

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric background. In the upper left, a large, bright, circular light source, possibly a full moon, is partially obscured by dark, silhouetted structures that resemble a city skyline or industrial buildings. In the center, there is a faint, ethereal image of a person's face, appearing to be a man with short hair, looking directly forward. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, purples, and greys, with the bright light source providing a strong contrast.

***Jonathan
Amsbary***

Cyberblood

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All that is good in this book each of you have made better. I take full and sole responsibility for anything that is bad. I love you all.

Chapter 1

David plopped into his computer station because he knew it would be hours before he could sleep. Alcohol usually kept him awake and the cold and pain was adding to the effect. He'd get online and chat for a while, that would calm him down, and maybe he could get some sleep tonight.

He sat quietly with his eyes closed as the machine hummed to life. He waited for the operating system to boot and then moused his way into his Internet connection and then the chat server. He typed the login and password commands and then waited for the Java script to run. All in all the whole process took about three minutes—it felt like three days. While he was waiting he wondered to himself who would be on tonight. He was pretty good at guessing.

The scroll was flying by fast and furious and it hurt his eyes for a second.

David stared at his computer screen waiting for the next instant message to arrive on the chat screen.

—Mistress of Darkwinds—Looks down at her little footstool and gently caresses his back with her heel.

—Sub-Thrall—Imperceptibly coos with pleasure a slight smile stealing across his lips—Mistress of Darkwinds—: Digs her heel into her footstool. "Now behave little boy, you don't want Mistress to punish you? Do you?"

—Sub-Thrall—"No Ma'am."

A smile played across David's face as he entered the last command. He was finally getting somewhere with Darkwinds. He had played her for weeks and she was good. He had

almost all the other Domme in the Chateau eating out of his hands. She was one of the last holdouts. They had chatted cordially since he'd come online a year ago, but he never really felt that she liked him very much. Somehow she didn't seem to approve of him. Of course, that made her the prize of prizes.

—Mistress of Darkwinds—: Reaches down with her crop and lightly caresses her tender boy behind his ear. "Of course you don't."

"Bitch." David hissed under his breath as he considered his next post. His skin was on fire and, as always he truly felt the kiss of the crop. He had felt more pain from others. He was often reduced to tears by his virtual punishments but the release was transcendental. He had often tried to explain it all to his everyday friends but they never got it.

"Oh well, to hell with them." he thought before he could type in his next command.

—Mistress of Darkwinds—Kicks her little subbie. "What's the matter boy? Cat got your tongue? I have a cat, and it bites. But you know that, don't you? Would you like to meet my cat little boy?"

"Yes." he hissed aloud.

He considered his next play. It often didn't pay to seem eager, but if he seemed indifferent she might leave him. God, how he wanted her. As David considered his next move an insistent pounding on the door interrupted his thoughts.

"Open up Motherfucker!"

The baritone voice belonged to his best friend Patrick Dane. David knew Pat wouldn't give up—Sub-Thrall—"Need to go Ma'am." He typed frantically.

"Just a minute Asshole!" David screamed, his voice cracking in excitement and anger. "Why now, dear God. Why now?"

—Mistress of Darkwinds—: "Whatever." ~yawning with boredom~

"Shit!" he yelled at the monitor. "Now she's pissed!"

Running to the door he yanked it open and saw Pat's grinning face.

"Weekend bro! Time for some beer, and when that runs out some *more* beer!"

"Goddamn it! Pat, did you ever think of calling before coming over?"

* * * *

"Did, but your phone's busy, like always. Now go tell your make-believe fiends goodbye and come get shit-faced with your best friend. You know something? Sometimes I don't know why I bother with you."

"Because you don't have any friends except me."

"Not true *mon amie*, I have lots of friends. Joanne, Samantha, Wayne, a whole bunch."

"Those are *my* friends stupid. Now sit down on the couch and give me a minute."

He rushed back to the computer as he heard Pat click the TV to the Cartoon Channel.

God how typical! David thought. I hope his mom has a comfortable basement, for when this dweeb graduates. Who am I kidding, he's not graduating. Stop arguing with yourself idiot and get back to Darkwinds. This is going to take some finesse.

David sat in front of the computer and scanned the chatter's list. He was crestfallen when he saw that Darkwinds had left the room. He tried a private message but the system reported that no Mistress-of-Darkwinds was currently online. Damn! he thought, "She logged off! Oh well, everyone has a real life, how mad can she be? How mad can she be? Very,very mad!"

—Sub thrall—Bows to all Domme and bids his friends good night.

A string of "Be wells" and "hugs and kisses" scrolled down the screen as he prepared to log off. Thrall was very popular and everyone liked him, well almost everyone. He smiled at the string of well wishes. He really loved these people. He closed his browser and started moving his cursor to the Start button to shut off the computer.

"Oh hell. Fuck Bill Gates," he muttered to himself and shut off the power with a snap of the power button without powering the operating system down.

He stretched long and looked back into the living room and saw Pat laughing at the cartoons. He started to rise and his knee buckled.

"Damn!" He hadn't used the cane when he ran to let Pat in. Tears of frustration, anger and pain rolled down his cheeks. He had known this pain all his life.

"Stupid fool! Stupid fool! How could I be so stupid? I have to live my life with a bad leg and now I'm brain damaged to boot!"

He knew that his leg was going to throb for days now. He hobbled on his cane into the living room.

Pat's grin suddenly melted as he saw his best friend's pain and he started to rise to help him.

David waved him off. "You know Pat, when you're right, you're right. We need beer, beer and more beer after that."

With that, the two friends shambled out into the waiting night. David's apartment was centrally located. He hated driving and he couldn't walk very far at a stretch. The night was wet and cool—what he called a *soft* night—very common in Southern Indiana in early winter. A few degrees cooler and his knee would be stiff as a board, but for some reason, this was an ideal condition for him and his pace quickened as they worked their way to Nick's.

There were a couple of sacred cows in Bloomington Indiana. One was the Little Five-Hundred Bicycle Race and another was Nick's.

It was a rather ordinary bar, but the quintessential hang out for student's who were old enough to drink. Bloomington was a tough town. If you were underaged, you could get a drink, but you weren't likely to get it in a bar. Like any college town, there were dance bars, gay bars, frat bars, townie bars, pool halls and pick-up bars. Nick's was none of these.

Nick's was *the* bar. Everyone paid homage to Nick's at one point or another. The front room had the small bar and grill, tightly packed booths where the service was surly and most

of the law students drank. David said they were so abused by their professors all day they didn't realize how mean the waitresses at Nick's were. Pat said the law kids were in training to suck up to their future bosses.

The cool people headed for the small loft upstairs. *Cool* was not a word that normal people would use to describe these patrons, but in Bloomington they were very cool. They were mostly professional students and ageless dropouts who were caught in the web of the small college town and never left. One of them even ran for mayor on a bet and won. He ran his administration from Nick's loft.

Nick's back room was composed of chaotically arranged tables and shabby booths. Grad students and most of the fun patrons hung out in the back, mainly because the video games and pinball machines were there. It was Friday and the joint was packed.

Pat and David made their way to the back and found the gang, namely Wayne, the musician; Steve, the dropout; Samantha, the nurturer; and Julie, the encyclopedia. Cyber-Dave was the computer wiz. Pat was the geek, which was saying something in this crowd.

Actually they were all geeks. Each possessed of extraordinary intelligence but physically or socially flawed in ways that caused more narcissistic youths to shun them. One might suspect that they would one day become popular, because adults value intelligence while physical beauty and wit are the currency of young.

Wayne was sitting in David's chair. He got up without a word. David always sat in the corner, where he could hang his

leg out without fear of tripping the waitress or one of the drunken grad students. He settled in and hung his cane on the back of his chair. He often wondered about the moment of fate that had twisted his life so much. A second earlier or later and that accident would have happened to someone else, or not at all. But not to *his* entire family.

He was the only survivor of the tragic accident. He was raised from a young age by his father's sister and her family. He was cared for. He never wanted for any physical need. He only missed love. His leg kept him out of physical education classes, Boy Scouts, summer camp, and life in general. His trust and insurance settlement set him up for life, but he always wondered what that life was worth anymore. But then, he had his friends, both physical and in cyber. He knew he was lucky in his friendships because they loved him for who he was, not what he looked like or couldn't do.

On this night he was finding it hard to concentrate. Darkwinds had really thrown him off his game. It would take weeks, a virtual eternity in chat, to get back to where he was. How would he play it? Cool and polite, or submissive and groveling? It was hard to tell with her. She was so chaotic about who she would choose, sometimes picking the correct well-trained submissives, but often choosing the aggressive bad boys who needed punishing. It would take some thought.

"David! Are you paying attention?"

Julie of the harsh, angular face was shouting. "I asked you a question!"

"Sorry, I have things on my mind."

"Damn make-believe friends on your mind more likely."
Pat griped.

"When are you going to give that shit up and start paying attention to your real friends?" Julie pressed.

* * * *

"Look, they are real people. They 're just as much flesh and blood as any of you. We share an interest. That's all. I don't expect any of you to understand. But I thought you guys would at least be happy that I'm happy."

He almost said "getting laid regularly," but they would never understand that. When he finally confessed his submissive sexual nature to all of them, they didn't understand that either. They didn't understand where he acted these fantasies out. Damn, didn't they know if he could find a real-life Mistress he would go with her and screw the Internet. That one of the things he was looking for in chat ... to meet a real Domme woman. It was risky doing that. Most relationships that began in chat failed. But he was smart and he watched his friends, learned from their failures and successes. He thought he could make a real-life connection work if he ever had one.

There was an awkward pause which Julie finally filled.
"David, we are happy for you, and yes we should respect what you do. But it just feels like we have to fight for your time now. If you had a real-life girl friend we could meet her and still be with you. David, we miss you."

She was close to tears and Samantha silently reached over and patted her knee, which caused her to smile wanly.

Samantha and Julie were a couple. They were an odd couple, to say the least. Julie was tall and rail-thin while Samantha was short and fat. They had met David in a 'Sociology of Sex' class two years before. They thought he was tres cute, and adopted him immediately. He was smart and open, which they both loved, and he had a need to be mothered, which they both responded to, although neither would admit to it. He could bring either of them to helpless laughter or tears in seconds.

In fact, it was David who really brought the gang together. He had brought each of the members into the group and it was a little frightening to them all that he was now withdrawing.

"Sally bring another pitcher please!" Wayne yelled across the room. "David's paying for it." Wayne hated conflict and overly emotional scenes. He basically didn't understand feelings and used humor to deflect people. David had heard him play, the flute of all things, and could not understand how Wayne could make such beautiful music without having a clue about human feelings.

"Yeah, I got it." David said quietly. He shook off the mood and leaned over and kissed Julie on her cheek. "I'm sorry Love, I've been a shit, I promise to do better."

Julie turned her smile to him and searched his eyes, hoping upon hope that he was telling the truth to her and to himself.

David and Pat struggled home. It had gotten a lot colder, and David's leg was hurting like hell. Pat was very drunk and was having a hard time walking. David, while not as drunk,

was barely able to move himself along because of his knee. The two made quite a pair, and David muttered something about the "blind leading the blind" at one point. The cold air and his growing anger kept him moving quickly. The same could not be said for Pat.

* * * *

When they finally stumbled into the apartment, David's mood went from bad to worse to hideous. David was notorious for his bad moods, and this one was a dilly. Pat, if he were able, would have given it a name, he was up to "M" and said the next one would be called "Bad Mood Mabel." David smiled in spite of himself. This is why he loved Pat so much. Pat was immune to his anger. Pat's humor had often rescued him from the pits of despair, and even the thought of what Pat would say was even now working it's magic.

Pat smiled when the warm air of the apartment struck him and then collapsed on the couch.

"Don't throw up asshole." David said to his comatose friend, and hobbled into the kitchen. His knee was throbbing and he considered taking a pain pill, but he'd had too much to drink. Even if he felt sober, he knew he wasn't, and that the pills could hurt him badly. He had his stomach pumped before, and he planned never to suffer that indignity again. He settled for a glass of milk instead.

* * * *

He plopped into his computer station. It would be hours before he could sleep. Alcohol usually kept him awake and the

cold and pain were adding to the effect. He'd get online and chat for a while. That would calm him down, and maybe he could get some sleep later.

He sat quietly with his eyes closed as the machine hummed to life. He waited for the operating system to boot and then moused his way into his Internet connection and then the chat server. He typed the login and password commands and then waited for the Java script to run. All in all the whole process took about three minutes—it felt like three days. While he was waiting he wondered to himself who would be online tonight. He was pretty good at guessing. The chat rooms had a rhythm. Some people were only on in the morning or afternoon, *daytimers*, whose moods reflected the time of day; bright and chipper. Some came on only in the evening. They gave the feeling of being in a club or bar. Then there were the *nighttimers*. Between midnight and about six or seven—depending on the time zone—the chat rooms were dominated by hard core chatters and insomniacs. The mood was dark and tempers flared easily.

* * * *

The chat rooms were not used exclusively by Americans, but they dominated. They were followed closely by Canadians, then Brits, then Aussies, then the non-English speakers (who often had better English spelling and grammar than the natives.) But the rooms followed the sun as Americans saw it. David often wondered if his Aussie friends thought everyone in America was depressed and mean

because that was who was up and chatting when they were online.

He checked the friends list, and was happy to see his friend Mistress-Dove was on. He liked her a lot, and she liked him back. They often chatted about non-bdsm stuff. And he thought she was sexy as hell. She had told him the same, and she usually was up for a good cyber romp. He typed "/goto Mistress-Dove" and was instantly transported to the "Bondage Chateau"

The scroll was flying by fast and furious and it hurt his eyes for a second.

—Sub-Thrall—Bows to all who are Worthy and waves to his friends.

The standard greeting would get everyone's attention and announce him as a submissive to the room. A string of *welcomes, greetings and good evenings* rolled down the screen. His buddy, Sub-Flame was online, and he thought he might entice her into some vanilla action if neither of them could get anything going with a Domme.

—Sub-Thrall—Makes his way to the subbie couch and huggles his delicious friend Flame, groping where he can.

—Sub-Flame—Giggles and gropes Thrall—wooo hoooo!

—Mistress-Dove—smiles as she sees the handsome Thrall enter the room and play with his subblings.

Good, she noticed him, and was not with anyone right now. "Mr. Scott, I need warp speed and I need it now." He muttered to himself.

—Sub-Thrall—Greets Mistress Dove and bows before her once more.

Though he had technically bowed to her when he entered, the extra was a nice touch that let her know he was interested.

—Mistress-Dove—Smiles to Thrall and thanks him. "I am well little one. It is nice of you to care. And you are well little Thrall?"

—Sub-Thrall—"Could not be better, especially seeing you tonight."

—Mistress-Dove—"I couldn't sleep tonight. Felt a pull to get me online. Now I know why ~smiles~ Please come sit at my feet little one."

—Sub-Flame—Woo-hoos for Thrall—Sub-Thrall—Sticks his tongue out at Flame then runs and kneels at Mistress-Dove's feet, back straight and head held high, eyes downcast.

—Mistress Dove—Smiles at her little one and pulls him into her warm lap—Sub-Thrall—cozies down into her lap and smiles with great pleasure.

The conversation scrolled on, Dove had been in some discussion with a Domme friend of hers and went back to it. Though she tossed in many tickles Thrall, cuddles Thrall or lightly kisses Thrall lines to let him know she was really thinking of him.

He responded in kind, occasionally waving to an entering friend, laughing at some antic of another sub or sending a more risque message to Dove in private.

* * * *

Now that David had his lap, he relaxed and allowed himself to cheer up a bit. He paid more attention to the goings on in

the room. There was a good crop of newcomers and tourists tonight. The newcomers were ok. They might make a stupid comment or do something awkward, but with a gentle word or two from a regular (usually in private) they would calm down and try to fit in. Only about one in twenty or so would ever come back, but new blood was important, and everyone knew it.

The tourists, on the other hand, were idiots. They came in and made stupid comments, trying to get the regulars to argue and fight with them. One of the more wonderful features of chat was the ignore button. If one ignored someone or "clicked" him or her, then nothing that was said by that person would appear on your screen. If everyone did it, then it was kind of a virtual death. Occasionally a regular from other rooms or other service all together would come in, they were usually treated like a distant cousin at a family reunion.

The two main allied rooms consisted of people who were into fantasy role-playing. One focused on the warrior/barbarian types. The women who went there were often even more submissive than the ones in David's room. David did not like the way people from that room treated the women, but he was polite nonetheless when one of them wandered into the Château. David's group was more into the magic of fantasy. They often pretended to be wizards, dragons, vampires or were-wolves. These were the Kindred and David liked them very much. It was for this reason he perked up when Vampire-Empress—a bold name to use among the Kindred indeed—came into the room.

* * * *

He had never seen this Domme before, and typed his usual greeting when he was with another.

—Sub-Thrall—Bows his head to Vampire-Empress. Wishing her a good hunt and hoping her clan thrives.

—Vampire-Empress—Scowls: I'm sorry, Sub-Thrall I do not know what you mean by clan, but my hunt has been a little frustrating. Perhaps you would be kind enough to come here and discuss it with me?

—Mistress-Dove—Glares at Vampire (Domme never used to title with each other) Perhaps you did not notice that Thrall was sitting in my lap?

—Vampire-Empress—No indeed, my apologies Mistress-Dove, I meant no offense. Does this one belong to you?

—Mistress-Dove—Vampire, no offense taken. It is clear you are new to our rooms, please call me Dove, and if Thrall belonged to me he would wear my name: Dove's-Thrall.

—Vampire-Empress—~smiles~ He seems a bright and delicious young thing. If you don't mind me asking, why does he not belong to you?

—Mistress-Dove—~Chuckles~ That's a good question Vampire LOL (laughs out loud). He a slippery one, and many have tried, but he's hard to nail down.

—Sub-Thrall—~blushes~

—Vampire-Empress—Well thank you, I wish you both a good night. Thrall, perhaps you and I can share a drink when you aren't.... otherwise engaged?

—Sub-Thrall—Yes Ma'am, it would be my pleasure.

—Vampire-Empress—I'm sure—Good night.

* * * *

The system reported her exit. The conversation scrolled on for a while. Dove was a little put off by Vampire, but quickly got back into the rhythm and began flirting with Thrall in earnest. David had to concentrate very hard for a while, because Vampire had left a strong impression on his mind. But he too, quickly settled down and began tickling and groping Dove, in private, and the night played on.

Conversation online was a dance, and this was the prelude. The point was to get the other person worked up to the point where they had to take you private. As a submissive he could not make a room or ask a Domme into it, so he had to tease and arouse her until she decided it was time.

Finally, after a while the message "follow me" came to him in private and he quickly put his computer into "follow" mode. Now he would follow her automatically into any room she ventured or created.

—Mistress-Dove—Waves to all her friends and bids them goodnight.

—Sub-Thrall—Waves and says ta ta to all his friends.

Suddenly, David's screen went blank and the server informed him that he was now in "Mistress-Dove's private room." David smiled.

* * * *

Dove was good, and although she was not the sadist he really craved, she would push him a little and then "cyber"

him good and hard. David glanced over his shoulder to see Pat snoring happily on the couch. It would be pretty embarrassing if Pat came in the middle of the session. But that wouldn't happen tonight. Tonight he belonged to Dove, and David would be sure it was a memorable one .

* * * *

—Mistress-Dove—Unties Thrall's wrist and allows him to fall to the floor.—Sub-Thrall—Crumples to her feet and sobs softly.

—Mistress-Dove—Bends down and kisses his cheek, then sweeps him into her arms and cuddles him passionately. There, there little one, you did well tonight, your Mistress is pleased.

—Sub-Thrall—~Sniffs~ Thank you, Ma'am.

—Mistress-Dove—But I must go now. Do try and get some sleep.

—Sub-Thrall—Yes Ma'am, I will.

—Mistress-Dove—Kisses her Thrall and quietly leaves

David watched the computer announce her exit, and then logged out of the system as well. He was spent. It was a more rigorous session than he had expected from Dove. He had cried for her and felt her lash. Maybe Vampire had pissed her off and she was showing Thrall just who was the boss. Hard to tell. But David was exhausted—and satisfied. He would sleep like a baby now.

It was very late, and David was glad it was winter for a change. If it were summer, the sun would be coming up now, and sleep would be impossible. As it was, he would be deeply

asleep before the light arrived to keep him awake. He stripped to his shorts and crawled between the cool sheets. He hugged his arms around a loose pillow for warmth, until his body warmed the bedclothing. Then, as predicted, he drifted off into a deep and happy sleep. His last thought was of the New Domme, Vampire-Empress.

* * * *

In his dream, David was kneeling on hard stone looking out over a throng of shabbily dressed people below. They were silent except for the scream of one lone voice.

A young woman, girl was sobbing monotonously. A stray thought crossed David's mind as he watched the mob below. The offering was considered of age, and would in fact be an old maid soon. In David's world she was a child. David considered how he knew all this, and then pushed the thought away as the presence of his Mistress made itself felt. She was dressed in a white flowing gown and she walked to stand next to him. He could tell she was watching the spectacle below, though he could not see her face.

"Just typical, don't you think?" she asked. "I mean, you demand a tribute, and of course they come up with a virgin girl." Her manner and tone were discordant with the actions around him. His surroundings were exotic and bizarre and she sounded like some disenchanted housewife sizing up the slim pickings at a clearance sale.

"Do you think I should be more specific next time. Maybe a strapping young man, blacksmith's apprentice perhaps?"

"Ma'am?" was all David could manage.

"Don't worry my pet, I don't expect you to be able to think for me. Yet."

David watched below as the mob bound the girl to two pillars of stone. She silently sobbed, slumped against her bindings. The crowd silently evaporated and her moans echoed among the stonework below.

"No point in dragging this out and letting the poor thing suffer. Come." Empress hissed.

David followed her through a maze of halls and corridors. They glided down many stairs and through many doors. Ancient gothic painting and statues watched over him. He could feel their eyes watching him and he felt judged and small. He wanted to run and hide, but had no power to do so, and no idea where he would go if he could.

Finally, they came into the courtyard. He could hear the girl beg, "Please, please, please," over and over again. Her exhaustion stirred his pity. His Mistress strode to the young woman and without a word grabbed her hair and pulled it back. The girl stopped crying and held her breath. Then, unexpectedly the woman in white turned to him and he could see her face. But all he saw were two red blazing eyes. She handed him a large knife and he knew what she wanted him to do.

He considered a moment, weighing the million consequences of obeying or refusing. The knife felt hot in his hand he dropped it, thinking it had burned him. He fell to his knees. He felt her bend over him and braced himself for her retribution.

To his surprise, he felt her soft lips on his cheek and she whispered "In time love, in time." She then stood quickly, knife in hand and quickly sliced the throat of the struggling girl. The victim gave out a high squeal and then fell silent as her blood and life flowed away. David could not help but watch as her pupils dilated in the last moment of her life on this earth.

"Come my pet, I have servants who can prepare her for the crypt. I need your services elsewhere."

Again they ascended into the castle, until they reached a large warm bedroom. A huge four-poster bed stood dominant in the middle of the room. She pulled David into the bed and took the bloody knife and slowly cut his clothing away. David was terrified and completely aroused at the same time.

When he lay naked on his back she laid the knife against his erection and smiled. This time all he saw were gleaming white teeth, "Do you think I could find a better use for this my pet?"

David was beyond words but nodded as best he could. She wheeled around and looked down into his face. "I need something from you."

He felt the edge of the knife against his throat as she straddled him with her powerful thighs. She pressed hard, and he hoped the liquid he felt on his neck was his sweat and not his blood. He tried to cry, but he silently opened his mouth and no sound could come out.

She locked her mouth on his and he felt her sucking hard, drawing out his tongue. He felt razor sharp teeth grinding against it and his mouth filled with blood. He could feel her

drinking. As his mind swam in pain he felt her lower her sex over his aching erection. Fear, pain and rapture mixed into an unbearable cocktail and he climaxed immediately. Feeling ashamed, he felt tears in roll down his cheeks.

Again, expecting her anger, he was surprised to her soft laughter. "Oh yes my precious pet, oh yes." He didn't understand her meaning, but was terrified by it nonetheless.

* * * *

David awoke with a start. He stifled a yelp as he quickly realized he was in his room. He looked at the clock and it read back 1:30 p.m. He was in his bed and the sheets were soaking with his sweat and sperm. He stumbled to the shower, needing the warm water on his face to snap him out of his stupor.

"A dream, it was just a fucking wet dream." he muttered. "Maybe Pat is right. Maybe I am spending too much time online."

He allowed the water to flow over him and calm him. He felt grimy and the water helped him feel clean and whole again. He tried, with some success to push the horrifying images from his mind, but those eyes and teeth had somehow etched themselves in his soul.

David dried himself and threw on a robe. Stumbling out into the living room he was happy to see that Pat had left and that he had not, in fact, thrown up. He found Pat's dirty dishes and knew he had helped himself to breakfast before he had left—a ham sandwich black coffee. David smiled and

noticed that the coffee was on and didn't smell too stale. Pat must have left less than an hour ago.

He poured himself some of the hot black liquid and stared out the window. It was snowing hard. It was the first real snow of the season, and it promised to be a dilly. David was glad it was Saturday. In his youth, he hated snow days. He was good at school and liked going to class. Snow days reminded him of what he couldn't do—run and play. But it was Saturday, and he could enjoy this snow.

"Nothing like hot coffee on a cold snowy morning. Who cares if it's two fucking p.m.?" David said to himself happily. If he hadn't known better he'd have said that his leg didn't even hurt any more.

Chapter 2

Ginger Collins looked out on the bright winter day and grinned. There was something about a bright, cold, snow-covered day that could amplify a good mood, and Ginger was in the best of moods. Life was good. School was going to be over in a few short months. She was going to spend a glorious summer with her Master, and she had already been accepted to the Cordon Bleu in Paris. She ventured out into the cold Canadian air and headed for her car, in twenty minutes she would be with Kit, and that always made her smile.

Ginger was a submissive. She had known it all her life, but it had taken Kit to bring it out of her. They had been best friends forever.

Kit led, and Ginger happily followed in her considerable wake. Kit was expansive. She had big appetites, big dreams, big plans and big hopes. With Kit, the word charisma almost seemed to be an understatement. Even from an early age she commanded the attention of any room she entered. She was beautiful and bright. Her teachers adored her, though she coasted through school. Her friends all looked up to her, though she could be cruel one minute and loving the next. The adults in her life enjoyed her, though she was always getting into trouble. Ginger was her best friend.

Everything Ginger knew about life she learned from Kit. As children, they had practiced kissing with each other, though Ginger knew Kit wasn't practicing. While Ginger was strictly heterosexual, Kit considered herself bisexual.

Ginger was conservative and very monogamous. Kit was very generous in her sexual appetites and satisfied them whenever and wherever possible. In many ways, they were complete opposites. But they absolutely loved each other.

* * * *

As the car cranked reluctantly, Ginger remembered the afternoon that changed her life forever. She and Kit were fourteen. Kit was in a bratty mood and being particularly teasing and mean to Ginger. She was pushing all her buttons until Ginger threatened to punch Kit if she didn't stop. It was what Kit did next that threw Ginger into a complete rage. Kit laughed at her.

Ginger had flown at Kit and tried to fight her, but Kit was taller and stronger and easily wrestled the smaller girl to the floor. Ginger remembered how full of rage she was, and how Kit fueled it by holding her helpless and laughing harder. Kit sat on the small of Ginger's back and began spanking her hard. Ginger howled in pain and rage, but Kit just hammered on and on.

A million thoughts raced through her mind. She felt terrible and thrilled. She was angry but happy. What was happening? What was she feeling? Why was Kit doing this? All she could do was scream as the pain and her confusion collided, making her head spin.

Finally, Ginger broke down and began crying and pleading. Kit kept spanking. Until—after what seemed like an eternity—she stopped and turned Ginger over and cuddled her.

Ginger sobbed in Kit's arms while Kit rocked her. A part of her realized that she was happy and completely aroused. Kit continued to coo and fuss over Ginger as she sobbed. Then she kissed her, long hard and deep. Ginger had never been kissed like that before by any boy. She felt such love and passion that she almost fainted.

Kit pulled back and looked into Ginger's wet eyes and said, "Don't worry Hon, I won't take advantage of you, you aren't gay, just submissive."

Ginger didn't know what that meant, but Kit explained it to her. She showed Ginger how her need to please and be accepted by everyone was deep and real—how she followed Kit from this need.

Kit had known about Ginger's orientation for a long time. The dynamics of the two of them that day gave her a way to show Ginger her true nature. Ginger cuddled happily in Kit's arms for a long time as she explained.

From that moment on they had been sisters. Kit had helped Ginger find ways to express her sexuality. She introduced her to dominant men and women and other submissives like her. Bit by bit, Ginger learned what a true, loving dominant/submissive relationship was. She learned that it was about love and not violence. She also learned to not be ashamed of her feelings.

Sure, there were abusive Dommies, just as there were abusive *vanilla* lovers, the bondism term for those not in the lifestyle. Ginger had been with one once. He had pushed her way beyond her limits and beaten her severely. When she called "safe" he merely laughed at her and hit her harder. She

was in college at the time. The man had terrified her and hurt her badly. When he was done with her he told her that she was now a true slave, and then rolled over and went to sleep.

When the *vanilla* was snoring loudly, Ginger had crawled timidly out of his bed and called Kit. Within twenty minutes Kit was at the house with three of the biggest men Ginger had ever seen. They worked the guy over pretty well, and Kit told him that they would kill him if he ever showed his face in any of the dominant/submissive clubs again. No one in the room thought she was exaggerating.

Then Kit took Ginger home with her and let her stay until she felt confident enough to be on her own. Ginger lost a year of school, but with Kit's help, she was on her own and happy again. She had since taken her love life online. She dated a few men she had met in the local clubs, but she never let anything become too serious.

After some time, she found a Master online who was warm and caring. Like many, he had no plans to form real-life relationships, and used the Internet as his sexual playground. Unlike many others, he was not married, but had a job that kept him too busy for traditional romance. Ginger often wondered what the job was, but he only explained that it was some sort of troubleshooting. He had agreed to take some time off in the summer and spend some real-life time with Ginger if she liked. In her heart, Ginger knew that this would probably be the end of her relationship with him, but she thought it would be sweet none the less. So she was happy.

She pulled up in front of Kit's house and blasted the horn twice. In a flash, Kit was sitting next to her, singing a song

she had made up about the snow. "Snow, snow, beautiful snow. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful snow!"

Ginger cringed. Ginger sang semi-professionally, but Kit couldn't stay on key for fifty dollars a minute. She never let this stop her, and she was always making up these stupid songs.

"If you're going to sing, then I'll ride in the trunk." groused Ginger.

"Don't give me any ideas, my little Gem! Now drive on!" Kit slapped Ginger's thigh.

Ginger put the car in gear and pulled into traffic. It was going to take them at least an hour to get to Debbie's house. Ginger thought there was no point in trying to rein in Kit,—no human being had ever been able to yet—so she joined her in her silly song. The two friends drove on singing and laughing. As the drive settled into pleasant monotony, the two relaxed and began talking in earnest. Kit, as usual, wanted Ginger to tell more about her mysterious Master.

"It caught us both by surprise, you know. He's so busy and I always felt like I was just playing online. We were attracted to each other because neither of us wanted a commitment. Then one night, wham! There we are, discussing terms and then I offered him my neck and he accepted.

"I don't know, it just felt right for both of us. Maybe because there is no future for us, who knows?"

"But what does he do? What's his story?"

"All I know is that he's some kind of troubleshooter. A consultant. He gave me his office number, and if he's not

there, I get an answering service for Hunter Solutions inc. They wouldn't do anything but take a message."

"You sure he's not a criminal? A killer or something?"

Ginger shrugged uncomfortably. "Who can be sure about anything these days? I thought I was sure about Ron..."

Both women were silent for a moment, trying to remove the image of the man who had beaten Ginger so badly from their minds.

"But I have a feeling that a criminal wouldn't have given me his office number, or have one for that matter. I also don't think a criminal would be that open or work that hard.

"Besides, you know the confidence he exudes."

Kit nodded in agreement. She had introduced them. Master-Slayer was well liked and respected by everyone. He had never taken an online submissive, and he was considered quite a prize. He didn't cat around, but he was not a prude either. Kit, as Sub-Arrow and Mistress-of-Life, had spent time alone with him, and he was a real turn on. She was tickled when Ginger, as Sub-Tamekitten, had become Slayer's-Kitten. Sub-Arrow had stood by her side during the collaring ceremony. The car moved through the local traffic and the women chattered on about nothing at all. They parked in front of the modest house in the Montreal suburbs. The fresh snow made it look cleaner and fancier than it might ordinarily seem. Ginger took in the sight as she parked and again thought about how much she loved winter. To her, it was a season of life and hope

* * * *

They rang the bell and heard Debbie call from inside,
"Come in, you guys. I'll just be a minute."

They found the door unlocked and they let themselves in.

"Just have a seat. I'll be down in a second." Kit looked at Ginger and they both shook their heads and ran upstairs to where the voice was coming from.

"Damn you two!" Debbie cried, "Leave me alone! I'm almost done!" Debbie was sitting at her computer and her two friends crowded around to see what she was up too.

They were not disappointed.

—Sub-Flame—Strains against her ropes, small tears filling her eyes.

—Lord-Raptor—Raises the flogger again and again

*SWATS*SWATS*SWAT*SWATS*SWAT*SWATS*

—Sub-Flame—Cries and begs her Master for mercy.

—Lord-Raptor—Drops the flogger and sees his girl's tears and moves to kiss them, praising her for her bravery and courage.

Reading over her friend's shoulder, Kit howled with laughter. Debbie turned beet red. They had all done what she was doing, but it was embarrassing—and stimulating—to have her friends reading over her shoulder. Debbie gave up.

—Sub-Flame—Master?

—Lord-Raptor—Yes dear? Looking with pleasure at his beautiful subbie.

Debbie reached around and swatted Kit before she could make another remark.

—Sub-Flame—Master, this girl is sorry, but I must leave. I have real-life obligations.

—Lord-Raptor—I understand, Little one.

—Lord-Raptor—Unties Flame and kisses her passionately—
Sub-Flame—Returns her Master's kiss happily.

—Lord-Raptor—Watches his subbie leave.

Debbie hit the exit button and the chatroom logged her out. She left the computer running. Debbie had two phone lines, so it didn't matter if she stayed connected forever.

Kit poked Debbie in the ribs. "Raptor? My god, kiddo, couldn't you come up with something a little better than him? Hell he's such a—stuffed shirt. He thinks he was born with that title."

"Oh he's not so bad when you get to know him. Actually he's pretty tentative and insecure when you get him private. All his strutting and pompousness is for the general public in open rooms. Besides, you know how it is on the weekends. Most of the interesting chatters are out having real lives." She stuck out her tongue at her two best friends.

"You know it was either Raptor or something tame with a Thrall. Though, to be honest, he was throwing off some pretty good cyber-vibes today."

Kit woo-hoo'ed loudly and pushed Debbie from her chair. "This I got to see for myself." The other two watched her, knowing it was impossible to deter her, and neither really wanting to.

* * * *

Kit's hands danced over the keyboard and she was quickly logged in as Mistress-of-Life. Kit was a *switch*. She would come in both as a sub and a Domme depending on her mood.

Most chatters knew this but some did not approve. Still, everyone knew that most of the regulars switched from time to time. Like everything though, Kit made a production of it and hid it from no one, so she earned the scorn of some of the more hypocritical chatters. Kit enjoyed that part best of all. Sometimes she would go into a room in her Domme persona and go on and on about some brutal session she had suffered in real-life, complaining about her welts incessantly.

Kit did a /goto, and quickly was in the same public room as Sub-Thrall. She ghosted a second to be sure he was not in service to anyone right now.

—Mistress-of-Life—Summons Thrall to her knees—Sub-Thrall—Runs to Mistress-of Life and kneels at her feet, back straight, head high, eyes downcast.

—Mistress-of-Life—Holds Thrall's head and then snuggles his tonsils out.

* * * *

One of the British chatters introduced the word snog to the others. It meant necking, hugging and kissing, foreplay. Everyone quickly ran with it and soon there was lots of snogs, snogging, snuggles, etc., going on. Once someone mistyped the word kiss and it came out liss. To cover their mistake, they claimed it was a kiss with lots of tongue, so now lissing was among the favorite activities too.

Kit invited Thrall for a private chat.

—Mistress-of-Life—David—they all knew each other's real names—an honor in chat—Ingrid and Debbie are here with me, would you like to go private with all three of us?

—Sub-Thrall—Nods.

Kit set up the room and invited David in. Within minutes they were steaming each other's screens with many lurid suggestions.

"Cyber-vibe is an understatement girl." Kit hissed to Debbie at one point. More than ever, they could feel David in the room with all of them and they were getting pretty worked up

Kit regretted two things right away. First was that she was not alone with David. She knew he could satisfy himself, but she did have a modicum of propriety, and would not satisfy herself in front of her friends. The second was that she had not come in as her submissive persona. David was in rare form and she felt like kneeling before him and offering herself to him completely.

After what seemed like an eternity, they parted and no one felt like speaking. Kit snapped off the computer. Finally, she broke the silence and said "Whatever that boy is eating, we have to get some. Damn!"

The others didn't laugh. They just nodded their assent. They moved around the house quietly for an hour or two. Debbie, tidying up a little and Ginger and Kit unpacking in the guest room. Later they all got dressed and made themselves up for the evening.

* * * *

Ginger was usually uncomfortable with long silences, and would often joke or sing to fill them. She noticed, however,

that she was enjoying this night's quiet and moved silently in the glow of the encounter.

As they were gathering in the living room to set out on their adventures, Kit said what they had all been feeling.

"Damn, we gotta get that boy to take a title, I think he has his stable of subs right here."

Ginger blushed. She suddenly felt like maybe she had cheated on her Master. She would tell him about it though, and if he wanted to punish her, then so much the better. Somehow she knew he wouldn't, though.

* * * *

The club was lively and hot. The music was loud and the drinks were weak and the three girls were having the time of their life. Ginger knew some of the guys in the band and they had asked her to sing in the upcoming set. She happily agreed. Kit watched with satisfaction as she went to go warm up.

"You really love Ginger, don't you?" Debbie asked.

"I love all my friends." Kit said reaching across the table and taking Debbie's hand.

Debbie laughed "Thanks, but that's not what I meant. I wasn't fishing. I mean you two really love each other. I love seeing it. Mainly because I get to see a soft side to you that you usually keep hidden. It's nice."

Kit's defenses went up immediately and she thought of something sarcastic to say. Instead she relaxed and held Debbie's hand instead. "Yeah, well..." was all she could think to say.

The jukebox was unplugged and the band was introduced. They called Ginger onto the stage and began playing slow and sexy. Ginger was belting out some road house favorites and people were getting up to dance. It was a rule on "Girls night" that they wouldn't flirt or dance with anyone else because this was their time. If they wanted to dance they would do it with other girls. Sometimes they got a few insults or remarks from any men who dared enter the bar that night, and sometimes they got a compliment and offer to take their dance someplace more intimate. But this night they danced in peace to the sound of their Ginger's singing.

When the song ended, they returned to find the waiter at their table with a round of drinks they had not ordered. Kit sighed and told him "Do I have to hang a sign? We aren't here to get picked up, now take it back to whoever sent it. Please!" She dropped a five on the waiter's tray and he moved away quickly.

"Damn," she moaned. "If this keeps up, I'm going to get up on stage and explain to the room just what NO means." They had been getting drink offers all night. It was not uncommon to get one or two invitations. But some unknown admirer wasn't taking the hint. This was the tenth time she had sent the waiter away. Maybe since she tipped him this time, he'd run interference for them.

A short while later a man with two drinks in his hand approached the table. Obviously, the waiter got the message across and now he was being bold enough to deliver his own drinks. Kit took a breath and prepared to read him the riot act. His manner stopped her short.

"Ma'am, I talked to the waiter, and I'm sorry." She notice the while he stood straight, his eyes were downcast. Kit nodded.

After a time she spoke, "Leave the drinks and your card with a number I can call you whenever it suits me. You will meet me at the Club DeSade on Wednesday. I will call you with instructions on how to get there and how to be admitted."

The Club DeSade was more than private. It had no listing, charter or license to operate. But it was the hottest S/M club in the area and took a lot of pay-offs to keep it that way. "At that time you will be instructed about your manners."

The man left the drinks and took out a business card and wrote a number on it. He laid it next to the drinks.

"If this number rings up a service, or a woman answers, that's it. You'd best not be playing me."

"No Ma'am," he said softly. Kit smiled to Debbie. She had never once looked at the suitor after her initial appraisal. "You may return to your seat, do not try to make any further contact with me or my friends, understood?"

"Yes Ma'am" he answered, and was gone. Debbie watched him wend his way back to his friends. He spoke a word or two to them and they all got up and left the club. Kit never once looked up. Debbie was amazed.

"How do you do that? I mean in here of all places!"

"Don't know. After a while you just get the radar up and running and they come to you." She grinned, "He was pretty tasty, don't you think?"

"How could you tell? You never looked at him?"

"He was wearing a Brooks Brother's suit and silk tie. His shirt was professionally cleaned and starched. He was wearing expensive, yummy cologne. I'll be you anything he drives a Mercedes, Porsche or BMW." She held up the card for Debbie to see, "He's a lawyer."

Debbie was amazed. She had watched closely. Kit never once looked at the card, either. "How can you tell?"

"Like I said, good radar. Oh and he dresses to the right." Kit winked and Debbie blushed.

Later, the three friends found themselves sitting in Debbie's darkened living room sipping hot chocolate. The mood was mellow and they could not imagine being anywhere but right there. It was late, and they were all exhausted, but they all wanted to stretch the moment as far as they could.

"Kit what do you want?" Ginger asked.

"A marshmallow would be nice, a big one, not those pokey little ones."

"Not what I mean stupid, what do you want, from life? I mean you fly off in so many directions...."

Kit thought for a second, "Someone to show me one way to go."

They sat in the dark, not speaking.

Chapter 3

Jean Monet unlocked his apartment and walked to his desk. It was late and he was anxious. This assignment would take a long time, he knew. He looked back on the last five years of his life and wondered what it all meant. Was he any closer?

The council was showing more patience than he was. They had warned him that this assignment might take a long time. In fact, that it might never come to fruition. They had been hunting this one for a long time. She was slippery and wise. She had lived a long time and did not make many mistakes.

He had taken out some minor vampires early in his career. In fact, it was because of his success that the council chose him for this assignment. Renee had warned him that this would be different. Unlike most of the others, she knew about the council and she was clever and knew how to hide.

Over the years he had come close. He suspected that he had even met this vampire once or twice. He thought of how many trails that had led to nothing. He couldn't even use himself as bait. If she attacked him, she would expose herself to the council, so she would not do that. Instead, she relied on her powers of deceptions and cunning to hide, and she laid false trails.

He flipped on his computer and set his e-mail to retrieve. He saw he had thirteen messages from Kitten and smiled. His answering service also showed that she had called there a number of times as well. She would be out with her friends tonight, so there was no point in trying to call her. He thought

of the folly of this relationship. Why was he all weakness and need? All his life he had worked to be tough. He wondered if this weakness be his undoing? He hoped and prayed not.

* * * *

He noticed Chairman Renee had left him an e-mail and he opened it. The message was short and to the point:

"Intelligence suggests subject may be exposing herself for capture. Be careful.—Renee."

Jean shook his head. He knew what the message meant. He was not the only hunter chasing Angelique—his pet name for the subject. She had so many names it was impossible to know what to call her. He also knew that "old ones" sometimes got very bored and exposed themselves to hunters just for sport.

Jean often tried to comprehend the hellish curse of eternal life and shuddered to himself. If Angelique wanted to play, that meant that she would leave clues for him to follow. If he wasn't careful he might follow one to his own death. Or worse.

He sat in his office chair and watched the city below for a very long time. After a while he took out his rosary and knelt at the foot of the cot and prayed. He prayed for strength, he prayed for the safety of his friends, he prayed for answers. Mostly he prayed for his faith to remain strong.

Chapter 4

David settled in behind his computer and logged into chat. A hot cup of coffee at his side he navigated into the Bondage Château with ease. It was a typical Saturday night and most of the action was going on in private rooms. Some were secured, but most were open. He thought he would drift around a while and see what action he could dig up.

This afternoon had been fun. Kit and company had gotten him pretty steamed up, but he needed something more. He needed to be submissive.

The Château was lively, but mostly with people coming in and out. Some of the regulars were gossiping, so he thought he'd stay for a bit and see what was up.

—Lord-Stingray—I'm telling you, he's coming in as two or three different people and he's leading a bunch of subs on. We have to do something.

—Mistress-Darkness—But what? You tell the subs and they just get mad at you, and Paladin doesn't care what any one else thinks of him.

—Sub-Thorn—shakes her head: I try and warm them, help them. But they just won't listen.

—Sub-Thrall—I know love, you work hard, but you do help some. Look at me (Grins)!

—Sub-Thorn—I suppose. It's just so damn frustrating.

—Stingrays-Shadow—Huggles her sister—Sub-Thorn—Thanks sis.

As they spoke, the system announced the comings and going of a number of chatters. Some David knew, most he

didn't. He paid little notice until the name Vampire-Empress was announced by the system.

—Vampire-Empress—Enters and nods to those who are Worthy and smiles to all the tasty subs. (*^^^ ^^*)

"Nice touch" David spoke out loud. Many of the subs used emotive symbols, the most famous were the sideways smiley faces :+), winks ;+—, frowns :+(. and a few made up personal signals.

David had to get Vampire's attention. He immediately devised a plan. He noticed that she brushed off a couple of the pushy male subs, so a direct attack was not going to work. David grinned, this is what he was good at. A short burst of typing and he was in.

—Sub-Thrall—Looks to see where he put his garlic. Damn, must be in his other pants.

—Vampire-Empress—Smiles.

—Sub-Thrall—: Well I do always carry a crucifix for just such an emergency—darn, left it in the car!

—Vampire-Empress—looks at Thrall—Sub-Thrall—A mirror, someone lend me a mirror—quick!

—Vampire-Empress—Beckons Thrall to her side.

—Sub-Thrall—Looks at Vampire-Empress with terror and walks as though his will were not his own, then kneels before her.

—Vampire-Empress—caresses the charming boy's face and asks him to fetch a warm red refreshment.

David grinned. She just asked him for a serve. This was typical foreplay among the regulars. Not all the subs served, but those who did, hardly ever regretted it. David kept a

notebook with all the Domme's favorite drinks by his computer. It really impressed them that he remembered their favorite beverages and foods.

—Sub-Thrall—Rises and walks to the server. Checking the stores he looks up and smiles to Vampire-Empress.

—Vampire-Empress—Smiles and nods to the tasty Thrall.

—Sub-Thrall—Examines the crystal and find one perfect goblet with a monogrammed "V" upon it. He takes it down and inspects it for cracks or flaws. Finding none, he polishes it and sets it upon a silver—oops, polished wooden tray.

—Vampire-Empress—Nods to the thoughtful subbie.

David grinned, she noticed. Good.

—Sub-Thrall—Searches the stock of wine, he inspects the clubs offerings. Finding nothing to Vampire-Empress's standards he settles for a Chilean Merlot.

David knew wines, and it impressed people who did as well when he went for the Chilean vintage. France had suffered a grape blight and most of the traditional French wines were now grown in Chili and other South American Countries.

—Sub-Thrall—Uncorks the wine and sniffs the cork to be sure that the wine is not skunked and examines it to be sure it was stored properly. He then pours it in the waiting goblet. Taking a perfect white rose from the vase, he places that too upon the tray.

Balancing it with his left hand he moves to Vampire-Empress and offers her the refreshment.

—Vampire-Empress—Takes the wine and sips casually. She shakes her head at the poor quality of the club's offerings.

Grazing her hand over the boy's jaw she tells him to come with her and prepare something more suitable.

David felt the thrill of success that he always felt when a new Domme asked him to go private. Perhaps it was this feeling that he craved more than any other, and kept him from settling down. He set the computer to follow and waited as she took him to her private domain.

The screen went blank for a long period of time. David wondered if she had dragged him to a new server. He had heard rumors that it was possible to do that, but he never talked to anyone who had been able to do it or had it happen to them. He chalked it up to yet another cyber legend, but now he believed. Maybe he'd ask her how afterwards.

—Vampire-Empress—Strides into the large Gothic room and sits upon her throne.

—Sub-Thrall—Stops and bows in the doorway, waiting for permission to enter.

—Vampire-Empress—Nods to the manling.

—Sub-Thrall—Walks gracefully to his Mistress and kneels on the cold stone floor, ignoring the pain the unyielding stone causes.

—Vampire-Empress—Smiles down at her little one puts her hand under his chin, tilting his head up, and making eye contact with him.

David felt an incredible chill run through his body. It was not dissimilar to other feelings of Domination he had felt on the net, but this was a thousand times more powerful. David knew he was completely in her power and was more sexually excited than he had ever been in his life. In a small part of his

mind that he still controlled, he wondered, almost as an observer, if this is what love felt like.

—Vampire-Empress—Lifts him to his feet and stands before him, giving him a soft kiss on his full red lips.

David shivered and almost orgasmed on the spot. He wanted to type how he felt. How aroused he was. To reach out and touch her perfect body. To write his love for her. He wanted to say so much, but could only force his finger to type one line.

—Sub-Thrall—Opens himself to her kiss, turns his head to expose his neck.

David was suddenly terrified. His mind had placed him in the castle he dreamt about the night before. All the horrible images from his dream flooded back in an instant. He felt cold. He didn't know what was happening. He never experienced a mood swing like this. Complete love and joy one second and hopeless terror the next. He now wanted to run, to get up. Turn off the computer and never come back. He could only sit and watch as the screen as the words slowly scrolled in front of him.

—Vampire-Empress—Bares her fangs and buries them into the soft beautiful flesh of her precious little one. She drinks deeply.

David's terror peaked, and vanished as quickly as it had come. It was replaced by total sexual release. David felt himself pouring into this goddess. It was more powerful than any sexual experience he had ever had, either in cyber or in real-life.

David didn't know he could feel like this. Wave after wave of pleasure washed over him again and again. His eyes unfocused and only saw soft brown images, then dark, then black, then nothing.

* * * *

David came to. God, he had passed out! He looked at the clock in a panic and was relieved to see he was only out for a minute or two. He cleared the cobwebs out his brain and looked in fear the computer screen. He was scared that she would be angry that he had been silent. His heart sank when he realized that the computer was off. He must have killed the power before he passed out.

He new enough about the human mind to know this was possible. He heard stories of drivers who, while fighting sleep woke themselves up driving somewhere other than the highway they thought they were on. For a short period, anyway, they had operated without volition, but, but had reacted correctly to external stimuli.

David thought about logging back on, but quickly discarded the idea. He had no way of finding where Vampire-Empress had taken him without her help, and he knew somehow that she would not return to the chateau. Still, he was possessed by a complete sense of well being. Somehow he knew she wasn't mad at him. That, in fact, she was pleased and would spend time with him again.

Suddenly he felt the need to be among his friends. Julie and Samantha would be together tonight. They did need some time alone. Pat and Wayne had invited him to shoot

pool at the Student Union. For once they didn't argue when he said he wanted to stay in. He knew he could catch them there.

The Student Union pool hall was lively tonight. Usually it was weekday afternoons when the tables were full. But the weather was lousy and the students were looking for things to do indoors. The small bowling alley was crowded and there was a two hour waiting list. The video room was packed and noisy with players packed shoulder to shoulder stuffing quarters into the games as if there was no tomorrow. There were many waiting to use the pool tables as well

Pat and Wayne had gotten there early and were shooting eight-ball. They had no intention of giving up their table. A couple of frat types, tired of waiting decided that they would offer a little muscle and see if they could drive the other boys away.

Pat tried to ignore the approach of the muscle-bound fools as they neared. He said a silent prayer that they would move on, pick on someone else. It was a story that had played again and again in his life. He started to tremble as the two move in for the kill.

"Don't you think you assholes have played long enough?"

Pat scanned the room for any sign of help, maybe the student cafeteria worker? He knew it was a futile to call for help.

"Don't look to anyone else motherfucker. No one cares about you. No one wants you here. Just go."

Pat couldn't speak through his terror. Wayne was backed off by the simian's partner and he knew the truth. No one

would come to his aid. If he tried to stay, he would be beaten and still lose the table. He started to back off. The shame stung, but it was a feeling he had grown up with.

Then, suddenly, he heard a loud crack come from behind his adversary. Pat almost fainted.

If Pat were able to understand what he was seeing he still wouldn't have believed it. David had come out of nowhere and had slammed his cane against the pool table. Everyone in the room stopped what they were doing and watched. The student worker thought about yelling something about not hurting the tables, but thought better of it.

"Who the fuck do you think you are asshole?" David said steadily.

The frat guy turned to confront his new adversary. He outweighed David by a hundred pounds at least. But something in David's manner stopped him in his tracks.

"Tell me something, Shithead. You hesitated, you're thinking maybe there's more to me than you first thought. You're having doubts. Maybe I know karate, maybe I'm crazy, maybe you can kick the crap out of me, but you don't know. But you do know one thing, without a doubt, I have no doubts about you and that I'm prepared to kill you where you stand. Now make a move or get the fuck away from my friend." David ran his fingers lovingly over the smooth oak of his cane.

The frat boy was losing face. Everyone was watching him to make a move one way or another. The small fuck with the cane had scared him bad and he had no intention of moving on him. Maybe he could salvage his pride and scare his first

victim. He turned slowly but David slammed his cane against the table again.

"Don't look at him, this isn't about him It's about you and me. You better fucking hope that nothing happens to him, ever. Cuz if he wakes up with a head ache I'm going to come out and find you and tear your fucking lungs out!"

For maybe half a second the frat boy considered fighting, thinking his pride was worth the beating he knew he'd receive. Maybe his friend would help him, but he saw that he had long evaporated. Alone, he lost his confidence and was secretly afraid he might loose his bladder control at any second. He turned and ran from the building.

"I hate fuckers like that." David said in his wake. "God it would have felt good just to drop that asshole in his tracks, see his head open up like a ripe watermelon."

"David!" Pat managed to choke out "What the Hell was that?"

Pat truly didn't know who it was standing in from of her. He seemed taller, and stronger than his best friend. He had never seen David act cold and cruel like that before. Pat was frightened of David for the first time in his life.

David made eye contact with Pat and blinked twice. Suddenly Pat recognized David again, the monster was gone and his old friend was back.

David laughed and said "It's all attitude. You remember Alice Cooper? If you look closely enough you can see what a scrawny guy he is, but he used to bully people twice his size when he'd go out in his leathers. Attitude."

"Whatever." Pat gulped.

"Now lets play some stick, boys tonight's on me cuz I feel great."

* * * *

David found himself in a cold stone room he knew to be a Dungeon. Before him was a young naked girl in a cage. The inside of the cage had razor sharp points and she was trying to be careful not to cut herself. His mistress appeared and spoken in the same discordant voice he remembered.

"Do you know that the population grows and grows and that we live on a ball in space? That means, not matter how slowly it grows, we will eventually run out of space for everyone. There are more people than there are rats, and she thinks she someone's special?" His companion picked up a hot poker and approached the terrified girl.

She pressed the glowing poker through the bars and the girl moved quickly to dodge it. She succeeded in avoiding a terrible burn, but cut herself on the spikes that she had momentarily forgotten. Again and again, the woman stabbed with the poker, and again and again the girl got cut. Some of the cuts were minor and some were deep.

Eventually the accumulated loss of blood took its toll and the girl lost consciousness. She fell against the cage and sliced herself fatally. Her life's blood flowed through a grate in the floor directly below the cage.

"Come look my pet. See how frail and ineffectual she looks? How could any of their lives be worth more than a moments notice? Don't you agree?"

* * * *

But David did not agree. There was a small part of him that considered her words but he was overcome with revulsion at the sight before him. He was sick and he was ashamed that he had disappointed his Mistress yet again.

Vampire-Empress surprised him again by kissing him deeply and saying "In time my pet, in time."

And then she lowered him to the floor and once again made quick and furious love to him.

* * * *

David rose with a start and was again bathed in sweat and sperm. He felt grimy and like he wanted to cry. He hobbled to the shower and again washed the dream from his body if not his mind. And paradoxically, as before, he was overcome by a sense of well being and happiness as he thought about facing the day ahead.

Yes, the world seemed to open for him like a flower. Backing that bully down was easy. People were such fools. If you gave it a modicum of thought it was easy to get them to do just what you wanted. Yes today was, in fact, the first day of a new and exciting life.

Chapter 5

Vampire-Empress opened her eyes and sighed in satisfaction. Thrall was coming along, and soon the game would be afoot. She considered the dream the girl in David's dream and wondered why she had made such an impression. Even before her transformation, there had been so many, hundreds. Was there something special about that one? Or was she just representative of the many. A face to put where her vast mind needed one. *Who knew? Who cared?*

She did know one thing, she envied the child the ability to feel that life was so precious. And to know that it was so fleeting. To wonder what lay beyond, and look at it with optimism. How many would be so noble if they had waiting for them what She did. She knew what lay beyond. But her life had become so Hellishly monotonous that the true Hell had lost its fright. In fact, it might even be welcome.

If not for the game she would have put herself in the sun years ago. The wonderful, glorious game. Her new opponent was glorious. Renee was clever and smart. He used all his advantages to their best, and he had many advantages.

First of all, he had the best technology and the best technicians. She too had access to wonderful technology, but it was still alien to her. She was basically distrustful and hesitant enough to keep her half a step behind Renee. He embraced every technological advance with glee and kept a staff of the best, well paid and cared for.

His second advantage is one that she would not have admitted until recently. While she had the advantage of long

life and memory, he had the advantage of shifting strategies. She was smarter than he and had personally fought and beat all of his predecessors. Experience in the "show" sports people call it. But he could study the tactics of his predecessors and change his attack. She was bound by her own personality and methods. She knew this.

She also knew that she was a coward and that she was afraid of Renee and his council. That they would hunt her for eternity, and there was nothing she could do about it. Except use it to amuse her, to make the unbearable monotony of her eternal existence livable. For a while, anyway.

Would this be the last game? She wondered. The thought gave her a chill that was not all together unpleasant. Yes but it would be a game to remember. Perhaps it was time to remove one of Renee's pieces from the board. She considered his pawns for a moment and chose her victim. The choice was rather simple. A beautiful bit of misdirection. Renee's hunter would assume he was the target and put his attention away from her true goal. She smiled.

She walked to the window and looked out over the city that would some awaken from another night's sleep. The sky was turning from black to gray. She craved to see the sun, just once. It had been so long. Maybe today she would just sit in her chair and wait.

No, where was the sport in that?

Chapter 6

Pat was sitting at Bear's and was getting impatient. David was never really punctual, but thirty minutes was excessive, even for him. He waved the waitress off yet another time and set a limit in his mind. He didn't want to leave, but he hated eating alone in restaurants. He sat and nursed his watery drink.

David finally strode in and smiled broadly at Pat. Pat had never seen David like this. He was bold and confident. He actually spoke to two or three women as he entered the room. He also noticed that David was carrying, but not leaning on, his cane.

"*Que paso*, old buddy?"

"Not bad, you seem in fine spirits."

"You have no idea *mi amigo*. You have no idea."

* * * *

David slid into the wooden booth. He grabbed a menu and quickly scanned the bill of fare. "Damn, I'm hungry. Think I'll get a steak."

David did in fact order a steak, and soup and an appetizer and a salad and dessert.

"When did you get a tape worm?" Pat asked, his stomach hurt just thinking about all that food.

"Pat, I don't know, it's just like I've been walking around in a trance and then woke up. Is this what normal people feel like? It's great!"

"I wouldn't know." Pat muttered.

"Hey, bro. You know I really should thank you for all this. You've been kidding me and ignoring my bad mood. Maybe it finally took hold."

Pat smiled "It's funny, I'm just used to being the happy one in this relationship. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were in love."

David blushed.

"No way!" Pat said.

"Well, I wouldn't call it love, yet. But this really could be it, Pat. She really could be the one." David paused to gulp the beer that the waitress had left for him a moment ago.

"Pat I know how you and the guys feel about my online friends, but I've never felt like this before. Never. I met the most incredible woman. I mean, you know, we really don't know each other very well. But, you know, she and I have this, well, chemistry. She's everything I'm looking for. Everything."

"David, what if she's ninety years old or something?"

"Pat, I don't care, I don't care about anything other than how she makes me feel. And I know, she feels the same about me. God Pat, this could really be the one. She really could be It."

"You know I'm happy for you, but David, your experience with women is even worse than mine. Take your time. I mean it. You hear about these people who run off and meet someone off the Internet and you never hear from them again."

David rolled his eyes "Don't worry, most of that is urban legend. I'm pretty smart, I know what I'm doing."

"Okay then David, but just remember that no one goes into something like this believing that they will be hurt. No one." The conversation lightened quickly. They gossiped about acquaintances and discussed their classes. Pat was working on a research project with one of the psych professors. It was an honor for an undergrad to be offered this kind of an opportunity. David was happy for his friend and saw him in a new light as well.

David turned quiet for a second "Pat, how much do you know about dreams?"

"You mean the scientific or theoretical stuff?"

"Not sure what you mean by that."

"The scientific stuff is what we can measure, REM, cycles, deep or light, memory, that kind of stuff. The meaning of dreams, symbology, purpose, all that's theoretical, no way to truly study or measure. In fact, some scientists deny dreaming all together. But they deny the existence of the mind too."

"The theoretical stuff, meaning." David's eyes were shifting quickly and his voice was low.

"Some, what do you want to know?"

David explained his dreams of the last two nights. "I mean, I've come to terms with the fact that I'm sexually submissive and a masochist, but these images scare the Hell out of me. And that it's all mixed in with sex. God, am I turning into a serial killer or something?"

Pat laughed softly "I hardly think so. Okay, I don't know much about the symbolism stuff, but most therapists will tell you that reoccurring dreams are your sub consciousness

trying to get your attention. I can recommend a couple of good Docs at the clinic, it's not my area, but I know they are good."

David's eyes sparkled and his mood shifted again. "No worries my friend, I probably just need more sleep or sex."

"Isn't that an oxymoron?"

"Probably" David laughed.

"But you probably are spending too much time on that computer. Who knows what all that is doing to your subconscious?"

"Yeah, maybe. Who knows?" Pat knew David paid no attention to his last comment.

Pat walked David home and then walked back to his own quarters. He lived in a rooming house that was notoriously referred to as the Wildlife Sanctuary. Pat liked it because of the chaotic atmosphere. The house was once a grand mansion. Pat's room used to be one of the parlors, or maybe a dining room. The house had been remodeled so much it was hard to tell.

The room was large and the ceiling was tall. Pat had enough space for a water bed, a large desk and work table. He settled down and tried to read his latest assignments. He was having trouble concentrating, a terrible sense of dread had overcome him. He was sure something terrible was about to happen. "Maybe I've got David's moodiness now that he doesn't want it?" Pat wondered to himself. He was shaken from his reverie by a knock on his door.

Chapter 7

Debbie had a tough day at work. She thought back on her day, and couldn't put her finger on anything in particular. Her co-workers had been touchy and there were a thousand tick-tacky little things that filled the day. She could not look back on any one thing that she had done that could have made any kind of difference to anyone.

She stepped into her shower and prayed that the warm water would soothe her and pick her spirits up. She knew that living alone was taking it's toll, but she didn't know what to do about it. After years of family and kids, it had all fallen apart so fast. Somehow, she felt she just lost her husband as her children flew the nest. Like maybe he was just misplaced. She didn't miss him, just his company.

She was relatively young still, forty-one wasn't that old anymore. She had more than half her life ahead of her and she intended to be happy. Coming to terms with her submissiveness was a first step. A very important first step.

There was a light knock at the front door and Debbie looked out the window and saw a car with a flat tire in front of her house. She knew how awful it was to break down in this weather so she threw on a robe and ran to the front door.

An elderly woman smiled up at her as she opened the heavy front door.

"Come in Ma'am, you must be awfully cold." Debbie's breath plumed even though she was still inside the door jamb.

"Thank you dear, if I could just use your phone. I hate to be a bother." The old woman sniffed and dabbed at her red nose with a lace-trimmed handkerchief.

"Oh no bother at all." Debbie stepped to one side so the old lady could enter. "The phone is over there. Can I get you some coffee, or tea. You could use something warm I am sure." She closed the door and turned to face her guest.

"Something warm, yes. And I am afraid it is going to be a terrible bother for you."

Debbie had no time to scream as the woman closed her hands around her throat. The small old woman had been replaced by a young and tall woman. Her hand had Debbie's throat in a viselike grip and held her off the floor. She considered her with dispassionate eyes as Debbie kicked and struggled. Those eyes were that last thing the Debbie ever saw.

* * * *

The smell of blood had filled the house and Angelique felt giddy. The girl was no challenge at all. The little thing had passed out and never woke up. She had savaged the poor thing and made sure to spatter her blood all over the house. She wanted to get everyone's attention, and she knew she would.

Her hands were slick with the girl's blood when she sat down at Debbie's computer. She turned it on and logged onto the network as Debbie's persona Sub-Flame.

The passwords were easy to pull from Debbie's mind before she died. She navigated to the Bondage Chateau and

chatted ideally with some of the regulars, as soon as She saw Sub-Thrall come into the room (as she knew he would), She typed: *AFK*, then a moment later *HELP!!!*

She left the computer on, took a very quick shower, changed into some of Debbie's clothes and walked out of the house and drove away the flat tire thumping on the ice as she vanished from sight.

Chapter 8

Ginger picked up the phone on the second ring "Hello?"

"Ginger? This is David. I think there's a problem.

"What's wrong hon?"

"Nothing I hope, but Debbie was just online, is still on, but she's not answering me. I know I'm not making any sense. Debbie was on and then went *AFK*. A moment later she typed *HELP* and then nothing."

Ginger was speechless as David talked "I called her house, but the phone just rang. You better check on her Ginger, I'm worried."

"Sure thing David. I'll call when I get a hold of her."

She didn't know what to do. Maybe she should call Kit. She dialed the number and the phone rang and rang. David had probably called Kit first, she cursed herself for not asking him.

She thought about calling the police, and hesitated. It was an outlandish story. Then she remembered her own attack. How alone she had felt. She picked up the phone and dialed the operator.

It took a moment to get the local police, and a little longer to explain her story. She had to do so three times. First to a clerk, then to an officer and then to a detective. She was getting nervous and angry.

"So you're telling me the a friend of yours in the states was talking to Debbie Mills on the computer? She typed a call for help and then he couldn't talk to her anymore? The he called her and then called you when she didn't answer? You called her and then you called us?"

"That's right, please I know it sounds weird, but please send someone over to her house. She could be in terrible danger, there are awful people out there. Please." She was starting to cry.

"Ma'am? Please calm down. We sent a car out ten minutes ago. Now please tell me your name again, please it's for the report."

"Ginger, Ginger Beaumont. I her best friend, I would feel awful if anything's happened to her."

"I know Ma'am and I'm sorry, we just have paperwork to go through."

Ginger mechanically answered the rest of his questions, giving her name and address, her phone number, and how she knew Debbie over and over again. Then after an eternity the voice on the other end of the phone cut her off. When he spoke, his voice was not a reassuring, more hollow than before.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, your friend's been hurt, can I send a car for you? You should come here as soon as possible."

"Yes" Ginger choked into the phone and hung up before he could confirm. She fell on the floor sobbing. She stayed that way until the doorbell rang and a handsome young Royal Canadian Mounted Police uniformed officer lead her to his car and drove her away.

She quizzed him for details, but he said he was out on a rural patrol and was called in to run her down to the city. He didn't know anything. He said he could try and find out, but wasn't likely to get a straight answer since he'd have to call his station and they would have to call the local police from

there. Ginger told him to never mind and stared out the window.

* * * *

Detective Alexander hung up the phone and looked the memo he has handed. "Are you sure?" He asked the dispatcher. The officer just nodded and waited for instruction.

Alexander sighed and said "Okay you guys know the drill. Get the forensic guys down there, call the coroner and anyone else you can think of. Oh yeah, you might as well call the RCMP, they are gonna want a piece of this too. And get an officer to this address as quick as you can. Call a Mountie if you have to. But I want her here, quickly."

"Yes Sir" The officer said and disappeared to start make calls. Alexander shook his head. A mess, a God damn mess. He didn't needed messes like this. He needed nice quiet crimes. Easy to solve, or easy to write up. This was going to be neither. This was going to be a mess and it was going to kill his career if he wasn't careful.

Maybe the pros from the RCMP would take over, and he could save a ton of money on aspirin. He generally didn't like to hand cases over to the National cops, but this was different. As far as Alexander was concerned this is why Canada had a national police force. To handle shit awful cases like this one.

* * * *

It took a while for Ginger to notice that the office didn't not try to soothe her with false hopes. Instead he tried to get her

to focus on other things, gently quizzing her about her job and other interests. It worked, and before she knew it he was escorting her into the local police house.

"Excuse me Sergeant, this is Miss Ginger Beaumont, I believe detective Alexander is waiting for her."

The officer pointed them in the right direction without a word.

"Thank you Sergeant." The officer replied and escorted Ginger down the hall.

Ginger noticed two things about the officer. First, he was very polite. She thought the desk sergeant had been very rude, but he took it in stride and was still courteous. Second he knew his way through the police station. He obviously had been here before, but still paid the courtesy of asking to be let in. She was impressed with his manners. She had always heard about how well trained RCMP officers were, and now she believed it.

They were met in the hall by a middle aged man who desperately need to loose weight and have his shirt pressed. "I'm Detective Alexander, we talked on the phone. Please won't you come into my office? Officer why don't you have a cup of coffee on me?" He nodded with his head and the officer smiled and made himself scarce on cue.

They sat in an office that was a mess as the man who occupied it. "Miss Beaumont, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. A dead body that we believe is your friend, was found at the address you gave us." He paused and Debbie began to cry again. He move from around the desk and sat next to Ginger. He tried to comfort her, but was obviously

awkward. He thought maybe he should have asked the mountie to stay, they seemed real good at this stuff.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to identify the body when it gets here. It should be in an hour or so, once the detectives can do their work at the scene. I'd be happy to get you something, anything while you wait." Ginger just shook her head and sobbed quietly.

"Does Ms. Mills have any family we should call. Someone in town?"

"No" Ginger sniffed. "She has three kids in college right now. Two down in the states and one in Alberta. She divorced and I don't think her husband lives close anymore. You should look in her address book, it will be in her computer desk."

"About that, you said that she was logged into a chat room, and it was one of her chat friends that called you?"

"Yes" Ginger hesitated, but knew all the details would come out so she just took a deep breath and told the detective everything.

"Debbie and I belong to a BDSM group. That's..." The detective waved off her explanation with his hand. "We meet people online and talk about our feelings and stuff. We often act out our fantasies together. Nothing like this has ever happened to any of us before."

Alexander could feel his ulcer burn. Shit, now she's into kinky sex and computers. Was there no end to the bad news? He continued to ask questions and was happy the Ginger cooperated so readily. At some point she had asked to use the phone and called another friend. Kit showed up before the

body was brought to the station, and so the two of them viewed it together.

"Before we go in." He said as evenly as he could "I gotta warn you that it is never easy to see something like this. And the circumstances are not good, I mean who ever did this made a real mess of it all. It won't be pleasant."

Kit looked at Ginger and offered to go in alone, but Ginger insisted that it was the least she could do.

Alexander was surprised that both women held up so well. There was a strength inside them that he admired. Kit's was obvious. She was a tough dame, and he had seen his share. But Ginger had a rare strength, one that wasn't obvious. She had a strength that you could count on when things got tough. Later, that night Alexander was sitting in his office going over the details in his head. He was not the officer of record, that would be Ames. But Ames answered to him and he would coordinate, take the heat, while Ames would investigate. Ames walked into his office to give him the preliminary report.

"Well you can guess most of it. We have a real sicko. Made a real point of spreading the victims blood all over the house. I mean every room. Real stone killer if you ask me. It looked like she..."

"She?"

"Yeah, she, I'll get to that in a second. It looks like she showered and then used one of the victim's dresses."

"You're sure it's a female?"

"Without a doubt, forensics found a clean set of prints, belonged to a woman, or the smallest man he ever saw."

"Prints? You got prints? Just tell me good news like that up front will you?"

"May not be good news boss. Turns out the killer sat down and typed the last message on the computer herself. With the victim's blood still on her hands. Like I said, a real stone killer."

Why in the name of Christ do you kill someone and then type a call for help?"

"Showing off? Who knows? I hate everything about this fucking case."

"You and me both brother, now go home and sleep. Tomorrow is gonna be Hell and the day after ain't gonna be any better."

"Night boss."

"Night"

* * * *

At 6:00 a.m. Alexander got a call that made him the happiest policeman in the Western World "Alexander here." He said before being truly awake.

"This RCMP Commandant Ormsby. Regarding your Mills Homicide, we just want you to know that we are taking jurisdiction if you have no objections."

He wanted to scream "Praise the Lord" and offer to buy the faceless voice a new car, but all he said was "No objections Sir. I assume you have this cleared with my boss."

"Fine, please forward all casework today directly to my office, instruct your officers to speak to no one about any of

this, and you can release the body to the family whenever you like. Any questions?"

"No Sir."

"Fine, have a pleasant day Detective."

Detective Alexander planned to have the happiest day he had enjoyed in a very long time. He looked out the window and saw a gentle snow falling in the lamp light. God he loved the snow.

If detective Alexander knew all the phone calls that led to the one he received at 6:00 a.m. it would have made his head spin. By 10:00 p.m. the night before, the preliminary forensics had been worked up.

The writeup on the physical evidence was forwarded to RCMP for cross checking in their files. At 11:15 a senior investigator at RCMP shot an "Off the record" copy of the finger prints to a friend of his who worked for the FBI in Washington. They had been sharing evidence for years. Each used their private source of information to get the jump on their co-workers. Each had helped the other rise through the ranks.

At 12:35 a.m. the source in Washington got a flag on the prints. He had to chase down file in hard copy because it was referenced to an archived case that was not in the data base. At 1:14 he pulled the file and found a note the said "Notify Director any time day or night if any prints match these." The note was by the director of the CIA 1:35 a.m.

Renee had no clue as to the source of the notes, but he knew where to get one. He drove to his office and arrived at 3:00 a.m. Then he pulled a special file out of his private safe

and found a cross-referenced note with instructions. It gave a French phone number and instructed him to do whatever the voice on the other end of the phone asked.

The call was placed at 3:25, voice on the other end of the phone was polite and to the point. The voice asked the all case work regarding the prints be forwarded to him, and that it would be in everyone's best interest if he were allowed to conduct the investigation without any interference.

It took two and a half hours to work the request back to Detective Alexander. By the beginning of work everyone was looking forward to a worry free day. Everyone in law enforcement that it. Renee, on the other hand, looked at the casework the various faxes and computer sources were giving him. He was worried, very worried indeed. He was very happy, however, to see an e-mail.

—Jean R—: "Subject has made contact in Canada. Am responding. Will draw funds and support from Account Blue. No further contact will be made until case is resolved—J."

Renee smiled. His faith in Jean was not unfounded. He knew the man had what it took.

Chapter 9

When Ginger finished at the police station, Kit took her back to her house. Neither of them talked on the way home. They were both feeling raw and grief stricken, and they both had a feeling of dread that they could not articulate. If this could happen to Debbie, was anyone safe? What if the interned had spawned some crazed BDSM killer?

They entered the house and Ginger said thinly, "I need to call my Master, I need to speak to him bad."

"Of course Baby, of course."

Ginger punched in the numbers and hoped against hope that Jean would be home. The phone rang twice and he picked up "Thank God." Ginger exhaled into the phone.

"Ginger, is that you? What wrong baby?"

"It terrible, just terrible."

"What's terrible? Ginger, please tell me."

Ginger started to speak, but the pressure of the last five hours cut loose and she sobbed uncontrollably.

"Ginger! Ginger! Honey, please speak to me, What's wrong baby? What's wrong?"

Kit ran over and picked up the phone with one hand and pulled Ginger into her lap with the other.

"Jean? Sorry, it's been awful, Ginger has held up so well, I guess it all just fell on her right now."

"Kit? What's happening? Please tell me, I need to know."

"It's Debbie, she's been murdered. It was horrible, she was mangled almost beyond recognition. Ginger was the one who called the police, she and I identified the body, it was awful."

"Kit I'm sorry, I know how terrible you both must feel. But I need to tell you something and I need you to understand and do exactly as I tell you. Do you understand?"

"Yes Jean, I do." Something in her tone drove through Ginger's grief and she stopped crying immediately.

"Okay, in a short time a car will pull up in front of your house. There should be at least two men in it. They work for me. Don't go out and talk to them, do not invite them in. They will not ask to come in for any reason. Not for coffee not to go to the bathroom.

"No matter what, do not answer the door. Do not let anyone into the house. Do not use the phone and stay off the computer. I will be there as soon as I can, probably before dawn. Until you see me, no one comes in or out for any reason. Understand?"

"Yes, but..."

"No buts Kit. This is important. Now I have calls to make. I will see you soon. Tell Ginger I love her please?"

"Of course." Kit said into the phone but Jean had already hung up.

It occurred to Jean that he had never told Ginger that he loved her before. She had told him many times. He was more reserved. "Hell of a way to tell her" he said to no one in particular.

He looked up the number for his Montreal contacts and dialed. "I need a minder team. Authorization Tango Blue."

"Yes Sir" the voice on the other side said.

Jean gave them the address and told them what to look for. The man on the other side sighed. Jean thought about

the craziness of the world he lived in, he was sending a team of men to watch over his girlfriend and her best friend. And he told the man he was up against a vampire and the man just sighed, because they both knew that a werewolf would have been much easier to cope with in this situation.

"This is a 'no contact' job, do you understand? No contact! Your team is to remain in the car unless they believe the subjects are in danger. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir."

"I will personally relieve your team when I arrive. Can you arrange a car at the closest airport. Where can I drop a Lear?"

"Hold." After a short pause the man returned with the airport's name and location and assured him a car would be waiting.

"Will you need a driver?"

"No just detailed directions to the location, make sure the car seats at least three. And fix the local authorities. I'm in a hurry."

"No problem Sir."

Jean hung up and dialed again, this time he knew the number without looking it up.****"This is Jean, I need to be in the air in forty five minutes. Authorization Tango Blue."

"Yes Sir. Destination?"

Jean told him the destination and hung up. Now for the hard part.

He sat at the computer and opened his e-mail program. He formatted a letter for Renee and sat and thought for a moment.

His first instinct was to take Kit and Ginger to France and stash them with the Committee until this was over. That would keep them safe. He started typing and then quickly erased the words. This is what She wanted. She wanted to distract Jean, to hurt him. But why didn't she just go after Ginger directly? Jean remembered something Renee told him about the war.

"We used to leave mines out for the German's. Especially when we knew the Allies were coming. They were terrible things, blow some guy's nuts right off. Screw up their leg pretty bad. Most would cripple permanently."

"Cripple? Why not just use mines that killed?"

"If you kill someone, it takes them out of the battle, if you maim him, you take him out and the two guys that have to carry him to safety. Plus, they are scarier. Soldiers get used to the idea of death pretty quickly, but no man wants to loose his balls."

Jean meditated on those words for a moment and made a decision. It was a terrible decision and it would put those he loved into terrible danger. He prayed God would forgive him if he was wrong. He knew he never would forgive himself. He type a short e-mail and sent it on to Renee.

Then he muttered a prayer and hurried on.

* * * *

Kit hung up the phone and looked silently at Ginger. The terror they both felt had pushed away all feelings of grief.

"He said he loves you." Was all that Kit could think to say. She held Ginger in her arms and the two women sobbed

together. After a time, Ginger's exhaustion overcame her and she fell asleep.

Kit put her on the couch and looked out the window. Sure enough, a car was parked out front. The windows were tinted and Kit wondered who was watching her house from out in the cold night.

* * * *

The sky was turning gray with the morning sun a knock had startled Kit awake. She had fallen asleep an hour earlier, exhaustion had caught up with her. Her mouth was dry, her head hurt, her eyes were puffy, and she felt awful. She was, however, glad to be alive. She looked out the side window and saw Jean standing on her porch. She had never met the man, but she had seen his picture. He e-mailed it to Ginger when they started seeing each other. She was not suppose to show it to anyone, but he relented and allowed her to show it to Kit and Debbie.

Ginger was overjoyed with the picture. The man in the picture had male model good looks. In fact, Kit had always believed it was not Jean, but some picture he had cut out of a magazine. The body was too perfect, the face too rugged, the hair too black, the clothing too expensive. Everything about the man in the picture was too perfect. Kit teased Ginger that her Master was really three hundred pounds and scared, with a pronounced limp.

But the Adonis from the photo was now standing on her porch knocking insistently "Kit! Ginger! It's Jean open up! Come on! I'm freezing out here."

Kit opened the door and pulled him into the house "Thanks for pissing off the neighbors, I hate them anyway."

"Kit." His voice was soft and assured, but showed a lot of relief. He hugged her. "Praise God" he muttered and Kit knew he meant it.

"Is Ginger all right? Where is she?"

"She's asleep on the couch."

"No she's not" Ginger muttered as she pulled herself upright.

They both looked at her a moment as she gained full consciousness. She rubbed her eyes and suddenly realized who was in the room with her. She shot up and then fell to her knees before Jean. "I'm sorry I was asleep Master, I should have greeted you. Please forgive me."

Jean pulled her to her feet and hugged her to his strong chest "Oh, my love, you have no idea how happy I am to see you finally. I just wish the circumstances were happier." Ginger began crying into his chest. She thought she had run out of tears last night, she was wrong.

After a while, the three found themselves in the kitchen while Ginger made some coffee. No one felt like eating, but they all needed coffee badly.

"So what are you, some kind of cop?" Kit finally asked.

"You might say that. Let me start at the beginning. It's a long story and I don't think you will believe me. But please let me say it all. Twenty years ago I was indoctrinated into an order of Dominican monks. I was young and earnest and my faith was the unshakable faith of the young. My monastery life was rigorous, but loved it. But one day the abbot call me

to his chambers and informed me that I was to be dismissed. That somehow it was felt that I just didn't fit in. I knew better than to argue, but I was crushed. My whole life seemed to unravel before my eyes.

"The abbot rose and waved me back into my seat and left and another man, dressed in a suit, came in and introduced himself to me. He told me that it was noticed how deep my faith was and how much I seemed to hate evil, in all it's forms.

"He said he could use a man like me in his organization. That he was an agent for a private organization that had a secret charter from the Vatican. And that he needed me. He needed me to be a hunter, a hunter of evil." Jean paused. "Kit? Ginger? It was one of those evil thing that killed Debbie yesterday. I have been hunting this thing for five years now. It finally decided to attack me." Both women saw the pain in his eyes.

"You expect me to believe that you are some sort of international agent for the Pope who hunts psychotic killers?" Kit was confused and she got angry when she got confused.

"Well, yes but not psychotic killers..." Jean took a deep breath and said. "Vampires."

Kit's 's anger got the best of her and she threw herself at him.

He easily fended off Kit's attack without hurting her at all. "You said you would let me finish." He said as Kit stopped her attack. Without a word she sat back in her chair and glared at Jean and then nodded.

"I was as incredulous as you when I was first exposed to the truth about these things. Vampires and other agents of evil are real, and they walk among us. I have spent my life hunting and killing them."

"You've killed vampires?" Kit breathed,

"Three actually, all servants of the one that killed Debbie yesterday. I was assigned to her when my boss became the director of my organization. She has been my life for the last five years. I know how hard this is all to swallow, but I can prove it too you if you give me the chance. My first thought was just to whisk you both off to France, and tell you nothing. Keep you safe and ignorant until I could resolve all of this."

"Why didn't you?" Ginger scowled.

"Because I need your help. I need your help to find the thing that killed your friend, our friend. I need you help to eradicate the worst mass murderer this world had ever seen."

"Anything." Ginger said quietly, but firmly.

Kit turned her glare to Ginger, "Are you insane? I know you are supposed to love this guy, but you don't really know him! He could be the one who killed Debbie for all we know."

"I called him in Atlanta last night, it is not humanly possible for him to have killed Debbie and get back to take my call."

"Okay, then he's just some deluded nut."

"Jean is telling the truth, and I'm going to help him. And you're going to help too, if for no other reason than to watch over me."

Kit was furious, Ginger had trapped her, and she hated being trapped.

She turned to Jean "Okay Motherfucker, you heard her. But I swear if you do anything to hurt her or cause her to loose faith in you I will tear your heart out and show it to you as you slowly die at my feet."

"Understood, now get packed. It's not safe here. Hell, it's not safe where we're going, but at least I can keep an eye on you there. Look, I can still take you to France where you'll both be safe. But I do need your help, God help us all, I do need it."

"We'll be ready in twenty minutes. I keep a few things here, I assume we'll be able to buy a few things when we get to where we are going."

"Yes, back to Atlanta. They have great stores, and you can shop your hearts out, at least during the day. After the sun goes down, you are with me. Don't worry about money, I have the worlds most generous expense account. I don't even get audited."

"When's our flight?" Kit asked. Jean smiled because it was the least hostile thing she had spoken in a while.

"The plane is ready when we are."

"What, you have your own plane now?"

"Well, a Lear, but it's not mine, I just get to use it whenever I need to. Look, if I am a nut, then at least I'm a well-heeled nut."

Kit couldn't think of one more thing to say.

* * * *

True to his word, Jean drove the two women to the waiting jet and they were in the air in no time at all. Kit was

overwhelmed by the experience, but somehow Ginger was treating it all like it was just another day. Kit marveled at her ability to love. She knew it was her love that was guiding Ginger and her into this adventure. She hoped against hope that she was right. She too felt Jean's charisma, it was overwhelming. But she wanted to trust him, but she did not trust herself enough to listen to what her own heart was saying.

Jean sat down with them after a time "Look here's the plan. As I figure it, She killed Debbie to draw me off and to take you two out of the picture. I suspect that She is somehow using cyberspace to find her next convert. You know, hide in plain sight. You know how many vampires are on the Net?"

Both women shook their heads. "A lot?" Ginger whispered.

"A way lot. I figure that She will hit someone that you both know and I need you to stay online and watch over the community. Let me know if anything weird happens." Jean shrugged indicating he was done.

"That's it? That's your plan? You've been hunting her for five years and that's the best you can do?"

"Well there is one more thing, I've publically severed all contact with my home organization. She will know this. She will know I am alone and may attempt to attack me directly."

Kit threw herself back in her chair and said "Well as long as you've thought this all through."

"Not really, I only started working on this plan last night, after Ginger called"

"Do you have to be so damn truthful? I guess there *are* vampires, you tell us all these stupid truths. No reason you should lie about that and then tell use all this stuff about making it up as you go along."*

Jean started to speak but Kit threw up her hand, "No! just be quiet. I want you to either tell me everything's going to be all right and this is all a big game to impress your girl friend, or I want you to be quiet."

Jean shrugged his shoulders and sat back in his chair and looked out the window.

Ginger waited until he relaxed and then sat next to him wordlessly and laid her head in his lap and was asleep in seconds. Kit just looked out the window and fumed. Buried deep within her anger was one lone thought that told her that this is what she had lived her life for.

Chapter 10

Pat looked across the table at his friends as they argued, teased and laughed. So much had happened in the last week and he was feeling odd. Spring Semester was about to begin and summer would bring changes for them all. Pat thought about his own career, his plans and goals. Despite what David told him over and over, he did have plans and it looked like they were going to come to fruition. Wayne was off to New York to try and live off his music. He had some contacts, and had no pretense about getting symphonic work right away but was confident that he could find enough studio work to keep him afloat.

Samantha had already had three job offers in school systems across the Midwest. Julie, well that was a story wasn't it? Pat reflected back to the weekend when he was alone in his room. Funny how your life changes in a moment. It all began with a knock on his door.

Pat was surprised when the light rap had disrupted his reading. He wasn't expecting anyone. He wasn't the type that people just dropped in on, and he was concentrating hard on the data analysis displayed on his computer. He couldn't believe the results, and was double and triple checking. He ambled to the door and opened it to find Julie standing before him.

"Julie?"

"Hi Pat, how are you?"

"Julie? I didn't even think you knew where this place was."

"Pat, I've lived in Bloomington all my life, I know where the Wildlife Sanctuary is. Everyone does. Now are you going to let me in?"

"Of course, please come in. Have a seat." He pointed to the shabby couch against the wall. He quickly scanned his room and was relieved that it wasn't too messy, although his stack of Penthouses has out and piled next to his water bed. Pat blushed slightly, but Julie ignored it.

Pat looked around and grabbed his computer chair and pulled it close to the couch so they could talk. "Oh, can I get you something, I think I have a beer or two in the fridge" he pointed to the dorm refrigerator in the corner.

Julie just smiled and said "No thanks, I'm fine." She looked around and finally added, "I never have been in the Sanctuary, it really is something."****Pat knew what she meant. The house had once been the largest mansion in Bloomington, a large and elegant home, with a commanding presence. It was still large, and despite years of neglect and abuse at the hands of literally hundreds of students, it retained at least an echo of its former grandeur.

The house had been partitioned off by a family member who inherited the monstrous house back in the sixties. The neighborhood had degenerated by then, and it was impossible to sell the large mansion. There was some talk about tearing it down, but the owner thought that he'd let the students do that one piece at a time. Still, the old house was tougher than he expected, and 35 years later it still stood as a local landmark. The owner put the minimal amount of maintenance into the structure to keep the housing authorities of his back.

He was waiting for something major to go wrong. Then he would raze the structure.

If you looked carefully, you could still find hints to the wonderful house that it use to be. David's front doors, were actually an elegant set of French doors with leaded glass and crystal door knobs. He kept them covered with a curtain for privacy. "Would you like the two bit tour?" He asked, feeling very uncomfortable.

"No thanks, maybe later. Hey, I don't want a beer, but a soda would be nice."

"Yeah, I can do that. Can't get through the day without at least three sources of caffeine."

He pulled a can out of the fridge and opened it, grateful for something to do. Julie had something on her mind, but she was having trouble saying it. And he was amplifying her nervousness.

"Pat, there are some things we need to talk about." She finally said and then paused to think about her next words.

Pat could only focus on the use of the words "things," noticing the plural. He nodded.

"Well I guess David is a good place to start as any, are you as worried about him as the rest of us are? I mean you've known him longer, I guess you are his best friend. What's going on?"

"I don't know Julie, it's.... "He searched for the right words "it's like he's, I don't know, it's like he's growing." The word just came out and Pat thought about his description a second and decided he was happy with it. "You know, it's like when we were teenagers, and our friends started growing in

different directions. Some became cool, or they were jocks, or dopers? You tried to hold on for a while but you eventually lost track?"

Julie nodded, Pat continued "Maybe it's happening to all of use and we're just focusing on David because he's always been in the center of our group. This time next year, I may be the only one left in Bloomington, it's kind of scary. We are all growing in our own ways. It's taking us away from each other.

"David says he's in love, he can work his computer magic where ever. I guess he'll go to his woman when he can, after graduation. I'm glad it's a few months off. It will give them some time to think about what they are getting into."

"Do you think all this computer stuff is healthy Pat?"

"Hell, I don't know. David's been doing this for a long time, and he generally has been Okay with it. It's just been recently, but he says he's in love and I've seen love screw normal people up." Pat laughed softly.

"But I worry about these people Pat. I mean this whole Sadomasochism thing sounds pretty scary to me."

"I wonder if your parents say that about the lesbians, Julie?"

"Julie looked at Pat in the eye and smiled weakly. She knew why she chose him for this conversation. He'd get right to heart of things and find a way to make himself clear, even if it stung a little. The thought of her parents, her father, made Julie wince.

"Pat are you really going to be a psychologist?"*****"Despite what David says, yes. Actually I

can graduate right now, I'm just using this semester to get a jump on grad school. Professor Friesen is going to be my advisor, and we are working on a project together. The data I'm crunching is even more promising than we hoped. I should be well published even before starting as a grad. It will be a real feather in my cap."

"That's nice, but that's not what I meant. I'm just so afraid, well you know, my Dad."

"Pat knew exactly what Julie was talking about. Her father was a famous developmental psychologist that Indiana was proud to call it's own. And like many in his field, her father had experimented on his children from the time they were born. She remembered the shifting sands of her childhood, the lack of direction, standards. How cold and unemotional her father could be. Every question she had was merely reflected back at her. She never got boundaries or answers. Her friends envied her freedom, but she hated it.

To make matters worse, her father would discuss her and her development endlessly in class. He was totally unfazed by her hysterical attempts to stop him. She finally withdrew from his classes altogether.

"Julie, why did you stay in Bloomington?"

"Because I'm sick. I have a sick need to show my father I can be happy without him. I have a sick need to offer rebuttals to the hundreds of *Intro to Child Development* students who think he's some sort of God. I believe in my heart that some day he'll see the error of his way and apologize to me. Because I don't know anything else."

They sat silent as Julie tried to keep from crying. Finally she looked at him and said "Pat, you are so gentle and kind. So funny, so handsome, it would kill me if you turned into him."

"Don't worry Julie, I'm not your father. There are psychologists who actually have normal lives and families."

Julie just sighed and shook her head as if the thought did not bear consideration.

"So you aren't going to follow Samantha?"

"No, we've been running on impulse for a while. Neither of us are really into the lifestyle, if you know what I mean. I know I'm bisexual and I suspect she is too. We're both going to settle down and find husbands some day.... Which kind of brings me to the next thing." She took a deep breath and looked at Pat "Why don't you have a girl friend?"

"Wow, you don't hold back do you? Well this is the time where I'm suppose to say something about standards and saving myself for Mrs. Right, but I won't bullshit you. Look at me, I'm not the kind of guy girls go for." Pat was bone skinny and had a baby face that made him look about fourteen.

"It's just, you know, the image. It's like falling behind in math. In high school I looked like I was twelve. Everyone just assumed I was some sort of gifted student and treated me like I was made of kryptonite—unless they needed lunch money." he hesitated. "Now in college, I'm so awkward. Everyone has all this heartbreak and experience to fall back on.... I don't know, I just kinda gave up."

"You know something, your gonna love that baby face of yours someday. Trust me. And girls may love tough

experienced guys, but women love tender guys who will listen to them."

To punctuate her statement Julie leaned forward and kissed Pat full on the lips. It was not a friendly kisses. It was a blow-your-socks-off, I-didn't-know-you-still-had-your-tonsils, if-we-don't-get naked-in-the-next-five-minutes-I'm-gonna-die-kiss. Pat thought he lost consciousness.

Julie guided Pat to the bed and pushed him back. She removed her blouse and crawled on top of him. Then she slowly unbuttoned his shirt. He tentatively reached for her breast and touched it softly. She cooed and pressed his hand harder against it. He let her lead, and soon found himself naked laying beside her. She pulled him close and ran her hand over his stomach and down over his aching member. Then, to his mortification, years of sexual frustration released and he climaxed suddenly and explosively.

"Oh God!, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Oh God! Oh God!" He was hysterical and Julie started kissing his face.

"Shhh, it's ok. It ok." She purred and held his head to her chest and he sighed and wept for a moment.

"I really am sorry Julie." He said with a little more composure.

Julie smiled "It's ok, it happens. You want to know the truth? It's a little flattering." She gave him a wicked grin.

If Pat ever doubted how wonderful women were he never would again.

"I've been dying to do this with you Pat. I care about you, deeply. I have for a long time."

"How? Why? I mean, What? I mean why me?"

Julie chuckled "I meant what I said, you are funny, handsome and sensitive. And any woman would be thrilled with you."

Pat's hands started to touch her again and Julie smiled and lay back for him.

"I just, you know. want to touch you, look at you."

"Lover you can do anything you want."

As it turned out, Julie spent the night and he did indeed.

* * * *

Pat sat back at the table and watched Julie and Samantha together. He couldn't help feel a little jealous and guilty. They had decided they would keep their affair secret as long as they could, since she and Samantha intended to break up in the summer anyway. Somehow it was karmic that he finally had a girlfriend but he couldn't say anything for fear of hurting her lesbian lover.

On a brighter note, David seemed more himself tonight than he had been in a while. Maybe he was settling down. He seemed happy and relaxed and totally with his friends tonight. Though the argument had drifted into the realm of masochism and sadism yet again.

Typically it was Wayne or Julie that would attack David, but tonight Wayne was alone in the assault. Julie sat on the sidelines as best she could, and Pat smiled at her, knowing that his words had an impact on her.

"How can you call something like that love? I know you've told me again and again, but I just don't understand how you can get off by someone hurting you!"

"Wayne, how many time do I have to tell you? Pain is just a part, a small part, of what a dominant/submissive relationship is all about. It's what the pornography magazines focus on because that's what makes good picture. It's like saying that heterosexual relationships are strictly about fucking. Or a lesbian relationship," nodding to Samantha and Julie "Is strictly about oral sex. If I'm not mistaken, sex makes up only a small part of these relationships?"

"What makes the relationship a relationship is that both people love each other and respect each other. That they fulfill each other's needs both sexually and emotionally."

"But David, you hear so much weird shit, especially about the Internet."

"Granted, you do hear bad stuff about the net and about dominant/submissive people because there are bad people who do one or the other or both. But, how many so called regular marriages have some sort of abuse or violence in them? About half, last time I checked. How many so-called normal families are torn apart by divorce and child abuse? How many children are raised by nannies and child care workers?"

"Wayne I know you think I'm somehow abnormal, but look at what you are comparing me to? Shit, did any of us have childhoods we would wish on our own future children?" He looked around the table with a questioning eye. He knew no one would rise to that bait.

Pat knew they were in dangerous waters, David had taken the conversation dangerously close to a topic that could set

any of them off, he decided to jump in and try to guide it to calmer waters.

"So David, love must be doing something for you. You aren't even using your cane. I couldn't even spot a limp tonight."

"Tell you the truth my friend, I've been hiding behind that damn cane and this fucking leg too long. Sure it hurts sometimes, but who doesn't have pain in their lives? When I think back on all the stuff I missed out on because ... well you know. I'm just determined not to miss out anymore."

"No one at the table could possibly argue with that. In fact, Wayne raised his glass in salute to David and his new outlook. "To David and to love"

"And to life" David added as they all clinked their glasses together and drank to the future

Chapter 11

They had talked little for the rest of their flight. Kit thought as the plane was landing that she had always wanted to fly in a private jet, and that the current circumstances prevented her from enjoying the experience. She stepped out into the early evening air and was struck with the warmth of the air. Atlanta in the winter can be cold or it can be temperate, this evening it was temperate. It was also wet. A light rain had recently fallen and the airport lights were reflecting off the ground in a spectacular display.

Jean lead them to a waiting limousine. Ginger was still taking it all in stride, but Kit was still suspicious and petulant. "Don't we have to go through customs or something?" Actually she had no idea what you had to do when you flew from Canada down into the States. She had driven into New York and Michigan a number of times, and the boarder crossings were always easy, with only a few perfunctory questions to ask either way. The relationship between Canada and the U.S. had been friendly for a considerable length of time, and they shared one of the longest and friendliest boarders in the world.

But they were in fact, two countries. A fact that often slapped young adventurerers in North Dakota or Montana who ventured across the boarder at night through unsecured check points. Most got away with it, but those who got caught wound up paying stiff fines, and some even faced prison time.

"Don't worry it's been..."

"Taken care of" Kit finished his sentence in exasperation. "You are right, either you are telling the truth, or you are the most incredible string puller in the world. Do you always drive around in limo's?"

"Not really, I don't like them. I'm a control freak I guess. But I'm so fried right now, I haven't slept in a very long time."

"I think it's nice" was all Ginger could add to the conversation.

Kit was growing more and more agitated with Ginger. She was so calm, and Kit was so incredulous that the contrast was beginning to bother her. It made her question herself, and she hated questioning herself. Kit hated thinking about herself at all.

Like everyone Kit knew, she had scars. Deep ones. She had always been a stunning beauty, and she hated it and loved it at the same time. She always blamed her looks for the sexual assault she suffered at the hands of her mother's brother. She refused to call him Uncle Jeff, although he urged her to do so at every meeting.

It was a common enough story, tragically. She was just coming into her sexuality and Jeff was older and handsome, and it flattered her when he'd teased her and paid attention to her. He walked her out into the woods during a family outing and summarily raped her when they were far enough away for him to be safe.

The encounter happened so fast that Kit sometimes wondered if it in fact happened at all. Other times she marveled at how ten minutes could change your life forever.

For the longest time Kit did everything she could to make herself unattractive. The scars on her arms were the vestiges of her attempts at self mutilation. She never talked about it to anyone. That is until she cut too deep once and was hospitalized for attempted suicide.

The doctor was kind and sympathetic, but eventually even he made a pass at her. Unlike her uncle, he did not force the issue. She had grown in the intervening years and was strong and wary. She thought that it was her physical strength that had saved the day the last time she was attack. After that she became compulsive about exercise and strength.

Later, she learned her beauty could be a weapon and that she could control men with it. It was natural that she was drawn to the BDSM lifestyle. She was thrilled by the power exchange. Thrilled to be able to dominate handsome and virile men who gave themselves to her, thrilled to give herself over to men who would dominate her, always secure that she was truly in control and could call safe any time she wanted. She also learned that her threshold for pain was quite high. The Dommies she gave herself to never came close to finding her breaking point, and this too, thrilled her.

She always looked older than she was, and by the time she was a freshman in high school, she was already running with a very fast, and sexually adventurous crowd.

Her musings had calmed her. She remembered having Ginger as her best friend. Growing up with her. Sharing everything with her. She looked at her and smiled. She loved her very much and perhaps her anger was also a result of

jealousy. Kit hated jealousy, and did her best to push it from her mind.

The limo pulled up in front of a glass and steel high rise. Jean ushered them into a plush lobby full of marble and security camera. A handsome and well built man with impeccable manners greeted them from behind the desk.

"Mr. Kyle, good evening. Company?"

"Fred, actually these are guests of mine who will be staying indefinitely. Miss Ginger Beaumont and Kit Wells."

Ginger extended her hand and smiled brightly as he shook it. "It is a pleasure to meet you Fred."

Fred's officious manner faded for just a second as he shook her hand "It is a pleasure Miss Beaumont." Kit noticed that his southern accent had come out in full force.

Jean smiled "Please arrange for them to have keys and full access to the facilities Fred."

"Yes Sir Mr. Kyle it will be my pleasure indeed. If you young ladies wouldn't mind signing the guest log, I will get this processed and everything should be taken care of by the morning." They both signed.

"Thank you Fred. Hope you have a quiet evening. Please tell John goodnight for me."

He whispered to the women "John is security, they are both armed, but John is something else." The apartment was beautiful, impeccably clean and Spartanly furnished. The main room had computer and work station, a dining room table, a small but very good stereo, and a small cot in one corner. "I sleep in here, I've preferred cots since my days at the monastery."

He put their things in a large but equally sparsely furnished bedroom. It had a king size bed and a dresser, but that was about it. "Hope you don't mind sharing." He said and left them alone to freshen up.****Ginger smiled and looked longingly at the bathroom "Go ahead baby. I can wait" Kit lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling as she heard the bathtub run. After a moment she got up and walked into the main room and stared at Jean.

"Yes, is there something you need?"

"Yes, I need my life back. I need some sanity, but I'll settle for a beer."

Jean smiled and went to the refrigerator and pulled out two Mexican beers. He uncapped the bottles and handed one to Kit and joined her at the table. "So what's your story Kyle, how does a former monk turned vampire hunter wind up on the Internet playing Dominant games with my best friend?"

"Fair enough, I suppose a lot about me doesn't add up. Trust me, I surprise myself sometimes. I think it's what makes me so good at what I do."

"You're good at this?"

"The best."

"But you said you've only killed three vampires in twenty years, that you've been chasing this one for five, and haven't gotten close."

"Most chase all their lives and never see a vampire. Our director, my mentor has only killed five, and he's something of a legend in our organization. Vampires are the hardest, most un-dead loose their minds when they transform. Vampires, on the other hand, tend to get smarter. They are

also cowardly by nature, which makes it very hard to corner them. A vampire can go to ground for years at a time. Just shut themselves off. So you have to really be ready to strike before you make your move."

"Most un-dead, you mean there are other sorts of monsters?"

"Oh yes, werewolves and...."

She cut him off with a wave of their hands "Never mind, sorry I asked. But really, how did you wind up in our lives like you did?"

"It really has to do with the MO of the vampire I'm hunting. She is old and corrupt to the core. She is ancient and she likes playing games with us. One of her favorite techniques is to hide in plain sight. Blend in among vampire wannabes. I've spent a good deal of time in the vampire bars in New York and New Orleans. I even met Anne Rice once. Not that she frequents these establishments.

"So, I'm hanging out in the clubs, making friends, listening. I mean I'm there for years. I start wearing the make up and got a few thing pierced. Made some friends, cautiously followed some leads. These guys disappear on a regular basis, so running down every missing make up freak was a challenge. I got close, real close. She was working on transforming one of the wannabes into an actual vampire. I found out who it was, and exposed myself to stop him from killing a small girl.

"So he's one of your three?"

"No, he wasn't transformed yet. He was close though."

"Isn't it just a matter of getting bitten?"

"Not at all, if it were, the planet would be crawling with vampires. As it is we estimate there are less than a hundred. The transformation, to be effective, has to take place in two steps. The first is the corruption of the victim's soul. The vampire will do what she can to eliminate any shred of humanity in the proposed consort. You see if they carry any sense of decency when they make the physical transformation, they quickly loose their minds because of the horrors they must commit to survive.

"Usually, the victim is first exposed to horrific sights, then asked to participate in them, and then eventually forced to commit them on their own. I killed the last one as he was about to rape and kill a ten year old girl. She's alive, but I spooked the real vampire and she went to ground. It was then I learned about cyber vampires.

"A lot of the regulars in the vampire clubs also spent a lot of time online in various chat rooms. You're certainly familiar with the one's that frequent the Chateau. Well I started spending time online as Lord-Slayer. While the vampires make up the back bone of the kindred, there are many others, including human characters.

"I had a hunch that she would pick her next victim in cyberspace. But I over looked the Chateau. I was online for almost a year before I realized that a number of the kindred were also spending time in the deviant sex rooms. So I followed them in."

"I learned the rules, and behaved properly. Blended in. It's what I do. You notice I didn't spend much time in private with anyone until I met Ginger. That was a mistake, a big one. But

despite my upbringing I am still a man, and I am not under any vow of celibacy anymore."

"I also discovered that I am naturally dominant. I like having a dominant submissive relationship. I wanted to keep it online, Ginger was suppose to meet me this summer for a couple of weeks, but we both knew she was off to Europe after. And then Debbie was killed."

That stopped the conversation cold. Kit had a million questions, but they somehow didn't seem to matter anymore. They both sat quietly sipping their beer until Ginger joined them.

She was wearing one of his light cotton robes. She touched it and said "I hope you don't mind Master. It so lovely, I feel you hugging me when I wear it."

"Not at all Ginger, please sit and join us. Would you like a drink?"

"No thank you, Master." She sat and Kit excused herself and went to grab a soak on her own.

"I suppose there are some things we should talk about."

"What ever you like Master."

Maybe we should start there. Ginger, you know I've never had a submissive in real-life. Well, this has taken me by surprise, and I'm not sure I'm ready for 24/7. So if we are alone, you can call me Master, but please call me Jean in public. Actually I'd like you to call me Jean, unless.... Well you know."

She blushed a little and nodded. "Jean is a beautiful name. Though I suppose it causes a lot of confusion."

Yes it does, I suppose I should change it to John." He tried to pronounce it with an American accent with very little success. "But I'm attached to it."

"I know what you mean. With a name like Beaumont, everyone thinks I'm from this part of the world. My daddy was, but he dodged the draft and married a Canadian flower child who had a thing for Gilligan's Island" She opened her arms wide "And now we have Ginger Beaumont, 27 years later." They both laughed.

"What was your father like?"

"Don't remember much about him, when Carter pardoned the draft dodgers he went back home to Mississippi, and Mom and I never saw him again. She could have chased him, or sued him for support, but that isn't her style. She's sticking with this flower power stuff until she dies."

Jean smiled. Sitting across the table from Ginger was making him very happy. He did love her, or at least who she seemed to be online. So far, her real-life presence had not disappointed. She was pretty, not stunning, but pretty. She has giving and kind, and he thought he did love her.

"Ginger, I am not what you would call, a ladies man. In fact I am very inexperienced. I've never had a girl friend in my life. And the few sexual encounters I have had were hollow to say the least. This is all very new to me."

"I know Jean" She reached across and took his hand in hers. "I'll be gentle. Jean, I loved you the second we met online. I still love you, and find whatever love you can give me, to be more than enough."

"There is something else, I'm sorry. I'm so terribly sorry for what happened to Debbie, to what happening to you."

"I know, and I know you didn't intend for any of us to be hurt. Be we were, and we are here now. Jean, even if I didn't love you. Even if I didn't know you before last night, I would have come with you. That thing killed someone I love. Reached into my heart and ripped something from me that I'll never have again. I want it stopped. If I can see to it that just one person is spared this grief, then I'll be happy."

Jean leaned over and kissed her softly on the lips. She parted her lips and softly sucked his tongue into her mouth. They kissed passionately until they were disturbed by Kit. "If you two are going to start acting like teenagers then I just may go up on the roof and throw myself off!"

"Don't worry love. We'll try not to offend your delicate sensibilities." Ginger grinned.

"Look what I found" Kit said holding up a business card, "Guess I'm gonna miss my date this week. This was probably the guy I was suppose to marry. A submissive lawyer no less. Do you both have any idea what kind of a meal ticket that could be?" She mugged, but no one would rise to the bait.

"Actually I do feel a little bad standing the poor guy up. Well, he is into suffering." She giggle as she dramatically tore the card in two. Ginger smiled to herself. Kit was back.

Chapter 12

As usual, Pat escorted David home from their night out. Neither of them were particularly drunk, and it turned out to be a pleasant night for a walk. A light snow was falling and the temperature was hovering around the freezing point. There was no breeze and the street lights gave the falling snow a surreal effect. Pat was enjoying his friend's new outlook on life, and believed he shared it. He wanted to tell David about how he and Julie were an item, but kept his mouth shut out of respect for her wishes. He did not want to hurt Samantha either.

"I never really enjoyed the snow before." David mused "I was always such a bother. I never got it why people would go on and on about it. How beautiful it is. Well you know what? They are right! Especially at night like this, I can't believe I never noticed it before!"

David actually started running and Pat took off after him, "Hey! Slow down! You don't want to hurt yourself!"

David turned on his friend "Hurt myself? That's not possible, maybe you should worry if I'll hurt you!" and then picked up a handful of snow and threw a snowball that caught Pat square in the face.

"You asshole, you're gonna pay for that!" and Pat launched a counter-offensive.

The two of them played in the snow like a couple of school kids. Throwing snowballs and wrestling. After a short time David had managed to pin Pat and started stuffing snow down

his coat. Pat started screaming for mercy "Okay, I give, I give!"

But David kept tormenting him "Stop it! I give up mother fucker!" David kept on.

"God damn it get off me you asshole!" and Pat somehow got a hand free and hit David flat in the nose.

David grabbed his face and rolled off of Pat. Pat was crying tears of fury and pain and wondered if he was going to have to fight his friend. Pat had never in his life struck anyone. He was terrified.

David stung from the pain. The blow had caught him on the tip of his nose and his eyes watered and a jolt of pain seared through his brain. As he rolled in the cold snow, he felt as if Pat had broken his nose. He was going to make him pay for that, pay dearly. Then, as suddenly as it had come upon him his rage faded. Maybe it was the cold and the wet snow. He looked at Pat and said "Sorry guy, don't know what came over me."

Pat relaxed a bit "Sorry I hit you man, I didn't mean it."

"No problem, I had it coming. Shit, maybe it was the beer. God I'm so sorry."

"Forget it man." Pat had to take his coat and shirt off to get the snow off, and he was really feeling cold.

"Let's get you to my house quick, I'll make some coffee." The two of them trotted the last two blocks to David's

When they got inside, Pat was shivering badly. David felt awful. He rushed into the bed room and grabbed a blanket and returned. "Get those wet things off. Don't worry I won't rape you."

"Very funny asshole." Pat managed to say with as much good humor as he could muster. He was quickly wrapped in the soft blanket. As good as his word, David quickly produced hot coffee. Pat sipped his coffee and wondered if coffee was really a good thing to have if you were hypothermic. He quickly discarded the objection because the hot liquid felt so good going down.

"God, I really don't know what came over me. I really am sorry."

"I know David, you're not used to feeling this good. You should have spent some time outside when you were a kid. You would have gotten some of this out of your system."

"You don't know how right you are. You know I've been thinking about it. I really think I've been hiding behind my bad leg."

"I mean, come on. They have guys who race in wheel chairs up mountain, and I won't go outside and play because my knee hurts? I think I was just mad at the world Pat. Mad for crippling me, mad for taking my parents, mad for making live with people who didn't love me. Well you know what? I don't blame them, not any more. I was a shit. I was self centered and unpleasant little shit. They fed me and clothed me and saw to my needs. You know what else? They didn't touch one fucking dime in my trust fund. Not one."

"The court took the insurance money and the settlement money and put it in a trust. All they had to do was go to the trustee and tell them they were using the money for me. But they didn't. They could have robbed me blind Pat, and they didn't. Hell, even taking what's fair, would have knocked me

back pretty far. Well I'm buying them a new car tomorrow, I'm not kidding. A brand new SUV. Shit, they have ten times more than that coming."

"David!" Pat said to get his attention. "It's Okay. Listen to me, it's Okay! You got carried away tonight. It happens. You were a sour little kid, well your parents were killed and you were crippled. I'm sure they understand."

"If you want to buy your uncle and his family a new car tomorrow then that's great. But just don't do it because you are feeling guilty. They chose to raise you on their money. Their choice. I'm glad that you aren't going to be hard on them anymore, but don't start being hard on yourself either."

There was a pause as David considered his best friend's words. Finally David reached across and grabbed his friend behind the neck. "You are the closest thing to family I have. I love you Pat." Then feeling awkward he added "In a manly completely heterosexual sort of way you understand?"

Pat brushed his arm off and smirked "Asshole." David offered Pat his couch, but Pat was anxious to get home. Julie was planning to call, and maybe come over if it wasn't terribly late when they got home. David lent Pat some dry clothing and one of his coats, and Pat walked the three blocks back to his room.

David was just as happy that Pat had declined his offer. He was planning to get online, and he didn't want to be disturbed. He could believe how he felt about this new woman. He had only seen her the two times, and was really only with her the once. But he knew in his heart that he loved her. He knew also, that he needed her. He didn't tell Pat and

the others that he really didn't know her at all, because they would never understand. But he knew she was the one, he just knew.

He thought he could tell that she felt the same way too. He prayed and prayed that he just wasn't projecting his wishful thoughts.

He logged on and got himself to the Chateau. Checking the users list he was heartbroken to see that she wasn't there.

He did notice that Nightwinds was.

—Sub-Thrall—Bows to those who are Worthy and slips into the room.

—Sub-Vixen—Smiles and huggles her brother Thrall.

—Lord-Virtue—Nods to Thrall and smiles.

And on it on it went. The chatters spent an awful lot of time saying hello and good bye to one other. He settled in with his coffee as he watched the screen before him.

—Sub-Thrall—Moves to the submissive's couch and sits, watching the room.

—Mistress-Nightwinds—Smiles coolly to Thrall and beckons him to her feet.

Two day ago, David would have been jumping for joy at this request. But that was then, and this was now. He thought for a second about what to say. The nice thing about chat was that there were so many glitches in the system that you could blame a slow pick-up on "chat lag" or being "frozen". He thought and thought but finally could only say one thing.

—Sub-Thrall—Declines your gracious offer Mistress.

—Mistress-Nightwinds—Looks at Thrall with some regret and then gets up and leaves.

David had seriously pissed her off, and he knew it. But he had given her many chances and now he had someone he really loved. To hell with her if she can't take it. Then, suddenly, the system announced the entrance of Vampire-Empress.

—Vampire-Empress—Strides in and nods to those Worthy and smiles to all the tasty subs, especially Thrall.

—Sub-Thrall—Smiles at Vampire-Empress and asks if he can get her a refreshment.

—Vampire-Empress—In time, little one, in time. As you know, very little here can satisfy my thirst. But please come sit with me if you will.

—Sub-Thrall—Runs and kneels at Vampire-Empress's feet.

—Vampire-Empress—No, no, little one, in my lap.

—Sub-Thrall—Climbs happily into Vampire-Empress's lap and smiles warmly to her.

—Vampire-Empress—Smiles and bends down to kiss her perfect little Thrall lightly on the neck, noticing his scars have healed nicely.

—Sub-Thrall—Smiles and shivers.

And so it went for about a half an hour. Vampire-Empress chatted and flirted with the other Dommies in the room and was gracious and kind to all the subs. As expected, she would publicly kiss him or cuddle him from time to time. This was to show him, and the rest of the room, that he was what was truly on her mind.

At one point a rude tourist came into the room and made a crude comment to David. He knew better than to rise to his own defense. It was typical for the subs to turn to a Domme

for help. And if they were with a Domme, then it was expected that they remain quiet and let the Domme handle the encounter.

—Vampire-Empress—Looks to the rude tourist, Built-to-Please, and asks that he be quiet and show some manners. Thrall is with ME and you have now insulted both of us.

—Built-to-Please—Shakes in his boots. So what's it to me if you don't like the way I talk to your little boy toy, Bitch?

David gasped as he read the words on his screen. As expected there were many threats and insults hurled at the tourist. Not many knew Vampire-Empress (or Vampire as the Domme called her) very well. That was unimportant because a stranger had called her a bitch, everyone would rise to her defense.

—Vampire-Empress—Raises her hand and wishes all to be quiet.

David was shocked that all the chatting had stopped. Even when a regular asked for quiet, or attention, there were some who just kept chatting. But not a soul typed a word. David wondered for a second if he had, in fact, frozen. The words started appearing however, and he read on.

—Vampire-Empress—Thanks all for their attention and also for rising to her defense. But I assure everyone that I am more than able to take care of this little man.

—Vampire-Empress—Turns to the newcomer and walks to him eyes glaring red. Leaning in, she considers sucking him dry. She reconsiders because she is sure he tastes rancid.

—Vampire-Empress—Instead draws a gem encrusted dagger and holds it to his throat. "You have no idea what you

are up against. If you are smart you will leave here and never come back, under any name. If you don't you will find that I am no one to be trifled with. Now go."

The system showed that he did leave.

—Vampire-Empress—Thank you all for your indulgence. Thrall, follow me. Be well all my friends.

David set the computer to follow and she once again led him to the stone room of his dreams. The scene was very much as before. She bit him again, and he felt the same electric charge though his body. She made furious cyber-love to him and he was completely satisfied by her. After, she asked him some questions.

—Vampire-Empress—I would like to know your name, your first name, if you feel comfortable.

—Sub-Thrall—My name is David.

—Vampire-Empress—David, a good biblical name. King David was a passionate warrior. I like that David. David, do you love me?

David was blown away by the question. He thought of something glib to say but could only type.

—Sub-Thrall—Yes.

—Vampire-Empress—Smiles. Good. Would you like to wear my collar, David?

—Sub-Thrall—Oh yes! More than anything!

The last question betrayed her as the newcomer that David suspected she was. It was considered good form for a submissive to offer their neck to a Domme they were interested in. Not the other way around. David, however, could have cared less.

—Vampire-Empress—I'm happy, We will arrange a ceremony and do this as quickly possible.

—Sub-Thrall—Smiles with great pleasure.

—Vampire-Empress—There is one more thing I'd like to ask you. I sense you had a confrontation in the last day or two. Somehow I see you in some sort of room where people play games.

David was shocked. He had heard about psychic connection between online chatters, but he had never experienced it himself. He told her about the confrontation in the pool hall.

—Vampire-Empress—I'm glad David. It is right to defend ones friends. I am glad that this frat boy did not harm you. You are very important to me. Yes it would have upset me greatly if he had harmed one hair on your perfect head.

* * * *

Later that night David had another one of his dreams. This incident however, it was set in the present day. He found himself in the pool hall with his Mistress and the frat boy he had confronted the other night. He was shackled to the wall and she was flogging him with a bullwhip. The frat's screams were deafening, but this time David watched in fascination. He declined, once again, her offer to participate. Yet he did not pity this victim. Truth be told it made him happy to see him suffer. David thought it was justice, for he knew that he had brought much suffering to others.

As the screams faded, and the boy's blood flowed. Then She turned to David and laid him on the pool table and made

love to him gently. This time the act seemed to take forever. He heard the victim's sighs and whimpers as he plunged deeper and deeper into his Mistress. He looked over and saw his head tilt to the side and he knew the man had just died. David climaxed gloriously into his Mistress.

David woke up, not with a start, but slow and happy. He had soiled the bed again, so he stripped the showered, showered and wondered why he didn't feel as good this time as he had the first time it happened.

* * * *

Earlier that evening, Bill Wilkes was having a bad night. In fact his luck had turned sour the other night when that geek had chased him out of the pool hall. He wondered how he had let that happen.

He was at a party and had drunk way too much. He had started with beer, but he moved on to the hard stuff and was seriously drunk. His date had left hours before in a royal huff. She was a dormy, one that he had planned to screw, one way or another. Dormies just didn't count for much. But he was at the bar and she got bored and left. Bill's mood went from bad to worse.

He knew he was going to pass out, so he went outside hoping the cold night air would stun him into consciousness. He paid no attention to where he was, or where he was going. Before long, he turned his ankle and spilled down a small embankment and rolled out onto the road.

This was the precise moment a charter bus from the University of Wisconsin was taking a load of equally drunk frat boys back to Madison came by.

Bill was torn up very badly as he was run over and then mangled by the bus. It took the paramedics twenty minutes to arrive and finally pry him out. He had died as they were pulling him from under the rear axle.

Witnesses would later report that the poor man screamed and cried like a baby until he had finally and mercifully died on the cold street. His red blood, stinking of alcohol, froze to the hard concrete.

Chapter 13

Kit was feeling more relaxed than she had in a long time. She had missed her opportunity with the lawyer, but was thinking that this building might make up for it. It was a luxury high rise that catered to busy business types and the idle rich. In a sense, it was like living in a four star hotel. There was a kitchen service that would deliver meals from a very extensive menu. There was a maid service, that Jean did not use because he didn't want strangers in the apartment. There was a laundry and shopping service. There was a first class exercise facility with an indoor pool, sauna, and all the trimmings. There was even a masseuse.

She had the works in the gym and returned to the apartment to find a glorious breakfast the Jean had ordered. Ginger was serving. The melon was sublime.

"Morning" Jean said with a smile. "I see you found the gym."

"Yeah, I got up early and found the directory over by the phone. Your people here are good, they already had my name at the gym. I breezed through as if I had lived here all my life. Hope you don't mind, I kinda had the works. I have no idea what it will cost."

"As I said, it's not a problem. In fact these were dropped off early this morning for both of you." He pushed two Platinum Visa cards across the table. To her surprise, Kit saw that her name was on the card. Ginger's was on hers as well.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd be a little careful with those. I mean, don't go buying a car or anything like that. But you will

need clothing and stuff. Also if you have to flee in a hurry, you can use those to fly wherever you need to go. The cards have no limit on them. They won't be traced, because they draw from what we call a Blue Account: money set aside for a field agent's use that isn't recorded in any fashion at the home office. Makes it harder for someone to trace our actions and movements."

"Tell me about this organization you work for." Kit said.

"Sure, in a way you might consider us the Vatican's answer to the CIA. We go back as far as the Spanish and French inquisitions. Now before you get all upset about that, you need to know that most of what you believe about the inquisition is not true. It was a propaganda smear started by German princes who were trying to sever their relationship with the church. They had printing presses, and they knew how to use them. But that really isn't the point. The inquisitors were actually lawyers and scholars of their age. While some got embroiled in local politics and issues about cosmology, a small group found evidence that many of the demonic creatures of folklore actually existed. They set out, with the help of the Dominicans, to fight and hopefully eradicate this evil.

It was set up with a very generous endowment of New World gold and has since managed to put together a couple of pretty good revenue streams. We don't have that many field agents, but our support network is strong. We also have a working relationship with most law enforcement agencies."

"You mean the FBI and RCMP and who knows else knows about the vampires and werewolves?" Kit asked, trying not to be as hostile as she was the night before.

"Well-placed individuals within those organizations do. But it's not the kind of thing that we want getting out. The possibilities for widespread panic aside, many of the creatures we hunt are elusive and smart. This is one case where bigger, is not better. We found that putting one hunter on one monster, is usually the best course of action."

"Okay, so you've been hunting this thing, this vampire for five years."

"Right, I took over from another field agent who went undercover and was never heard from again. Her name is Elizabeth XIII, but that's meaningless. She has used that name in centuries. I call her *Angelique*, a conceit of mine I suppose. I enjoy watching old reruns of *Dark Shadows*. She was a noblewoman in the 15th century in Eastern Europe. She was pretty much the law in her territory and ruled with more than an iron fist. She was sadistic and twisted even in life. It is impossible to tell how many she killed, mostly young women from the peasant and merchant classes. It wasn't until she started killing noble born girls that the local authority stepped in.

Though her execution was recorded, we know that she had already become a vampire, and used her powers to escape. The authorities, such as they were, were either hoodwinked bribed or threatened into supporting her. We picked up her trail shortly thereafter, and have been hunting her ever since."

"So were dealing with someone who can turn into a bat and all that, right?" Kit encouraged.

"Yes and no. There may be powers that we don't know about. Vampirism is not universal thing, it manifests in many ways. We know for instance, that you become one by drinking the blood of a vampire, or by offering yourself as a servant to Satan. That is what Angelique did. The process goes something like this: an individual offers her services to Satan and he grants her great powers and eternal life, but curses her with vampirism as well. Every vampire that is made in this way has it's own particular flavor, or set of abilities. But there are some things we do know. She is confined to the night, sunlight will kill her instantly. She needs some human blood to survive, though she can go long periods, maybe even centuries without it. As far as we know she does not have the power to transform herself physically, and she is gifted psychically. She therefore, has the ability to appear in many forms to people. She can be hurt by most things that hurt you and me, but killed is another story. To be completely and totally destroyed she must be exposed to sunlight."

"So the fact that she has these psychic powers is how she's using the Internet to find her next victim?"

"That's the theory. Given the fact the Debbie was killed, I believe I am on the right track. She is trying to draw me out. Perhaps scare me away from cyber space. There is one other possibility and that is she's trying to draw me into cyber space, in the hopes that I will miss her true attack. That's one reason I need you two, you can be my eyes on the net while I do other things." Jean said.

Kit nodded, but could think of nothing else to say. She looked to Ginger who only smiled and nodded as well.

"One other thing, the old chestnut about evil needing an invitation is true. Without your expressed permission, she, nor any she can send to harm or spy on us, may enter our home. Invite no one in, for any reason what so ever. The building staff has explicit instructions to never enter this apartment. I can fix anything that goes wrong, and all the other services are dropped off. Meals that sort of thing. Understand?"

Both women nodded. He hoped they did.

True to Jean's word, Kit and Ginger were able to go on a spending spree with their magic cards. They were ordered to return by sundown, but given no other restriction. Kit found the malls of Atlanta to be plentiful and well stocked. The one thing they were told to buy were computers. Two desktops and two lap tops. They bought the best they could find. That went for the clothing as well.

As the day began to wind down, Kit sat with Ginger at one of the food courts. They were both tired again, they had shopped and now they were dropping.*****"Are you believing any of this Ginger?"

"Everything Jean said has checked out so far. I mean these credit cards, his apartment. He is so sincere, I can think of any reason he'd lie to us about this. I can't see the advantage to him. I mean he not some desperate computer geek trying to get in our pants. I mean, I don't believe getting women is one problem Jean has. Do you?"

"No, you're right about that. But it's just so impossible."

Cyberblood
by Jonathan Amsbary

"I know Kit, and maybe he believes what he's saying but it's not true. Maybe Debbie's killer is some pyscho who thinks she's a vampire, and this group does too. But if they find and destroy her, I don't care what they believe."

Kit cold only nod in agreement. As promised, they returned to the hotel while the sun still shone in the Georgia sky.

Chapter 14

True to her word, Julie managed to meet with Pat later that night. She came over and wound up staying the night. As the sun started to poke through the window Pat found himself cuddling her naked and sleeping form in his arms. She snored lightly, Pat thought he had never heard such a wonderful sound in his life. He then wondered if that snore would sound delightful or annoying in twenty years. He chuckled to himself.

Julie woke lazily and kissed him deeply on his lips. "What's so funny, lover?" She purred.

"Oh nothing, just a stray thought. Mostly I was laying here looking at you, how beautiful you are. I couldn't sleep, I'm too ... I don't know, too ... too new to this."

"Don't worry, your life will get back into its rhythm again. But do enjoy this feeling while you can. You'll never have it again." She kisses his smooth chest and laid her head against him.

"Can I ask you something Julie?"

"Anything"

"Am I Okay? I mean, you know ... here, in bed?"

Julie laughed softly, "going to tell you something that's going to be among the best advice you may ever get. Never ask a woman that. We hate it. Lovemaking is different for us, it's not as goal oriented, if you understand what I mean. When you ask a question like that, it put too much pressure on us.

"But just this once, yes you are more than Okay. Pat, I have loved you as a friend for a long time, and what I feel for

you now may be my true love. I don't know because I've never felt anything like this before. But there is one thing I'd like to recommend to you."

"What's that?" he asked tentatively.

"I know this is all new to you. I mean I'm the first girl you've done this with and everything, so someone has to tell you this and it might as well be me."

Pat felt his stomach grow heavy and he had an impulse to run away.

"Pat, you're wonderful and considerate and gentle. But Pat?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not made of glass."

Pat felt himself relax a little bit.

"Look, I'm not asking you to rough me up or anything, and if you have to be too rough or too gentle, too gentle wins every time. But I'm not going to break. I mean ... let me see if I can say this right? Pat I want to feel your strength. I want to know I'm with a man, and that I excite you.

"It's not like the stuff David talks about, the whole whips and chains routine. It's just I need you to be a little more forceful."

Pat noticed that she was blushing. He smiled at her and kissed her deeply.

She returned his kiss with passion. "That's the first time you've initiated a kiss with me Pat. I like it."

He kissed her again and pulled her on top of him. She felt his excitement and smiled. "You want me up here lover?" Pat smiled in response. She straightened up and straddled him.

She paused and smiled then lowered herself onto him. She rode him as they made love as the sun rose. When they finished Pat lay back and drifted to sleep. Julie kissed his cheek softly and whispered in his ear "I love you, Pat." She liked the sound of that. She wondered if she would ever work up the nerve to say it while he was awake. True to his word, David set out to buy his uncle and his family a new car. He called Pat in the middle of the morning and told him to get himself ready, that he was coming over.

Pat looked over at Julie who quickly got up and dressed quickly. "Have fun lover, give me a call later will you?"

"You bet." He couldn't take his eyes off her and felt a little empty when she had gone. He moped around the room until he heard David's banging. "You ready to scoot amigo?"

"Yeah, let's hit the road."

They took Pat's car and David directed him to a dealership on the edge of town. Pat was shocked when he realized where he was. "David this is a Mercedes lot!"

"I know, like I said, this isn't a fraction of what they could have taken from me. They could have bought one of these for themselves if they didn't have to take care of me."

"But David, I know you have money, but can you afford something like this? I mean you live so..."

"Poor? Sure I do. Truth is I don't like spending my money. Used to make me feel guilty, like I was profiting from my parent's death. But that's over, if I can make people happy with the money then that's something. Isn't it?"

"I guess, but you can afford this?" Pat asked sheepishly. "I knew you had beer money, but I didn't think you had Mercedes money."

"I haven't come close to spending what I make in interest yet. And believe me, this isn't gonna push me over either. Come on, lets have some fun."

The two of them strode into the show room and David announced in a clear ringing voice "where are those Alabama Mercedes I keep hearing so much about?" A salesman perk up but quickly looked disappointed and a little angry when he saw what was obviously two students in the showroom.

"Look kids, there's a three month back order on those things. I also really don't have the time to waste. So if you want to poke around the lot go ahead, but I have work to do."

Pat felt nervous but, to his surprise, David pushed ahead. "I suppose we don't look like your typical buyers, so I'll cut you some slack. But indulge me." He pulled out a credit card and handed it to the man. "You go check the available credit on that card and then come back and we'll talk turkey."

"Look, we're not set up to take credit card purchases this big."

"I'm not going to buy the car with the damn card, I just want you to know who you are dealing with. So go do some computer magic. If you come back with a smile and coffee for me and my friend I'll buy a car from you. If it doesn't check out, we'll be on our way."

The man looked at the card and then at David and then at Pat. Pat felt about two inches tall. He turn the suggestion over in his head and could not see a down side to David's

suggestion no matter how hard he tried. "Wait here, I'll be right back."**** "We both like our coffee with cream and sugar." David called to his back.

Five minutes later the salesman returned. He was standing straighter, he had put on his sports coat, and he held a tray with two coffee mugs on it. "I'm sorry I gave you a hard time Sir, but..."

"I know, don't give it another thought. Now you say it takes three months to get an SUV?"

"Yes Sir .."

"Call me David, and this is my friend Pat." Pat leaned forward and shook the man's hand.

"Yes David, there isn't a thing I can do about it."

"It's not a problem, it's a gift for some people who don't expect it. They'll get more use out of it when the weather warms up anyway. I suppose you have some kind of a book, with options and such, for me to look at."

"Sure do." The man smiled "Please step into my office."

For the next hour they pored over extras and colors. David went full tilt on everything. "I can get this delivered, right?"

"Anywhere in the world actually."

"South Bend will be fine. And I want you to take care of the tax and licenses for me. Oh and can you recommend a good insurance agent? I want them to turn the key and go, no worries. Understand?"

"South Bend? I think I can arrange everything. I have some friends up in the region."

"Good, good. David wrote a sizable deposit on the car and handed it to the man. You figure everything out and then do

the paper work and figure the balance. When you ready call the number on the check and we'll settle up. Good?"

"Great! I may just take the rest of the day off."

"Sounds like a plan. Oh and Phil?" He had insisted that David also call him by his first name.

"Yes."

"I expect that there will be some extra charges for all that I'm asking for, hiring someone to stand in lines and such. And I expect that you will want a commission that's fair for your time and effort. But if you try and fuck me you live to regret it." David was not smiling and stared directly into the salesman's eyes.

"Yes Sir." The salesman's smile faded.

"Good Phil, I know I can count on you. Will look forward to getting your call soon."

As they got back into the car Pat looked back at the salesman who was watching them leave. Phil was staring at David, he wasn't smiling.

David took them both to lunch down at the lake. Lake Monroe was Indiana's largest Lake if you didn't count Lake Michigan. It had a number of resort hotels and restaurants and some of them stayed open year round. The restaurant was small but elegant. Pat noticed that there were no prices on the menu. David encouraged him to get what he wanted and Pat ordered the steak and shrimp.

"Pat there is something I'd like to ask you, something I'd like to talk to you about."

"Of course, David."

"Look, I know you don't approve of my online life, but I want you to listen with an open mind. It's important to me. Please do judge me."

Pat smiled warmly "Anything David."

David took a deep breath and started to talk "You know I've met someone. Someone I love. As crazy as it sounds, it really was love at first sight, she told me she feels the same way. Last night she asked me something import. Last night she asked me to wear her collar."

"What?" He tried to not sound incredulous and failed.

"A collar, Pat. It's something we do. It's a sign of ownership. She will put a collar around my neck and I will belong to her. In many ways we will be married to each other. There is a ceremony and everything. You understand it's all metaphorical since it's online. But I'm sure she'll ask me to come to her and do this in real-life soon. Then I will wear her collar for real."

"David, it's a lot to swallow all at once, but like I keep saying, if it makes you happy."

"It does Pat, it does."

"You said there was something you wanted to ask."

"Yes, Pat will you stand by me. I mean sit at the computer with me during the ceremony. Be my second."

"Are you asking me to be your best man?"

"Well I guess that's close enough. Yes I'm asking you to be my best man."

"Of course David, you're my best friend. Of course I'll stand by you."

Cyberblood
by Jonathan Amsbary

"Thanks." David smiled "I was going to make you pay for lunch if you said no."

Chapter 15

Vampire-Empress looked at her computer screen and smiled. He had made a transparent move to try and trap her. This memorial service was too tempting. She remembered reading Robin Hood (she remembered every word she had ever read), and how he had been trapped at that silly tournament. Well, Okay then, she would take his bait, but on her terms.

She considered her next move and smiled. She had taken one of his players off the board and he responded by keeping his two pawns in plain sight, but moved to protect them instead. It appeared as he sat on the board unprotected, but she knew Renee better than that. He would never leave his most powerful piece unguarded.

She thought about the pieces and decided she couldn't take any of his pawns off the board just now. Maybe she could put some into play. Certainly a few of her pawns would come in handy at this memorial of theirs. She smiled, if she couldn't take his players off the board, maybe she could give him more to protect.

She turned to her repast. She had held him on the bed with her mind for an hour or so while she plotted. She kept him from moving, but made sure he was awake and aware of what was going to happen to him. The smell of adrenaline and fear was overpowering her.

The mark had picked her up in a local club. His technique had been aggressive and awkward. She had played stupid and vapid until she had lured him into her home. She had

toyed with him a bit, first arousing him sexually then inflicting physical pain and then showing his mind the image of what was to become of him. His terror was tangible.

She looked at her victim's naked body and marveled at its vulnerability. She wondered just how much pain this one would take before his life flickered away. She worked on him slowly and methodically, imagining that he was Jean, and possibly Renee. Her body contracted with sexual pleasure thinking of Renee laying helpless in her clutches.

She had allowed him the use of his voice and he screamed into the night. It didn't matter, no one could hear. She timed it perfectly, his life slipped quietly away mere moments before the sun appeared in the east. She rested in her coffin and smiled as her dreamless sleep overcame her. Her body full of fresh blood and her mind full of fresh schemes.

She thought of her new life with David. She thought of the pleasure they would share and the terror they would spread. Perhaps, as a special gift to her lover, she would find that stupid tourist from the other night. Yes, what a fitting wedding present that would make for her new consort.

Chapter 16

Everyone from the Chateau was pretty shaken by Debbie's death and David was no exception. He had called Pat to come over and they talked about it at length. There was a lot of tension in the air and the discussion drifted back into familiar arguments.

"David, can't you see this is why I worry about all the time you spend online?"

"Pat, she was my friend. If anyone really knows about this it's me. I'm certain it wasn't another chatter who killed her."

"How do you know that David? How do you know?"

"Why do I have to be the one to prove my suspicions around here? I mean, all we know is that Debbie chatted and she was murdered. She probably drove and did a lot of other stuff too. In fact, if you want to look at it logically, it was probably someone like her ex-husband who did her in."

"But shit, a chatter get murdered and everyone thinks it's automatically chat that killed her. I'm surprised that the papers didn't pick up on that angle."

What David didn't know is that there was no angle for the papers to pick up on. Renee and the Committee couldn't stop the story from leaking out. Honestly, the papers had it hours before they did. If they had gotten ahold of soon, and there weren't family members involved, they might have kept the story quiet. But they had thrown up a steel curtain around the crime since then. Nothing leaked out. Agencies just kept cross referencing with each other and mumbled stuff "continuing

investigations." This satisfied the press, which quickly found other gory stories to write.

The family and friends were harder to shake. But given enough time, Renee knew they would give up. Perhaps a good cover story could be sold to the children. Maybe an insurance policy could mysteriously surface. Renee knew it would take some finesse, but he also knew he'd solved this problem a thousand times before. He hated it.

But Pat and David knew Debbie was a chatter and they continued to argue until they both were too tired to go over the same ground for the fifth or sixth time. They eventually decided to call a truce.

"So anyway, they are going to have a memorial online for her. I think it's a good idea. We all really loved Debbie, and it's terrible when something like this happens to someone you love."

"I suppose."

David sighed "Pat, please I need you to understand that she meant something to me."

"Okay, you're right David. That was uncalled for, I'm sorry."

"Thanks, I know you are just worried about me, but there is no need."

Pat could only shrug. He could not apologize for worrying about his friend.

David tried to change the subject "So how long have you and Julie been seeing each other?"

"What?" was all Pat could say. He didn't know what else he could say. Should he lie? Should he confront? Should he confess? How the hell did David know anything?

"Relax Pat, I should have given you some warning. But it's been pretty obvious watching you two together. I mean it doesn't take a genius to see you two care for each other. And recently you've been watching each other too closely. Almost making a point of not talking to each other. Either you're both in love or just mad. If you were mad at each other, then you would tell me. Right?"

"I suppose." Pat said, knowing he was admitting everything.

"Look, I'm happy for you guys. I really am. Julie is one hell of a girl. I mean she's kind of skinny, but she's cute and smart. Hell, a year ago, I would have been jealous. You know I had the major league crush on her when we first met?"

"I remember." Pat was beginning to relax and a small smile was returning to his face.

"I also understand why you're both trying to keep this quiet. I mean Samantha is going to be a problem."

"I know David, that's the one part I really hate. You know we both love Samantha, but Julie says they both kind of know it's winding down. They are both waiting for school to end so they can blame the break up."

"Do you love her? You know, love her. Not like we always have."

"I think so. But it's so hard to know. David, how do you know if you're in love? How do you know you love this vampire woman?"

"Vampire-Empress," David corrected "I suppose it's just trusting your feelings. I just know that's what it is."

"Well that really helps." Pat said sarcastically "I wonder if that explanation will work on my next lab report? 'I have no proof that variable X impacts variable Y in such a way. But I have a feeling I just have to trust.'"

"Pat, psychology can't tell you a damn thing about life. Thought you knew that by now. I mean shit, look at Julie's dad."

"You're damn straight there." He paused. "So you really just picked it up from watching us? You weren't just fishing just now?"

"No, I really deduced from watching you. It funny, but ever since I met this woman online, I've become more perceptive about people. I mean it's so obvious in some cases. Like the asshole that was picking on you the other night. I could just tell that he was a blow hard and that I could back him down. Obvious."

"God, don't remind me of him. Did you hear what happened to him?"

"Not really."

"How could you not know, *Everyone* is talking about it."

Everyone was talking about it. The boy's blood alcohol was high enough to kill him without the help of the bus. The bus had just made it quicker and bloodier. A fire storm of pro and anti fraternity groups were using this issue to make political hay. Mother Against Drunk Driving was planning a rally soon. The kid's parents were going to sue the University for millions

of dollars. The University revoked the fraternity's charter and the national organization was reviewing the Frat's status.

"Guess I've been wrapped up with what's happened to Debbie. And there's my love life to consider. I guess I'm just not paying attention to the rest of the world."

Pat filled him in on the details. And he told him about all the activity that had sprung up in response. All David could say was "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

"David!"

"Come on, like you're going to miss that twisted fuck? I bet he's date raped a least a dozen or more girls. Let's go ask some of them how they feel about it? The world's a better place without him.

"God, I'm so sick of false grief. I mean who really gives a fuck about most of what passes for tragedy these days? Look at Bosnia or Africa or the middle east. All these wars and atrocities, who cares? People have been killing each other in these places for centuries. Why should we get excited now. What makes one side more sympathetic than another? It's politics, all fucking politics. I just wish they'd all kill themselves and get it over with, Leave the world to those of us who want to live in it."

"I suppose that's how the German's felt in the thirties." Pat was hurt and getting very angry. "Maybe you'd care if you grew up with stories about how your Grandparents and their families were killed by that monster. Do you know I don't have one Jewish friend, not one, who wasn't touched by the holocaust?"

"So I suppose you want to tell me that my Grandmother was some insignificant ant that was crushed under the heel of history? I suppose your friend Debbie was just another useless victim in an over populated world?*****"I don't care if that guy was a shit or not. He had friends who cared about him. He had family who loved him. And now he's gone, and they will miss him. They will hurt. They will never know what would have become of him.

"That's the point David. It's not the millions of Jews who were killed it's the tens of million that are left to carry the memory and the loss. That's the point David. Don't ever tell me that a human life isn't worth anything."

The two sat in silence for a while until David looked at Pat and said "I'm sorry, really. That's not what I meant. You know that."

"Yeah David, I know." He stood and patted David affectionately on his shoulder and then let himself out and took what felt like a very long and cold walk home. When Pat got home his answering machine was blinking. It was Julie and she sounded urgent. When he called she almost broke down when she herd his voice.

"Oh God Pat, Oh God! I don't know what to do. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

She ranted on like that for a while until Pat finally got a word in "Julie! Please tell me what's wrong? What happened? Why are you sorry?" He heard her taking a deep breath.

"It's Samantha, I don't know why. We were talking about our relationship again. How the magic was just going out. And

I blurted out about you and me. My God, Pat it crushed her. How could I be so stupid? How?"

"Pat sighed deeply "Julie, I'm coming right over. I want you to know that this isn't your fault. It's the truth Julie, she was going to find out anyway, it's best she heard it from you. Now wait right there, I'm coming over."

"Okay Pat" He heard her begin to sob. He hung up and rushed over as quickly as he could. Samantha was hurt and furious. How could her life be unraveling so fast. She knew she and Julie were having problems, but how could she turn to another lover so quickly? And why did it have to be Pat? Samantha had also harbored a secret attraction for Pat. In her mind, Julie was physical beauty defined. Why did she have to take Pat? Couldn't she leave ugly for ugly?****She drove to David's house and actually missed Pat by only about ten minutes. She needed someone to talk to and David was the only choice she could think of. He let her in and they sat in silence for a minute.

If Samantha were thinking straight she would have noticed how distracted David was and just got up and left. But somehow life isn't like that and bad situations often go from bad to worse in a blink of an eye because of it.

"David I have to talk, it's horrible"

David was about to try and wave her off, he was too wrung out by what happened to Debbie and then his fight with Pat to really give Samantha any attention. But she pushed on before he could. It was a terrible mistake.

"It's Julie, she's sleeping with Pat."

"You know?" David blurted out.

"Yes, Julie just told me."

Then it hit her "You know." She quoted back to David
"What does that mean? Did you know about those two?"

"I can't lie to you Samantha, yes."

"My God, am I that big a fool?"

"No Samantha, I figured it out and Pat confirmed it."

She didn't hear him "Oh God, I'm going to be sick. How could they do this to me? What have I ever done to Pat?"

David tried being logical "They didn't do this to hurt you Samantha, Pat feels terrible. But come on, you know you and Julie were having troubles. And the truth is I don't believe either of you is really gay. I mean look at Julie, she's just acting out against her dad. Now that the lesbian thing didn't work, maybe she'll shave her head and join the ashram But let's face it, it's just not her."

"And what about me David?"

If David were smart, kind, empathetic he would have lied or deflected the question. But he was tired and wrung out and very raw. He could only be truthful. "I mean look at you Samantha. You latched onto Julie because she would never pressure you about your weight."

"What?"

"Oh come on Samantha, do you have a mirror? Is this a surprise to you? You can mother Julie and she isn't going to fuss at you about being fat. Maybe what you need to do is loose some weight and find a man of your own to love. People do it everyday."

"How dare you..." Samantha was sputtering, she was having a hard time forming coherent thoughts.*****"How dare

I?" David raised to the challenge "You come here looking for a shoulder to cry on, to turn me against my friends. When I make a perfectly legitimate observation, you then turn on me. Is that what friendship means to you Samantha? I either back you up without question, or nothing?"

Samantha didn't know what to say, so she just got up and left. David thought about chasing after her, but he didn't bother. He quickly settled down and thought that manipulating people was an easy thing indeed.

If you could look back objectively at all the mistakes that were by or around Samantha that day, it would have been quite a list. But undoubtedly the biggest mistake was to get back into her car after leaving David's. She couldn't see very well and her rage clouded her judgment completely. Had she been lucky a policeman would have stopped her after she ran the first or second red light, but all of Samantha's luck was running bad. In fact, not only did she miss the red lights at intersections, she missed the blinking lights at the rail crossing too. She didn't miss the train.

A CSX freight train bound for Indianapolis caught her front bumper as she drove through the crossing without noticing the warning lights. The train had three engines and was pulling one hundred and thirty three cars. It was going forty five miles per hour and its tonnage was almost incalculable. It took the engineer three miles to stop the train. Samantha's car was carried the entire distance.

Chapter 17

Raymond Ashford was angry. He looked out from his deck at the Gulf of Mexico. It was gray-blue this time of year and you could see dolphins playing and fishing boats not far off shore. The water was too cold for swimming and the community of Seaside looked like a deserted museum piece. It stood as a silent sentinel over the dunes.

Ray had other concerns. Buy any measure, he was wealthy. The deal he was working on now would make him wealthy still. But this was about to change. It was doubtful that he could remain in his show place home much longer. Certainly he could not remain long enough to consummate his deal. He was not certain he could remain long enough to preserve his wealth.

His instincts told him to run, but he knew from experience that his disappearance combined with his actions last night would bring destruction down upon him. Every account he had, would have electronic snoops put on it. If he so much as used a credit card, he would quickly and quietly be destroyed. No, Ray had to leave town in a predictable and even tempered way.

He thought about the last twenty four hours. How he had regrettably severed his business relationships, talked to real estate agents about selling his home. He would talk to his banker and accountant tomorrow about transferring his accounts and setting him up in a new playground of the idle rich.

He thoughts drifted back to the night before. How he had stood on the dunes and watched the sun sink over the eastern end of the shore line towards Alabama. It was a beautiful night and he was with a beautiful woman. He didn't even know her last name, and her first name was quickly fading from his mind. He had simple seduction on his mind. He was well built and handsome. An ageless middle age, that women often find attractive, and a princely bankroll, Ray had no trouble finding companionship.

They were walking down the beach as is got darker and he turned to kiss her. She pressed into him and opened herself to his kiss completely. Her skin was smooth and perfect. Her figure was the ideal of this age. She came from a good family, she was quite the catch and she was his.****His head spun with pleasure. The woman had an intoxicating effect on him, that he seldom felt. He was more aroused than he had been in many years. He could feel her delicate heart beating and the blood rush close to her skin as she too became sexually aroused.

Then it happened. He lost control. He hadn't considered the chance of transformation because he had eaten within the year, and his control was impeccable. If he needed he could go years without a kill. It was a talent that had ensured a long life. Ray was a werewolf.

He had thrown back his head and screamed as his body convulsed and contorted. His date was frightened and quickly tried to run from him. But the sand was soft and deep and she could not run far before Ray was ready for the hunt. As smart as he was in his normal life, he only retained a fraction

of his intelligence in his other form. He was all hunger and instinct, and it was his hunger that drove him now.

He was on her in an instant. He tore into her with primal fury older than any man. Her blood spilled into his mouth as she whimpered and then died. He moved from her form quickly and hid among the dunes until morning, he awoke naked and bloody (as he always did) with the morning sun. He moved in the dawn light to recover his clothing. Fortunately he had transformed a few hundred yards from the kill, so he didn't have to leave any incriminating evidence near the body.****He had been seen leaving with the young woman, so the police called upon him in his home in the middle of the morning after the body had been found by an elderly couple on their morning constitutional.

The officers seemed satisfied with his story. That he had walked her out onto the beach and tried to seduce her. She had rebuffed him and they parted, somewhat angrily. The attack was obviously made by a rabid dog, so he wasn't even a suspect. They only hoped he had seen something. He said he hadn't, and they seemed satisfied with his answers and left. They were very polite, as police often are with men like him.

Now he needed to work out his next move. As he said, if he ran, he would bring terror down on himself. Not from the childish police, but from the hunters. They would already be sending investigators here. They checked every animal attack. They would be putting their electronic snoopers on all financial transactions. If he bolted, they would catch him in a second. But he knew staying had it's dangers too.

He would transform for at least two more nights, maybe three or four. The lust was upon him strong and powerfully. It would not leave him until it ran its course. He suspected interference from a third party. Someone had psychically tampered with his defenses and smashed them without warning. There were only a few who he knew who could do this. He would someday visit the one he suspected. Not as a wolf, that would be suicidal, for her power would be at its height at night. No, he would find her while she slept and drag her into the sunlight and watch as she burned slowly before his eyes. He smiled at the prospect.

But he couldn't allow himself the luxury of thinking about the future and his revenge for too long. He had tonight to think about. And the next night, and the night after that.

* * * *

The Vampire-Empress was happy. She knew she had to find a distraction and she found one closer to home than she needed when she stretched out her mind and searched. She needed something to distract Jean's mind, at least for a short time, and Ray would be the perfect distraction. She had known Ray a very long time. He had paid her a large sum of money to help him psychically control his blood lust. She had taught many of his kind.

"Poor baby," she thought with a smile. He never realized that she could easily take away what he had given him. He was a perfect pawn in their game. Jean had received notification about the animal attack from an emergency e-mail account he kept, so that Renee could contact him in an

emergency. *"Animal attack, Destin, Florida. Contact P. already onsite. Call me. R.*

Jean knew the import of the message and knew he had to respond. The chance that this was unrelated to his current case was remote. He had to investigate this case. With any luck, it should be a quick hunt. He considered what to do with the women.

Taking them along had certain dangers. The monster they would be hunting was clever, powerful and ruthless. But leaving them here, without his protection, would make them vulnerable to Angelique. That could be what she wanted—to draw him away from them—to make either a physical or perhaps psychic attack. He sat with both of them and explained this to them.

"Well, I said I could prove myself to you. I thought that my actions would do that. That I would show I was trustworthy. But if I show you a werewolf, I think that would prove to you both once and for all that I'm telling you the truth."

"I suppose." Was all Kit could say.

"I'm coming with you." Ginger said in her even manner that seemed to set a standard for the other two, time and again. "Not because I need proof, but because I feel safer when I am with you."

While the women packed, Jean prepared his tools. Two shotguns; one pump, one double barreled, both twelve gauge and sawed off.. Two rifles; one Winchester thirty ought thirty lever action, and one three-oh-eight bolt action, both with scopes. Five ten millimeter double action semiautomatic

pistols, all with laser sights. All the weapons were loaded with silver ammunition.

On the flight down he gave each of his companions a pistol and a showed them how they worked. He also showed them how to use the shotguns. It was unlikely they would be in a position to need the rifles, so he didn't bother with them.****"If this is a werewolf, and we are pretty certain that it is, then you need to know some things about it. Unlike a vampire, we have to hunt this monster at night. There is no way we can tell if someone is a werewolf by day, and we won't risk killing an innocent on a suspicion.

"The werewolf is powerful and clever, but not smart in its wolf form. It will look very much like a large dog, and will act mostly on instinct. It will either fight or flee. It can appear on any night, not just a full moon, and most have control over their transformation. That is they can hold it off for periods at a time. One they transform, only daylight, or death will change them back. And once a lust over takes them, they will be compelled to transform for any number of nights in a row. It can be as little as three nights, or as long as a month. Though werewolves who are that powerless against their blood lust tend to live long.

"We suspect that this werewolf is very old and very smart in his human form. I suspect that Angelique has somehow drawn him out in order to draw me off. Either to draw me away from the computer, from Atlanta, or from you. I have no way of knowing.

Kit noticed the sun had set while they were speaking. She could only wonder what had become of her life in the last week.

* * * *

Ray watched the sun set from a secluded part of a national park. He was naked and his clothing were stashed under a green tarp. It was not too far away from the first kill, but far away enough that the searchers would likely not be here. If he went too far, then it would tip the werewolf hunters for sure. He hoped he would wake near enough to this spot so that he could get back to his clothing and his car without trouble. He felt the transformation start to take hold of him and he cried in agony.

In his lupine form, he truly was a creature of the night. A million smells and sounds filled his senses. He searched the wind with his nose and finally found what he was looking for. An inebriated college student had drifted away from his friends camp ground. He had been drinking all day, and like his friends, had no ability to form a coherent thought. He stumbled from the camper and went into the cold night air, sobering up just a little.

His drunken mind remembered a dance club that they had passed getting to the camp ground. The club was twelve miles away, but that didn't matter to him right now. He tended to roam when he was drunk, and if someone said they knew a girl in California he could screw, he would probably set out for the coast on foot.

Ray pranced along the tree line where the forest met the dunes. He came up on the drunken young man easily, and his victim showed no fear as the monster approached. He and his friends had not read any of the papers nor had television. They had no reason to be afraid of a stray dog along the beach.

"Good dog" were the last words the young man said before he got his throat torn out.

Chapter 18

Ray had a sickening thought as he prepared to go home. He realized that he had not fallen victim to his lust in decades. He had usually planned his kills methodically and usually to his advantage. He could not count the number of business partners who entered into inheritance agreements with him. A common business practice for partners who wanted to be sure they didn't lose their life's work to a capricious heir. As long as murder, of any sort was not involved, the business would revert to a surviving partner, or partner's upon one of the partner's death. This was usually offset by a generous life insurance policy that was paid for by the partnership. This took care of the partner's heirs.

Wolf attacks, or in most cases, dog attacks, were rarely considered acts of murder. It was surprising to note how many people are attacked and killed by dogs every year. The attacks were usually on usually children, but enough adults are killed to disguise one or two attacks in a decade that were to someone's advantage. Even the Committee couldn't track him.

Now everything had changed. He realized that the Committee would not write off his involvement with the debutante. In fact they would zero in on it. He was surprised it took him until today to figure that out. Now he really was trapped. He didn't have enough cash to run far, and if he used a credit card to go anywhere, they would be on him in a second.

He drove carefully back to his house in Seaside. There were the usual few tourists roaming the streets in the off season Ray was sure that he spotted one tourist who paid particular attention to his house. He drove down the beach and waited a couple of hours. When he returned, he found the same man, casually watching his house. Ray was screwed. He had three hundred dollars in his pocket, a couple of changes of clothing and a car, that would probably be hot before the day was out.

Philip was waiting for the unlikely trio of werewolf hunters at the small Destin airport. Introductions were quickly made and the three were soon in a car cursing down the gulf highway.

"So what we have is two victims. The girl from night before and some drunk kid last night. The attacks were ten miles apart from each other, not an unreasonable distance for such things, but the sheriff's hunters weren't even close to the kill zone last night. If you ask me, we got a live one."

"Possibles?" Jean asked curtly.

"I'll be you a promotion to the home office that it's this rich guy, Ray Ashford. He was walking on the beach with the girl before she was killed. The local heat didn't think much of it, of course. They just asked if he saw or heard anything, when he said he didn't, they left. He said she hosed him down and they had a fight and he left her on the beach. Could be telling the truth, but I could drive this car through the holes in the story. Mainly, guys like that, don't get hosed by girls like that."

Jean, Kit and Ginger soon settled into an easy rhythm in their temporary home. They moved into a resort cottage that was attached to a large and famous golf complex. The cottage was remote enough that their coming and goings would not be noticed. As with his home, Jean explicitly told the manager that he did not want anyone coming into the cottage for any reason. He punctuated his request with a large gratuity to the manager and to the cleaning staff. They were left alone.

He put the pump shotgun under one of the two king sized beds, and made sure the women knew where it was. They were instructed to keep a pistol on their person, or within easy reach at all times and especially at night. He gave them a special warning. "Remember what I told you about evil needing to be invited into a dwelling?"

They both nodded in response.

"That doesn't apply in this situation. There are many deadly things in this world that aren't strictly evil. A shark, or a lion, for instance, can kill you. No one can seriously think of them as evil though. The werewolf, in his wolf form, is like that. The wolf is neither good nor evil, it simply is what it is: a deadly animal. The werewolf in his human form, on the other hand, is completely evil. Often very smart and can often use the beast to his own advantage. Usually by being with, or close to his intended victim before a transition takes hold of them.

"There is only one way that a person can become a werewolf, and it isn't by being bitten by one. They have to sell their soul to Satan. Usually for immortality. Satan never makes a clean bargain with any mortal. The person will

usually carry some sort of curse, but knows the only release from the curse is death. They also know what waits for them after they die. This is why it's called a devil's bargain."

Ginger shuddered at the thought. She thought immortality with certain damnation assured if you were destroyed was bad enough. If you added the curse of the lycanthrope or vampirism on top, it really was hellish.

"So keep the weapons close at all times. If he finds out where we are, he may attack us here. Day or night. Silver is the only substance that can assure his destruction. Even if he is shot with it and it doesn't kill him, it will harm him greatly. For one thing, he can not hold his wolf form if he is touching silver."

"Why doesn't he use silver to hold off his transformations? You mentioned that he is probably unable to control his killing lusts right now. Why doesn't he just wear something silver until he feels safe."

"Because it also causes him great pain to be in contact with it. We know so much about werewolves because we have some who work with us. They were all captured, and have silver imbedded under their skin. The nerves surrounding the implants are electronically blocked. The electronics are controlled by encrypted radio transmitters. This keeps the monsters on a very short leash indeed."

Ginger thought that this sounded like a cruel solution to an impossible problem. She reminded herself, however, that Jean was at war with these monsters, and kept her observation to herself.****"You can set up your laptops here. I know you want to have Debbie's memorial service as soon

as possible. I am sorry that I won't now be able to attend. I will be busy at night."

"We understand. Where's Philip going to be?"

"Philip has made his own arrangements, I don't know his, and he doesn't know mine. Though there are private investigators watching both of us at all times. It's kind of a double blind arrangement. This way an enemy can't capture one of and force us to betray the other. It's a very old system and it has worked flawlessly for as long as we've used it. But don't let your guard down. We can still be attacked."

* * * *

Life worked its way into a semblance of normalcy for the trio of hunters. They set up their computers and got online. It was nice to be able to talk to their friends again. Jean took them out shopping or sightseeing during the day. True to his word, however, he was gone all evening. He would sleep for only a few hours in the morning. He insisted it was enough, that his monastic life had taught him how to survive with little sleep.

Life for everyone else in the area was anything but normal. The animal attacks were occurring with terrifying regularity. Jean had told him that the wolf would likely kill one person each night. On the nights where no attack was reported, Jean speculated that the beast hadn't left the body where it could be found.

Everyone in the resort town and outlying areas was working up a frenzy. Posies were springing up all over the place. Bands of armed men and women would roam the area

and shot anything that moved on four legs. Hundreds of stray dogs were killed. Many pets were killed too, and dog owners soon learned to keep their pets inside and only took them out on a leash. Even dogs in fenced yards had been killed.

Arguments and violence were becoming commonplace as pet owners retaliated against their neighbors. The tourists either left or stopped coming all together. No one with small children could be found with a hundred miles. It seemed that people were less afraid of hurricanes than a rabid animal running loose.

Ray sat on a dune in state park watched the ocean roll in and out and thought about his next move. He had already stashed his car and would use a stolen to move around in. He was less afraid of the local police then he was of the Committee's hunters. He knew that his house was being watched by at least two different people at all times, he had n way to get at his belongings.

His money supply was running low and he was tempted to flee, hoping to get lost among the refugees from the resort town. But he knew that was hopeless too. If he had some real cash, maybe, but the little he had wouldn't get him far. Plus, if he got spotted in the stolen car on the highway, that would be disaster. If he was spotted in his own car, that would be disaster too. He didn't know what to do except wait and hope his lusts soon got under control again. He cold wait a year or two, live on his wits. He'd started with nothing before, he could do it again.

Ray wasn't incredibly old for an immortal. A mere 150 years old. He had once met a vampire that claimed to be

more than a thousand years old. It was hard, even now, to imagine living that long. He had little to do with his time during the day, so he contemplated his beginning and became moodier and moodier.

Ray was a Union soldier conscripted from a small town in Indiana. Like many conscripts he was angry and frightened.

He didn't have any particular love of southerners, or his fellow northerners for that matter. The thought of killing a few, didn't bother him in the least. The thought of being killed by them bothered him tremendously. The last thing he wanted was to get killed fighting to free some nigger slaves.

Ray's mother was a witch woman. This was not uncommon, most were really midwives and herbalists. But Ray's mother was a true witch. She practiced the black arts secretly. Ray knew that Satan existed and knew how to strike a bargain with him. Which is exactly what he did.

Ray wanted two things. He wanted to get away from the war and he wanted immortality. He knew the price for any bargain with Satan, so immortality had to be part of the deal. He had heard tell of many immortals from his mother, so he knew it was possible.

Late one night, he crept away from his training unit and performed a summoning ceremony. He had lured one of the other conscripts to follow, for he knew blood would be needed. He cut the hapless fool throat and performed the ceremony. ****Sure enough, a rather unassuming middle aged man appeared inside the circle of blood in response to Ray's call. The man was cold and somewhat sarcastic. Ray told him what he wanted and the man asked if he truly

understood the cost of his request. Ray assured him he did. The man smiled and told Ray to return to his camp and that his deliverance would come to him the following night.

Ray buried his companion and crept back to camp. Fortunately he had not been missed yet. He awoke the next morning and heard the fuss that broke out around the absence of his companion. Desertion was not a uncommon occurrence, but they search anyway. A party of men and dogs uncovered his body that afternoon. The rumor was that the unlucky fellow had been taken upon by a local band of brigands.

That night Ray lay in his cot wondering what would happen to deliver him from service to the Union. He then felt his first change. The pain was awful, and he thought he was going to die. But he didn't, he merely had changed into his wolf form for the first time. He killed his tent mate and ran off into the waiting night.

The next morning, he was naked, bloody, cold and scared. He knew what had happened. He knew there would be strings attached to his bargain, but he had hope he might be made a vampire or something similar, not a werewolf. But he wasn't going to worry about it, a deal was a deal and did what he had to do to survive. Because now, survival was the only thing that mattered.

Over the years, he had learned to use the beast to his advantage. He had also amassed quite a fortune. He had met other immortals. He had learned about the Committee. He had learned to hide in the electronic and information age. And

now he found himself with nothing, wondering what his next move should be.

He had met some of his trackers while in human form. They often had hunting dogs, and the dogs would lead them to Ray. While the dogs knew they had the killer, their human owners just thought they had some homeless hermit living in the woods. They would often warn him or threaten him. But they always left him alone. He had to think of something, and he had to think of it soon.

Chapter 19

Kit and Ginger decided that they need to hold Debbie's memorial as soon as they could. The whole werewolf hunt had throw them off of their schedule. They had hope to do this days ago. They had been so busy, that they had not been online very much. Some of their friends were beginning to worry about them all over again. No one knew where they actually were, as far as chat community knew, both women were still in Canada. It made them vulnerable to same killer that got Debbie in the minds of their friends. Little did they know the real dangers they faced.

The original plan had called for Jean to officiate over the ceremony. He was the perfect choice for a number of reasons. First of all he was a man. It amazed Kit to think about this, but the BDSM crowd was pretty chauvinistic. Even though there were male and female Dominants and male and female submissives, most of the leaders were male Dominants (Doms). Usually the female Dominants (Domme) followed their lead. Kit also noticed that most open switches were women. If a male sub switch to Dom, he usually didn't switch back. Almost no Dom would switch to sub.

She also noted that some of the women were gay, or bisexual, but all of the men were straight. There was another room for Transvestites and gays into BDSM, and their paths never crossed. As usual she chalked it up to the nature of things and let it go at that.

Kit was tempted to officiate over the memorial but gave up the idea for two reasons. First of all she wanted to speak

about their friendship. The officiator would not get so personally involved. Secondly, she and Ginger each felt they should do their best to keep an eye on the room, get a feel for what was going on, and to talk to each other as it was happening. If the monster was going to show up, they wanted to spot her.

They got online and checked the users for a suitable candidate. They checked the users list for any one listed as Master or Lord. They noticed the Lord-Whip was on, and they both agreed he would be an excellent choice. Whip was well known by all the chatters. He was on a lot and got to know many through many of the shifts. He was respectful and polite. He didn't cruise or play any of the subs. He was quick to defend a sub or any friend against aggressive tourist. Kit knew he was moody and prone to depressions. But he was an ideal choice nonetheless.

They invited him into a private room and asked him to officiate. He accepted, of course, and told them how honored he was to be asked. Like many, he was fond of Debbie and was very sad at her passing. They agreed that the service would be that night at midnight EST. It was important to establish time zones when you made plans. Chatters came from all over the world and you got easily confused. It was particularly for the chatters from Australia or New Zealand. Not only were there many time zones to calculate, it changed depending on the season. Australia is in the southern hemisphere and, as a result, had reversed Day Light Saving Time. So sometimes you could be 17 hours from your chat partner, 18 hours or 19 hours, depending on the time of the

year. No one wanted to figure Indiana into that calculation, since Hoosiers never observed Day Light Saving Time.

They had some time to kill. The sun was high in the sky, and they knew they wouldn't be able to sleep. They were both very jazzed. The thought that they might get a tangible lead tonight made them feel like they were kids and it was Christmas eve. They sat out on the patio and admired the golf course in front of them.

It was green, lush and about the most beautiful thing they had ever seen. It was hot enough to swim or do other summer stuff, but it was great golf weather. Kit commented as to the foolishness of golfers. Despite the reports of animal attacks, they were out in force. Foursomes of golfers trundled by their cottage in a regular procession. The carts were always full of men. Ginger wondered if women golfed in Florida, or maybe the attacks had scared them off. Kit saw that many of the carts carried rifles or shotguns in them. Maybe these golfers weren't as foolish as they seemed at first blush.

A few of them stopped to warn the women about the dangers of being out alone. Kit was certain that these were veiled attempts at seduction. Kit enjoyed displaying the shotgun she brought out on the patio. There was something about a well armed woman that was very off putting. Kit was enjoying this more than she should have.

"Have you been thinking about this Kit, I mean have you stopped to think about what's happened to us in the last week or so? Back before, well you know, we were just three working girls living from check to check. Now Debbie's dead

and you and I are living this James Bond existence with a former monk. I mean we're hunting werewolves and vampires for Christ sake!"

"What!" It was not a question. Kit was stunned. Through this whole ordeal Ginger had been this even handed, even tempered model of submissive perfection. She accepted every idea, every order of Jean's with hesitation. Without question and now this.

"Shit Ginger, where have you been? This whole thing's been beyond my imagination and now you're showing doubts? I don't know if I can handle this Ginger, you're the one I've been leaning on emotionally. You've been so damn sure of yourself, sure of Jean. If you start falling apart, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"I know, and when he's here I do believe him. I believe every word. And it has made sense at every stage. But if you look at the whole thing, it's impossible. Look, my body tell me that there should be snow on the ground, and here we sit in a golf course wearing wind breakers. It's January! I've never been out of Canada before. It's suppose to be cold in winter, there's suppose to be snow. I'm not the kind of person who vacations in the sun.

"So now I'm here and we're hunting un-dead monsters. People just don't live like this Kit." She was starting to cry and Kit went over and hugged her. It was tough for Kit to do.

Kit had known Ginger all her life and Ginger followed every lead that Kit made. But there was one thing that they both knew. They both knew that Ginger was the strong one, the stable one, in the relationship. Kit was always leaning on

Ginger, always crying on her shoulder. Kit was always the one that needed calming down. Ginger was always the stable one the calm one.

This calm, however, was a thin facade over her true emotions. After her assault, Ginger went into therapy. She was very mistrusting of her therapist and didn't reveal much of herself. Her therapist was patient, but eventually told Ginger that she was wasting everyone's time and was going to cut her off.

Ginger told the woman that there was something deeply disturbing about her, that she was afraid to reveal. The therapist reassured her that Ginger could tell her anything, and so Ginger finally confessed her submissive tendencies.

The therapist was completely understanding. In fact, she was a submissive in a deviant relationship herself. She assured Ginger that behavior, while not normal, was not necessarily destructive. Just like any relationship, you had to make sure your needs were being met and that you could communicate openly and honestly with your partner.

Ginger almost died from the overpowering sense of relief that she felt when the woman had told her this. Kit was a little pissed when she heard about it later because it was the exact thing she had always told Ginger. But Ginger just shrugged and said, "I always thought you were sicker than I was. How could I believe you?" She was dead serious.

It was a real breakthrough for Ginger and soon they were exploring the depths of Ginger's psyche. The one problem that Ginger had that the therapist insisted she work on was her inability to lean on other people. To turn to them for help.

In a way, her submissive nature was a bit of a conceit. She never had to ask anything from her partner, put any demands on him. All she had to do was obey. In many cases just lose her self in her submission. This all started to change.

Ginger started to learn how to reach out and ask for help and support. She was often angry with her friends because they weren't helpful to her, but she realized she never made her needs known to them. She started leaning on Kit more. She started leaning on Debbie more.

Kit just realized at that moment, that Debbie's death had regressed Ginger back into her old habits. Kit had been so wrapped up in her own grief, her own disbelief, that she didn't notice that Ginger was acting in her old, closed off way. She held Ginger and Ginger sobbed for a time.

When she was cried out she told Kit "I do believe Jean, I really do. It's just I'm so scared, it's so hard for me to reach out. It's just, just..."

"I know love." Was all Kit said and the two sat together and watched the sun set. They both sighed, wanting to watch but knowing how important it was that they be inside when the sun disappeared.

Kit had questioned Jean about the night "Isn't it just full moons that we have to worry about?"

"Not necessarily." Jean had answered "It's true that most werewolves do change on lunar cycles, but that's just because the full moon tends to stir the lust more. A werewolf will transform on any night that their lust overtakes them. They will continue to transform each night until the lust cools."

Kit locked the doors. She had found a chair the faced the windows that was backed into the corner. She sat watching the sky darken from the safety of her room. The pump shotgun resting on her lap like a lover. ****

As he knew he would, Ray started his transformation just as the sun set. He cursed to himself, because he was still in his car. He was driving across town to get away from the hunters. To hell with patterns, he had to survive the night.

He had picked his route poorly and got sidetracked off the main road. He has still on the outskirts of town as the sun was setting. The pain in his stomach told him he didn't have long before he would loose control of the car altogether. He threw the car to the side of the road and ran straight away from it. He didn't know or care if anyone had seen him.

He ran and ran, until his legs deformed and he fell on the ground writhing in pain. As the transformation completed his world view was once again that of the beast, not of the man. He could smell the green grass and healthy trees. He put his nose into the air and sniffed for prey. He found no clear scent, but smelled human life in the distance. He followed his nose across, what his wolf senses assured him to be a large meadow.

* * * *

The Memorial went very smoothly. Kit when in as her Domme persona made a public user room called *"Sub-Flame's Memorial Service: Please show respect."* In the room rule she typed *"This a memorial service for someone we all loved very*

much. Please show respect don't try and pick someone up. Any disruption will be met with an immediate 'room ignore.'"

Normally, someone who was disruptive would be given a chance or two, but not tonight.

In the meantime, Ginger had logged on and notified everyone on their ICQ list about the impending service. It was a quarter till midnight, and the room was filling up fast. Kit and Ginger both smiled sadly looking at the large number of friends who had come to say good bye to Debbie.

The chatters greeted each other, but did not converse with each other, at least not publically. Mostly they waited for Midnight, when Lord-Whip would make his entrance. In the meantime Ginger was making a list of all the chatters who had vampire, dragon or wolf names. As midnight approached she counted 24, there were a total of 85 chatters on the list.

At precisely midnight, Lord-Whip entered the room.

—Lord-Whip—enters the room dressed in long white robes with gold embroidery. Walking to the front of the room he rings a bell and holds his arms up to hold all in silence.

The room went quickly. A few of the chatters indicated that they were *listening* or *paying attention* but most just sat quietly and waited for Lord-Whip to continue.

—Lord-Whip—stands before his friends and family and lights three candles.

—Lord-Whip—Friends, we have met on this night for a sad occasion. One of our most loved has passed and passed by violence. Her death was sudden and a shock to use A/all. Sub-Flame was beloved and she will be missed. Our lives have all been diminished *but a degree with her passing.*

—Lord-Whip—I know almost all of you here. I know you have your own prayers and your own gods. If you will A/all take a moment and pray or reflect to help Flame's soul pass easy to the next world.

The screen was absolutely still for a few minutes. Kit and Ginger both had their heads lowered and were praying quietly.

—Lord-Whip—My friends, as a matter of process I will now call upon each of you in turn. If you wish to say nothing, that is fine, but you may share a thought with the room about Flame if you like.

He worked down the list. He had agreed to call on Ginger and Kit last. Some of the chatters remained quiet or just passed. Many told stories of when they had met Debbie. Some told stories that showed Debbie being happy or silly. Others talked of times when Debbie had helped them in a time of need. After about an hour, Ginger was called.

—Slayer's-Kitten—This has been a very hard time for me. I was a friend of Flame's both in cyber and in r/l. I will call her Debbie from now on.

—Slayer's-Kitten—"Debbie had the kindest heart I have ever known. She had known great suffering. After her children left home, her husband of twenty two years quickly followed. She was devastated by the loss, but soon grew to accept it. In fact she learned to accept what she was and was so happy she had found all of you. All of us. I just want you to know how much you all meant to her. How much she loved each and every one of you. That's all."

It was Kit's turn.

—Mistress-of-Life—There is not much I can add to what my dear friends have already said. I loved Debbie more than I thought I could love anyone. She was warm and open, a great listener. And you a/all know how much I can talk. Though a sub, I thought of her much like a second mother. A mother that I had always wanted. Warm and loving. I will miss Debbie very much.

—Lord-Whip—My friends, go in peace and hold the memory of Sub-Flame and Debbie close and fondly in your hearts.

The chatters started logging off. There was none of the standard "be well" statements. They just left quietly. Kit and ginger waited until the room was empty except for them and Whip. Kit typed "Thank you" and they both snapped off their computers. The two women cried for a little while, then smiled wanly at one another. It was over.

* * * *

Ray came across a small dwelling and could smell people inside. He usually would avoid dwelling like this, but he was hungry and his lust needed to be sated. He approached the house carefully and could tell that the inhabitants were inside moving. If he could form coherent thought, he might have devised a plan to lure the people out. His lust was even making his thinking harder than usual in his wolf form. He could only make a frontal attack. Ray threw himself against the front door of the house.

Kit and Ginger both jumped when they heard the loud crash against their front door.

"Oh God." Ginger gasped as a second crash shook their cottage. Fighting the urge to scream and hide, both women went for the weapons that they had religiously kept handy.****On his third attempt, Ray overpowered the hinges of the heavy door and it came crashing in. It took him a second to recover from the self inflicted blow and he stood on the door growling, honing in on his intended victims. Both women discharged their weapons almost simultaneously.

Ginger had good luck. A ten millimeter slug torn through Ray's right leg. It caught him in the meat of the leg. Though it missed the bone, the pain it caused was unbearable. Ray lost control of the leg and spun ninety degrees. He didn't know it, but he was fortunate that the slug passed through cleanly. While the hated silver had caused great damage and pain, it would not continue torment him. He was not so luck from the second blast.

Kit had used the shotgun she had been cradling all night. She had caught the wolf head on. Only two things had save it from a quick and merciful death. The first was, ironically, the previous wound. The pistol shot had spun Ray and moved him away from the epicenter of the blast. The second was the range at which Kit shot. She was across the large room when she shot, a good twenty feet across the great room. If the shotgun had not been sawed off, she might have killed him, or perhaps missed him altogether. As it was, the short barrel of the gun allowed the silver shot to disperse quicker than normal and Ray was hit with a widely scattered array of pellets. If Kit had waited for the wolf to come closer, she would have cut him in half.****Nonetheless, Ray was hurt

and he was hurt badly. The silver shot had not passed through him. It was imbedded and already burning hotter than the fires of Hell. He could feel his form changing and he hobbled out the door and ran as best he could into the night in more pain than he believed possible.

Neither woman felt like moving for a very long time. They didn't know that Ray had left. For all they knew, he was going to make a counter attack any minute.

After exactly one minute and thirty seven seconds Kit heard a sound from the front and she shot again at the front door.

"Shit!" Cried a voice loudly and insistently. "Put the fucking gun down!"

She noticed a flash light beam cut through the front door. She lowered the gun.

"Please! I'm here to help! I'm not coming in, but please don't shoot at me anymore!"***** "Who are you?" Kit called back.

"Name's John Thurstun, I'm a bodyguard, a PI. Philip Johnson hired me to watch this cottage, to help you if I could. He told me to stay outside unless I had to come in. Do you need me to come in?"

Kit looked at Ginger, who just shook her head. "No, we're Okay, but are you safe out there?"

"Don't worry, my partner's here. He both have weapons with the ammo that Mr. Johnson gave us. We'll be Okay. If you need anything just let us know. We'll camp on the porch until the authorities show up.

Kit could see a second flashlight move away from the cottage about 20 yards, and then move back at a trot. She heard a second voice "John, you ain't gonna fucking believe it."

"Believe what? You get the tracks on that dog?"

"Oh yeah they head straight off into the woods over there. But you ain't gonna believe me."*****"Believe you? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Well those dog track? They go about twenty yards or so that way and then there's this big bloody mess like the dog fell down and bled for a minute and then got up and ran some more."

"What so remarkable about that?" John was getting angry.

"It was dog track to the mess..." he paused.

"Yes, so?"

"They were man tracks, barefoot, leading away to the woods."

"You asshole, you can't see shit. Wait here."

The first man trotted down the same path as the first, and then walked back.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What did you see?"

"Didn't see nothing, now sit down and shut up and guard the fucking ladies."

"But..."

"But nothing, we were paid to guard some ladies. Not follow bloody tracks into the night. Now sit there and watch the door, while I call the boss."

The girls heard him call Philip, and within twenty minutes Jean came running in the front door. "Oh God, are you both Okay?"

"We're fine, Jean" Ginger reassured as she flew into his arms. She kissed him on the face excitedly. Kit stood like a third wheel at his side until he looked over and swept her into his arms. "Thank God, oh Thank God" He said over and over again. Just then Kit was sure she heard the sound of sprinklers.

"See, I told you there weren't no fucking tracks, asshole." She heard from the front porch.

Chapter 20

Ray was in trouble. He had been shot. Shot with silver. He was in pain and he was bleeding. He watched from the momentary safety of the woods as the occupants of the cottage summoned help. He wondered how they knew about him. Wondered why they had silver bullets and shot. In his fevered and pain wracked mind he could only come up with one answer. It was Her. She had played him for a fool.

She either wanted him dead, which was unlikely, or she wanted them dead. This seemed very likely. She had stripped his control, she had planted the thought of driving through town when he did. She had guided him as a wolf to their door. "Damn Her" he hissed quietly. "She's already damned. So am I. Ironclad, no escape clause." He thought for a moment. He was angry enough to kill in his human form.****He wanted to kill those girls in the cottage. They had hurt him badly. They should pay for that. He wanted more to find that vampire bitch and gleefully watch as the sun roasted her flesh. That was something worth living for a goal.

He thought of his options, and he had few. It was going to be light very soon. The trail of his blood would be easy to follow. They'd kill him and bury the body somewhere. These guys were good. They were very good.

He remembered an old saying about the enemy of my enemy. As much as he hated the Committee and those in the cottage, he hated Her more. Perhaps he could accomplish something with his life after all. He knew what waited for him when he died, so any life, was preferable. He knew they

would keep him alive as long as he was useful, and Ray could be very useful.

He struggled to his feet and screamed in pain. The wound to his hind leg was not translated to his upper thigh. The muscle was badly damaged. If it had been an ordinary wound, it would have healed when he transformed. But this was made with silver. Even if it was clean, it would take a long time to heal.

He looked around for some sort of stick he could use as a crutch. The grounds keepers were very thorough. He found nothing. Ray just hobbled his way back to the cottage.

The first thing he saw were two large men sitting on the front porch. They both jumped when he came into their perception. He must have been a sight. Bloody and naked, maybe they thought he was one of the animal's victims.

They didn't seem to recognize him as a threat. One of them started to move towards him slowly. Ray grinned to himself. Maybe he could get a gun from one of them and turn the situation around. Kill all but one of them and force the survivor to take the blasted silver out of his chest.

His plan was thwarted before it even was half formed. The larger of the two, grabbed his friend's arm and pulled him back. He then pointed his gun squarely at Ray.

"Don't come no closer. I can call you an ambulance, but I have my orders. No one come close to this cottage. Understand?"

Ray nodded "I understand. I take it you're not Committee are you?"

"Don't know what you're talking about. I guard things. You want that ambulance?"

"It wouldn't do me no good my friend. Tell you what, send your friend there in to get the man in charge. You tell him that he's won and his prize is waiting for him."

The big man considered and nodded to his companion. A moment later, a smaller, trim man sprinted out the front door and walked to within ten feet of Ray. He leveled a short double barreled shot gun at Ray. Ray smiled "You know those were real popular when I was just a young thing. Course we used black powder and just dropped in pebbles or what ever we could use for shot. Couldn't afford no lead or steel shot back then."

"I'm sure. Man tells me you have something to say to me."

"Sure enough. My name's Ray. I'm who you're looking for. I give up."*****"You sure? I mean you know who I am? Who I represent?"

"Hell I known 'bout the Committee before you were a lust feeling in your daddy's mind. And yes, I know exactly what I'm doing."

"If you're sure, I can end it right here for you."

"Appreciate the offer friend." Ray honestly was beginning to like this man "But you go to church and they tell you 'bout heaven and hell. Well I can't speak for heaven, but I seen hell. I ain't in no hurry to get there just yet. If you take my meaning?"

"Yes sir, I suppose I do. So here's what we're going to do. I'm going to take you back to the cottage. There are two

women in there. You aren't to talk to them. You aren't to look at them. Understand?"****Ray nodded.

"On the way my big friend is going to tie you tightly. If you struggle or make any move I might consider threatening I'll cut you down where you stand. Don't think you can try to take him hostage, because I'll kill him to get to you. His soul is clean, I know where he's going and I don't mind helping him get there. Understand?"

Ray nodded and suppressed a smile. Yes, he was beginning to like this man very much.

It had gone just as Jean had mapped out. Ray found himself bound and bleeding in the bathroom of the cottage. He didn't even try to look at women, though he could help notice that they were both lookers, and the tall dark one held a shotgun like it was her baby. She must have been the one. No one spoke until another man showed up.

"Well Phil, we got ourselves an actual prisoner."

Phil was delighted. A kill was good, but a capture was great. They often provide information about other immortals and un-dead. It was also easier to get your hands on their money if they were actually still alive. It was SOP to raid the wealth of the monsters they killed. It was often substantial, and they never had heirs, for obvious reasons. It was usually a simple matter, a bribe here, a computer glitch there, to funnel it back to the Committee. The problem was finding out where it was. If you had them alive, they could point you in the right direction.

Phil had been working this case for years, and had estimated Ray's wealth at well over two hundred million. It

was probably higher, maybe even substantially higher. Ray would likely hold back, in the futile hope that he might live to use it someday. But Phil would get his hands on the money he knew about.

He sat next to Ray and flipped open his computer. He started drilling Ray about his accounts and has furiously making entries.

"Damn gold mine is what we got Jean. This guy's gonna keep us in the black for a very long time to come."

Jean smiled and Kit glared at the two of them. Jean turned to her.

"I told you we operated on a grant from the Vatican, and private donations, well some of our donors need a little persuading."

* * * *

Mopping up was surprisingly easy. No one had heard any of the gunfire, so no report was made from the outside. They whisked Ray off to the airport and stuffed him into Jean's Lear jet. His next stop would be France. Phil went along for the ride. He was like a school kid in a toy store as Ray revealed his various accounts and access codes.

The cottage was a mess. Jean had already bribed the grounds keeper to run the sprinklers. One of the bodyguards produced a body of a large evil looking dog and laid by the front door. The two men were then paid a rather princely stack of cash and they were never seen again.

A quick call to the sheriff got immediate response. The local authorities were so happy that they might actually have

the animal responsible for the killing that they believed Jean's story about the attack and carried the animal away. Jean knew that since the killing would now stop, they could close the books on this werewolf happily.

The owners of the resort, fell all over themselves being nice to Jean and his traveling companions. Jean was sure they were terrified about possible law suits. They told them to not worry one second about the damage to the cottage, that they were planning to redecorate anyway. In fact, they could now collect insurance, so it was actually a good thing.

They were offered an ocean view penthouse in one of the luxury high rises on the south side of the resort. This was not a huge sacrifice, since it was likely to go empty this time of year anyway. The three were happy to take them up on the offer. Jean would be without his plane for a few days anyway. He also thought they needed a break before they returned to their bigger hunt.

Ray had been very forthcoming about his money. He also hinted that he could help with many of their ongoing hunts. Jean knew he would let this information out in dribs and drabs. Ray had looked at Jean just before he was taken away.

"You're looking for the bitch vampire aren't you?"

Jean didn't respond, Ray just smiled.

"Tell you something, partner. You're close. You'd never had gotten me if you weren't"

Jean sat on the balcony overlooking the gray ocean. The seagulls pestered them and the three of them delighted in feeding the birds who were great at eating on the wing. This

they did in spite of the enamel sign telling them explicitly not to feed the birds.

When they got back, Jean would take what the women had learned at the memorial and what Ray had said and work out his next move. She had sent Ray after them. To what end, Jean was not certain. Ray may have thought it was merely to eliminate them as a threat. Jean knew his prey was much smarter than Ray. He only hoped he could be smarter than she.

* * * *

The Vampire-Empress thought about how the game was unfolding and smiled. She always liked playing against Renee. He was smart and clever, and her victories against him were the more delicious because of it. He was also very handsome in his day. She rubbed the tip of her right fang with her tongue. This new one Jean was proving his equal, if not his superior. He was unpredictable. She knew she should fold up her tents and sneak off into the night. Yet she couldn't bring herself to do that, not yet anyway. The game was too thrilling.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her form was stunning. Though she was turned out as a rather old woman, she had long ago learned how to change her looks using nothing more than her will power. She would always represent the current age's standard of beauty. In this case, tall, alabaster skin, fit but skinny. Her eyes were slightly hollowed. If she had looked like this in her own time, she would have been considered hideously ugly.

She wore a short black skirt, silk blouse and a jacket that matched the skirt's leather. Her hosiery was black and fine. She wore thigh length boots. Her hair, golden and flowing framed her like a halo from the icons she was forced to worship as a young child.

She thought about those days and scoffed. How she had hated those drills. She hated the church, and she soon learned to hate those saints. Well *she* was more than a saint now. She had made herself a dark angel and she walked among men and spread death in her wake. Her eyes flashed red in the mirror for a brief second and then she turned and went into the night to find her next kill.

Chapter 21

Pat looked at himself in the mirror. He was facing tonight with a mixture of dread and hope. His friendships had seemed shattered in the past month or so. Wayne senior recital would bring them all together for the first time in a long while. He hoped it would make everything better. He feared it would make everything worse.

He remembered the fateful phone call that Julie had received. The conversation was short and she seemed stunned. They had been in the living room watching T.V. when the phone had rung, and Julie answered it in the bedroom. He could tell something was wrong by the way she responded. All she said was "yes" and "yes". There was no courtesy in her voice. No attempt to make the other party acknowledged.

She hung up the phone and looked blankly at Pat "We have to go to the hospital, something about Samantha having a car accident."

"What?"

"That was the police. They said something about a train, a wreck. I can't remember? Sam, something..."

Pat had thought to quiz her more, but immediately thought better of it. Julie was in shock. He needed to get her to the hospital. They drove the thirty minutes in complete silence.

They were went to the emergency room as instructed and announced themselves to the admitting clerk. The were sent to a small private room and waited for a short time. A man in green scrubs finally came in an introduced himself.

"I'm Dr. Taylor. I'm the resident in charge today. Thanks for coming down. Can I ask how you know Miss Simms?"

"She's my girl friend." Julie had said automatically. The doctor didn't even blink.

"Well can you tell me if she has any family? Anyone else close?"

"Her mom lives in Chicago, I don't know the number. Please, tell me what has happened."

The doctor thought a second and then rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry, I should have said something sooner. It's been a long shift. Miss Simms was in an accident, a bad accident."

"Oh my God!" Julie blurted. "Is she ... "*****"She's alive, but in very bad shape. A lot of bones broken, and we're afraid there's damage to her internal organs. Miraculously, there didn't seem to be any skull fractures, but she got knocked around pretty good. She's in surgery now, well know more later. Are you sure you can't get hold of her mother?"

"Positive, I don't have it here. Can't you call the school, they should have a number for her."

"Of course, I was going to ask if she was a student. We're pretty sure, but you can never tell. It's the weekend and everything. Hate to drag someone down to work on a wild goose chase..."

Julie hadn't responded, she only stared at the far wall.

"Is she going to be Okay?"

"Honestly, it's too soon to tell. The vitals were as good as we could hope for, and we got her stabilized pretty easily. She's young and strong. She should be Okay, but there are

no guarantees. Is she does come out, she'll have a long convalescence. She was banged up pretty bad."

"Do you know what happened?"

"You'd have to get the details from the police, we don't know everything. But it seem that she ran a railroad crossing, we don't know why. She hooked her car by the bumper and was dragged some distance. I'd say she pretty lucky. If she'd been caught by the train broad side, or if she hit the train broadside, you'd be down at the morgue right now."

Pat glared at the doctor for that remark.

"Sorry, tact is the first thing you loose around here. Anyway, you can wait here or go home. We'll call you when we have news."

"We're staying" Julie had said firmly.

"Fine there's a waiting room up near surgery. It's more comfortable than the one down here. I'll have an orderly show you where it is. The surgeon's name is Jan Keesley. She's the best we have."

Pat noticed that he didn't add anything like "I'm sure she'll be fine."

The doctor, however, did add, "Your friend will have a long, hard recovery, she'll need her friends."

They waited what seemed like two eternities for word from the surgery. Pat had bugged the desk nurse six or seven times. She brushed him off every time, but he had to do something. He and Julie were feeling miserable. The guilt was setting in. Samantha was a bad driver to begin with, and they knew how upset she was when she left Julie's.

Finally, the doctor came in and sat down beside them. She was middle aged and very trim. She had the look of a long distance runner. Pat remembered her blue eyes and thinking how kind they looked.

"She's going to make it."

Her friends exhaled noisily.

"It was a tough one, she took one hell of a ride. We put some pins in her to hold her broken bones where we could, but we mostly worked on her organs. I had to repair a tear in her liver, and she lost her spleen and gall bladder. She can live without those. She'll need more surgeries in the next few days to set the rest of her bones. I'm not an osteopath, I couldn't tell you if her arms repairable or not. But she'll live. Do you have any questions."

They each had a million questions, but none that the doctor could answer. Julie reached across the table and grasped the surgeon's hand "Thank you."

The woman smiled in return. "She should be waking up soon, they'll come and get you when she's able to see people. I should warn you, she's pretty beat up. Took a three-mile ride from what I heard."

They waited in silence again and were eventually summoned to a private room. Julie wanted to go in alone and Pat wouldn't argue with her. She gasped when she first saw her and Samantha turned a dreamy eyes to her and merely said "Oh."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Julie whispered and her tears started flowing.

"Yeah." Samantha muttered. True to the doctor's words, she was a mess. The bandages were white and sterile, but the flesh that was exposed was bruised and puffy.

"What do you need?" Julie asked through her tears. "What do you want me to get for you?"

"Some pajamas, I guess, and a robe, for when I can get out of bed. I suppose I'll be able to read, so bring my spare glasses and I had a couple of books on the kitchen table I haven't started yet. God, I don't know, just figure it out ... did I really hit a train?"

That's what they told us."

"Us?"

"Pat's with me."

"Oh." Her voice got cold and thin again. "I really don't remember much after I left your apartment. I was headed over to David's. I don't remember if I got there or not. I don't remember anything about the accident." She just stopped and drifted back into a fitful light sleep. The next few days passed in a soft blur. Pat and Julie fetched everything the Samantha wanted. At some point Samantha's mother appeared and added a flurry of chaotic energy to the whole situation. She was a partner at a Gold Coast law firm and seemed to move three of four speeds faster than everyone else. She was genuinely concerned and stay through the remainder of Samantha's surgeries. No one was unhappy to see her go.

* * * *

Samantha didn't have a father *per se*. He had left to go "find himself" when Samantha was born. No one knows what he found, they never heard from him again. Samantha's mom had thrown herself into her work and her school. She went on to law school and then became an associate at an up-and-coming firm on the north side of Chicago. Samantha always remembered her saying "Honey, I'm sorry I don't have time right now. After this semester I should have more time."

The semesters dragged into law school. The she would say "That I'll have more time if I can get a job at one of those Gold Coast firms."

Then, "Once I make Junior partner, I'll have more time, honey."

Finally it was: "I really have a shot at a senior partner sweetheart, any time now." She had made senior partner when Samantha started her junior year of college. She had long since stopped thinking of her mom as her mother. She was just someone she had lived with as a kid, shared a house with.

Samantha's mood had improved some over the following weeks. Julie and Pat went to see her every day. Wayne came a couple of times a week. David didn't come at all. Saying only that he had his fill of hospitals as a kid. He sent some impressive flower arrangements and gifts. Pat got very angry with David about his not coming, but David was completely unfazed. This made Pat all the madder, but there was nothing that he could do about it.

Samantha had warmed to Pat a little, but he knew it was hard on her. But their daily visits had demonstrated

something to Samantha that she had never known before. The visits showed they cared for her. Even if Julie wasn't her lover anymore, she did love Samantha.

Samantha still had a lot of anger to work out about Julie and Pat. The hospital psychiatrist had started coming around, and he helped draw out some of Samantha's feelings. Though she tolerated Pat's presence, she did wish he would just go away and leave. It was a truce, uneasy at best. But Pat took what he could get.

Weeks later, Julie appeared from their bedroom looking stunning. It had always amazed Pat the women could live in the relative poverty of studenthood, and still make themselves look like they could walk into a posh party. Her dress was black and simple. She had a few pieces of jewelry. Pat was happy that she wore the earrings he had bought her at the small store up on the square.

"I'm nervous Pat, we haven't all been together since before the accident."

"I know, it's like we've been living in our own private world, but now we have to go back to reality. It's scary."

"Pat there's something I want to say to you. It's hard, and I don't want you to make any knee jerk responses."

Pat looked at her with more than a little fear in his eyes.

"Pat" she put her hands on his shoulders "I love you."

His heart swelled.

"Pat, I have loved you for a long time."

"Julie ... I..."

She put her fingers on his lips. "Shhh. I don't want you to say anything right now. I just want you to know how I feel."

Just think about what I said." She kissed him "Are we expecting anyone?" Pat asked as he broke the kiss.

"Not that I can think of. Oh, Wayne said he'd pick Samantha up and David is meeting us there."

Julie moved to the front door and found Wayne and Samantha, who was still in a wheelchair. Wayne was standing behind her.

"Hi Julie," Samantha smiled. "I asked Wayne to stop here first. Would you guys mind taking me, I'd like to talk, and Wayne needs to go set up."

"Of course Sam." Julie was the only person allowed to call Samantha Sam.

"Thanks" Wayne said "I gotta get going, talk to you after the show." He was gone like a wisp of smoke.****"I wanted to talk with you guys, there are some things I need to say. I've been working up the courage, I hope you can listen to me."

"Of course." She said and they helped Samantha into the room and sat in the couch across from her.

"You know I've been seeing a shrink?"

Julie nodded but Pat shook his head.

"No one, including me, knows if my accident was a failed suicide attempt or not. So they assigned the county shrink to me, just for good measure. He's a nice guy, he's helping me a lot.

"One of the things I've been working on is my anger at you both. Julie, you hurt me." She held up her good right arm to keep Julie from talking "But people get hurt by their lovers all the time. They get hurt by their friends all the time. I've been

so desperate about being rejected yet again, I could only cling to you, even though we both know it's been over for a long while. So there you are, we were lovers and now we're not. Julie, Pat, I can forgive you for hurting me. Can you forgive me for blaming you for my problems?"

Both of her friends her in tears and just nodded and kneeled by her chair to hug her. It was awkward and they both worried they might hurt Samantha. They held the hug a very long time.

After they separated from the hug, Julie offered to help Samantha with her makeup since she only had one arm to work with. It was a great moment for both of them. Pat heard them giggling and laughing in the bedroom and he felt happier than he had in a long time.

When they came back into the living room Samantha's made eye contact with Pat and then her eyes went due south. She started to giggle and Julie poked her. Pat blushed. Julie whispered in his ear "Don't worry love, it's a compliment."

"So I've got one more surgery to go." Samantha said. "Turns out there's this guy in Birmingham that's done great work with synthetic bones. It's very experimental, but they're hope they can repair my arm completely." Her left arms had been pulverized by the train. There had been extensive work to save the arm. They could have shortened it by four or five inches, but this last surgery promised to leave Samantha with no visible impairment. Her left leg was also broken, but it was healing nicely.

In fact, Samantha had lost quite a bit of weight, and her physical therapy was having good results. The therapy was

Cyberblood
by Jonathan Amsbary

helping her cope with some of her self-concept issues. In an ironic way, Samantha thought this accident might have been the best thing that ever happened to her.

Chapter 22

David looked at himself in the mirror and was pleased indeed. His life had changed in the last month or so, and it was all for the better. He thought about the guy in the pool hall and smiled. His Mistress had once told him *"There are two kinds of people in the world: wolves and sheep. If you are going to be my sub you must learn to be a wolf. I don't want passivity from you. I want the world to know what a powerful and strong sub I own."*

David had puffed up with pride when she had said that. But he began brooding about it later. He had always tried to think of people as basically equal, basically good and deserving of respect. "A sheep would believe those things" he told himself.

Yes he had been such a sheep all his life. It made him sick. He was losing patience with his friends because of their sheeplike behavior.

He had also transformed his looks. He took advantage of his angular and skinny face and grew a goatee. Then he started dressing better. Soon he had traded his cane for a ebony walking stick. He didn't need it often anymore, but it looked very stylish.

With the improvement in his appearance, David started getting attention from the women. He wasn't sure if it was the clothing or his demeanor, but he was getting second and third looks from women who had never noticed him once before. When he told his Mistress about this, she said she was happy and that he should learn to use people for his sexual

appetites. He was all that mattered to her, how he used others only made her prouder of him. He had been on a sexual marathon ever since.

He had all but given up on school. He didn't need it. He already had more money than he could ever really use. He also knew as much or more about computers than his professors. What he didn't know, he sure wasn't going to learn from these guys, he'd learn it on the "streets". No, he was too busy for school anyway. What with his time with his Mistress and his sexual exploits, he needed to sleep some time.

Even his nightmares had gotten better. Well that wasn't exactly right. They had become less disturbing to him. When he told his Mistress about them, she told him that they merely represented his internal growth. That he was metaphorically killing his old life. This made sense to him and he embraced them more.

The dreams, in fact, had become more horrific in their imagery. The scenes of torture and out-and-out butchery had become more and more graphic. The stories often changed. Sometimes they would be set in medieval times, others in the present. The victims were almost always women, and he was always encouraged by his Mistress to participate in their destruction. Until today he never had.

Today's dream, he slept during the day now, had been a turning point for him. Instead of being confronted with some horror right away, this dream had started as a powerful erotic dream.

He found himself lying in bed with his Mistress. She was kissing and caressing him all over. Every time he tried to touch her to return her affections she gently, but firmly, pushed him to his back and told him to lay there and accept the pleasure she was giving him. She teased him and she pleased him.

They performed many sexual acts upon him, using her hands and her mouth and her own sex to please him. In his dream he orgasmed many times. His endurance was superhuman.

He then notice the presence of five young women who were in attendance to his lady. They followed his Mistress's commands and leads and began pleasing David as well. They were all beautiful beyond measure and he was delirious.

Finally he was spent and she rolled him onto his back again. His Mistress whispered into his ear "Choose the one the pleases you the most."

He considered the women who had lined up for him, their gaze upon the floor. He had never had such a delicious choice in his life. He picked a well endowed woman, girl really, who had raven black hair and beauty beyond the others. She was more beautiful than any girls he had ever seen.

The others were dismissed with a wave of his Mistress's hand and she took the girl by the wrist and led her and David to another room. It was a long way and David noticed the girl softly weeping as they went. They found themselves in a large room, that David realized was a dungeon.

She pointed to a girl in a standing and exposed position. She was naked and sobbing. His Mistress looked at him and

said, "You have satisfied you sexual hunger now satisfy you other lust. Your lust for her blood."****Though hesitant, David had actually participated this time. While his Mistress had again done most of the torturing he had inflicted small but painful wounds on the girl with a long sharp needle.

At first he was deaf to her cries of pain but he found himself actually enjoying them after a time. As her life drained from her slowly, the dream started to fade as well. The last thing he remembered was his Mistress telling him how proud she was of him.

* * * *

He was anxious when he woke up and immediately got online. It was later than he would have liked, and he need to get ready for Wayne's recital. In had just turned dark outside, and he needed to speak with his Mistress, Badly. He logged on and the system told him that she was already on. With a sigh of relief he did a goto command and was whisked to her side.

It was not, as he expected, the Chateau. She had already made a private room and was there alone.

—Vampire-Empress—There you are my precious one. I was expecting you. That's why I made this room for us. Do you like it?

—Sub-Thrall-VE—Mistress I am so glad to see you. I wasn't going to log on until after the recital. But my dream tonight was so disturbing.

He had taken her initials to show that he was hers but not yet collared by her-the D/s equivalent of being engaged..

—Vampire-Empress—I'm glad you could come. I felt you might. You had another of your dreams?

—Sub-Thrall-VE—"Yes, it was so different from the others. I'm frightened.

—Vampire-Empress—"Tell me about it, little one."

He did so in exact detail, leaving nothing out.

—Vampire-Empress—Tell me how you feel besides being frightened."

—Sub-Thrall-VE—Mistress, I'm ashamed to say.

—Vampire-Empress—You know you are to tell me everything. You are never to feel shame for doing what *I* tell you.

—Sub-Thrall-VE—Yes Mistress, I am upset, please forgive my error.

—Vampire-Empress—Of course my little pet.

—Sub-Thrall-VE—Mistress I felt ... excited. As weird as it sounds, it turned me on.

—Vampire-Empress—My pet, David, I have two things I want to give you right now.

—Sub-Thrall-VE—Yes Mistress.

—Vampire-Empress—I want you to plan a schedule your collaring. You are ready to wear my collar. Now I have something for you right now."

—Vampire-Empress—draws a golden dagger across her left breast. Blood flows freely. She pulls his head to her breast so that he may suckle as a newborn child.

—Sub-Thrall-VE—opens his mouth and lets the sweet fluid flood his mouth. He drinks deeply, feeling her strength flow into him.

David was not really in control of himself when he typed the last message. He had done it automatically. He had done it without any thought at all. It was, however, exactly what he felt. He sat before his computer and felt a surge of energy flow into him. He had never felt this strong before in his life. He could feel every muscle fiber, every nerve cell come alive. Alive with her power. Alive with her strength.

She had always drunk from him. But drinking from her was a remarkable experience for him. It was, in fact, the only sadomasochistic thing she had ever done with him. She had never put him in bondage, she had never beaten or teased him. She just kept him at her side and would feed upon him.

Now, he was feeding off her, and he was exhilarated. So much of his confusion about his dream simply vanished. She was right. He was casting his old life off. He was beginning a new one with her.

—Vampire-Empress—Now David, I want you to plan the ceremony. We can have it whenever you like. As long as it is in the evening. Make any arrangements that you like. You may have anyone officiate. You may choose any you like to second you, and I will show up with mine.

—Sub-Thrall-VE—Yes Mistress!

—Vampire-Empress—David, I am proud of you and I love you. You are ready to be truly mine. And soon, very soon, you will be ready to come to me in r/l and be mine for eternity.

—Sub-Thrall-VE—Yes Mistress" (tears of happiness in his eyes).

—Vampire-Empress—Now you have a recital to go to. It wouldn't do to be late for your friend's big night, would it?

—Sub-Thrall-VE—No Mistress, good will I see you later tonight?

No answer. She had already logged off. David felt a thrill of excitement course through him. He didn't know he could be so happy. He didn't know love could feel so good.

Chapter 23

Wayne watched his image carefully as he adjusted his tuxedo. He was normally handsome, but in his tux he was a knockout. He thought he had perhaps lived his life for this moment. If he was anything, he was a pragmatist. He knew there was little hope that he would have this much attention in a musical performance again.

Wayne was talented. He was, in fact a prodigy. He had show an interest in music all his life. He always favored his musical toys as an infant and toddler. He had found a flute in the attic that had belonged to his mother when she was in school. He taught himself to play it at the age of four. He had always wondered what would have happened if he had found his father's clarinet first.

His parents encouraged his music at all stages. They never pushed him. They never had to. Wayne suffered from Asberger's syndrome. Not that they knew it then, he was just considered to be mildly autistic.

He had tremendous verbal and cognitive skills from an early age. He showed no interest in other children or friends. He did not know it at the time, but his parents had been encouraged to keep him among his peers and pushed him into social situations as much as possible.

They even did this with his music. They found a school that had a elementary school band and enrolled him in it. His father took an extra job to pay the private school's tuition. Even in first grade, he was first chair in the orchestra and the band. His whole school career had been centered around his

music. Even though he got straight A's in everything, except physical education, he never really internalized the information. He did however remember everything he had ever learned that wasn't music. He just never really felt much of it was important.

His father worked extra to provide Wayne with the education they needed and his mother worked overtime as a mother. She made every effort to encourage Wayne's social abilities. His friends were always welcome in his house. She went on every field trip. She drove the band members who couldn't make the bus. She was always hosting band parties.

Grace had become the band's mom. She was universally loved by everyone, and he remembered she got a special mention and a plaque that the kids paid for at Wayne's senior awards ceremony. Wayne, of course had swept all the music and mathematics awards.

He knew his parents were going to be here tonight, but true to form, had neglected to tell David and the others. They would be happy to see his parents. Wayne came from Indianapolis, and his house was less than an hour's drive from IU. They had opened their home to Wayne's friends as they always had. Each of them had spent at least one night under their roof. They all called them "mom" and "dad".

His friends truly loved his parents and he was happy they did. Though he did love his mom and dad, he didn't have a clue on how to show it. He knew how much they sacrificed for him, but he didn't know how to thank them for it. So many of his friends, including his current ones, came from broken and dysfunctional, they found the family life they craved in his

home. His parents found the children they craved in Wayne's friends.

Wayne's recital was getting a lot of attention from the faculty. Wayne had made many friends among faculty of the department. His abilities were extraordinary, and all of the teachers wanted to have him as a pupil, have a piece of him.

Wayne had written, arranged the entire project. He didn't have to do this much, but he wanted to. He had a knack for mimicking a particular style. He had written tonight's piece in the classical style. He enjoyed the technical aspects of it. The counter points and repetitions, the variations on theme. He had no idea the emotional impact his music had on people.

The time since Samantha's accident had been hard on Wayne. He had no problem visiting Samantha in the hospital. Pat had warned him about how she looked, but Wayne had thought that she should look bad after being hit by a train. He was not the least bit shocked by the bruises, bandages or tubes.

He had gone to visit every time Pat had reminded him. As usual, he would not have thought about it on his own. He had brought presents, flowers, tapes, books and puzzles to keep her busy. They spoke little, but Wayne knew intellectually that she enjoyed her company, so he was happy enough to be there. It was not the Wayne didn't like or care for his friends, he just didn't know how to show it. They had all learned this about him and accepted him on whatever terms he could offer. They never pressured him. He suspected his mother had spoken to them about it.

What had been hard on Wayne was the Pat and David were mad at each other. Pat was feeling tremendously guilty about Samantha, thought Wayne didn't know why. He pushed everyone to visit her all the time. David didn't go once. Wayne could not understand why.

Pat could be gentle with Wayne, but he could not with David. They argued incessantly about it. David stopped coming along on their weekend trips to Nick's. It was just he and Pat and Julie. If he was capable of feeling such a thing, he would have felt like a fifth wheel with the new lovebirds. He didn't, nor did they ever try to make him feel unwelcome.

David had begun putting pressure on him though. Wayne had become the middle man between Pat and David. It seemed Julie had written David off completely. David would call him up and rant for hours at a time. Complaining how no one understood him or his needs. How it wasn't his fault that any of this had happened. How he had his fill of hospitals in his youth.

Wayne felt tremendously awkward listening to David. If he had any social skills, he might have finessed him off the phone. Maybe he would have feigned interest in David's rants and watched television or done crosswords while he talked. Maybe he would have been able to offer some useful advice. Maybe he would have gotten mad like Pat. Wayne was unable to do any of those things so he sat and memorized every word the David had said.

Pat was better than David. He had Julie to listen to him. But Pat was interested in what David was doing. What he was thinking. Wayne wasn't sure how to handle Pat either. He

didn't know what information to give him. What information to hold back. He had no clue as to what David might want kept confidential and it didn't occur to him to ever ask. He would merely repeat back to Pat David's rants word for word. He didn't know if this helped or not, but he didn't know what else to do.

It was a stressful time for Wayne. He was so happy that he had his recital coming up. He also had other senior recitals for his classmates that he would be performing in. Most of his classmates would have found the performances to be an additional, if not major source of stress. Wayne found the rehearsals a welcome relief from the social pressures he was feeling.

He threw himself into his work. He pushed his quartet to the breaking point. He demanded perfection from them. He didn't shout or throw tantrums, he merely stopped them whenever what he was hearing had not matched perfectly what he had conceived. His violinist had taken him aside and tried to explain that it would never be perfect. Wayne didn't understand. She then took him aside and told him that she would kill him if he interrupted either the dress rehearsal or the actual performance. He understood this, it was something every band director and orchestral conductor had resorted to with him. He didn't understand emotions, but he understood violence.

He had noticed that many of the weaker students had enlisted him to perform in their recitals. He knew it was because he would improve their performances. They tolerated and in fact needed his perfectionism.

He answered a knock at the dressing room door and found his parents standing arm in arm. His mother took one look at him and burst into tears. He looked at her and said "I'm sorry." It was a programmed response. She cried louder and laughed all at the same time and threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. ****He reminded himself at time like these that Japanese business men had to be trained to suffer the handshakes of their western counterparts, though they hated any physical contact and greatly preferred bowing. Wayne would always remind himself that if they could tolerate the handshakes of westerners he could tolerate the hugs of his mother. Again, it wasn't that he found the contact painful or uncomfortable, he just didn't know how to respond to it.

His father told him how proud he was of him and Wayne parroted the rehearsed responses he had learned in his youth. Again, he loved his parents very much, and he knew his coldness hurt them badly. He just didn't know how else to act.

Wayne was the last to enter the small stage set aside for recitals. He glanced out and noticed that the small auditorium was packed. This hardly ever happened for undergraduate recitals, but Wayne's was considered special. He couldn't make out who was in the audience and soon dismissed their presence. He sat and nodded to the conductor he had selected.

The performance was seamless. Even Wayne had to admit the it was a wonderfully performed piece. He let the music wash over him as he always did. For a short wonderful moment he was lost among the complexity of the

notes.****When they finished, there was a momentary pause. He had taken the audience on quite a ride and they needed to catch their collective breath. After an eternity of silence, they all jumped to their feet and applauded furiously. Wayne stood and took his bow. He was pleased his music had moved these people. Not only had he used music to escape the complexity of human interaction, he found that he truly made a connection with people when he performed. For Wayne, this was how he returned his mother's hug.

There was a reception for Wayne. If he had taken the time to ask he would have found out it was planned by Julie and paid for by his parents. They had rented a room at the local Ramada Inn and many of Wayne's classmates and teacher filtered through for a drink and a handshake. Wayne was surprised by the turn out, he was never really aware of his own celebrity within the music department.

Most of his classmates shook his hand and told him how they were sure he would "make it." That some day he would play one of the important symphonies. Wayne's logical mind dismissed this notion, knowing that the number of available chairs in an particular decade could be counted on one hand. He was more confident that he would find studio work and that he could live off his flute. He had no dream of fame.****He was happy to see that the whole gang had come and that they were, in fact talking to each other. His parents drifted around the room, soaking in the adoration that Wayne was receiving. He noticed that David had approached Pat, he couldn't hear what they were talking about.

"Can I speak with you out in the hall a minute, Pat?" David had asked.

Pat looked at David and considered. The last thing he wanted was to start up with David on Wayne's night. He knew it would mortify Wayne's parents and he loved them too much. He normally would have trusted David to behave, but his behavior had become so erratic and self-centered, he just wasn't sure.

"Don't worry Pat, I won't make a scene, I just need to say some things. It's O.K., I promise." Somehow, David had once again read Pat's mind. It was starting to creep Pat out.

"Sure," he said curtly. They walked out into the hall and found a quiet spot in the stair well.

"Pat, I know you have no reason to believe this, but I'm sorry. I really have been behaving badly for the longest time. It's ... I don't know ... just that, there's so much going on. Well, and everyone, is going to be leaving soon. I feel us separating and it's scaring me I guess. I've never let anyone as close to me as I've let you guys. Pat I'm scared.

Pat sighed, "David, I understand all that, but you have to learn to reach out to us. Damn it David, I hope we're friends forever. I want to be the best man at your wedding some day. I want you to do the same for me. As far as I'm concerned, you're my brother, we don't give that up because we graduate. So please stop acting like a shit, O.K.?"

David nodded. "Pat, will you still come to my collaring? I sure would like you to be my best man."

"Of course I will, David. I'm honored."

"Good, if I can arrange it, it will be next Friday night. Please don't tell the others yet. I know you don't approve, and I appreciate that you're coming anyway. No need to worry the others."

"O.K. It sounds like you're really serious, David. It isn't just some cyber game."

"I'm dead serious Pat, I love this woman. Damn it, I don't even know her real name, but I love her. Tonight she told me when I'm ready she wants me to come to her. To be hers. That is why I want you to be my best man in person when the time arrives?"

"Didn't I say yes?" Pat said flatly. He did his best to withhold his misgivings, but David read his mind again.

"Don't worry my friend, it will be O.K. Nothing that feels this right can go wrong."

"If you say so David. Now please go inside and fuss over Samantha a little. She really been through so much. She needs you, she needs all of us."

David did just that. They went back in and helped Wayne and his parents celebrate this happy moment. Pat thought that maybe everything would be all right after all. Julie had told her she loved him, Samantha was on the mend, David seemed more human than he had been in a long time, and Wayne had just knocked everyone on their ass. For the briefest of moments Pat honestly believed that everything was going to turn out fine.

Chapter 24

David spent the next week furiously preparing for his collaring. Collaring was considered a very big step and he wanted to make it perfect. The D/s community was less concerned with gender roles than with Dominant submissive roles. While a certain amount of sexism took place, submissives usually took what the general public would think of as the female role. As such, the collaring was often seen as the submissives "day", and the submissive typically made most, if not all the arrangements. This was David's moment in the spotlight and he intended to make the most of it.

He knew of scores of D/s pages on the Internet. Chatters were notorious for creating their own chat rooms. These would often contain stories, or poetry. They might list and brag on the virtues of their friends. They often had advice for people new to the D/s community. They always cross linked each other. Many of them had detailed descriptions of collaring ceremonies. Some from real-life and many from cyber-space.

David rolled through as many cites as he could and finally put together a ceremony that was to his liking. He would need someone to oversee the ceremony, and he would have two seconds, Pat and another friend from chat. Their job was to talk of his virtues and worthiness as a submissive. He was hoping that Slayer and Slayer's-Kitten would be acceptable as the overseer and his second respectively.

That night, he was talking with Vampire-Empress and she told him that the ceremony he arranged was just fine. In fact

she said he had done quite well. She only had three things to change. The first was that she would not have a second. As his Domme she needed no one to prove her worthiness, it was only David's opinion that mattered. David understood this decision and swelled with pride at her reason for making it.

The other two changes confused David. She absolutely refused to allow Slayer or his Kitten to be involved in the ceremony. They could come if they wanted, but they could not participate in any way. She offered no reason for this, and David knew better than to ask her about it. He was also instructed not to tell anyone she had rejected his friends. Unhappily, David kept his mouth shut.

David arranged to have a second phone line installed in his house and bought a laptop computer. He had planed to get one sooner or later anyway, so this wasn't a big deal. Now Pat could be in the same room with him and on-line at the same time. He set up an account for Pat and made him a chat persona called "Friend-of-Thrall." It was hardly original, but as far as David was concerned it would only be used once.

David noticed that there were many collaring taking place at about the same time. The interesting thing is that many of them involved vampires or other kindred. If he believed in such things he might have felt the hand of fate in this fact. "Thirty two."

"You're kidding, Ginger." Jean was amazed.

"I'm serious, Kit and I have been keeping track. There are thirty two collarings that involve kindred in the next couple of weeks. And, all of these chatters were at Debbie's memorial."

Jean thought for a minute. True to form, Angelique was hiding in plain sight. This could be a red herring, but he felt in his bones that she was going to make a move soon. Jean turned his options over. He needed a way to narrow the list.

"Has anyone asked you or Kit to be in their ceremony?"

"Not one, this is also a little strange, a lot of our friends are involved and not a single one has asked us to take part in their collarings."

"Nor I." Jean added.

"Okay. There is no way to track all these people down. We are certain that she's one of the Dommies collaring a sub in the next two weeks. We are also certain that we are being excluded from the ceremonies. I want you and Kit to make a short list of your friends that you think might have asked you. We also need to figure out what she wants, what she's looking for in a sub. She never does anything on a whim. Maybe that will lead us closer."***** "Sure thing, I'll get Kit on it when she gets back from the gym."

Kit had been working out like crazy since they got back from Florida. She actually had started while they were enjoying themselves on the beach. She started taking long runs twice a day in the sand. Now, she was using the buildings health facilities to burn her muscles into perfection.

She had lost all her doubts in Florida. She now accepted what Jean had told her as gospel. She worked out for two reasons. First it gave her something to focus on, so she didn't have to dwell on the facts as they were presenting themselves. Second, she wanted to be prepared for anything.

As a result she was crafting her once so-so body into a remarkable tool. Her muscles were growing and becoming defined as never before. She could run for miles now, and she even got lost on one of her runs. Of course Jean insisted that she run only in daylight. She loved her body as it grew and her work outs were pure pleasure to her now. She relished the pain and fatigue, but she knew she had to be careful not to hurt herself. She learned to moderate her workouts to allow her body enough time to heal.

She also noticed a remarkable change in her world view. At first she worked out to numb herself, so she wouldn't have to think about scarier things. This worked at first, but then a strange thing happened. Suddenly her thinking became acutely sharp. She saw things with amazing clarity, remembered things she'd long thought she'd forgotten. She was however, tremendously calm about all the impossibilities going on around her.

She also was getting her share of attention from the other patrons of the facility. Most were male, but she noticed a glance or two from some of the women as well. While she normally would have been in sexual heaven from all this attention, she never returned any of their attentions.

Ginger was also working out, but not as much. She was just maintaining a fit body. Kit, on the other hand, was making a machine. When she returned to the apartment Ginger smiled and said "Hey Ramba! The Master has a chore for us."

Kit grinned and knew she'd get Ginger back for the Ramba crack later.

"We need to make a list of people who might have used us in their ceremonies and didn't. We also need to ponder what a vampire might especially need from any of these people."

"Need? You mean besides blood?"

"You got it."

"No problem, ought to be fun."

* * * *

Jean was busy looking over some reports from France. He maintained his silence to the Committee, but he could still pick up his e-mail from home. It seems Werewolf Ray's debriefing was going slowly. He was being very coy and letting out information in very small and often cryptic bits.

Ray claimed that he had not seen Angelique in years. But he did admit that he had arranged a rather large payment to be forwarded to her annually. This was in return for her helping Ray psychically satisfy his lusts. It seems that once she made contact with him, she could extend control no matter where he or she traveled. He intimated that she had similar arrangements with other werewolves that he knew. He would not discuss how much he paid, and the accounts he discussed quickly led to dead ends. This was to be expected.

There was one thing that Ray had revealed that everyone thought might be some sort of clue. He said, "We're all products of our time."

Jean meditated on that statement for hours. He was sure it was very important and not a false lead. But at this point, it was hard to tell which. He knew a lot about Angelique's time of origin, and Ray was certainly right about that. In her day,

she was literally the law of her domain. She had reportedly tortured and killed hundreds if not thousands of young girls. Jean had the image of three young women being dowsed with cold water in a freezing courtyard. They were naked, but from the dress worn by the many spectators, it appeared to be the heart of winter and very cold. The artist caught the suffering of the young girls as they slowly froze to death for her entertainment.

It was a disturbing picture. It showed Angelique's sadism and it showed the indifference of her age to such atrocities. In fact, he had to remind himself that she didn't get into trouble until she started murdering girls of high birth. There was some speculation that she had literally run out of peasant girls to murder.****Was Ray giving him some clue about her computer use? Was she leaving a trail that Jean should be able to snoop? Where were her financial records? Was there a trail there? So far no one had yet exposed these clues. Perhaps the vampire was sloppy with her victims, but careful monitoring of southeastern newspapers never showed an extraordinary jump in missing persons or mysterious murders. It just didn't make sense.

Jean knew Angelique didn't have to kill her victims at all. He also knew that she would kill, because she was homicidal to the core. He just wished he could find her Achilles heel. He knew her weakness was staring him in the face if he could only see. Angelique was delighted. The game was going so very well. That fool, Ray had provided an amusing distraction. She had monitored him closely and felt his anger at her. She felt the sting of her betrayal. It amused her greatly. She

would have to live without his tithe, but it was just too delicious to feel him go like that. She was only sorry that she had not actually felt the moment of his death.

Jean had been too close and his cloaking skills were too good. She lost Ray just before he surely had died bleeding and whimpering in the woods. She shivered with sexual energy just thinking about it.

She turned to the young college student kneeling at her feet. She had picked him up at Five Points. She had search his mind and found no close relatives or friends who would miss him for a very long time. He might never be missed—college students went missing every day.

She had held him with her mind, but kept him awake and fully aware of his fate. He was sweating profusely, and the scents of fear and excitement were filling the room. It was intoxicating.

She sat beside him and whispered "Night, night lover. Say hello to my Master will you? He'll be so happy to see you."

She kissed his neck lightly and ran a hot wet tongue over his sensitive flesh. He shuddered. She bit down suddenly and viciously into his neck and his blood started pumping into her mouth. She swallowed it all, filling herself with his essence.

She began shuddering in delight as his life slipped from him. She was overcome by tremendous sexual satisfaction. She had felt this rush long before her transformation. Most immortals curse Satan for their condition, she thanked him every day.

She was a realist. She knew that she must die sooner or later. No matter how long she prolonged her existence, the

universe itself would come to an end. She would then be brought to Hell for eternity which would eclipse her life no matter if she lived another year or five billion years. Most immortals overlooked this fact, thinking only in terms of their pitiful life spans.

Angelique planned to be welcomed home when she died. She readily acknowledged Satan as her Master. She knew her only hope for a bearable afterlife was to be his agent in this life, for she knew how deeply he hated man. The Devil hated God, and man was made in His image after all.

She walked to the Eastern window and saw the sky turning gray. "Soon," she thought. "Soon I'll bring David to me. He will be very amusing. He was strong and pliable. Not to mention his other attributes." she purred. Yes, David would soon be turned, and she would have won again. She retired to her coffin very happy indeed.

Chapter 25

Kit was off for one of her marathon workouts and Jean and Ginger were sharing a pot of coffee and strategizing. Jean was getting restless and moody. There was something staring him in the face and he was missing it. It was making him crazy.

"My last message from Renee says that Ray has just clammed up. Won't say a word. He's given me something, but what?"

Ginger had helped brainstorm the idea, but they couldn't figure out how knowing Angelique's age was a clue to finding her now.

"Tell you what, I'll get on the web when I can and see what research I can dig up about these royal families. Maybe something will emerge."

"The problem is that, there are just so many difference between then and now. Everything is different. It could be as simple as that she lives in a house without air conditioning."****Ginger nodded. "Of course I'll have to work in my research around all these collaring ceremonies Kit and I have to evaluate."

There was a pause and finally Ginger said "Master?"

Jean immediately perked up. Ginger rarely called him "Master" anymore. He nodded.

"Master, all these collaring ceremonies have cause me to think."

"Yes."

"Well, I know that you have noticed me online, but that you and I have never really intended to do anything in real-life. I know that we have been so busy. I know that you have a lot on your mind."

"Ginger, you're rambling."

"Yes, sorry. What I'm saying is. Even though we hadn't planned to be together here we are. You have been a perfect gentleman. You haven't pressured me into doing anything. You have done your best to provide and protect me and Kit."

"Sir, I have seen your life. I have seen what you do and seen how you do it. I know it is important, and I know you give everything to it."

"Sir, I loved you when we met online. You were kind and firm. There was a sadness about you that broke my heart. I have kept you there ever since.

Master, this time I have spent with you has made me realize that what I feel is truly love." She knelt at his feet.

"Master, I know that your life is full, and that there may not be a place in it for me.

"Master, I must, however, say this or I will regret it my entire life. Master, if you can find a place in your life for me, I will give you whatever you need, be whatever you want. Master you are the most Worthy man I have ever met. I don't think I'll ever meet anyone who I'll be able to love more than you.

"Master, I offer myself to you, without hesitation or reservation.

"Master, I offer you my neck without condition.

"Master, you may take me and do as you will."

She then lay her head on his lap and twisted her body so that she was face up to him. She then arched back as far as she could and closed her eyes. Her soft and beautiful neck was completely exposed to him.

Jean was surprised by the offer, shocked actually. He had not been involved with the D/s community very long, but he knew that Ginger had acted correctly. It was considered proper for a submissive to offer themselves to the Dominant. This made the gift of submission complete and pure.

Jean had been thinking about his case so hard, he had stopped thinking about Ginger and Kit as women. He had, however, begun to think of them as partners and as his wards. For so much of his life he had pushed his feeling and needs as a man aside for greater causes. He realized, for the first time that he had needs that needed fulfilling, no matter how deeply he had buried them. Perhaps this is what the Abbott been speaking about all those years ago.

He thought carefully about what he wanted. About what to say. Ginger waited without making a move.

"Ginger" he said finally. "I understand the gift you offer me. I know you have no greater gift that you can give a man than your submission. I am honored beyond my words to express. I want you to know that this is to be my last hunt. Renee wants to retire and has asked me to take his place. He has been grooming me for the directorship for years. If I survive this, whether we destroy her or just drive her to ground for now, I am done."

"Ginger, if you will come with me to France, if you can wait until I have a true life and a true home, I will put my collar

around your neck and keep you at my side for the rest of my life."

Though she had not moved, tears had begun leaking from under her closed eyes. His tears were running down his face freely. "There is one more thing. I would like you to marry me. Not only do I want you to be my submissive, I want you to be my wife."

She opened her eyes and smiled "Oh yes, Sir."

He swept her up into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. Highly excited, he still had the presence of mind to lock the bedroom door. He laid her down on the bed and she looked up at him with complete love.

Jean was not an experienced lover. He had never really loved anyone before and his sexual encounters had been few and they were more technical than passionate. He had never felt like this before.

His mind was so cloudy that he didn't remember many of the details. He could not remember how they had gotten out of their clothing, but he remembered the wonderful feel of her smooth, soft flesh. He didn't remember laying next to her, but he remembered her lips, full and soft parting as his tongue sought hers. He didn't remember laying above her, but he remembered feeling himself inside her. Wanting to meld with her completely, become one with her.

He hadn't remembered how long they made love, but he remembered exploding into a violent orgasm and the feeling of floating above her. He was completely removed from the world. For a brief and perfect moment there was only the two of them, He thought he might be lost in her. He didn't care.

He remembered little but saying "I never knew what love felt like until this very moment." And they both cried at that.

* * * *

Kit was happy, very happy. Her workout had been exhilarating. And, she had made a good workout friend. Unlike the other men who tried to pick her up, Bill Tilly had honestly admired her and wanted to work out with her. He had early on assured her that he was married, and had no interest in her romantically. Though she was skeptical, she found him true to his word.

Bill was a karate instructor, or at least was trying to establish himself in the area.

He had explained that his art (as he called it) was Kajukembo. It was, for the most part, it was a Chinese martial art, but had roots in Judo and TaeKwonDo as well. He had learned it while stationed in Albuquerque in the Air Force. He loved it.

His wife's career had taken them to Atlanta. He had said it was tough starting here, because all anyone knew here was TaeKwonDo. But he was going to persevere and make a dojo.

He had started training Kit in the small aerobics room that the club offered. He didn't really focus on the traditional forms and moves. Rather he centered his training on self-defense and fighting techniques. Kit was limber, long limbed and in great shape. She took instruction quickly and they were soon sparing with abandon. At least she was. She knew her sensei was always in control of himself.

Kit got the works when they were done: whirlpool, sauna and massage. She was relaxed and happy when she got back to the apartment. When she moved to the bedroom she found the door locked and instinctively knocked. When she heard giggling she felt embarrassed.

"Never mind, sorry!" She called through the door. She thought a second and couldn't help but add "It's about time!"

Then, just because she was Kit, "And change the Goddamn sheets!"

She heard more giggling and went off to find some food with a big grin on her face.

Chapter 26

David was as excited as could be. The day of the collaring had arrived and he was very nervous. He was somewhat disappointed that there seemed to be so many collarings happening around him. Some of his friends were tired of showing up at the ceremonies, he did admit that they could be tedious at times. There was also widespread discussions about the appropriate time and place to give a collar.

Many of the new Dommies were unknown in the Chateau, they were relative newcomers. Many of the regulars were unhappy about that. They thought the newbies didn't understand the true and deep meaning of the collar. That they were somehow being mocked.

To make matters worse, some of the collars that had been given had already been returned. There were many hurt subbies who filled the rooms and sought sympathy from their friends.

Many of the regulars started talking about setting up training rooms, or clinics to talk about the problem and think about what should be done about it. One thing that could be said for this bunch was that they were fiercely loyal to each other. Many of the experienced Dommies and subs started taking the new ones aside and giving them advice, usually to "slow down."

You could often hear, "A collar given in a day will be lost in a week." Or "Any Dommie stupid enough to collar a subbie he or she doesn't know usually gets what he or she deserves."

And the reverse was true for subbies that took collars from Dommies they didn't know well.

David was a bit mortified that some regarded Vampire-Empress as unworthy. No one had known her very long. They were all polite to her because of her connection with David, but he knew they did not approve. He had grown tired of arguing on her behalf. Soon, everyone just said that they hoped he knew what he was doing. David was sure that he did.

At precisely sundown David set up the room for the collaring. He set up a user room called: "Vampire-Empress's-Collar" and put into the room description: *The room is large made of rough stone with a huge fireplace. It is lit by hundreds of white and red candles and the fire burns brightly in the fireplace. There are comfortable chairs and couches around the room. There are plenty of soft furs in front of the fire. There is a small clearing with a red carpet and flowers of all colors and shapes are everywhere.*

David smiled as he typed these words. The description evoked memories of his dreams which no longer feared. In fact he embraced the dreams as a sign that he was becoming worthy of his soon to be Mistress.

Though Pat had not yet arrived, David logged him into chat and brought his chat persona into the room. There they waited as more and more chatters drifted in. David waited a while, until there was a good sized and reliable crowd and then he excused himself and took his persona to a private and secured room. He would make an entrance when it was time.

Pat showed up shortly and David told him what he had to do, and when he had to do it. Pat hugged David closely and told him that he loved him and how happy he was and then dutifully sat at the laptop computer. He added, "I noticed you gave me the new computer, asshole."

David just grinned.

David had let Pat in the open room and could see as the guests arrived. His online friend, Sub-Brat and Mistress-Dove soon arrived and David invited them to his room. Lord-Mist, was going to perform the ceremony and he waited in the main room with the others.

Soon David found a private message from his Mistress that she was waiting in her own room and that they should now begin. David sent a private message to Lord-Mist for him to begin.

—Lord-Mist—May I have everyone's attention please?

Everyone stopped talking and settled down.

—Lord-Mist—Thank you, as you all know, we are here to celebrate and witness as Vampire-Empress puts her collar upon Thrall's neck. Please be respectful and quiet during the ceremony. Do not argue with any tourist who might come in. If someone is rude, you are to immediately ignore them.

There were a few acknowledgments. Mostly people just kept quiet.

—Lord-Mist—We are ready.

—Lord-Mist—~ rings a bronze bell three times—Lord-Mist—Vampire-Empress and Thrall have chosen to become one ... They have reached this decision after deep reflection and weighing the seriousness of the commitment. They have

chosen to show their commitment to each other by Collaring Thrall and making him Vampire's-Thrall.

—Friend-of-Thrall—Approaches Lord-Mist and stands at his left hand—Sub-Brat—(enters the room).

—Sub-Brat—Approaches Lord-Mist and stands at his left hand next to friend.

—Mistress-Dove—(enters the room)

—Mistress-Dove—Approaches Lord-Mist and stands at his left hand.

—Sub-Thrall—(enters the room)

—Sub-Thrall—Approaches Lord-Mist and stands at his left hand. Wearing dark cotton pants and a white silk shirt. I am barefoot and carry a soft leather leash in my hands—Lord-Mist—Looks at Mistress-Dove and smiles—Will you speak for the worthiness of this sub?

—Mistress-Dove—Yes I will, happily. I have known this one for quite a long time. He was the first person I met when I came online. I was nervous, but he was confident in his submissiveness, polite and patient with me as I learned to accept what I was and what I could give him and you all. I have always found Thrall to be the most worthy of subs.

—Lord-Mist—Thank Mistress-Dove. Brat will you speak for your friend?

—Sub-Brat—Yes my Lord.

—Sub-Brat—Thrall had been my best friend and brother for as long as I can remember. He has listened to my problems and been loyal and polite to E/everyone that I know. I can think of no sub more worthy than Thrall."

—Lord-Mist—Thank you Brat. Friend, will you speak for Thrall?

—Friend-of-Thrall—Yes I will.—Friend-of-Thrall—I have know Thrall for years. He is my closest and dearest friend. I had no brother until I met him. I love him with all my heart and wish him the best in his new life."

—Lord-Mist—Thank you Friend.

—Lord-Mist—Rings the bell three times—Vampire-Empress—enters the room.

—Vampire-Empress—Approaches Lord-Mist and stands at his right hand. She is wearing a long white flowing gown, she carries a bright golden collar. Her eyes are afire with the love she feels for Thrall.

—Sub-Thrall—offers the leash to his Mistress I offer this leash to you to guide me and lead me along on my journey with you. It is my desire to belong to you and to follow you, wherever you choose to take me.

—Vampire-Empress—Takes the leash and attaches it to the Golden collar.

—Vampire-Empress—I take this leash in the spirit of love in which it is given. I know what precious thing you give me today. I promise to guide you and teach you, and protect you and your love through all eternity.

—Sub-Thrall—Kneels before his Mistress.

—Sub-Thrall—Mistress, I have loved you since I set eyes upon you. I give myself to you through love and compassion. I will trust you and obey you for all eternity.

—Vampire-Empress—attaches the golden collar around Thrall's neck.

—Sub-Thrall—(leaves the room)

—Vampire's-Thrall—(enters the room)

—Vampire-Empress—I present to my worthy friends—
Vampires-Thrall!

—Lord-Mist—Let everyone present do all they can to help
Vampire-Empress and her Thrall be successful in their new
lives together.

A chorus of *cheers* or *applauds* or *here here's* scrolled
down the screen as everyone got their two cents in.

—Lord-Mist—Let's Party!

The chatter then launched into a cyber-party. Many of the
Domme talked of buy drinks for the house. Several of the
subs describes sensuous dances that they performed to honor
David and his Mistress. There was lots of back slapping and
congratulating. Some described virtual gifts for the happy
couple. David reveled in the sea of well wishes and happy
attention.

After a time, he received a private message from his
Mistress instructing him to follow her to a private room. David
smiled at Pat and said "Time to go, bro."

"Sure thing, David. Have fun. I really am very happy for
you."

"Thanks man, and thanks so much for coming."

"My pleasure." Then he scooted out the door before things
got even more sappy.

The party went on after David and his Mistress had left.
This is what chatters loved to do. They did it very well. David
was sessioned by his new Mistress, while Pat walked home.

Cyberblood
by Jonathan Amsbary

It was an early spring night and it was raining and cold. Pat hated Indiana in the spring. Every place has a great season and a terrible one. Indiana has wet miserable springs, but you make up for it in the fall. Pat was feeling a little blue as he walked. He figured it was the wet weather that was making him feel that way. At least he told himself that was what it was.

Chapter 27

Ginger and Kit were feeling wired and happy and neither of them felt like sleeping. Jean, as usual, went to sleep on the cot in the corner of the great room. They had once asked him if they disturbed him when he went to sleep like that and he assured them that they didn't. He had trained himself to sleep where and when he could. He told them the once your body realizes that it might be deprived of sleep for days at a time, it learns to sleep through anything.

The women started the evening in a giggly mood and eventually settled down to work. The events of the day had weighed heavily on them both. They were coming to terms with what their lives had become.

They both started doing net searches on Royal European families. Some actually had their own web pages with genealogies listed. Sometimes they used other data-bases to hunt down family lines.

By two in the morning the only common thread the Ginger could find was that the lines were a lot more tangled than one might think. It was almost impossible, she found, to actually trace a title back very far. By two in the morning she gave up, and she and Kit went to bed.

* * * *

David's night had awakened him in more ways than he knew possible. He had not slept at all and he was watching the sun come up as he sat parked outside Wayne's apartment. He could feel her now. She was with him.

But somehow he knew that she had been with him for a very long time. She was healing him. She was making him stronger, better. She was throwing off his self imposed shackles once and for all. Through his submission he was becoming complete and whole for the first time in his life.

He knew Wayne was an early riser and saw his bedroom light turn on. David smiled and waited another half an hour so that Wayne could go through his morning routine. He sat back in the seat of his car and waited. He glanced in the back seat and saw his suitcases and few belongings that he really needed. Last night she had said he was ready to come to her.

He knew that he would. Screw school. Screw Bloomington. Screw Pat and Julie, screw them all. He didn't need them, and once he said good bye to Wayne, he'd be on his way. It would take him about eight hours to get were he was going. Still, he thought he should look up Samantha and say good bye.

Samantha had flown down to Birmingham to have her arm worked on. It was going to be a long and complicated process. Usually, when you have a bone shattered like she had, the doctors would have to shorten the arm. Then you can have the arm repeatedly broken and stretched to grow new bone. It's a long and painful process. Some doctor at the University of Alabama, Birmingham hospital was working on a synthetic bone that would greatly shorten the process if it worked. CSX had agreed to pay for Samantha's procedures because it turned out the engineer tested positive on his drug test and Samantha's mom was drooling to sue them.

He went to the door and knocked. Wayne let him in. He was not surprised to see David, but was not that he was

expecting him, Wayne was just never surprised by things like that. "Come on in. There's some coffee."

"Thanks" David said and poured himself a cup of coffee. He drank it black and hot. "Wayne, we need to talk."

"Sure David, what's up?"

"Wayne did Pat tell you I was collared last night?"

"No, you got arrested? He hadn't said a word about it."

"Come on! Collared.. You know, like being engaged online. Well I asked him not to, but I always thought he might anyway. I'll have to thank him when I get the chance." David smiled and licked his lips lightly.

"Anyway, last night I gave myself to a Mistress, a Domme. I belong to her now."

Wayne listened and nodded. "Sounds dumb to me."

"Wayne I love this woman. I'm going to go be with her. To live with her and be hers forever."

"That's nice." Wayne didn't know what else to say, he never really did. "When will you go to be with her? At the end of the semester, after we graduate?"

"No you don't understand, I'm leaving today, now. I just stopped by to say goodbye."

"Oh" Wayne felt suddenly terrible. He didn't want to lose David, but his words were hard to find. "But David, what about graduation? We were all going down to Florida after commencement." It was lame, but it was the best he could come up with.

"Fuck that, Wayne. I don't need it. None of us do. Hell I'm smarter than most of my professors already. What the fuck

do they know? Look at you. You're twice the musician than anyone on this campus is. You don't need their diploma."

Wayne just blinked. David was getting agitated. He knew he needed to get going and he didn't want to lose his nerve. "Look, I have a long drive home, I should go."

"Sure David. Can I get your number?"

"I'll call when I get there." David lied and flushed. "Wayne can I hug you before I go?"

"Huh? Oh. Thanks for asking first."

David smiled. "I've known you for years Wayne, I know what you're like."

The two young men embraced hesitantly. What Wayne hadn't noticed was that David had reached nonchalantly into his jacket pocket and grabbed a strong and very sharp knife. As they hugged, David easily slipped the blade under Wayne's ribcage from behind as he pulled him to his chest. He supported Wayne against his body as he pulled the knife out and the other boy quickly bled to death in David's arms.

"Sorry, my friend. If Samantha had been killed by that train this might not have been necessary. That was the plan. Besides, you're too good for this world anyway."

He laid Wayne on the floor and quickly left. For some reason he didn't worry about his fingerprints or any other evidence that he might have left. He only worried about what his Mistress would say about his first kill when he saw her at sundown tonight. The thought gave him a shiver of delight.

* * * *

When Ginger woke up the next morning she found she was the last one up. She poured coffee all around joined the others at the table. Everyone was tired and a little edgy as the new day was beginning. "I didn't turn anything up last night." She said finally. "In fact, I don't think we're going to find anything this at all this way. There just aren't any highborns left."

"What do you mean? There are lots of people with titles."

"I know, but they aren't really the ones we're interested in. I kept hitting these walls. Either someone would sell a title at some point or allow someone from the growing middle classes to marry into the family and carry the family name. This started around the first plague, when labor cost got so high. There were wholesale sell offs all through the industrial revolution. The middle class just kinda ate the upper classes up."

"My God, that's it!" yelled Jean. "I knew it had something to do with money. Damn! It was staring me right in the face."

He was getting very excited "Look, the nobles had to sell off their lands and then their titles because they didn't know how to be capitalists. These were people who made their living off the land. They charged tithes to their petty lords who passed it along to the peasants. That's what the vampire was doing with Ray, and with many others, evidently. By offering her psychic services she could induce them to pay a tithe to her. She was treating them like petty lords. We kept looking for her investments, but she isn't making any."

"She's just gathering her money and spending it. She's not using it to make more. She's not being a capitalist. She

doesn't understand capitalism. My God, Ray was absolutely right! She's a product of her time. We all are."

"We just have to find one of those collared subbies who has lots of money."

Both women said "David" simultaneously.

"Who?"

"David, Thrall, Sub-Thrall. Oh shit, Vampires-Thrall. He has millions. Got a big insurance pay-out and court settlement when he was a kid. He's loaded. He told us about it a while ago." Kit had said nervously.

"Where does David live? Do you know his full name?"

"Yeah. David Sommers. He goes to school at IU, but he talked about Bloomington all the time. He's crazy for the place."

"Go pack. We're on the road." They were ready quickly and Jean had them in the air within thirty minutes. If you climb a mountain while someone else is descending it, you are bound to pass them along the way. David was traveling due south down Interstate Highway 65. He was driving through Louisville Kentucky at the precise moment that Jean's plane was being vectored North from Louisville for a final descent into Bloomington, Indiana.

Chapter 28

There are certain advantages to living in a collage town. If you took the university away from Bloomington Indiana, it would look like a thousand small towns across America. There is a town square, absent the civil war memorial that is so common throughout the Midwest and southeast. It is rather ordinary looking with a courthouse bordered by four one-way streets. Small storefronts face back on the square from all sides. At first blush this could be Anywhere, America.

Close examination, however, would betray Bloomington. The store fronts look ordinary, but do not house ordinary occupants. A close look will reveal art galleries, a range of restaurants that most towns could not support and jewelry store that offered one-of-a-kind items from local and national artisans.

Unlike most towns, you could hear a world-class opera, attend the latest touring theater company, or buy unique art. You could find dress shops with merchandise from all over the globe. You could troll through used book stores and craft shops. Not to mention the fact that you can find pizza, Chinese, or Mexican food from more than a hundred restaurants. There is also an obligatory Mall with many of the major departments stores represented and well stocked.

Without the University, Bloomington would be just another post-industrial small town of thirty thousand or so. Though it is arguable that Bloomington could not support that number now that the stone quarries were shut down. With the University, the town swells yearly to almost ninety thousand

and has services that many small cities two or three times larger can't support.

One of these services is an airport capable of landing a small jet plane. The tiny airport, which is a good drive west of town, may not have grand restaurants and gift shops, but has a small counter and a folksy, rural feel to it. Like everything else in this town, looks are deceiving. The runway, which is the heart of any airport, is long enough and sturdy to drop a Lear jet in with ease. There are sufficient mechanical and fueling services as well.

Jean's plane made a smooth landing. The runway was still a little slick from several rainstorms the night before. The sun was trying hard to break out, and it looked like it might make an appearance sometime later in the afternoon.

There are working farms close to the airport and the odors of freshly plowed fields struck the inhabitants as they debarked the plane. Ginger was very much reminded of the small town in which she had lived in Canada, and felt a sudden twinge of homesickness.

As usual there was a car waiting. This time, it contained David's address and a map to his flat. Jean looked over the directions and decided that the trickiest part was to get out of the airport itself.

They phoned David's a number of times and received no answer. This worried them because of the collaring the night before. Logically, he should have been home either spending cyber time with his Mistress or sleeping it off after a long cyber session. Maybe he had taken the phone off the hook? If

he had call waiting, the phone would ring and ring as if no one was home.

They arrived at the apartment in ten minutes. Like Pat's room in the Wildlife Sanctuary, David's apartment was one quarter of what used to be a large an impressive mansion in Bloomington. Unlike the Wild Life Sanctuary, it was cut up into upscale apartments, not rooms. The structure retained much of it's splendor since all of David's neighbors were junior faculty at the University. Unlike David, most students could not afford the rent in the upscale building,

They knocked several times, but got no answer. Thinking he might be asleep and trying to ignore unwanted company Kit called to him through the hardwood door. "David it's Kit! Open up! It's very important!" She pounded to emphasize the point.

She and Ginger stared at the door, willing it to open with all their might. They hoped against hope that they were wrong about this and that David's Mistress wasn't their vampire. Ginger turned to Jean with sadness in her eyes. Jean calmly and quickly picked the lock and they were suddenly in the small but comfortable apartment. It smelled of old wood and coffee.

They looked around the apartment and confirmed that it was empty. They tried to see if there was any evidence that David had left or that he might be coming back soon. The trouble was is that they didn't know how the apartment should look, so they didn't notice what was missing.

The only real clue they had is when Kit came out of the bathroom and said "The toothbrush is gone. There's no

deodorant and unless he's bald, his hair brush is missing. My guess is that's he packed up and gone."

"Okay, Ginger fire up his computer and let's see what's there. Kit, see if you can find an address book, or notepad he might have written on."

Both women went to work while Jean got on his cellular and called some contacts to run down phone logs and other vital data for this address.

Ginger checked ICQ first. Unless you tell it not to, ICQ will keep a history of all incoming and outgoing messages. The history files were massive. She checked the last twenty or so and found that most were from Vampire-Mistress. They now had her ICQ number. If she logged on again they might be able to snoop her IP (Internet provider) address. This would give them her city. It was something, a shot.

She opened his e-mail software and found no messages saved in the directory. She checked the trash and found that David had set it to automatically empty when he closed his client software. She got into the system utilities and checked for recently deleted files. Some of them were e-mails. She saved this information to disk as well. If one of these files came from the vampire, they would know what city she was in. Kit knew she would need some software to recover this information that she didn't have with her right now. She saved the files along with the ICQ history.

Kit had no luck finding hard copies of anything. Either David didn't keep hard records, or he had taken them with him. They didn't know which.****They sat on the sofa and considered their next move. Their discussion was interrupted

by a knock at the door. "David! Hello! Who's in there with you?"

Jean considered for a second and then opened the door to find a young man in slacks and a dress shirt leaning on the doorjamb.

"Who are you?" the young man demanded. "Where's David?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out. I guess you don't know where he is either?"

"Are you guys cops?" Ginger asked worriedly. "Is David in any trouble?"

"No, we are private investigators, and your friend might be in danger from someone he met on the Internet. We are trying to help him, but he seems to be missing."

Pat didn't know what to do or say, so he said nothing.

"We have reason to believe that David has, or will, make contact with a very dangerous person. I don't mean to frighten you, but this person has killed people. It is very important that you tell us anything that can help us."

Pat's head was spinning and he was having a hard time concentrating. The man's words were frightening him badly and he felt like his brain was being overloaded.

"Can you tell me if anything is missing from the apartment?"

Pat drifted around the room and said "His new laptop is gone. I don't know, maybe a few books."

"Thanks, can you...?"

"Wait" Pat's brain finally went into gear. "Do you have some ID? How the hell do I know who you are."

Jean handed Pat his card. "All this says is Hunter, Inc. It doesn't prove anything. If you are PIs you'll have licenses." Pat was feeling on firmer ground now.

"I lied, I'm not really a PI but I am someone who is trying to help your friend. What is your name?"

"Pat."

"Pat, David may be in very real danger. As his friend, you may be in trouble, too."

"What's that? A threat?" Pat eyed the door and tried to calculate an escape route.

"No, not at all. We won't harm you. We want to help you. This person that may be after David has been known to hurt the friends of his intended victims too."

"Look, I don't know who the fuck you people are. All I know is that you don't belong here."

"All right, we're going. You have my card. That's my cell number. Call me day or night if you feel in any danger. Please, it's important."

"Yeah. fine." Pat thought about standing his ground and throwing them out, but his will was crumbling fast. Jean took away the need.****"Come, let's go, there's nothing more here." Jean hurried down the hall, his head low, as if readying himself for attack.

When they got to the car Jean called a local contact. In this case it was a local sheriff who knew to answer any questions from anyone who used the code words the Jean had used. He asked the sheriff if anything strange had been reported lately. There was nothing. Then as he was about to hang up the man told him to wait.

Jean drummed his finger impatiently on the dash. The man came back and told him they had a body, probable knifing victim. He gave Jean the address and general directions to the station on how to get there. Jean closed the phone and put the car in gear.

"Unless I'm very wrong, David is her target. Vampire-Empress is Angelique." he said, and drove out into the street.

* * * *

Pat walked back to Julie's apartment. It was a hike and it gave him time to think. He wasn't sure what to make of his encounter, and he almost threw the man's card away three or four times, but he saw no harm in keeping it and filed it in his wallet instead.

When he got home he heard Julie crying before he could open the door. She flew to his arms and sobbed muttering "It's awful, just awful" over and over again.

Pat was getting worried again. His encounter with the mysterious man and his friends, now this. "What's wrong Julie?"

"It's Wayne! Oh God, it's just so awful!"

"What happened Julie? What's wrong with Wayne?"

"That was Wayne's mom, Oh God, I don't know how she found the strength. But she wanted us to know what happened." She started crying again,

"Know what? Julie?"

"Wayne's dead, Pat. She didn't know any details, but from the sound of it there was something terribly wrong. She

thinks he might have been murdered. Oh God, who would do that to Wayne? He never hurt a fly in his life!"

Pat felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. "Oh God Julie, you have to listen to me." He told her about the man he had met at David's place.

When he finished she said, "Pat I'm scared."

"Me too." They both turned at the sudden knock at the door.

They found Jean standing at the entrance. He looked into their faces and could tell they had already heard about their friend.

"Pat, I know you don't believe me. But you have to listen to me. If you want I can have a police officer to come here and vouch for me."

Pat shook his head. "Just tell me what you want."

"Look, the last thing I want to do is add to your misery. I've lost friends Pat, I know what you are feeling. But this is important. Whoever did this may have David under their sway."

"What?"

"What I'm saying is that you should not trust your friend David any more. If you hear from him, I wish you would call me. But in any case, please don't trust him."

Julie had enough and started to cry again. Pat looked Jean in the eye and said "If you'll excuse me, we've had a terrible shock and my girl friend needs me."

Jean started to say something and changed his mind "I'm sorry" he said curtly and left.

Pat sat and comforted Julie in his arms for a long time. It had gotten dark and they were sitting without turning on the light. The ringing of the phone snapped them out of their trance.

"Hello"

"Pat, it's Samantha, I'm going to have my first surgery tomorrow afternoon. I just wanted to speak with you guys before I did. You know, hear a friendly voice." Pat had almost blurted out what had happened to Wayne but his compassion and common sense got the better of him.

"I'm sure it will go well."

"Oh, I know, but I'm just nervous, you know. Hey are you all right?"

"No, I mean yes, we're fine . It's just..." He thought furiously for something to say.

"It's just I've caught you in the middle of something." She sighed theatrically. "Well you get back to Julie and when you get your clothing on, you give me a call, Okay?"

"Sure."

"Oh, one last thing."

"What?"

"How did David know about my surgery?"

"What?"

"Didn't you know? I got a call awhile ago, seems like he's in town. He's coming to visit in the morning. Isn't the sweet?"

"Yeah." Pat felt very cold.

"Well you guys be good and do lots of things I wouldn't do." She laughed and hung up the phone.

"David's in Birmingham." He told Julie flatly.

"What do we do?"

"Call the Birmingham police?"

"And tell them what?"

"You're right. I suppose we could call what's his face."

"Do you trust him?"

"Not really"

"Me either."

"How soon can you be ready to go?"

"I'm ready right now."

"Let's go."

"Right, Do you know how to get to Birmingham?"

Chapter 29

The drive from Bloomington, Indiana to Birmingham, Alabama is incredibly simple. You catch Interstate 65 in Columbus and drive south until you hit Birmingham. You cross three state lines, pass through Louisville, Nashville and a handful of small town and cities along the way.

Pat had taken a number of history classes that discussed the importance of the Roman roads. Roads were a hallmark of the civilization. He remembered one year a flood had wiped out all the bridges in this one part of France, except one that was built by the ancient Romans and was still in use. It was important for civil engineering, getting from one place to another. It was also a powerful rhetorical statement, the Roman's built roads to last, if they built one in your back yard you knew neither the Romans or the bridge were going anywhere.

If the Romans had created the art of road building, then Americans perfected the skill. Even the German Autobahn pales in the scope and design of the American interstate system. The road tied all major cities together, and you can drive from coast to coast without seeing one stop sign. You could use the system day or night and be assured that you could find gas, food and bathroom enough to keep you going. Pat thought that Americans would also be looked back at as road builders two or three thousand years from now.

Neither Pat nor Julie had ever traveled far south of Indiana. There were amusement parks in Louisville and Cincinnati that they had each visited at one time, but that

was about it. Most people get a thrill when they drive through Nashville for the first time. They think about the fame and all the recording artists at the Grand Old Opry. Even if you didn't like country music, Music City is still pure magic.

In the moonlight Pat noticed what the locals called the "Bat Building."—the local Bell Telephone building with twin communication towers sweeping up its roof. It is an impressive structure and does look like it came right out of a Batman comic book. Pat noticed the building and shivered slightly, he considered waking Julie from her slumber to share the sight and his unease, but soon shook off his fright.

Pat kept drinking hot coffee into himself to keep awake. By the time he reached the Alabama boarder, he was sure he was hallucinating. Looming on the side of the road was what Pat would have sworn was a Saturn five rocket. "Shit, first vampire buildings and now rockets. This is some fucking trip." He said to himself.*****"What?" said Julie as she half stirred from her slumber.

"Nothing love, nothing." Pat reassured her, but he felt deep in his bones that he was lying.

Julie woke up and she drove the rest of the way as Pat lay comatose, despite all the coffee he'd drunk, next to her. She paid less attention to the local sights than Pat did. To be honest, there aren't many sights to see between Nashville and Birmingham. The highway winds gently through some very beautiful and empty countryside. At night you can only tell it's empty, the beauty is somewhere else.

You have lots of warning driving into Birmingham from the north, but you don't really see the city itself until you are

right on top of it. Julie was startled by the sudden appearance of its suburbs as she threaded the car past the Interstate 20 interchange. She nudged Pat, because she needed him to help her navigate at that point.

He groggily pointed to an exit that she missed and so she had to take the next exit and turn around. It was three in the morning, and the city had little traffic. They were nervous because they were obviously in a bad part of town and didn't want to make a wrong turn. They were on University avenue and quickly passed under a walkway with the letters "UAB" boldly displayed. They had spotted a Best Western as they got off the highway, so they turned around yet again and checked in.

They left instructions for a 6:00 a.m. wake up. Three hours of sleep were better than none. They collapsed in the big bed, still in their clothing. Julie snuggled close to Pat and found something cold and hard in the small of his back.

"What's this?" She asked.

"A .357." he said as he fell asleep.

"Oh" she replied, and quickly followed suit.

* * * *

Jean had been very frustrated. He didn't really expect David's friends to trust him. They had no reason to. But he blamed himself for the fact that one of them were already dead. He thought they should stay in town. Try to keep an eye on them. If Angelique were true to form, she would send David after them sooner or later. He had already killed one

friend, his corruption was well underway. If there was any hope of saving him, he would have to move soon.

Ginger had really taken to her computer work. He had provided her with some very secret Internet access codes. He typed in David's name and the names of his friends. Any electronic transaction that they made would flag.

Absolutely nothing flagged on David. He was probably using cash for all his transactions. She found his friend Samantha was in a hospital in Birmingham, Alabama. She then got an interesting flag on Julie.

"She's on the move." Ginger announced.

"What?" asked Jean.

"I have a credit card purchase in New Albany, Indiana. Nine gallons of gas. They're moving south."

"Okay, let's get going." Jean said and they gathered up and left the small hotel they had checked into a hour ago. The desk clerk had winked at Jean when he checked in with Ginger and Kit. He would talk about the trio for a long time to come, especially since they left so soon.

Kit has happy to go. She was feeling restless. Worse, she was feeling useless. She hadn't done a thing since they left Atlanta.

"What about these computer addies?" Ginger asked.

"Check them on the plane." Jean instructed.

Jean's only order to the pilot was to fly south. "Head for Birmingham, but I may divert you along the way."****The pilot shrugged, the F.A.A. hated it when you diverted in the middle of a trip, but he was paid well enough to take that

kind of heat. He looked coolly at Jean and said "Yes Sir". They were soon flying south.

A second credit card transaction confirmed the duo's southward journey. This, coupled with Samantha's record, gave them a sure destination. If they had any doubts, they were shattered when Ginger announced "I got a make on Vampire-Empress's IP."

She paused dramatically, "It's an ATT account out of North Central Alabama, probably Birmingham. There's no way to narrow it."

Jean knew he had the bitch now. But he had to wonder if that's how a fly might feel if he were hunting a spider as he entered her web.

"Here's what we do. We should be in Birmingham hours before they get there. We will get a hotel room, Ginger find something near the hospital. Then I will stake out the hospital and Kit will tail the other two from their hotel. If they check into one." Jean paused. "Ginger, you keep researching. Check the paper archives for stories about odd money expenditures. We all better get some sleep. Things are going to start jumping if I'm not mistaken."

True to form, Jean was asleep in minutes. Kit soon followed. Ginger couldn't doze off, but decided that she wasn't going to tail anyone, just do research. She could start that now. She tapped quietly while the other two slept.

David had followed the directions perfectly. The roads were odd and never took right-angle turns. By the time he reached the gate he didn't have a clue as to where he was or what direction he was facing. He was in some woods south

something of Birmingham. He had left the interstate and then state highways and then paved roads far behind him. He saw no hint of civilization for mile. He just kept driving as the road got worse. Finally coming to a large iron gate anchored by stone pillars. A huge and obvious sign warned about vicious dogs and electric fences.

As instructed, he parked his car and waited. He thought maybe this was a back entrance because there was no intercom or bell to summon help. He hope he had it right, he didn't want to spend the night out here alone. Even with his newfound confidence, he was nervous.****The sky darkened and eventually turned black. It was dark and he could see nothing. He was told to not use his headlight or any other light source, so he just sat in the dark. He thought he had fallen asleep because, suddenly there was a woman standing next to him outside the car.

His heart jumped and he prayed it was his Mistress. David had no idea what she looked like. Though he knew in his heart it didn't matter, most sexual deviant people were not primarily motivated by looks, rather sexual tastes, he was overcome with her beauty.

Though it was dark, her pale white skin seemed softly glow in what little moonlight filtered it's way through the trees. He could make out her dark sensual eyes and long flowing blonde hair. She looked exactly like the woman in his dreams.

He half fell out of the car and quickly knelt before her. He was looking at her feet, but he could feel her smiling.

"Mistress" he said "I am pleased to finally kneel before you."

"Oh my little one" she purred "How pleased I am to see you and your beauty. You followed my instructions so completely. I am very proud of you."

His heart almost stopped at hearing her praise.

"Now drive me to my home in your machine. I wish to see you better."

"Yes Mistress." He ran around to the other side of the car and opened the door for her. She sat regally in the passenger's seat allowing her fingertips to trail lightly over his hand as she did. She shivered.

As he started the car he reached for the headlights, but her hand stopped him cold. "You have no need of those. Look your eyes have adapted nicely to the dark, you can see the road perfectly now." True enough, he did.

He inched the car along the country path and eventually came to a large clearing. The sudden glare from the full moon was momentarily blinding, but he saw across the field to a large house. It was pushed up against the other side of the clearing with trees weeping over it. But enough of the moonlight hit it so that he could appreciate just what a palace it truly was.

It was huge. It looked like some huge European palace and was very out of place in southern Alabama.. He parked where he was instructed and followed her into the structure. He knew exactly where he was because he had already walked these halls in his dreams.

"It was you, Mistress?"

"What's that, my pet?"

"You sent me those dreams, didn't you?"

"Yes I did little one. You have to be ready for the grand adventure that awaits you."

"Thank you, Mistress."

"She smiled and he felt the warmth of her love envelop him.

"Now have you done all that I asked?"

"Yes Mistress."

"Let me see." She held his face and stared into his eyes. He could feel her mind move into his and he delighted in the sensation. She pulled the memory of his attack on Wayne into her mind. He felt it replay like he was watching a movie.

"I am so proud of you, you are becoming so strong my pet. You really are worthy of me." She finally purred.

She then knelt before him and unzipped his pants. He was standing in a large marble foyer, but he couldn't move. She gently pulled his throbbing manhood from his pants and sucked it into her mouth. The sensation was overwhelming. He climaxed with a loud groan. His knees buckled and he passed out.

When he awoke he was laying in a large bed. He knew this bed as well. She was laying next to him, naked. His clothing was gone. "Welcome back my pet," Angelique purred. "Oh how delicious you are. How I am going to enjoy you." With that she pushed him on his back and mounted him, taking him completely into her in one fluid motion.

He gasped and she rode him furiously. He had slightly more control than before, but he still climaxed quickly. As he felt his seed pour into her he saw her throw her head back and show her fangs, beautiful and white, glint in the

moonlight. She clamped her mouth on his neck and he felt her teeth sink deeply into him. She moaned as his blood pumped hotly into her mouth.

She pulled back and he saw his blood on her mouth. "Oh" she said wildly "So hard to control myself with you." He swelled with pride.

"Soon you will have my gift and we will hunt the night together. You would like that wouldn't you, my pet?"

"Yes Mistress."

"Good, then there are plans to make. You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow. You called your sick friend already I assume."

David nodded and knew no more.

Chapter 30

Ginger had arranged lodging at yet another Ramada Inn. The hotel was attached to the research end of the University Hospital. It was a huge complex often referred to as the University that Ate Birmingham. It was five a.m. and the three were making plans for the day. Ginger located Pat and Julie at a cheaper hotel on the other side of the university campus. She had sweet talked the desk clerk into telling her when the duo was to be awakened. Kit would take the car and stake out the parking lot. It was obvious where they would wind up, but they needed to be sure.

Jean was going to stake out the Samantha's hospital room. There would soon be a shift change, and Jean knew that was when she was going to be the most vulnerable. Ginger was going to spend the day tracking down a lead of her own.

She had been trolling through the local papers and came across a story that was almost too perfect for their needs. The headline had read:

Secret Castle in Rural Alabama

BIRMINGHAM—Not many people know that there is a European Castle in rural Alabama. This winter an ancient structure was purchased from the crumbling Yugoslavian government. For an undisclosed amount, the Government of Yugoslavia had sold an ancient castle to a reclusive resident of Alabama. The structure was dismantled and recreated on a private estate somewhere in the state.

Only one native seems to know the location, and he's not telling. "It was really something." Said Otto Sams who owns a

small construction company. "Far as I know, you could be twenty feet from it and not know it's there. Probably couldn't see it from the air."

Sams, whose job it was to clear and prepare the site, knows what he's talking about. "I've been clearing land in Alabama for twenty years and I ain't never seen anything like it." Said Sams. Sams claims that all the other workers were imported and most didn't even speak English. "I was kind of a gopher for the project. Someone to take care of stuff, you know."

Sam's may know where the Alabama castle is, but he's not talking. "I have a reputation in this town. I get paid to keep my mouth shut, I keep it shut."

The story went on, but she had what she needed. Jean agreed that it was a solid lead and they should track it down. He did add one thing "Ginger, if you can find this guy. I mean if he's still alive. He's alive because she didn't want to close of all the leads. It might be a trap. Be careful."

"Yes Master." she said so sharply Jean wondered if he heard a trace of sarcasm in her voice.

"A .357!" Julie woke suddenly and punched Pat in the arm two minutes before their wake up call came.

"Huh?" Was all Pat could muster after his short sleep. He hadn't felt the punch, yet.

"What the hell are you doing with a *gun*!" She demanded.

Pat rubbed his eyes and blinked. He held his hands instinctively in front of his face and struggled to full consciousness. His arm started to hurt, she had caught the muscle dead on.

"Hold on." He said in an attempt to get some time for his brain to start working.

He got up and went into the bathroom and splashed some water on his face. He walked back into the room and saw Julie glaring at him. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what the hell you are doing with a gun. Those things are, are dangerous!"

"I know."

"Then what are you doing with it?"

"I figured we might need it. I mean we're up against someone who's already killed someone."

"But where did you get it?"

"I've had it for years Julie. Julie I grew up in Iowa, farm country. Even geeks like me had guns. We all did."

"You mean your parents know about that thing?"

"They bought it for me for my sixteenth birthday."

Julie was dumbfounded. Living in Bloomington she new about "townies" and their guns. But her father was a card carrying liberal. She used joke that he was thrown out of the SDS for his progressive ideas. She was raised to hate guns and everything they stood for.

"But..." She just couldn't think of what to say.

"Honey, please don't worry. I know how it works. I've shot it many times. I'm actually a pretty good shot. I've been thinking about joining a team up in Indianapolis this summer."

"Is it legal for you to have that, to carry it around hidden."

"Not in the least, and if I get caught with it I could get into big trouble. But trouble I can deal with. Being killed I can't"

"You should have told me about it."

Pat thought for a second "Honestly? It never occurred to me to tell you. It's just like you don't tell me if you're wearing heels or not. It's just not that big a deal."

"Would you use it, you know, shoot someone?"

"I hope to God I never have to find out. I don't know if I could use it to defend me, but I do know I'd kill any motherfucker who tried to hurt you." Julie secretly liked that answer.

"Now can we please get some coffee and get over to the hospital? I don't know how to find her room. Her surgery is this afternoon, and I don't want Samantha being alone. If the freak who killed Wayne is down here, I don't want her hurt."

"What about David?"

"What about him? I don't want him hurt either."

Neither of them could admit that David could actually have been the killer.

* * * *

David had walked his Mistress to the secret room that held her coffin. It has completely hidden, and no sunlight could find it. He watched the sun come up and wondered if it was the last time he would see it. If all went well his Mistress would turn him tonight. It made his head spin with delight and his heart swell with pride to think of it.

There was hardly a fiber in his body that did not want what she was offering him. He thought about his former life and was almost ill. He had been so weak, so pitiful. He had

deserved the bad things that happened to him. He had asked for it.

It would all change now. Now he would have the power. Power was all that mattered in this world. The power of money, the power of arms, the power of evil. He didn't know how he could have been so stupid. He was worth millions, and he still let people push him around. He treated his wealth life it was dirty or something,

He thought of his friends and was even more contemptuous. They also deserved what they had or were going to get. They too were weak and blamed their problems on parents of fate. Gods, what a pathetic bunch of whiners they were. Not one of them would go on to live a life that was worth the food they would consume. Well he'd fix that. He fix that very soon.

Today he'd take care of Samantha. Then it would be a simple matter to lure Pat and Julie into his clutches. He thought about which of the two he kill first. Who should have the pleasure of watching their lover die as their last sight on earth.

He scoffed again. Love? They didn't know the meaning of the word. They were simply rutting animals. He considered them lower than barnyard animals. A pig doesn't know love, it just has it's instincts.

Well David was no animal. Not any more. He knew he once was a pathetic sheep. But no more. From now on he would prey upon the meek and the sheep of the world.

He left the house and started making the Drive back into Birmingham. Samantha's surgery wasn't until the afternoon.

He knew he'd find a time to be alone with her and then, well, the surgeon could take the afternoon off.

* * * *

Julie and Pat had a quick breakfast and got directions to the hospital. They were told that it was a hike. But that is was in walking distance. They said that the parking was hideous and that they might acutely get there faster by walking. It was a pleasant morning, so they decided to give it a try. It was a pleasant morning, warmer than they expected for early spring. Spring time is a glorious season in the south and even in the heart of the city, they swore they could smell blooming flowers.

You could tell that this was a city that took itself seriously. It was 6:30 and there was already a lot of traffic, on the street and on foot. Student and faculty rushing to their early classes. Doctors and nurses rushing to make their shifts. There was a small crowd and neither noticed the slim attractive woman following them half a block behind. To be honest, Pat had only seen her the once, and he had been pretty focused on Jean at the time. He probably would not have recognized her even if he had spotted her.

When they got to Samantha's room they were both in her greatly improved mood.

"Pat, Julie!" She has squealed in delight "What are you guys doing here?"

"We got a wild hair and thought we'd come see you through this." Pat lied.

"It's not that big a deal. Jeeze guys, first David and now you two. Is he with you?"

"No he came on his own. We don't know where he is right now."

"Well he called last night, said he'd drop by this morning." She was beaming. "God, I love you guys."

They chatted for a while and were interrupted by a small but steady stream of orderlies and nurses. Finally one came in and looked at Julie and Pat saying, "You'll have to excuse us, I need to prepare Miss Simms."*****"She has to give me a shot in the ass, guys." Samantha teased.

"Let's run down and grab a magazine. We'll be back in a few. Don't go anywhere."

"I won't" Samantha called to their backs as they left the room.

Kit had met up with Jean in the hospital. They both watched the room while all the young people were in it. They decided that Kit would follow anyone who struck out on their own. Which is exactly what happened as Julie and Pat went in search of a gift shop.

Kit followed them down through a maze of stairwells and corridors to the gift shop. It was easy to tell the many renovation had been done on this facility. There seemed to be more stair wells than rooms. Walk ways and offices, connected and intersected in all the strangest places.

She repositioned herself as Pat was looking over the magazines and Julie was looking at presents for Samantha. It was ironically at that precise moment that Pat spotted David down the hall and ran after him. Julie quickly followed.

Kit looked up and saw Julie's back running down the hall towards some goal that she could not make out. She had a pretty good head start and she silently cursed herself for taking her eyes off them. She took flight, and made a mistake that she would regret for a very long time. Reflexively she yelled "Julie!"

Julie turned and saw a woman she did not know running after her. She became terrified. Even if Pat had been able to recognize Kit, which was questionable at best, Julie had never seen her before. What Julie saw was a stranger in hot pursuit. She was terrified and ran faster towards Pat who had just caught David.

Pat had grabbed David by the arm and was just about to talk to them when Julie crashed into them both. Before either of the men could talk she pointed at Kit who was at the far end of a walk way trying to fight through the milling crowds of the hospital. David took immediate control. "Follow me, I know where we can loose her."

David began to run and the others quickly followed. He made for quick turns and led them through a nondescript door which looked like it was probably an office door. It was, in fact, a stairwell to an older building that the hospital had been grafted onto.

The stairwell was empty and David lead them up two flights of stairs. Neither of them had the presence of mind to question how David knew his way around this bizarre maze of buildings. He had, in fact, been checking escape routes for the last hour and a half.

They paused on the landing. Pat and Julie were out of breath, David was not.

"My God David, what's going on? Do you know about Wayne? Who do you think killed him?" Pat mind was buzzing, he couldn't form a coherent thought. The short run, his lack of sleep and his general sense of panic and dread had taken a hold of him.

"Don't worry, it's nothing you have to concern yourself with." David then produced the same knife he had killed Wayne with and lunged at Pat.****Pat had been making eye contact with David and missed his move entirely. He was a sitting duck and his brain had no time to react. Julie, on the other hand, had her head lowered and saw David's hand reach into his pocket and produce the knife.

She was already lunging towards David when he launched his attack. She had managed to bump Pat and grab the knife. She could not, however, stop David's forward momentum. David drawn the knife up in an arc to stab Pat under his rib cage. He missed his target.

What he hit was Julie's abdomen. She had moved closer to David than Pat so he hit her lower. He pierced her belly and skewered her appendix before the long dagger made an mirror wound as it poked through her back. The blade had also severely lacerated her hands where she had grabbed the knife.

Julie howled in pain and pulled back. She managed to twist a little and David's grip on the knife loosed enough for her to wrest it away from him as she fell. She would later find out the this probably saved her life because the knife was filling

the same hole that it had made.****Pat screamed at David in a rage and pulled the Colt Python from the holster he had clipped to his belt, hidden in the hollow of his back.

"Don't move *goddamnit!*" He yelled.

In one fluid motion David swept the gun out of Pat's hand with his ebony walking stick. The maneuver completely surprised Pat.

"Fuck you, asshole." David said and lunged again at Pat with his walking stick.

* * * *

In the meantime, Kit had lost the trio and she was cursing herself. She didn't know how she could be so stupid. Why had she called out to Julie? She stood for a second. There was no need to search wildly. As she was catching her breath, she heard Julie's scream.

She was close to the door to the stairs and pushed through. She heard the sounds of the struggle and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time. When she had climbed two flights she saw David lunging at Pat with some kind of stick. She body blocked him and the they sprawled on the ground.

They both got quickly to their feet and David held his cane like a quarterstaff. He was grinning evilly at Kit. He lashed at her legs with his cane and she dodged enough to prevent any damage to her knee, but he still hit her in the calf and she howled in pain.

She remembered what Bill had told her about weapons. "Go opposite" he had told her "If it's long move in. If it's

short, like a knife, stay long." She prayed that the cane counted as "long" as she jumped in and grappled with David.

David had caught her in the ribs as she moved in, but her strategy had worked. The blow lacked the leverage it would have had if she had stayed back. She grabbed the hard cane and twisted her body. ****The move worked perfectly. She wrested the cane from David and she followed with an elbow to his face. He yelled and fell back. Kit continued spinning towards David, but he had fallen away.

Sam fell into an aggressive stance. Her knees were bent and she was on the balls of her feet. She scanned and quickly reacquired David. To her dismay she saw that he had successfully retrieved Pat's gun and was leveling it towards her. He would have shot, but the sounds of the fight had brought more than one bystander. David merely jumped past the emerging crowd and made good his escape that he had earlier planned.

Kit considered giving chase, but knew it was suicidal. David had the gun. She let him go and looked to Pat who had been hunched over Julie during the whole fight. She realized that he was instinctively using his body to shield her. She looked at the crowd and said, "I don't suppose one of you is a doctor?"

Chapter 31

Ginger had a productive morning. A few phone calls had told her where she could find Sims. He was working a job just south of town. She got directions from the desk clerk and ordered a rental car for herself. It took an hour to get there, but it was delivered nonetheless. She was amazed at the results a limitless credit card can produce.

She was glad she got directions, because she had never in her life been in a town as confusing as Birmingham. Every street seemed to have three names, and none of the streets ran north/south or east/west. Ridges ran through the city from the north east to the south west. The streets were a confusing web as they ran alone, through, over and around these ridges.

She finally found the site and was confronted with a huge area of dirt and mud that probably once held a stand of southern pines in the not too distant past. She managed to get someone's attention, which was no easy trick. She asked to speak with Sims and was told to wait. Thirty minutes later a strong looking older man with a pot belly was standing in front of her.

"Can I help you Ma'am?"

"Yes please, I am writing a chapter for Random House. They are putting together a book of American castles. I saw your article about the work on the Alabama castle and I was wondering if you could answer a few questions for me."

The man cursed under his breath, but smiled at Ginger all the same "Ma'am, I don't know if ya'll read that story real

hard, but you should know I got paid not to tell anyone where that castle is. The owner wants to be left alone. Can't see as how I blame her. All the people asking questions. People got a right to live in peace don't they."

"Oh yes Sir." She had quickly learned that southerners responded favorably to the words "Sir" and "Ma'am".

"I agree completely, and we would never want to compromise their privacy." Ginger lied "I understand you were properly compensated for your silence and all I wanted was to see if we could hire you as a consultant on the project."

She reached into her bag and produced three thousand dollars. She had stopped at a bank and changed the money into smaller bills, mostly twenties. The wad of bills looked very impressive.

Sims looked left and right and then took the cash. "Well I can't tell you where the castle is but I don't suppose it would hurt to tell you a little about it. You know, what most people don't figure out is that place that big is gonna use a lot of electricity. I mean it certainly is gonna use more than that trailer that was on the land when they strung the lines. Know what I mean?"

"Yes Sir, I think I do. Thank you for you time."

"Welcome Ma'am, now you be careful and good luck with your book."

Ginger graced him with her best smile and got in her car and drove off.

She found a waffle house and sat in a booth in the smoke-filled diner. She linked her laptop with its cell modem to the

network and started hacking around power company records in the Birmingham area. It took a while, seven cups of coffee to be exact and a two glares from the waitress who asked three times if she wanted any food with her coffee, but she found a trailer address that was using the power of seven houses. Ginger got the address, and chuckled to herself. She left one hundred dollars in tens on the table and drove quickly back to the hotel.

The waitress thought she'd have to rethink her opinion of Yankees as she rubbed the bills between her fingers.

She called Jean on his cellular and was told to meet him at the coffee shop of the hospital. That she should get detailed direction to the address she had gotten. The last request was very difficult. The desk clerk didn't have a clue as to where the address was. He asked one of the cleaning crew who lived close to area, an old black man with a perpetual five o'clock shadow. He didn't know, but made a phone call to some who might.****He made two more calls, obviously he was getting forwarded from one person to the next and finally started writing. He eventually handed Ginger a piece of paper with the directions. "Man says he's hunted round there. Seen some strange gates. Says no one goes there."

Ginger looked at the directions and her eyes crossed. The directions to the castle took almost a full page. Ginger thanked the man and gave him two hundred dollars for his trouble. He smiled big for her and said "Any time Ma'am, if ya'll need anything you just ask for Joseph."

Ginger assured him she would, and headed over to the hospital.

She found Jean, Kit and Pat sitting in the coffee shop in a secluded corner. Jean had told Pat everything. Pat was stunned, but he believed it. After seeing the monster his best friend had turned into, he was ready to believe everything. Both he and Kit had fresh blood on their clothing.

Julie would later tell people that if you have to get stabbed, it is best to get stabbed in a hospital. She received immediate and excellent care. An excited staff had her in the emergency ward in five minutes and rushed her to surgery when they determined that she was stable. She and Samantha were operated on at approximately the same time. Jean had arranged for them to be in the same room when they woke up. He also arranged for two burley, well armed body guards to be placed outside their room.

He looked at the company at his table and thought for a second and then spoke "This is it. We get her by sun down, or the hunt is over. She'll know she's compromised once she reads David's mind. She'll kill him and abandon her home.

"I want you to listen to me. This is deadly serious. She's smart and she's ruthless and she's powerful. If we are with her when she wakes, we're dead. Do you understand?"

Everyone at the table nodded, Pat had already convinced Jean that he should come with them. If anyone could get through to David, he could.

"It's already getting late, we'll have three, three and a half hours tops when we get there. If we fail, we fail. Our deaths won't help anyone." They all agreed.

"Ginger, I want you here when the women will come out of surgery. Samantha doesn't know anything but Julie is going to be frightened. You'll have to keep her calm."

She knew it was a ploy to keep her from coming and it made her angry. She could also tell from the look in his eyes that she was not to argue.

"Yes Master." She said without a hint of sarcasm or complaint.

"Master?" Pat perked

"Don't worry it's what she calls him when she's not in her bottle." Kit joked. They all laughed.

An hour and a half later, the three found themselves confronted with the large iron gate. Jean had no patience. Or hope that they were going to sneak up on anyone. He took a shotgun and blasted the lock three times.

The party was well armed, they all carried ten millimeter pistols. This time, they carried sub sonic hollow points. "Careful, they will do sever damage to anything they hit." "I know" Pat had said as he broke apart the pistol and quickly reassembled it. He was making sure it was in good working order and clean. Jean was impressed.

The three also carried sawed off shotguns.

They approached the huge house and saw David's car parked in front. "Be careful, he's dangerous and we know he has Pat's gun."

The Castle was indeed impressive. It was more than Pat imagined it would be. He looked at the sun and then back to the house. It was late, and they had to find both David and

the vampire before the sun set. He knew David wouldn't be hard to find, and that worried him.

They approached the front door carefully. It was ajar they cautiously moved through it one at a time. Pat knew they couldn't possibly search a building this large while they had to worry when and where David would attack them.

The inside of the house was a grotesque as the outside was impressive. It had never been cleaned, and thick layers of dust and filth covered everything. Weeds had actually begun to grow in some of the collected dirt and insect and flies were thick. The worst thing was the hideous stench of rotting meat that filled the air. Pat and Kit almost vomited when they first were assaulted by the air.

Pat wondered if David saw the house this way. He suspected that he did not. He knew in his heart that he saw it the way she wanted him to. To him, this castle was grand and immaculate.

There was something about the house that bothered Pat. It was familiar to him in a creepy way. He realized that it was exactly like the house that David had described in his dreams.

David had heard the gun shots and watched them pull up in front from a second story window. He had been huddled in the room, terrified that his Mistress would be disappointed with him when she woke. Now he was renewed and happy. Now he saw his chance for redemption.

He noticed that the three intruders were well armed. He knew the pistol in his hand was deadly but he knew he had to be cautious with the well armed trio. He knew the house very well, he planned his ambush and waited.

The search was going slowly, and Pat was getting more and more frustrated. Jean looked at his watch. "One hour." He hissed "We make contact or we're gone, but we only have one hour."

They had search about a quarter of the first floor. There were endless dens and dining rooms. Servant rooms, parlors, and music rooms. It just went on and on. They had search one wing of the first floor and had moved back to the large foyer when a room on the second floor caught Pat's eye. It was a library. He could see the book selves. Something about the room intrigued him. Something David had said about his dreams.

David had mentioned one library many times. For some reason it seemed to be one of the reoccurring themes in the stories. Pat had tried to psychoanalyze the meaning of the library, but had come up short. He now realized how futile the effort was. That the library was a real place, not a Freudian manifestation from David's id.

Pat was momentarily lost in thought and strayed behind the other two as the entered yet another larger dinning hall in the other wing. He found himself alone and was startled back to reality by the lone report of a pistol. He knew from the sound that it was his .357.

"On the floor, now!" He heard David's voice yell.

He heard something being dropped on the hard stone floor. He knew it was a shotgun.

"Oh Pat, why don't you come join your friends?"

Pat thought for a minute.

"Give it up Pat, I know where you are, and you've lost. Bitch why don't you tell him the situation?"

"He's shot Jean, he's hurt badly. He has me covered. Pat get out of here!" Kit yelled.

"Yes Pat, why don't you do us all a favor and get out of here! Then my Mistress and I can eat in private! Don't worry, we'll come see you when the time is right! But before you go, I want you to throw your shot gun through the door. If you don't I'll blow her knee caps off. She's dead anyway, but I don't think you want her to suffer do you?"

Pat thought for a second and realized that David wasn't aware of the pistols, he had only asked for the shot gun. Pat tossed the gun through the door.

"David, there's still hope. You don't want to do this."

He heard David laugh. "Oh give it up Pat. You have no idea who you are talking to anymore. Your friend is dead, gone! Now it's me, and the earth shall tremble where I walk."

Pat knew he was in trouble. There was no time to get help, or even try a flanking move. He gambled on one stupid plan. He drew his pistol "David!" he called as he approached the door.

"Yes Pat" his voice was mocking and confident.

"You missed something"

"What's that Pat?"

"You forgot that I might have another gun." He stepped through the door "She has one too."

David sized up the situation quickly. Pat had hoped that David would shoot at him and that Kit would take him out, but David kept the gun trained on Kit.***** "So what,

asshole? Oh, I know you'd sacrifice yourself, but you don't have the balls to shoot me."

Pat's hand trembled but he kept the gun on David "Drop it."

"Or what, I can read your mind, fucker. I know you can't shoot me."

"Wishful thinking David." Pat shot twice and David fell.

Pat rushed to David and Kit rushed to Jean. Both were alive. David was bleeding and unconscious. Jean was also bleeding but awake. "Find her!" he said with as much force as he could. "This is all for nothing if you don't find her."

Pat looked at Kit and said, "Follow me, I think I know where to look."

He led her to the library "David used to dream about this room all the time. I gotta believe she's here somewhere."

They looked for a short minute and both found their prize at the same time. There was a bookshelf that was hinged to swing out. Behind it was a small room with a casket in the center. Her own life style and over confidence was her undoing. The dirt and grime had kept the case from closing completely and she never thought to have it fixed.

The coffin itself was beautiful. It was made from ebony and was gilded with gold. They opened it and found a stunningly gorgeous woman laying peacefully inside. She had no pulse and was perfectly still. They knew what to do.

Without a word they reached into the coffin and lifted her body out. She was light and they easily carried her out into the front of the house. As promised, the sun seemed to bake her on the spot. She began to age instantly. Jean explained

that sunlight would undo the magic that made her what she was. He said the sunlight would turn the Vampire Empress, Angelique, the dust she truly was. The wind soon carried her remains aloft and scattered her over the Alabama forest.

When they returned to the house they found Jean on the phone. "There's a helicopter on the way. It's big enough for all of us. I also arranged for a clean-up crew. Unless I'm wrong there is going to be a lot of money stashed around this place."

Epilog

The clean-up had indeed turned up a sizable fortune. Jean and David were flown back to the hospital and had their wounds treated. David was kept under strict lock and key. The hospital staff was told that he was an escapee from a mental institution and they accepted the story without question.

Jean had done his "Mister Fixit" routine and they got nothing but cooperation from the Birmingham authorities. When David was well enough to travel, he was coptered to the airport where a private medijet flew him off to France. Jean made arrangements for Pat and Julie to follow.

If there was any hope of restoring David's sanity, it was with the experts at the Committee. They also new that having Pat and Julie handy would help in any possible recovery. They both readily agreed. Despite everything, they loved David, or at least the David they knew. They would do anything to get him back. As soon as they got Samantha back on her feet, the two would go to France.

Jean talked with Renee, who told him to get back home when he was ready. Renee was anxious to get on with his retirement. He needed Jean to come learn the job. There was no question that Ginger would follow Jean, but that left the question of Kit.

"Now what?" Kit asked Jean. She was obviously sad.

"Up to you I suppose. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know, it's jut that for once in my life I've felt alive. Like I've got something to do. I've never had that."

"The job's not over yet, Kit."

"What?"

"The job's not over, it never is. There is always evil. We always have to fight it. Especially now. With Angelique gone, all the other undead she was helping are succumbing to their lusts. There are already a rash of animal attacks all over the U.S."

You mean I can keep doing this?" She brightened.

"If you want to. I'm the director, I can hire anyone I want. Do you want a job?"

"YES!"

"Well, you'll have to be trained, and you won't get a big case for a while, but..."

Kit didn't hear any of the details, she was too happy.

The End

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