It was a good era. I often said I would have liked to live in that time." A time when men had cherished women. Even the staunchest feminist couldn't find any negative in that.

"You would have been most welcomed. It would be simple to live in future times, Lucinda. Maybe you could find one that is as equally pleasing."

He was escorting me up the stairs, his hand on my elbow.

"Not so simple, Malcolm. My time is here."

"Time is what you make of it, love."

"Don't call me that, please. You know we can never be more than friends." I wasn't completely convinced we could be even that, but at least I was trying.

"Can't we?" I felt his eyes on me.

"No." I couldn't help but wonder, had I met him in another time, under other circumstances, would things have been different?

"You are still in love with him," he said.

"Who?"

He eyed me with an amused tolerance. If I couldn't even fool him, how in the hell was I supposed to fool myself?

He bowed regally at my door and I smiled. "I'll see to my own bath Malcolm, but thanks for the conversation." Oddly enough, I meant it. He had taken my mind off Joe and for a moment, I had even been able to relax around him.

I took my drink into the bathroom and filled the water in the oversized tub to the top. Malcolm might have his flaws but taste wasn't one of them. The tub was the size of my bathroom at home and any girl's dream. I added lavender from the crystal bottle setting on the ledge.

As I soaked in the steamy water, my mind wandered to the room downstairs. Was Joe still there, with Rena?

I had had sex with Joe twice in two weeks. It was more than I'd had in a year. It should have been enough.

But I felt more starved than ever. I wanted him to hold me, utter those loving words while he made love to me. To the real me. Not because I needed to assuage some lust craving of Malcolm's, but because he wanted me.

He wouldn't turn me down if I needed him as a vampire. Would he turn me down if I needed him to make love to me? He could turn off his feelings long enough to have wild sex with me. But could he turn them off while making love to me? That was what I needed, the emotional connection.

I felt as if he were cheating on me with me. Am I losing it or what?

And then the man walked into the room, as if I had conjured him up just by wishing him there.

"Lost? Rena's room is down the hall." I picked up the sponge and squeezed water down my arms, ignoring him.

"Jealous?" He leaned against the wall, his stance anything but relaxed. His eyes followed the drops of water as they slid down my arms.

"Of course not. She's not your type. She's a vampire, a bloodsucker."

"Seems I'm not adverse to having sex with them."

I felt my face burn. "Them. You mean because you've been sleeping with me?"

"We haven't been sleeping, babe."

He was in a mood, as his sarcasm made evident. He had no reason to be hurt or angry as far as I was concerned. "Get out. I'm not here for your sexual urges. Go find Rena."

"No, I'm here for yours. We fuck only when you need me to assuage some lust craving brought on by Malcolm's blood, is that it?" He didn't raise his voice, but it vibrated with anger. As if he had reason to be mad at me, when he'd been the one to let another woman hang all over him.

"Let me bathe in peace. Go find your little slut downstairs. I don't need your charity fuck." I tossed the sponge into the water and slid lower until my head rested against the edge. Closing my eyes as if blocking him from sight would make him disappear.

"No, Malcolm will be happy to take care of that for you." He stepped toward the tub, his hands fisted at his side. My eyes opened, then widened.

"What'd you do, drop your sure thing to run up here and see if I was getting lucky?" I asked.

Candlelight flickered around the room, casting shadows that faded quickly. As Joe took a step toward me, I saw the look on his face. Rage. "Back off, Joe. I mean it, don't make me hurt you." I stood, dripping water, just in case I needed to defend myself. Joe had never tried to hurt

me before, but I had never seen him so angry with me.

“Too late for that.” He reached for me. I could have fought him. Should have. But what was the point? We both knew I wanted it. I felt his anger die, the minute I was in his arms. He was lifting me, carrying me to the bed. How many times had he carried me to our bed over the years we had been together? No use dreaming about the past, when the present was pressing against my stomach.

As he pressed into the mattress beside me, his fingers trailed slowly down my face, my neck, stopping on my stomach. His mouth covered mine, but not with the strength of the other two times. This time Joe was slow, feather light. His thumb traced my jaw as his tongue slowly made love to my mouth. He moved lower, covering my breast as his tongue traced lazy circles around my nipple. Fire raced through me as my body came to life.

And then I realized what he was doing. He was making love to me, making me open my heart and feel. This wasn't what I needed. It might be exactly what I wanted, but want had no place here. I wanted it all with Joe. The fairytale. Kids, dogs, forever after. What I could have was sex.

I didn't want to taste slow, sensual love only to be denied when my heart fell for him again. Didn't want my heart involved at all. I wanted fast, hot sex. The kind where you couldn't think.

I reached for him, trying to drive him faster. “Hurry Joe.” I was ready for him, more than ready.

“We've got all night.” He murmured against my skin as his tongue continued on its slow meandering path. “Slow down just a bit.”

His soft caresses stirred too much in me, too many memories. Of long nights making love while the rain beat against the window. Of Sunday mornings, staying in bed to make love until noon. Of laying on the couch, just kissing for hours. I didn't want to be reminded of those times. All they would do is make me need him again. Make me feel as if I would die without him. Make me feel, damn it. I couldn't fall for Joe again, because the next time I lost him, it would surely kill me.

I rolled him over, straddled him, and then slid over him in one quick move. I closed tightly around his hardness, savored the feeling of our bodies connected for only a heartbeat before I started moving at a frenzied pace.

I closed my eyes against the disappointment I saw in his eyes. The minute he gave himself up to the ecstasy of our bodies, he rolled me over and took control, driving us harder. It was over quickly. Exhausted, I closed my eyes and gave in to sleep.

The next morning, he was gone. It was probably not payback for the same stunt I'd pulled on him, but my mind couldn't keep from accusing him. When the entire day had passed without so much as a call from him, I knew that was exactly what it had been.

Joe was angry at me for having sex with him. He had wanted to make love, wanted more than the physical act. The hell of it was, I wanted more as well. I was just smart enough to know there was no more for us.

* * * *

By nightfall, I was irritable, lonely, and fighting the change once again. No wonder I was sitting in the main room, with Malcolm to keep me company.

"There will be a gathering here tonight of my people. Many belonged to Surgis and must now swear allegiance to me."

"No problem, I'll make myself scarce," I said.

"On the contrary, I would prefer that you make yourself abundantly available. It would be an excellent opportunity for questions, and we could possibly learn something beneficial to the investigation."

Every vamp in the city, probably in this county and the surrounding, was coming to the castle and Malcolm wanted me to be there. I so didn't want to.

Since the bureau had been formed, it was law for all vampires to register with me, to keep an accurate count. The city officials wanted to make sure the vamps didn't suddenly outnumber the humans. I didn't think that would be a problem. Since the no biting law, the number of newly turned vampires was surprisingly low.

I knew their numbers to be only around fifty, give or take, including the few new applications I had processed this year. Not many, in a city of hundreds of thousands. But one vampire was much scarier than a hundred, maybe even a thousand humans, so I figured they were a lot more evenly matched than anyone figured.

Malcolm was right. Tonight would be the perfect time to snoop around. It meant I needed to talk to Joe, and that was almost worse than facing the vamps tonight. I knew he was angry with me, and cowardly or not, I just wasn't ready to face him yet. Actually, maybe it was the

perfect time. With so many of the bad guys around, he wouldn't have time to chew on me.

"Inform Joe, so he can have the team here." If the request surprised Malcolm, he didn't show it. Maybe he knew Joe and I were having our little spat.

"You know how pissed off the MPD would be if one of their finest got himself drained tonight, right?" I asked. A room full of vampires and human cops seemed like begging for trouble to me, but it wasn't my call.

"If one of the men, how did you put it, get themselves drained, it would likely be of his own doing."

"You know what I mean," I snapped.

"Yes. I can assure you my people would never feed on one of my guests without permission."

I waited, but he said nothing more. "And you won't give that permission, right?"

"It would be impolite," Malcolm said.

Why couldn't I ever get a solid answer from this guy?

"Impolite and illegal. Just see that none of them get carried away."

"You seem to conveniently forget, Lucinda, that you are a vampire."

"There's nothing convenient about my life, Malcolm." I left him and went back up to my room. If I was going to be on display tonight, I wanted a little down time to prepare myself.

I'm like the main attraction at a freak show. Humans and vamps alike both watch me intensely, just to see if I am more dead or alive. I get the impression both sides hope I'm not like them.

Neither care much for me. The humans figure any vampire blood is too much, and since I can grow fangs and suck them dry, I guess I agree. The problem with the vampires, well, I don't exactly hide the fact that I don't want to be one of them, and I guess my denial offends them most of the time.

The truth is that I find both sides equally annoying. I wouldn't admit this aloud, but the vampires are growing on me, and I actually like some of them. Doesn't mean I want to be one. I just understand their hard position. Most of them, like me, didn't ask to become what they are. They have spent years, sometimes decades, evolving into their lifestyle, and you have to admire them for that courage.

I took a long bath, in no hurry to join the party below. I would have to make my way

down to the basement level before long, but Joe and the other cops had been off for a few hours, and I knew they would be downstairs already.

I pulled on my tightest black jeans, not for the attention they would draw but for the hardship they would present on removal. Closest thing to a modern day chastity belt, and since I could turn at any time, I needed the added security.

I slid into my black leather boots and a white peasant shirt. I loved the way the billowy sleeves caressed the tops of my hands--plus they would hide the bracelets. I added the necklace, but with the low neckline of the blouse, it was fashionable instead of a blatant insult. I brushed my hair until most of the curls had straightened, but I knew in the Memphis humidity they would bounce back before I descended the stairs. My slow, careful hand applying my makeup wasn't because I cared how it turned out, but because I was stalling. Once I realized the ploy, I finished quickly and forced myself out of my room.

The house was eerily quiet. If there was a party going on downstairs, it wasn't like any I'd ever attended. In the south, you could count on a running theme through all of the parties. Plenty of drunken rednecks and ear-busting music. Both seemed absent tonight.

I had been to the basement only once, and after being shot, I didn't remember much about it. The bedroom where I had been taken was the first door I passed, and I continued down the long dark hall, praying I would come across others soon.

Yes, I still pray. I gave up on church services last year, but not out of fear of burning to death on the threshold. Truthfully, most congregations don't want my kind inside their doors, and I can't stand a hypocrite. I still pray, and even wear a cross necklace on occasions. I figure I need God more these days than ever.

My heels clicked over the uneven stone flooring as I turned the corner of the torch-lit passageway. It opened into a large room, packed full of standing bodies. Some were even breathing. The silence was deafening. There seemed to be some kind of show down front, and something told me I didn't want to see it. As I made my way down, the crowd of bodies stepped back to let me pass. Joe appeared and fell in step beside me. He didn't speak, so I knew he was still mad, but at least he was there.

When I stepped through the crowd, I realized what had everyone's attention. Malcolm was seated in a chair large enough for a king. His black pants were tucked into boots that stopped just below his knees, and unlike mine, his looked as soft as baby's skin. His white shirt was

unbuttoned down his chest, the lacing left open to show his muscle and tone. Vampires approached him, offering their wrists to him as they knelt at his feet. I watched as his fangs pierced skin, sank deep into the vein to draw out the very essence of the man. Then I realized that this was what it meant to swear allegiance to the new master.

Surgis had turned many of these present, and the only way to ensure they would follow the new master was to bind them through blood. Malcolm would have their memories, know if they lied to him, and he would be able to call to them if the need arrived.

I realized that the man kneeling to Malcolm was unknown to me, and as my eyes scanned the room, I realized many faces were unfamiliar. There were many more than fifty here, nearly twice that number. It seemed not everyone felt the need to obey the registration law. I hoped it was the only law they were breaking. After Malcolm had his price in blood, the man moved off and the next stepped up. At this rate, Malcolm wouldn't need to feed for a week.

Rena stood on Malcolm's right, Ian on his left. I stepped up beside Ian. "Can he feed from all of them?"

Ian chuckled at my question, but it didn't annoy me. Had anyone else done that, I would have been bristling, but Ian didn't make you feel as if he was laughing at you because of your ignorance, but rather that you had indeed amused him. I was glad to oblige.

"He does not feed, merely takes enough for the binding. Tis not a hardship. Most here are his own."

I knew the significance of Ian's position in the room, as it announced he was second only to Malcolm. What surprised me was that Rena stood in the third position. She had climbed the ranks in this new clan quickly.

"Did Malcolm bind Rena to him already?"

Ian looked shocked by my question.

"Rena is as old as Malcolm. She answered to Surgis, as master. Once that bond is broken, she will na be owned by another. She gives her alliance freely, ta demand blood is to suggest her disloyalty. Malcolm would ne'er dishonor her so."

I nodded and continued to watch the show. I should have been horrified, watching someone suck the blood from another. That it didn't, horrified me even more. Malcolm was right. I was becoming more like them every day. Would I wake up one day and not be able to feel the sunshine on my skin? Would I be forced to rely on the blood from a human as my only

sustenance? I shuddered and fought the urge to cry. My eyes cut to Joe. His face was hard, the lines around his mouth tight. What was he thinking about this little performance? I was certain he wasn't standing there with his mouth watering, as mine had just started doing. How would he react if I were the one drinking from another's wrist instead of Malcolm? I was certain he would be mortified.

Chapter Seven

I felt, more than saw, Malcolm stiffen and instantly knew something was wrong. The man at his feet was also unknown to me, and I had no idea what had prompted Malcolm to rise to his feet.

Malcolm turned his mouth away from the wrist and then spit the mouth full of blood on the floor.

“Rise!” Malcolm demanded.

The vampire jumped to his feet and took a step back. My skin began to tingle as I felt the surge of power fill the room. Ian stepped forward, his chest nearly touching the man’s back.

“How dare you offer me tainted blood? You present to me your wrist, when you should be presenting me with your carved heart. You have betrayed our kind and brought shame to our race.”

“No, Master. I have done nothing wrong.” The vampire’s eyes looked left to right, wide with fear. Whatever he was accused of doing, the guilt was evident on his face.

“You, Trayvor, were made by Surgis not by my blood. My blood is the blood of the Memphis Triad. Ptah, the high God of Memphis, Sekhmet, mistress of war, sickness, battle and her child Nefertem. How dare you taint the blood of the Gods?”

“Please, have mercy on my line, Master.” Whatever the man had done, he was terrified now that he had been found out.

“Bring forth your line so that I may see what you have born.”

Trayvor motioned to a young woman, and she stepped forward. She was beautiful, with an intriguing allure of innocence rarely seen among a race that had seen more than most people could envision. Youth wasn’t the reason for her innocence, though she couldn’t have been more than eighteen at the time of her death.

She held a tight grip on the hand of a man twice her age but still handsome and strong. Though not matching in age, it was obvious they were matched in their feelings for each other.

They both bowed to Malcolm.

“Stand,” Malcolm demanded, and from his tone I could tell he had little patience left.

“You are of Trayvor’s line?”

“Yes, Master. I am Raymon, and this is Shayna. Please take what I offer.” The man offered his wrist, but Malcolm only stared into eyes the color of creamy coffee. Whatever Malcolm had been looking for in their depths, he seemed satisfied that he had found it, as he took the offered wrist into his mouth. Raymon gave a slight jerk as Malcolm’s sharp teeth tore into the flesh. The wound was ragged and punishing painful.

My stomach rolled as I stared at the gaping hole of flesh just as Malcolm covered it with his mouth. He took a minimal amount for a true exchange before shoving the hand away. When the woman presented her wrist, it was shaking. I couldn’t blame her. It took a great deal of courage for her to offer it, after seeing what Malcolm had just done to the last one offered to him.

Malcolm didn’t rip the flesh open this time, simply sank his sharp fangs into the creamy white skin. I had experienced the shot of pain fading to ecstasy that Shayna now felt.

Malcolm drank deeply, and for a moment, I thought he was going to drain her completely. I saw Raymon stiffen, but he wisely stood back while Malcolm made his own decision.

What was I supposed to do if he decided to drain her, right in front of all of us? It would not kill her, but it would be a painful agony until the blood was replaced. I was the one person the vampires were supposed to turn to for help and protection, but did I dare protect them from their own master? The rules were strict and failure to follow them could easily insult them all. I knew this was not an area I should intrude.

I didn’t want to watch it. Just as I made the decision to turn away, Malcolm released Shayna’s wrist. When she swayed on her feet, Raymon reached for her, holding her around her waist to steady her. Together, they stepped back.

“Mercy will be granted to your line, Trayvor. As of now, they are of my line. Step forward.”

The man hesitated, finally realizing he had no other choice but to obey. Just as his feet moved him forward, Malcolm’s hand shot out. Power rose higher, the pressure building inside my head as it built inside the room. Trayvor froze, locked in place as around him, people took several steps back. No one wanted to be connected in any way to what was about to happen.

“You have thrived on the adrenaline of those who fear you. You have used the strength granted you by the Gods to bring terror into those who have been entrusted into your care. It is against human law to drink from those unwilling, yet you have killed many in your thirst for power.”

There was the problem with allowing a vampire to drink from your veins. They knew your darkest secrets. Had I had such things to hide, I would never have shown up tonight and offered my wrist to a man who wielded that kind of power.

Joe’s head snapped to Malcolm at this news, and I knew he was about to do something really stupid like interfere. He couldn’t help it. It was the cop in him.

I put my hand on Joe’s elbow to stop him, knowing that this was to be handled by the master. To interfere was dangerous. Joe turned to look at me, understanding but debating on breaking that rule.

“You have walked a path of your own making, and you have chosen poorly.” Malcolm’s words caught Joe’s attention and mine.

I watched in horror as the blood began pouring from the vampire’s pores. “You are not worthy of this blood.”

There was a gasp of shock, surprisingly from my own throat. My eyes stared at the form, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. The body was coated in red, soaked in the very thing that had led him to this pain. It poured to his feet, pooled there. Just when I thought it would cover the floor, Trayvor dropped to the floor, empty. No one moved. So much fresh blood, the good kind from a vampire, and not one vampire went for it. Then I found out why.

Power continued to build, and I felt my eyes watering from the pressure. My head throbbed as I stared at that blood.

Then the blood started to bubble, popped as it slowly began to take another shape. Each drop grew, began moving as it turned into a thousand roaches. It was a mound of moving legs, scattering from the light. I saw one run across my foot. I would have jumped and likely screamed, but I was locked in place with fear. How was it possible that such creepy things erupted from blood? Was Malcolm really that powerful? No way would Doc find a scientific reason for that trick.

Finding every crack and crevice, the nasty little things disappeared as if they had never been. The body was cleared from the room, all evidence of Trayvor’s existence gone with the

fleeing insects. I can't say I wasn't glad. But before I could even take a calming breath, my lungs grew tight. The power had not evaporated and was looking for a new target. As the closest, it found one in me.

Changing always hurt. Can't die without a little pain. But this was no slow transformation. The beast was pulled from, screaming. One minute I was alive, the next I was dead. The undead. I felt my heart stop, the breath ripped from my chest. My fangs, without the preparation, felt like knives pushing through my gums. I would have fallen to the floor had Joe not held me tightly.

I opened my eyes, looking up at him through red haze. "Welcome, my child." Malcolm's voice was deep, echoing in my head. "Come, swear alliance to your master."

I wanted to run from the room, deny it. Then the vision started. Egypt, in all its glory. The pyramid, the alabaster sphinx, the statue to Ptah. There were people entering a pyramid, loaded with baskets of silk, trays of food. Gifts to honor their Gods.

"Memphis was beautiful."

"Was?" Malcolm was looking at me strangely.

"It is a dead city now, isn't it? Shame." At his raised brow, I continued, "Deserted. I read it somewhere."

"You see what we want you to see. Because it is void of humans does not make it an empty city. Is not your Memphis void of humans?"

Good point. My Memphis had been turned over to the undead.

"Come to me, Lucinda." He held out his hands, and for a second I felt the need to reach out and touch them. But Joe's hold on me tightened, and the need passed. Slowly Joe moved us toward the door, then we were moving up the stairs. When we got to the main room, I dropped to the sofa while Joe poured himself bourbon. My head still ached, but it was a throbbing I could live with. Without the power rushing through me, I could think clearly again.

I heard the footsteps on the stairs, and now everyone was leaving quietly. Obviously, the party was over. I'd been to some wild parties in my life, woke up with some pretty bad headaches, but tomorrow would probably be the worst yet, and I hadn't drank a drop. I guess a power high was as bad as alcohol.

"We must retire now. Dawn approaches soon." Malcolm sauntered into the room like any normal man, instead of the monster I just learned him to be. As if he hadn't just drained a man

and turned his blood into a thousand filthy roaches.

"I'm not sleeping in this house. Ever." I crossed my arms over my chest and played the sulky little girl really well.

"You insult the master if you leave," Rena said, as if I really cared. But then again, I had just watched what the master had done to the last guy who made him angry.

"Insult him? He filled this place with roaches. Thousands of them. Rude, if you ask me. And do you know where all of those roaches are now? No. You don't. And neither do I. I'm not closing my eyes and having them crawl all over me!"

"They will not harm you," Malcolm said, as if I would believe him.

"Wanna bet?"

"You fear no man, no vampire. Yet you are afraid of a insect a mere nothing to your size?"

Boy, did he have me pegged wrong. No fear? Most of the time, I was too damn scared to move. Let them think what they will. It was better that they didn't know that they terrified me.

"I'm not afraid of them, they're just nasty. And those innocent little nothings will be here long after we're all dead and gone. They're harder to kill than you are."

"You cannot leave," Malcolm stated again, more firmly.

"They don't come out during the day, much," Joe added, as if that was helping any.

"Should fit right in around here. We'll sleep after the sun rises.

Malcolm frowned. "I do not like your sleeping arrangements."

"Tough." Joe stood beside the fireplace, his arm braced on the mantle.

"Sleeping in a coffin is worse than sleeping with roaches," I said. Wasn't it?

"I do not sleep in a coffin. I have a vault. Inside that vault, I have a bedroom with a bed. It is more like your large safe than a coffin. Fireproof, neither sunlight nor human can enter. Only I can open it."

"Makes sense." Couldn't he have shared that little news flash the first day?

"I'm glad you think so. Others who are not so fortunate make their own space. In basements, crawl spaces, whatever is convenient. And yes, some sleep in coffins. There is a large room downstairs made to the same specifications as mine. It holds many beds.

"My blood grows stronger in you, and you weaken during sunlight hours."

The denial was on my lips.

“Do not deny this. You cannot hide your restlessness, your weakness from me. You may join me to rest. You will benefit from being locked so deeply away from daylight.”

“We’ll pass, thanks. I’ll take care of Lindy.” Joe eyed Malcolm with a warning in his eyes.

“You begin to bore me, human.”

“And you’re about to piss me off. I’ve heard all I’m going to about Lindy from you. She’s not yours, Bloodsucker. Get over it.”

“And if I choose not to *get over it*, human?”

“Boys, stop it. Thanks for the offer, Malcolm, but we’re fine. I’m only a little tired from lack of sleep.”

“You haven’t fed,” he said, like I needed him to tell me that.

“I was getting around to it.”

“Soon you will need fresh blood for your first bite. I will provide a willing partner.”

“Nice try. I might follow the storybooks on most of this, but I know that deal. If I bite, I turn. Permanently.”

“Not exactly. You will turn regardless. Having fresh blood only lessens the pain.” As if turning dead permanently could hurt more than doing it weekly.

Just what I wanted to hear. I didn’t want to think about that.

“I saw you with Rena earlier. Did anyone learn anything new tonight?” I wanted to change the subject, and blood and murder always worked with this group. Man, do I need some new friends.

“We have learned that a vampire does not have the humans.”

“How do you know that?” My attention was on Malcolm now.

“I asked.”

I snorted. Not very ladylike, but why break my image now? “You asked. Why didn’t I think of that? Come on Joe, let’s go knock on a few doors. If we run across the killer, I’m sure he’ll confess immediately, saving ourselves tons of work.”

“Sarcasm does not become you Lucinda,” Malcolm said.

Says who? I think it totally becomes me.

“And they would not lie to me,” Malcolm added.

“Sure, Malcolm.”

“They are mine. The penalty is too steep, and I would know.”

I tried to read the answer in his eyes but gave up. Did I really want to know? I knew he could read things from the ones he had taken blood from. And he had taken my blood. There was a pattern there I didn't want to exist. Closing your eyes against unpleasant things didn't make them disappear. I had learned that one quick enough. So, I asked the one thing I didn't really want to know. “How?”

“The same way I know when you are lying to me.”

Not going there. Nope. No way. “Fine. If they don't have them, then who does? That leaves other humans and that just doesn't work for me. Why would they grab their own kind?”

“You tell me. What is to be gained by it?”

That one was easy. Only one place this was headed if we couldn't stop it. “War between the races. You saying it's a setup?”

“I do not know. I only know that if my people tell me they do not have the humans, then that only leaves other humans.”

I plopped down next to Ian on the sofa. I liked Ian. I did not like this conversation. I had liked Ian the minute he had opened the door to me that first day. There was just something about him that attracted others.

“You are tired, lass.”

“Yes.” He put his arm around me, and I laid my head back. It felt good, resting on Ian's arm. “Talk to me, Ian.”

“About?”

“Anything. The weather for all I care. Any words rolling off that tongue of yours soothe me.” From his chuckle, I knew he didn't think I meant it. How could he not know how beautiful that musical lilt was?

“Ye remind me of me own dear sister. Headstrong and stubborn, that one.”

“Thank you.” I closed my eyes and let his words flow over me. Strange how much they soothed me.

He chuckled again, warm and deep. “Aye. She'd have mistaken it for a compliment as well.”

I opened my eyes and grinned at him. “You need a woman, Ian.”

“Is it an offer you're making me then?”

This time, I laughed. “I wish. I seem to have one man too many in my life as it is.” I nodded toward the corner, where Malcolm and Joe had carried their conversation.

“Ah, but I can solve it for ye, just say the word.”

“Do you like it, Ian? Being a vampire, I mean.”

“I know what you mean. Aye. Malcolm is like me own brother.”

“So he’s the one who turned you?”

“Aye, that he’d be. And I whipped his arse good for it the first score of years.”

I laughed again, as he’d meant for me to do.

“Then we became the best of friends.”

I closed my eyes again and drifted on the melody of his words. I could sleep here. Ian would keep the bugs away, would watch over me while I rested my eyes for just a few minutes.

Chapter Eight

I awoke to the stream of sunlight across my face. I didn't remember going to bed. It was the first time I hadn't needed sex after turning. First time I hadn't fed, for that matter. Maybe Ian was good to have around. I'd talk to Doc today about that. Maybe my cravings were getting better. I knew it wasn't true, but denial worked on rare occasions.

From the corner of my eye I saw Joe stirring across the room.

"Morning," he said.

I looked beside me, noticing that Joe's side of the bed hadn't been slept in. So he was still mad at me. I couldn't expect anything else. I had been a real bitch to him, but it was the only thing I could do for both of us. I didn't want sweet words from Joe. Couldn't let such things get to me. They were just words, cheap to give but expensive to receive. I'd be the one paying for them.

"Morning. Who put me in bed?"

"I did. You were out cold, and Ian's arm fell asleep. It was also time for his watch."

"Thanks."

"No problem. I was surprised you slept after the statement you made."

"Guess I figured Ian would keep me safe. Not much that isn't afraid of the big, bad vampire." I stretched like a cat.

"I don't make you feel safe, do I, Lindy?" He stopped strapping on his holster, staring at me. I knew this was a serious question, and I knew more was hanging on my answer than the question implied.

"You always have." I could sense he didn't believe me. How could I make him understand I couldn't let all of my guard down and trust him completely? Ian couldn't hurt me, because I didn't love him like I loved Joe.

My cell phone interrupted further comment, joined a second later by Joe's beeper. It was another victim. I knew it even before I heard the words in my ear. However, this time, the victim

was not dead. And not a stranger.

* * * *

I stared down at Ian, bile rising in my throat. He had been staked on the cobblestones at the boat ramp at Tom Lee Park. The other members of the team who had beat us here had already cut him loose and moved his body into the back of a box truck. Odd, but an ambulance let in too much light and choices were limited on short notice.

I leaned over him, my tears dripping onto his face.

“Oh, Ian.” It hurt, seeing him that way. Ian was my sanity in a world gone mad.

“None of that, lass.”

I wiped them away. Tears would do him no good now. “Bite me, Ian. Drink from me and you’ll be all right.”

“Too late for that.”

“No, it’s not.” I grabbed a box cutter that had been left in the truck and pricked my finger. I held it over his mouth, allowing the drops to fall. I knew he was right when he turned his face away.

“Human.” He mumbled. “Too much power. Tis a wee man what brought me down. Look out for Malcolm, tis him they wish to harm.” He closed his eyes. I shook him, tried to wake him, but his was an eternal sleep.

Sunlight doesn’t turn a vampire to dust. Nothing so instantaneous. It burns, straight through skin, muscle and tissue. Once the veins are exposed, the blood dries up. No chance of recovery since the blood has nothing to travel through even if it is replaced. It is an excruciating death, a slow one. One Ian didn’t deserve. One someone was going to pay for.

* * * *

I was unlucky enough to get the pleasure of telling Malcolm his best friend was dead, but it was something that would have to wait. I still had a few hours of daylight left and a dozen reports to complete. Joe’s report to his superior was nothing compared to the dozen I had to complete every time one of the dead died. And the mayor was being his usual impossible self. I snagged the forms and agreed to complete them at Joe’s office, while he did his own.

I wanted to be there when Doc did Ian’s autopsy.

Officially, it couldn’t be done until after the sun set. The law had passed last year prohibiting daytime autopsies for vampires. Right after one had been performed on a vamp down

in New Orleans who hadn't actually been dead. Even a vamp can't recover from being dissected. It's a good law, actually. Since vampires have no vitals, mistakes are easily made. Joe and I argued over going. He didn't want me there, and I refused to budge. I understood he was trying to protect me from hurting more over Ian's death, but some things had to be faced.

He ended up staying with me, which still didn't make me happy.

He was standing several feet from me, trying to ignore my tears as effectively as he was ignoring me.

I couldn't blame him. Most men didn't know what to do with a woman's tears. I hated them myself, but couldn't seem to stop them. Seeing Ian as he was hurt like hell.

"He was empty." Doc hadn't started the actual cutting, but preliminary tests wouldn't hurt Ian. Not that anything could anymore.

"He couldn't be, Doc. I saw him last night and he was healthy. No way was he starving. And Ian would never let another vampire drain him. Could the sunlight have dried it all up?" I couldn't think about the last time I had seen Ian. It would do him no good, and I needed to pay attention so I could get this bastard.

"It is possible, I suppose. But I do not think that is what happened. You said there was no blood at the scene. If the damage to his body caused him to bleed out, there would have been a large amount of blood once the sunlight opened up the veins. It appears he was completely drained. Not starving, not sun damaged, but drained."

"Ian said the man that did this was human." I moved away from Ian's body, leaning against the counter that was covered with surgical instruments. The room Doc used to perform autopsies was connected to his lab, but unlike the lab, this room was kept sterile.

"He also said with strong powers," Joe added.

So he was listening. He had moved across the room to join us but still kept his distance from me. It just proved how screwed up I really was that I wanted him standing closer. Close enough so that his scent filled my head, instead of the smell of Ian's death.

"What does that mean? How can a human have strong powers?"

"You do. You're stronger than any human even without the change." Joe looked my way, but it felt as if he wasn't really looking at me.

"Doc, there isn't another Vamp-hum, is there?" I asked.

"I've heard rumors. Not of another Vamp-hum, and I would have heard about that. I

believe it is safe to say you are the only one in existence.” Lucky me. I just love being one of a kind.

“There are stories of those who seek eternal life without the sacrifices that accompany it. It is said that they drink the blood of vampires, believe it gives them power without turning.”

“Why haven’t I heard these stories? Surely the vampires would know of such a group?” I asked.

“Maybe. This was many years ago, in the New Orleans community. Most believed the stories were merely tales for the benefit of the tourists. There were a few deaths for a brief period--unexplained, of course. Then suddenly they stopped.”

“Maybe whoever was behind them left the area,” Joe said.

“Or maybe they never existed, and the deaths were unconnected. New Orleans can be a rough town. You must understand that most of these tales are created solely for the mystic. Vampires thrive on the fear they bring to men,” Doc said.

“How could it even be possible to drink their blood? Anyone who took a few sips would become infected.”

“Yes. Like I said, only tales. Stories to frighten us.”

“But if someone believed it to be true, maybe they would try to accomplish it by drinking the blood,” Joe said.

“It’s common knowledge that’s how the virus is transferred. They’d know the outcome. And that doesn’t explain the humans that were taken. They have nothing to offer,” I said.

“Quite right.” Doc removed the soiled latex gloves from his hands and dropped them in the trash. “Except blood.”

“It’s about the blood. I can feel it.”

“I would agree with you.” Doc moved to the sink, washed and dried his hands.

“What gives me my strength, Doc?”

I could tell Doc was pondering the question before he gave his reply. “Malcolm’s blood.”

“Yes, but what exactly in his blood? Is it the virus?”

“His blood is the mutated cell from the virus.”

“But what if we removed the virus? What would be left? Regular blood, right? What would then happen to Malcolm? Would he become human?”

“No, he can’t. He is not alive, his organs are dead. There would be no way for him to

breath air, no heartbeat.”

“So he would die.” Really die. Not just the mock death he did every morning at daybreak.

“Yes. However, if we were to take a living being, a human, and give him vampire blood, then accurately kill the virus--”

“He would have vamp power without turning vampire.” I finished for him. That was the great thing about working with someone so closely for years; you could almost follow each other’s train of thought.

“Exactly.”

“But you are talking about the cure,” Joe supplied.

“I know.”

“How is that possible? There is no cure, you said so yourself.”

“I don’t know. Dying cells are the only things we’ve come up with. The question is, what is stronger than vamp blood?” Doc asked, his mind already working to find the answer.

“Did you run those samples for me?” I had asked Doc to run a few tests on my blood, pitted against the samples of vampire blood he had from the victims, just in case I decided to try his antidote. Provided of course, that Malcolm would ever conveniently die to give me the necessary blood. Not likely, I knew.

“Yes, just finished the test earlier.”

“So tell me then, what is stronger than vampire blood?”

“You are. Your blood anyway, so it would seem.”

“Sure it is, Doc. That’s why Malcolm’s can control me so easily, why I crave blood.”

“But the fact that you don’t crave it continuously proves my theory. Look here.”

I followed him to the counter and then peered into the microscope.

“I was using your mutated cells. Half yours, half Malcolm’s. I expected when I added another’s pure vampire blood, yours would be gobbled up first since it is still half human.

“What I got was the opposite. The mutated cells attacked the new invader, which means--”

“My mutated cells are stronger than pure vampire blood. So another vampire could bite me and I wouldn’t turn completely.” Nice to know.

“Correct. Unless it is Malcolm. I still don’t know how his blood would react with the mutated cells. We can assume if you ingest more of his mutated cells, they would succeed in

killing your own cells this time, and you would truly become a vampire.”

“And if my blood recognizes his as a component of my mutated cells, they would not attack. Then this supposed cure someone might have created would not work on me.”

“True. But your blood can kill the blood of another. While it may not work against Malcolm’s, I suspect it would work on any other vampire.”

I would have to give that one some thought. It meant that my blood might actually be used in the cure for other Vamp-hums. If any existed, anyway. “Would it work on the newly bitten? Could I be the missing link in a cure for others?”

“Only for a short window. The problem is, the organs die quickly after someone is bitten. Once they have died, they can never return to living. Which means that the blood must be administered at the precise moment.”

“So I could be the answer to the cure.” It wouldn’t help me any, but at least others could benefit from my being bitten. It was something, at least.

“Yes. But it will take more study to perfect it.” Doc reached across the counter, his hand squeezing my arm. I knew it was his way of showing me he cared. “You need to be careful, Lindy. Whoever is behind this, may have already figured out you are not as you seem. Any human would have died from the shot you received. Yet you were walking around in the sunlight, which indicates you are not a vampire. And you are known. If there is someone out there playing this roulette, you would be his answer.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Doc pulled on fresh latex gloves and added his cotton apron. Performing an autopsy on a vampire is risky. Since the blood carries the virus, one little slip of the knife and you could easily infect yourself.

Ian’s wasn’t so dangerous, since there wasn’t a drop of blood left, but still Doc took the proper precautions. He’d be a fool not to. Doc might live in his scientific world most of the time, oblivious to the real world around him, but he was no fool.

“It’s dark outside.” I looked toward the windows to confirm Doc’s words. Sure enough, my own image stared back at me as the black turned the window to a mirror.

It wasn’t a pretty sight. Dark circles under my eyes made me look as if I’d been in a fight and lost. My hair had turned into a nightmare of curls from the humidity. I normally didn’t worry too much about my appearance unless I was trying to get to Joe, but this was even bad by my

standards.

“We’ll begin.” Doc sounded much more excited than the rest of us as he approached the body. He saw this as a great scientific mystery to unfold. I saw it as the cutting up of a friend. I guess I wasn’t cut out for the medical world anymore.

The scalpel was sharp, and I turned away before Doc made the first cut. These things didn’t usually bother me. No way they could after working in a hospital in my other life. But this wasn’t just anybody. This was Ian. I had a soft spot for Ian, and I couldn’t watch him get cut up.

The metal door to the lab swung open with such force, it banged against the wall, startling the life from me. From the look on Joe and Doc’s faces, they were just as surprised.

Chapter Nine

“Touch him, and you will die.” Malcolm’s voice wasn’t what caused Doc to drop the scalpel immediately. It was the power surrounding Malcolm, the threat in his eyes.

“Malcolm.” Since I recovered first, I crossed the room, stopping just out of reach. With Malcolm’s strength and power, the same city wasn’t far enough. He was on the edge tonight. I didn’t blame him, but I didn’t want to be the one trying to calm him down. As the only other person in the room anywhere close to his strength, I knew it was up to me.

“I’d hoped to tell you about Ian before anyone else had the chance. I’m sorry. We were just too late.”

His eyes never left Ian’s body as he glided toward the table. His feet were on the ground, but I swear he didn’t use them.

Malcolm didn’t answer me, didn’t so much as acknowledge my presence in the room.

The pain in his eyes as he stared down at his oldest friend was more than I could take. I moved my gaze to the wall of books behind him and tried to read the names.

Anything to keep the damn tears away.

Doc’s gasp brought my eyes back to the center of the room.

The palms of Malcolm’s hands had been slashed open, and blood was quickly spilling over. Malcolm had laid both of his hands on Ian’s face, the blood soaking into the dried flesh. I wanted to tell him it was too late, but as I watched Malcolm cover Ian’s face in his blood, I wasn’t so sure. I silently prayed that I was wrong.

Malcolm pumped his hands, kept the blood flowing freely as his hands moved lower, covering Ian’s chest. I watched in horror as he literally gave Ian a blood bath.

And then I realized what he was doing. His blood, the ancient blood of the gods, was the most powerful. As Ian’s master, his blood would flow in Ian’s veins. By covering Ian’s body, it was as if Ian’s own blood was repairing himself.

Rebuilding each layer, beginning with the veins.

Malcolm swayed on his feet, his concentration so locked on his task I don't even think he noticed. He was draining himself in order to provide the massive amount of blood needed to cover Ian's body. I don't know if he wasn't aware of the risk, or if he just didn't care. Either way, I couldn't watch it happen.

My eyes met Joe's and I saw the fleeting thought cross his eyes. This could be our chance to try Doc's cure. If Malcolm killed himself in order to save Ian, we would have our blood necessary for the trial. Even as I read Joe's refusal of the idea in his eyes, I was stepping forward.

I knew what Malcolm needed. I didn't like it, but there was nothing that could be done about it. Aged blood would not be strong enough to sustain Malcolm's life. Weaker than fresh, the amount needed would be too great. And I doubted Doc kept that much on hand. He kept a small supply for me, just in case.

My blood was a delicacy. The human in me filled it with life, the vampire filled it with power--Malcolm's power, ancient and pure. And I was the only one in the room who could handle the large donation that was going to be needed. I knew the minute Joe figured out my plan.

"No, Lindy. I'll provide what he needs." The sacrifice of that didn't escape me. Joe providing for a vampire in order to save me from doing it was a huge sacrifice. He hated them, had for years.

"You can't take the loss. Let me try and if it becomes too great, I'll let you. Please, Joe, let me try. If you lose too much blood, we won't be able to replace it." We wouldn't even be able to do a transfusion, since the only human in the room was Doc and he'd be needed to perform it. "And I might need you to replenish me." I hated to say it, to remind him I was the same as the two vamps we were watching doing things too hideous to consider. I'd hate it even more if I had to drink from Joe again. While I loved the taste of him, I knew he hated it.

His nod was hesitating, but I didn't wait for more affirmation, knowing I wasn't likely going to get any. As I joined Malcolm next to Ian's body, I realized Malcolm hadn't spoken since his first declaration when he had threatened Doc. Since I wasn't sure if it was a concentration thing, I remained silent as well.

I looked down at my wrist. Should I cut it open with the scalpel? The thought of Malcolm's fangs sinking into my flesh wasn't as creepy as it should have been and the stirring I felt in my loins caused me to take a step back. Not a good thing to be turned on by the enemy.

My movement caught Malcolm's eyes. He watched me through distant eyes, giving nothing away of his thoughts.

Doc provided the answer to my dilemma by handing me the scalpel. The slice from the blade burned against my skin, but nothing I couldn't handle. Hell, I'd handled bullets, so I'm not sure what would constitute too much to handle for me these days.

I held my wrist up to Malcolm's mouth in a silent offer, and the minute he scented the blood he latched on. Relief flooded me when I realized there was nothing sexual about this.

We were like a feeding assembly line. Doc gave me a bottle of the aged stuff since my loss was still minimal. I poured it in as Malcolm sucked it out. Ian's body was healing fast, and Malcolm closed the cut in his palm and offered his wrist to Ian's mouth. Ian didn't even puncture the skin.

Malcolm swore, the first we'd heard from him in what seemed like hours but was more like thirty minutes. He slashed his wrist with his nail, a nifty trick I knew I'd never try, and forced the blood into Ian's mouth.

Unlike when I had tried this morning, Ian's throat slowly began to swallow. Suddenly, both of Ian's hands gripped the offered wrist, and he drank greedily. For a moment, I thought he would suck the entire arm down his throat.

The sucking on my wrist increased to accommodate Malcolm's blood loss, and soon my head began to swim. Malcolm realized none of us would be able to drink our fill and pulled his wrist from Ian. He released mine almost simultaneously.

It was almost comical to see three powerful vampires as helpless as babes as Malcolm and I leaned heavily on the table beside Ian.

Slowly, Ian's eyes fluttered open. Standing closest to him, I was the first one he saw. His voice sounded hoarse, barely a whisper, but the silence in the room had carried the words.

"Ah, me very own angel come to save the devil." I took one look into those beautiful eyes of his and did the one thing that horrified everyone in the room. Myself included. I broke down and sobbed.

I don't have many friends. In fact, it's safe to say Joe would be my only one, but since I'm sleeping with him, I guess ulterior motives exist there. Doc would count, but sometimes I wonder if I've only become a specimen to him lately. Malcolm, well, he's the last one I'd call a friend since he tried to kill me. And I'm sure the only reason he still puts up with me is that he's hoping

to finish the job. But Ian, well Ian is the only one that doesn't want anything from me. The only one who is nice to me for apparently no reason. Having him back meant a great deal.

I wiped at my eyes, moving away from the table to retreat to a corner. It didn't take long for me to get it together.

* * * *

We took Ian home with us. Not a bad night, if I do sound like I'm bragging. Arrive for an autopsy, leave walking beside the body. When we arrived home, and I use that word even though it creeps me out, we settled around our cozy little living room. Almost sounds normal, huh? Only instead of coffee, some of us were drinking our O positive.

Ian looked better than Malcolm or me. Says a lot for the ancient blood. His mood, however, was much worse. Seems I'm not the only one getting killed pisses off.

"How can you not remember something as important as the man who attempted to kill you?" Malcolm didn't try to hide his disgust.

"I dinna forget the man, you fool, I ne'er saw him. I tell you, he snuck up behind me and laid me low."

"Then how did you know he was small? In the truck this morning, you said he was a wee man."

Ian softened his tone for me. "Not his size, but his stature. His..." Ian seemed to be searching his mind for the right word. I decided he'd been through a bad enough day, so I helped him out.

"Energy."

"Aye." Ian grinned his thank you. "He was no strong one what did me in, but a mere human."

"With vamp powers."

Ian turned his head, didn't meet my gaze. "I dinna see this to be sure, but no mere human could accomplish such an attack. I am no mere bairn."

"He could have been newly turned."

"I agree," Malcolm added.

"Why did you think he was after Malcolm?"

"Ach, I canna believe I was that close ta the bastard and dinna wring his neck." Ian paced the room, angry energy circling him. "It was Malcolm, ta be sure. He said me blood was

preparation for the true test to come. The most powerful blood. As Malcolm is master and ancient, 'twas him that he spoke of."

"Wasn't Surgis older?" Joe was sitting next to me on the sofa, but there seemed to be miles separating us.

"Yes, by two hundred years."

"Then his blood should have been the key. Seems his would be more powerful than yours." I turned back to Ian. "Did he say powerful? Were those his exact words?"

Ian frowned, searching his memory. "Strong, but is that na the same?"

"Not necessarily. Malcolm's may be the most powerful, but depending on what you intend to do with it, his might not be the strongest."

Malcolm disagreed from the sound he made. Snorting really didn't sound natural coming from him. Should I tell him Doc's theory? About his attempted cure? Malcolm might be on my side today, but tomorrow, we could be enemies again. Especially if he decided to pursue killing me. But what could he do to prevent the discovery of the cure? I gave up and told him everything. Ian and Rena seemed more interested than Malcolm.

"What is needed for this cure of your doctor's?" Malcolm asked.

"Your blood," Joe supplied. Then followed that up with a statement he seemed a little too happy to make. "Withdrawn moments before your death."

Malcolm slid his eyes to me. "I can see the problem."

"This isn't about Doc's cure." There was no reason for me to feel guilty. I hadn't tried to kill Malcolm for his blood, while he had done exactly that to me. I met his eyes evenly. "This is about some crazy who may be stealing vamp blood. The reason I told you about Doc's theory was to help us catch this lunatic."

"And you believe this man is trying to create a cure?"

"Not exactly. I think he may be trying to extract all of the good from the vampire and none of the bad."

"Selfish prick. Does this na prove it then? The man is after Malcolm's blood. Ya said yourself that his is the key."

"The key to curing me, as it is his blood that infected me. But not the key to a general vaccine. Doc seems to think I am that key." I didn't meet their stares. I didn't want to be a key to anything, damn it. Like everyone wasn't already out to get me without adding extra incentive.

“Yes, that would appear to be the case,” Malcolm said. “Then we can assume he will come for you when the time is right. When he does, we will have our killer.”

“You think you’re going to use Lindy as bait.” Joes words were low, but no one could miss the threat, the anger. “Think again. This bastard won’t get within miles of her.”

“She will be protected.”

“She sure as hell will. And not by some parasite that doesn’t give a damn about her.”

Joe might be mad at me, but he would protect me. Guess he didn’t hate me after all. Not that I had really believed he ever had. But telling myself that sure made it easier to keep my distance from him.

“It’s not like I’m fragile, guys. He’ll come for me, whether I’m guarded or not, when he’s ready for me. We can assume the timing is not perfect. He will need time to run his tests from Ian’s blood. The virus takes two days to completely overtake the body. We should have at least that much time to come up with a plan.

We tried for two hours to come up with something, but in the end, we only came up with more arguments. I finally gave up and went to bed.

* * * *

I hate whiners, people who complain twenty-four-seven. So when for three days once a month I become one of them, it ain’t pretty.

This is, of course, Malcolm’s fault. Going dead wreaks havoc on a woman’s monthly cycle and mine has ceased altogether. That’s the good news.

Bad news, I still have PMS, only without relief. It worsens each month. I used to be scary once a month, now I’m downright psychotic. And I know this. Should make it better but the truth is, I just don’t care. I have a right to go a little crazy every once in a while.

The only thing that has ever helped me through is chocolate. I’ve craved it since my periods began in junior high.

So naturally, it is one of the things my body can no longer tolerate. It makes me sick. Really, really sick. I know this because I have refused to believe it and tried to make my body learn to get over it.

Normally, I try to hide out in my house when I get this way. I hate taking it out on unsuspecting others. Innocents. But lucky for me, this month I have the culprit right downstairs.

I had waited all day to vent my frustrations, and the time had finally come. I wanted to be

cruel, vindictive. A real bitch. I'd lost chocolate, for God's sake.

"You're looking a bit peaked tonight, Lucinda."

Malcolm's first words when I entered the room. Now, you tell me--who started it?

"This from a man who has been dead for more than five hundred years?" I snickered.

Wasn't proud of it, but that's what I did.

"True. However, your coloring is usually more warm."

"Used to be even warmer before I met you." I slumped onto the sofa.

"Ah." Malcolm's lips curled. "A pity party."

"Screw you."

"Your mood is rather annoying tonight." He was standing near the bar, drinking down his breakfast.

"You think?"

"I *think* I do not wish for the honor of your company in this present mood." He slid his empty glass onto the mahogany surface of the bar and turned his attention to me.

"You kicking me out, bat boy?"

"Bat boy? Amusing. I am simply telling you to improve your attitude or excuse yourself."

"Like hell." I jumped from the sofa. "You don't like my attitude, tough. You're the reason for it. You and every other crawler of your species." I wasn't singling out vampires, just men in general.

"Hello, sweetheart." I spun on my heels, stared at Joe's grin. He picked *now* to be nice to me?

"What is so damn amusing?" Hands on my hips, I was ready for him if he dared to draw any closer.

"Nothing at all. I'm just happy that for once in our relationship it's not me you're chewing up and spitting out. PMS, huh?"

That's the problem with keeping the same guy for any length of time. They think they learn you.

"Its doesn't take PMS to get fed up around here. And we don't have a relationship, in case you haven't noticed. We have--"

"Sex," Malcolm offered. I shot him dead with my eyes. Shame it didn't work.

"All of this is your fault. Your life is shit, so you have to make sure everybody else is

miserable, is that it? Well congratulations, Malcolm. You succeeded. Now I hope you rot in hell.”

It would have been a beautiful exit had it not been for the black cape draped over the ottoman, dragging the floor. And who wears a cape these days? I stumbled right over it, struggled to keep from falling down. Again, Malcolm’s fault.

I fled the house. Wasn’t very well done of me, but done anyway. I knew Joe, and probably Malcolm, would be mad at me for leaving alone. Hell, after what we’d discussed last night they’d probably be beyond mad. I also knew the risk was low, since it was too soon for the test on Ian’s blood to be complete. Course, I could be wrong about the whole thing and the guy could make a grab for me tonight. With the current mood I was in, I almost wished it. Besides, a person could only hold in so much anger before they self-combusted.

I walked down Crump Boulevard toward the river. This part of town had once fallen to crime and decay, but it was coming to life again. I hated to admit it, but it was the vampires that had revived the area.

To the right, I heard horses whinny. I had missed the sound. Maybe if I snuck around quietly, I could get a glimpse of them without setting them off. Horses hated me now. Joe loved horses, owned several. See how deep our problems run?

I turned down Florida Street. There was a stable up on the overpass, where they kept the horses when they weren’t pulling tourists in their fancy buggies around town.

It was still dark in this area with most of the streetlights busted, but vamps preferred it that way. I heard the voices in the shadows just as I stepped under the viaduct. My eyes adjusted to the dark.

He was no more than a kid, sixteen at best. And although I knew it couldn’t be, he struck me as fresh, newly turned. Nobody got to turn in this town without consultation with me first. And I had never laid eyes on this kid.

Our eyes met, and I saw the fear, the confusion in them. The cross that was held in front of his face seemed to catch what little light existed, shooting out a prism of light in all directions. The teenagers, near his own age, blocked his path.

I stepped forward. The cross couldn’t hurt me, couldn’t hurt the kid either, but he didn’t seem to know that. How could he not? That was one of the first things I had learned. We weren’t the devil, made from the devil, or evil incarnate. God hadn’t turned on us.

“What is going on here, boys?” I moved slowly, as if I didn’t really care what they were up to.

“Nothing that concerns you, lady.

There is nothing worse than a hateful kid. “Well, now I guess I’ll be the judge of that. Why don’t you let him go on his way?”

The tallest boy laughed. Lord, I hate adolescence. When kids think they know it all and don’t really know diddly.

“He’s one of them.” He nodded to the kid as if that would be enough to cause me to turn and run.

“I see. So what are you planning to do about that?” I positioned myself between them and the kid, just in case this got out of hand.

“We don’t want his kind around here. Nobody around here would miss him. Hell, they’d thank us for driving his kind away.”

Where had I heard that before? I stared at the kid, his skin the color of coffee, and replied. “There was once a time people said that about your kind. Don’t you think this town has seen enough racism?”

He stepped back, shamed I hoped.

“What are you, some vamp-loving bitch?” This from the greasy head wearing the leather jacket. It was a warm night. The humidity in had already dampened my hair and this kid was decked out in leather. I hope he felt cool, cause he looked like an idiot.

“Director of Vampire Affairs, to be politically correct. Now you kids run on home before you get into some real trouble.”

I saw the moment leather jacket made his decision. Damn, but I hate fighting kids. Where the hell were their parents anyway?

He stepped toward me, took a swing. I had expected it and dodged his fist easily. I never expected the other kid to throw one.

He caught me on the cheek, and my head popped back. It hurt like hell. When I didn’t go down, he knew he had screwed up. I felt the change coming over me, and I knew he had, too.

When I opened my eyes a short time later, they had all wisely cleared out.

“You’re a vampire,” fresh face announced, as if he was telling me some great news.

“Took you long enough to figure that out, kid.”

He shrugged.

“How old are you anyway?”

“Sixteen.”

“By that, I hope you mean you’ve been undead for that long.” The kid’s hair looked to be caked with crud, his clothes dirty and torn.

“No. I’m sixteen, but I’ve been a vampire since yesterday.”

I choked on air. No way was this kid leveling with me. It was illegal to bite anyone under eighteen, consenting or not. And even consenting, there were still rules.

“Where’s your master?”

“Who?” He actually looked confused by the question.

“The vampire who bit you,” I clarified, using the last of my short supply of patience.

“I don’t know.”

I shook my head in denial. “It’s his duty to train you once he has turned you.” That was a new law, and one of mine I’m proud to say. I wanted to ensure no one else was dumped alone and trying to figure out how to fill up the hunger pains.

“I don’t know anything about that. I just remember getting bit and then waking up yesterday, uh, last night I guess.”

“Where?” I searched the dark corners, hoping to spot some guilty vampire.

“I woke up in a warehouse a few streets from here.”

“Where were you when you were bitten?” I spit out.

“Oh. Beale Street. I was walking to my car. I’d parked it behind Alfred’s, cause they don’t break into them as bad there. I was buzzing pretty good, so I don’t remember much. Didn’t see anybody, just felt those teeth.”

“And you’ve been wandering around since last night? Great.” I eyed him carefully and noticed the blood on his T-shirt. “You haven’t fed, have you?”

He turned away, ignoring my question. Shit. I had my answer.

“Damn it, you have!” I stepped toward him, and he made a fast retreat.

“Wasn’t my fault! I couldn’t stop myself. I was so hungry, and the guy was just lying there, sleeping in the doorway. Man, I think I killed him. Shit. What am I gonna do now? I wanna go home. I’m going home. I don’t wanna be no stinkin vampire.”

I knew the feeling. Shame that didn’t change a darn thing. “I know. You ever heard of the

castle?”

He shook his head, wiped at the tears on his face. Shit, a kid. Just what I needed. “Never mind, I’m going that way.” Or it looked like I was now. I wasn’t ready to go back, to face Joe and Malcolm and listen to their recriminations.

Chapter Ten

“Malcolm, this is Billy. He’s one of yours now.” I’d met Malcolm and Joe standing in the front yard, getting ready to call out a full search for me. Joe was pissed, so I pulled a stunt he had pulled on me many times. I jumped on him first, threw him off balance while he tried to figure out what I was mad about and then ignored him. Works for him sometimes, so I thought I’d try it. How come it never works for women?

“Pardon?” Malcolm’s manners could get on a person’s nerve sometimes.

“He’s yours. A rogue bit him yesterday. He needs guidance.” And I needed a shower. Between the humidity and the sweat from my walk, I smelled rotten. As the kid stepped closer to me, I was relieved to realize the smell wasn’t coming from me.

“Then we will find someone--”

“No. He’s killed already. It’ll take someone who can help him learn control over his bloodlust. As master of Memphis, it’s your responsibility.”

“He is just a mere child.” Malcolm looked over the boy as they followed me into the house.

“Yeah. Life sucks, huh?”

“This is payback for biting you,” Malcolm announced, and he actually sounded snippy.

I stopped, turned to look at him. Was I punishing him? No, not yet. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t enjoying the hell out of this. “No. Sticking you with a teenager is just an added bonus. You’ll know when payback comes.”

I showered, dressed, and stomped back downstairs. My problems were growing by truckloads. Everyone was still gathered in the main room, Joe on the phone. I waited while he ended his call.

“That was the chief. Tim Dunlund just surfaced.” Joe dropped his cell back into his pocket.

“Alive?”

“Completely. He walked into the station. Seems his housekeeper fainted when he walked into his house this afternoon. When she recovered from her shock, she explained to him he was missing, presumably dead. He went downtown to clear things up quickly. Guess he didn’t want the will read yet.

“According to him, the housekeeper was confused. Claims he’s been out of the country, vacationing.”

“And they believe him?” People as powerful as Dunlund didn’t just disappear.

“I spoke to Hotchkins myself. He said Dunlund appeared a bit dazed but otherwise coherent. No marks on his neck, and since he was out and about in mid daylight, it doesn’t appear he has turned vampire. If it was a lie, it was a convincing one. No one can seem to come up with a motive, either.”

“I could find out if he is being completely truthful.” I looked at Malcolm and shuddered. One taste of blood and Malcolm could tell you things about the guy even his mother wouldn’t know.

“I don’t think taking a bite out of a favored citizen is what the mayor has in mind here, Malcolm. Thanks for the offer.”

Malcolm shrugged, as if he didn’t care one way or another.

“Wherever he has been, it seems unconnected. I guess we need to concentrate on the current problems. We can worry about Dunlund later.” I explained my meeting with Billy, and his lack of a master.

“It would seem we have a rogue.” Malcolm’s calm voice indicated it was a small thing, easily handled. I knew better.

“A rogue. Shit. I ain’t got enough problems? Missing humans, dead vampires, and millionaires who disappear and reappear better than a magic act. Problems seem to find me at an alarming rate.”

“You’re not alone in this. We’ll deal with this problem first, since it seems the most pressing.” Joe was talking to me again, but I wasn’t sure why. Yeah, I have a real problem with things coming too easy.

I glanced over at the kid just as he pulled the glass away from his mouth. He had a liquid mustache, but instead of milk, it was O positive. Christ, the kid wasn’t going to last a day.

“I need to go to the warehouse where our kid over there woke up. The rogue just became

priority.”

“I agree. Let’s go,” Malcolm said as he stood to join Joe and me.

A cop and a ancient vampire. Could a girl feel more protected? Not in this city.

The building was on Front Street. I had passed it a dozen times and it always piqued my interest. Arched doorways and wrought iron railings that led to what once had been a cobblestone courtyard could be seen from the street. And lucky for us, the lock on the gate had been busted. We let ourselves in.

There is a smell that develops over time of rot and decay. Of desolation and despair. This place reeked of it. Rodents left alone for too long had left their marks everywhere. The ground was littered with their droppings. Rats, mice, pigeons, and a few other things I refused to guess at. The germs that hung in the air here could give the vampire bacteria a run for it.

Darkness had settled comfortably in for the night, so flashlights were pulled out, mostly for the humans. The vamps didn’t need them.

Joe had refused to let me come alone, and for that I would be forever grateful. Not even I was that stupid.

We had also dragged along backup. Two from each team, since we didn’t know what we might encounter. Best to cover all the possibilities, both breathing and well, not.

Malcolm had decided to join us and seemed as distracted by the filth as I was. Maybe more so, which I found amusing. He had once lived in times without flushing toilets or running water.

Most of the abandoned warehouses downtown consisted of one large storage space. We couldn’t get that lucky here. This place had definitely once been a showplace. The marble was covered in filth but still showed hints of its grandeur. The wood trim, the little that hadn’t been torn off and burned for heat by the homeless, was cherry.

Offices divided the space and ran the length of the building. Storage was left in the back, but one glance told us there was nothing hiding in there. That’s the good part about big open spaces--they leave nowhere to hide.

Unfortunately, we needed to search the offices, or what was left of them, individually. It would have made more sense to come back during daylight hours, but then we wouldn’t have the extra muscle with us. And when it comes to a fight, I want the vampires on my side. Hard to kill, bad attitudes, yep. Just my style.

Everyone paired off, one human and one vampire per team. That way, no matter what we encountered, someone would be able to handle it. When I was automatically paired with Joe, I was both relieved and upset. I wanted to be with him to watch his back, and I knew he would watch mine, but it also meant I was one of the vamps. Okay, I know that to be true, but the reminder gets to me sometimes.

I should have known things were going to go straight down. When the hair on my neck stands, it's a clear warning. I never seem to remember that until it's too late.

I pointed the light at the door, and Joe eased it open. His gun was drawn and ready. Shame I couldn't change on command, grow my fangs when I needed them. Then I'd be as armed as he was. As it was, he seemed to have been shorted on the partner deal. I might be a vampire, but if I couldn't change, I was basically worthless.

It all happened in seconds. I saw the two by four coming down on Joe's head just as he was turning toward the guy. He went down hard. I couldn't see the blood, but I smelled it, and for an instant, I thought he was dead. Joe. My one weakness. The only thing I loved in this sorry-ass life. Then I heard him moan. I was ecstatic over that little noise until I saw the man step toward Joe's body to finish the job.

Anger and panic ripped through me, tearing my fangs out and sharpening my nails. I could take anything and not change, mess with Joe and things got ugly.

I grabbed for the board, threw the man against the wall when he didn't relinquish his hold on it. Just when I thought I had contained the threat, I felt the needle slide into my skin. My knees buckled, and I went down hard. I knew I was in big trouble even as I sank into darkness.

* * * *

Never let anyone tell you vampires love dark, damp places. The darkness, well, it's true we are connected to it, which is obvious since we come alive only at night. But damp? No way. Most vampires don't even like water anymore, though I have no clue why. I think it comes from learned behavior.

I mean, I live for my showers, but I lived for them when I was alive. But for most of the older vamps, showers weren't even invented in their time. Most of them bathed in a freezing creek once a month, and the experience doesn't bring back warm fuzzy memories. Since vampires don't sweat and have no way to smell, bathing isn't such a necessity.

But when I opened my eyes and found myself strapped to a steel table in some smelly

basement, I could understand their dislike of dampness. It sank beneath my skin, freezing my already icy blood.

For some reason, I had not changed back to human form. Maybe I needed to feed first, but that seemed an unlikely possibility in my current position. More likely, I was going to be the meal.

I wished I could say I was alone. But from the shuffling sound and the tiny moans, I knew there were at least one other, maybe two. I turned my head, but the darkness covered everything.

My arm burned and I knew I had been cut in the scuffle. My luck, I would bleed to death before anyone showed.

I could smell blood, and all of it wasn't mine. That meant somewhere in this room there was blood, and it wasn't still flowing in someone's body.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the sudden bright light that flooded the room. When I eased them open, I was staring up at fluorescent lights. Someone had taken the time and expense to update this smelly place, at least enough so they could actually see the filth.

It seemed it was my lucky day for finding lost humans. Strapped down on the table beside mine was Larry Brown.

There were tubes hooked up to a bag of blood, but it was impossible to tell if it was being filled or emptied. I would bet they weren't filling him up. There was no movement from him, and I wasn't sure if he was already dead.

I heard feet shuffling behind me. I turned my head up and to the right, and saw Peter Caldwell heading toward me. He looked much worse than the last time I had seen him.

His hair was longer, but grimy and limp. His skin was taut against his bones, and he was moonlight pale. He looked like something out of a zombie movie. His eyes were on me, but I swear they looked unfocused and dead inside.

"Peter." He didn't react to my voice. The closer he got to me, the faster my heart raced. He seemed locked on one target, out of his head.

The last time I had seen the kid, he had been sun-kissed and warm to the touch. And breathing. From his appearance, the transformation had been hard on him.

Dying hurts. Don't let anyone tell you different. Mine had been a small taste, but if the sample was accurate, the pain was unthinkable. Luckily, the mind usually shuts down when the

experience becomes too much. Looked like Peter's mind had never recovered.

Peter stopped beside the table, his empty eyes looking down at my arm. I saw the needle in his hands but had no time to prepare myself. Not that I could have done much, strapped down like I was.

I had been a nurse. I had slid IV needles in more arms than I could remember and never once had failed to find a vein on my first try. It was something the other nurses had envied me for.

Peter had no experience. It took five tries before he finally hit a vein. It had been nothing more than luck that he found one then.

I watched as my blood began to fill a bag. There is a reality that hits you as you watch your blood drain from your body. A vulnerability, knowing that your life could be drained away so easily.

"What are you doing?" It seemed a stupid question, since draining me was obviously what he was after. I watched as Peter checked the flow, then moved to Larry. Once he determined he had adequately emptied the man, he removed the final bag. He had been drained of blood. I know these things, from more than his translucent skin. I'm a vampire, it means my life to know.

"Peter, can you hear me?" I knew he wasn't simply ignoring me. If I had a prayer, I was going to have to find a way to reach him. "I saw Angel the other day. She misses you. Do you remember Angel?" Recognition flickered in his eyes, then dulled.

"Let me help you, Peter." It seemed I was in more need of help at the moment, but I didn't think mentioning that to him would help me any. "Untie me." He stopped, turned to me, and for a minute, I thought he was going to actually obey me. When I didn't speak, he turned away.

"Peter, look at me!" He did as I commanded. I had the blood of the master in my veins, and the master could command lesser vampires. Could it really be that easy?

"Untie me, Peter." His brows wrinkled as he fought his inner struggles.

"Now! I am your master, and I command that you untie me."

Officially, it wasn't true. I wasn't master over anyone and never would be. Only the vamp that turned you was your master. But the ancients could command lesser vamps and there were only two left, Malcolm and Rena. Hopefully, I had enough of Malcolm's aged blood in me

to command the newly turned. It was about time his blood came in handy for something.

I watched Peter approach, watched as he slipped the knife from his pocket, slid out the blade, and pulled it under the bindings.

I grabbed the IV and jerked it from my arm, just as my legs swung off the table. I cursed from the sting and ignored the blood trailing down my arm. It seemed Peter had found a vein and opened it up on the last stick, and now it didn't want to stop. It would take a few minutes to clot.

Peter's eyes fixed on the blood, then glazed over. I knew I was about to be in real trouble.

"Snap out of it, Peter. What the hell's wrong with you?"

"He seems to be suffering from a power high." I hadn't heard anyone approach and spun to face Rena. Why wasn't I surprised?

"It happens on occasion when one ingests the blood of too many vampires." She sighed. "It would appear I need a new test subject." Her eyes moved to Larry. "And another food source."

There really is such a thing as hysterical laughter. I know this from experience. And I was bubbling over with it.

"Okay." I shook my head, trying to process too much information as fast as possible. "Blood research. I understand why Peter would be convenient. But the other humans..."

"He saved me years of work. In fact, all of the men did. Tim was sweet enough to lead me in the right direction. If not for him, I would have taken valuable time finding Peter. Brown was necessary to get me in the lab."

"Why let Dunlund go?"

"You never know when a man of his power might come in handy. His blood served no purpose. Blood is easy to come by. Power, well power is a much more valuable commodity."

"You're searching for a cure." Rena sashayed across the room, her laughter echoing against timeworn stones.

"Oh Lindy, you disappoint me. You cure what is unwanted. What I seek is power.

"You can't imagine what it is to serve a master lifetime after lifetime. Surgis could have released me. For all his claim to care for me, he was too selfish to give me my own life." Rena walked to the table.

"Maybe he was afraid you would leave him."

"Of course I would have left him. He had no right to own me. So I bought my own

freedom.”

“With Surgis’ life. You ended up with a new master anyway.”

“Malcolm will never rule me. I am older than him by decades and had I been born male, I would be ruler today.” Rena crossed to Peter. He stood statue still, his eyes unseeing. If he was on a power trip, it wasn’t one I wanted to take anytime soon. I watched as Rena raked a nail over his cheek. The blood started quickly, and she wasn’t about to waste a drop.

Peter was short, and with Rena’s heels, she could easily lean into him, running her tongue over the gash to take in every drop.

“You’re pissed off. Maybe I can understand that, being controlled by Surgis all those years. But what do you hope to gain by this? Even if you kill Malcolm, the no-female rule still applies.”

She licked her blood-red lips slowly, savoring the taste.

“No one would dare challenge one with my powers. But I do not wish to kill Malcolm. Not when I can command him instead.”

“You know he would never bow to you.” The blood on her lips was looking good to me, and I felt my stomach rumble.

“Ah, but he will if he wishes to save his people.”

“You would destroy the vampire?” I was as guilty as the rest of the world. I automatically assumed all vampires would fight to save their own race. Guess not.

“Yes. But it won’t come to that. The threat, once proven real, will be all that is necessary for Malcolm to do as I say. It is his one weakness, his need to protect his own.”

“He’ll fight you, and younger or not, he’ll win.”

“Possibly. That is why I have no intention of fighting him. Now, while I have enjoyed our little girl talk, I must insist you return to the table. I’m afraid I need to extract more of your blood.”

“If you’re not after a cure, what good is my blood to you?” I didn’t move. No way was I going to climb back up on that table and allow anyone to strap me down. If I was going to die, at least I would be swinging when it happened. The vulnerability of being helpless was worse than a quick death.

“Your little cure theory left out one scenario. If Malcolm’s dying blood cells will rid you of his mutated virus, then they can kill him as well.”

“You have to kill him before the cells will turn on themselves.” Which was my problem with the whole cure thing.

“No. I have to kill his cells. Killing you, creates those dying cells. Once the human in you dies, only his cells will remain. Once they begin to die, I can extract his cells and create his killer. All I have to do then is to inject his dying cells into his own body, sit back and wait while they do their job. It will be him that brings on his own death.

Rena smiled. “I really should thank you. Had it not been for the information you gave so freely about your cure, I would still be searching.

“So you see, I really must have your blood.”

“Then come and get it. Why send a boy?” I nodded toward Peter, who still hadn’t moved. He looked as harmless as a puppy.

Rena looked over at Peter and shook her head. “You know, we share a bond, you and I.”

“Bond? Yeah right. Wanting my blood doesn’t give us a bond.” Okay, drinking it seemed to do the trick as Malcolm can attest to, but that wasn’t something I cared to think about.

“Yes. There are few of us, females who do not answer the call of a master. We could rule them all.”

Rena held up the syringe that contained the light amber liquid. I stared at it, mesmerized. In that little tube was the answer to my prayers. Doc could analyze it; duplicate the formula to create an antidote.

“It is all here, in this tiny container.”

My throat was too dry to swallow. “How did you do it?”

Her laugh was normal, not the laugh of a madman.

“That’s the beauty of it, I didn’t. I didn’t have to do anything except find the right men and they did all of the work. It was simply a matter of removing the disease they were trying to cure and substituting it with our little virus. Your Doc’s notes provided the rest.”

“If you hurt him--”

“You dare to threaten me, when you hold no power? Really Lindy, that’s unwise. I could kill you with so little exertion. But don’t worry, I didn’t harm your little friend. Oh, I was prepared to take his blood and bend him to my will, but it was not necessary. Your little doctor lives in a world all his own. It was easy to pay him a little attention, a little conversation and he told me everything I needed to know. I removed the memory from him, of course. Very easy to

do when the man can hardly remember where he left his glasses.”

“I see. And you kept me busy with the rogue.”

“There was no rogue, though it would have been handy. Shame I didn’t think of it. The boy simply had too much alcohol in his system to remember the event. I could not use his blood, thanks to that alcohol content. Since I had already infected him with the tainted blood, there was nothing I could do but turn him out. I certainly wasn’t about to waste valuable serum on him when the alcohol would confuse the results.”

Rena’s fangs suddenly seemed too large for her mouth. Her eyes glared red, and I knew our chat was about to be over. I also knew there was no way I could match her power.

I had just found something scarier than the roaches. No one knew where I was, and there was no way they were going to find me when I had no idea myself. I wanted Joe. I’d even settle for Malcolm. In fact, I wanted the whole damn task force, vampire and human alike.

Had Malcolm succeeded in finishing what he had started on the muggy dark street in New Orleans, he would have been my master and I would have been able to communicate with him even through the miles. It was because he hadn’t done just that that I was even in this mess. In fact, no one would even want my damn blood, had he turned me completely. Again, this was all Malcolm’s fault.

Maybe I’d get lucky and Joe would kill him after Rena finished me off. The last time I had seen Joe, he had been knocked out on the floor of some abandoned warehouse. Did he even have a clue that I was missing? I looked down at the cut on my arm, saw the dried blood that had ran down to my finger. Just maybe, I had left a trail behind.

Malcolm’s blood was mixed with mine. If there was a trail, no matter how faint, he could follow it. There was hope that they would find me.

“But first, I must tie you to me. My blood is strong, and will bind you as securely as Malcolm would have. Then I will have no need to force you.” She reached for the syringe. I knew what the red stuff in it was. Blood. Her blood. If I survived this, I was swearing off the stuff. It had been way too big of a deal in my life lately.

Doc had told me that another vampire’s blood wouldn’t be enough to defeat Malcolm’s blood. That it couldn’t harm me. He hadn’t said anything about the blood from a vampire more powerful than Malcolm. I had all the foreign little cells swimming in me that I wanted.

Rena couldn’t force me to drink her blood. I might be weak, but not that weak. But if she

was able to slip that needle into me, she wouldn't have to bite me.

She moved like the wind, one minute standing in front of me, and the next behind me. I tried to turn, but I was just slower.

Rena grabbed me from behind, pressing the needle against my neck just as the cavalry arrived.

Joe, his gun drawn, was first down the stairs. Malcolm followed him by only seconds. As the room filled with the rest of my team, I sent up a silent thanks to the man above for answering my prayers.

For a second, it seemed everyone just stared at each other. The thought crossed my mind that Rena would just give up now that she was outnumbered. I should have known better.

Joe cursed as the needle slid into my skin. One jerk, and the liquid would be forced into my body. No one moved, I didn't even dare to breath. Lucky for me, I don't do a lot of it when I'm dead. I looked down at the table in front of us, my eyes locked on the antidote. Would it work against whatever this idiot was about to fill me with?

As I felt the cool liquid burn a path through my veins, I realized I was about to find out. Without the threat to me, nothing held Joe back. He shot the bullet straight between the eyes.

Bullets might not kill vampires, but the force and shock knocked Rena back. The arm around my neck drew me down with her when she fell. I knew she would recover long before any of us wanted her to. Kicking just like a girl, I scrambled out of her reach.

There is just something freaky about knowing some creepy little parasite is inside you, finding a home and getting ready to settle in. And from past experience, I know what kind of damage they can do.

Joe was there, lifting me gently and lowering me to the table.

"Grab the other needle."

"You don't know what's in it, Lindy. Wait until Doc has a chance to run tests--"

"By then, no telling what will have happened to my body. Besides, it's the cure. Its what we wanted. Do it now, Joe."

"Not at a risk to you. It could kill you, for all we know. I don't give a damn what you are, I'm not going to watch you die."

I grabbed the needle from his hands and took the choice away from him. I jabbed it into my leg and prayed for the best.

Nothing happened. But then, it had been at least an hour before Malcolm's bite had started killing me.

The shriek from behind me had us all spinning around. Malcolm and Rena were locked in battle and from the sounds, Rena wasn't doing so well.

Ancient or not, it seemed Malcolm had just had more experience with killing his own kind. His nails extended and curled into deadly razors. His face contorted, changed into the monster most humans never witnessed.

Vampires, really old ones, are truly the thing of nightmares. Their ability to grow a second set of fangs, shorter and sharper, had only been a myth. Or so I thought. As I watched Malcolm rip open Rena's neck, I realized there was a lot I didn't know about my new race.

Blood poured down Malcolm's chin, but he didn't seem to notice. Or maybe he liked the proof of his kill. And we all knew Rena was going to die. There was a madness in his eyes that clearly said he would have it no other way.

Rena's eyes searched wildly for a miracle. But Malcolm's nails slashed at her neck, ripping open veins faster than she could heal them. When she was weak, he released his hold on her and she fell to the ground.

I felt the power rising and knew what he was about to do. I wasn't about to stick around this time and watch those damn roaches scatter about.

"Get me out of here." Joe needed no further encouragement. Just as we cleared the top of the stairs, a blood-curdling scream ripped through the air. I knew it would be the last sound Rena ever made.

We stopped by Doc's on my way back to the castle. Doc drew blood. He needed more tests, but apparently the cure had taken care of the nasty little needle that had been let loose inside me. It had done nothing for my other problems. As far as Doc could tell, Malcolm and my blood cells were still waging the battle inside me.

I hugged him, told him I'd stop by next week for my regular donation and returned to the castle.

The only thing left to do was gather my things and go back home to my real life. A life without Joe in it. God, how depressing.

Joe and I filed our reports by phone, promising his chief and the mayor that we'd show up for a meeting come daylight. We showered and met everyone back downstairs. It was too late

to worry about going home tonight, and dawn was only hours away.

I had barely sat down on the sofa next to Joe, when Malcolm handed me a glass.

“Brandy. You need it after tonight.” See, I told you he was from another era. I turned it up and emptied the glass. I was from another era, too. And in my time, women didn’t demurely sip brandy when the world got too rough.

Malcolm raised his brow but said nothing at the empty glass.

“I’m packed. I’ll be out of here at dawn,” I said.

Malcolm’s forehead wrinkled. “I had hoped you would chose to remain.”

“The job’s done. There’s nothing here for me.” I hated to admit it felt a little sad leaving. It wasn’t the castle or its occupants that made my heart ache. It was leaving the make-believe world I had been living in with Joe.

“We have certain issues that must be dealt with.”

Joe spoke up. “No, you don’t. All issues between you and Lindy have been settled. We are walking out of here together and no one is going to stop us.”

My head snapped around to Joe. “I’m leaving here alone, Joe. There is no reason to drag this out.” No way I could take it if he did. The only way I was going to be able to walk away from Joe was to hit the door, run all the way and never look back. One look at his eyes, and I would be a goner.

“You’re not walking away from me again, Lindy. Not this time.”

I jumped from the sofa to pace. When I turned to look at Malcolm, his eyes were glowing.

“That doesn’t work on me, Malcolm. You can’t charm another vampire.” It was the only thing I had going for me where Malcolm was concerned.

“But you are not a vampire yet, are you? I agreed to leave you alone until this business was complete, and now it is done.”

I was locked on his eyes and felt like I was falling. I wanted to look away, to stop the ground from reaching up for me, but I could do neither.

“Come Lucinda, join me. We are one. Let go of your resistance and join me.”

I tried to fight it, but his pull was too strong. Like half of me was being ripped apart. I felt the change coming over me and cried out.

“Leave her alone, damn you.” Joe jumped up, ready to battle a room full of vamps in

order to save me. Not very smart, but sweet just the same.

“No. This must be her decision. You can’t interfere.”

Strong arms tightened around Joe, holding him back.

There was nothing I could do. I wanted to beg Ian to release him, beg the other cops in the room to take him away so he wouldn’t witness this, but they were as helpless as Joe. My feet crossed the room to Malcolm, traitors with a mind of their own. Or instructed by Malcolm’s. It seemed Malcolm did hold power over me.

“Join us for eternity, Lucinda. Come, make our union complete.” His nail opened a gash in his neck, and I saw the blood flow. My eyes stared at it, mesmerized by the dark red liquid I wanted more than life. I crossed to Malcolm and started to bury my lips for a taste. A moan sounded in his throat as my lips touched the skin of his neck. I wanted to drink from him, wanted to taste him. But something in me revolted, and I took a step back.

“Let me taste you. One bite and we’ll be together for eternity.”

Malcolm knew where to touch me to ignite the flame. His hand caressed my bare shoulder, lowered to rub against my breast.

I heard Joe’s growl, deep in his throat.

Malcolm pulled the hair away from my neck, exposing the dark-blue vein. His tongue glided slowly over my skin. Bloodlust flooded through me.

My head dropped back, offering him what he sought. His mouth opened wide and started to lower.

“No!” The scream tore from Joe’s mouth and woke me from my haze. I blinked, wide eyed, and looked back at Joe.

“Come here, Lindy. Come on sweetheart. I love you. I’ve always loved you. Don’t leave me in this life again without you. Please.” I stared at those gray eyes, those eyes I could fall into. Joe. He was what I wanted. All I wanted.

I jerked from Malcolm and ran to Joe. Ian released him and he grabbed me. In his arms, I felt safe.

“Welcome home, baby.”

I buried my head against his neck, felt life flowing in him. The scent of male, heady and hot, quickened my breath.

“If you ever come near her again, I’ll kill you, you bastard.” No one in the room doubted

that Joe meant it.

Malcolm held up his hand. "There is no need. She has made her decision, and I will honor it. I will not force her will to mine." He turned and walked from the room. I didn't even complain when Joe picked me up and carried me out of the castle. I didn't care where we ended up, now that we had ended up together.

The End