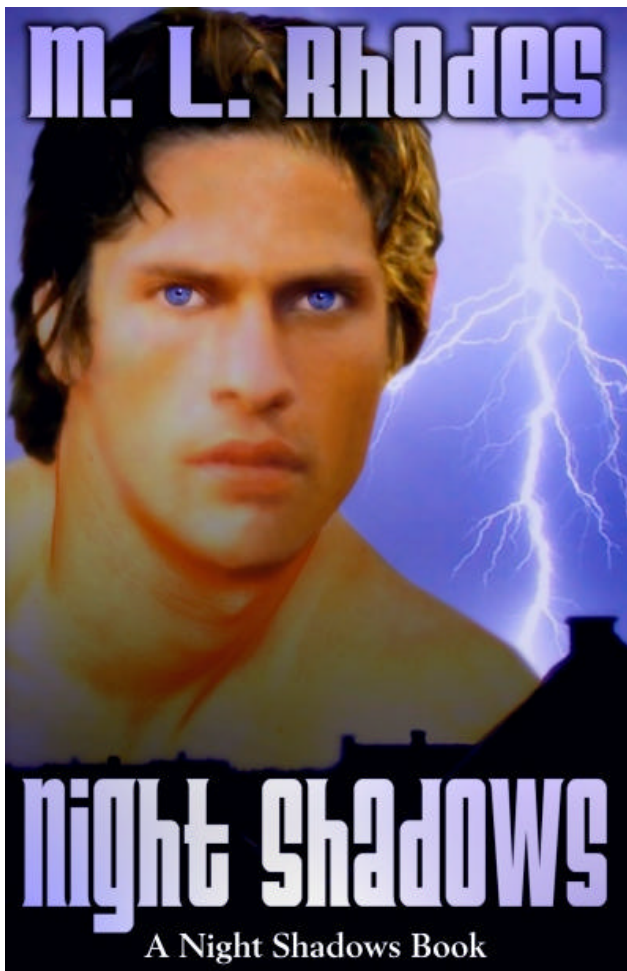


M. L. RHODES



night SHADOWS

A Night Shadows Book

NIGHT SHADOWS

“Tell me your name,” I gasped.

“Does it matter?”

His voice was intoxicating. It was all I could to do to respond...yet it was important to me to at least know his name. To have something besides just the purely physical plane on which I could feel some connection with him. “Yes. It matters to me.”

One of his hands stroked down over my belly, nudged between my legs, silently ordering me to spread them. When he cupped my mound, I wanted to sob.

He turned me and tugged me hard against him so my back was molded to his chest. Then he resumed his position of one hand fondling my bare breast, the other pressing, releasing, pressing my cunt. I let my head fall back against his shoulder. The bulge of his cock strained against my rear-end, and his lips found my ear, my neck. The wet tip of his tongue fucked the sensitive skin near my jugular, and it was a damned erotic sensation.

You want me, Rachel.

“Yes,” I cried.

Why?

“Because I feel you. In my head. In my body. I...I feel like I know you, but I don’t know why.”

Do you like the way I touch you?

“Gods, yes.” I settled each of my hands over the top of his, urging him on. “I’ve wanted this.”

I know.

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NIGHT SHADOWS

BY

M. L. RHODES

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*For Gary Oldman, who made
me realize just how sexy vampires could be.
And for James Marsters, who, as Spike, has starred
in too many of my fantasies to count.*

*Special thanks to my friend and critique partner,
Marin Thomas, for the excellent feedback she offered as I was
writing this story. To my older son for making up the word haertaeg for
me when I needed an ancient vampiric term. To my father-in-law, Phil,
a man of phenomenal knowledge, for giving me a crash course about
the Samurai—any errors I might have made are mine alone.*

*And, as always, to my husband and kiddos
for their constant love and support. I wouldn't
know what to do without you guys!*

CHAPTER 1

The year 2067

Power Sector Delta

Formerly the southern regions of the Denver/Cheyenne Metroplex

His energy made me sizzle.

I don't mean like beads of water on pavement during a heat wave. Heat waves were an everyday occurrence in this part of the country, so I knew whereof I spoke.

No, what I felt was a sizzle of the elemental kind. A sizzle that started in my belly, warm and fiery, then spread to my breasts in a long, sweet, flame-fingered caress, and eventually coiled deep in my womb. It was the kind of sizzle that made me forget all about the shitty serial killer murder case I'd been working, that had frustrated and stymied me for weeks. Instead, I was left weak-kneed and wanting, barely able to keep my balance as I lifted my foot onto the first rung of the rusty fire

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escape ladder to reach my second floor apartment on this late September night.

This area of the city had once been filled with upscale condos and trendy eateries. But now, moldering decay bled from the brick buildings. The restaurants were long gone, and the few remaining residences were lucky to still have running water and sewer. Many parts of the city no longer had those luxuries.

A hot, dry wind suddenly churned through the alley in the darkness, sending leaves and litter in a swirl around my foot still on the ground. The days-old rotting stench of trash cans up and down the alley warred with the tang of ozone from the coming thunderstorm. It wouldn't actually rain; it seldom did anymore in Delta Sector, thanks to unchecked global warming in the early twenty-first century. Greenhouse gases in the atmosphere had surged to shocking quantities, raising temperatures higher and faster than experts had ever predicted, and forever changing the face and climate of Earth.

But the tingle coursing along my skin had nothing to do with the wind or the dry electricity from the nearby storm, and everything to do with the man who haunted my thoughts. I stood there, unmoving and lost in the moment. Knowing I should go up the ladder. But wanting only to go to him.

He was watching me. As usual. I could feel his gaze on my backside, could feel him checking me out from the soles of my boots, up my denim-clad legs, resting for a moment on my ass, then sliding along my back as if I weren't wearing a synthleather bomber jacket or cotton tank top. The perusal ended, lingeringly, on the loose twist of heat-sticky dark blonde hair at the nape of my neck.

I don't know how I knew he was checking me out. But I did. I always did.

Some women might have been freaked by his attention—strange man in a dark alley, night after night, watching. Yet I wasn't. Sad to

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say it, but weirdoes, sickos, and bad guys were my life. I was used to perverts trying to cop a feel as I patted them down or booked them at the station. I was used to killers and psychos watching me, trying to read me, trying to play me. I'd spent my entire life living in and around Delta's underworld stench. And this guy didn't give me that vibe.

Every night, when I got home from the late shift, he was there, leaning against the lamp post that, even if there wasn't a government-controlled power shutdown each night, hadn't given off light in a decade, the bulb probably smashed long ago in a gang war.

I suspected he'd recently moved to the area, which would explain his sudden nightly presence. One night a couple of weeks ago, as I walked up Exeter Street and turned into the alley, there he was. In the dark I couldn't make out his features, couldn't see what he wore, couldn't tell much of anything except that he was around five-eleven and a hundred eighty pounds—my cop brain, always mentally assessing so as to more easily identify a suspect later.

But even that first night, I *felt* him—felt the physical potency that surged off him in waves. Felt him in all the places that made me squirm. Just like tonight.

Two weeks of me coming home, him watching. Not once had he said a word to me. And to be fair, I hadn't spoken to him either. I'd just enjoyed his nightly visual appraisal, then gone in the window of my apartment, pulled off my clothes, fallen into bed in my dark bedroom, and gotten myself off with my hand.

Tonight, with my foot still balanced on the bottom rung of the ladder, my panties damp with unfulfilled desire, my breasts aching, I swore softly. This was ridiculous. I was single. I was thirty years old. I could damn well take care of myself. And I was horny.

And by the feel of his hot gaze on my back, mentally stripping me of my clothing, he was, too.

I turned and looked at him over my shoulder. An occasional flicker

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of light from the waxing moon peeked in and out of the burgeoning storm clouds, allowing me to see that he stood in his usual spot, a dark shadow against the darker night.

"How long are you going to stand there checking me out without talking to me?" I called across the alley. "You ogle my ass, you watch me climb up here night after night, and you probably have a pretty damned good idea what I'm doing once I go into my apartment. Yet you never say a word. Some people might think you were a stalker."

I swear I felt him smile.

"You don't believe I'm a stalker," came a deep, mesmerizing rumble.

I didn't quite recognize his regional accent. The Northwest? California maybe? California *before* the coast was underwater. But his voice had the effect of smooth whiskey, sending my already-stimulated libido into a warm, drunken swell.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"If you really thought I was a stalker, you'd have hauled me in to your police station by now. Questioned me. Maybe even locked me up."

His words should have alarmed me a little, or at the very least put me on alert, but they didn't. Still, he shouldn't know such things about me, when I knew nothing about him. "What makes you think I'm a cop?"

"The jacket. It's a dead giveaway. Only cops, drug dealers, and rogue bikers wear them in this heat."

"How do you know I'm not a drug dealer or a biker?" I couldn't stop the smile that curved my lips.

I'd just thought his voice was sexy. It was nothing compared to his rich laughter.

He didn't move from his spot in spite of my friendly and, I hoped, open tone. And, damn, I was hoping he would. Move closer to me.

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Wasn't that why I'd initiated this conversation in the first place?

"Rachel," I said, finally stepping off the ladder and turning to face him. "I'm Rachel."

"I know."

That gave me pause. "You seem to know a lot about me. How about sharing something of yourself. Like why you're out here every night? Most people in this neighborhood bolt their doors after nightfall and hide away until dawn. But you...you always seem to be around at midnight. Why is that?"

"You could say I work a night shift. Like you do."

I peered into the gloom by his lamp post, trying to get a better look at him. But the moon simply wasn't bright enough at this point in its cycle, even when it wasn't cloud-covered, to show me anything beyond his form. "And your job is...?"

"Security."

A peal of thunder echoed through the maze of old buildings, and another gust of wind swirled around my legs, then rose higher, lifting strands of my hair from their knot at the back of my head and tossing them about my face.

"Security. Right. Let's see, the bars closed hours ago, at power shutdown, so that leaves out bouncer. And someone in corporate security wouldn't live in this part of the city in this hell hole. They'd be up north in The Heights, in a well-lit mansion, frolicking behind safety glass windows. Clearly that's not you. So I'm thinking...hmm..." I studied his shadow for a moment. "I'm thinking maybe you do 'security' for one of the crime bosses. Maybe you're their muscle and you hang out down here around Exeter to help control their rat infestation problem."

The stranger laughed again, sending yet another curl of desire through me.

"Are you always this cynical, Rachel?"

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"I'm a cop. It comes with the territory."

I felt him smile once more. "So why do *you* live here?" he asked. "If you think it's such a hell hole?"

"Here we go again...more questions for me without really answering any I've asked you. Are you always this cagey?"

"Comes with the territory."

"The *security* territory?"

"That's right." He finally stepped away from the shelter of his lamp post and walked toward me.

My heart tripped into overtime in my chest, and, for the first time all night, I grew shaky. Though I hate to say it...not from fear. No, the closer he drew toward me, the stronger I *felt* him. The stronger the sizzle. My body, which had already been pleasantly tingly, began to prickle like pins and needles, with most of the prickling right between my legs.

He stopped an arm's length from me, and my first impression was that I'd been dead wrong about his height—not something that happened to me often. He seemed to tower over my five-foot-six. Then I realized it wasn't that he was taller than I'd thought, but rather that he had such a commanding aura—it practically caused the air around him to vibrate. He simply gave the impression of being enormous.

Though his face was still in shadow, at least now I could make out a few more details. His shoulders were broad, his legs long and well-muscled under his jeans. He wore boots as I did. And then I smiled. "So, would that make you a drug dealer or a rogue biker?" I asked, sizing up his jacket with a raised eyebrow.

"Which do you want me to be?"

The words were a brazen fantasy come-on. At least to my sex-starved mind.

"Security, huh?"

"You keep coming back to that. Does it bother you?"

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He stepped closer, and the powerful aroma of blatant male arousal swirled around me, teasing me mercilessly with invisible, magic fingers that stroked me in all the right places. Holy crap...who was this man?

"So, tell me, Rachel, why did you stop to talk to me tonight? You've been walking past me for two weeks, climbing your ladder, going to bed. What changed tonight?" His voice had dropped to a throaty purr.

"I was just...being neighborly."

"Uh-huh." One of his fingers brushed my cheek. His touch was cool against my heat, and I squirmed, wanting more. Much more.

"I know something else about you." He leaned in close, his fuck-me scent eddying more tightly around me like the hot wind had moments before.

"What's that?"

"I know there are more pleasurable ways to feel good than what you do up in your apartment every night."

I felt my face burn with a flush. *Damn.* I'd been joking—well, okay, mostly joking—when I'd said that to him earlier, about how he probably knew what I was doing up there. But even as the brief sting of embarrassment coursed through me and flickered away, an all-consuming flame took over my body and raged out of control.

You want me, Rachel.

My breath caught and I stared up at him. Was that his voice I heard in my head, that I felt pulsating throughout my body as if my very cells already recognized him and craved him? No, of course not. I was hearing what I wished he would say.

You've wanted me every night, from the very beginning. Just like I've wanted you.

"Yes," I whispered, already forgetting it wasn't really him speaking to me.

His tongue flicked lightly around the two gold studs in my left ear; I

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very nearly collapsed against him at the unexpected contact.

“What do you want from me?” he whispered, his words brushing my ear.

Knowing I was being reckless, but not caring, I leaned back and met his shadowed gaze. “I want you to come up with me tonight.”

“Are you sure?” His voice was velvet smooth. “You want me to come up to your apartment, come in with you?”

“Yes.”

“A complete stranger?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You know why.” I swallowed hard, not sure why he was playing this game. I knew he wanted me.

His hand cupped my neck, pulling me closer. His mouth brushed below my ear, then crept upward, creating a hot, lustful track along my ear lobe. “Is this what you want?” he murmured in a husky timbre.

I nodded, my head suddenly spinning too fast and my body tingling too hard for me to speak.

He continued his trek, teasing along my jaw and finally searching out my lips. I closed my eyes and opened my mouth to his questing probe. He tasted slightly of cinnamon, a flavor I loved. Our tongues mated in a fast, urgent dance, then slowed to a wet, thrusting exploration that made me dizzy and unbearably horny. It had been a long time since I’d had sex. Real sex, with a man. And, oh, I hadn’t realized until this moment just how much I’d missed it.

My arms went around his neck, my fingers dug into the soft thickness of the hair that brushed his nape. Aside from horny male, he smelled clean and soapy, like he’d just taken a shower, and that was mixed with the scent of leather. Not synthleather, with its slightly vinyl chemical smell, but real, aromatic leather. *Damn.* His jacket was the real deal. I hadn’t seen anyone wearing true leather in years.

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When his free hand curved around me to palm my ass and tug me closer, I went willingly. The press of his erection, held prisoner within his jeans, hit the throbbing folds of my mound. Even with the two layers of denim between my flesh and his, I moaned at the contact.

His hand on my neck slid down until it, too, cradled my butt. He lifted me with ease, encouraged me to wrap my legs around him, and settled me more fully against him. His strong arms raised and lowered me, teasing my clit against his groin.

I could usually get myself off with a few fast strokes. If I wanted it to last longer, I might make a game of it with myself, stop and start several times, play with my nipples, then have a damn fine orgasm. But tonight I realized my body was out of my control. This wasn't about a few quick flicks to ease my sexual frustration. Nor was it about anything that even resembled the routine masturbating I'd fallen into comforting myself with of late. This was raw, hungry, and I knew this stranger wouldn't be satisfied with one quick fuck. I also knew, in that same odd way I'd known he was watching me, wanted me for two weeks, that he wouldn't let me be satisfied with an easy release.

A bolt of lightning split the night nearby, lighting up the alley for a brief second, giving me an instantaneous glimpse of the man I was with. I had the impression of dark hair, sculpted cheekbones, and an all-consuming gaze before black fell once more and thunder reverberated around us. On cue, the wind picked up, not teasing this time, but savage.

He pulled his mouth from mine and lowered me to the ground. I swayed for a moment, but his arm snaked around my waist, holding me up. "To your apartment. Now," he ordered. "We've been out here too long as it is."

I nodded, understanding his concern in spite of my aroused haze. The coming storm aside, the streets weren't safe after dark. Yeah, I walked them every night, the two blocks from the train to my building,

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but it wasn't wise to linger too long. With the power grid shut down every night between 8:00 P.M. and 6:00 A.M. to conserve energy, leaving most of the city in the dark, the night crawlers and criminals ruled the streets. Even cops seldom went out alone unless they were going to and from work.

I turned toward the fire ladder, feeling him close behind me, his presence both thrilling and strangely comforting. The wind tugged at us, nearly ripping my hands free from the rusted rungs, but always his large, muscular body was behind me, pressing against me, keeping me on course.

At the second-floor landing, I shoved up the dusty glass of my living room window, hooked my leg over the sill, and let first one foot, then the other, drop to the ancient hardwood floor inside. Although a couple of residents lived above me, mine was the only habitable apartment on the second floor, and it was practically crumbling out from under me. But I'd lived here ten years; it was familiar, safe in its own odd way. Besides, where the hell else would I go? As far as living spaces went, I couldn't afford much better on my salary. No one could these days.

I beckoned the stranger in, but he paused just outside the window and studied me long and hard.

"Are you sure you want me to come in?" he asked, his voice as intense as his eyes had appeared in the flash of lightning. He seemed to watch me closely, as if my response were somehow of the utmost importance to him.

"I'm sure." I took a step backward. I wanted to get back to where we'd left off in the alley. My body was screaming for his. "Come in."

With a movement that was unnaturally graceful for a man as big as he, he was suddenly standing in my living room with me.

He seemed even larger in here, dominating the room.

In that moment, his nearness saturating the air around me, I faced

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the truth. I wanted him worse than I'd ever wanted any man. I wasn't sure how a total stranger could elicit this response from me. But whether it be fate, a two-year sexual dry spell, or just plain reckless abandon, I craved him with a hunger I was pretty sure wasn't going to be sated in one night. Still, if one night was all I might get, I was damn well going to make the best of it.

I pulled my hair free of its twist, letting the thick waves fall around my shoulders, then tugged off my jacket and tossed it in the general direction of my old sofa.

I heard him pull the window pane down at least part-way but knew he didn't close it completely because I could feel swirls of the hot wind outside stirring up currents in the stagnant air in here.

"Are you going to shoot me?" Wry humor laced his tone.

Startled, I stared in the direction of his voice for a moment, then I realized...my gun, in its shoulder holster, was now visible. Except in the pitch black interior of my apartment even I couldn't see it—I felt it against my side, felt the harness flexing across my back, but couldn't see it. Still, he knew I was a cop, knew I wore the jacket to conceal my piece, so he didn't need to view it to know I had it on.

"Are you going to give me a reason to?"

"I'm not afraid of dying." Humor still threaded his words, and, as usual, he'd responded to my question with a non-answer.

I snorted. "Everyone's afraid to die. Some people are just too macho to admit it."

I knew he was smiling again, but then, in the beat of a heart, I felt the energy in the room shift from amusement to thick, barely restrained passion. It hovered on the stuffy air like a blanket of sexual musk.

He strode toward me. My pulse was suddenly fluttering again. His hand caught my arm and he drew me toward him with a firm pull that brought me up within inches of his chest. His mouth crushed mine, his tongue taking up where it had left off in the alley, but this time with a

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vehemence that left me reeling. When at last he lifted his head, I could feel his gaze burning into me. "It's not too late to back out. Do I scare you, Rachel?"

"No. You probably should, but you don't."

He tugged at the Velcro strap of my holster until it, with gun intact, slid off me. I heard him set it aside on the coffee table. Normally I would never let anyone near my gun, but again I was struck that I felt no threat from him.

His hand slipped under my tight red tank and yanked it up and off. My bra tore at the skimpy clasp and was gone as quickly. Big, cool hands took command of the aching flesh of my breasts, kneading the full globes, rubbing my nipples into painful peaks, wrenching agonized groans of pleasure from me.

His touch worked like one of the highly addictive sexual stimulant drugs that had become so popular back in the twenty-forties and fifties, heightening nerve ending stimulation, sending blood rushing to swollen sex organs.

My breathing grew stuttered, my groin became unbearably tight, as if some internal thread were pulling it hard toward the center of my being. My thighs squeezed together to either hold off or help along, I wasn't sure which, the orgasm building in me like the storm outside.

"Tell me your name," I gasped.

"Does it matter?"

His voice was intoxicating. It was all I could do to respond...yet it was important to me to at least know his name. To have something besides just the purely physical plane on which I could feel some connection with him. "Yes. It matters to me."

One of his hands stroked down over my belly, nudged between my legs, silently ordering me to spread them. When he cupped my mound, I wanted to sob.

He turned me and tugged me hard against him so my back was

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molded to his chest. Then he resumed his position of one hand fondling my bare breast, the other pressing, releasing, pressing my cunt. I let my head fall back against his shoulder. The bulge of his cock strained against my rear-end, and his lips found my ear, my neck. The wet tip of his tongue fucked the sensitive skin near my jugular, and it was a damned erotic sensation.

You want me, Rachel.

“Yes,” I cried.

Why?

“Because I feel you. In my head. In my body. I...I feel like I know you, but I don’t know why.”

Do you like the way I touch you?

“Gods, yes.” I settled each of my hands over the top of his, urging him on. “I’ve wanted this.”

I know.

With a swift motion and little difficulty, he unfastened my belt, undid the snap and zipper on my jeans, and pushed them and my panties down over my hips, thighs, and calves. I toed off my boots and kicked aside the wad of denim and satin.

He raised one of his feet to my low coffee table, then lifted my right leg and draped it over his thigh, spreading me open. The oven-like air in the room brushed my exposed sex for just a moment before his hand returned to my weeping cleft, this time stroking along the bare, slippery folds with a slow motion that made me want to scream with bliss. His fingers—two, three, I didn’t know—pushed inside me.

Within seconds I was on the edge. I’d never wanted to come so badly in my life. My moans, uninhibited and raw, filled the room.

His erection rode against my ass as he rocked our hips back and forth together. The heel of his palm grated on my swollen folds, bumping, grinding, even as his fingers made up their own rhythm inside me. His other hand tweaked and fondled my breast. And his

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tongue continued its erotic play on my neck. We swayed together in a heated dance, to music that played only in our bodies. I wanted to cry, laugh, moan, and crawl inside him all at the same time.

"This is only the beginning, baby." It was a promise, one I knew he'd keep.

His voice, his smell, and his masterful hands became my entire existence in that moment. My head swam. I was drowning.

His tongue slid inside my ear. "I'm going to fuck you all night, Rachel," he whispered.

Sparks of pure gold and brilliant silver flashed behind my eyelids. My body drew in on itself, one muscle, one tendon, one cell at time...then, in a great shuddering explosion, I came apart.

He held me tight against him as contractions tore through me, ceaselessly continuing his sensual torture until I cried mercy.

When my body finally stopped spasming, he held me as I tried to catch my breath. My mind tumbled with questions, with things I wanted to say, yet I couldn't find voice to get them out. Mostly, I wanted to know who this dark stranger was and how he seemed to know my desires so well.

He pressed a kiss to my temple and stroked the sweat-dampened hair from my forehead. "Because it's important to you...my name is River."

Something inside me churned upside down and inside out at his quietly spoken words. I sensed he'd just given me a gift, something precious, as if his name was not usually offered freely.

"Thank you," I whispered, and meant it sincerely.

He turned me so I faced him. His arms curved around me, drawing me in closer to his solid form. He smelled confident, enrapturing...and still horny. I could smell his hunger as clearly as I could smell my own sultry musk seeping from between my legs.

His lips closed over mine, once more claiming my mouth. It was a

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demanding conquest, letting me know in no uncertain terms that we weren't finished yet.

Without breaking the kiss, he lifted me like he had outside, in a quick, effortless motion as if my weight meant little to him, and instinctively my legs curled around his waist. My bare breasts pressed against the leather of his jacket; my wet folds rested on his metal belt buckle, sending a new quake through my so recently recovered body.

I let my fingers play in his hair for a moment, trying to imagine the exact color. Then I used my palms and fingertips to explore his face: tracing his forehead, memorizing the planes of his high cheekbones, the straight line of his nose, and, when he finally pulled his mouth from mine, the soft fullness of his lips. While my hands were hot, sweaty, from the stifling air in the poorly ventilated apartment, his skin was blissfully cool, as if the heat didn't bother him. I was envious.

"Bedroom?"

"Behind you," I murmured.

Still carrying me, he traversed the distance across my small living room and through the kitchen without running into anything. I knew the old place well from having lived here so long. I could, and did, ramble through it in the dark after power shutdown every night, saving my candles for emergencies. I'd never bothered with the pricey battery-powered lanterns some people had. My salary didn't allow many luxuries, and besides, the dark of night was my time—when I worked, when I was at my best—so it had never scared me.

River had never been in my apartment, yet he moved with such ease I wondered if he had unusually sensitive night vision. I'd heard stories of people who'd lived in the dark for long periods of time who had developed highly sensitive visual acuity. With the energy crisis at a critical stage for the past fifteen years, solar and hydro power at a high cost premium, and only a handful of the über-rich able to afford the indulgences people in the early twenty-first century had taken for

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granted, I suspected there were many citizens who now lived all their non-daylight hours in stygian blackness.

In my bedroom he set me back on my feet.

“Strip me,” he commanded.

No other man, no other person, would have gotten away with bossing me around like that. They would have found a fist in the face or my gun in their ribs faster than they could have blinked. Yet with him I found myself eager to comply. I wanted to feel him nude against me. Wanted his skin, his muscle, his flesh straining against mine.

My hands slid inside his jacket, encountering the soft fabric of a T-shirt beneath. I pushed the jacket over his shoulders and let it slide down his arms until it fell to the floor. Returning my hands to his chest, I stroked my palms over his rigid nipples through his shirt. When he shuddered, I smiled.

“Your smile is sexy as hell,” he growled.

Again, I was taken aback, and my hands stopped their exploration. I couldn’t see anything. How could he see me?

But before I could ask, he grasped my hands in a firm grip and moved them to the hem of his shirt. “Take it off. I want to feel your touch on my skin.”

I lifted his shirt up the hard planes of his smooth, hairless chest, and standing on tip-toe, I pulled it over his head and threw it aside. Damn, he was beautiful. I didn’t need to see to realize that. My hands were doing a magnificent job of translating what they felt. His pecs rippled beneath my palms, his nipples grew even harder, and without thinking, I leaned forward and licked one. A soft hiss escaped him, encouraging me to continue. I swirled my tongue around and around the stiff peak, took it in my mouth and sucked, bit lightly, then sucked some more. I moved to the other nipple, giving it the same attention.

At the same time my fingers moved to his belt, working at the buckle. I freed the button on his jeans and slowly grated down the

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zipper, easing it over his bulging erection. Finally, pushing at his pants, I managed to get them down around his thighs, allowing his throbbing cock its eager escape. With one hand I cupped the heavy weight of his balls, enjoying the sensation of crisp hair and swollen fullness against my palm. With the other, I curled my fingers around the width of his hefty shaft. He swore softly, and his hips surged toward my touch. He was as proportionately large down here as the rest of his body. Big, hard, and superb.

I'd never been a fan of giving head. Maybe because I'd never been with a man who was willing to give as good as he got, so it always seemed one-sided and egotistical for a man to expect it. But the urge to have River's flesh in my mouth was almost overpowering. I dropped to my knees and tongued the crown of his penis in slow, teasing strokes.

He groaned. "Fuck, Rachel..." His fingers drove into my hair, his palms cupped my head, and he pulled me closer.

His skin was cool, even down here, but delicious in a heady, intoxicating way. His scent surrounded me as I laved his cock from the swollen head to the root nestled amongst rough curls, then back again.

Damn, I wanted to see him. I wanted to experience the expression on his face as he grew nearer his release. Wanted to feel the closeness I knew could come from seeing a strong man like this in his most vulnerable moment.

Pausing from my ministrations, I untied his boots, pulled them off, and finished removing his jeans. If I couldn't see him, at least I could feel all of him and know he was *au naturel* like I was.

When I returned to his groin, I savored his clean, musky fragrance and took my time exploring the texture of his turgid, veiny cock. My tongue seemed particularly fond of the underside of his cockhead, and he seemed fond of it also if the low groans rumbling in his chest were indicative. I screwed his slit with the tip of my tongue, imagining it was his dick screwing me. When his hips began to thrust forward and his

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hands clenched and unclenched in my hair, I grinned. He didn't have to speak to let me know what he wanted. The toying was driving him mad and he craved more.

I took him in my mouth, accustoming myself to his size. Then, grasping his hips, I pulled him toward me, seating him more firmly, and encouraged him to fuck my mouth.

He shuddered. I knew he was losing it, and I loved it.

You don't know what you do to me, Rachel. You don't...

His shaft thrust faster. I could feel it pulsing. It lengthened and grew harder still until it thrummed in me. I wanted him to lose control, wanted his cream sliding down my throat.

A deep animalistic groan tore from him, part pain, part out-of-his-mind pleasure. Suddenly, I felt his life-force surge up from his balls, coarse along his length, and, in a powerful explosion, burst from him in hot waves. For the first time in my life I swallowed a man's come. Yet I knew it wasn't just any man's, knew there was something different, *potent*, about River's. It was like getting drunk on the strongest, most succulent whisky ever made. Each gulp filled me with a rush of heat, and was followed by a dizzy sense of euphoria.

His orgasm took ages, like he'd been building it up and had had no release in decades. I savored every drop of it, greedy and demanding. By the time he'd spent his last and I'd licked him clean, I was as drunk as I'd ever been in my life. I clung to him, my head resting against his hip, my eyes squeezed closed as I tried to get my bearings. I wasn't sure I could stand.

But like an anchor in a storm, River's arms were around me, pulling me up.

"Open your eyes, Rachel."

"Everything's spinning."

"I know, baby. But if you open your eyes it'll stop. Trust me."

Slowly, not believing I wasn't going to topple over or pass out, I did

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as he asked.

What I saw caused me to jump backward with my heart pounding and shut them again.

River didn't let me go; he tugged me close again. "Shhh, it's okay. Open them, Rachel. Open them...and see."

He sounded so reasonable in the face of what I knew was sheer insanity. But unable to resist, wanting to understand, I opened my eyes again.

Where once there'd been nothing but darkness, a room shrouded in the black of a stormy night, I now saw everything in a soft silver glow. I could see my bed, still rumpled from where I hadn't bothered to make it this morning—or any morning—the window, the nearby chair draped with haphazardly tossed clothing...all as if a thin patina of silver dust had been sprinkled over them and they were lit from within.

But what truly left me swaying was that I could now look upon the man next to me. See the beautiful ripple of his muscular chest and firm abs, the way his narrow waist and hips flowed down to his still-raging erection and his long, powerful legs. See the handsome planes of a face that could easily grace the cover of a men's digital mag, and the arch of dark eyebrows curving over deep-set blue eyes. I couldn't make out most colors exactly in the silver glow, but I knew his eyes were blue, of an intensity that matched the Colorado sky on a sunny summer day. His tousled hair fell onto his forehead, around his ears, and curled slightly at the nape of his neck. It was dark in color but lighter than I'd first thought. And then there was his wide mouth, full-lipped, sexy...and smiling.

"Hi," he said softly.

Good gods. The sight of him in this odd, glowing vision was almost too much to bear. My heart felt so full and my throat so constricted with an inexplicable surge of emotion I could barely breath, could barely swallow. "I don't understand," I whispered.

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But then a thought occurred amidst the fuzz of my brain...he'd probably been doing drugs tonight, and by swallowing his semen, I was feeling the residual effects from them. That had to be it. This vision thing was a drug-induced hallucination.

I hate to burst your ever-logical bubble, Rachel, but it's not drugs.

He cupped my cheek in his hand and kissed me, slowly, displaying a seductive gentleness no one in my life up to this point had ever shown me.

He laid me back on the bed and reclined next to me, propped on one elbow.

I stared up at him, still mind-boggled at the fact I could see him. "How...?"

Another smile turned up the corners of his lips, and his eyes twinkled. "You're just always full of questions, aren't you?"

"That's what I do. I'm a—"

"Cop. I know. And I've no doubt you're a good one. But that doesn't have to define you as a person. There's more to you than your job."

I shook my head, the denial coming swiftly, instinctively. "No. It's my life."

"Maybe. But it doesn't have to be. It doesn't have to rule your every waking moment, even when you're off duty. Life isn't always logical. There aren't always clear-cut answers. Sometimes you have to be willing to open your mind to bigger possibilities." He looked at me pointedly, as if I should glean some special meaning from his words.

"You don't even know me."

"I know you better than you think. You're dedicated, loyal, independent. You don't suffer fools, and you believe in the greater good, which is something most people of this time are incapable of."

"You watched me walk home for two weeks and you've spent maybe an hour with me tonight, yet somehow you've figured out all

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this about me, huh?" I offered him a sardonic lift of my eyebrow. But the scary thing was...he was very close to being correct. "Anyway, I'm supposed to take seriously the philosophical ramblings of a drug addict?"

His expression hardened for a moment, but then humor lit in his eyes again. "I told you, it's not drugs."

My heart stopped beating for a split second. He hadn't told me that. It had been the odd voice in my head, my internal voice I pretended was him. "You didn't say—"

"Didn't I?" He smiled and lazily traced the line of my collar bone, before his fingers dipped down to skim around first one of my nipples, then the other.

"I..." I closed my eyes and sighed at the sensation of his fingers on me once again.

Damn it. I needed answers. Suddenly needed to know if I'd just plain gone crazy or if I was simply dreaming all this—the biggest erotic dream of my life. But his touch on my skin seemed to have the effect of a narcotic, further dulling my mind to anything except the pleasure he offered. By the time his palm caressed the slight swell of my stomach and the hollow of my hip, then worked its way down into the triangular thatch of hair on my mound, I could barely think at all.

His fingers slipped through my small patch of curls, over my smooth labia, and into the wet crease of my pussy, up...down...up...down, before pushing inside me. I cried out, lifting my hips from the bed. "Please..." I moaned. "I want you inside me."

"Patience, babe. You'll get what you want before the night's over."

"Now, River. Take me now!"

"Don't worry. I'll make the wait worth your while." His hand made a bold stroke over my wet folds to dip into me briefly, leaving me gasping and desperate for fulfillment.

He moved over me and settled himself between my legs. His cock,

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still hard in spite of his bountiful orgasm a few minutes ago, nudged between my folds...but didn't enter me. I tried to squirm beneath him, to move it closer to where I wanted it, but he evaded each time.

"I don't want to wait any longer," I growled, nearly mad with desire at this point. I grabbed his hips, digging my nails into the cheeks of his ass to drag him closer.

All I got for my frenzied effort was a sexy, taunting chuckle. "Now, now. Behave."

When I struggled against him, he grasped my hands, pulled them up and over my head, and held them in place with a steely grip. In a motion so fast I could barely see it, he grabbed one of my belts off the chair next to the bed and wrapped it around my wrists, securing me to one of the wooden slats on my headboard.

"No!" I snarled. "You are not doing this shit, not tying me up."

I tried to kick at him, but he caught my feet with ease, and in another round of swift movements, he'd secured my legs spread eagle, one foot tied to the foot rail with a scarf, the other with another of my belts.

I felt a streak of fear for the first time all night. Yet lingering beneath the fear and building stronger every moment, I discovered I was also excited, and, gods help me, aroused as I'd never been in my life.

What did that say about me?

I liked control. I was always in control. My father had taught me, as my grandfather had taught him, that when you were a cop in Delta, you always had to be in control. Everyone would try to pull your strings and use you to their advantage—bad guys, city officials, corrupt colleagues. The only way to stop it was never to let anyone in, never let anyone see your fear, and never let anyone control you in any fashion. Because if you gave even an inch, before long you'd be nothing more than a pawn in someone else's game.

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Trust me, Rachel. It'll be good. The best you've ever known.

"Stop it!" I growled. "Stop playing me!"

"Is that what you think I'm doing? You think I'm playing you?"

"I don't know what you're doing! I feel like...like you're...I don't know, manipulating me!"

"You're the one who invited me up here, remember?"

"I know I did! But—"

"No buts. I asked several times if you were positive you wanted me here, wanted what was going to happen."

"I know."

"Have I done anything at all to indicate to you that I want to harm you or do anything but give you the pleasure *you* sought me out for?"

I bit my lip. "You never said anything about tying me up."

"You mean the part where I tied you to your bed and now your nipples are so hard"—one his fingertips toyed with a stiff peak, and it was all I could do to keep from lunging upward and crying out with desire—"and your pussy is so wet you can barely stay sane?" His finger moved lower now, to the spot in question, and probed inside me while his thumb drew circles over and around my clit. This time I couldn't hold back the shuddering moan.

"Admit it, Rachel. We've got nothing to lose by not being honest with each other. Right now you're excited. You're turned on. So what are you afraid of?"

"Piss off!" I turned my head to the side and felt a tear slip down my cheek and into the pillow. I couldn't admit my fear to him. Could barely admit it to myself...that if I gave up control for even a short while, I might like it. And then how would I ever find myself again?

"Trust me. I won't hurt you. And if, at any point, you want me to let you go, want me to leave, I will. I swear it. You just have to say so."

"How do I know I can believe you?" My voice was shaky, which I hated. Everything in me rebelled at showing such a weakness. "I don't

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even know you.”

He towered over me, then his mouth pressed lightly to mine. “But you do,” he whispered. “I’m a part of you. Can’t you feel me?” He rubbed his forefinger over the slit in his cock, captured a drop of his milky essence, and fed it to me. Even that one small drop sent another mini-rush through me, and for a split second, the silvery glow in which I now saw everything sparkled even brighter.

River smiled and nodded. “If you try, you can do more than just see through my eyes.”

My heart thudded inside me. “How?” I asked again. “How is this possible? What kind of drug are—”

A cool finger pressed to my lips. “No more questions tonight. All you need to know is that I can make it good for you. Better than you can imagine.” Once again his voice curled around me, sucking me in, making me want to give him anything he wanted, and to let him do anything to me.

“Oh, gods,” I groaned, closing my eyes. I was falling...falling...

“Will you trust me?” His voice seemed to come from far away and inside me all at the same time. “Trust me, Rachel. You won’t regret it.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “Yes...”

His mouth and hands were everywhere then, stroking, squeezing, soothing, stinging, caressing...bringing me to the brink of pain, only to give me sensual pleasure instead. He built my arousal bit by bit, bringing me to heights I’d never know were possible, but always stopping, moving, changing texture or location just as I was about to climax. He touched me in places I’d never been touched, did things to me I’d never imagined or that I’d never imagined I’d respond to...things that left me shivering with unbridled lust.

The hours blurred. I had no idea how long it went on, and I lost track of how many times I begged him to take me, cried for him to let me climax. Each time, he’d lower his lips to mine and kiss me with a

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hungry yet gentle passion that filled my eyes with tears and made me crave more from him than just the physical burn his erotic tortures elicited. Then, when I'd succumbed to his indulgent worship and my mind had calmed, he'd return to the sexual stimulation that kept me climbing to ever-new levels of tension, screaming for a release I knew wasn't soon to come.

At last he must have realized I could take no more. He unfastened me, sank onto the bed, and drew me into his lap. His soothing, softly murmured words and his gentle touch kneading my aching muscles were both a relief and an all new sensual experience. His pulsing shaft probed the tender skin of my bottom, reminding me he hadn't found release yet either.

He nuzzled his face into my neck and his tongue found its favorite place against my jugular, giving it a slow, deep lick that, for some reason, was more erotic than anything else he'd done to me. My body surged upward in his arms at the action.

He lifted me, turned me so I faced him, my legs on either side of him, and held me easily above his jutting erection.

"River..." I cried, my voice almost a sob. "Damn it, please!"

He probed up, letting his penis slide just inside my aching crease. "I know you're wound tight, but everything you've been feeling will just make it that much better when you get what you want."

"I don't do waiting very well," I said, my body shaking with need.

"All good things are worth waiting for, baby." And with a slow, sweet motion, at last he gave me what I needed.

I cried out as he entered me, filled me, stretched me. His shaft was like velvet steel inside me, and my inner walls clutched it with desperation. His own sigh, which built into a rumbling, pained growl of satisfaction, told me he'd been as needy as I.

I began to ride him, rocking back and forth on his rod, pressing my hips down onto his groin to get him as far into me as possible.

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He swore, then groaned as his shaft found deeper purchase within me. His hands stroked my face, and he kissed me.

My Rachel. You're mine now! Only mine!

The intensity of the thought rang through me, startling me.

Was it possible...? Could it really be him in my head?

It was then I finally realized what he'd meant earlier, when he'd said he was a part of me. I *felt* him. Not just his energy, as I'd experienced for the past two weeks, or his desire, which was like a live thing, coiling around me, pulsing with energy. No, it was more than that. Now...I could feel his emotions. When I concentrated, they washed over me in pounding crystal waves. Burning anger, frustration, the need for vengeance—but none of them directed at me. Loneliness that ate at him from the inside out. Hunger—a constant raging hunger that plagued him every day, but for what I didn't know. Regret for things past, things I couldn't fathom, but for which he felt deep sorrow. A newly burgeoning tenderness. I couldn't read any deeper on that one, but a part of me wondered if I was the source of it. And...there was one more that nearly eluded me, but that I eventually grasped. Fear. Cold fear. *For me.*

I gasped and pulled away from his kiss. His gaze locked with mine. A brief flicker of realization lit in his eyes, then was shuttered. What felt like iron doors slammed closed in his mind, leaving me on the outside once more. I winced and turned away. "Damn you," I muttered, feeling betrayed.

"Look at me," he ordered.

When I resisted, he grasped my chin and forced me to do as he said. Then he held my face and stared hard at me. Little by little I felt the tight knots in my mind ease, felt my tension slip away.

"What are you doing to me?" I whispered.

"You're safe with me, Rachel." His voice was almost hypnotizing in its calmness. "You're mine, and I'll keep you safe."

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He lifted me, laid me back on the bed, and thrust deeply into me.

You're mine.

Everything in the strong, independent, logical me rebelled at the idea of belonging to anyone. I was my own person, my own keeper, damn it! *Never give up control for even a second.* But I'd already done that tonight, hadn't I? For better or worse. And right now, with my body quivering around River's pulsing shaft, my hips surging upward to meet him, I realized he was right. Stranger or not, logical or not, in this moment in time I was his.

Nothing else mattered right now except the elemental need to find release with this man. I clasped his shoulders, pulling him closer to me, welcoming him.

He wasn't gentle, and I didn't want him to be. I was too hungry for him, had waited too long.

He drove into me with phrenetic intensity, and I urged him on, begging for him to fuck me harder, faster. The bed banged against the peeling wall as our bodies collided. I knew I drew blood as my fingernails dug into his back and I didn't care. He didn't seem to care either and, in fact, it only seemed to urge him on, turn him on, and bring him to an even higher pinnacle of carnality.

With a sudden movement, he pulled out of me, flipped me over onto my stomach, dragged me to my knees and re-entered me from behind. I groaned and raised my ass higher for him, giving him better access. This new pounding forced his hungry cock directly against my cervix, creating a buzz deep in my womb. His hands molded to my buttocks, squeezing them, spreading them apart. A finger slid down into my pussy next to his cock, sopping up some of my juices, then it rotated and pressed against the tight ring of my anus, and slid inside me. After a moment of deep, static penetration, it, too, launched into a plundering rhythm.

"Holy gods!" The groan ripped from my throat.

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My head began to spin from the assault I was taking in both passages. My body throbbed; pulses of light flashed behind my eyes. I reached beneath me and diddled myself, rubbing and tweaking my clit. The burn of climax began to steal over me, curling my toes, tingling through my skin, heating my slit.

But once again before I could go over the edge, the rug was jerked out from under me. River pulled out of me and twisted me to my back once more.

“Damn you!” I cried, glaring up at him. “Damn you to hell!”

“Already been there,” he growled. He lifted my legs and draped them over his shoulders, pressing me deeply into the mattress. His fingers dug into my hips as he dragged me closer to him. He poised his cockhead directly at my opening. And then, with a brutal thrust, he filled me again. I sobbed. Inexplicable raw emotion surged through me, causing another sob to build and escape.

I closed my eyes, arched my body, tilted my head back, and let go of my control.

River’s mouth closed over mine, invading all my senses, then slid to my ear, and down to my neck.

The climax hit me suddenly, roaring through me like a tidal wave. I cried, maybe even screamed as it rolled with me, tossing me over one wave, dragging me down...down...down...then up and over the next. I felt River’s climax join mine, felt the heat of his seed shoot deep within me, spreading like a current of electricity through my womb and out into my body. Dizziness assailed me again, as it had when I’d drunk his cream, and this time I welcomed it.

I felt the firm tug of River’s mouth at my neck, which brought on another wave of my release. It tore through me, swallowing me in its maw until I couldn’t breathe, then tossed me back to the surface once again. Over and over the scene repeated itself until, at last, exhausted and thoroughly sated, we collapsed together in the hot, tangled sheets.

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The last thing I remembered before falling into a hazed sleep was River pressing a possessive kiss to my lips and telling me again I was his.

CHAPTER 2

The heat woke me, as it usually did. Sunlight pouring in through the sagging slats of the window blinds scorched my nude body. I felt the bed sheet wadded near my feet.

For a moment I lay there, my eyes still closed, struggling to bring myself out of the deep, almost drug-like sleep I'd experienced.

And then I remembered.

Holy crap.

What could only be described as a surge of pussy-clenching eroticism rushed through my body as I opened my eyes. I sat up, then winced as more than one body part protested. My flesh was tender in a veritable cornucopia of places, but even still, another rush of sexual fever enveloped me.

And the man who'd done this me? I knew without having to search that he was gone; just as I'd felt his presence, I felt his absence.

A cavernous emptiness welled around me for a moment, terrifying

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me. But then I shook my head and forced the feeling into a deep corner of my heart. No matter what had happened last night, no matter how River had played my body like a virtuoso, had opened me like a flower aching for a drop of rain, had peeled away my long-built protective walls...

I had to catch my breath and swallow back another swell of loneliness.

“Don’t!” I told myself. “Don’t even go there, Rachel. He’s just a man, like any other you’ve slept with.”

I was not going to let myself miss him. I barely knew him. I sure as hell wasn’t going to get all clingy and dependent on him.

But even as I dragged myself out of bed and headed for the bathroom, I knew something was different. If he was like any of the other lovers I’d had over the years, the ones I’d been able to screw for a few days, or maybe weeks, then walk away from with no regrets, then why couldn’t I banish the deep down sensation that last night, for the first time in my life, I’d felt truly fulfilled?

Flustered and out of sorts, and not at all happy about it, I turned on the shower and let the water grow tepid—it was too hot for hot water. But at the last minute I put in the plug and filled the tub instead. When I sank into the blissful succor of the water, I leaned my head back, closed my eyes, and sighed.

Yet I found no peace. As the nearly cool water lapped over my flesh, memories of last night returned in force. My nipples tingled from the remembered feel of River’s fingers rolling them and from the insatiable way he’d suckled and nibbled them. My neck stung, a lot actually—I smoothed my fingertips over the spot and winced. I was pretty sure I had a hell of a hickey where he loved to kiss and suck there. My buttocks were tender from the erotic spanking he’d given me while I was tied up, both my orifices were sore in a pleasant, overstretched and well-used way. My thighs and my groin were achy as

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well, no doubt from being spread wide and at his mercy for so long.

“Oh, gods,” I moaned. I wanted him again. Now. My hand slid into the water to massage my mound and find some relief. But when it came, it was a pale shard of light compared to the heady golden sunshine River’s body had been able to conjure for me.

It wasn’t until I was back in my bedroom in front of the mirror, pulling on panties and a bra, that I saw the bite. It was in my groin, just between my pubic mound and thigh. Then, when I lifted my wet hair to brush it out, I found another in the spot River loved to linger...on my neck.

A flutter of something uncomfortable went through me. He’d bitten me. The idea of a man biting me was...kinky. Too kinky? I asked myself.

I don’t know. Maybe.

I’d read enough porn to admit that sometimes stories about the hard stuff—bondage, submission, pain and the like—gave me an illicit thrill. Reading, however, was one thing. It was safe, detached, and didn’t directly involve any of those things happening to me. Yeah, last night I’d let River tie me up and excite me as he saw fit...at the time I’d been aroused out of my mind, not to mention second-hand drugged from his narc-laced semen. But biting me? That was pushing toward downright sadism.

Then a memory of the incredible orgasm I’d had last night flashed front and center in my mind...the part where he was pounding into me, I was already coming, and then, when I felt his mouth on my neck, I’d convulsed again.

“Crap. I got off on it,” I mumbled, not sure if I was ashamed or kind of excited by the fact.

A new flush of sexual heat crept through my body. Was it going to be this way all day, for gods’ sake? With me squirming in my panties every time I even thought of him? *Shit.*

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I wondered if I'd ever even see River again. Maybe he'd been waiting down there for two weeks hoping I'd eventually invite him up to have sex, and now that he'd gotten it, he would move on to bigger and better things. Why else would he have left this morning without saying goodbye?

"Enough already!" I'd just spent the night with a gorgeous, hot-blooded Adonis and had the most utterly magnificent fuck of all time. I needed to leave it at that and move on. I'd known when I invited him up it would probably only be for one night. Even if I wanted more, it was best to put an end to it, finish it on my terms.

If I were completely honest with myself, River had not only managed to finesse his way behind my protective walls and convince me to give up control and let him do what he wanted with me—both of which went against the grain of who I was—but he'd also brought out a sexual side of me I hadn't known existed. And that, quite frankly, scared me a little.

Relationships with that kind of intensity never lasted anyway. It was like lighting dynamite. An exciting race of the fuse, a fucking fantastic explosion, and then it was done, burned out, leaving nothing but destruction in its wake.

I sure as hell wasn't going to be left in the middle of ground zero to clean up the mess.

A buzzing sound startled me out of my thoughts and I realized I was still standing in front of the mirror in nothing but my panties and bra. The buzzing came again. I tossed down the hairbrush and went in search of my jacket, which I'd shed in the living room last night. Finding it on the couch, I slid my hand in the inner pocket and pulled out my palm-sized vid-phone just as it buzzed again.

With a flick of my finger, I opened the connection.

"Detective Jones? Oh...uh...sorry, did I catch you at a bad time?"

It was the young rookie who'd been following me like a randy mutt,

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making pathetic attempts to come on to me for weeks now. And I wasn't the only one. The damn kid must sport a constant woody, the way he acted around women. Right now he looked both excited and a bit embarrassed. I hoped he got his eyes full of me in my black lace underwear, 'cause this was all he was ever going to get. "What is it, Butler?"

"Captain West asked me to call you. There's been another murder."

Instantly I was in work mode. "Same MO?"

"Don't know. The captain didn't give me details, but if he's calling you, then I assume—"

"Never make assumptions," I snapped. "We're not in that line of business. If you have a problem with that, you should go find a job somewhere where accuracy isn't important."

His face grew red and I knew I'd humiliated him. I'd been told more than once I was too hard on the newbies, but damn it, how else would they learn? I'd learned how to be a cop at my father's knees, and he'd never given me an inch, telling me the difference between doing the job right and doing it sloppy could mean the difference between life and death. These cocky young kids who came onto the force with no patience, big expectations, wanting to work the tough cases before they had the proper experience, and have everyone coddle them along the way, were disasters waiting to happen. Someone had to nip that shit in the bud. Otherwise the fools would get themselves killed.

"Now tell me the facts," I said, speaking slowly and succinctly. "Where's the body? Has the coroner picked it up yet? And has West already been to the crime scene?"

"Yes, Captain West has been there. The body's already been taken to the morgue."

"Thank you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to finish dressing and then I'll be in." I thumbed the off switch without saying goodbye, and watched as Butler's flushed cheeks and blond hair faded out.

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I left my apartment a few minutes later the same way I'd come in the night before. The building's front door had rotted away a few years ago and the super hadn't ever bothered to get it fixed. Finally, one of the residents had found a piece of heavy wood and nailed it over the opening. So for those few of us who lived above the first floor, the only comings and goings were via the fire escape. Probably another reason only a handful of people remained in the building; the apartments weren't exactly easily accessible. But it suited me fine.

The sun shone hot in the late morning sky, and I began to sweat inside my jacket before I'd even made it to the street. The scent of decaying trash was even more pungent in the daytime...again, the damned heat. My nose twitched, and I lifted a hand to the lower half of my face until I made it out of the alley and onto Exeter.

The street was nearly deserted this time of day, with just an occasional pedestrian. Many residents in this area were the aforementioned night crawlers and criminals, and they preferred the dark for their business. The other residents, of the more lawful sort, either worked a day shift and had left hours ago, or were stay-at-homes—the elderly, in particular—who did their damndest to keep cool inside darkened houses in front of their fans.

It was rare to see an automobile in this part of the city. The government had spent a dozen years in the thirties and forties fighting the Middle Eastern nations for oil rights, spending every free dollar on their wars instead of on the research and development of new power sources. When the environmental crisis, largely created by the very oil they'd fought for, became so obvious even the most obtuse politicians had to notice—like when the coastal cities began to flood from rising ocean levels—the government had had no choice but to create drastic new laws against emissions and the unchecked consumption of energy. Fossil fuel vehicles—gasoline, diesel, and the assorted hybrids—had been completely banned in 2050.

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The drastic new laws and cutbacks, while helpful to the environment, had, however, led to an economic collapse. One the country was still drowning in. Now, the only highspeed transportation options were electric cars or electric public transit. The government was playing around with hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles—had been for decades—but there was still no cheap, consistent way to convert water into fuel for cars.

Translated into simple terms, what all this meant was that only the rich could afford to own vehicles now. Hell, my police district only had three electrics for the whole department, while in The Heights, the cops there had two or three dozen at their disposal. It sucked. But that's the way politics and money worked.

I caught the train two blocks down Exeter at the corner of 18th, sliding my transit card into the slot, pushing my way through the turnstile, and stepping into the sweltering interior of the car. It was only half-full this morning—mostly truant teenagers and the occasional shopper. I stood, clutching a peeling rubber hand strap, and once the train slid into motion, spreading my legs to keep my balance.

I departed the train a block from the police station. Here a few businesses had managed to stay open—a grocery store, liquor store, drug store, and a couple of restaurant dives. I popped into Jose's Tacorama for something to eat, realizing I'd had nothing since my break yesterday evening.

"Detective Jones! ¿*Como estas?* You come for your usual, *sí*?" José didn't wait for me to respond. He moved to the stove behind the counter and started frying meat. It was all soy these days because beef prices were so high not many could afford it. But by the time José had worked his spicy magic on it, the soy burger tasted as good as the ground beef I remembered eating as a kid.

"*Sí*. And give me a Coke, too, would you?"

"You got big cases today, *chica*?" He swiped at his sweaty forehead

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with the back of his sleeve, then flipped the food with a spatula.

“The usual. Murder and mayhem.”

He clucked and shook his grizzled head. “You know I don’t like you out there chasing those bad *hombres*, *chica*. Pretty girl like you should have a safer job.”

“I know.” I gave him an indulgent smile. We had this same conversation every time I stopped in, but José meant well and it was kind of nice to know someone cared.

He flipped the pseudo-meat into a couple of crunchy taco shells, added lettuce, tomato, and a generous dollop of his eye-watering salsa, then wrapped everything up in paper. He passed it to me across the counter, and bent down to pull a can of Coke from the refrigeration unit under the bar.

I handed him my currency card and he slid it through the reader on his handheld, then passed it back to me.

I gathered up my food and drink. “Thanks, José. Have a good one.”

“It will only be a good day when I can retire to *mi casa* and once again have air conditioning. And we both know that is not going to happen in my lifetime,” he said with a grin.

I wolfed down my tacos as I walked the block to the station and tossed the paper into the trash can near the precinct steps.

Several people waved as I passed through the lobby and headed upstairs to the homicide division. When I slid into the chair at my piled-up desk, the first thing I did, after tugging off my jacket, was open my desk drawer and pull out an assortment of bottles.

Here in Delta Sector and the rest of the Rocky Mountain regions we were in a perpetual drought, but in other parts of the country the warming had a different effect. In the midwest and southern sections of the country, for example, they still got rain, lots of it, and the lengthened growing season, along with the extra carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, gave rise not only to high yield crops, but also fruits and

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vegetables of very large size. Which should have been dandy. Except for one major drawback...while the additional CO² made the plants larger, their nutritional quality was low—considerably lower than smaller vegetables had been several decades ago. So people had the choice of eating huge quantities just to get the nutrition they needed, or taking vitamins and other supplements if they wanted to stay healthy.

After popping my capsules and washing them down with the last of my Coke, I made my way through the maze of desks to the captain's office. I rapped on his door. I could see through the glass window he was on his vid-phone, but he waved me in.

West was a burly redhead, and one of the few people left in the department who still felt the need to wear a tie. He could be mulish and uncompromising, but he had a good sense of humor—most of the time—and he genuinely cared about the people who worked for him. I'd always respected him. So had my dad when they worked together.

"Butler contacted you?" he asked the moment he'd ended his call. He mopped his forehead with a large white handkerchief—another old-fashioned item—then, without waiting for my answer, continued, "Body's at the morgue. Our killer's struck again, except this time we got a break."

"How so?"

"This victim still has her head."

"Damn." The other three had been decapitated and the heads never found, so this was a break. "How can we be sure it's the same killer then?"

"It's the same one. Victim's in the right age range, same pristine crime scene. Go over to the morgue and see for yourself. Take Butler with you."

"Oh, for crap's sake, not Butler. I'm sick of him giving me moo eyes and drooling at the mouth."

West chuckled, a booming sound in his small, cramped office. "It's

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a bitch being one of the oldies in the department, isn't it, Jones? You're a hard ass with the kids, and I don't always condone that, but that's exactly what this particular one needs. He's too busy trying to impress his peers and suck up to his superiors to get his job done properly. And I know you're just the cop he needs to whip him into shape."

"Fuck," I muttered. My day was going downhill already and it'd only just begun.

"Deal with it," West said, his tone indicating he wasn't going to be argued with on this one.

"Fine. But don't blame me if he comes back with my boot in his ass."

"Hey, Jones!" West called before I could shut his door.

"Yeah?"

"You okay? You look...different today."

A ripple of unease shot through me, and I reached up to be sure the collar of my blouse and my long hair—which I'd worn down today on purpose—still covered the mark on my neck. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. You sort of have a glow."

I snorted. "It's called sweat. It's ninety-two degrees outside and not much better than that in here."

"Yeah...maybe." Then he waved me away and the moment was, apparently, forgotten on his part.

But I had to wonder what was different enough about me for a man like West to notice.

I wound my way back through the maze, grabbed my jacket off my chair, and found Officer Butler "sucking up," among other things, to a female rookie in the bathroom. He was taller than I by several inches, but I grabbed him by the collar of his gray uniform shirt and pulled him out the door, leaving the young woman red-faced and tidying her uniform.

Once I had him outside in the semi-privacy of the corridor, I laid

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into him with my best-ever case of fury. “You stupid little prick! Do you want to work here or not? Because if you don’t, then you’re on the right path. Keep up with shit like that, coming on to every female you pass like a horny dog, and you’re going end up out on your ass in the street in a big hurry.”

He blushed to the roots of his carefully combed blond hair. “I’m—”

“Useless? Yeah, you pretty much are. But right now West’s decided you’re in my shadow today. You need to know upfront I’m not happy about it and that if I had my way you’d be gone by now. However”—and I gave him a scathing glare at this point—“since the boss says you’re with me, so be it. But I’m warning you, Butler...one false move, one flirtatious grin, one hand on me that’s even remotely inappropriate, or one more fuck-up of any kind, and I’ll make sure West knows how you spend your breaks. Are we clear?”

He swallowed hard, and I knew I had his ass. “Yes,” he mumbled.

“That’s ‘yes, ma’am’ to you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he whispered as if it were about to kill him to say it.

“All right then, let’s go.”

I stomped down the steps, through the lobby, and out onto the street.

“Where are we going...er, ma’am?”

“To the morgue.”

“Oh.”

Out of the corner of my eye I could see him turning green around the gills. *Shit*. We weren’t even there yet. With my luck, he was the passing-out type.

Another train ride found us at the morgue forty-five minutes later. It was housed, like some kind of horror video stereotype, in the basement of an abandoned hospital. The hospital had moved to a smaller, cheaper-to-power location six years ago, but the morgue had stayed.

“Knew I’d be seeing you today,” Kaia Malachi called from behind

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her desk on the other side of the gray reception room as we entered. She gave me her usual broad smile, which always filled her black face with a reverent joy that seemed out of place for someone who worked in a morgue. I'd never been able to figure that out.

She met us halfway, gave me a bone-crunching hug, then eyeballed my companion up and down with a look of barely concealed humor. "Who's the youngster?"

I saw Butler stiffen at the comment. Obviously Mr. I-Can't-Keep-My-Fly-Zipped didn't appreciate being called a youngster.

"Officer Butler. He's along to learn something useful," I said, giving him another one of my pointed stares.

"Charming." Then out of the side of her mouth, Kaia mumbled to me, "How come you always get stuck with the fuck-ups and newbies?"

"Must be my sweet personality."

I felt Butler bristle again, but I had to give him credit...for a wiener, he was showing remarkable restraint.

"So, what have you got for me today?" I asked Kaia. "I hear we have another body from our killer, but this one has a head."

"Yep, sure does. Come on back."

Kaia preceded us through the swinging doors into a corridor that led to the autopsy lab on the right and the body storage facility on the left. We turned right.

When we entered the blissfully cool lab—the room had to be kept at low temperature for obvious body deterioration reasons—she walked directly to the blue-sheet-covered lump on the metal table in the center of the room.

"Here's your girl." She whipped back the sheet, exposing a tangled mass of wheat-colored hair and a pallid cadaver that had already been autopsied.

I heard Butler suck in a wheezy breath.

"Steady there, big guy." I gave him a friendly slap on the back, then

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turned my attention to the body on the table.

“She’s approximately twenty-six years old, five-seven, a hundred-twenty pounds, no signs of a struggle, and like the others, she had sex sometime shortly before death.” Kaia pulled a metal pointer out of the pocket of her white lab coat. With it, she lifted the flap of skin that had been cut earlier to expose the internal organs.

Butler swayed next to me and I heard a gurgling noise, then a choking retch.

“Don’t you dare puke on my body,” Kaia said in a stern voice. “Out! The john’s down the hall, second door on your right.”

Butler bolted faster than I’d ever before seen him move, his uniform boots beating on the gray tile floor.

“Guess he learned something useful,” I said dryly as we watched him go.

“Don’t think that boy’s going to make much of a homicide cop. Better get him out on foot patrol. Let him write energy violation tickets or help little old ladies cross streets.”

“Nah, he’d probably want to feel them up.”

“Ah. A sperminator, is he?”

“He’d like to think so.”

We both grinned.

“Okay, so tell me more about our victim,” I said.

“Well, here’s where it gets really interesting. In the other victims the head had been removed, so we assumed the draining of blood had come from that. But this gal has some marks that are either going to confound you cops further or give you some answers—weird though they may be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Check this out.” Kaia pulled back some of the thatch of the young woman’s hair, exposing her neck on the left side. She indicated something with her pointer. “Right here.”

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I moved around the table to the other side for a better view. What I saw caused my lungs to seize. “Oh, fuck.”

“No, I’d say suck is a better word.”

“She’s been bitten.” It was foolish to state the obvious, but that’s what came out of my mouth. Considering how fast my heart was racing and how a strange fog had suddenly filled my head, not to mention the bite mark on my own neck chose that moment to throb, I was surprised I managed any words.

“Yep, she has.”

“An animal?” I found myself desperately hoping...

“No. I didn’t find any traces of saliva, which was odd. But from the size of the wounds and the measurements I took, the bite looks to have been made by something the size of a human mouth. The teeth that did it were larger than human incisors, but still generally human-shaped.”

I drew in a deep breath to gather my thoughts. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying this woman is just as drained of blood as the other three victims. However, since her head is clearly still intact, she didn’t lose the blood from decapitation.”

“You think she lost all her blood from the bite? What, like someone sucked it out of her?” As my heart rate slowly returned to normal, logic began to kick back in. “Isn’t that impossible? I mean, the human body holds how much blood?”

“In an average body? Approximately six quarts.”

I began to pace. “Okay, let’s say some weirdo gets his kicks from killing young women, and that he even gets some kind of sexual thrill from biting them...” Thoughts of what River had done to me last night filled my head. Again, my body tingled in response, even as a round of niggling fear stole through me. “But sucking six quarts of blood from these women? And then doing what? Swallowing it?”

“Hey, I’ve been in this business a long time. I’ve seen stranger

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things.”

“Like what?”

“Like the time the man came in with—”

“Okay, never mind, that was a rhetorical question. Back to this girl. Kaia...” I paused and made a face. “Don’t you think it’s a stretch to believe some psycho sucked the blood from her? Yeah, there’s the occasional odd bird who likes to play at being a gothic vampire wannabe—that’s been going on for decades—but any more than a few sips and they’d probably be heaving harder than Butler is. Swallow several quarts of blood? No way.”

“You got a better explanation? Again, may I remind you that this victim still has her head. The punctures were not made by any kind of an instrument. They were made by teeth. And the blood vessels and skin around the bite show definite signs the area was submitted to suction.”

“There you go. Maybe some kind of suction device!”

“You do your job and let me do mine. I’m the doctor here, and I’m telling you there were no ‘devices’ used. If one had been, let’s say a suction cup, the tissue damage would have been more consistent all the way around the area, and it would have been more pronounced. She’d have a bruise the size and shape of the device. What I found was consistent with a more natural source. I’d bet my next paycheck it was a mouth.”

“This is nuts. There has to be another explanation.”

“When you come up with it, you let me know. But I know what I see.”

I huffed out a breath. “What about the other women, who all *did* have their heads removed? Maybe this girl isn’t a victim of the same killer.”

“Mmm. Come here. Let me show you something.” Kaia motioned me back to the table. She ran her pointer along an imaginary line

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between the young woman's neck and her collar bone. "The other women were decapitated here. All of them done precisely here, with no more than a quarter of an inch difference."

"Okay..."

"So, if we removed this girl's head in the same place"—she moved the pointer again—"what would we not be able to see?"

"The bite marks, obviously. They'd be with the head."

"Exactly. So what I'm saying is that if we had found this body first, the one with the head and the bite marks, what conclusion would we have drawn? The only conclusion?"

I gnawed on my lower lip. My logical mind was trying to counter her words, but was drawing a blank at the moment.

"We only assumed the other women lost blood because of the decapitation," Kaia continued, "but in reality that scenario never made sense. If a person were decapitated, there would be splatter. Yet did you find any at the crime scenes?"

"None," I admitted. "And there was no evidence the killer had cleaned up after himself either."

"Because maybe he didn't have to. By the time he got around to removing the heads, there was no blood left to splatter, drip, or otherwise make a mess."

"So why does this one have a head then?"

"Maybe he got interrupted. How do I know? I just look at the bodies. You're the one who has to figure out the whys and wherefores."

"What was the time of death?"

Kaia pulled a notepad out of her pocket and flipped through it. "I placed it between five and six this morning. Probably just before sunrise." She tucked the notebook away. "Now, come here. I want to show you one last thing. This was not on the other victims."

She moved down the victim's body and paused near the hips. When she began to spread the body's legs apart, my heart suddenly filled my

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throat. “Seems like our blood-sucking vampire got a little carried away with himself this time. Check this out.”

My gaze fixated on the marks Kaia pointed to. Another bite. This one in the groin.

Shit. Oh, shit. My head spun and I had to grab the edge of the table to steady myself.

“Like I said, none of the other victims had this.” Kaia’s voice sounded like it was coming from far away. “Maybe your killer got a little too carried away with his sexual fetish and decided to branch out—do her neck and her groin—then, because he wasted too much time, he heard someone coming and had to leave before he could do the head. By the way, this location shows indications of heavy sucking as well.”

“Cover her up,” I mumbled, and stalked toward the door.

Kaia caught up with me, her white lab coat flying behind her, her large breasts bouncing as she jogged. “Rachel, wait up.”

I paused near the door, attempting to draw in deep breaths and focus without *looking* like I was drawing in deep breaths and focusing.

“What just spooked you?” Kaia asked me directly.

I faced her. “Nothing. Just had all the info I need for now.”

“Bullshit.” Her probing, coffee-colored eyes held me at their mercy. “I’ve known you for too long to buy that. Have you seen bite marks in the groin like that before?”

“No.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Again, let me say, ‘bullshit.’”

Damn, she was way too observant. So what was I supposed to tell her? “Yeah, actually, I have...a sexy stranger, whom I know nothing about, treated me to the best fuck of my life last night and gave me a set of bite marks all my own.”

I dragged in another shaky breath. “I’m fine, Kaia. I promise. I just slept like crap last night”—true, since I hadn’t actually slept at all until

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just before sunrise—"so I'm just edgy today."

"Uh-huh." Kaia's throaty voice told me there was no way in hell she was buying that. But at least she didn't push further.

"I'd better collect Butler and get back to the station. Okay if I call you if I need more info?"

"Of course."

I left with the feel of her dubious gaze burning into my back.

I found Butler looking nearly as pale as the body I'd just examined and leaning against the corridor wall as if it were the only thing keeping him upright. He was hardly the cocky twit he'd been in the bathroom at the station with the girl cop in his embrace. But in spite of the fact he was a shit, I couldn't help take pity on him. I hadn't fared much better the first time I'd visited the morgue eons ago with my dad. Of course I'd only been twelve at the time, along for the ride with my dad as he worked a case. Still...that first dead body experience was a pisser.

"Let's go get you something to drink," I said.

Hell, I needed something, too. I was still struggling to keep myself together. Visions of the silver-glowing sight of River between my legs last night, then of him thrusting into me as his mouth latched onto my neck assailed me, making it hard to breathe. What kind of coincidence could it possibly be that the dead girl in there had the same marks I did?

Butler and I stopped at a food cart a block from the morgue. I bought us each a frosty, dripping bottle of purified water the vendor dug out of an ice chest, and we stood in silence in the shade of a building, swigging the cold liquid. The heat of the day was on the increase, and at two-thirty in the afternoon, which is the time my GPS watch now showed, it had to be pushing a hundred degrees.

But somehow the temperature wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as the niggling suspicions that continued to plague me. *Why? How? Was it possible...? No. Damn it, no. But maybe... Oh, crap.*

I mentally groaned.

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“Let’s go. I have work to do at the station,” I told Butler.

But as the afternoon wore on, I found no easy answers, either to my own fears, or to the identity of the killer.

I discovered the newest victim more than fit the killer’s pattern—each woman had been between twenty-five and thirty years of age, each had been healthy, no evidence of drug use, none of them the type to pick up strangers in bars or elsewhere, and none of them showing any sign of struggle, which meant they’d either chosen to be with the killer or they’d been unconscious when he killed them.

A quick call to Kaia informed me that each of the victim’s bodies showed not only signs of having had sex, but also of multiple orgasms. I had no idea how she could tell these things, and wasn’t sure I really wanted to know. But if she was right, clearly the young women had been with the killer by choice.

All four victims had also been killed in their homes, and all were middle-class—which in all honesty didn’t mean that much anymore. I was middle-class, too, but look where I lived.

And what was up with Kaia’s blood sucker theory? How could any human suck six quarts of blood? Just the thought of it made me gag. There had to be some other answer. Had to be something we were missing. Vampires were the stuff of literature and old 2-D videos from the twentieth century. This was the real world—ugly enough in its own way, but still grounded in facts and logic.

But underlying all my research and tossed-together theories for the rest of the afternoon and evening were the nagging similarities between my experience last night and the victims’. No matter how I tried to put it out of my mind, I couldn’t stop thinking about how I’d invited a perfect stranger into my own apartment, a stranger who’d brought me to multiple orgasms, a stranger who’d bitten me. And a stranger, who, from the best of my drugged, fuzzy-headed calculations, probably left my place before sunrise. Which meant, theoretically, he could have had

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time to take the train twenty blocks to the latest victim's apartment, have sex with her, and kill her.

No! For two weeks River watched you, and not once did you ever get a bad vibe about him. Not once did he make you feel like he was stalking you.

Yeah, but clearly the victims had invited the killer into their apartments of their own free will, too. Maybe that was all part of his game. Maybe that was his gift.

CHAPTER 3

I went home early that night. Since I'd gone in hours before my usual shift, I didn't feel guilty about cutting from the station around nine o'clock. I was fried. My brain, my body, and my emotions. When I was fried I got snappish, and most of my colleagues were no doubt glad to see me go. Hell, they probably cheered when I left.

The whole way home on the train I wondered if River would be in the alley tonight waiting for me. My body craved him with a desperate hunger. But my intellectual side hoped he wasn't there because it would be easier to avoid him than to face him after what I'd discovered at the morgue.

I didn't want to believe he'd had anything to do with the murders I was investigating. I hoped with all my heart he didn't. Partly because, in spite of the drug hallucination thing and the biting, I'd enjoyed his company more than I'd enjoyed anyone's in a long time. And partly because I didn't want to believe I could possibly be so misguided and

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suckered in by lust that I'd lost my ability to discern bad guys from good guys.

But in either case, I'd already decided this morning I was going to end it with him anyway. It was for the best.

"Coward," I muttered to myself. "If you want to end it, just tell him. You're not going to be able to sneak past him every night."

My heart was pounding when I rounded the corner from Exeter into the alley. I paused for a moment and dragged in a deep breath.

I didn't see him.

I began the walk toward my fire escape and felt no hot gaze on my back, no sizzle, no nothing.

A wave of relief swept over me. But two seconds later a pain of loss started in my heart.

"Oh, for gods' sake, Jones, this wishy-washy crap isn't going to do."

Steeling my back, I climbed the ladder, shoved open my window, and stepped inside.

My feet had barely settled on the floor when I felt strong, possessive arms around me, pulling me in and up.

"You're home early. I missed you today," came the deep, sensual voice that squeezed my heart and sent heat rushing to my womb. And then he kissed me. Hard, hungrily, his fingers spearing through my loose blonde hair and tugging me closer.

And, damn it, stupid, stupid me...I kissed him back.

Within moments I was drowning in him all over again, just like I had last night. His scent, his muscular, aroused body surrounding me, his mouth moving on mine...

He lifted me in his arms, cradling me against him like a bride being carried over the threshold, and moved without ever stopping the kiss.

But I did. "Where are you taking me?" I gasped, my body on fire and my head spinning.

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“To the bedroom, where I plan to spend the next several hours worshipping your body and making you insane with desire,” he growled. “Damn, Rachel, I’ve been out of my mind with need for you all day. I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

Oh, crap. I was lost in him. Lost...

“No, River, wait a second.” I pushed against his chest, trying to force myself to snap out of it, to regain at least a tiny bit of control. “Put me down. Put me down!”

He did. We were in the kitchen. But he didn’t stop touching me; his hands slid inside my jacket, pushing it down over my arms, tugging it off, unfastening my gun holster and removing it, then reaching for the buttons on my blouse.

“Stop, River. We need to talk.” I took a step backward, rubbing my arms to calm the shivers of longing that continued to pulse through me. Then I turned, and out of instinct and many years of familiarity with living in my apartment in the dark, dug in a drawer and pulled out several squat candles and a box of matches. One by one I lit the pillars and set them around the kitchen.

“Why the candles?” I heard seductive humor in his voice.

“Because...tonight I want to be able to see you. With my own eyes.” I placed the last candle on the table next to him, then straightened and looked into the softly lit face of the man who haunted me. *Oh, my...*

Even more enthralling than he’d been in the silvery glow from last night, he was a sight to behold. Dressed in jeans and a tight black T-shirt that showed off his broad shoulders and muscular arms, there was something almost Elysian about him with his pale skin and sculpted face, his soft brown hair and cerulean blue eyes. He was an arresting presence.

“Hi, beautiful.” His smile was part angelic, part bad boy lecherous.

“Hi.” I smiled back. Couldn’t help myself. And once again I had to

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tamp down the urge to throw myself at him, rip off his clothes, and have my way with him.

“Do you feel better now that you can see? Shall I finish undressing you here in the kitchen?” he teased, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

A ripple of need curled around me and a quick vision of us locked skin to skin going at it on the kitchen counter suddenly filled me.

His smile widened as if he could read my mind. “I see you’ve been needy for me today, too.”

He bent his head to kiss me, but I held him back with a hand on his chest.

“We need to talk,” I repeated, though my voice came out a bit quivery.

His gaze suddenly cleared and I felt it focus on me, as if he were trying to see into my soul.

“You’re afraid of me tonight.” It was a statement, not a question. And it was said in a serious tone.

“No...” I said slowly.

“Yes, you are. Something happened today. Tell me.” This time a command instead of a question.

“I...” I sucked in a deep, shaky breath, then before I could back out, I blurted out, “I need to know why you bit me last night.”

His dark eyebrows rose. There were several seconds of silence during which my heart nearly pounded right out of my chest.

“This is the moment of truth, isn’t it?” He sounded resigned, but not surprised. His gaze burned into mine. “Why do think I bit you, Rachel?”

The question caught me off guard. “I...” I swallowed. “I...I don’t know. I guess because you’re...well...into kinky stuff. Pain.”

I heard a soft huff of breath that almost sounded like a laugh. Then the moment passed and he was all seriousness again. He reached out and stroked my hair with his big hand. Like steel moving toward a

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magnet, I instinctively leaned toward his touch, wanting to feel it on my face as well as my hair.

“Did you feel pain when I did it?”

“No,” I admitted. “I didn’t even realize you’d done it until this morning.”

“But you felt something last night. Even if you didn’t know I was biting you, you felt something...didn’t you?”

My face flushed with heat, and desire pulsed between my legs. “Yes,” I breathed.

“You liked it.”

“But why, damn it? Why did you do it?”

“Why?” He leaned closer to me. His hand still cradled my cheek. He pulled my face toward him, brushed his sensual lips against mine. “Because it’s in my nature,” he murmured.

I swayed on my feet, feeling his arousal and my own course through my body. Gods, I needed him. Wanted him inside me, wanted...

“When I’m sexually aroused my instincts kick in and I feel the urge to feed.” His mouth lowered to my neck and nuzzled under the collar of my light cotton shirt. Hot magma built in my core, and all I could think, all I could imagine, was how fast I could get his thick cock inside me.

But then his words suddenly sank into my head.

I pushed him away once more, and stepped back. “What do you mean *feed*?”

“I’m a vampire. I drink blood to survive.”

There was no apology in his tone. No hint he teased. Just a seriousness that sent a chill down my spine.

“Oh, shit. Not only are you a drug addict, you’re delusional.”

His grip on my arm was so swift I didn’t see it coming. Nor did I remember him pulling me toward him, but next thing I knew I was molded against his chest with one of my arms pinned behind my back, the other to my side.

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"I told you last night, it's not drugs. Come on, Rachel, open your eyes to the world around you. Your logic will only get you so far, but you can't explain everything with it. There are things in this world you don't know about yet, things you can't explain. Like the serial killer case you're working on."

My heart filled with ice. "What do you know about my case?" I whispered.

"I know the clues are all right in front of your face, but you refuse to believe them. You keep trying to explain what's happened according to the basic rules of human understanding. But what you're not opening yourself to is the possibility that what you're dealing with is not human."

"No!" I struggled against him, trying to wrench myself free, but his grip was iron. "I'm not going to stand here and listen to the ravings of a madman," I snarled. "Let me go!"

"A madman? Is that what you think I am? No, baby, you have no idea what a real madman is. The real madman is the killer you're hunting."

"The killer who convinces women to invite him into their homes so he can have multiple sexual encounters with them? The killer who bites them just like you did me? Where were you this morning after you left here, River? The latest victim was killed between five and six. I figure that's about the time you left me, and she didn't live far away."

"You want to know where I was when I left you? I'll tell you. I felt him...your killer. After you went to sleep and my mind quieted, I felt him. I followed his thoughts, his lust, but it was too late. He'd already drained her. He sensed I was coming and left before he could take his souvenir like he had with the other three."

I sagged in his arms. "You were there?" I whispered. Oh, gods. River had been there. He was the killer.

Didn't you hear anything I just told you? Listen to me, Rachel! I

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know what you're hunting and I assure you, it's not me.

"Stop it! Stop it!" I cried. "Get out of my head." But then I made a face when I realized how I must sound. "Not you!" I spat. "It's not you I hear. It's myself, but you're the cause of it and I want it to stop."

It is me. You're not imagining it.

"No!" I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Yes, baby." His voice dropped low, soothing. "There was already a connection between us, even when we first talked out in the alley. But now that connection is even stronger. Last night you willingly took my seed inside you. *Willingly*. That's created a link between us that can't be broken."

"No. No, no, no."

"Look into your heart." His voice was maddeningly calm. "You know it's true. Just as you know I'm not the person who killed those women. If I were the killer, you'd feel it, like you felt my other passions and emotions last night."

Suddenly my eyes popped open and I struggled to focus on his face. "Last night...fear. You were afraid for me. Why?"

"Because he's going to come for you. He's toying with you right now. The first kill, maybe the second, were motivated by his own twisted madness. But once you were on the case and he saw you, felt your strength, your determination, it became a game to him, with you as the ultimate prize."

"I don't believe you," I whispered, my body once again icy, my breath coming out in soft gasps.

"It's true. He's old. I've felt it. Old, and weary of what he sees as his dull eternal existence. But now he's discovered you. He's enamored of your strength, your life force. He sees you as a challenge. He'll continue to kill other women only until he lures you in close. Then he'll strike."

"No." Even I heard the shocked denial in my voice. "It's you, isn't

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it?”

“Damn it, Rachel!” He gave me a little shake. “Are you listening to me at all? If I wanted to murder you, why would I have spent the night with you, then left you alive? Do you honestly think there weren’t a dozen times last night that I couldn’t have snapped your neck, or fed from you until life left your body? But I didn’t, did I? Why the hell would I want to kill you when for the first time in a hundred years I’ve actually found someone I genuinely enjoy being with?”

I stared at him, knowing he’d just said something important, but not able to sort it out. His words floated around me, glistening like droplets of pale ink still too translucent to form a real picture.

“I came here, to this neighborhood, to protect you.”

“Why?” I whispered.

“I told you. I felt the killer you’re after, felt his fascination for you, his desire to have you. The women he kills are chosen randomly so there’s no way to know who he’ll go after next. But his real goal is you—so I came here to make sure he didn’t succeed.”

“Security,” I mumbled. “You said you did security. You’re so full of shit.”

“Security is exactly what I do. The thing you have to understand is that not all vampires are the same. We all have to feed in some fashion or another, but how we choose to go about it is as different as our personalities and backgrounds. Many vampires live among humans. Most of them are never found out because they’re discreet, because they know how to survive without drawing attention to themselves, without leaving dead bodies in their wake.”

I winced at that, but River continued without pause. “There are some, though, who go bad. Just like there are humans who go bad. For those, it’s not about the feeding or survival, it’s about their lust for the power they wield over humans, their lust for the kill. That’s all they crave. When I discover vampires like that, I hunt them down. Needless

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to say that doesn't make me terribly popular with my own kind, but I do what I have to do."

"Why do you keep saying all these things? There's no such thing as vampires. "

"You've seen the evidence. There are vampires, and you know it."

"Prove it."

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. "You'd think last night would have given you enough proof. But no, you're still determined I drugged you." He shook his head. "All right, try this on for size."

He plowed a hand into my hair and, clutching a handful of it, tugged my head back—not enough to really hurt me, but enough I couldn't pull free. Then he buried his face against my neck.

I cried out. My body instantly shuddered to life with that familiar, writhing arousal. And when I felt his lips on my skin, his tongue probing me, I squirmed in unadulterated pleasure that I couldn't have stopped if I'd wanted to. He lifted me with his other arm, the one not holding my head, until my cunt pressed against his erection. I felt weightless. I moaned and thrashed in his arms, wanting...wanting... The prick of teeth on my neck didn't hurt. Oh, gods, no. Instead, it filled me with raging lust, heightening my desire.

I was close to climax within seconds. My body thrummed with passion, with dizzying rapture...and then I was over the edge, spiraling through space.

When I finally came back to my senses, he lifted his head and met my gaze. My startled gaze. Because in that moment I discovered a truth that rocked my world. Where before River's perfect white teeth had been as normal as mine, he now had two elongated fangs instead of incisors. Red. Covered with blood.

My blood.

I screamed...or tried to. My lungs were so constricted with fear and shock nothing actually came out. When I attempted to jerk away from

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him, another truth asserted itself. We were no longer standing on the ground. Instead, we floated two feet above the floor, our heads inches from the ceiling. A sob billowed up from my chest.

Slowly, we sank until once more my feet were on solid ground. My legs were too wobbly to carry my weight, so River continued to hold me against him. When I next looked up at him, his fangs had retracted. But a tiny drop of crimson still clung to his lower lip. He caught it with his tongue and it disappeared.

“Proof enough for you?” he said gruffly. He sounded hurt, as if I’d forced him to do something he hadn’t wanted to. A miniature wave of guilt shot through me. But then anger surged in its wake.

“Let me go,” I demanded, my voice cold.

He sighed but released me.

“I want to know how you got me to invite you up here last night. I want to know what you did to me to make me feel your desire, how you continue to make me feel this raging hunger for you that won’t go away, even though I don’t want to feel it anymore! You used some kind of mind control on me, didn’t you? You brainwashed me or used some kind of mind trancey mojo!” My voice grew ragged and I knew my babbling was becoming irrational. Another sob clawed its way up from my aching chest.

“You’re accusing me of using my glamor on you?” he growled, sounding completely affronted at such a charge.

“Well, you did something to make me fall all over you!” I swiped at my damp eyes with the back of my hand. “I would never have acted the way I did, never invited you in or let you tie me up last night if I’d been myself. You did something to me!” At this point I was downright screeching. Not an attractive sound, but I was falling apart for the first time in my life and I didn’t seem to have any control over what I was saying or feeling.

“Rachel...”

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“Leave me alone, damn it! Just go away! I don’t want to see you anymore!”

“Rach—”

I grabbed my gun out of the holster that lay on the table where River had put it, and pointed it at his chest. “Take your twisted stories and go! Now! And stay away from me!”

I watched the lines around his mouth grow tight and his body stiffen. “I told you before, I’m not afraid of dying.” He grabbed my gun hand and yanked it toward him so the hefty barrel of my weapon dug into his flesh directly over his heart. “Go ahead. Pull the trigger. See what happens.”

My breathing came out in harsh rasps. My hand shook.

He dug the gun in deeper. “Do it! Damn it, do it!”

Seconds ticked by in slow motion. My heart pounded and the kitchen seemed to spin around me, leaving River and me in the core of a churning funnel.

He glared at me. “No? Well let me save you some time. It won’t work anyway. Your weapon can’t kill me, Rachel.” He pushed the gun and my hand away from him in disgust.

“I’ll go. But I want to make one thing clear.” He got right in my face and I saw hurt in his blue eyes, felt it radiating off him as vividly as I’d always felt his desire. “I did *not* glamor you in order to make love to you. The only time I used it last night was when you read my fear for you. You were so upset by it, all I wanted was to soothe your worry. That’s it. That was the *only* damn time. Everything else, everything you felt, everything we did...” His voice dropped to a gravelly whisper. “It was all real.”

He turned and was gone out the window in a blur.

Shock...and then sorrow flooded through me, consuming me, leaving me shaking. I sank into one of the kitchen chairs as tears welled in my eyes.

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Maybe my weapon couldn't hurt him, but my mistrust had.

CHAPTER 4

For three days I licked my wounds and tried to convince myself River's revelations in my kitchen were just vivid bits of my imagination, and now that River was gone from the picture, my life would fall back into its normal routine.

And for three days, the little voice inside me told me I was full of shit. That my life had forever changed and I'd better learn to deal with it.

For three nights when I came home from work I didn't see him. Not in the alley, not waiting in my apartment. I clambered in my window and shut and locked it firmly behind me, telling myself I wanted no surprises. But the constant ache in my chest belied my conviction.

In spite of River's absence, I still felt him. At home. At work. Wherever I was. It was different than before—no heated gazes on my back, no aroused energy pulsing from dark corners. But he *was* with me. A faint presence in my mind and heart. I also felt his vigilance. I

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knew that even though I no longer saw him...somehow, some way, he was still watching me. I wanted to be angry about that, but I couldn't bring myself to be. Which confused me. How could I have such conflicting desires—wanting him gone, but glad he was there?

Still, that frustration was nothing compared to the physical withdrawal my body was suffering. It was like I was on some sort of sexual stimulant that kept me constantly enflamed. Even at the most banal moments as I read paperwork, made phone calls, followed leads, just the slightest brush of anything on my nipples had them rock hard and stabbing peaks in my shirts. The tiniest pressure against my nether regions left me wet and aching.

I was perpetually aroused to the point I'd taken to slipping away from my desk several times each day to give myself a quick hand job in the bathroom. It was the same at home. Yet, all the masturbating in the world couldn't give me the satisfaction I yearned for. My orgasms were barely palatable—like drinking weak tea when what I really wanted was double espresso.

Gods, I craved sex with River. And worse, I genuinely missed him, which alternately left me lonely and sad, or pissed off when I reminded myself I was in control of my own life and damn well wasn't going to grow dependent on anyone, especially not a man who had to be delusional.

"There are vampires, and you know it... Everything you felt, everything we did...it was all real..."

I couldn't get River's words out of my head. The logical me insisted this had to all be part of some elaborate fantasy he had woven. But in my heart, no matter how crazy it seemed, I felt his honesty. Just as I continued to feel guilt over his hurt.

"I'm going fucking crazy!" I muttered the fourth evening. I threw down the folder I'd been studying and rose from my desk. I needed to get out of here, get some air.

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The detective in the cubicle next to mine gave me an odd look, but went back to working on his handheld. I wasn't sure if it was a good sign or a bad one that my colleagues were used to hearing me talk to myself, mumble swear words, and make quick exits these days.

I grabbed my jacket and escaped. I had no destination in mind. Since the sun was just beginning to sink toward the mountains, and I figured I had probably forty-five minutes before twilight and over an hour before full darkness, I set out walking in a random direction.

There'd been no new murders, which, considering my jumbled mental and emotional state, was a blessing. But Kaia, during my daily phone conversations with her, was still convinced the victims had been killed by a vampire. Oh, she used that term lightly because she didn't really believe there were such supernatural beings, but it came down to the same conclusion—she fully believed a *someone*, not a *something*, had sucked those girls' blood. And I had to admit to myself that, after what had happened with River in my apartment the other night, Kaia's theory was becoming less and less nonsensical.

Vampires.

How could it be possible? How could humans have lived all these centuries making up legends and stories of such creatures, only to have them be real? I was still struggling with the idea, and still wanting very much to disbelieve it. Yet so many things that had happened with River only really made sense if I did believe.

River...a vampire.

If I was totally honest with myself, each day that passed I felt a growing assurance the life I had *thought* I'd known was the real delusion, and actual reality was much more complex than most people believed.

I hadn't imagined any of the oddities that had happened. The bite in my groin was healed now, as was the original on my neck. The newer one from the night in my kitchen was nearly gone also, but each time I

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looked at it in the mirror, or touched it—as I did now, running my fingertips across the punctures—the vision of River looking down at me, fangs extended and covered in my blood, swam through my head. I tried to shut it out, but I couldn't. Maybe because I needed to keep seeing it...to believe.

What did I know about vampires? Probably as much as the next citizen...and, unfortunately, most of it came from fiction and old 2-D videos. Vampires sucked blood to live, they often ensorcelled their victims with some kind of mind control—glamor, River had called it. Supposedly they could be scared off with garlic, crucifixes, and holy water. Guns, as River had coldly pointed out, couldn't hurt them. So falling back on the old legends and stories, did I then assume they had to be killed by a stake in the heart or beheading? Or did you have to burn them? Maybe it was all three; my vampire knowledge bank wasn't overly full.

What else? They were called the undead, although I wasn't sure what that meant exactly. Did that mean they were neither dead nor alive, or that they were dead but somehow animated? They were immortal—unless, I guess, they were beheaded, staked, or burned. They lived in the dark since sunlight supposedly killed them. They slept in coffins.

At that a shudder tore through me. The idea of River sleeping in a coffin was just too much to bear.

But the part about vampires only being active in the dark made me remember that all four murder victims had been killed at night or very early in the morning...before the sun would have been up. Was there a connection? Nighttime murders, victims drained of blood... River had said I all the facts in front of me but I was trying too hard to explain them with human logic, which was impossible if the killer wasn't human.

Crap. Okay, let's say, purely hypothetically and tossing all

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reasonable human logic aside, that the killer was a genuine bloodsucking vampire. How the hell did I stop him? I was fresh out of wooden stakes, and I didn't own any sharp instruments appropriate for head-chopping.

What a gods-damned nightmare.

I suddenly noticed the sun was almost spent. The last rays of its radiant orange light pulsed on the horizon.

Glancing around, I realized I was in an abandoned section of the city, an area that had once been block after block of sleek steel, concrete, and glass automobile dealerships. But no more. The long stretches of parking lot, once full of shiny new cars, were now nothing more than a bleached, cracked wasteland dotted with exhausted tufts of brown grass. Sagging signs still hung in front of a few of the looted and graffitied buildings—Ford, Chevrolet, Cadillac—tired sentries of a world gone by.

I'd wandered farther and longer than I'd planned. Pushing vampire thoughts to the depths of my mind, I brought myself back to full cop vigilance as I turned around and headed in the direction from which I'd come. I'd have to hurry to beat the dark.

Within minutes, the glow of sunset faded into the drear gray of twilight. Still the dead car dealerships stretched out on both sides of me, although I could see the light of a train station a few blocks ahead. It was to that I fixed my sight. The trains, though electric, ran twenty-four/seven in spite of the power shutdown each night. The same was true for hospitals, law enforcement facilities, and other emergency-related agencies. These "essential services" were on a separate power grid from the rest of Delta Sector.

The sudden need to be off the streets before full darkness urged me on. Much safer to take the train to the precinct than walk the remaining distance.

Rachel...

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The voice came to me like a whisper of hot wind.

“River?” I whispered, slowing my steps and peering over my shoulder.

Come to me, Rachel...

My pulse raced. I turned, studying the nearest building. For some reason I was drawn to it.

Come to me...

I felt a pressure in my mind. I concentrated on it, and realized it was urging my feet into motion.

This way. Come to me...

The pressure grew stronger, and my will began to sway. I felt the need to hurry for the train dim and the urge to enter the building grow into a fierce desire.

In that instant I knew. This wasn't River. River's voice in my head had never tried to coerce me to act against my will. He would never encourage me to stay out on the darkening streets or enter an abandoned building at nightfall instead of getting on a train to light and safety. I knew it as surely as I knew my own name.

The realization worked like a forest fire in my head, burning away the dark allure of the voice and clearing a path for my own will to return.

I turned and sprinted toward the train station. By the time I fell into a seat on the train, my lungs were searing, my head pounded, and raw fury scorched my veins.

Rather than disembarking near the police station, instead I changed trains and headed toward home. It was early yet, and normally I'd work several more hours. But what I sought couldn't be found at my desk.

Once I'd gotten off the train, the two blocks between the 18th and Exeter train station and my alley were the longest I'd ever traversed. I'd been a cop for ten years, had been working homicide for seven of those, and in all that time I'd never truly been spooked by anything. More

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than once people in the department had called me Iron Jones. A cast iron stomach, an iron will, and impervious to things that went bump in the night. But tonight, as I jogged those two blocks, I hated to admit I felt invisible hands reaching for me and glowing eyes watching me.

“Get a grip, Jones,” I muttered under my breath. “This isn’t you. Get a grip.”

But in spite of my attempts at self control, I’d never felt so relieved to put my feet on the fire escape ladder and make the climb to my apartment.

Once inside I searched the entire place to be sure no one lay in wait for me, then lit candles in every room.

I was pissed at myself for being so jittery, and tried to recapture some of the fury I’d felt when I’d first boarded the train after hearing the voice calling me. Much better to be mad than scared.

It had been the killer. I knew it in my bones. And now I also knew how he’d lured his victims. If I hadn’t already been exposed to a vampire’s voice in my head, hadn’t recognized it for what it was, would I have succumbed to it like the other women had?

I stripped off my clothes, but for the first time in recent memory, in spite of the stuffy heat of my apartment, I was cold. I slid into bed and dragged the sheet up over me. I kept my gun handy, on the table next to the bed.

Emotional exhaustion from events of this evening and from the past several days washed over me. I hadn’t slept well since the night with River in the kitchen. But I seriously doubted I’d be sleeping tonight, no matter how tired I was. If River had been right when he said the killer would come after me—okay, not *if*...it was obviously a reality—then the killer probably already knew where I lived.

Shit. Oh, shit.

* * *

I didn’t remember dozing off, but I must have because I came

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awake to the feel of cool, non-threatening hands stroking my hair.

I rolled over, noticing the sheet was now tangled near my feet, and looked up into River's troubled blue eyes. He was crouched next to my bed, and I could see his face in the soft yellow glow of the candlelight. He looked paler than usual.

"I told you I didn't want to see you anymore. How'd you get in here?" I demanded. Even though all I really felt was relief at the sight of him, old instincts died hard, and I couldn't seem to stop the purely defensive reaction that came out of me.

"You didn't lock the window tonight like you have the past nights."

"Oh, yes, I did."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes—"

"No. You left it open on purpose."

Damn. I really was transparent, wasn't I? "Even if I left it open, that didn't mean I wanted you to come in."

"Let's not play games. I felt your fear while I was in the shower after I woke up this evening. I went across town to find you, but by the time I got there you were already gone."

My pulse skittered at his nearness, at his words, at the sight of him, in the flesh, after four long days away from him.

"Talk to me, Rachel. Tell me what happened tonight."

His presence was already calming me, which my natural instincts wanted to be angry about—I was still having trouble getting past the dependency thing.

"I heard him," I said. "He tried to lure me, just like you said he would. I felt him trying to force his will on my mind, to make me go to him, and I fought it. I ran."

River's body tensed and I swear the air around him crackled with angry energy. "Fuck!" It was more growl than spoken word. "How did this happen?"

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“I went for a walk this evening, before sunset. I needed to get some air, get away from my desk. I was lost in thought and walked farther than I meant to, and by the time I turned around to head back to the police station, the sun was going down. That’s when I felt him in my head.”

“Damn it! You can’t let that happen again, Rachel. You can’t go off by yourself at night!”

It was on the tip of my tongue to snap at him that I was a cop and I’d go wherever I damn well pleased. But before I could get it out, he pulled me up into his arms. I felt his anger turn to worry, then to a protective possessiveness that stirred something deep in my soul. He stroked my hair and pressed soft kisses to my forehead.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I swear it.”

I gave up all pretense then of being in control. For the first time in my life I shoved aside my almost feral need to be strong no matter what, and let myself lean on the strength and protection he offered. I savored the feel of my puckered nipples against the weave of his chambray shirt, the grate of his jeans on the bare skin of my bottom, and his clean, soapy scent. But mostly I savored simply being close to him again.

“He probably knows where I live, River.”

“I’m sure he does. But he can’t get to you in here.”

“You got in.”

“I was invited.”

I leaned away from him and looked up into his face. “What do you mean?”

“A vampire can’t enter someone’s house unless invited. We can throw ourselves at a wide open door all night long, but unless we’ve been invited to come in by the person who lives there, we simply can’t enter. It’s physically impossible.”

“So that night, that first night you were here...that’s why you acted

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so weird and specific about whether or not I really wanted you to come in?"

He smiled and stroked my cheek. "That's why."

"If I hadn't invited you, no matter how much I wanted you or you wanted me, you couldn't have entered?"

"That's right. So unless you invite the killer in, he can't get to you here."

A sick knot tightened in my stomach. "He got into the other women's houses. Obviously he convinced them to invite him."

"The other women didn't know what they were dealing with. You do. And the other women didn't have me."

A swirl of heat filled my veins, ribboning its way through my body and into my heart.

"This whole vampire thing... It's real isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And the mind stuff...the glamor, you called it...you didn't...?"

"I told you, Rachel, everything between us is real. It has been from the beginning. You already know this. You felt it from the start just like I did." He suddenly smiled. "Besides, you're too damned stubborn for glamor to work well on—if you hadn't wanted me to come up here that night, no amount of mental sweet nothings would have convinced you otherwise."

I surprised myself when a soft laugh escaped me.

I reached for him then, wanting to be close to him, to reassure myself that, in spite of the bizarre turn my world had taken, there were things in it that were good and right. I unbuttoned his shirt as our lips feathered light kisses against one another. When the blue fabric that matched his eyes was finally parted, I stroked his chest, savoring his sleek, hairless musculature, and reveling in the cool touch of his skin. Cool, I knew now, because he wasn't ruled by the internal thermostat that kept humans alive.

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For some reason it was that realization that finally allowed the truth to hit home full force. *A vampire.* River wasn't like me. He wasn't human. *Oh, gods.* A wave of hopelessness sprang up out of nowhere and coursed through me. How could this ever work?

He cradled my face in his hands and caressed me with his gaze. *It can work if we want it to, baby.*

"But how? I don't want to be a vampire like you. I don't want you to change me into one."

He looked startled I'd even suggest such a thing. "I would *never* turn you and force you to live in my freakish hell. Even if you asked. Fuck, Rachel! I hope you know I care about you more than that."

My breath caught in my chest for a moment at his impassioned words. "Then how? How can it work, River? You drink human blood. You need it to survive. I..." My eyes widened and a streak of horror shot through me. "Do you kill people? Humans?"

He looked at me straight on. "I don't prefer to kill when I feed like some of my kind do, and I haven't done it in a very long time. But I am a vampire. If I needed to take a life for my own survival or to protect someone I cared about it, I'd do it." There was no apology in his voice. "Would you do any differently? Could you kill if your life or someone else's depended on it?"

I couldn't fault him when he was so direct with me. "Yes," I admitted.

He nodded his acknowledgment.

"When you...when you feed. Do you have to do it every night? And where do you...well...who..."

"Whose blood do I drink?"

"Yes." I was pretty sure I didn't really want to hear the answer, but the cop in me needed the morbid details.

"Many vampires still hunt, looking for the unsuspecting to feed from. But there are humans who know of our existence and who've

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made the choice to specialize in feeding us. Some offer blood alone; others, because they understand the close nature between our sexuality and our need to feed, offer both. We can get sustenance without drawing attention to ourselves in mainstream society, and they get cash. It's a relationship of mutual benefit to all parties concerned." He sounded calmly matter-of-fact, as if the surrealism of what he was telling me wasn't even a blip on his radar.

"Like a prostitute, you mean?" I could hear the shock in my voice.

He shrugged. "We just call them 'feeders,' but I suppose that's a logical comparison."

Oh, crap. Nope, I didn't want to hear this. I did *not* want to hear this.

"Maybe not, but you need to hear it." He tilted my chin back so I was looking directly up at him. "Yes, I need to feed every night, or at the very least every two or three nights if I want to stay strong enough to move around and function normally. But before you get all squeamish on me and start comparing me to the killer you're after, who's been draining victims dry, I actually need very little blood to survive. Do I hunger for more? Yes. Always. But I don't require it. And I learned a long time ago I'd much rather live with my hunger than live with my guilt."

I dragged in several deep breaths. "Were you...were you with someone else tonight?" I had to know.

He smiled at that, and the sight filled me with an inexplicable warm glow. "No. I haven't been with or fed from anyone since the first night with you. I find I have no desire for anyone but you."

"But you said you needed to feed at the very least every two or three days. It's been four nights since you were here last." Then I realized why he looked so pale, paler than he had four nights ago. "Oh, gods, River..."

"You're the only one I want, Rachel." His deep voice slid like fiery

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magma through my veins. “But I won’t take anything from you that you don’t freely offer.”

I could barely breathe my chest was suddenly so tight and my throat so full. I suppose I could have wrestled with a decision, whether to help him even if it meant giving myself over to a strangeness I could barely understand, or to push him away and continue to cling to my logical, black and white world. But really, there was nothing to struggle with. I knew what I wanted, what I’d wanted from the first time I’d felt him in the alley. Something in him called to me—to my body, my heart, my soul. And everything in me returned that call.

I lay back on the bed and held out my arms to him. “Come here.” My voice sounded husky, sensual.

His eyes seemed to light up as he moved toward me, saying without words, “I-am-so-going-to-screw-you-until-you-collapse.”

I smiled, and a small river of pure sexual elation rushed from my cleft.

We kissed for ages, all passion and tongue, with little moans escaping as the heat built. And then his lips moved lower, nuzzling my neck, a breast. His mouth closed over one of my nipples, drawing it tight and suckling it until my back arched and I buried my fingers in his soft hair, holding him against me. Again, as it had been with the kiss, his pleasure over my breasts wasn’t rushed, and by the time his mouth moved lower still, pausing for his tongue to probe my navel, then kiss the hollow between my hip bone and mound, I was on fire.

He grasped my hips and pulled me around on the bed so my ass was at the edge of the mattress, then he sank to his knees on the floor and spread my legs. I raised myself with a pillow behind my head and found him studying my wet folds with an expression of raw desire.

“You look like a cat who’s about to pounce on a succulent morsel and is contemplating just how damn good it’s going to be.”

His laughter sent ripples of pleasure through me.

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He raised his head, his brown hair deliciously tousled, and met my gaze. "Have I told you how much I love that you make me laugh?"

"No, you haven't told me that."

"Well, I do. It's been a long time since I've laughed."

His gaze returned to my exposed sex, which pulsed from nothing more than his heated look. "And have I also told you"—his voice dropped to a husky purr—"how much I love the way you keep your pussy smooth, with just this little triangle of hair on your mound, and the rest as soft as a baby's skin?" One finger slid into my wet, slippery crease.

"No," I gasped. "You haven't told me that either."

"It's sexy as hell. Promise me you'll keep it smooth for me."

"I promise," I murmured.

His finger continued to fondle me, sliding in and out of my hole, over and around my clit. "Promise me something else."

"What?"

"Tomorrow, when you go to work, I don't want you to wear any panties."

His words seared into me, lighting a sensual fire in my core.

"I want to know that as you're going about your business, all serious and cop-like, underneath your clothes you're as smooth and exposed and wet as you are right now. I want to know that, when you're sitting at your desk, the seam of your pants will be rubbing your clit and riding up inside these soft lips, making you crazy. And when that happens, I want you to think of me, think of this moment."

"Oh, gods," I moaned.

His mouth moved closer to me, and my body tensed in expectation, in excitement.

"There's one more thing..." I felt the words against my heat.

"Anything." Damn. Anything, so long as he kept touching me and talking to me like this.

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I felt him smile.

"You're going to be insanely horny all day remembering this conversation, feeling your smooth cunt rubbing against your pants. But no matter what, no matter how hot you get, how wet, you're not allowed to come."

"That's not fair!"

"Oh, yes it is. No more of those watered down orgasms you've been having the past few days."

"River! Damn it!" I cried, raising up on my elbows to stare at him, feeling heat suffuse my face. "How could you possibly know..."

His smile sent another jolt of sexual current through me. "We're a part of each other now, remember? I see it in your mind, smell it in your—"

I groaned, threw myself back onto the pillow, and closed my eyes. "I'm not sure I like the fact you know these things."

He laughed. "Yes, you do. It's turning you on that I know. I can smell that, too."

Then his voice grew serious. "You're mine, Rachel. You've accepted it. I feel your acceptance of it in everything you've done tonight. I won't betray your trust, and I won't ever intentionally hurt you. But I would like for you to trust me to take care of your sexual needs and know how best to make you feel good."

I stared down at him, my heart racing even as my body thrummed in response to his words.

"Your other physical relationships were never what you hoped, were they? You found it was easier to masturbate than to cater to someone else's wants."

Crap. He could read me so well it was almost scary. His honesty was embarrassing, yet at the same time, it was kind of a relief to have it out in the open.

"I got tired of doing most of the giving and not getting much back

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in return. Besides, I always felt like I was nothing more than a conquest. 'Nail the tough woman cop just to say she could be mastered.' It pissed me off. And I usually ended up pissing them off because I wouldn't play their game and submit to their pubescent fantasies."

A flicker of a knowing smile curved River's lips. "I thought so. But I also know flying solo hasn't given you the satisfaction you crave either, has it?"

This honesty thing was hard. "No," I sighed.

"I know you don't like to give up control, and I respect that about you. In all honesty, I love your strength and your stubborn will. It's part of what drew me to you in the first place. What you need is a partner who's not threatened by that strength. You need someone you can let go with and give up control to, yet trust that you aren't going to lose your identity to. There's a hell of a lot of pleasure to be had by trusting someone completely. " He boldly stroked my clit with his thumb, eliciting a whimper from me.

"Choosing to give your body and control of your desires to someone else doesn't have to make you feel weak, Rachel. Not if you have the right partner. Not if you're with me."

That slow, deep sizzle of arousal I'd first felt in the alley crept through me again, heating my blood and curling around my womb. Who'd have thought a vampire could be such a sensitive-to-a-woman's-needs sex god? He was the first man I'd ever been with who gave a damn whether I found satisfaction or not.

"So...the question is, can you trust me with your sexual fulfillment? Can you give me control of this one thing, at least for a while, so I can show you how good it can be?"

"Yes," I whispered without hesitation. Logical me wondered for a split second why I didn't hesitate. But the truth was, so far he'd done a damn fine job of fulfilling my desires. And each time he'd encouraged

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me to let go, to let him have his way, I'd come out of it with the best sex of my life. I'd never felt demeaned or somehow less of a person because I'd submitted to his wishes.

"There'll be no more of you getting yourself off in quickies, either at work or at home. Are we clear? If there's any getting off to be done, you have to accept that I'll take care of it for you or let you know when I want you to do it yourself. No exceptions. Can you do this?"

"Yes. I want to do this."

"I'll know if you cheat," he said with a challenging tilt of an eyebrow.

"I won't cheat." Why the hell would I want to if I knew I had this, *him*, to come home to? My body quivered just thinking about it.

He smiled; probably reading my thoughts again. "You won't regret this decision. I'm going to make you a very satisfied woman." His mouth nuzzled my folds, sending slow, undulating waves of pleasure through me; a hint of things to come. In a soft, seductive voice, he said, "I plan to fuck you well and often, baby."

And he didn't waste any time proving it.

The erotic things he did with his mouth brought me to a writhing, sobbing peak in short order. Then, to my immense frustration, he backed off, only very lightly stroking with a finger, and nowhere near my throbbing bud that yearned for attention.

"Please, River," I cried. "No teasing tonight. It's been four days!"

"You have to trust me, Rachel. I won't disappoint you."

Damn it. I knew he wouldn't. But I was just so... "Unnhh!" His mouth was back on me again, and gods help me, I didn't know what exactly he was doing down there, but he was a master at it.

My fever quickly built again, this time to an even higher frenzy. My hips rose off the bed, my hands clutched in his hair. He was merciless, working me and working me, pausing, then going at it again. I sobbed, pleaded, demanded...I wasn't very good at patience. But, oh, he was.

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At some point I finally gave up trying to control him or my surging lust. I closed my eyes, riding the impossible waves of the pleasure he offered, and let myself fall into a well of hot, liquid, lascivious passion. I began to understand just what River had meant about the sensual gratification that could be found when one let go and trusted completely.

Like the first night we'd been together, my orgasm, when it came, hit me hard and suddenly, exploding through me in a million brilliant shards of crystal flame. I felt River's mouth move to my groin, felt his bite, but it, too, was bliss. And with his every suck, my body spasmed in satisfaction.

Just as he'd made me his when I took his seed into my body, I realized I wanted him to take my blood into his. I wanted to make him mine.

You are mine! I thought at him with a sudden fierce possessiveness.

He stilled and I felt surprise ripple up toward me. Then, a highly charged current seemed to emanate from him, enveloping our bodies, electrifying the air around us. With a soft groan, he returned to my groin and, unexpectedly, I came again, my hips surging off the bed.

When River finally rose, he lifted me back onto the bed, stripped off his clothes so fast it couldn't have been anything but supernatural, and settled his big body between my legs, which I opened to accommodate him. He pulled my hips down so my wet folds just brushed the head of his turgid cock.

There was no trace of his vampire feeding...his teeth looked as normal as mine, and I saw no blood, even though I knew he'd just taken some from me. He looked down at me, and for a moment, even though he hadn't climaxed in me yet tonight, I felt the pulse of his emotions: his driving, sexual hunger yearning to be sated...and unadulterated joy. It was washing over him in sparkling waves.

I smiled. "Do you feel better?" He looked better. Healthier. His skin

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held a more natural, almost human tone now.

“You continually surprise me.” His voice was soft, his blue eyes glowing.

“How so?”

The slow bloom of his smile filled me with a heat that, for the first time, wasn’t entirely sexual.

When he kissed me, I was afraid I’d taste blood...but instead I tasted my bitter-sweet musk lingering on his lips, along with the subtle flavor of cinnamon I’d come to associate with him.

I am yours. I knew the first night I saw you, felt you, that you were the one.

My breathing slowed. I could feel my pulse throbbing. “The one?” I whispered.

He responded by seating his thick shaft deep within me.

He didn’t move at first, just remained completely still, filling me...gods, filling me so full. I felt him pulsating inside me, felt my body answering. With agonizing leisure, he withdrew until he was almost out of me. Then he drove into me again, holding my gaze with his own.

Unlike the frenzied coupling we’d shared the first night, this time it was slow and sensual, our bodies moving in fluid motion together, ebbing and flowing like a warm tropical ocean. The heat inside me rebuilt quickly, magnified a hundredfold, a thousand fold now that he was in me, around me, part of me. In a fleeting thought, I realized I’d never before experienced such profound closeness and synchronicity with anyone.

I wrapped my legs around him, wanting him closer still as I swirled in the wild, pulsating eddies of yet another burgeoning climax. And then I spun out of control. Orgasm burst through me like liquid fire. I cried out and clung to River, wanting it to go on and on and never end.

As I rode the swells of my release, River found his own. Like

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before, I felt his seed burst against my womb with a warm, intoxicating heat that spread through my body. The air seemed to quiver with sparks of energy, and this time I watched as the world around us took on a lustrous glow. With the candlelight enhancing it, tonight it was almost as if the room were a prism, sparkling in rainbow colors of light.

River kissed me with a dizzying passion that spread heavy, sated warmth through my body, then rolled to his side, still inside me, carrying me with him until I was snuggled next to him. He wound a strand of my long hair around his forefinger and brushed the ends of it against his lips.

"I missed you these past few days," I said softly. The admission, which was out before I realized it, surprised me. But after the amazing closeness we'd just shared, I guess I didn't feel like playing tough girl and pretending I'd never given him a thought. I had. Every second of each one of those four days.

"I missed you. Kept hoping every night you'd leave that window open."

"You did?"

"Oh, yeah." He combed his fingers through my hair. "Damn it, Rachel..." His voice seemed to catch for a moment. "We're good together." He tugged my face closer and kissed me again.

Oh, we were. Every cell in my body vibrated at the same frequency as his. It was elemental.

"Hey," I said, several minutes later when I came up for air from yet another kiss that had gone on and on. "How did you know my window wasn't locked tonight? How'd you know it was locked the other nights? You were still watching me, weren't you?"

"Of course I was."

"I didn't see you, but you must have been nearby."

He smiled. "I live in the basement apartment across the alley."

"You've been that close?" For some reason knowing it sent a little

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thrill through me.

"I have. But I like being this close much better." He stroked a big hand down my bare back, sending new shivers of longing through me. "Go ahead and ask your questions."

"What questions?"

"The ones you've been dying to ask. Vampire questions."

"How do you kn—"

His raised eyebrow and knowing look stopped me.

"I'm not sure I'm ever going to get used to you reading my thoughts," I groused, but I wasn't really mad and he knew it because his smile widened, showing off his white teeth and the little dimple I'd suddenly just now noticed in his left cheek.

"Ask," he ordered.

"Okay, okay. Well...you don't....er..." I felt my face inadvertently scrunch up in distaste. "You don't sleep in a coffin, do you?"

He laughed. A full-out, deep, rumbling laugh that echoed off the peeling walls of the room.

"It's not funny!" I said. But I found myself grinning. His obvious good humor was like a warm swell around my heart.

"That's the first question out of your mouth? Do I sleep in a coffin?" This was said while still laughing.

"Well, do you?"

"No! Hell no! I don't sleep in a coffin. You've been watching too many old *Dracula* vids. I sleep in a bed. A nice bed, if I must say so myself." He grasped my ass and pulled me closer to him so his half-erect shaft, which was still inside me, seemed to suddenly grow perky in a hurry and delve deeply into me. "And I have every intention of showing you just how comfortable it is very soon," he said in a sexy growl.

I moaned, maybe even groaned as his mouth nuzzled my neck and his cock continued its newly aroused plundering. I hate to say it, but a

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few cock-strokes later, I came again. I think I surprised us both.

“Damn.” His smile had turned sultry. “You did miss me, didn’t you?”

I knew my face was red, but I had missed him, yes. Like crazy. And with his glorious rod all hard and eager in me, his big body pressed to mine, it’s not like I could stop myself from getting turned on.

I cleared my throat. “Now, about the rest of those questions.”

He chuckled again. This time it was low and sexy. “Let’s hear them.”

“How old are you?”

“Another personal one, huh? Typical cop.” He grinned. “Depending on how you look at it, I’m either perpetually thirty-five or I turned one hundred and two this year.”

My breath seemed to whoosh out of my lungs and I simply stared at him. I don’t know what I’d expected. I remembered the night in the kitchen when he said for the first time in a hundred years he’d found someone he enjoyed being with, but I guess that number hadn’t really sunk in. Until now.

“Since I can tell you’re somewhat mind-boggled by that, the specifics are that I was born in 1965, then in the year 2000, when I was thirty-five, I was made a vampire.”

“How were you turned?” I asked. Now that the subject had been opened, I found I wanted to know more about him.

His thumb brushed over my lips and his gaze grew troubled. I felt his emotional iron doors inch shut. “I don’t like to talk about my past. That’s a story best left for another time.”

I wanted to know, but I nodded. Clearly this was touchy territory, and I was afraid if I pushed at this early stage of our relationship he’d shut me out completely.

“A general question then. What about crosses and holy water? Do they work to scare off vampires?”

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“Ah, the old crosses and holy water question.”

I sensed his mood lightening again and I experienced a rush of relief he wasn't upset with me.

“Vampires aren't demons like the early Christians wanted to believe, so many of the old myths are mostly that...myths. That said, a person wielding a protective symbol of any kind—religious or even just a regular object they've imbued with protective power—if they have a strong enough faith in its power, they can use it effectively against a vampire, against anyone, even you, if their intent is strong enough. It's all about belief and intent.”

“What are you saying? That the next time I do a bust, if the scumbag holds out a cross or his lucky coin and he believes strongly that he can ward me off with it, then he might be able to do it?” I was trying not to laugh.

“That's exactly what I'm saying.” River was dead serious in his response. “Native Americans, shamans, many pagans, and other cultures and religions of the world have always known this—why do you think so many cultures use amulets? They're not just trinkets for show. They serve a real purpose—to protect the wearer from harmful energy regardless of the source. It's just not common thinking in mainstream society.”

“People protecting themselves against other people with symbols and amulets?”

“Think of it this way...most humans aren't afraid of other humans the way they're afraid of what they believe to be the supernatural—vampires, ghosts, demons—so it doesn't occur to most of them to use such protection against one another. The reason protective symbols have worked in the past on vampires is because we were considered demons, true evil. In a situation like that, if one were scared enough and had been indoctrinated all one's life that evil could be eradicated by strong faith, then the person's faith gave power to the symbol he or

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she bore, and it was effective.”

Whoa. I had a feeling there was a lot of substance to what he’d just said. The logical part of me could find no quarrel with his words; it made sense in a weird sort of way.

“Well then, what about garlic? Is that a myth, too?”

“Garlic? To scare off vampires in this day and age when humans live on spicy ethnic foods?” He gave a soft snort of laughter. “Garlic might once have held certain protective powers, but it’s too common now. If vampires couldn’t tolerate garlic, we’d starve. It seems like humans always have garlic coursing through their veins.”

I thought of José’s spicy tacos, one of my food staples, and wondered if River got any of the residual burn from them. Damn...maybe I should cut back?

He grinned. “Don’t stop eating your tacos if they make you happy. I don’t mind.”

I groaned. When was I going to remember he seemed to know my every thought? But then I sobered as a more serious consideration popped into my head.

“So how do I stop the killer?”

The air around us, which had been warm and saturated with contentment, grew chilly. So did River’s countenance. He slid out of me and sat up. “You don’t,” he said, looking down at me.

I scrambled to sit up as well, my ire rising at his presumption. “Damn it, I’m—”

He held up a hand. “Hear me out before you ream me, Rachel.”

I dragged in a couple of deep breaths to calm myself, and bit back my tirade.

“I have total faith in your ability to hunt down human criminals,” he said. “Total faith. But this guy isn’t human. He’s twenty times stronger than any man you’ve ever known, he’s old as hell—I’m guessing he’s been around for many hundreds of years—so he knows every human

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trick you might throw at him, and he's not going to be even remotely threatened by any human weapons you point at him."

"Which is why I asked how I can stop him," I said through gritted teeth. "You made it clear the other night that guns won't work. I'm asking you for help."

"And I will help. But it's got to be done my way. You can't go charging after this guy. He'll kill you, baby. In a heartbeat. And I'm damn well not going to lose you!"

I swallowed hard. Part of me wanted to argue, maintain my need for control. But he was so terribly serious I knew every word he said was true. Both the part about the killer and his impassioned determination to protect me.

"Ok-ay," I said slowly, trying to keep my need to be in charge in check. "So tell me what we have to do."

"He's going to be watching, waiting for another opportunity to get you alone like he did earlier tonight. If that doesn't work, he'll move in closer to you, try again to glamor you, get you to come to him."

I shuddered. That was the last damn thing I wanted to go through again. The feeling of having someone attempting to control my actions had been both infuriating and terrifying. "But isn't that exactly what I want him to try?" I said, in spite of my fears. "I can't stop him until I lure him out."

"No! Hell, no!" River's eyes blazed blue fire. "We don't want to give him the chance to contact you again. Instead, tomorrow night, once it's dark, I'm going to go looking for him. I know where he tried to glamor you tonight. Since you went walking before it was dark, he wouldn't have been able to follow you to that area of the city. That means he's probably holed up around there somewhere and you inadvertently stumbled across him. It's the perfect place for him to hide. Everything around there is deserted. Not even gangs hang out around those old car places anymore. If I can find his lair, catch him in

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it, I can deal with him before he comes after you again.”

“I’m going with you.”

“No—”

“Don’t *even* tell me, no,” I ground out, rising to my knees on the bed so I could look at him face to face. I stabbed a finger in his chest. “This is my case, and obviously I’m his next intended victim. I have every right to be a part of this, and damn it, I will be a part of it. Don’t even think you’re going go out there like the lone damned ranger and leave me to play the helpless maiden waiting for your return. No fucking way. And don’t even think you’ll sneak out there without me knowing either.” I paused, my chest heaving from my outburst.

“Are you done with your rant now?”

“Are you done playing Joe Hero?”

I thought for a brief second I might have seen his lips twitch, but it was gone before I could be sure.

“As I was trying to say, before you made assumptions and went off on me...” He raised an eyebrow, challenging me to interrupt him again. I gave him a pointed glare. “No sense in leaving you behind because you’re so damned stubborn you’d just follow me anyway, or worse, take off after him yourself just to spite me.”

“You...you weren’t telling me you didn’t want me to come?”

“Sometimes you’re a piece of work, Rachel Jones.” And then, completely unexpectedly, he kissed me. Thoroughly. Stopping only when my knees began to quake and I was in danger of toppling over.

“I’ll come by the police station just after sundown. Meet me outside, okay? And for motherfucking sake, don’t bring along that golden boy with the randy dick, ’cause if I see him look at you one more time with that lovin’ feelin’ in his eyes, I might kill him.”

My mouth fell open. Of course I didn’t realize it until River put a finger under my chin and pushed it closed.

“You’ve watched me while I’m at work?” I whispered, not sure if I

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was annoyed or comforted or even just downright aroused by the possibility he'd been watching when I wasn't aware.

"Of course I have. After dark anyway."

"And Butler?"

"Is that the pussy-struck asshole's name?"

I grinned. "Yeah, that's him."

"As long as he keeps his hands, his horny gaze, and his pecker to himself around you, I'll mind my manners. But I'm telling you, baby, if he fucks up even once, I'll cut off his balls, and I'll damn well enjoy doing it."

I had a feeling he meant it. Something told me that even in the most well-behaved vampires, a barely restrained feral streak still churned just below the surface. I made a mental note to remember that.

"Now come here," he growled, wrapping his big hands around my waist and tackling me to the bed. "I'm going to give you what pussy boy will only ever dream about."

Oh, yeah.

Oh, baby!

A vampire sex god for sure. And he was mine all mine. I couldn't help but smile smugly. For the first time in a long time, I decided it was pretty damn good to be me.

* * *

Much, much later I was awakened by River's hand caressing my back.

"I have to go. It'll be light soon."

"I don't want you to leave," I said, enjoying having my breasts pressed against his chest, his half-erect cock nestled near my groin, and my legs twined through his.

His slow smile left me breathless. "It's been a long time since anyone's told me that." He brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. "Unfortunately, I can't stay. Too much light in your apartment once the

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sun comes up. About the only place I'd be safe is in your bathroom, and once I was in there, I'd be stuck there all day until sunset."

"I don't think *I'd* want to be stuck in my bathroom all day."

"Exactly," he said with a grin. "You'll be safe here. Just don't leave your apartment until the sun's fully up." His kissed me with hungry tenderness, then slipped from the bed.

I was almost dozing off again when he stroked my cheek. I opened my eyes and looked up into his intense blue gaze. "I'll see you tonight. Until then...be careful."

And then he was gone.

CHAPTER 5

The killer struck again early that morning. According to West, Kaia had put the time of death between 2:00 and 3:00 A.M.

Guilt ate at me. I couldn't help but wonder if, since the killer hadn't been able to get me, he'd murdered another woman to spite me. I kept remembering what River had told me, about how this ancient vampire was toying with me, that he was only killing the other women to draw me closer to him.

I wanted to talk to River about it, to see what he thought about this morning's murder. But by the time I got the call from work, the sun was up and scorching, and I wasn't sure what exactly River did during the day. Did he sleep? Did he closet himself away in his dark bedroom and not come out at all? I'd never gotten around to asking him what happened to him during daylight hours. For all I knew, he had no power during the day and was in a coma or something until the sun set. And he'd left me no way to contact him, no phone number...hell, I wasn't

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even sure he had a phone.

But I didn't have time to ponder it. I was needed at the morgue ASAP, so I barely had time to take a quick shower, dress—remembering, with a warm surge of yearning for River, to remain panty-less—and get on the train.

As the day progressed, my fears were proven true.

This one was ugly. The killer was definitely pissed and letting me know it. As with the first three victims, this one had been decapitated. Unlike the others, he didn't keep the head. It was delivered to me via a courier, at my desk, about noon. A large box, with no return address. I had a sick gut feeling before I ever opened it. I'm not sure how I knew what was going to be in the box, but I did. Just good ol' cop intuition, along with a little remaining vampire superpower semen-mojo left over from last night, I guess.

"This is getting personal," West said, looking over my shoulder at the contents of the box.

"You think?" I snapped. Then I dragged in a deep breath. "Sorry."

"Don't be. Just watch your back, Jones. I don't like the turn this case has taken. He's flaunting his kills now. And he's specifically flaunting them to you. He's toying with you."

"So I've heard," I mumbled.

West look at me askance, but I waved it off. "I've already spoken to the courier. He was just a kid, clearly not involved. Said some thug gave him fifty bucks to deliver the box here. We're trying to track down the thug, but I suspect he was a go-between and not the killer."

What I didn't mention to West was why I was so certain of that. The teen said he'd been paid around eleven that morning to deliver the package. The vampire wouldn't have been out paying couriers at that time of day. I figured he'd paid the small-time crook before sunrise, who'd then passed it off to the courier later. I doubted we'd ever catch the middle-man. The vague description the kid gave fit a hundred such

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low-lives—scruffy dark hair and beard, dirty jeans, dirty white T-shirt, somewhere between thirty-five and fifty years of age. No distinguishing marks he could remember.

Forensics came and took the victim's head, and I went out to search the area where the courier said he'd been approached.

The search turned up nothing, just as I'd suspected. The kid lived in a run-down, low-rent apartment high rise. Interviews with numerous residents proved what I'd thought...there were half a dozen men who fit the thug's general description just living in that one building. Which meant there were probably dozens more in the surrounding complexes.

A phone call to forensics told me nothing new.

I sent Butler to interview the kid again, just in case we'd missed something the first time. I knew we hadn't. But I had to go through the motions.

At four-thirty I was back at my desk, frustrated and no farther along in finding the killer than I'd been in the morning.

Again the urge to find River and get his take hit me. But at this point I figured I'd be seeing him again in a couple of hours anyway when he met me to go vampire lair hunting.

A cop-intuition shiver coursed through me. *Vampire lair hunting*. We were going at night because River couldn't roam around the city during the day. But it would be taking a chance as to whether or not we'd catch the vamp, since he might already be out and about by the time we found his hideout—if we found his hideout. However, if I went now, while it was still daylight...if I managed to find his lair, I might also find him.

River's warning buzzed in my head...the one about how this old vamp was strong, would know all the tricks, and could kill me easily. Plus, I'd asked River about the vampire scare-off stuff but I hadn't ever asked him specifics about how one destroyed a vampire. And the way River talked, I suspected this old dude would have to be destroyed. No

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such thing as vampire prisons...well, at least not that I knew of.

Did I play it safe and wait for River or did I go now on my own to see if I might catch the bad guy at home? The words “too stupid to live” popped into my head, which is what I always called people in books and videos who insisted on walking into the dark, deserted house knowing full-well the psychopathic killer was probably in there. In my own defense, however, I *was* a cop. It’s not like I couldn’t damn well take care of myself. I’d been doing it since I was sixteen when my dad was killed in the line of duty and I’d taken off on my own rather than go to the foster home the court wanted to put me in.

Shit! I tossed the empty Coke can I’d been drinking from into the trash can next to my desk, feeling little satisfaction from the metallic *clang* it made when it hit inside.

What to do?

The buzz of my vid-phone jarred me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

It was a red-faced Butler. “Detective Jones, you might want to come down here. I think I have someone who might have seen the killer paying the thug.”

“Where are you?”

“On York, in that big old cemetery. A few blocks from where we questioned the kid’s neighbors earlier today.”

“I’m on my way.”

The train let me off a couple of blocks from my destination. The cemetery had probably been a place of beauty for the dearly departed fifty years ago. But now, with the constant heat, and water scarce, what had once no doubt been broad stretches of verdant grass was nothing more than a dirt pile with crumbling gray headstones.

I found Butler and another uniformed cop—a portly kid with sweat stains the size of platters under his arms—with an ancient, shriveled woman whose hair and skin were the same color as the gravestones.

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She sat on a concrete bench under a scraggly elm tree—one of the few shady spots left in the whole cemetery—clutching a tapestry handbag to her chest. Butler and his companion stood next to her.

“Detective Jones!” Butler called when he saw me approaching. “This is Mrs. Evans.” He leaned in close to the old woman. “Mrs. Evans, this is Detective Jones. I’d like you tell her what you told us.”

The little old lady squinted up at him, then looked at me suspiciously for a split second before fixing her gaze on her liver-spotted hands. Her skin looked tissue thin; I could almost see the blood creeping through her veins.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Evans. She’s a friend. Please tell her about the man in the cloak.”

The old woman’s rheumy gaze was as gray as the rest of her, except for the yellowed whites of her eyes. I got the distinct impression she wasn’t all there in the head. I crouched near her. “Hello, Mrs. Evans. What did you see?”

“I came to visit Harold.”

I looked up at Butler, hoping he could fill in the blanks.

“Her dead husband. He’s buried right there.” He pointed to a headstone a few feet away that indicated the person laid to rest beneath it was Harold Evans, born 1977, died 2041.

“Okay,” I said. “And when you visited Harold, did you see something unusual?”

Ignoring me, she rummaged through her handbag until she pulled out a wadded tissue, which she began to shred into tiny pieces. These, she methodically put in the pocket of her shapeless, flowered housedress.

“Mrs. Evans, I’d love for you to talk to me.”

The tissue ripping continued.

Once again I looked to Butler for help.

“Tell her about the rising from the grave stuff,” the chunky young

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cop said, digging an elbow into Butler's ribs. According to his name badge his last name was Hoffstetter. I didn't remember seeing him in the homicide division. He was probably street patrol.

I stood and motioned the two men away from Mrs. Evans. "Tell me what she told you."

"Apparently she comes here twice a day to visit her husband's grave—early in the morning before sunrise when it's cooler, and again before sunset," Butler said. "This morning she saw two men having a conversation just on the other side of this tree. One guy apparently walked up, but the other one she swears 'rose from the grave.'" Butler rolled his eyes here.

"What does she mean, 'rose from the grave'?"

"She claims one minute he wasn't there, the next he was," Hoffstetter huffed.

"Who was the other man?"

"She says she heard the grave riser, who, by the way, she claims was dressed in a hooded cloak"—another Butler eye-roll here—"tell the other guy he had two jobs for him today. One was to find someone to deliver a package, the other was something about stopping a hairy dog."

"A what?" I snapped.

Butler shrugged. "That's what she said. Two jobs...deliver the package and stop the hairy dog. The hairy dog, according to her, lives downtown and the guy was told to go there this afternoon and do him in while he slept. Then she saw the guy in the cloak give the other one money. The guy who took the money left by way of the cemetery gate, and the cloak guy disappeared into thin air, the same way he arrived."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I mumbled. "You brought me down here for this?"

If it weren't for the package thing and the money exchanged, I'd think I'd made this trip for nothing. But then the memory of the night

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in my kitchen flickered in my mind and I remembered how I'd somehow ended up floating with River two feet in the air. *Damn.* Obviously River could levitate. Could all vampires do that? Could they maybe even fly? If so, going on the wild assumption Mrs. Evan's cloak man and the vampire serial killer were one and the same, that might explain how he'd appeared and disappeared. In the predawn darkness, the woman wouldn't have been able to see what really happened. If it had been the vamp, though, why would he have had this conversation in plain sight and standing only a few feet away from the old woman and take a chance on a witness overhearing his plans?

Oh, crap, what was I thinking? I had a little old lady who had to be pushing ninety, was clearly senile, and talked about hairy dogs and magic tricks. It was likely none of it meant anything.

"She says the one guy was covered in a cloak. Could she tell any specifics about him? His hair color, build, anything?"

"Nope."

"What did the guy who took the money look like? Could she see him in the dark?"

"She just said he had a beard. Nothing else. But that does fit the description the teenager gave of the man who paid him. And since she mentioned the cloak guy telling the other one to find someone to deliver a package, we thought it was worth bringing you down here."

I scowled. Then looked at my watch. Nearly five forty-five. The sun would be setting soon.

"Okay, Hoffstetter, see Mrs. Evans home, will you? It'll be sunset soon and she doesn't need to be out here. Butler, you're with me."

We got back to the police station just at sunset. I sent Butler up to the department to see if he could turn up anything else odd that might have happened at the cemetery. In spite of the fact River said he didn't sleep in a coffin, I couldn't get those stupid old vampire videos out of my head. And in them, the vampire always seemed to hang out at the

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cemetery. So for all I knew, the killer had been around that cemetery before. It was a stretch, but I hated feeling so damned helpless.

I paced in front of the steps waiting for River.

Twilight fell, and over the next half-hour the sky deepened from burnt-orange, to pale gray, to dark gray, to black. Yet River didn't show.

Damn it! Where was he? I checked my watch. I paced some more.

Another thirty minutes passed and still no sign of him. If we had any hope of catching the killer in his lair before he left to go do his...well, whatever it was psycho vampires did at night, then we had to get to that abandoned car dealership soon. I still felt guilty as hell over the murder this morning; I was pretty sure the killer had done that to get back at me for not succumbing to his will last night. If he wasn't stopped, if we didn't catch him before he could leave his lair, there was no way of knowing what direction he might take and who he might prey upon next. I was afraid he'd kill again tonight, then that murder, too, would be on my conscience.

Where was River? I wasn't sure if I was worried or pissed. Or maybe some of both.

Finally, I dragged out my vid-phone and called Butler.

"I need you to do something for me. Get my night-pack out of my bottom desk drawer and get down here. I'm in front of the building."

A minute later he stood by my side, holding out a black nylon pack that contained a flashlight, extra batteries, emergency flare gun, candles, a lighter, and a night vision sight for my holstered gun.

I didn't bother with pleasantries. "I'm supposed to be meeting someone here, someone who might be able to help with this murder case, but he's late. I'm going to go on without him. I need you to wait here until he comes."

"No offense, ma'am, but I don't think it's a good idea for you to go off on your own this time of night."

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“No choice. There’s something time sensitive that’s got to be done.”

“You know solo patrol after dark isn’t regulation. Everyone’s supposed to have a partner with them after sunset. I’ll go with you.”

“No. I was a cop when you were still popping pimples and having wet dreams about your school teachers. I can take care of myself. It’s more important that you wait here so you can tell my friend where I’ve gone.”

“Detect—”

“Not another word, Butler. Don’t make me get ugly. You’ll do as I say. Now, my friend is five-eleven, dark hair, blue eyes, probably dressed in jeans and maybe a leather jacket—not synthleather, real leather. He might get kind of snarly when he sees you...in fact, he probably will. Just be on your best behavior. You don’t want to piss him off. Tell him I waited as long as I could, then I went on ahead to the place he and I talked about.”

“Well, at least make sure your tracker is functioning so we can find you in an emergency!” Butler called as I stalked away.

He was referring to the transponder built into my GPS watch that would allow anyone at the department and most government facilities to log into the computer system and find my whereabouts down to the inch. Little did Butler know I had disabled my tracker the moment it had been requisitioned to me under a new state ruling two years ago requiring all law enforcement personnel to carry one not just while on duty, but off.

I’d been and still was supremely pissed me off to think a bunch of faceless cops, bureaucrats, and politicians would always know where I was at any moment. It all went back to that control thing my dad had taught me...as in, never let anyone have it over you. With Big Brother always watching, I could think of no control more frightening.

The day they mandated we all had to get epidermal implants instead

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of using the watch was the day I'd probably find a new job. But since I wasn't the only law enforcement officer POed about the mandatory tracker, including a lot of higher-ups, I hoped I'd never have to face that decision. West was the only one who knew I'd disabled mine, and he, thank gods, had covered for me more than once, saying mine must be malfunctioning and I'd get it in for repairs.

I glanced back over my shoulder and saw Butler red-faced and scowling, but standing where I'd left him. He might want to hump me—along with everything else that had breasts—but he'd do what I said because he respected my authority...or maybe he was afraid of me. At this point I didn't care which, as long as he got the job done. I just hoped River didn't do anything rash when he found Butler waiting for him instead of me.

River. Damn it! Where was he? I didn't relish the idea of going vampire hunting by myself in spite of my confident words to Butler. But I wasn't going to let the killer strike again. Not on my watch.

Still...my worry for River weighed on me. As I boarded the train, although I felt ridiculous doing it, I tried to open my mind to him, see if I could feel him out there somewhere. But all I experienced was a big black blob of nothing.

For those four days we'd been apart, even though I hadn't seen him, I'd always felt a shimmer of his presence with me. Now I didn't. Was it because I'd been well satisfied last night, so I wasn't needy like I had been those four days? Although the dampness in my jeans each time I thought of River told me I was still hopelessly needy when it came to him.

His absence and mental silence bothered me. He hadn't met me when he'd said he would, and I couldn't feel him at all. I hated not knowing what that meant. I hoped he was okay. And if he was, he'd better have a damn good reason for standing me up.

I left the train at the same station where I'd boarded it last night...at

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the edge of the vast, deserted automobile dealership wasteland. This far out on the line, the train was nearly empty. No one got off but me.

I opened my pack, pulled out my night vision sight, and screwed it onto my gun. My weapon was a custom-made funky cross between a semi-automatic handgun and a high-power assault rifle. It was longer than what cops had carried back when my grandfather and dad were on the force, but light, like the Glock pistols made in the early twenty-first century. It had a hell of an impact, and a thirty-round magazine.

I'd learned to shoot when I was ten, could hit a target dead center every time at fifty yards when I was twelve. While other preteen girls had lived through the age-old fussing about clothes and boys, I'd grown up with a bunch of cop "uncles and aunts" who'd taught me how to run fingerprints through the national database, investigate a crime scene, and shoot to kill.

I tried to comfort myself with these thoughts, even as River's words about how my weapon couldn't kill him or his kind came back to haunt me.

I set off toward the abandoned building I'd been drawn to last night. It was dark now, but the moon was bright enough at this point I could make my way without having to use my flashlight. Goose bumps prickled on my skin, but I forged ahead.

I felt no manipulative voice in my head tonight. I was relieved by that. But by the same token, if the killer wasn't around, then I wouldn't be able to end this. And I wanted to. Badly.

Still...I wasn't sure what I'd do if I did find the vampire. Maybe if I just shot the shit out of him, even if it didn't kill him it would injure him enough to slow him down. And then what? I'd run like hell, most likely. I was a cocky cop, but I wasn't stupid.

The old Cadillac dealership looked the worse for wear on the outside with its disintegrating concrete walls, broken windows, and sagging sign. Once I pushed open the door and entered, flashlight in

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one hand, gun in the other, I discovered the inside wasn't much better. Vandals had definitely been in here—there was no usable furniture, the few old wooden desks were no more than rubble scattered across the dirt-covered floor, and gang tagging covered most of the wood-paneled walls. Several of the walls looked on the verge of collapse.

I flashed my light around, but saw no sign of habitation or of recent activity in the main showroom where I'd entered.

Methodically, but careful not to disturb anything for fear of bringing the entire building down on my head, I searched all the rooms—presumably offices—but found nothing. The last door, however, opened onto a stairwell that led downward.

Bingo.

A vampire who couldn't do the light of day certainly wouldn't be camped out upstairs with all the windows. A basement, however...

I crept down the stairs, keeping my flash on the ground in front of me so I didn't trip and break my neck. At least the old concrete steps were solid under my feet.

The cool, muzzy scent of dusty decay assailed me as I descended. My eyes watered and I fought back a sneeze.

When I hit the bottom, the stairs opened onto a hallway to my left. I followed it, peering into each of the small rooms I passed—more offices, perhaps—but finding no sign of recent occupation. Double doors at the end of the hall loomed in front of me.

If the killer had been using this place as a hideout, then this room had to be it. If not, I'd have to go back out to the street and pick another building to search.

My gut, however, told me that, even if he wasn't here right now, the vampire had been here at some point. I couldn't put my finger on why I knew...maybe I felt a certain supercharged energy in the air. Similar to the energy I occasionally experienced around River when his emotions were high.

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It wasn't too late to turn back. I could go now, find River, and bring him back here with me.

But something in me insisted on grasping the door handle. Slowly, I pushed the door inward. It gave off the faintest of squeaks; not enough I would have noticed had I been anywhere else, but enough in this place that my breath caught in my chest for a moment. I still held the flashlight in my left hand and I had a death grip on my gun with my right.

At the first examination with my light I saw nothing, so I moved farther in. It was a large space—probably a hundred yards long from end to end—surprisingly open, airy, and high-ceilinged for a basement. I suspected it had once been a storage facility. Several tumble-down shelves still stood in clusters around the room, along with piles of debris—wood, trash, fallen ceiling tiles, and broken furniture. Steel support poles jutted from the concrete floor to the wood and steel beams of the open ceiling like ancient columnar ruins. A garage-style door was set in the wall at the end opposite from where I stood. It was probably an outside access.

“My dear Rachel. I knew you'd come tonight.”

The smooth, slightly European-sounding voice behind me nearly sent me through the ceiling.

“Fuck!” I spun around and shone my flashlight toward the imposing figure I found standing a few yards away, blocking the path between me and the stairs.

What I saw was not at all what I'd expected.

When River had said this vampire was old, I knew he'd meant one who'd been a vampire for a long time. But I guess I'd also assumed he'd meant physically old as well. The being I faced, however, was not.

“Are you surprised by what you see?” His smile was almost preening. It said, “I'm a fine specimen, I know it, and I'm sure you'll think so, too.”

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The attitude was grating. But, damn, no wonder his recent victims had gone with him willingly. At first glance, he was breathtaking. He was around River's physical age—early to mid-thirties. But he was taller than River by a few inches, and leaner. He wore black pants and a blousy, gray, silk button-up shirt that probably cost a fortune and looked ridiculously out of place in this basement warehouse. His sleek black hair fell to his shoulders, he had a strong jaw and straight patrician nose. He looked like nobility, both in appearance and in the way he carried himself. His smile was sensuous and enticing.

But his eyes...they gave him away. Whereas River's were always so expressive—at times smoldering with passion, other times fiery with anger, and yet others sparkling with humor and mischief—this vampire's were cold, with a glimmer of bored insolence in them.

"Your light is not necessary." He waved a hand and candles lit up around the room.

Oh, shit. If he could do that, I was in deep trouble.

I kept my gun trained on him as I backed away from him. "Why did you kill those women and take their heads?"

"Direct and to the point. I appreciate that." He waved a hand airily. "I was bored. Tired of the interminable nights and months and years and centuries having nothing with which to amuse myself. When you've been around for eighteen-hundred years as I have, you find you've done it all...over and over and over again. It leads one to try new things...to stir up some excitement, if you will."

"If life's such a drag, why not end it? Why not walk out into the sun some morning and put a permanent end to your boredom? Save us all from your ennui?"

He laughed. It was cold and jaded, like his eyes. "Ah, but that would be too melodramatic, don't you think? The stuff of sentimental fiction...the brave hero who cannot go on and chooses to sacrifice himself rather than live in a world where he has not found love."

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“So you somehow think it’s better to kill others than yourself? Sounds cowardly to me.”

His smile deepened. “What you must understand, my dearest Rachel, is that I’ve killed many in my time. Too many faceless humans to count. It’s what we vampires do.”

“Not all vampires. Or so I’ve heard.”

“All vampires kill. It’s written in our very bones and undead flesh. Any who claim otherwise are liars. By the way, how rude of me. Let me introduce myself. My name is Segundo Anguis Dorjan Markos. Naturally I would not expect you to use the entire pretentious lot, so you may call me Markos.”

Put down your weapon. It cannot harm me.

A shudder ran through me at the feel of his voice in my head again. I did my damndest not to let him notice. “Don’t,” I snapped. “Your words in my mind can’t harm *me*. Maybe it worked on the others, but you’re wasting your time with me.” At least I hoped so. I was afraid what he might convince me to do if he continued to get in my mind. He’d nearly convinced me to come in here last night. If I hadn’t managed to break away and run for it, I hated to think how I would have reacted had he continued to press me.

I changed the subject, hoping to distract him. “How’d you know I’d come back tonight?”

“Because it’s your way. Once you got on the train last night, I’m sure you realized just how close you’d come to catching the killer you’ve been after. In spite of your fear and the possible danger to yourself, you would have no choice but to return. It was a matter of principle for you. I knew you’d follow the trail I left. Tell me, did you find the old woman? I was tempted to drain her and leave her bones next to those of her long departed husband’s, but I thought it would be a nice touch if she was around to tell you she’d seen me.”

“You knew she was there listening to you?”

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His cold laughter echoed against the concrete walls, causing a shiver up my spine.

A surge of missing River, missing his emotional warmth, coursed through me. I tamped it down as quickly as I could. I didn't want this creature reading my thoughts like River did. Didn't want to give him any extra insight into what made me tick. I tried to take deep breaths and clear my mind.

Oddly, he didn't seem to notice my mental slip about River. Was it possible he didn't read minds like River did?

"Why me? What do you want with me?"

"Don't you know?"

I shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. "You want to kill me like you did the other women."

He moved closer in that zippy vampire way River occasionally moved—one minute he was several yards away from me, the next he stood only an arm's length away. "Oh, no, my beautiful Rachel. Why would I want to snuff out the existence of such a worthy being? No. I rather think there are better ways to get to know you. An eternity's worth."

His long-fingered pale hand reached out to my face, but before it got there, I dug my gun into his chest. "Don't. Or I'll shoot."

His laughter sent another chill up my spine. "Go ahead. Shoot me. Do you think it will harm me?"

It was like *déjà vu*. River's words from last week coming back at me. Unlike that night, however, I had no qualms about pulling the trigger now. So I did.

The recoil from my gun jerked my hand upward only slightly, and a hole appeared in the vampire's gray silk-covered chest. I fired again, and another appeared next to it. Trickle of dark, almost black blood, seeped out of the two injuries. But the vampire himself merely smiled. He swiped his long fingers over the blooming wounds, and the holes

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closed before my eyes.

My heart pounded as I watched. *Oh. Fucking. Crap.*

With a quick wave of his fingers my gun was wrenched out of my hand and scudded across the concrete floor, settling to rest against one of the steel poles thirty feet away.

“Enough of that nonsense,” Markos said. “I will not tolerate your resistance.”

Although he wasn’t touching me, I felt invisible fingers tighten around my neck. My breath seemed to seize in my lungs. His icy dark eyes bored into me. Then I felt the dark weight of his presence invading my mind. No words this time. Just a powerful weight forcing its way into all the nooks and crannies, attempting to crush my own thoughts and will.

My head began to spin as the lack of oxygen from the vise around my neck became critical. Still he wasn’t touching me, but I felt the cold squeeze of his merciless fingers around my throat, nonetheless, choking the life from me. At the same time, the heavy dark press in my mind continued.

No! I was not going to let this happen, damn it! I tried to reach for him, but found I couldn’t move my arms. They were pinned to my side by the same invisible force that squeezed my throat.

Speckled lights began to flash in my head. A dim haze formed over my vision. Still, I attempted to struggle, tried to fight him mentally, to shove his dark plague out of my mind.

A sudden memory came to me—of how River had shut me out of his head the first night we were together. It was as if steel doors had slammed shut.

Although it was getting harder and harder to think, I tried to visualize similar doors. Tried to imagine I was on one side and Markos, with his thick mind blanket, was on the other side of the portal. And then slowly, inch by excruciating inch, I began to drag the doors closed.

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I knew I was seconds from passing out, but, with my last bit of will, I slammed the doors, hearing the imaginary clang with ferocious intensity in my head.

The influx of black fog stopped cold, and even as I drew in what was probably my last breath, my head cleared. I glared at the vampire in defiant satisfaction.

Suddenly, the vise around my throat was gone. I gasped, and air rushed into my lungs. My arms were no longer pinned. I dropped to the floor on my hands and knees, coughing.

“You bastard,” I gasped, my voice so hoarse it barely came out.

He grasped me by the arms and pulled me back up. My legs could barely hold my weight, so he held it for me. He smiled, appearing amused on the surface. But I could see in his black-ice gaze that he was angry I’d managed to resist his attempt at glamor.

“While I expected nothing less from you, don’t fight me again, Rachel, my dear. The next time my punishment won’t be as kind.”

“Fuck you,” I rasped.

He slapped me. Nothing invisible this time. The cold flesh of his hand cracked against my cheek and mouth. Pain shot through me. But even as I tasted blood on my lower lip, I glared at him again.

He wasn’t used to being defied, and it showed. The lines around his thin lips tightened. His smooth, alabaster forehead creased. But then his features smoothed over once again, and he threw back his dark head and laughed.

“You have such spirit! This is exactly why I knew you’d make my perfect partner. You and I will have such fun, my darling. The world will be ours to take, and take it we will.”

His words slowly sank in.

“You...you want to make me a vampire?” I croaked. *Oh, gods.*

“But of course. The moment I saw you, I knew.” I watched as his fangs extended...their sharp points appearing below his upper lip.

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For the first time in my adult life, I admitted to myself I was downright terrified. I could taste it, like a bitter knot of bile in my throat. Could feel it coursing like an icy mountain stream through my veins.

River, where are you? I need help.

“Once I’ve drained you almost to the point of your human death,” the vampire was saying in his smooth glacial voice, “you will drink from me and be reborn to a life so full it will defy your imagination. Ah, we will be magnificent together, Rachel! Now hold still, my dear. This will only hurt for a moment.”

He pulled me close and lowered his head to my neck. I struggled in his grasp, but I was still so weak from his near strangulation minutes before, it nearly exhausted all my energy just to stay upright.

“No!” I cried, jerking my head from side to side. But to no avail. I felt his mouth against my flesh. Felt the sharp pain of his teeth puncturing my skin. I screamed. This was nothing like when River had bitten me.

But as quickly as he’d bitten me, I heard Markos hiss in a language I didn’t understand, and he shoved me away. I hit the concrete floor hard, then slid several feet.

“You’re tainted!” he screamed. “The *haertaeg* has had you! I smell his scent all over your skin and taste him in your veins!” The words were spat out of his mouth as if they were pure filth.

I stared up at him in a daze.

“I knew he was watching you to get to me. But you contemptible little bitch! You let him have you! You let him fuck you! He’s tasted of your blood, and his seed has desecrated your body! It flows through you still, contaminating you!” His shrieking echoed against the walls and open ceiling.

River. River was this *haertaeg* he was referring to. “*My Rachel. You’re mine now! Only mine!*” River’s declaration that first night we

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were together had obviously meant even more than I'd realized. A rush of gratitude surged through me that River *had* marked me as his. Clearly the old vampire didn't want to make me his dark mate any longer.

Markos paced in front of me, pure hatred gleaming in his eyes. "I should have destroyed him myself instead of sending lackeys to do it today! Oh, that I had seen the last light leave his eyes, that I had seen his body disintegrate and melt into the earth!"

I stared up at the livid vampire, my still-fuzzy brain trying to find a lie in his words. But his fury was such I knew in my gut he wasn't feigning.

Oh, gods... was that why River hadn't met me tonight? Markos had sent someone to destroy him today? Had they found him, maybe while he slept and was unsuspecting and unable to defend himself?

Tears stung my eyes and grief speared through my heart. Even though I'd only known him a short time, what I'd felt and experienced with River was more than I'd ever shared with anyone. I couldn't fathom I would never see him again. Never feel his cool, sensual hands on my body. Never hear his voice or his deep, rumbling laughter.

"You've ruined everything!" Markos snarled, bringing me back to the reality of my own imminent danger. "You were mine. You were meant for me. But you've given yourself to a creature so low it was never even worthy of existing in this world."

He was suddenly towering over me. His long fingers curled around my still-aching throat and dragged me upward until I faced him. "For this crime...you will die." He placed a hand on either side of my head, and I knew he was going to snap my neck.

At the second I expected to feel the crack, a thunderous crash echoed through the warehouse followed by a rabid, animalistic roar that shook the walls. I suddenly felt myself flying through the air as if I'd been catapulted from a cannon. The back of my head hit one of the

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steel posts. Pain shot through my skull as my body slid downward. I settled in a limp pile on the floor.

I managed to open my eyes against the pain, and through the blur of vertigo, I saw two towering figures—one dressed in gray and black, the other in jeans and a leather jacket—sailing through mid-air at one another.

River! A breathy sob crept out of my throat at the sight of him. He was here. And alive.

The air crackled with fury—I had the odd sensation the hair on my arms and at the nape of my neck stood on end from it.

Watching the two vampires fight was like nothing I'd ever experienced. It was like something out of science fiction. Or one of those martial arts vids where the combatants literally flew, meeting to strike one another in mid-air, then rebounding off the wall or the floor and launching at one another again.

There was no doubt in my pain-shrouded mind it was a fight to the death. River wielded a sword of extraordinary length, and his movements were smooth and terrifyingly deadly. Markos evaded with equal agility, and seemed to possess the power to send inanimate objects—debris, wood, chunks of ceiling tile—flying at River.

Both of them had fire in their eyes. At least that's how it looked. The odd glow was unnerving.

I felt dizziness nearly swallow me. But I dragged myself to an upright position.

Markos was stalking River now, like a black panther hunting prey.

I knew my body was useless in this fight, but there had to be something I could do to help River. I was having trouble holding back the darkness threatening to cloud out my vision, and the splitting pain in my head seemed to surge with my every movement. I spotted my gun, but it was too far away for me to get to, and I knew it was of little use in any case.

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Then I saw my night-pack laying on the floor just a few feet away. It must have fallen off me when Markos threw me.

I crawled inch by inch, my head throbbing, fighting back tears, until I snagged the strap and was able to drag it close enough I could unzip the pack.

I glanced up and saw the tables had turned, and now River stalked Markos, his sword held high above his head. But with a wave of his hand, Markos sent a triangular piece of steel flying toward River, the aim such that it would shear off River's head if it hit. He was forced to sidestep it in that high-speed vampire way, which gave Markos all the opening he needed and he lunged at River, another piece of steel in his hand.

My breathing coming in painful gasps, the pain in my head nearly blinding, I clawed open my pack and felt inside it. My fingers closed around the flare gun.

A plan formed in my mind, more instinct than strategy. I wasn't sure if this would work. Hell, I had no idea if it would work. But it was something...

I looked up to watch the vampires. I had to be close enough... I was too dizzy to trust my aim at a long distance.

Once again, I forced my body into motion, this time literally dragging myself like a military commando, inch by inch across the dirty concrete floor.

I watched, waiting for the right moment, needing Markos to be close enough to me and away from River.

When the moment presented itself, everything happened fast I'm sure, but to me it seemed like slow motion as I watched it unfold.

I fired the flare gun at Markos, and shouted River's name at the same time to warn him away. I watched the red ball of fire slice through the air, watched Markos turn toward me, see what was headed his way, but too late. The flare hit him dead center in the chest,

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instantly igniting his shirt, his skin. He screamed...an unholy shriek. At the same time, I watched River pause for a split second as if he were focusing, a fierce expression of intensity on his face, then in a movement of pure grace, he arced the blade of the sword down and across, severing Markos's head from his body.

At that point oblivion embraced me, and I went gratefully.

* * *

"Rachel."

I heard the voice as if were coming from far away.

"Come on, baby. You're going to be okay." But the deep voice didn't sound as certain as the words. I heard, and felt, the worry between the lines, and that's what finally wiped away the remainder of the fog in my brain.

I opened my eyes and turned my head to find myself looking up into a concerned, blue-eyed gaze.

"River," I whispered.

"I'm here." He gathered me up off the concrete floor, where I realized I'd been lying. As if I were as fragile as a china doll, he settled me in his lap and brushed strands of hair off my cheek. "You scared the hell out of me, Rachel. I was afraid I wouldn't get here in time—" His voice caught.

"Is he...gone?"

"Yes, he's been destroyed."

"He was old, just like you thought," I said in a hoarse voice, babbling the first thing that came to me. Maybe I just needed confirmation the events of this evening had really happened. "He said he'd been around for eighteen-hundred years."

River didn't seem surprised. "He fought like an ancient. Usually only the oldest of us have the power to move objects like he did."

"He..." I swallowed hard. "He also just sort of waved his hand and closed up the gunshots wounds in his chest." Even though I'd watched

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it happen, I could hear the shock in my voice.

“Mmm. Yes, an ancient. Some of the really old ones have the ability to heal themselves fast like that.”

“Do you all get stronger as you get older?”

“We maybe become more adept at using the power we have, but our strength and abilities don’t increase. As far as the ancients, no one knows for sure, but it’s suspected they’re a slightly different species than modern vampires. Personally, I think it’s more likely that two thousand years ago there were very few vampires and their blood was purer. Over the millennia, the species has gotten watered down as more and more humans are turned, and with each generation, some abilities have been lost.”

“I don’t think he could read my mind like you can.”

“Vampires each have different gifts. Most can do rudimentary glamor of some sort—sometimes just enough to lure humans to feed from, or to erase a human’s memory of having been bitten. A smaller percentage are adept at planting thoughts and desires in minds. I’ve only ever met a couple of others besides myself, however, who can read thoughts.” He shrugged. “I don’t know why I can do it, unless maybe as a human I had above average psychic abilities that went untapped and my vampire blood enhanced it.”

“And the flying thing? Or levitation, or whatever you call it?”

“Some can use it to travel, but most who have that particular gift can merely hover for a few seconds. That’s all I can do. Others can’t rise at all.” He smoothed a cool hand over my hot, dusty cheek. “How’re you feeling, babe?”

I realized my head hurt considerably less than it had when I’d passed out. “I...I think I’m doing okay. Better than I thought I’d be.”

“I used some of my blood on your head injury.”

“What?” I tried to sit up in his lap, but he wasn’t ready to let me up yet, obviously, because he easily overpowered me—in a gentle sort of

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way. "I'm not...?"

"No, of course not. I rubbed some on the back of your head. You aren't going to become a vampire because of that. The only way you can be turned is if one of us drains you nearly dry first, then you would have to drink our blood. But vampire blood has mild healing properties for humans. I can't totally heal you, but I can help ease the pain."

I relaxed back into his embrace, suddenly feeling warm and at ease.

"You're alive," I whispered.

He gave me an odd look. "Well, technically, no. Not in the human sense."

"I know. I just meant... Markos, that was the other vampire's name, said he'd sent people to destroy you today."

Understanding rippled through River's gaze. "Oh. That." His tone was filled with cool disgust. "Yeah, he did. Four damned roughnecks. They got into my apartment while I was sleeping, tried to inject with me colloidal silver, but I woke up before they got the full dose into me."

"Silver what?"

"Colloidal silver. It's a liquid that some humans think has antibiotic properties. But to a vampire, the trace element of silver in it can be deadly. If we're injected with it, it basically fries us from the inside out, turning our veins into toxic stew, and destroying us. In smaller quantities, like I got, since I woke up before the fuck-ups could finish, it works more like a Mickey. Puts us out for a few hours, makes us feel like shit, but we survive."

His color was pale. I'd chalked it up to his fight with Markos, but I wondered if it was because he'd been drugged. "That's why you weren't waiting for me tonight."

River grimaced. "That's why. Damn it, Rachel..." His voice got that funny, husky catch in it again. "You should never have come here alone. He was about to kill you."

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“Actually, he wanted to turn me. But when he bit me...” I raised my hand to the new puncture wounds on my neck. “He got furious. He said he could smell you and taste you. He knew we’d been together.”

River’s expression grew fierce and protective. “Damn right he did. You’re mine.” He hugged me to him and stroked my hair.

“He wasn’t happy about that,” I murmured, closing my eyes and savoring River’s scent. Even after the exertion of his fight with Markos, he still managed to smell clean and comforting.

Comforting. What a strange word to use for a vampire.

River pulled back and gazed down at me, a look of surprise and maybe even wonder on his face. “You really think that?”

“You’re reading my mind again,” I accused.

“Of course. But do you really find me...comforting?”

I sighed. “I guess I do. Sometimes.”

I sat up, and this time he let me, supporting me with a strong hand behind my back. I slid off his lap, then gingerly felt the back of my head to discover it truly was much less painful than it should have been. I’d expected to have a knot the size of a super-fruit, but instead had only a little swelling. I flexed my hands and feet, then rubbed my sore neck. I was bruised in several places, but seemed to be all in one piece. And damned, damned grateful to be alive. Thanks to the man sitting next to me.

I looked up at him, into his warm blue eyes, so unlike Markos’s icy orbs, and relief and an unexpected tenderness filled me. River had saved my life tonight.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He stroked my cheek, his touch gentle, his eyes still expressing his concern.

Then I scowled. “He called you something...”

“*Haertaeg?*”

I nodded. “It didn’t sound very nice.”

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“It’s not. It’s ancient vampiric language. It means traitor. Traitor of the worst sort. One who turns his back on his heritage and kills his own people.” Tight lines creased the skin around his mouth and his expression was grim. “I told you I wasn’t popular with my own kind.”

Markos had hated River, hated what he stood for. At last I began to understand River’s fierce loneliness that I’d felt the first night we’d been together. He was an outcast in the vampire world. He wasn’t human, but the vampires didn’t believe he was one of them either because he hunted his own kind.

A lump filled my throat at his dilemma. What had caused him to be so different from other vampires? To hunt them rather than live amongst them?

“Another time, Rachel,” he said softly, and I knew he’d been listening in on my thoughts again. I nodded.

“So...what is this exactly?” I pointed to the sword on the floor next to him; it had been returned to its scabbard.

He picked it up almost lovingly. “It’s a *katana*. A Samurai sword.”

I remembered how smoothly he’d handled the blade, his movements almost poetic. “And you know how to use something like this because...?”

He smiled for the first time tonight, but his eyes hazed a bit, as if he were suddenly lost in a memory. “My mom ran a martial arts studio, so I grew up absorbed in that lifestyle. I studied *iaido* with a Japanese master for several years as a young man.” At my quizzical look, he explained, “Traditional Japanese swordsmanship.” Then his gaze seemed to clear and he was really looking at me again rather than lost in the past. “Funny how life prepares us for things yet unknown.”

He cupped my face in one of his hands. “You sure you’re okay?”
“Yeah.”

His thumb stroked my lower lip and when he pulled it away I saw my blood on it. River brought it to his mouth and sucked it off. Then he

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pulled my face toward him and he kissed me, leaving me weak-kneed, even though I was still sitting down.

"I should call the department. Get someone out here," I murmured.

"There's no point. Your flare burned his body. Vampires don't burn the same way humans do. There won't be anything left for them to find—not even his head. And that will only lead to questions you probably don't want to have to answer."

"So how do I resolve this case? Officially, I mean? If I don't come up with a killer, the case will remain open indefinitely, and the victims' families will never have closure. I know what that's like. I don't want to do that to them if I have a choice."

River studied me closely for a moment, his blue gaze probing me. Then he nodded.

He lifted me to my feet, and once again I was surprised I was as steady and felt as good as I did. He retrieved my gun and handed it to me. Once I had it safely holstered, he led me outside through the twisted and now-open warehouse door. This was obviously the way he'd come in. *Good gods*. The door looked like it had been caught in a hurricane. How much muscle had it taken for River to have ripped it away like that?

I think I was in shock as the reality of just how strong he really was hit me.

He handed me his sword. I had to wrap both hands around the scabbard to keep it horizontal and off the ground because it was so long.

"Stand back," he commanded.

Still rather stunned, I did as he said. He returned to the warehouse, and from my vantage point, I watched as he pulled up one steel post after another. When part of the ceiling and the closest wall began to give way, he helped them along until they crashed on top of Markos's ashes.

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I watched River work, tearing down part of the building with his bare hands like it was made of nothing more than children's building blocks. I added that up with the twisted, mangled door, then, glancing down at the Samurai blade I held, I remembered how he'd come tearing in there tonight like a rabid animal, fighting with deadly acumen and slicing off Markos's head without missing a beat.

Sheer panic surged through me. My earlier comfort floated away like so much dust in the warm night wind.

What in holy hell had I gotten myself into?

Life as I'd known it was gone. But this new reality was just too overwhelming. I'd taken a vampire for a lover. A vampire of unparalleled strength and fury. A vampire who drank the blood of people like me and killed his own kind as well, not even being stopped by the tricks of a vamp almost two millennia older than he.

Oh, gods. My heart pounded and I felt dizzy all over again.

River returned to my side. I realized he held my flare gun and he'd managed to fish out my one remaining emergency flare to use in it. He fired the flare into the building, into the pile of rubble he'd created. A red burst was followed by orange-fingered flames, which sprang up with a whoosh. The wind fanned the flames, spreading them, until the entire lower level blazed.

He turned to me and gestured toward his handiwork. "Here's your closure...you found the killer's lair, he tried to capture you, but you fought with him, you managed to break free, get your flare gun, catch both him and the building on fire, then make your escape. The building collapsed just after you got out of the basement. The police will investigate and discover remains of the heads from the victims he took as trophies—"

"They were in there?" I croaked.

"Yeah. He had a collection shelf. Be glad you didn't see it. Anyway, they'll investigate and find the remains of the heads. Even

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though they won't find any trace of the killer's remains, the building will be a mess and you'll have your injuries to back up your story, so they'll trust you took him out. Especially when there are no further murders. Case closed."

I ran it through my mind, but could find no gaps in his logic. He was right. It would effectively close the case. "They'll still expect me to report in tonight, though, get investigators out here. And there is a fire currently burning."

"A fire you want to burn because the longer it burns, the more damage there is and the more convincing your story. It's not like there's anything around here but asphalt. There's no danger it's going to spread. Hell, no one will probably even notice it, and if they do, won't care since this whole area is virtually deserted. And you can't very well report in when, after you escaped the building, you passed out and didn't come to until tomorrow morning." A daring grin curved his lips.

I stared at him, feeling like I should argue, but realizing I had absolutely no urge to. "Tomorrow morning?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I thought I might show you my bed tonight," he said in a seductive growl. "If you're up for it. You look in need of some serious TLC."

Then, taking his sword out of my hands, he swept me into his embrace and kissed me with a tender passion that turned me inside out.

When he acted like this, all I could focus on was the pleasure he brought me. My earlier panic at his vampiressness faded, and tingling arousal took its place.

"*Serious* TLC?" I said, my heart thudding in a slow, desirous beat.

"Oh, yeah." He slid a hand under my jacket and down into the back of my jeans, where he stroked the bare skin of my ass. His smile was pure sensual persuasion, and my body, bruised though it was, pulsed with answering desire.

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A gust of warm night wind swirled around us, whipping my hair against my cheeks, and scattering ash and dust at our feet. But it was nothing compared to the potent waves of heat that surged between us.

Holy crap.

Yes, he was a vampire, which meant he came with all the super-power, blood-sucking, scary attributes. But for now I decided it would be prudent...and, okay, convenient...to shove that to the back of my mind. After all, there were more pressing issues to think about in the here and now. Like the elemental fact that he alone made me sizzle.

I had a feeling I was going to be a very happy woman in his bed tonight.

M. L. RHODES

Award-winning author M. L. Rhodes has been writing for a living for nearly twelve years. Along with the erotic romance fiction she currently pens for Amber Quill Press, she's also published everything from poetry, to magazine articles, to short stories, to traditional romance, to steamy romantic suspense novels (all under other names). In her fiction works, her characterization and emotional storytelling have received high critical acclaim from such places as *Romantic Times Magazine* and *Word Weaving*, and have garnered her numerous awards in the writing industry.

Intelligent, empowered heroines and strong-but-tender heroes are her favorites. There's nothing more exciting than putting two spirited people on the page together and watching them navigate the pitfalls and the emotional and sensual delights of falling in love. That is, after all, what romance is all about!

If you'd like to keep up with what's going on in M. L.'s world and find out about her new and upcoming releases, surf on over to her website at www.mlrhodeswriting.com. She also loves hearing from readers. You can reach her at ML@mlrhodeswriting.com.

* * *

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