



Blood Hunt

The Legend

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The Legend

Never underestimate the seductive power of vampires.
Cursed be the witch who defiles herself with he who will not die.
Woe to the child of the undead, conceived by witchcraft,
for inside this unholy beauty runs a river of tainted blood.
The undead who drink of her overcome the sun.
Look for the child whose strength has no boundaries,
heed our dire warning before it is too late.
Destroy this child of darkness.
Once it comes to full power, all will be lost.
Nothing can fill its insatiable appetite.

Behold the blood-beast who will not die!

Chapter One

Blue lights flashed. A scurry of footsteps pounded down the congested hallway.

"Bri, Emergency, STAT," Dr. Reese ordered in a clipped tone.

When she glanced up, adrenaline kicked Nurse Brianna Eaton's heart into overdrive. Dr. Reese shoved a stethoscope into his lab coat pocket, turned and rushed off in the direction of the elevators. His long stride carried him past the nurses' station within seconds.

"Coming," Bri yelled, hating Monday morning already. She threw her patient's chart onto the desk and bolted after the doctor, through the long tiled corridors of Charleston's St. Francis Hospital. When she reached Housekeeping, the pungent odor of strong disinfectants burned her eyes and nostrils like sulfuric acid. She quickened her pace, barely caught up with him, but managed to squeeze through the elevator doors before they closed.

"What's up?" Bri studied Dr. Reese's weathered face, the grim set of his mouth. In addition to the worry she'd often seen in his smoky-gray eyes, she saw anguish.

"Emergency called. EMTs brought in Megan and her son Jason."

Fear clenched Bri's stomach muscles. "Oh, my God. What happened?"

"Rollover MVC."

Her pulse raced as she translated the hospital jargon to motor vehicle collision—the deadliest kind—a rollover.

"Jason's side of the car took the force of the impact." Dr. Reese frowned. "Times like these, I wish I was a surgeon, not a pediatrician." He took a deep, labored breath and released it, angrily stabbing the elevator button with his finger. "It's bad. Jason has internal bleeding. They're rushing him to surgery."

"And Megan?" Bri sensed her best friend still lived, but she'd sustained injuries, too. Worried, she used mental telepathy to probe deep into Megan's mind for answers and instead, jumbled fragments of pain slammed into Bri. Confusion. Despair. Fear...my God, so much fear. Her pulse quickened. She fought against the emotional riptides and pulled away from Megan's oppressive thoughts.

Dr. Reese shook his head. "Megan suffered bruised ribs, lacerations and a concussion. She lost consciousness when they took her from the ambulance, but she's alert now. Dr. Clark is keeping her overnight for observation. Barring any complications, she should be released tomorrow." He glanced at Bri, tears misting his eyes. "Megan's pretty scared. I knew you'd want to help her through this."

Bri heard the slight tremble in his voice and nodded. Everything seemed surreal. Her heart went out to this middle-aged man who loved her and Megan like his own family.

He cleared his throat. "Tell her I'm heading to the OR. Everything possible is being done for Jason. Soon as I find out anything, I'll let her know."

Ping.

The elevator doors opened. Bri exited at a run in one direction. Dr. Reese raced toward the loud rush of the OR.

"Which room is Nurse Megan Blakely in?" Bri asked, stopping at the front desk.

"Straight ahead, second room on the left. I'll buzz you through." The nurse hit a button. Large doors swooshed open. Once inside, Bri hurried down the long corridor. When

she came to an abrupt stop, the soles of her nurse's shoes squealed on the vinyl tiles. She entered the room and glanced at the monitor above the bed, relieved Megan's blood pressure reading was normal.

Megan had kicked the sheets half off. The shapeless hospital gown on her petite form looked like it had swallowed her whole. She moved around, her limbs restless. Standard procedure for a concussion, the head of the bed was elevated thirty degrees. A bottle of betadine, used to wash out wounds, sat on the nearby table. Angry lacerations criss-crossed her arms. Her face was swollen, pale, not like the vibrant Megan she'd known since childhood. The spitfire she'd shared a room with in college. She touched Megan's damp, honey-brown hair and gently smoothed it from her bruised cheek.

"Bri," Megan whispered. Her eyes opened wide, bleak. She sobbed.

The sound broke Bri's heart. "You okay?"

"I'm sore all over, like someone beat every inch of my body. Other than that, I keep telling them there's nothing wrong with me." She leveled hazel eyes at her, anger flashing deep inside them. "Can you get me a clean uniform? Mine has blood all over it." Megan swung her legs over the other side of the bed and half stood, one hand holding onto the arm of a nearby chair.

"Hey, where do you think you're going? Get back in that bed." Bri flew to her side, easing her under the covers.

"If I could get rid of this headache, I'd be fine." Megan winced and rubbed her temples.

"You have a concussion." Bri glanced at the monitor again, worried that Megan was moving around too soon. "Your blood pressure is still normal. That's good because it keeps the blood flowing to that stubborn, hard head of yours."

When Megan tried to get up again, Bri gently grabbed her by the shoulders to hold her still. "Rest until your doctor tells you otherwise."

"I should be with Jason, not lying in this bed like some invalid. If I'm not there when he wakes, he'll be scared."

Bri straightened, hunting for the right words to comfort her friend. "Scared? Jason's never been scared of anything. Besides, Doc Reese, his old fishing buddy, is with him."

Megan smiled, a little color returning to her face.

"The minute Dr. Reese knows anything definite, he'll tell us. The best thing you can do for Jason right now is stay put, let your body recover. When he wakes up, you'll be right by his side."

Bri wondered how she herself would have survived without Dr. Reese, who also served on the Board of Directors at the hospital. He helped bring her into the world twenty-five years ago and remained her closest ally.

Handing Megan tissues, Bri sat on the bed beside her. Megan shook her head, a look of confusion on her face. "It was awful. I still can't believe it happened. One minute I'm taking Jason to the school bus stop, like always. Next thing I knew some crazy woman sped out of a side road." Megan grabbed Bri's hand and squeezed hard. "The car shot out of nowhere and slammed into the side where Jason was sitting."

Megan's thoughts were so strong, Bri couldn't escape them. Helplessness. Fear...so intense it numbed the senses. Like a horror movie, macabre scenes played. Their car was struck with violent force, propelling it toward uneven shoulders. The vehicle rolling,

tumbling endlessly down a steep hill. Shards of glass filling the air as windows shattered, pulverized into a dangerous powdery residue, raining down, embedding itself in their soft flesh. The frame of the vehicle screeching, groaning like a writhing beast caught in the jaws of death. Metal doors bending inward, trapping the helpless occupants strapped inside. A loud, crushing thud. The vehicle landing hard against a big oak tree. Jason's small body twisted, bloody, motionless...so still. Megan, dazed, covered in blood, fighting to scream. No sound coming from her open mouth.

When Megan released Bri's hand, it sent a long shudder through her as she pulled away from the terrifying thoughts and back into herself.

Bri swallowed the painful lump in her throat. Tears stung her eyes. "There was nothing you could have done." Her chin quivered at the guilt-ridden expression on Megan's face. "Oh, honey, you didn't fail Jason."

"My mind knows that, but my heart..."

"Will mend." Bri clutched the nametag on her uniform, studying the dark circles under Megan's eyes, the reddish-purple bruises on her cheeks. The way her shoulders slumped with weariness. How frail and bone tired she looked. "You should try and sleep."

"I can't." Her voice sounded hoarse, barely a whisper.

"Can I get you anything? Call anyone?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Not until I know..."

Dr. Reese walked through the door. Bri saw the anxiety on his face, the utter bleakness in his stance. She felt his anguish from across the room where she sat on the couch.

Megan put a hand over her heart. "He isn't...?"

Not yet.

Bri heard Dr. Reese's thought and cringed. This can't be happening. Not to Jason. Not to a six-year-old little boy with his whole life ahead of him. Not to Megan. She'd lost her husband three years ago. Hadn't she suffered enough?

He cleared his throat. "Jason is alive. There's no easy way to say this, I'm sorry." He glanced at Bri with loving, paternal affection before returning his gaze to Megan. "It's a touch and go situation. They have to remove his spleen and...he suffered liver damage."

Severe.

Bri heard the ugly word Dr. Reese thought, but omitted telling out of love. She listened, dazed as he went on to say, "He's in good hands, Megan, the best. They'll call when he's out of surgery. After they give us the okay, Dr. Clark agreed to let me take you down to the Surgical ICU in a wheelchair and stay with Jason for a little while."

Megan glanced at the ceiling, tears sliding down her cheeks. "My heart keeps saying don't give up, he'll pull through. But my mind keeps replaying what I've seen in real life. I can't think of one kid who survived something like this." She groaned, the sound laden with anguish and despair. "Dr. Reese, please tell me I'm wrong. Please tell me my Jason's going to make it through the night."

Dr. Reese dropped his gaze to the floor. "If I lied, you'd know it, Megan. His prognosis is grim, but miracles happen. He may surprise us yet."

"That's not good enough. Maybe you two want to take a wait and see attitude, not me. No sir, not me. Never." She clamped her arms around her middle, her eyes fierce. "It almost

killed me when Stephen died fighting that fire. I can't go through that again. I won't. You have to help my son, Bri. He's all I have left in this world." Megan rocked back and forth on the bed like someone fighting to comfort herself. She turned and stared at Bri. "I've seen things."

Bri's heart skipped a beat. "What things?"

"When we were growing up, I saw plenty. I pretended not to notice the weird stuff about you. I'd convinced myself you were some kind of powerful magician and only I knew your secret."

"A magician?" If only it were that simple.

"I never told a soul what I saw, Bri. Ever. I thought if I told anyone, you'd stop being my friend and move away. I'd never see you again."

Bri shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you? I remember red, angry, sunburns that disappeared overnight. Childhood cuts and bruises that vanished before my eyes. The time you fell off your bike and broke your left arm. It was a compound fracture, Bri. Twisted. Mangled. The bone stuck out through the skin. You stood and it had healed, like it never happened."

Dr. Reese stepped forward, his face stark white. "You're imagining things."

Megan pointed an accusing finger at him. "I don't understand it all, but you know about her, don't you? That's why you do her physicals, handle her immunizations, everything—including periodic blood tests the hospital requires."

"Listen to yourself," Dr. Reese said. "What you're saying is crazy. I delivered Bri into this world and I look after her medical needs, like any of my patients. It's the concussion, Megan. You're not thinking straight."

"Maybe." She leveled her eyes suspiciously at him. "Nevertheless, I want Bri to donate blood for Jason."

For several seconds, Bri couldn't move. She stood there paralyzed by disbelief, overwhelmed by terror. Her mind sought escape, but there was no escape. Megan's demand ricocheted like a deadly silver bullet accurately fired into Bri's brain, tearing at her sanity.

What if he becomes like her? A freak. What if her blood kills Jason, instead of saving him? She'd be responsible for his death. Could she live with that guilt? What if he lives and they find out about her?

Dr. Reese stared at Bri, his lips compressed. "Megan doesn't understand the full impact of what she's asking."

"Do any of us?" Bri bent her head forward, kneading the tense muscles at the base of her neck with her fingers.

"You don't have to do this," he said, emphasizing each word.

What choice did she have? She could lie, say her blood type doesn't match Jason's, but she couldn't do that to her best friend. The only one who could stop this was Megan.

"If Bri agrees to do this, no one can know the blood came from her," Dr. Reese said, his tone somber. "Megan, it's imperative we all understand that from the beginning."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Bri lifted her head, spearing Megan with an intense gaze. "Aren't you the least bit curious about what I am?"

"Don't go there," he warned.

"Megan has a right to know what Jason *might* become. Once we've given him the transfusion, there's no turning back."

He hesitated, expelled a long breath and nodded.

"I only want to know one thing." Megan raised her index finger. "Are you human?"

"Part human." Bri had opened the door. She had no intention of closing it, not until Megan knew the facts. "Maybe when you learn what I am, you'll change your mind about me giving blood to Jason."

Megan shook her head.

"The other part of me is a creature believed only to exist in fiction, yet here I stand. Unlike the pure species, I age like any mortal. Sunlight doesn't kill me. I don't need a constant supply of human blood to survive."

Megan's intelligent eyes grew wide.

Bri probed her friend's mind, seeking fear, but found none, even as her mind mulled over one word – *Vampire*.

"Your secret is safe with me, Bri. Always. I haven't changed my mind."

That same loving friendship they'd shared all these years beamed at her. Bri swallowed the lump in her throat as she turned to Dr. Reese. "How would we pull it off, Doc?"

"We'd have to plant a false trail, cover our tracks." He laid his gentle hands on Bri's shoulders. "Once I draw your blood, you need to get *out* of this hospital."

"Okay."

He moved closer and whispered, "I'm sorry. When you come to my office for me to do the procedure, I'll have to slice deep into a main artery. Otherwise, the puncture will heal too fast and cut off the flow before I finish."

She grimaced at what she would have to face. "I know."

"This whole thing scares me," he said. "We have too many unknowns. What if we're taking all these chances for nothing?"

"I've thought about that possibility, but as you said, it's my decision."

"In spite of all the dangers, you're going to do it, aren't you?"

Bri glanced at Megan, who chewed her thumbnail as she watched them.

"Yes."

"Will you please tell Danielle I tried to talk you out of this?"

Dr. Reese's gentle eyes looked so sad when he said her mother's name. He whispered 'Danielle' like a reverent prayer. Bri felt sorry for him. She'd suspected for a long time he wanted more than friendship from her mother. "I'll make sure she knows you put up a really good fight."

"Thanks. Once I draw your blood, I'll take care of everything, including getting it to Jason for the transfusion," Dr. Reese assured her. "Afterwards, go exercise, do your martial arts class, like usual. Make sure they see your arms, not a mark on them, in case people start nosing around. That's important, Bri."

She gave him a reassuring smile and moved toward Megan. Bri wanted to run and hide, pretend none of this was happening.

"Thank you." Megan gripped Bri's hand. They stared at each other, neither of them saying a word.

She trusted Megan with her secret – with her life.

"I knew you wouldn't stand by and let my son die. Not when you could save him."

"Save him? You have to understand something, Megan. I've never done anything like this. There are no guarantees. What if my blood kills Jason, instead of saving him?" Her heart slammed against her ribs.

If she killed that precious little boy, she didn't know how she'd live with herself.

Megan hugged her. "Love Jason enough to give him a fighting chance, Bri. That's all I ask. I'd do it myself, if I could."

"I'm losing my mind." Nurse Lori Hammond lifted the little boy's arm, staring at the name on the critically ill patient's identification bracelet. *Jason Blakely*

Her hand trembled as she ran her fingers back and forth over the bold letters.

He looked like Jason Blakely, same curly brown hair, round sweet face dotted with impish freckles. But it couldn't be him. No way.

Where is his incision? She gasped, fear tightening her throat.

She punched the call button to summon another nurse before collapsing into a chair.

Minutes later, gray-haired Nurse Jackson poked her head into the Surgical ICU. She glanced around the room. "Where's his mother?"

"Megan looked exhausted. Dr. Reese brought her orange juice and wheeled her to the nurses' lounge for a ten minute break."

Nurse Jackson released a long, sad sigh. She quickly moved to Lori's side and patted her shoulder.

"Stupid drunk driver. They don't do squat to them. When are they going to stop letting them get away with murder?" Nurse Jackson glanced at the bed. "That child is about my grandson's age." She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. They said he'd probably go peacefully during the night. Do you need me to page Dr. Clark and Dr. Reese?"

Lori shook her head. "No, the kid's sleeping like a baby."

Nurse Jackson furrowed her brows. "Then why did you call me in here?"

"I...uh..." Lori shuffled from one foot to the other. No one would ever believe her.

"Well?" She fisted her hands at her hips. "We're short staffed. You know how busy I am. Why'd you call me in here?"

"This isn't the same boy." She knew how crazy that sounded, but it was the truth. It couldn't be the same boy. "I mean it is, but it isn't. Do you remember that movie where they put these pods out, people went to sleep and aliens took their place?"

"Are you stoned?" She eyed her suspiciously.

"I don't do drugs and you know it. I came in here to check his incision, but —"

"But what?"

"This kid had an abdominal incision straight down the middle of his belly, stapled shut with drains coming from both his sides. I've been keeping a close watch on the incision. It's gone. Vanished. His staples and drains are lying in the bed. How'd that happen?"

Nurse Jackson leaned, peered into her eyes and sniffed her breath. "You must be on something. I'm going to give you a drug test and find out what."

"See for yourself." She pointed to the bed, her hand shaking.

"You're crazy." Nurse Jackson stomped over to the foot of the bed, removed the flow sheet Lori had charted on and studied the information. "Looks routine. You checked his vital

signs, gave him meds and changed the dressing on his incision. Nothing out of the norm."

Lori's body shook uncontrollably. "Until now." She grappled with the impossible. "This isn't the same boy, I tell ya."

"So you keep saying." Nurse Jackson stared at her like she'd lost her mind.

Maybe she had.

"Jason Blakely had his spleen removed, so where's his incision?"

Nurse Jackson let out a gust of breath and charged to the head of the bed. She turned and glared at her. "Once I lift this sheet and check his incision, it's over for you. If they find drugs in your system, they'll fire you. If they don't find any, they'll schedule you for a psyche exam."

Sweat dripped from Bri's long hair, secured in a ponytail. Her exercise clothes were damp. They clung to her like a second skin. In one quick, smooth movement, she leaned, brought her leg up and dealt a lethal kick to the punching bag.

Whack!

She watched the bag gyrate violently as it sailed back and forth. The physical exertion eased her stress, but not all of it. Her thoughts kept returning to Jason. Had she given him life? Or death?

"Take that!" she yelled, delivering another fatal blow.

Whack!

The sounds reverberated like a loud clap of thunder throughout the cavernous martial arts studio.

She glanced at her smooth, unblemished arm and pondered the injustice of it all. How quickly her body healed, while any normal human's was so frail.

Randy, the owner of the school, waved at her. His bald spot glistened with perspiration. "Everyone's cleared out but you and me, kid. I don't know who made you mad today, but I hope you kick the crap out of the jerk."

She laughed and waved back, reminding herself to tone her workouts down a bit around other people. He headed to the front desk, where he stayed most of the time. That left her alone, which allowed her to practice skills best kept to herself.

Thirty minutes later, Bri grabbed her small towel and rubbed sweat from her body. She flung the towel across her shoulder, turned toward the wet area and sighed. Time for a soak in the hot tub, followed by a long, steamy shower. Maybe it would relieve the tightness in her shoulders and neck muscles caused by stress.

Two steps later, the entire school plunged into darkness.

An uncontrollable shiver racked her body.

Where was Randy? She expected him to yell out, say something. Crack a joke.

Deadly silence.

She spun toward the entrance and tilted her head, listening.

The only sound was the deafening beat of her heart, echoing in her ears.

Had someone killed the lights? Within seconds, her superior night vision kicked in. She spotted a fifty pound free weight on the floor about thirty feet away.

Where could Randy be?

She inched her way toward the front desk, scanning for possible intruders.

The entrance door was closed, but strange, smoky vapors drifted under the door jam.

"What the hell?" Goosebumps shot up her arms, the hairs raised. She sniffed, but smelled nothing that would indicate a fire.

One entity floated into the entryway.

Another disappeared behind the nearby counter.

She fought the fear lodged in her throat.

A ghostly apparition shimmered like brilliant, living crystals of jade light. It hovered, and then moved toward her. The haunting spicy aroma of cologne drifted along the creature's path like an invading mist. It surrounded her.

Where had she smelled that before?

She took a deep breath and bent low, hands fisted. Damned if she'd cower in the dark like some weakling. Oh, no. *Bring it on! You want a fight, you got one.* If anything attacked, it would regret tangling with her.

"Take your best shot!" she yelled, grabbing the offensive.

"Are you stupid?" a stern male voice asked.

Startled, she swallowed a scream. "Are you?" she countered, hiding her fear. "If you're smart, you'll make tracks out of here. I don't want to hurt you, but I will."

An angry form coalesced into a tall man, one she vaguely remembered seeing. But when? Where? Who was he? His jet-black hair was tinged with gray at the temples. He wore an immaculately tailored three-piece suit and appeared to be in his thirties, but instincts told her, his looks were deceiving.

Adrenaline spiked nervous energy through her veins.

What did he want?

"You did a very stupid thing today, Bri." Angry eyes glared at her.

How did he know her name?

"Only my friends call me Bri. Who are you?"

If he intended to attack, why the delay? It made no sense. Apprehension clawed her mind. What was he waiting for? Maybe he wanted to distract her, while the other one... *God, where is the other one?* She shot a quick peek over her shoulder.

Nothing.

She scanned full circle, but still found nothing.

"You're flesh of my flesh, marked with my DNA. How can you say you don't know me?" The tone of his voice dripped with arrogance.

It dawned on her exactly who he was. *Her father.* The lowlife had disappeared from their lives when Bri was five. After what he'd done, how could he ever show up again?

"You sonofabitch."

He raised one dark brow, but said nothing.

"How did you get inside? I thought *your kind* needed an invitation."

"My kind? Need I remind you that, being your father, we're the same kind?"

"Wrong! Part of me is very much human. We're nothing alike. Want to watch the sunrise with me and prove my point?" She paused for his response. Images flashed in her mind of burning rays cremating his body. The only thing left, a pile of ashes, scattered by the wind. "I didn't think so."

"On that point, you're right. But, you belong to me, Bri. I don't need your permission

to enter anyplace where you are."

She stepped closer, her chin raised in defiance. "I belong to no one, especially your bloodsucking family. I disowned you. I want no part of you or your kind."

"You can't disown your bloodline."

"Newsflash. I already have." She moved away and glanced worriedly toward the front desk. "Where's Randy? What have you done to him?"

"I merely gave him a suggestion that he needed to go home, which he obeyed. He won't remember anything about it tomorrow."

"You didn't bite him or anything?"

A faint smile of amusement crossed his lips. "No, I didn't bite him or anything. I used hypnotic mind control."

The same thing he'd used on her mother.

"Do you realize what a stir you caused by allowing your blood to be taken and given to a human?"

"Who told you?"

"I have my sources. *Who* isn't important. This person warned me about what happened with a six-year-old boy at the hospital."

Fear squeezed her heart like a cold fist. "Is Jason alive?"

"Oh, yes. More than alive." He arched a brow. "The hospital is trying to solve a puzzling question, one they intend to leave no stone unturned to answer. How a critically ill boy, not expected to live, can suddenly grow a spleen and repair a severely damaged liver."

Jason was alive!

Bri didn't know whether to jump with joy, or frown at the deadly mess she'd created. "I wasn't sure what would happen when he received my blood. I thought it might kill him."

"But you knew about your vampiric heritage. You had to suspect if it didn't kill him, it would cure him. You thought it worth risking your life to save this young boy?"

She bristled at his callous attitude. Humans mean nothing to him. "Yes. I weighed the possibilities and took steps to hide my identity. I had to try. I'm not some heartless, soulless creature without feelings, like you."

"Heartless? Soulless? Without feelings? Where do you get your facts, young lady? You don't know the first thing about me."

"What's there to know? You're a vampire."

"One of the ancient ones," he added, puffing his chest.

"An ancient? Well, congratulations. That means you're more cunning and evil than the poor pathetic bloodsuckers who didn't make it, right?"

"I do what is necessary to survive."

"Exactly. And to procreate your species?"

"Procreate?" He tilted his head and looked puzzled.

"Are you confused? Maybe it's been a long time since you raped someone and impregnated them." Her body shook with fury. "You raped my mother."

"Rape?" His mouth gaped.

His look of surprise only served to fuel her anger and contempt for him. Did he think the truth would never come out?

"Who told you I raped your mother?"

"She told me. And your evil seed produced a freak." Bri ground her back teeth together so hard her jaw ached.

He frowned, lines creasing his forehead. "There are things you must know. To survive. You need to hear them from your mother." He stretched out his hand to Bri as if he were a king commanding her instant obedience. "Come."

"No way! I'll kill you before I let you near her again." Bri's voice remained icy calm.

She expected him to lunge, attempt to rip her throat out with his fangs. Instead, he lowered his hand and smiled, a look of sadness in his eyes.

"If anyone could destroy me, Bri, it would be you, because I couldn't raise a hand to harm you, child. You thought your mother in danger and wished to protect her. Thank you for that."

The words he'd spoken, the concern, none of it fit the image she'd grown to hate. Why should she believe this act of his? He hoped to trick her, so she would let her guard down. Oh, no! She wasn't buying any of his lies.

"Did it ever occur to you that the discovery of your vampiric blood could make your mother a target, too?"

She stared at him, her neck muscles tightened as she studied the horrible implications of his question. To hide the truth of Bri's lineage, her mother had carefully woven a pretend lover, a casual affair. One who split, after he found out about the pregnancy. Dr. Reese had helped perpetuate the lie, listing this fictitious person as the father on Bri's birth certificate. *If my mother simply explained to the coven that she didn't know he was a vampire, surely they wouldn't kill her.* She nibbled the inside of her cheek. What if they didn't believe her?

"Bri, it isn't only the coven we need to worry about. In the hunt for you, other forces may harm your mother."

Why hadn't she thought about that possibility? She hated to admit it, but he was right. Her mother could be vulnerable. She was a witch, quite capable of casting spells. Would that weapon alone protect her? It couldn't even compare to Bri's superhuman powers. That of witch and vampire.

Her father's eyes penetrated her own. "Finally, something we agree on. As a precautionary measure I'd like to assign someone from our blood-bonded family to protect your mother." He shook his head and exhaled a long breath. "The bodyguard won't be me, Bri, so wipe that suspicious look off your face."

Having extra firepower if anything went wrong would help. She couldn't work and safeguard her mother at the same time. "Agreed."

"I'd also like to assign a protector to you. He's not of our blood-bond, but he comes from another fine family. Logan Vance is my best friend."

His best friend. Well, that certainly was a recommendation she could ignore. What did she need him for? She pursed her lips and shook her head. "No."

"Two warriors are better than one, Bri. I suspect you know very little of your powers. Logan could teach you. It might be the edge you need to survive." He paused. "You won't change your mind?"

"No."

"Very well, we do this the hard way." He turned his back to her. And vanished.

Stunned, she pivoted, scanning the area. Where did he go?

His parting words gnawed at her like piranhas, eating her alive. What did he mean?

Okay, she'd seen him leave, sort of. But, she couldn't shake the growing sense of foreboding rising deep inside her. It kept screaming that something wasn't right. This piece of lowlife had given up way too easy. Then...

Wait a minute! Originally, two vampires had ghosted under the door. One had drifted behind the front counter. Did it leave with him? Or could it be skulking around the place, waiting to strike?

After searching the building twice and finding nothing, she decided her imagination was working overtime. "Come out, come out, wherever you are," she chanted, half-jokingly. She released her hair, shoved the scrunchy around her wrist, turned and strolled toward the wet area.

No sooner had she spoken than a ghostly apparition shimmered before her. She jumped back. The thing glowed like brilliant, living crystals of light. It flickered blood-red before turning cold, sapphire-blue.

A form coalesced into that of a large, muscular man, who looked to be in his late twenties. He was tall, at least six foot five. Unlike her father's more formal attire, this handsome, virile man wore jeans and a loose pullover shirt. He stalked toward her, his jaw line taunt, and stopped within inches of her. She could feel his intense body heat, smell the fresh, woody scent of his cologne. His warm breath, laced with a hint of peppermint, whispered across her face and neck.

She stared into cobalt-green eyes, fringed with a forest of the thickest, longest lashes. Mesmerized by their intense sexuality, she couldn't break away. She felt a sense of falling into their depths. Her heart rate suddenly became erratic, the rhythm so fast it threatened to burst from her chest. Seconds later, it slowed, became almost non-existent. She grew hot, lightheaded. Her palms sweated. For a moment, she couldn't breathe.

Was this a test of wills? His against hers. Had she failed?

His full-lipped sensual mouth lifted in a slow smile.

You bastard!

Tearing her gaze from his, she gasped, taking in large gulps of air.

If he used mind control on her again, he'd find himself with a stake through his heart.

Logan Vance stared at this woman, who blatantly responded to him. She wore nothing but a black mesh top, ass-hugging shorts and Nikes. A towel lay across her shoulder. He watched the rise and fall of her breasts. The way they strained against her skintight top. He forced himself to look away but his gaze reluctantly returned, following the alluring V-neck above her generous cleavage.

He shook himself. What the hell was he doing? This woman is impure. Tainted by her mother's witch DNA. She is an inferior mortal creature, one who ages. One who must be destroyed.

Why was his best friend, Nathan Wellman, so adamant about protecting his daughter? He hadn't seen her since she was five, except at a distance. She'd rejected her own kind. Hated her father so much she'd threatened to kill him if he went near her mother. How dare this witch threaten an ancient, both respected and revered by his people.

She didn't even have enough sense to understand the full impact of what she'd done by giving her blood to save that child. How many would die because of Brianna Eaton's irresponsible actions?

Would he be among them?

"So, you don't need my protection." Logan studied her smoldering, midnight-blue eyes, the way her pupils dilated slightly when she looked at him. Interest? Maybe.

"You must be Logan Vance."

There, her eyes lit with dazzling blue fire again.

"The only one I need protection from is my father. Maybe I'll turn vampire hunter and destroy him."

Anger shot through Logan. He shook his head, disgusted with this irritating woman. Why had her mother lied to Bri? Why didn't Nathan tell her the truth?

"I'm not going to argue with you about your father. I'd be wasting my breath. Let's just say we have very different views about Nathan and leave it at that. For now."

She lifted her stubborn chin. Her long, silky black hair fell down the middle of her back. He glanced at her naked, enticing neck. Her jugular vein pulsed with the powerful life force of her blood. The sweet aroma called, beckoned. He felt his hunger growing.

How easy it would be to give in, rip out her throat. Drink his fill.

"Protecting you wasn't my idea." If it wasn't for Nathan, she'd be dead right now. Why had Nathan stopped him from killing her? "Blame it on your father. But, I have a proposition."

She folded her arms. One dark brow arched as she threw him a contemptuous look.

He snorted in disbelief. Him bed a witch? Never! "Don't flatter yourself, witch. It isn't *that kind* of proposition. I merely want you to prove you don't need my protection."

"How?"

"I'm pure vampire. This means I have a distinct advantage, I'm stronger than you. Unless you've mastered our ways of fighting, you're no match for me." She scowled at him and he couldn't resist goading her. "Of course, there is one area in which we might have equal strength—arm wrestling." He extended his hand.

She slapped it away and huffed.

Logan doubted Bri knew the full arsenal of deadly vampire skills she possessed, let alone his. She had a lot to learn. "You believe yourself superior. Okay. We fight, not to the death, but to prove which of us is right. You win, you'll never see me again. I win, you accept my protection."

"You're asking me to whip your ass?" She threw him a half smile. Her sexy lips trembled slightly with amusement.

Logan rejected the erotic images that popped into his head, concentrating instead on what she meant. "If you think you can handle it, have at it. You ever fought a vampire?"

She hesitated as if weighing her answer very carefully.

Would she admit she'd never fought one, or lie?

She eyed him suspiciously. "No, but don't let that make you turn-tail and run."

Logan suppressed a smile. *Gutsy woman.*

"I'd like to see what you have, hot shot. There's a huge workout room in the back."

They strutted toward the battleground.

Logan chuckled when she opened the metal box, flipped each of the circuit breakers and turned the lights back on. "Can't you see in the dark?"

"Of course I can, but your night vision might be superior to mine. No sense giving you an advantage, is there?"

They entered the arena, a huge room with gleaming wood floors that doubled as a basketball court.

"Is this what my father meant by doing it the hard way?" She moved across the room. Her graceful, long-legged athlete's body reminded him of a ballerina. She whirled to face him. Knees bent, hands lifted in a defensive mode.

"Yes. He figured if you wipe the floor with me, you don't need help."

She nodded and threw him an evil gleam, obviously pleased with the idea.

"First lesson in fighting vampires," he snapped. "Never stare deep into their eyes as you did mine. Mind control is a powerful weapon against humans. It can't touch a pure vampire, but it could be used to destroy a half-breed like you."

A faint blush crept up her neck and into her tanned, oval face. How vulnerable she looked at that moment. He fought the strange sexual pull of this witch, her unholy beauty. It was only natural that she would try to entrap him with vile potions and devil spells.

This mortal would be so easy to kill.

Why had Nathan insisted Logan test Bri then teach her to use her vampire powers? He couldn't understand the man. The way he'd snuck around for years to see Danielle. He'd ignored the basic precept that vampires don't bed witches.

The only good witch is a dead one.

If he hadn't promised Nathan...but he had. This was before Brianna Eaton had threatened to kill her father, he reminded himself.

Logan growled like an angry beast venting his frustration.

One heartbeat later, he crossed the room and lunged at her. Like lightning bolts, she punched and kicked him, her well-aimed superhuman blows striking hard against his right shoulder with jarring thuds. Excruciating pain tore through his body. His bones popped, crunched. A loud crack shot pain across his shoulder and down his arm. He moaned deep in his chest.

Dammit. The half-breed had broken his collarbone.

She jumped from his grasp.

He winced with every movement. It hurt like a hot poker burning a path along raw, exposed nerve endings. He grimaced and bit his lower lip to keep from crying out.

"Serves you right for attacking me," Bri taunted.

Don't pass out. How would he explain it to Nathan?

Logan's body accelerated the healing process. He maneuvered himself away from her, while his bones mended, fused.

Within minutes, the damage she'd inflicted on him had healed. He would never underestimate this enemy again.

"Like I said, I don't need your protection." Her voice dripped sarcasm.

Rage threatened to overwhelm him. "Believe me, I wish that were true. Second lesson in fighting vampires. A deadly one. Never wound one, and then allow him to recover. It pisses them off. Big time!"

Logan traversed the room at supersonic speed. Angered by her defiance and threats on Nathan's life, he leapt forward and seized her wrist, squeezing it tight. After spinning her full circle to gain momentum, he slammed her hard against the wall with a resounding thud. Air rushed from her lungs. His body pinned her in place with brute strength. She gasped and attempted to kick him. Face-to-face, she squirmed, pressing against him, fighting in vain to free herself.

"You aren't going anywhere, witch." His breathing became labored.

Her lush body rubbing against his sent heat roaring to his groin. He heard her heart pounding and blood swooshing through her arteries. Once again the hunger grew, but this time it was coupled with something unexpected, an almost overpowering need to seduce.

Canines extended, they hovered mere inches from her tempting skin.

She blinked, her face filled with confusion and fear.

Refusing to give into strong primal urges, he grabbed her throat with both hands and squeezed. Not to crush her windpipe as he would any inferior enemy, but to stop all breath. To force her into submission. To force her under his complete control.

He remembered how vulnerable Nathan had sounded. The sadness in his voice. *"If anyone could destroy me, Bri, it would be you, because I could not raise a hand to harm you, child."*

Logan would see her dead before he allowed that to happen.

"If you even *think* about killing Nathan, I'll forget my promise to protect you. I'll kill you myself." Logan smelled her fear, thick in the air.

He tightened his hold. Once her body grew limp, he released her.

She crumpled at his feet with a hard thud.

He stepped away from her, studying every reaction.

For minutes, she hacked out dry coughs and gasped, sucking in large gulps of air.

To his amazement, Bri struggled to her feet and stepped toward him. Hatred blazed like hot coals as she drew nearer and stopped within inches of him.

"Go to hell, Logan."

Her contempt slammed into him.

The tall beauty grimaced, bent low and resumed her fighting stance. He admired her courage in the face of death, but that would not stop him from destroying her.

"Understand me, Bri. You go after Nathan, I *will* kill you."

Every look, every movement shouted defiance.

His gaze riveted on her thick, purplish bruises.

He winced and mentally kicked himself.

As the imprints of his large hands faded, he fought the urge to enfold her in his arms and erase her memory of the pain.

What strange power did this witch have over him?

He could afford no mercy for this devil woman.

"Choose life or death. Now, witch!"

Chapter Two

I can't let you kill my daughter.

Nathan's ominous telepathic warning flew at Logan like a blizzard, instantly chilling his fury. He glanced at Bri and grimaced. How could he have been so stupid? He should have known Nathan would hang around the martial arts school to watch his daughter fight, assess her ability to defend herself.

Did Nathan think Logan disloyal? Consider him a traitor?

Would Nathan destroy him? Probably.

He grimaced as he waited, more concerned for Nathan, who was not only his leader but like a father to him.

Logan was in trouble either way he moved on this one. If he taught this witch everything she needed in order to survive, wouldn't she turn around and use it against her father? Would Nathan truly allow the witch to destroy him? Did he care so much for her even though she despised everything about him? It appeared that way.

She wants to kill you, Nathan.

I don't blame her. Let me worry about that. You promised to train my daughter and become a team. Do it. Help her understand our family, Logan. Stop this nonsense immediately.

Nonsense?

Logan glanced at Bri, who stood ready for battle, oblivious to her father's presence.

How do I diffuse this situation, Nathan?

You're asking me how to handle a woman? Use your imagination.

He heard Nathan chuckle and sensed he had left the building.

Wonderful! Okay, how are you going to pull your ass out of the fire, Romeo?

He closed his eyes and wracked his brain. This late in the game, he wouldn't dismiss any idea as too far-fetched.

Maybe he could make her doubt the veracity of what she believed about Nathan and her mother. If Logan succeeded, Bri should seek the truth; uncover the lies, for herself.

If he and the witch both died, had she stopped to think of the dire consequences to other people, especially the boy?

What if her actions ended up exposing them to the world, proving vampires exist? Wouldn't she feel responsible, want to keep this from happening?

He wondered how much Bri knew about herself. Not much, he'd bet. If he did eventually have to kill her, he needed to explore that area for himself, find out what strengths and weaknesses she possessed.

Know your enemy. That motto had served him well for centuries.

He smiled to himself as a plan unfolded in his mind. One any respectable, alpha male vampire would be proud of.

If all else failed, he'd scare the shit out of her.

Bri dropped her fighting stance and stared at Logan, puzzled.

What is that arrogant, pigheaded bloodsucker waiting for? Why are his eyes closed?

"You going to throw up?" she taunted.

He opened his piercing green eyes. "I'm trying to figure out if killing you right now is worth dying for."

She flinched at his threat and blinked, confused at his remarks. "I don't understand."

"If anything happens to you, Nathan will kill me."

She snorted at the absurd remark. "You're best friends. I'm nothing to my father."

"I wish that were true." Logan stepped closer and snarled down at her. "If it were, I'd rip your throat out and tear your body asunder without blinking."

A cold chill raced up and down her spine at his viciousness.

"You're kin. I'm not," he snapped. "With vampires, blood comes before friendship." He paused. "If we both die tonight, who's going to protect that little boy? What's his name?"

"Jason Blakely." Guilt tugged at her heart. How could she have forgotten about him? Would he be in danger because her blood coursed through his tiny veins?

What would happen to Megan? Dr. Reese? Her mother? Would this whole thing unravel? Who would defend them?

"Of course, I'm sure Nathan will assign someone," Logan said.

She frowned at the idea of depending on her father to defend what he would consider mere expendable mortals, common links on the food chain. Worry assailed her, quickly turning to fury. "That cold-blooded, sonofabitch wouldn't give my loved ones the time of day." An appalling thought hit her with force. "Now that he's back, who's going to keep him away from her mother?"

Logan quirked a brow, tilting his head to the side. "What if you're completely wrong about your father?"

"I'm not," she said with utter conviction. "My mother wouldn't lie to me."

"No?"

He folded his arms across his broad chest. His biceps rippled, drawing her attention to his hard muscled body. "Well, someone is sure as hell lying. I know one thing, for sure. Vampires can't father children, not in the usual way."

Bri stiffened her spine at the obvious lie he'd tossed her way. "Of course they can't. I was born in a cabbage patch."

He looked amused. "I never said we can't have sex." He smiled. "Wouldn't be any fun living without it."

That cocky smile of his made her wonder. What would it be like to throw caution aside, surrender and make love to a vampire? Just once to satisfy her curiosity, she assured herself. Purely a scientific experiment.

He laughed.

His amused eyes told her that he'd read her thoughts. She huffed out an indignant breath at the utter gall of this arrogant, conceited vampire.

"It's kind of a pity if you choose to die right now though. I mean, you're the only one of your species. In the entire world."

"That's impossible." She shook her head, unable to understand the sudden sadness, the deep sense of loneliness she suddenly felt. She couldn't be the only one.

"Yes, you are. I don't know how it came about, but Nathan had to have a lot of help to pull off that particular miracle. Maybe some kind of ritual."

"Liar!" Her head reeled at the unfounded accusations aimed at her mother. What he

had said was impossible. Her mother wouldn't disobey coven laws. "Why are you saying these horrible things? Surely there are others like me. Vampires *can* breed. My mother was raped. What reason would she have for lying to me?"

He shrugged. "If you had gone with Nathan, I think you'd have found out the truth tonight—about everything."

"I already know the truth. After this is over, I'll confront my parents and force my father to admit every despicable act he did."

Logan paused, a look of sadness on his face. "Even if I let you live, it doesn't matter. I'm dead. So are you."

"Really? What made you say that?"

"How can I teach you the arsenal of weapons available at your fingertips, if you don't trust me? How can we work as a team, watch each other's back, if you don't trust me? How can we survive, if you don't trust me? Don't you understand? You opened Pandora's Box when you donated blood. Do you think you're the only vampire that might be exposed? Everyone, everything we love will be destroyed, unless we stop it."

She chewed her bottom lip. How could she trust this vampire? Fear clawed her insides. Did she have a choice? He was right. Innocent lives would be lost. She needed to take a chance, drop her defenses with him. Besides, if Logan kept his word, it was a win-win for her. Witchcraft coupled with every vampire weapon she could master would increase her chances of destroying her father. And if she had to—Logan.

"Do you honestly think we can stop them?" she asked.

"We can try."

"Okay, I want to do this." She nodded. "I trust you." The words tumbled out, but in her heart she wasn't sure she would ever trust him.

"Do you?" His lips tightened into a suspicious line, like he didn't believe her.

"Yes."

"Why don't we put it to a test?" Logan tugged his shirt over his head, dropping it onto the hardwood floor. He stuck his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting undressed." He opened the snap and unzipped his fly.

"You plan on raping me?"

"What?" His mouth dropped open. "Me? Damn. Your mother really did a number on you. All vampires aren't rapists, or murderers. We have good and bad in our species."

"Let me guess. You're one of the good guys?"

"Hell, yes."

She crossed her arms and glared at him in disbelief. "You hate witches, so excuse me if I call you a liar."

He pulled off his jeans and briefs with one swift motion and kicked them aside.

Lord have mercy, he was buck-naked. Beautifully, dangerously standing before her in the buff. Her heart thudded with excitement. She tried not to stare at him, not to study every bare inch of his tempting flesh, but it was no use. Her willing eyes devoured every bit of him. From the smug look on his face, he knew it. He straightened to his full height, letting her eyes drink their fill, exceedingly proud of his manhood.

"Third lesson in fighting vampires. Shapeshifting requires complete nudity."

Shapeshifting? Well, that brought her to her senses fast.

"You can change into some kind of animal?"

He nodded.

"By simply concentrating on the creature's form then within seconds, shapeshifting. I'm going to show you the most vicious, killing machine you'll encounter among our species. One that automatically goes for the throat."

She gasped.

A look of concern flittered across his face. "Don't be afraid. This is what you must learn to become, Bri. I will not harm you. I can control the beast I become."

"Can you?" she asked, unable to keep the doubt from her voice.

"Yes, completely. I'll shapeshift to the beast and later return to my original form."

He moved nearer to her.

"Do you trust me?"

Her heartbeat pounded like water rushing in her ears. Her arms shook. What if he was lying, tricking her into letting her guard down so he could attack? She considered using her power to control time, maneuver behind him without detection. She'd successfully used it on humans. Would it work on Logan? She remembered the bad side effects afterwards, which would leave her vulnerable for a while, and dismissed the idea as far too dangerous. If he attacked, she needed all her strength to go one-on-one with him.

"Do you trust me?" he repeated.

She stilled her trembling body. Tamping down emotions, including her intense hatred of him, in order to gain the knowledge she needed. "Yes. I trust you. I trust you. I trust you," she kept muttering under her breath. The words were her only ties to sanity.

He suddenly hunched down on all fours like a wild beast. His body twisted, contorted. Bones popped, dislocated themselves.

He didn't scream in agony, though the process must have been excruciating.

Enthralled by the miracle of the transformation occurring before her, Bri studied each change Logan's body made.

His nose, limbs and hair grew. They became elongated.

Later, he lifted his head and howled.

Bri felt her heart beating an uneven tempo, one of fear as she came face-to-face with the frightening creature he had become.

Canis lupus. Wolf.

His evil yellow eyes gleamed, turning blood red. He sniffed the air as if catching her scent. Black and gray hair bristling, teeth bared, he moved noiselessly toward his prey.

"I trust you," she whispered, ordering herself to stand her ground, not to run.

Suddenly – instead of striking, tearing her throat out, he stopped.

She remembered Logan's words. "*This is what you must learn to become, Bri.*"

Nathan stood beside the king-size bed and stared in awe at Danielle. How sound his love slept. Her shoulder-length black hair fanned across her pillow, short, wispy curls hugged her fair cheeks. Even though fifteen years had passed since he'd seen her this close, he was utterly enthralled by the sight of her. How perfect she looked. The way moonlight stole into her bedroom, fingered her tempting form and kissed a face more beautiful and regal than

Helen of Troy.

He bent, blew a warm puff of air against her soft neck and whispered, "Beloved."

To his utter amazement and delight, *still sound asleep*, she sighed his name and almost drove him wild with the need to seduce and possess her. As if their time apart had never existed, she lifted her inviting arms from the covers and reached for him.

Not yet. They needed to talk, hash things out about Bri.

He straightened, avoided Danielle's grasp and studied the sensuous expression she wore while she slept. It reminded him of the first time they'd made love, when she was barely eighteen. The years he'd secreted her away for exquisite nights of passion to hide their relationship from the prying world.

It pained him that he'd been forced to watch Bri grow up from a distance; often through letters and pictures sent to him by Danielle. She had turned twenty-eight when they'd decided it was far too dangerous for them to chance meeting again, or for him to come near his child.

That's when the witches' warnings surfaced again, stronger than ever, about sexual relations between a witch and vampire and the ominous threat of The Legend.

Their forbidden love affair had ended.

"Nathan," she whispered in her sleep, arching upward.

She wouldn't let him change her, become one with him, but he could no more stop himself from loving this witch than he could still his own heartbeat forever.

Not even when she betrayed him. Then — and now.

"Nathan, darling." Her voice sounded low, husky as she slept. "Love me."

He smiled, wondering how often she'd dreamed of making love to him. Not as often as he'd dreamed of claiming her sweet body, he'd bet. The offer was more than tempting. But right now he wanted to swat that lovely backside of hers.

His heart grew heavy. Why couldn't she love him enough to let him change her?

This should wake her.

"I came to rape you."

Her navy-blue eyes flew open wide. She jackknifed to a sitting position and leaned against the headboard, a guilty expression on her face. "I should have told you about the terrible lies, but I thought you would hate me." Tears filled her eyes.

"So you decided if you waited, told me in person, you could twist me around your little finger."

She nibbled that sexy mouth of hers.

He sat on the bed and cradled her against him, amazed at how right she felt in his embrace. *This is where she belongs. Forever.* "Next time you send a message to me saying Bri's in serious trouble, don't leave anything out, okay?"

She sniffled as she nodded. "I've made such a terrible mess of both our lives, Nathan. All the stupid lies to hide Bri's heritage from the world. We sacrificed our love to protect our daughter. For what? In one day, she's put herself in harm's way. I should have told her everything. Maybe this wouldn't have happened, but..."

As she sobbed her heart out, he kissed the top of her head and massaged the tension in her back. He understood this woman better than he understood himself. With all her mixed up, crazy logic, he still loved every atom of her being. Always would.

"You were afraid Bri would hate you, if you told her the truth." Nathan knew Danielle

had gone against her own people by loving him. Eventually, she'd done the unforgivable in order to have a baby by him.

"Here." He withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

While she noisily blew her nose and composed herself, he moved away. He steeled himself for their inevitable fight, one he had no intention of avoiding. Cautiously, he eased into it by telling her about his meeting with Bri, careful to omit any details about Logan.

"I can't believe Bri actually threatened to kill you."

"Really?" He clenched his teeth until his jaw ached. Anger seethed deep within him. "I don't suppose the real reason I left ever came up over the years. The fact that I left out of love, to protect you and Bri. Leaving the two of you was the hardest thing I ever did."

She avoided his gaze.

"You taught Bri everything she knows about her blood-sucking family. I'm a heartless, soulless creature without feelings. A vile rapist, who has raped her mother for years. Can you blame Bri for wishing me dead?"

Anger flashed across her face, along with something he never expected. Fear. Fear of him. That realization almost brought him to his knees.

"God, Danielle. I have a right to be mad. You betrayed me. Honestly, I'd like to wring your beautiful neck, but how could you even *think* I'd physically harm you?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. All I do is hurt you and, honest to God, the last thing I wanted to do was hurt you. I had to protect Bri. I don't want her to turn out like me."

He exhaled a deep breath, feeling like she'd delivered a mortal wound to his heart. One far more deadly than a stake, striking him deep within his soul. Finally, she admitted what he'd suspected. The real reason she'd turned Bri against her father and her own people.

"You don't want Bri to fall in love with a vampire. Maybe choose a different path. She might decide to stop being a witch. Turn pure vampire—like me." He touched Danielle's cheek, caressing baby soft skin. "Would joining our family be so bad?"

"One of the undead? Yes. She wouldn't be human, or a witch, like her ancestors."

None of this made sense to him. He spoke the obvious, hoping Danielle would listen to reason. "Bri is my child, part vampire. She isn't completely human. What will happen when your friendly, neighborhood coven gets wind of her DNA?"

Danielle's blue eyes widened.

"They aren't stupid. The truth will come out." He threw up his hands in defeat. How could he reach her? "Bri started a ball rolling that can't be stopped. What will your people do when they find out you broke their laws? Misused witchcraft to get pregnant with my child?"

Her body trembled.

"Beloved." He enveloped her in his protective arms. "As long as I live, I would never let them harm you, or our daughter. I'm sorry loving me has come to this, but I'll never regret our time together. Or your having Bri."

"Even though I tricked you, in order to get pregnant?"

"I understood why, the depth of your love." He kissed her lips, lingering for a taste of their sweetness. "I told Bri I wouldn't guard you myself." He chuckled. "Our daughter will have my hide if she finds us together, particularly like this. I got her to agree you need a protector, so I've assigned young Matt Griffin."

She nodded. "Who did you assign to Bri?"

Dread shot through him. He should have seen that question coming. Would she discern the *real reason* he'd chosen Logan? She didn't know anything about him, except he was Nathan's best friend. He didn't want to answer, but he had never lied to her. "Logan."

Her head lifted, her gaze speared his. "He hates witches."

"Almost as much as he loves and respects me. He doesn't know everything, but he knows Bri is our daughter. Our secret is safe with him."

She opened her mouth to speak but closed it.

"My decision is final. It isn't open to debate, Danielle. I'm not sure how many will come against Bri, but they're coming. It's only a matter of when. Logan will serve as both her protector and teacher. They'll become a team. If she's to survive, she has to learn to use *all* her powers. Witch *and* vampire."

"I know," she whispered, her chin quivering. "I don't want to think about it. Help me forget about everything but you and me tonight."

She caressed his chest with her fingertips at first, placing a kiss on his neck. Her warm breath against his skin made him grow harder. She unbuttoned the buttons slowly, one at a time, reached inside his shirt and fingered the hairs on his chest.

He glanced at her nipples, pebbled against her sheer nightgown. He ached to be buried deep inside her. "If you ever need me, use mental telepathy. I'll find you, Beloved."

"Can you read my mind now?" She rubbed her sweet body against his erection.

He chuckled deep in his throat. "Loud and clear." He stood and glanced down at her. "I intend to divest myself of these clothes fast. If you have any qualms about seeing me naked after all these years, cover those gorgeous eyes of yours."

The little vixen sat up, snatched her gown over her head and threw it across the room. Her gaze was glued in his direction. "I've dreamed a long time about a night like this."

He groaned at the sensual picture her naked breasts made for him. Breasts he ached to touch. Taste. His fingers became all thumbs as he removed his shoes and socks, pulled his pants down and laid them across the back of a nearby chair. He took off his tie, getting rid of it, along with his shirt and coat. Then he hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his briefs and froze.

Her tongue darted out. The brazen vixen licked her lips in an open invitation to him.

He peeled his briefs off and lowered himself onto the bed.

Her fingers whispered across his shoulders, down his chest then stilled. She glanced up at him, her eyes clouded with sadness. "You're still thirty-two, Nathan, beautiful, like a Greek god. I don't have the same, young body. I'm forty-three now."

He pulled her against him, desperate to keep her with him forever, and then squeezed his eyes shut. He'd been thirty-two for centuries. One day she'll be fifty, sixty...until the inevitable stabbed him. He'd stand over her grave and say goodbye to his Beloved. The hell of loneliness would begin and never end.

A shudder of dread ran through his body. He blinked tears away.

His painful thoughts lead him to never give up hope he could convince her to agree to the change, before it was too late for both of them. He was determined to stay near her this time, teach her his ways, until he'd made Danielle his, in every sense of the word. For eternity.

He almost sighed with relief as a plan unfolded. The only sure way to protect Danielle was to transport her to his home, built like a fortress. Matt Griffin could guard her much

better there than here. She'd be safe, where she belonged, with Nathan. He would stay with her tonight. When she fell asleep, he would execute his plan. Faster than she could whisper his name, she would find herself sequestered away from any harm.

She trembled in his arms.

Opening his eyes, he breathed deeply, inhaling the tropical, ginger scent of her perfume mixed with her musky arousal. "You're still the most beautiful, precious thing in my life."

He eased his fingers into the elastic band of her sheer panties, inched them down and carefully removed them. His penis throbbed for the joining he'd denied himself all these years. He sat back and enjoyed the sweet view of her, knowing she was his again. Unable to resist, he bent and kissed the soft tuft of dark hair, licking her vagina then the nub of her clit.

She gasped and called his name.

"I could give you an instant orgasm, sweetheart. Unlike any you've ever had." He lifted his head and watched her.

Sitting up on the bed, she glared at him. "Nathan Wellman, don't you dare bite me down there."

He laughed so hard it brought tears to his eyes. It had been so long since he'd had any joy in his life. "I wouldn't dream of it. I was thinking of biting you right here." He slid his palm up the inside of her leg, fingering the spot where an artery pulsed.

She shook her head and wore that sassy, defiant look he knew so well. "Let me put it this way, Nathan Wellman. If you want anything from me tonight, those fangs of yours better stay sheathed. Got it?"

He chuckled. "Got it."

Moving up beside her, he took her in his arms and kissed her warm, responsive lips then her earlobe, raking across it with his teeth, pulling gently. "Beloved," he whispered.

Her body shuddered against him.

His warm tongue rasped her throat, across her breast, licking her extended nipple. Taking it into his mouth, he sucked greedily and teased the bud with his tongue and teeth.

She moaned.

"God, you taste good. I wouldn't want to neglect the other one." He grabbed each nipple with his thumb and forefinger, squeezing and rubbing them back and forth.

"That feels so good, Nathan. It's been too long. Please..."

"Please what?" He wanted her to say it.

"Come inside me, where you belong."

His body celebrated the words he'd longed to hear. Heat surged through him and he grew harder. He parted her thighs and groaned when she opened her legs wide, eager to receive him.

"I don't want to hurt you." His fingers caressed and teased her. He slid two fingers deep inside her soaking wet entrance, testing her readiness.

She moaned when he took his fingers out, his thumb rubbing back and forth on her clit.

He knelt between her legs, draping her thighs over his.

"You belong to me, Danielle. Only me." He slid his hands beneath her hips and tilted them toward him. He breathed in the deep musk between her legs.

"Yes," she whispered, her voice husky with desire. She scraped her fingernails down his back and over his buttocks as he guided his erection into her.

Not wanting to hurt her, he moved slowly. The effort made the muscles in his arms quiver as he took her inch by inch.

Danielle thought she would die from the pleasure of his stretching, filling her. His slow slide was sweet torture. It sent a ripple of anticipation through her body. Her breath grew ragged. The core of her ached for him—all of him. She arched her hips higher, wiggled and drove his shaft deeper. “It feels so good. Stay right there. Don’t move.”

Nathan stilled.

He glanced down at her with a mischievous grin. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Fully hilted, he rocked his hips a little. “Positive?”

She whimpered from the pleasure, unable to stop the ripple of need that grew like a quake when he moved. “No.”

He chuckled. “That’s what I thought.”

His thrusts were long. Hard. Mindless need drove her as he filled her. She could think of nothing but the feel of him as the muscles within her passage tightened, caressing the full length of him. As he slid in and out, need coiled tightly inside her. She met every stroke with an unrestrained, frenzied move of her own, reaching for exquisite release. It made her breathless. He quickened the pace, pounding into her. Deeper. His hips ground against her, bringing her to a shattering climax. She moaned his name amidst endless waves of pleasure.

He gently tweaked her nipples, before cupping them and running his thumbs back and forth across the tips, gently scraping them. She arched in his arms. Her womb contracted, squeezing him. While the second orgasm was building, he looked down at her lovingly, hungrily. He murmured her name before capturing her mouth in a slow openmouthed kiss. His tongue teased hers until she shuddered with need. They climaxed together and clung to each other, sated, delirious; savoring the intimacy they had long denied each other.

Danielle caressed his beautiful face. She refused to think about what Nathan had planned for her. He forgot she could read his mind and block him with telepathic shields from reading hers. No way would she allow him to transport her to his house, not even for her own safety.

“Go to sleep, sweetheart.” His large hands moved slowly in a lethargic circular motion, soothing the tense muscles in her back.

She yawned, sorely tempted to follow his command, until she thought about Bri. Their daughter would jump to only one logical conclusion. Her mother had been kidnapped by her rapist father. Instead of fighting the real enemy, Bri would foolishly waste precious time and strength trying to rescue her mother and kill her father. Her daughter might die, if her mind was diverted from the real threats.

Danielle freed herself from his arms and jumped from the bed.

“I have no intention of going to sleep so you can transport me, Nathan.”

She shot across the room and lifted her hands overhead.

Nathan stared at her with pleading eyes. “Don’t.”

With outstretched arms, she spoke the spell, “Come, powers of the land and sea. Come to the aid of your sister I plead. Hearken ye unto me. Form a circle of protection against all who would remove me from thee.”

A wall of bright light encircled her, bathing her naked body.

With the speed of a bullet, Nathan stood before her.

He reached toward the force. A strong bolt of electricity arched. It entered his fingertips, knocking him to the floor.

With little effort, he quickly arose to an upright position. "I can protect you better at my home. Please, come with me."

"Don't fight me, Nathan," she warned.

He stepped forward. "You would never seriously harm me."

Tears burned her eyes. "I love you, Nathan. I always will, but don't ask me to desert our daughter when she needs me the most."

"I won't let anything happen to either of you. Don't you know that, Danielle?"

She nodded, her heart breaking. "I know," she whispered, her voice quivering.

"Then why won't you come with me?"

"You can't expect me to hide like some coward while our daughter faces God knows what. I won't let you tie my hands when I could help her, too."

A look of deep anguish covered his face. "But you might die, Danielle."

"If that's what it takes to save Bri, so be it!"

Chapter Three

"Bri!" Logan yelled.

At the sound of his voice, Bri's mouth dropped open. Her hand trembled as she fingered the badge on her nurse's uniform, turned and saw Dr. Reese and Logan walking down the hospital corridor like fraternity brothers.

How in the world did these two meet? When? She couldn't have been more surprised if an elephant had crashed through the roof of St. Francis Hospital this Tuesday morning and landed in the lobby's marble water fountain.

With each step they took, every muscle in her body tensed.

Logan's shimmering icy blue tie snagged her attention, along with his navy trousers and blazer. He smiled slightly and the dimple in his right cheek deepened. She searched his handsome face for one flaw, something to turn off the unwanted sensual pull she felt for this vampire, but found none. The closer he came, the more uneasy she grew.

A nurse intercepted Dr. Reese, wanting his signature, so Logan reached Bri first. He leaned and whispered in her ear, "You already proved you trust me. Don't blow it now."

She shivered as his warm breath feathered against her neck, carrying a hint of wild mint. "You're pushing it. Last night you pulled a vanishing act like my father. This morning you strut into the hospital with Dr. Reese like it was an everyday occurrence."

"Something urgent came up. If I thought you were in danger, I would have stayed," he said matter-of-factly.

Dr. Reese stopped in front of them. "It was my fault Logan left."

Her heart dropped to her stomach. "You know about him?" She glanced back and forth from Dr. Reese to Logan. "Did someone forget to include me in the information loop?"

"Everything happened too fast, Bri," Dr. Reese said. "I called Danielle about the danger. Matt Griffin, her protector, filled me in on Logan." Even though Dr. Reese sounded like a man who had the situation under control, Bri heard the uncertainty in his voice. "Later, we met at your mother's house and developed an action plan to counteract their moves."

Danger? Action plan? To counteract whose moves? She had called to check on her mother around nine last night. She didn't say a damned thing about any of this.

"When did you meet at my mother's house?"

Dr. Reese looked puzzled. "Around midnight."

"Excuse me. All this happened while I slept?" She released a frustrated breath.

Logan opened his mouth, but Dr. Reese raised his hand. "I'll take the heat for this one, son. After the day from hell, as your physician I decided you needed rest far more than we needed your invaluable input."

"But..." She resented being treated like a child, but she had slept like the dead last night from sheer exhaustion.

"Bri, trust us to work in your best interest," Logan said.

She was going to tell him exactly where to shove that be-a-nice-little-girl-patronizing routine.

Logan gave her a disarming grin.

Dr. Reese grasped one of her elbows. Logan clamped a firm hand on the other. She was enveloped by fatherly admiration on one side and a bad case of lust on the other as they

led her up the long, tiled corridor.

She didn't know which scared her the most. The black and gray wolf he had shapeshifted into last night, 'the killing machine', or the devastatingly gorgeous vampire holding onto her now. *Aren't they both killing machines?* She inhaled his intoxicating scent, which spun a web of desire around her, acting like an aphrodisiac. No wonder women fall helplessly under his spell, offer their throats to him. He seduces them and makes them willing victims.

Her feelings for him made her cling to the deep hatred Logan felt for her, like a welcomed lifejacket, keeping her from diving into him and drowning, losing herself forever.

"Okay, fill me in. What danger? What are you talking about?"

"You'll learn soon enough." Logan pulled her nearer, picking up the pace.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"A meeting. I'm working undercover to protect us. Play along. I'll fill you in later." He steered her toward one of the large conference rooms, with Dr. Reese close on their heels.

Shouldn't Logan be asleep in some coffin? How'd he get here in the daylight? Bri wondered. Why wasn't he toast?

Coffin? What century are you in? You watch too many inaccurate, scary movies.

Startled, Bri jumped as Logan projected his thoughts into her mind. He patted her arm and gave her a reassuring smile. How could anyone resist that sinful, heart-stopping smile? *Well, you better. You'll be working with him.* She gnawed her bottom lip, vexed with herself for being physically attracted to a vampire, who was not only her father's best friend, but had threatened to kill her.

I'm not immune to the sun. Extended exposure can cause my death. While Dr. Reese drove, I hid under a thick blanket.

Okay, how did you get from the car to inside St. Francis?

The parking lot is underground.

Are you suicidal? You aren't underground now. Don't you think someone might notice if you spontaneously burst into flames?

Relax. Dr. Reese and I checked out the building last night. There's a heavy plastic film on the windowpanes that filters out ultra-violet rays, in addition the windows have lined drapes. As long as I don't get direct sunlight for an extended period, I'll be fine.

I still can't believe Dr. Reese knows about you.

"Later." Logan paused, his hand on the doorknob. "Brace yourself, Bri."

At the sound of his ominous words, her heartbeat did a fast trot. She willed herself to put on a cool façade, her protective shield of indifference firmly in place as the door opened.

An astute looking, middle-aged man wearing a drab gray suit looked up from a burgundy leather bound book, removed his glasses and set them on the table.

"Col. Taylor, these are the two people I told you about yesterday," Dr. Reese said as they walked into the conference room. "Nurse Brianna Eaton and Logan Vance, the head of hospital security. They'll be happy to assist you while you're here."

Head of security? Since when? Courtesy of Dr. Reese, she would bet. How in the world could Logan pull this off?

The phony background's already in place, in case anyone checks. Go along with it, Bri.

She tamped down the nagging fear that Col. Taylor would discover the lie.

"Colonel." When she offered him her hand, he glanced at it and promptly ignored the

gesture. Well, she wouldn't make that stupid mistake again, she thought, dropping her hand. Maybe she should have saluted him instead.

"Have a seat. Let's shortcut the introductions. We have a lot to cover." He motioned to the green leather chairs directly across from him. "Take notes. I'll only say this once."

He studied them like opponents in a chess game, while they took their seats at the long mahogany table. Each of them grabbed a tablet and pen from the supply in front of them, poised to do exactly as he'd ordered.

"I'm Col. Oliver Taylor head of the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, or the AMRIID."

He paused, waiting for them to finish writing.

"Infectious diseases?" Bri glanced up, frowning at the implication. St. Francis had one of the most thorough post-op care programs around. They prided themselves on quickly identifying even the slightest problem a patient might have experienced. "We don't have any in this hospital."

"Don't you?" He threw a harsh glance her way, like she'd turned into an annoying mosquito. One he would splat. "Then it won't take long to rule out that possibility."

They aren't looking for infectious diseases. Bri lowered her brows.

Of course not. That's a ruse. They're here because of the boy you saved.

Col. Taylor snatched papers from a thick folder, including a large gray envelope and handed them to Logan. She couldn't help noticing the envelope and the Colonel's suit were the same ordinary shade of gray. Yet there was nothing ordinary about his steely gaze or the goose pimples riding her flesh.

"This is a list of Army personnel assigned to the investigation, including myself. The envelope contains headshots of each of those individuals."

Logan glanced inside. "What exactly *are* you investigating?"

"To avoid any misunderstanding of our mission, I'll spell it out." Col. Taylor paused as if weighing his words very carefully. "It was reported that a patient, six-year-old Jason Blakely, survived injuries from a car wreck by performing some rather remarkable feats. It made me curious, so here we are."

"I'm confused, Colonel." Logan rubbed his chin with his hand. "How does what you described fall under your jurisdiction? Doesn't the AMRIID investigate suspicious deaths, not survivals? The little boy's recovery, however miraculous, doesn't seem like something that would prompt a huge team looking for something like infectious diseases."

"We're in the business of hunting answers to questions, through the use of research. If you came into the hospital and suddenly grew two heads, whether you survived or died wouldn't be the crux of our investigation. The research community wouldn't rest until they found out *how* this abnormality had occurred. We have an obligation to the public to check it out. If the report that came to our office is true, this boy did something equally as bazaar. Like I said, it made me curious."

"Who reported it?" Bri asked.

His lips formed a faint smile, one a cat might give a mouse before he swallowed the creature he'd tormented for hours, while it was still alive. Cold, deadly eyes speared Bri, who refused to cower and look away under his blatant intimidation.

"I'm going to let your question slide. Chalk it up to you being nosy, which should be

avoided around me, understood?"

"I can assure you, our staff will help in any way they can," Dr. Reese said, in an obvious attempt to change the subject. He threw a nervous look at Bri.

"I'd like Nurse Eaton to answer my previous question." Col. Taylor pushed away from the table. He glared at her as if he held her under his thumb and enjoyed watching her squirm. "Do you understand?"

When she said nothing, Logan gave her a quick glance, like she'd lost what little sense she had. *What happened to your cool façade? Pretend you have to mind this contemptuous ass.*

No. Why is Col. Taylor making such a big deal about this? He didn't act this way when you asked questions. What if it isn't about my questioning him? What if he thinks women are weak? What if he's testing to see if I fall in that category, so he can boot me off the team?

Maybe. Find out.

Bri looked Col. Taylor square in the eyes without batting a lash. "I don't think you'd work with someone without a backbone, Colonel. I'm respectfully telling you that I understand completely, but I'm bound to irritate the hell out of you occasionally, because you're right, I'm damn nosy."

The piercing way he stared at her for several moments made her wonder if she'd been wrong. It seemed as though he were studying her reaction to him, and then he threw back his head and laughed. "You have guts. I'll give you credit for that. Dr. Reese said you were tough, but I didn't believe him."

A look of triumph flittered across Logan's face. *Nice going, partner!*

"Now, since we want to avoid the press getting wind of anything, civilian clothing will be the uniform of the day at all times. My staff and I need badges that identify us as hospital employees so we blend in with everyone. At the same time, it should allow easy identification by those who need to know at a glance that an individual works for the AMRIID." His gaze shifted to Logan. "We're to have complete clearance to every area of the hospital. Can you arrange that?"

Logan leaned back in his chair and nodded. "No problem."

Bri turned toward Logan. He exuded a cocky, instant air of confidence, which matched Col. Taylor's brisk, I'm-in-charge-and-don't-you-ever-forget-it attitude.

"I'll put a unique color-coded strip on them. To everyone else it'll look like a sensitivity patch to measure any possible exposure to dangerous agents in the labs."

"That'll work." He lifted his chin. "Carry it out," he snapped.

Logan held up the envelope Col. Taylor had given him with the photos to use on the badges. "How many are in here?"

"Twenty."

Bri almost dropped her pen. *Twenty surgeons, researchers?*

Not likely. My guess is he's expecting trouble. Most of them are probably combat soldiers on standby. I'll check the names out.

"When do you need them?"

"In four hours the first five of our team will arrive. I'd like them to distribute the badges as the remaining groups filter into the hospital."

"It's doable. What else?"

Col. Taylor snorted. "For starters, a list of anyone who had contact with Jason Blakely

from the time of the accident, which would include EMS, OR staff and family. I also want to know how to contact them, including addresses."

Bri shoved her trembling hands under the table. "I can provide those details."

"I understand from Dr. Reese that you and the boy's mother are best friends." Col. Taylor looked right at her as if he was accusing her of being directly involved in the catastrophe surrounding the boy, which she tried to put down to her overactive imagination. But it wasn't working. She couldn't shake the nagging feeling he knew.

"Yes, we grew up in the same neighborhood. We went to nursing school together."

"Good, that'll come in handy."

Handy? How? She nibbled the corner of her mouth.

Logan nudged her foot under the table none too gently. She fought the urge to jump up and kick him back equally hard.

Don't ask! Be a good, little team player.

Kiss my ass.

He moved, his knee coming dangerously close to hers. Her breath caught. Damn, she hated this sexual pull she felt when he was around. She turned her head and found him studying her with an intensity that threw her, until she forced her attention away from him.

Without explaining the offhand remark, Col. Taylor said, "I need a secured section of the hospital for us to work in, a couple of conference rooms and a sizeable area in the lab. Special equipment will arrive tonight. If you have a private entrance we might use, that would be great. Just show us where to set it up, we'll do the rest."

"I'll take care of finding the temporary space," Dr. Reese said, scrawling notes across his tablet. "That shouldn't be a problem."

"Everything should be in place and fully operational late tonight. I'll schedule appointments starting tomorrow to interview the staff, those you've identified as having direct contact with the boy, to find out what they know. Late tomorrow afternoon, I want to talk to them as a group about the seriousness of leaking information to the press. Anyone who does so will be arrested, interrogated and face Federal charges. Withholding information, impeding this investigation in any way will not be tolerated. Understood?"

He speared them with an accusing look, like they'd already broken the law.

They glanced at each other, sharing a common uneasiness before nodding.

Bri studied the list she'd written down. "Anything else?"

"I want two independent, verifiable sources of everything that happened to the boy from the time he set foot in this hospital. All medical charts, lab work done prior to surgery, every scrap of paper concerning this patient will be turned over to me, including a list of donors who supplied blood. How many are we dealing with?"

When she wrote 'Donors' and 'Blood', Bri thought she would faint. Her breath grew shallow. *Don't hyperventilate.* It felt like someone had sucked the oxygen from the room.

The man is fishing, she reminded herself. *Calm down! Don't panic.* She forced herself to take deep, slow breaths. He doesn't know a thing.

Yet!

"We had six donors. Some of the initial blood came from the blood bank, but they can trace who donated it. I'll start gathering the information you need," Dr. Reese said, his face pale as he continued writing.

"That's it for now." Col. Taylor glanced at Logan with contempt, like he was beneath him. "You may join me for lunch at Red Lobster to hash out security issues."

Lunch? Outside? In the sun? Bri swallowed hard. Her heart skipped a beat.

Logan stood, not a hint of alarm. "Some other time."

Bri admired his strength in the face of danger, the way he handled himself.

Logan gave him a half smile, like one holding the winning hand at a stud poker game. "We already have keypad entry and surveillance cameras in the labs and work areas. That's pretty standard in hospitals. After you get settled in, Colonel, I'll be glad to drop by the lab, see if you need any areas upgraded."

"It won't be necessary for you to go inside the lab," he snapped. "If we require changes, I'll contact you in your office."

Logan held up the envelope. "Right now, I need to work on the badges."

Col. Taylor nodded. "Get them done."

Dr. Reese and Bri stood, joining Logan. They walked toward the door, leaving the Colonel alone at the table.

"By the way..."

Col. Taylor's voice made her body snap to attention. The instant Bri turned she saw the malevolence in his face, his eyes. Predator's eyes. Evil reached and wrapped itself around her like an oppressive, dark cloak.

Why did she feel he was springing a trap?

"Dr. Reese assured me his entire staff would cooperate in every minute detail." He hesitated. "We'll see. Until this investigation is over, Jason Blakely is under the direct care of the AMRIID. No one will be allowed to see him or communicate with him without my permission."

It felt like he'd kicked her in the teeth.

Jason is his prisoner.

Her hands grew cold, clammy. She dismissed the unthinkable. Her mind whirled with questions, one after another pelted her, each more painful than the last.

Why couldn't Megan demand Jason's immediate release and take him from the hospital? Bri already knew the answer. This monster won't allow Jason to leave. Whether Col. Taylor's powers extended that far or not, it would be very dangerous for anyone to test him, especially Megan. *How could she protect her? Will she let us handle this?*

What if the Army decided to wisp Jason away? *We might never find him again.*

Leave it alone, Bri. You're not rational when it concerns the boy.

I owe it to his mother to find out.

Who's his mother, Bri?

That's a stupid question. Megan is his mother.

Is she?

What? Bri shook the confusion from her mind. Frustration and a feeling of utter helplessness she couldn't ignore made her direct one burning question at Col. Taylor. "There's nothing wrong with Jason. When can he go home?"

He snorted, in an irritating way that was beginning to get on her nerves. "That's premature. We've barely started the investigation."

Bri clenched her teeth, anger gnawing at her. The kind that would make her do

something stupid, act first and think last, if she didn't get a firm handle on it fast.

"He's a little boy," Bri pleaded, hoping this man would listen to reason. "He'll be scared, want his mother with him. Can you fix up a cot, let Megan stay in the room with him?"

"I haven't said I'd allow his mother in, have I?" He sneered at Bri.

"Jason won't understand why she isn't there." Bri waited for Col. Taylor to show one ounce of compassion, instead, cold predator indifference glared at her.

"That's *my* problem, Nurse Eaton, not yours. I assure you the matter is under control. Once I find out what happened and how, I'll make a determination."

Make a determination?

She fisted her hand, holding churning emotions in tight check. For the first time, her primitive vampire side fought for dominance. How long before, like Dr. Jekyll, this Mr. Hyde personality took control? Once unleashed, taught to fight and kill with deadly vampire efficiency, could it ever be controlled by her human side again?

Bri glanced at Logan, whose face mirrored the anger she held deep inside. A fierce, deadly light flashed in his eyes.

The horrible realization must have hit both of them at the same time.

Oh my God, Logan. This monster has no intention of ever letting Jason go, does he?

Logan shook his head.

"You look worried, Colonel."

Oliver glanced at Lt. Nash, who was Army from his crew cut to his spit shined shoes. He stood in the doorway of the conference room, hero worship beaming at him. "More puzzled about getting to the bottom of the boy's recovery than worried."

"How so, sir?"

"The usual. I know some things about this case already. Others I feel, but can't quite wrap my arms around."

Lt. Nash nodded. He straightened the knot on his gray and white necktie. "You'll figure it out, sir. You always do."

He smiled a little at the total confidence this young Lieutenant had in him.

"Everything's set up, like you ordered, sir. We received a sample of Blakely's blood, taken before surgery. The labs running tests on it."

"Excellent." Oliver ran his fingers back and forth across the coarse stubble on his chin. "The boy's mother asked to see her son four times today. I denied her access, of course, but we'd better keep her under surveillance, just in case."

"Will do, Colonel."

"She threatened to hire an attorney. If she makes one move to carry that out, place her under military arrest and bring her to me."

"I'll see your orders are carried out, sir."

He remembered questioning Nurse Megan Blakely, who would make a very bad poker player. She couldn't lie worth a damn. She knew what happened to her son. He could feel it clear to his bones. Concealing information during a military investigation was a very serious charge. Right now he wanted information more than an arrest. But how to get it out of her? That was a delicate question, one that needed careful thought. He smiled. She would make a

good pawn, one that might prove useful as leverage later in the game.

Acid churned in his stomach as he glanced at the stack of papers he'd been studying for hours. He suspected someone on the hospital staff was involved with whatever happened to the boy. Who? How? Why? He hadn't the foggiest idea. It was like a piece of the giant puzzle he knew fit, made perfect sense, but he couldn't see it clearly right now – but he would.

He grabbed a sheet of paper containing the names, positions and addresses of Dr. Reese, Logan Vance and Nurse Brianna Eaton and handed it to Lt. Nash. "These are the members of the hospital staff assisting us. Run a complete background check on them immediately."

"Got it covered, sir." He took the piece of paper. "We sedated the boy like you ordered, Colonel. Now what?"

"Have our lab run a full blood workup and compare it to the one taken before his surgery. Keep Blakely under lock and key, no visitors until I change the orders."

"Yes, sir."

Quick as Lt. Nash left, Oliver's mind turned to his current dilemma. A lot of things bothered him about this case. He had more questions than answers, but that was normal at the beginning of an investigation.

How could Jason Blakely do the impossible—grow another organ? How could his surgical scar vanish? How could his liver repair itself?

Maybe the hospital or nurses mixed up patients. Hey, stranger things have happened.

Ten minutes later, the phone rang, interrupting his thoughts.

He snatched up the receiver. "Col. Taylor speaking."

"You're not going to believe this, sir. It's Blakely. You better get down here quick."

The first thing that came to mind was the sedative they'd used. Did the boy have an allergic reaction to the medication? He couldn't afford to lose him this early in the game, not until he had all the answers. "Is he okay?"

"Yes, sir. Please get down here fast, so we can show you what's happening."

"I'm on my way."

Oliver slammed the receiver down with a bang and rushed to the lab.

Upon arriving, he tapped the password into the access pad. The heavy, double-doors slid open, admitting him to the secured area. Once inside the main hall, Lt. Nash ran toward him.

"It's the weirdest thing, sir. They're having trouble drawing blood."

"What?" His jaw dropped.

"I told you, you'd have to see it to believe it. Watch."

Jason Blakely lay on the gurney still as a corpse. His small left arm was extended, a tourniquet tightly in place.

One of Oliver's surgeons, his face as pale as the hospital gown the boy wore, shook his head. "It's impossible, Colonel. As soon as I insert the needle and draw a drop, his skin seals, rejects the needle."

The surgeon demonstrated the procedure.

Time seemed to stop, move in slow motion. Chilling apprehension crawled up Oliver's spine. He could almost see the boy's body repel the foreign object from his vein. Like magic! Quick as a blink, the puncture wound vanished – not a mark on his arm.

"I've never seen anything like it." The surgeon pursed his lips. "It's got me stumped."

Oliver stared at the boy, the rantings of Nurse Hammond playing across his mind when she had reported something unusual during her shift in the Surgical ICU. *"Do you remember a movie about pods? People went to sleep and aliens took their places. I think that's what happened to this poor little boy."* He thought her demented at the time, but now...

"Sir! You okay?" Lt. Nash asked.

Oliver shook himself mentally. Adrenaline coursed through his body by the buckets, heightening his senses, along with his determination.

What was he dealing with? Will this prove a danger to national security?

He turned and glared at Blakely, who had suddenly become not only a mystery to solve but his enemy.

I'm going to find out what you are, if I have to dissect you myself.

"I don't care how deep you have to cut. I want a complete blood workup on Blakely. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." The surgeon lifted a scalpel from the tray. The blade gleamed as he brought it near Blakely's small arm.

Oliver didn't flinch when the knife sliced into the boy's artery.

What is wrong with me? After dinner, Bri had showered and changed into something comfortable, a white skirt, pink tee and sandals, but she couldn't relax. She paced the length of her living room, unable to shake the terrible, oppressive thoughts bombarding her.

"You're going to wear yourself and that expensive rug out, not to mention what you'll do to the hardwood floors." Logan's navy blazer lay across the back of a nearby chair. His hands released the handle on the recliner. The footrest popped out. He leaned back and sank deeper into the rich, bourbon leather.

The doorbell rang, followed by a knock.

Bri strode to the entryway and opened the heavy, Victorian style door.

Megan stepped inside and closed it behind her. Bri recognized the long, blue dress Megan wore. She'd bought it on their last shopping spree together. When she entered the room and saw Logan, her brows lifted. "Should I come back later?"

"No." Bri quickly introduced them to each other. "Logan is helping us."

"Are you a...?"

"Vampire." Logan smiled at Megan, who stared at his perfect white teeth as if she expected fangs to pop out any second.

"Like Bri?"

"No! I'm not a half-breed."

Bri heard the derision in his voice. She clenched her jaw.

"You make it sound like an insult to have a human side." Megan straightened and lifted her chin. "I think it has some distinct advantages."

"Like this one?" He raised himself from the recliner, walked over to the oval, full-length antique mirror in the corner and stood before it.

Megan gasped. "It's true. You have no reflection."

"I haven't had one for centuries."

"But—I also can't see your clothing in the mirror." Megan glanced back and forth from

Logan to the mirror. "Fascinating."

"Anything I wear or hold is quickly surrounded by my essence. It becomes a part of the dark, magical aura of what I am. A vampire."

"How do you shave? Cut your hair?" Megan wrinkled her brows, obviously deep in thought about the perplexing problems.

"We're gifted with eternal youth. I stay exactly as I looked the day I was changed."

Megan gave him a half smile. "Okay, not having to shave my legs would be great."

He chuckled.

"How can you remember what you look like after all these years?" Megan asked.

"I can't." He sighed. "I had pictures, but they aged, faded to nothing."

A feeling of sadness hit Bri. Logan could never see his handsome face, the cleft in his chin, the fire in his stunning eyes.

He glanced over his shoulder and tossed her a heated look, before turning away.

Had he read her thoughts? He must have. *Well, communication between the two of them is one thing, but this is not only ridiculous but downright embarrassing.* They needed to lay down some ground rules about reading each other's thoughts all the time.

"I'm glad Bri isn't a full vampire," Megan said. "Her human side has a reflection. She can see how beautiful she is inside and out."

Bri felt Megan's anguish when they looked at each other. Her shoulders slumped in utter despair.

"I shouldn't have begged you to help Jason. I took advantage of our friendship, but I was desperate, I couldn't just let him die." She almost collapsed on the plush velvet sofa. The circles marring her porcelain skin earlier had darkened to black smudges. Her eyelids looked swollen, like she'd been crying.

"Megan, don't think that way, please. I understand. We couldn't let him die."

Tears slid down her cheeks. "When I went to Jason's room they said he'd been moved, transferred. It scared me. I thought something was wrong with him again."

Bri wanted to spare Megan more heartache. "He's fine."

"You promise?"

She smiled, remembering their solemn, unbreakable oath they'd shared over the years. "Cross my heart and hope to die." The lie was told out of love, surely that made it okay.

"One of the nurses said he'd been placed under the care of Col. Taylor." Megan's lips tightened. Bri sensed her friend's anger. "I approached this Army guy four times, begged to take Jason the peanut butter brownies his babysitter had made. The man refused. I told him I planned on getting an attorney. He looked at me like he wanted to strangle me on the spot."

"You shouldn't have threatened him." Concern laced Logan's voice.

"It was stupid, but I got mad. Does he have a legal right to take over decisions affecting my son?"

"I don't know," Logan said. "The Army might claim they're acting in defense of national security. If they do, I'm not sure what their boundaries are." He pursed his lips. "We don't want anything leaking to the press. The fewer people who know about this, the better. Let us handle it."

Megan nodded. "Col. Taylor wouldn't tell me anything, but he scared me again—the way he kept asking questions, interrogating me."

"What questions?" Logan asked, his jaw line taunt.

"If I knew what happened to my son. He asked me that twice. Did I know any of the blood donors? How long did I stay with Jason? Was I alone with him?"

Uneasiness made Bri's mind race. Were they routine questions Col. Taylor asked anyone who came in contact with Jason, or an indication he suspected Megan had lied?

He may have her under surveillance.

At Logan's warning, Bri's heart hammered against her ribs. She fought to keep her voice steady. "It's probably nothing, Megan, but I don't think you should talk to Col. Taylor. Avoid him, if you can."

"I wouldn't tell him anything. I promise. I never would."

"I know," Bri whispered. "There's a possibility he may have you followed."

Megan gasped. "Who is he?"

They filled her in on the AMRIID and their investigation. It didn't escape Bri's notice how careful Logan was to omit anything that might further alarm Megan.

"They have armed guards over my son, like he's a prisoner." Her hands trembled.

"How many?" Logan asked.

"Two, but I bet there's more inside the lab." Megan narrowed her brows. "Can't you float into the lab some vampire way and check it out?"

Logan smiled at her. "Not unless I'm invited once. I've even feigned a problem with the security system, but their men checked it out. So far, they won't let me in."

Megan nodded. "Well, I noticed they used a password to open the doors. Only the AMRIID personnel, with those red color-coded badges came in and out when I was there. Col. Taylor has Jason isolated." Megan chewed her bottom lip, worry lined her face. "I hate to ask you to help us again, Bri. It's so dangerous."

Bri sunk into the over-sized sofa and grabbed Megan's hand to comfort her. "I knew the dangers when I agreed to help Jason."

"Please watch out for my son." Megan bit her lip until a drop of blood formed at the corner of her mouth. "Don't let them destroy him."

Logan stepped forward. He handed her a handkerchief. "We'll do everything in our power to rescue Jason and move him to safety."

"It won't happen overnight." Bri patted Megan's shoulder as she wiped her lip. "Please know we're working on it. Go home and rest. Keep your strength up – for Jason."

Megan hugged Bri. She turned and shook Logan's hand. With a faint, hopeful smile she left.

The instant the door closed, Bri felt like the weight of the world had landed on her small, inadequate shoulders. Their gazes locked.

"This whole thing is like some gigantic whirlpool, one I created. It's spinning faster and faster, the circumference growing larger and larger. I have no idea the number of people it will suck under and eventually destroy."

"Take the advice you gave your friend. You worked hard at your regular job, plus stayed late pulling the information together Col. Taylor wanted. Get some rest, Bri."

"That's a luxury I can't afford, until Jason is rescued."

"Your human side needs rest to function."

"Well, it's time for that side to shut up and take a backseat to the one that can solve this

problem,” she snapped.

If immortality had taught Logan one thing over the centuries, it was when to let a woman rant and rave, even if she was wrong. Like now!

He flopped down in the chair and watched Bri pace her living room, sensing the intense, nervous energy arcing through her. It desperately needed an outlet, anything to get her mind off Jason.

“Why did you listen to my thoughts?” Bri stopped in front of his recliner and glowered at him. Her arms were folded under her chest, drawing his undivided attention to her breasts, which he tried in vain not to notice.

If he seduced her and had sex with her, it would definitely take her mind off Jason, for tonight. It would relax her, let her sleep deep. And tomorrow? She’d claw his eyes out and try her damndest to kill him. But, she’d know what it was like to have a vampire take her. And he’d know what it was like to make love to a witch, forbidden fruit. Something he never would have considered, until he met her.

He lifted his hands and shrugged. No way would he answer her question. He wasn’t about to admit his feelings toward her had taken an abrupt turn into the super hot, erogenous zone. It stroked his ego to know, so had hers, even if she hated the fact he realized it.

An angry image of Nathan stomped his mind. Beyond any shadow of a doubt, thinking about having sex with his best friend’s daughter better be as far as Logan went. Besides, he knew better. Aside from the fact she was a witch; the timing was lousy, like asking for major double-trouble—no triple-trouble. Getting involved, even if it was nothing more than lust for a beautiful woman he was protecting, would remove his objectivity. He couldn’t afford to have anything cloud his judgment. If he hesitated for a nanosecond, it could get one, or both of them killed.

“Are you some kind of pervert?”

He almost laughed. Hell, yes. The normal, oversexed alpha male vampire kind. *And maybe you’ll be lucky enough to realize it one day.* But he wouldn’t admit that either. Not to a witch, he reminded himself. Not to a witch he might later have to kill.

Her eyelids drooped at half-mask. She looked exhausted. He wanted her fully rested, fresh, and ready to fight tomorrow. If she refused to give her body what it needed, he would use mind control to make her sleep.

Her brows knitted in a deep frown. “We need to lay down some ground rules so this doesn’t happen again.”

He bit his tongue to keep from smiling. “Maybe you can use a code word when you’re lusting after me and having dirty thoughts. That way, I can disengage, tune you out.”

She pursed those sexy lips of hers, obviously not appreciating his wry sense of humor. “I have a better idea. Why don’t I use a telepathic shield to completely block you from reading my mind?”

It felt like she’d thrown a bucket of ice water in his face. Time to eat crow! Mind linking is an invaluable weapon. One they couldn’t afford to ignore.

He swallowed hard, putting on his most contrite face. “You said you were curious, Bri. So was I. It felt nice to communicate with you by mind linking, but I went too far. I embarrassed you. From now on, your private thoughts are just that—private.”

“Okay. You have my word, I won’t listen to yours either.” Her stunning, midnight-

blue eyes flashed daggers at him. "If you ever attempt to use mind control to make me sleep, I promise you, I'll break your other collarbone."

He straightened in his chair, surprised to learn she'd listened to his thoughts also. *What else had she heard?*

She smiled. "Now you know how embarrassing it is to have someone else hear your every thought."

Once the problem was resolved, he could feel her mind overload with the same worry about Jason. Wasted energy. The boy would be fine, if they didn't rush things. Killing Col. Taylor wouldn't solve the problem. Someone else would take his place. Neither would killing his men, which was a viable option. They had to play it smart.

Logan had to do something to take her mind off Jason.

Change the subject. Distract her, even if what you say startles her or makes her mad again. At least if she's mad, she'll forget about the boy for a while.

"Which bed is mine?" He watched her eyes widen in surprise as she nervously glanced toward the two-toned linen and white carpeted staircase leading to the second floor. "You don't expect me to sleep on the front porch, or protect you by long distance, do you?"

She turned her head, avoiding his eyes.

"I thought we were past this. Are we back to you not trusting me?"

"Of course not. I'm sorry I didn't show you to the guest bedroom. It's up the hall from mine." She blushed. "There are blinds, heavy drapes and plastic film on the windowpanes. What about a change of clothes?"

"I'll transport to my house later, get what I need and be back here in no time." He gave her a half smile. "Do you want me to explain how I took on the role as head of security?"

"No." She lifted a brow. "I figured it out. Dr. Reese is on the Board of Directors."

Logan nodded. "That's part of it. Don't you want to hear the details? I think you'd be surprised." And angry, to learn her father's role in all this.

Bri paced the length of living room with full force again, dodging the oversized leather ottoman. The last thing she wanted to hear right now was a lengthy explanation from Logan. She could care less how her mother brought Dr. Reese and Logan together, or how he went undercover as head of security at the hospital.

"Tell me later," she said.

"Fine," he snapped.

She felt like a caged animal. Nervous energy coursed through every pore. The room hummed with the charged particles. It crackled in the air around her, like live electricity, sparking her overactive mind.

"Will you stop?" Logan's voice sounded both angry and concerned. He loosened his tie and undid the top buttons of his white dress shirt.

Bri slowed her pace. "I don't know what's happening to me. I can't feel Jason's pain, but I know they're touching him, holding him down. They're doing something awful to him. Not knowing exactly what they're doing is eating me alive."

"If you knew, it wouldn't change anything. You'd be more miserable because we can't charge in like the Cavalry, or we'll end up like Custer. We need to train, gather information through reconnaissance and spying on Col. Taylor."

"Okay. I get the picture." Bri kicked the wooden magazine rack. It shattered and toppled to the floor with a dull thump against the rug. "Everyone I love is in danger because of me. I'm standing here doing absolutely nothing, like some useless weak link, until I get my sorry act together."

"They won't kill him."

"You omitted the word, 'yet'. As long as he's useful, they'll keep him alive, not one second longer."

"If we have to kill every one of them, we'll save him, I promise." Logan moved to the sofa and patted the area next to him. "Come, sit down."

Bri reluctantly took a seat.

"Listen to me. If you can't feel Jason's pain, they've sedated him so he won't fight their procedures."

"What procedures?" Her heart raced.

He grimaced. "My guess is, they're drawing blood."

"No." She shook her head back and forth. "I remember how deep Dr. Reese cut to draw mine – the excruciating pain."

"Didn't he use anesthesia?" Logan asked.

She shook her head. "It would contaminate the blood transfusion."

Logan flinched. "Whatever wounds they inflict on him, his body will heal fast. Jason can't feel a thing, Bri."

"That means his brain isn't functioning, right?"

"Not so we can probe it."

"I don't understand. I can't probe his mind, yet I know they're doing things to him." Bri lowered her brows. "How do I know that?"

Logan took a deep breath and released it. "You won't believe me, so why bother?"

She glared at him. "Oh, no you don't." Her voice rose to match her growing frustration. "Out with it. You keep telling me I know very little about your ways."

"*Our* ways," he corrected.

"Stop sounding like my damn father. Teach me."

He nodded and tilted his head toward her. "Jason has evolved."

"Evolved?"

"Don't look so surprised. You knew he might change."

"This is my fault. I meant it for good, but I've endangered so many lives."

"You won't find me disagreeing." His lips formed a sexy half smile. "Have a little faith in me and in yourself. Let's speed up your training so we can kick ass."

She nodded. "I'm willing to live at the martial arts studio, or wherever you want to train, if that's what it takes. I'll try anything."

Determination sparkled from his eyes. "Dr. Reese has arranged a large secured area of the hospital for our training. I already checked the room out. None of this will be easy, but we can do it."

She couldn't let go of what Logan had said earlier. "You think Jason has evolved. What has he changed into?"

"You didn't fully understand what it meant when you gave him blood. His body repairing itself is a manifestation of his evolution."

She wrinkled her brows, confusion flooded her mind. "I don't understand."

"You sense Jason because he's evolved to a higher species, superior to mere humans."

"We're going around in circles. What are you trying to tell me?"

Logan folded his arms over his broad chest. "The two of you have a special bond."

Bri threw up her hands in defeat. "You're still speaking Greek."

"In your heart you know, but you don't want to face the truth." Logan took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "You blood-bonded with him. He's now like you."

Her shoulders slumped. His words reverberated in her head. The very thing she'd been afraid of was true. "I didn't want to assimilate this boy into my species. I would have done anything to keep that from happening."

"I know. You only wanted to save his life, but when you transferred your vampiric blood to another being..."

She blinked tears away. "I changed him genetically."

"Yes." He stood, moving to stand by the window. "We'll begin training at the hospital before daybreak. I want you ready for anything they throw at you. Dr. Reese has someone taking part of your shift so we'll hit it hard, Bri. Why don't you get some rest?"

"Later." She exhaled a shaky breath. "That isn't everything, is it?"

He turned and their gazes caught. "No."

"Tell me."

She waited, tensing in the long silence.

"Jason may look, act, like his old self, but he isn't. He's no longer Megan's child."

"That doesn't make any sense. Whose child do you think he is?"

"Yours!"

Chapter Four

Logan heard the bedroom doorknob click.

Light footsteps echoed in the shadows.

The tantalizing jasmine body wash Bri had used on her skin filled his room.

Was he dreaming?

Lord, he hoped so.

His first impulse was to order her to go away. Didn't she know he normally slept during daylight? None of this was routine for him. It was hard adjusting to a sleep pattern that matched hers. He knew it was Wednesday, but his days and nights were all screwed up.

When he opened his eyes, she stood beside the bed dressed in a sleeveless tight bodysuit. Silhouetted by the moonlight filtering through the window she looked like she wore nothing. His body reacted. Great, just what he needed—a hard-on. Fighting the feelings she stirred in him, he suppressed a groan.

Apprehension, along with that stubborn determination of hers flashed at him from her beautiful face. "I'm ready to workout."

He turned his head, glancing at the clock on the dresser. "It's two-thirty in the morning. Did you get any sleep?"

"Some."

He thought about using mind control to make her sleep for a few more hours, but decided it wasn't worth chancing another broken collarbone. Even if it was for her own good, forcing the issue certainly wouldn't do anything to boost her trust in him.

She turned to leave. The back view of her bodysuit made him look twice at that seductive rear of hers. "I'll do my warm-up routine, and then run fifteen miles. By that time, you should be up."

He vaulted off the bed and caught her arm. Their gazes locked.

She is a witch, forbidden fruit. A half-breed, unworthy of him. Yet...

"Give me ten minutes to pull on shorts and a T-shirt and grab a change of clothes for work."

She nodded, staring at his bare chest. "Can I ask you something?" Her teeth nibbled her bottom lip.

He was tempted to connect with her mind again, find out what she wanted. The texture, richness of her intimate thoughts had comforted as well as intoxicated him. Her snappy retorts, especially the sexy ones meant as insults, had pleasantly surprised him. *What about his promise to Bri?* Guilt pelted him. He was ashamed at how much he longed to touch her mind with his.

"Sure, ask away."

"Last night, you had a glass of Merlot, but you didn't eat anything at dinner. As far as I know, you haven't eaten since we've met.

She hesitated as if afraid to continue.

"Unless you've sneaked out...and bitten someone."

He grinned at her. Was she worried he might get hungry in the middle of the night and bite her? "You really do need to stop watching those horrid movies."

Nathan would be proud his daughter was asking questions about her family. And Logan was glad to dispel the lies. "I can and do eat food, but not as often as you. Vampires live forever, with or without blood, unless someone succeeds in destroying them. I'm an ancient, strong enough to survive without fresh blood."

"So you never drink blood?"

"I didn't say that. Over time, lack of blood would cause me to lose strength."

She looked away from him. "But you don't *kill* to feed?"

"I'm not going to tell you vampires never kill to get blood. Power greedy ones do, but no one in your family or mine slaughters the innocent for blood."

She huffed out a breath. "It's hard for me to reconcile what you're telling me now with this image I have of vampires as undead fiends, who suck the life out of the living."

"That's not who I am, Bri." He glanced longingly at her neck, the carotid artery throbbing with her strong life force. "Women willingly become hosts and give me what I need. In return, I give them great pleasure."

Curiosity glistened in her eyes as she stared at his mouth. Her emotions beat against his mental shields, making it harder to resist her. Whatever powerful spells she'd cast on him, they were seductive, almost impossibly seductive.

"It's a sensual act?" she asked.

Heat pooled in his groin. "Very much so."

"Painful?"

He lifted a brow, amused by her last question, wondering how she would react to his honesty. Would it shock her?

"When I sip their blood, they're in the throes of a powerful orgasm." He smiled at her and resisted the sudden urge to wink at her. "I've never had any complaints."

She moved closer, tilted her head back, looking him in the face. Her tongue darted out, moistening her full lips.

He felt her mind wrestling with indecision. The same dangerous indecision he was wrestling with.

Moonlight bathed her face and dark hair in a soft halo. The way it caressed her took his breath away.

Bri was like an alluring drug that, taken once, would enslave him forever.

He fought the lustful desire surging inside him as he looked at her.

Damn he wanted her bad.

A great disappointment, mingled with relief, filled him when she turned and hurried from the bedroom.

Logan glanced around the huge secured exercise room Dr. Reese had provided for them at the hospital. Although the old pecan hardwood floors were scarred, they glistened. He welcomed the padded, sparring mat in one corner and the soundproofing.

They'd been training hard for two hours and made progress. However, he still didn't have the answers to what he needed to know. Could the vampire side of Bri dominate the human side? If it did, could she control what she would become? In order to move to the next hierarchy of vampire skills, she must possess these basic abilities.

He winced at the large bruise on Bri's left cheek, caused by her failure to duck his right

jab. What she was going through now would be nothing compared to what the enemy would do, if they overpowered her. He had to know her strengths, weaknesses, make sure she was ready for anything and anybody, but he hated causing her pain.

"Concentrate, Bri! You won't have time to cast spells." He snapped his fingers. "That's how fast the enemy will be on you. Tap into your vampire side for more than superhuman strength. We're going to repeat the fourth lesson over and over again, until you get it right."

She shot him a dark, hateful look.

Good, the anger would help test her.

"How am I supposed to outrun you?" she asked, huffing out a breath.

"By mastering the fourth lesson."

"What the hell do you think I've been doing?"

"Obviously, you aren't doing it correctly. Let the vampire side do the work, always."

Logan growled, venting his frustration.

Like the enemy she would face one day, he gave her no warning. Two heartbeats later, he crossed the room, turned and met her fist, which dealt a sharp jab to his stomach. It felt like a sledgehammer had hit him full force. He jerked backwards, fighting nausea and pain, but managed to smile to himself. Hot damn! She'd done it. Traversed the room at supersonic speed. And clobbered him good.

"Is that fast enough?" She gnashed her teeth together.

Gold flecks, ignited by anger, sparkled within her gorgeous eyes. She had no idea what was happening to her, but Logan did. He would need all his strength to help her through this the first time.

She spun away from him. "I'm going to check on Jason, make sure he's okay."

Logan instantly blocked her path. "They won't let you see him."

"I don't need permission. I'm a witch, remember?"

And Jason is her child. An additional reason she wouldn't need permission.

Had she learned to use another vampire skill? "You can get inside without them seeing you? How?"

"I can control time, which makes me invisible to humans."

Logan shook his head. He dismissed it as an inferior witches' trick. "I don't want you taking foolish chances, Bri. My way is quicker, easier. Safer. I don't have to worry about surveillance cameras spotting me." He turned to leave. "I'll check on him for you."

"No." She yanked him back around. "When I use this gift, I don't have a reflection. The cameras can't see me." Her chest heaved, like she'd been running a great distance.

He felt her rage growing, multiplying in strength.

The gold specks in her eyes forewarned him of the danger. She was on the verge.

He had to help her through this.

"Do as I say, Bri."

"Go to hell." Her body trembled. He felt her rage turn to red, hot fury. "I need to know for myself that Jason is alive and he isn't being tortured."

She bent low, her body in a defensive stance, hands ready to block his moves. Seconds later, she advanced on him. Her hands and feet punched and kicked him with well-aimed lethal blows. As the vampire side of her became more dominate, her moves grew stronger, faster. He finally countered with a firm hit to her stomach, which made her hesitate, but

ended up only making her more furious.

She growled like a rabid animal.

He ducked under a vicious kick, clearly aimed at his head.

Confusion filled her eyes, now only bold, golden flakes.

Logan saw the fear, at the same moment her canines extended, bared at him.

"The first time is always frightening, Bri." He tackled her, shoved her to the floor and pinned her down. It was like riding a wild, bucking bronc as she fought for freedom. He sat up, his knees pinning her arms at her side. "Control it. Don't let *it* control you."

Moments later, her canines began to slowly retract. She grew calm. At the same time, the golden flakes gave way to the stunning midnight-blue of her eyes. Her pale skin turned a rich, honey brown. Color returned to her face as the feline contours of the change receded.

"Don't move," she pleaded, confusion in her eyes. Her body trembled slightly beneath him. He felt her fear, not of him, but of herself. "Did I hurt you?"

"No."

He hovered above her, aching to touch her, studying every rise and fall of her chest. Sweat outlined her pebbled nipples. For one insane moment, he grappled with a strong desire to lean closer and brush her lips with a soft kiss.

"What happened?" she asked.

"You changed for the first time."

"To a vampire?" She laughed, but it sounded bitter. "All these years, denying I was like my damn father." Tears shimmered in her eyes, even as anger twisted her face. "Don't you find that ironic?"

"No."

Logan groped for words, but didn't know how to reach her. She'd been running from who she really was far too long. Would she ever accept herself? Nathan had been right. She couldn't disown her bloodline. Maybe, after she learned the truth about her father, got to know her family, she wouldn't hate them.

"Stress, coupled with fear or anger are potent stimuli, Bri. Your vampire side took complete control, like we've been pushing it to do. The change is a protective mechanism. It's a good thing. Spurred by your anger, it has added another weapon to your arsenal."

"I didn't feel I had *any* control."

He stood, moved away and fought his need to touch her, offer her comfort. "It's a skill you'll learn quickly, but you never lost control, Bri."

She rose from the floor and strolled toward him.

"But I had the urge to kill."

"Which is normal, but you didn't go with it."

"What if I change and can't control the urge? Does that happen sometimes?"

He nodded. "They become rogues, kill the innocent without mercy." He looked at her sweet, angelic face.

She grimaced. "Do you let them keep killing?"

"No. We destroy them." He tapped down the urge to tell her more. If anyone knew how to skillfully track and terminate rogues, it was Logan.

Her jaw line drew taunt.

"But that won't happen to you, because it isn't your nature. You'll use it to protect

yourself and your loved ones.”

It was like a black cloud of doubt moved over her face.

“Trust me, Bri. You *will* master this.”

“Promise me...” Her chin quivered.

Seeing her deep pain hurt him, too. No matter what she was, he couldn't deny her the comfort she needed. Not at a time like this. He drew her into the safety of his arms, amazed at how right it felt.

When she wasn't fighting him, when he wasn't fighting her, their differences didn't seem that insurmountable.

“Promise you what?” he asked, stroking her hair, softer than he'd ever imagined.

“If I become a rogue, promise me you'll hunt me down and destroy me.”

“I promise.” He spoke the vow, knowing in his heart it was a promise he would never have to keep.

“I want you to do something else.” She glanced up at him.

His heart pounded against his ribs.

“Please, check on Jason. Make sure he's not in any pain, that he's okay.”

Why the sudden change? “Didn't you demand to see him for yourself?”

Her shoulders slumped. She stared at him with a haunted, bewildered look. “After what happened, I don't trust myself not to kill them.”

Logan clenched his teeth. If Bri had lost her fighting spirit, they wouldn't have a chance of surviving this deadly avalanche rolling their way.

Desperate to have the old Bri back, he decided to drop her into the middle of the action. When you're thrown, you get back on. *Sink or swim, woman.*

“No. This is something you need to prove to yourself, Bri. When the time is right, we'll strike with deadly force. Right now, I trust you to check on Jason and return promptly to this very spot.”

With a tiny movement of her hand, Bri slowed time in and around the AMRIID research lab for everyone but herself. Once she moved on a faster plane, she became invisible to those entering and operating within the complex.

As a test of whether it had worked, she strolled beside a man wearing a lab coat. She glanced at his name badge. Capt. King was oblivious to her presence and reached for the keypad. Bri memorized the entry code he entered. Heavy, double-doors slid open. Was he one of the men hurting Jason? Would she have to kill this man? She followed him into the secured area.

Once inside, she scanned for other personnel, moving carefully down the busy tiled corridor. She noted the layout of the rooms, equipment and how many guards were stationed within the lab. It surprised her to see the men carried short rifles. What did her friend that fought in Vietnam call that weapon? Oh, yeah. An assault rifle. How could these people be a party to this monstrous scheme? Didn't they care what they were doing to Jason and his mother?

This was a quick reconnaissance, she kept reminding herself. Check on Jason. At the same time, gather information on the enemy, so they could use it when they rescued Jason.

When she rounded the corner, nothing had prepared her for what she saw. She

swallowed her scream.

In the middle of a large room was a cage. Jason lay on a gurney surrounded by iron bars. Her gaze caressed his round sweet face, so still, almost lifeless. Tears filled her eyes. Her mind felt his heartbeat. In that instant, she knew what Logan had told her was true. The loving bond she felt for Jason was that of mother and child. She acknowledged the fact to herself, but would do everything within her power to make sure Megan never found out. The monsters had an IV dripping into his left arm. Oh, my God. They must have it inserted into an artery.

Adrenaline coursed through her veins. She fought the same demons as before, when she'd changed for the first time. The deadly uncontrollable monster within, far worse than these heartless humans who did the unspeakable to a child. If they destroyed Megan's child, no power in heaven or hell would stop Bri from exacting a horrible revenge. They would beg her to kill them before she was finished with them.

She stared at Jason. Her arms ached to hold him, snatch him up and take him to Megan. Even though he couldn't hear Bri, she made him a silent promise, before she left. *I'll get you out of here soon, back to your Mom.*

Oliver was surprised when he hadn't found Nurse Eaton's name on the list of people who had been alone with Jason Blakely. He'd confirmed she'd been with Megan and no one had seen her enter the boy's room, but it still surprised him.

When the phone rang, he frowned. So much for his plan to review files turned over on Blakely, before the last of the hospital staff interviews hit him this morning.

He yanked the receiver up. "Col. Taylor speaking."

"This is Capt. King. I have something to show you in the lab."

Before Oliver could ask shit, the phone clicked dead. He slammed the receiver down with a bang and rushed to the lab.

After entering the password into the access pad, the heavy, double-doors slid open, admitting him to the secured area.

With every step down the main hall, Oliver seethed inside. He burst into the research lab. "I haven't had my first cup of coffee, so this better be damned important, Capt. King."

"Sorry to bother you so early, but I thought you'd like to see these." The gray-haired researcher shoved a pair of thick reading glasses into his lab coat pocket. He pointed a gloved finger toward rows of testing equipment, sitting atop a long workbench that ran the length of one wall. "Under no circumstances are you to touch the slides. Wear these, just in case."

He tossed Oliver a pair of latex gloves.

"I won't bore you with a lot of scientific jargon on hematology, at least not on Wednesday." Capt. King chuckled, obviously amused at something, which flew right over Oliver's head. "We don't use the digital/video microscopes for medical diagnosis, but it'll demonstrate the unusual results we're running into with our extensive blood screening and analysis. Take a peek at a couple of slides." He directed him to one of the microscopes.

Oliver lowered his head and glanced through the high-powered lenses. "I don't know what the hell I'm staring at, but it's a pretty colorful show." He allowed his vision to adjust to the light, focusing on the uniform round, dull red circles. Their centers were paler, slightly off-white. They floated around, not doing much of anything, occasionally tapping each other

lightly like a pinball machine.

He squinted and focused on objects twice as large as the red circles. "What are these big, grainy irregularly shaped things?"

"White cells, neutrophils."

Oliver watched the lobes move around, fascinated by their lively energy.

"The only thing I want you to do is remember what this slide looks like, sir. Pay particular attention to the colors, shape of the cells, their size, formation, anything unusual that catches your attention. This is Blakely's blood *prior* to surgery, drawn by the hospital."

"Did we double check it?"

"Like you always say, trust no one. We compared it to blood samples taken from the car accident. It matches."

"Good." Oliver looked at the middle-aged man, who seemed to get a great deal of satisfaction from teaching him Microbiology 101.

Capt. King pointed to another microscope. "This is the sample of Blakely's blood *we* drew. Now, compare what you saw previously to this slide."

Oliver moved to the right. He stared through the other lenses. "The red is different—more vivid."

"That's normal. You should see an oxygenated bright red, blood from a main artery, rather than the previous duller red from a vein."

"I see some clear, disk-shaped objects, lots of them."

"These are platelets. They're unusually large in size and number in the boy's blood. That abnormality would explain why we had trouble drawing a sample without using an artery. Platelets have self-sealing properties to repair a leak in a blood vessel. We're paying special attention to the life span of his platelets. I think we'll find they don't follow ours, which is eight to ten days."

Something zipped around on the slide. "Well, I'll be damned. There's more activity on this one, lots of things moving. The shapes of the objects are totally different, like looking at night and day."

"Exactly."

"Even *I* can tell the two slides aren't the same." Oliver furrowed his brows and glanced at the researcher. "How's that possible?"

"It isn't. We expected some differences, but nothing like this. You're looking at medical history." Capt. King tapped the microscope with his index finger. "Did you notice anything that stands out as significantly different?"

Oliver studied the second slide again. Why hadn't he noticed it before? It was very dramatic. "Something is moving around fast, aggressively on this slide, within a circle."

"Bingo!"

The object swirled. "Fascinating. What is it?"

"We've identified it as an unknown type of antibody. We're still running tests to analyze it. Aggressive is the right word, Colonel." He removed the slide. "I performed this experiment earlier, but I wanted you to see what happens when I introduce a tiny amount of my blood into Blakely's."

Capt. King took a dropper, carefully squeezed a drop onto the slide and shoved it back under the microscope. "Take a look."

Oliver stared through the lenses, not believing what he saw. The strange whirling object in Blakely's blood seemed to attack. "I'll be damned. Your blood looks like it's being invaded by the boy's. It's changing to Blakely's and that antibody is stirring like crazy all over the slide again." His jaw drew slack. He lifted his head, staring at Capt. King in utter disbelief. "I can't tell your blood from his."

"Mine doesn't exist anymore, Colonel."

The implication set off a loud alarm in Oliver's mind, like a time bomb exploding. "Do you have any idea what caused this abnormality?"

"Nope, not a clue."

"How about a contaminate in the OR?" Oliver shrugged. "Hell, I'm grasping. Maybe something got into his bloodstream while he was in surgery?"

He nodded. "I agree with you. I don't know *when* it happened, but something very powerful and dangerous *did* get into Blakely's bloodstream. We're still trying to analyze what we believe is another antibody, not as dramatic as this one, but equally as powerful. We've also run into several other abnormalities we're working to isolate and identify."

"Which means?" Oliver asked.

"His blood is no longer that of a human, at least not as we define anything human."

Oliver threw his hands up, frustrated by the lack of clarity as to what they were dealing with. "What does that make the boy?"

"His DNA has changed, Colonel. To what, we don't know."

"Are we dealing with a different body?"

"Possibly. On the outside the boy looks the same, but he's not the same boy. From preliminary tests, the only thing we know for sure is—Jason Blakely is no longer human."

No longer human. His words rattled around in Oliver's brain like deadly hand grenades. "Would you rule out the possibility this creature is dangerous?"

"His blood is dangerous." He pursed his lips. "I wouldn't rule out anything."

"Even the possibility we're now on his menu?"

Capt. King gasped before nodding. "Or the fact he may attempt to change others genetically."

"Like an invasion?" Oliver asked.

"Exactly."

"Of what?"

"We don't know, Colonel."

"I want a lid kept on this, Captain."

"How tight a lid?"

"We'll thoroughly brief our men, so they are aware of the situation, but it doesn't go outside our group. We don't want to panic anyone and I sure as hell don't want the FBI involved. They'll take over our investigation, cloak everything in a veil of secrecy and crowd us out of the picture. The Army is perfectly capable of handling this case, without the Fed's interference."

"I totally agree, sir."

Oliver smiled, glad Capt. King understood the seriousness of the situation. "Treat the creature as hostile. Keep him inside the secured lab area, sedated and caged."

"Yes, sir. With your permission, I'd like to restrain him to the bed also, in case he finds

a way over time to fight the sedation."

Oliver nodded. "Shackle him. Carry it out."

He could almost see the handwriting on the wall, the very thing Nurse Hammond had ranted and raved about was true. It was a brilliant plan. No hostile takeover of our planet by the alien creatures. Contaminate the blood supply by introducing their strain, which could eliminate the human strain. Perfect! *Destroy us from within, before we know what hit us.*

Well, someone who intended to stop them did know – Col. Oliver Taylor. *I will utterly destroy every one of you.*

"How do we fight something like this, sir? I mean, Blakely looks normal. We don't know how many..."

"Aliens," Oliver offered.

"Yes, sir."

"We have something they want, Captain."

"What's that?"

"Bait. One of their own."

Oliver returned to the second slide. He bent his head and stared through the high-powered lenses at the alien blood.

Logan sighed with relief when Bri entered the exercise room again. The shirt she wore drew his heated attention, knowing it covered her bodysuit. She closed the door. Instead of turning, she held onto the nearby wall. What the hell? Her body slumped. He shot across the room, lifting her into his arms, cradling her head against his chest.

"God, Bri, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's the side effects of using my power."

He felt her legs tremble. "What side effects?"

She winced, squeezing her eyes shut. "Muscle spasms, weakness."

Her power to distort time sounded like something that could get her killed. "How long are you vulnerable after using it?"

"It depends on the length of exposure. This was a short one, so around thirty minutes." She took a long, shaky breath.

He carried her to the padded sparring mat and laid her down. "I'll be back in one second." Traversing across the room, he rummaged through his duffle bag and grabbed a thick, oversized towel. Once he returned, he covered her with it.

"Where do you hurt?"

She moaned, scrunching her face up. "Right calf. Charley horse."

He knelt beside her, pulled her foot into his lap and kneaded her calf, pressing deep to relax the muscle. It went into a spasm.

"Oh. Oh, God it hurts."

"I suggest we drop the power to distort time from our arsenal as not worth the pain it causes after you use it." He flattened her right foot against his thigh, stretching the Achilles tendon and muscles as he squeezed the baseball size knot between the heels of his hands.

"You were right." She hissed between clenched teeth.

"Which time?"

"Smart ass," she snapped.

He chuckled and she punched his arm.

"The minute I saw Jason I felt the bond as his mother, but I don't want Megan to know. It would break her heart and there's no reason for her to ever know. God, I wouldn't hurt Megan for the world."

Logan nodded. "She may eventually suspect, but you can deny the truth. She'll believe you, Bri." He pulled at the knot, pushing his thumbs into it, until it finally relaxed.

She released a sigh.

Once the pain had subsided, his touch took another turn, one of enjoyment. For the third time today, he admired the formfitting bodysuit she wore. The freedom it gave his wondering hands. He slid them up her smooth leg, his fingers gliding over her tempting skin.

"I need to tell you about Jason, what I learned."

She glared at his hands, effectively stopping his quest. He reluctantly removed them from her leg.

He listened attentively to her full account of the lab layout and events. When she mentioned seeing assault rifles, it confirmed what he already knew through background checks. Fifteen of the men working for Col. Taylor were combat soldiers, Infantry. A myriad of emotions surged through his inner defenses. He was proud she'd taken a risk to check on Jason, gotten the access code and data to help them rescue him. Logan clenched his fists when he thought about the little boy. How could anyone do such despicable things to a child? Logan frowned at the emotions he heard her express when she talked about revenge. He thought about Nathan, how devastated he'd be if Bri had to be destroyed. Logan hoped he could teach her to use, yet control the vampire side. Her powers were not her enemy, but like any society, vampire families operated within a strict set of laws. Break them and suffer dire, often fatal consequences.

"Are you feeling better?"

She smiled. "Still fatigued a little."

"You're pushing yourself too hard," Dr. Reese said as he ambled into the exercise room like the walking wounded. His unshaven face looked gaunt, haggard. Bluish smudges rimmed his bloodshot gray eyes.

"I don't want him to worry about me," she whispered.

Logan nodded in agreement.

"Col. Taylor is still interviewing the hospital staff. I wanted to give you a copy of the listing I provided to him on the six people who donated blood for Jason." Dr. Reese handed the papers to Logan. It contained their home addresses, phone numbers and work information.

"On your copy, I highlighted the name I substituted for Bri's. The Army will run into a brick wall when they investigate that fictitious donor."

Logan hoped Dr. Reese had covered his tracks. "Why?"

"She has been dead for fifteen years."

Logan chuckled. "Good one."

"I'm not sure what form the Army's interrogation will take with these five real blood donors. I was hoping you could provide protection for these individuals." Dr. Reese frowned, the lines around his mouth deepened. "I'll let you two hash this out after I leave. Megan might need something to help her rest, so I'm making a house call."

After Dr. Reese left, Logan warily approached Bri on what he knew would be a sore subject. Would she accept his suggestion or tell him to shove it? "We need Nathan's help."

"Why?" Her mouth flew open. She stared at him with a look of astonishment mingled with a heady amount of disgust. "How could the blood donors be in any danger? If the Army asks them questions, they'll get nothing but the truth. If the Army insists on blood tests, they won't match Jason's."

"It's a precaution," Logan said. "We don't want any of them hurt. If we could get help protecting them, I'd feel better."

"They're safe. The Army has no *reason* to harm them." She huffed out a breath. "I need to get ready to work my shift. At the same time, you have to stay close to Col. Taylor, find out what he's up to." She glared at Logan. "Don't push me. I'm not asking my father for a damned thing."

"What if the Army believes the blood donors have information?"

"But they don't," she snapped.

"Correct. They can't supply details they don't have, which could put them in more danger."

"How?" Bri lifted a brow and gave him a dubious stare.

"What if Col. Taylor doesn't believe them?"

Hidden behind a concrete pillar in the underground parking lot of St. Francis Hospital, he awaited his prey. Sheer pleasure filled him when Capt. King left the AMRIID lab and strolled to his car.

He liked surprising his chosen victims.

Taking human form, he stepped within view. "Capt. King, I was wondering if I might have a word with you."

Key in hand, the gray-haired researcher turned. "Yes."

No fear marred his face. Good. He had a proposition to discuss with this human.

"I believe I have something that would be highly beneficial to both of us."

Curiosity filled Capt. King's mind. It was so strong. He could touch it, if he could play with this human's brains. He almost smiled at that thought. Humans were truly a delicacy, but he had other plans for this one.

"What would you say if I could offer you eternal life, Captain?"

The human grinned.

"I'd say, what took you so long to contact me?"

His mouth dropped open. It had been hundreds of years since a human had surprised him. "You know what I am?"

He pulled his lab coat around him. Something flickered in his pocket. "You and I have a lot in common. We both love blood. You drink it. I study it." He grinned again. "But I'm willing to do both."

He reached for the human's thick glasses, threw them on the concrete and stomped them. "You won't need these."

The human's eyes showed excitement. "What do you want for this gift?"

Obedience. He would have that from Capt. King, soon as he changed him. "Information."

The human nodded, and then offered his neck.

The prey's heartbeat accelerated. The blood rushed through his arteries, calling him to feed on the life force.

Capt. King cut his eyes at him. "Will it hurt?"

Why is it humans always expected to gain the world at no costs to them? He grinned. "Oh, yes. I assure you, it'll hurt like hell."

In case this weakling screamed, he silenced his vocal cords.

Rapier like fangs ripped into the jugular. He drank his fill.

Chapter Five

Bri watched Logan stalk toward her, reminiscent of the deadly wolf veiled deep within him. One he could call forth by simply picturing the beast in his mind.

The gentle sway of his slacks and blazer choreographed each lithe predatory movement he made. Desire took her breath away. He loosened the knot of his necktie and unbuttoned the first two buttons on his dress shirt. His dark eyes bore into her when he reached the nurses' station.

"Did you find out anything new from Col. Taylor?" Bri asked.

"Later." He waved his hand as if dismissing her, and leaned closer to her. "Your heartbeat's erratic. What's wrong?"

"Megan called five minutes ago." A sense of uneasiness about the whole conversation spiraled through Bri and Logan's intense gaze didn't help. "She went to thank Ruth for the brownies she had baked for Jason and to return her glass dish, but no one answered the door."

Bri kept fighting off despondency that cloaked her like the darkness of night when she thought about the gentle, retired schoolteacher who baked tons of goodies for kids and kept Jason after school hours for Megan.

"Is that unusual?" Logan asked.

"Maybe it's nothing." Bri shrugged and stumbled into the nearby chair, remembering Megan had said she'd glanced through the garage door windows and saw Ruth's Camry inside. "Maybe she's taking a nap, didn't want to be disturbed. Maybe one of her children picked her up, so she could visit with the grandkids."

Logan lifted one dark brow, giving her a dubious stare. "Who are you trying to convince? You? Or me?"

Bri glanced at the clock on the wall, which read eight o'clock. She rubbed the back of her neck, pulling the tight muscles. "The thought you might be right keeps ghosting through my mind."

"About what?"

Her throat closed as she grappled to get out the words. "Ruth was one of the first blood donors."

Their eyes locked, each mirroring the same worry.

"Why don't we ease *both* our minds? In the past, this woman has welcomed you into her home?"

"Yes, lots of times."

"Then we have permission to enter." He offered his hand to her. "We'll drive to your place and take it from there. Let's make *sure* she's okay."

Within seconds of parking her car and closing the garage door, Bri and Logan were standing inside Ruth's living room. *Whoa!* Bri's heart went into double time. Were the walls or her head spinning? Disoriented, she felt herself pitch forward. She grabbed Logan around the waist and clung to him.

His arms held her safely against his chest. "In order to avoid detection, I transported you. The speed makes you a little lightheaded the first couple of times, but you'll get used to

this mode of transportation.”

Her fingers, as if finding a will of their own, coasted across his hard chest. She glanced into his eyes, heavy-lidded with passion, and blushed.

Once everything came into focus, she loosened her hold and stepped away from him. The spacious, two-story house was dark. The familiar whiff of mothballs, which the middle-aged woman kept scattered inside her closets, permeated the air.

“Stay put while I look around,” Logan whispered.

She shook her head, taking a deep breath to calm her nerves. “I’m coming with you. If Ruth’s sleeping, you’ll give her a heart attack.”

Logan nodded.

They moved in tandem across the plush, rose carpet, Logan taking the lead. She scanned the area for anything the least bit suspicious or out of place. The living room always reminded Bri of a beautiful, Victorian style parlor, with colorful Tiffany lamps and elegant, ornate furniture. Ruth kept the house spotless, no dust bunnies allowed.

The medium size kitchen lay off to the right. A cooking island with double ovens was located in the middle. Copper clad pots and pans hung within easy reach from an oval metal rack above the range top.

They moved slowly across the Italian marble floors and quietly checked the small bathroom off the hallway.

Nothing.

Maybe she *had* left to spend time with the grandkids.

The burglar alarm pad by the back door stood in deadly silence, the green light indicating the system wasn’t armed flashed at her. A knot of fear sat in Bri’s stomach. If Ruth had gone away, she would have set the alarm before she left.

She noticed Logan staring at the same thing, his jaw line tense.

As they made their way up the carpeted, spiral staircase to the second floor, a couple of steps creaked. Her heart jumped to her throat. They halted, scanning for any trouble.

Once they reached the landing, they carefully made their way to the master bedroom. The door leading into it was closed.

Ruth could be sleeping, Bri thought, wishing it was true.

Logan pushed the handle down. The door squeaked open.

Bri smiled when she saw Ruth sitting in a chair, facing an open window. She must have fallen asleep. A faint sliver of moonlight ghosted across the bedroom. Her head was lowered, resting on her chest as if she slumbered. A large oak tree formed a menacing shadow, hiding her features.

“Ruth,” Bri whispered, taking one step over the threshold. “Don’t be frightened. It’s Bri and my friend Logan. We were worried about you.”

A metallic, sweet odor reached her nostrils. One she’d smelled a thousand times in her line of work. *Blood!*

She hurried forward.

Logan grabbed her arm, jerking her back hard against him. “No.”

The alarm within that one word sounded like a shotgun blast.

“Stay here!” He rushed to Ruth and crouched beside her chair. “Go back downstairs, Bri. I’ll join you shortly.”

She heard the command he issued, coupled with anguish.

Her legs remained motionless. Disbelief choked her. "Ruth?"

"She can't hear you," he snapped, anger in his tone. "I don't want you to see your friend like this. Go...down...stairs. Now!"

Dread squeezed her heart as she turned, slowly making her way to the nightstand. "I'm a nurse. I see carnage every day at the hospital." Her fingers trembled as she switched on the crystal lamp atop the bedside table.

She spun full circle in the cauldron of blood. The pristine walls, carpet, bed and the floral chair Ruth sat in were spattered red.

Tears burned Bri's eyes. "That dear, sweet lady never hurt anyone. Did Col. Taylor murder her?"

Logan stared at Ruth. "No."

Bri moved closer to the lifeless body, hoping to find clues as to who could have done such a vicious act.

"She put up a hell of a fight." Logan glanced up. "Bri, don't. Remember her the way she was. You don't want to see her like this."

"No, but I owe it to her. I want to help look for the person who did this."

Detaching herself emotionally, Bri performed a visual examination of the wounds. She winced. Someone had sliced Ruth's throat at least twice, deep, nearly severing her head from her body.

Logan pointed to the right side of Ruth's neck. "He may have thought the gaping wounds would hide these."

Bri saw two puncture wounds into her jugular vein. "A vampire?"

"Yes." Logan nodded with a look of disgust on his face. "I don't know how he gained access, some trickery, but he did. There was no reason to kill this frail human—none." His eyes lit with anger. He sniffed the dead body and the air, before letting out a low growl.

Her heart skidded to a stop. "What is it?"

"A rogue vampire is hunting you, Bri. A male, engorged with the energy of Ruth's blood. Do as I have. Use the vampire side of you. Learn his unique scent."

She hovered near Ruth and walked the perimeter around the body, sniffing to discern between the blood feast and the rogue vampire's own individual scent. A light whiff of him lingered, drifted up to her.

"Lemon and lavender. I can definitely identify those, but there's a faint musk mixed in with them. The other two scents almost overpower it." She hesitated, something worried her mind. "That's really weird. I've smelled this before, but where?"

The illusive memory almost surfaced. She sniffed hard again. In college? Biology or anatomy? She wrinkled her nose in disgust at the faint, putrid odor.

"Aha," she said as the memory hit her full force. "Professor Horton, Biology 101. How could I forget that jewel? Mold, decay from a pathologist's autopsy on a cadaver that had been exhumed by court order to determine the exact cause of death."

Logan gave her a sharp look.

An involuntary shiver jerked her body, a mixture of confusion and fear. "You said vampires no longer sleep in coffins."

"I didn't lie. This one *prefers* the comfort of the soil from his grave during daylight."

"You expect me to believe this bloodsucker would rather sleep in filthy stench than a nice, clean bed."

"There are some who hate change. They cling to the old ways, want to revive the dark inhumane time, when vampires preyed on humans. We tolerate them, unless they cross the line, like this one has." Logan hesitated. "This rogue killed Ruth, which means he has the list of donors."

Stunned, she stared at him. "How?"

"Locate him and we'll find the answer. Maybe he used mind control. If he did, that person won't remember anything. The worse scenario, he has turned someone into his minion, to do his bidding."

Bri nodded. "Whoever killed Ruth knows she isn't the one he's hunting."

"That's probably what set him off, angered him to brutally kill her." Logan expelled a slow breath. "He'll go after the other blood donors."

"This rogue will not appreciate the irony of hunting a woman who's been dead for fifteen years," Bri said. "When he finds out one of the names is fake, he'll become even more enraged."

Logan nodded, his brows furrowed. "We could get the Army off your back, add more confusion to the mix by creating another false trail."

She didn't like where she thought Logan was heading with this scheme. "How?"

"Clean up the crime scene. Stash the body where it can't be found. When the Army can't find her, they may jump to the conclusion she's the one they're hunting."

"I can tell you've never watched forensic stories. No matter how much you clean, blood shows through." Bri shook her head vehemently, the thought appalling. "Ruth has children, grandchildren and friends. I won't even consider it."

"She's already dead, there's nothing we can do for her except destroy whoever did this to her. Don't you want to *try* to throw the Army off your trail?"

"Yes, but not this way."

The doorbell rang out several times, like a blaring car alarm.

She gripped Logan's arm.

Their gazes flew to the lamp she'd turned on.

He reached into his pants pocket, withdrew a handkerchief and thrust it in her hand.

"Wipe your fingerprints off anything you touched."

After she'd quickly removed any evidence from the crime scene, he grabbed her around the waist.

A key slid into the lock. It clicked. Someone opened the front door.

He'd be damned if the police or FBI would hijack his investigation and take all the glory. This is a military operation.

Oliver clenched his rubber-gloved hands and straightened his protective lab coat as he studied the meteor shower of blood in sixty-two-year-old Ruth Madden's bedroom. He trusted every one of the AMRIID men he'd handpicked for this investigation at St. Francis Hospital. They had served under him before. He trusted their loyalty. He trusted their discretion. He trusted their keen sense of duty to follow orders to the letter.

"Remember, this is a military operation," Oliver reminded his men. "We want to keep

it that way. So work fast."

The three officers continued to snap photos, dust for fingerprints, collect blood and fiber samples.

"After you thoroughly process the crime scene and the house, the cleanup crew will arrive. All of this carnage has to disappear, like it never happened."

Oliver moved close to Capt. King, who hovered over the victim.

"It looks like a damn war zone, Colonel. Give me a hand. Be careful with her head, it's barely attached. The attack was vicious. Her spine's been severed."

Oliver grimaced at the deep slashes, the exposed, torn jugular. Holding her head steady, they carefully moved her from the chair to the gurney.

"What are those two marks on her neck?" Oliver asked.

Capt. King cut his eyes at him. A strange, eerie light glowed within their depths. "Probably nothing, but I'll check them out when I do the autopsy." He covered the body with a sheet. "You figure she knew something, Colonel?"

"That's exactly what I think. They silenced her before we could question her."

Oliver dug his cell phone out of his pocket and punched his assistant's number.

"Lt. Nash speaking, sir."

"Ruth Madden's dead. Assign a guard to each of the remaining donors. Alert our people of the situation."

"Will do, Colonel."

Oliver clicked off.

"I'll get the body back to the lab and do a full autopsy, but it's pretty obvious how the lady died."

Oliver nodded.

"We'll do an official cause of death report for our records, Colonel. Keep it classified as Top Secret. We'll issue one to the family, stating the cause of death was natural causes. After we clean up the body and do some repair surgery, we'll release it."

"Good, we don't want a word of this leaking to the press."

"Agreed, Colonel."

Bri breathed a sigh of relief and held onto Logan. She didn't care if every wall in her living room danced a little jig. They were safe and had escaped discovery. The dizziness of traveling so fast made her heart race, but this time the side effects passed rapidly. Logan was right. Her body was adjusting to this mode of transportation.

She stared into the room. The oppressive darkness reminded her of Ruth, the terrible way she'd died. Bri eased out of his arms and quickly turned on every light.

Logan walked up behind her. "We need to talk."

She didn't need him to remind her that Ruth's death was her fault, too.

"I can't deal with this right now." She glanced down at her nurse's uniform, which had a small dark red stain—Ruth's blood. Blood that was on Bri's hands.

"We don't want Megan checking on Ruth, especially tonight." Logan massaged Bri's shoulders and neck. "Why don't you let me call Dr. Reese and tell him about Ruth Madden? He can stop by Megan's and break the bad news to her."

Bri winced as Logan's hands worked on a knot between her shoulderblades.

"Please tell Dr. Reese everything, including about the rogue. He'll know how much to tell Megan. I...I need to grab a quick shower." The last thing she wanted was for Logan to see her cry. She turned and ran toward the stairs.

Thirty minutes later she returned, her hair still slightly damp, wearing something that made her feel feminine, a clingy, sleeveless knit dress and boots. Blue always lifted her spirits, and she needed it tonight.

She hoped the two coats of light concealer she'd applied around her eyes hid the redness and swelling.

His gaze raked her body appreciatively, before lingering on her face. "Feel better."

She cleared her throat. "Some. Did you reach Dr. Reese?"

"Yes. He's heading for Megan's."

Her chin quivered. "Thanks for taking care of that."

"I'm sorry about your friend." His mouth tightened into a hard, thin line. "God, I don't want to go into this now, you're already hurting, but we need to talk."

He removed his blazer and laid it across the back of a chair, before sinking into the cushions of the over-sized sofa. "We're at a crossroad, Bri. Jason needs help. If the other four blood donors *are* still alive, they're in imminent danger."

Her heart tore in two, thinking about the possibility of more of them being murdered. She plopped down beside him on the sofa.

"I know this is hard." He turned and leaned toward her. "You don't want to ask your father for anything, but—"

"Can't we find a way to protect them without my father's help?"

Logan rolled his cuffs to his elbows. "I don't see any way around it."

"Maybe you should go by yourself."

He cocked a brow and gave her an incredulous stare. "And tell Nathan I left you alone after finding the rogue had murdered someone? No thank you. Like I said before, I'm not going to waste my time arguing with you about your father. I'd defend his character with facts. You'd crucify his character by regurgitating what your mother has fed you for years." He released a long breath. "Let's stick to what we *can* agree on. It won't take the Army long to find the body. It wouldn't surprise me to learn they were the ones at Ruth's front door. When they do discover she has been murdered, they'll find some bureaucratic way to bury the truth and heighten the security on Jason."

Pain gnawed at her stomach. "It'll be harder for us to get him out." She exhaled a frustrated breath. "Knowing Col. Taylor, he may be cruel to Jason."

"Yes. That bastard intends to discover exactly what the boy is. They'll also step up the search for you, through the surviving blood donors. What we have are the proverbial two dogs after one bone. If the Army is in the wrong place, at the wrong time, they don't stand a chance against the rogue."

Bri cringed. "If they die, there's no way to keep a lid on this. "

"Not when the press gets involved." Fine lines creased Logan's forehead. "Nathan said there were things you must know. To survive. He also knew you wouldn't believe him..."

"Unless I heard it from my mother." At the time her father had said those things, Bri couldn't think of anything but keeping him away from her mother, protecting her. Yet, she remembered that he had been adamant about them going *together* to see her mother.

"We can't both be right about Nathan. Prove me wrong, Bri." He stood, extending his hand to her. "It's impossible for us to protect all these people without assistance. We need help. I'm going to see Nathan. You coming?"

She hesitated, her rational side and emotional side warring. One eager to seek the truth, question her parents. The other blindly accepting her loving mother's word. Someone Bri knew had no reason to lie. Her need to get to the bottom of this once and for all, coupled with her wanting to protect the other blood donors, no matter what it costs her, won.

"What do you think my father wanted to say?"

"Why don't we ask him?"

"This is my father's house?" Bri shivered, chilled not by the night air, but knowing that what she learned soon could change her life forever.

She stared at the prominent three-story mansion that looked like it stepped from the pages of a catalogue on beautiful historical homes to tour. The Neo-classical style architecture dated back to pre-Civil War. A large curved portico dominated the front of the red brick structure. Impressive white Ionic columns stood like giant sentinels as they walked toward the steps and iron railing leading to the mahogany entrance.

"Yes. Nathan had it built in the eighteen hundreds." Logan drew her to a halt. "You're shaking. This can't be easy, but you won't be alone. We'll face it together. Nathan is expecting us. Breathe deep, take a few minutes to collect yourself before we go inside."

Sucking in air, she held it before releasing it. "I don't know what I'm supposed to feel when I see him again. Right now I feel revulsion. What if my mother finds out I came here? Will she think I've betrayed her?"

"We don't have the luxury of backing away." Logan locked elbows with her, picking up the pace again. "If your mother lied, you have a right to know why."

Five minutes later, the butler admitted them into the house. "Miss Brianna, I'd know you anywhere."

Her jaw dropped. *Why would the butler recognize her?*

Bri glanced up at the ornate Venetian glass chandelier in the entryway. The two-inch heels on her boots clicked across the hardwood floors, the sound echoing as they followed him into the massive den.

"Mr. Wellman will be with you shortly," the butler said, leaving them alone.

A cluster of framed pictures on the marble mantle above the fireplace caught Bri's attention. When she could make out peoples' faces in the photos, her mind reeled. The first one was Bri at age six, dressed in a baby bear costume for her first role in a school play. Two were taken at her high school graduation and included Megan. Sandwiched between these were Bri riding her bike, winning a spelling award and taking a martial arts class.

"There are more over here," Logan said.

Bri strolled to his side. She studied the framed snapshots of her graduating from nursing school, along with Megan. "Where did my father get these?"

"From your mother." Bri felt the strong support of Logan's arm as he placed it around her shoulders and drew her near. "Remember, you're not alone."

Footsteps echoed down the hall.

Logan released her and moved away.

Her father rounded the corner and entered the den, dressed in a gray three-piece suit. He smiled warmly at them before his dark eyes clouded with worry.

"You're safe here. I'd give anything if this was a social call, rather than trouble."

He showed them to a round antique mahogany table with hand-carved wheel-back chairs, upholstered in white linen. They seated themselves.

"Col. Taylor hasn't breached your cover as head of security, has he?"

Bri wrinkled her brows. "How did you know about that?"

"Logan and I came up with the plan. Your mother and I worked together with Dr. Reese to pull the whole thing off."

Her father said it so matter-of-factly, like their being together was normal. Bri glanced at the pictures on the walls again, remembering when her mother had taken most of them. Was it true? Had her mother sent them to her father? Or had he gotten them by some other means. Just because her mother worked with her father to come up with these protection plans...well, a parent will go to great extremes and do things they hate doing if they really believe that's the only way to guarantee their child's safety. That didn't prove her mother had lied to her.

"No, my cover is intact." Logan looked at her with concern as if he understood her turmoil. "I've been giving your father progress reports, so he's up-to-date on the AMRIID, Col. Taylor, Jason. Before Bri and I tell you the horrible thing we found tonight, I need to let you know what I learned from spying on Col. Taylor by mind linking. From the preliminary results on Jason's blood, Col. Taylor is convinced he's hunting aliens."

Nathan's jaw fell. "As in men from Mars?"

"You got it," Logan said.

"Well, Col. Taylor isn't that far wrong." Bri raised her brows. "We are an alien species, just not from outer space."

Logan nodded. "Col. Taylor wants to keep this a military investigation. He's afraid that if the FBI find out, they'll hijack his case."

Nathan rubbed his jaw as if deep in thought. "Now that bit of information might come in handy. It's always good to know what a man's greatest fears are."

"The only thing it tells me is he's paranoid," Bri said. "He's a very dangerous man."

"I agree." Logan glanced at Bri. "We need to tell Nathan what happened to Ruth."

"Ruth?" her father asked.

Bri swallowed the lump of sadness and guilt as they filled her father in on the senseless brutality of Ruth's death.

Anger shot from her father's eyes.

"We came here to ask if you'd protect the donors."

"Of course I will. If the vampire who's hunting Bri or Col. Taylor sees her with the blood donors, they'll eventually figure out she's the one they're hunting."

Logan pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to him. "This is a list of the four that need protection. I hope we're not too late."

Her father pushed back from his chair. "Wait here while I assign someone." He turned and vanished.

"I want to show you something, Bri." Logan stood. "It'll help you understand the Nathan I know."

Logan hurried to the mahogany bookcases covering one side of the wall. She followed close on his heels. Her gaze dropped to a large photo album sitting atop one of the shelves. When she opened the album and turned the pages, she found more snapshots of herself, along with letters. She recognized her mother's elaborate handwriting on the envelopes.

Bri glanced at Logan, who settled in a winged back antiques pressed velvet chair. "You've seen these pictures before?"

He nodded. "Your father likes to drag them out and reminisce. But if I'd told you about them, you wouldn't have believed me."

Bri couldn't deny it. Would she ever completely trust Logan?

She sorted the letters by date. By the time she'd read a couple, she realized these were passionate, tender love letters from her mother to her father. They chronicled Bri's childhood, important milestones in her life. Her mother wrote details about each picture she sent him. Bri couldn't deny the evidence, love letters in her mother's handwriting, after her father had disappeared from their lives. It was true. Her mother had lied to Bri, but why?

Reading these gave Bri an entirely different perspective on her father. One of a loving man, who reluctantly left his family, but kept in touch with them, living through these letters, photos and stolen moments, painfully forced to love and watch them from a distance.

In the middle of letter number nine, she heard heels clicking, echoing down the hall, along with hushed voices.

"After we talk to our daughter, stay the night, Danielle. Let me hold you, comfort you."

My mother is here. Bri felt the color drain from her face.

"Nathan, I can't. The coven could be snooping around, hunting answers. It's too dangerous."

"Please, Beloved."

"I can't, darling."

Her mother and father entered the den.

Bri stared at her mother, who stopped mid-stride. "You lied to me."

Her mother nodded, tears filled her eyes.

No wonder her father looked shocked when she accused him of rape.

"Why?" Bri whispered, gripping the photo album, holding onto a history she wasn't able to share, to a father she wasn't allowed to love.

Her mother's chin quivered. "Fear of losing you." She straightened her floral jacket. "You might give in to their seductive powers—stop being a witch. Turn pure vampire."

Bri closed her eyes for a bitter second against the pain washing through her. "You should have told me the truth, instead of manipulating me with lies." Bri looked at her suspiciously. "Is that the only reason you lied?" She listened to her mother's heart race, her mind agonizing over two words—*The Legend*.

As a throbbing pain shot through Bri's temples, she glanced at Logan. Did he know about the witches' warning?

Amidst her mother's sobs, her father pulled her into his arms. "Please, don't cry. It breaks my heart to see you hurt."

Love poured from him every time he looked at her mother, like he worshiped, adored her, hungered for the mere sight of her. Would Bri find a man who could love her that deeply? Unconditionally. If she did, she would never betray him.

Her father walked toward Bri, his eyes glazed over with sadness. "Let's concentrate on surviving these forces. After it's over and you're safe, we'll talk about the past, which I'd like to remind you can't be changed."

"Not until I know a few things." Bri glared at her mother. "You broke our laws forbidding vampires and witches to have a sexual relationship. Do you know why we have these injunctions?"

Silence.

Her mother avoided looking at Bri.

"Of course you do." The unspoken question burning Bri's mind seared her with fear. Had her mother done the unforgivable? "Because of the very real temptation to use witchcraft to produce a child from such a union. Did you use a fertility spell to conceive me?"

Silence.

"Yes." Her mother's voice was barely a whisper.

God help her! Logan had told the truth. Vampires can't have children the normal way.

She was the bad seed prophesied. She was The Legend.

"How could you do this?"

"Your mother did it out of love for me, Bri." Her father lifted her mother's trembling hand and kissed the palm. "She wanted you so badly."

Did her father know about the spell? "You went along with this?"

Silence.

Her mother cleared her throat. "He didn't know."

"I never regret having you, Bri." Her father stroked her mother's hair.

Bri gritted her teeth. "If the coven knew I was The Legend, they would kill me."

"Stop it," Logan pleaded.

"Why should I? How would they do it, mother? Burn me at the stake? Yes, that would kill both the witch and the vampire." Bri shook with the bitterness of her thoughts. Her head swam with the cruel ways the coven could deal with her. "Decapitation? Yes, that would kill both the witch and the vampire. Which do you think they would prefer?"

"Your mother loves you," her father whispered.

"Does she?" The instant Bri asked she knew it was her hurt lashing out, all those years, all those lies.

"How can you even ask such a question?" Her father's eyes widened. "She broke the laws to have you, exposed herself to death."

"I would defy *anyone* who tried to harm you," her mother snapped.

Bri understood far more than either of her parents' intended when her mother's scathing gaze darted from Bri's father to Logan. She could almost touch the dire warning that sparked at them, a witches' warning—swift, deadly.

"Stop it!" Logan yelled, instantly by Bri's side. "Your mother and father have guarded your secret, sacrificed their love to keep you safe. The coven doesn't know about your DNA. We'll defend you with our lives."

"Aren't you afraid of me?" Bri asked, her voice bitter.

"Oh, you got me scared now." Logan laughed. "Why? Because some dumb superstition was created to keep witches and vampires apart. Because it warns you'll become this fierce blood-beast. It's nothing but hype. Besides, you don't kill someone because of what

they *may* or *may not* become."

"Really? Weren't you the one who warned me you'd kill me if I even *thought* about destroying my father?"

"That was when we were both stupid. I didn't know a damn thing about witches and you knew even less about vampires."

Logan's words were like a slap, jarring her to the core.

What was she doing?

She looked at the anguish on their faces, anguish she'd caused. Yes, her father had suffered. Yes, she was The Legend. Yet through it all, her parents still cared, she could see it in their eyes, in the thirst, the hunger that lingered. Her mother defied everything she held dear to give Bri life. Her father loved her as well, would continue loving her for lifetimes.

When they grew silent, Nathan glanced at them. "I guess everyone is through yelling." His baritone voice remained calm. "Well, we're an official family now, warts and all."

She smiled and understood how her mother had fallen hopelessly in love with this charming vampire. In retrospect, he had suffered the most from their relationship, yet he remained honorable, loving. He hadn't denied the allegations Bri flung at him. Instead, he'd insisted the truth come from her mother.

"There's something you need to know about your mother. In the midst of all this trouble, she defied me, used witchcraft to prevent me from moving her into my house. You needed her, so she refused to leave your side."

Her mother stared at the floor.

Only when Bri embraced her did she respond by hugging her back. "I shouldn't have lied to you. Do you hate me?"

"I might feel like wringing your neck sometimes, but I could never, ever hate you."

Her father beamed at them. "Just so you know. No one in our blood-bonded family would defy me. They won't harm you."

Bri didn't miss the implication. Her father had cleverly chosen her protector, one who wasn't of their blood-bonded family. One who could kill her, if he had to.

She put her telepathic shield up to block Logan and her mother from reading her mind.

Father, no one else can hear me. There's been enough fighting in our family. Mother will never forgive you or Logan if I must be destroyed. In the event of my death, please see that mother gets the letter I'm writing and placing in your photo album."

I meant what I said earlier, Bri. I could never harm you, child. It'll break my heart if Logan is forced to destroy you one day.

I know. She lowered her telepathic shield.

Bri swallowed the pain, strolled across the room and stood next to Logan.

"So far the only ones hunting me are the AMRIID, Col. Taylor and this vampire, who probably has followers." She smiled, hoping they believed her bravado. "Piece of cake."

"How about Jason?" her father asked. "You want us to help get him out of there?"

She didn't want him endangering his life. They could handle this. Besides, if they needed him, he could be there within a heartbeat.

Bri looked at Logan, who raised a questioning brow.

Act natural, she warned herself.

You say yes and I'll break your other collarbone, in front of my father. Try explaining that to

your alpha male vampire friends.

Logan gave her a cocky smile. "No, we'll handle it."

Her father chuckled as if he'd read her thoughts. "Our guarding the donors may scare off the rogue. I can't guarantee we'll get a chance to destroy him. You want us to track him down, take him out?"

Logan glanced at her.

I owe this vampire for killing Ruth.

He nodded in agreement, but a hint of worry flittered across his face.

"No, we'll handle it," Bri said.

"How much more training does she need before you two rescue Jason?" her father asked Logan.

"Shapeshifting. We'll complete that tonight."

Logan smiled at her. *You ready to kick ass tomorrow night?*

Bri grinned. *Yes!*

Finally, they would get Jason out of that hellhole.

Chapter Six

Two things told Logan he was in major trouble. The way Bri's passion-filled eyes devoured him, stripped him naked, and then made love to him. The Ronnie Milsap song that kept playing over and over on the stereo in the living room asking the same burning question, "How Do I Turn You On."

"A half a sandwich, that's what we agreed on. Something light," Logan reminded her.

He rolled his cuffs up, rested his hands on the table and leaned against the cushions of her breakfast nook, his back to the bay window.

She opened the refrigerator, glanced inside then shut it so hard it rattled the wine rack sitting on top. "I have a confession."

Uh-oh.

"You forgot to buy groceries?"

When she whirled to face him, the hem of her blue dress lifted, revealing those gorgeous shapely legs. He tapped down the sudden desire to feel them wrapped around him in the throes of passion.

"I lied."

At least she had the decency to blush when she'd admitted it.

"There's a lot of that going around lately." He folded his arms across his broad chest, leery of where this conversation was headed.

He saw the pained expression on her face.

This woman is definitely up to something.

She's off limits, he reminded himself, but that didn't stop this constant craving for her. A craving that begged him to throw caution aside.

"If you're not starving, we better transport to the hospital workout area. Shapeshifting, remember?" His gaze dropped to her full mouth, her tasty lips. She flicked her tongue across them, wetness lingering on her lower lip. He suppressed a groan.

She shifted from one booted foot to the other. "You aren't making this easy."

He did a little shifting of his own, adjusting his briefs. "You don't strike me as the shy type. Come right out and say whatever's on your mind."

She released a long sigh and inched closer to him. "Will you at least hear me out before you say no?"

Uh-oh.

He cocked a brow. "I'm listening."

"You said you believe The Legend is all hype."

"Damn straight. All this nonsense was dreamed up to keep witches and vampires apart. Each believes the other is evil. It's all about balancing some pretty awesome powers."

"What if you're right?" She wrinkled her brows. "What if we *prove* it's a lie?"

He had a good idea where she was leading him. Neither of them wanted to think of the other possibility, but someone *had* to say it. "What if we *prove* it's *true*?"

She snorted. "Don't you think I've thought about that? Hell, I've thought about nothing *but* that since I found out who I am." She shook her head, a look of anguish on her face. "Not knowing is driving me nuts. Will I wake up one morning, look in the mirror and

see what?" She shrugged. "This—this monster. One way or the other, I *have* to know."

"Hey, relax. I agree. We both need to find out the truth." She wasn't the only one thinking about the promise he'd made to her. God help him if she became a super-rogue vampire later on, and he had to kill her.

He saw the relief on her face and fought the urge to shout, "*Whatever it is, I'll do it.*" Before he took that giant leap, he wanted to make sure both of them had thought this thing all the way through, from every possible angle.

Her eyes narrowed. "Here comes the part you'll balk at, but I can't do it without you. We can test the basic precept of The Legend."

"Okay, what theory are we testing? Spell it out, Bri."

"I'm part vampire, part witch. Sunlight doesn't kill me. I could live at the beach. Prolonged sunlight would kill you."

"So?" *Old news. Say it, Bri.*

"If you drink my blood, will it transfer that property to you? I can't get any plainer than that. Does my blood have the power to allow full vampires, like yourself, to exist in sunlight?"

Bingo! Right where he knew she was leading him. Meet the vampire lab rat.

Hey, why wouldn't he do this for her? If it was a lie, nothing would happen to him. If it was true, he could go to the beach. It sounded like a win-win. Besides, no way could that boatload of crap be true.

He had no problem following the next logical conclusion. "If we prove it's a lie, we get rid of two blood hunters—witches and vampires. We would remove any reason for them to hunt you because your blood won't do squat."

"Right." Her face lit up with what he recognized as hope.

He wanted to make sure she hadn't forgotten their remaining target. "However, we still have to take out the rogue. He has broken our laws."

"We think the same about that murderous bloodsucker." She pursed her lips. "He's toast."

"Good."

Had she really thought this next part all the way through? Nah! She'd learned a lot about their family, but she still had a ways to go. He'd bet this would never have occurred to her. *Time to find out.*

He fought a smile when he asked, "How do you propose to test this?"

Without hesitating, she pulled the neckline of her knit dress lower and shoved her hair back, exposing her throat to him. "I give you permission to bite my neck, just a nip." She looked like someone who was placing her head on the execution's block.

Logan was convinced that brilliant idea flew right out of a horror movie. "I think you might have missed something, partner."

"What? I'm offering to become your host."

"It's not that simple. Wished it was." *Liar.* "That's not how it's done." Release of a vampire's fangs was triggered by deep, primal emotions. He got a taste of a particular primal emotion every time he looked at Bri and got a hard-on.

Her eyes spat blue fire. "Oh, no. I'm not submitting to the change, buster. Get it through your thick head. I don't want to become a full vampire. I'm only submitting to you

sipping a little of my blood, so we can see if The Legend is true."

"I got that the first time, but I told you it's a sensual act." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and threw her a cocky smile. Did she get the picture? Should he form letters with his hands and fingers to spell out *foreplay*, followed by *sex*?

Her jaw drew slack.

He could almost see wheels spinning like crazy in her head, but decided not to invade her private thoughts.

No fun tonight, he told his erection.

Logan chuckled. "Let's go workout."

"No." She bit her lower lip, holding it before releasing it. "I'm willing."

His heart raced. "Willing to do what?"

"Have sex."

His mouth fell open. She'd done it again, surprised the hell out of him.

"As long as you understand, it's just sex, Logan." She lifted her brows. "Can you handle that?"

Can he handle that? Was she kidding? All she had to do was walk into a room and he was hot and ready. He admired a strong woman, like Bri. She knew what she wanted and spelled it out loud and clear.

She was learning fast. By the time the danger was over, Bri could stand up against any force. She wouldn't need protection. From anyone! She wouldn't need him. That's what he wanted. Right? The student to master the teacher.

He hesitated.

"You aren't coercing me into sleeping with you, Logan. I think we've both wanted this for quite some time. What have you decided?"

Decided? What was wrong with him? A ravishing woman offered herself to him and he felt disappointed, empty inside. Why? Lots of women had casually come and gone over the centuries, it surprised him that this particular one bothered him so much. While he might admit it to himself, he would never admit it to her.

He'd help her with her experiment and perform one of his own. *Vampire style.*

One by one any rational reason for stopping this before it went too far deserted him. Replaced by one driving need—to be buried deep inside her.

In an instant, he closed the distance between them. He lifted her hair, placing soft kisses on her neck and shoulders. She trembled. He inhaled the strawberry scent of her shampoo and unzipped the back of her dress.

"What are you doing?" Her voice sounded breathless with anticipation, he hoped.

"Taking you up on your offer." He raised a brow and grinned, determined to keep the mood light. "Your blood against mine. Half-vampire versus full vampire. Purely a scientific experiment."

He studied her, for any denial, any hint that it meant more.

Nothing.

She smiled. "Perfect. It keeps things simple."

He ignored the dull ache of disappointment.

"Let me do the honors." He stilled her fingers as they reached to remove her dress. "I enjoy unwrapping packages."

"No." She brushed his hands away. "You've always been the seducer." She tipped her head back, leaned toward him until their bodies touched. "Not this time." Her fingers grasped his belt, undid it and took it with her as she stepped backwards.

He chuckled when she slapped the floor with the leather, making it snap like a whip, and then laid the belt across a chair.

She's out to prove this is only sex.

His libido shouted, *why fight it? What a way to go.*

In a graceful choreographed striptease for his eyes only, her hips pulsed in time with "How Do I Turn You On". His heated gaze slid over her, unable to look away. Damn she was gorgeous. Her clingy dress slid down her arms, billowed around her booted-feet as she stepped over it.

Unabashed, she stood before him, all lush womanly curves, dressed in a skimpy royal-blue bra, which opened in the front to paradise. Her breasts cascaded over the silky fabric. His gaze lowered to her bare midriff. He imagined dipping, swirling his tongue in her navel. A scant triangle of material drew his heated attention. *Lord, love her.* She wore a bikini.

Need punched him in the gut.

Her lips lifted in a sexy, irresistible smile. Excitement sparkled like shooting stars in her eyes, darkened with desire. "You're overdressed."

As if by magic, her fingers reached for him. For one fleeting second, he forgot how to breathe. She unbuttoned his trousers. Her hands made contact with his erection as she rasped his zipper down. He bit his bottom lip from the sheer pleasure of her touch.

He lifted her hands to his lips, kissing the palms, her wrists. When he sucked her index finger, her pulse jumped as her breath caught.

Every touch, every glance they shared increased their desire for each other. He wanted her so badly, he couldn't think straight, but not like this. He wanted to intensify the pleasure for both of them, not rush into it like a house afire, which is how his body felt.

"We need to slow it down a tad, take the scenic route," he whispered, determined to take back control before he lost it, laid her on the kitchen tile and took her fast. While that would slake their lust, it would not accomplish what he had in mind, showing her with his body that what they would share tonight was far more than mere sex.

She chuckled, unbuttoned his shirt and placed a light kiss on his bare chest.

He swept her into his arms, went to the breakfast nook and sat her on the table. He placed a kiss on her lips, his tongue tasting her.

She drew back and smiled at him. "I sense a power struggle."

"Really?" He nudged her legs apart with his knee. "I wonder where you got that silly notion." He stepped between them, inching forward until his erection pushed against her wet bikinis.

"When you put it like that, I think we've found the winner," she said, her voice husky.

He chuckled, enjoying this sexy, playful side of Bri.

Let the experiments begin. Hers and mine.

He cupped her breasts, weighing the fullness, the way her nipples tightened when he slid his fingertips and thumbs across her silky bra. He smiled into her eyes, laden with lust. "I think we're both winners, especially tonight."

Bri closed her eyes against the painful lies she'd told Logan. While she needed his help with the experiment, no way was this just sex. Regardless of how he really felt about her now, things had changed, her emotions had changed. She'd discovered a lot about her life tonight. Her father wasn't the bad guy, her mother had lied to her and Logan wanted to protect her. Look at the way he'd stood up to her mother, vowing he would protect Bri with his life. She wanted to love him. Enough to pretend it was only sex. Enough to give herself to him, to live a seductive fantasy with him tonight, tomorrow, however much time they had.

"These boots have to go." He yanked off one boot, and then the other, lining them up on the floor. After he pulled off her socks, he stuffed them into her boots.

She kept thinking about what she'd done. This was the only way it would work, him believing the lies. He could continue protecting her, without cumbersome emotions that might slow his reflexes. If she became a rogue later, fulfilling the last of The Legend, he could destroy her, without it destroying him, too. And the best part, she would have what she wanted – to love him for whatever time they had left.

No regrets. That's what she wanted. If she didn't make love to him, she would always have regrets.

She trembled when he placed soft kisses on her eyelids. Warm puffs of his sweet breath brushed her skin, prickled her flesh. He moved in a slow, circular pattern of sheer pleasure. Forehead. Cheeks. Chin, lingering to tease her lips with his tongue. He chuckled when she playfully nipped at him with her teeth.

Moments later, his mouth closed over hers in a fierce, hungry kiss. Her heart beat out of control when his tongue slipped between her lips again.

"I'm afraid these have to go as well." His palm coasted down her stomach. He shoved the silk bikinis aside, circling, massaging her, until she was soaking wet. His thumb played with her, increasing the pressure until waves of pleasure set her core on fire.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered. "Every inch of you." He curled his fingers in the elastic band, rolled her panties down her body and removed them. Seconds later, he unfastened the clasp on her bra. The straps slid down her arms. Her breasts swelled, ached for his touch, his tongue, his mouth.

"I love the way these feel." His thumbs scraped across her nipples, and then his thumbs and forefingers tugged at the tightened buds. Ultra-sensitive, he set the tips on fire.

She moaned as intense pleasure mixed with a hint of pain rocked her, almost making her come.

"You like that?" he asked, rolling her nipples between his fingers.

She nodded.

"I want to taste them."

He cupped her breast, caressing, lifting it to his open lips. They closed over her hard nipple, his teeth lightly rasping, and then his rough tongue lathing the nub. She arched against him. His jaws flexed as he sucked her nipple hard, his fingers plucking the other one.

She was so near...

"Logan." Quick, sensuous ripples of release shot through her body. She clutched his hair, pulling him closer, prolonging her pleasure.

When she floated back to earth, he was smiling at her.

She reached for the waistband of his trousers, wanting to see all of his tight body. As if

sensing her desire, he shoved his trousers and briefs down, freeing his erection.

Her fingers closed around the length of him, feeling him surge at her touch. "Okay, *this* is impressive."

He groaned when she stroked his shaft from the base to the head, rubbing the moisture released on the tip.

Smiling at her, he kissed her breasts, and then her stomach, his tongue lapping her skin. She held her breath, anticipation building to a crescendo as his lips brushed her inner thighs and inched higher. She shuddered when he leaned her back, his tongue stroked her mound. His teeth lightly scraped her clitoris once, twice. Desire made her quake with need. She bucked from the warm pleasure as he suckled her with his lips and tongue. He grabbed her hips and held them still.

She couldn't take much of this.

"Logan." Her second orgasm hit her, deeper, sweeter than the first.

In the middle of drifting in ecstasy, he pulled her to the edge of the table. "I'm not going to hurt you. Do you trust me?"

Their gazes locked, mirroring the same hunger.

"Yes." She spread her legs wide.

He grinned at her. "This is your lucky night, Bri. I want you to compare the previous orgasms to the one I'll give you when I sip your blood."

Instead of fear, she greeted his thick, hard shaft with a long sigh when it plunged into her to the hilt. Her breath caught as he lifted her hips and drove deeper into her, picking up the pace. Faster. Harder.

The last thing she remembered was the sensation of falling a great distance into a swirling pool of liquid pleasure. Hot. Filling. Ecstasy bathed her body from the top of her head to her toes. It became so intense, so exquisite she screamed. "Logan!"

"Are you sure," Bri asked Logan for the hundredth time. "There are no marks on my neck. Maybe you didn't drink enough."

Logan stood admiring the same workout clothes she wore when they first met. The night she'd broken his collarbone. A black mesh top and those sexy, ass-hugging shorts.

"I'm going to record the answers for you next time, so you can hit, Play. I sealed the wound by licking it when I exited. Your vampire side took care of the healing." He chuckled. "I drank enough."

He didn't want to tell her that he had a damn hard time just sipping her. A taste, that's all he'd allowed himself. A taste of liquid ambrosia. A taste he'd held in his mouth, savored. "It was sweet, tangy. Delicious, like the finest, imported wine." He winked at her. "Sounds like you want a repeat performance."

"I do not," she said, like some petulant child.

Yes, she did. So did he.

"We proved everything they said about me was a lie? My blood has no special powers, right?" Bri asked. The hesitancy in her voice told him she couldn't believe it.

"Yes. I sipped your blood. I let the sun shine on one leg and it burned the shit out of me. Nothing has changed. Forget about the rest of The Legend, too, where it warns about how you end up later in life. You're not going to turn into a two-headed, fire-breathing

monster." He laughed. "And I can throw away my trusty dragon slaying sword, My Lady." He bowed from the waist. Thankful to whatever fate had decreed that he would never have to keep that promise he'd made to Nathan and to her. She would not die by his hands, not ever.

Her experiment had been a success.

How about *his* experiment? *Vampire style*. Was there such a thing as 'branding a woman'? Supposedly a vampire had the ability to do that when he had found a woman he wanted as his mate. He would make soul-bonding love to her, pour his seed into her and she would crave him and *only* him as her lover. He wished he knew if it had worked on Bri or, like The Legend, it was nothing but mythological lies.

"While you're at the hospital tomorrow, bring Dr. Reese and Megan into the loop about what we're doing. Do it over lunch, in case Col. Taylor has their places bugged. Afterwards, we'll drop by Nathan's for a briefing, and then we'll go after Jason."

"I never thought this day would come." She smiled at him. "Thank you."

"Nothing to it. Now, concentrate on the lesson – shapeshifting."

"First tell me you're proud of me."

He *was* proud of her, so was Nathan. She had learned a lot about their family, but this was only the beginning.

"You talked me through it, but I changed to a vampire for the second time and I felt totally in control."

He smiled at her. "Plus, you mastered leaping, hovering and walking on the ceiling, without breaking your neck. Great job. Now, stop stalling. Back to the lesson."

She scrunched her face up. Even making faces she was adorable. "I watched you shapeshift. The whole process looked... excruciating."

He wasn't going to lie, tell her it didn't hurt. "Come on. It's like the burn when you lift weights, you'll learn to love it before long. Hop to it, so we can get some rest tonight."

Without hesitating, she shucked her workout clothes right in front of him.

He couldn't take his eyes off every naked, luscious curve. His mouth went dry. He thought he would choke on his tongue.

Concentrate on the lesson.

"Okay, you hunched down on all fours, like this." She did just that.

His breathing became shallow. Her tempting heart-shaped butt formed the most erotic, seductive vision he's ever seen. His body reacted.

Concentrate on the lesson.

"And you started to change."

After several seconds, she expelled a long breath. "Nothing's happening."

"Give it time."

Several minutes ticked by.

"Okay, why isn't something happening?"

When she arched her back, twisted around to glance at him, her breasts jiggled. He groaned inside, wishing she was on top of him, so he could fondle them.

"Tune into your vampire side, let it dominate. See in your mind's eye the creature you wish to become. Focus on that image. Burn it into your brain. *Stay focused.*"

"Okay, before I zoom into an animal, how do I get back?"

"You take another form, but it's still your essence locked inside the animal's body."

Don't worry. You'll be able to reverse the process. Ready?"

"No, but I'm going to do it anyway. If I get stuck in some toad's body, it's your fault."

He chuckled. "You won't."

Five minutes later, her body contorted. Bones popped, dislocated. Her nose, limbs and hair grew, became elongated. It was the same process he'd gone through to shapeshift into the wolf, except Bri had chosen a different color wolf. Snow white, like ice crystals.

She lifted her head and howled.

He smiled. She'd surprised him again.

Her yellow eyes, gleamed, turning blood red. Her white hair bristled. Teeth barred, she moved noiselessly toward him.

Within two feet of him, she stopped, studying him.

"You're beautiful, no matter what form you take."

Thirty minutes later, Logan stared at what he'd come to realize was a very serious problem. One, he couldn't solve. One, only Bri could solve.

He circled the wolf, sprawled out on the floor, perfectly content.

Frantic, Logan's heart tumbled.

"Dammit! Don't just lay there, do something."

Nothing.

The wolf closed its eyes as if bored with Logan.

"Great! How am I going to explain this to your father? He's going to destroy me, for sure." He thought about Bri's mother. "Hell, your mother will probably do some black magic incantation and boil me in oil."

He wanted to grab the animal around its stubborn neck, shake some sense into it, but Logan knew better. Even if it was Bri, instinct might cause the wolf to attack, go for his throat.

There was no reason Bri shouldn't be able to shapeshift back to her human form. Not one! Except, the unthinkable – she didn't want to.

"Jason is depending on us. You want to leave him with Col. Taylor?"

The wolf rose. Its ears stood up.

Logan's body shook with tension as he waited.

It was like talking to some mischievous child, refusing to mind. "Do it now!"

Ten minutes later, he gasped in relief as the process reversed.

Quick as his Bri appeared in her human form, he gathered her naked body in his protective arms. "You scared the shit out of me, woman." He lifted her face to his. "Baby, don't you ever scare me like that again."

Her chin quivered. "I-I wanted to stay. I felt safe." Tears misted her eyes.

He placed a light kiss on the top of her head. "Oh, God, Bri. You can't run away. We'll survive this thing."

She clung to him. "I don't want to be alone."

He wanted to absorb all her hurt, fear, every negative emotion she felt. "Shh, I'm here."

"When your arms are wrapped around me, I feel safe."

"I'm not going anywhere."

She glanced up at him. "Please, sleep with me, hold me."

The doorbell rang, making Larry Upton jump. He frowned and glanced up from his

favorite TV science fiction show. Who could be calling on him at eleven o'clock at night?

He strolled to the door and glanced through the peephole. A man held up some kind of official looking badge. Larry opened the door. "Yes?"

"Mr. Upton, I'm with The Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, AMRIID." The man flashed the badge again. The thing was nothing but a blur without his reading glasses, which were sitting on the coffee table.

Larry had never heard of them, but his ears perked up at the two ominous words. Infectious. Diseases. Were they here to warn him about something?

"Did I come in contact with something bad at the hospital?"

"No. I'm sorry for the lateness of my visit, but we're conducting an interview of all the people who donated blood to Jason Blakely. I was wondering if I might come in."

Larry hesitated.

"It won't take but about five minutes of your time."

Larry smiled, wondering if this was some human-interest story they were working on. "Is this for the newspapers?" He always did want his name in the papers.

The man in the lab coat nodded and smiled real friendly like.

"Well, why didn't you say so to begin with? Sure, come on in."

Larry glanced at the open can of beer on the table and the pizza box, containing three uneaten slices.

He reached for the remote and flipped off the TV. "Excuse the mess, I wasn't expecting company." Larry turned around. He lifted a brow. "What is it you want to ask me?"

The man in the lab coat glowed, became transparent.

Larry blinked several times.

The man vanished in a puff of smoke.

Chills ran up Larry's spine.

A vapor like mist drifted across the living room. Like something out of a horror film, the mist thickened, solidified into a tall man, dressed in black, wearing a trench coat.

Larry's heartbeat raced.

The man speared him with an evil gleam.

"Nice of you to invite me in." A sinister smile crossed the man's lips.

Their gazes locked.

Unable to look away, Larry's eyes widened as the man bared his teeth.

Rapier like fangs glistened in the lamplight.

Larry opened his mouth to scream.

Instantly, the man flicked his hand as if issuing a command.

The scream died in Larry's throat.

This can't be happening. There's no such thing as vampires. He was having a nightmare. Wake up!

His mind frantically warned him—RUN! Suddenly, his body grew cold.

Why couldn't he wake up?

He couldn't feel his arms and legs.

His heartbeat raced, threatening to jump from his chest.

He found himself face-to-face with the monster.

Trapped in a deadly web, fangs ripped into Larry's neck.

Logan glanced at Bri, bundled under the bedcovers, cuddled against his chest. She was warm, soft. He listened to her breathe, felt it stir the hairs on his chest. He listened to her heartbeat, the blood rushing through her veins. He'd simply held her close, like she'd asked, but it was something he'd never forget.

Logan!

Oh, God. Please tell me that isn't Nathan mind linking with him, while he was in bed with his daughter.

Nathan?

You want me to tell you it isn't me? Nathan chuckled.

Shit!

Do you care for my daughter?

Very deeply.

Nathan chuckled again. Welcome to the same boat I'm in with Danielle. However, I would like to remind you again that this is my daughter you're in bed with. I seem to recall you lecturing me, saying you couldn't understand how I let myself get in that awful predicament, falling in love with a witch. I don't want Bri hurt. She deserves someone who can love her unconditionally.

I agree and I wouldn't dream of hurting Bri.

Well, I have to admit it gives me a great deal of satisfaction seeing you wearing the same shoes.

Okay, okay, did you come here to gloat?

No, I need you to transport to Larry Upton's apartment. He's been murdered, like Ruth Madden.

Logan glanced down at Bri. One of her arms was draped over his shoulder. He kissed the top of her head. She would blame herself for this murder, too, but it wasn't her fault.

Logan, I'll watch out for Bri while you take care of this. Two of my blood-bonded family will meet you. They'll fill you in on the details. Find out if we're dealing with the same killer rogue.

Logan tightened his arms around Bri. He was determined to let her sleep. He'd slip out, be gone for a little while and return to hold her.

Nathan?

I'd like to tell Bri exactly who I am.

I don't object, but I have to warn you, coming clean with her may backfire on you.

I know.

Bri woke up Friday morning with the warm memory of Logan holding her during the night. She reached for him, but found her queen-size bed empty. Disoriented, she bolted upright, leaned her head back and bumped it against the mahogany headboard. "Ouch!"

Sunlight filtered through the slits in the blinds and danced across the Persian rug. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand and couldn't believe her eyes. Eight-thirty. She'd overslept. Thank goodness Dr. Reese was covering for her and Logan.

Where was Logan? Vampires had a natural time clock as far as the sun was concerned. Why hadn't he awakened her?

The aroma of fresh coffee wafted to her nostrils. She smiled. He must have brewed a pot.

After a quick shower, she changed into jeans and a black tee. She slung on her leather boots and practically flew down the stairs.

"Logan," she called out, scanning the kitchen.

He wasn't there.

When she entered the living room, she found him. Barefooted, he stood in front of the antique mirror, dressed only in gray trousers.

The look on his face was one of awe.

He glanced at her and pointed to the mirror. "I have a reflection. I can see myself." He inched closer to the mirror and stared at himself, his hands sliding over his cheeks and chin. "Do you know how long it's been since I've seen myself? I'd forgotten what I looked like." He stepped back and turned full circle, as if making sure his reflection followed, studying himself again, from different angles.

"You're beautiful." She smiled at him.

In her heart she was glad her blood had given him this wonderful gift. He deserved to see how handsome he was. Those gorgeous dark green eyes of his were a work of art.

Like a kid overjoyed with new toys, he lifted his arms and touched the sunlight pouring through the windows. "I've been on the patio. I actually laid in one of the lounge chairs for thirty minutes. I didn't burst into flames. It didn't burn, Bri. Not one little scorch. Since I've sipped your blood, sunlight can't destroy me."

Their gazes caught.

She watched the joy he felt turn to pain and utter sadness as the full impact of what this meant hit him.

His eyes widened as if in disbelief. "It took a while for your blood to work. I don't understand it. I'm still full vampire, yet your blood had added something to mine that gives me a reflection and allows me to survive in sunlight." He lifted his brows. "Do you think these abilities will go away?"

"No."

"You knew it was true, didn't you?" Logan asked.

"In my heart I knew, but I hoped I was wrong." She gulped a deep, shuddering breath.

He shook his head, like he wanted to wish it all away. "There's *nothing* a vampire wouldn't do for what your blood can give them." He rubbed the back of his neck. "This rogue and any of his followers won't stop until they find you."

She swallowed the hurt inside.

"Listen to me, Bri. Just because we've proven the first part of The Legend is true, doesn't mean the entire thing is true. I can't see you turning bad. No way."

"I wish I believed that." She glanced at the floor, avoiding his eyes. "You made me a promise, Logan Vance, I expect you to keep it."

He knitted his brows together. "If you think what we did was just sex, you're wrong. How can you hold me to that promise?"

"The Legend warns that the creature I'll become is impossible to kill. It'll be feared by every vampire that walks the earth." Her voice faltered. "With you...if I hesitate the least bit, you might succeed where others would fail."

"Damn." He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

"If *you* destroy me, I don't think I'll mind it so bad." Tears ran down her cheeks.

Logan held her in the warm safety of his arms and kissed the top of her head.

"Do it for the Bri you hold right now. Okay?"

He exhaled a shaky breath.
“Bri...” He nodded.

Chapter Seven

"Telling my mother is a stupid idea," Bri whispered. "Not to mention dangerous. I'm not sure how she'll react." To say her mother would be pissed Bri had slept with a vampire would be an understatement.

Bri nervously glanced around her father's den, expecting her mother to appear any second. If her mother decided to take revenge on Logan, Bri and her father would have a hard time ending the fight and keeping them both alive.

Logan sat beside her at the antique mahogany table, not saying a word. There was anger in the tightness of his mouth and the way he avoided her eyes that she couldn't understand.

"I'll break it to my father and let him handle telling her."

The firm set of Logan's jaw told her what he thought of her suggestion. He was determined to tell both her parents at the same time, whether Bri liked it or not.

"Better yet, forget about telling them." She grabbed Logan's arm in a last ditch effort to call this whole thing off. "Let's leave and go rescue Jason."

At the sound of her father's voice in the hallway, she bit her bottom lip.

Too late!

Logan pulled his arm away from her. "Are you ashamed you slept with me?"

Her jaw slid open. "Is that what you thought all this was about? No. Hell, no." She blushed.

His expression softened. "They have to know and both of them should hear it at the same time. We don't want them to accidentally find out from someone who happens to notice that I've changed."

She knew he was right, but that didn't make facing her mother easier. "Okay, but don't go into details."

Logan smiled and jiggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Did you really think I'd give them a blow-by-blow account?"

Bri chewed on a hangnail at the base of her thumb's cuticle. "Just say you tasted my blood. An experiment. Simple. You don't have to say *how*."

He rolled his eyes. "I think I got it the first time. However, your father is a vampire, remember? He knows *exactly* how I tasted your blood."

"Great!"

"I don't know what *you're* worried about. When your mother finds out, she'll assume this is entirely my fault. I used mind control, or something. I don't think she'll welcome me with open arms, unless she has a stake hidden up her sleeve."

"You won't be alone, Logan. We'll face this together."

He chuckled. "Where have I heard that before?"

"Well, it's true."

"That's easy for you to say. You won't be her intended target." He lifted a brow. "In case this togetherness fails miserably, how do I tell if your mother's about to send me to oblivion with one of her spells?"

Footsteps echoed down the hall.

"The den is like a tomb, every word vibrates like a kettledrum in the hallway." Her father smiled as he entered. "Since she's zapped me with electricity, I can answer that. She lifts her arms and begins her spells by saying, 'Come.' Relax, you two."

Relax! "I don't think that word is in my vocabulary," Bri said.

"You have a little bit of a reprieve. I don't want your mother upset by the briefing, so I ordered young Matt Griffin, her protector, to transport her here after we're finished." He smiled at Logan. "In case you're wondering, you have an ally. I'm on your side, both of you."

Bri smiled at her father, who was sticking his neck way out on this.

"By the way, Col. Taylor had Lt. Nash do a background check on Dr. Reese and the two of you. No surprise to us. We expected them to snoop. Our family covered your backs, made sure they only found out what we wanted them to know."

Her father picked up a crumpled newspaper from the magazine rack. He took a seat across from them and dropped the paper onto the table. "I don't suppose either of you read the obituary column today."

"No," they said in unison, giving each other a puzzled look.

Bri glanced down and into the happy, smiling face of Ruth Madden. The picture in the paper brought back painful memories of that horrible night they'd found her. Bri grimaced.

"I'll save you the trouble. According to the notice, she died of a massive heart attack. She has been cremated. Her memorial service is being held tomorrow at Second Baptist. Afterwards, her ashes will be interred at Good Shepherd Cemetery."

"Col. Taylor?" Bri asked.

Logan nodded. "His alien theory. The only ones who know vampires exist are witches, who wouldn't want to expose themselves. He doesn't realize he's doing us a huge favor by preventing others from finding out."

"Let's hope the Army continues to hunt these aliens and not us." Her father glanced at Logan. "I wonder what kind of death he'll give Larry Upton."

"Larry Upton?" Bri asked.

Logan leaned toward her and whispered, "I'm sorry. I didn't get a chance to tell you about the other blood donor."

Oh, God. Not another one. How many people would die because of her? "You didn't want to upset me."

Logan nodded.

Her father explained how he'd asked Logan to check on the murder scene.

Bri blushed when her father mentioned he'd watched over her while she slept, until Logan had returned. She hid a smile when her father told her that he'd made sure Logan's intentions were honorable.

"I wasn't gone long, Bri. You were sound asleep, safe. I didn't want you to see what the killer-rogue had done. This sadistic monster tortured the victim."

"Because he didn't find me." She cringed and glanced away.

If he did find her, what would he do to her?

"Something bothered me about the crime scene." Logan rubbed his chin. "I smelled the same scent of the rogue, but someone else was in the room with Larry Upton."

"You didn't smell him at Ruth's?" Bri asked.

"No. Perhaps he didn't go inside, but only came to the front door."

Bri nodded.

"This person went inside Larry Upton's, but didn't stay long."

Bri furrowed her brows. "How could you tell that?"

"His unique scent was on the porch and only one area of the living room. It was like he stepped in, waited, and then left suddenly. I think Larry Upton allowed this person to enter the apartment. Once he gained entrance, the rogue entered."

"Any idea who it might be?" Bri asked.

"Maybe it's the same person who supplied the rogue with the list of donors. From the scent, it's a male. I think the rogue has turned this man."

"It could be someone who works for Col. Taylor." Her father glanced at each of them with concern. "Be very careful when you rescue Jason. Don't underestimate this minion for a second. He won't be hunting Bri for himself, but to earn favor with the rogue, which means he's willing to do anything."

Bri took a deep, calming breath. "I touched bases with Megan and Dr. Reese. He gave me a list of things to find out when we rescue Jason. What meds they gave him? What IV's? I hope we can find his medical chart."

She glanced up and found Logan's worried gaze on her.

"We'll find it, Bri."

"My house is the safest place to hide Jason," her father said. "It's built like a fortress. Plus, we have alarms and guards on the premises. When Dr. Reese and Megan come to visit Jason, family members can make sure they aren't followed. We can use mind control, erase memories, plant any memory we wish, those are also viable options. Whatever we encounter, we should be able to handle the situation."

Bri was amazed by this man she was proud to call her father. "Great minds think alike. I told them I'd talk you into letting Jason stay here."

Her father laughed. "Will they come up tonight and wait for him?"

Bri shook her head. "Both of them think Col. Taylor will call Megan the second he finds out Jason has been removed from the research lab."

Her father nodded.

"Neither of them wants to endanger Jason. Waiting is so hard on Megan. They intend to come up after three days for a brief visit. Dr. Reese is taking her to his lakeside cabin this weekend. We're hoping some fishing will get her mind off everything for awhile."

A sad, faraway look filled her father's eyes. Bri knew he was thinking about the years, not days, he'd been forced to stay away from her.

"Since we're almost finished, I'll alert Matt to bring Danielle."

Bri and Logan exchanged a worried look.

"Hey, we're in this together. Family," her father said, pausing a few minutes. "Your mother is afraid you'll be lonely and hurt, like she has been with me."

Logan pulled a card out of his pocket and placed it on the table. "This pediatrician is one of my friends and part of my blood-bonded family. Bri and I will drop Jason off, get him settled in, but he'll be pretty much out of it and need to rest, get his strength back over the next few days." Logan pointed to the card. "Give him a call and he'll check Jason."

Her father put the card in his coat pocket. "I'll take care of it."

Heels clicked, echoed down the hall.

Bri almost jumped out of her chair.

My mother is here. Bri felt her hands grow cold.

Her mother stepped into the den wearing the most stunning azalea print jacket dress. It certainly snagged her father's attention. She always looked so feminine.

"You're both dressed in black." Her worried gaze flicked over Bri and Logan. "It's time isn't it? Please be careful tonight." She seated herself next to Bri's father. "Don't hesitate to use the spells I taught you." Her voice sounded unsteady.

"I won't let anything happen to Bri," Logan assured her mother.

"You better not."

"I have something to tell you." Bri glanced from her father to her mother.

"I should be the one to do it," Logan said, as if taking full responsibility, when it had been her idea to begin with.

Her father moved forward in his chair. He looked like he was ready to pounce on any trouble that erupted.

Bri studied her mother, watching for any hint of animosity while Logan explained of their doubt about The Legend and testing the witches' warnings. His sipping Bri's blood and the changes it made in him.

Within minutes, all of them were staring at Bri's mother. Her eyes widened. Two emotions flittered across her face—anger and fright.

"I had hoped the myth was a pack of lies. If anyone did succeed in capturing Bri, they would find her blood useless and let her live." Her mother sighed, her chin quivered. "I can't tell you how sorry I am that any part of it is true, but I'll never believe all of it is true."

Logan nodded. "That's what I keep telling Bri."

"Do you?" Her mother sneered at Logan. "Did you seduce my daughter?"

"Danielle!" Her father's gaze hardened.

Bri glanced at Logan. "He did *not* seduce me." She smiled at him. "I had to talk him into it."

"What, my daughter's not good enough for you?" her mother asked.

Logan shifted in his chair.

Bri heard his teeth clenching. "Mother, if we had proven it wasn't true, blood hunters would be out of our lives forever. I had to know."

"Is he trying to talk you into letting him turn you?" Her mother cut her eyes at Logan.

"Hell, no," Logan said. "Any decision like that would be up to Bri, not me. I wished you understood our family better."

Nathan cleared his throat. "I'm working on it."

"I'm frightened for you, Bri." Her mother's voice broke. "I don't want you hurt by anyone, including Logan."

Bri wanted to level with her about Logan, let her know how hard this was on him, too, but she couldn't be sure how her mother might react. She might try and kill Logan.

"Hey, we've made some progress. Have you noticed we're yelling less at one another?" Her father beamed. "We have a surprise for you, Bri."

She opened her eyes wide. "What?"

Hurried footsteps sounded down the hallway.

"Bri!" Megan ran into the den. Dr. Reese followed close on her heels.

Bri studied his haggard face. Although he smiled at her, underneath was a river of worry.

"We wanted to see you before you left." Dr. Reese nodded toward Bri's father. "Quick as you leave, we're heading back home. His people made sure we weren't followed."

"We did a little bit more than that." Her father smiled. "If anyone asks, Col. Taylor's men will only remember that you didn't go out tonight."

Megan smiled.

"We're getting a pediatrician to examine Jason," her father said. "I don't want you worrying about the boy. We'll take good care of him."

Bri didn't miss the sadness when Dr. Reese cut his gray eyes at her mother and father. Once again, she felt sorry for him.

From the look her father gave Dr. Reese, her father knew this man was in love with her mother. The look wasn't one of jealousy, but of pity. As if he understood, as no one else could, how much it hurt to love this woman.

Bri stood, her arms open wide.

Dr. Reese and Megan grabbed her in a group hug.

Amidst their cries of, we love you, thanks and cautioning her to be careful, Bri bawled like a baby.

God help her to always keep them safe.

"Hide this."

Bri stared at the stake Logan handed her.

"In case we run into the minion, don't hesitate—destroy him."

She bent and stuffed the dagger-like piece of wood into the top of her boot, testing several times to make sure she could retrieve it fast.

"Do you trust me?" Logan asked.

Uh-oh. What's he up to?

"Yes."

As they neared the AMRIID research lab, Logan misted into fine vapor particles. He disappeared before her eyes.

Great! Was there something he forgot to tell her?

He's invisible.

You're on your own, kiddo, she reminded herself.

Logan would be around, but she couldn't see him. She hoped he'd be there when she needed him.

Bri flicked her hand, using her power to slow time in and around the AMRIID research lab. She realized that Logan, wherever he was, would be on the same fast time continuum as her, able to see her every move. And if the other vampire, the rogue's minion, was in the research lab, so could he.

Not wanting to punch the entry code in and take a chance it had changed, or alert anyone if the doors were computer monitored, Bri waited for one of the Army personnel.

As Lt. Nash strolled by, she joined him. She waved her hand in front of his face to test her slowing of time for them.

No reaction.

Good. It worked, which meant she couldn't be seen by the surveillance cameras.

He reached for the keypad. Bri compared the numbers he entered to the ones she'd memorized earlier. They weren't the same. She wondered how often they changed the code.

The heavy, double-doors slid open.

She followed him into the secured area.

Once inside, she moved slowly down the vinyl tiled corridor, scanning for any personnel working late at night. She recognized the faces of the two guards who were in a room off to the right, enjoying a coffee break and shooting the bull.

Her heart thudded. Jason was around the corner.

When she saw him, he was still as death in the middle of the large room, lying on a gurney surrounded by bars. Her gaze caressed him once again. She probed and felt the blood flowing through his tiny veins, blood she'd provided from her artery to save his life. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat made her smile.

An IV still dripped into his left arm. Something had changed though. The bastards had shackled him to the gurney.

She spotted his medical chart. She thought about using her power to will the object to come to her and dismissed the idea. The camera would pick up the chart floating through the air. *Brilliant, Bri. That might raise a little suspicion.* She'd wait and let Logan grab it as they fled the facility.

Bri worked on the next problem. How to open the jail cell and shackle? This would require a spell. One to subtly open the locks, but make it appear to everyone, particularly those damn cameras and any personnel monitoring Jason, that the locks remained intact.

She lifted her arms. "Come, powers of the land and sea. Help free a child that belongs to thee. Hearken ye unto me. To any enemy, let there be no change in what they see. Please, obey my plea. Set this loved one free."

Unseen forces opened the locks, yet left them in place.

Had anyone noticed?

Bri scanned the area.

Nothing.

She thanked the powers of the land and sea for aiding her and Jason.

Four horrendous days. That's how long Jason had been in this experimental hellhole.

Finally, she could get him out.

Suddenly, the mild fragrance of lemon and lavender hit her, reminding her of Ruth's blood-soaked bedroom, along with something different – a splash of vanilla.

Her heart jumped into her throat.

She sniffed and caught the hint of putrid, mold and decay.

Nausea grabbed her stomach. She swallowed hard.

It was the rogue, only not the rogue – someone else.

God, unbelievable – humans couldn't smell this crap. They were lucky.

Bri spun, scanning the area again.

Nothing.

The foul odors drew nearer.

Did this minion have the ability to become invisible, like Logan?

She cautiously moved toward Jason.

A large hand grabbed the back of her long hair, pulling her away, fingers jerking the strands so hard he snatched some of them from her scalp.

She swallowed her scream, lifting her telepathic shields to block this fiend from reading her mind.

Tears filled her eyes. She winced, biting her bottom lip.

Logan. I could lean forward and dump this sonofabitch on his head, but if we topple anything, the security cameras will pick it up.

"Well, well, what have we here?"

He jammed the barrel of a gun against her spine. The muzzle pressed hard against her back.

She felt the blood drain from her face.

Logan. We need to get this idiot outside.

Bri wrinkled her nose. The rotten odor was coming from inside him. His blood—the rogue's blood. Logan was right. The rogue had turned this man.

"I know someone who's looking for you."

She brought her foot up trying to kick the vampire, but failed.

The eerie, sinister cackle he released hissed against her ear. "He wants you bad. Bet he'll be really happy I've found you." His breath reeked of onions. "He'll reward me with my first human prey."

The disgusting thought sent a shiver up Bri's spine. This beast was no better than the one who'd sired him.

"Not if you kill me." She gritted her teeth.

His fingers pulled her hair harder.

Pain seared her scalp. Her skull felt like it was on fire.

She swallowed the lump of terror in her throat. "What do you think he'll do, if you kill me?"

"Maybe he won't know, bitch. Did you ever consider that?"

"You think you're smart enough to hide something from him?" She bent her head back to ease his grip a little. Her neck popped. "Think again!"

"Shut up!"

"He'll torture you, like he did the blood donors."

She kicked her leg back, aiming for his groin and missed.

"Stop struggling, bitch! We're going to see him."

Fear, coupled with anger sent adrenaline rushing through her veins. The deadly vampire within her fought to emerge. She tapped it down. *Not yet! He thinks you're helpless. Keep it that way.*

Where are you, Logan? Are you hurt?

"Go ahead and shoot, because I'm not going anywhere with you!" It would hurt like hell to have her spine blown away, but it wouldn't destroy her. Within minutes her body would heal the massive damage. But the Army personnel would hear the gunshot and come running. They would try and locate them, even if they couldn't see them.

"Yes, you are."

His gun was suddenly pointed at Jason.

Chapter Eight

Logan was within two feet of Bri and the rogue, but they couldn't see him.

Bri was right. He had to get this vampire outside or blow their cover.

Waiting for the rogue to make a mistake was killing Logan, especially with that gun shoved against Bri's spine.

Minutes seemed like days.

He concentrated on the weapon.

It moved toward Jason.

Now!

In one swift motion, Logan surged forward and transported them to a heavily wooded area outside the research lab. A secluded place they could deal with the vampire without fear of anyone being alerted by gunshots or furniture flying through the air.

Since the vampire was newly turned, Logan counted on Bri recovering first.

She didn't disappoint him.

Angry blue fire shot from her eyes, all directed at Logan.

Still dazed by the speed of the trip, the vampire swayed. He released Bri's hair. She vigorously rubbed her scalp, her face scrunched up.

"What took you so long?" Bri snapped.

"I was waiting for you to whip his ass," he teased.

Taking the advantage, she dealt two blows to the hand that held the gun. The weapon fell to the ground like a heavy stone. Bones cracked, splintered, broke through the skin on his forearm. Blood spurted, shot up in the air.

The vampire screamed deep in his chest. It grew to an agonizing roar. His arm dangled in a twisted, awkward position.

He swiftly moved away from them.

Logan glanced at the bloody stump, which had started to heal.

"Is there any reason you want this one saved?" Bri asked.

Logan shook his head. "He was dead the minute he touched you." He meant every word. Bri belonged to him. He would kill anyone who tried to harm her.

Golden flecks sparkled in Bri's eyes. The vampire side of her rose up, fierce. The bony structure of her face took on a hard, catlike appearance.

Logan intended to prevent Bri from killing this vile minion. Oh, he would die, but not by her hands. Their family would deem that Logan carry out his duty, destroy those who prey on humans.

He waited, watched to see what she would do.

She snarled at the vampire. "You have two choices."

The vampire spat at her.

She jumped back. Brown slime landed between her boots. "An easy death." She smiled, bared her fangs. "Or a hard one."

The vampire rose to his feet but made no move to attack.

Logan took a wide stance, tense, ready.

"Who turned you?" Bri asked.

Silence.

Fully recovered, the vampire hurled himself at Bri. She jumped high in the air, almost to treetop height, turned a back flip, and then landed solidly on her feet. The vampire headed for her again.

With streak-lightening accuracy, Bri struck two blows to the vampire's chest, knocking him backwards. One side caved in, collapsed. He gasped and fought to draw air.

"Who turned you?" Bri asked again.

He coughed and spat blood. "Go to hell, bitch. I'm not telling you a damn thing." He bared his fangs, hissing like a snake. "I wanted to become a vampire. You can't beat us."

Logan shook his head in disgust. The vampire wore a lab coat. His badge indicated this was Capt. King. Logan had met his kind before. Those who sought out vampires, wanting the gift of immortality. They were willing to do anything to obtain it, including become mindless, soulless puppets of someone like the rogue. Capt. King was in the right place, at the right time. The rogue needed help, so he granted the request. Pity, this man never understood it came with a price, followed by a swift penalty.

"You're wasting time," Logan said.

I just want this idiot to give me the damn name.

It isn't going to happen, Bri. Jason needs us.

She glanced over her shoulder at Logan. He saw her indecision mingled with pain.

Good. She's having trouble killing the vampire.

Logan breathed a little easier. He watched her very carefully. That's what he was supposed to do, right? Keep an eye on her, for even the slightest hint she would become a monster. That's what Nathan expected. That's what his family expected. That's what their species expected.

Bri bent, withdrawing the stake from her boot.

Logan was instantly by her side.

When she stood and drew back her hand to kill the vampire, Logan's hand covered hers.

Would she defy him?

Their gazes met, held.

Her catlike features softened.

He smiled at her when she became his Bri again.

"I'll execute him." He almost whispered, "It's my responsibility. One I take very seriously," but bit his tongue instead of saying more. Now was not the time to tell her.

As she released the stake to Logan, she turned to the vampire. "This is for Ruth Madden and Larry Upton, the innocent people you helped torture and murder."

The vampire swung a kick at Bri.

Logan drew back his hand.

He lunged, plunging the stake deep into the vampire's heart.

His stunned body froze for a second. It shriveled, dried before them into a powdery ash, as if instantly cremated. The dust fell in a heap on the bed of leaves strewn across the ground of the forest.

"I'm proud of you." Logan lifted Bri's chin, his eyes captured, held hers. As he gently massaged her scalp, he removed the pain this fiend had caused her. "You controlled the rage."

"It was hard, Logan. I wanted revenge, to kill the bastard."

"I know," he whispered. "Let's get Jason and take him to Nathan's."

Bri put her arms around Logan, holding tight. She was sucked into the swirling black void, landing inside the cell where Jason was being held.

They scanned the area.

Nothing.

Quick as she removed the IV from Jason's arm, she freed him from the shackle. Alarms blared like foghorns warning of imminent danger throughout the complex.

Damn. Her heart jumped into her throat.

Boots stomped down the corridors, heading toward Jason's prison.

Were they going to get caught?

Adrenaline rushed through her, fueling her vampire side.

Security cameras couldn't pick them up, but they had only seconds to escape. If they failed to rescue Jason, the Army would step up security or move him to another facility.

Tamping down her fear, she forced herself into action.

Logan grabbed the medical chart, hanging beside the bed.

Bri lifted Jason, cradling him against her. She kissed the top of his head, holding him tight. Thank, God, the boy wouldn't have painful memories of this hellhole.

Logan put his arms around them protectively.

As Bri flicked her hand to remove the time spell, he yanked them back into the safety of the swirling black void, snatching them from the lab area teaming with the AMRIID personnel.

"We made it," Logan whispered as they shot through space like missiles.

Her mother was pacing back and forth across the den when they appeared. Tears streamed down her cheeks when she spotted them.

"Thank, God. Nathan and I were so worried." She ran toward them, gently lifting Jason from Bri's arms. "I'll take him upstairs. The pediatrician is going to examine him. Afterwards, I'll put the boy to bed." Her mother kissed Jason's cheek. "Poor little thing, you need rest and lots of food, along with someone to spoil you rotten. Don't you worry, sweetie, your Uncle Nathan has someone waiting for you in your room who will do just that."

"Here's his medical chart." At the foot of the stairs, Logan carefully laid the chart in her mother's hand, and then sped back to Bri.

Her father entered the den. "Was the minion inside the lab?"

Logan nodded. "Bri whipped his ass. Afterwards, I destroyed him."

Her father smiled. "Both of you did good. You work well together." Pride beamed from his eyes.

For the first time in her life, instinct took over. Running to him, she flung herself at her father and hugged him.

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed.

Minutes later, her father cleared his throat. "Logan tells me you don't believe vampires eat food. Your mother fixed something light so we could prove it to you. She told me it's your favorite dessert – German Chocolate Cake."

After they had each washed up in the bathroom, her father took her arm, directing her

into the dining room. Her boots sank into the plush, rose patterned rug. The mahogany table was large, square. In the center was a gorgeous arrangement of snapdragons, mixed with Irish lace marigolds, white nicotiana and yellow-centered dahlias. Off-white, quilted cushions covered the high-back chairs. A multi-faceted glass teardrop chandelier was suspended from the ceiling.

Her eyes widened. The table was already set, including linen napkins. Each plate had a generous slice of scrumptious, homemade cake. The fresh coconut and the rich German chocolate frosting made her mouth water.

A sterling silver coffee urn sat next to what was left of the cake. Bri was already eyeing it for seconds. She lifted the urn, filling each cup with the piping gourmet brew. The smell of warm cinnamon and hazelnut wafted up to her.

Just as they were settled around the table, her mother walked into the room. She took a chair next to Bri's father, who gave her a kiss.

"Thanks for making my favorite dessert."

"You're welcome." Her mother nodded with a smile. "I telephoned Megan and Dr. Reese to let them know Jason had arrived safely. Dr. Durham talked to them for a bit, to ease their minds about Jason."

"Good," Bri said. "They should sleep better tonight."

Bri turned toward Logan, studying him.

With a great flourish, he picked up his fork and dug into the cake. He lifted a large bite, opened his mouth and shoveled it in.

Damn, it was sexy watching him eat. The way his jaws moved, such strength. She'd make sure he did this more often.

"How is it?" she asked.

He swallowed. "Delicious."

Bri took her time, enjoying every sinfully rich forkful.

In the middle of her second cup of coffee, her calves contracted.

She winced, grabbed Logan's thigh, squeezing hard through the searing pain.

"Oh, God." She panted. "Oh, God." Her toes drew up, separated.

He turned, his brows narrowed in concern. "Muscle cramps?"

She nodded. "Worse than before."

He knelt beside her, pulled her booted foot into his lap and kneaded her calf, pressing deep until the muscle relaxed.

"Better?"

"Yes."

"You used your power longer. Those cramps aren't finished with you."

She scrunched her face up. "I know."

Her mother hurried to her side, fussing over her. "I forgot you get them after you distort time. They're always bad."

"She'll be fine. I need to get her home where I can look after her."

Her mother leaned and whispered, "He really cares about you."

"Yes, he does," Bri whispered back.

Her father winked at her.

Logan kissed the top of her head and enfolded her in his arms.

Later that night, she was lying across her bed. Logan was tenderly undressing her.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

When he removed her red bra, her nipples beaded.

He groaned.

After sliding her red bikini panties down her legs, he bent, kissed her stomach, which tightened at the touch of his lips.

He moaned.

"Damn, you wear some hot underwear."

"Victoria's Secret."

"Remind me to thank her."

She chuckled.

"I know how over-sexed we are, both of us are equally matched in that department, but what I'm doing tonight is purely medicinal. Well, almost everything."

He took lotion he'd grabbed from the bathroom, squirted it between his hands, rubbing them together to warm the lotion, slathering it on her naked body.

When her muscles painfully bunched, knotted, his hands, thumbs were right there, kneading and massaging, until the cramps subsided.

"Roll over so I don't neglect the other side."

After she obliged him, his nimble fingers massaged her calves again.

She sighed from the pleasure of his touch. "Do you know what you do to me?"

He leaned forward, his erection touching her backside.

She giggled. "I guess you do."

He chuckled. "We're both exhausted. We need rest, more than we need sex. I'm going to massage you until you fall sleep. Afterwards, we'll get under the covers and hold each other."

"That sounds great," she said, around a yawn. "This almost makes up for making me wonder where the hell you were. If something had happened to you."

His hands stilled. "I wasn't sure who might be listening to our thoughts, but it wasn't worth the risk. I had to maintain the element of surprise, in order to save you, Bri."

He massaged her shoulders and back, his thumbs pressing on either side of the vertebra of her spine. The soreness melted away.

"Yea, I was surprised all right. Surprised that I didn't knock the shit out of you for worrying me so much."

He kissed the back of her neck, causing her to shiver.

"It's nice to know you care about me."

She sighed. "Did anyone tell you that you have a strange way of looking at the world?"

He chuckled. "Yeah." He patted her bottom. "I care about you, too."

"Colonel, we've had a major security breach in the lab," Lt. Nash said.

Oliver slammed the phone down. "Damn."

In less than twenty minutes, he was inside the research lab. Several of his men were going over the area for any trace evidence. "What the hell happened?"

Lt. Nash ran toward him. "Something managed to enter the lab, avoid our surveillance cameras and remove Blakely. We can't find Capt. King. He's missing."

"Damn." Oliver shook his head. How the hell could this happen? Once again, he'd underestimated the alien. "After we gather the security camera film, let's review it together."

"Yes, sir."

"Hey, we found something!" one of his men yelled.

Oliver hurried toward him.

The man picked up a clump of long, jet-black hair with his gloved-hand. "Looks like it was pulled out by the roots." He carefully bagged the evidence.

"I want this analyzed for DNA." Oliver stared at the hair, which reminded him of Nurse Eaton. It could be a coincidence, but he intended to check it out.

"Lt. Nash, search Nurse Eaton's locker here at the hospital. See if you can find a sample of her hair for comparison with what we found tonight."

"Yes, sir. I'll get it to the lab right away."

If anyone knew what happened to Jason Blakely, it would be his mother.

Oliver pulled his cell phone from his pants pocket. He punched the number for one of the men he'd assigned to tail Nurse Blakely.

Quick as someone answered, he said, "This is Col. Taylor. We've had some trouble at the lab. Did Nurse Blakely leave her house tonight?"

"No, sir."

He was getting tired of the body count rising, more problems than answers. Tailing her was getting them nowhere. One person could help him fill in the missing pieces—Megan Blakely. Time to bring her in for interrogation, along with someone else he suspected had those same missing puzzle pieces—Dr. Reese.

"I don't need you to tail her anymore. Resume your normal duties."

"Yes, sir."

Oliver clicked off.

"Lt. Nash, do you have Dr. Reese's phone number?"

"Right in here, sir." He pulled out his business organizer. Within seconds, he'd retrieved the file.

Oliver punched the number into his cell phone.

He picked up on the fifth ring.

"This is Col. Taylor. Sorry to bother you this late."

"No problem, Colonel. What can I do for you?"

"There's been some trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Dr. Reese asked.

Oliver almost snorted. *You and the boy's mother know exactly what kind of trouble. The two of you know where the boy is.*

"I don't want to go into it over the phone. Could you and Nurse Blakely come down to the lab tonight? I'd like to discuss a few things with you."

He hesitated.

Time to play hardball. "If you don't have a ride, I could have some of my men stop by, escort the two of you here."

"That won't be necessary. I'll swing by Nurse Blakely's house and pick her up. How

long do you think this will take?"

Oliver smiled. "Not long."

Neither of them would leave until they told him where Jason Blakely was and the name of the alien.

He watched Megan Blakely's place from the wooded lot across the street.

After killing two blood donors, he still wasn't any closer to finding the special blood. Now, heavy surveillance guarded each of the remaining donors.

He had a feeling, even if he killed all of the blood donors, they couldn't help him with his hunt for the one prophesied in The Legend.

But he knew who could – the boy's mother.

No one would convince him that she didn't know who gave her son that blood. He sneered. He'd get the name out of her.

Dr. Reese pulled up in front of her house. He exited the car and strode up the walk. Megan Blakely ran out of the front door.

He watched, listening to their conversation.

"How long do you think we'll be at the hospital?" Megan asked.

"Not long."

They got into Dr. Reese's vehicle and sped off.

Knowing their destination, he transported himself to the underground parking garage at Charleston's St. Francis Hospital and waited.

Once they entered the garage, he followed them to the row where they had parked.

This late at night, the area was deserted.

He hid behind a pillar.

The second they exited the car, they would be vulnerable. He would attack.

He waited until both car doors slammed.

Like the dangerous predator he was, he swooped down on them.

Dr. Reese threw a punch, but it barely grazed his cheek.

Why are humans so easy to kill? It takes all the fun out of it – except for the feeding.

He loved it when humans got their adrenaline pumping, fear would do that. It made the blood so much richer.

Megan Blakely opened her mouth to scream.

He silenced her vocal cords.

She started to run, but mind control halted her movements.

Now to his meal.

He extended his canines, sinking them deep into Dr. Reese's jugular. The man jerked from the pressure on his throat. As he lifted the human from the ground, his feet danced in mid-air. It only served to heighten the pleasure as he drunk every drop of the life force this mere human had to offer.

When he finished, he released the body.

It dropped to the greasy pavement with a heavy thud.

He turned to her and smiled.

Megan Blakely stared in his eyes, mesmerized.

She was totally controlled by him. He strolled to her, touched her cheek.

His for the taking.
He placed his hands over her eyes, willing her to sleep.
Pulling her tight against his body, he transported her to his house.

Chapter Nine

Bri thought Saturday would never come.

Had it only been five days since she'd donated blood to save Jason? So much had happened. So many lives had been changed by that one act. God, it felt like a hundred years. Was it only yesterday that they'd rescued Jason? She could imagine how it felt for Megan. Two more days before she would visit her son. For Bri's own sanity, she needed this weekend. But to spend the morning like this...

She gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white.

Uneasiness spiraled through her, like a sharp knife carving her soul. She'd awoken early, put on an appropriate black shirtdress, suitable for mourning, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't make herself attend Ruth's memorial service. Letting go of people she cared for was something she didn't do well. Her mind always refused to accept the truth, refused to deal with the utter grief. As if the very act of denial kept them alive forever, when in reality it only postponed the inevitable.

She had to face it.

No matter how painful, this was the right thing to do, she kept reminding herself. To visit the place Ruth's ashes were interred. To pay her respects to a gracious, gentle woman. To say goodbye, let go of her forever, but do it privately.

"You okay?" Logan asked.

She jumped at the sound of his voice. "Sure." She bit the inside of her cheek so hard she tasted blood.

He unbuttoned his jacket. "I wish Dr. Reese and Megan had come with us. It would have helped. The three of you could have shared the grief, helped each other get past it."

Bri spotted the sign for Good Shepherd Cemetery and put on her turn signal.

"No, I don't think I could do it if they were here. I'm sure they attended the memorial service, and then headed up to Dr. Reese's lakeside cabin, like they do most weekends. It'll do them good to get away, do a little fishing."

"Wouldn't the Army find it a little suspicious that they left town when all this is going on with her son?" Logan asked.

"They were hanging around until Colonel Taylor notified them about Jason's disappearance. Knowing those two, they'll put on the performance of their life, with Megan saying she can't go now and Dr. Reese insisting she needs to get away for her sanity. Besides, the Army has been following them, so they'll have nothing to report but the size of the fish Dr. Reese and Megan caught."

She turned right, following the winding road until she came to the massive aboveground structure. The funeral home had described it on the phone earlier as a peaceful depository for the remains of loved ones. Individual slots housing the urns containing those who had been cremated reminded Bri of impersonal, extra-large safety deposit boxes, stored within a solid granite and marble wall. At least Ruth's former students and loved ones could come here, bring flowers, pay their respects and remember her as she was, before...

Bri pulled up to the curb and let the car idle.

She blinked back tears as she reached for her keys.

Logan stilled her hand. "You want to talk about it."

"What's there to talk about?"

She glanced at the immovable wall, which was as hard as the immovable fact—Ruth was dead—murdered.

All the brass nameplates were in straight, even rows, everything neat, orderly, like the cemetery with its beautifully manicured grass and large, moss covered oak trees. A place of rest. A place Ruth should have gone to when she was eighty or ninety, not sixty-two. And she would have. If she hadn't made one fatal mistake, donated blood to Jason. That one act of human kindness had caused poor Ruth her life.

But it wouldn't have, if Bri had stayed out of it.

Logan expelled an audible breath. "Are you through beating yourself up?"

Her chin quivered.

"Damn." Shaking his head, he got out of the passenger side, slammed the car door none too gently and walked to the driver's side. "Let's go," he said, opening her door.

She glanced into green eyes that held concern, mingled with a touch of anger. Her fingers trembled when she turned the car off and pocketed the keys. He stepped back and waited, while she exited and closed the door.

"We'll find Ruth's nameplate, together. I'll wait while you deal with the fact she's dead and not coming back. I'm sorry, truly sorry, but there's nothing you or I can do to change her murder. It won't be easy, but you need to let it go."

Bri heard his take-charge tone, but didn't resent it. Right now she needed someone who could deal rationally with this loss, because, for the life of her, she couldn't. Her mind kept screaming, 'murderer'.

He grasped her elbow and led her to the wall, pointing to one of the nameplates.

She lifted her eyes and read, 'Ruth Madden, born July 12, 1944, died July 25, 2006. Until we meet again, you will be missed.'

Logan put his strong arms around Bri and pulled her against him. "Now, tell me about Ruth, some of the good things you remember about her." His voice was barely a whisper against her ear, but the tenderness reached deep inside her.

For the first time since it had happened, Bri thought about Ruth and smiled. "Ruth always made Jason a small, chocolate birthday cake, one layer, just for him. When he was younger, she would cover the kitchen table with a plastic tablecloth, put the cake in the middle of the table, set Jason in front of it and let him eat caveman style, with his fingers." Bri laughed. "He got it everywhere. His face, his feet, his hair. Oh, and his ears. We took lots of pictures. He was grinning in every one of them. Afterwards, Ruth cleaned up the mess, including the biggest mess, Jason."

Logan chuckled. "Hang onto the good times, cherish them, remember them from time to time. That's how you cope with deep loss."

Bri kissed the palm of her hand and placed it against Ruth's nameplate. "Goodbye, my friend." She thought about the sentiments on the nameplate. Her family couldn't have said it better. "It's so true, Ruth. Until we meet again, you will be missed."

Logan's hands moved to Bri's shoulders. As he massaged, she leaned her head forward, stretching the tight neck muscles.

He put his arm around her waist. "Let's go over there," he pointed to a green wooden

bench shaded by a cluster of trees, "and talk."

They walked across the thick carpet of grass.

She took a deep calming breath as she sat beside him.

"I don't want to leave without getting a couple of things off my chest, Bri."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he put his hand up to stop her.

"Just listen, please. This may make you mad, but it needs saying. I've spent so much of my life saying goodbye to people I loved. I lost my parents, four brothers, two sisters. Several of my vampire friends were destroyed by rogues."

She nodded, thankful for a glimpse into what his life had been like.

"I've had more than my share of dealing with guilt, Bri."

This was something she intended to probe into later with him. What had he done that he felt guilty about? Survived his family? Or was it something else?

He turned to face her. "All of you are caught in the same vicious, self-destructive thought pattern. Megan feels guilty because she believes she used her friendship to get you to donate blood. You feel guilty because you did it and people are dying. Tell me something. At the time you donated blood, who did you think would be the real target?"

She didn't hesitate. "Me."

He nodded, as if confirming something he knew all along. "Then you made the right decision, with the limited knowledge you had at the time. You can't second guess yourself now. Asking yourself 'what ifs' can drive you insane."

"So far, you haven't said anything that would make me mad."

"I'm not finished. If you want to play the blame-game, you would have to include your mother."

"She's guilty because she broke our laws, fell for a vampire?"

Logan gave her a sexy smile. "No. The minute Nathan and Danielle met, nothing in heaven or hell could have kept them apart. They love each other." He hesitated. "And it isn't because she defied everyone to have you."

Bri shrugged. "Then I give up, what is it?"

"Keeping you away from your family with lies. If she hadn't done that, if you'd had a relationship with your father, you would have sought his advice. He would have gone over all the possibilities, others being hurt and suggested another way—turning the boy."

"Into a full vampire?"

"Yes. To humans, he would be dead, have no heartbeat."

She narrowed her brows, puzzled. "You have a heartbeat. I've heard it."

"Because you're part vampire. Your mother, for example, can't hear Nathan's."

For some reason, knowing that made Bri feel sorry for her mother. One of the things Bri enjoyed was hearing Logan's heartbeat kick into overdrive when he held her.

Logan continued, "We can also control our heartbeat and respiration, halting both, going into what would be considered suspended animation."

"Wow. But, if Jason was turned, he would remain six years old forever."

"Yes."

She frowned. "He'd miss the best years of his life, growing up."

"True, but the other people would be alive and you wouldn't be in danger."

She glared at him. "You're right. I'd be furious if you even hinted about this to my

mother. Enough people feel guilty without adding someone else to the mix. It's history, unchangeable. Like you said, we can't second guess it now."

He nodded, his gaze roaming her face. "You need to take up for yourself with the same vigor you take up for your mother."

It took a while for what he said to sink in, get past the hard, stubborn layer that always took full responsibility for everything, the control freak inside her. He was right. She came down on herself too hard.

"Who is really guilty of these horrible murders, Bri?"

"The rogue."

He punched the air with his fist. "Yes. You finally understand. The bastard didn't have to kill them to get to you. Like every mass murderer, he enjoys killing."

Logan stood. He grabbed her hand, pulled her to him. "While we're in the graveyard, we might as well go on a scavenger hunt."

She hesitated.

"If you don't feel up to it, I'll do it alone." He turned to leave.

She grabbed his arm. "What are we looking for?"

"Something to replenish our supply of stakes, whitethorn bushes. Stake a vampire with any other wood, it will only stun them. Once the stake is removed, they're back in business. Stake a vampire with one made from the whitethorn bush, it has the same effect as cutting his head off. It destroys them."

"I'm game."

"I'll get the stuff we need from the trunk, and then I'll show you what whitethorn bushes are. They have mahogany-colored bark and stiff, straight, white spines."

Thirty minutes later, they had gathered the whitethorn and wrapped it in a tarp. Logan touched the bundle. "My family will take care of these." He scanned the area. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Wait right here."

She blinked, but he was gone.

Five minutes later, he reappeared.

"I'm curious." She moved closer to where he stood. "Why haven't you taught me to transport and vanish into mist?"

"I was wondering when you'd get around to asking me that. Believe me, I've thought about it long and hard. You're not a pure-vampire, so we're in a hazy, experimental area here with what you can and can't do. If you tried to transport on your own, there could be risks to you. Transporting with me removes those risks. If you tried to mist, there's a strong possibility you might die, Bri. I wasn't willing to take any chances."

She remembered how dependent she was when the minion had the gun shoved against her spine. If she had the skills to transport, she could have removed him from the lab before Jason was in any danger. "I can deal with 'could be risks'. Hell, we're living with them every day. Teach me to transport."

Logan expelled a slow breath. "Okay. When we get back to your place, consider it done, but we'll do it in stages to minimize the risks."

"As long as I can add that weapon to my arsenal, I don't care how we do it."

Logan plopped down on the bench. "Do you remember me saying that I've had more than my share of dealing with guilt?"

"Yes." She settled beside him, turning to face him, eager to hear what he obviously needed to get off his chest.

"Well, a lot of it comes from not telling you who I am."

She didn't flinch from his gaze. "If you're trying to tell me you'll kill me if I become a blood-beast, that's old news. I'm holding you to your promise."

He shook his head. "That's only part of it, Bri."

Apprehension seared her mind.

"First, I want you to know that your father gave me permission to tell you this. I belong to an elite unit of guerilla fighters. We enforce the laws of our family by hunting rogues, destroying them. I'm the squad's leader, code name The Annihilator."

Bri took a deep, calming breath. Logan was equally capable of protecting her or killing her. "Why would I be upset by this? I've seen first hand the death and destruction rogues wreak on peoples' lives."

"When I originally agreed to protect you, I wanted to kill you. I couldn't understand why Nathan stopped me."

"This is your big secret?" She remembered her own, similar thoughts about Logan. "If you still felt that way, you could have killed me any time." She held his hand. "I'm glad you're on my side against this rogue. Just answer one question. Why did you sleep with me?"

"To help you disprove The Legend, only it backfired." He gave her a sexy grin. "God, I wanted you. Still do."

Her heart did a somersault. "Then what are you waiting for, partner?"

The features of his face relaxed, as if she'd lifted a heavy burden off him.

Logan placed a light kiss on her lips, his tongue teasing her, promising more. "I think Dr. Reese and Megan aren't the only ones who need to get away this weekend. After I teach you to transport, would you be willing to pack a few things, head out to my house?"

She grinned and threw her arms around him. "I might be persuaded."

He cocked a brow. "I plan to spend the weekend touching you anywhere I want." He winked. "You yell 'Uncle' when you're ready to surrender."

After parking, Bri grabbed her makeup bag off the back seat. She hurried to join Logan, who was taking her small suitcase from the trunk. "Your house is near my father's, right?"

She stared at the thick, magnificent azaleas that filled the flowerbeds with a profusion of pink blossoms. Her gaze followed the elegant, lacy veranda of the spacious antebellum, three-story mansion. The Neo-classical style architecture and the white Ionic columns were every bit as impressive as her father's house.

Logan pointed to the distance. "He's right over that hill. My house was built in 1827, five years after your father's."

"It's beautiful."

Logan locked arms with her, picking up the pace as they walked toward the steps and iron railing leading to the beveled, double doors of the main entrance.

"Thank you for teaching me to transport," Bri said.

"It turned out to be pretty easy. Maybe I'm overly cautious."

He led her into the house.

A hand-blown, elegant Venetian glass chandelier in the shape of roses hung inside the

entryway.

"There's just you and me this weekend, in this great big house."

Her heart skipped with excitement.

"I'll show you to our room"

Her black heels clicked across the hardwood floors, the sound echoing as she followed him to the hand carved winding staircase. The bold, red carpet reminded her of the scene from *Gone With The Wind*. She found herself longing to be swept into his strong arms.

Carry me to bed.

He grinned at her. "Hold that thought." He grabbed her makeup bag from her and shot up the stairs.

Faster than she could blink, he was back.

Oh, God. Did she project that thought directly at him?

Yes, you did, like shooting off a firecracker in my head. You still are.

I need you.

I'm glad. Don't think of anything but us.

The few feet separating them might as well have been the Grand Canyon.

With two eager steps, he closed the distance between them, drawing her into his arms. "You're beautiful, intoxicating."

She leaned her head against his broad chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart as it picked up speed. An involuntary sigh slid past her lips.

Quick, fierce need arose in her as they ascended the stairs.

He carried her into the most exquisite, masculine bedroom she'd ever seen. They brushed past a classic, cherub tapestry, hanging from a brass rod. Her eyes widened at the size of the bed, larger than a king-size, for sure.

"I had it custom made," Logan said.

Above the headboard, a half-round ornate crown draped with rich, brocade added a regal aura to the bed.

Logan gently lowered her to stand on her own two feet, which sank into the soft, gold colored carpet. He threw the velvet navy and gold pillows onto a nearby chair, drawing back the covers, revealing red satin sheets.

He patted the mattress. "This bed is as soft as it looks."

She smiled, imagining their entangled bodies rolling around on a cloud.

"Close your eyes," he whispered.

Her eyelashes lowered. She trembled with need when his lips coasted over her eyelids, her cheeks. His moist tongue traced the shell of her ear, and then dipped inside, circling the sensitive flesh. She shuddered. He blew a warm puff of air across her ear. The familiar smell of this man, mingled with his woodsy cologne, drifted to her nostrils. Delicious sensations tingled across her entire body, causing her nipples to ache for his touch.

She opened her eyes. Shivers paraded up her spine as his lips continued to forage, skimming across her chin, brushing her neck, dipping into the hollow at the base of her throat. His warm, moist breath feathered across her skin, igniting senses she hadn't realized she had until this very moment. She sighed with pleasure. Moisture trickled down, creaming her panties.

Whatever hopes she had of taking it slow this time, vanished when he gave her an

open-mouthed kiss on the lips. The same undeniable need, like a raging wildfire, burned out of control. Her breath quickened.

He pulled away from her, panting and staring at her in awe. "Whoa, we'll never make it to the bed if we keep this up."

"Is that so bad?" she teased, eyeing the thick carpet.

He groaned. "You don't know how long I've wanted you in my bed."

She started to unbutton her dress, but he stilled her hands. "Let me," he said.

Once he laid the dress across the back of a chair, he turned.

His eyes devoured her.

He fingered her pink, sheer demi bra, lingering to outline the heart designs before unfastening it and sliding it down her arms. The smile on his face when he bent to slide her matching bikini down her legs made her chuckle. He glanced up at her, heat radiating from his eyes. "Damn." He sighed. "You're delicious from any angle."

"If I don't hide your body from my sight, we're lost." He stood and swept her into his arms, depositing her under the covers.

Afraid he would snatch his clothes off, deny her the pleasure of seeing him strip, she said, "Hey, where's my floor show?"

He paused and grinned. "You're determined to make me suffer."

She wiggled her eyebrows. "Oh, yeah. You know what they say about sex? It's ninety-five percent anticipation."

Uh-oh.

The wicked glint in his eyes told her she'd regret that last remark.

He strolled to the nightstand and pushed a button on the CD player. The familiar refrains of Ronnie Milsap's, "How Do I Turn You On" filled the room.

"I've been had," she said, recognizing a set up when she saw one.

He grinned, wiggling his eyebrows. "Not yet."

"Promises, promises," she teased.

His fingers moved to the buttons on his shirt, slowly unbuttoning each one to reveal a muscular broad chest, dusted with dark hair and washboard abs. He removed the shirt and threw it onto the bed.

"More," she whispered, her flesh heating to flash point.

He shook his finger at her, treating her like a petulant child. "Didn't anyone ever teach you patience?"

Patience?

"Two can play at this game called frustration. You want to see how impossible that word is between the two of us?"

She sat up ramrod straight against the headboard, shoving the covers to her waist. Like a feline, she arched her back, cupping her breasts as if offering them in invitation.

He stared at her breasts, hunger in his gaze. "Someone is not playing fair."

As he grappled with his pants, he almost toppled on his head.

No way could she keep from laughing. This vampire, who had lived for centuries, undoubtedly had thousands of women, was as desperate for her as she was for him. He had no idea how powerful that made her feel.

His oaths flew through the air as he snatched off his pants and kicked them aside.

Quick as he peeled out of his briefs, he hurried and sat down beside her on the bed.

Bri tried her damndest not to stare at his erection, but failed miserably.

"Why is it that what should have been a sexy, seductive striptease turned into a bumbling, buffoon act?" he asked.

She gave him an innocent who-me look. "I have no idea." She pulled the covers back.

He groaned, deep in his chest. His gaze slid over her nakedness, lingering on her breasts. Her nipples tightened, begging him to taste, suckle, enjoy.

She let out a long impatient breath. "Are you going to stand there with your tongue hanging out all night?"

His lips twitched as he lay down beside her.

When he reached for her, his mouth met hers in carnal, hungry, open-mouthed kisses that devoured her. His sweet tongue tangled, stroked hers.

He planted kisses across the fullness of her breasts. Lifting one, he flicked his rough tongue across the nipple, worrying it with his teeth. She jerked against him and took in a deep, ragged breath.

His open lips closed over the tight bud. When he suckled tenderly, she ran her fingers through his hair, clasping him to her breast. She never wanted the pleasure to end.

She crooned his name, over and over.

"I want you inside me," she whispered. "This time I want to feel you shudder, explode when you climax."

He parted her thighs and caressed her, bending to lick, suckle. Hot desire clenched her stomach muscles and moved lower to the area he now paid homage to with his tongue.

His hands slid beneath her hips, tilting them toward him. Anticipation grew as he slid into her in one swift motion. Her breath caught at the intense pleasure of his stretching and filling her.

"You belong to me," he whispered, moving in and out.

"Yes." She moaned, burying her face in the crook of his neck.

The rhythm was slow at first, but grew harder, faster in intensity. Desire drove her to push her hips against him, meeting each fierce thrust.

"Oh, God." She arched her back, seeking release.

His gaze held hers captive. He smiled into her eyes.

She wrapped her legs around him, changing the angle of his thrusts, inviting him deeper.

He shuddered.

She screamed as she exploded and laughed with joy when she felt him join her within seconds. Her pulse raced, her internal muscles squeezed, milked him with each spasm. She trembled and gasped for breath. Every sensation rocked her body with warmth as their climaxes went on and on.

Still panting, she moaned in protest when he left her body.

He rolled onto his side, tugging her close.

She nestled against his chest, enjoying the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, her fingers playing with his chest hairs and tracing his nipples.

He pressed a kiss to her brow. "We should make love more often. It's been a long time since I've heard you laugh."

"What's wrong with now?" she asked.

"Not a thing." He kissed her, leaning against her.

She moaned into his open mouth when his hard-on rubbed against her thigh.

Must...stay...awake.

In the middle of the night, someone's thoughts awakened Bri. Startled, she tossed the covers aside.

Where...am...I?

The person bombarding her mind sounded weak, disoriented.

Her heart thudded against her ribs.

Logan reached for her. "Shh. You're having a nightmare, go back to sleep." He settled her back under the covers and wrapped her in his arms.

So...sleepy.

Her eyes flew open wide. She sat up, leaning against the headboard of the bed.

"What's wrong?"

She tilted her head and listened. "I don't know what's happening, but I keep hearing someone's thoughts."

"What's the person thinking?"

"Stay awake. Where am I? I'm sleepy. I can make out the words, but I don't know who it is."

Must...get...out...

"Do you still hear the thoughts?"

"Yes. This has never happened before. It's like my mind has turned into a receiver for someone I'm sure is in trouble."

"Do you think your mind could be playing tricks on you? Maybe you're imagining what Ruth Madden might have said."

Bri gave him a you're-full-of-it look. "That's crazy. Ruth is dead. Whoever I'm hearing is very much alive."

Jason...needs...me.

Bri shot out of the bed. She screamed. "It's Megan."

She grabbed both sides of her head and squeezed. "Oh, God. Oh, God. Please don't do this to me." Tears filled her eyes.

"Megan? How's that possible?" Logan asked. "She's with Dr. Reese."

"Dr. Reese?" Bri paced the bedroom. *Okay, calm down. Everything is okay. It's your imagination. Nothing more. Probe Dr. Reese's mind.* Bri's heart threatened to explode.

She sat on the edge of the bed and concentrated.

"I'm going to probe his mind."

She squeezed her eyes shut, closing out the rest of the world.

Nothing.

She shook her head to clear it. Grasping a firm vision of Dr. Reese, she tried to probe his mind again.

Nothing.

Her stomach muscles clenched.

"Do you still hear the thoughts?"

"No. They stopped."

"And Dr. Reese?"

She exhaled a shaky breath and swallowed hard. Tears filled her eyes. "He's dead."

The minute she admitted it to herself, it was like someone had packed her heart in ice. She felt numbed by the pain, the loss. This man had been her surrogate father from the day she was born. Had loved her like his own child.

Logan flew to her side of the bed and sat down beside her. "And Megan?"

Bri probed her best friend's mind.

Nothing.

Bri rocked back and forth, fighting grief, fighting to stay strong for Megan.

"She's alive. I can sense it."

The beast within called to Bri, beckoned for release. She tamped it down. Not now, she whispered silently to the vampire inside.

Logan stroked her hair, held her against him.

The rogue had proven he was willing to do anything, kill anyone to find her. She didn't want others to become his next victim. If the rogue succeeded in finding her, she would fight him to the death rather than submit to anything he had planned for her. To do that, she needed every weapon she could possibly learn in order to beat and destroy him. She had to be equal in strength and skill to this monster. And she would. Dammit, she would.

"Teach me to mist."

"Misting is really complicated, Bri. You actually spread your molecules, change your molecular structure to become vapor, mist. Then you use your vampire powers to bring your molecules back together, to the human form again."

The beast within became angry, impatient. "I don't care how complicated the process is." Her voice grew stronger, roared. "Teach me, dammit!"

"There's a possibility you'll die, Bri."

She snorted. "You think I give a damn?"

"That's the pain speaking, Bri. What about your mother, your father, Jason—me? We care if you die."

"I want every weapon I can learn. Without it, I'm going to die anyway. Either you teach me, or I'll find someone who will."

Logan hesitated. He stared at her for a moment, his gaze sad, and then asked, "When do you want me to teach you?"

A lump rose in her throat, but she squeezed out a terse answer. "Now."

"Do you trust me?" Logan asked.

Bri furrowed her brows, wondering why he'd asked that question again. "Yes."

He laid back, rested his head on the pillow and drew her down to him. She nestled against his chest.

"This won't be easy to hear, but you have to know this. It's two in the morning. If Dr. Reese is dead, the rogue gorged himself on blood. After this blood-feast, he'll sleep through the day, for sure, and he'll wake up tonight. What you heard was Megan fighting to wake up. The rogue used mind control to put her to sleep. You won't hear from her until tonight."

Bri shuddered at the horrible picture Logan's words painted. "When he wakes up, he'll torture her."

"Yes. Until he gets your name from her."

Tears of anguish poured from Bri's eyes. She remembered Megan saying she would never tell anyone about Bri. She knew her friend. God help Megan. She would suffer so much agony. "She won't tell him."

"I know." Logan kissed the top of her head. "I've been in a similar situation. Dr. Durham, the pediatrician looking after Jason, is my uncle. He had a son who served under me. A rogue captured John and tried to make him give up my name. He died with the secret."

"I'm sorry." Bri placed a light kiss on his chest.

"Use your telepathic shields tonight, so you don't pick up Megan's thoughts."

Bri moaned as the thought of what was ahead tore her up inside. "I love Megan too much to do that. I'd feel like I was deserting her, leaving her to face death alone. We'll go through it together, like everything else in life."

"I'll be there with you."

"You said Dr. Durham's son died with the secret. How did you know that?"

"The same way you'll know what Megan goes through tonight. I probed his mind, shared his pain." He hesitated, drawing her closer to him. "I'll hold you, go to sleep. You'll need all your strength to learn to mist and face this later on tonight."

"I can't sleep."

He glanced down at her, sadness in his eyes. "Don't hate me, Bri."

"Why would I hate you?"

Their gazes caught.

"Go to sleep." He placed his hand on her eyelids, closed them.

Everything went dark, silent, fading to nothing.

Oliver stared at the blank screen, wondering if he should hit rewind. He'd watched the security tape from the night Jason was taken five times and still hadn't seen a damn thing that was suspicious. How the hell did they pull it off?

Lt. Nash walked into the conference room. "We've impounded Dr. Reese's car, Colonel. We're looking for trace evidence in the vehicle and at the crime scene."

Oliver glanced up. "Did they complete the autopsy on Dr. Reese?"

"We're still working on the final. The preliminary indicates he died from severe blood loss, same as the donors. We'll prepare two reports, like usual, sir. One version for the family and release it to the press. One version for our files."

"Fine." Oliver frowned. Dammit. The monster was always one step ahead.

Not only had this thing killed four people, if he included Capt. King, but this time it had taken someone with it. Like Oliver had suspected, the alien had kidnapped someone who knew too much, someone who had become a dangerous liability.

But why *take* Megan Blakely? Why not murder her, silence her for good? That piece of the puzzle didn't make sense.

The phone rang.

Oliver yanked the receiver up. "Col. Taylor speaking."

"This is Maj. Farley. We were able to extract DNA from the hair collected in the lab. It's a perfect DNA match with the strands extracted from Nurse Eaton's hairbrush."

Oliver smiled. So, Nurse Eaton had stuck her neck out to save Jason, but how did she get away with it?

"We took it a step further, sir. We compared these two DNA hair samples to a third."

Oliver furrowed his brows. "A third?"

"Jason Blakely's blood sample."

"I'll be damned." This was better than he thought. Oliver moved forward in his chair. Adrenaline gushed through his system. "And?"

"We've found your blood donor, sir. The alien who's been doing these gruesome murders. Nurse Eaton's DNA is a match on all three samples, the hair collected inside the lab, her hairbrush and Jason Blakely's blood. We nailed her, sir."

Oliver puffed out his chest. He stood. "Thank you, Major."

"Colonel, you should pick up Nurse Eaton's mother, too. We can check her DNA, but I'm certain we'll find another match."

"Will do. Good work."

Oliver hung up the phone. His mind raced to complete the puzzle.

He'd just answered his own question. Why kidnap Nurse Blakely instead of killing her? She and Nurse Eaton were best friends, which meant one of three things. Maybe only Nurse Eaton was the alien. Maybe both of them were aliens. Dr. Reese found out and was silenced. Maybe Nurse Eaton was reluctant to kill Nurse Blakely because they had become best friends. He wondered how far that friendship would go. To his way of thinking, it would only be a matter of time before this alien murdered Nurse Blakely.

"Lt. Nash, we've found the killer."

"Who, sir?"

"Nurse Eaton."

Lt. Nash's jaw dropped. "Are you sure, Colonel?"

"Positive. We have solid DNA evidence. Blood doesn't lie."

Lt. Nash moved forward. His eyes flashed the same excitement over the hunt as Oliver felt inside. He was already reaching for his business organizer.

"We need the addresses of Nurse Eaton and her mother. What's her name?"

"Danielle."

"Send a recon team to each location, see if they're in their homes, how many are inside. We need this information before we roll."

"I'll get two men to scout each house immediately, sir."

"In the meantime, have a detachment of twelve men fully armed for night combat. We're striking while they're asleep. Alert our men to be prepared to use deadly force against an enemy who may have advance weapons. Hopefully, we can capture the aliens and bring them to the compound. They'll need sedation and restraints. It's imperative we move them to the designated military area within one hour of detention, no later."

"You think others will come after them?"

"Hell, yes. I don't know how many aliens we have, but we'll keep the prisoners alive, use them as bait for a while."

"Maybe we can keep some of the specimens for experimental research," Lt. Nash said.

Oliver nodded. "And we'll dissect the rest, use them for research, too."

If it was the last thing he did, Oliver would locate Jason Blakely and destroy him, along

with Nurse Eaton and Danielle Eaton.

Chapter Ten

The star-filled darkness seemed oppressive as Oliver climbed into the first of two military Humvees, loaded with equipment and twelve of his best Infantry. His men briefly acknowledged him with a salute and a nod, their faces drawn, anxious. He glanced at his combat shirt and trousers. It felt damned good to be back in uniform and out of civilian clothes. Like stepping into a different world, one fraught with danger and the possibility of death. It felt even better to command a combat division again. The sense of power always gave him an adrenaline rush. He looked over his shoulder at the camouflaged vehicle behind them, ready to move at his command, and straightened his helmet, which contained earphones and a camera.

"I wanted to check the two-way communications to make sure the wireless was working. Can you hear me, sir?"

"Loud and clear." He smiled. "Until they start up these Humvees. They're worse than airboats."

Lt. Nash chuckled. "You'll be able to hear okay with the new equipment. The recon team is ready to brief you."

"Sir, this is Lt. Graham. We searched Tango Coordinate One. Nurse Eaton's car was gone. There was no sign of her anywhere. However, we had better luck at Tango Coordinate Two. Danielle Eaton is home, along with what obviously is her bodyguard. A young man, mid-twenties, about six foot three, long black hair and mean eyes." He hesitated.

Oliver frowned at the news that Nurse Eaton had eluded capture. He would deal with her later. Right now he was more concerned with what Lt. Graham wasn't saying. What had he seen that he was reluctant to report? "Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?"

"Well, sir, the damnest thing happened while the bodyguard was checking the grounds. I was afraid to mention it. I figured you wouldn't believe me."

"Try me. What did you see?"

"Well, the man sniffed the air for our scent a couple of times. You would have sworn he was a Beagle. I heard him growl loud deep in his chest, like some angry mountain lion. We pulled back to throw him off our scent. It worked. He relaxed, continued checking around the outside perimeter. About ten minutes later, he disappeared, poof, into nothing, and reappeared in the living room."

Oliver shoved his sleeve back and glanced at his wristwatch. It was two in the morning. "What are they doing now?" He wanted to hit them while they slept.

"It's quiet inside. The lights are out. They've turned in for the night."

"Do you have anything else to report?" Oliver asked.

"No, sir."

Silence.

"Colonel, I've never seen anything like this bodyguard. When he growled, he turned toward me. Of course, I was hidden in the forest, so he couldn't see me. With my night vision goggles, I got a good look at his face. It looked like some harsh, grotesque Halloween mask. What I saw wasn't human."

"Weren't you briefed we're hunting aliens?"

"Yes, sir." Lt. Graham cleared his throat. "Do you know how farfetched that sounded to me? I thought you were off your rocker, but I apologize for even thinking it."

Oliver sneered. All he needed was to capture one. Just one. There would be no denying aliens exist. The world would know they're among us and they're not here to shake our hands.

"Lt. Nash, are the equipment and weapons aboard?"

"Yes, sir. I checked the list myself."

They were set to go. All Oliver needed to do was give the order. "This is Colonel Taylor. Abort Tango Coordinate One, that's a no go for tonight. Proceed to Tango Coordinate Two. Park a half-mile from the designated target. We'll proceed on foot from there."

Oliver chose to ignore the familiar roar of the Humvee. Instead, he reviewed his tactical fight plans along the way. He would set up a command post near the house where he could direct the mission and aid his troops. Two men would assist him. The remaining ten would split up into two teams. One would be deployed to the front of the house, the other to surprise the enemy from the rear.

Each man was equipped with sophisticated, two-way communications inside their helmets, night vision goggles and monoculars, assault rifles with a laser light for targeting at night, Tasers and grenades. His men were highly skilled in close fighting, so he didn't expect any friendly fire casualties, where they shot one another in the heat of battle. These were seasoned combat soldiers. He hoped their expertise, coupled with instant obedience to his commands and the latest weapons, would be enough to overcome the enemy.

"We're fortunate, Colonel. Apparently she values privacy. Our target lives in a rural area, surrounded by trees, no nosy neighbors."

Oliver viewed Danielle Eaton's isolation a little differently. "You know a better place to hide her secrets from the world?"

Twenty minutes later they turned onto a gravel road. The Humvees spewed dust and gravel as they followed the winding road deep into the woods.

"We're within a half-mile of the house," Lt. Nash said.

The vehicles pulled off the road, approaching a large clearing. They stopped just short of the tree line.

"Lt. Nash, Capt. Lee, come with me. Red Team hits the front of the house. Blue Team takes the back. You have your orders. We'll be nearby if you need help. Keep in contact with the command post." Oliver put on his night goggles and snagged his assault rifle off the seat before leaving the Humvee. Dead leaves crunched beneath his boots.

Trees rustled and swayed in the distance. The two teams, loaded with combat equipment, fanned out, taking different paths through the dense trees.

Thirty minutes later, Oliver, Lt. Nash and Capt. Lee knelt behind a clump of bushes and watched the covert action unfurl. They scanned for any trouble as the teams cut phone and power lines, dismantling any security system.

"Red Team is in place, sir."

Several seconds ticked by. No animals moved, no crickets chirped. Nothing. Just the eerie silence of the night.

"Blue Team is in place, sir."

Oliver believed in the element of surprise. Don't do what the enemy expected—enter

through doors. Once he issued the order, all hell would erupt. "Watch your back. On the count of three, break through the windows. One. Two. Three."

Glass shattered. Wood splintered. Boots stomped. The deafening sounds rent the night air in sharp contrast to the earlier deathlike quiet.

"We're in," the two team captains said in unison.

Oliver glanced at the blanket of low lying fog moving into the area. At this stage of the assault, his men would be moving slowly toward the interior, searching for the enemy.

A burst of gunfire from assault rifles filled the air. It lit up the darkness inside the house. He heard a woman's screams coming from another sector of the house. They were high pitched and continuous. A deep, guttural moan came from a man. Shouts of, "Get the bastard. Make him let go." Another barrage of gunshots. Suddenly, a loud roar of what sounded like a wounded animal pierced the night. The creature shrieked as if in pain.

Oliver's heart pounded against his ribs. "Talk to me, dammit. What's going on?"

Lt. Nash moved nearer to him. "You want me to move forward to assist them, sir?"

"No, let's give them a little more time to get the situation under control."

Two minutes of nothing but grunts, rushing feet and occasional curses flew through the communication lines.

"The bodyguard was waiting for us." The soldier gasp, his breath coming in shaky pants. "He attacked. Lightning speed. Superhuman."

Oliver heard the fear in his voice.

"Any casualties?"

"Pvt. Jackson."

"Is he dead?"

"No."

"How badly wounded?"

"The thing almost tore his right arm off." He stopped to gulp more air. "We landed fifteen rounds into the bastard. Made him let go."

"Did you kill him?"

"No, sir. He's back. Not a mark on him." He sucked in air. "It's like he skulked in a corner, waited and healed himself."

Oliver remembered Jason. The experiments they'd conducted. Timing how long it took him to recover. They removed two of his fingers. Within five minutes, they'd grown back.

"The only way to get rid of him is to annihilate him."

"How do we do that?"

"First, keep plugging away at him with everything you have. He won't leave the woman he's protecting."

Another barrage of gunfire lit up the darkness inside the house.

"We got him good."

"Any more casualties?"

"His claws slashed Lt. Lawton's thigh to the bone."

"Were you able to stop the bleeding?"

"Yes, sir."

"Keep the bodyguard occupied, while you search upstairs. Once you remove Danielle Eaton, we can destroy him."

Silence

"We located her, sir, but we have a problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"She has an electrical force field surrounding her."

"How do you know it's electrical?"

"Lt. Graham tried to grab her. When he touched the force field, he got zapped. It knocked him on his ass. He almost passed out from the high voltage."

Oliver shook his head. "Find a way to short circuit the power source. See if water will do it. If that fails, hit her with a Taser. The current that travels from the gun to the electrodes in each barb will stress her muscles. If you bring her down, remove the force field, her muscles will be instantly disabled."

Silence.

A sizzling, followed by a loud whack sounded.

"Don't let her lift her hands," the soldier yelled. "Zap her good."

Oliver chewed on his thumbnail.

"The water worked. We used the Taser twice. She's tied up now."

"Wound the bodyguard again, give him all you have. While he's recovering, remove her from the house. It's imperative that you leave the front door open. Repeat that last command."

"Leave the front door open. I got it, sir."

"Give me an all clear when everyone has safely vacated."

"They're coming out now," Capt. Lee said. "She's with them."

The Red Team and Blue Team hurried down the front steps, carrying their wounded. They sprinted toward the trees. Their boots crunched against the pine needles strewn across the ground.

"All clear, sir."

Oliver glanced down at the grenade-thrower. "No way could anything survive this hell." An incendiary grenade would produce a tremendous amount of heat, burning at 2200 degrees Celsius. If it can burn through a half-inch steel plate, surely it could destroy this creature.

Oliver used the grenade-thrower to lob a grenade at a wall inside the house. It ricocheted off the wall, surprising the bodyguard, who lay on the floor recovering from massive wounds.

In less than five seconds, a huge fireball exploded. The creature's screams were loud shrieks of agony as he was encased in a solid wall of flames, burning him alive. Oliver choked on the smell of burning hair and searing flesh.

"Capt. Lee, see to the wounded. Alert the lab we're bringing them in for treatment."

"Yes, sir."

"Lt. Nash, take the alien to the Humvee. Taser her again if necessary. I don't want her waking up."

Oliver watched the house burn. Timbers crackled, flames lifted into the sky and sparks ignited nearby trees.

Lt. Nash patted him on the back. "We captured her alive."

Oliver smiled. "Get her to the lab. Once they're through with her, we'll take her to the

other compound.”

After they had left the area, fire trucks wailed in the distance.

Bri would be mad as hell when he allowed her to wake up. Logan didn't know if food would appease her, but it was worth a try. He strolled across his kitchen and checked the pasta dish he had baking in the oven. The rich aroma of chicken, mozzarella cheese and red peppers wafted through the air.

Soon as he turned around, a ghostly shadow shimmered in front of him like brilliant crystals of burnt almond. He didn't need the form to become solid to know it was his uncle, Dr. Chris Durham. Although Logan hadn't seen Uncle Chris since his son John had been captured by a rogue, tortured and murdered, Logan didn't hesitate to recommend him as an excellent pediatrician to look after Jason. Did his uncle still blame Logan for John's death?

“Something smells good. What are you cooking?”

“Chicken Tetrazzini.” It was a simple dish, but Bri loved it. Almost as much as she enjoyed watching him eat. “You're welcome to join us.”

He shook his head. “Thanks, but I had a late breakfast.”

His uncle didn't come to check out Logan's culinary skills. What did he want?

“After I examined Jason, I thought we could talk, but you had already left.”

“Bri had muscle cramps, so I took her home.”

“Anything serious?”

“No.”

His uncle cocked a brow. “Where is she now?”

“Sleeping.”

His uncle glanced at the clock. “It's almost noon.”

“She had a really bad night. We found out Dr. Reese was murdered by a rogue vampire and Megan had been kidnapped. Bri couldn't sleep, so I used mind control to help her. If you're going back to Nathan's, maybe you could break the bad news to him.”

Logan saw the pained expression on his uncle's face. Last night's events were eerily familiar, reminiscent of the way John was kidnapped. Logan lost two good men to the rogue. The guilt nearly ate him alive for years. The fact he tried so hard to find John, but couldn't save him still haunted him.

“I'll take care of it. I'm sorry about Dr. Reese. I liked him.” His uncle avoided Logan's gaze. “This reminds me of John's kidnapping. I hope you get Megan back.”

“Me, too, but I don't see how we can possibly save her.”

“Someone told me that you mind linked with my son, shared his death.”

Logan nodded. He hoped his uncle hadn't come here for a blow-by-blow of the agony his son had endured before he died. Logan wouldn't take anyone into that private nightmare.

“Thanks.” He hesitated, as if the thoughts were so painful he couldn't get them out. “I know you did your best to locate where John was being held. I think what made me strike out at you so hard when you notified me of his death was the fact he idolized you so much. All he talked about was being in your unit, fighting beside you. He was my only son. I was jealous of your closeness with him.”

Logan fought the image of a young twenty-two-year-old kid and the senseless way he was murdered. “Do you know what John talked to me about all the time?”

His eyebrows lifted. "What?"

"You."

Through the pain reflected in his eyes, his uncle smiled. "I wanted to give you a heads up. When you didn't destroy Brianna Eaton immediately, it started a lot of unrest within our family. It's the fear of The Legend. Several want to take the matter out of your control and destroy her. They worry that since you're involved with her, you've lost your objectivity."

"I don't want to go against my family, but I can't see killing Bri over something that may or may not happen. She's an innocent, until she proves otherwise." Logan wondered where his uncle stood on the issue. "Are you among the ones wanting her destroyed?"

"Yes."

Logan winced. "I don't know if it will do any good, but please tell them I promised Bri if she turned into a rogue, I would kill her."

His mouth dropped open. "She asked you to do that? To kill her?"

Logan nodded. "Yes, she did. Furthermore, you have my word, if it's the last thing I do, I intend to keep that promise."

Bri glanced at the fingers of moonlight slipping through the bedroom blinds. With her head nestled against Logan's chest, she thought about the day so far.

The dread on Logan's face when he'd ordered her to wake up and she'd instantly obeyed his command. The relief when she'd accepted why he'd used mind control and forced her to sleep.

Her surprise when she'd walked into a kitchen filled with wonderful aromas, to find Logan had cooked Chicken Tetrazzini. She had no idea he could cook. Even though she hadn't felt like eating, he'd worked so hard she couldn't let him down. They'd talked and ate the delicious meal together. He'd admitted the main reason he never ate much was because he hated to eat alone.

She would trade every good memory she ever had or would have in her entire life, if Dr. Reese and Megan were still alive.

"Thank you for teaching me to mist this afternoon." She would always remember the fear in Logan's eyes when she misted for the first time and the joy when she materialized again, one-hundred-percent of her. Poor Logan kept worrying that half of her molecular particles would still be floating in the hemisphere someplace, never to be found again.

"You okay?" Logan held her tighter as they lay in bed.

"Right now, yes, but I can't promise how I'll be when the rogue wakes up and hurts Megan."

Logan kissed the top of Bri's head. "If it's okay, I'd like to probe your mind, share this with you."

Touched by the tenderness of what he was willing to put himself through for her, she was afraid her voice would falter so she simply nodded.

Wake up my lovely.

Bri stiffened, her eyes widened. "It's started." Her hands trembled.

"I know. I heard it, too." Logan exhaled a deep breath.

Guilt stabbed Bri in the soul. She'd caused every bit of the pain Megan was going through. *Please God, give me the strength to stay with Megan. Let her know that I'm with her*

through this whole, horrible ordeal and that I love her.

Bri was drawn into Megan's mind by her powerful emotions, the numbing fear that gripped every part of her body. It was as if Bri were there in the room with Megan, hearing every word spoken and unspoken, through her best friend's mind.

"Don't make me angry. Who donated the special blood to your son? The blood that cured him."

Megan's body trembled. *"I don't know."*

"Liar! Your pulse jumped when you said the words. I'm going to give you one more chance. Who donated the special blood to your son?"

"I can't tell you."

"But you will tell me. Vampires have the power to provide pleasure or excruciating pain when we feed. Which do you think you'll get, my lovely?"

Bri glanced at Logan. *"Is that true?"*

"Yes. We can inflict either one."

The rogue's fangs sank into Megan's neck.

Suddenly, pain ripped through Bri's spine. She arched as each vertebrae twisted.

Megan screamed. Bri screamed.

Logan rose and leaned toward Bri, looking deep into her eyes. *"Oh, my God. You're an empath."*

Bri's breath came in short pants. Pain lapped her body. *"No."*

"When you probe the mind of someone you love very deeply, you feel their pain. I can't let you put yourself through this, Bri."

"I'm sorry." Bri gnashed her teeth. "This is my decision, not yours."

"When the rogue tortures Megan, he'll be torturing you, too. You'll feel everything."

Tears filled Bri's eyes. *"If I could take Megan's place, I would. I don't care how much pain I feel. I'll survive, my best friend won't. This is something I must share with her. I welcome the pain."*

The muscles in his jaw tightened. *"That's misplaced guilt talking. You're not guilty. Dammit, the rogue is responsible for what's happening to Megan."*

"I failed her. I should have kept her safe." She sobbed.

Logan lay back down on the bed and hugged her to him.

"Oh, Bri. That's the same crap I fed myself when John Durham was kidnapped by a rogue. You. Me. We aren't God. We can't wrap the people we love in a protective covering and store them away so life can't hurt them. I wished we could."

All she could think about was Megan, the agony she is enduring.

"I wished I could see through Megan's eyes, see the bastard that's killing her. I hear his voice. Feel what he's doing to her. I want to see what he looks like. If I have to search every place this bastard might hide, including coffins, I'll find him."

Bri waited for the rogue's next move, her body tensed.

She felt claw like fingernails dig into Megan's scalp. Damp, rivulets of blood ran into her hair.

The rogue's fangs sank into Megan's neck again.

Radiating pain circled Bri's head, as if someone were taking a fine surgical saw, removing the top of her head and pulling it apart.

Megan screamed. Bri's body trembled, went into painful spasms.

Suddenly, Bri grew faint. "The bastard fed deeper from her blood." The end was near for Megan and there wasn't a damned thing Bri could do about it. If only she had the power to see through Megan's eyes, see the face of evil.

Logan stroked her hair. "He knows she won't talk, but if she *thinks* your name."

Bri's eyes widened. "It's the same thing. He'll read it from her mind."

Logan held her tight. "Yes. Even if it's your first name, you'll be easy to find through high school yearbooks, nursing school graduation pictures. If Megan communicates with you mentally, the rogue will figure out you have the ability to probe your friend's mind and he wins, he knows you're the one he's hunting."

"I feel weak...faint..."

"You should, my lovely. I left you just enough blood for one more, tiny feeding."

Tears poured from Bri's eyes, soaking Logan's shirt. "Oh, Megan."

If you hear me, Bri...

Seconds ticked by.

Logan hugged her to him. "I'm sorry. She thought your name. There's no need for the rogue to keep her alive. He has what he wants," Logan whispered.

"I know." Bri's chin quivered.

Megan was on the verge of mercifully passing out from the loss of blood.

Tell Jason I love him. Look after him for me.

"I'm hungry again, my lovely."

The rogue's fangs sank into Megan's neck.

Megan's pulse slowed.

Bri counted each precious beat, until...

They stopped.

Logan's fingertips gently touch Bri's eyelids. He closed them. "Sleep, darling. Sleep deep tonight. You'll need your strength when we hunt this bastard."

Logan was treating Bri like some invalid. She would not let the rogue win. So far this monster had been responsible for the death of five people. She wanted two things from him, the location of Megan's body and his destruction. It had become her mission.

"One more bite." Bri stared at the forkful of fluffy pancake, dripping with syrup, Logan held in front of her mouth. "I can't. I'm stuffed." She grabbed her napkin from the table.

Logan had an I'm-not-taking-no-for-an-answer look. "Open up."

Rather than argue with a man determined to pamper her, she did as he said. She wrapped her lips around the last morsel.

"That bastard knows your name. You're staying here until this is over."

Bri glanced at her white tee and denim pants, the last clean outfit she had. "I only packed for the weekend."

"You can wash clothes at my house just as easily as you can at yours. We'll transport to your place from time to time and get whatever you need, but you aren't going alone. Not until we destroy this rogue."

Bri fought the urge to salute this bossy, adorable vampire. "Yes, sir."

Logan pushed his chair back and stood. "Let's stack these in the dishwasher. By the time the load finishes, we'll be back from your place."

An apparition shimmered with a vibrant jade light. Bri recognized her father's spicy cologne. As his image became solid, the smile on her lips died. Instead of his normal, impeccable suit, the one he wore was rumpled, like he'd slept in it. Dark circles rimmed his eyes. His face was haggard, his lips tight.

Bri and Logan exchanged a worried look.

Logan rushed to her father's side. "Sit over here, Nathan." Logan locked elbows with her father and helped him into a chair, and then sat across from him.

"Would you like some coffee?" Bri asked, jumping up without waiting for his reply. Her father looked like he could use several cups. "We made a fresh pot." She quickly filled a cup and set it in front of him. His hand shook as he took a sip.

Bri settled herself in the chair next to him. Whatever was wrong, it had nothing to do with Dr. Reese or Megan. This was some new problem. One that hurt him to the core, but what?

"I don't know how to tell you." Tears misted his eyes.

She grabbed his hand and squeezed it tight. "Just tell me."

He cleared his throat. "Last night someone killed young Matt Griffin and took your mother."

Bri inhaled a gasp. "Did the rogue take her?"

"No. It was a military operation, at least a dozen men."

"Damn." Logan shook his head. "Colonel Taylor."

Her father nodded. "I probed the firemen's minds. They found evidence of an explosive device and rifle bullet holes and shells. The house was under siege before it was burned to the ground. But, thanks to the Army, that'll never get reported as anything but a short in the electrical lines."

Bri blinked. Her mother loved that house. A lot of memories went up in those flames.

Nathan winced. "God knows what they did to young Matt to keep him from protecting Danielle. They got her out of the house somehow. Afterwards, they threw an incendiary-grenade inside, destroying poor Matt in the fire. He was such a nice young man."

Bri released a shaky breath. "I'm sorry about Matt, but thank God, mother wasn't taken by the rogue. I don't think I could stand losing another person to that bastard."

Her father glanced at Logan. "Megan?"

"Yes, last night," Logan whispered.

Her father put his arms around Bri. "I'm sorry about Dr. Reese and Megan."

Bri hugged him back, but couldn't cry. Something inside her was beyond angry, beyond crying, beyond anything but revenge.

"Your mother's gone and it's all my fault."

Bri pulled away from him. "It isn't your fault."

"I should have had more men protecting her. I should have assigned someone older. I should have forced her to stay at my house."

She gave him an incredulous stare. "More men wouldn't have helped against a military operation, nor would being older. You would simply have had more dead men." She snorted. "You couldn't force mother to stay at your house. Remember, she zapped you."

He patted Bri's hand. "I've been up all night. The AMRIID has cleared out of the hospital."

Bri gasped. "They took mother with them."

"Yes, but I'll find out where Colonel Taylor has taken her. I'll get her back, I promise."

Bri hugged him again. "I know how deeply you love her. There's no doubt in my mind you'll find her and rescue her. Don't let it eat you alive. My mother needs you right now."

"I know. Don't think about going to your mother's house. It's a total loss. If you go back to your house, transport, don't drive and be very careful. One of your neighbors said several military men were asking questions about you."

"Damn." Logan fisted his hands.

Her father's eyes glowed with anger. "I think Colonel Taylor planned on taking you, too, but you weren't home."

Bri glanced at Logan. The thought of someone throwing an incendiary-grenade and burning him alive made her heart stop. *If anything happened to you...*

He smiled at her. *It won't.*

Logan expelled a long breath. "As long as we're laying out problems, before Megan died she thought Bri's name."

Her father clenched his teeth. "The rogue knows her name."

Logan nodded. "Rather than sit here waiting for the bastard to come after her, we're going to reverse the game—hunt him."

"If you're going out looking for him, I could use your help."

"Finding mother?" Bri asked.

"No. It'll be my pleasure to take care of Col. Taylor. We're also working on another problem. There's an internal war within the families. From the rumbles we've heard, it isn't a large faction, but watch your back. Some want Bri dead. Some want her blood. She's under my protection. These few are defying my dominance. Just help us identify these traitors."

"After we identify them, then what?" Logan asked.

"We'll destroy them before they destroy us."

Chapter Eleven

The second Bri put her hands on the morning newspaper she'd opened it to the Obituaries. In it was the announcement of the passing of Dr. Reese, one of Charleston's finest physicians, who had died from a stroke. When she read that people could drop by St. Anne's to say goodbye to him, the beginning of a plan for revenge wrapped around her wounded soul like a soothing balm. It was only fitting that Dr. Reese, God rest his sweet, compassionate soul, would aid in revenge against his and Megan's murderer. The whole thing smacked of payback, which made it perfect. She wanted to hurt this rogue, tear his heart out, the way he'd torn hers out. What she had planned for him was only the beginning, she promised herself. A touch of pain, until she delivered the final blow.

This Monday would be etched in Bri's mind forever as another painful turning point. It was hard for her to think about going to work at St. Francis Hospital, knowing Dr. Reese and Megan wouldn't be there—ever. They'd been such an integral part of Bri's life for so many years. If she went to the theater, she would remember how they'd always put a giant tub of buttered popcorn between them and dug in. Afterwards, they'd debated the movie, the pros and cons of scenes. If she went fishing, she'd remember the weekends they'd spent at Dr. Reese's lakeside cabin. He'd helped her reel in her first fish and clean it. Man, over the years they'd eaten tons of fish. Megan was who Bri had turned to with boyfriend problems. Dr. Reese was who she had turned to when she'd been discouraged with nursing school, wanted to throw in the towel. He'd tutored her, helped her through it. He was always there, helping her, protecting her.

Life would go on, but without two of the people Bri loved.

She had called the hospital and taken a week off due to a death in the family. As far as she was concerned, Dr. Reese and Megan were family.

For the first time in her life, she allowed the angry beast to rule. Every time she thought about Ruth, Dr. Reese and Megan, the Dr. Hyde hidden deep inside Bri roared. It roared to be the one to rip this rogue apart. She felt her strength multiply as the furor inside her grew. Once unleashed, could she call it back? Could she control it again? Would she want to control it again?

Logan stood in the doorway. "Uncle Chris says its okay for Jason to have visitors."

Bri was afraid to ask. "Does he know about his mother and Dr. Reese?"

"Yes. Before they had a chance to tell him, he sensed it and asked if what he felt was true." Logan glanced at her with concern. "You okay?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Let's spend time with Jason, see how he's doing. Afterwards, we'll transport to your place and pick up a few things." Logan strolled into the living room and stopped mid-stride. She knew he sensed the turmoil and sadness that filled her. "What are you reading?" He studied her face as he joined her on the oversized couch.

"Dr. Reese's obituary. After we see Jason and get my things, I want to drop by St. Anne's."

His gaze softened. "We'll drive to the cemetery later. You can say goodbye there, like you did with Ruth."

No way would she tell Logan the real reason she wanted to do it at St. Anne's. He'd think her plan was too dangerous, order her to forget it. Well, she had no intention of backing down. "This is something I have to do for myself, for Dr. Reese."

Logan frowned, concern in his eyes. "You can go inside, I can't. The instant you set foot through the doors you'll be vulnerable. If anything happens, I can't help you."

"What have you trained me for, Logan?" she snapped.

He cocked a brow. "So we could work as a team, remember?"

"I have to stand on my own two feet sometime. You're overprotective."

"I'm not being overprotective, I'm doing my job."

She huffed. "It's daylight. The rogue is asleep in his coffin. He would have the same problem you have entering a church, so I'm safe. There's no reason I can't go alone."

"You're not going to St. Anne's. The rogue could have his minions hiding, watching you. He could follow you here."

"Don't you think I'd notice the tail? I'd definitely get suspicious of windows tinted so dark you can't see in. That would scream 'vampire' to me."

"You're forgetting Colonel Taylor."

"He wouldn't dare do anything with others around. Besides, my father would have thought of that possibility. He'd have someone scanning the attendees. Mind link with him, verify it, if you'd like."

He opened his mouth as if he were going to speak, but then closed it.

She fought the smile playing across her lips. In his world, vampires made the rules. They were dominate, expected blind obedience.

"I'm not used to hearing the word no." His gaze teased, seduced. "I could *make* you say yes."

She lifted her brows. "I know you, Logan. You could, but you won't."

He reached out one hand and touched her face. His fingertips outlined her lips ever so lightly. "God, you sorely tempt me to spank your bottom."

She nipped his finger.

He shook his head and groaned. "When we transport to your house and get your things, grab everything you need. This is a one shot deal. We're not taking another chance going back, not until Nathan has dealt with Col. Taylor."

She nodded.

Their gazes locked.

"Okay, we'll go to St. Anne's together. I'll wait outside, but I want you to tell me *exactly* how long you'll be inside. You better not be one second late, understood?"

"Understood."

"Do you have any idea what it would do to me inside if something happened after I gave in to you?"

Guilt seared her because for the first time she hadn't been entirely truthful with him. If she had, he never would have allowed her to begin her plan for revenge.

Dressed in black, Bri and Logan walked arm in arm to the front of St. Anne's. Logan stopped on the steps and glanced up at the beautiful stained glass. A kaleidoscope of colors swirled through the tranquil scene of trees and sky with God's hand reaching through the

clouds toward mankind. There was no disrespect in the way Logan looked at the front of the church, rather Bri saw awe and regret on his face.

"Thank you for going with me to see Jason today. Between the two of us, I think we cheered him up."

"A kid can tell when he's loved. You're wonderful with him, Bri." Logan took a step away from the church. "I'd give anything if I could go inside, but this is as far as I can go." He glanced at his watch. "Thirty minutes, that's what you said you needed."

She nodded and turned.

He grabbed her hand, pulled her against him. "Say goodbye to Dr. Reese for me."

She swallowed hard. "I will."

As she opened the large, heavy doors and stepped inside the quiet red carpeted vestibule, she was met by one of the priests.

His kind eyes reminded her of Dr. Reese. Her breath caught. "I'm Father Michael. Are you here to see Dr. Reese?"

Afraid her voice would falter, she nodded.

He pointed to the front of the altar.

Her hands shook. God. She hadn't expected the open casket, which made it harder for her to say goodbye, to pretend he was on a long vacation, to pretend she hadn't lost him. She could see his familiar gray hair from where she stood.

"There's a guest book to the right."

Bri signed her and Logan's names.

She walked to where Dr. Reese lay. He looked like he was asleep, something he never found enough time for in life. She had the strangest urge to touch him on the shoulder, shake him, order him to stop this nonsense, get up from there, back into her life. Most of all she wanted to shout she wasn't ready to let him go. She never would be.

She stared at him and whispered, "I know you can hear me. Logan wanted to say goodbye too, but he can't come inside." Tears burned her eyes. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at goodbyes." Her chin quivered. "Actually, this is the first time I haven't done it at the gravesite."

She stepped away, her heart aching, but turned back to him, reluctant to break even this contact. When they put him in the ground she wouldn't see him for a long time. "I know Megan is with you. Tell her I love her, too. Let her know we're looking after Jason. We'll make sure he never forgets her. You'll always be on my mind and in my heart, Doc."

The pain of saying goodbye ripped her heart and soul apart. She bent and kissed his cold cheek. "Until we meet again." Tears poured from her eyes. She snatched a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped at her face.

Father Michael walked up and put his hand on her elbow. "Maybe you'd like to light a candle in his memory."

"Actually, Father, I'd like to light three. I've lost several dear friends recently."

"I'm sorry, my child."

"Father, while I light candles I was wondering if you could do something for me." Bri pulled out the vial concealed in her dress pocket. "Could you fill this with Holy water?"

"Bri, I'm dressing you tonight," Logan said.

She chuckled. "That's a first. You've always been taking my clothes off."

He rolled his eyes and tried to look indignant. "If I recall, you did a little undressing of me, too."

She reached for him and he swatted her hands away.

"Back to business." He draped a long, sexy black outfit and a black trench coat across his bed, followed by mid-length boots. She laughed when he placed a makeup kit on the bed.

"I'm very fussy about my makeup, thank you. Not that I wear that much, but I like it to look natural."

"Not tonight. I'm in charge of that, too."

"You're having fun bossing me around, aren't you?"

He cocked a brow. "Definitely. Okay, pay attention. This is a wrist blade. It goes in your boot." He clicked the catch several times to show her how to draw the weapon. "This is more effective against hosts than vampires, but it will wound them."

She lifted the wrist blade and studied its weight.

"You'll wear this innocent looking, ornamental belt around your waist. The wooden stakes have been dyed black and decorated with beads to match the trim around the neck of your dress. These are from the whitethorn you helped me collect at Ruth's cemetery."

Bri was impressed. "They don't look like stakes."

He nodded. "Then we did our job."

"Once you get into the boots and the dress, I'll do your makeup."

As she undressed, the heat in Logan's eyes could have ignited the room. She wasn't sure how much he wanted her to take off. When she reached for the clasp on her bra, his hand halted her.

"Leave the sexy bra and bikini panties." He winked at her.

When she bent to put the boots on, Logan was all lust. His erection was clearly visible from across the room. She smiled at him, glad this sexy vampire found her desirable.

She slid into the silky, long dress that hugged her bust, accentuating cleavage.

"Are you using me as bait?" she asked.

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "Turning the tables on the rogue is the only chance we have because he isn't going to suddenly stop hunting you. We're trying to level the playing field a little, that's all."

"Sit on the edge of the bed."

When she complied, he said, "Look up."

Bri was a little embarrassed at his studying her skin and face so closely. She knew every imperfection and was sure he would see them, too.

He applied concealer under her eyes with his fingers. Okay he saw her dark circles.

"Stop fidgeting."

Had she been fidgeting? She stilled her hands.

He took a damp sponge and applied liquid makeup. "You have gorgeous skin, soft, subtle." With a brush, he stroked a blush on her cheeks, forehead, nose and chin that was lighter than she normally wore.

"Won't that make me look pale, washed out?"

"That's the idea."

"Putting makeup on a woman isn't something most men would feel comfortable doing,

nor is it something they would really be able to do very well, but you seem very comfortable with it."

"In my line of work, I've had to disguise myself more times than I care to remember."

She frowned at the black crap he lifted from the makeup kit. "Whoa, what's that? It looks like tar."

"We're going into the vampire district. Nightclub hopping. To bad guys hunting human hosts, goth is in. It's an aphrodisiac, like you're dressing up, pretending to be a vampire because it's what your heart desires."

"Please tell me that's not what turns you on."

He laughed, lifted her hand and placed it on his erection. "This was there when you were 'au-naturel'. I know you noticed."

She removed her hand and felt herself blush under all this goop. *Oh, my God, had her tongue been hanging out earlier? Probably.*

"If there are real vampires in the nightclubs, why doesn't anyone tell the press or do something to expose them?"

"Human hosts know about the vampires. They're attracted to them. Remember what your orgasm felt like when I sipped your blood?"

Just thinking about falling into that pool of intense pleasure make her wet.

"Do any of the human hosts get harmed by the vampires?" Bri asked.

"No. They never have. Blood for orgasms is a pretty even exchange."

Bri wrinkled her brows. "But if someone in the nightclub finds out about the vampires, or a human host gets mad at one of them and decides to tell the authorities, whatever, how do the vampires keep their secret?"

"Mind control. They simply wipe out the memory of the events. Vampires can also use group mind control, erase events, plant information humans then believe are facts."

"I don't know. It seems dangerous."

"Like living on the edge? Today, danger is in."

"Close your eyes." He ran a brush over her eyelids. "Open your mouth a little."

She gasped when he did the unexpected, kissed her.

"I snuck that in before I put this on you." He ran a tube of brownish lipstick across her lips. "Keep your eyes closed, until I tell you to open them."

He took her hand and led her across the room.

"Open your eyes."

She stared at her reflection in the oval, floor length mirror. Her mouth dropped open. "I look like Lily on *The Munsters*. This is going to attract vampires?"

"Yes."

"You expect me to look like this every time we go out and hunt this rogue?"

"Yes."

"Then he's dead the minute I find him."

Logan laughed. "Bri, you leave the rogue to me. I want to get information from him before I destroy him. We need to know what he wants. Does he want your blood or he wants you dead? How many followers does he have? Where are they? We have to destroy both him and his followers."

"Maybe we'll luck out the first time." She glanced at herself one more time and winced.

"After this is over, I wouldn't trust you within twenty feet of my face with makeup."

He chuckled.

Bri pulled on the black trench coat. She kept her eye on Logan. Was he suspicious? She gathered the clothes she'd taken off, carefully removed the vial of Holy water hidden in a handkerchief and shoved it into her coat pocket.

"Will they search me?" Bri asked.

"Not now, you'll blend in with the crowd. I've gone undercover at the nightclub before using my real name but a phony background. I'll help get you in the door."

"Then we split up?"

"After a little while, we don't want it to be obvious, but I'll keep an eye on you. I have to warn you that you may be shocked by what you see, but try to look cool, interested. It's pretty much anything goes in these places."

"You've been in them a lot?"

"Yes." He gave her a cocky smile. "You sound jealous."

She laughed. "Who me?" This is where she expected him to give her the line, "That was before I met you, babe," instead, he stared at her with amusement.

"Both of us need to use our telepathic shields to block anyone in the club from reading our minds. Also, if the rogue gets near you, put a special block up for him. Don't take any chances with him."

Bri huffed. "I'm not likely to forget something that important."

He handed her a fifty dollar bill.

"What's this for?"

"Don't carry a purse. Someone might want to get to know you better and steal it to find out where you live."

She shoved the money into her pocket. "I'll pay you back."

He nodded. "Don't do anything stupid, like go off with a vampire on your own."

Bri chewed on her lip. His statement hit a little too close for comfort. "Why would I do something like that?" Her heart skipped a beat.

Logan shot her a suspicious look.

Bri stared at the gaudy neon sign in the shape of collagen injected size lips, setting the night sky ablaze with a sick, bloody hue. Big bold letters read, *Ultimate Kiss*. How obvious could you get? The ultimate kiss was that of a vampire. She swallowed the nausea that plagued her, attributing it to jitters about entering this sin palace. Thank, God, she had her weapons because she would need them.

She glanced at Logan in his sexy, leather outfit. It looked like someone had poured him into it. He turned to shake hands with someone, who cut his eyes at her and winked. Bri smiled at the tall, muscle-bound two-hundred pound gorilla. When he flashed his fangs at her, she wondered if smiling was a wise thing to do. She would hate to have to kill every damn vampire in the place, but they better think again if they thought they could stick their fangs in her neck, or any other place, for a blood bank withdrawal.

"Relax." Logan loosened her fingers from the death grip she had on his arm.

"Sorry, the guy gave me the creeps."

Logan smiled. "It was his way of smiling back at you."

"Uh-huh. I'm frowning the rest of the night."

Fang-guy got to the entrance first. He held the door open for them.

"He's the bouncer, Bri. I know him. He's one of the good guys. He signed us in."

"Great, we're in. Maybe you could give me a little clue how to tell the good guys from the bad?"

Logan pointed to his nose. "I think you'll know the rogue when you meet him."

Bri would never forget the rogue's voice either. The way he kept referring to Megan as 'my lovely', up until he drank her last drop of blood and stilled her heart. Bri clenched her teeth so hard her jaw ached.

I'm going to destroy him, Megan, but first I'm going to hurt him, make him suffer.

The place was electric, lit up like an airport. By the time she glanced at what others had worn, she felt comfortable with the goth look. Logan was right, she blended in with the crowd. "This place sure is packed for Monday night. How late are they open?"

Like everyone else, she found herself yelling to carry on a conversation. The techno, dark rave noise reminded her of a kettledrum echoing through the place with a constant pounding of the music's rhythm. She hoped these people had their hearing tested each year because this was definitely lose your hearing sound level.

"They're open until four."

"Four in the morning? Don't these people have jobs?"

Logan pulled her close and whispered in her ear, "Humans do. Most vampires are independently wealthy. Some have acquired it from the humans they've murdered. Most of the ancient vampires have lived and worked for so long they've accumulated tons of money."

She lifted her brows. "Like you and my father?"

"Yes," he said matter-of-factly, not in a proud, vain manner. "There's two dance floors. We need to hit them both, make sure we're seen."

They quickly made their way to the bottom dance floor, which had a crazy looking car in it. Bri stared at it, wondering how in the world someone thought of this gimmick. The vehicle was covered in vivid red, yellow and green fuzzy material. Several people danced to dark techno on the hood and trunk of the car. Others jumped up and danced on the tables and a raised platform. It looked like fun. Bri smiled when she spotted one couple in the front of the car doing some serious making out.

Thirty minutes of swimming through an ocean of sweaty, gyrating bodies, they turned, plowed through the crowd and trudged back to the top floor.

Like magic, the music upstairs changed to a slower beat, the lights lowered and the noise level dropped a decimal.

"This must be the calm before the storm," Bri said, in a normal tone. "At least people can talk without screaming now."

"Don't get too attached to the sound. I enjoy the tracks from the eighties, too, but it only lasts thirty minutes." Logan smiled when he led her to the dance floor and pulled her into his arms. "Do you realize this is the first time we've danced?"

"Yes." She moved closer to him, her head nestled against his chest. Once again, she enjoyed the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. It would be heaven making love to him every night, cuddling against him and letting that sound rock her to sleep.

"We'll split up after we dance this number. Trust me, Bri. I won't be far away. You

may not see me, but I'll be near."

"Okay," she whispered.

"Bri, don't do anything foolish tonight. I have this funny feeling you've decided to do something rash. I could understand why, but don't take chances with your life."

Rather than lie to him, she stalked away and headed for the bar. Maybe she would hear something to help locate the rogue and his followers. She'd already made her mind up what she intended to do. Nothing would persuade her differently.

The bartender moved to her side of the bar. "What'll it be, gorgeous?"

"An alcopop." She could nurse the fizzy, lemonade soft drink and enjoy the sugar high.

Her keen sense of hearing picked up a lover's quarrel to her right. Seems the girl couldn't understand why he didn't at least want to try a threesome. She kept huffing out a frustrated breath when she lobed reasons to do it and he returned the high shot with reasons for keeping their relationship limited to the two of them.

"Where's your sense of adventure? John is a nice guy."

From the shocked expression on the young man's face, that went over really well.

Bri wondered how the girl would feel if he'd said Silvia was nice, too. He'd like to try her in the threesome first. Bri would be willing to bet jealousy would rear its ugly head. The girl would put her foot down.

To the left of Bri a couple of men argued about whether their master would share. She assumed the vampires were talking about sharing a woman. She almost choked on her drink when they said, "Bri" and realized they were talking about sharing blood – her blood.

Instantly, she turned and studied them. They appeared to be in their twenties and were into nose and tongue studs. Both wore trench coats and had smooth blond hair with blue streaks. When one of them noticed her looking at them, he winked at her. She sipped her drink and listened intently, hoping they would reveal the name of their master.

Logan?

I'm here.

To the left of me, two men in trench coats. They're after my blood.

I'm on 'em.

Suddenly a whiff of the foul odor of mold and decay drifted to her nostrils.

Bri spun, scanning the area.

Nothing.

She turned back to the bar.

"Bri," the voice whispered against the back of her neck. His voice gave her goose bumps.

She spun again, scanning the area.

Nothing.

It was the rogue. He was here.

Something touched her hair. She swatted at it. When she glanced over her shoulder, no one was there.

A hand wrapped around her waist, pulled her back against him. "I know who you are, my lovely. The Legend."

Bri gasped and put her telepathic shield up again to make sure this bastard couldn't read her mind. At the same time, she dismantled his shield.

Bri was sucked into the black whirlpool by the rogue as they transported. Her stomach threatened to heave at his vile odor. They landed in the middle of his bedroom and she quickly moved away from him. The room looked like a gaudy bordello. Blood red carpet covered the floor and one wall. A mahogany king-size, rippling waterbed sat against the back wall with a nightstand on either side. On the ceiling was a mural of men and women engaged in different sexual positions.

If this fiend thought he could throw a dart and pick which one he intended trying with her, he better think again.

She turned, glanced at him and studied the face of evil. Her mouth dropped open. Deep down she'd expected to see the evil inside him reflected on his face, like the mark God had given Cain when he slew his brother. His victims deserved a warning, a scar of some kind that screamed the pain he was capable of inflicting on them. Instead, she stared at a tall, broad-shouldered man without a blemish on his masculine face that could grace the hottest cover of GQ.

His dark, intelligent eyes smiled at her, obviously pleased at her shock. "God, you have stunning blue eyes," he said with a sexy grin.

Bri blinked, unable to break contact with this devastatingly handsome man. A perfect camouflage for the monster within. Looking at him reminded her of Ted Bundy. The only time his victims saw the rage hidden beneath his innocent façade was when he tortured and murdered them. "Who are you?"

"The vampire who's going to possess you."

Like hell! Anger built inside her. Anger she tamped down. She wanted to show him the monster that lived inside her, the one begging to rip this arrogant vampire's head off, but first she needed to probe for facts. He had a reprieve from her wrath, until she knew where Megan's body was. After that, she would destroy him.

She opened her eyes wide and feigned fear. *Tell me your name.* "I at least deserve to know who thinks they're man enough to possess me."

He bent at the waist. His long, wavy hair fell over his shoulders. "Gregory Stone." He straightened. "I own *Ultimate Kiss*." He waved his hand with flourish at the surroundings. "I live in the loft above the nightclub."

Bri forced her body to quake. "Do you intend harming me?"

His dark eyes softened. "No, my lovely. You're the treasure I've searched for. You aren't as other humans. Your blood is not mere food. It's for blood-bonding with me and my followers. We'll give you pleasure in return for the gift of walking in sunlight again."

She strolled over to him, as if interested in him, and put her hand on his arm. He flexed his bicep. "I'm honored. I've heard of those who cling to the old wiser traditions, such as yourself. How many are in your dominance?"

He grinned, obviously pleased with her choice of words.

Once he seduced her, he'd control her. He'd command this witch to use spells, give them children for a new race of vampires.

So that's his plan. The idiot didn't know witches could disengage a vampire's telepathic shield.

"I have seven who obey me."

Bri heard his heart skip two beats. *Liar!*

"You don't trust me." She pouted and looked hurt.

He gave her a cocky smile. "Of course I do."

"I have a right to know how many in the pack you want to share me with." She moved closer to him. "Maybe I prefer staying with you, Gregory."

"And I just might let you. I have thirty."

His heart stayed steady. He'd told the truth.

"I could allow you to have your choice of playmates, if you'd like."

"I'd like that." She smiled at him.

He reached out and fondled her breast.

At his touch, something bazaar happened. It was as if the magic spell that had created this being lifted, allowing her to see the true age of this loathsome creature. She cringed at the withered hand that felt the weight of her breast.

Calm yourself. You came to do a job.

She'd noticed his lack of security in the club. "They protect you?"

The malicious monster that had wreaked havoc on her life and destroyed her friends puffed up like she'd insulted his honor. "I need no one's protection. Who would *dare* try to harm me?"

She's standing in front of you, idiot! Once he told her where Megan's body was, she'd give him two worlds of hurt.

She forced herself to lean into his touch and smile. "How do I know you speak the truth? Maybe you're not a believer in the ancient ways." She glanced around the bedroom, again. "You have a regular bed. I don't see a coffin."

"Oh, my lovely. I assure you the bed is for sexual romps with humans. I sleep in the coffin every day, like our ancestors. Come, I'll show you."

Gregory led her down the hall into a room with a hot tub. Steam rose from the churning water. The smell of chlorine hung in the humid air. They had walked in on a threesome, who could care less if others watched them.

Bri's face flamed. *Oh, my.* One dark-haired vampire peeled off the top of a well-endowed woman with long blonde hair. He sucked her breasts, moving from one to the other. His fingers plucked her nipples. While she moaned with pleasure, the other vampire lifted her so he could enter her. The vampire moved from her chest to her neck and began feeding. Instantly, the woman had an orgasm.

Bri remembered Logan sipping her blood. The heady rush, the sensation of falling into an intense liquid pool of pleasure that bathed her body. It was an unforgettable orgasm. She studied their faces. The knowing smile the vampires exchanged. The sheer ecstasy on the woman's face. A sigh passed her lips.

Bri averted her eyes as heat rose to her face.

Gregory laughed. "This threesome excites you. My men are just having fun with a regular to our nightclub."

They moved into the next room. He pointed to the opened black coffin sitting in the middle of the room, filled with stinking filth.

"See, I keep it in here. I didn't lie." When he walked over to show her the fine workmanship, she reached in her pocket and opened the vial of Holy water.

Bri glanced around, but didn't find any other coffins. "Your followers don't share your love of the past."

"They have discarded their motherland soil, broke with the past."

The closer she came to the coffin, the more it stank. "May I?"

Gregory smiled and nodded.

She hid the vial in her hand as she reached, lifting the damp soil with her fingertips. Her gaze on him, she poured the Holy water across the dirt and returned the vial to her pocket. He was in for a big surprise. She doubted he would be stupid enough to allow prolonged contact with the Holy water to destroy him, but it sure as hell would burn his flesh. Once his motherland soil was consecrated by her he could never use it again. The thought of destroying something he valued gave her a great deal of satisfaction. Every day he would remember who dealt the blow. Every day he would want revenge—on her. And he would fall right into her hands.

"Come, my lovely." He led her back through the hot tub area.

The threesome was still going strong, only the men had changed positions. The other man was feeding at the woman's neck as his friend pumped his cock into her. Once again, the woman's face held a look of rapture, even as blood was drained from her body.

As they entered the bedroom, the door crashed open.

Anger shot from Logan's eyes. "What are you doing here with him?"

Is Logan jealous? She wrinkled her brows in disbelief. He must be insane to think she would take up with this monster.

"He wishes to take you away from me, my lovely. Dammit, she belongs to me!" Gregory yelled.

Bri threw the bastard a look of contempt. If he and Logan fought, the rogue would be destroyed. She needed him alive for a while longer, so she could find Megan's body. Bri lifted her hands. "Come, powers of the land and sea. Come to the aid of your sister I plead. Hearken ye unto me. Form a cage of pain that only I can remove around this enemy who wrongfully claims me as his."

A wall of dazzling light encircled the rogue. He touched it and a blue laser beam shot into his chest. He screamed.

"You witch. This won't stop me forever. I'll force you to serve me."

Bri felt a sense of triumph at having trapped the monster. She lifted the mental shield between the two of them so she could communicate with him and probe his mind. He would have to talk now. She controlled the laser with her hand, setting it off again. The rogue gnashed his teeth.

How valuable is one more day of life to you, Gregory?

He snarled at her. *Name your price, witch.*

The location of Megan's body. From the evil grin he threw Bri, he had something else he wanted in return for the information.

Bri fisted her hand, harnessing the power of the laser. He screamed when the beam seared his chest. The smell of burning flesh rose in the air.

Footsteps pounded toward them.

The two vampires who had been enjoying the threesome ran into the bedroom naked.

"Get him!" one of them yelled, bearing his fangs.

Kill the rogue's minions, Logan.

A heartbeat later, Logan changed into a vampire. One of them flew toward Logan and landed a right punch to his jaw.

The minions swarmed over him.

Logan growled and threw them against the wall. They smacked into it and slid onto the floor, rising immediately. He removed two stakes from his pants pocket.

The minions hurled themselves toward Logan. They smashed into him. The impact knocked the stake from his right hand. One of the minions fought for control of the stake.

Bri lifted her hand and commanded the stake to come to her. Instantly, it materialized in the palm of her hand.

Logan attacked the minions. They soared into the air to avoid his assault.

Quick as lightning, Logan met one of them midway and plunged the stake deep into his heart. The vampire screamed. His flesh melted, leaving nothing but a skeletal body. It disintegrated to a heap of ashes that rained onto the carpet.

"Logan, hold out your hand!" Bri yelled.

She commanded the stake to leave her and go to Logan. It materialized in his hand.

When the other vampire saw what had happened to his friend, he ran.

The rogue grinned at Bri. *That information is worth more than what you're offering. I want your word you'll meet me, alone when I summon you. If I defeat you, you'll agree to be mine.*

She didn't hesitate. *You have my word.*

He snorted. *You think you can destroy me.*

I don't think it. I know it.

Logan blocked the fleeing vampire's path. He threw a punch and connected an uppercut to the minion's jaw. He reeled from the impact. Logan pulled back his hand and delivered a mortal blow to the vampire. The stake was embedded deep in his chest. He fell and shriveled to fine, white powder.

Your friend's body is buried in her own backyard, Bri.

"Release him," Logan said, pointing to the cage.

She shook her head. "I made a bargain with him for the location of Megan's body."

Logan snorted. "Well, I didn't make any deal with this devil."

"I won't release him." She stood in front of the cage.

The rogue laughed, obviously amused by their standoff.

Logan threw her a suspicious glare. "You don't want me to kill him. You're determined to do it yourself."

"Yes."

Logan frowned and grabbed Bri around the waist. She flicked her hand and removed the wall of pain from the rogue.

They transported through the spinning black void and landed in Logan's bedroom.

"I want some answers. Now! What were you doing with the rogue? Did he hurt you?"

Bri felt her stomach lurch. She barely made it to the commode when she heaved. "I'm dying." She heaved again. "Can you die from a rogue's stench?"

Logan pulled a washrag from the cabinet and wet it. He flushed the commode, knelt and washed her face. "Bri, I thought he might have used mind control on you. That he had

seduced you. That you had made love with him."

After she stood, she hurried to the sink and lifted her toothbrush from the counter. She squeezed toothpaste on the toothbrush. "Don't talk like that or I'm going to throw up again."

He chuckled. "What am I going to do with you? You don't mind worth a damn."

After she brushed her teeth twice, she turned the dual jets in the shower to full blast and flipped on the lights beside the shower's entryway.

Quick as she stripped, she threw the clothes at Logan. "Burn these. I'll never get the stench out."

His appreciative eyes raked her naked body before he threw the clothes into the trashcan.

Bri walked into the heart of the luxurious tiled shower, large enough for ten people. A ledge covered one wall, allowing the bather to sit while enjoying the heat. Not satisfied she would ever get the stench off her, she scrubbed herself with two kinds of body shampoos and washed her hair three times. The scent of strawberry, lavender and ginger filled the air. She didn't want any trace of him on her skin.

"Do you feel like having company?" Logan asked.

"I thought you'd never ask." She wanted his hands on her to wipe away the reminder of how the rogue had defiled her, touched her breast.

He strolled into the shower, unadulterated hunger burned in his eyes. Hot water sluiced over his chest.

She grabbed the wintergreen soap he liked and lathered his body. The clean, male scent rose between them. Excitement danced in his eyes.

As she returned the soap to the holder, he stepped under the shower spray to rinse off.

The water pounded their bodies, beading her nipples. She leaned into him, wiggling the tight nubs against his chest.

He lowered his head and claimed her lips.

She sighed into his mouth. Her tongue stroked his. He tasted like rich addictive chocolate and strong espresso – delicious.

They broke away, panting and staring at each other.

He flipped the water control knob down to almost nothing. The pounding dual jets turned into a fine heated mist.

Bri fondled her breasts, lifting them to him.

His tongue licked, circled a hard, dark nipple. She shuddered as his mouth covered the tip and suckled. Her legs grew weak.

He enfolded her in his arms, lifted her, and then laid her on the ledge covering one wall of the shower.

"You scared me tonight, Bri. You're heading down a dangerous path, one I've traveled myself. Dammit, I don't want to lose you."

"You can't prevent this, Logan."

"Don't you think I know that? Hell, no one was able to talk me out of revenge either."

He knelt, kissed her stomach and slid his hands between her thighs, pushing them apart. His mouth moved lower, to the soft, damp curls of her mound.

She trembled as he separated the folds and suckled her with his lips and tongue. Hot desire rose up in her. It left her begging for the next velvet stroke. He quickened the rhythm

and slid his tongue inside her. She whimpered. Her breath came in pants. Heat surged through her, lapping across her stomach, thighs and deep within her. With a will of their own, her hips arched toward him as she came. He licked her quivering flesh until she floated back to reality and stared into his heated gaze.

He gave her a sexy grin. "Now that's my kind of hot shower."

"Really?"

She used one hand to cup and massage his balls. With the other hand, she ran her thumb across the head of his cock. The sharp sound of his inhaling a deep breath echoed in the shower. She lifted up, leaned forward and slid her tongue along the length of him, swirling her tongue around the tip. His body jerked.

"I want to feel you climax around me," Logan whispered, taking control, positioning himself between her thighs. He rained searing kisses on her throat, her cheeks, her mouth.

She ran a finger down his back, her fingernails raking his skin. The thick head of his penis entered her. Her back arched, wanting the full length of him. In one quick thrust, he plunged into her.

"Yes," she said with a contented sigh.

He smiled down at her as he slid in and out of her, slow at first. She met every stroke, raising her hips to push against him. He gave her a slow, wet kiss, their tongues mating.

Her body trembled with jolts of pleasure when he quickened the pace. He thrust into her over and over, deep, hard. She clutched his shoulder, wrapped her legs around his hips and drew him deeper, meeting his powerful thrusts.

The moment her orgasm rocked through her, she felt his body jerk inside her as his climax overtook him. She smiled and tugged him closer. They held each other until their breathing returned to normal.

When she stepped out of the shower, Logan wrapped her in a large, fluffy towel and cradled her in his arms. He sat down on his bed and held her tight. "I need to know what happened at the club. Now, from the beginning."

"I lied to you today."

"I knew that. Your heartbeat jumped. Why did you do it?"

"For all the people I loved, the ones he stole from me. When I said goodbye to Dr. Reese, I obtained a vial of Holy water. I had to hurt the rogue somehow."

"How?"

"I poured the Holy water on the soil in his coffin."

Logan shook his head. "You pissed him off. So instead of seducing you, he'll force you to obey him."

She nodded. "If he tries, he'll regret it." She tightened her jaw. "I made him tell me. According to him, Megan is buried in her own backyard."

Logan exhaled a long breath. "I'll contact Nathan. We'll make sure she gets a decent burial. If you'd like, I'll see if we can bury her next to Dr. Reese."

"I think Jason would like that."

Logan ran his hand through his long wet hair. "Revenge is an awful thing. I know where you're coming from, but don't let hatred eat you alive." His thumb lazily stroked her jaw line.

"You said no one could talk you out of it. What did you do?"

"It isn't something I'm proud of." His eyes clouded with pain. "When I defeated the rogue that kidnapped John, instead of killing the bastard quickly, I tortured him like he did John. The savage image of what I did is burned in my mind."

"I know what you're saying, but there's this hurt inside, deep inside. Until I kill him, I can't heal."

He nodded. "I understand, I really do. We made him hurt tonight, Bri. You took away his coffin and I killed four of his followers."

Her eyes widened. "You killed the two at the bar?"

"Where did you think I was? How many followers did the rogue have?"

"Thirty. The rogue wanted me to blood-bond with them and use spells to become a broodmare."

Logan chuckled. "Thirty? Brother, he certainly told *that* to the wrong woman."

She smiled.

"Well, at least we know how many of his minions we're hunting. They're only part of our problem. We need to find out which vampires wish you dead. I'm afraid we'll have to look among my own family for them."

She saw the pain in his eyes. "Who?"

Logan placed her under the covers and joined her. "I need to rule out Uncle Chris. I hope he isn't involved, but I think he knows who is."

He sighed and she could tell something was on his mind.

"What's wrong?" Bri asked.

"Don't lie to me again."

She saw the hurt in his eyes, the sense of betrayal. He would try and stop her from meeting the rogue alone, but she'd given her word. "I won't." She rubbed her damp, naked body against him and reached for his erection. He didn't disappoint her. "When we make love this time, will you sip my blood?"

Logan stared at her. He cocked a brow and frowned. "Not until you tell me what brought about this sudden urge."

"Don't you trust me?"

He snorted. "Are you kidding? Nope. Come clean, something else happened at the club."

"It was nothing really. When the rogue took me to where he kept the coffin, I saw something that made me think about it."

"Well?"

"Well what?" Her face flamed.

"What did you see that embarrassed you so much?"

"A hot tub with a threesome," she blurted out.

He cocked both brows. "You were turned on by the threesome."

She punched his arm. "No, when the two vampires fed on the woman. I remembered when..."

"You thought of me." He sighed with relief. "For a moment, I was seriously regretting taking you to the nightclub."

"Well?" she asked, pushing her hair aside and exposing her neck.

Excitement danced in his eyes. "You want a repeat performance." He chuckled. "It's

addictive, huh?"

She winked at him and reached for his erection.

Chapter Twelve

"Here's where the Army's holding Danielle." Nathan stuck a red pushpin into a map of the city that he'd hung on the wall of his den. "The small research facility is one hundred and fifty miles from here. It's way back in the middle of the wood and isolated."

The three blood-bonded family members he'd selected for the mission and Dr. Durham, who'd insisted on coming with them so he could tend to Danielle's medical needs, studied the location for a moment before taking seats around the mahogany table. Nathan was pleased to see that everyone wore black suits as he'd requested. These clean cut, all American young men were perfect for the job, except for one sparkling earring he'd spotted, but that was easily remedied.

"The facility is approximately ten thousand square feet." Nathan pointed to the center of the table. "These are the floor plans for the building." Each of them grabbed a copy and took a couple of minutes to review the layout.

Nathan took a seat. "Before we leave, I want to make sure we exchange information. I don't want any misunderstanding about our objectives and what we hope to avoid."

"Have you been inside the facility?" Richard asked.

"Yes." Danielle belonged to Nathan. He had no problem misting to where she was being held. "The set up is similar to what I told you the Army had at St. Francis. Danielle's being kept in the center of the lab. She's sedated and restrained." He said it matter-of-factly without sharing the myriad of emotions that churned like the blades of a tiller, cutting deep within his soul. He remembered the joy that filled him the moment he'd found Danielle alive and listened to her steady heartbeat. The almost uncontrollable rage at what Col. Taylor had done to her. The pain that rocked him when he'd forced himself to tamp down his natural instinct to strike out, utterly destroy those who had murdered Matt and harmed both Jason and his Beloved. The inconsolable sorrow that had almost brought him to his knees when he left her unconscious, strapped to a gurney until he could put his plan to rescue her into motion.

"What kind of opposition are we talking about?" Jeffrey asked, playing with the diamond stud earring in his left earlobe.

The question snatched Nathan from the constant melancholy that would haunt him until he held Danielle in his arms again. He'd lost her once; he couldn't bear to lose her again. "They have a security system, key entry to gain admission to the lab, electric fences and armed guards. I counted nineteen men in the compound, fifteen combat soldiers and four researchers. That had five researchers, but Capt. King became the rogue's minion and Logan killed him."

Jeffrey nodded and cocked a brow. "And weapons?"

"For transportation, they have two Humvees parked on the grounds. Stashed inside, there's an arsenal of assault rifles with a laser light for targeting at night, tasers and grenades, including means of launching incendiary-grenades. They're fully equipped with two-way communications inside their helmets, night vision goggles and monoculars, so the fact it's dark when we're going in won't give us the advantage if they decide to attack."

Richard glanced around the table and laughed. "Whooee, you have a whole lot more

confidence in the four of us pulling this off than I do.”

“There’s a reason I picked the three of you.”

Jeffrey glanced at Richard and snorted. “Let me guess. No one will miss nerdy, computer geeks.”

Nathan chuckled. “You’re modest. I happen to know you’re fierce, cocky and not afraid to speak your minds. Those are traits I need. Each of you can fight like hell, but that’s not all I’m after. With the exception of that diamond stud, which has to go, you have the look for this particular mission.”

“What look?” Jeffrey removed the earring and pocketed it.

“Of FBI Special Agents.”

Jeffrey and Richard’s jaws drew slack. Seconds later, their dark eyes lit with excitement.

“You need one thing to make the picture complete—a service weapon.” Nathan pointed to a box that sat on one of the bookshelves. “A Glock 22 pistol. It’s more for show, but this man right here will teach you the basics so you at least look like you know how to handle it. I’d like you to meet Mike Connor, the third member of our team. Those broad shoulders make him look like a world class wrestler. Don’t be fooled by his looks. In real life he serves as an Instructor in Violent Crimes at the FBI Academy.”

After an enthusiastic exchange of introductions, Nathan withdrew special holders containing fake FBI identifications and badges from an expandable folder. A second later, he glanced at the names and then gave the correct one to each man. “For tonight, Mike has been demoted and works with us.”

Richard ran his fingers across the glossy finish of the ID. “That’s why you asked for an old photo, taken about the time I was changed.”

“Yes.” Nathan handed them a small white envelope. “We avoided using the originals. I know how rare these photos are. I’m returning them to you.”

Jeffrey studied his ID and glanced at Richard’s. “Hey, we’re FBI Special Agents for the Counterterrorism Division. Cool.”

“We work for the same division,” Mike said. “Nathan is the Assistant Director, our boss. Make sure you put the holder where you can easily access it, in case they demand identification. Only one catch, you need to return them to me after the mission. If anyone asks specific questions about the FBI, I’ll answer them.”

After they did as Mike instructed, Nathan placed a pair of thick reading glasses made with no magnification and having ugly black frames in the middle of the table.

“I’d like one of you to wear these.” Instead of balking and mouthing off that vampires don’t need glasses, Jeffrey and Richard grabbed for them at the same time. Jeffrey won. He quickly put them on and grinned.

Nathan steeped his hands. “The greatest fear Col. Taylor has is that his case will be taken away from him by the FBI. He wants to prove aliens exist.”

“Aliens. Boy, would he be surprised to see what kind of aliens he’s really hunting.” Jeffrey chuckled. “Maybe if we showed him our fangs, he’d run the other way.”

Nathan chuckled and reached inside the folder again. He snatched out the legal document Mike had used mind control to obtain. “This is a search warrant for the Army facility. After we identify ourselves and wave this around, they should cooperate. They’re to turn over all records pertaining to the case, but we’ll need to verify they’ve complied.”

"Rather than waste time tearing the place apart searching, use mind control to find out and ask questions of the humans. Listen to their heartbeat to see if they lied to you," Mike said. "You may have to wipe out some of their memory afterwards."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

So far the team he'd selected was working pretty well together. "Hopefully, whatever boxes we confiscate will fit in the Ford Crown Victoria's trunk. I'll help Dr. Durham get Danielle into the ambulance that will accompany us. While we're inside the facility, the ambulance driver will stay and guard both vehicles, in case the Army tries to pull anything."

Dr. Durham glanced at Nathan. "I'll take care of removing Danielle's IV's and any machines monitoring her vital signs. If we can locate her medical chart, I need it."

"Jason's was hanging on his bed. Hopefully, they have it in the same place this time."

Richard furrowed his brows. "We're after the records and you'll get Danielle out."

"That's our objectives. I hope to avoid any violence during this mission."

"Anything else?" Richard asked.

Nathan shook his head. "Don't hesitate to use mind control, if you need it. Get in and out of the facility fast."

They exchanged worried looks.

"What if Col. Taylor decides to check our credentials?" Jeffrey asked.

"I've got it covered," Mike said. "It's nighttime, I doubt they'll try to reach the information number on our ID's. If they should, it's covered. The Army will be told we're on special assignment and work for the FBI. Nothing else."

"Any other questions?" Nathan asked.

A couple of them shrugged.

"I've known you a long time," Mike said. "It isn't like you to let Col. Taylor walk away without a scratch on him."

Nathan gritted his teeth. "After Danielle is safe, I have something special planned for the bastard." He took a deep, calming breath. "While you show them the basics of how to use the Glock, I promised Jason I'd go up and see him before I left."

As Nathan climbed the main stairway leading to the bedrooms, he thought about what he should tell the boy so he wouldn't be frightened. Jason's keen mind had sensed something was happening. He'd made a point of probing other people's thoughts and had figured it out.

When Nathan opened the bedroom door and stepped inside, he still had no answer as to what he should tell Jason, except honesty. The child would sense if anyone lied to him.

Tension built between Nathan's shoulderblades.

Jason snagged a fairytale off the shelf and jumped into the king-size bed. He wore his favorite pajamas, the ones his mother had given him just before she died. They practically had to bribe him to give them up so they could be washed. "Will you help me read?" His innocent hazel eyes stared up at Nathan.

He lay down beside Jason and opened the book. "It's past your bedtime, but we can read a few pages. Did Aunt Emma help you brush your teeth?" The middle-aged lady had been a lifesaver, agreeing to stay here and look after Jason for a while.

"Yes, sir." He paused. "Do you have to go after the bad man that hurt me?" His chin quivered. "Is this the same man who hurt my mom?"

"No, this bad man isn't the one who hurt her." Nathan put his arm around Jason. "He

hurt you though and I have to go after him. It's the only way to get Aunt Danielle back. I kind of like Aunt Danielle."

His little head bobbed up and down against Nathan's chest. "Me, too." The boy sighed. "But what if the bad man hurts you?"

"He won't."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

Jason grabbed the book. "Will you wake me up when you bring Aunt Danielle home?"

"I will, but she'll be really sleepy for a while. Dr. Durham's going to look after her. She'll need to rest and get her strength back."

Jason lifted his head and wrinkled his little brows. "Like when I came here. The bad man gave Aunt Danielle something, too."

Nathan swallowed hard. "Yes, but after tonight the bad man can't hurt anyone else."

Jason smiled and it tugged at Nathan's heart. He thought about how he'd do anything to keep this freckle-faced boy safe, but he also thought about Bri, all those wonderful years he'd missed when she was a child. The times he hadn't been there to read her a fairytale.

Nathan intended to mind link with Logan the minute Danielle was safe. He and Bri could come to the house and see Jason. "Guess who'll drop by to see Danielle tonight?"

The boy's eyes rounded. "Who?"

"Aunt Bri and Uncle Logan."

"Did you know my mom asked Aunt Bri to look after me?"

"Yes."

"My mom loved me a lot."

"I know."

The boy plopped his head on the pillow again. "Hurry and read so you can go beat up the bad guy."

Nathan chuckled.

Mike had insisted on driving the black Ford Crown Victoria. The vehicle spewed dust and gravel as they followed the winding road deep into the woods. Nathan glanced through the windshield at the darkness and menacing fog off in the distance. He read the 'Restricted Area' sign the Army had posted and hoped nothing went wrong tonight. The ambulance carrying Dr. Durham trailed close behind them. Over on the left shoulder of the road, headlights reflected off an animal's eyes. A deer leapt away from them.

"We're almost there," Mike whispered.

"I brought the megaphone, in case we needed it." Nathan glanced at the apprehension that filled their eyes. "Everyone remain cool and we'll get through this just fine."

"How close do you want to get to the research facility?" Mike asked.

"Close enough to talk to the guards," Nathan answered.

"You got it." Mike pulled the car up to the gate. The ambulance parked behind them.

"Stay put until I talk to them." Nathan snatched the warrant off the dashboard at the same time he removed his holder from his pocket. With the FBI ID and badge clearly visible, he exited the passenger's side of the car and held them high in the air. Quick as he slammed the door and turned around, two assault rifles were pointed at him.

"Leave. You're in a restricted area." One of the guards aimed a rifle at Nathan's head.

"FBI," he yelled. "I'm Nathan Wellman, Assistant Director for Counterterrorism. We have a warrant to enter the premises and search and seize evidence vital to national security." Logan waved the documentation in their faces.

"You hold it right there." The guard used his two-way communications. "Col. Taylor, we have an incident at the entry gate. Men from the FBI are here with a search warrant."

Nathan would love to see the expression on Col. Taylor's face about now. He probed his mind and heard the 'damn' he yelled and 'let them through'.

"Col. Taylor has given permission for you to enter."

Nathan motioned for his men to join him.

The guard opened the gate and checked their ID's as they filed through the entrance.

Dressed in his combat uniform, Col. Taylor charged down the corridor to meet them. The expression on his face was rage. Fire leapt from his eyes. "What the hell is this about?"

"Do you really want to discuss this here?" Nathan asked, taking the initiative. "Can't we find somewhere private?"

"The conference room." Col. Taylor led the way.

Once they entered, they dropped into the chairs around a long metal table. Harsh fluorescent lights glared from the ceiling. If this room was any indication, the Army hadn't spent a lot of money furnishing the facility. Other than the file cabinets lining one of the walls and the beat up table and chairs, the place was stark.

"To answer your question, this is about the mysterious deaths of Ruth Madden, Larry Upton, Megan Blakely, Dr. Reese, and the disappearance of Capt. King. This all happened following the recovery of a little boy named Jason Blakely. This case is being removed from the Army's jurisdiction and placed in the hands of the FBI."

"I want to see your warrant," Col. Taylor demanded.

Nathan handed it to him, along with his identification. "You're to turn over every slip of paper pertaining to this case to these Special Agents. Failure to comply will place you in contempt of court."

Col. Taylor pursed his lips. "If you'll follow me to the lab, I'll deliver them to you."

Their heels clicked on the tile as they hurried down the corridor. Col. Taylor punched entry numbers in and the access doors opened. They stepped into the lab area.

"Lt. Nash, these men are from the FBI. I'm putting you in charge of gathering all the files on this case and delivering them to the Special Agents."

"Yes, sir." Lt. Nash turned toward them. "Follow me."

Nathan saw his men traipse off after Lt. Nash, leaving him and Dr. Durham alone with Col. Taylor.

"I understand you've captured one of the aliens," Nathan whispered.

Col. Taylor's jaw dropped open. "How'd you find out?"

He furrowed his brows. "Surely, you don't expect me to disclose my sources. If you'll take me to this creature."

"Damn." Col. Taylor hit his palm against the side of his leg as he turned and rushed off down the hallway.

Nathan and Dr. Durham were right on his heels.

When they rounded the corner, Danielle came into view. His mind reached for her and

almost sighed out loud when he heard her faint heartbeat. He fought to keep his façade of indifference firmly in place. "What did you plan on doing with the creature?"

"We'd gotten all the information we could at our lab. The alien was scheduled for dismemberment tomorrow. Her body parts would have been sent to other labs for analysis."

Nathan's chest tightened into a ball of pain. He spun, looking in the direction of Dr. Durham. They stared at each other in disbelief. *One more day and we would have been too late.*

"Contact your guards at the front gate and have them bring a gurney from the ambulance. This alien will be turned over to Dr. Durham."

"You don't know what you're doing," Col. Taylor pleaded. "This is our chance to prove aliens exist. We've got to stop them. They're here to contaminate our blood supply and take over our bodies."

"Do as you're told," Nathan snapped.

Col. Taylor pulled out his cell phone as they hurried toward Danielle.

Dr. Durham removed the IV from her left arm and covered the wound with a bandage. He grabbed the medical chart from the front of her bed and placed it on a nearby chair.

Nathan removed the restraints from her wrists. It took all he could do not to reach for her and clasp her body to his.

The guards rolled the noisy gurney down the hallway. Soon as it was parked beside Danielle, Dr. Durham and Nathan carefully lifted her from the hospital bed to the gurney and covered her with a sheet and a blanket. Dr. Durham turned and snagged the medical chart from the chair.

Five minutes later, Richard, Mike and Jeffrey pushed carts containing boxes down the hallway. The wheels clicked across the vinyl tile.

Twenty minutes later, the documents were loaded in the trunk and Danielle was safely inside the ambulance.

He mind linked with Logan and explained the situation to him so he could break the news to Bri. His daughter would insist on seeing her mother tonight, which is what Nathan needed desperately, to have his family around him.

Nathan had stayed away from Danielle all he could. He climbed in with the doctor and her, content to simply stare at her, hold her hand and assure himself that his world was intact, his family was intact, and his sanity was intact.

For the second time in his life, he felt like crying. He had come so close to losing his Beloved.

Amidst the threats and curses of revenge by Col. Taylor, they pulled away and sped toward freedom.

"Are you sure she's okay?" Nathan asked.

Dr. Durham checked her pulse. "She's fine."

"I don't want her to come to and not find me there."

The doctor shook his head. "There's no possibility of that tonight."

"If anyone asks, tell them I have a promise to keep for Jason that the bad man will never bother him again."

Nathan misted into the research facility. He found Col. Taylor alone in his office, still fuming over the FBI taking his case. Perfect. Without warning, Nathan materialized, swooped down and captured the bastard. He transported him to a secluded area where no one could

hear the screams.

His eyes widened. "You aren't FBI."

"No."

He gasped. "You're an alien."

"I'm an alien species, but not from outer space." Nathan changed and bared his teeth at Col. Taylor.

Nathan could taste the human's fear. "This isn't something I enjoy, but my family comes first. You hurt Jason, the little boy my daughter helped. You were going to dismember Danielle. I have no doubt that Bri and Jason would have been destined for the same horrible fate if you had found them. And you incinerated poor Matt Griffin." Nathan shook his head. "I'm not sure his father will ever get over his son's death."

Col. Taylor's body trembled. "What are you going to do with me?"

"My first impulse is to kill you. The only reason I don't is the fact that I need someone on the inside of the AMRIID to protect my blood-bonded family and keep our secret. That someone is you. You're going to start by making sure no one finds out about Jason. I want him safe."

"Okay." His head bobbed up and down.

"That doesn't mean you won't suffer. I need to show you what'll happen if you betray my family again."

Nathan could afford no mercy. Every time he drew Col. Taylor's blood, the man screamed in agony.

Thirty minutes later, the last word Col. Taylor whispered as a human was – Vampire. The very thing he abhorred would be the very thing he would become.

"From now on, you'll be taking orders from me." Nathan bared his fangs and sunk them into Col. Taylor's neck again.

"Are you sure the bad man can't ever hurt us?" Jason asked.

Nathan smiled when the boy yawned. "Positive."

"Do you know what Aunt Bri and Uncle Logan asked me?"

"No. What?"

"If I wanted to live with them and be their little boy." He furrowed his brows. "They don't want me to forget my parents, but they want to adopt me."

"That's wonderful. You love them and they love you."

He nodded, but avoided Nathan's eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"I love you and Aunt Danielle, too. If I get adopted, would I still see you?"

"You bet, all the time. We'll live right next door to you. We can still play and read stories together."

Jason grinned and hugged Nathan.

Quick as the boy closed his eyes, he started snoring. Nathan chuckled, turned off the lamp on the bedside table and left.

He hurried down the hallway and stepped into Danielle's semi-dark room. He closed the door behind him. She looked beautiful with the moonlight caressing her baby soft skin. Her heartbeat was strong, steady, like a familiar song, one that had often lulled him to sleep at night. "Get well, Beloved."

The bedroom door opened.

"I knew I'd find you in here," Bri whispered. "I didn't want to leave without thanking you for being mother's knight and charging to her rescue."

Tears misted his eyes. "You don't have to thank me. Danielle is my heart. If anything had happened to her, I wouldn't want to go on living."

Bri placed her hands around his waist and hugged him. "I want the same kind of love you and mother have."

Nathan smiled at her. "You have no idea how flattering that is, but you've already found that kind of love with Logan, don't you know that?"

She sighed. "Yes."

Bri knew what she wanted. If she could get Logan to agree to it.

"Woman, you're after something."

Bri lifted her head from the pillow and hit Logan with what she hoped was her most innocent, charming denial. "Who, me?"

Okay, this isn't working. She didn't know how to ask him. Try another approach.

She rolled to face him on the bed and threw her leg across his naked hip, covered only by a sheet.

He winked at her. "You're definitely after something."

She needed to throw him off track, not be so obvious.

"Can I talk to you about anything?"

He rubbed her thigh. "You know you can."

"Something bazaar happened while I was at the nightclub that I can't get off my mind. I guess it's because I don't understand it."

"What?" His dark brows lifted.

"First you have to promise not to get mad. To take what happened in the context of my making the rogue think I was attracted to him."

He shot her a look that was pure jealousy. The only thing missing was fire coming out of his ears.

Great, she should never have mentioned it.

"Forget it." She pulled her leg away from his hip.

"Not a chance."

"Okay, okay. There was nothing sexual on my part. It was simply the role I was playing."

"Un-huh. You got into the role." Sarcasm dripped from each word.

"So I could get to his coffin and find out information from him."

"We've been through that part before."

"Anyway, when the rogue touched me..."

"Where?" He threw her a suspicious gaze.

"Is that important?" she hedged, hoping he'd back away from the question.

He speared her with an intense stare. "It is to me."

"My breast."

He coughed several times. "He touched your what?"

"You know...breast." She pulled the sheet down and exposed her chest.

"No, I don't know. You didn't say anything about it when I asked you to tell me what happened at the club."

"It wasn't anything sexual."

He snorted. "That sounds like a line some teenager might use to cop a feel. I'm going to touch your breast, but there's nothing sexual about it."

She gave him a harsh look. "Well, at his touch, something strange happened."

"Uh-huh." He pursed his lips.

"It was as if the magic spell that had created this being lifted, I saw the true age of this loathsome creature. I cringed when I looked down and saw his withered hand."

His mouth dropped open. "You did it again."

"What?"

He smiled at her. "Surprised the hell out of me."

Wait until she asked him the real question. It'll knock him on his ass.

"You don't have any reason to be jealous of El-Stinko."

He chuckled. "I like that name. Maybe what you saw was a premonition of his death."

"At my hands?"

His body tensed. "You know how I feel about you facing that bastard alone. Don't get me started on the subject or we'll have round number two."

"Okay, okay."

"Maybe you have the ability to touch a vampire and if he's bad, you see his true image. If you do, that would be an invaluable weapon."

She chuckled. "I'm not sure how I'd test that particular weapon."

He frowned at her. "Did anyone ever tell you the quickest way to turn a man off is to get in his bed and talk about another man?"

"I don't think of El-Stinko as a man."

He cocked a brow. "What do you think of him as?"

"The face of evil." Her eyes misted. "I hate that his was the last thing Megan saw."

He touched her face, his fingertips outlining her bottom lip. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Make me yours."

"You *are* mine."

"Always," she whispered.

He sat up and leaned over her, his gaze held a touch of sadness. "Until death parts us."

She touched his cheek. "Can't we cheat death?"

"Only if you..."

"Change."

"Are you asking me to change you?"

She kissed his chest. "Yes."

"Whoa. That's not something you can undo. This is serious stuff."

"I know."

"Do you have any questions, anything that might worry you if I changed you?"

"Will I have to have blood on a regular basis? Can I still eat regular food?"

"No. You'll drink mine tonight and that's it. Since you are addicted to the orgasms from sipping my blood, you can still do that. Yes, you can eat regular food."

"When I gave blood to Jason, he became my son." She scrunched her face up. "Will I become your child or something?"

He grinned at her. "You're worried about incest. Okay, let's back up a bit and see if I can explain this. When children are changed, the magic spell that creates the vampire's aura works to ensure the child will have someone to look after it, someone immortal, so it becomes the child of the one who created it. Does that make sense?"

"Yes. It'll be a child forever and need protection."

"With adults, it doesn't work that way. We would be bound, but as husband and wife."

"Would I still be of my father's family?"

"Yes, but like humans you're part of my family, too. You married into it."

She nodded.

"Any more questions, concerns?"

"Would I still be me?"

He tilted his head to the side. "I don't know what you mean?"

"Would we be having this kind of conversation after you change me or would I become your minion, blindly following your orders?"

He chuckled. "Somehow I can't picture you jumping to my orders. I want a companion, not a minion." He ran his hand up her inner thigh. "Do you have any more questions?"

"No."

He pursed his lips. "Well, you should. What will my blood do to yours? There are a lot of gray areas. Your blood gave me a reflection and I can live in sunlight, so I think we've proven that should hold for you, even if you drink some of my blood. You shouldn't lose those abilities. However, it may make it impossible to pass those traits onto others."

"What's wrong with that? If my blood becomes worthless, they'll stop hunting me."

"True, but once they find out about Jason, they won't stop hunting him."

"Agreed."

"And there's a little matter of the other half of your blood, the witch. Will my blood destroy that side of you? Will you lose your powers?"

"We can test that one."

"Only after the fact. If your power is gone, it's permanent. How's your mother going to feel about you turning your back on that side of your family?"

"Unless...it *isn't permanent*. My blood infected yours and changed it. Maybe yours will overcome mine, but over time I might be right back where I started."

"The only thing I'm sure of is your immortality. The aura would hold on that part since you literally die during the change."

Her body tensed. "Die! Whoa. Backup. Maybe I didn't think this through. Good thing we talked about it."

He hugged her to his naked body. "Your heart would stop for a second, and then it would start up again. That's a small price to pay for immortality."

She thought about the alternative. "I remember what my father said. Without Danielle, he would lose the will to live. She's mortal. He's immortal. Like you and me. I want what we have together forever. I'm willing to throw the dice and gamble on the rest."

"I think..."

"Hold that thought." Bri sprang from the bed and threw on her jeans and a striped tee. She stepped into her favorite boots. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"To play Santa."

"In the middle of the night?"

Bri was yanked into the swirling black void as she transported. She knew where to find her father. The instant she landed, she found him lying beside her mother, cradling her in his arms. She gently touched his shoulder.

He opened his eyes and blinked as if disoriented. "Bri, child, what are you doing here? Is something wrong?" He left the bed and stood beside her.

She smiled into his loving face. "No, something is very right. I've asked Logan to change me." She touched the sleeve of his wrinkled suit. "Please don't fuss at him. It was my idea, not his."

He chuckled. "I'm not your mother. She'll be pissed about it, but I'll talk to her. Trust me, she'll accept it." He hugged Bri. "I love the idea of you being around forever. But you didn't come here to tell me that, what's on your mind?"

"Right now my blood would enable you to walk in daylight and have a reflection. Since I don't know the full impact of the change, I'd like to give you a 'gift' of my blood." She held her left arm out. "I thought Dr. Durham could draw some for you and mother."

He laughed. "Your mother may never take the big plunge."

She winked at him. "Then you can go to the beach together and admire yourself in the mirror."

"You got a deal. It gives me more ammunition to talk your mother into the change." Her father smoothed Bri's hair. "I'd give anything if I could turn back the clock and share your growing up."

She cleared her throat. "You can help us raise Jason."

Bri spun through the churning black void. Had Logan given up on her and gone to sleep? She smiled. Well, she'd have to find a unique way to wake him.

When she landed, Logan's smiling eyes greeted her.

"Did you say hello to Nathan for me?"

She grinned and undressed. "He's happy for us. I played Santa with my blood. My father, my mother, in case she takes the plunge soon, and your Uncle Chris, who drew it. I talked to your uncle. He doesn't want me dead, but he'll nose around and find out who does." She lifted her hand. "Before you ask, yes, I begged him to be very careful."

Logan's heated gaze roamed her naked body.

She strolled to her side of the bed and joined him under the covers.

"Where did we leave off?" She leaned and kissed his chest, licking his nipple. "Oh, yeah, you said I think."

He groaned. "You might want to wait a day, think it over."

"Nah."

"You're still determined to face the rogue, so you might want to reconsider jumping into changing."

"Nah."

He furrowed his brows. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Well, I'm not. This is a big, big deal. I insist that you wait and think about it more. It can never be taken back, Bri."

"You said you didn't want a minion. You want a companion. I have thought it through very carefully. Please, make me yours forever. Don't turn me down."

"I could never turn you down." He nibbled at the corners of her lips. She ran her fingers through his hair at the nape of his neck, clasp his head tight and drew him closer. The longing in his eyes stole her breath.

Her tongue lazily outlined his mouth. It parted and she thrust her tongue between his teeth. He caught her hungry mouth in a wet, searing kiss. If it was designed to make her think of deep, penetrating thrusts and drive her out of her mind, he'd succeeded. She melted against him and arched toward his hard-on.

"God, you taste delicious. I want to sample all of you." He kissed his way down her neck and moved lower, over the curve of her breast.

Anticipation made her breath catch.

"Your heart's racing triple time with mine." He licked her nipple. His rough tongue lathed the sensitive tip.

His mouth closed over it. She gasped when his teeth worried the nub. His jaws flexed as he sucked her nipple deep into his mouth. He took the other nipple and lightly scraped his thumb across it, making it supersensitive. As tingling needles of pleasure spiraled deep inside her, she ran her fingers through his hair and held him in place.

He glanced up at her, his gaze full of concern. "You may be nervous about what I might do tonight. I would never hurt you, Bri."

"I trust you." Her searching hands ran down his taunt stomach. She dipped her finger into his navel and explored it.

She moved lower and wrapped her fingers around his shaft, sliding them up and down the full length of him. His breath quickened. He fondled her breasts. She bent and brushed the tip of his cock with her lips. Her tongue lapped the salty moisture. She took him into her mouth and sucked him deep.

"Bri." His voice sounded strangled as he moved her away from him. He released a ragged breath. "That was close."

She laughed. "That good, huh."

"You know it was." His marauding fingers moved down her body, his thumb pushed against her clit. He moved in slow, sensual circles.

She moaned with an ache that only he could fill. "You're torturing me."

"Not yet."

"That sounds like a promise."

"It is." He moved two fingers inside her and pressed up until he came in direct contact with her G-spot.

She gasped and rolled her head back and forth on the pillow. "Oh, my God, I think you're an expert at this."

He stroked her G-spot, increasing the pressure with each movement. His other hand

pushed on her lower abdomen.

A warm, deep, sensual feeling flowed through her and grew in intensity. She was soaking wet. "Okay, I know why you stopped me. Uncle. I want you deep inside me. Now."

Moments later, with one swift thrust he filled her.

She arched her body and sighed with pleasure when they merged as one. "Oh, yes. That's what I wanted."

"I know you. That isn't all you want."

At first, he moved slowly in and out of her gradually building her arousal. She bent her legs, lifted her hips and drew him deeper. He picked up the pace, thrusting into her harder.

"I love you, Bri." He nuzzled her neck and ground his hips against her.

When her climax hit, she screamed in ecstasy.

The last thing she remembered was being bathed in the warmth of his love.

"Awake to immortality, Bri."

Bri took a deep breath, opened her eyes and blinked, feeling disoriented. "Oh, God. Did I go to sleep on you?" She yawned. "Whenever you get ready to do this thing, just do it."

He smiled down at her. "I've already done it."

She lifted her brows. "You drank my blood?"

"Yes, and you sipped mine."

"My heart stopped?"

"Only for a second. You weren't asleep darling, you passed unto death and I awakened you with a command."

"But I don't remember any of it."

"I promised you no pain. Welcome to my family, Bri." All the love in the world was reflected in his eyes. His lips claimed hers in a sweet, slow kiss.

Chapter Thirteen

Gregory held his arms out for his personal maid to help him put on his navy cashmere blazer and brush away any lint. He glanced at his powder blue dress shirt and dark gray trousers. He'd taken special care selecting his wardrobe for tonight, down to the black leather Gucci shoes. Seduction, particularly of one who would prove most difficult like Bri, demanded perfection in everything.

"I expect the summer house to be impeccable."

"Yes, sir."

Although he would easily win the physical battle with Bri, especially with the plan he would implement, it was the mental battle that intrigued him the most. The challenge of winning her over beckoned him. He didn't want to use mind control or force their blood-bonded relationship, unless he had to, but that would be up to her. Instead, he wanted her as a willing partner. If his plan worked, she would be convinced he really cared about her. He smiled at the thought of this woman who hated him so much willingly sharing his bed. What a trophy! The only impediment he needed to remove after they fought was her memory of her friends he'd killed. He shook his head. How the hell was he supposed to know the weak human side of her held such deep affections for mere mortals?

Her blood would allow him to become a Daywalker, a much treasured gift. But the greatest gift would be her ability to produce children with him and later with chosen members of his pack through witchcraft, casting a spell. More than anything, he'd always wanted children, to begin a new species of powerful vampires who would possess the ability of walking in the sun as Daywalkers. His own super race.

His relationship with Bri would be different from any others, not just for sexual gratification. With his plan of deception, he would nurture her love for him and later for the pack. She would learn to love them and selectively pick her playmates. He would enjoy teaching her the unlimited pleasures she could experience during lovemaking. Once under his dominance, sharing herself with the pack would become second nature to her. He would soon take control of that, too. She would be rewarded to those most loyal to him. Those who provided him with humans he could use for food. This woman would help him become the most powerful vampire. He smiled, relishing the thought of others bowing before him and obeying him as their supreme leader.

"A young lady named Brianna Eaton will be moving in with me."

He glanced at the sultry blonde. The fabric of her black uniform strained against her shapely breasts. He didn't miss the flicker of anger in her green eyes. Enticing as she was, perhaps it had been a mistake to take this fiery vampire to his bed, after all she was a servant, but she had been insatiable and willing to do anything to please him. What she could do with that gorgeous mouth of hers...well, it made it worth the danger, at the time. But he had no use for her now, so his plans for her would be perfect. All he had to do was push a few buttons, use a little mind control and the problem she presented to him would be solved forever. The last thing he needed was this jealous vampire causing trouble between him and Bri.

"I expect you to serve her. She'll be our permanent guest."

"Master, I heard the pack speak of this vampire who has special powers. How desirable

she is. What does she have that I don't have?" Her sensual lips pouted.

He glanced at her with disdain. "Jealousy doesn't become you, Nicole." He held his temper at bay, but she needed to remember her place. As far as his dominance, she should bow to it. "You must learn obedience and to share." He glared at her. "This is what I'll teach the new lady from the beginning. I'm sure my men will be glad to teach you a lesson about sharing that you won't soon forget."

"That won't be necessary." She cowered before him.

"Look deep into my eyes," he ordered. "When I say the words 'That will be all' again, you're to hide in the backyard, shapeshift into a snow leopard and wait for Brianna Eaton. You will slash her right arm, wounding her deep, but you will *not* kill her."

"Yes, Master."

"You will tell no one about this."

"Yes, Master."

"Know your enemy." Bri stood on the steps and pointed to the library, her key to that knowledge. Inside her shoulder bag were pens, tablets, index cards, sticky notes for marking items they might need to copy and money for the copy machine.

She turned her face toward the sun. What a glorious Wednesday. So far, she couldn't tell any difference after she'd changed. Like Logan had initially thought, she still had a reflection and was a Daywalker. The only thing certain was her immortality. For one hour this morning she'd practiced controlling her heartbeat and her breathing like Logan had taught her, stopping them, fascinated by the whole miraculous process. The witch powers she'd been born with and used before still worked. Only time would tell if her blood had been changed in other ways and how it would manifest itself.

Logan and her mother had insisted on coming to the library to help with the research. Both of them had an ulterior motive...to prevent Bri from facing the rogue alone. But she'd given her word to Megan, to herself and to the rogue. She intended doing just that, but first she wanted special ammunition, more than the vial of Holy water inside her shoulder bag, and the two stakes she had hidden in the top of her boots – psychological ammunition to fire at the rogue's Achilles heel.

"I plan on spending the entire day searching for information on Gregory Stone."

"What exactly are we after?" Logan's cobalt-green eyes squinted in the sun.

"He's lived for centuries. The library has genealogy software to trace a person's ancestry and family tree back to the seventeen hundreds. Using that and the Internet, I want to know everything possible about his life. That is, *if* he kept the same name."

"You want to use this information against him. Psychology 101?" her mother asked.

Bri nodded. "I want an insight into the *real* Gregory Stone. What makes this monster tick? Like interviewing a serial killer personally, I'm betting we find he has always been violent, even before he was turned. His history should reflect that fact. Whoever made him into a vampire only compounded the problem. Judging from the carnage we saw, he has become more violent over time."

Logan cocked a brow. "You still plan on keeping your promise to fight this sociopath alone?"

"Yes. He doesn't want to kill me, which will work to my advantage."

Logan knitted his brows. "No, they just want your blood and to make a baby machine out of you for him and his minions."

Her mother gasped. "My God, don't even think about trying to understand what makes this monster tick. Stay away from this mentally deranged creature. Let your father and Logan destroy him."

This isn't going to work. "Look, why don't you let me do the research? I figure I won't get through until after six tonight. Logan can come back and pick me up then."

They exchanged a worried look.

"We're staying." Her mother marched up the steps, determination in her stride.

Logan wasn't far behind.

Jeeze!

By six o'clock they were still gathering information about Gregory Stone, who was born in seventeen ninety. She laughed when they'd discovered the egocentric bastard had kept the same name. His horrific past made Jack the Ripper seem pale in comparison.

Her mother stared at the copy of the photo they'd found. She leaned toward her. "Does he look like this today?"

Bri remembered the first time she'd seen his face. "Devastatingly handsome? Yes. The faded black and white photo doesn't do him justice."

Logan cut his eyes at her and glared. How many times would she have to tell him that he had no reason to be jealous of her and El-Stinko? The creep made her gag.

Her mother shook her head. "It's hard to equate this handsome face with the atrocities he's accused of committing over the centuries. To be sentenced to death for butchering his unfaithful girlfriend and her family. That must have been around the time he was changed."

"I think so." Logan showed them copies of newspaper articles he'd found.

She cringed as she read about Major Gregory Stone, who served during the eighteen hundreds at the largest and worst Northern Prisoner of War Camp, Point Lookout. Diaries of the civilians and Confederate soldiers spoke of his cruelty and bloodletting, which led to hundreds of deaths over a two-year period.

Her mother pushed back from her chair. "We need to wrap this up. I have my monthly meeting with the Coven tonight, so I can't stay much longer."

Bri glanced at the piles of books strewn across the table and the dozen or so sticky notes that tagged pages she needed to copy. "I've got at least two more hours of work." She turned to Logan and whispered. "It won't take you a second to transport her home. I'll still be right here, hard at it when you return."

Logan frowned. "The sun's set. I don't like leaving you alone. I'll contact Nathan, have him pick her up."

"That won't work," her mother whispered. "He took Jason to a movie, to get his mind off his mother. The child has nightmares sometimes. We end up letting him crawl into bed with us so we can make sure he gets back to sleep."

Bri tightened her lips and stared at the face of evil, the man who'd caused all this pain and suffering. The man who'd made it unsafe for her entire family. "I don't want Jason alarmed, which is exactly what'll happen if you interrupt the movie and snatch them out of there." She glanced from Logan to her mother. "Will you two stop worrying about me? For God's sake, take her home." She kept her voice low and glanced around at the young people

studying in the library. "I'll be fine."

Logan opened his mouth to speak, but she waved her hand and dismissed his objections. She watched him as he checked and made sure no one saw them before he walked her mother behind a huge bookshelf and transported.

A hand touched her hair. I thought they would never leave.

She jumped as the rogue projected his thoughts into her mind. She looked over her shoulder but saw no one. *Games again. He loves to play mind games.*

How did he get inside the library? It's a public place, she thought. Anyone can enter, even the undead.

She sniffed the air, expecting to smell rotten, decaying mold, but smelled only his lemon and lavender scent. Was that because she had changed or because he no longer slept in his coffin?

I didn't mean to startle you.

When his hand stroked her back, she jerked away from him.

I'm flattered. You've been reading about me, my lovely.

My lovely? You call me that after I poured Holy water in your coffin?

I underestimated you when you came into my nightclub. That won't happen again. Actually, you did me a favor. I've learned to sleep without the coffin.

He ran a finger down her spine. *You hate me because I killed your friends, but it was the only way I could find your name and make you hunt me yourself.*

Well, you succeeded. I intend to kill you tonight.

When you fail, my lovely, you're mine. Remember?

An invisible hand stole around her waist. She quickly shoved papers inside her bag and threw the strap across her shoulder. *You promised to come when I summoned you. Let's go, Bri. I'm taking you to my summer home.*

He directed her to the area behind the bookshelves, where no one would see them.

Bri was yanked into the swirling black hole. The moment her feet touched the Persian rug, she moved away from him and put her telepathic shield up, blocking him from probing her mind. Instantly, she dismantled his mental shield. More than ever, she needed to know what this sociopath thought all the time.

When she glanced at him, she was unable to break contact with this handsome man who obviously had the power to make women swoon over him.

His dark, intelligent eyes smiled at her. "You still enjoy looking at me. I'm pleased."

She tore her gaze from him, angry at herself for admiring the façade that hid the real monster from the world's view. "I was just imagining ripping your head off."

He looked smug, amused. "And here I thought we could at least act civilized until we had our little confrontation."

Civilized? Were the senseless acts of violence he'd perpetrated over a lifetime civilized?

"If you'll sit there, I'll get us a drink." He motioned to an almond colored sofa with pillows covered in velvet fabric containing splashes of red and almond. "What would you like?"

What if he drugged her? She would need all her wits to destroy him. "A soda, unopened, if you have it. As long as it has caffeine, I'm fine."

"I have plenty in the refrigerator." His heels clicked as he strolled across the hardwood floor to the back of an elegant bar, obviously an antique. Four old-fashioned chrome stools, with seats upholstered in beige colored vinyl, were lined up in front of a beautiful maple and mahogany bar. The mirror on the wall and large fluorescent lamps on either side made the area look much larger.

"The bar's gorgeous. What period is the style?"

"Early nineteen hundreds."

She perched on the couch and set her shoulder bag on the Persian rug.

A hand-carved screen sitting in one corner of the room caught her attention. The intricate, painstaking details on the panels resembled fine lace. She marveled at how well the dark brown on the insets and the red lacquer on the panels matched the décor of the room, which included brown and red embossed wallpaper that looked like velvet.

He crossed the room and stopped in front of the couch. "I watched you today –"

"How?"

"Tinted car windows and underground parking. Marvelous inventions for vampires." He handed her a soda. "It allowed me to enter the building without being destroyed."

She popped the top and took a sip.

"You didn't eat all day at the library, so I took the liberty of asking my staff to prepare a light snack."

As if on cue, a blonde dressed in a black uniform appeared carrying a tray loaded with assorted fruits, cheeses and crackers, along with utensils, small dessert plates and napkins. When she set the tray on the coffee table, her green eyes speared Bri. If looks could kill, she would be toast now. What in the world was that about?

"That will be all." He waved his hand as if dismissing the woman. The possessive way her gaze flicked Gregory, undressing him, told Bri what she needed to know. The woman was jealous of Bri because of the attention this man was giving to her.

He offered her a plate and napkin. When she refused to take it, he smiled. "I can assure you the food is safe to eat, Bri." He loaded a cracker with cheese and slid it into his mouth.

Her stomach rumbled loudly. "I can't eat much before we fight." She grabbed a slice of apple and bit into it. After finishing it off, she grabbed another one.

"Do you want anymore?" he asked.

She shook her head and he removed the tray, setting it on the bar.

"You don't want to reconsider fighting me?" His eyes pleaded with her.

For some reason, she became curious. She wanted to test what she'd seen when he'd touched her breast at the nightclub. Maybe it was a fluke. Maybe she'd imagined it. She rose from the couch. "Give me your hand."

He knitted his brows, eying her suspiciously. "What for?"

"Humor me." She paused. "Unless you're afraid."

He moved closer. His hand shot out to her.

She latched onto it. Although his skin was warm, a chill ran across her spine. His hands were capable of such unspeakable cruelty.

Within seconds, she was staring at his withered hand, nothing but bones. Her breath caught as she raised her gaze to his face. Once again, this strange power she'd developed lifted the magic spell that had created this being. Like a rotten, black onion, each putrid outer

layer peeled away. She saw this evil, loathsome creature without skin. Only a pathetic skeleton stood before her, reminding her that this creature was only an illusion. A dangerous, deadly illusion.

Her eyes widened and she snatched her hand away.

"What did you see?"

She avoided his gaze. "Nothing." What you will become again.

He laughed, the sound sinister. "You had me going for a minute. Let's call this whole thing off. I really don't want to hurt you. Over time, I think you could learn to care about me the way I care about you."

She snorted in disbelief. Nice try, but she'd heard better lines from pimply teenagers in high school. He wanted her to become the 'queen bee' of his pack. Brother! That told her all she needed to know about how deeply he cared. He'd probably get a kick out of watching the action like some voyeur.

Reaching inside her shoulder bag, she removed the research they'd accumulated at the library and fanned it across the leather top of the mahogany coffee table.

"Do you have any idea how many people you've murdered?"

He gave her a blank stare.

She pointed to the coffee table. "According to these records, it's in the thousands. I personally know of five." She lifted her chin. "You aren't capable of caring for any one."

He released a long, labored breath. "You're wrong." *Bitch!*

She swallowed a laugh as she read his mind. "Am I? I have something you want. That's what you care about. Once you get that, what do you think your sick, demented mind will do?" Bri glanced at the newspaper clippings. "The same thing you did to these innocent humans." She pointed an accusing finger at him. "No more, Gregory."

The day he no longer needed this bitch is the day he'd rip her heart out.

Anger seared her. She tamped down the monster inside her.

The muscles in his jaw flexed and jumped. His gaze dropped to the black jeans, striped tee and boots she wore. "You're dressed for it, but do you really want to fight?"

His eyes tried to seduce her, draw her to him, but coldness blanketed her heart.

"Why do I get the feeling you're trying to psychoanalyze me?" He chuckled. *He'd eaten the heart of the last doctor who'd tried that.* "It won't work."

Bri ignored him, closed her eyes and remembered the words this fiend had uttered to Megan. "I'm going to show you the same compassion you showed my best friend when she told you she felt faint from your draining her blood and torturing her." She opened her eyes. Anger roared inside her. He could have let Megan live. "You should, my lovely. I left you just enough blood for one more, tiny feeding."

His eyes widened with shock. "You mind linked with her while she died?"

Bri nodded. "I'm an empath."

He gasped. "I tortured you at the same time?" *Delicious. He'd make a point of hunting an empath so he could see it.* His brows furrowed. "Why would you do such a thing?"

She swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "For something you'll never feel—love. Megan was my best friend."

Get rid of the memories and he'd be one step away from controlling her.

His hand reached out for her. "I could remove the pain."

She jumped back. "That's something else you'll never understand. I don't *want* to forget Megan—ever." She was more like a sister than a friend.

His lips tightened. He seemed resigned to the fact she wouldn't back down. "I thought we'd do this in the backyard." He pointed to a side door. "Follow the path and it'll lead you to a large grassy, densely wooded area. I'm going upstairs to change then I'll join you."

He headed for the hand-carved, winding staircase leading to the second floor. Mid-stride he turned toward her. "I'm really not a monster."

Who was he trying to convince? "Yes, you are. The worse kind. You have no idea how many you've killed. I doubt you remember their names."

"You expect me to remember their names?" He laughed, the sound cold, sinister again, almost like she'd insulted him by asking.

"I'll settle for the names of your girlfriend's family. Her fourteen-year-old sister. Her mother and father, both in their fifties."

His eyes glittered with excitement. The bastard was enjoying reliving what he'd done to this poor family. She probed deeper into his mind and saw him violating the young, innocent girl and smiling as he bared his canines, sinking them into her neck. She could hear her screams, falling on the deaf ears of her parents, who lay butchered in the next room. Bri swallowed the bile that rose in her throat and pulled away from the carnage.

"I don't remember," he said with a sinister smile.

She shook her head. "You don't think you've done a damn thing wrong, do you?"

He lifted his chin. "No."

An uncontrollable shiver racked Bri's body.

It wasn't the blackness, illuminated only by the blanket of twinkling stars that made her feel uneasy. Her night vision had kicked in without a problem. The skin on her arms prickled with the sensation that someone, something was watching her every move.

Moonlight streamed through the towering pines straight ahead of her. She inched her way along the uneven grassy area of the backyard, scanning for whatever had alerted her that something wasn't right.

She didn't trust Gregory. Had he sent her into a trap? Were his minions hiding in the trees? Maybe he'd decided not to take a chance on her destroying him. He'd sent his mindless minions to hunt and destroy her.

She took a deep breath and bent low, her hands fisted.

The sound of heavy breathing echoed around her in stereo.

Fear rushed through her, leaving her fingertips cold.

My God, what's out here?

An animal growled in the distance.

Her heart raced.

Heavy breathing and then a terrifying human-like scream filled the moonlit air.

Fingers of awareness skidded up her spine as she scanned the area again.

She caught a flicker of movement in a tree about two yards ahead and to the right.

Moonlight reflected off angry, golden eyes that glowed like those of a demon.

She stared at the grayish color and the spots on the creature. A snow leopard? In Charleston? That's impossible. Unless...it's a shapeshifter. She froze and studied the five foot

animal that looked smaller than the ones she'd seen in zoos, which meant this one was a female, weighing around eighty pounds.

If Bri turned to flee, the leopard could run her down before she could strip and shapeshift to defend herself. If she lifted her hand to evoke a spell, she'd never get it finished.

Would a vampire have a chance against a snow leopard? *Well, she was about to find out.*

She slowly lowered her hand. *No sudden movements.* She levitated the stake hidden in her boot up her leg. It materialized in the palm of her hand. The vampire side of her rose up, fierce. She snarled and bared her canines at the animal.

As if the leopard sensed danger, it jumped from the tree. Furry foot pads sped across the pine strewn grass, heading straight for her.

Bri jumped into the air, avoiding the beast. When she landed, she dug the dagger-like stake into its flank, drawing the blade upward into the meaty flesh. She withdrew the bloody weapon. The leopard screamed in pain, even as the wound began to seal itself and heal.

The animal struck out at her. Sharp claws dug into her right arm. It shredded her skin, causing her to drop the stake. Bri screamed like a rabid beast. Long canine teeth pierced her flesh down to the bone, shredding a strip from her arm. Blood spurted from the gaping wound. She took an agonizing breath, kicked the leopard hard in the ribs and escaped.

Suddenly, an angry black wolf appeared out of nowhere. It jumped on the back of the leopard. The wolf's claws and teeth dug deep into the spine of the animal. They strained against each other. A human-like cry of pain ripped from the leopard's throat. It rolled and tried to dislodge the wolf. After the third attempt, it succeeded.

Bri winced and bit her bottom lip. She willed the stake to come to her. It appeared in the palm of her blood smeared hand.

The leopard attempted to run from the wolf.

Bri fought the pain that shot through her arm. She lifted into the air and dove onto the leopard, plunging the stake into its spine over and over again. As the animal fell to the ground, writhing in pain, she jumped to the side. The leopard reared up, blood oozed from the slashes across its back. Lunging forward, she shoved the stake deep into its heart. Blood covered her hands. She dropped to her knees, staring at the face of the beast.

Die, bitch! No longer a wolf, a naked Gregory stared at the leopard. His thoughts were directed at the animal, not at her, which made her think he knew this shapeshifter.

The shapeshifting vampire changed from a leopard into the blonde woman who had been jealous of Bri. Once in human form again, she withered and disintegrated to nothing but dust.

"Your arm looks like raw hamburger." He stalked toward her.

She glanced down, surprised to see the wounds had not started to heal. Would he take advantage of her injuries? Would he attack without giving her body time to repair itself?

She refused to stay on her knees, to hovel at his feet. She gritted her teeth and pulled herself upright. Blood flowed freely from her wounds and dripped onto the ground.

His muscular arm held her pressed against him for support. "Let's get you inside and let your body recover."

She pushed away from him. "I don't need help. I'm fine. Quick as my arm heals, we'll get back out here."

"I hope you know I didn't have anything to do with Nicole attacking you."

His heart skipped like crazy.

Liar! Bri bit the inside of her cheek against the pain. He must have used mind control to get Nicole to do this, but why? It made no sense to delay her like this. She had no doubt that her arm would heal fast, so he couldn't take advantage of that for very long when we fight. He's up to something.

"Damn stupid woman. She probably heard us talking about fighting. Maybe Nicole thought she would protect me."

They entered the house. He grabbed a towel from a closet and handed it to her. She wiped at the blood as they made their way down a carpeted hallway that led into the kitchen. "Sit here. I'm going to grab some clothes." She plopped into a chair, relieved to see the wounds had started to heal, but not understanding why the process had been delayed.

Within seconds he'd returned, dressed casually in jeans, a T-shirt and Nikes. His hands moved toward her wounds.

She straightened and slapped his hands away. "Don't you dare touch them." She wanted to close her eyes and rest a bit, but refused to give into the urge. A strange feeling of general weakness fell upon her when her body was fighting to recover. It would soon pass.

As if a skin graft had been applied over her torn flesh, the area filled in with tissue. It left no scar. Minutes later the slashes began to seal themselves like invisible stitches were pulling them shut. She took a deep breath and ran her hand over her unblemished arm.

He wet a dishrag at the sink and threw it to her. "I'm not sure how much blood you lost. You want to try to stand?"

She held onto the table to steady herself and rose to her feet. A bit of nausea hit her. She swallowed hard. "I'm fine."

"Liar." He retrieved a glass from the overhead cabinet. "Sit back down."

She ignored him and remained standing.

A little laudanum should do the trick; give him the edge he needed to defeat The Legend.

She glared at his back.

He opened the refrigerator, removed the container of orange juice and poured her a small glass. "Drink this."

She scrunched up her face. "I'd probably barf if I drunk that before our fight."

His eyes flashed anger.

The nausea had passed. She lifted her arms upward and stretched. Tonight, she would rely on the monster within her for strength. The beast would have free reign. "I'm ready when you are."

As she studied the fierce expression on his face, she remembered his victims and the justice they deserved. Ruth Madden. Larry Upton. Dr. Reese. Megan Blakely. And whether he deserved justice or not, since he'd chosen to become a vampire, Capt. King.

Bri gave full reign to her primitive vampire side when it fought for dominance. She beckoned the Mr. Hyde within her to take control, destroy the rogue vampire before her. A rumbling built within her like an angry volcano about to explode.

She gnashed her teeth and stared at him.

No longer tamping the rage down, it multiplied in strength.

"Are you afraid of me, Gregory?" Her voice sounded cold, distant.

"Afraid?" Confusion filled his eyes. "Not in a million years." He glared at her, but made no move to attack.

Her rage turned to hot, molten fury.

"You should be very afraid of me!" Her voice projected out with a roar that thundered into the night.

One heartbeat later, she crossed the distance between them and lunged at him. She barely felt the impact, which knocked him off his feet with a swoosh as he hit the ground.

He rose and threw a right jab at her. She ducked.

Straightening, he caught her jaw with a left punch. Her teeth cut her lip. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. When her tongue worried the spot, it burned.

With lightning speed, she punched and kicked him in the gut with superhuman blows. He snarled at her and soared into the air.

"Run, you coward!" Before he could gain much height, she slammed into his body with a thud that jarred him hard. He continued upward, stopped and started losing altitude, falling to the ground like a misfired rocket.

Thump!

Canines extended, he stood and flew at her. He grabbed for her throat. She locked onto his extended arm and twisted it violently. She lifted her leg and yanked his arm down with brute force across her thigh. His bones cracked. He drew in a deep, shaky breath.

He transported away from her obviously not trusting her to allow him time to heal.

"You're a little rusty, Gregory. What's the matter? You can only kill helpless humans?" She snorted.

"Behind you." He released an eerie cackle that hissed against her ear.

She spun and he punched her in the nose, breaking it. She winced with the pain. Blood bubbled from her nose and spurted down her lips and chin. A sickly, metallic taste filled her mouth and ran down her throat. She spat the blood out.

A sinister smile crossed his lips. "The fight has just begun, my lovely."

With three hard, fast blows to his chest, she knocked him backwards. Every punch was delivered with the force of a sledgehammer. Air swooshed from his lungs. Something cracked. Loud. A rib, perhaps. He gasped and fought to draw air.

She wiped the blood from her chin and felt her nose, which was mending.

The instant she saw his form shimmer to leave, she lunged at him. They tumbled into the whirling darkness and landed behind one of the large oaks.

She freed herself from his arms, but not fast enough. Sharp claw-like fingernails dug into her scalp and riveted her in place. Struggling to move and gain some advantage made the pain far worse, but she wouldn't let that stop her. He would plunge his fangs into her neck if she stayed pinned like this. She yanked her head forward. His nails sunk deeper into her head. Blood ran down the sides of her temples and forehead. It dripped into her eyes, making them sting and burn. She grimaced and forced her head backward fast, slamming her skull into his face hard, at the same time she stomped the hell out of his left foot. Bones snapped, crushed by the impact. He groaned, reeled backwards and released her.

She roared with anger and seized Gregory's arm. Using all her strength, she spun him full circle twice and hurled him into the trunk of a large oak.

Whack!

His breath came in short, wheezy gasps.

She held out her hand and beckoned the stake forth. It materialized in the palm of her hand.

"You will never harm another human." Anger speared her forward. She shot toward him and raised the dagger-like stake high into the air.

Gregory spun to face her. Canines extended, he hissed like a nest of snakes.

Leaves rustled in the trees, as if something had disturbed them.

"Don't kill him!"

The minute she saw Logan swoop and land nearby, a war erupted inside her. "This is my fight, not yours!" Her voice roared with defiance.

"Obey me, Bri."

"Obey you?" She laughed. "Go to hell." The battle inside her raged. Part of her shouted, 'kill the rogue.' Another part of her wanted to listen to reason, but it was too late.

As if by magic, Logan appeared in front of her.

Their gazes met, held. "Fight to control it. Don't let it control you."

"I can't pull back the vampire once it has been unleashed." Her body shook.

"Yes, you can."

"I don't know how."

"Let me help." He placed his hand on the stake. "Release it to me," he whispered.

She hesitated.

"Have you stopped trusting me?"

Seeing Logan, feeling his hand on hers, projecting calmness throughout her gave her the strength to resist the vampire side of her. She released the stake to Logan.

He glanced at Gregory and threw her a sexy smile. "You did good." He winked. "You must have had a good teacher."

"The best." She smiled back at him.

"We need him alive a little while longer." His voice softened. "Cast a spell to imprison him."

She wrinkled her brows. "Why?"

"We need him to save you and your mother from the Coven."

Chapter Fourteen

Bri stared at the large pentacle drawn on the dark, wooden floor. Candles flicked as her gaze traced the five-pointed star with a circle around it. Voices murmured different opinions of what the Coven members should do with Danielle Eaton, the traitor. 'Death' and 'Bind her powers' were heatedly debated. She glanced into her mother's wide blue eyes. They mirrored the same emotion churning inside Bri—fear. Would they kill her mother?

"Trust me big time." Logan's warm breath feathered against her neck.

Her father grasped one of her hands. Logan clamped the other one.

Haley Candela, High Priestess of the Coven stepped to the podium located in one corner of the living room of her house. The heavy set, middle-aged woman gathered her black robes around her and pounded a gavel against the top of the podium. "Quiet." Her mouth tightened into a thin line.

A hush fell across the room.

The muscles in Bri's stomach clinched.

Haley pointed an accusing finger at Bri's mother. "Danielle Eaton, you have been summoned to appear before this council to defend yourself against the grave charges of breaking our laws, using witchcraft to produce a cross-breed abomination." Her dark gaze flicked anger at Bri.

She stifled a gasp as they presented the evidence against her mother, thankful it fell short of learning about Jason. He was safe from their wrath, at the moment, but God only knew what they would do to him if they learned the truth. As they continued the charges, Bri was amazed the Coven didn't know of her ability to use witchcraft, something her mother had taught her. If they did realize it, they would bind her powers. Instead, they were concerned about her blood and the powers it would unleash.

"How do you plead to the charges?"

Her mother straightened. "Guilty to using witchcraft to produce a child with the man I love, but she is not a cross-breed abomination."

Bri was proud of her mother. The way she'd stood up to the Coven. The way she'd corrected the horrible description of her child. She wanted to run to her mother and embrace her, show her that she loved her.

Disorder broke out among the crowd, who stood in a circle around the oak paneled walls of the room.

Haley pounded her gravel and silenced their grumblings. She speared Bri's father with a distasteful glare. "You dishonored us by loving one of the undead—a vampire."

The passionate look Bri's mother and father exchanged made Bri proud of them. In spite of every obstacle thrown at them, their love had not only survived, but thrived.

"I still love him."

Her mother's declaration to the world and to her father brought tears to Bri's eyes.

Haley glanced around the room. "Danielle has condemned herself with her own words. It is up to this council to render a punishment that befits her crimes. At this time we will take a vote on whether she merits death or deserves the mercy of her sisters, who feel her life should be spared, but we should bind her powers."

"Danielle Eaton, come forward and face those who will decide your fate."

Her mother walked in front of the podium and turned to face them.

"All those in favor of death by drowning, raise your hand."

Drowning? Bri chewed the inside of her cheek. She jerked her head around and counted the number who agreed – fifteen.

"All those in favor of binding her powers, raise your hand."

Bri held her breath as she counted the number who agreed – fifteen.

A tie.

The only one who hadn't voted was Haley.

Bri closed her eyes and prayed this woman who once was her mother's friend would show compassion.

"It is the decision of this council that your powers will be bound."

Bri breathed a sigh of relief.

Tears shimmered in her mother's eyes as the ceremony was performed. Gold ropes that symbolized binding were placed around her raised hands. Haley spoke the words invoking the gods to bind her mother's powers forever.

"It is done. From now on, you may no longer call yourself a witch. You are banished from our presence forever."

Her mother's chin quivered.

Bri felt her mother's sorrow and shame. To be forced from something taught through generations of their family was almost unbearable.

Haley walked around the circle of the fellow witches. She stopped in front of Bri. Cold, assessing eyes stared at her. "You are The Legend."

"Yes."

"You are aware The Legend warns that such a child should be destroyed?"

"I am."

Logan and Nathan stepped forward.

"We would like to present evidence that there is no validity to the statements in The Legend." Logan strolled around the room, glancing into the faces of those around them. "According to The Legend, the undead who drink of her overcome the sun. This is a false statement, which can be proven with the help of some friends, if you'll allow me a little leeway to do just that."

Haley nodded.

"Bring him out," Logan said.

A sedated Gregory Stone was carried on a gurney to the middle of the room. Dr. Durham trailed behind him, carrying his medical bag.

"This vampire is a rogue who takes great pleasure in hunting and killing humans. Over the centuries he has murdered thousands." Logan pulled out the research they'd done on Gregory at the library and handed it to Haley, who studied them. She paused and glared at the rogue several times. "I propose to have Dr. Durham draw some of Brianna Eaton's blood and give the transfusion to this rogue. At sunrise, we will place him in the sun and you'll have proof that The Legend is nothing more than superstition."

Haley nodded. "If you have proof, I'm sure this council will want to see it."

Dr. Durham stepped forward. He led Bri to a chair. "If you'll sit here, we'll get this

over with quick." He placed a drop cloth across the chair to protect the furniture and bent closer. "Would you like a sedative before I cut into an artery?" His eyes were kind, caring.

"No. I can endure the pain." She leaned and whispered in his ear. "Will you be at Nathan's after this is over? I need your medical advice." Maybe he had an explanation for why her body delayed the healing process earlier tonight. Had the change caused the delay?

He nodded.

She turned her head toward Logan, who winced as a surgical knife sliced and Dr. Durham drew blood for a transfusion.

"I'm finished."

Bri glanced down at her arm. He put pressure on the deep laceration for several minutes and watched as the wound healed itself.

Within ten minutes he had given the blood transfusion to Gregory, who was still under sedation.

"Sunrise is at five-thirty. We can either stay here or reconvene at that time tomorrow morning." Logan lifted her brows. "I'll need volunteers within your council to carry the rogue into the sun. Vampires must protect themselves from its deadly rays."

Bri, no one must know there are some among us who are now Daywalkers.

She nodded at Logan.

"There's plenty of room here, for those of you who wish to wait it out." Haley pointed to the winding staircase leading to the second floor and to the oversized sectional sofas. Most indicated they were staying and Haley left to make a pot of coffee.

You're betting that when Logan changed me that my blood no longer has the power to make a vampire a Daywalker. The Coven doesn't know I've changed so this will prove, to them, that The Legend is superstition. What if you're wrong? Bri glanced at Logan and her father.

There's only one way to find out and we can't think of anyone more worthy of using to prove our point. If it's true, vampires will stop hunting your blood. It's worth a try. Either way, we won't let them harm you, child. Her father smiled at her.

At five-thirty several members of the council, including Haley, carried the gurney containing the rogue into the front yard and left him. When the rays first hit him, he stirred, his eyes opened wide with fear.

Bri stepped onto the huge wooden front porch. She sat in a swing and rocked, hoping nature would deliver swift justice to this sociopath.

Heat shimmered like rising steam from his clothes and skin. The sun's rays brightened into a dazzling burst of light. Large blisters popped out on his face and hands. The circles grew, multiplied. He screamed as sunlight ate his flesh. Flames shot from his forehead, face and chest, turning the gurney into a bed of fire.

She felt relief. Her blood was worthless to vampires. And, the rogue was gone, he couldn't hurt her family, the ones she loved again. An image of Megan and Jason filled her mind. Jason would never have to fear this monster.

Suddenly, he glowed and disappeared.

Uneasy, she walked to the cot...no ashes. Oh, my God. Her heart pounded against her ribs. Could he have survived? Yes...she knew it...he's alive, he survived.

Her limbs trembled as she walked back into the house and joined the others, who had watched the experiment through a large picture window.

Haley reconvened the council meeting. "While you have proven The Legend has fallacies, I would ask one thing of you, Logan Vance."

"What?"

"Should Brianna Eaton prove to be this blood-beast, you will destroy her."

Logan glanced at Bri. "She already made me make that promise to her."

"Then it's settled." Haley raised her arms over those who attended the council meeting. "Blessed be to each of you. This meeting is adjourned."

They made their way to the garage, got in Dr. Durham's Lexus, which had heavily tinted windows so no one would suspect any vampires were Daywalkers and drove to Nathan's house.

Bri thought about Gregory Stone. Fear wrapped her heart in a cold blanket of ice.

"What's wrong?" Logan asked. "You've been moody ever since we got into this car."

"I didn't see the flames consume his body. There were no ashes. He transported."

"Honey, if he did, it won't do him any good. He was already toast."

She shook her head. "I can feel his heartbeat. He survived."

It was the middle of the day when Nathan drew the heavy lined drapes in his bedroom and took Danielle to his king-size bed. More than anything he wanted to comfort her. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her against him. He relished the times they cuddled under the covers. Warm. Safe. Loved. Her head rested on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry they bound your powers."

"I know," she whispered, her chin quivering. "But I found out that I love something far more than being a witch."

His heart hammered, beating with anticipation. "What?"

She caressed his chest with her fingertips. "You."

"You don't know how long I've longed for you to say that."

"I decided something else today." She placed a kiss on his neck. Her warm breath brushed his skin.

"What?"

"That I don't ever want to be without you again."

He smiled into her eyes. "Does that mean you'll live with me?"

She rubbed her body against his erection. "Definitely, right here."

"But I want more."

"Name it, it's yours." Nathan kissed the top of her head.

"Love me enough to lose yourself completely to my love." She sat up, snatched her gown over her head and threw it across the room.

He chuckled. "I don't know why you come to bed with clothes to begin with."

"Nathan Wellman, I have to maintain some decorum of dignity. I can't let you know what a wanton I am, totally besotted with you."

He laughed at her teasing. Her breasts brushed against him. He ached to touch them.

"Do you remember when you first wanted me to lose myself completely to your love?" she asked.

He squeezed her warm, naked body against him. "Yes, I was trying to convince you to let me change you so we would be like this forever."

"Well, I'm convinced."

His heart soared. "Are you sure? Maybe you should think about it for a day or two."

She pouted those sexy lips of hers. "You don't want me with you for an eternity?" Her fingers feathered across his shoulders.

"God, you know I do."

She smiled at him. Her eyes danced with excitement. "I have a little confession."

"What?"

"I asked Bri what it was like when Logan sipped her blood."

Nathan's jaw drew slack. "And she told you?"

"That is was like falling a great distance into a swirling pool of liquid pleasure."

"Those are her words?"

"Yes."

He grinned. "I would always make anything we did ecstasy."

"I vote you change me and I drink the gift Bri left me—her blood. That way we'll both have reflections and be Daywalkers."

He raised his hand. "I second the vote."

She grabbed his hand and kissed each finger. "I'd like to go to Hawaii and live on the beach for a while."

His warm tongue rasped her throat, across her breast, licking her extended nipple. "Two weeks in Hawaii sounds like fun. We can drink champagne to celebrate your birth into immortality."

"I like the way you think." She reached for his erection. "And the way you feel."

Bri parked her car at Pineview Cemetery. Looking in the rearview mirror at Jason, she took a deep calming breath. She needed to be strong for him, but she didn't know if she could.

"Is this where my mom is?" Jason asked.

She glanced at Logan, who sat in the passenger seat, and cleared her throat. "Yes, she's buried next to Dr. Reese."

Jason fingered the petals on two artificial flower arrangements. "Do you think Doc Reese would like some flowers, too? I don't think mom would mind if I share."

"That's an excellent idea." *You should be smiling about now, Megan, at how well your son is turning out. You did a great job.* "Your mom would be proud you shared."

She grabbed one of the arrangements and quickly got out of the car before she started bawling. Logan and Jason soon joined her. They strolled across the plush grass toward the plots where Megan and Dr. Reese were buried.

"Is it okay if I talk to them alone?" Jason asked.

Logan grabbed both arrangements and set them near the graves. "Sure." He pointed to a park bench under a giant oak. "We'll be right over there, in case you need us. Take your time."

The instant she turned to walk away, tears ran down her cheeks. "I don't want Jason to see me like this. I'll come out here alone some time and say goodbye to them."

Logan put his arm around her waist and pulled her against him as they trudged through the thick carpet of grass. "I'll come with you, help you remember the good times."

She took a deep breath, grabbed a handkerchief from the pocket of her dress and wiped

her face. "I'd like that."

When they plopped on the bench to watch Jason, Logan put his arms around her and held her tight. She thought of all the changes her life had taken, all the things she'd learned. How her prejudice against vampires had almost cost her the relationship with her father.

Logan kissed her hair. "We need to start Jason out right, train him in the ways of his family, in case they come after him."

"We will. And my mother and father will help."

"Uncle Chris is still gathering names of vampires who have turned against Nathan and want you dead. If you're right about Gregory Stone, we have to track him down and destroy him. And we have a few of the rogue's deadly minions still running around."

She rubbed his arms as he held her. "We'll be ready for anything they throw at us."

Jason took the handkerchief she'd given him out of his pocket. She swallowed the lump in her throat as she watched him wipe his face.

"I asked Uncle Chris to see about running some tests on your blood, Bri. We still don't know what might happen further down the road."

She smiled, thankful Logan had forced her to accept him as her protector. If he hadn't, she never would have had him in her life. She wondered if he would be ready for what she was about to throw at him now. "I already had him run tests because right after I fought the leopard and the rogue something strange happened when I was wounded."

"What?"

"It took longer for the healing process to initially kick into full force."

"What in the world could make that happen?"

"Your Uncle Chris and I have found out one thing my blood did that we didn't expect."

"What?"

"Remember all the times I felt nauseous, threw up, felt dizzy. Well, he believes the delayed healing is just another symptom."

"Is it something bad?" The lines on his forehead deepened.

"I don't think so. Why don't *you* tell me?" She grinned at him. "I'm pregnant. And before you start putting a guilt trip on yourself, the baby is fine."

She lovingly rubbed her stomach. Without this beautiful man, she'd never have this new life growing inside her.

His eyes widen with shock. "How?"

"Did I get pregnant?"

He nodded.

She giggled and punched him in the ribs. "You don't know how to make babies?"

That sexy smile of his took her breath away. "You know what I mean."

"Well, when you sipped my blood, it gave you the ability to father children."

"Did Uncle Chris say anything about this added bonus not mentioned in The Legend?"

"Yes. He's probably still grinning about it."

Logan grabbed her and hugged her tight. "Don't you know what this means?"

"That you're going to become overprotective after I have the baby and we're going to fight a lot."

"That's a given. If you even think about going off alone to fight anyone, you can count on that, but it's something else."

"What?" She wrinkled her brows.

"The Legend warns about witchcraft being used to produce a child with a vampire. There's no mention of vampires suddenly acquiring the ability to father children the normal way. I mean, they mention your blood giving vampires the power to become Daywalkers, but not one peep about something as miraculous as fathering children."

"So?"

"Maybe they were silent because they didn't know, which means it isn't infallible. Just because some of The Legend is true doesn't mean all of it is."

"Hmm. I don't know that their silence proves anything about it was untrue. But if it'll make you stop worrying about my waking up with two heads or whatever and having to kill me, I'll concede you could be right."

He smiled at her. "Should we tell Nathan about the potency of your blood? I mean he might get your mother pregnant."

Bri thought about all the years her father missed seeing her grow up. "I told your uncle *not* to tell my father. Let it be a surprise."

They laughed.